

## **T...O...R...N...: Research Findings as Performance Art<sup>1</sup>**

Lisa Kay

*In this article, I present an ethnographic performance text that describes research findings from the qualitative dissertation study titled *Art Education Pedagogy and Practice with Adolescent Students at-risk in Alternative High Schools*. “T...O...R...N... The Play” uses a narrative approach that represents participants’ stories naturalistically and realistically, using their multiple voices and words. The inclusion of the narrator/researcher’s voice offers both description and analysis of the data. Using art-based research methodologies, I integrate bits and pieces of information and imagery, stories and data, literally and figuratively. This piece illustrates the complexities of education through art in two alternative school environments and demonstrates the overlap of art education and art therapy ideas and techniques in use with students who are labeled “at risk.”*



As a strategy to create critical sites of learning, performance art pedagogy makes it possible for all observers to become participants, and all participants, creators of cultural learning. Its multicentric and dialogic processes recognize the cultural experiences, memories and perspectives—participants’ multiple voices—as viable content. (Garoian 67)

*T...O...R...N...*, a play in one act, takes place in the fall of 2007 in two Midwestern alternative high schools. The play presents qualitative research findings naturalistically in narrative form. The main characters in the play are two art teachers, their art

---

**Lisa Kay** is an artist/researcher, art educator, and art therapist. She is an adjunct faculty member in Art Education at Northern Illinois University and in Art Therapy at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

<sup>1</sup> Before I started my dissertation research, I made preliminary site visits. Throughout the day I encountered shredded and “torn” paper everywhere: at a car dealership, in classrooms, in restrooms, and restaurants. I saved the bits and pieces of paper, created a visual memo representing my experience, and reflected on my art work and the day (see Figure 1). Was I torn between something? Are these youth torn? T.O.R.N. seems a fitting title for this ethnographic performance text, as it describes my research findings and is an organizing metaphor for my research.

students, and the narrator, who is an observer of the action but who also interacts with the teachers as well as the audience. The students' stories and their relationships within the classrooms are told through both words and images. The teachers have selected their own pseudonyms. To protect the anonymity of the students, the student characters in this piece have also been given pseudonyms. The schools' names have also been changed for the same reason. Dialogue is taken directly from students' verbalizations and conversations in the two classrooms. The art work is from the art teachers' collections.



Figure 1. T.O.R.N., Visual Memo, 2/9/07.

## CAST

The art teachers: Mona Lisa (Kozol Community Educational Center), Louise Nevelson (Birch Substance Abuse Treatment Center)

The students: Adam, Aimee, Alexandria, Anna, Ben, Carl, Eric, Jake, JaNelle, Jasmin, Jason, Jerome, Jessina, Karin, K.G., Kyle, LaToya, Liam, Martina, Matt, Mikayla, Mike, Rhonda, Robert, Rosa, Stefan, Vince

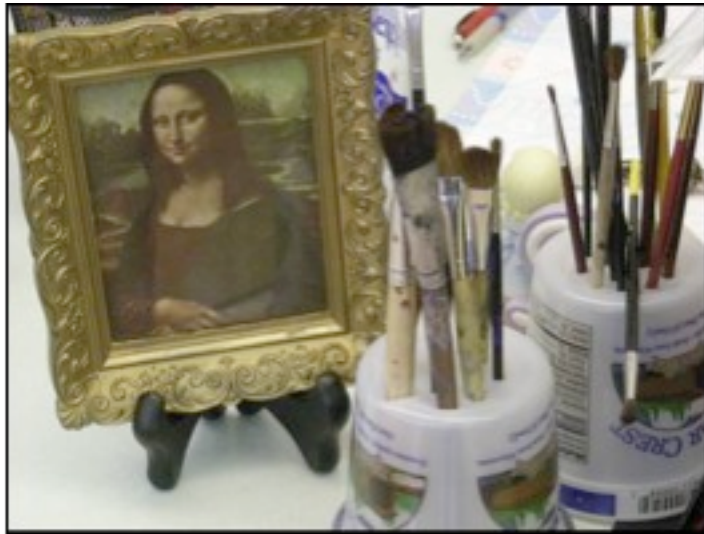
Ms. Hazelton (class aide to Louise Nevelson)

Mrs. Jankowski (Guidance counselor, Kozol Community Educational Center)

Mrs. Webb-Jackson (Principal, Kozol Community Educational Center)

Additional aides, counselors, and students

*Lisa Kay*



*Figure 2. Mona Lisa's Desk.*

**Mona Lisa:** Art Teacher, Kozol Community Educational Center, a thirty-something single female with no children, the youngest of 11 children. She describes herself as an artist, an introvert, and a right-brain thinker. Before coming to Kozol, Mona worked with at-risk students in an aviation program sponsored through the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) and as an art teacher in a science and arts magnet school. These experiences prepared her to work in an alternative high school. A certified art teacher for 10 years and working on her national board certification, she believes that “art is about open communication in a visual form that leads to discussion about issues ... a hands-on way to deal with things, to think about things, and a way to do things differently.” She enjoys nature, painting, raising horses, and living in the country.

**Louise Nevelson:** Art Teacher, Birch Substance Abuse Treatment Center, a thirty-something, married female with three children, ages 6, 2, and 1. While in college Louise volunteered in an after-school art program for at-risk students. She believes that all students are at-risk and have unique, special needs. Her knowledge is based on her degree in art and regular education. Her special education experience comes from on-the-job training – working with these students every day and attending classes on behavior management and de-escalation. A certified art teacher who has taught art for seven years, she believes that “art is a part of everyday life, and [the purpose of] education in art is to get students to believe in themselves.” She is a professional painter who loves nature and mentoring her students.

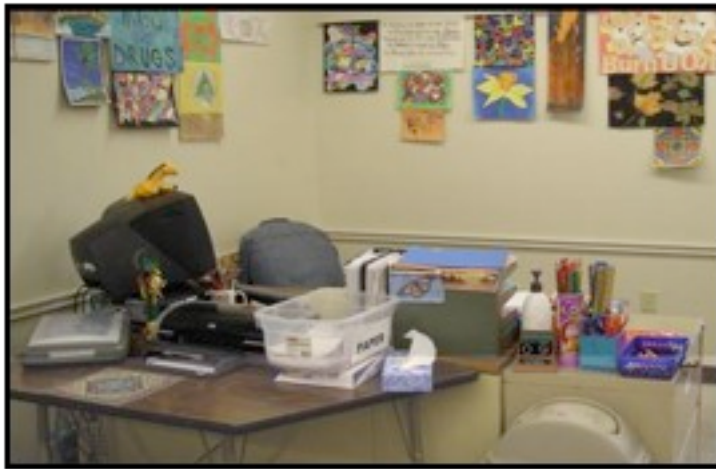


Figure 3. Louise's Desk.



Figure 4. *Bead Collage: Teaching Philosophy*, Lisa Kay.

**The Narrator:** Lisa Kay, Artist/Art Therapist/Educator/Researcher. Lisa is a dedicated artist, researcher, art therapist and art educator. Her creative voice is integrated in her identities. These are inextricably linked and essential for her to balance multiple realms and roles. She uses art as a tool in research and therapy and considers teaching as part of her art practice.

**The Students:** Male and female, freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors, ages 14-

*Lisa Kay*

19, they represent a microcosm of teenagers, a cross-section of social, gender, and ethnic groups. Most are visually and verbally expressive, although some are quiet and withdrawn. The students are characterized by their teachers as having negative self-perceptions, including very low self-esteem. The teachers describe them as independent, creative, immature, withdrawn, depressed, angry, discouraged, talkative, unfocused, belligerent, insecure, obnoxious, frustrated, and needy. The students come from dysfunctional families with minimal parental involvement in school or their lives. They are dealing with a cadre of family issues, including abuse, divorce, abandonment, alcoholism, drug use and addiction, and/or mental illness. They are coping with many social issues, including gangs, guns, community and school violence, addiction, drugs, pregnancy and teen parenting. Some are living independently, going to school, working, and parenting themselves—sometimes a child and sometimes a parent. Others attend a residential treatment school for substance abuse. Many are taking art for the first time.

## **The Settings**

**Kozol Community Educational Center:** This alternative school is housed in an old building originally constructed in the 1920s as a middle school. The school is surrounded by asphalt and cement, with little to no green space. It sits amid moderately maintained houses of the same era. Situated in an urban multiethnic neighborhood, the structure is monumental—gray brick with carved stone gargoyles of children’s faces at the corners of the facade. A uniformed security guard sits behind a desk located immediately inside the front door checking student identification badges and writing visitor passes. It is not unusual for the principal—walkie-talkie in hand—and a police officer to be at the school entrance, nor is it unusual to see a police car or an ambulance outside the front door. The interior of the school has its original dark oak wood molding, ceramic tiles, hardwood floors, large casement windows, long corridors, and wide staircases. The building has many beautiful mosaic backsplashes designed and crafted by WPA artists that frame the water fountains and serve as unacknowledged memorials to the time the school originally served as a “regular” district school. One of these fountains, located outside the art classroom, is used by students as the water source for everything, including painting projects.

Visual art, graphic arts, music, and business classes are all electives at Kozol. Students must take one fine arts elective: either visual art or music. If they don’t like music, then they take art. And usually there is a waiting list to get into the program because only 15 students are allowed in each class. The class size is small due to the limited size of the art education classroom and the alternative education philosophy that advocates a low teacher to student ratio to promote one to one attention and individual instruction. The curriculum is self-paced. Students are expected to work independently. The curriculum adheres to district and state goals and is structured on

learning the elements and principles of art. The curriculum is divided into six sections; each section has a packet of information related to the art concept for students to study and complete. Packets are designed to be completed in one class period. After completing each art packet students take a short quiz. Then they select from two different art projects in each section. Using formal elements and principles, students create artwork that has personal meaning and connects to them in some way. When they finish each art piece and a self-critique, students are ready to start another packet. After completing all six, they earn their art credit. Students are required to have 60 hours of instructional time to earn each credit; therefore, even if they finish required assignments early, students must remain in art class after finishing the Art I curriculum. Often students choose to continue in Art II or Art III.

**Birch Substance Abuse Treatment Center:** This center was originally built in 1916 by the Birch family, who donated their homestead and land to be a school and an orphanage for boys. The old building has been replaced with a new high-end facility that resembles a lodge more than a hospital or school and which sits on several acres in a country setting amid woods, lakes, gardens, and trees. A long winding road leads to the building that uses huge wooden beams to hold a steeply pitched roof. Flowering plants and shrubs are planted at the building entrance and throughout the well - maintained campus. On the south side of the building is a Japanese serenity/meditation garden with a walking path around a lake with bridges and benches. A wooded area with dozens of species of indigenous trees frames the garden. The inside of the building is warmly decorated with natural earth tones and a stone fireplace with a large mantel, which is a focal point inside the entrance. Framed fine art and photographs adorn the walls. Two female receptionists in ordinary dress greet staff and visitors. Visitors are directed to a sign-in log and escorted into the main part of the building. Staff enters by swiping ID badges. Locked doors mark the entrance to a long carpeted hallway that leads to the education center.

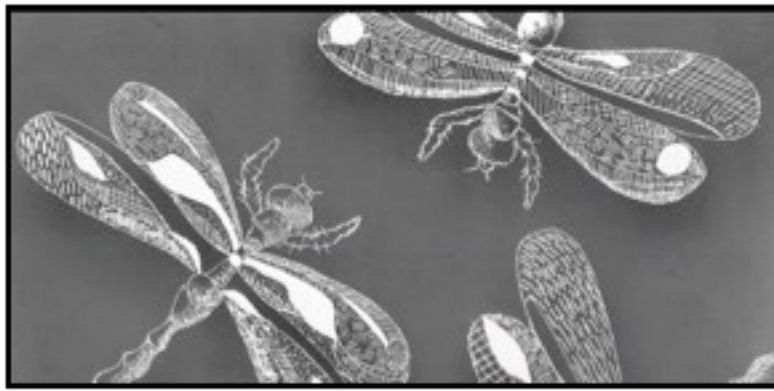
The art education program is an integral part of the school program at Birch. All students are required to participate in art class and are given grades for their participation. During the majority of the treatment program males and females are separated; therefore, all classes, including art, are gendered. Classes average 12-13 students and meet daily throughout the week. When there is a school holiday, art class usually still meets.

Some curricular decisions are based on economics, others on space. A limited budget impacts the supplies available for art making, while limited space requires Louise to rotate when students work with certain materials, like clay. Storage space for work in progress is at a premium. The curriculum combines the elements and principles of art with technical instruction to facilitate emotional expression. Because the curriculum adapts to the needs of the class and “is all about them,” Louise integrates topics of interest to her students so they feel more connected to the lesson. She rotates and recycles half a dozen or more of her lesson plans. Some lessons, according to Louise, may seem childish because these students have not experienced

*Lisa Kay*

typical arts and craft activities, like leaf collecting and drawing or pumpkin carving, as children. And they lack confidence in their art abilities and have low self-esteem, so the curriculum is filled with success-oriented lessons that focus on students' positive strengths and self-identity. Activities of the Center, like poster, slogan, and decorating contests, are interwoven into art lessons. Some lessons focus directly on recovery issues. Louise works with some students and their counselors on individual art projects that deal with emotions. The Center calls these lessons "treatment work." All work counts toward their class participation. Louise helps students enrolled in art classes in their home school to keep up with their art assignments while in treatment, and communicates directly with art teachers at their home school. While the art work that students complete for their "regular" art classes is graded, most art assignments in this alternative school are not.

**Images of students' art work are projected onto a scrim on the stage.**



*Figure 5. Dragonflies, Art Student (from the collection of Mona Lisa).*

## T. O. R. N. . . .

*“A room hung with pictures is a room hung with thoughts.”*  
 — Joshua Reynolds (English Artist), 1723-1792

## Prologue

*The Narrator is seated in a chair on a raised platform in the rear center of the stage between two empty classrooms.*

**Narrator:** In *Performing Pedagogy*, art educator Charles Garoian asserts that teaching and learning is performance art and that “performance art pedagogy is the praxis of postmodern theory” (10) that “facilitates agency through self expression, acknowledges identity work as a significant content in arts education [and] creates discourses and practices that are multiethnic, participatory, indeterminate, interdisciplinary, reflexive, and intercultural” (122).

Sitting the art classroom, I observed students changing classes and art teachers preparing for their next class; I visualized actors quickly moving props and sets and assuming their stage positions. I listened to multiethnic, intercultural dialogue and observed participatory artmaking focused on self-expression and self-identity. To capture these reflexive discourses and teaching practices and present a visual portrait of my findings, I transformed my field notes into a play. I was living “performance art pedagogy” and was myself transformed from therapist to researcher in the process.

*It’s warm outside and it’s extremely warm in the art education classroom at Kozol. The heat is on in the building; the sun is generating more heat through the large windows. Examples of student artwork hang on the walls. A bulletin/chalk board displays daily announcements and class/school information. Quotes that read “Artists create the world they imagine” and “An artist is a person who uses imagination and skill to communicate ideas in a visual form” frame the teacher’s desk.*

*Students enter the multi-grade/multi level art classroom—some with MP3 players and headphones in place, tired and sleepy, most wearing huge, invisible backpacks – filled with their emotions, hardships, struggles, and their troubles. They may self-identify as losers, quitters, and/or addicts. There is minimal difference between students here and in other traditional schools. There is an art studio atmosphere in the class. Art supplies, for students’ use, are organized in drawers, on open shelves, and in cabinets or storage closets. Students are simultaneously working at multiple levels on various assignments with different media. The teacher moves from student to student, checking on their progress, demonstrating lessons, and offering technical assistance, encouragement and/or support.*

*Images of student artwork are projected onto a scrim on the stage.*



*Lisa Kay*



Figure 6. *Lighthouse*, Art Student (from the collection of Mona Lisa).

### Scene 1: Beginning

“It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance, and I know of no substitute for the force and beauty of its process.”

— Henry James

*Portable chalkboards and bulletin boards divide the stage into two classrooms. Students sit at tables; there is a desk and chair for each teacher. Students enter the classroom talking to one another, getting settled in their seats and at their tables, asking questions, and taking out their work. During the first five minutes of class the teacher reviews the class list, adds new students to it, and begins explaining expectations to her students. The art teacher gets students working right away. She introduces a basic introductory lesson that uses their names. The personal identity project is success-oriented, helps them relax, and promotes the belief that they are capable of creating art.*

*Louise walks onstage and talks to the Narrator.*

**Louise:** Every student has special needs; every student needs special attention. All are *at-risk* in some way and are typical of high school teenagers in the Midwest.

**Louise** (*turns to class*): All right, class, let's get started. Sign in and take your seats. Who's not here today? Who's finished with their projects and who needs my help? Who is the new kid?

**Louise** (*turns to audience*): I get my students comfortable with drawing and expressing themselves through art. This is especially helpful for those students who lack confidence as artists and have low self-esteem. As their visual expression develops and they move through the art education program, I introduce them to metaphor (representing their ideas and thoughts via art and symbols).

*Mona enters stage left, talks to Louise, and remains onstage.*

**Mona Lisa**: I have to be careful because the administration in my district doesn't want students to be **too** expressive. This is hard to do in art. I tend to guide students toward nature as a theme because of the limitations the school administration places on content in art education. Nature is safe or innocuous.



*Figure 7. Leaves, Art Student (from the collection of Louise).*

**Louise**: I guide my students toward nature because I believe that nature does connect my students to beauty and the natural world around them, which is important. I focus my students toward positive images, themes, and aspects of themselves. I explain that it's time to have a different focus. It helps them re-think how they define themselves and their life situations. We sometimes do projects that incorporate their names or initials and emphasize self-identity.

*Lisa Kay*

*Students enter both classrooms, sit at the tables. Louise's students begin talking.*

**Ben:** I've been told I was artistically challenged.

**Louise:** By whom?

**Ben:** Everybody – my parents, my teachers, my friends.

**Adam:** I'm an art hater!

**Louise:** Hater? That's really a strong statement.

**Adam:** I do.

**Kyle:** Me, too.

**Louise:** Are you just going to sit there today?

**Ben:** I've never been an artistic person. It's hard to think of ideas. I'm **not** an artist.

**Adam:** I can't draw.

**Louise:** Can't, or won't? Have you ever tried?

**Adam:** Yes, and every time it looks dumb.

**Kyle:** I'm so lazy. I said, I'm not an art person.

**Adam:** These are stupid projects. I hate them!

*Images of students' kaleidoscope designs are projected onto the back wall of the stage.*

**Narrator:** I call it “art angst.” The students describe their dread, fear, anxiety, and sometimes anguish associated with making art, but I call it art angst because one student showed me the kaleidoscope design he made using the word “angst” to represent his feelings about his life. This is partly like the art anxiety that students may experience in regular art classes, but for these kids in the alternative high school settings, the emotions may be more exaggerated. Maybe not. Louise said these kids are like kids at any other school. We'll see... These students have strong feelings about expressing their thoughts and ideas or revealing anything about who they are. Some don't like to get messy. Many are frustrated because they have never “done” art or have been criticized when they have. This may be just like “ordinary” art education students in “regular” schools.

*Mona is demonstrating shading to one student. Another student holds up her work for the teacher to see. Louise is helping a student with a project and responds to another student's request for help.*

**K.G.:** Mrs. N., help me please; this is not turning out right.

**Liam:** I can't do this. Can I . . . ?

**Jake:** I'm finished; look.

**Louise:** I see, I see. Liam, I want to see you try first, and then I will help you.

**Liam:** I'm going to try to do it my way.

**Louise:** Great! I know you can do it. It's looking awesome.

**Matt:** I tried and I can't; I hate this shit, it's too messy.



Figure 8. *Kaleidoscope*, Art Student (from the collection of Louise).

*Mona spends individual time with this student. Several students watch as she assists a student even if they are not doing the same project. Then, Mona systematically moves around the classroom, working with as many students as possible during the class.*

**Rosa:** My work is ugly!

**Mona Lisa:** What don't you like about it? May I help you with it?

**Rosa:** I'm highly upset with this drawing; it's not working.

**LaToya:** Ms. Lisa, Ms. Lisa, Ms. Lisa, I don't like this. I need help.

**Mona Lisa:** OK, OK, Hang on, I'll be right there; let me finish here.

**Louise** (*turns to the audience*): My classes are small—12-13 students per class. This allows me to make contact with each student, each class, either about their artwork or about themselves. They trust me and feel comfortable with me. One difference from other schools is that in my classes male and female students are segregated. The Center mandates this practice and I like it because it seems to decrease some negative

*Lisa Kay*

social behaviors. I find that my students take more risks, especially the girls, in art making since they don't have to deal with the opposite sex. On the whole, they are more receptive and open to teaching and learning.

**Mona Lisa** (*turns to the audience*): My class size is rarely more than 15. This is due to the educational philosophy of the alternative school and the size of my classroom. I couldn't fit one more student in. It does allow me to give individual instruction and personal attention to my students, which I really like. I try to work in some way with each student every day. I would find this difficult to do if I had a class of 30 students. It's important for my students to know that I am there for each and every one of them. I think by doing this I develop rapport with my students and it facilitates a sense of mutual respect.

*Students exit stage from both sides. Both teachers and the Narrator remain.*

## Scene 2: Working Things Out

*The stage remains divided into two classrooms. Louise is at the entrance to the class; Mona is sitting at her desk. Students, aides, and special education teachers are coming in and out of the art classrooms. Students sit down at tables and begin getting ready for class. They are humming and singing and talking about things that happened the night before. Mona explains to her students that as long as they are working, they can talk to each other and listen to music, either on headphones or cell phones. If the noise level gets too loud or they aren't working or thinking about their projects, music is turned down or off. One student in Louise's classroom asks permission to turn on the radio. Louise tells her class that they can listen to music while working on their projects but the volume level can't go above 13, John Mayer's song "Waiting for the World to Change" is playing: "Me and all my friends, we're all misunderstood, they say we stand for nothing and, there's no way we ever could... we just feel like we don't have the means, to rise above it. So we keep waiting, waiting for the world to change, we keep waiting on the world to change."*

**Liam:** Hey, that's a good song. It describes us. Nobody understands us.

**Jake:** Yeah, I get in trouble a lot, but I'm really not all that bad. Who ain't bad in school? Who doesn't get in trouble at home?

*Students are involved in finishing up many different art tasks: doing a collage, making a "god box" (spirituality collage box), or painting a name design. Louise is explaining a new assignment that combines warm and cool colors and promotes positive self-identity. She tells Mona and the audience that when the majority of her students are finished with one project, she introduces something new. That way nobody gets too bored and she keeps things interesting.*

**Louise:** I want you to think of a word that represents something positive about you.

**Mike:** I can't think of a word.

**Louise:** A good word, a positive word.

**Ben:** Me, either.

**Louise:** What describes you?

**Adam:** Girls, hot, ah, money, gangs, addict, alcoholic.

**Louise:** No, I want positive descriptive words. NO negative imaging. Think about words that represent how you feel or something that is important to you. Draw that word, then design the composition; use warm colors for the foreground and cool colors for the background. Does everyone understand what I'd like you to do?

*Students nod their heads in understanding and begin to draw words like HAPPINESS, EMPTY, PEACE, SUCCESS, or INTENSE on their paper.*

*Image of Kaleidoscope fades out and the feeling words fade in.*



*Figure 9. Word Design, Art Student (from the collection of Louise).*

*The teachers talk to the Narrator.*

**Louise:** I give my students flexibility within my structure but I combine teaching art technique with the expression of emotions. This is what's important in art education for me. My curriculum is rotating and I recycle my lesson plans. There are times, though, when I must base my teaching decisions on my budgetary and space limitations. While I focus more on class needs as a whole, I assign some projects for individual students called "treatment work." We don't have IEPs but I am on students' treatment plans. I give them credit for this work and sometimes their home



*Lisa Kay*

school art teacher does also.

**Mona Lisa:** Budget and space impact my curriculum, too. I have a limited budget. Don't all art teachers? I waited for months for get my supplies for this school year. I alter assignments because when I don't have the supplies students need, there are some techniques I just can not teach. I don't have a sink in my art classroom. My students ask, "How can you teach art without a sink?" It's not ideal, but we manage. My curriculum is designed, for the most part, to be self-explanatory and self-guided. I have created packets covering the formal elements of art that include pertinent information, worksheets, quizzes and a self-critique. Giving my students freedom within the curriculum yields discipline and internal control. They usually complete my class within 9-12 weeks working 5 in-class hours per week.

*There is a flurry of activity and energy on and offstage. Students are moving about the classroom and offstage to the restroom, to the water fountain, and to the library to search for images for projects. Counselors are coming into both classrooms stage right and stage left looking for students and consulting with the teachers. A voice over the loudspeaker publicizes Red Ribbon Week activities and announces the quote of the day: "Curiosity has its own reason for existing—Albert Einstein." No one seems to pay much attention.*

*Mona steps forward center stage and everyone freezes.*

**Mona Lisa (Soliloquy):** Art is a social way of working things out. I assist my students in finding their own way—in art and in life. When they are working on art assignments in class, they are working things out in their lives. We get conversations between one another. This gives them a sense of trust in me and in each other. It's not always about art; it's about reaching them for that day. They've been kicked out of other classes or kicked out of the house. I want them to open up, have a positive attitude about school and realize that art and education are about them. My students feel that they never really match up to others, their peers, and that they are misunderstood. They have been expelled from regular school or sent to jail and/or treatment centers. They say that adults in their lives don't believe in them. In my art classes I want them to experience something different. I guide the art process, giving them freedom and flexibility within the curriculum to choose projects and subject matter. They are given options: choice of media, images, even paper size. The only exception is that they must work daily. They will be given an academic watch if they are not progressing. If no improvement is made by the student they are dropped from class.

*Louise steps forward, talks to Mona, then returns to her desk.*

**Louise:** I believe that when they have choice, they can relax; when they realize there aren't such strict rules, they have a sense of control and empowerment.

**Mona:** A curriculum that is open to everyone gives students the freedom to express themselves and freedom to relate art to their own lives. I believe that when curriculum is connected to students' lives, they are self-motivated. You can teach formal elements and principles of art and include meaningful pictures that connect to your students.

### Scene 3: Reflecting

*The scene changes as the Narrator enters with a basket of beads. The three sit together center stage at a table. The clinking of beads, charms, and found objects against metal tins can be heard. Like kids in a candy store, the art teachers express their excitement as they begin to run their fingers through the miscellaneous objects. As they select objects to create a bead collage that reflects their experience as art educators with students at-risk in alternative high schools, they discuss their philosophies about art and teaching.*

**Louise:** Oh wow, exciting! It looks fun. I've never created a bead collage. We can do this while we talk?

**Mona:** This *is* really fun. Teachers don't get the opportunity to do this very often – make art and talk about their teaching practice.

**Louise:** I don't take time to formally reflect on what I do or think about myself and how I teach art. Before talking to you, I just did my thing you know, my teaching. Now I am noticing what I do; before, I just did it without much thought.

**Mona:** (*Soliloquy*) Art can bring open communication out in a visual form. Not *just* in visual form, but in verbal as well. But when bureaucratic and hierarchical structures of schools restrict [and censor] art work and imagery students can use in their work, open communication is affected. Kids need to be able to look at images and art work in their environment, relate to it, and reflect upon it. It's amazing what my students come up with—things that I would never think about. I am lucky to have as much communication with my students as I do. But you know it depends on the personality of the teacher. Some teachers are quick to write a referral or send a student out of class. I'd rather discuss a student's negative language or behavior than just sending them out of class. I create an environment in the art classroom where students feel that they can express themselves, within reason, both verbally and visually. They are surprised that I allow such freedom of expression because they say, "when I was at the other high school, we weren't allowed to do any of this."

I think that as an art educator, I can't separate my teaching from who I am as a person. Look these beads, everything is intertwined, affects another, and is interwoven. My teaching is just like this (*holds up beads*)—the intertwining of culture, community, and school. My students are unique and come from different cultures like



*Lisa Kay*

these beads, yet, it all works together. The outcome of art education is that students develop self-identity as they learn to move through their communities and the world. Through the visual arts they discover that they can be individuals. That's the heart of the mission for me as an art educator.



*Figure 10. Bead Collage, Mona Lisa.*

**Louise:** What I teach my students is that art is a part of everyday life. My students are so egocentric. I try to get them to be less self-centered and connect to the visual art world around them. They don't know how to see, I mean really look at things in their environment. They have lost their sense of color and a sense of wonder that young kids have. These beads are so colorful. I try to recapture that sense of awe by looking at nature and color. I try to show them the colorfulness of art education. Not that my curriculum is all color, but I think that color is really strong. Once they understand the power and emotion of color, they are more sensitive to their feelings and others'. I believe that education in art is to get students to express their feelings—their identity. I want my students to believe in themselves because if you get anybody to believe in themselves, then it will do wonders. They need a lot of support and encouragement. Finishing an art project boosts their self-esteem levels.

*Louise quietly arranges beads and continues to look for just the right ones.*



*Figure 11. Bead Collage, Louise.*

**Louise:** What are these little funky ones? Oh, that's a nice one. I'm trying to find something to represent the emotional. I realize that I am doing a kind of therapeutic art with my students and want to signify that somehow. It's not art therapy, but it kind of looks like it because I have students connect with their emotions through their art. Artists express emotions. I love to teach and inspire my students to put some passion and emotion in their art—something of themselves. I want them think creatively – outside the box—and try something that they haven't done before in art, like working with a new technique, a different process, or an unusual material.

I'm going to try to tell you what all this means to me. I'll start here. This artsy one represents my beliefs about art. Some beads are handmade and remind me that as a teacher I am molding the students with my hands and my beliefs about art, about education, and about life. I wanted to make sure that this large black onyx was at the end because it looks like a puzzle piece. You are molding your students, with their

*Lisa Kay*

puzzle pieces, into who they are and giving them what you have to teach them so they can make it in the world. Umm, these are my dumbbells (*points to tubular silver beads*) to represent being strong. In my teaching, I'm kind of like a personal coach assisting kids in becoming strong and believing in themselves. I want my students to be positive, look on the bright side of things, and stay playful like some of the objects I have included in my bead collage. And this light green bead, which has many facets, represents the quality of being easygoing as an art teacher. You have to be that way and not so structured or harsh. You can't take things your students do personally; you have to lighten up a little bit. This section of wooden beads (*points to a section of the strand of beads*) is so primitive, and yet delicate, like my students. The heart, even though it's big, is for delicacy too, and for love. These kids need a lot of love, encouragement, and support to succeed. These beads are totally unique, again like my students, and represent that in teaching everything is forever changing, different each day with each student depending on what is happening in their lives. As a teacher you have to be flexible to change at any moment. Education is a very intricate process.

**Mona:** I've never used my art to organize my thoughts about teaching. It's kind of like art therapy, isn't it? I think that reaching kids at a different emotional level, especially for contemporary students of today, is so important. They are dealing with a lot of issues and environments that we don't touch on [in the education process]... There has to be more. I would really like to get into art therapy to know more about it.

**Narrator:** This type of tactile art process is not art therapy; however, it is a method to help individuals express ideas using metaphor (like Louise did), communicate experience symbolically (as Mona has), and make meaning through visual and verbal viewing of art in a way that artists and art educators often think.

**Louise:** I think that a focus on the emotional side of things in art education for teachers is needed. I came out of college with technical art knowledge, but what was lacking was how these students were going to present to you—you know, how they are going to come into your class. They come with emotional backpacks. They don't teach you in teacher education about the emotional side of teaching.

**Mona:** In my university classes we touched briefly on the emotional needs of students, those students with emotional disturbances and at-risk. I don't believe that the university offers adequate education to teachers to prepare them to work with students at-risk. I would like to see pre-service art teachers do their student teaching in places like Kozol. Then they would be able to manage just about anything. What they would learn here about the social and emotional sides of the art classroom they could then use in the traditional educational setting.

**Louise:** Art teachers need "special" education more than regular classroom teachers

because often students who are having difficulties academically, behaviorally or socially end up in the art classroom. Art teachers need a couple of classes that teach them what to expect from these students, how to handle students at-risk, and how to deal with their special needs. Maybe call it “Art Therapy for Educators.” The class could give art teachers more knowledge about how to work with troubled kids, the ways in which art is used as therapy, and how art teachers can apply the approach in the classroom.

*Mona leaves the stage to enlarge an image on the copy machine. Her students file into class and the classroom aide supervises the students. Mona returns to help a student with her landscape painting and demonstrates how to use an Xacto knife. The students are working on self-portraits, texture and perspective assignments. Several students call out for her help. She works with her students while Louise asks her student's permission to demonstrate on her drawing. Louise sits down and starts to draw on the paper. As she is finishing up with this student, another student calls out for help with his 2-point perspective drawing.*

**K.G.:** Mrs. N., please come here. This is so confusing. I don't know what I'm doing.

**Louise:** Is it okay if I show you what I mean on your drawing? I won't ruin it, I promise.

**K.G.:** I know; it's okay. Will you do it for me?

**Louise:** No, but I'll get you started and help you understand 2-point perspective. *(She draws a line as she continues to talk.)* It's not easy, I know, but you can do it. It takes practice. You'll get it. I have confidence in you.

*Students' art work is projected onto the back wall of the stage.*



Figure 12. *Imagination*, Art Student (from the collection of Mona Lisa).

*Lisa Kay*

**Louise** (*to audience*): I often demonstrate directly on students' work. I ask permission first. I try to be sensitive to and respectful of their personal boundaries before I proceed. But...sometimes I can't help myself and I just dive in.

**Narrator**: Most students are very comfortable and welcome her help; some want their teachers to do their art work for them; others prefer not to have *anyone* touch their art and this needs to be respected. It is one thing to demonstrate a technique for students but to "*just dive in*" is intrusive practice.

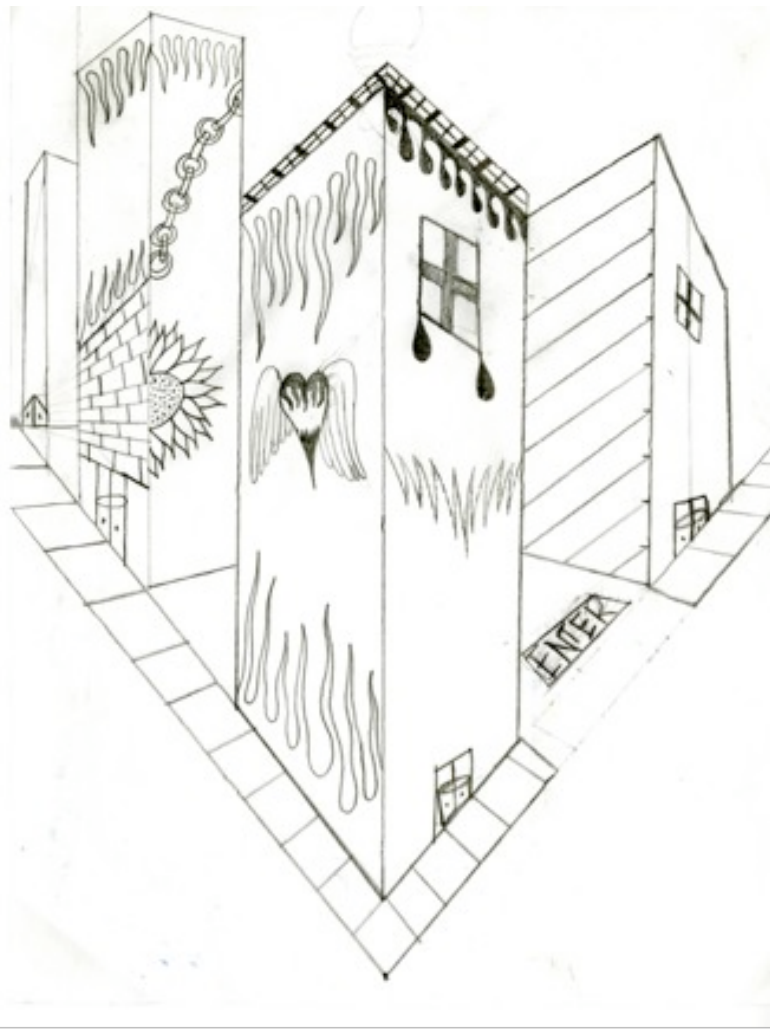


Figure 13. *Perspective Drawing*, Art Student (from the collection of Louise).

*Images of multiple student self-portraits are projected onto the stage scrim.*

**Narrator:** Several students are working and talking about what had happened the night before. They begin working on their papier-mâché initials, name designs, or watercolor texture paintings. Others are working on special assignments, like abstract or realistic self-portraits or collages.



*Figures 14 & 15: Self-Portraits, Art Student (from the collection of Louise).*

**Louise (to a student):** I was just sitting down to *bother* you. Where's your art journal? You haven't shown it to me lately.

**Kyle:** I always forget to bring it to class.

**Louise:** I need you to bring it to class tomorrow first hour.

**Kyle:** But, I don't come 'til 10:00.

**Louise:** Ask Mr. Cooper to let you come down to my class first thing in the morning.

**Kyle:** Okay, Mrs. Nevelson. I'll try to remember.

**Louise (addressing another student):** Are you going to sit there all hour?

**Ben:** I'm not very artistic. I *can't* do this; will you help me?

**Louise:** Yes, I will, but remember if you think that you can, you will; if you think you can't, you're right.

*Lisa Kay*

*The next class period.*

**Aimee:** Mrs. N, I can't do a self-portrait. Just thinking about doing it is making me sick. I can't even look at ME. I hate myself!

**Louise:** What is it that you hate about yourself?

**Aimee:** Everything—my face, my body, my life, my relationships. I'm scared to do this assignment. I don't know what to do.

*Louise adjusts the assignment for this student. Aimee listens to the clear and succinct step-by-step instructions that her teacher delivers. While continuing to focus on the self-portrait, Louise asks Aimee to create a collage on the theme of people and relationships. She begins looking for images in magazines to represent the theme.*

**Louise** (talks to narrator and Mona): I adapt my lesson plans and curriculum to meet students' individual needs. My pedagogy is student-centered—centered on individual needs rather than curriculum-centered—with a flexible framework comprised of individual instruction, concern for emotional needs, discipline, and respect. Other times assignments are altered to meet class needs. I work individually with my students to build rapport, earn their respect, and engage them in the art making process.

**Mona Lisa:** I had a student who initially hated art classes explain recently that even though some of the assignments seemed elementary, they made him think about his life. This was different from what he has experienced in regular high school, where he felt art was waste of time. Everyone did the same project at the same time! In this setting he was able to make personal connections to his art. While adhering to district or school guidelines, I link assignments in some way to students' lives and personal interests. I encourage them to be as expressive as I can, incorporate meaningful objects, special poems or songs, nature scenes, comic heroes, and important people in their lives into their artwork.

*Mona turns her attention to her class. Louise and the Narrator observe.*

**Robert:** All I want to do is get my art credit and get out of here and graduate.

**LaToya:** I don't. Ms. Lisa, I got my credit, but I want to stay in art.

**Mona Lisa:** It's time to move on, celebrate your accomplishment!

**LaToya:** But, I don't want to; I like it here. I'm going to miss you. Art at the other schools don't give you choice like you do.

**Mona Lisa:** I do things a little different here, you're right.

**Rosa:** Yeah, you let me be independent and pick what project I want to do and what pictures I want to use.

**Mona Lisa:** Yes, I do but within school guidelines. No violence.

**Mikayla:** You let me move at my own pace. I like that.



**Mona Lisa:** I do expect you to work independently, but you know that I will help you with your projects any way that I can.

*Mona suddenly looks over her shoulder at a group of students sitting at a table in the corner of the room close to the door. They are talking about sexually provocative topics and making and graphic gestures.*

**Mona Lisa:** Gentlemen, gentlemen, positive conversation in the art room today.

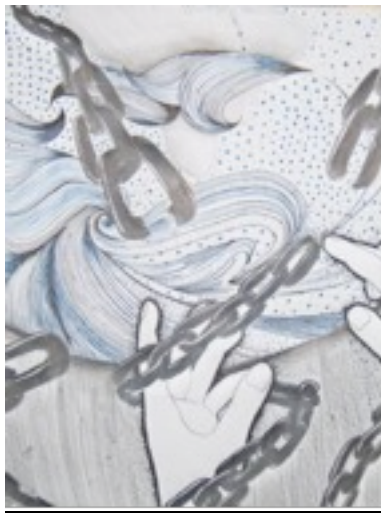


Figure 16: *Chains*, Art Student (from the collection of Mona Lisa)

#### Scene 4: Violence

*Mona Lisa points to the bulletin board with samples of finished student artwork and explains to a student how the curriculum works. She discusses her expectations with her student. Some students challenge curricular guidelines in assignments. Despite knowing that they are not allowed to use violent images or gang or racist symbols in artwork, some students test limits and use imagery that is censored. Some explain the meaning of their art content in their self-critiques. If they can justify their use of their images, they may use certain imagery. This opens up constructive dialogue between student and teacher.*

**Vince:** Just tell me what I have to do to get out of here.

**Mona Lisa:** What level are you in, Art I or Art II?

**Vince:** Art I.

**Mona Lisa:** You can select a picture to use for your assignment.

**Vince:** Okay, where are they?

**Mona Lisa:** Look over there in my file cabinet; you'll find file folders or magazines



*Lisa Kay*

filled with all sorts of images you can use in your artwork. Or you may go to the library next door and search the Internet for a suitable image, or bring a picture in from home.

**Vince:** Too many choices. Too much trouble. Just give me a picture to use.

**Mona Lisa:** Okay, I can pick one for you, but wouldn't you like to select your own picture?

**Vince:** Oh, I guess so. I'll bring one tomorrow.

**Mona Lisa:** Just remember—it has to be appropriate.

*The instrumental introduction to Billy Joel's song "Pressure" begins playing as Mona walks forward and talks to the audience. Louise and the Narrator listen.*

**Mona Lisa:** I remember one of my students brought in an image to class that he wanted to use in his artwork. I encourage students to use imagery that is meaningful and I allow images that are expressive as long as they don't signify school violence. However, the content of this one was offensive, violent, and racist—people pointing guns at each other. I could not allow it. I talked to the student about the appropriateness of his picture. He explained that this picture was his world—what he sees in his neighborhood in the city. While I understood his explanation, we discussed alternative images he might use to communicate what he wanted to express. He thought about it for a while and settled on another picture. We were able to negotiate a solution. He was able to express himself. He felt heard.

**Louise** (*responds to Mona*): With some of my students I never quite know what's going on in their heads. You were lucky that you were able to talk to that student without him getting upset. One day in class one of my male students became really upset. I didn't know what was *really* going on with him. He started going off on me about something. I can't even remember what it was but I do remember his anger. The students in my class tried to talk him down. I tried to stay calm. I stood in front of him, allowing some distance between him and me. I didn't want to get too close; I wanted to give him some his space and separate him from the rest of the class. I tried to help him work though whatever was going on, but it wasn't working. So after a few minutes, I simply asked him to turn around, not to say anything, and excused him from class. He complied. *Was I relieved!* I explained that when he was ready to come back to class, I was available to talk to him about what had happened and try to figure out some solutions. (*Louise moves center stage, turns to speak directly to the audience*): It's really scary, at times, to be an art teacher.

*As the scene changes Figure 17 is projected onto the back wall of the stage.*



Figure 17. Collaborative Photoshop Collage, Art Students (from the collection of Louise).

### Scene 5: Conversations

*While Louise is cleaning and organizing her classroom, students enter Mona's classroom, engaged in conversations. They talk about politics, world events, and other social concerns while they are working on their art projects. Racial and ethnic issues surface in the art class context. Mona talks to the audience.*

**Mona Lisa:** Each of my students is unique. I try to get to know who they are individually. I listen to students' conversations but I can't hear or respond to everything. I intervene when necessary. My students are like bumper cars...bumping energy off each other. I listen to the statements that they make in class and try to see where they are coming from—their perspective. They come from different cultures and from cultures different than my own. I try to understand what it's like to be them. Art is a way to open up communication through visual means that leads to discussion about what is going on in students' lives.

*Stefan opens up Karin's purse and looks inside.*

**Stefan:** What in the world? You got four rubbers in your purse.

*Lisa Kay*

**Karin:** That's personal business.

**Stefan:** It ain't personal.

**Karin:** If it ain't, then what is?

**Jereme:** What does it mean to be grown?

**Jessina:** Grown is when you got responsibilities and take care of yourself—food, bills.

**Jereme:** When you are 18, you are grown.

**Jessina:** That's bullshit.

**Mikayla:** I need help.

**Mona Lisa:** What do you need?

**Mikayla:** Come here. I'll show you; look at this.

*One of Mona's students says that he is really interested in politics and "international stuff." He says that he watches the Fox News channel, even on Sundays. He is particularly interested this year because he can vote and that there is a possible candidate who is African-American.*

**Robert:** I hope Obama wins; he'd be the first black president.

**Mona Lisa:** Just because he looks it, does it mean he's black?

**Robert:** His father is Kenyan.

**Stefan:** What race? African?

**Robert:** Presidential, stupid.

**Robert to Ms. Lisa:** What, you don't want a black president?

**Stefan:** You just hate him.

**Mona Lisa:** How do you decide who to vote for?

*The sound of day care children yelling can be heard outside the classroom windows. One student comments that she sees her child playing with the other kids.*

**Robert:** They are really starting to get on my nerves! (*pointing out the window to the children*) We don't need another Clinton.

**Stefan:** Whites want power over blacks.

**Robert:** I get to vote for the first time this election. Need to get rid of Bush.

**Stefan:** Why, do you think he's stupid?

**Robert:** Him and his father started all this mess.

**Vince:** If I were president, I'd legalize marijuana.

**Jessina:** What about impairment? You make bad decisions.

**Vince:** I make good decisions when I'm high. I can focus. My mind sticks me on things.

**Jessina:** I don't like the way drinking makes me feel.

**Vince:** Ah...Gray goose and Hennessy, Hypnotiq.

**Jessina:** It makes me throw up.

**Jessina:** My mom's an alcoholic and I hate it. You can become one at any age.

*Students at one table are chanting hip hop rap songs with inappropriate lyrics as they are working on their artwork. Mona refocuses her students on their work.*

**Mona Lisa:** Not good language.

**Stefan:** Are you talking to me?

**Mona Lisa:** I think so. You are singing, aren't you? And it's offensive in class and not acceptable in school.

**Stefan:** Don't be talkin' to me, because you're scared.

**Mona Lisa:** I am not scared; should I be?

**Stefan:** I'm your worst nightmare. I've got niggeritis. She's actin' like a nigger—loud and ignorant.

**Mona Lisa:** *Watch your language!*

**Stefan:** You're going to get it. You'll be the opposite of Michael Jackson.

**Mona Lisa:** I'm not sure what that means but I'm glad you are so blessed—you talk and don't work.

**Carl:** Hey teacher, I need help with my project.

**Stefan:** She's going to shoot you.

**Anna:** What are you talking about? Ms. L. isn't going to hurt you.

**Mona Lisa:** You talk so loud.

**Stefan:** I'm white so treat me like it. Don't kick me out. Don't give me an "F." You play favoritism to white people.

**Mona Lisa:** I do? You earn grades in my class for participation, quizzes, and completing your artwork.

**Stefan:** Eyes on black, eyes gonna crack.

**Robert:** You racist! You Negro hater. *(Student announces to class)* She gave me a "C" because she hates black people.

*Robert quickly apologizes and says that he was just kidding. As Mona escorts this student outside the classroom to privately discuss his behavior and comments, a silhouette image of the two appears against a scrim. The whole class waits in breathless anticipation. When the teacher and student re-enter, the other students pretend to mind their own business. Robert and Mona return to class. As Roberts sits down in his seat he addresses the other students.*

**Robert:** She said for me to be nice or she would call my mama.

**Narrator:** "Teachable moments" abound! Teachers can address critical issues, and challenge attitudes, perceptions and belief systems in the art classroom.

**Mona Lisa** *(teachers talk to each other and the Narrator):* My students make racist comments to get my attention, engage me in conflict or test limits. I try not to get into power struggles with them, but I am honest and tell the truth. There are some things that I cannot accept in my classroom.

*Lisa Kay*

**Louise:** I confront my students right away and challenge their sexist, racist, and stereotypical comments. That's why we have so many problems in the world. People stereotype each other based on race, gender, religion, and ethnic background. They need to learn tolerance. They may not like it, but I will bother them until they get it. When I talk to them, they usually they come around. There are times when a student can't, so I give them space—time to think about what they say and their attitude. They know that I am available to talk if they are ready.

*Matt is working on a name design that incorporates color, pattern, and texture. He is using only two colors, black and red. Louise reminds him to use more than two colors, at least three.*

*The previous image fades out as this name design comes into focus.*



*Figure 18. Name Design, Art Student (from the collection of Louise).*

**Matt:** What, do I look Mexican and Black?

**Ms. Hazelton:** That's stereotypical, ignorant, and offensive.

**Louise:** We don't tolerate statements like that in here. It doesn't matter, what race, what color, what religion. We don't use gang colors.

**Matt:** You try to control everything we do in here.

**Ms. Hazelton:** No.

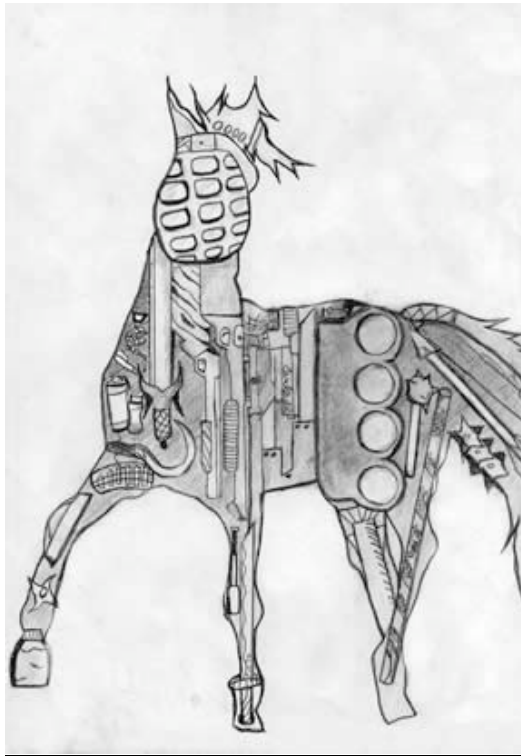
**Matt:** I'm out of here.

*Louise makes a comment as the student walks offstage.*

T...O...R...N

**Louise:** Matt, when you calm down, come back in the classroom and we can talk about it.

*The following two images are projected stacked one above the other.*



*Figure 19. Texture drawing, Art Student (from the collection of Mona Lisa).*



*Figure 20. Charcoal portrait, Art Student (from the collection of Mona Lisa).*

Lisa Kay

## Scene 6: Taboos

*Jereme stops drawing, coughs, and comments about the strong smell of the permanent marker. The sound of an electric pencil sharpener grinding, over and over and over, is heard in the classroom. The classroom becomes quieter.*

**Jereme:** I'm old enough to go into the army, I'm grown. I'm moving out when I finish high school.

**Jason** *(to art teacher):* What would you do if you knew that the world was coming to an end?

**Mona Lisa:** You can't do anything about it.

**Jason:** Yes I can; I'd take a bottle of ibuprofen and jump out of a window.

**Jereme:** I'm not afraid to die.

**Stefan:** What if a nigger put a gun to your face?

**Jereme:** I guess I'd take it.

**Carl:** I'd use a gun. *(simulates using a semi-automatic weapon)*

**Jason:** Every time you talk, it scares me.

**Carl:** Well, I think that your drawing is scary.

**Jason:** What's so scary about it?

**Carl:** I don't know; it just is. It's dark, dude, and intimidating!

**Jason:** What about your picture? It's filled with all kinds of weapons. What's that all about?

**Rosa:** I don't want to hear about this stuff because, according to the Aztec culture, the world will come to an end in 2012. It's depressing me. I don't know why you want to talk about it so much.

*Students witness, question, and challenge each others' imagery and symbols. Artwork they create is not always pretty; it can be dark, ugly, and scary. Teachers discuss the meaning of students' artwork, either one to one or in their self-critiques. When necessary, they are redirected. A student reviews her progress on her artwork with Mona. Her picture juxtaposes provocative symbols—a syringe, pills, upside-down crosses, open books, and an anatomical heart with a corn stalk, three ears of corn, and a brick wall.*

**Mona:** I was really curious about this image. I knew that the images and symbols were meaningful to this student; however, if administrators saw the picture—well, they would be shocked and want me to censor its expression. I view art that is offensive and shocks me sometimes in an art museum or at an exhibit, but should it be suppressed because I don't like it or don't understand it? How do you respond as an art teacher when you see similar work created by students? It's a dilemma. I asked this student what she was trying to say and I discovered that she was communicating

metaphorically, not literally. I think that this happens a lot with students. She explained to me that her picture represented the challenges, the influences, and the temptations that she confronts in her life every day—drugs, sexuality, spirituality, and school. I don't think that most art teachers would allow students to create this type of work, because it contained drug-related images like a syringe and pills, but I was interested to know more about all the symbolism.

**Narrator** (addresses both art teachers): As an art teacher do you manage it by saying she can't do it or re-channel her ideas to express it differently with more acceptable images? *Or* do you talk to students about their symbols and images?

**Mona:** I talk to my students about their work and have them write descriptions in their art critiques. That way I can truly understand my students through their art and if I see or hear something that really concerns me, I will get them help.

**Louise:** It is totally unacceptable to allow students in art class to draw anything drug-related. The philosophy and the policy of the Center require that I say no. I want them to learn ways to define themselves other than through drug paraphernalia anyway. I'm not an art therapist, but sometimes I give my students assignments that are more therapeutic in nature. I talk to my students about the meaning of their artwork. Counselors also talk to the students about the art assignments.

*Louise walks offstage, while Mona remains.*

### Scene 7: Life Issues

*Ominous music begins to play as JaNelle walks onstage and approaches Mona Lisa's desk, picking up a utility knife from the pencil holder.*

**JaNelle:** Mrs. L., you hear what happened at Adams High School? I'm worried about other people's safety. You need to lock this thing up. Someone might hurt someone.

**Mona Lisa:** No, I don't know what happened.

**JaNelle:** There was a stabbing at Adams. They need metal detectors in all the schools in the city. I don't feel safe in school.

**Mona Lisa:** The district may resort to that, but here we have an open campus. Students are given responsibility and the freedom to come and go.

**JaNelle:** I know, but I still think that we need more security. It's hard to focus on my work.

*The image of King appears first, then as the Narrator begins to speak the folder appears.*



Lisa Kay



Figure 21. *Shape/Form*, Art Student (from the collection of Mona Lisa). *Visual Memo*, 4/15/07

*Mona puts the tool in her drawer. JaNelle sits down at her table and begins working on her final Art I project to receive her class credit before she graduates. She pulls out her art folder that is covered with handwritten words – RACISM, ABUSE, SUICIDE, ADDICTION, VIOLENCE, RAPE, TEEN SEX, CRIME, COCAINE BABIES, CANCER, and CHILDBIRTH. From her folder she removes a picture of Martin Luther King that she intends to incorporate in her artwork. The music volume gets softer.*

*The Narrator holds up her small re-creation of JaNelle’s folder with the provocative words written on the front.*

**Narrator:** I made this “visual essay” because I was so struck by JaNelle’s process. I found the contrast between the written words on her art folder and the image she pulled from inside of her art folder a powerful visual illustration of her concerns. Many students worried about real and potential violence as well as the multiple cultural issues that impact their lives personally, collectively, and culturally. It’s challenging for these teachers to know how to deal with these issues that their students bring into the classroom. Narrator walks to the back of the stage, stands quietly, and observes the remainder of the scene.

*Louise enters stage left and returns to her classroom. She sits at her desk and checks something at her computer. Students are at different art levels and focused on multiple projects and assignments. Students look to their art teachers for technical suggestions with their artwork, for individual instructional time, and for help with personal issues. She is assisting and talking with several of her students. One of Louise’s students calls out while Mona is sitting at a table with several of her students. Two female students, one Latino in ART III and another African-American in ART I, are involved in conversation about their respective art assignments. Karin, sitting at the other end of the table, starts talking directly to Mona. Both teachers are interacting with students.*

**Louise:** Give me a minute. Keep trying. I know you can do it. (*Turns attention to another student*) What's wrong?

**Jake:** I don't know.

**Liam:** Me, either.

**Matt:** Well I know; it's parents. They *are* the problem.

**Louise:** Is it all them or some you?

**Jake:** I don't know, Mrs. L. I don't know what I feel most of the time.

**Matt:** I know, I feel hate. It's all of them. I hate my family. They are all so ignorant. They think I'm worthless and that I will never make anything of my life. I'm sick of hearing that. I don't want to talk to them.

*Lights focus on Karin and Mona. Louise and her students end their conversation and listen to what is happening in the other classroom. Soft music plays in the background.*

**Karin:** Ms. Lisa, you don't have any kids, do you?

**Mona Lisa:** No, I don't.

**Karin:** Will you adopt my baby?

**Alexandrea:** She may as well adopt it. She'd take good care of it.

**Karin:** I'll give it to you for free. I'm not dealing with two kids. I don't want it.

**Mona (to Narrator):** That was a difficult moment when Karin asked me to adopt her baby. I didn't know what to say. I draw boundaries between school and the personal. I have to. She sees me like a counselor but I'm not. I do listen, though, and tell my students what is real to me. My own experience of pain, loss, and trauma does help me to empathize with them.

*Lights focus on Louise as she talks to the audience.*

**Louise:** I wish I could take all my students home with me, but I can't. For me, letting go of my students is one of my most difficult challenges. Through their art and conversations, I get to know them at a deep level. I think it's what makes me a good teacher. I care about students and encourage them to be successful. I am very honest with my students. I let them know what they are doing well and areas that need improvement in their artwork. I encourage my students and let them know that they are capable. They don't hear that from adults in their lives. I get attached to them. I know that I can't fix everything in their lives, they need to move on, and I need to let go. I wonder, without the kind of candy-coated support they get here, whether they will make it.

*The sound of a Chris Brown song is heard from a student's cell phone. Mona instructs a student to turn off her cell phone and put it away. The smell of permanent marker fills the air as students are drawing black borders around their paper to frame their art work. One student holds up his drawing, while another calls out for the teacher's assistance.*

*Lisa Kay*

**Stefan:** That's baby-making music. (*Turns to look at Karin.*) No more babies for you.

**LaToya:** I need help.

**Mona Lisa:** I'll be there in just a few minutes. Hold on.

**Eric:** I'm finished; look.

**Mona Lisa:** I see, but I think that this area needs work. Keep working on it. You aren't finished yet.

**Eric:** But it *is* finished. I'm tired; I don't want to work any more. We only have five minutes. Class is over.

**Mona Lisa:** No, it's not. Remember your participation points. Reports come out at the end of the week. Keep working—you can get a lot done in the time that we have left.

*The room is quiet. Only the humming of lights, the computer, and the air conditioner are audible. Anna continues working on her landscape painting for a contest. Mona and Karin are drawing and continue their earlier conversation.*

**Karin:** Ms. Lisa, I'm going into basic training. It pays well, but I can't afford to pay for two kids. This boy isn't gonna pay. It's a white boy this time.

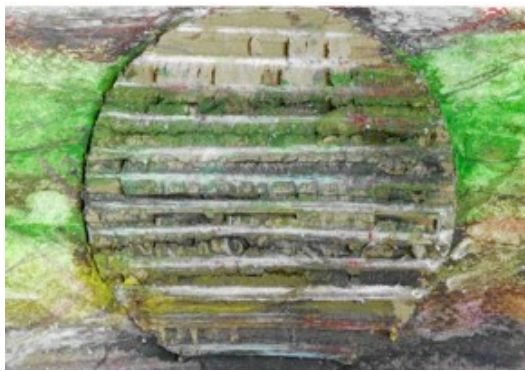
**Alexandrea:** It was last time, wasn't it?

**Karin:** No, it was a mixed guy last time. Ms. Lisa, see if you had him in art class.

**Mona Lisa:** We've got three minutes. Time to clean up. Clean up. Put your finished work to be graded on my desk, work in progress in your folders or portfolio. Everybody clean up. Line up at the door and stay inside the class until it's time to go.

*The sounds of pencils tapping and rulers slapping, of paper shuffling into folders/portfolios and drawers closing, of footsteps across a squeaky wood floor and chairs being shoved into tables can be heard as students prepare to leave the classrooms.*

*The following image is projected onto the back of the stage wall.*



*Figure 22. Teenscape, Visual memo, 3/3/07*

### Scene 8: Distance

*A week later. As art class begins Mrs. Jankowski comes into the class to check the number of students in each art class, to discuss the art waiting list, and to add new students to the teacher's class roles. As she leaves, a teacher calls on the phone, checking to find out if a student for whom she has written a pass was in art class. Students are humming, singing rap songs, and talking while waiting for class to begin. The principal enters the classroom looking for a student.*

**Mrs. Webb-Jackson:** Mrs. Lisa, have you seen Rhonda?

**Mona Lisa:** No, I haven't seen her come in yet.

**Jasmin:** I saw her in the hall.

**Mona Lisa:** She's usually here by now. I don't know where she is.

*Rhonda, who has been hiding unnoticed under the desk by the computer, crawls on the floor, stands up, and starts to walk out of the classroom with the principal.*

**Rhonda:** I'm in trouble again, but I'll be back.

**Mona Lisa:** I'll be here. Who's missing today? We have a small class.

**Martina:** Jackson left campus yesterday. Nobody knows where he is.

**Eric:** He'll be back. He's done this before.

**Mona Lisa:** What about Tamara?

**Jasmin:** Haven't seen her, but I heard the twins are sick.

*Students remain on stage frozen in their places. Louise walks on stage to Mona's classroom. Narrator comes forward from her position at the back of the stage and joins the teachers.*

**Louise** (to the Narrator) There are lots of stereotypes about students who are labeled "at-risk." They can be demanding of teachers' time and attention. In regular schools teachers don't have or take the time, don't understand them, and I think that they are afraid to work with them. I feel more comfortable working with at-risk kids here more than kids in regular schools. I get to have such a close relationship with them compared to a regular classroom that can be superficial. Small classes allow me to spend time with them individually. In an alternative setting, they can be who they are and, through our discussions and their art creations, I get to know who they are. It's hard to deal with all this sad stuff. I don't know what to do with it all. Sometimes, at lunch or after school when I'm not with students, my sarcasm leaks out. I think this is the way that I deal with all the terrible stories that I hear. I get sarcastic. I also make art out outside of here. That helps me deal with it too.

**Mona Lisa** (to the Narrator) I find that my own spiritual practice helps me deal with all the pain and suffering that my students bring into the classroom. My biggest challenge is making sure that I'm not moody and that I give my students the proper response. I'm always checking in with myself emotionally. My students are dealing

*Lisa Kay*

with lots of hardships and struggles, more than the average traditional high school teenager may have. Their struggles would be huge for adults, much less a teenager.

*The following image is projected onto the back wall of the stage.*



*Figure 23. Spontaneous Painting, Art Student, From the Collection of Louise.*

**Narrator:** Your students are dealing with intense issues of “life + death, body + blood, joy + pain, love + hate” every day. This is their world. It may not look pretty, but it is their reality. What you are doing is what I call transformation art pedagogy. You have transformed and reshaped traditional art pedagogy and curricula to address the needs of adolescent students at-risk in alternative high schools. You teach in a way that respects and cares for your students. You offer these troubled, at-risk students opportunities to acquire art knowledge and engage in art making that assists their transition from *torn* to *form*.

*The following image is projected onto the back wall of the stage.*



*Figure 24. Bit by Bit, Collage/Assemblage, 2007*

**Narrator:** I made this collage/semblage to help understand my experience as an artist/researcher/educator (Irwin 2004). I incorporated bits and pieces of information, stories and data, literally and figuratively. I (re)searched, (re)looked, (re)examined, (re)explored, (re)organized, (re)arranged and (re)connected with the data. The resulting art work has three main elements: the central drawing (with bits of torn paper, real cicada wings, and two visual memo cards) and two vertical sections flanked by eight visual memo cards (collaged with handwritten notes/doodles, magazine images, and scraps of diagrams, drawings, and dissertation drafts). The middle drawing was inspired by the Irish Spirit Wheel (MacEowen 2007), a student's artwork with a corn stalk, and the mosaic water fountain outside the art classroom at Kozol. The three large spheres in the center represent my tripartite identities and the ears of corn represent kernels of new knowledge. This art piece illustrates a transformation from "torn" to form, from chaos to order, from part(s) to whole.

Lisa Kay

### Scene 9: Returning to Class

*One week later. Students are going in and out of the classroom for various reasons. Some are taking passes, which hang on the wall by the door, to the office or the library, while others get water from the water fountain outside the classroom for their painting projects. Several students call out in unison, letting their teacher know what they need. Mona hands out papers. She demonstrates a painting process for several students. With her back turned, she listens to class discussions. She continues painting and prompts students to get focused on whatever project they need to work on. The smell of paint and turpentine fills the room.*

**Mona Lisa:** All right, class, let's get to work. Sign in. You want to get credit for being here today. Who needs to take a quiz? Who needs their next packet? Who is ready to do their self-critique?

**Karin:** *(holding a small cup of water)* Ms. L., did you hear what happened to me?

**Mona Lisa:** No, I haven't. What happened? I wondered where you were last week.

**Karin:** I had to go the emergency room. I didn't know what was happening to me. I lost 14 pounds in the past two weeks; I was stressed out, not eating or drinking. I had a miscarriage. I had to have this procedure where they cleaned everything out.

**Mona Lisa:** Oh, Karin, I'm concerned about you.

**Karin:** Me, too!

*The following image is projected onto the back wall of the stage.*



Figure 25. *Solitude*, Art Student (from the collection of Mona Lisa).



T...O...R...N

*Karin returns to the end of the table in the art classroom, sits alone, and continues working quietly on her art assignment. Mona Lisa writes notes in her grade book.*

*(Lights fade to black and the curtain falls).*



## Works Cited

- Garoian, Charles. *Performing Pedagogy: Toward an Art of Politics*. Albany: SUNY P, 2000. Print.
- Irwin, Rita L. "A/r/tography: A Metonymic Métissage." *A/r/tography: Rendering Self through Arts-Based Living Inquiry*. Ed. Rita L. Irwin and Alex de Cosson. Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational P, 2004. 27-40. Print.
- Kay, Lisa. *Art Education Pedagogy and Practice with Adolescents At-Risk in Alternative High Schools*. Diss. Northern Illinois University, 2008. *ProQuest*. Web. 11 November 2008.
- MacEowen, Frank. *The Celtic Way of Seeing: Meditations on the Irish Spirit Wheel*. Novata, CA: New World Library, 2007. Print.



*This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.*