

STATEMENT OF SARAH FABIO CONCERNING INTEGRITY
as discussed in the integrity workshop of
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transcribed from audio tape by Joe Reese

Ralph Ellison made a statement that the artist is no freer than the society in which he lives. It seems to me that this is probably true, and that it is also true that the society is no freer than the artist is free. This then might place those who are artists in a rather dual position in terms of sensitivity and in terms of integrity. If someone speaks of sensitivity as being responsive to the feel of things from the bare foot experience-- we might have to ask is that all there is to sensitivity? You have to question whether the person lives in a controlled environment. That is, for instance, does the person live in a home where the heating element is in the floor, and where, with the aid of a thermometer, you can keep the heat at 90° temperature all the time? Or is the artist out there facing the hawk, that is the wind, and really putting his full apparatus for registering sensitivity to test?

I am saying that since obviously you can control the environment you can also control sensitivity. I maintain that in my brief stay at CCAC, I have not seen in working with you as artists, that in responding to the immediacy of your time and place--your environment--that you have exerted the influence that is expected of you in being accurate barometers of the time. As a group you are not appreciably different from the major body of students at large. I am fortunate in having had a very wide experience with students from the East Bay schools--Merritt Junior College, State Colleges and University of California at Berkeley--so I have been in a position to observe them.

Today, the community as well as students in public schools, high schools, are beginning to ask about the function of the art student, the role of the artist in education and in society. Maybe it is time that we stop talking about society because we limit our concerns to a narrow but powerful elitist group. It is unfortunate that the artist is only talked about on the society page of the Oakland Tribune. This page has very remote connections with the life of the average student and your concerns should be not so much with society, rather your concerns should be with the notion of community. Maybe we ought to stop talking about the artist and society because that is how you get all of those little old lady patrons who subsidize art schools and coerce artists to paint flowers; paint lies--imitation flowers--instead of painting the human condition and trying to give society something to look forward to as human potential and a mirror from which we might get an accurate reflection of ourselves that might aid us in goal setting toward a greater humanism. It seems that CCAC or any school, art schools included, should have some kind of relationship with the immediate community rather than being content to relate to the abstract notion of society, that the school should have some responsibility to the needs of the people--all the people including racial minorities. So that to talk about things like being sensitive or having integrity without first manifesting a basic concern for people becomes meaningless and idle chatter.

It's awfully hard for a Black artist in a school like this to have a sense of integrity and oneness as it is very hard for him in the society of America as a whole. This same difficulty is experienced by the Asian, Chicano, or anyone else who is not White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant and/or of a certain upper-level strata in society who think that art is for them exclusively anyway. Because a person is gifted with having a larger bankroll does not mean that he is also gifted with the integrity and sensitivity that goes along with making a fine kind of artist who can serve the aesthetic needs of our country. It seems to me that the Black people have a very difficult time with the possibilities of being integrated--united within themselves--because there is a duality

that is inherent in being a minority with majority rule in all things. Particularly is this true in an art school. There is a duality that results from your coming from a culture that makes demands on you and, at the same time, there is a great demand from another culture with which you have to relate aesthetically and rhetorically. This is very difficult when this culture is one that perhaps offers more in the way of oppression or suppression than it does in understanding and it is one marked by a single Europeanized vision which does not allow for the kind of pluralism that would make us all able to relate to each other from a position of ethnic strength.

The Black artist should be able to respond as an integral person. He has to bring in a Black perspective, a Black aesthetic, a Black rhetoric that approximates itself to the felt reality because, you see, America does not have a rhetoric which matches the black. You are just following a rhetoric that has no meaning. Every time you say a word, it could be a dirty word. You really don't know. Take the word "democracy", for instance. It occurs to me you don't know what any of these words mean: integrity, sensitivity, society. An artist is going to have to have a rhetoric that goes along with the reality that you think you have or ought to have as an artist. As a black studies instructor at CCAC, I must repeat, I am here because I feel that not only is the artist no freer than the society, but the society is no freer than the artist. I am here to free the Black artist so that he can go out and help free society. We are a microcosm of society, whether you think so or not. I think America is so simple-minded, so facist, really, that from kindergarten through art school education is much the same. Everybody runs around with a rhetoric that doesn't fit their reality. All you have, I tell you, is the outward signs of being liberated, bare feet, hippy costumes, the hair, etc. What you've been saying here these two days curriculum-wise is that you are enslaved by the institutional systems that have nothing to do with your sensitivity and integrity as artists black or white.

The Black student is liberating himself, and is after such educational training that will enable him to move toward a sense of integrity. I think that because he is moving, perhaps, that is one of the reasons why the White student also sees that he is not liberated, and that there is something that he is going to have to do.

I am saying that the whole white aesthetic is a lyncher of the Black artist. A student of mine was taking sculpture and was doing a head with an Afro-Bush. Her's was the only head that didn't blow up in the kiln. She got a "B" because the instructor said he'd never seen anybody who looked like that. He lacked a sense of reality. He'd never seen anybody wearing a Bush like that because he'd never been out in the Black community. He, therefore, down-graded the person and said there was something wrong with the perspective. Now-a-days, artists see Afros all the time and he understands that "that's a Black person with a Bush." I know of a kindergarten teacher who tells her little Black kids who take a black pencil and color their faces in black that they will never be artists because they have no sense of color. I suggest that you, instructors as well as students, open up your minds and think. With help and input I think there will be a move to make some changes. It should be a CCAC community resolve and not up to me to tell you how to correct the problem. I am just telling you that these are some of the things I think about, and that hopefully in my class we can think of what we can do if this is true and respond with integrity and responsibility.

I know that even though I am teaching literature, I have told students that I would like to work toward a seminar with artists involving a 9-unit block or of an inter-disciplinary nature for those who already have had some type of previous introduction to the black experience. It is crucial that they do get some type of consolidation of person which will create a new type of Black artist who not only paints Black, if he wants to, or who is not afraid to paint Black, talk Black, and look Black. At the same time, if he chooses to paint according to the white aesthetic he can do that too. But he should not

be forced to denounce his own cultural identity in order to do this.

The Black artist right now would only get from you and the present educational system the kind of information that would project your whiteness upon him in order that he compete with an artistic society at large for a place in the sun. I know of this system's narrowness because of my past experience and because they have been afraid. My classes aren't all Black, you see. I have 40 students, 30 are white. I think the white students are gaining another perspective and are really being enriched by being able to see a perspective different from his for the first time; he also knows what a white perspective is, what a white aesthetic is because he also sees what another aesthetic is. There is nothing wrong with being white. You just ought to know when you're white; you ought to know what culture you bring to your whiteness. What is your perspective? What is your aesthetic? And do not presume that you are like cyclopes and have one, integral eye, that is to see all. The Oakland Museum scandal shows that that's what's happening. What do you know of that "crisis"? That is part of your community. Maybe some Black artists should speak up and see what is needed to be whole, integral, sensitive Black artists. Black people are not mere subject matter. That's why I have a list of Black books needed. I asked the librarian to list the things here from Black writers. I also went to U.C. and said, "I'm going to want to know what you have in your Black library." "We don't segregate things like that" I was told. I am a teacher of Black Literature so I need to know something about Black writers. You didn't know you would have an Ethnic Studies Program so I am not saying that you should have a way of dealing with that, but I am telling you that you have no rhetoric for dealing with this reality. You ought to be able to sit down as academic people and figure out that this old system won't accommodate and that we should develop a new system.