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Anne Thulson and Rachael Delaney Elaborate on the Art of Being Both Artists and Art Educators

by Khaleel Herbert

The opening reception of the *Radical Compliance* and *Wayfinding to Sustainability* exhibitions not only showcased a plethora of art crafted by art educators from all over Colorado, but also included a lecture by art educators Anne Thulson and Rachael Delaney from Metropolitan State University of Denver (MSU). The opening reception took place on May 6, 2016 at MSU Denver's Center for Visual Art.

Thulson and Delaney's lecture covered the feeling of being lost as an art educator and how it made, and continues to make, an impact for them as teachers, artists, and students of their own craft. Since 1987, Thulson has taught college students and children. She has been teaching art at MSU Denver for five years. Delaney started teaching art at the K-12 level in 1997 and has taught at MSU Denver for 10 years.

"We wanted to explain from our own experiences that teaching is an impossible profession. On one

hand, teachers need to know what they want their students to be able to know and do," says Thulson. "On the other hand, in reality you never can know ahead of time what your students will be able to know and do. In that paradox, we teach."

Thulson and Delaney explained why they wanted to teach art as well as create it. "I fell into being an artist because the world makes the most sense to me through my metaphor, story and image," says Thulson. "I went into art education because I was more interested in doing art with others and not by myself."

"I never thought I was going to be an educator. Then I had the opportunity to teach—and it transformed me," says Delaney. "I had the opportunity to collaborate, think and build with others. I found out I am the most effective when I share and design with others. I am not good at being the lone wolf." Art educators can sometimes get "lost" when teaching, but Delaney and Thulson say that it

is an opportunity for educators to be students. “Teaching requires the educator to always be the humble learner,” says Delaney.

“Being lost means that you need to always be researching and finding your way. You can’t teach well if you do not continually study what it means to teach,” says Thulson. “You must remain an inquisitive researcher of your students, your methods, your content and yourself. If you don’t, your curiosity languishes, your empathy dries up and your curriculum stagnates.”

As art educators, Thulson and Delaney had come across confrontations with their students.

“It was a terrible project in my early days of teaching that I concocted,” recounts Thulson. “Students were constructing some architectural forms out of rolled paper. They had no choice in the content or the material or the manner in which they manipulated the material.

“Because they had no choice, they were not engaged. They were making my art through their obedient hands,” continues Thulson. “One ‘disobedient’ student deviated from my plan. When I criticized him, he said, ‘This isn’t your project! This is my project!’ That changed my teaching and I started to introduce more ways for students to have agency and construct meaning in my classroom.”



Delaney recalled a moment of confrontation when she was teaching color theory to her students. “I ignored the fact that my students already had expertise in color. I needed to build off of their expertise and not insert expertise onto or instead of their knowledge.

“I needed to build for understanding and all I was building for was book knowledge about color,”

continues Delaney. “Trust me, the assignment sucked.”

Delaney and Thulson discuss how they practice art as artists while being art educators. “I make in a very painful and labor intensive way and I love it,” says Delaney. “I use my summers to make and my semesters while I teach to research and practice what I am making. This past semester, I have been teaching myself how to make lace. Now that it is summer, I will start to make the art.”

Thulson says her art output is limited, but she stays devoted to it. “I think making art is sustainable while teaching, but I have an intentionally limited output. I’m committed to do at least one transient time-based artwork a year like the lecture/performance we enacted. I make paintings too.

“Being a painter is not a career for me. It’s not a hobby. It’s more like a practice, like yoga,” continues

Thulson. “I also think of teaching as an ongoing performative conceptual artwork. So in that sense, I’m making art every day during the schoolyear.”

Delaney elaborates on the importance of the teacher practicing what is taught. “It is disingenuous to ask others to make when you do not do that yourself. I also find that my teaching is smarter and I am more effective in the classroom when I am making and caring for my own creative practice.”

“It is about empathy,” says Thulson. “How can you teach something that you don’t do?”

Thulson and Delaney’s lecture reminds art educators to never stop learning. Getting lost allows them to reflect and learn from experiences that will aid them in “getting back on course” with their students. ●