

Through the Lens of the Endgame

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Prepared for the
2011 Yale University Forum on Art, War and Science in the 20th Century

Hosted by
The Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park

May 19-23rd 2011 on Hornby Island, British Columbia, Canada

On July 26 1945 some of the best minds in the world exploded the first atomic bomb at the Trinity site in New Mexico.

On August 6 1945 nuclear warfare was born with the bombing of Hiroshima.

On August 9 1945 Nagasaki was similarly bombed.

On August 15 1945 Japan surrendered.

I was born on October 23 1945.

I was born in the shadow of the Endgame.

When Jay suggested that we work together on what he called the Blue Rider Moment, the idea excited me on several planes.

As part of the "Introduction to the Sculpture Park" web site I had stated: the purpose of the work is to extend the ancient narrative of art and consequently rekindle the historical spirit of modernism. In addition to viewing the work, which includes the Sculpture Park itself, the goal is to revive the interdisciplinary creative impetus of early modernism and to attain the understanding of art as a serious and credible source of special insight for the evolution of ideas.

And under the title of "A New Synthesis": Science is truth by analogy. Art is truth by metaphor. Resonating together, they are the New Synthesis.

When I was younger I regarded the resonance to be with modern physics and chemistry. As I matured the resonance became with Darwin and the science of evolution.

For me, the period of early modernism became part of my journey from a farm high school in southwest rural Ontario. The unwritten purpose of education was limited to a means to make a living free of the eldest brothers who would inherit the farms. The younger siblings would either remain virtual slaves on those farms or succeed in other professions.

Art was simply not in the cards or on anybody's horizon. University was the escape.

At that time London Ontario had a major university without studio courses and the city had no art museum. As a consequence, if one were born an artist and lived in a typical rural area there was no direct contact with art.

Art was a self-taught and primitive affair swamping in the innate ability for mimesis.

I had chanced upon a tiny, new and experimental liberal arts university in Michigan where seminars were the rule and both art history and—to my amazement—studio classes in life drawing and painting were offered.

Here I left behind a curriculum for the professions and entered into the excitement of the Enlightenment and art.

I do not underestimate the value of the Enlightenment and the German Idealists in my education. United States was a proud child of the Enlightenment and its history is replete with the triumphs and the flaws of the best thinking of the time. The German Idealists proclaimed qualities of art separate from the dominance of philosophers. These arguments allowed art to finally enter institutions of higher learning valued exceedingly beyond the traditional perception of it as craft.

As a consequence I learned to value myself as an artist and to recognize art at the highest level of knowledge.

Under the tutelage of a modernist art historian who was himself an artist, I became a proficient abstract painter.

My liberation by liberal arts integrated with art history and studio courses freed me to eventually become what I was truly born to be—a sculptor. That evolution was realized in graduate school and since hammered out by the market. My obligation to that liberation is now manifest in the Sculpture Park.

Modernism until 1914 is my first realization as an artist. It is therefore indelibly personal.

I found it highly compelling to revisit this period from where I began as an artist. This is not for empty nostalgia but to measure 45 years of critical experience.

As you can assume from the evidence of the work and the previous forums there is a highly developed overview to this one as well. The entity of the Sculpture Park represents the transparent and unconstrained context of the work.

In this forum cultural historians will approach this critical period of the descent of my work.

In order to describe the lens through which I now revisit early modernism I want to return to the shadow of the unfolding Endgame.

In August of 1949 the Soviet Union tested its first nuclear weapon. The Endgame was on.

In November of 1952 the first thermonuclear explosion vaporized the island of Elugelab in the Marshall Islands. The hydrogen bomb was born. The explosive and radiation yield was many orders of magnitude higher than the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs.

In August of 1953 the Soviet Union exploded its first hydrogen bomb.

The shadow darkened and spread globally throughout the 1950's. We became certain of mutually assured destruction regardless of either side's preparation for victory.

In 1960 Herman Kahn published *On Thermonuclear War*¹. In it he posited scenarios for alternatives to mutual annihilation. In spite of his arguments, or perhaps because of them, these alternatives appear equally absurd to the possibilities of a "Doomsday Machine" which he cogitates. This "Doomsday Machine" and Herman Kahn will be central to Stanley Kubrick's "Dr Strangelove" released in 1964.

¹ Kahn, Herman, *On Thermonuclear War*, Transaction Publishers 2010, Original Printing 1960 by Princeton University Press.

Kahn's arguments rationalize mega death. The destruction of major cities is exchanged in favour of ending escalating war. Mega death becomes transactional.

This approach is once again published by Herman Kahn in 1962 in *Thinking About The Unthinkable*².

The Endgame has alternate outcomes all wholly abominable and absurd to any except military planners.

In 1962 I received the Cuban Missile Crisis for my 17th birthday. We actually expected annihilation at any time. London Ontario was in the line of a continuous industrial belt from Illinois through Michigan, Indiana, Ohio and upstate New York.

I knew that there had to be another way through this. It took another year and my first real existential crisis. I began to look to art and started writing. I know now that I could only do this as an a priori cognition and in an ad hoc way. I had no plan where it might lead.

Eventually it led to my undergraduate education and my first emergence as an artist.

It was at this time that I encountered a thought that was profound enough to stay with me all these years and help form my definition of art.

The way I remember this is that I was reading an article by Simone de Beauvoir while on a bus at the age of 19. I say this is the way I remember it because I have not been able to find this quotation anywhere. Still I attribute it to her because it affected me so profoundly and my memory seems so specific.

She was speaking of the collaboration of occupied France with the Holocaust, how ordinary people—stationmasters, engineers—all those people routinely doing their ordinary jobs in the

² Kahn, Herman., *Thinking About The Unthinkable*, Avon Press 1964, Copyright Herman Kahn, 1962.

infrastructure of murder—were certain of their own morality. She contrasted that with individuals who acted under great risk to themselves to save the condemned.

Her conclusion was that our very existence itself depends on our acts of individual conscience.

I now had two parallel, individual existential necessities: art and acts of conscience. It would take another 20 years of maturity for them to fuse.

Eventually this formed one of the tenets of my definition: "art is an act of will in accord with a mature conscience".

First, I had to pass through my second existential crisis in 1979.

The shift of the cultural center after World War One and the post World War Two era naturally focused on the displacement of European culture to America. Regardless of what the Europeans thought of American culture at the time, their influence would make American artists the heirs of European modernism.

Among the artists of this displacement are sculptors Archipenko and Jacques Lipchitz, painters Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Albers, Hans Hoffmann, Marc Chagall, George Grosz and Willem DeKooning, writers Isaac Bashevis Singer and Thomas Mann, and composer Arnold Schoenberg to name just a few.

This shift to America followed by its victories in, and intact emergence from, World War Two placed American artists in the focal point of the world. Among those artists grounded in European modernism David Smith was the natural departure point of my evolution.

Part of the following is paraphrased from a letter to Jay Winter on June 12 2010:

As an inveterate evolutionist and progressive artist, I perceived an almost insurmountable problem when I returned to art history and specifically the work of David Smith as my point of departure.

The fractures to early modernism that we have discussed as a point of departure for our project had long ago affected the direction of art.

Humpty could never be put together again so that was not the issue. It was that history had reached an apparent dead end. The cold war had left the thinking members of our generation as dead men walking. The Doomsday Machine central to "Dr. Stangelove" was conceived by Herman Kahn in *On Thermonuclear War* published in 1960. The inevitability of the terminal fire storms were a given long before the deadly possibility of nuclear winter was conceived.

To approach the meaning of the Insights/Themes we need to return to 1979. The promise of the Carter Presidency in 1976 was that a moral and highly educated man—he was a nuclear engineer—might finally lead America out of the dysfunctional maze of the past many years. In the end we watched his presidency disintegrate with the resurgence of tribalism in Iran that culminated with the American hostage incident and was quickly followed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

The art world was weak, corrupt, irrelevant and hopeless. Why bother?

Why indeed.

The art world was not the source of art. I had to face that I was dying inside as an artist.

At first I was able to return to work out of sheer need. As I have stated, I had decided to challenge art history for a potential creative run. It was a final gamble.

The magazine *Science* published *Nuclear Winter: Global Consequences of Multiple Nuclear Explosions* in 1983 (by Turco, Toon, Ackerman, Pollack and Sagan). It was with that final

confirmation that I arrived at the insight of "The End of the Age of Agriculture" as a means to keep working. By recognizing the end of the age and understanding it, one could work beyond it provided that we could maintain our current survival on a day to day, year to year basis.

This was hardly Quixotic. It was a question of no chance for survival verses some possibility however small.

As I earlier stated in the Introduction to this forum I was surprised that art was capable of itself evolving knowledge. And that this knowledge would have remained encoded in the work were it not for the arguments presented to me that they might have value in written form to future generations.

I want to make it clear that the insights do not in any way imply a new ideology or any other prescription. I have no interest in having to convince others of their inherent truth. The insights are intrinsic to the work already completed from 1980 to the present.

They are one artist's means to working through the environment of anti-art of the omnipresent absurdity realized since and including the modern 30 years war from 1914 to 1945.

The essential working concepts that evolved with and from the work between 1979 and 1984 have so far been condensed to the End of the Age of Agriculture and the definition of art as an act of will in accord with a mature conscience.

As such the insights are realized as ideas in the sculptures. I present them firstly as a gift to me that I in turn offer to anyone who might also perceive their benefit.

I have spoken of the origins of the definition of art, now I want to speak to how the concept of the End of the Age of Agriculture evolved.

As I advanced through the early nineteen eighties from my position of challenging art history, I simultaneously worked my way back through David Smith and his American contemporaries to

the source of modernism itself. Eventually I arrived at Donatello's Mary Magdalene as a starting point. The question that naturally followed was: when could modernism be perceived to have fully arrived?

That was difficult to answer. The full arrival—if it could be said to exist—would likely be at some great cultural pivot point. Could that pivot be identified?

From the late enlightenment onward there had been an extraordinary number of innovations and rapid expansions of knowledge. Apart from the explosion in experimental art, one would have many obvious choices: the American Revolution, the electrification of North America and Europe, the invention of the process of synthetic ammonia, relativity physics, the Russian Revolution, to name just a few.

I reached a conclusion that none changed the world more radically than strategic bombing.

In the time that I was doing this thinking, the magazine *Scientific American* ran an article on how agriculture ended the age of hunting and gathering in Europe.³

Until the advent of agriculture, Europe had been naturally covered in forest. In short order as agriculture became adopted the entire continent to the Iberian Peninsula was cleared for farm land. 35,000 years of hunting and gathering by modern humans that had occurred since the first migration from Africa to Europe ended by 5,000 years ago.

It occurred to me that if agriculture could end an entire age of human cultural development, so too could the age of agriculture end.

It was plain to me that agriculture was based on the securing of land and assuring the next years' crops. It followed that all the institutions of civilization were based on these premises including the invention of a warrior class that had historically come to dominate all by assuring the necessary security.

³ Search for this 1984 issue is ongoing.

But since World War Two no-one could claim to have that security and above all, no-one could claim to guarantee it. Yet all of the institutions of civilization were founded on those principles.

This thinking was also in line with the current industrialization and global distribution of food production itself. Manufactured fertilizer and advanced growing methods allowed for production of food literally anywhere and advanced mechanization and farming techniques had reduced the need for massive labour input. In the 1980's the common figure was that one American farmer could feed an estimated 76 people. By the 1990's one American farmer could feed an estimated 100 people.

Very deep and much thought was required to realize this insight. Eventually I concluded that the absurdity that was characteristic of the race for advanced strategic weapons was the inability—and hence the failure—of our institutions to be able to recognize and address the potential of this entirely new reality. The institutions and much of our actual thinking were rooted in a 10,000 year age that had ended.

I was quite aware in 1979 that the basis for an advanced technological economy was based on military priorities. Thus the advanced economy ubiquitously carried the stigma that its prime engine of research had become the very military industrial complex about which Eisenhower finally warned in his farewell address in 1961. Of course his warning was obviously long after the fact anyway.

In less than fifty years, the applications of air warfare, from dirigibles through fixed wing aircraft and intercontinental ballistic missiles, finally ended a ten thousand year age.

The fundamental principles of the Age of Agriculture—security of person guaranteed by the possession of protected territory—was violated by global access from the air. Strategic bombing, originally conceived as destruction of the other side's ability to make war, became tacitly acknowledged by the end of World War Two to mean the destruction of cities.⁴ In the post

⁴ Badash, Lawrence, *Scientists and the Development of Nuclear Weapons*, Humanity Books, 1995, (98.)

World War Two period, this evolved rapidly to thermonuclear warfare and came to include the secondary destruction by nuclear fallout and eventually to the awareness of potential nuclear winter. Ultimately, the imperatives of the warrior class and its institutions were no longer able to protect civilians at any point on the earth. The social contract of 10,000 years was terminated.

The Enlightenment that had meant to liberate civilization with the spirit of knowledge had evolved through that knowledge the means to destroy civilization itself. Under the most extreme circumstances it may prove to have evolved the means for the extinction of the very humanity it mean to uplift.

For me, art had become the means to work through this but first one had to acknowledge the end of the age of agriculture. It was not the spirit of the Enlightenment but rather the exploitation of science within the failing values of the end of this age that led to the dilemma confronting existence itself.

In "Art Beyond War" presented at the 2010 Company of Ideas Forum, I wrote:

"...that to be able to measure the inherent value of an artist's work is to be able to accept each artist's perception of the extent of all human knowledge in that artist's time. Original art is created beyond the limits of that extent and informs rather than reflects.

Consequently, original art itself becomes located on the map of the human soul and in so doing adds to the sum of all human knowledge. Original art and the human soul evolve together."

It is important to note that the spirit of original art is certainly not prescriptive by its nature. As a map of the human soul it is descriptive—allowing future generations of artists to themselves evolve and enlarge the map.

Individual artists may be bound to their beliefs but the spirit of original art must exist independent of those beliefs in order to survive as values for future generations.

Further in the paper I wrote regarding Darwin and the "Origin of Species":

"Nature, by the passage of time and by the genetic sculpting of life has created a history that is crushingly honest and constantly probing the future. It is thus simultaneously innocent and guilty of the most destructive crimes that lead to the most magnificent creations. Without life there is no witness to this awesome and terrifying creative unfolding of the universe.

As far as we know, we fragile humans are the only fully cognizant witnesses. With this capability comes the great responsibility of this knowledge. This responsibility is a priori in those who are born artists. The act of will that I describe in my definition of art is the act of witnessing and recording this knowledge. This is the highest of human values—the recognition of the value of life itself. Therein resides the mature conscience. This is the essence of our being. Art is the map of the human soul.

Evolution in time will continue with or without human existence. Progress will remain— inexorable and unrelenting—even if we manage to destroy our necessary environment and perish in a nuclear winter. Art is the authentic internal scream against the suicidal nature of our rooted tribal culture."

Finally to view modernism through the compound lens of maturity another element is added.

At the 2010 Company of Ideas Forum I spoke of the 35,000 year proven history of art. Agriculture has a 10,000 year history. Civilization has a 5,000 year history.

To an artist civilization may indeed be a temporary evolutionary upstart. Because I perceive the human soul as the sum of all human knowledge (how can it be any less?), I highly value civilization in its rapid expansion of that knowledge and its contribution to the evolution of the human soul. However should civilization prove to be short-lived by its own hand and humanity manages to survive, artists will continue as they did before civilization.

Why understanding this is critical, is to differentiate the history of art as a statement of the viewer from that of the artist. In the presentation of 2010, I showed the spirit of the artist fused with the subject from the Chauvet cave some 35,000 years ago through Otto Dix in the twentieth century.

I discussed the history of art by artists perceiving the encoded spirit of art manifest in the essence of liberation and originality passed from generation to generation of artists.

In drawing artists from the mass of slaves required for civilization in the age of agriculture, the artist had the advantage of becoming a petty functionary with a significantly improved life over peasant farm slaves, quarry workers or soldiers. Philosophers—high level pedants of the warrior class—debated aesthetics while artists were at best lowly craftsmen. Indeed they were petty functionaries manifestly providing symbols of immortality to the right to rule of the warrior class.

The spirit of original art remained wholly encoded throughout the European history of art by artists. For reasons that I discussed in *Art Beyond War* it became manifest as defiance in the Renaissance. I chose Donatello's Mary Magdalene as the beginning of modernism. In the case of the Italian Renaissance the defiance was supported by the assumption to power of the upstart middle class of merchants and merchant bankers. However, until the Enlightenment evolved an independent middle class of artists centered in France in the 19th century, artists remained petty functionaries throughout the world.

Of course as the middle class grew so too would the natural pool of artists born into it. Simultaneously an open market for art grew that would become the symbol middle class evolution.

In 1874 a group of artists challenged the then existing market in France for an independent statement for art itself. Arguably freed from the petty function of mimesis by the photograph as well as the artists' possessing moderate financial independence, the spirit of original art was once again liberated from the pre-conceptions of the market.

These artists broke civilization's long-standing relationship with artists as petty functionaries.

Art would now evolve openly and rapidly.

I have separated this new open modernism in art into four parts that may also inform cultural history:

1. 1874 to 1900: assertion.
2. 1900 to 1914: radical assertion.
3. 1914 to 1962: defiance.
4. 1962 to the present: resignation stated as defiance.

What had been encoded artist to artist for five thousand years now would assert itself as the actual subject of art in the following period of radical assertion.

In art "revolutionary" is a marketing term. Art is subject as is all evolution to a continuum of overlapping time. This is certainly the case of the period of "assertion" 1874 to 1900. 1874 is particularly chosen because it is the year of the highly significant exhibition mounted by the independents whose work had been rejected by the Salon—the marketing system of the time in France.⁵

1900 is an arbitrary demarcation. It is based on the high expectations of the new century. Many of the artists of the assertion period lived and worked well into the twentieth century. Of them three are acclaimed as a point of departure by almost every group involved in the period of radical assertion: Cezanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin.

⁵ The Editors of *Réalités*, 1973, (*Impressionism*), Chartwell Books, (7)

Like their contemporary scientists' search for the essential elements of the universe, artists were searching for the essential elements of original art. Freed from the prescription of mimesis, art could take any number of forms. As in the great experimentation of music between the time of the Renaissance and the sublime counterpoint of Bach where the elements might contain lyrics or not, so too in the great experiment in the liberation of painting and sculpture the composition of the abstract elements came to be the narrative of art itself.

The result was a frenzy of experimentation throughout the European world that was brought to America in the Armoury Shows of 1913 in New York and Chicago.

Unfortunately the new art and emerging artists became swallowed by the festering nationalism of Europe. The outbreak of war in 1914 would lead to the respite of 1918 to 1939 while the malignancy of Europe's history built a new generation to replace the lost cannon fodder. A great 31 years war was underway.

A number of artists would die in the first instalment of the war on both sides. Notably, Macke and Marc in German uniform, Raymond Duchamp-Villon and Apollinaire wearing France's. Others like Braque would survive serious wounds. Those who found that they could still make art after facing the absurdity of this new and terrible industrial warfare would form a natural period of resistance. This was the first great test of the ability of the new art to survive.

Resistance that wins is born in defiance and defiance becomes its permanent identity. That which fails ends in resignation. When rebellion and resistance becomes a marketable style it is resignation stated as defiance.

Otto Dix and George Grosz directly addressed resistance.

Confronting resignation stated as defiance is the means to solve the enigma of Marcel Duchamp.

Marcel Duchamp was an artist who moved directly from radical assertion to resignation stated as defiance.

It is impossible to understand how he could be regarded as anything but a failure as an artist. His positions on painting and art itself were necessarily self-fulfilling.⁶ Anyone but a fool would realize that to continue would have to be recognized for resignation masquerading as defiance. He finally and rightfully did resign in 1923 to play chess full time.⁷

His most biting criticism—the readymades—became co-opted in a statement of reverse irony when they were acquired as museum pieces after being re-created.^{8,9}

Duchamp became cynically revived in the 1960's when it became clear how marketable resignation stated as defiance would turn out to be. He died in 1968 resurrected as a market hero.

The marketing of resignation stated as defiance continues to dominate the art world. It is a world of self-induced annihilated values bereft of the spirit liberated in 1874.

Duchamp's legacy has been to legitimize the artist's return to petty functionary—a readily replaceable manufacturer—buried deep beneath the layered infrastructure of the culture behemoth.

I was born in the shadow of the endgame.

I am an artist.

Art is an act of will in accord with a mature conscience.

There can be no resignation.

The artist is witness to existence itself.

Art is the celebration.

⁶ Cabanne, Pierre, 1971, (*Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*), Thames and Hudson (67).

⁷ Apparently not completely retired he created a final piece: "Etant donnés" first exhibited in 1969 at the Philadelphia Museum.

⁸ Cabanne, Pierre, 1971, (*Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*), Thames and Hudson (119).

"In 1964 Galleria Schwartz in Milan produces thirteen readymades in series of eight signed and numbered copies."

⁹ Lowry, Glenn D., Introduction, 1999, (*MoMA Highlights*), Museum of Modern Art (87).

"Bicycle Wheel , 1951 (third version after lost original of 1913)." (From the Janis Collection.)