

Notes on the Civic and the Solitary

I ask myself how we will have passion in Toronto, when its citizens avert their eyes from each other when they meet on the street.

The body is the expression of passion. You cannot see "art" until you see others. You cannot "hear" art until you hear others. Art does not speak unless you "speak" to others. Art is about putting us back into our bodies, but it cannot do this if we take our bodies back to the streets and avoid others.

There is no way to legislate human encounter as a premise to the expression of art. What could motivate a citizenry to the humane reflection on itself by looking, speaking, encountering freely? An atmosphere? But an atmosphere is created by trust, and the habit of trust in dealing with others, in commercial spaces, public spaces, galleries, parks; and trust and ease in human relations is steadily eroded by media alarms of abuse, likely danger, exhorting us to the need for caution in all human relations; distrust is further abetted by the distancing conventions of virtual telecommunications-- television, radio, internet, cellars, etc.; technologies that proposed to bring people closer have become the surrogate means of encounter. The body is bypassed by virtual freeways trafficking supply and demand with less and less need of somatic expression; chat rooms and on-line buying, on-line services etc. induce the physical "solitary". We fantasize that art will rupture this isolation. But we have a paradox at the centre of our efforts to make a city creative: world technology conspires to dis-embody the citizens of a city, yet a city is compelled to consume virtual technology to compete in the world.

This paradox is what culture builders try not to look at "straight-on". Why should they? They can do nothing about the progress of virtual technology. So we sink more money into the arts as if to stack sandbags against the tide of the "impersonal"; as if doing so would create a sandbar between the ocean of the "informational" future, and the disappearing coastline of human encounter.

Alternately, we persuade the commercial users of globalizing technology to employ aesthetics that speak to the "sensual" of a city. The leverage here is that "it is good for business" to re-address the somatic and aesthetic requirements of citizens. This is the tired forum of "creativity and business"; a dialogue that attempts to put the paradox to sleep by appearing to make an "art" of the city. The reasoning being that if commerce uses artistic tactics we may neutralize the tension between the local and the global, the human and the impersonal, the virtual and body.

This may work, or not work (assuming we are not just putting "art" at the service of industry with the easy thought that what is good for the economy is good for art, and vice-versa). For this kind of thinking only continues to polarize commerce and art, and calls them to negotiate, not join.

The philosophical question remains. Are the commercial requirements of a city to compete in a globalized economy by nature contrary to the requisites of humane civic aesthetic?

Let us be rid of bandage solutions; a bench at the threshold of corporate towers, or a park overshadowed by skyscrapers, or an abstract sculpture at a commercial intersection; such items do not credibly negotiate what a citizen requests as "aesthetic". Nor does the creative sloganeering tossed about in boardrooms and office workshops. Nor can you fool the citizen into the artistic by painting silos and converting warehouses into art-space, and transforming industrial parks into theme-sites.

Where public art in public space is concerned -an axiom might be considered: visual distraction only goes so far so long as people are distracted from each other. And the question to profitably entertain is: how to create civic strategies that discourage people from being distracted from each other? (Keeping in mind that reconstructing the space between people is never a physical project; it is a metaphysical project, and even a spiritual project).

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