

The Teacher Was the Sea: Remembering Pacific High School

by Erin Elder

As is evidenced by this issue of Proximity, many contemporary artists are stepping in to fill the gaps and inequities created by educational legislation that effectively standardizes and depersonalizes the American public education system. While many of the projects cited in this magazine practice innovation in form and content, it is nothing new for artists to work in a pedagogical vein. There exist countless precedents in which teaching has been seen as craft, experience as product, education as process, and school as form. One such precedent of note is that of Pacific High School, an alternative community-school in northern California in the 1960s and '70s. This short essay aims to relate some of the big ideas, events, and characters that comprised Pacific; it serves as an incomplete report of Michael Kaye's out-of-print retrospective The Teacher Was the Sea and lays the groundwork for thinking about the legacy of artist-driven education projects.

The brainstorm of several disgruntled parents and teachers who wanted a new educational alternative, resulted in the creation of Pacific High School which started in the fall of 1961 with 11 students, one full-time staff member, and no place to call home. After an extended field trip to the Sierras, Pacific settled into a rented space above a law firm in Palo Alto and offered a schedule of courses that students could elect, but were not required, to attend. The goal was non-hierarchical progressive education in which everyone involved was responsible for his or her individual experience.

Within the subsequent four years, the school moved eight times and struggled to pay bills, maintain enrollment, and practice some collective notion of student-empowered education. Of these early years, Kaye recounts the main struggle as a common but naïve faith among faculty that kids would go to classes because they want to, that learning is its own reward. He recalls thinking that “all we have to do is cook up a bunch of interesting, relevant classes and that kids, after a period of adjustment will flock to them.”

Faculty struggled to create a curriculum that adhered to a no-rules, no-hierarchy

manifesto, often discontinuing classes that students didn't attend or offering one-off workshops to test their feasibility. Students were invited to join long-term field courses to study ecology in Mexico, to work with legislature in Sacramento, to practice French in Quebec, even to Albania for "eight fun-filled months in the world's most hated country." This mosaic of curriculum was punctuated by frequent parties that, in effect, restored good feelings and created a shared sense of freedom. Parties, Kaye claims, were "the redemptive saving feature of the school."

In spring of 1965, as Pacific teetered on the brink of closure, the school was given a 40-acre parcel of land in the Santa Cruz Mountains (to be specific, it was a trade: the land was commission for handling the legal work involved with acquiring 440 acres for a local conservation group.) Buildings were moved to the land and others were constructed. To aid in the school's mere survival, classes were relegated to the morning while afternoons were given over to the building program.

The faculty was made up of a constantly changing cast of characters, voted on and invited by the community at large. Stanford professors taught pro bono courses, Ant Farm and Zomeworks initiated alternative building workshops on the property. Musicians from the San Francisco Tape Music Center taught music with synthesizers and hand-made instruments and the radical art collective Videofreex brought cameras and new perspectives to the students at Pacific. Most people who taught at Pacific were not teachers by trade, but rather they knew how to do things that the community admired and were hip enough to the Free School experiment to readily participate.

With hands-on projects and visiting teachers, there was a growing sense of purpose grounded by daily activities. While building shelters, gardens, and instruments provided a sense of structure (both literally and metaphorically), a new director of the school introduced a vastly radical approach to the already alternative environment at Pacific that bred anxiety and a pedagogical groundlessness. Artist Peter Marin, the new director, wanted to create "a feeling

to the place: a sense of intensity and space... a 'guilt-free' environment, one in which the students might discover or become what they were without having to worry about preconceived ideas of what they had to be." Under his directorship, students were encouraged to go out and experience the world on their own (to even experiment with drugs and sex), knowing that Pacific was "a place to come back to."

At one point during this period, the school received a phone call from a police officer who was holding eight kids he had found on the beach. His conversation with the Marin went like this:

"You say they're on a regular field trip?"

"Yup."

"What kinda field trip?"

"Marine biology and oceanography."

"How come there was no teacher?"

"The teacher was the sea."

By summer 1966, Pacific was in such economic turmoil that teachers were not afforded salaries; still many decided to continue teaching, and moved onto the land to live rent- and commute-free. Classrooms became bedrooms, tents sprouted up, teachers lived in their cars and by becoming a live-in community, Pacific was reinvented.

That summer, the faculty decided to stop bus service for students and invited them to live on the land as well. As a "live-in, community-school," Pacific needed boarding facilities to bring in more students. In a spontaneous burst of brainstorming, the group decided to invite Lloyd Kahn, who was associated with the *Whole Earth Catalog* and was an experienced dome builder, to lead the construction of the experimental school. As the domes went up, more students seemed to materialize; several students built their own dome homes. Kaye says, "people were apparently so desperate for alternatives to conventional high

schools that they were willing to try a boarding school with only ephemeral boarding facilities.” By the first day of school, 60 students were enrolled. Parents paid up to \$3,000 a year in tuition, which included room and board and required students to participate in the chores and governance that sustained the place.

As a community-school, life at Pacific was shaped by a trial-by-fire democratic process. All business was discussed in a constant string of community meetings, during which every student, staff, and faculty member had an equal vote. What to stand for and how to “STOP SUPPORTING PASSIVENESS” were regular items on the agenda. Through this process, relationships between the faculty and students became increasingly intimate and rules were never put into writing. Kaye describes Pacific as “made up of people with an aversion to giving and taking orders. If we were not going to give orders, then the only way to ensure that the kids acted responsibly was for them to feel committed to the community. And the only way to ensure this commitment was for the kids to have power.” Getting the kids to take that power, to believe in it and use it to real ends was a different story.

Education remained a central focus, but as the community grew (and met incredible challenges) the politics increasingly took into account the daily function of meals, dishes, sanitation, and relationships. Kaye writes:

“We were all living together. The artificial distinctions that had for so long separated students and staff were blurring. Each morning we staggered into breakfast together. When the sanitation in the kitchen screwed up, we all had the runs together. The older and younger people were becoming friends – lovers. Kids and adults were talking openly about the school, themselves, and each other. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of this. It meant that the kids could be part of the very fiber of the place.”

Kaye’s book was published in 1972 when Pacific High School was at its height. With 80 students and constant calls from prospective staff, he writes about the school as a complicated mix of success and failure. The school was never intended to be a living utopia or a model of free education; in retrospect, the

teaching methodologies are questionable and the cultural context incomparable. For Kaye, teaching at Pacific was not necessarily about training young minds, but about testing the limits of freedom, democracy, shelter, adolescence. He muses, “Beneath all of its changes and confusions there has always been a bedrock common-sense, a surprisingly consistent principle at work: to restore to the center of experience *experience* itself.” For better or for worse, Pacific was a shared experience in learning how to live, and also maybe one of living how to learn.

*All quotes from Kaye, Michael S., *The Teacher Was the Sea*. Links Press, 1972.