

Visitations: City of Ziggurats [Kootenay School of Writing's funding]

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Torn from April's dusk, the semi-ethical alley lilacs are not unrelated to the morning's spectacle: a ring of bored city councillors at the cultural funding appeal hearing, wreathed in the red naugahyde of their tilting seats. The council chamber is paneled entirely in oiled Philippine mahogany, the carpet a plush burgundy, the councillors' chairs both papal and lazy-boyesque, and Vancouver City Hall's an ominously massed ziggurat from Bertolucci's conformist Italy. The lilacs rot in their vase. A city plays out its fantasy across a civic site and duration, a fantasy of power's structures and gestures – architectural, sartorial, botanical, governmental, pedestrian. From a certain point of view, polis is style.

The rhetorical mode of the new right is achingly familiar. Cozy vocabulary items such as "community" implode into ideological caskets. Vancouver's Non Partisan Association (NPA) city government wields a double-barrelled use of the term. NPA's "community" seems to refer to immediate neighbourhood, a sort of grass-roots co-responsibility bounded by a specific site or district. But at the same time, community means those with purchasing power, social [end of page 34] visibility, expansionist potential. In the paper-rock-scissors game of civic politics, the second version persists when the first is marginal. Community has become a soft term for capital. Cash is style.

Take, for example, the recent civic fiasco witnessed by the Kootenay School of Writing (KSW). A writer-run collective which offered a full program of poetry readings, seminars, book launches, talks and conferences in Vancouver for the past fourteen years, KSW has a solid reputation with national and international readers and writers, having built generative exchanges with experimental poetry scenes in San Francisco, Calgary, Seattle, New York, and Great Britain, and also having sponsored the publication of the respected poetry journals *Writing* and *Raddle Moon*. This year the centre's application for civic operational funding was turned down. The city has provided about a quarter of the non-profit centre's budget for thirteen years, expressing as recently as last year satisfaction with programming and general operations. Previously allocating an underwhelming 1% of its cultural and social funding budget to ongoing literary programming, they reduced the citywide figure to .6% by cutting KSW's \$3,500 operating grant to nothing. Clearly such a sum is not going to make a real difference in balanced budget agendas.

When KSW collective members began the appeal process with Cultural Services staff, we received a rhetoric of justification which altered over the course of several weeks. It began as a populist argument centring on a starved notion of community, and KSW's perceived lack of it. City employee Sue Harvey also expressed disappointment that the centre had not contributed to the "redevelopment of the neighbourhood," a block where drug dealers swagger in knots against the decaying façades of derelict and empty buildings, and where audience members find it increasingly dangerous to walk day or night, let alone wait for public transit. Such strategic use of trumped up grassroots rhetoric metamorphosed over time and with the receipt of dozens of letters of support for KSW from all over BC, England, the US and Canada to a critique of the centre's lack of fiscal development.

Cultural Services' final brief puts it this way: "Staff have met with representatives of the society and reviewed opportunities for increasing its audience base, earned revenues and private sector support. Based on the volume of letters received expressing concern with respect to the city's funding, there is clearly a following for the Kootenay School of Writing. The society's challenge will be in working with these supporters to encourage them to also express their interest in a tangible way by becoming paying audience members and donors." The message here is clear. "Community" means those who pay. "Demonstratable support" means cash. The funding organization puts the squeeze on its community. Shall we then, like grade-school bullies, implement an Art Tax, a sort of mandatory tithing to buttress our shrinking fiscal state, since, as one councillor put it, property taxation is a "difficult tax base" for our funding? Falling short on cowboy audacity, we appealed to the zero dollar decision using socially acceptable rhetorics. We analysed the terms of rejection and countered them,

realizing all the while that the process was moot, since the city has rarely altered a funding decision through the appeal process.

So we did not attend the morning appeal hearing as civic believers, but to symbolically display our tidy compartments to our government. At 9 a.m. we mounted the steps with the obedient social nervousness which certain architectures are meant to impel. Vancouver City Hall was built in 1935 at a cost, then of 2 million dollars. This was the height of the Great Depression. Funding was supplied in part by Special Bond, which ensured wages for the workers. Designed by institutional architects Townely and Matheson, the monumental building is the epitome of Art Deco, already in transit towards the international or Moderne style, as it was known then. An unembellished poured concrete exterior manages to correctly express a stern austerity, while the rigidly symmetrical stepped masses house incredibly opulent interiors. Inside the foyer, gold leaf ceilings, walls of polished French grey marble, deco fixtures, buffed wood, detailing in brass – an extravagance of stultifying authenticity causing immediate longing for faux, faux anything. The hearing was upstairs in the council chamber. Even the stairwells were lined in gold leaf. The circle of teak desks had a sort of crenellated trim, the grid of mayoral portraits, a dire Warholian charm. Behind the mayor's dais, a range of flaccid flags, then above these, a horizontal rank of small windows, through which I watched, as appeals for funding for aid to off-street prostitutes and male victims of abuse were rejected, the billowing trousers of workers moving up and down silhouetted ladders. Filmic indeed. [end of page 35]

Faux was clearly located here, in the charade of reconsideration. Certainly though, KSW cannot consider itself unique in its abjection. The application of market profit expectations and the correlative collapse of the idea of cultural community into the imperative role of the consumer has forcibly molded companionable margins. Last year Burnaby City Council shut down the Burnaby Art Gallery, claiming that director Karen Henry was not addressing the community with her programming, which largely reflected artist-run curatorial support of critically engaged, conceptually rigorous work. Coach House Press' collapse has left some of our best literary writers – Robin Blaser, Sharon Thesen, Gail Scott, Phyllis Webb – to struggle to find distribution for their published work. In the States, HarperCollins paid off the contracts for a few dozen novelists, among them Rebecca Browne and Matthew Stadler, whose work they considered inadequately marketable, cleaning from their stable the experimental, the gay, the engaged, with one stroke of cash. And it's a crude irony that KSW itself incorporated as an artist-run centre after David Thompson University Centre, in Nelson, was shut down by a Social Credit government in 1983. Founding members Colin Browne, Jeff Derksen, Gary Whitehead and other students and faculty of the DTUC Writing program moved to Vancouver to continue their activities as a non-profit society after Socreds deemed the arts-based university unprofitable.

With this shove from the city, it seemed that KSW had been made to chomp firmly on its own tail. Enter hero. Through a Byzantine network of phone calls, Michael Ondaatje offered to help bail us out by giving a benefit reading. As publicity went out for this May event, unforeseen response began to roll in. Offers of money, space, a programming role in Vancouver's Writer's festival, free public relations services – Ondaatje's name functioned as a glowing seal, attracting a zealous public charity. Even City Hall's Cultural Services offices made approving sounds, letting us know they'd be pleased to "monitor our development" over the coming year. Ondaatje's interest, intended to help us protest the city's funding decision, has functioned as a dominant sanction of the collective's fourteen-year history.

It is difficult not to let an edge of bitterness taint our appreciation – not bitterness towards his generosity, but towards the apparent reality that cultural work needs mass media sanction in order to present a marketable façade, and that such sanction often erases the fertile and convoluted paths of minor aesthetic trajectories. It's already a cliché to note that *The English Patient* has sadly trumped decades of Ondaatje's community-based work with Coach House Press, and the tensile cross-genre wiring of *Billy the Kid* and *Running in the Family*. Yet he could help raise \$6,000 by giving a poetry reading to a sold-out audience of five-hundred people. KSW will enter its fifteenth year on solid ground. The habitual avant-garde resistance to popular or populist cultural authentication will locate itself in less and less viable margins as

somewhat unwillingly but with secret thrills of pride we mirror the spectacular architecture of ziggurats, cast lilacs aside.

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