

Almost Broken: A Stroll at the Edge of the Cliff

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Almost Broken: A Stroll at the Edge of the Cliff

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Plenary Address, Universities Art Association of Canada Annual Conference,
University of Guelph, 2 November 1995

Having just heard on the radio this morning a member of the Reform Party call for the dismantling of our national arts institutions, starting with the Canada Council, I thought that before I begin my remarks, I'd read to you two rather extensive epigraphs as preliminary strokes towards a map of where we find ourselves as we prepare to present our work here over the next three days.

To construct a field of energy for debate, I've gone to two eminent practitioners of the so-called exact sciences: the chemist/philosopher Michael Polanyi, alas no longer alive, and the experimental physicist, Ursula Franklin, Professor Emerita at the University of Toronto, a continuing powerful presence in the intellectual life of the country. I find their thoughts relate with a curious intimacy to the experience of understanding, teaching and making art in Canada in 1995.

These are passages chosen almost at random because so much of their thinking seems relevant. Here, from a context ostensibly very different from ours, is what they've written:

Sobering, from Polanyi:

An art which cannot be specified in detail cannot be transmitted by prescription, since no prescription for it exists. It can be passed on only by example from master to apprentice. This restricts the range of diffusion to that of personal contacts *It follows that an art which has fallen into disuse for the period of a generation is altogether lost ... These losses are usually irretrievable.* [Emphasis mine.] It is pathetic to watch the endless efforts — equipped with microscopy and chemistry, with mathematics and electronics — to reproduce a single violin of the kind the half-literate Stradivarius turned out as a matter of routine more than 200 years ago.¹

And, following her discussion of “redemptive technologies,” heartening, from Franklin:

Social change will not come to us like an avalanche down the mountain. Social change will come through seeds growing in well-prepared soil — and it is we, like the earthworms, who prepare the soil. We also seed thoughts and knowledge and concern. We realize there are no guarantees as to what will come up. Yet we do know that without the seeds and the prepared soil nothing will grow at all. I am convinced that we are indeed already in a period in which this movement from below is be-

coming more and more articulate, but what is needed is a lot more earthworming.²

The tail end of Hurricane Opal a couple of weeks ago whipped through Toronto and ripped away some key protective something-or-other over my studio window. Cleaning up after the waterfall that resulted, I found among the drenched papers (some could be saved, others not) all sorts of things: letters, production notes, sketches — and a file of draft texts. As sometimes happens during an unexpected clean-up, I found myself curious about evidence of an earlier self, in this case that part of my life devoted to teaching.

The file included a flyer for a one day event I organized at the Gallery Stratford in the mid-seventies called *The Art of Art and the Teaching of Teaching*; notes for a previous U.A.A.C. talk I'd given as part of Tony Urquhart's *Passing the Baton* panel in Winnipeg in 1989; and a typescript of a lecture-presentation I gave in Vienna in 1992 at a symposium on *The Academy between Art and Education*.

Sitting and leafing through the file in the midst of the chaos caused by the storm, I was reminded by these and other writings how engaged I've been and still am by the role of the artist-teacher, and I found this continuity comforting. But what became very clear as well was that the world in and for which these texts were written is gone. Over. *Verschwunden* (vanished).

I don't have a lot to say today. These days I'm a Jenny-One-Note, singing the same song over and over again; the one about the future of post-secondary art scholarship and practice in this country; which in my view is the same melody as the one about the loss of our cultural treasure, about the programmed abandonment or annihilation of the most profound means to an identity, and in witnessing this, of the increased marginalization of the mind and the heart, of intellectual commitment and compassion. That's the song I must sing again this evening. Everyone in this room knows the tune, and could easily sing it with me.

But, in addition, I do have a few questions that perhaps we as colleagues and friends can look at together.

Looking back into the clumps of notes that survived the storm it becomes clear to me that the 1989 talk I gave at the University of Manitoba — it began with the sentence, “I was four when I realized for the first time the power of representation...” — strikes me now as utterly and inappropriately trusting. It was predicated on the belief that

someone actually cared how I became an artist, or at least how I understood that to have happened.

The 1992 presentation was more austere: "Dysfunction, gaps in the chain of evidence, and other teaching stories," was given at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, at an international symposium sub-titled *Artistic practice and teaching — a critical investigation*, another context entirely. This time there was an edge; I discern already some symptoms of concern following from the conditions we then faced, — there had just been a national unity Referendum, Free Trade supporters had bought great chunks of the media (people I knew were wearing buttons that said "Free Canada, Trade Mulroney"), the long-simmering agenda to undermine the power of the universities in the public mind had begun to show itself — and, yes, I was suspicious, but looking back, I see that there was not nearly enough edge or concern.

Yes, there were warnings. Most of us here this evening were already re-designing programmes, curtailing expectations, sensing the shift that represented a loss of faith in education and a growing romance of skill-training, and fussing somewhat about this, but on the whole one could remain optimistic enough to imagine that culture might yet enter the public discussions on the future of the country and be given its place and its due. One could still somehow give the benefit of the doubt to the moratoria on hiring, the freezing of salaries, the quantification of everything from funding by headcount to counting citations, and still imagine these as temporary, hoping that they might help fix things and then pass. And then, following from Northrop Frye's contention that the university is the engine room of the culture, we would go on and teach and make art and contribute our share to that engine, to that culture.

My apprehension, already present in 1992, has in three years deepened and widened. The veil of optimism has been ripped away as cleanly as the hurricane took the what's-it that left my studio exposed. Standing before you is a bundle of persistent suspicion, and even fear. I would hope to be proven wrong, but until that happens, this is what has awakened that suspicion and that fear. (A number of the instances I'm about to describe are local, but diagnostic nevertheless. Perhaps before the conference is over, we can compare notes regarding similar situations in all the provinces.)

Working backwards: Last week I learned that despite major expressions of support, the art section of the Toronto Public Library (I have the details here from Mary Williamson, York's Fine Arts Bibliographer Emeritus) has been annihilated as a separate resource (it is now folded into the main collection and serviced by students or inexperienced

part-timers), and that the archiving of historic documents has quietly been dropped for some years; that St. Lawrence College in Kingston has lost its art department; that the Art Gallery of Ontario no longer has an audio-visual resource library, or rather that it must remain dormant, unattended and unavailable; that the services of Fern Bayer, the Curator of the Provincial Fine Art Collection, are no longer required; that Reinhardt Reizenstein's public commission for the City of Toronto, awarded to him via an adjudicated competition, has been arbitrarily cancelled by City Council; that next week the Royal Ontario Museum will close the Planetarium to the public permanently (there may be a few school tours left before Christmas, but it is otherwise closed).

We know about the slamming of the door of the Canada Council Art Bank and the shoddy way in which it happened. We know what happened to the art department at the University of Ottawa, rescued in part because of the outcry from sister institutions. We know about the earlier attempt to close the Art Gallery and the Fine and Performing Arts Departments at Dalhousie University. We know, or think we know, what's happening to the C.B.C. (In all these instances, the mix of rumour and misinformation and unilateral decision-making create a climate in which it is not so easy, really, to know anything beyond what we are told.)

In Toronto there are rumours that they're closing the zoo. It must occur to anyone who has been watching the Queen's Park or House of Commons question periods on television that perhaps they just can't stand the competition.

But amongst all these irretrievable losses, and the climate that makes them conceivable, is a growing threat to the place of studio practice in the university and in the art college setting. I'm well aware that at U.A.A.C. there are as many or more art historians than artists present, but I am convinced that this is a matter for all of us. Once it is decided to eliminate studio, it is a small step to deciding that the study of art history is a luxury. At York University, despite clear and openly expressed faculty disagreement, there is a move afoot under the current administration towards a differential fee structure, charging either 25% or 33% more (depending on how you calculate the difference) for studio courses than for history or theory courses.

If instituted, this will create a hierarchy of means, itself problematic in its effects. The very credit designation system which enabled studio courses to bring to the University greater government support in the past is to be invoked to penalize drawing, painting, photography, printmaking, sculpture and interdisciplinary studio students now. It's not surprising that as practitioners we begin to feel unwelcome.

The very rich programme of presentations that's waiting for us here in Guelph represents a remarkable range of research and practice. Just skimming the *Journal* pages, I see that we're invited to consider, among other topics, *Women and Self-Representation*, *Painting and Historical Memory*, *Arrière-Garde Criticality in Ceramics and Fibre Practices*, *Cinema and Art History*, *Passing the Baton IV*, *Post-Colonial Issues in Canadian Art*, *Italian Painting, 1000 - 1400*, *Art and Nature*, *Art and War*, and that's not even the half of it. A weatherfront to be cherished, I think, looking at our collective work.

And then I think again of that politician's statement this morning, a baffling contrast in its zeal to cancel support for research and practice in the arts to all that our work represents.

Closer to home, again in my own department at York, at the beginning of the summer, the Chair in his earnest desire to comply with instructions, opted to slash so many studio courses that, had this in fact come to pass, all our graduate students in studio would have been denied the right to teach and the studio area around which the department was built twenty-five years ago would effectively have been closed within a year for lack of students able to continue.

Assuming that this decision was taken in good faith, and taking other losses into account, the question that arises is this: what are the forces at work both inside and outside the university that invite such decision-making? What Gordian knots, Scyllae and Charybdises are facing us all? And how will we conduct ourselves separately and together when the time comes?

The deficit exists. There is the government of the day and its way of tackling it. Yes, French/English, provincial/national, native/immigrant divorces and their destabilizing effects are in the air. But something else is going on as well.

Last Monday, in a casual conversation at a somewhat muted public celebration of the arts, Barry Callaghan turned a phrase which I believe identifies precisely this other dimension. In talking about current slash-and-burn, take-no-prisoners government policies, he said "They're just a bunch of economic fundamentalists. They demonize the deficit, so everything connected with it becomes the work of the Devil."

With that, some things became clear. It isn't just a matter of what has been called the naïveté or Philistinism which characterizes our provincial government of the moment: neither notion explains the levels of zeal, anger and contempt accompanying the undoing of one link after another of the infrastructure, of the cultural web that has sustained us as students, scholars, artists and citizens.

No matter how assiduously arts groups from C.A.R. (Canadian Artists' Representation) to Councils do their homework, regularly producing and substantiating figures which show how effectively and profoundly the arts fuel the economy — I have a selection of them with me this evening for anyone interested; my favourite is that the average tax-payer in Ontario contributes \$4.35 per year to the arts through the Ontario Arts Council, not much more than the cost of a pack of cigarettes — no one is listening. No one dares to listen to the Devil.

In response to faxes from Rob Fothergill, a colleague in the Theatre Department, and from Trinity Square Video, an artists' production centre with its roots in Trinity Square Church, I went down last Friday to Metro Hall, the gleamingly swish new building just off King Street in Toronto, to speak about the arts to the Financial Priorities Committee of Metro Council.

I somehow found my way to the Council chamber and put my name on the speakers' list, the first time in my life I've ever done that. I was warned that there was a long list and that time might not permit the Committee to hear me. I said I'd wait.

To their credit, three hours later at 6:00 p.m., the Committee voted to stay on to hear the few remaining deputations, and I got my chance. I got to speak after a sequence of speeches that would make stones cry. I got to speak after the speeches of people in wheelchairs, the octogenarians, those so infirm or having such difficulty with the language that they came with helpers. I spoke after listening to volunteers who give thousands of hours a year toward maintaining key social services in the city plead to be allowed to continue giving, after a man in his nineties sang in a quavering but strong voice a song of his own composition begging Metro Council not to cut funding to his neighbourhood drop-in centre. I listened to meals-on-wheels drivers, interpreters, social workers, nurses' aides, mothers' helpers, caregivers and receivers of all kinds. Each was allowed five minutes. Everybody expressed immense gratitude that the Committee (only some members of which were actually present in that large circular chamber) allowed them to speak at all. It was Lourdes without the miracles.

Whatever I might have said, or in the end did say, how could it matter after this parade of human suffering, of heroism and true idealism in adversity passed before the eyes of those judging financial priorities?

It is only in taking a step back from this staged event that a shadowy understanding emerges of what it might have been about.

What does it mean that life and art are so manoeuvred as to seem to be each others' adversaries? What does

it mean that the wretched and the dependent are required to make a case to a few powerful and seemingly fit people in upholstered seats? What does it mean to have so little regard for the needy that it is assumed that their lives must, by definition, be barren of music, dance, film, theatre or visual art, the very gifts that can make pain tolerable and can transform misery to meaning? What kind of mind, collective or individual, sets things up so that those in need of help are required to present themselves at their most vulnerable to try to secure basic support?

When did our understanding of entitlement shift? What has happened to grace in giving and dignity in receiving? What were all these people, most of whom have paid their dues and their taxes in spades, doing begging?

There are two recurring mantras that I've heard in recent months, phrases repeated as if the speaker is on automatic pilot, as if, said often enough, they might produce conviction. The government mantra is: "When the deficit is taken care of, we'll start spending money on the arts again." And the artist/scholar/teacher mantra: "We haven't seen anything yet. It's going to get worse."

The first is, in my view, sheer idiocy. What is being inflicted is a trauma to memory so great that there's no turning back. Once structures that took decades, and arguably centuries, to build are destroyed, how is the money, if there is any, to be spent wisely? Who will review, appraise, advise? Who will be in a position to learn how to make necessary distinctions? Who will remember and how? Which lives, their development interrupted, can be re-directed? How can they forget the years they've lost?

To return to Barry Callaghan's quip, where the arts are demonized, even if the market is seen as the seat of redemption, what market can thrive when the merchants have long gone under? In a community that no longer exists, whose isolation can be eased? What broadcasts can be expected from the few exhausted bureaucrats that somehow manage to keep their jobs? The key question is, how will we remember?

From matters of expertise and identity to questions of economics, the government mantra is either foolish or disingenuous or both. It is rooted in ignorance of how and under what conditions art happens and in the arrogant notion that throwing money at something at some unspecified time in the future will in itself, without those conditions, do.

The second mantra worries me even more. The phrase, "We haven't seen anything yet," is more often than not volunteered with a kind of cliff-hanging bravado, a nervous grin and a nod of the head, that suggests a kind of hypnosis at work. We're meant to continue, the gesture says,

bravely onward, "facing reality," so to say, and bracing ourselves for further bloodletting while still doing a good job and smiling.

Good boy and good girl rhetoric begins to show itself and is rewarded. The voices are all around us. *Look how much I can do without actually breaking my health and my spirit. Look how much so and so is doing over there and not complaining. Consider yourself lucky that you have a job...*

The collegium has become a fiction, a despised fiction. While under attack we are at the same time being infantilized by lack of information, by unilateral decision-making, by accusations that we are not practical, by implications that we, art historians and artists alike, are frivolous, spoiled and cosseted in our towers of ivory.

It is already anachronistic to care about students. It is already a sign of weakness to be compassionate with each other. It has for some time been a dismissive catch-phrase to call someone a child of the sixties. It is sometimes suggested that it is indirectly because of the civil rights idealism of that time that we are now in debt. The essence of double-think is to make you believe one thing is happening to you while perpetrating on you another. When idealism is demonized in this way, you know you're in trouble.

One symptom of this, in the departments where you and I work, is for administrators, no doubt with the best of intentions, to allow you to choose which limb to cut off, and if you're not thorough enough, to move you along with the help of a few more threats and promises. In such a climate, and with the body-mind split given such endorsement by this government, I see signs that art historians and artists who until now have shared fruitful responsibility for the same body of students are now played against each other. It's in this climate that the whispering begins that art history, after all, is history, and has an assured place in the university, say in arts or humanities faculties, but what do we do with this curious presence of the artist in the university?

At a time in which, more than in any other in my experience, there is a hunger and necessity for creative thought, those capable of providing it are being quietly and steadily neglected and disenfranchised. By notions that studio courses are more expensive than history courses, and by a marked shrivelling of the commitment to interdisciplinarity, to the rich mix that comes from allowing theory, history and practice to challenge and nudge each other into being better at what they do for having been required to consider it differently.

Gone almost completely is the notion that it is among the scholars and poets of all disciplines, in the hotbed of inquiry that was the University, that art can best thrive and

serve. Grant Strate, when he chaired our Dance Department, used to talk about “the thinking foot,” a quality of movement that comes from a larger awareness of the world as well as of muscle groups.

In the hierarchy of what is considered meaningful in this country generally and by certain governments in particular, studio practice is a liability. It’s only a matter of time. We’ll die, or leave, or get wise, or give in.

A seeming digression: I’m rather interested in some of the so-called new technologies. Working recently on a Web site has been exciting and challenging, and I’m happy to have been able to carry the project to the completion of its first phase. Working as I do, I get to read a lot of stuff touting new media as the answer. The arts may be demonized but, my goodness, how pure and glowing and redemptive are the computers and all that they purvey. I learn this week from a newspaper article that my university is deeply immersed in considering the possibility of providing degrees via the Internet. Perhaps it can be done well, and certainly people will try, but I’m curious to see how it will be carried out, by whom, and with what pattern of consultation.

At a recent meeting of a varied, one might even say bifurcated, group of artists and technophiles called hastily together by Cultech, the Chair of which is Paul Hoffert, who is also chair of the Ontario Arts Council, to discuss a proposed conference that would bring artists and technicians together, the discussion arrived several times at a point when a non-artist would say, “Sure we get along. I hire artists all the time. Once I have a concept, it’s no problem to get someone to do the rendering.” Said in each instance without a whiff of irony. So: the technicians have the concepts which the artists are hired to service.

The mind-set that supports this hierarchy is far from the one which centres on the creative symbiosis between art and technology. It is an inversion, the mirror-twin, of the equally mistaken notion that only artists are creative, and that technology is subordinate to that creativity. Another version of the body-mind dichotomy, a gloss on the severing of studio practice from the University, a commentary on the playing of social services against the arts, it comes from a mind-set which increasingly, both explicitly and implicitly, shapes the context in which workers in the arts and in the humanities find themselves.

In the days and weeks before the Referendum, I found myself thinking again about Montreal, about the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, about McGill, Sherbrooke Street, St. Jean Baptiste Day, the old Union, Stanley Street and Borduas,

Boulevard St. Denis and the Botanical Gardens, Albert Dumouchel’s print shop and Louis Dudek’s poetry series, and in those years, Leonard Cohen speaking poems and playing guitar in local clubs ... and an early poem he wrote came to mind.

“*Nothing has been broken*”³ is about many things at once, as only a poem can be, but the way in which these are invoked is quite simple. A chain exists, one link of which is a blue butterfly. The world in its many guises, thinking the butterfly is the weak link, attacks it again and again, and is each time foiled and falls back, “baffled by blue dust.”

It’s not clear why the world wants to break the chain, nor why the butterfly is so formidable, but it is and it has to be. It is what Polanyi called the unspecifiable without which there is no tradition at all. (You can see where I’m going with this.) In our case the link is almost broken. Perhaps there’s a way in which we can re-constitute ourselves into such a link, fragile and fiercely strong, and resume our task of holding the chain together. What can we do or say or invent that will have that force? How can we develop a strategy that will protect and strengthen that chain?

I think it’s important to see how close we are to the brink, that each and every one of us is next in line. I believe that in numbers there is strength. I think that damage control at this point is a cynical fiction. The damage to people, to practices, to hope is so great already that much is, as Polanyi would say, irretrievable.

(An aside: Think of the reported record profits banks and insurance companies have made this year, and then tell me there’s no money.)

I have no idea how we can act, let alone prevail, but it seems to me that it’s time for the CCA, the Councils at every level, the Professional Associations, the Boards of Directors of museums, galleries, foundations, the editors and staffs of our journals, independent writers, collectors and consultants to come together as one force, a weather-front to protect what we cherish and to see that it is passed on, the specifiable and the unspecifiable. The earthworm effect, as Ursula Franklin might say.

The U.A.A.C. has a special role in this, in that it represents history, theory and practice in one professional country-wide association. It represents that non-puritan integrative ideal placed in the university context, the opposite of the pathological cleansing that is going on. And the people to start it off, in my view, should be the curators of the university galleries. With one foot in research, the other in the art world, they are best placed to begin the gathering of energies required.

I haven’t asked anyone’s permission, and I know we’re all overworked, but I’m proposing that Mary Sparling be

partially lured away from giving all her time to the Pier 21 project, and that, at the other end of the country, Scott Watson make a date with her, and that they get hold of Loretta Yarlow, Chantal Bouthat, Luc Charette, Michael Bell and of course Judith Nasby who is co-hosting this event, and others whom I haven't yet met, to map out a beginning for a joining of all arts organizations in the country. Sometimes just a little move can shift things, and a wave of energy can start. We won't know if we don't try.

- 1 Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago, 1958), 53; based on the Gifford Lectures, University of Aberdeen, 1951-52: "On Tradition."
- 2 Ursula Franklin, *The Real World of Technology* (Toronto, 1990), 120-21; C.B.C. Massey Lectures, Lecture Six.
- 3 Leonard Cohen, *Parasites of Heaven* (Toronto and Montreal, 1966), 22:

NOTHING HAS BEEN BROKEN

Nothing has been broken
 though one of the links of the chain
 is a blue butterfly

Here he was attacked
 They smiled as they came and retired
 baffled with blue dust

The banks so familiar with metal
 they made for the wings
 The thick vaults fluttered

The pretty girls advanced
 their fingers cupped
 They bled from the mouth as though struck

The jury asked for pity
 and touched and were electrocuted
 by the blue antennae

A thrust at any link
 might have brought him down
 but each of you aimed at the blue butterfly

Six weeks after giving this talk Vera Frenkel decided to leave her position as Professor and Co-ordinator of the Interdisciplinary Studio Programme of the Department of Visual Arts at York University. She will continue contributing as consultant to the Graduate Programme, and as an artist in the community.