

The politics and business of art



The academic crowd absorbing social theory, politics and art.

International views on art

by Stephen Roberts

You may not know what art is but you do know what you like. However, do you know if it's modern? This was one of the subjects grappled with at the conference.

On the first morning Joy Cohnstaedt, York's dean of fine arts, presented a paper on arts policies in Canada, the US, and the UK which dealt with their unequal distribution of arts fundings. According to Cohnstaedt, these policies are pluralist, elitist and have resulted in the maintenance of "a class society with the benefits flowing to the educated elite of Western European origin and those who have a similar stake in these values."

Cohnstaedt believes the challenge lies in developing a democratic cultural policy. In Canada, this would denote an integrated policy combining English and French speaking political structures and realities that would allow people to "transcend their perception of themselves as consumers rather than participants." Cohnstaedt feels this will require "a stronger sense of community" as well as the clarification of the part of funding organizations as to whether their purpose is to support aesthetic or social objectives.

Cohnstaedt's paper was the most focused, best presented and substantial of the session. By contrast, her colleague, Sarah M. Corse of Stanford University, attempted to illustrate the national differences in self-image between the US and Canada as revealed through a small, selective study of prize winning books from each country. Corse feels the books reflect the social and aesthetic backgrounds of both Canadians and Americans. The paper, which began with an interesting thesis and a satchel of potential, was short-sighted and redundant in its findings.

It tediously revealed, once again, that many Americans' view of the world does not extend past their Atlantic and Pacific shores, or their Mexican and Canadian borders. Almost anyone living north of the 49th parallel could have made the same conclusions, after an evening of watching television on any given night of the week.

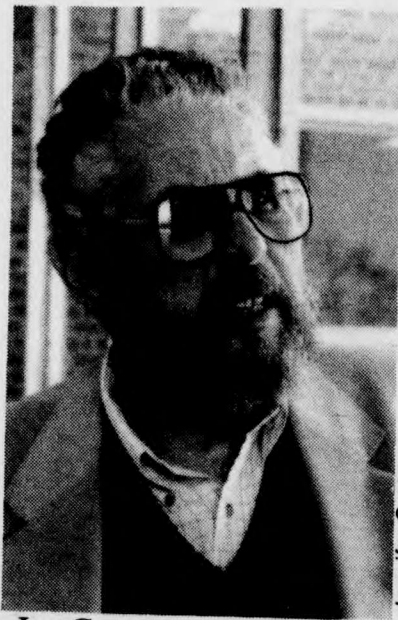
Professor Jean M. Guiot, from the University of Ottawa, gave the funniest presentation of the morning: a comparison of the public funding and structuring of theatre companies in Canada and Australia based on virtually no data at all. Guiot spent 15 minutes talking with his hands and concluding that, as subsidies for theatre companies decrease, companies are forced to rely on larger, safer productions. He also explained that private vs. public support in Canada is not gaining ground. Neither point was a hot flash to anyone familiar with the local theatre scene.

The afternoon session addressed the issue of art and interpretation. York's David Liu, whose paper on what makes modern art modern, dealt with painting. According to Liu, modern art calls attention to itself and its own awareness of itself as a manufactured object. Furthermore, it requires the analysis of the culture from which it comes in order to be understood. According to Liu, resisting tradition will probably be seen as the predominant feature of modern culture. It was not explained, however, how this differentiated the "modern" era of art from previous eras and movements such as Romanticism or Neo-Classicism. Both movements resisted tradition and later became traditions which modernism resisted, and modernism is now supposedly a tradition which the post-modern movement (?), fad (?), craze (?), is resisting.

Robert D. Leighninger Jr., of Western Michigan University, explained a justification for the separation of art and craft, and Timothy Dowd, of Princeton University, delineated the dichotomy between "high" art and popular art. Leighninger concluded that the dichotomy, unsatisfactory and in need of change as it was, was to some degree necessary as a tool to organize reality. Dowd proposed transcending the dichotomy by focusing on innovation in given genres.

The panel was, however, left spinning its wheels during the open discussion after the presentations by a questioner who asked, "Who benefits from the distinction between art and nonart, art and craft, high art and pop art?" echoing the question in at least one other audience member's mind.

Last weekend, Glendon College played host to literally dozens of arts administrators, practitioners and educators from around the world for the 15th Annual Conference on Social Theory, Politics and the Arts. From the keynote address by Mavor Moore at North York City Hall to the closing luncheon on October 8, Excalibur was there.



Joe Green, conference coordinator

The politics of multiculturalism

by Mark Moss

On par with the environment, multiculturalism and the converse side of it — racism, is one of the most pressing issues facing Canadian society. In a country that prides itself on being ethnocentric and encouragingly open to all cultures, the fact that it is not working as planned is a serious issue.

It affects all facets of Canadian life, domestically as well as in the international arena. Canada is looked at by the rest of the world as a supposed functioning model how many different peoples can live in harmony, retaining indigenous cultural customs, all within the Canadian national tradition. The concept of multiculturalism permeates every level of Canadian society and it is in this context that playwright, critic and Professor Emeritus of York University Mavor Moore spoke on "The Politics of Multiculturalism."

Moore was introduced by York's president Harry Arthurs, who found an appropriate forum to comment on the university's multicultural student body. Sixty per cent of York's undergraduates are from minority groups which one third are visible minorities. As keynote speaker for the 1989 Wendy Michener Memorial Lecture, given at the conference, Moore discussed the issue of multiculturalism last Friday at North York City Hall. He spoke in front of an audience composed predominantly of academics, of which most were caucasian and about one fifth were women.

As a distinguished man of arts and letters, erudite and objective, Moore was, as usual, accurate and direct in discussing the topic. Well researched, historically precise, up to date on government policy and well versed in the etymology of 'key words' ("the meaning of multiculturalism is still confusing"), Moore succinctly highlighted the plight, current circumstances and possible future of multiculturalism in Canadian society, with appropriate relevance to the arts and especially the political ramifications.

Moore stressed that in Canada, as elsewhere, multiculturalism must be made to work. "Governments that can't cope with multiculturalism won't last!" Every aspect of society, notably education and government policy but also advertising, business and labour must be included within an overall policy of multiculturalism.

Moore spoke of the past problems with multicultural policy which lead to a series of paradoxes, specifically that individuals wish to be different and retain their culture, but concurrently have the desire to be treated the same as everyone else. This is a difficult state to maintain and function in and, as a consequence, he said that the younger members of ethnic groups "have defected to the mainstream," shedding previous cultural baggage and moving Canadian society in an American melting pot-like direction.

Moore covered all the immediate problems one can possibly imagine in such a debated and controversial issue; the threat to the existing dominant culture, the tendency to stereotype and the non-static nature of culture. He stressed that in its best form, multiculturalism must foster an environment for understanding, not judgement and its inferior vs. superior connotations.

As "it is the mind's nature to categorize," he said, we must work out a system of classification vis-a-vis education that involves the use of stereotypes, but not derogatory ones.

In closing, Moore said that multiculturalism must be continued as a subject of high level concern and dialogue and all the available options must be pursued. Appropriately, his final remarks were directed at the burgeoning multiculturalism in the Soviet Union and Gorbachev's ambivalence to the micro-nationalist sentiment.

Third World arts policy

by Stephen Mitchell

African art administrators are wrestling with a puzzling dilemma these days: do they gear their programmes towards local or international markets?

It is a difficult enough task satisfying the local market, never mind the international.

At last weekend's conference, Nigerian research assistant (and one-time theatre manager) Razak Ajala reminded his audience that a common characteristic of most Third World countries is that cultures long since independent of each other were banded together in the 18th and 19th centuries by European imperialism. Nigeria, for instance, now comprises approximately 200 distinct cultures and languages.

"These are people who sing different songs and worship different gods," Ajala illustrated, "all lumped together in one nation."

By the turn of this century, imperialists were in the process of replacing traditional values with colonial values that were sold as "better, more civilized, and of a higher standard," Ajala continued.

For example, the music of European churches replaced the strains of traditional rhythms. Later on, music of a white/black "hybrid" nature crawled out of the wreckage of culture clash: in Jamaica, this hybrid became known as reggae, in Ghana, highlife, in Nigeria, afro-beat.

Some Third World artists have benefited from the coming together of cultures; African writer Chinua Achebe, for instance, is well-known on the international market.

However, Ajala also pointed out that a group like the Jamaican Philharmonic Orchestra, while accepted and commercially successful on