Finding Art’s Place
Experiments in Contemporary Education and Culture

Nicholas Paley
Finding Art’s Place
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Acknowledgments

As in many books, the writing here initially looks backward in time. Two decades ago, during my very first week of graduate study at the University of Wisconsin, I had the good occasion to be assigned Michael Apple as a mentor for coursework in curriculum and instruction. It is he who stands in my memory as the first professor who took seriously the status of the artistic as a critical variable in educational thinking and practice. In his classes and seminars, he variously assigned or referenced the writings of Dwayne Huebner, Maxine Greene, Rudolf Arnheim—specifically inviting students to consider the kinds of understandings their work brought to bear on educational study. He privileged the work of practicing artists by discussing them in class. He talked about (and exhibited) Norman McLaren’s experimental films. He spoke admiringly of the work of Käthe Kollwitz. Coming almost directly from
undergraduate school, where I had studied art and art history, I found such views welcoming. In fact, I found them surprising. In time, I came to recognize how rare these views were, for much of my other coursework that year focused on the empirical and the objective: thinking as straightline, clearline. Perhaps even more to my benefit, though, was how he provided the opportunities (as well as the resources) for students to struggle with articulating how the artistic is a question for the educational through academic projects that invited experimentation with the multiple ways that knowledge might be produced. While a considerable emphasis along these lines was accorded to exploring the languages and inventive possibilities of filmmaking, he was always open to and supportive of other forms of artistic production. That this book appears at all is, in large part, due to this kind of long-standing intellectual encouragement. Michael Apple encouraged his students to take risks, and by so doing, opened spaces for an imagination of difference before such practice became a name.

Other people and institutions helped make this book possible. Special thanks need to be given to Tim Rollins, and Nelson Savinon, Carlos Rivera, Angel Abreu, Victor Llanos, and the late Christopher Hernandez of K.O.S. for their ongoing cooperation in this project. Their studio was always open to visit and they were readily available to discuss their work, often during the most hectic days of last minute preparation to meet exhibition openings or deadlines. They graciously answered any question about their method of artistic/educational practice at any time. Many thanks also to Jim Hubbard, Linda Posell, Marie Moll, and Rachel Clark at The Shooting Back Education and Media Center in Washington, D.C., which was the focus of my inquiry of this multi-sited project; and the children at the New Community Center—in particular, William Cawthorne, Angie Campbell, Tameka Atkinson, Sabrina Greeley, Savon MacLemore, and Michael Sesay, who welcomed me into their photography group with interest and zest; and the volunteers and staff at Shooting Back who provided continuous support for this project. Three original members of the Shooting Back project, Dion Johnson, Charlene Williams, and Daniel Hall, found time to talk about their former and current work when they were busy with many school and community projects. I am indebted to them for their openness and also to their mentor, Ella McCall-Haygan, who also found space in her schedule to discuss their work with me. The staff at the Video Data Bank in Chicago, especially Ayanna Udongo and Mindy Faber, were most helpful in providing the primary visual documentation and background material about the work of Sadie Benning. The paintings of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. that are displayed in this book are courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery; Ron Warren was responsible for extending the loan of their visual documentation to accommodate revised publication schedules. Overall, this project benefited greatly from the support of all these individuals. Without their assistance, this book could not have been produced.

I received much good advice from readers within the academy who commented on various parts of the book as it progressed. It is certainly not their fault that I didn’t always act on their thoughtful suggestions. Paul Shumaker read and
then outlined crucial revisions on an early version of the theoretical framework for this project, providing models for thinking about initial conceptual organization. Joel Taxel made suggestions that supported the accent on the artistic when I was less than certain of its effectiveness. Janice Jipson read and reread the entire manuscript in its many versions; eventually, I couldn’t ignore her repeated recommendations to (“for the hundredth, thousandth, billionth time”) follow my inclinations in constructing a book that would experiment with disciplined systems of analytic practice, that would push ideas of artistic representation of educational issues to their limits. Her understandings and insights also served as a reminder that such textual production was not an expression of an oppositional standpoint, but one of difference and independent affirmation. Kari Lokke, who was simultaneously engaged in exploring the politics of writing in her own scholarship, provided long distance clarification and intuitive support. My colleague at George Washington University, Linda Mauro, examined nearly every word of every idea with her intelligent eye; often her suggestions for textual improvement were lengthier than the manuscript in question itself. My students at George Washington University, particularly Honora Mara, Louise Brooks, K.B. Basseches, and Bill Ritter variously read and critiqued selected versions of the chapters on Tim Rollins and K.O.S. and Sadie Benning; their critical observations helped considerably in the shaping of the present versions of these chapters. Maxine Freund, department chair, was supportive of this project throughout; her administrative decisions cleared valuable spaces and time for writing which made it possible for the book to be completed within most editorial deadlines. I am also indebted to George Washington University for granting a sabbatical leave which supported the completion of this book.

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Last, many, many thanks to my editor, Jayne Fargnoli, who initially saw promise in this project and then determinedly, skillfully guided it through the multiple stages of its evolution and production. Her patience, editorial suggestions, and expert direction over a three-year period were absolutely instrumental to this project’s completion.

Beyond these acknowledgements, or perhaps because of them, I have come to recognize the deeply interconnected nature of authorship. The writing is really many writings. Imagination goes all the way round.
Dedication

For all the children and young people who struggle to find a place for art in their lives and in their communities.

All royalties from Finding Art’s Place: Experiments in Contemporary Education and Culture will go, in equally divided amounts, to the Art and Knowledge Workshop, Sadie Benning, Shooting Back Education and Media Center, and Dion and Friends.
There have to be disciplines, yes, and a growing acquaintance with the structures of knowledge; but, at once, there have to be the kinds of grounded interpretations possible only for those willing to abandon "already constituted reason," willing to feel and to imagine, to open the windows and go in search.

—Maxine Greene

*Reflections from the Heart of Educational Inquiry*, 1991

Questions of whether children and youth have anything to contribute to a society’s cultural capital are customarily so self-answering that any other view of the issue seems startling. Familiar educational notions have traditionally identified young people as “students” or “pupils,” locating them in passive cultural roles where—under varying conditions of supervision—they are expected to serve a kind of apprenticeship, gaining the skills, dispositions, and knowledge that the adults of a given society deem important for them to possess. It is only at some later chronological point, after they have demonstrated a certain level of accomplishment, that youngsters are permitted to engage (albeit differently on the basis of ability, appearance, gender, color, and class) in the various tasks of cultural practice. During their early years, however, those domains of culture associated with the making of discourses,
histories, and systems of representation are, for the most part, a closed case. In the economies of cultural production, the years of childhood are only a bridge to a future time.

Such essentialized ideas about the construction of cultural meanings, the agency of children and youth, and the politics of imagination are currently being challenged by a small number of unrelated, non-school projects asymmetrically located across the contemporary social landscape. It is precisely at these sites—situated primarily in what are thought to be the shadowed zones of metropolitan areas—that a number of children and youth, working independently or in collaboration with adults and/or each other, are struggling with the realities of imaginative and cultural production through the varied energies of the arts. On the basis of conventional assessment procedures, many of the young people involved in these projects would be assigned to the lowest groups in their classrooms. Outside the academy, their work provides alternate indices of their capacities.

I came across what may be the longest-lived of these projects unexpectedly in January, 1987, reading a review in *Artforum* about an exhibition in New York of the artistic/cultural/educational work of Tim Rollins (an artist and former South Bronx junior-high-school teacher) and K.O.S., or Kids of Survival (a group of teenagers from that part of the city). From this review, I learned that Rollins and K.O.S. worked together in an after-school project called the Art and Knowledge Workshop, where they collaborated to explore the various connections between literature/art and their daily lives in the South Bronx. A key part of this collaboration was reading classic works of world literature and then transforming them into visual works of art. Using texts as widely divergent as Franz Kafka’s *Amerika*, Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, and Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* as a starting point, Rollins and K.O.S. would read these books together, discuss their various meanings, then literally tear them apart, using their pages as a base upon which they would then paint a series of images that related the books’ meanings to their own lives. I later learned that one of the results of this collaboration was an ongoing series of paintings which were regularly shown in gallery spaces and major exhibitions nationwide.

I recall being immediately attracted to their work. As a teacher educator exploring links between education and the arts in areas beyond those Cameron McCarthy has identified as “the current privileged theoretical and political concerns of the imperial center” (or, first-world, school-based studies), I particularly liked how their project brought forward “peripheral” experiences and voices, articulating them into artworks of unusual impact and power. Even though the review in *Artforum* only hinted at the paintings’ visual complexity, I found their presentation deeply compelling, and active with urgent, complex meaning. I was also struck by how Rollins and K.O.S.’s collaboration seemed to forge connections across a plurality of forces not generally addressed by formal pedagogy: impulses related to the political and the poetic, the ideal and the intuitive, the canonic and the contemporary, making and breaking—“learning and burning” (Rollins’s expression).
It was during this time that I also became aware of other sites where similar individual and group projects were taking place. Because it is in the city where I work, I learned about Jim Hubbard and his efforts in photography with homeless and “at risk” children in Washington, D.C. at the Shooting Back Education and Media Center. I also heard about “Voices From the Streets,” an acting troupe of inner-city children and adults in Washington, D.C. whose performances were linked to a socially active agenda. The staff at Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago told me about the complex, diaristic video productions of Sadie Benning, a high-school dropout from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, who used a Fisher-Price Pixelvision toy video camera to explore her emerging sexual identity and the visual possibilities of self-definition. It was at the Video Data Bank at the School of the Art Institute also in Chicago that I came across the work of Branda Miller (a video artist, curator, and editor), video projects that engage city youth in actively examining issues such as drug use, teenage pregnancy, and school attendance. On a less defined terrain, I also encountered the cultural interruptions and fugitive iconographies of the graffiti artists. Most recently, I heard of Wendy Ewald’s work in teaching children from low-income backgrounds to use photography to document their lives, families, and neighborhoods.

Perhaps it was the very peripherality of these projects that made them stand out so insistently. Provisional in terms of life-span, generally unconnected to the disciplined specificities of conventional school knowledge and practice, and located in the shifting interstices of contemporary urban life, their existence placed into abrupt relief many of the mainstream objectives prescribed for children and youth by official educational representatives: notions like performance-based learning, isolated subject mastery, attaining an economic edge, finding a competitive niche, meeting Goals 2000. Measured against the contours of this “high-end” talk were the energies of languages that seemed, educationally speaking, overlooked, ignored, left out.

Artistically, several of these projects had, like Rollins and K.O.S., gained considerable critical attention. The photographs by homeless children in Jim Hubbard’s “Shooting Back” were shown in a major exhibition in Washington, D.C., then as a national and international traveling exhibition. Wendy Ewald was a recipient of a MacArthur Award in 1992. And Sadie Benning’s videotapes were screened at numerous national and international film festivals, with one of her latest works also selected for the 1993 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

The more I learned about these forces emerging outside the academy, the more their existence seemed to complicate customary definitions of children’s capacity within and across knowledge relations. In time, the complex associations related to several of these projects’ forms, textures, and occasions provoked demands in me beyond mere interest. Since little was written about them, at least from an educational perspective, I began to imagine a small collection of writings addressing their individual existence—but also speaking to issues that might be connected in ways perhaps as asymmetrically un/related as the projects themselves. At the time, I
speculated that some of these issues might include, but not be limited to, the following: the engagement of children in the construction of social and cultural materials; the kinds of representation that counted in culture and why; the place of art in children’s lives; the role of children as artists in society; and the dynamics of what the artist Elizam Escobar has thoughtfully called “the power of the imagination’s struggle.” It was along these lines that an idea for a book tentatively emerged, one that I began to see could work on differential terrain simultaneously, unevenly—even ambiguously—and one that I felt might connect many of the issues related to art and education, children and imagination, culture and politics in noncompartmentalized ways. It was from these preliminary speculations that, in late 1991, the research and writing for this book began.

From the outset, the more fundamental but perhaps less visible characteristics of this effort involved working through a paradox: How to write about these artistic interruptions without stereotyping thinking about the artistic? By this I mean, how to explore—but simultaneously maintain—the complex nature of these projects’ potential range of meanings, associations, and understandings without collapsing their energies into a closed system by consolidating them within any single language, style, or theory?

Since the reality of this question is also central to much debate in contemporary educational criticism (here I refer to the different efforts of a growing number of educators whose work resists analytic structures grounded in unified theoretical systems by targeting the ways such structures repress contradictory articulations and experiences and/or by displacing the idea of a unified analytic with critical strategies that are multiply sited and shifting), I want to key here its importance for this project, emphasizing in the next several pages the theoretical reroutings that were central to the structuring of the writing in this book. The alternative analytic and compositional arrangements to be found here are the result of a conscious decision to construct a textual orientation functioning at a slant to official narratives of educational power.

Beyond the tactical nature of these reroutings, such a move also points to important metacritical issues in educational study: namely, concerns related to the kinds of forms considered legitimate for representing knowledge (why restrict analytic expression to forms of “already constituted reason”); the character of these forms’ terms and propositions (why certain inscriptions and language systems instead of others?); the struggle to bring forward issues of spectatorship and educator identity (why continue the fiction of writer invisibility by repressing the articulation and formulation of subjectivity as a fundamental component of analytic inquiry?); and the process by which one goes about making the mechanics of such deliberations explicit and clear. In what follows, I intend to show how writing about these projects presented an opportunity for working through such issues concretely, but from perspectives that left their naming provisional. It is to an explanation of this opportunity and these interests that I now turn.
The writing in this book is constructed along the lines of several various and variously related modes of address. Broadly speaking, these multiple lines of address explore indirections. They deliberately avoid recognizable discourses of official educational traditions, whose disclosures seem frequently informed by patterns of unified narrative, forms of global thinking, and assumptions of ownership (of history and time, experience and identity, personal value and cultural development). Such totalizing approaches—characterized in a broader critical context as “the classic attempts to see everything steadily and see it whole...[from] a vertical view downward”5—have been compellingly challenged across a variety of disciplinary areas by more than a decade of important, sustained work in the different modes of poststructuralist and feminist thinking.6 Drawing support from and sympathetic to this rich body of work, I saw an opportunity to construct an analysis that would bring forward “diverse, hidden, necessary points of view”7—gestures not normally admitted in authoritative educational narratives—by accommodating critical engagements like those Nancy Miller has offered: “a process of reading through [a series of multiply positioned intertextualities], rather than towards [a sequence of serially arranged arguments leading to a fixed ideological point]...”8

More specifically, these intertextualities are constructed through the following modes of address: nonobjective artistic practice, bricolage, polyphonic voice, and the rhizomatic (this order is not hierarchical). Distinct but connected, separate but intersecting, these modes frequently interpenetrate each other’s territory, venture across each other’s boundaries, and resist analytic compartmentalization. Despite their fugitive tendencies and the dangers and difficulties inherent in specifying or containing them by definition, each of these modes of address is discussed further and separately below.

**Nonobjective Artistic Practice**

“How is educational study an issue for art?” is a question that, during the past several decades, has been differently taken up with increasing interest by a growing number of educators dissatisfied with positivist ways of talking about educational study and practice.9 Over the years, one of the most thoughtful of these individuals has been Maxine Greene, who, in many of her writings on education, has explored the power of artistic stances and their relation to educational work. Drawing on her deep engagements with the varied energies of the arts, she has repeatedly argued their importance to pedagogic theorizing and practice, perceiving such approaches as similar to “shifts of attention [which] make it possible to see from different standpoints; they stimulate the ‘wide-awakeness’ so essential to critical awareness, most particularly when they involve a move to the imaginary—away from the mundane.”10

More recently, Trinh T. Minh-ha has spoken pointedly to the requirements of explicitly linking these kinds of shifts in critical perspective to a politics of inquiry—especially when addressing modes of artistic practice:

Every artistic excursion and theoretical venture requires that boundaries be ceaselessly called to ques-
tion, undermined, modified, and reinscribed. By its politics of transformation, critical inquiry is ever compelled to look for different approaches to the aesthetic experience, different ways of relating to it without categorizing it. Different inquiry by its very inquiry; different attitudes of self through knowledge, different knowledge of the self through the selves within (without) oneself. To maintain the indeterminacy of art, criticism is bound to test its limits, to confront over and over again the legitimation of its own discourse, hence to bring about its own indeterminacy. 11

Connected to these and other 12 voices articulating the imperative to explore artistic modes of analytic representation, the writing in this book is structured as an experiment to open up the sphere of educational study to a logic of expression that “tests limits” much in the ways that the projects discussed here seem to do themselves. In claiming this intensive mode of address, I attempt to more sharply frame the question, “How is educational study an issue for art?” from a perspective that serves unregulated forces— (“to come up with something that can’t be contained, something that both formally punctures [the] existing language on the subject and then, through that hole, pours new information, provocation, and radical juxtapositions to provoke not the sympathy, but the imagination of the viewer[reader])” 13—rather than reproducing perspectives where art might serve normalizing forces that smooth out experience into objectified analytic arrangements.

The idea of developing an inquiry that resisted analytic objectification by merging educational thinking with such an artistic practice was most satisfying when I imagined it at its most open point. 14 It was at such an expressive location, however, that such an address simultaneously generated the greatest pressure—since claiming this kind of stance ran against the grain of suppositions that define disciplined analytic practice: the need to write as “a good academic”; the need “to stay within the lines”; the need to contribute to “narratives of educational tradition.” The complex tensions generated by these contradictory requirements (personal and professional, private and public, autonomous and authoritative) created a hybrid of energies that pushed open fissures in conventional frameworks of educational inquiry. “Zone[s] of possibility,” 15 Walker Percy once called these kinds of nonobjective critical opportunities. Why not make use of them? Why not exploit them?

Bricolage

Closely related to the address of nonobjective artistic practice is the notion of bricolage. Various theoretical frameworks during the twentieth century, bricolage has been encoded as an artistic strategy (initially developed by the Dadaists and Surrealists as a method that juxtaposed unrelated, incongruous elements in order to liberate understanding from the mystifications of straight-line thinking); as an anthropological concept (to describe the means whereby “primitive” cultures conceptualize and organize their environments); and recently, as a cultural term (to clarify practices, within certain youth