

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

MFA: More Fine Associations

Robert Wood · Tuesday, August 18th, 2015

Recently, I spent a week at the Vermont College of Fine Arts in Montpelier as part of a writers' conference. It was the first time I was exposed to the workshop style that defines the American MFA. There have been articles upon articles written about this phenomenon, and they have, for the most part focused on the aesthetic question of whether the MFA produces good work. Occasionally this has been framed around liberal individuals instead – good writers not good work. But for the most part, people have attended less to the peripheral offerings that the MFA encourages or, to put it somewhat differently, its social relations.

The sights, sounds and smells of Vermont in summer are something to behold. Even for a southern hemisphere lad who grew up on the incomparably stunning Indian Ocean, Vermont is a lush and beautiful pastoral symphony with mountains high and valleys deep. This is one kind of place that MFA people write from – the quiet town in nature. The Iowa model one might call it. The other is, of course, the urban location of New York, Chicago, LA, where the frisson and energy of diverse peoples trying to make it in various industries provides rich fodder for the artist's offering. The contexts in which MFAs happen are one of the things that escapes our immediate attention – this is MFA as a certain type of lifestyle that has nothing to do with work.

I could be fixing tractors, but if I am doing it in Montpelier I am likely to be eating the same apple as a budding poet from VCFA. I could be selling bonds, but if I am doing it in Manhattan I am likely to be eating the same apple pie as a budding poet from Hunter College. This is, of course, assuming that such shared material experiences are within our different budgets. What I always loved about America, and what I find compellingly different from Europe, is how class did not pre-determine one's taste. When I lived in Philadelphia and went to Penn, I knew billionaires' kids who would happily munch \$1 burgers. I never found that in Paris – if you are wearing Louis Vuittons there you ain't going to Carl's Jr. The MFA happens in this very American world.

The MFA too offers a community – it is work being done together. The myth of the isolated genius is a persistent and Romantic one, and one that I was particularly vulnerable to when I first quit the academy. Writing though lives and breathes in context and in community. That we need official ways to create community is I think a symptom of broader cultural problems that have plagued 'the West' for at least the last forty years. We could critique this, blame neo-liberal capitalism, that ill-defined scourge, which is set up as a straw man when we need to reach for a social explanation of what ails us. We most certainly should seek those responsible for creating the conditions that have so enervated our society that communities need to be created in order for art to happen.

But this neither allows us to see the art that happens in spite of this broad social change over recent generations or provides us with the comfort of a group of fellow travelers. If the world has changed we need to go out and meet it – that might mean rallying against funding cuts to the arts as well as going to grad school. Selling out is different from buying in, and some acts take a bit of both.

What I found remarkable about the VCFA experience was how good-natured everyone *seemed*. Reviews of work have gone from hard nails to featherbeds in published reviews and classes but this amiable way was replicated at meal times and events, where the tenor was pleasure and enjoyment. Any sense of competitiveness was thoroughly sublimated. There were no knives but awkward glances.

The tenuous bonhomie of colleagues, the mixed messages and assessments of aesthetics, the difficulty in restraint when wanting to defend your work all contribute to the paradoxical quality of this social situation. The paradox being: we are in this together, but we are competing for limited air time, publishing opportunities and attention. Our best friends are our greatest enemies.

The workshop, that bread and butter of the MFA, produces a particular and peculiar set of disciplinary procedures and ways in the world. That might be the base expression of the superstructural question of whether they can produce good work. But it is something of a closed system – they are whole economies that support themselves aesthetically. People are invested in them always already. What needs interrogation though is the way in which the material side of the MFA life – eating in a cafeteria, sleeping in a dorm bed, being in classrooms that are only used occasionally – matters. What does it mean that there is an entire market of people hoping to bloom late as writers? Why the persistence of the myth that everyone has a novel, or any other such expression, in them? To always struggle with it relies on a type of idealism that is naive, but one in which vested interests are sure to maintain. This politics and economics should not be forgotten.

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