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Anecdotes about (art) education and other Lessons Learnt

10

Where and when I grew up in the western suburbs of Sydney, most kids left school at fifteen or sixteen to try to get jobs - not always successfully, it was the seventies after all - as bank tellers or shop assistants or fitters-and-turners. In that climate there was little room in high school curricula for such non-vocational frivolity as *Art*. Indeed there had been little demand, and it was only at the insistence of a few good, albeit peculiar, students and with our art teacher's support, that we were permitted such a luxury at all. In order to take it as a subject in our senior years we and our teacher had to do it on our own time. We were three students, the only ones to take advanced level Art and English. In fact, most of our friends had already left school by then: one had run off to a commune to join her boyfriend and get away from her father; another began his now burgeoning career as a union organiser by working as the shop-floor delegate in his branch of the public services; another had bought a property up north from the small fortune she'd amassed pushing the pills for which she had a penchant; another ended up in a mental ward; another married and pregnant; still another was a ballroom dancer who married and soon divorced her partner. So we three who remained became a team, a *mod squad*, two het. girls who liked to write and draw and win debates and play soccer, and a fag (my penchant for fag-haggery had started at an early age) who designed clothes and produced plays. We were a queer crew and a big part of being seen to be queer was that we were studious but hip, bookish but drug-taking: like some ghastly experiment from *Creature Feature*, we were the brains who fucked. We saw ourselves as part of an imaginary intelligentsia, our home-grown Bohemia. Having discovered Marx and sex, we happily expatriated ourselves to Utopia, to our books and drawings and fantasies, far from the abject banality, the quotidian brutality, of our working class lives. Art history was an integral part of this fantasy life. And where we grew up, meant that *does not compute, Will Robinson*. Yet, for us it was the place where we *made sense*. We revelled in all those afternoons after school and all those mis-spent lunchtimes with slide projectors whirring, the bright white heat of the day pouring in through the cracks under the door, making us out, in our darkened art room, as different. For us it had the same transgressive aspect that smoking cigarettes in the toilets might have had for other students. It distinguished us. It was cool.

To seek out New Life and New Civilisations

It was the seventies and in amongst the rife unemployment and the stag-flation, there were the anti-Vietnam moratoriums, the biggest protests ever, and the election of the first Labour government in decades, largely on the strength of their platform policy to end conscription. I remember vividly the Whitlam Labour Party's slogan that year, it was 1972, and they told us, "It's time": Time for change, time for education, time for universal health cover, time for a pension rise, time for you and me. I still have the badges. It was time for local heroes like Tom Uren and Jack Ferguson to get elected to office. I remember the fabulous sick feeling we all got in the stomach

that year from the thrill of seeing people like us, from where we lived in positions of power. Finally, the spell of hegemony that told people they had better leave running the country to the nabobs who'd been born to the job was broken. Our Whitlam government *boldly went where no man had gone before*. It was the seventies, after all. This was the brief window of possibility through which my friends and I slipped: Our high school, dubbed 'disadvantaged', was given extra state money. We were given extraordinary teachers, young and, in retrospect, incredibly idealistic. We were taught for the first time ever, it seemed, that we could *be something*, we were given the gift of curiosity. We read *Campaign*, the early homo journal that we got from the city; we took hallucinogens with our science teacher; we recited poetry after school with our English teacher; and we admired Kritios Boy, as he was known in our Helen Gardners, as much for his buttocks as for anything else. We speculated the Greek scholar who'd named him would probably have agreed. We transferred all this into a crush on the art teacher whom we loved almost as the father none of us had. We called him by his first name, he wore mauve buckled shoes and beautiful suits, and he gave us life-skills we might never otherwise have learnt. And he taught us art. For us culture - music, art, literature - was mixed inextricably with our burgeoning political, social and sexual consciousnesses. We were keen as mustard; keen for knowledge; keen for the mobility that knowledge seemed to imply; keen for the sensate experiences we read about in books. We were keen all right and the new Labour government's free tertiary education policy only made us all the more hungry. While of course, a life time of internalization can't be dissolved by the mere stroke of a pen, the life we might otherwise have lived had gone from us forever.

Heart of Glass

It had taken my high school art teacher's intervention to get me into art school. For even though I had, in fact topped the HSC in art and several other subjects, an achievement usually reserved for a student from the ruling class, I had somehow failed the interview. Here was where I learnt, graphically, of those invisible ceilings and walls that contain the beguiled disenfranchised. At college I found that the safety net, that fourteen miles of red roofed fibro houses, factories, and rattling train lines separating my world in that high school art room from the real (art)world, was gone. There were very few students from my neck of the woods at art school and those who were, were the kind of macho boys I'd always done my best to avoid. Almost everyone spoke with a toffy accent. Certainly, I am the only one in my family to go to University and my accent said as much. Much to my chagrin, the art school education that I thought would give me access to other people who loved art and wanted to be artists, in fact taught me over again about privilege; this time in relation to cultural practices I'd claimed and

thought of as my own. *Lost in space*, I finished the program but, after that, it took a hemisphere and thirteen years for me to return to school.

An Imperial Culture

In 1986 I travelled to New York on a grant from the Australia Council. It was there I found that the bulk of the modern art history I'd so fondly memorised throughout my schooling was housed in one institution on Fifty Third Street, as if the highlights of my history, my education, could be reduced to one collection in one building on one street in one city; as if our high school slides were simply and summarily a pre-packaged kit from one over-riding, and irrefutably predominant place. Interestingly this experience was exclusively in modernist art history in the United States, the pre-modern to be found in European museums was much more dispersed, conflicted and more imperfectly represented in art history texts. So while I understood long before, the irony of knowing all the words to all those American TV shows, friends from around the world and I all singing in unison to the same theme song, sometimes in different languages, this art history, my own private art history, was a different matter. Where I'd thought I was going to see in the flesh just some of those objects I'd only ever seen in reproduction, instead I found what could have been the master plan for art History 101. Suddenly my safe place, my intimate, was reduced to a neatly reified commodity designed for easy transnational viewing to the profound seamlessness of its cultural imperialism. I took umbrage.

Hegemonically Yours

12

My first black tie event at the Modern marked the complete shattering of any illusions that I still clung to, that it was only geography that had separated me as an artist in Australia from that pulsing centre, The Museum of Modern Art. Cinderella to the core, my aspiration was to pass. Alas, I had nothing to wear and where was a fairy god-mother when you needed one? Of course, all my worst ancient anxieties about class position were triggered.

Bells rang in my head announcing the extreme dubiousness of the tie by which I had always so thoroughly identified myself with art and art-making. However, not to be deterred on *this mission Jim, should you decide to accept it*, I donned a little black dress and the ironic, I argued, plastic baubles that stood in for adornment. A lack-luster event, I returned home that evening well before midnight, disgruntled that the crowd should be so dull and so dully, vulgarly, rich, and me with neither coach nor mice nor handsome prince, my only solace, swollen by now to huge proportions, being the chip on my shoulder. So not only was that Culture house a club to which I could only ever distantly belong but, to add insult to injury, it was a boring affair anyway.

Mirror, Mirror

Remember the eighties? The grotesque accumulations of ill-gotten gains? Remember the thrills of an eighties art world mesmerised by the notion of a decentred subject? Remember irony? This was a period marked by elaborate installations and high production values, all the better to fragment, rupture, then suture all over again, subjectivity. This was the period marked by the arrival of a privileged post-modern subject, free to appropriate, quote and parody. Appropriation. More like expropriation more often than not. Indeed anyone on the exterior of this House of Cards knew that such postured decentring was of significance only if you'd ever usually seen yourself in the middle of things. That is, this nominal, certainly not material, rupture meant little to those for

whom the production values of these aura-less objects far exceeded a year's wage. Just as the fiscal excesses of the eighties, the boom, the yuppie success stories, the flagrant greed of the few, was inversely related to the severe decline of the real wages of the majority of working people, so too, in the art world, post modernism's radicality hinged upon the actual privilege of its perpetrators at the expense of those cultures and peoples from whom it, post-modernism, borrowed. Sounds like so much modernism to me.

Repo History

In the last decade of the twentieth century in New York a group of artists gave themselves a task: to repossess history. In their endeavour they found that the Wall Street Stock Exchange was once the major site for slave trade in the north-east; they sign-posted the city with the names of the indigenous tribes that once inhabited it; and they developed interventionist strategies about a range of social and political issues that would have been sneered at by the average eighties post-modernist. But they were not alone: ACT-UP, Women's Action Coalition, Paper Tiger TV, and a myriad of other collaborative organisations were making their presence felt. Artists contesting the prevailing hegemony (including that of the heroic avant garde), *boldly going where no-one had gone before*, gave form and voice to those subjects never adequately accounted for in the histories of modern art, those who appear in its narratives only as metaphors or inspiration. There was a sea change in the cultural practices of the early nineties: affirmative action and changing demographics both saw to that. It seemed at last as if my childhood identifications with the figures from my own private art history had come to life, re-inventing their patched together stories, all the better in the retelling, like Mary Shelley telling her story of Frankenstein. Indeed it seemed possible to imagine a different version of late modernism in which notions of entitlement, democracy and a sensate rationality of the doubting subject kind could actually produce the very mechanisms by which modernism and its universal subject could be undone. To put it another way, the very order being criticised as exclusionary, elitist, a paragon of white supremacy, and so on, was the very same order that contained the critical apparatus for its own dismantling. So there were those rabble rousers and rat-bags vying for their entitlement in the big pie that is (art) history by using the rhetoric that had formerly functioned to exclude them. It should be noted at this point, that in a place and time in which evidence, like the written word, is sanctioned above all else, we exist when we are represented. We exist to ourselves and we exist to them and we are reminded that this ostensibly separate culture wouldn't/doesn't exist without us. We are entitled to repossess it. They borrowed from us to get it.

A History Without a Past

What is all the more striking and disturbing, then, is that this is, it would seem, a history without a past, as if none of this has ever happened before, as if, new-born to the world, we've just opened our eyes to the New Art

History, to Radical Activism, cultural politics as the latest fad. the joke goes:

Q. Why is February Black History Month? A. Because it's the shortest month of the year.

So what did happen to the seventies? Why is that decade so often characterised as the (other) *nothing decade*?

Nothing for whom? What is this active forgetting about? What internalization is at work here? What of the radical labour movements, Black nationalism, feminism, the resurgent interest in indigenous culture, commie pink culture and all those other historical/political/cultural movements of the seventies? What does it mean some twenty years later to listen to Gil Scott Heron rapping that the US is *a nation that can't take much more*?

Gil, this nation's taking it is business as usual. How much does this bespeak a continual cultural streaming (to appropriate that pedagogic term of the period) in which it matters less and less that our sphere of experience doesn't coincide with the dominant? Did it ever matter? Isn't there another pattern to observe in which our voices are only audible in times of economic downturn? How does culture as exemplified by the museum reflect or inform these beliefs?

The Museum a World of Difference

Lately the work of my cultural heroes has been surveyed in the hallowed halls of the museum, and, lo and behold,

I find that their work seems small, reductive, out of context, mere tokens of the entire bodies of work that they stand in for, pale traces of their actual substantiality, or else overblown, hyperbolic productions, as if even with the best of intentions, the museum in its present guise couldn't help but engulf the individual work, rewriting meaning to the museum's own specifications. In general the work seems contaminated by an institutional demise,

built into the very structure of the survey show, in which any such attempt to summarise a period of time falls short of its goal. In an epoch in which such characterisations are less and less plausible for reasons too complex to entail here, the survey show, as format, seems to be part of the problem. Like the faded glory of many other totalising discourses, big survey shows seem more and more inadequate as systems of representation. They are like

the grand gestures of by-gone eras also falling by the way-side: the great expos of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are no longer financially viable; nor are the transoceanic shipping lines; neither the fabulous nineteenth century department stores nor their twentieth century incarnation as shopping malls. The Olympian challenge of totality and global culture is itself transparent as an illusion pumped up with enough steroids and capital to make it seem a total farce.

Someone's Gotta Furnish It

Yet I have a curious nostalgia for that faded glory, those attempts at an all encompassing discourse, as in *A History of Art*, or in the Biennale, or even Affirmative Action, for it was in the very structures that support such notions, that the likes of me as an adolescent found a psychic home. Do I sound like a bleeding heart liberal? Well, if I do it's because so much is now no longer at stake, the political terrain having shifted such that it seems we can't even use those old spatial metaphors of right or left anymore. The things that had us on the streets during the Fraser years were the very things tolerated under the older, less innocent and fiscally more conservative, Labour Party of

the now very recent past. I mourn the passing of that time. Of the recent election it has been said that the Australian electorate opted for sleep. What of the republic, the South East Asian twenty-first century, reparations for a racist colonial history and all the things I cherished about Labour, all those things; universal health cover, education and the like, that until recently we thought were settled? Seems to me, the Australian electorate is going to have a rude awakening, a lesson hard learnt. So what role does culture play? How much of our culture is complicit? What does it mean when major contemporary art museums deem to think it perfectly reasonable to allow a partisan political party to launch its arts policy on their premises? When my work was reproduced in nation wide dailies as part of the back-drop for the Liberal Party's pre-election Arts policy launch during one such an event I was appalled. It seems the contemporary museum concerned, felt no compunction about staging an event as charged as a partisan political rally without the explicit permission of the artists exhibited. Where has the artists' entitlement gone? If as I have argued, representation counts and, lest we forget, political difference is palpable, then it does matter how one's work is contextualised, just as it matters who gets into office. John Howard, these are the things that matter. Lest We Forget.

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