

Introduction to the 2011 Yale Forum on Art, War and Science in the 20th Century

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Sadly, on August 23, 2010 Larry Badash passed away. I received a short email from his partner Nancy Hofbauer whom many of you recall, accompanied Larry to last year's Sculpture Park forum as a reader.

Larry's paper, "Nuclear Winter at the End of the Age of Agriculture" was a culmination point.

What had begun on my return to the working value of art history 30 years before now resulted in the highest level of discourse regarding the survival of civilization itself. It was an honour that Larry brought his knowledge to our forum.

It is on this elevated plane that we begin the 2011 forum.

(For those who have not read his paper, or wish to reread it, there are copies available on the table along with a number of his books for reference.)

As I explained on the tour of the sculptures, after finishing graduate school in 1969 I assumed my right as heir to the avant-garde in the then surging art market. To my generation of artists—and of course the market—this assumption was that novelty itself was originality and our natural place was to supersede the previous avant-garde.

The unlimited fatuousness of the art world—my world—smothered in the hubris of total commodification brought on my existential crisis of 1979. It was time to return to, and challenge art history itself. So the new journey began in 1980.

Once I crossed the threshold of original art via art history rather than its rejection, a flood of insights began. This was a feedback loop of knowledge through the work itself and it came as a complete surprise. The insights became ideas in the work which in turn generated new insights.

Art was indeed capable of evolving knowledge.

This knowledge would have remained encoded in the work and only occasionally spoken—mainly to other artists—were it not for a conversation with my daughter Leba.

In December of 2005 the Sculpture Park became registered with Canada Revenue Agency; the planning could begin.

I had had two successful openings under the auspices of the Hornby Island Festival Society earlier in the decade. My thoughts were to continue with them on a management arrangement.

Leba convinced me that we should be planning symposia and a facility to accommodate them. Her friends and colleagues were becoming interested in the ideas that I had evolved over the past many

years.

This both surprised and excited me. Firstly I didn't realize she had discussed the ideas or that her generation might be interested. As to who might manage the forums, she suggested her friend Karun Koernig whom I had met when he was a high school student many years before.

Karun visited the Island in November of 2006. We toured the work which clearly resonated with him and he communicated acute sensitivity and deep intelligence. He convinced me that indeed his generation would benefit from knowledge of the work. He encouraged me to talk of the insights that had evolved with and from the sculpture. This took place over a concentrated three day period. These were transcribed in a highly condensed form into "Insights" and the "Themes" of the Sculpture Park.

Karun is a man of many talents and experience. We began planning the future forums to describe the context of the sculptures. Thus the Sculpture Park would not only house the work but would become the communicator of the context.

Michael McNamera, a presenter at the first forum, and a consistent observer at each one following was commissioned to design and build this excellent facility.

Three years ago, the Sculpture Park hosted its first forum seamlessly organized by Karun. The participants were colleagues of Leba and Karun, Michael McNamera, and our rapporteurs chosen for their education in art.

We began as a symposium. I had chosen to name the activity, "The Company of Ideas" as an identity for the process. The success of the first symposium which included an excellent presentation on modern architecture by Michael McNamera was based on the curiosity of the participants and their willingness to suggest programmes for the future.

However, Karun and I realized that the "Themes" for discussion were both original and difficult. We discussed this at length immediately after the forum and as a result I asked him to create a specific paper which we could offer as a model for critique followed by a call for papers. He would write it on the topic of "The Value of Art at the End of the Age of Agriculture" applying the principles of Richard Dawkins.

The result was an excellent paper incorporating my definition of art as "an act of will in accord with a mature conscience" as a driving force for the evolution of culture.

The concept of consciousness and a mature conscience will appear consistently in our discussions. The insight of the "End of the Age of Agriculture" is now over 25 years old as is my definition of art. Rather than eroding over time, the concept of the "End of the Age of Agriculture" has been continuously reinforced by historical events and my growth as an artist.

Since 1989 I have been extending the history of art deep into evolutionary history. As I discussed at previous forums this extension has strengthened my definition of art.

The forum of 2009 had 5 presentations by five authors: Karun Koernig, Jenni Pace Presnell, Sam Yeaman, Jeff Foss, and Jerry Swatez.

Ultimately Karun and I realized that the Sculpture Park is about passing this lifetime of work to future generations. Karun was continually critical of what he called post-modernism in the education system.

The ideas that evolved in my work were about the assertion of existence in the face of absurdity (more about this later).

The term post-modern first entered my reading as a reference to architecture, namely Philip Johnston's AT & T building in New York completed in 1984. It soon referred to contemporary architecture. By 1985 it was being used ad nauseam in the art market in New York. I only understood it vaguely as educational terminology through my daughters Leba and Charo in the 1990's.

In spending time with Karun who himself has spent his adult life educating young people, I realized that the absurdities of my generation, immediately ominous then, immediately ominous now, were not even on the knowledge horizon of his generation. Imminent issues of the survival of civilization itself were simply falling into the general failure of what I had called "cultivated ignorance". That this was occurring among the best educated is exigent.

For the 2010 forum we took the bull by the horns.

Karun addressed the issues of post-modernism.

Both Jeff Foss and Jenni Pace Presnell addressed possibilities for a new humanism.

Jay Winter addressed the suicide of the warrior class in World War One.

Lawrence Badash addressed the immanent potential of nuclear winter.

I addressed the possibilities of the genetic disposition of art and conscience.

After the forum Jay and I discussed the possibilities of continuing the discourse in the framework of his discipline of Cultural History. This was a new field to me. As I understood Jay it essentially came into being in the 1970's long after I had finished graduate school. I was intrigued to see if there might be some ongoing relationship of the Sculpture Park and Cultural History.

From early in university I had become highly proprietary of art history as artists have always been. For myself, it essentially meant only accepting the interpretation of that history from historians who themselves had wanted to be artists.

The way I see it now, sharing what I have called the history of art by artists is necessary to increase the experience of the sculptures themselves.

Since the foundation of the Sculpture Park, I have continuously attempted to expand the base of discourse. This is in line with the context of the evolution of my work.

This year in addition to our panel of scholars we are also welcoming ten students: five from Yale and one from the University of Victoria who have not visited the Sculpture Park before.