

Who's afraid of the arts?

by Jules Heller,
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This is the text of a special address that Dr. Heller read to a recently convened arts committee.

If the title seems reminiscent of a certain work by Edward Albee, no plagiarism is intended. If the title, in any way, stirs imagination, it is well chosen. If the title describes the spirit and substance of what I believe about the arts in this brief exposition, I, for one, will be surprised and delighted. For I intend to present my dreams for the arts at York University in the context of the buzzing, blooming, burgeoning world in which you and I live.

Various critics have described our times as the Age of Anxiety, the Automation Revolution, the Population Explosion, the Cultural Renaissance, the Space Age, the Age of McLuhan or "Messages from the Toronto Medium", the Age of Black Power, and still more recently, the Time of the Student Revolution. All of these honorable men, in their search to make sense of the world, describe the truth — as they see it and understand it.

CURIOUSER . . .

As Alice said, our world gets curiouser and curiouser: It is engaged in a mad, astronomically-expensive race to put man on the moon, and is in no hurry to cope with many of man's problems on earth. In the name of Peace, it prepares for Armageddon. It asks man to overreach himself in his dreams, hopes, and aspirations for the good life, and simultaneously urges him to burrow deep within the bowels of the earth to save himself from instant death or wall-to-wall misery. It praises and glorifies creativity, yet vilifies or is apathetic to truly imaginative human expression. It pays lip service to the uniqueness and sanctity of the individual, yet it mass-educates him to sameness, mass houses him in ugliness, mass packages and cans tasteless foods to pervert his palate, mass produces reproductions of culturally-vitamins books, records, plays, paintings and sculpture, and mass-medias him to numbness. It smothers creativity with do-goodism or "sincerity" and squashes talent with singularly deadly, but beautifully constructed metaphor. Deep in the Freudian unconscious of its collective societal heart, despite protests to the contrary, it still rates the individual according to the current balance in his checkbook, the number of taillights and headlamps on his cars, the quantity of bedrooms and bathrooms in his home, the size of his TV screens, the number of times he has travelled abroad to "in" places, and the cost of his hi-fidelity system.

We live in a time of revolution — a "less-is-more" revolution that shakes the whole structure of society throughout the space ship we call, "Earth". This revolution respects no political, social, or economic boundary line; it has little regard for the way things were, and less for the way they are. It is more dynamic a revolution than was caused by the invention of the wheel, the discovery of the alphabet, the very beginnings of painting and sculpture, the brewing of beer, the post and lintel system of structure, the creation of the steam engine, mini-skirts and 'rock' music, or the founding of a group of non-insects called the Beatles. It is a revolution which began with the miniaturization of

transistors, moved to solid state or integrated circuitry, and now offers a host of invisible new tools, materials, and services that currently benefit a large segment of the world's population — and occasionally causes power blackouts to discommode 30 million people.

John Quincy Adams was indeed prophetic, when he said we must learn the arts of war and independence so that our children can learn engineering and architecture so that their grandchildren may learn the Fine Arts and painting. If this is the order of things in this disordered and disorderly world, and if continuous renewal is the price of survival, then the arts will play a most important part in our strategy for survival.

Yet, and this is what makes our world even more curiouser, there are other reactions, other interpretations given the same phenomena. To the astronaut posed on the threshold of space exploration, this is the most exhilarating age in which to be alive; he is viewed by many as the reincarnation of Marco Polo, Jacques Cartier, Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, Henry Hudson, and Vitus Bering. To the physicist exploring another world through his field ion microscope and staring unabashedly at the life of the atom on a pin point, this is the best of all possible times. To the surgeon, analyst, and religious leader probing the vast uncharted inner space of mankind, the here and now, the past, and the future collide and spark each other into flame. This ballistic confusion of man, machine, and ideas has provoked and reawakened the painter and poet, sculptor and composer, printmaker and playwright, writer and dancer to renewed awareness of his condition. Villages, towns, cities, provinces, and federal governments are reacting to this cultural jolt in diverse ways, all seeking answers to unforeseen problems. University art centres, community arts councils, and "Friends of Art" spring into existence to offer programmes of varying degrees of excellence.

Statistics-minded persons assure us that more people attend symphony concerts than baseball or hockey games, that millions of people queue up to see billions of dollars of paintings and sculpture, that classical records sales soar higher than space capsules, that the business of selling musical instruments and art supplies has recently become Big Business, that theatre and opera enjoy large new audiences in still newer facilities in hundreds of urban and non-urban areas, that books and magazines command astronomical readerships, and so on, and so on, and so on.

In the light of this information, someone recently remarked that we are enjoying "a bull market in Beethoven, Rembrandt, and Bernard Shaw, and week-end titillations about Hindemith, Klee, and Beckett". But what does it all mean?

For 30,000 years and more, man created a total sensory record of his dreams, hopes, fears, loves, hates and wonders. He painted, engraved, modelled, carved, sang, danced, built structures, and acted out that which moved him to personal expression. Even a cursory examination of the **trivium** and the **quadrivium** reveals the presence of the Fine Arts in the curriculum of

the early university. If, indeed, we are dedicated to educating the whole man in the latter part of the 20th century to prepare him for a better society, the role of the Fine Arts in that new society, thanks to the wonders of science, medicine, and technology, is exceedingly clear.

COME DREAM

Come dream with me. I see the Faculty of Fine Arts in terms of talented, totally-committed, creative people. I see professional artists, performers, scholars, research workers in the arts — many of international repute — converging upon York from near and distant mainstreams of culture to help us form unique interdisciplinary programmes in and between the several arts. These men and women will set the new style of the campus, work like Trojans, fight like alley-cats, involve themselves in "thing making", argue, respect the silence required by a colleague (for a moment), carry big sticks, speak softly to students, and produce exciting research at the interface of traditional disciplines. Imaginative students and more imaginative staff will be attracted to York in numbers. Why? Because it continually will dare to find better solutions to thorny problems; because it will remain flexible and young in spirit and, hopefully, wise beyond its chronological age; because it can say now and in future, as can few Universities, that it believes in our goals and purposes as we believe in each other. If we fail, it will not have been for lack of courage. But we will not fail. On the other hand, if we succeed because we failed to take artistic risks, if we succeed because we imitated another's seeming success, we will have contributed less than nothing to the growth and development of the arts in Canada.

Come dream with me. I see a magnificent Centre for these several arts, a spellbinding symbol, something more than a pile of bricks, a lump of reinforced concrete, or a cage of glass. I see a magnificent landmark for the Fine Arts — the quintessence, if you will, for the North American continent. Separate, yet interconnected structures for Art, Music, Theatre Arts, Film, and the Dance will together create a new form infinitely greater than the sum of its parts. The nearby Museum will house a modest, yet rich teaching collection of prime examples of works of art from all stylistic periods; the Art Gallery will grace the campus with ever-changing contemporary exhibitions of works from many cultures and will provide certain surprises, from time to time, even for seasoned gallery-goers. There will be an Arts Research Library, organized to take advantage of new technologies, in physical proximity to the Galleries. Both the Gallery and the Library are at the core of the Centre to allow students and others, as they cross the core to enter specialized studios, a series of reference points concerning tradition and innovation.

Come dream with me. I see both students and faculty engaged in continuing dialogue as they, together, involve themselves in the stuff of the arts inside and outside the University. I see artists and scientists, performers and scholars, engineers and dancers, physicists and sculptors, social scientists and designers, humanists and film makers learning from each other and producing something of value. I see a well-equipped printmaking workshop to encourage professional artists through-

out Ontario to come to York to create and produce lithographs, etchings, woodcuts, and silk-screen prints to keep alive the Printmaking Revolution.

Finally, I see a curious relationship between the words, "art" and "revolution" in this bit of doggerel:

"There is no art without life. There is no life without growth. There is no growth without change. There is no change without controversy. There is no controversy without revolution." Come dream with me.

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