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Connoisseurship Unplugged: “Mic Check”!

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Teaching is an activity that requires artistry, schooling itself is a cultural artifact, and education is a process whose features may differ from individual to individual, context to context.

Elliot W. Eisner (1976)

Feelings, images, and ideas of the past were crisscrossing as I sat in my seat. It was approximately a week or so after learning about Elliot’s passing that I attended a lecture by political activist and scholar Angela Davis who was invited to speak as part of a weeklong series of programs on the Penn State University campus commemorating the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Still grieving over the loss of my teacher, Elliot, I listened to Davis speak about her radical, countercultural work during the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Liberation Movement, her leadership of Critical Resistance and the Communist Party in the U.S., and her more recent cultural work in generating a movement to abolish what she refers to as the “Prison-industrial Complex.”

There I was, sitting in Schwab Auditorium among a crowd of students and faculty, listening to Davis speak about her controversial political life, while reflecting in gratitude for having been Elliot's student. My sentiments about him while attending to her message could not have been more disparate, more incongruous, yet from in-between what I had learned from him and what she was saying, emerged compelling encounters and alliances. Perhaps the agglomeration stirring in my mind was due to my geographical proximity in the San Francisco Bay Area in the early to mid 70s. It was during those years that my initial acquaintance and eventual studies with Elliot began, coincidentally when Davis was being arrested, tried, then acquitted for supplying weapons to the Soledad brothers' that resulted in the abduction and killing of a judge outside the Marin County Court House.

Davis began her talk by acknowledging the significance of great leaders like Dr. King, Nelson Mandela, and other named freedom fighters, while reminding the audience that we too easily identify with and monumentalize individuals when in fact historical movements are accomplished by multitudes of the unnamed. She expressed concern about the lack of sustained alliances for social justice today as compared with the 60s and 70s. The example she gave was the social media movement that brought out the vote for Barack Obama then quickly dissipated due to voters' assumptions that racism, sexism, and other social injustices would end with his election. To emphasize the contributions of unnamed cultural workers, Davis cited the Birmingham Bus Boycott; namely that it would not have happened, and its impact felt socially and politically, had it not been for those unnamed individuals who in solidarity refused public transit on December 3, 1955.

"Mic Check"! "Mic Check"! Exhorting the audience to exercise their right to assembly as American citizens in bringing about social change, Davis invoked the Occupy Movement that began on Wall Street in 2011 and spread to major centers throughout the Nation and worldwide. Then, in contrasting the demonstrative power of the multiplicity with those of monumental individuals, Davis described the Movement's "human microphone." "Mic Check"! Denied a permit to use any form of electrified sound amplification, Occupy protestors improvised by shouting "Mic Check"! to alert the crowd that someone in close proximity was about to speak.

As speakers spoke, each of their phrases were repeated in unison by those within range to those out of range of a speaker's voice thereby translating and transmitting what was heard, understood, and drifting throughout the crowd. "Mic Check"! "Mic Check"! Protesting in solidarity, Occupiers' performed their "microphone unplugged," which in pop music parlance stands for acoustic rather than electrified amplification. Occupy Movement's human microphone constituted an acoustic assemblage where the content of what was heard, and how and what was translated by those within range disarticulated and unsettled the ideological

refrains of the originating speakers by relaxing accuracy to probabilities of mishearing and misunderstanding.

Is what is lost in translation really lost or repeated and understood differently? Does misunderstanding constitute lack, an absence, or the presence of anomalous kinds of knowing? Poet and literary critic Édouard Glissant characterizes the act of translation as transversal, a crisscrossing of locutionary encounters and alliances. Similar to the acoustic assemblage of the human microphone, its process is non-hierarchical and referential.

Translation is thus one of the most important variants of the new archipelagic thought. The art of jumping from one language to the other, whereby the first is not extinguished and the second does not insist on its disappearance. And it is also an art of leaping because today every translation accompanies that skein [assemblage] of all possible translations of each language into any other. (Glissant as cited in Birnbaum and Obrist, June 2010, p. 307).

Hence, understanding the workings of the human microphone according to Glissant's characterization of translation suggests that a given speaker's phrases are not "extinguished" nor is there any insistence on their "disappearance." Instead, what emerges from its acoustic, referential process is a mutational kind of repetition that unfolds and enfolds hearing and understanding differently by riffing, that is, improvising off the refrain of existing knowledge rather than its exclusion. For Elliot this process of thinking otherwise through disclosure and enclosure was essential to the research and practice of art and teaching (1976, p. 141). "Mic Check"! Elliot was radical in his own right, a radical educator who through his scholarship and teachings articulated an "artistic vision" for the field of art education and curriculum studies. His musings on art and education continue to rouse the imagination of educators and their students nationally and internationally. He thought long and hard about their intersections, and when speaking, he did so on his feet, extemporaneously, with eloquence. Improvisation is not impoverished, but profoundly informed by the immensities afforded by exploration and experimentation. Elliot trusted that new ways of seeing and thinking would emerge by relinquishing control, letting go of what he already knew and understood, letting go of authorship. "Mic Check"! Elliot was a radical thinker. His was the kind of thinking characterized by Glissant: traversing historical and disciplinary languages of art and education, to accommodate a multiplicity of incongruous ideas and images, agglomerations of disparate and disjunctive understandings from which emerged his compelling representations of teaching and curriculum as "educational criticism" and "connoisseurship" (1976).

“Mic Check”! The human microphone that brought the disparate fields of art education and curriculum studies into solidarity was activated long before Elliot’s passing inasmuch as his teachings and writings have been translated into several languages across the world. Such broad dissemination of his ideas notwithstanding, Elliot was and continues to be an “electrifying figure” similar to the originating speakers that the unnamed activists of the Occupy Movement riffed. His continues to be a monumental voice in the history of art education, a distinction bestowed upon him by so many students, teachers, and researchers in the professional field who follow his work. Yet, as Elliot suggests in the epigraph at the beginning of this essay, “education is a process whose features may differ from individual to individual, context to context” (1976, p. 140). While educational criticism, connoisseurship, and other monumental metaphors have gained him prominence, it was nevertheless, the practices of unnamed teachers and their students, who constitute the individual and contextual shifts; that is, the human microphone of art education and curriculum studies that he espoused.

To claim Elliot radical is an exaggeration on my part, and perhaps of other grateful admirers. The use of such an honorific, however, is problematic insofar as the etymology of “radical” is the word “root,” which assumes Elliot as the ultimate source, as the person in the know, the critic, the connoisseur. In other words, to suggest Elliot radical sets him *apart from*, rather than *a part of* an on-going movement; a participant in a collective undertaking that Merleau-Ponty (1997) characterizes as the many “irrecusable and enigmatic” participations of others (pp. 130-132). While not the “root,” Elliot was nonetheless an individual through whom change was both amplified and refracted. The struggle of both named and unnamed teachers and students who continue to advocate for the arts in education by riffing his pedagogical and curricular refrains constitutes the multi-vocality, the acoustic assemblage that is art education and curriculum studies...

Hence, connoisseurship unplugged: “Mic Check”! “Mic Check”!

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About the author

Charles Garoian received a B.A. in Art and an M.A. in Art from California State University, Fresno, and his Ph.D. in Education from Stanford University. He has performed, lectured, and conducted workshops in festivals, galleries, museums, and university campuses in the United States and internationally. His teachings in art studio and art education focus on the exploratory, experimental, and improvisational processes of performance art. In addition to scholarly articles in leading journals on art and education, Garoian is the author of *Performing Pedagogy: Toward an Art of Politics* (1999); co-author of *Spectacle Pedagogy: Art, Politics, and Visual Culture* (2008); and, *The Prosthetic Pedagogy of Art: Embodied Research and Practice* (2013); all three volumes published by The State University of New York Press. The Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Getty Education Institute for the Arts has supported his creative research and practice.

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