

Trumpeter (1993)
ISSN: 0832-6193
Elevation

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Some things in life just don't make sense. We seem to have, for example, a curiously uneasy relationship with the pursuits of human excellence and quality of life. We seem resigned to sectoral excellence and collective middlingness. We create the occasional musical masterpiece, muster the odd scientific breakthrough and sometimes act in enlightened ecological and humanitarian ways. But is it enough to elevate the human experience more than temporarily? Does it all reflect a refined sense of living and add up to a better world? I'm not sure that it does. Most people, despite good intentions, are content to crouch in the lush foliage of mediocrity. Every once in a while, we peek through the weeds and see something better. But this vision of a better life is blurred and amorphous. It will take leaps of faith and imagination for us to discover the exact nature, the shapes and the dimensions of this lifescape.

The leading edges of human resourcefulness and creativity are often situated in the realm of art. It is there that we are most consistently uncompromising and self-critical. We let our spirits soar in pursuit of the beautiful, the magical, the horrible and the compelling. We seek and discover themes universal in scope and significance. Art at once accommodates the diversity and the oneness of the human experience. And so it is that millions flock to New York city's Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art. We experience the creative crucible and then depart from the cloudland, perhaps elevated, confused, gratified or disturbed. It is, in Huneker's words, "an instant arrested in eternity". It seldom resonates long enough to stir our collective imagination. Outside the gallery, human decadence and misery are juxtaposed as vividly as anywhere on Earth. The built environment lies in a ruinous natural setting. The homeless live and die on sidewalks overshadowed by billion dollar condominiums. Sectoral excellence seems small compensation for general hollowness and despair.

Underlying our resignation to mediocrity is our reluctance to validate the practice of escapism. We generally hold utopian visions to be acceptable as forms of diversion, but hardly appropriate as lifetime preoccupations. The pursuit of excellence is, in effect, a kind of escapism. It would be risky, after all, to venture into a lifescape where dreams were welcomed without boundary, where fulfillment, rather than compensation, was the goal, and where the elusive ethos needed to unite humankind seemed within reach. But it may be our only practical course of action, and the time seems ripe to embark upon it.

What is required is not so much a revolution, but rather a synthesis. It is a matter of fusing scattered but tangible dreams of excellence and providing a stage upon which they will be acted out. We already know that many of us are

at least ambivalent toward, if not absolutely repulsed by the manic, misguided societies in which we live. Just beneath our overt resignation to the rat race lies a more latent but very deep sense of alienation from it. We are a generation in search of a richer alternative and awaiting a catalyst for change.

But we must reallocate our attention and make a more concerted effort. It is critical that we distinguish the significant from the trivial and the sublime from the shallow. How do we do this? We revive and exercise our innate sense of quality which has been subverted by dehumanizing, dream-killing institutions. The instruments of mediocrity include misdirected educational systems, reductionist methods of scientific inquiry, a fixation with technological means without ends and an overpopulation of television sets. Governments will be slow to provide disincentives for the vapid and the meaningless. People must do it. Just as mediocrity is pervasive, so can quality have a ripple effect.

It is by now a truism that everything seemed possible in the romantic and radical 1960's and that the succeeding decades were best characterized by cynicism and disillusionment. But some of the sensibilities which propelled the 1960's predate it and persist to this day. In the summer of 1948 a group of Montreal artists signed a manifesto entitled Refus Global - absolute refusal - and became the Automatistes. These were dream years too. Inventive, surrealist-inspired and resolute in spurning social and artistic convention, the Automatistes positioned themselves among the francophone vanguard who would eventually precipitate Quebec's Quiet Revolution.

In the years which followed the signing of Refus Global, dreamers such as Paul-Emile Borduas, Charles Gagnon, Francoise Sullivan and Jean McEwen would use their techniques and ideologies to create subversive paintings which confirmed the social role of the artist. Concerned with organic/naturalistic themes expressed abstractly, they broadened our lifescape with each daring brushstroke, each sensual indulgence and each soaring journey.

The Automatistes were not a fleeting aesthetic/political crystallization. Years after the movement evolved in several directions, Quebec artists continue to edify and expand their visions and dismantle formidable, centuries-old institutions and perceptions. To look at Charles Gagnon paintings such as "From Within", "November Steps" and "seul les enternuements sont eternels" ("only sneezing is forever") is to see why.

The seemingly rarefied universe of the artist may be accessible to us all if we are willing to explore and redefine the parameters of the human experience. As we seek to create a richer existence for ourselves and a more harmonious relationship with the natural world, we should not discount the value of dreams and their elevating potential. When we finally begin our collective renaissance and rediscovery, we may also recognize the obvious - our dependence upon alternative movements to induce lasting social change is only a partial answer, a manifestation of sectoral excellence. The most critical ingredients for substan-

tive change reside, albeit latently, within society's mainstream. Let's get on with the 1990's.

Citation Format

Mulvihill, Peter Royston (1993) *Elevation Trumpeter*: 10, 1.
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