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## ARTICLE

**Shaking Them Up: Aesthetics in Social Foundations of Education**

Mary Bushnell Greiner

“How are we going to shake them up?” This is the question Maxine asked me as she and I planned a summer course for K-12 teachers as part of Summer Session 2007 at the Lincoln Center Institute for the Arts in Education. It’s a variation on the questions that permeate all of my conversations with Maxine: How can we understand another’s experience? How do we move out of complacency? How do we enact and live transformations? How do we move away from prefabricated images and meanings to joyously birthing our own selves through our interactions with art and ideas? How do we shake ourselves up?

In addition to her roles as a Teachers College professor, prolific and provocative writer, inspiring member of the academy, past president of the American Educational Studies Association and American Educational Research Association, and caring neighbor, Maxine has also been the philosopher-in-residence at the Lincoln Center Institute since its inception nearly 30 years ago. As LCI’s philosopher-in-residence, Maxine’s lectures, writings, and presence have had a profound impact on generations of New York City teachers. Each year, these teachers return to work with extraordinary Teaching Artists who journey with them in explorations of works of art, including Richard Serra’s building-sized sculptures at Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), the theatrical performance *Fly* (2009) about the Tuskegee Airmen, and modern classical music. They also return for Maxine’s lectures. Teachers recount how thrilled they are to hear someone (and not just anyone, but a renowned professor) affirm the importance of art for education and for lived experience. This is something they know in their hearts, or in their own personal experiences, because they devour novels, delight in ballet, revel in a musical performance, or return to a favorite painting. Despite their personal commitments to art, they hesitate to bring it into their classrooms because they have been carefully trained (often by us) to submerge and deny the importance of art in favor of the perceived greater necessities of a structured schooling system. They return each summer to hear Maxine remind them that art is central to our lives and our possibilities, as individuals and in community with others.

In a recent issue of *Rethinking Schools*, Heidi Tolentino (2007) tells of her African-American high school student who rejected the intention of a white student to understand African-Americans’ experiences with voter registration in the 1950s. The white student was taking the voter registration exam in a timed 10-minute session in her own named effort “to feel what it was like” for African-Americans who risked livelihood, family, and sometimes their lives to register to vote. In response to her voiced intention, an African-American student countered, “You can never know what it’s like. White people can never know what we went through.” Both students, I feel, experienced a failure of imagination that, I suggest, might have been rebuilt through experiences with art. I believe the African-American student was communicating that to understand the oppression of Blacks and their struggles in the Civil Rights movement requires more than knowing the facts. You have to know what it felt like in its emotional impact and its somatic impact. Works of art can foster that kind of rich aesthetic experience, as artworks are the manifestations of individual and collective experiences.

I want to take these learnings from and experiences with Maxine and use them to challenge all of us as education scholars, and particularly those of us who are social foundationists. To restate the question she asked me about our students, how can we shake ourselves up? I ask further, how do we engage in honest dialogues with one another as academics so that we can understand others’ lived experiences? Where are aesthetics within social foundations of education today? Stacy Otto (2007) gives a glimpse of how art can be central to our comprehension of others’ experiences when she examines the last paintings of Édouard Manet and uses them as a springboard for considering grief, mourning, and loss as experienced by today’s students. Through art, she is able to engage herself and her audience in the emotional and somatic experience of mourning and loss in a way that theory and data could not approach alone.

In my own work (Bushnell Greiner, 2004) I have been exploring my teacher education students’ learning through aesthetic education. What pedagogical growth might emerge from encounters with a performance such as *Twilight: Los Angeles* by Deavere Smith (1992) or the visual art of Jacob Lawrence? I have been invigorated by watching my students move out of their familiar classroom behaviors as they create a sculpture, or thoughtfully pay close attention to a classmate’s movement in response to a line of music. Nevertheless, my deep understanding of the possibilities of art emerged only when I spent extensive time with works of art at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. Immediately preceding and then following September 11, 2001, I carefully attended to two works of art, and was astonished by how my transactions with the artworks were radically altered because of the transformed context of how I lived in the world. When the veneer of certainty and safety cracked, art became my means of navigating the awfulness of ambiguities in which our world has always existed.

Art invites multiple interpretations and, just as importantly, re-interpretations over time and in different contexts. Social foundations scholars are continually trying to engage with the experiences of others, whether they are our students, research participants, colleagues, or the otherness of other analyses. We endeavor to remain open to ambiguities. Could we not centralize works of art in our professional analytical lives as a means of understanding and communicating the impact of race, class, gender and sexuality? Even more so, could we not work to keep art central in our work so that we tap into its exceptional possibilities of expressing human experience.

Art is inherently messy, in that marvelous sense of messiness that Patti Lather has spoken of (2007). Through experiences with works of art, we can “put our bodies in uncomfortable spaces,” so that we can “disrupt our own embodiment” (Lather, 2007, p. 29). Such disruptions are at the heart of cultural studies of education, which provide a means for social foundations of education scholars to locate themselves as engaged and active participants in our world (Lather, 2006). What is the meaning of a work of art? What is its meaning to our students? Our colleagues? How can we get to a place where we recognize another’s interpretation of a poem, movement in dance, a melody? Art’s meaning is ambiguous, complex, contextual – wonderfully messy – and therein lies its inexhaustible opportunities.

One of our summer students, a middle-school teacher, announced with delight, “When my students read Tillie Olsen’s short story *I Stand Here Ironing* (1988 [1961]), I’ll bring in an ironing board and iron and have them iron wrinkled shirts while they read aloud. I wonder what will happen?” I notice this teacher carries in no predetermined outcome of what experience will emerge from her plan. Instead, she creates an environment that can foster students’ explorations through, vitally, their intellect and their somatic experience. Here is a short passage from that story:

Emily. She does not smile easily, let alone almost always as her brothers and sisters do. Her face is closed and somber, but when she wants, how fluid. You must have seen it in her pantomimes, you spoke of her rare gift for comedy on the stage that rouses a laughter out of the audience so dear they applaud and applaud and do not want her to go.

Where does it come from, that comedy? There was none of it in her when she came back to me that second time, after I had had to send her away again. She had a new daddy now to learn to love, and I think perhaps it was a better time.

Except when we left her alone nights, telling ourselves she was old enough.

“Can’t you go some other time, Mommy, like tomorrow?” she would ask. “Will it be just a little while you’ll be gone? Do you promise?”

The time we came back, the front door open, the clock on the floor in the hall. She rigid awake. “It wasn’t just a little while. I didn’t cry. Three times I called you, just three times, and then I ran downstairs to open the door so you could come faster. The clock talked loud. I threw it away, it scared me what it talked” (Olsen, 1988, pp. 12-13).

In my own reading, I feel my arm moving the iron back and forth and then feel in her words Tillie Olsen’s returning, revisiting, to present to past and back again. I make new sense of the narrator’s comments, then make new sense again. The narrator’s attempts to “gather” what cannot be wholly gathered, in contrast to the cloth on the ironing board that can be tamed, subdued, made perfect. What a contrast to the inevitable imperfections of life and how we live it. But for you, these words likely take you somewhere else. Where to? And why? What if we could create a safe location in which you could follow that thread and take the rest of us with you? What if the classroom (elementary, secondary, college, or graduate) could be a place where students and their teachers can venture into unknown realms?

Early in our summer course Maxine asked, “Can you imagine living without art? What is gained or lost if we live without art?” On this occasion of honoring Maxine’s life, her contributions to education, philosophy, aesthetics, and learning, I hope we all might find new ways to center art within our lives, to nurture its value as a core instrument for the expression of human experience. To live without art would be to live a sterile, clinical life. To research and teach without art is to create classrooms that are sterile in every sense. Jeannette Winterson says, “To live for art ... is to live a life of questioning. And if you believe, as I do, that to live for art demands that every other part of life be moved towards one end, then the question ‘How shall I live?’ is fierce” (1996, p. 161). Thank you, Maxine, for all of your gifts and especially for reminding me, and so many teachers and teacher educators, to keep asking “How shall I live?” in our teaching, research, writing, and living every day.

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