

March 2006

INTELLIGENCE

TOP SECRET

Mat Callahan's quarterly newsletter of music, art, and philosophy
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I will be making another tour of the US in March 2006. Mainly, I'll be speaking at Universities about specific themes developed in my book, "The Trouble With Music". In addition, I'll be doing radio interviews, participating in panel discussions and, in a few places, playing songs. This is a wonderful opportunity for me to engage in serious discussion about music and its role in the world. I am grateful for the assistance given by my publisher, AK Press, and the good people at Broken Arrow Records. Special thanks are owed Thad Wharton of Broken Arrow who did the hard work of putting this tour together.

That said, I remind you that this newsletter is sent to each of you on my list and is available on my website. I hope it provides food for thought and I encourage everyone to send me your comments and dissents. I will gladly include such discussion in future issues.

The tour schedule is as follows:

March 6	New York University	(Manhattan)
March 7	Sanctuary for Independent Media	(Troy N.Y.)
March 8	Interview WBAI/ concert at Bluestockings	(Manhattan)
March 9	Albright Uniniversity	(Reading PA)
March 10	Bookstore concert	(Philadelphia)
March 11/12	Left Forum	(New York)
March 13	Oberlin College	(Oberlin, Ohio)
March 14	Saginaw Valley State	(Saginaw, Mich.)
March 16	New Mexico State Univ., Las Cruces	(Las Cruces, NM)
March 17	St. Patrick's day feast	(Albuquerque, NM)
March 18	Anarchist Book Fair	(San Francisco, CA)
March 20	California Institute of Integral Studies	(San Francisco, CA)
March 21	SF State University	(San Francisco, CA)
March 23	Stanford University	(Palo Alto, CA)
March 23	Tia Chucha's Cultural Center	(Los Angeles, CA)
March 25	West Coast Live Radio (PBS)	(San Francisco, CA)

Open to the Public:

March 7 – Troy, NY

7:00 pm: The Sanctuary for Independent Media. 3361 6th Ave, Troy NY (at 101st, where 6th Ave turns into 5th Ave). A donation of \$10 (\$5 students/low income) is requested at the event.

March 8 – Bluestockings Bookstore, NYC

Bluestockings – 7:00 pm; Free. 172 Allen Street (bet. Stanton and Rivington, Lower East Side, 1 block south of Houston and 1st Ave.). By train: F train to 2nd Ave, exit at the 1st Ave, and walk one block south. By car: If you take the Houston exit off of the FDR, then turn left onto Essex (aka Avenue A), then right on Rivington, and finally right on Allen, you will be very, very close.

March 11/12 – Left Forum, NYC

Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, 51 Astor Place (between 3rd Ave. & Lafayette St.)

March 13 – Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH

Oberlin – 4:30 pm; Wilder Hall, Rm 101; Free

March 16 – New Mexico State Univ.

7:00 pm: New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM; Hardman Hall, Room 106; Free

March 18 – Anarchist Book Fair

"Around 2 pm": San Francisco County Fair Building, Strybing Arboretum, Golden Gate Park, SF, CA (overall fair is 10 am – 6 pm); Free

March 21 – San Francisco State Univ., Downtown Campus

7:00 pm: 425 Market Street (at Fremont), 3rd Floor

March 23 – Sylmar, CA

7:00 pm: Tia Chucha's Café Cultural 818-362-7060
12737 Glenoaks Blvd.

For further tour information contact:

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Upcoming in 'ITS':

Over the coming months Intelligence Top Secret will present two series. One will be Tom Powell's research into the little known but widely influential theories of economist/philosopher Friedrich Hayek. The other will be a presentation of the philosophical/historical basis for continuing our quest for human liberation. Why we must go on. This will feature an introductory survey of key figures and questions, a discussion of first principles/categories of thought and finally a discussion of the current landscape; where the philosophical battle lines are being drawn today.

What follows is a discussion of Public Art by Tom Powell, for many years a sculptor and curator of public art.

Why Public Art Sucks

(And How It Can Be Improved)

Across America for the past quarter century or more, municipalities, counties, states, public institutions and universities have taken it upon themselves in the spirit of humanism and civic responsibility to become the sponsors of publicly funded visual art. On campuses, street corners, and barrio walls, on billboards, bus stops, and freeway abutments, in derelict downtowns in desperate need of revitalization, public artworks have sprung up like cultural mildew. Large freestanding metal behemoths, colorfully painted wall murals, ceramic mosaics, foam and fiberglass installations, neon bolted to architectural concrete, lithographs lining the hallways of county courthouses, glass baubles casting rainbows about the sunlit atriums of mental health wards: what hasn't been commissioned? What medium and what style of our pluralistic post-modern art smorgasbord has not been purchased for public display with public moneys?

A handful of these public artworks are great, no doubt about it. A larger handful are unbelievably atrocious. But the vast bulk of this public adornment is merely mediocre. As the dust of each new commission settles, as the patina of newness dims, the fate of public artwork in America is to relentlessly fade into the background grime of the surrounding urban wallpaper. Can this truly be the case? I invite you to do your own mental inventory of the public artworks in your town.

The One Percent for Art funding mechanism attached to public capital improvement projects at the local and state level was hailed as a brilliant strategy to capture some public funding for art when it was first conceived and implemented in the 1970's and 1980's. In the several decades prior to that, funding for public art in the United States had completely dried up. The federal government buttoned its purse to everything except cemeteries and war monuments when it got out of the W.P.A. funding business at the onset of WW II. State and local governments had no previous experience in art patronage. Religious sources were non-existent as Catholics were not erecting cathedrals while Protestants have little use for art. But by the mid-1970's, the most critical cause for the poverty of public art in the preceding half century was the popularity of architectural modernism which eschewed the adornment of buildings. Thus, the one percent for art funding strategy for artists and for the visual art world was indeed a step in the right direction. The idea steadily gained momentum, and by the 1990's one percent (even 2%) for art mechanisms had become institutionalized across the land. A decade further, artistic careers have been financed, thousands of public artworks have been commissioned, millions of dollars in public investment have been spent.

This sounds remarkably like a success story, not a suction, but the truth is that after three decades, this well-intentioned vision has plateaued into more of the same mediocrity. Public art is in desperate need of a new vision, and new blood at the helm. While complaints from artists, administrators, and the public rebound all over the map, the shortcomings of the entire enterprise actually fall into four main groups.

The first failure of public art in America has been its inability to understand that there are in fact two parallel patronage systems that bring visual art into public awareness. The dominant mode in terms of budget and sheer quantity is advertising. Advertising is a public art. It is the "popular" public art in contrast to "elitist" or "formal" public art. Advertising is free and ubiquitous. In corporate, consumer driven, capitalist America, advertising is a necessary condition. But, in order to be effective, advertising must change, update, and seem forever novel. The attention span of American consumers has been conditioned to be brief. The result on formal public art is that murals and sculptures on street corners look staid; they become dated as soon as the paint dries.

The paradox of this situation is that advertising, "the applied arts," as a sub-category of art, can be brilliant occasionally, but taken as a whole, it can never be as creative or imaginative a venture as fine arts. Advertising and propaganda follow the visual arts, not the other way around. The pace of production, the unrelenting sales pitch, and the compromises inherent in that form of patronage encourage artists in the advertising profession to steal imagery and concepts from fine artists all the time. Applied art routinely milks the fine arts without credit or remuneration. A royalty tax on advertising would go a long way to help fund formal public art.

This brings us to the real crux of the matter, the difference in budgets. For every one dollar spent on public art, and this would include all the local, state, and federal subsidies for public art programs, institutions, museums, and opera houses, etc., thousands and thousands of dollars are spent on advertising. The advertising budget for a big box retailer runs ten to twenty-five percent of their annual operating costs or higher. By contrast, public visual art is generally funded by one percent of project cost for capital improvements like new firehouses, parks and roadways. The true lopsidedness of this funding situation is obscene. Public art sucks in many cases because there just isn't enough of it to form a critical mass. Adding another decimal place, ten percent for art, to its funding source would begin to rectify that. Formal public art is drastically underfunded in America.

The second reason public art sucks is because the entire process is controlled by bureaucrats and political appointees, many of whom are complete ignoramuses when it comes to art. Public art programs in most communities are subordinated hierarchically within the Planning Department or within Cultural Affairs. The director of the public art program may hold an art degree, but he answers to the department head above him who is subject to political pressures from above. To keep his ass out of the fire, the director of the PAP does his best to avoid controversy, and so censorship is built into the commissioning process. This is reflected in the call for entries, and the guidelines for submissions. The themes that are chosen for commissions are generally pallid and intended to be non-offensive, politically correct, and please Lord, not controversial.

The selection of the winning entry is done by committee. Rarely is there any critical criteria on who can serve on a selection jury for such juries are assemble under the misguided political expediency of "inclusiveness." Juries are assortments of well-intentioned members of neighborhood associations, site architects, a representative of the municipal department from which the

moneys are attached, artists, tenured art faculty, political appointees, and perennial dilettantes. Few of these souls have ever taken an art appreciation class, have any vision for public art beyond "I know what I like," or have agreed to make any long-term commitment to serve on consecutive selection juries for five to ten years, or to generally educate themselves about appropriate sites, materials, methods, or public art in any historical or philosophical context.

The selection process is the biggest failure of all public art programs. Decision-making by ignorant, inclusive committees and good public art are mutually exclusive principles which come together only by rare statistical coincidence. The unfortunate general mediocrity of the national collection of public art which has been acquired by cities and hamlets across the nation through this funding mechanism can be attributed first and foremost to the fiasco of entrusting the administration of the program funds to mid-level bureaucrats with no degree or background in art, no concept of collection, no long term vision or goal, and no commitment to maintain or conserve the art which now represents millions of dollars in public investment.

The third problem with public art in America is the general antagonism towards it from architects. The source of the antagonism is that architecture is still wallowing in the fiscal aesthetics of modernism. To the general dismay of its founders, the clients of big architecture embraced the glass and steel ugliness of modernism for the beauty of its bottom line. Post-modern architecture has yet to attract clients in numbers to return to the opulent budgets of yesteryear.

While individual architects may like public art, and may collaborate effectively with commissioned artists, as a rule, architects are taught to believe that architecture is the highest art form, which of course it is, when its done their way. Historically, architects have chosen the artists to adorn their buildings. In this manner, the architect controlled the entire project budget, created the interior and exterior spaces for art to hang, dictated the form and style of accompanying artwork, and thus reduced the role of artist to artisan.

By contrast, one percent public art moneys are withheld from project budgets to be administered by art bureaucrats. What self-respecting architect would want some schlock public artwork appended upon his opus? Therefore, architects always get themselves appointed to the art selection jury, and they try to nix any art proposals they consider aggressive or challenging. Often, architects figure out how to rip off the public art money to divert into their own budget for landscaping or fancy railings. A fair warning to any artist after a public art commission: do not automatically trust the architect. A fair warning to architects: create architectural spaces for artists.

The final reason why public art sucks today has to reside with the artists, themselves. Artists in the United States are educated in art schools, the "best" ones are generally affiliated with universities and private colleges. The education offered by university art schools across America is sorely deficient in two fundamental categories. Art schools do not teach student artists how to make a living as artists simply because art professors do not make a living as artists, they don't have a clue how to do it, they never have done it, so therefore they don't instruct it, even offer it, or consider it relevant. While this situation is not without its pathos, it does clear the field of art students of mild persuasion who are not willing to starve after graduation to pursue the vocation. Students wishing to make a living as artists generally must attend design colleges of applied arts.

What is by far a more flagrant dereliction of instruction is that art schools do not teach the philosophy of art. Instead, art schools

teach art theory which throughout much of the 20th Century has consisted largely of hyperbole and good psychedelics. All of us have little bits and pieces of philosophy inherited from our grandmother, personal prejudices, and lessons picked up along the way from the school of hard knocks, but this hardly represents a cohesive, rigorous philosophy. To do philosophy, to organize the observable world into a rational epistemology requires a particular quality of mind that is rare in the human species. Fortunately for artists, there have been a significant number of these thinkers who have devoted their faculties towards art. So where are the art professors who have made any effort to collect these wisdoms? Where is the course curriculum for a philosophy of art? The relevant question here is, how can any civilization hold any grand vision for a public art that defines it as a civilization (as all previous civilizations have been defined by their art) if it possesses no guiding philosophy of art? Public art in America sucks because we the artists are philosophical cripples, full of agendas, full of theories, but with no larger vision.

If you are an artist reading this, especially one who has attempted or participated in public art, I know you will recognize your own experience as I've described it. Do you care? If so, what can be done to significantly alter the situation to favorably benefit artists, and to create a meaningful and visionary public art?

Strategies and methodologies for success can be invented or borrowed. The important thing is to create vision. The first part of that vision must be to raise the funding of public art by a hundredfold and more. Nothing under the regime of capitalism has stature if it is not expensive. For public art to be validated, it must consume more of the public purse. Therefore, art must figure out how to tax the big ticket items of advertising, religion, architecture, government, education, health care, science, sports, and especially militarism. Art projects must siphon off significant portions of these budgets. That would dramatically change the world!

The economics of vision will require the activism and dedication of artists and their supporters. Nobody will hand this over to us. We must each develop our own positive vision of the future, a vision both personal and collective. This allows us as artists to operate out of familiar self interest towards societal goals. Collectively as artists, we possess both the moral credentials as educated culture workers, and the necessary skills as technicians to project into the public domain the future we envision for our families, our species, and our mother earth. We can be critics, visionaries, and educators just as readily as we can be shills for the agenda of a patron.

Vision requires philosophy. One cannot be an effective visionary without knowing the thoughts on the subject of those who preceded us. This does not mean mere opinion though that is useful, but a deeper understanding of how visual art stimulates the individual psyche or how it can define the cultural identity of a society. Why has every human population as far back as we can excavate found it necessary to produce some form of visual art expression? Why is art so central to the human identity? These are the macro questions that beg investigation in the education of young artists. A profound and courageous philosophy of art is the road to the empowerment of artists as a profession and as a class. It represents one energetic path along which to steer global civilization towards a saner course.

Public art has long been the propaganda arm of those who have ruled, sometimes benignly, sometimes through terror. It does not have to be that way.

Thomas Powell
January 2006

Recently, friends here in Europe asked me what became of San Francisco. Was its legendary radicalism a thing of the past? Was its countercultural, utopian reputation-exemplified by music and politics-still deserved? Or, had it been transformed into something else: the citadel of the computer 'revolution'? Here is my reply; the humble observations of a native son.

The Actual, the Virtual and the Utterly Ridiculous

San Francisco in the early 1990's was the site of mass hysteria. Due in part to two decades of intense hype, the fever known as the 'dotcom bubble' engulfed the populace. This coincided nicely with the collapse of the Soviet Union-something akin to a 'cosmic convergence' with the added bonus that everyone was going to be rich!

I recall observing this with growing incredulity. Not only was the Computer the oracle of a New Dawn in human history, virtual reality was replacing actual reality right now. I didn't buy it. Not that I'm so smart. It's just that being a poor musician, supporting myself by taxi driving, I had no illusions about capitalism. Living and working as close to the streets as I did, for as long as I did (18 years), meant that nothing ever changes. Fashion is history, choice is servitude and only thought is forbidden. Everything, literally everything else is permitted, in fact, wildly encouraged. The more fantastic one's appetite, the more likely to find a purveyor of its satisfaction. From glory holes to online dating services, everything was available 24/7. From smack to crack, any substance was yours for the asking. If one dared to raise the question: "Where in your frictionless economy are the workers who make these gadgets?" one was scorned or pitied as a 'left behind'. If one ventured innocently, "Where do you put this junk when it breaks down and who's going to pay for that?" even young iconoclasts would look askance as if to say, "You just need more RAM." More like a generation of Alfred E. Neumanns than radical utopians. Besides, for a while there they were pulling down stock options (along with their burritos and diet cokes) worth millions. Who could argue with that? Karl Marx? He's dead.

When the rolling blackouts hit to be followed (a few years later) by the tapes of conversations proving that Enron deliberately manipulated energy at the cost of the public one might be forgiven a bit of "I told you so" cynicism. It only required a few megabytes of memory still functioning in one's brain to know that, marketing blather notwithstanding, there had been no suspension of economic laws. Indeed, I must honestly say that I have little sympathy for the vast numbers, including some very nice folks, who fell for this nonsense, jumped on board the Titanic AFTER it had hit the iceberg and sunk into the oblivion of an ecstatic embrace of consumerism. As Marx wrote, 'First time tragedy, second time farce'. All this was predictable and quite obviously redundant. What had once appeared as simple 'class war' in the case of Thatcher's attack on the coal miners or Reagan's attack on Air Traffic Controllers was now purported to be the 'happy ending' to all our suffering by way of IT, the internet and EBAY. All we had to do was click 'OK' and get with the program.

Now, this is easy to see. No one seriously disputes that history did not end, that there is a profound economic and political crisis within the US and its global empire and that there will be hell to pay in the coming decade. This does not make me happy. But I am greatly relieved to know that the 'reality based community'

can once again politely assert that the earth is round and not be laughed out of the smoke-free coffee house. The sheer arrogance of some of the yuppies I had to encounter was enough to make me physically ill. But worse, actually, was the manner in which San Francisco-and its vaunted liberality-became the opposite of a liberated zone in the blink of a mouse click. The very transgressions that were once rebellious were completely absorbed in the 'liberal-democratic' ethos being used to bolster the imperial designs of US foreign policy. Not only was opposition in disarray, it was comprised of the most willing disciples of the very liberties and freedoms being foisted on the Iraqis at the point of a bayonet. Much self-proclaimed radicalism was just that: self-proclaimed. Moreover, it was self-centered, focusing on individual liberty already guaranteed in the Constitution and celebrated by capitalism. This politics consisted of demanding that the government protect our right to do as we please. Banging on an open door. Tilting at windmills. Choose your metaphor. This is absurd in the extreme and it is an outgrowth and tributary to the 'dotcom' bubble, the religious faith in IT and the dated notion that doing something your Grandma might find offensive is a revolutionary act. Indeed, doing something your boss might find offensive was not even on the agenda.

Meanwhile, the infection mutated in most ingenious ways. While, doubtless, Bush, Blair and their cronies don't believe a word they say to the public they clearly don't know the truth, either. Their utter bankruptcy-in imagination or in any practical skill other than media manipulation-has been exposed. The Iraqi people have proved that "believing the hype" is perhaps the most dangerous delusion a leader can maintain. Something akin to a heroin dealer getting hooked on his own product. What emerged in the week of Bono, Blair and Bombings (remember G8, Glen-eagles, London July 2005?) was the actual clashing noisily with the virtual and the virtual fooling fewer and fewer people anywhere. Thus, Bono, Bush, Blair, et al are appearing utterly ridiculous to anyone with an independence of mind.

This brings us back full circle to the dot com bubble in SF. If we are to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery-and belief in the benevolence of capitalism is certainly that-we must clean out the Aegean Stables thoroughly. A task worthy of Hercules and us mortals, too. Being full of shit is not a crime. But prolonged and systematic denial of the consequences is, at the very least, unhealthy. Moreover, cloaking venality and servility in the guise of 'postmodernism' or whatever jargon one wants to conjure up only demonstrates Joe Strummer's maxim: "selling is what selling sells." The complete betrayal of principle, as principle, the desertion of the Commons or Public Space to rapacious private plunder, the rejection of any appeal to the greater good or to humanity's liberation; all these symptoms were championed not by reactionaries but by the 'clever' young entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley, always accompanied by Rock Stars. The charge was led by former revolutionaries and radicals who'd 'seen the light'. 'Capitalism with a human face', The Ethical Corporation, Green/Feminist/Minority-friendly and Profitable, too. The disaster here is that a generation has been hoodwinked and it will take another to, as the Beatles put it, 'get back to where we once belonged'. Or, forward to where the actual-which forever stares us in the face-is met with the steady gaze of the fearless.

*Mat Callahan
February, 2006*