

A Magazine for Colorado's Art Educators

Collage

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Inside

Chains that Bind
Art That Gives Voice
Empty Bowls

Healing Arts: An Essential Element

CAEA 2000 Exhibit
Columbine Since April 20th
CAEA Election Results
... and much more!

IN THIS ISSUE

	Page
Notes from the President	2
Looking Ahead: Fall Conference 2000	4
Columbine Since April 20th.	5
New Website for Cherry Creek Arts Festival	7
Art That Gives Voice	8
Scholastics Exhibition and Awards	13
Empty Bowls	14
CAEA 2000 Exhibit	16
Special Pullout Section:	
Events and Important Dates	18
Executive Board & Representative Council	19-20
CAEA Membership Form	21
Presentation/Workshop Proposal Form	22
News from Around Colorado	23
Healing Arts... An Essential Element	25
Lesson Plan: Three-Dimensional Box Design	26
A Sampling of Summer School Offerings	30
Resource Review	31
Chains that Bind: The Challenges Facing Women.	32
NAEA News.	34
Representative Council Election Results	35



Cover: Artwork by John Mulnix II, a student at Liberty Commons School.
Max Rich is the student teacher at Liberty Commons, CAEA Student Chapter.

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stances is not a result of a style adopted knowingly in relation to other styles, but an expression of the urgency to communicate conditioned by existing material realities (meaning both art materials and the artist's access to technique). For these artists—child artists, adolescent artists, innocent artists—it is always inadequate, but often from the audience's point of view this naivete is also the bearer of a precious, fresh perception.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Thirty years after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a broadcaster at a Nagasaki television station proposed to the management that the company invite viewers who survived the bombings to record their memories through art and send in their responses. The station was overwhelmed with over 2,200 works of art. The images "were almost unbearable to look at, such as is their intensity and directness. What they make one feel about the possibility of nuclear war or accident hardly needs to be put into words" (Brett, 1982, p. 114).

There have been numerous attempts to portray the carnage and grief of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. These attempts by historians, artists, and actors—in essence observers—interpret these horrific events as opposed to living through them. Haunted by the severity, the survivors make no attempt to present an "overall view" or try to "sum up" the event. As a result of actually living through the event, the work, unpolished and innocent, is personal and specific. It concentrates on the facts of the experience.

The art work from the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is overpowering—not because it looks inward—but because it looks to record and share what was experienced. Experienced, not in the form of presenting the viewer with information, but providing the audience with a way to feel the events encountered by the artists.

The Power of Art To Give Voice - YA/YA and Tim Rollins + K.O.S.

Paulo Friere (1970, 1996) notes that often efforts to help the marginalized, are in response to viewing them as objects needing assistance. Objectifying the marginalized denies them their humanity. Instead, he suggests, the approach should be one of problem posing. "Problem posing bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality...it affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming" (Friere, 1996, p. 65). This process, if you will, allows those who feel like they have no voice—no way to be acknowledged by the dominant culture—to become participants in the culture. Allowed to "have a voice through the making of art," human beings can leave what Freire (1996) describes as the "culture of silence."

I have had the opportunity to study and work with two groups of artists involved with "giving voice" to marginalized adolescents. The first, Young Aspirations/Young Artists (YA/YA), was founded when local New Orleans' artist Jana Napoli invited students from Rabouin High School to work in her studio, which was located near the high school. Tired of neighboring business people's disparaging remarks about the mostly African-American students at Rabouin, Napoli was determined to establish a relationship with the students she encountered everyday. With eight students, Napoli organized an exhibition of their paintings of historic New Orleans buildings and invited city and business officials to the opening. When all the paintings sold she realized the potential for using art to promote the students' self-esteem, to teach entrepreneurial skills, and to develop positive attitudes towards education—in fact, she was leading them to the "process of becoming."

The work that YA/YA is best known for developed shortly after the opening with the donation of several secondhand chairs, tables, and chifforobes which the students painted with vibrant colors and bold designs. But the work is much more than just "decorated" furniture. As Claudia Barker (1996) wrote "when Jana told the YA/YAs to paint their hopes and dreams, she not only

gave them an assignment, she gave them permission to search their souls for an experience and a set of feelings that could be made into art. It is that depth of feeling that makes the YA/YA work seem so vivid and alive" (p. 20).

YA/YA now bills itself as a non-profit arts and social service organization. Under the direction of Napoli, practicing artists head the furniture workshops, the print workshop, and a retail gallery. Structured after the medieval artisan system and the modern Arts and Crafts Movement, students in YA/YA begin at the entry level, progress to apprentice and eventually apply for guild membership. With the growth of the program, a fourth level has been initiated to include alumni students—those presently enrolled in college. The workshop moves students into mainstream culture. In their interactions with artists and corporate clients and through travel, YA/YAs build their confidence and learn to maneuver through different cultures without compromising their own beliefs and histories. The workshop provides the means for these adolescents to bring voice to the mainstream and demonstrate that their voices have value.

Similarly, Tim Rollins, a former special education and art teacher from the South Bronx, has worked tirelessly with students categorized as "learning disabled," "dyslexic," "emotionally handicapped," and "neurologically brain-impaired." To enable them to succeed in the traditional educational system, Rollins created Kids Of Survival (K.O.S.), to empower adolescents through education. The central premise of his workshop is to get his students to read by choosing books with themes of strug-

gle; themes that speak to his students' own lives. Teaching kids how to make and appreciate art that is "political, beautiful, and accessible" (Fairbrother, 1989, p. 75) is Rollins' ongoing concern and primary motivation. It is symbolic that K.O.S. enter the Museum of Modern Art—their work is in its permanent collection—through the front door, as artists, not through the Education Department as participants in a high school program. Such an act demonstrates that these young adults have a voice—a voice to be recognized and carefully listened to by others. For example, a noted painting based on Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, a story of guilt and shame, provides a vehicle for students to examine how and why they are labeled "underprivileged or disadvantaged" and how they can use art to transform a stigma of shame into a symbol of pride. Rollins + K.O.S. have moved their work beyond the South Bronx, involving themselves with community-based projects throughout the world.

Author and educator Nicholas Paley (1995) suggests that children and adolescents are often looked at as having little to contribute. Yet they need to have their voices heard and acknowledged in a technological society and educational system that increasingly promotes conformity and standardization leading to a "culture of silence." The work created by these groups allows participants to gain a sense of worth as well as access to the dominant culture. Although what emerges from the K.O.S. studio are collaborative finished pieces, the individual is never negated. The participants "own" their images. Personalities are encouraged.

Night and Day



The Right to Ownership and Voice

Lowenfeld has contended that art is a way to learn, to understand the world we occupy, not something to learn. Art can provide the means to understand the emotional, physical, social, and psychological. The artist Robert Irwin has suggested that too often we live life on the periphery, our

to 11 •••••➔

understanding grounded in abstractions rather than perception. And in his article "Why Do We Teach Art Today?" Richard Siegesmund (1998) considers the following:

To expand empirical knowledge to include art, and moving art into the mainstream of disciplined inquiry, may require art to move down from its pedestal. It can no longer claim to be a discrete, objectified realm of knowing outside of rationality or an intelligence adjacent to cognition. Neither is it a neutral instrument for creating social self-awareness. It is, however, a realm of feeling, sensory concepts, and exquisitely varied forms of human representation that give us insight in what it means to be in, relate to, and comprehend. Or, even more succinctly, to have knowledge of the world (p. 212).

Years ago I taught art at a large suburban high school. The school had approximately 2,200 students and the art department four full-time art teachers. During my last year at that school I had a group of Art II students, many of whom had a social problems class before my class. Often they would enter the art room deep in conversation—talking about the inequity of world food distribution, abortion, the Holocaust, capital punishment—and often much of our class time was spent immersed in continuing their conversations. One day I proposed to the class that they give voice to their concerns by creating a piece of art reflecting their thinking on a topic of their choice. Students were encouraged to write about the issue beforehand as a way to internally develop the image and to use materials and techniques that best allowed their work to "communicate its intended meaning."

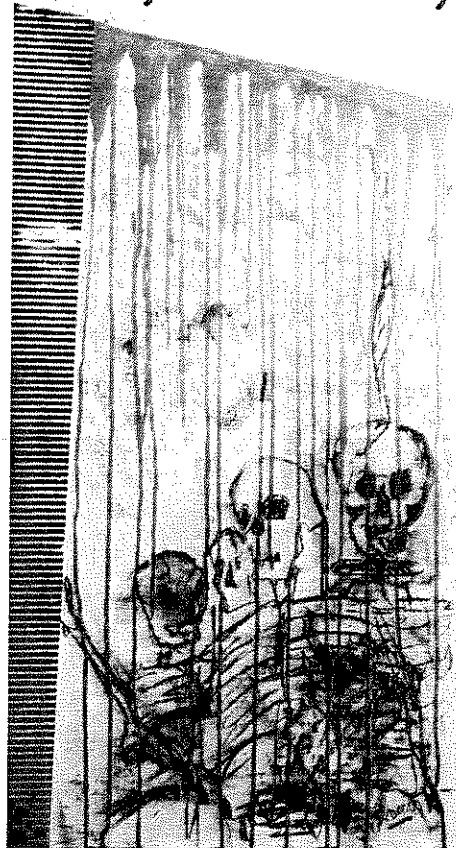
The art created by these students (shown in the photographs accompanying this article) was as diverse and "opinionated" as the topics explored by them. Writing about the relationship between races in the United States one student wrote:

Night and Day are unique and individual. They are separate but one cannot exist without the other. Their power is equal. Some believe Day is more important than Night, but without Night, Day would never rest. When they meet at dawn, the sky is not divided between the two - but a mixture of brilliant lights that fills the sky. The struggle between Night and Day will last an eternity.

Another student considered:

Destiny of the Guilty deals with the controversial subject of capital punishment. The future of the imprisoned is twisted with the chains of fate. Each carries a ball and chain of uncertainty and fear while they cautiously creep around the corner, not knowing when they will meet face to face with the Mistress of Death.

Destiny of the Guilty



Student's interpretations were lyrical and often mysterious. Their use of metaphor and analogy was carefully considered in their writing and in the media chosen to make their intentions more concrete.

The exemplars presented demonstrate the importance of sharing "conversations about things that matter to their participants" (Bellah et al., in Zurmuehlen, 1987, p. 142). In reflecting on this point in my career as a teacher of art, I

acknowledge the strength and power of what my students taught me as they created their art. Zurmuehlen (1990) stresses that students must be considered originators, transformers, and reclaimers of experience—a way by which they are given voice. She writes:

...Students can be originators: intending, acting, realizing, and reintending, combining critical reflection and action to constitute a praxis of art. They can be transformers as well, symbolically transfiguring the idiosyncratic meanings of their life experiences into presentation symbols of art. And they can be reclaimers of phenomenal presence, attending to what usually is taken for granted and, in validating their subjective perceptions, they can understand that "seeing" is an aesthetic determination, we make it happen...we participate in the sense of once...now...then...that shape our individual and collective life stories (pp. 64-65).

To give voice to students, to engage in dialogue is—especially at this point in educational reform—necessary for our students well-being. Standardization and an over-emphasis on testing with a focus on test scores rather than the test takers leads to the kind of "silencing" referred to by Freire. And Eisner (1998) makes the plea that schools must move beyond "conceptually dense and emotionally eviscerated abstractions to forms of representation that utilize all the senses to help students learn..."(p. 29). In the battle of reform and its emphasis on banking education (with the teacher "depositing" information into the student), too often the reason for schools-our students-are overlooked and their voices ignored. It is time to reconsider where "reform" is truly taking us. ❖

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- Editor's Note: The photographs accompanying this article show art work created by students in Patrick Fahey's Art II high school class.*

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