

ADULT EDUCATION.....

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It was an already crisp September morning and I was off to my first day at school in nearly two decades. I had enrolled in a new art school simply called The New Art School. Being accepted had not been difficult.

The New Art School was located in Toronto's Lower Junction Area, slightly north of the Museum of Contemporary Art which had previously been The Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art. Yes, nationalism seemed so twentieth century.

I entered the nondescript building housing The New Art School and stood in line for registration confirmation. There was a small mixed group of students standing in front of me. They were all nondescript as was I, except for me being older than the others.

I handed over the necessary papers addressed to me: Kevin Keith Walker. When I made little videotapes that rarely screened I went by the name of K.K. Walker. I was amused when somebody assumed I was a girl...Kathy Karen perhaps? But no..I am Kevin Keith. And I don't expect any of my instructors to recognize me or my name.

I had made the decision to get some formal education as I was sick of assembly line jobs or, even worse, the service industry. At least I had saved enough money to pay more my adult education. The secretary gave me an information packet which I was now to study, after confirming my courses. Painting, Sculpture, Media Art, Theory and Criticism, and Curation. I only recognized the name of one of the instructors... Pratiba Monseurrat, whose video works I knew from a few festivals I had attended over the years. None of the others I knew, although apparently Susan J. Davis had once been a prominent local figurative painter.

I walked down the hallway away from the office, past the offices of various instructors. I could see a woman who I recognized as Pratiba Monseurrat. I noticed an office for somebody named Anne Hambleton and then another office adjacent to hers for a man named Terry Evans. Both these individuals appeared rather older than the other instructors in their offices..I wondered what courses they might possibly be teaching. None of mine at least for now, but I was curious. Perhaps these were administrators and not instructors?

I decided to check out the cafeteria as I didn't have any classes until the next day. The cafeteria was what I expected...passable generic food choices. Most of the students in front of me were vegetarian and I felt strange since I am not a vegetarian.

I did notice Anne Hambleton and Terry Evans sitting in opposite corners of the cafeteria. Neither of them were vegetarians.

The New Art School was entering its first year. It had been conceived in opposition to the city's main art college but its degrees were still considered valid or certifiable. One didn't have to be a budding Picasso or Henry Moore to be admitted. But art journalists had been impressed with some of the names enlisted as teachers. The students he had seen so far did appear to be racially and ethnically diverse, albeit all younger than him. He hoped there were some other mature students, not that he wasn't to spend all of his time with them.

The phone rang. The caller was his mother...she had informed her son that she would be in town for the day. Perhaps she wanted to go to the Art Gallery of Ontario before having dinner?

Marianne Dilworth did not wish to take in the AGO this particular afternoon. The main exhibition was by Diane Arbus and Marianne was at best lukewarm to photography. She was a serious easel painter.

Marianne had never felt comfortable discussing art with her son Kevin. Her son had never really liked her paintings, she could tell despite his efforts to feign enthusiasm. She knew full well that not everybody liked everything but she honestly didn't see that much difference of either ability or intellect between her paintings and so much of what Kevin enthused about.

Marianne knew very little about video art. She knew that most of it wasn't television.

Art was one of three subjects Marianne preferred to avoid when talking to her son. The other two subjects were the boy's birth father and his younger half-sister. Kevin never talked about his stepfather, which was fine with his mother.

She wanted to know who were some of his teachers.

"The only name I recognize is Susan J. Davis for painting. I remember her two decades ago...she was actually kind of a big deal but then her kind of painting became quite unfashionable."

"Oh. What were her paintings like. Kevin. I can't say I recognize her name."

"Big messy figurative paintings. Susan Whatever the J stands for Davis had a reputation for wildness in general."

Marianne nodded. She wanted to know the name of the Sculpture course instructor.

"Carlos Reyes, I think that's his name."

"Oh....I've seen his work. I'm not sure that it's sculpture, mind you."

"Do you mean that it's not exactly traditional, Mom?"

Marianne sipped her wine.

“Carlos Reyes had an exhibition at the gallery in Hamilton. It seemed to consist of whatever the cat brought home.”

I nodded. That sort of exhibition had of course long also become a tradition.

“Well, his job as an instructor is to be open to all sorts of practices. As long as he’s supportive of what his students choose to work on, I don’t care if his own work has become a tiresome cliché.”

“Or isn’t really art”.

I nodded. Mother did have strong opinions as to what was and wasn’t art. Photography didn’t make the grade because it was documentation. Of course, so much photography could hardly be reduced to the category of ‘documentation.

Marianne finished her salad and lit a cigarette. She always said she was trying to quit smoking.

“I met with your stepfather the other day, Kevin. We meet every second month.”

I was surprised by this. Surely they were not going to get back together after so many years?

“Don has broken off with his girlfriend. Did you ever meet Courtney?”

I shook my head.

“She was nice. I thought they suited each other, but I guess not”.

I couldn’t imagine my stepfather Donald Dilworth suiting anybody, but I bit my tongue.

“So, Mom. You don’t wish to take in Diane Arbus? I have a like and dislike of her work but at least there’s something to have an opinion about.”

Marianne scowled and exhaled.

“Once was quite enough for me. Her work is insensitive, and exploitative. Don’t you think so?”

I shook my head. I didn’t think Arbus’ photographs were that easy to dismiss. I had always thought that consent was involved.

Marianne finished her cigarette and sat silently. Then she asked me if I’d noticed any mature students. I replied that I hadn’t but that I wouldn’t mind if there were two or three or more. I

think my mother was hoping I'd meet somebody and get involved with them. But I chose not to pry.

We both finished our glasses of wine and declined refills. Now it was my turn to pay the tab.

The wine had made me tired, so I enjoyed a brief nap and then got around to the important required reading.....Pierre Bourdieu's *Forms of Capital*. The next day's theory class would be discussing Bourdieu on artists and class, as well as the concept of 'social capital'. I remembered being at a drunken art opening at which a young ambitious artist asked me whether or not an older academic artist had what one calls 'social capital'. I tried not to laugh in the younger artists' face.

I had chosen to resume my post-secondary education in an environment where I had no social capital. This was going to be a challenge.

Art has always had a skewered relationship with class politics. Art is for the one percent, according to many. Art is individualist and therefore neo-liberal. Well, not necessarily thank you. Art is elitist...well, yes. Claiming something one made as 'art' was an elitist gesture but is this necessarily a matter of I'm an artist and you're not? No, I don't think so.

I found myself thinking about people who don't like art. My sister was like that, although she was obsessed with music. I once asked her if she was interested in any art form besides music. She thought for a minute and then replied perhaps architecture.

Lisa might have had a longer life if she's liked art and maybe even developed some sort of art practice. Not that drugs were unusual in the art world, but still.....some sense that she wasn't just anybody, some sense of self-respect might have helped her.

I read the designated Bourdieu pages, grabbed a light dinner, and then prepared for a very long first day.

The Crit and Theory course was being presented by a youngish man named Tariq Middleton. Tariq was definitely younger than myself and probably a lot smarter to boot.

There were about fifteen other students in the classroom. All but one were younger. There was one male student who may well have been older than I am.

Tariq assumed everybody had done their reading and he outlined Bourdieu's premise that artists did not fit comfortably into classically defined class structures. This was not exactly a revelation but I wanted to see where this would go.

Sure enough a young man in a plaid shirt opined that artists were the voluntary poor.

"The voluntary poor?", interrupted a woman with the instructor's tacit approval.

The young man acknowledged that her point was taken and then continued to proclaim that artists had made the choice to be downwardly mobile as opposed to those born to poverty whether extreme or relative.

The other students groaned. If the young man felt so strongly that artists were pretenders to authentic poverty then why was this young man an art student in the first place. I wondered what the young man's practice might entail.....surely not social realism or documentary photography.

I decided to test the waters.

"I don't think Bourdieu sees the artists as being willingly poor. I think he sees them as not being easily aligned with working or middle classes."

Another student wondered why these tired and British ideas of a class system were being dragged out yet again.

Tariq smiled, taking it all in. I had the impression that he was being intentionally vague in order to get the students to do the work and fill up space. Tabula Rosa, so to speak.

Further discussion was entailed and then the class concluded. I suspected Tariq wanted to find

Well, at least he wasn't an accountant. My stepfather had been an accountant. I had never felt much in common with my stepfather.

At least he wasn't a musician.

"His name is Greg. You'll like him.

So we agreed to meet this Greg person over the upcoming weekend and then I resumed my reading. I hoped Marianne wasn't jumping into something too quickly. I was surprised that she was dating anybody, but of course each to their own et cetera.

I didn't feel like dating anybody. I was going to be too busy with my studies. Of course I would visit the local tubs once or twice a month, and not necessarily on weekends.

I had enjoyed the Curation session with Pratiba Monseurrat. I was wondering what current exhibitions her class might be making a field trip to. I was curious for things to become site-specific, as is the commonly-used term.

And then the painting class. Well, I had taken the plunge. I decided that I should do some life drawings at home. Susan J. Davis was going to be inviting a model into her class and the class was expected to render the model accurately.

I would not have licence to say well Ms. Davis I'm only interested in abstract painting therefore I shall make a brief representative reference to the model and then basically ignore him or her.

No, I would be expected to paint a portrait. And then a landscape. Well, I was a paying consensual adult.

Thankfully, there were no further phone calls so I was able to read continuously before calling it a night.

Carlos Reyes was the sort of attractive bald man who made hair seem redundant. He had a wonderfully engaging face. His Sculpture Course was going to be fun, although arduous.

Carlos slowed slides of many of the usual suspects....Michelangelo, Brancusi, Epstein, Hepworth, Moore. And then Robert Smithson....land art is certainly a form of sculpture. And the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark. Eventually I knew Carlos would be showing collectives who did installations involving found objects and everyday materials....art that his mother routinely described as 'look what the cat dragged in'.

As much as I appreciate all of these modernist and even postmodernist titans, I found my mind wandering. I thought about people who don't like art. Such people are all over the map politically and with regards to practice. There are a lot of people who don't like art who I would never invite to the same dinner party. There are hard lefties who see art as elitist and belonging to the one percent. There are people in the performing arts who disliked all forms of gallery art. There are political activists who say they don't like art but they really mean that they dislike art systems. Political banners and sets for agitprop theatre are fine...just don't refer to them as 'art. And then there are the Philistines....there are a lot of them, arguably comprising the majority of the population.

My sister Lisa was dismissive of the fine arts and she had little use for film or theatre, although she did watch a lot of television. She was a music enthusiast with little if any interest in the visual components of music performance and presentation. I once asked her if she was interested in any other art disciplines and she shook her head before suggesting perhaps architecture.

I was aware of my senior Derek Waddington also being a student in Carlos Reyes' class. I wondered what Derek might make in the studio. I also wondered what I might make. One cannot violate the classical until one has mastered the classical....that is the rule so entrenched that it rarely needs to be spoken.

I had no further questions for Marianne's new beau. He was much more relaxed than his predecessor. Donald Dilworth had been a continuously nervous wreck. I had never understood my mother's attraction to my stepfather.

The fish and chips arrived. They were barely passable. The lager was passable enough that I ordered a second.

Marianne and Greg drank much slower than I did. So now Greg was asking me what my favourite course was so far at The New Art School. I thought briefly and then answered Theory and Crit.

'So you're a theory-head, Kevin?'

I grimaced and told my mother's new boyfriend that I had a love hate thing with theory I told him that I often found theoretical texts highly invigorating but too often I thought theory to be highly at odds with practice.

Greg smiled. "Same here", he assented.

"I didn't expect that you would have a background in art and aesthetics theory, Greg?". I almost called him Gregory.

He laughed. "Oh, when I went to Ontario College of Art you had to know some theory, or be able to convince your instructors and the other students than you did, It was all Baudrillard....Foucault this and Foucault that...

"Fuck all" Marianne interjected.

Greg laughed and winked at me. Marianne's art practice truly had nothing whatever to do with any manifestation of theory.

A Smiths or Morrissey song was now playing on the pub's playlist. I surmised that this retro pub did not ban artists on the basis of their odious politics or nasty personal lives.

But some customer must have requested that the playlist be turned down. Because now there was a bulletin from the evening news.

There has been a shooting at a small cafe in Toronto's West End. An armed man entered the cafe and commanded people to go outside with their hands up. Then the man shot the cashier and owner, who has been rushed to the nearest hospital with life threatening injuries....

Terry Evans' face was now being highlighted on screen. Greg motioned for me to be quiet as I was about to comment that I knew who this man was.

Marianne grabbed her cigarettes and ran out the front door without saying a word to either Greg or myself.

"The gunman then ran and was accosted near Bloor Street and Dundas Street West by police. The man was initially identified as Terry Evans, a clerk employed by The New Art School in the Lower Junction Area. However, a witness has come forward to identify this man as Anthony Vader. The gunman was previously known as Tony Vader, a British blues guitarist who disappeared in the late nineteen seventies and who had been presumed dead. He has been charged with assault with a weapon. If the cashier, identified as Maroud Pensura, does not survive, then the charge against Anthony Vader will be upgraded to murder.

The screen returned to kits sporting event, with rolling headlines taking up the screen's lower third.

