The 2018 International Edwin Ziegfeld Award

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I would like to begin by expressing my thanks to the United States Society for Education through Art (USSEA) for honoring me with this award. I am humbled to receive the 2018 International Edwin Ziegfeld Award.

To Dr. Angela LaPorte, I want to say thank you for all your work in organizing and managing the nomination and adjudication process. To my friend and colleague, Dr. Fiona Blaikie, thank you for nominating me. To Drs. Kerry Freedman, Charles Garoian and Anna Kindler, thank you for writing letters in support of my nomination. For your immense generosity and mentorship, Anna, Charles, Fiona and Kerry, which I have received in abundance from you ever since I set foot on this continent, I am most grateful. My thanks also to my colleagues and students at The University of British Columbia. Your thinking provokes mine.

Given that this award carries the name of the late Edwin Ziegfeld and is awarded in his honor, in preparing my remarks for this afternoon, I thought it would be important and appropriate to return to some of his ideas concerning art and education, and to think about how they show up, come to appear (or not) in how we think and talk about art and art education at the current time. I should say that my desire to return to some of his ideas, which greatly influenced the development and advancement of our field, is not motivated by a yearning for a time that is no longer. In Ziegfeld's own words, "living in a bygone world can be really harmful if it insulates people from new, expanding contacts with the world of the present" (Ziegfeld and Smith, 1944, p.52). But neither should we forget what Mary Hafeli argued in an article that she published in *Studies in Art Education* in 2009: Noting that scholars in art education have a tendency to ignore (forget perhaps) the work of those who have gone before them as they try to figure out issues, concerns or curriculum possibilities in the actuality of the present, Hafeli (2009) warned that "our custom of not explicitly acknowledging, connecting to, and building upon the work of other art education scholars . . . results in a fragmented, incoherent disciplinary knowledge base—a condition that ultimately may slow the deepening of our collective insight and deter substantive refinements to the field's evolving theories and practices of art teaching and learning" (p. 370).

I was first introduced to Professor Ziegfeld's ideas in the early 1990s during my teacher

education program at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin, Ireland. Professor Ziegfeld retired from academic life some 20 years earlier in 1970. That was one year before I was born in December 1971. So he had left the academy before I arrived in the world. And yet, as a young art student in Dublin in the 1990s, I was introduced to his ideas about art and education, most especially his contribution to the Owatonna Art Education Project.

For those who might not be familiar with that project, it was an art education experiment whereby Ziegfeld and others went to live and work with residents of the city of Owatonna, a small city located 75 miles south of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Ziegfeld and his colleagues lived with and among the people of Owatonna for five years and during that time, they engaged in many conversations with residents in an effort to find out if art was actually a part of their lives. Ziegfeld and his colleagues engaged in many conversations with the people of Owatonna to learn what residents "needed to know about art" in order "to make more effective use of it in their lives" (Ziegfeld and Smith, 1944, p. 49). And in return, Ziegfeld and his colleagues offered their services to the people of Owatonna, when invited to do so. They offered advice on aesthetic related matters and coordinated evening classes, summer schools and visiting speaker sessions on the broad topic of aesthetic practice. They visited the homes of community members as well as their gardens, places of work and the shops that they frequented. In doing so, they studied how community members produced place and made aesthetic choices. Even though Ziegfeld and his colleagues went to study the Owatonna community in order to learn from them, a community was also formed by the curiosities and intentions of the project.

Three key curiosities and intentions seemed to motivate and thus frame the project. One was a curiosity about how art showed up in the lives of residents of Owatonna; another was a desire to further engage those who lived in the community in practices of making aesthetic objects, choices and judgments so as to extend, enrich and deepen their aesthetic awareness and aesthetic sensibilities; and a third was to create an art education program for schools in Owatonna that reflected the interests, needs, concerns and desires of the community.

Studying this immersive intervention from the perspectives of today, one might say that with all of its limitations, including its lack of attention to power structures and power struggles, its acceptance (even advancement) of gender stereotypes and gendering practices, and its desire to articulate art's usefulness in a rather instrumentalist way with a utilitarian purpose, in some respects the project was a precursor for several socially engaged art projects that have been staged and produced in recent years, especially those that are pedagogical in nature and educative in intent. In its entirety and variation, the

Owatonna Art Education Project was committed to studying how art could serve as an active and direct way of engaging the world; one that could be mobilized to solve problems that were identified individually or collectively by members of that community. In doing so, it seemed to have encouraged interpersonal human relationships to develop and flourish.

Many of the activities that Ziegfeld and his colleagues introduced, facilitated and led in Owatonna seem similar to what contemporary artists who identify as socially engaged artists do today, as they work with emergent and established communities. Consider, for example, Theaster Gates and his Dorchester Project; Peggy Diggs and her Domestic Milk Carton Project; Fallen Fruit and their Public Fruit Jam project; Tania Brugera's Immigration Movement International Project; Paul Butler's Reverse Pedagogy Project; and Suzanne Lacy's projects, Turning Point and Under Construction which were staged in my home city, Vancouver.

Like these projects just mentioned, which are loosely described as social practice art works[i], the Owatonna project provided occasions for residents to come together, to learn together, and to learn things about themselves and each other that they may not have learned otherwise. One might further say that the project illuminated and made visible what art can make possible in a way that Carol Becker (1994) explains when she writes, "Art is often a kind of dreaming the world into being, a transmutation of thought into material reality, and an affirmation that the physical world begins in the incorporeal – in ideas" (p. 68).

One might say, then, that more than 90 years ago, Ziegfeld and his colleagues were engaging in principles and practices that today are valued, promoted and pursued by socially engaged and social practice artists. In some respects, the Owatonna project offered new social programs that responded to the needs of the community at that time, which seems to be a key motivating factor of socially engaged art practices at the current time.

However, while Ziegfeld and his colleagues seemed curious about how art showed up in the lives of the people with whom they worked, and argued that art offered a unique opportunity to think about one's environment and to shape it, it would seem, nonetheless, that the experiment at Owatonna and the publications that arose out of the intervention were framed by the belief that for art education to be included in a school curriculum, it needed to have a practical and useful function. It needed to effect positive change of a particular kind. Otherwise, it could not be supported. The act of articulating art's useful nature seemed to be a great concern of the project staff with the result that the experiment at Owatonna sought to demonstrate how engagement in art and art-related activities

contributed positively to the life of children and adults in ways that seemed relevant and useful to the practical dimensions of their lives. To simply pursue art for art's sake, or to study it without expectation did not seem to be an option. Perhaps this is what Kerry Freedman is pointing to in her reading and critique of the project, which she shared in an article published in *Studies in Art Education* in 1989. She wrote, the project "[represented] a philanthropic vision . . . based upon a rationality mediated by both conservative and progressive interests" (p. 16).

Another critique perhaps of the Owatonna Project is that it is one that is **strong** on Strong Theory. Silvan Tomkins (1962) describes Strong Theory as a theory of "wide generality". It is, he adds, "capable of accounting for a wide spectrum of phenomena which appear to be very remote, one from the other, and from a common source". (Affect 2: p.433-34). For instance, in Chapter 7 of *Art for Daily Living*, Ziegfeld and Smith (1994) discuss the implications of the project for art education, noting that the curriculum developed during the project "can indeed be done in any school system, without a large staff and without extensive equipment or elaborate material" (p.95). They add, "In fact, the real achievement of the Owatonna Art Education Project was not its course of study, although this is certainly the practical embodiment of its principles, but the principles themselves, which taken all together constitute a widely applicable point of view in art education." (Ziegfeld & Smith, 1994, p. 95). The choice of words 'should' and 'must' which they used repeatedly in articulating and elaborating principles and practices that ought to "govern and direct the purposes, the content, and the methods of an effective art education program" (Ziegfeld & Smith, 1994, p. 96) already positions their recommendations within the realm of strong theory. This choice of words indicates their distance from a disposition that lies at the opposite end of Strong Theory. That is a disposition informed by Weak Theory.

Unlike Strong Theory, 'Weak theory', explains Tomkins, "is little better than a description of the phenomena which it purports to explain" (p.433). Unlike Strong Theory, it doesn't believe it can give an exhaustive or all-encompassing account of anything. Weak Theory does not seek to provide authoritative accounts. Rather it encourages one to attend to things with curiosity, asking what they could mean or wish to mean without wanting them to mean anything in particular. Weak Theory encourages one to suspend judgment long enough for other possibilities to emerge. And it encourages one to attend to what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to the things that one encounters are already somehow present in them (Stewart 2008). What if Ziegfeld and Smith embraced the concept of Weak Theory in sharing accounts of what occurred during the project at Owatonna, how might the reported accounts and suggested curriculum appear otherwise? What other types of doing and interpretive possibilities might show up, be suggested or pointed to? What other stories might have been told?

What other possibilities might be imagined for art education in schools?

I will close with an example that, for me, indirectly suggests how Weak Theory can be generative for bringing us into understandings of life, not by insisting that we see life in one way or another, but rather that we follow its rhythms, surfaces and textures in ways that feel right. Almost three years ago, shortly after the US Supreme Court's ruling on same-sex marriage, I read an editorial in The New York Times, by Frank Bruni, which opened with the question, "How will the Supreme Court's ruling on same-sex marriage alter the way Americans feel about the country, and how we feel about ourselves?" In response Bruni (2015) wrote, "I can't speak for everyone" – this is one of the core qualities of a disposition informed by Weak Theory; the acknowledgement that one can never speak for all – "But I can speak for this one 12-year-old boy. He stands out among his siblings because he lacks their optimism about things, even their quickness to smile. He has a darkness that they don't. He's a worrier, a brooder. He's also more self-conscious. He can't get comfortable with himself . . . I can speak for a 16-year-old boy. He has a word for what he is — "gay" or "homosexual" or something worse, depending on who's talking — but he doesn't have answers for what that's going to mean. . . I can speak for a 20-year-old college student. He has opened up to his family and to many friends about who he is, not because he possesses any particular courage but because being honest involves less strain, less effort, than keeping secrets and dreading their exposure" And on, Frank Bruni, goes, until he nears the end and writes, "I can speak for a 50-year-old man who expected this to happen but still can't quite believe it, because it seemed impossible when he was young, because it seemed implausible even when he was a bit older, and because everything is different now, or will be."

Thank you.

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[i] Maria Lind (2012) describes social practice "as art that involves more people than objects, whose horizon is social and political change – some would even claim that it is about making another world possible" (p. 49).