

Queers, Art and Education

Ed Check

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Introduction

What do sexual orientation issues have to do with art? Art, pedagogy and culture are methods to negotiate our sexualities in public and private. Rather than perpetuate a false universality, I will attempt in this paper to speak a more personal truth. For me, this working paper in art education serves as a way for me to work through my rage and outrage about society and education, as well as a vehicle for education. In this analysis, my gender, socio-economic background, self-esteem, education, religious and other value systems, color, sexual orientation, size, attractiveness, etc., all contribute to my understanding and determine how I participate in the world. Subtle wonderment, years ago, on my part, as to how my sexual orientation would impact my life and art has given way to an overt activism which affects all facets of my teaching and life activities. Issues of sexual orientation can be found in my writing, my artwork and my teaching.

My training within art entailed a heavy dose of formalist education in the elements and principles of design. My teaching as an art educator reflected my training as a student. I taught to the expectations and visuals I observed in Wachowiak (1977), rarely linking art to real life issues. I promoted the use of formalist principles and the construction of art objects related to male European artists in the art classroom. But after ten years of teaching at the elementary level, a master's degree, and other professional and civic affiliations something was stirring inside me. I decided to further this investigation of myself in a Ph.D. program at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. It was during the course work phase of my program that I realized I could no longer pass for "straight;" I had to acknowledge and speak against overt and covert discriminations against a plethora of issues, including sexual orientation. Now, four years later, I have had many opportunities to investigate and research the intersections between art, education, and sexuality. I have been able to make connections between my sexuality, pedagogy, art, and other life activities. It is this information I would like to work through with you and share.

Histories of Invisibility

Historically gays and lesbians have been written out of art texts and omitted in classroom discussions. This omission renders gay and lesbian artists and issues invisible. When gays and lesbians are mentioned in school, (often under the clinical topics of health education or biology), they are often misrepresented, stereotyped, devalued or mystified. Health texts locate the

topic of homosexuality near headings such as sexual deviance, sexual dysfunction, pornography, bestiality, necrophilia, sexual abuse, prostitution, rape, exhibitionism, pedophilia, voyeurism, transvestism or incest. Pseudo-scientific misrepresentation and myth glamorize the social construction of deviance even further:

There is general agreement that multiple factors probably play a part in the development of the homosexual state. Some of these include disturbed parent-child relationships, arrested psychosexual development at an immature stage, and cultural emphasis on "masculinity" resulting in feelings of inadequacy in males (Sinacore, *Health*, 1974, 72).

How does the above translate into bigotry? The recent Measure 9 in the State of Oregon not only defines homosexuality as "abnormal, wrong, unnatural, and perverse," but links it to issues like sadomasochism and pedophilia. Sexual diversity is defined as pathological and deviant. As a result, difference quickly gives way to bias, bias foments discrimination, discrimination begets violence, and violence maims and kills.

As it is becoming increasingly apparent, heterosexuality is the privileged norm in American culture and is represented as natural and ordinary. Given this privilege, gays and lesbians become tolerated, at best, as less-than-standard deviations from the norm.

The fields of art and art education both deny and perpetuate the biases of heterosexuality. The idealization of the heterosexual in society and art perpetuates specific values and norms and permits an ideological dominance by groups which actively discriminate against those with less power. For example, art historians, art educators, and art critics have represented themselves as conducting sexually undifferentiated, politically and economically disinterested, and objective studies in art. At the same time, gay and lesbian artists have written, reflected, and constructed works about their identities but many of these works or artists are omitted from discussions, have their work or lives distorted to serve other interests, or are simply rendered invisible.

Simon Watney (1987), author and AIDS activist, speculates that our "social identity" and our perceptions and conceptions of other men and women are at least partly constructed through our encounters with the myriad of visual images available in our society. If gays and lesbians have been producing art, why has their work been hidden or rendered invisible? How can art education be utilized as a site of intervention to begin to dispel myths and stereotypes about gays and lesbians? Why do art educators dismiss information which might serve to mitigate the violence and discrimination against gays and lesbians? What are our responsibilities to gay and lesbian students who find little information about themselves in their histories? To

straight students to educate them about the contributions of gay and lesbian artists?

An Urgency for Representation and Research

We, as art educators, tend to glamorize the history of art and present material in classes in professional, clinical, and expert ways. Schools legitimate the authority, biases, and prejudices of the dominant heterosexual, white, male-biased culture. Human sexuality, likewise, is defined, presented, and represented as heterosexuality in contemporary schooling practices, and is promulgated as such throughout the school curricula. Gays and lesbians are not just written out of textbooks but are actively sought out and discriminated against in public spaces.

In the District of Columbia, several teachers repeatedly taunted an openly gay fifteen-year-old, calling him "faggot" and "fruit," knowing that he was also being harassed and beaten by fellow students. When he complained to other teachers and the principal, they blamed the gay student for his mistreatment and recommended that he leave school. In Rhode Island, a high school principal expressed relief in his opening-day speech to the student body that the only openly gay student in the school would not be returning for his senior year. The principal neglected to mention that the boy quit school because teachers and students taunted him when he "came out" the previous year (Dennis and Hartow, 1986, p. 449).

No one should be surprised, given the evidence of hate crimes, to know that the rate of teen suicide for gay and lesbian adolescents is three hundred percent higher than the national average.

Theoretical Positions on Invisibility and Representation

Gloria Anzaldúa, a lesbian feminist writer, speaks to the issue of being "written out" and the urgency to redefine and challenge accepted ideas and social constructions:

I often times feel oppressed and violated by the rhetoric of dominant ideology, a rhetoric disguised as good "scholarship" by teachers who are unaware of its race, class, and gender "blank spots." It is a rhetoric that presents its conjectures as universal truths while concealing its patriarchal privilege and posture (p. xxiii).

Besides being "disappeared," there is a contradiction in the fact that when gays and lesbians are empowered to speak, they are unable to say what is in their hearts or on their minds. In effect, gays and lesbians are not only historically hidden, erased, and invalidated by others, but also by themselves.

This self-imposed "internalized homophobia" is one consequence of growing up in a society which does not value any deviation from the heterosexual norm.

The Personal Is Political Is Aesthetic

Last semester, I facilitated an art education methods class session that viewed a video produced by Biografilms, entitled, "Drawing the Line: A Portrait of Keith Haring." The class was also responsible for reading an article by David Deitcher in the *Village Voice*, entitled, "Crossover Dreams: Sexuality, Politics, and the Keith Haring Line." While both texts include many examples of Haring's art, the video excludes any mention of Haring's sexuality, his advocacy and fight against the politics of AIDS, his dying from AIDS, or the affect and role sexuality played in his life and his artistic career. The video emphasizes the universal qualities of all artists, suggesting Haring is linked to the line of Pop Art's greats like Andy Warhol. Deitcher's article focused on the contradictions of Haring's gayness combined with issues of self-hate and internalized homophobia. Deitcher explored the public and private aspects of Haring and his relationships to his audiences:

Once he was asked if the kids that hung out with him looked up to him as a "gay role model." He replied by covering all the bases: "I know a lot of hard-core street kids who would say that they hate faggots, but they would never say that they hated me. Right? 'Cause they don't know me as a faggot. They respect me as a person, which is the most important thing. So it never really becomes an issue. I mean, there's a lot of kids I know who hang out here who know it, but they don't care 'cause it's like I'm not doing anything to them to invade their space or try to threaten them. I don't make an issue of it" (p. 111).

The ensuing discussion in the classroom centered around whether knowledge concerning someone's sexual orientation is appropriate or necessary when trying to appreciate his/her artwork. Some students argued that the video misrepresented Haring, his life, and his artwork. Other students suggested they did not need to know about the private aspects of an artist's life to understand or appreciate his/her art. Issues of censorship and self-censorship arose as did issues of survival, truth, identity, compromise, and integrity.

Working Toward What?

Papusa Molina, a feminist writer, suggests that we are not aware of the many times we participate and, with our daily actions, maintain a system that distributes rewards based on gender, age, class, sexual orientation, religious/cultural background, physical, and mental ability, etc. Is it any wonder art educators utilize videos and texts which reinforce the status quo?

Is it any wonder why the field of art education continues to possess a peripherally low status in schools? Do the silences of art educators endorse the violence and intolerance toward diversity? To date, the National Art Education Association has fostered little support or actions in AIDS education or other social issues involving discrimination, though the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers have gone on record condemning discriminations based on sexual orientation.

Gay and lesbian "visions" are sites of contestation and intervention in art. Discussion and space to facilitate reflection and action are essential toward rethinking, re-evaluating and relearning other ways of acting, saying, knowing, and appreciating. Lucy Lippard (1990) suggests that one's lived experience, respectfully related to that of others, remains for her and perhaps for all of us, the best foundation for social vision, that incorporates the best in art.

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