Public Pedagogy and the Unconscious

Performance Art and Art Installations

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Public Pedagogy and the Unconscious: An Introduction

I begin this chapter with a description of a public performance project as an example of my approach to public pedagogy. I collaborate on this project with my colleague at Texas A&M, Stephen Carpenter. Steve and I are visibly different: Black male and White male, older and younger, taller and shorter, gray hair and black hair. We also have many non-visible differences: religion, sexual orientation, cultural heritage. However, students often comment that Steve and I are the most closely aligned professors in both theory and personality in our college. Despite our visible differences, many colleagues assume that we share a research agenda and political ideology. While we are certainly not identical twins, we do share more in common as visual artists, progressive educational researchers, and environmental activists than any of our other colleagues. In fact, by coincidence, we both often wear identical black sports jackets with our jeans when teaching or lecturing. To disrupt larger notions of identity and difference, we often joke with colleagues that our sports jackets may look alike, but one is more textured and the other is thicker.

In the spirit of public pedagogy and performance art, Steve and I use these notions of identity and difference to our advantage in our project. As I will discuss below, I believe that autobiography informs and guides my approach to public pedagogy. In fact, my commitment to social justice, queer theory, and arts-based research emerges from the work of William Pinar (2004) on currere.

Steve and I often co-present lectures on our campus and at conferences that provide many opportunities for us to engage in public pedagogy arts events. One of our strategies is to begin our class lecture, college committee report, or conference presentation at separate podiums on either side of the front of the lecture hall. Perhaps we just stand before the class or committee at opposite ends of the front of the room. Gradually, as we are presenting our report or class lecture, we physically move closer to each other until we are standing next to each other. We then hold hands for the duration of the presentation (see Figure 5.1). Throughout this process we continue the report or lecture in the same style and tone, each presenting information on the topic. In other words, we do not break the professional rhythm of our presentation, nor do we call attention to the fact that we are holding hands. We have done this in a College of Education general meeting, we have done this in an undergraduate class on the foundations of education, and we have done this at a confer-
ence while presenting papers. We continue to lecture as if nothing is unusual. However, the audience notices that something is unusual, and we gauge their reactions in preparation for a discussion with the audience after our lecture is concluded.

We use this public performance as a vehicle for interrupting assumptions and sedimented perceptors about gender, identity, sexuality, and difference. One time, an undergraduate student who knows that Steve is married to a female engineering professor, reported to the dean that “Dr. Steve Carpenter is gay and is cheating on his wife. I saw him holding hands with Dr. Slattery in class.” The student made this complaint even after our discussion of the event as a public pedagogy performance! The sight of two men holding hands in a lecture was so startling and held such deeply sedimented assumptions, that the student could not even process the fact that it was a public pedagogy art event. We believe that many students and adults respond in the same way. Their reactions come from the unconscious. Thus, this chapter explores the role of the unconscious in public pedagogy and the impact of the arts as a way of deconstructing sedimented perceptors.

Investigations of Public Pedagogy: The Unconscious in the Arts

The source of my painting is the unconscious. Jackson Pollock (Cernuschi, 1992, p. 1)

Like modern painters, my students and I have come to feel that we rarely need to refer to subject matter outside ourselves. We work from a different source. We work from within. William Pinar (1972, p. 331)

I seek out ways in which the arts can release imagination to open new perspectives, to identify alternatives. The vistas that might open, the connections that might be made, are experiential phenomenon; our encounters with the world become newly informed. When they do they offer new lenses through which to look out at and interpret the educative acts that keep human beings and their culture alive. Maxine Greene (1995, p. 18)

We hear the multiple voices within the contexts of our sustained collaboration, and thus recognize that ‘finding voices’ is not a definitive event but rather a continuous and relational process. Janet Miller (1990, pp. x–xi)

It is not enough to place concepts in opposition to one another in order to know which is best; we must confront the field of questions to which they are an answer, so as to discover by what forces the problems transform themselves and demand the constitutions of new concepts. Gilles Deleuze (1991, p. 95)

I have always felt a symbiosis with the modern abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock. Even though Pollock has been enshrined in both popular culture and elitist art circles as an icon
among 20th century painters, I consider Jackson my personal mentor and creative muse. I never met Jackson Pollock in the flesh—he died in a drunken automobile accident on Long Island, New York, August 11, 1956, when I was one month shy of my third birthday—but I have always known him in my imagination and in my soul. Jackson Pollock is a constant companion in my work.

I have written previously about my first encounter with Pollock’s massive canvas *Autumn Rhythm* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in 1971 (Slattery, 1995, 2006). Prior to this encounter, I had never formally studied art history, Pollock’s method of drip painting, the New York School of Art, or Abstract Expressionism. Rather, calculus, physics, Latin, theology, and football dominated the classical curriculum of my all-male Roman Catholic high school in New Orleans in the late 1960s. I unconsciously considered painting to be a woman’s leisure pursuit—not only because the positivist patriarchal milieu of my high school mandated a hegemony of the “hard” sciences and “hard body” sports, but also because my mother was an artist, and my younger brothers and I were sometimes embarrassed by the huge life drawings of plump naked women hanging in our home. When I traveled with my classmates to the Met for that field trip in 1971, I was a cocky high school senior reluctantly tagging along on a mandatory tour of an art museum. I was not looking for Jackson Pollock, but we serendipitously found each other in a crowded gallery of the museum. There was something mythic about my first encounter with Pollock’s *Autumn Rhythm*; my rebellious adolescent worldview felt a seismic jolt. That moment of jarring intensity in the Metropolitan Museum of Art continues to disrupt my life and my work as a restless professor of curriculum theory and philosophy of education. It also informs my understanding of public pedagogy and performance art. Following the lead of Jackson Pollock, I turn to the unconscious as the source of my arts-based public pedagogy projects.

Jackson Pollock entered therapy in early 1939 with Dr. Joseph Henderson, a Jungian psychoanalyst practicing in New York City. The traumas of life took an exacting toll on Pollock’s spirit, rendering him alcoholic, suicidal, and emotionally paralyzed. He could not speak about his desires, disappointments, and demons, even to his therapist. Pollock biographers Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith attribute Pollock’s demons to more than his alcoholism:

> Even when it began with beer in the morning and ended with bourbon at night; even when its roots reached back to junior high school, or further, to an alcoholic father; even when his life dissolved, as it had several times over the last twenty years, into a series of drunken binges punctuated by hospitalization, drinking alone could not explain what was happening to Pollock. It couldn’t explain the long plaintive discussions about suicide with friends…. There was something behind the drinking that was pushing at Jack- son from within, tormenting him, even trying to kill him. Jackson Pollock had demons inside. (Naifeh & Smith, 1989, pp. 1–2)

With the help of Joseph Henderson, Pollock soon discovered that he could express his deeply guarded secrets in improvisational drawings. These “psychoanalytic” sketches became haunting visual metaphors of the inner life of a tortured soul. In 1943 Pollock produced a drawing titled *The Guardians of the Secret*, which typifies his symbolic style, but now he was working on large scale canvases (Varnedoe & Karmel, 1999). Such representations presented many hazards for Pollock. Naifeh and Smith (1989) explain:

> Images resonant and powerful enough to energize a painting proved also deeply threatening. They were the very images—of devouring females, charging bulls, and ambiguous sexuality—that Jackson needed most to suppress. Throughout his life the periods of greatest emotional upheaval were also the periods of most explicit imagery. (p. 435)
In the finished painting *Guardians of the Secret* two figures are apparent, one at either end of a table. Other figures are faintly suggested, obscured beneath a profusion of shapes and colors. Naifeh and Smith contend that this painting represents a group portrait of the Pollock family at a dinner table—with Jackson conspicuously absent. His parents, Roy and Stella Pollock, are reduced to abstract motifs unrecognizable even as human beings. They are transformed into featureless totemic figures, or, as Naifeh and Smith (1989) suggest, “stark amalgams of lines and shapes and colors that merely suggest a human precedent” (p. 436). Why was Jackson not included in this family portrait? Was he still alienated ten years after his father’s death? His “secret” is carefully “guarded” by the totemic anima and animus figures protecting a maze of black and white calligraphy that covers the tabletop around which the Pollock family has gathered.

Jackson Pollock’s unconscious directed his symbolic improvisational sketches and paintings—and his huge abstract expressionist canvases—which shocked the art world as well as the pretentious and repressed post-World War II American society. Pollock’s drawings and canvases compel a response. This aesthetic experience creates a context in which both the “reenchantment of art” (Gablik, 1991) and “releasing the imagination” (Greene, 1995) become possible. Such aesthetic experiences that emerge from the unconscious and move toward reenchantment, imagination, social change, and educational renewal become the focus of my approach to public pedagogy.

**Poststructural Notions of “Self” and “Autobiography”**

Poststructural investigations problematize notions of self-formation, multicultural understandings of difference, the politics of recognition, and autobiography—as well as public pedagogy. I offer a poststructural critique to locate this investigation of public pedagogy and art installations in a postmodern philosophical context. I will address the complexity of notions of the self and autobiography before launching an investigation into the role of the unconscious in public pedagogy, autoethnographic educational research, or in Pollock’s abstract expressionist sketches and paintings.

In academe the notion of an individual subject has been called into question as these provocative themes emerge: “the disappearance of subject,” “the death of individual,” and “the disappearance of the author.” These themes problematize modern notions of the cohesive subject and the conscious self, challenging scholars to look at the world without the disposition of textual authority and without any subjective intervention by the power of language (Barthes, 1977; Burke, 1992; Foucault, 1972). Scholars have suggested that language forms do not assert anything; rather, language reveals the tentativeness of all discourses, universal and totalizing discourses in particular, and demonstrates the essential insufficiency of words for expressing truth. Critics of poststructuralism argue that the loss of universal rationalism and a turn toward the unreliability of the unconscious will entail the loss of all ability to distinguish good from evil and the beautiful from the grotesque, which can only lead to tyranny, to anarchy, to nihilism, and to the end of civilization as we know it.

In this contested terrain we must ask: What is the self? What wisdom can we glean from philosophers, poets, performance artists, and painters about the nature of the self? Investigations of the self have often centered on romantic notions of an ideal or perfect form, modern notions of embodied structures that define the essence of the individual person, or psychological notions of latent identity controlled by an ego or superego waiting to be gradually uncovered or healed. Some scholars propose a Hegelian dialectic to negotiate a true self. Here the self is situated between the lost and lonely individual (“The Minimal Self”) or the romanticized ideal
individual (“The Imperial Self”) and capable of inherent narrative unity (Lasch, 1984). Recent discourses reject these conceptions of the self and challenge scholars to either reconceptualize their understanding of the self or give up the quest for the holy grail of self-awareness because the self does not exist. Working within the unconscious is another alternative.

Postmodernism views the self in terms of a multiplicity of ironic and conflicting interdependent voices that can only be understood contextually, ironically, relationally, and politically. Poststructuralism goes further and rejects the notion of the self because the search for the true and lasting self is a metaphysical dead end. While postmodernism proposes a radical eclecticism of “both/and,” poststructuralism rejects the project to delimit in any way by contending that the self is “neither/nor.” Public pedagogy offers the opportunity for the researcher and/or artist to engage the postmodern and poststructural philosophies in order to contextualize public projects and release the imagination. Pollock modeled this process when he engaged Surrealism, the psychoanalytic aesthetic manifesto of the early 20th century, to conceptualize his aesthetic vision.

The Influence of Rene Magritte and Surrealism on Jackson Pollock

Frederich Nietzsche (1968) concluded in The Birth of Tragedy that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art. In light of the Nietzschian and poststructural critiques, let us consider the work of the Belgian Surrealist Rene Magritte as a precursor to Jackson Pollock’s Abstract Expressionism. Magritte’s painting La Trahison des Images (Treachery of Images), popularly known as Ceci N’est Pas Une Pipe (This is not a Pipe), and Michel Foucault’s (1983) commentary on Magritte’s painting in his book This is Not a Pipe, provide an aesthetic insight into the poststructural philosophy of the self.

Surrealism, the school of painting associated with Magritte and Salvador Dali, challenges the assumption that art (or any aesthetic text) is a one-dimensional portrayal of reality. Magritte’s paintings startle the viewer and demand a reexamination of a host of assumptions, including space, time, dimensionality, relationality, and, of particular interest here, notions of the self and the unconscious. Surrealism provides an opportunity for viewers to reconsider their own preconceptions of familiar objects and experiences by presenting reality in new and often disturbing ways (similar to the example of my public performance with Steve Carpenter above). Some surrealist work, especially that of Joan Miro, is called automatism because ideas are expressed as they flow forth unfettered by logic or conscious structure. Surrealists sought meaning in destruction and hope in rebuilding—a reflection of their social context in the interwar years in the 1920s and 1930s. Surrealists established a context for Pollock and other the Abstract Expressionists who portray an inner world of energy and motion. Stephen Polcari (1991) writes:

Pollock’s statement that he painted with visible energy and motion, organic intensity, memories arrested in space, and human needs and motives is a near-manifesto of Bergsonian vitalism. For Henri Bergson, life is striving, a need for invention, a creative evolution. Through the human body, vital movement courses and pursues moral life. Bergsonian philosophy describes an organic consciousness in harmony with Pollock’s (and Thomas Hart Benton’s [Pollock’s mentor]) implicit understanding of natural action. For Bergson, life is imbued with organic consciousness, a sense of spirituality beyond mere biological or physical determinacy. Organic consciousness is seen in continuous movement. [As Pollock writes,] “Consciousness is co-extensive with life...matter is inertia.... But with life there is free movement.” (pp. 255–256)

Here visual efforts unite time and space, and Pollock reflects this journey into the unconscious in his search for generative forces and cycles of human existence. No longer does a sym-
bolic figure or a mythical god represent the potency, vitality, fertility, and transformative power of the world and the self. Abstract forms and relationships represent this vitality for Pollock. It is here that I find a synergy for my public performances.

Both Pollock and Magritte reflect a disgust for their times and a distrust for traditional practices. They were both products of and cultural critics of their social milieu. Social and personal conflict provide nourishment for the aesthetic expression of both Magritte and Pollock. The self is no longer a mirror image of reality, rather it is a challenge to the very assumptions of totalizing images, boldly announcing “This is not what it appears to be!” When asked why he did not paint pictures of nature, Pollock responded, “I am nature.” The canvas, nature, life, and self all merge in a phenomenological encounter, a “visceral rather than a visual experience of art” (Bernstein, 1992, p. 1). The irony of a person proclaiming not to be a self is as startling to the casual observer as Magritte confronting us in the museum with the words *Ceci N’est Pas Une Pipe* on his painting of a pipe.

Returning to the paintings of Pollock, it is undeniable that Surrealists like Magritte were the catalysts for his Abstract Expressionist work. In 1947 the art critic Andre Breton wrote: “There are three major goals of Surrealism: the social liberation of man [sic], his complete moral liberation, and his intellectual liberation” (Gershman, 1974, p. 80). Surrealists sought freedom of thought, speech, and expression. Pollock actually applied the Surrealist philosophy directly to his painting. He was committed to the idea that the creative act is a process by which the artist defines her or his inner experiences and inner values. The finished work of art was conceived as a form analogous to the artist’s inner experience of the world, which included the work itself being created. This experience is what the painting means, and this meaning is stimulated by the very act of making the painting. In sum, the form of the work evolved as the appropriate articulation of an experience that occurred because the work was being made. I believe that this is an essential but often overlooked component of public pedagogy.

Pollock began his work without any specific idea of how it would come out. During the creative process artist and medium each affected the other, so that as the work took form, its meaning emerged. The creative act, therefore, was considered to be an ethical process during which the artist defined herself or himself by means of the actions taken in the process of painting. Thus, Pollock constantly reinvented the art of painting by relying on spontaneity to stimulate the direct expression of inner experience. However, unlike the Surrealists, Pollock also insisted on a role for conscious choice as the work progressed to address any compositional problem that occurred during the process of painting:

> When I am in my painting, I am not aware of what I am doing. It is only after a short get acquainted period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc. Because the painting has a life of its own, I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well. (cited in Chipps, 1971, p. 548)

**An Example of Arts-Based Autoethnographic Research**

In one of my art installations, I deconstruct notions of the body and practices of sexual regulation in schools and classrooms through an art installation of actual artifacts and other symbolic representations of my conscious and unconscious memories of my elementary classrooms in a Catholic school in the 1960s. The work recalls the methodology of assemblage tableaus by Edward and Nancy Kienholz (Hopps, 1996). This art installation includes two canvases, a free standing 1960s style wooden school desk with textbooks and personal memorabilia arranged
on top of and under the desk, and a wooden classroom bench converted into a makeshift altar forming a tableau. The installation includes contemporary protest music by Rage Against the Machine titled “Take the Power Back” and religious chants by the Monks of Taize titled “The Spirit is Willing but the Flesh is Weak” playing in the background. Candles and incense burn, purposely creating a Catholic monastic milieu. The viewer is invited to experience the tableau while kneeling on an antique Catholic confessional prie-dieu.

Viewers of the installation are warned in advance that religious, violent, and sexual images are juxtaposed with educational material and classroom furniture in the tableau. Some viewers find this evocative and illuminating; others find it provocative and unsettling. The installation tableau seeks understanding about regulation of my body in the Catholic school classrooms of my youth. However, once my inner work becomes an aesthetic representation in a public space, the piece is available for others to experience, evaluate, critique, and apply to other contexts. In effect, it becomes a piece of interactive research in a public space in an ongoing process of deconstruction and recreation.

When I started this tableau installation, I began by working within, turning to the unconscious for direction and inspiration. Like Pollock, “when I am engaged in the process, I am not aware of what I am doing” (Chipps, 1971, p. 548). Only after the tableau was completed could others respond to it and possibly construct a didactic purpose. Since regulation of the body continues to impact students in schools today, it is imperative that teachers and researchers investigate regulation of the body and experiences of sexuality. One way to do this is through traditional social science projects that quantify and codify such experiences for the purpose of exposing generalizations about sexuality in schools and curricular material. Another approach is to provide thick descriptions in case studies of individual students. However, in this arts-based installation, I take another approach by using the lessons of Pollock and Jung to work within to research bodily regulation in schools and classrooms. The unconscious is the place of my research, but expanded discourse about spirituality, sexuality, social justice, and curriculum are also my goals. Foucault’s notion of governmentality informs my work as I come to understand the ways that my body was regulated by catechisms, priests, and nuns that bombarded my consciousness with notions of celibacy, purity, heteronormativity, virginity, chastity, and the like.

**Foucault on Regulation and Governmentality**

Theoretical support for this work comes from Foucault’s (1975) notion of regulation and governmentality. Foucault (1983) writes that power works through language, and that language not only describes and defines human beings but also creates institutions to regulate and govern human beings. Literally, power is inscribed in our bodies and language governs our mentality. As we will investigate below, the images in my autoethnography installation tableau emerge from the unconscious and evoke such an understanding of bodily regulation in classrooms.

In studying Foucault, I began to recognize the ways that I had been constructed as an object of such regulation and governmentality in my adolescent classrooms, especially concerning issues of sexuality. While the exploration of the effects of such regulation might be effectively explicated using quantitative statistical methodologies, qualitative case studies, or traditional ethnographies, my public pedagogy explores the autobiographical context of the lived experience first and then allows the unconscious to direct the creation of an aesthetic text that represents symbolically these experiences. I agree with Linda Brodkey’s (1996) conclusion, “To the extent that poststructural theory narrates a story, it tells a complex story about the power of discourse(s) over the human imagination” (p. 24). Foucault (1977) writes,
We must see our rituals for what they are, completely arbitrary things...it is good to be dirty and bearded, to have long hair, to look like a girl when one is a boy (and vice versa); one must put ‘in play,’ show up, transform, and reverse the systems which quietly order us about. As far as I am concerned, that is what I try to do in my work. (p. x)

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1975) moves away from structuralism to explore power relations and oppression. He contends that discourse has a role in power relations and that the seeming abstractions of discourse do have material effects on people’s bodies because language is inscribed in our bodies. This is the primary notion that I explore in my tableau installation. What are the material effects on my body that have resulted from memorizing the Baltimore Catechism texts and performing Catholic rituals in my elementary classrooms in the 1960s? How might others be informed by my public display of these memories in a psychoanalytic art tableau?

While Foucault’s analysis of discipline and punishment in society deals specifically with prisons, the analysis can be applied to any institution that seeks to control those judged to be abnormal. In my tableau I apply these notions to regulation of the body, mandatory chastity, the preference for celibacy in the priesthood or religious community, and unquestioned heteronormativity in my Catholic school classrooms. The artwork itself is a construction of a tableau with the juxtaposition of symbols that flow from my unconscious. Some symbols are carefully and purposely incorporated into the tableau, but only after they resonate with the unconscious work within. However, they can only be understood in the context of the multiple layers of meaning in the entire work of art (Foucault, 1983).

Pollock used this process as he incorporated symbols from mythology, Native American spirituality, and Mexican muralism in his psychoanalytic drawings. Pollock lived in Arizona in his youth and traveled in Mexico on several occasions. He was highly influenced by Native American arts; he admired and collaborated with the Mexican artists Jose Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Diego Rivera. The context of Pollock’s drawings can only be understood if the conscious and unconscious influence of these artists and styles are considered. This is an essential feature of public performance and art installations.

### The Installation: Representation of Research by the Educational Artist Working Within

In my art installation, I look specifically at the normalization and regulation of sexuality in a Catholic school classroom of the 1960s (Foucault, 1978, 1986a, 1986b). Images from my Catholic catechism are included in the tableau, which is titled *10,000 Ejaculations*. The Catholic nuns who taught in my elementary school spent a great deal of time instructing the students to say prayers in Latin and English (e.g., Hail Mary/Ave Maria, Our Father/Pater Noster). One type of prayer was called the ejaculation. Ejaculations were short and spontaneous prayerful outbursts like “Jesus I love you.” Ejaculations were particularly recommended by the nuns in times of temptation. The gravest temptations were “impure thoughts” which could lead to the deadly sins of touching one’s body, masturbation, orgasm, or sexual intercourse.

The Catechism displayed in the tableau pictures angelic celibate priests and nuns with the word “best” inscribed under the drawing. A devout and pure married couple is identified as “better.” A single eunuch is labeled “good.” Good, better, and best represented holy lifestyles. However, the unmistakable message was that a sexless celibate life was clearly superior—preferred by God and the nuns. Of course, same sex relationships and homosexuality were not even options open for discussion. The Baltimore Catechism, still in use today in some Catholic
schools, outlines the prescription: “The doctrine of the excellence of virginity and of celibacy, and of their superiority over the married state, was revealed by our Holy Redeemer, so too was it defined as a dogma of divine faith by the holy council of Trent” (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 1962, p. 103). A copy of a 1962 sixth grade Baltimore Catechism can be seen in the tableau representing not only pre-Vatican II Catholic theology, but also the pervasive hidden curriculum and subliminal messages found in all school textbooks.

Students in Catholic elementary schools in the pre-Vatican II 1950s and 1960s were often required to make “Spiritual Bouquets.” The spiritual bouquet was a decorated greeting card with space provided to list prayer offerings for a special person—often the student’s mother. One such card that I made in school on April 11, 1961, and saved by my mother in a scrapbook, can be seen in the tableau. The spiritual bouquet contained a numerical listing of prayers to be offered for the recipient. The greater the quantity of prayers offered, the greater the implied religious fervor of the student. My classmates and I always felt compelled—both in the overt religious instruction and the subliminal suggestions of our conscience—to offer as many prayers as possible. This would not only demonstrate holiness and piety, but also our efforts to save the souls in purgatory who needed our prayers to escape to heaven. Each prayer was assigned a numerical indulgence that reduced time spent in Purgatory by deceased souls.

The most highly recommended prayers were rosaries and communions at Mass that provided maximum indulgences for the recipient of the spiritual bouquet and/or the poor souls in purgatory. However, these prayers were time-consuming and laborious. While I often felt compelled to include a few rosaries and communions on the spiritual bouquet, I usually preferred to pad the prayer offerings with lots of ejaculations. One of my spiritual bouquets with an offering of 10,000 ejaculations for my mother is seen in front of a replica of the Pieta. I enthusiastically presented a spiritual bouquet to my mother every year along with a ragged bouquet of assorted flowers and weeds from our yard. Adding thousands of ejaculations to a spiritual bouquet provided an appearance of religious fervor and spiritual gratitude.

Offering to recite 10,000 ejaculations for Jesus, Mary, the nuns, and my mother became a passionate religious mantra—although I do not remember actually keeping an exact count of the prayers, I just rattled them off in my head until I got distracted. The ironic juxtaposition of spiritual ejaculations and celibate, heteronormative sexuality are deconstructed in this tableau.

The Religious Sisters of Mercy were my teachers in New Orleans. I was never physically or verbally reprimanded by the nuns—probably because I was a compliant student with an angelic attitude. However, underneath my facade of purity, perfection, and piety was adolescent confusion and guilt that began during puberty. There are many interesting parallels to Jackson Pollock’s inner demons and the manifestation of his complex and at times conflicted sexuality in his sketches and paintings. While sexuality was never overtly discussed in my school or home, the hidden message that governed my thinking was that sex was sinful. My Baltimore Catechism again:

The sixth commandment of God is Thou shalt not commit adultery. The sixth commandment forbids all impurity and immodesty in words, looks, and actions whether alone or with others. Examples of this would be touching one’s own body or that of another without necessity simply to satisfy sinful curiosity, impure conversations, dirty jokes, looking at bad pictures, undue familiarity with the opposite sex. (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 1962, p. 125)

Along with classmates, I began to privately explore my sexuality as a junior high school student. I wonder today how the catechism lesson about familiarity with the opposite sex may have contributed to the experimental encounters between male classmates. Occasionally in seventh
grade, and without my parents’ knowledge, I rode the St. Charles streetcar to the French Quarter with friends after school on Fridays to see sexy peep shows at a penny arcade on Bourbon Street. This installation creates a “peep show” where only a few glimpses into the adolescent experience can be seen, possibly eliciting some of the same emotions: curiosity, discomfort, arousal, guilt, disgust, passion, etc. The religious and sexual emotions are juxtaposed to reinforce adolescent confusion. For example, the faces of naked men and women, juxtaposed next to Bernini’s Estasi Di Santa Teresa (The Ecstasy of St. Theresa), all display similar expressions. With the body of Jesus on their tongues, does this ecstasy portray Christian mysticism or sexual orgasm—or both? The painting of a woman mystic in spiritual ecstasy is remarkably similar to the expressions of sexual ecstasy in the erotica photographs. Juxtaposing sexual and religious symbols invites the viewer to re-experience the confusion and guilt of adolescence. However, like the student who complained about Steve and I holding hands in a public performance, sedimented perceptors of religion and sexuality drive some viewers to protest in anger.

The impression that sex was evil and touching the body sinful was reinforced by the fact that the body was always covered in my Catholic school—the nuns only exposed their faces and hands, girls covered their heads with veils, and modest dress was demanded at all times. In the classroom we were taught to avoid “impure thoughts” by praying ejaculations. However, I often fantasized about bodies and sex as I sat in my junior high school desk. The images from Playboy and Playgirl magazines in the tableau foreground my fantasies of the human body as an adolescent student, albeit covered with white hosts—the body of Jesus—to protect me from my impure thoughts. The pubescent male is constantly aware of his body with spontaneous erections and sexual fantasies. Efforts to control and regulate the body through prayer may have sublimated sexual arousal temporarily, but the religious mantra was seldom successful.

In this tableau installation, I have covered the genitals and explicit eroticism of the photographs with the symbolic body of Jesus—communion wafers. There are layers of meaning: the unconsecrated non-body of Jesus covers the impure erotic body images in the photographs; the body-less memory of the student who once sat in this now empty desk re-members suppressed erotic bodily experiences; the bodily re-membering is done under the watchful eye of Virgin Mary who is holding the limp body of Jesus; Mary, whose body was taken into heaven as celebrated on the Assumption, models virginity and purity as she watches over the school desk like the nuns of my 1960s Catholic schooling.

In this tableau, the viewer enters the bodily experience as voyeur. The viewer may be tempted to move the communion wafers from the photograph of the naked male and female bodies—either physically or in fantasy—to view the genitals. This may even cause the viewer to experience some level of arousal. However, like the adolescent student, this arousal must be quickly suppressed in the public space of the art gallery. This parallels the experience of students who sit in desks trying to control fantasies for fear that an erection or flush face will be publicly noticed. Many adolescent males hide their spontaneous erection by covering it with a book, shirttail, or sweater. When I was in school and an unexpected fantasy or erection occurred, I would attempt to regulate my body with the prayerful ejaculations taught by the virgin nuns in an effort to suppress images of sexual ejaculations. If the voyeur attempts to remove the symbolic body of Jesus from the sexual images, she or he will find that the communion hosts are glued to the photographs. The body of Jesus literally suppresses the impure thoughts and prevents them from being manifested.

When I first discovered masturbation in junior high school, I was overcome by guilt. I kept a secret calendar under my mattress—along with any erotica or pornography that my friends at school would share—and I would draw a circle around the date each day that I would masturbate. A calendar and photograph of a young man masturbating are placed under my desk in
the installation, hidden in a sense like my calendar and pornography under my mattress. The calendar served several functions. First, it recorded the number of times that I masturbated so that I would have an accurate count for Friday confession before Mass. Communion was not allowed unless the soul had first been washed clean by the priest’s absolution. Since a missed communion was a public admission of mortal sin, and because my catechism and religion lessons had convinced me that the worst mortal sin was sex or touching one’s body, the calendar protected me from a public admission of masturbation—or worse, the suspicion of sexual intercourse. Second, I thought that by keeping a count of my evil transgressions I could gradually wean myself off of this sinful act. Third, the calendar provided me with hope that during the next month I could reduce the number of times that I would masturbate, and thus minimize the risk of a scolding from the priest at the next Friday confession.

The final element of the installation is a cardboard artwork in the bottom corner of the desk, an art therapy project completed by my father in a psychiatric hospital on the morning of his death by suicide. After finishing the art project, my father left the hospital with a 24-hour pass, bought a pistol, called me in Santa Fe, and told me that he was going to shoot himself. I tried to dissuade him and asked if he has seen a priest, said his prayers, or gone to communion to eat the body of Jesus. As I listened frantically and helplessly on the other end of the phone, his final words to me were “Only God can help me now.” He shot himself in the heart and died two hours later. My active imagining of these dramatic events create a parallel between my father’s limp body, the limp body of Jesus in the Pieta in the tableau, and the limp body of those who were taught to recite 10,000 ejaculations to suppress impure thoughts, erections, and orgasms. Thus, my desk and the floor beneath the desk are littered with 10,000 white communion hosts (see Figure 5.2)—reminiscent of Jesus’ body as well as globs of white semen staining my linen and the floor beneath my seat. My elementary education was regulated by thousands of ejaculations—literally and spiritually. A complex curriculum of governmentality is exposed in the tableau.

This installation is a construction and re-construction of memories of my body in junior high classrooms. I collected artifacts from scrapbooks, yearbooks, and family closets. I also imagined furniture and icons, which I searched for in antique stores and junk yards. I worked within to reconstruct images from my unconscious, while remembering Pollock’s admonition that the creative process also involves consciousness of the overall effect of the piece. While the symbols are particular to my Catholic school experience, I believe that the issues I raise in this installation are applicable to many people. Repression of the body, sexual fantasies, uncontrollable sexual responses, and guilt and anxiety about sexuality are all a part of the educational experience of students who sit in school desks. Since there is no student seated in the desk in this installation—only the reminder of my presence with the plaster casts of my hands and my actual hand prints from a first grade art project—the viewer is reminded of the absence of the body and the attempt to repress sexuality in the school curriculum.

The hidden curriculum of the body has a powerful impact on the lived experience of students. These early life experiences, according to Jungian and other psychologies, emerge from the unconscious and affect our relationships and our education in multiple ways for our entire life. I have worked as an adult to (re)member my body with my spirit, my sexuality with my spirituality, and my fantasies with my imagination. I have concluded that the only way to avoid the hopelessness of my father’s suicide and Jackson Pollock’s alcoholism and depression is to remember wholistically, to live with my whole body, and to take the power of my body back from those who regulated it—including the governmentality by my own conscious and unconscious actions (Foucault, 1978, 1986a, 1986b). This public art installation tableau is an ongoing project to (re)member teaching and learning with the whole body. This is my approach to public pedagogy and public performance art.
Modern art—before its lofty ambitions were trivialized by American Pop Art—was searching for excellence and transcendence, partly in response to the hopelessness and destruction first identified in the Surrealist manifesto. Jackson Pollock and many of his contemporaries sacrificed everything, including sometimes their lives and their sanity, in a glorious attempt to make sense of a century that makes little sense in its horrific embrace of totalitarianism, materialism, and destruction. The regulation and governmentality of the body is another tragedy of modern life, particularly in the schooling process. The excavation of performance art and public pedagogy will hopefully contribute to understanding and ameliorating this tragedy.

James F. Cooper (1999) offers, perhaps, a fitting conclusion and tribute to Pollock and all artists working within:

Jackson Pollock took more with him than a tortured life when he fatally crashed his automobile against a tree on Fireplace Road in East Hampton, New York. His death signaled the end of an era of courageous experimentation that made American culture alive and relevant. (p. 7)

My hope is that more scholars and artists will engage public pedagogy and reinvigorate the public sphere in ways that will make global culture alive and relevant.

References


