

Altered States: Sexuality and the NAEA

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My very first NAEA conference was in San Francisco; I had left the grey, bleak rock-bound landscape of Nova Scotia far, far behind and I was transported, magically to another world where daisy trees bloomed, where spring was in the air and in my step, where every moment, every corner was rife with potential. . . Anything could happen! Once in the hotel I realized, immediately, that all around me there were rituals being enacted; cries and murmurs bespoke the onset of familiar and well-beloved rites; men and women gathered, acknowledged one another with calls and cluckings, embraced even while their eyes drifted, seeking out others, fellow beings who had come together, as they had done year after year. Why were they here? Why had they come?

The whole ceremony, as it unfolded, was intensely interesting. I was taken to the long lobby where I and the three other members of my faculty settled ourselves to watch what was termed "the parade." From comfortable settees set into alcoves we watched the passing crowd. We were a little separate from the rest and could see and make gentle comments on the cast of characters who strutted, minced, strode or swept past. There seemed, to my uninitiated eye, to be key figures - high priests - who were trailed by twittering acolytes. Men and women eyed each other, taking measure; there were bows and curtseys, gestures which proclaimed mastery or subservience; obvious even to me were the whispered assignations, the careful setting forth of agenda soon to be enacted, the establishing of power groupings and sexual encounters. I was fascinated - so much so that I hardly noticed the strange sidling movements of people who were watching ME! and who were edging ever closer, each keeping a wary eye on my three male companions who bristled a bit, self-conscious, self-styled champions who formed a phalanx around me, protective.

The game was on - and, I admit it, I was a not-unwilling participant. It was a game, a contest, a tourney of courtiers and courtesans; there was a joyful exuberance, a devil-may-care abandon. "Why do you come here, year after year?" I asked one conference goer. He looked at me, unbelievably. We were all together, were we not - removed from our usual settings for this fine springtime odyssey; all was all-potential, was it not? The energy was as tangible as the spring air: we were freed, for a while, from our usual lives, with the restraints, constraints, habits - all was fresh, and new and possible.

And so it continued; year after year we trekked to whatever city had been selected for the Orphic rites of spring. At each conference we would spy our former friends, lovers, colleagues; we would call, connect, embrace, circle, and deftly perform the movement known in square dancing as "Allemand Left" and pass on to the next partner. With joy, celebrating, we would engage in the dance, the game, the jousting. "And all was always now," to use T.S. Eliot's expression; there was no past and no future but a timeless present, a moment plucked from time and held, treasured. It was harmless play, for the most part; we all knew and respected the rules of the game. The operating question seemed to be not WHY? (which philosophers ask to motivate their search), or WHAT IF? (which I am told is what humorists use to set them going) but WHY NOT?

I hardly noticed the change happening, but suddenly I realized that the annual conference had taken on an entirely different tone. No longer was my personal state altered to one of expectation, of anticipation, of readiness to meet whatever new challenge might present itself to me, but I and others had lost the freshness, the leavening quality of laughter, the sense of heightened awareness. We were awake, all right - but grim. We huddled in tight groups, casting suspicious glances over our shoulders. When people smiled, their eyes were narrow, assessing. There was no lightness, no wit, no subtle repartee, no games played for the sheer pleasure of following the challenge of the tossed-off phrase - WHY NOT? There was sex, still, but something was missing. There was no sexuality, here. No fine, heady feeling of release and celebration. No energy, which is my definition of sexuality, fine energy by which one relates AS MAN or AS WOMAN to everyone and everything. Not even in the Women's Caucus did I discover any sign of a healthy acceptance of sexuality, or even once glimpse joyful acknowledgement of what I term the essential woman-nature, the Eternal Receptive.

Was it only me, I wondered? Had I, all unawares, tired of the festival? Had I become jaded, depressed, weighted down even here by the political manoeuvrings and academic sabotage which were undermining my work at home? Was I unable to bring to this ritual an ability to rise to the occasion as once I did, like bubbles in champagne, like yeast in bread, like the distillate of alchemy? Was it only I who was feeling all this heaviness? No, I decided, after serious reflection; it was endemic. I wrote, sadly, describing the state of art education as I felt it to be at the NAEA Conference in Detroit: "like ashes - dry, grey, residual . . . Irrelevant."

And so it continued. I fought against going to New York, Houston, Miami, New Orleans. I wanted to have nothing to do with an enterprise which, I felt, had lost its heart, had lost its way. The profession, as I judged it to be, was NON-SEXUAL. Suspicion and fear had transformed the field, whose members rushed to protect its exposed flanks. Fear-ridden, self-protective, malevolent, we hastened to proclaim safe, standard, sanitized values and aim towards re-acceptance by a newly conservative public. We repudiated our former hedonistic selves. We flaunted our hair-shirts while mumbling "WORK! VALUES! LANGUAGE! DISCIPLINE!" Instead of emulating the fine, brave forward movement of the risk-takers like artists, we settled for the Back-Step Shuffle. Negation and denial characterized art education and I wanted none of it. I fought back the urge to flee, the urge

to cry, the urge to stay by my surging sea and draw strength and nourishment from it - away from the NAEA and what I felt was its denial of the former restless energy of exchange, open question, potentiality ... its denial of a sexuality which proclaimed productive excess of energy.

But then ... Boston. I was riveted, my interest stirred to new life. Jan Jagodzinski dared to challenge the formerly undisputed status quo. He tossed the glove into the arena. He was unwise, imprudent, tasteless. He was outrageous. I couldn't believe it! Here was sexual energy flaunted, distorted, made all-too-evident. . . I was reminded of Dylan Thomas' exhortation:

Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage! Rage! against the dying of the light!

In a trice, the company was wakened from its torpor. People were outraged, amused and stimulated. They met in small groups, arguing the relative merits of the position Jan exemplified. A new energy, a sort of aesthetics of denial, swept over the Conference. I was reminded of the peculiar wind which blows in Europe of a summer. Called variously the Mistral, the Meltemi or the Bourra it sweeps in from the fetid regions and brings with it malaise, despair and depression. Bad humour abounds; sexual energy is misdirected and used for pain, for control. People hide from its relentless assault, afraid. As I saw it, Jan's performance was akin to this dark wind. To me, it was not funny, but interesting. There was sexuality there, all right: a dark, destructive energy was palpable - impossible to ignore. Those who knew about post-modernist aesthetics and the philosophy of De-Construction and its pre-cursor, Nihilism, were intrigued, but uneasy. "Will this save art education, or destroy it?" was the unspoken or whispered question. Polemics, positions and posturings followed as people scrambled to ally themselves with this new, altered state - or to decry it.

Sexuality? Oh, yes - but a denial by excess. NAY-saying, in the extreme. Nietzsche's "slave morality" was made glaringly evident.

Is there an alternative? Can we yet reclaim for our profession the quality of the fine, free days of our erst-while innocence? Will we ever again witness something like one of the most exhilarating performances I ever saw, at any Conference? CSEA held its annual meeting in Halifax in 1976; it was a small, homey affair but it had its moments. The one to which I refer, and which for me represents an apex of healthy sexuality came at the conclusion of a Great Debate which was, I think, about sexual politics and art education. At its conclusion, one of the protagonists, a lively Québécoise of generous proportions, rose to her feet, tore off her blouse and twirled it overhead, proclaiming "Vive la différence!" The hall erupted - uninhibited laughter and the hoots and whistles which accompany good, healthy, bawdy humour swept the room. We left laughing and exhilarated, energized by the display of unabashed sexuality: lusty, funny and energetic, it proclaimed the health of the tiny, young field which was the company of Canadian art educators. We LIKED each other, at that moment. We accepted and proclaimed our differences, our regional disparity, our individual quirks and our areas of problematic concern. Men and women,

sexual beings all, we proudly acclaimed our connection that day - we related as caring persons to each other and to our field. It felt good. We were not to know that this healthy sexuality could not or would not persist. Too soon we would be gripped with fear, and fear-ridden, we would act first to deny our true, sexual natures and adopt a politics of suspicion to replace the politics of hope which had just begun to surface. Sexuality is, perhaps, more vulnerable than it seems. In times of economic or social malaise or upheaval, free, joyous interrelationship is hard-pressed. True sexuality will only flourish in fertile ground; the ingredients for transformed awareness (the alchemical process of work towards an integrated consciousness) must include an attitude of acceptance and a generous spirit.

I wish, with all my heart, for a profession which knows its own heart, which supports and proudly accepts the many facets of its nature. I wish for something of the essentially creative energy which characterizes the artist, who works, with a will, to bring-forth something new to form. I wish that we learn to celebrate our differences, and rejoice in our shared values and beliefs. I wish that we have enough faith in our enterprise that we can, once again, laugh without embarrassment, acknowledging relationships which are vibrant and mutually supportive. I wish that we might infuse our acts, here and in our home environments, with the lightness which bespeaks a transformed energy. I would like to believe that we can re-discover an energy which allows and supports fresh ideas - ideas which are listened to, without judgement, and which spark off new ideas in new directions. I wish for a field in which positions are adopted and accepted as being only stages in the healthy, ongoing process of evolution. I wish that as art educators we are freed to relate to one another as caring human beings, sexual beings whose interactions are seen to be open encounters, potentially ripe and interesting. I wish that we might learn to take risks, and encourage our students to do the same. I wish that we be open and emboldened to learn "the secrets of our own hearts" by listening to others - artists, philosophers, mystics - who have something productive to say. I wish that we might learn to fly! Do I hope for too much? I don't think so. Heraclitus, in 650 BC, spoke thus:

If we do not hope, we will not reach the un hoped-for, since there is no trail leading to it, and no path.

I wish that we learn to dance together, rejoicing, acknowledging our sexuality as a possibility rather than as a problem. T.S. Eliot, again, described a ritual of fruitful complementarity:

The association of man and woman
In dancing, signifying matrimonie --
A dignified and commodious sacrament.
Two and two, necessarye coniunction,
Holding eche other by the hand or arm
Which betokeneth concorde.

Vive la différence!