

Editorial: Art and Solidarity

In many countries state support for the arts is declining, for both the arts in general and for the arts in education specifically. The creative and critical thinking that often accompanies the arts is a significant asset for schools in these turbulent times. The increased social awareness and co-operation that arises from the creative juxtaposition of people from different cultures brought together under the auspices of the arts, and who are prepared to overcome traditional differences through a common endeavour, is a form of creative solidarity.

I unexpectedly discovered an historical example of this recently, where an unusual social and political configuration occurred that was to have lasting significance for the artists and students involved, and might provide a salutary insight for us today: a new book from Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Centre (2019) which is focused on the experience of the painters Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence at a summer school at the College in 1946. The figurative paintings depicted in the book are interesting and worthy of attention in their own right, and refreshed my understanding of the works of this period in America and Europe; it is an era with which I have been familiar for many years, mainly through my studies of art. However, the accounts of the summer school given in the book, in conjunction with the images the works produced by students as well established artists, created a vivid representation of the historical, social and political context of the art college that was entirely new to me. The significance of the art production became much more pronounced as I realised the context of the southern USA in the grip of 'Jim Crow' laws that forced segregation to the great disadvantage of African and Native Americans. The location of the college in Asheville, North Carolina, presented difficulties for the Lawrences, not least in the violent menace latent in the region at that time – there had recently been a lynching of a black couple – and it was with some trepidation that they accepted the invitation from Josef Albers to teach and work there for the eight week duration of the summer school. As Caro explains (2019a), the college and the summer school effectively acted as an integration experiment, and such were the sensitivities and tensions that at one point a body of the college's students were driven to create a petition demanding equality of admission and treatment of non-whites. During the entire summer school the Lawrences did not feel safe to leave the premises, and even the journey home at the end of the summer school on the segregated train was humiliating. Once again there was a touching act of solidarity as the white art students who were also travelling

home on the same train broke with the segregation regulations of the train company and the laws of the state by joining the Lawrences in their 'coloured only' carriage.

As Caro (2019) notes, the absurdities of segregation meant that on the Lawrence's earlier visit to New Orleans they were not permitted to enter the art museums. Such inane and entirely gratuitous adversities presented the Lawrences with considerable obstacles to overcome simply to research their own field and progress their careers. Nonetheless, the progressive values of the college and its 'integration experiment' (Caro 2019a) formed an oasis of artistic production in which socially enlightened attitudes were an integral part of the creative practice. It was these acts of solidarity that accompanied the production of these works during this period that really caught my attention. The creative acts and the artistic experiments that their works represent are also now imbued for me with a social history in which the arts are a fulcrum of harmony and cohesion amidst the turbulence and turmoil of a society in crisis. It is possible to say that this feature of the college's ethos has as much to say to our contemporary audiences as the more familiar stories of the modernist integration of form and content.

Overall these episodes illustrate the potential for art education to be as socially cohesive as it is to be creatively experimental or aesthetically enlightening. It may be no coincidence that the contemporary resurgence of nationalism and racism emerges at a time of neglect of the arts in education. Fortunately this trend is heroically resisted by arts educators working on shoestring budgets in under-resourced schools, still providing intellectually challenging ideas as well as practically supporting creative practices. Hopefully these examples of historical solidarity will help to support their progress and keep the art in education alive and thriving.

References

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