

## Message from the President / *NAEA News* October 2009

### **The Arts and Public Priorities**

**If we take all the communities, peoples, classes, tribes, and nations that ever existed, we may be sure that since human nature in its native constitution is the relative constant, it cannot be appealed to, in isolation, to account for the multitude of diversities presented by different forms of association.**

—John Dewey (discussing freedom and why it is prized), *Freedom and Culture* (first published in 1939)

### **FOSTERING COMMUNITY: Cultivating K-12 Public Visual Arts Education in our American Democracy**

The arts serve a range of public purposes, and therefore are of benefit and concern to all Americans (The American Assembly, 1999). They help to shape what it means to be an American—connecting the nation’s identity to the reality of American pluralism, and in so doing advance democratic values both nationally and globally. The arts contribute to the quality of life and economic growth—enabling America to establish successful communities while increasing the nation’s prosperity. They help establish and maintain a well-informed and responsive citizenry—promoting deeper understandings about our diverse society by developing competencies both in school and at work, and by promoting the freedom to inquire in pursuit of the open exchange of ideas and values. And most importantly, I believe, the arts enhance the life of the individual by contributing to one’s potential and spirit.

#### **An Arts Agenda for America**

A broad arts agenda for our nation can be said to include innovation and creativity, economic development and job creation, and education—reflective of ways both business and industry can be served while offering students, both those who are inhabitants and those who are citizens, an education that shapes America for the future. The second of the five public purposes for the arts that Wyszomirski (2000) addresses in *The Public Life of the Arts in America* is “fostering community” (p. 60). This article continues a series on public purposes and the arts by discussing a role for the visual arts in civic dialogue. Over the course of the next several issues of *NAEA News* the remaining public purposes “contributing to prosperity, improving the quality and conditions of life, and cultivating democracy” (p. 60) will be addressed, along with their associated core values and ways of employing them to positively affect visual arts education in our nation.

#### **Fostering Community in Civic Dialogue**

The arts present a powerful force for shaping both the ethics and soul of a nation’s citizenry that can “define reality, shape the times, and give meaning to history” (Hunter, 1991, p. 225). The potential of the visual arts to make images indelible; to express challenging ideas through allegories, comparisons, and symbols; and to respond beyond the limits of verbal communication make it a powerful force for informing civic experiences (Bacon, Yuen, & Korza, 1999).

Democracy moves forward when an informed public is engaged in grassroots matters. The recent work of our Association through the actions of the Board, the Executive Staff, the membership, and NAEA's award-winning website is a testament to that practice. The exchange of civic ideas plays an essential role in moving the inertia of democracy. Democracy helps diverse groups find common ground by giving its participants multiple perspectives and allowing people to develop more complex, compassionate, and pragmatic views of each other.

This *NAEA News* President's Message discusses the need to provide communities an opportunity to overcome invisibility, similar in intent to the philosophy shared by Maxine Greene (2001) in her writing about the need to open up spaces for communicating. The results of the ideas and works of past and contemporary artists can be used to unite a cohesive, pluralistic, and spirited community if personal and civic interests coincide. Those master exemplars and the works produced by students could result in policy actions that positively impact the visual arts education of students in American public schools when conceived as reflective and thoughtful artistic problems devised by qualified visual arts teachers. Careful art problem construction and presentation may make it possible to redefine the concept of enlightened communities and, in the larger picture of both general education and art education through its programs, best serve both the development and education of the whole child through the visual arts.

### **Delivering Art Education through Structured Civic Dialogue**

Artists, past and present, have used aesthetic means to offer commentary on an issue, subject, or theme to convey a position and/or prompt others' perspectives. Their artwork establishes a dialogue about the subject depicted and serves to heighten viewers' consciousness about complex ideas. Public actions sometimes result—either from the artwork itself, or the artistic behaviors and processes in which the artist engaged while producing the work. Communication can be improved across cultural divides, and in best cases people become passionate to the degree that they cause a change in policy (Bacon, et al., 1999). Negative behaviors can be diminished as a result of the work of artists. I've often wondered what momentum it would add to our advocacy efforts and ultimately changes in national policies for arts education if the work of established artists documented the need for a comprehensive and sustained art education for America's students.

In April 2010, Vanessa Lopez, NAEA National Convention Coordinator, will initiate a 'talk back' series of sessions within the program planned for the NAEA Baltimore Convention (see Convention, p. 1).

Similar methods of inquiry offering opportunities for dialogue have been used to structure civic dialogue for the arts. (See Typical Points of Opportunity chart at end of this article.)

Strong opportunities for civic dialogue are dependent upon leadership and facilitation that offer participants the comfort to engage in conversation, artmaking that offers them a chance for discovery through experience with media and processes, and sustained conversation beyond the short term that accommodates differences in focus and perspectives among the public involved (Bacon, et al., 1999). Personal and public art stemming from these kinds of dialogue often helps both participants and viewers discern identity and launch equity or tolerance for pluralism, and results in a community that can boast of

civic pride (Wyszomirski, 2000). Therefore, what is provided through broad and carefully structured civic dialogue can offer a better quality of human experience with the people we know in the places we live.

### **Quality Civic Dialogue and Art Teacher Training**

Linda Louis, an assistant professor of art education in the School of Education Brooklyn College, describes an ongoing collaboration documented in 2001 with students in the course “Teaching the Creative Arts” to an audience of undergraduate early childhood majors:

In the studio component of this course, students make their own art and discover, as their future pupils will, that visual ideas are often informed by the medium itself. As they explore the properties, possibilities, and limitations of paint or clay, students become consciously aware that materials have expressive qualities as well as physical properties. This simple but profound realization—that physical actions on materials have expressive as well as visual consequences—helps to demystify the art-making process and makes it clear to students that convincing visual images rely on more than simple verisimilitude. (Louis, 2005, p. 165)

Addressing meaning and purpose along with production in this collaborative training for future teachers underscores the fact that art employed to deepen the experience and meaning through civic dialogue can both enrich and enhance the process.

### **Implications of Collaboration for Public Schooling**

In the Lowenfeld Lecture this past spring, Olivia Gude eloquently described the development of self-awareness in students and their potential as citizens in a democratic society:

Let us begin with a Lowenfeldian affirmation of the importance of early and recurring experiences of art education rooted in individual self-awareness and free exploration (1952). A child gains a sense of [himself] by freely playing with materials, images, and ideas. Paradoxically, immersion in the sensuous materials of the world allows the child to vividly experience his/her separate self, his/her uniquely personal idiom of feeling and making. Of course, what is important here is not ultimately the uniqueness of the artistic product, but rather the deeply felt connection between self, process, and product. The child develops the capacity for nuanced attention to the world and to his/her interactions with the material world. This attentiveness is not based in fear or wariness of the world, but in wonder and awareness of the potential to act and interact with the world. (Gude, 6/22/09, personal communication)

Like Gude, both Greene (2001) and Lowenfeld (1952) uncover the learner’s need to become an individual in order to have the capacity to function with agency and passion in a community and ultimately to contribute to the nation in which they live. Can a community of common people be created in an open and pluralistic world and survive? If given an education in the visual arts, yes it can.

### **Stripping Away the Darkness**

In the lobby of 30 Rockefeller Plaza, a team of six conservators will for the next 2 years methodically remove decades of yellowed varnish from lobby murals dating from the late 1930s. The murals are based on the theme “New Frontiers,” encompassing aspects of a modern society: science, labor, education, travel, communication, humanitarianism, finance, and spirituality (Vogel, 2009). They were painted by American muralists: immigrants to the US from all nations.

Just as artists in the 1930s created murals depicting democratic ideals, contemporary artists work in comparable ways. Their work can be used to discuss and respond to the notion of fostering community and can be found on urban walls around the nation. Octavio and Gustavo Pandolfo, Portuguese twin brothers who call themselves *Os Gêmeos*, have heightened graffiti art to Rococo style with their first public artwork in Manhattan. It is an epic narrative mural, 17 feet high and 51 feet long, located at the corner of Houston Street and the Bowery, that will remain up through March 2010. It attempts to transport community viewers to a world above and beyond the subways (Smith, 2009).

The third and fourth seasons of *Art: 21/Art in the 21st Century* (2005, 2007) offered viewers an opportunity to meet artists, see their work, understand why it was made, and in some ways engage the viewer in the notion of fostering community. *21* includes images from Alfredo Jaar, whose work comments on real life events and the paradoxes they can present; Mike Kelley, whose work recounts the nature of the rituals of schooling through performance and the architecture sometimes planned to force it to happen; the work of artist Inigo Manglana-Ovalle, that investigates the connection between culture, the science surrounding DNA, and the control we have over the places we live; and the collaborations of Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, that question the need for vulnerability of the self to surroundings in order to effect change and the logic of civil disobedience. I encourage you to look at their artwork and consider ways to engage colleagues, students, and stakeholders in a dialogue about the ways in which art education offers a visual forum for both civic and personal conceptions of community in our American democracy.

### **Next Installment to the Arts and Public Priorities/Contributing to Prosperity**

In my next President's Message, I will build upon ways discussed in the first two installments to show ways—as in the slogan of new NEA Chairman Rocco Landesman—‘Art works.’ Landesman explains, “The words are meant to highlight both art’s role as an economic driver and the fact that people who work in the arts are themselves a critical part of the economy” (Pogrebin, 2009). Consideration will be given to ways study in the visual arts can promote opportunities for the individual and strengthen its presence in American schooling.

### **Organizational Awareness**

- Members can expect to engage in or learn more about the following from the Board or members of the Executive Staff over the coming months:
- Status of NAEA policy revisions and position statements about art educators, students, and relationships, and work underway to address curriculum, instruction, and assessment
- Consideration of endorsing ideas related to 21st-Century Skills and a response to the Department of Education’s call for applications for *Race to the Top* funds—both in collaboration with MENC
- Nominations received for regional Vice-Presidential candidates and a ballot for members’ consideration
- A call for white papers to expand upon ideas discussed in *Learning in a Visual Age* to be reviewed by the PMC
- Opportunities for co-sponsored academies that offer professional development through studio practice as a means to inform pedagogy

- Results of the NAEA Board of Directors meeting in Baltimore, MD at the end of November via the NAEA website
- The need for ‘each one to ask one’ as a means for increasing the NAEA membership-at-large

**R. Barry Shauck, NAEA President**

College of Fine Arts, School of Visual Arts, Boston University  
617-884-1248; fax 617-353-7217  
bshauck@arteducators.org

### **Recommended Reading/Viewing**

- Art: 21/Art in the twenty-first century.* (2001). New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- Art: 21/Art in the twenty-first century/Seasons One and Two* (DVD video). (2003). PBS Home Video.
- Art: 21/Art in the twenty-first century/Season Three* (DVD video). (2005). PBS Home Video.
- Art: 21/Art in the twenty-first century/Season Four* (DVD video). (2007). PBS Home Video.
- Bacon, B., Yuen, C., & Korza, P. (1999). *Animating democracy: The artistic imagination as a force in civic dialogue*. Washington, DC: Americans for the Arts.
- Greene, M. (1965, 2007). *The public school and the private vision*. New York: The New Press.
- Greene, M. (2001). *Variations on a blue guitar*. New York: Teachers College Press.

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- Art: 21/Art in the twenty-first century/Season Three.* (2005). New York: Harry N. Abrams.
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- Greene, M. (2001). *Variations on a blue guitar*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hunter, J. (1991). *Culture wars: The struggle to define America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Louis, L. (2005). *The teacher education collaborative: An art educator's perspective*. In M. F. Holzer, & S. Noppe-Brandon (Eds), *Community in the making: Lincoln Center Institute, the arts, and teacher education* (pp. 163-174). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lowenfeld, V. (1952). *Creative and mental growth*, 2nd edition. New York: Macmillan.
- Pogrebin, R. (August 4, 2009). A world springs to life on an urban wall. *The New York Times*. Retrieved August 4, 2009, from [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/08/arts/08rocco.html?\\_r=3&hpw](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/08/arts/08rocco.html?_r=3&hpw)
- Smith, R. (August 7, 2009). New endowment chairman sees arts as economic engine. *The New York Times*. Retrieved August 7, 2009, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/04/arts/design/04mural.html>
- The American Assembly, Columbia University. (1999). *Deals & ideals: For profit and not-for-profit arts connections*. Arden House, Harriman, NY: David H. Mortimer.
- Vogel, C. (July 27, 2009). Stripping away the darkness as murals are reborn. *The New York Times*. Retrieved July 27, 2009, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/27/arts/design/27rockefeller.html>
- Wyszomirski, M. (2000). Raison d'etat, raisons des arts: Thinking about public purposes. In Joni Cherbo & Margaret Wyszomirski (Eds), *The public life of the arts in America* (pp. 50-78). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

## Typical Points of Opportunity and Methods of Dialogue

Stage	Points in the Development of an Artistic Work	Activities and Forums for Civic Dialogue
<b>Design and Planning</b>	The artist, curator, presenter or organization seeks input and participation from partners or collaborators, which includes dialogue about issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Advisory groups</li> <li>● Interviews and focus groups</li> <li>● Public forums</li> <li>● Partner meetings</li> </ul>
<b>Research</b>	Artists and curators seek contextual information that stimulates dialogue about issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Interviews</li> <li>● Story circles; oral histories</li> <li>● Meetings with community agencies</li> </ul>
<b>Artistic Creation and Development</b>	Artists and curators involve the public or targeted segments of the public in making the art or designing the event/exhibit; or the public is invited to interact with the artist on the work-in-progress. Feedback from the public may alter the artwork or creation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Studio workshops</li> <li>● Residency activities</li> <li>● Lecture/demonstrations</li> </ul>
<b>Pre-Presentation</b>	Before a performance or viewing of a film or exhibition, the audience is engaged in dialogue about relevant issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Facilitated discussions</li> <li>● Related programs offered in advance</li> </ul>
<b>Presentation</b>	The actual presentation offers an opportunity for public engagement on issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Individuals are participants in presentation</li> <li>● Interactive exhibition or presentations</li> </ul>
<b>Post-Presentation</b>	After a performance or viewing of a film or exhibition, audiences are engaged in dialogue about relevant issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Facilitated discussions</li> <li>● Panel discussions</li> <li>● Call-in shows</li> </ul>
<b>Distribution</b>	The work is distributed via touring, publication, media adaptation, etc., offering further opportunity for dialogue about issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Video or broadcast showings with facilitated discussions</li> <li>● Communication via interactive media (such as the Internet)</li> <li>● Touring</li> </ul>