

1. Provoked by Art

by ARDRA L. COLE

It is 1996. I am in New York City for the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). It is the weekend before the conference begins and my companion and I decide to take in some of what New York has to offer. By mid-afternoon, already experiencing sensory overload, we stumble into the Whitney Museum of American Art. The next few hours, until closing time, are nothing short of epiphanal. Serendipity introduced me to the art of Edward Kienholz (1927-1994) and Nancy Reddin Kienholz (1943-). Research would never look the same to me again.

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The Exhibit

Kienholz: A Retrospective (1996) is the largest collection of the Kienholz' work ever exhibited in one place. The sheer magnitude of the exhibit is, on its own, overpowering. One hundred twenty-four works — all freestanding, life-size sculptures, many in the tableau art form, of full-size reconstructed spaces, human forms, and assemblages of objects — fill three floors of the huge gallery. The vast physical and psychic space is animated with raw, realistic, often shocking, renditions of racism, domestic violence, poverty, child abuse, war, and all manner of oppression, human suffering, and societal pathos. I am immediately drawn in — intellectually, emotionally, and even physically — as I am, at times, lured to actually participate in the representations.

The Wait (1964-65). A figure of an old woman sits in a high back armchair in her living room. She is surrounded by things that define her now-small world: knitting in a basket at her feet, numerous framed family photographs on a table beside her, a (live) parakeet in a cage off to one side, and a (taxidermed) cat asleep on her lap. A large oval framed photograph of a man, presumably her dead husband, is centred on the age-stained wallpaper behind her. She sits in wait. The warm wave of nostalgia that washes over me turns cold on a closer look. The old woman's head is, in fact, a skull encased in a glass bottle; a framed photograph of a lovely and much younger woman is affixed to the bottle's upturned end. Around the woman's neck is a garland of smaller glass bottles each holding remnants of a once full and vibrant life. She is simultaneously weighed down and comforted by these memories as she grows old, alone, surrounded by decaying domesticity.

The Illegal Operation (1962). A cheap, tattered rug marks the scene of a sleazy, back street room where an illegal abortion has recently been performed. A rusted metal shopping cart, modified to serve as an operating table, is the focal point of the small space. On the lower shelf of the cart sits a rusty, blood-encrusted metal bedpan holding a set of bloody and corroded surgical instruments. Lying on the "bed" above the pan is a filthy sack of hardened cement ripped open at the lower end, its contents

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oozing onto the disgustingly dirty rags intended to catch the messy spill. A battered enamel pot holding unused tools, a galvanized bucket filled with hardened bloody rags, an old milking stool, and a household floor lamp with torn and blood-spattered lampshade are crowded together in the tight space defined by the rug. As "witness" to this horrific act I am at once driven to turn away in revulsion and compelled to stay and bear some responsibility for this heinous crime.

Sollie 17 (1979-1980). A door standing ajar in the hallway of a cheap, residential hotel beckons me. Realizing that I am prey to the artists' intentions, I swallow my discomfort, at the same time recognizing a slight voyeuristic thrill, and move toward the door. I poke my head in and immediately invade the privacy of Sollie's confined and solitary world. The hotel room is small, claustrophobic. A combination of dirty dishes and personal hygiene items clutter the tiny sink and surround just inside the door; my first clue to the size and state of Sollie's world. The room is cell-like: an old metal bed with bare mattress is partially covered by a worn, stained blanket; a small, wooden chest of drawers holds a portable television, a couple of battered cooking pots and a few sundry items; a small, two-shelf, dented metal cabinet serves as a pantry. Cigarette butts spill onto the floor from a large standing ashtray. A pair of underwear hangs to dry on a short line strung across one corner of the room. The wallpaper is spattered and soiled from a lifetime of neglect; a dark stain in one corner near the ceiling evidences a persistent leak. Two low wattage, bare, incandescent bulbs provide dim light. A small window gives view to the outside world — brick walls, smoke stacks, and rooftops in a rundown industrial area of a small city. A figure of an old man, skinny and hunched over, dressed only in a pair of briefs, is replicated twice; each figure a different depiction of loneliness and despair. He is lying on his bed reading a novel with a hand inside his underpants; he is sitting on the edge of the bed playing solitaire on the seat of a chair; he is standing looking out the window.

And on it went: a relentless reminder of the inequities and injustices that define our social condition; a blatant challenge to make it otherwise. One hundred twenty-one more encounters later I stagger out into the

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glare of softly fading daylight, indelibly marked by my experience of the past few hours. The work had its intended effect. My body felt ravaged; my emotions drained; my mind was in overdrive.

Part of the power of the Kienholz' art is in the demands it makes on the audience. As Ross (1996) says:

It is not the work's shocking truthfulness or the artists' willingness to explore intricate and delicate societal issues, nor is it merely their ability to create extreme dramatic impact through the use of assembled found objects. The Kienholz' works are forever lodged in our memory because they remain fresh wounds, scars that will never heal... . They remind us of the earnest limits of art and the requirements of civil life. (p. 22)

As a viewer I had worked hard; no part of me idle. I laughed and cried; I felt pain, revulsion, shame, pity; I remembered, imagined, denied, confessed, promised — all the while aware that, as a viewer, my role was significant. The artists' role was to fire me up — make me feel and think. They did their job and well. The rest was up to me. According to Ruskin (1996), Kienholz' "realism is our collective fears and the social responsibility from which [they] will not allow us to escape... . We are invited to judge our present social condition and then we are begged, through a visual scream, to create another reality, one which celebrates human dignity" (pp. 42, 43). *Provocative art.*

It is no surprise that words do not do justice to the Kienholz' work. Words are not their medium; objects are. Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz salvaged and reassembled everyday objects discarded by ordinary people to explore, represent, and make bold cultural and political statements about societal conditions and contradictions. They rely on humour, absurdity, exaggeration, and distortion to draw the viewer in to their work, sometimes physically as well as emotionally and intellectually. Playing on human inclinations toward voyeurism they often coerce the viewer to become an active participant in the representation. Forced to stand in line to gain entrance, climb on a stool to peer through a barred window, peek through a crack in a door left ajar, lift a young woman's skirt in order to discover intimate objects concealed underneath in a

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small chest of drawers viewers are at once victim and perpetrator, complicit in societal abuses and misdeeds. "For Edward and Nancy Keinholz, to be committed through art means to engage the beholder too — to surprise a person with an artistic device much as with a hello, and then to draw that person in...and better still to force the viewer to a position of self-identification" (Harten, 1996, p. 45). *Evocative art.*

One of the most significant qualities of the Keinholz' work is its immediate accessibility. The artists were interested in communicating about everyday issues with common materials easily recognized and identified with by ordinary people. Their art is described by Brooks and Hopps (1996) as "a visual poetry of the everyday... [They] believed passionately that art should be accessible to everyone" (pp. 122, 115).

Another reviewer and long-time follower of Edward Kienholz' art prior to his partnership with Nancy Reddin Kienholz stated that, "What [Edward] Kienholz was saying needed no higher translation, no cultural tastemakers or commissars to explain it. Indeed his meaning is painfully comprehensible" (Ruskin, 1996, p. 42). The words of Richard Jackson (1996), a lifelong friend of Edward Kienholz, resound most loudly for me: "The thing I like about Ed and Nancy's art," he says, "is that it's real democratic. It doesn't take a Ph.D. to understand it. So it kind of spoke to everyone. Not highbrow or exclusive" (p. 283). *Accessible art.*

The Commitment

The conference: well, I know I was there attending sessions, listening to presentations and making some of my own, meeting with colleagues, and doing all the usual conference stuff. And I know that this conference was supposedly a gathering of the "latest and greatest" in educational research, the "biggest and best" names in the field, the "who's who and what's what" in educational theory and research. But, when the plane left the runway to take me home, most of what had transpired at the conference remained on the tarmac. Words, spoken and penned by academics who worked so hard to achieve just the right scientific ring, were wrung dry of life — of emotion, of sensuality, of physicality. With the extraction

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of life juices the words became too light to take hold. As hot air turns water to vapour, the words evaporated into thin air. My experience at the Whitney, however, was more like a dense, early summer Maritime fog that seeps its way into the bones. And, if you've grown up along the coast of the North Atlantic, it is as though fog is part of your molecular make-up. It settles in your body, deeply and completely.

Provoked by art I returned to my university work with eyes opened and mind spinning with prospects and possibilities for rendering research in ways that mattered. If I were to make a difference through my work I could no longer rely on the very limited power of flaccid words and numbers. I needed words plump and dripping with life juice, compelling and evocative images, representations that drew readers and viewers in to experience the research "text." Readers of research needed to be moved to feel and think and to be inspired in some way by their experience. It was my job to invite that kind of encounter. It was my job to more fully portray the complexities of the human condition to broader audiences, and to invite even an approximation of the kind of holistic, full-bodied engagement I had experienced through art. Research, like art, could be accessible, evocative, embodied, empathic, provocative.

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