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Fenced In/Out in West Texas: Notes on Defending My Queer Body

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Abstract

In this article, I utilize autoethnography to describe and reflect upon my experiences as a queer artist, associate professor, and activist living in West Texas (1996-2012). To date, I believe there exist too few testimonies in art education that document how queer educators/artists manage myriad social, political, and everyday issues in their lives and workplaces. Such stories are necessary if I am going to equip present and future art teachers with anti-homophobia classroom strategies. I believe such stories are also necessary to counter cultural homophobia and violence and let queer students and teachers know they do not stand alone. Stories can assuage and possibly heal some of the brutality that occurs in schools. I offer this as one of many testimonies.

Preface

I am apprehensive about writing an article that is so personal about my professional life. Like autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis (2009), I write to better “understand [my life], become more aware of what [I] think and feel, and live for a more ethical and caring existence” (p. 17). I write to preserve my sanity. This writing is partial and incomplete, a mixture of memories growing up white, queer, and working class. This essay is also fractured, memories pieced together, messy at times.

I came to Lubbock, TX over fifteen years ago in 1996, full of courage, vision, and hope. And, I arrived queer.¹ My mom died in late July of '96 and as I helped my five siblings prepare to sell the house I had called home since 1956, I packed my belongings for a new chapter. The death of my last parent, moving to West Texas, leaving everybody I knew for a new home and a new life were at times overwhelming. I left Madison, WI, a city known for its friendliness towards gays and lesbians, for Lubbock, a city marked by homophobia. Upon arriving in Lubbock, I slowly made new friends and allies. However, I felt fenced in, scrutinized, and demonized by many local and state art educators, some who characterized me as a predator.

It is important for me to tell some of my lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) fenced in/out stories. It is precisely these kinds of stories I search for from students, educators, and artists as I record my own and make art and writing about them. My stories reveal parts of my journey toward my own continued self-acceptance. My internalized homophobia, fear of job loss, and demonization of my character are just three of the many reasons why I have chosen to remain silent at times and I assume why others follow a similar course of action. (For example, white-collar professionals in Lubbock are overwhelmingly closeted, including university professors and instructors.) When co-editing *From Our Voices: Art Educators and Artists Speak Out About Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Voices* (2003) with Laurel Lampela, I found it nearly impossible to locate LGBTQ art teachers who were willing to not only talk about their professional lives but write about them for the book.

Introduction

When I accepted a tenure-track position in art education at Texas Tech University (TTU) in Lubbock, Texas, in 1996, many of my friends literally feared for my physical safety due to West Texas's reputation as a hard-shelled, intolerant area. H. G. Bissinger's (1995) *The Killing Trail* described Texas male high school teens killing gay men on violent weekend sprees from Houston to Lubbock. Having spent seven years in Madison, WI rethinking my teaching, making art about autobiographic gay moments, and experiencing the benefit of participating in multiple LGBTQ community activisms, my decision to move to West Texas was for the job—my only job offer.² Initially, I feared for my physical safety because my friends did, but in retrospect I believe I have suffered much more emotionally and intellectually.

The purpose of my essay is three-fold. First, I will describe my historic complexities of living and practicing as an openly gay art education academic. Second, I will reflect upon ways I have felt fenced in/out professionally and personally, and third I describe how I have strategically created my own emotional and intellectual safety. Very few autobiographical testimonies exist in art education that witness the professional and personal realities of being LGBTQ in art and education. I believe that art teachers and students can benefit from such testimonies that describe how LGBTQ academics/artists/teachers/activists attempt to work and live and practice.

Much of my past and current art is partially inspired by experiences in my dad's carpenter workshop and in studying queer working class artists and writers such as Rae Atira-Soncea (<http://raeatirasoncea.com/>), bell hooks, Joanna Kadi, Helen Klebesadel, Audrey Lorde, David Wojnarowicz, and Janet Zandy. As I make art, I continue a bond that ties me to my working class roots (Kadi, 1996; Zandy, 2004). Therefore, this essay is autobiographical in nature: imagining; naming; and defending my queer body with my art/teaching/writing. I use auto/biography (Chapadjiev, 2008; Lubrano, 2004; McNaron, 1997) and autoethnography (Ellis, 2009)—my stories—as both theory and method. My memories and art serve as field notes. Through such personal examination/reflection, I answer important questions such as: What is my art for? Why do I teach the way I do? Why does working class or queer matter? What are some personal and professional impacts and/or repercussions of queer activism? It is the answers to these and other questions that form my teaching and art practices.

The Harsh Realities of Academe: “Why Is Check the Only One Doing This?”

When I arrived at TTU, I was told I was a controversial hire.³ Years later, colleagues regaled me with stories of what was said and how fearful many people were of me and for me. Many peers had never worked with an “openly” gay person. My reputation was immediately degraded within Lubbock art education circles through rumors spread by an Ivy League-educated colleague that I was a predator, although I had successfully taught elementary art for ten years prior to graduate school. An initial result of these rumors was that I was prohibited from supervising elementary art student teachers. (The colleague lying about me had never taught in an art classroom.)



Figure 1. Self-portrait.

To deal with these traumatic realities, I sought out a lesbian psychotherapist, thinking I had somehow brought all the slander upon myself (see Figure 1).⁴ My self portrait as a WW II warship revealed my fear and defensiveness. I felt as if I was being blown to bits by lies. Every article I wrote (Akins, Check & Riley, 2004; Check, 1992; 2000; Check & Akins, 2003; 2004; Check & Lampela, 1999; Fehr, Check, Keifer-Boyd, & Akins, 2002; Lampela & Check, 2003), art piece that I made, or outreach I developed/co-developed,⁵ about being gay in those early days simultaneously made me cautious about my identity. Rather than reach out to others, I slowly withdrew into myself, foregoing collaborations with allies and friends for about four years. I felt fenced in/out personally and professionally, emotionally and intellectually, as if I were being held captive (Herman, 1992). Captive in the sense that I felt I couldn't leave my job or flee because, as Herman describes, I was in prolonged contact with others who had coercive control over my life. My own internalized and historic homophobia worked overtime.⁶ This was and still is the convoluted climate in which I work.⁷

On October 2, 2011, an art education colleague phoned me to let me know that some members in the Texas Art Education Association (TAEA) office were threatening to write a letter to the TTU President because I helped hand out some left over *¿Y QUÉ?: Queer Art Made in Texas* (2007) exhibit catalogs at the 2010 annual TAEA conference in Austin. "Why is Check the only one doing this?" questioned an association representative. Her accusatory stance was directed at my LGBTQ advocacy and my open sexual identity. (I had made the *¿Y QUÉ?* catalog along with about eight other art catalogs from past exhibitions available at a TTU School of Art Masters in Art Education recruiting booth I co-personed at the conference.) My colleague steadfastly challenged the representative's homophobia, but her attempts to elicit tolerance were met with incredulity. "I" "was putting it [i.e. the catalog--subversive materials] in the hands of our youth," declared the representative. (But there

were no youth there. This was a conference for adults and we warned everybody there was mature content in all of the catalogs.) Whether it was handing out the catalog, being active in LGBTQ issues, or just living as an openly gay academic, I was demonized as a social threat.⁸

Ten years earlier, in 2001, a part-time Lubbock art teacher and I volunteered to be the local co-chairs of the TAEA fall conference that was to be held in Lubbock. We tried to create a conference that would house positive wellness opportunities (healthy food alternatives and studio practice), an anti-homophobia panel, and other amenities like photo-copy access, diverse studio access, and healthy food and beverage vendors. A “Sexual Identities and the Art Classroom” panel was cancelled only days before the conference and removed from the conference catalog by request of the TAEA President.⁹ The 2011 incident with entrenched homophobic attitudes and re/actions flies in the face of what’s currently happening to LGBTQ youth and adults across the U.S. and Texas: the 2011 repeal of *Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell* in the military; national increases in gay youth suicides and murders; Dan Savage’s *It Gets Better Project*; and the forming of hundreds of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) Chapters and Gay-Straight Alliances in middle and high schools. I personally receive occasional email requests from students studying about art education and from art teachers who ask me questions about possible LGBTQ strategies for inclusion in art classrooms.

Ways for Me to Heal

Judith Herman’s (1996) recovery paradigm from traumatic life events involving childhood and domestic abuse survivors, war vets, terrorist victims (and I would add LGBTQ persons) plays out in my mind and my daily-lived experiences. Remembering high school threats and violence, figuring out how to self-identify as gay in the 1980s, living the realities and health dangers during the AIDS epidemic, watching friends die of AIDS, writing a dissertation about gay identities, and now living in a part of the United States where gay is wrong/strange, I use Herman’s recovery strategies as templates for my teaching and making art: 1) establish safety; 2) remember and mourn; and 3) reconnect. I focus heavily on creating safety and use memory as a recovery strategy in my art and teaching. Reconnection is both a process and a goal for me. Reconnection is partly me reconnecting with myself to say my experiences are real. It is me creating community through witnessing to people who can hear me, and me standing up to people who can’t hear me. Reconnection is both process and goal (not simply connecting with people who have gone through similar terror or trauma, but reconnecting with myself, speaking out about my terror/trauma and looking at my survival tools in a conscious way).¹⁰ As far as I can remember, and that would include childhood memories, I have always felt shame/fear for being queer. I learned to fear the violence that happens to queers. Additionally, I learned others feared both queer and straight working class people. Workers are often debased in myriad media and cultural representations (Vanderbosch, 1997). Even though I am an associate professor, I identify as working class.¹¹ It is through writing, making art, and outreach activism that I experience any sense of playfulness and hope—my chance to heal into something different. But even in these spaces of hope and play, memories still haunt (Wojnarowicz, 1991; Zandy, 2004): my

being shamed and ridiculed in high school for being a “faggot;” my learned self-hate and low esteem that hampered my attempts to come out as gay and as an elementary art teacher in the 1980s; and my self-policing gestures, behaviors, speech, stories and histories.

When I make art, I get lost--for the moment--in my ideas. My art often begins with trauma: isolation; disconnection; fear and loss. My recovery is enabled and sustained by my actual making of art. I use collage/mixed media and recycle images. Most of my friends can sense my uplifted mood when I am making art. With my joy of making come ghosts from the past haunting me to be cautious. I rarely exhibit locally or online. I fear reprisals from local school administrators.

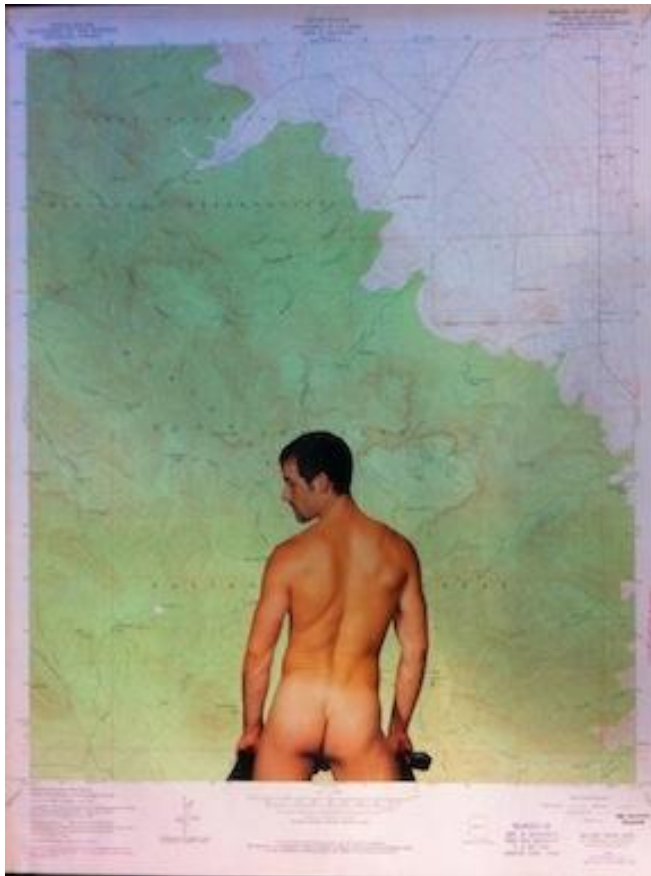


Figure 2. Untitled/boyfriend.

Untitled (see Figure 2) was part of my making 100 pieces of art before the end of 2003. I found a stack of county topographical maps being thrown away on campus. I call this my *Boyfriend Series*—I used iconic and ubiquitous pornographic images/objects to create two dozen pieces. I cut and glued these centerfolds/boyfriends/fantasies on the maps.¹² Even in fantasy work, I felt fenced in/cautious as I mapped my sexuality. It was safe only in my studio. I rarely exhibited these pieces.

With creating/establishing safety in my life through making art, eroticism becomes a possibility again. And yet, I do not have a website, mainly because of homophobes who complicate my academic life, inferring I am a predator because of my erotic content. Historically, I have always felt a sense of safety in making and using my hands. Starting

as a newspaper carrier in the third grade and working myself through three degrees, I realize what I do best, and what many working class people take great pride in, is working with my hands. My dad (1915-1992) was a cabinetmaker by trade, and I often built things with wood--mostly cities and cranes, while he stoked the basement furnace of his shop in the fall and winter months. I remember building cities in our working class backyard garden out of scrap pieces of wood and creating battle scenes with model ships (see Figure 1). The basement furnace room was my safe space of my imagined world of Plasticville, USA model railroading. I spent childhood and teen lifetimes in that furnace room imagining all kinds of

lives and possibilities. Whether in ongoing and never-ending house projects or making art, I feel safety and a sense of accomplishment and community especially when I share the fruits of my labor with others. It is these inherited tools and work ethic, coupled with a dose of working class hospitality, that I utilize in teaching.

It has taken me years to understand my positions, privileges, and responsibilities as a white working class male who has achieved a formal education. I owe many allies and friends for their support and compassion. My writing documents my trajectory as artist/teacher/activist. I become another witness in a white queer working class drama. I find myself returning to the past stories and fears to create contemporary means of safety, no matter how temporary. It is very important for me to know people's stories, where they have come from, and why they do what they do (Lippard, 2010). For me, that means drawing upon mostly working class artists and theorists whose backgrounds are similar to mine.¹³ As an academic, I find safety in commonalities I share with allies.

My lens for knowing and creating, whether as a teacher, artist or community member is ostensibly white, male, queer, and working class. My ethics and values are steeped in the early lessons I learned and witnessed as a kid and young adult (Kadi, 1996). Those histories and traditions are part of the lives of over two-thirds of Americans who self-identify as workers (Zweig, 2001). I believe in using my hands, emotions, and mind to create and build (Zandy, 2004). I set out to do a job and do it well, whether artistically, teaching, or writing.

Wojnarowicz's (1991) recollection of his childhood curiosity and its implications is similar to some of my professional decisions about what to write and what to exhibit:

I remember reading Archie Comics when I was a kid and being bored because they dealt with a world that had no correlation to my own. I remember having curiosity about sex and wondering why there was no sex in the world of Archie—the world of Riverdale. I remember taking a razor and cutting apart some Archie comics and gluing pieces of their bodies in different places so that Archie and Veronica and Reggie and Betty were fucking each other. A close-up profile of Jughead's nose on page five make a wild-looking penis when glued on Reggie's pants on page seven. After hours of cutting and pasting I had a comic that reflected a whole range of human experience that was usually invisible to me. But at the first sound of the key in the front door I'd throw everything away. I was curious, but I was not stupid. (pp. 156-157)

A good example of this tension are the gay male pornographies that influence my own self-sex education and art making. Pornographies/cultural taboos became source material for several art series. Tom Bouden's *In Bed With David & Jonathan* (2006) and *Queerville* (2007), *Diseased Pariah News* series, David Wojnarowicz's *Seven Miles a Second* (Wojnarowicz & Romberger, 1996), and Wojnarowicz's (1992) *Memories That Smell Like Gasoline* are examples of normalized and progressive gay male influences that help me culturally contextualize and re-imagine sex. White middle class gay ways of imagining and

representing gay sexualities are limited and narrow for me. I struggle to find contemporary representations of working class queer men in media that are life affirming for me. Using humor and pornographic images/objects, I try to create saner realities, only to find myself re-noticing the huge discrepancies in class relationships in the gay male sex industry and its actors/workers--many of whom are working class or working poor gay and straight men. I redeem many of these images of working class gay males in my art, often canonizing some. In the '80s and '90s, these actors were dying of AIDS at an alarming pace. In *A List* (1997/8), I created a poster documenting the deaths of popular gay male sex workers to AIDS, murders, suicide, or drug overdose (see Figure 3). I, and millions of gay and bisexual men, had fantasized about these bodies. This was one way for me to acknowledge and honor the lives of these working class and working poor actors.

Keith Ardent	Bill Harrison	Al Parker
Ben Barker	John Holmes	Paul Pellettieri
Scott Bond	Daniel Holt**	Jaap Penrap
Brad Braverman	Kurt Houston	Brad Peters
Tony Bravo	Jamoo**	Rod Phillips**
Jeremy Brent	Thom Katt	Christopher Rage
Arthur Bressan, Jr	Steve Kennedy	Tyler Regan
Chris Burns	Jon King	Lee Richards
Buster	JW King	Zeff Ryan
Luc Colton	Jesse Koehler	Lee Ryder
Dave Connors	Tim Kramer	Nick Rogers
Jake Corbin	Steve Kreig	Jason Steele
Joel Curry**	Chris Ladd	Marc Stevens
Pierce Daniels	Alan Lambert**	Eric Stone
Mike Davis	Lance	Bob Shane
Johnny Dawes	Jeff Lawrence	Joe Simmons
Melchor Diaz	Richard Locke	Glenn Steers
Ken Diamond	Clint Lockner	Joey Stephano
Glenn Dime	Steve Loignon	Eric Stryker
Ed Dinakos	Lucky Luc	Scott Taylor
Casey Donovan	Luke	Steve Taylor
Nick Elliot	Andy Mategna**	Chet Thomas
Lon Flexx	Craig Markle	Jim-Ed Thompson
Christian Fox**	Kurt Marshall	Kip Tyler
Steve Fox**	Leo Masters**	Frank Vickers
Roy Garret	Kyle McKenna**	Jon Vincent**
Matt Gunther	Jim Moore	Darryl Weld
Fred Halsted**	Wade Nichols	Brandon Wilde*
Ryder Hansen	Scott O'Hara	Chris Williams
Rydar Hanson		Joey Yale

No asterisk means AIDS-related death; *sex worker murdered; **death related to drug overdose or suicide

Figure 3. A list.

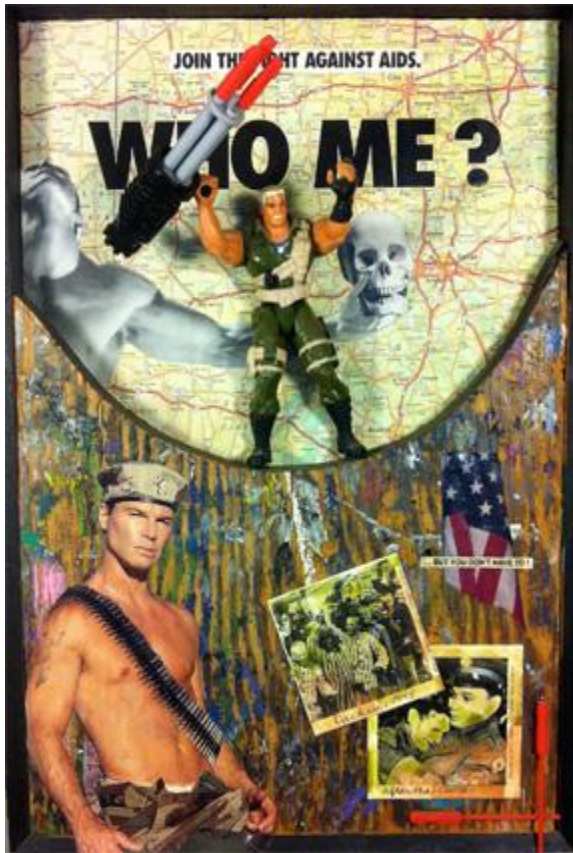


Figure 4. Fight against AIDS.

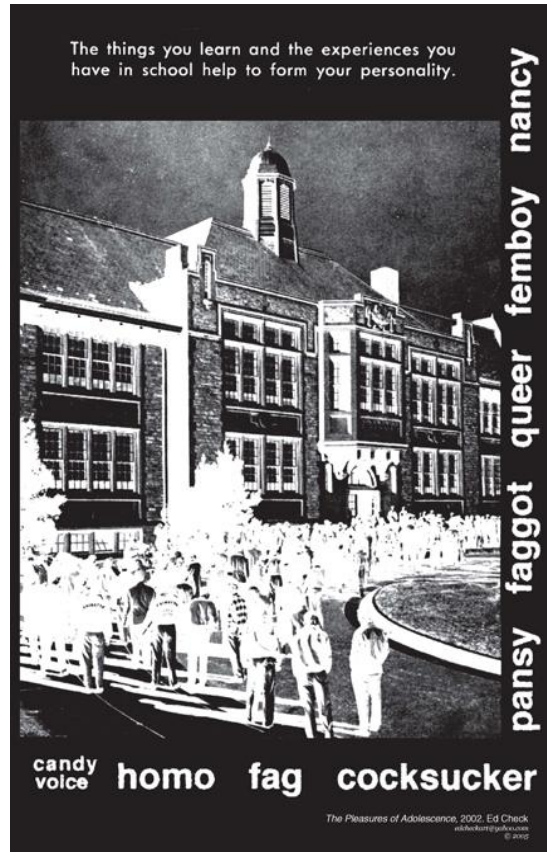


Figure 5. Pleasures of adolescence.

In 1998, I created a piece for a fundraiser for our local South Plains AIDS Resource Center (SPARC) called *Join the Fight Against AIDS: Who Me?* (see Figure 4). I recycled a gay porn pseudo-military image, a West Texas map, and military toys to create a story of the war against AIDS that many West Texans were losing. Persons living with HIV or AIDS in West Texas tend to be closeted about their status and marginalized in their communities.

In 1999, my *Pleasures of Adolescence* poster was selected to be in the *Outwest* Exhibit in Santa Fe, New Mexico (see Figure 5) by curator Harmony Hammond. (Hammond (2000) is an international lesbian artist, curator, writer, and feminist.) It documents how my personality was partially formed by my school experiences. What I learned, at a reception for the participating artists at Harmony's home in Galisteo, NM, was that many of us LGBTQ artists have stories that I believe need to be told in terms of how we came to our art, our individual struggles with material and representation, how our personal and professional fears interfere with artistic production, and other personal and professional compromises made in order to make the art (McNaron, 1997).

In the fall of 2001, I was accepted into an art exhibit called *Making Art Matter: Artists Transforming Society*, in Madison, WI. I exhibited my *Mother of AIDS* (see Figure 6) and my *Pleasures of Adolescence* poster. I used a virgin image to express support for those afflicted with HIV and AIDS. My brothers and sister and other relatives drove three hours to surprise me at the opening. I watched nervously as my brothers looked at and read my poster. We had not had that many talks about the impact of homophobia and violence on my life. Later, we had dinner at an eastside working class Madison eatery and talked a bit about my art. Both of these art pieces represented wounds: my psyche and self-esteem and ways I heal by telling my stories. That weekend, though artistically satisfying, was personally incomplete for me in so many ways. How do I catch-up with siblings about important gay events in my life? How does my silence aid me or work against me? Why can't I better integrate all my lived selves into a better whole? Part of my answer was that I was interested in creating safer spaces for myself and remembering and mourning my past but I was still unclear as to how to reconnect with it.



Figure 6. Mother of AIDS.

Boy in a Brownie Dress: **Terror and Shame**

1963 Sue Owart, my sister, mom, and me.



1956 I'm born into large working class Polish Catholic family in Manitowoc, WI. Dad's a carpenter. Mom works raising us six kids. I enjoy hanging around the kitchen helping mom.

1960 Christmas. Santa gives me a toy mix-master that really works.

1963 I really want to wear a dress. Mom borrows my neighbor Sue Owart's brownie dress. I run and bike around the neighborhood. A cashier at the Red Owl Grocery Store calls me "Nancy." I think it's a cool name. I find out later it isn't.

1967 With my younger sister Mary Lou and our friends, all girls, we play dolls and stage pageants. I'm jealous that Mary Lou gets a cheerleading package from our older cousin, a high school Physical Education teacher.

1970 For Halloween, I wear a flowered house dress and high heels and go trick-or-treating alone. On my way home boys from my seventh grade class push me around. The next day, I get teased at school. Later that year, my older brother John stops two boys from bullying me after school.

1971 Ed Check, 8th Grade Class Photo



1971 Eighth grade. I'm in hell. I lie awake terrified of tomorrow. The first day of junior high school—someone might call me names at morning assembly. During study hall, a football player calls me "candy voice." In Math class, in front of everyone, a friend says I like to cheerlead. In Citizenship class, in front of everyone, a girl calls me "femboy." I attend first track meeting. I am ashamed I'll stick out and don't go out for track.

1972 In high school gym class all during the year, two boys yell "faggot" and "homo." I try to avoid them and it doesn't work. I hang around the house and sleep a lot. Mom and dad wonder why I don't go out more.

1975 I am terrified someone will yell "faggot" at me during high school commencement—don't think anyone does. I am too ashamed to have a senior yearbook portrait taken.

1976 I start at a local two-year college, living at home. I run for Vice-President of Student Senate and find "Check is a fag" carved in the counter in student lounge. I feel sick to my stomach.

2002 "Memories of Adolescence," 14" x 14" Poster



1978 I work as a summer playground leader in Milwaukee inner city. A little girl says I "walk like a girl." For months, I practice walking "like a man." I start to avoid family events for fear that someone will bring up the brownie dress story.

1980-9 I teach elementary art. I struggle with being gay. Students think I'm cool, but I have low self-esteem as a teacher. An emcee at a teacher breakfast tells Rock Hudson jokes. I am attracted to masculine men, though one boyfriend acts effeminate. I find out that he is HIV+. I am scared of getting AIDS and losing him.

1985 Spring. While driving with my best friend Sue to an elementary student art show, for the first time in my life I tell the story of the brownie dress—my deepest most shameful secret. Recalling making her younger brothers wear dresses and makeup when they were kids, Sue laughs and asks, "Is that it?" I cry.

1989 I decide to go to graduate school for a PhD. In my classes I study politics, sexualities, genders, and feminisms. I begin to question how I was conditioned to hate everything "feminine, feminist, and female" (Elaine Showalter) about myself. I take seven years to finish.

1992 I volunteer at The United, a gay and lesbian agency, with Jane Vanderbosch. My dissertation is about two gay artists, David Wojnarowicz and Keith Haring. With Jane's encouragement, I include myself in my dissertation. My dad dies in June.

1996 Spring. I can't finish my dissertation. I go see Omie Baldwin, a campus therapist who is Native American. She asks why I don't want to graduate? I end up talking about core issues—low self-esteem, shame, terror, and the brownie dress. Omie asks me to re-imagine the pleasure of wearing the dress—how it feels, the joy I feel, what it feels like on my body. And she asks what I would like to say to the people who taunted me. I cry.

1996 In mid-July, I finish my dissertation, *My self-education as a gay artist*. At the end of July my mom dies. I never thanked her for letting me wear the brownie dress.

1997 My friend Gail Linsmeier tells me one of my aunts remembered me wearing the brownie dress and said my mom shouldn't have let me because it made me gay. Shame briefly returns.

2002 I drape house dresses, like my aunts and mom used to wear, over chicken wire attached to huge branches quick-kreeted into the ground—three in front of my house, one to the side, three in the backyard. My two-and-a-half-year-old neighbor tells her mom: "I like Ed's dresses."

2004 Hollis Sigler's art inspires me to hang dresses in my trees. After forty years of living with the brownie dress, I feel less terror and shame.²

2007 "Sun Dress," life-size, Mixed Media



^{*} Special thanks to Rose Lapiz for her editing and June White for her graphics expertise.

¹ Showalter, E. (1977). *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

² Herman, J. (1994). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror*. New York: BasicBooks.

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Figure 7. Boy in a Brownie dress: terror and shame.

Also in 2001, I was awarded a small Texas Tech University College of Arts and Sciences Research Enhancement Fund grant to create some original posters about advocacy and arts outreach to LGBTQ teachers, artists, students, and allies. It took me four years to develop and publish *Boy in a Brownie Dress: Terror and Shame* (2005) poster (see Figure 7). That poster tells an abbreviated and partial chronological story about how I remembered my

own internalized homophobia and misogyny haunting me for years—most importantly, the shame I carried into adulthood about wearing a brownie dress when I was five years old. My story revisits some of my gender and sexuality ghosts. I noted I never got to thank my mom for letting me wear the dress. I continue to hand out the *Boy in a Brownie Dress: Terror and Shame* and *Pleasures of Adolescence* posters at conferences and workshops.

In 2007, I suggested to an artist friend who is lesbian and closeted that she approach Harmony with a proposal to curate an LGBTQ exhibit in Lubbock using queer Texas artists. Harmony accepted and the *¿Y QUÉ? Queer Art Made in Texas* was a result. I was involved in planning and advertising this exhibit. Through email requests to local university programs and departments, I co-raised thousands of dollars to publish the catalog. Other academics involved with the planning were fearful of all kinds of reprisals; from shootings, to bombings, to firings, to local anger; there was no end to the precautions talked about in meetings. Not one negative incident occurred, but there was a palpable psychic fear that descended upon many of the planners.



Figure 8. Waiting series.

For *¿Y QUÉ?*, I used HO-scale railroad model buildings from my youth. In previous collages, I relied on images of gay porn actors to create a sense of homoeroticism. (I could not get friends or acquaintances to model for me.) So, in this piece, I created subjectivity/subjects using HO-scale people miniatures. Creating subjects in the *Waiting Series* (see Figures 8 & 9) was transitional for me. I used toys from my childhood to tell adventure sex stories in an otherwise literally whitewashed Plasticville, USA. The *¿Y QUÉ?* exhibit was quantified as a success. I visited the exhibit daily during its run, as religiously as I went to Polish Catholic Church as a kid. I planted myself in the exhibition space, sat there and just took it all in.



Figure 9. Waiting series. Detail.



In *One New Year's Eve in the Life of One Gay Guy* (2010), which was included in an exhibition called *Doll*, (see Figures 10 & 11), I re-enacted a recent break-up with a lover.¹⁴ Though we stopped being lovers, we remain friends. During the exhibition opening, I watched and listened to people react to the piece. Some laughed. Some were shocked. Others were intrigued that boy dolls danced with boy dolls. A florist, setting up for a reception in the gallery space, recognized the night and commented, "I was there...and that was me."

Figure 10. One new year's eve in the life of one gay guy.



Figure 11. One new year's eve in the life of one gay guy. Detail.

This piece is an example of safety, mourning and reconnection as I recall an evening of traumatic events including a betrayal of my boyfriend. My former boyfriend and I co-created the piece. I applied life knowledge and wisdom and decided to continue a friendship with my former lover. As tough as it was, that was the past and we both had reconciled our differences; a personal recovery and reconnection for me as the events almost felt humorous in retrospect.¹⁵

Connections to Teaching Practices

I rely on allies to keep me sane and safe. My friends Rose Lapis and Jane Vanderbosch warned me to never work in isolation. This is difficult for me as like my father, I go within myself rather than rage against people during times of stress. By closing down and withdrawing, I make fewer mistakes but the isolation can be daunting for me. But I do this for my personal safety. It is a temporary and constant strategy to maintain my sanity. I then strategize recovery possibilities of remembering and mourning. When do I reconnect? And/Or do I? I don't. I am not interested in reconnecting. Ally and Lubbock artist Future Akins-Tillett reminds me daily of the connection of my teaching/art/activisms to my stories. I listened as art historian Phoebe Lloyd grieved for her past by telling me stories of her gay brother in New York City who had died of AIDS in the '80s. Her brother died in virtual isolation in a hospital ward in the early days of the AIDS pandemic. For years, I listened to *The Kathy and Judy Show* on WGN AM radio Chicago via the Internet. These two white

straight queer friendly women, one middle class and one working class, integrated queer social and political issues into their everyday radio conversations. Kathy often talked about her “inner lesbian.” They made me laugh and helped me heal. They modeled and reinforced for me one public way of connecting queer experiences to everyday life.¹⁶

In spite of my own insecurities, I try to co-create safer spaces with and for students. It’s not only imperative that I invite my students’ lives into the classroom and their art (Christensen, 2001), but that I invite my life into it as well. (I’m getting better at this, but historically I rarely share my scholarship or art with students. I usually rely on other writers and artists.) In university classes I teach, undergraduate students are interested in how to introduce LGBTQ issues into curricula. Many understand and also fear the repercussions, losing a job or homophobia. They look for role models and curricular examples as many schools continue to be places of intellectual, emotional, and physical violence for many queer youth. (No citations here—I witness this in schools I visit and in conversations I have with students and teachers.)

Stories are one place for me to begin; discursive spaces for adolescents and adults to talk about and better understand our bodies, feelings, and fears. I encourage such dialogues in classes and with friends about the social realities for gay and straight youth. When I experience homophobic attacks because I appear to be the only person talking about queer topics in Texas, I look to allies and others for vision and reassurance.¹⁷ Rhoades (2011) examined the role of digital media in art classrooms to engage LGBTQ issues. She documents how dominant discriminatory discourses maintain anti-LGBTQ environs in schools. I also experience and witness these in Texas schools.

In the 70s and 80s, I was not aware of the multiple already existing blueprints for me to follow in art and teaching. It was as if little was written about gay or lesbian artists. I knew of no “out” educators or artists. The few courageous role models I knew of in mid-1980s Milwaukee were drag performers. I knew about ridicule and harassment, but I was unaware of the depressing histories and stories of gays and lesbians and LGBTQ academics committing suicide, being brutally beaten, murdered, or forced out of their jobs (McNaron, 1997). I experienced my gay sexuality as a war zone - from my first sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) as a closeted elementary art teacher in the 1980s to the contemporary dilemmas facing queer teens and adults today. I found out about David Hockney’s sexuality by accident. A painting professor had me study his style. Naked young men in Hockney’s paintings (Hockney, 1976; Webb, 1988) had me searching for books and information about him.

Herman (1992) points out to me that safety is key in living and learning situations. Sadly, safety is still not available to many LGBTQ people in West Texas. I have listened to many conversations of local professionals: doctors, lawyers, professors, teachers, nurses, and sales clerks—all closeted and afraid. It saddens me being one of a few openly gay persons. Yes, I attract more than my fair share of vitriol and hate that have at times had me doubting my self, my intuition, and my truths. Our Visual Studies students at Texas Tech University

have LGBTQ friends and seem to carry less shame, guilt, or fear than my generation. But even so, they have little idea of what to do in the classroom. And it is here where exciting dialogues and work continue.

In spite of homophobia in the TAEA, I experience moments of change and support. For example, at the 2009 conference in Dallas, I gave a presentation titled *Examining Trauma in Our Lives and Classrooms*, where I talked about my experiences with homophobia in West Texas and shared my posters. I included sexual identity as one of many traumas impacting students and teachers. Teachers attending that workshop testified about their worlds of homophobias and other fears facing them in their classrooms and personal lives. At the 2010 TAEA conference, we handed out remainder ¿Y QUÉ? catalogs, unaware of a storm of homophobia that was brewing. Concurrently though, a TAEA official was telling teachers who had questions about LGBTQ issues to stop at our booth and request a copy of the ¿Y QUÉ? catalog.

I notice as a teacher that when I fence myself in and manage my sexuality and my histories, I am not my authentic self and often feel as if I am a failure as an educator. When I am criticized for being biased because I bring sexuality as a cultural and educational topic into the classroom, especially my own, I must constantly remind myself that inviting myself into the classroom is as essential as students inviting their lives into the same classroom. My story becomes one of many. And yet, after teaching at the university level since 1989, as open as I am, I cautiously temper my stories in my courses.

In fall 2010, a gay graduate student requested to do an independent study with me on gay themes in art and education. Sam is an incredible painter, beekeeper, gardener, quilt maker, and house-builder. He has a life partner of 14 years, and though openly gay in our program, is closeted in his school district. He feels that if anything gets out about his sexual orientation to his school district administration, he will be fired. Though intelligent, he is not stupid. He knows his environs and trusts his intuition. When I taught elementary art in the '80s, at one fall teacher breakfast, an emcee cracked multiple jokes about AIDS and Rock Hudson. Like Wojnarowicz, and like my graduate student, I was not stupid. I suffered silently that morning in the midst of LGBTQ ignorance and homophobia. Much needs to change in Texas, in its rural and urban areas.

Years ago, I blended many aspects of my personal gay life in my dissertation (Check, 1996). It was a challenge for me to write myself into my dissertation and to tell some of my stories. When asked at my dissertation defense how this blending of autobiography, pedagogy, and art impacted me, I broke down and wept. I remember leaving the room in tears to compose myself.¹⁸ Those visceral feelings are still with me today. I have learned that to feel is just as important as to think. That continues to be a life-long learning lesson for me.

I have worked hard to educate my West Texas university community about LGBTQ issues in art and teaching. Though some are supportive, it's similar to teacher support in public schools that is unpredictable and varied. In fall of 2011, I showed some of the art in this

essay to an Intro to Theories and Practices in the Visual Arts (Visual Studies) class. I also talked about a research piece I am developing about five local working class artists as *Beautiful People*. When I asked for questions or responses, I was met with silence. At that moment, silence felt like an emotional/educational death. I didn't know if I fenced myself in or was fenced out/left out as a gay person by the students. But the following week, the class was engaged...and talked...commenting they liked this class because this is a space where they felt safe, where they can talk and be heard.

I have been told by current and former students that my being on the front lines and being "out," and their hearing my stories, and my asking them about their stories, though overwhelming at first, gives them the courage to be who they are and talk about things that are really important to them. As teachers, it helps them create and/or provide space for their students to tell their stories through art.

End Note

And now that I have revised and edited this essay, I wonder if what I have written matters? I realize how partial and incomplete my stories are. I feel the need to tell the stories from the trenches that I cannot forget so that readers will know that problems arise. I look for three things in writing and scholarship, especially if I intend to read it: are working people addressed, are queer people mentioned, and does the author disclose her or his background and privileges? I need these to begin to trust the writer's words. That's what I have given to you. I have many self-doubts and rely on my lived experiences and intuition to guide me in my teaching, making art, and community activism. My portfolio of art is my gentle reminder of past and current struggles, and how I need to extend to others the courtesies and assistance that were extended to me. With that, I humbly submit this partial and somewhat messy essay of notes, of memories, of how I defend my queer body in West Texas.

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End Notes

¹ The 2005 documentary *The Education of Shelby Knox* (Lipschutz et al.) beautifully describes the conservative social climate in Lubbock, TX.

² During my last years writing my dissertation, I would often remark in professional conference settings that the more I wrote my dissertation, the more jobs I felt I was writing myself out of.

³ When I interviewed for my position in the spring of 1996, a few people talked about LGBTQ issues or LGBTQ people. One closeted gay studio faculty member took me on a tour of local neighborhoods and flea markets, in response to my request to see a bit of Lubbock up close. As Dick got into his pickup and we were finally alone, his intonation, hand gestures, and stories radically changed. He was effusive, campy, joking, and lighthearted as he shared his stories. He described the professional and personal compromises he had made to exist in Lubbock. When I arrived in Lubbock in August of 1996, he invited me to a reception in my honor to meet his circle of mostly closeted white middle class lesbian and gay professionals. Though they were very nice and successful people, I didn't see myself fitting in as closeted or middle class. Admission to this professional group of kindred spirits meant keeping quiet about one's sexual identity.

⁴ My therapist asked me how I saw myself. I said I felt like a WW II heavy class cruiser with my bridge and decks afire. I had a few guns to return salvos, but was turning away from the conflict, moving toward safety and dry dock for repair.

⁵ Dr. Hans Turley and I established an LGBTQ and Allies faculty and staff social group that met on Fridays at local bars. We were also co-advisors for our university's Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Student Association (GLBSA). I helped co-create Day Without Art/World AIDS Day Observances and installations (1997, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2002), talks about LGBTQ artists at Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG) local chapter meetings, talks about my art to fine arts dorm members, to an LGBTQ Amarillo Outstanding audience, and to local museum audiences, and served as an "out" gay panel member in countless psychology and education undergraduate and graduate courses. I also helped co-found OutwestLubbock.org, an online community center for LGBTQ persons in Lubbock, TX and surrounding communities. Its main purpose is to confront the relentless homophobia in West Texas with LGBTQ-positive local programming and support for LGBTQ persons in the area.

⁶ I am referring to historic and present internalized homophobias that surface. When I was young, people made fun of my voice, physical attributes (e.g., stating I had eyelashes like a girl or walked like a girl), and yelled out words in school calling me a faggot. This resonates to the present day when persons on the phone think I am female and say "Ma'am."

⁷ Throughout my years in Lubbock (1996 to the present spring 2012), it has been the kindness of lesbian social networks that has sustained my emotional and intellectual sanity. I had the privilege of meeting and working on a local election issue with author Julia Penelope, who lives in Lubbock. Local lesbians, out and closeted, have opened their lives and homes to me. When I was the sole male at a lesbian party in 2002, the host Joy commented about my presence to a lesbian's surprise about who that man was at the party; Joy remarked, "That's not a man, that's Ed." I learned a lot about lesbian lives and fears and how difficult it was for many of them to be "out" in Lubbock. Most chose the safety of the closet.

⁸ The exhibition itself was supported by Cultural Activities Fees administered through the College of Visual & Performing Arts and the Ryla T. and John F. Lott Endowment for Excellence in the Visual Arts. The publication of the ¿Y QUÉ? catalog was supported by The President's Office for Diversity, The College of Visual & Performing Arts, the Fine Arts Doctoral Program in the College of Visual & Performing Arts, the College of Architecture, and the following Texas Tech University programs: Center for Campus Life, Housing & Residence Life, The Women's Studies Program, and the Student Counseling Center. There was additional local community support.

⁹ A short list consisted of a wellness session, activist general sessions speakers, one LGBTQ workshop (developed from an email request from an East Texas high school art teacher's experience of the high amounts of homophobia and violence she witnessed at her school), and practical things like where to shop and sightsee locally, experience West Texas hospitality, to access plenty of water and photocopies. The pre-conference TAEA Star magazine had published the workshop "Sexual Identities and the Art Classroom" that featured a four-person panel exploring LGBTQ issues in the classroom. A few weeks prior to the actual conference, we were vilified and condemned by the President of TAEA for our proactive LGBTQ stance and workshop. The LGBTQ workshop was cancelled, and we were warned by the President of TAEA that we were jeopardizing every Texas state art program (Fehr, Check, Keifer-Boyd, & Akins, 2002). The local Lubbock Independent School District administration got involved in preventing any of their art teachers from taking off school days to attend the conference. In spite of the workshop being cancelled, we held it at the Tech campus, driving participants from the conference site to the university in a van.

¹⁰ For many persons dealing with terror and trauma, a total recovery and reintegration or reconnection to community is not possible nor desirable. See Herman (1992), pp. 196-213, for an extended discussion on this topic.

¹¹ I agree with Joanna Kadi that in spite of my teaching at a university, my ethics, values, practices and histories continue to be working class.

¹² This piece was auctioned off at a September 2011 Outwest Lubbock art fundraiser at a local lesbian-run restaurant.

¹³ Theorists and writers include: Dorothy Allison, Meta Berger, Beth Brant, bell hooks, Jamakaya, Joanna Kadi, Audre Lorde, Julia Penelope, Jane Vanderbosch, David Wojnarowicz, Janet Zandy. Working class artists include: myriad gay porn actors, local drag queens and kings, Rae Atira-Soncea, Ralph Fasanella, Helen Klebesadel, and David Wojnarowicz.

¹⁴ What inspired the piece was a night of firsts for my boyfriend. That night at the bar, a friend “came out” to him and shocked him; he saw a former lover, whose mother had said he had died, dancing on the dance floor, and my lover made out with another man on the dance floor.

¹⁵ I had learned from lesbian and gay friends that a scorched-earth relationship policy wasn’t fruitful. I point-blank asked them how they could be friends with former lovers. They reminded me that they could not be the people they are without the experiences with former lovers.

¹⁶ Their type of progressive cultural talk and questioning eventually got their show cancelled after twenty years. (They once called the hotel room of the runner-up of a Mr. International Leather contest held in Chicago one weekend to talk about the lives of the contestants.) As women in their early 60s when their show was cancelled, reportedly due to lower ratings, they were role models for me on how to perform difficult cultural work.

¹⁷ These allies include the many friends, peers, and students who influence me: the work of Laurel Lampela, James Sanders and Deb Smith-Shank in the NAEA; and the ongoing work of the NAEA LGBTQ Caucus and members; performance artists I’ve seen like Holly Hughes and Tim Miller (we invited Miller to Tech); the work of people in PFLAG (Lubbock local Betty Dotts); GLSEN; Jim Sears’ work in the AERA; local and state drag people; Harmony Hammond; queer educators from Kumashiro to Jennings; state and national HIV and AIDS activists; countless straight allies (historically Blandy, Congdon, Hicks and untold others in NAEA); all too numerous LGBTQ historians and theorists; and also all of the straight and LGBTQ art teacher allies in Texas.

¹⁸ Initially, I thought I had failed. My committee members were wise women who knew how direct connections in real life, writing, and art are deeply felt and emotionally charged.