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Résumé de l'article

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## My Curious Day with George: Dr. Szekely Prescribes Play to a Visiting Artist-Teacher

*Jamia Weir*



Jamia Weir

Jamia Weir is a multi-disciplinary artist and elementary art teacher in Los Angeles. She earned a B.A. in Studio Art from the University of Vermont and M.A. of Art Education from the Maryland Institute College of Art. Her thesis work about Arts Integration and Eco-Art Education was published in 2016 in the journal *Art Education*. In 2021, Jamia took a sabbatical from teaching to attend an artist residency at the historic Byrdcliffe Arts Colony in Woodstock, New York. Outside of the classroom, she engages in the study of “improv” quilting, which relates to her work onstage as an improv performer.

This article presents a personal visit between art teacher/artist, Jamia Weir and Dr. George Szekely, a well known figure in the field of art education and a proponent of “Play Based Art Education.” Weir outlines ideas and sentiments gleaned from a day “picking the brain” of her “art teacher hero.” The conversation took place in the Hudson River Valley in July of 2021.

**Keywords:** *Play Based Art Education, Play, George Szekely, Artist Teacher*



"Don't follow the rules," he said, my art teacher hero. "Teaching is an art. There is not one right way for any one person. Just like the act of making art does not follow one exact prescription per person."

I first took notice of George Szekely and his work when I was in the Master of Arts in Art Education (MAAE) program at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). I told my professor Stacey Salazar that I was interested in one day staging art parades at school, as moving art shows for my elementary students' work. She told me I should definitely check out George Szekely's work, which is all about the use of play in art education. (The best teachers I've had are really good at pointing you in the right direction of a source for inspiration; an artist, book, or theory to further investigate.)

I got one of his books, *From Play to Art* (1991), and then made sure to see Szekely in person, at the first National Art Education Association (NAEA) conference I ever attended in New Orleans in 2015. I brought my mother, who was surprised to see everyone sitting on the

floor with Szekely when we walked into the convention room. This was not the kind of “talk” where someone is up at a podium, across from a group of people sitting in chairs. This scene mirrors the vibe Szekely fosters in his classes. I would later hear him say that chairs are for “play blocks” or props, rather than sitting upon. Unfortunately, I couldn't stay for the entire talk, because I had to give my own presentation about my Master's research. As part of the MAAE program at MICA, they ask that you submit to speak about your thesis research and I was selected to do so.

I later got to hear Szekely speak at UCLA and stayed the entire time. It was inspiring and engaging. This very playful, petite man, up onstage with props, pulling random things out of suitcases like a modern-day Mister Poppins, talked about how the toys and objects of

interest he brings to share with children inspire artmaking, such as using a blender to mix color. He was like a wild art scientist in a laboratory. All of this was staged as a performance of sorts, as it is in his classroom at times. I was so drawn to his philosophies, especially being somewhat of a performer myself through the years, that I was moved to speak to Szekely and his wife afterward. I found out that his musician son lived in Los Angeles, as did I, and we agreed to keep in touch, perhaps a future lunch might be in order.

### **Cut to a few Facebook messages and years later...**

It is Covid time, and I'm teaching elementary school children art on Zoom. It's actually going rather well, but after a year or so in, I'm witnessing kids getting antsy and thinking of different ways I can engage them. "Thinking outside the box to think inside the box," as I liked to say. Remembering Szekely and performance art, I pulled out his book again and decided to reach out to ask him if there were any videos of him in teaching mode. He directed me to his website (duh), which is so chock full of stuff I almost didn't know where to begin. I decided to start with a podcast to listen to and within the first ten minutes, learned that he had spent the past thirty or so summers in the Woodstock, New York area where he has a summer home. I couldn't believe my ears! I would be in an artist residency at Byrdcliffe Arts Colony Woodstock myself in mere months. We set up a meeting.

These are some of the gems I gleaned from that glorious and generous summer meeting, with a man whom I consider one of my art teacher heroes.

### **Let them know you are an artist.**

One of the first topics we discussed was being an "artist-teacher." This was a term I first adopted at MICA. My cohort Callie Martin wrote her thesis on this important and interesting idea: art teachers as artists and the relationship between both of those roles. Szekely is an artist-teacher, and he recognized that I am as well, encouraging me in my own personal artwork. "Let them know the importance of your being an artist at school", he told me. "Your art should be up in the office at the front of the school, not just the students' art, but your art as well.

Invite them to your art shows. Let them know you are an artist. Differentiate yourself from the rest of the teachers, as *Artist Teacher*. The art teacher should not be doing these other duties, like math assistant and lunch monitor". As we sat down to eat, I was pleased that this was the talking point that happened to come up first, the importance of my own personal art practice. I think I can safely say that George and I both believe that if you are engaging in the artistic process yourself, you can be a better guide and inspirator of the artistic process for your artist students as the art teacher.

### **Gathering ideas and materials for idea generation**

Szekely said "Trust the students," they will show you the way. We discussed the importance of children bringing in their own ideas and art materials. Invite them to bring in things they find from home or different places. This is all part of the artist's way. Yes, of course! There is total inspiration simply in the *gathering* of the materials. Sometimes you start developing ideas in the finding, before any art making even takes place. I thought back to my own work, especially with intriguing recyclable materials I'd find and gather, sometimes into larger collections, which was part of my excitement and idea generation. I once found an old umbrella in the parking lot at my old art studio building and turned it into this big plastic bag flower that I later would have a model hold while wearing my "trashion" pieces at an art exhibition. Szekely is a collector and he told me about all of his collections, for example, the stick horses, umbrellas, paper dresses, and paper doll clothes. This process of hunting and gathering for things that excite and inspire you is such an important part of the artistic process. You feel more connected to it, if it's coming from you in every bit of the artwork's development. Szekely was reminding me to really think more about my own artistic processes and try to model them for the children in the classroom, letting them be their own artists and art teachers in a way, prepping their own materials as collectors, rather than me always choosing and laying everything out for them.

### **\*Lightbulb flashes overhead\*: Tables and chairs are not for what you'd think.**

I take it Szekely spends a lot of time on the



"This very playful, petite man, up onstage with props, pulling random things out of suitcases like a modern-day Mister Poppins, talked about how the toys and objects of interest he brings to share with children inspire artmaking, such as using a blender to mix color."



floor with the students. He's more interested in the goings-on underneath a table. I began talking about the idea of darkness and light illuminating it via twinkle lights or flashlights, something I had seen my Canadian actor friend Isaac Kessler playing with on a darkened stage in Los Angeles. Szekely grew animated when the topic of using light came up. He has a treasure chest full of light objects and play-things such as glow sticks and lanterns. He said you can have the students go under the table and make it a darker space by using curtains or fabrics and then they can have their own light plays. As below, so above—tables make good stages or platforms for performances, and chairs can be props or building blocks. Anything can be a “play block” I later heard him say on the podcast he has with his Artist Teacher daughter Dr. Ilona Szekely.

### Parent Artists and Parent Students

I often try to incorporate parents in the school community who are practicing artists and bring them into my class as guests. Szekely was making me think of parental interaction in a different way, telling me to also take time to talk to parents who don't necessarily consider themselves artists. Getting parents to think about art in a different way is important so that they can better understand the creative process and what goes on in the artist's studio/art room. Szekely told me that in order to develop a relationship with the parents, he will invite them to accompany him on his walks where he totes around his wagon. They will walk and talk, collecting things along the way. Szekely brings them into the conversation about art ideas and the value of personally selecting art materials, making them feel like artists so that they can better understand and support their children. They can find and gather their own materials on the walk, and then use them to create with later. When I asked Szekely what made him begin this more avant-garde art teaching methodology of purposefully not directing or teaching at the students, but rather learning from them and sort of being along for the ride as they develop their own ideas, he said he learned it from his very own children. When he had children of his own and saw the way that they played and created at home, he changed the way he taught at school.

### Keep Working (= Playing!)

When Szekely's son was young, he had his own unique process of working. Even at a young age,

he was very serious about his music. Szekely would help his son make a schedule for the week and put it on a large piece of paper on the wall. He said that his son still works in this way. Everyone has their own relationship to routine and the creative process. Szekely gets up at 5:30 a.m. He told me that he writes in the morning and he makes art in the afternoon. He said to keep working. If you have gaps in the work, it's OK. Be realistic. If you are on vacation, or someone is ill, you don't have to, but if you know you have free time, make a schedule and stick to it. Just work when you have the time, but keep working on your art.

Szekely also recognized the value in, or style of some people, in not making a schedule: having free time to just be, or think, or dream, or walk about. Ideas come in different ways. I was recently having a conversation with a young musician friend who is thinking about going into teaching, to have something steady in his life. I was likening it to having a “routine” as an artist; it may sound boring or staid, especially for a previously nomadic and spontaneous artist, but when you go into that studio for those hours you have designated as “studio time,” that's where your free spirit can roam and you can be really messy and playful in those organized hours. Plan for the unexpected!

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It was an unforeseen gloomy day out, but it felt like the sun was lighting up my mind with Szekely by my side, spoon-feeding me inspiration as each raindrop fell. We didn't let the rain stop us from walking around outside by the water, where we saw a herd of deer along the way. We had an umbrella, but didn't use it much. He probably would've said it'd make a better toy or prop anyway! I think I recalled how as a kid I remember playing in the rain in my driveway, with my bathing suit on, holding an umbrella, and crooning “Singing in the Rain!” As memories of our childhood perk up, we should take note. What stands out in our minds from when we were kids? That's often where the magic is, the sweet spot.

I told Szekely something I remembered from when I was in kindergarten, the “Letter People” that the teachers used to teach us the alphabet. They were cute, blow-up dolls that each came

with their own song. I figured, if I remember that to this day, it might work well in my classes, so I adapted and made “Art Element People” that I often take out of a special box and use as playful art characters.

As our visit was drawing to a close, Szekely and his wife Laura generously took me out for pizza in Woodstock. I brought out my copy of *From Play to Art* (1991) and asked him to sign it. He looked through it and recalled his younger self in photos and told me his memories of that day the picture was snapped and what was going on in the classroom. He laughed at a bookmark I had forgotten was inside, with my cartoon sketch of a little girl with exaggeratedly long legs, to teach my students about proportion, by showing them things purposefully out of proportion. I pulled that out of one of my sketchbooks.

Later, back at my parents' house in Connecticut cleaning out some old paperwork I found an old NAEA Journal—and said to myself, I bet if I open this up I will find an article by Szekely, and sure enough there was. I kept that journal long before I knew who Szekely was, but in art education, he has long been making his mark. That article was about keeping sketchbooks as an art teacher and planning your art lessons as sketches. Art lessons = art! The a-ha moments continued long after our meeting. Szekely had me excited to go back into the classroom. He encouraged me to always learn and try new things. He said, “You should be trying to reinvent, pacing the hallways before a new school year, asking yourself: how is it going to be different this year? What am I going to do to change and try something new and exciting?”

I have a new motto this year, now that we have re-entered school full-time, fully masked, on campus after being on Zoom for almost two years: “Teach like there's no tomorrow.” Especially in times like these, anything can happen. One thing remains a constant—art will continue to energize and bring us joy if we keep playing with it, like an old and/or new friend.

### References

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Figure 1. George Szekely on a walk in upstate New York.



Figure 2. Deer grazing in the distance on a rainy day walk.



Figure 3. George sharing some of his vintage collections inside his Hudson Valley studio.



Figure 4. Book by Charles D. Gaitskell, *Children and Their Art*.



Figure 5. George Szekely's cowboy boots lamp.