

London Recaptured

for Greg Curnoe (1936-1992)¹

In August 1990, I returned to London, Ontario, for the first time in at least ten years. The occasion was a party Sheila and Greg Curnoe were throwing to celebrate their silver wedding anniversary with friends and relatives. When Greg phoned to invite me, I accepted on the spot. I would enjoy once again seeing London, which I had visited for the first time in the fall of 1966, nearly twenty-five years before.

Although it may have borne little resemblance to the *matinée chez* the Princesse de Guermantes that Proust recounts in *The Past Recaptured*, the party gave me the chance to renew acquaintance with a number of artists whose studios I had visited off and on in the sixties and seventies: Walt Redinger, Ed Zelenak, Murray Favro and Jamelie Hassan, among others, as well as Art Pratten, clarinetist, and Bill Exley, lead vocalist of the infamous Nihilist Spasm Band. I was flooded with memories of rowdy, reckless concerts at the Paris Biennale des Jeunes and the I.C.A. in London, England, in October 1969, which I have described in *Artscanada* (“Confessions” 67-8).

I was first exposed to the sound and fury of the Spasm Band in the fall of 1966 or early 1967, when Greg Curnoe invited me to attend one of their performances in the tavern at the York, a London fleabag. It was one of the funniest—and noisiest—shows I had ever been to. I could barely stand the din and experienced a nausea worthy of Sartre.

The anniversary party at the Curnoes’ was an evening of pleasant encounters with people who, like me, had aged somewhat; but the discussions, above all of politics, were as lively as in the past. One conversation in particular, in the kitchen, raised anew the question that had inevitably been put to me in English Canada back in the late sixties and seventies: “What does

Quebec want?" The very same question hung almost palpably in the air in London that summer, when everyone was still dazed by the collapse of the Meech Lake agreement and confrontations at the Kahnawake and Kanasatake reserves. I had no better answers in 1990 than ten, or twenty, years earlier.

The atmosphere out in the yard was much calmer than the heated excitement of the kitchen, which I had abruptly left in the face of attitudes that struck me as offensive to many of my fellow citizens. I joined in less agitated talk with, among others, Don Vincent, who had made a wonderful series of photographs of London artists and their studios in the 1960s, to be used in the catalogue of the exhibition *The Heart of London* I had organized for the National Gallery of Canada. This exhibition of works by eleven London artists was shown in Ottawa and several museums and galleries across Canada. It revealed to the public the extraordinary vitality of the contemporary art scene in London at the time. And it grew out of the discoveries I had made during my first trip to London in 1966.

A recent graduate of the Université de Montréal, I took a position in May 1966 as Assistant Curator of Canadian Art at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. My first months on the job had been devoted to getting to know the permanent collection of Canadian art and to helping catalogue it. Early in the fall of 1966, my boss, Jean-René Ostiguy, who was Curator of Canadian Art, got a letter from a young artist in London, Greg Curnoe, asking that the National Gallery consider purchasing one of his works for the permanent collection. Mr. Ostiguy had seen Greg Curnoe's work at the Sixth Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting in Ottawa in the summer of 1965, where Curnoe exhibited *Girdle*, and perhaps earlier, at the Mirvish Gallery in Toronto, in 1964.²

Mr. Ostiguy told me he found Curnoe's work attractive, although he had yet to see a work he thought substantial enough for the National Gallery's permanent collection. At the time, the National Gallery was struggling to overcome stagnation of almost Brezhnevian proportions in the realm of contemporary art; Jean Sutherland Boggs, who had been Director since June 1966, had scarcely had the time to take matters in hand and instil the dynamism the National Gallery would subsequently know.

So Mr. Ostiguy sent me to London on a scouting mission, to meet Curnoe and see if I couldn't pick something out, perhaps of modest size. Although I doubt that Mr. Ostiguy expected I would make any miraculous discoveries, he was obviously willing to examine the matter in closer detail.

From my point of view, it was simple. I had no idea who Greg Curnoe

was or even exactly where to find London on the map. I had never heard it spoken of as a centre of creativity and knew only that it was the birthplace of Paul Peel (1860-1891), one of the most famous Canadian painters of his time.

In fact, the only previous contact of any depth I had with contemporary Canadian art was through the Musée d'art contemporain in Montreal and that city's commercial galleries. I had seen the Canadian biennial exhibition in 1965 but had no outstanding memories of it. I knew New York fairly well and had visited, among others, the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum various times, where I was exposed to the main trends in modern art and some aspects of contemporary art. I had only been to one artist's studio, Guido Molinari's in Montreal, which I visited twice while at university, on a student assignment. He had extended a most courteous welcome, answering my questions about the sources of his art with great cordiality. I had very positive memories of my meetings with Molinari and had one of his paintings hung in my office at the National Gallery, an "avant-garde" escapade that astonished several of my colleagues. When my former teacher Louis V. Randall, whom I held in high esteem, came to my office, he was scandalized. With a laugh, he wondered out loud whether his student had not turned out decidedly badly.

The few newspaper clippings I took from the Greg Curnoe file at the Gallery's library provided little information and gave me no idea what to expect.

When I arrived in London, I went directly from the airport to deposit my bags at the London Hotel and then on to Curnoe's studio, above a store on King Street, London's main shopping street at the time. The city had an air of Victorian coquetry lulled to sleep in the comfort of its own prosperity. The large yellow brick houses and the two- and three-storey stores downtown made it seem as if it had been forgotten by time. The London Hotel, beside the Armoury, was the biggest hotel in town but showed its age. The plumbing was worthy of the Nihilist Spasm Band, of whose existence I was—alas, but temporarily—ignorant. In recent years, time has taken its revenge: parking lots have invaded downtown, the Armoury has become a hotel and the venerable London Hotel is no more.

Having confirmed my appointment with Curnoe by phone, I walked to 202 King Street and climbed the stairs to his studio. Inside, I was immediately bewildered by the total disorder. Magazines, collages, assemblages, drawings and all sorts of papers littered the tables, while two or three paint-

ings Curnoe had just finished, part of the “Family” series, leaned against the wall. Curnoe showed me two large drawings that he explained had been used at London Nihilist Party meetings: one of Francis Picabia, with the inscription *DADA!*; the other of Ontario Premier John Robarts, with the inscription “Vote No”. Curnoe enlightened me by informing me that the Nihilist Party was one of the numerous groups and associations he and some of his friends had founded and run. I have already mentioned the Nihilist Spasm Band. There was also the annual Nihilist Party picnic, the 20/20 Gallery, the Region Gallery, the magazine *Region* and later, *20 Cents Magazine*.

The magazines and galleries are gone; but the Spasm Band still gives concerts, and for all I know, the annual Nihilist picnic still takes place. Some years later, I had the honour of attending one of these. But I reached a sort of pinnacle when I appeared as drummer in the notorious Nihilist Spasm Band, in Paris, no less. By 1966, *Region* was on its last legs, but *20 Cents Magazine* was still going and I took out a subscription. I also visited the 20/20 Gallery, the Region Gallery, too, having disappeared.

These institutions served as a forum for the London artists of the period. Curnoe’s studio was also a gathering place, as was true, to be sure, of the excellent French-Canadian restaurant Le Petit Prince, founded by Ginette Bissonnette during those years.

In the course of our conversations, I soon realized that Curnoe was highly cultivated. He had the entire range of modern art history at his fingertips and could talk with equal ease of Marcel Duchamp, Robert Delaunay, Kurt Schwitters and Dadaism and the latest currents in contemporary art. As I was well acquainted with a number of his artistic and intellectual points of reference, our first contact was stimulating. Curnoe also expressed curiosity about Quebec politics. It was before the October 1970 crisis, when the atmosphere in and around Montreal was at times strained by sporadic FLQ incidents.

Despite the impressive accumulation of works, Curnoe’s studio itself was not particularly big. What I saw aroused my keen interest, but my hesitation in choosing a painting for the National Gallery seemed to confirm the accuracy of Mr. Ostiguy’s judgement. Perhaps sensing my hesitation, Curnoe invited me to come with him into a second room to get a large painting he had just finished. Together we carried it into the studio proper and set it up so we could view it more conveniently.

I reacted with immediate enthusiasm to the colourful exuberance of the painting, *The Camouflaged Piano* or *French Roundels*, and its simple,

straightforward eloquence. As Greg Curnoe was later to write, “It does not represent angst but as in a lot of my work it is the juxtaposition—of things and events that interest me—without any logical order” (Curnoe qtd. in Théberge, *Curnoe* 90). The painting effectively portrays a facet of the 1960 London artistic scene.

At the time, I wasn’t struck by its formal relationship to American and British Pop Art. Rather, I was struck by an analogy with Henri Rousseau, which quite surprised Curnoe when I spoke of it. But I sensed in this painting the absolute solidness, the unshakable faith in the reality of what is represented that one finds with Rousseau, though there is no stylistic similarity whatsoever between the work of the two artists. Curnoe’s entire output is impregnated with this strength of conviction.

I reserved the large painting for the National Gallery on the spot. A few days later I informed Mr. Ostiguy of my find, and soon after, the painting entered the National Gallery collection. Needless to say, however, it first caused consternation at the acquisition committee meeting, which I anticipated with a certain apprehension, given the committee’s reputation for conservatism. Curnoe’s painting and Guido Molinari’s *Black Angle*, from 1956, which I had discovered in his studio not long after my trip to London, were among the first works I suggested for purchase. I still savour the pleasure I felt when my suggestions were approved by Mr. Ostiguy, Jean Sutherland Boggs and a majority of the committee.

In this way, more intuitively than consciously, I had made a preliminary declaration of what my policy towards the contemporary collection would be: the important thing was to acquire strong, eloquent works, art that says what it has to say clearly and intensely.

When Curnoe and I left his studio, he invited me to visit the studio of another artist, Murray Favro. The chaos there was even more bewildering—if that’s possible—than in Curnoe’s studio. At the time, Favro was building ingenious flying machines from a mixture of refuse: sticks of wood, bits of salvaged metal and, for the outer skin of the fuselage’s wooden skeleton in the first version of his *Sabre-jet*, metal lithographic plates from the printshop where he worked as a commercial artist. Favro struck me as a somewhat taciturn, mysterious inventor, but he had a sensitivity that recalled both Marcel Duchamp and Buster Keaton, and a creative spirit that was more related to late nineteenth-century “tinkerer-geniuses” like Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison and the Wright brothers. I was impressed by

Favro's ironic intellect. A true philosopher, a Da Vincian cosmologist, he is an artist who deserves to be much better known in Canada and abroad. The day ended with dinner at the Curnoes' apartment, where I met his wife Sheila and their first child, Owen, who was only a few months old.

I returned to London often during the sixties, especially in 1968 when choosing works of the eleven artists who were represented in the exhibition *The Heart of London* (the title was taken from a painting by Curnoe, as well as Jack Chambers's *The Hart of London*): John B. Boyle, Jack Chambers, Greg Curnoe, Murray Favro, Bert Kelly, Ron Martin, David Rabinowitch, Royden Rabinowitch, Walter Redinger, Tony Urquhart and Ed Zelenak. The catalogue entry on the painting *The Heart of London* for the retrospective *Greg Curnoe*, which I organized for the National Gallery of Canada in 1979-1980, summarizes the intentions of the earlier exhibition (*Curnoe* 91-92), which aimed to convey the originality and vitality of this artistic milieu through significant works by a limited number of the many artists active in London. When I think back on the London scene of the sixties, what strikes me most is how all the artists there were proud of where they lived and of the institutions they had created and ran. Each had his own well-defined individuality and evinced a deep-rooted conviction that artistic creation was absolutely essential to his life. Yet, none of them tried to impose his stylistic preferences on the others. I owe a great deal to that milieu. In my career as a curator, I have always sought to define my professional goals and clarify my ideas with a strength of conviction equal to theirs. Whether I have succeeded is for others to say.

I went back to London often until mid-1979. By then, much had changed. Some artists left for Toronto and New York; others came to take their place. But the level of energy remained constant. Most of my sallies into the London art scene had Curnoe's studio as their focal point, but he was always quick to draw my attention to what other artists were doing and encourage me to visit their studios and see their exhibitions. His advice was always beneficial, and I was time and time again delighted by his intellectual curiosity and by his extraordinary openness to everything around him.

In 1968, Curnoe set up his studio on Weston Street. This too became a meeting place for artists, a forum for lively and animated discussions on a host of subjects. It was also the starting point for the first expeditions of the Association for the Documentation of Neglected Aspects of Culture in Canada, which was officially founded in Saint-Éleuthère, Kamouraska

county, Quebec, in August 1971.³ I had invited Greg and Sheila Curnoe and their children to spend a few days in Saint-Éleuthère, where I was born and spent my first seven years, so they could in turn get to know my part of the country. My family had lived over the general store my grandfather founded and built. As I look back on it today, it must be that over the years I re-experienced, in Greg Curnoe's studio, something of the atmosphere I knew as a child in the late 1940s at the Magasin Théberge, when the village sages came to sit in a big circle near the spittoons to talk and talk and talk, of provincial politics mostly—Duplessis was on everyone's mind!

A detail confirming this vivid impression comes back to me as I write. In Curnoe's studio there was a Windsor chair exactly like the ones at the entrance of the Magasin Théberge that the assembled coterie sat in during those evenings of impassioned discussion. I even seem to recall Curnoe's studio having a clay spittoon. But I dare not ask him whether it's true, for fear of shattering even the least part of this modest "past recaptured."

Postscript

This was written in March 1992, and I sent a copy to Greg Curnoe. He later told me he was flattered by it. "As far as I'm concerned," I said, "it is not flattery but the plain truth."

In March 1993, I went to London to visit Sheila Curnoe and to see the studio again. The Windsor chair was there, but I forgot to look for the spittoon.

NOTES

- 1 Translated by Donald Pistoletti, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.
- 2 Curnoe had not exhibited in Toronto during 1965, and his first solo exhibition at the Isaacs Gallery in Toronto did not take place until November 15-December 5, 1966, after my first visit to his studio.
- 3 See "The St-Éleuthère Manifesto" (in collaboration with Greg Curnoe) in *La Revue de l'Association pour la Documentation des Aspects Négligés de la Culture au Canada*, vol. 1, no.1 (December 1974): 1.

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