

Tradition and the Contemporary Collide: Newfoundland and Labrador Art Education History

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Abstract: Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, is a province proud of its historical traditions. Yet, these values are, at times, in conflict with contemporary global culture. The province's socio-political and cultural struggles and successes, and the impact of an ongoing boom and bust cycle in resource development, are echoed both in the history of art education and in its artistic evolution. From modernism and post modernism, and DBAE to VCAE, the development of the Visual Art Program at the Grenfell Campus of Memorial University in Corner Brook provides a cautionary tale on the vagaries of promoting artistic traditionalism over contemporary meta-modernism, and the role of art in the classroom in reflecting global society at large. With a growingly mixed population in the province, art education plays a significant role in a contemporary dynamic that can challenge a self-promoted geographic and historical myopia. Art in Newfoundland and Labrador increasingly acts as a suturing mechanism and reflective device, through which to look at these tensions, allowing the art educator to play a somewhat subversive role to the larger historical, political, and social agenda. Yet art education and art have also been used as a tool to serve various shifting political agendas. Negotiating this terrain as an art educator can be difficult; tradition and the contemporary collide, yet the dynamic of this play has produced some amazing results culturally. Walking this tightrope provides a model for a newer generation who have to be increasingly multi-cultural and internationalist in their views.

Keywords: Traditionalism; Contemporary Meta-modernism; Historical, Political, and Social Agenda; Subversive Role of Art Educator; Multi-cultural.

The history of art education in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL), Canada, the most easterly and one of the most isolated sections of North America, is as of yet largely unexamined (Pearce, 2006; Stamp, 2003). In our critical cultural inquiry (Park, 2007) we engage with such uncertainty and use both imagination and speculation to explore this history (Boland, 2012).

To most outsiders, Canada appears to have a historical homogeneity but, in fact, it is a medley amalgam of historical regionalism, differences, and problems, with often greater political, social, and cultural awareness occurring southwards to United States regional counterparts than East to West. Indeed, only 60 years ago the province of NL was an almost independent nation with historical closer ties to Boston, New York, and the United Kingdom (UK), than to Canada. In a close vote, forced upon by a financial crisis, NL decided to join the Canadian federation with a highly problematic (and some to this day feel rigged) vote of 51% in favour and 49% against.

With a growing mixed population that is still viewed within the narrow historical colonialist terms of British, Irish, and French immigrants, art education in NL plays a significant

role in a contemporary dynamic that can at times challenge this self-promoted geographic and historical myopia, including providing recognition of the province's often ignored indigenous cultures. Art in the province increasingly acts as a suturing mechanism and a reflective device through which to look at these tensions, allowing the art educator to play a somewhat subversive role to the larger historical, political, and social agenda. As such, the development of the Visual Art Program at the Grenfell Campus (Grenfell) of Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) in Corner Brook, a community of only 18,000 people located approximately 800 kilometers from the capital city of St. John's, and the history of its formation, has been significant. With it, art education and art, have been used as tools to serve various shifting political agendas, while also reflecting on other issues such as cultural and economic diversification in a small provincial environment.

Indeed, a collective mentality still exists in the province that the 1948 vote that led to the loss of independence in 1949 was fixed by the notorious Joey Smallwood. Smallwood's desire was to join Canada in a modernizing drive for a colony that had been seen as backward, parochial, and under the thrall of localized fish and mechanizing merchants and UK interests centralized in the capital of St. John's. This ongoing collective issue of nationhood versus provincial outpost is witnessed to this day in the prevalence of things like t-shirts that voice Republican sentiments set within a context of economic change (NL recently shifted in Canadian Federal transfer support payments from a historical "have-not" province to a "have" province due to off-shore oil wealth). The position of the province as the second largest off-shore oil production area in North America allows such Republican sentiments to resurface. These sentiments become part of the popular visual cultural idiom, taking on a relevance to art education and how that education is viewed in the province. Indeed, the art history and provincial social studies curriculum has been highly oriented towards a parochial and often xenophobic perspective often to the exclusion of groups like First Nations, Inuit, immigrants, and Canadian "Come from Aways" (CFAs).

This conflict between ongoing proto-nationalism existing in conjunction with Canadian federalism would emerge in the development of the province's first degree-granting art program in 1988. Its formation and subsequent impact would not only reflect political ambitions rooted in Smallwood "modernism", but also set the scene for an educational battle against the conceptual and neo-conceptual focus of the nearby, and world renowned at the time, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD). Its international reputation was fostered under the guidance of its radical director Garry Kennedy and with visiting artists like Joseph Beuys, Vito Acconci, and Claus Oldenburg, graduating notable students like the trans-gender artist Heather Cassills.

However, against this conceptual school, Atlantic Realism, a co-existing regional style and focus defined artwork of the maritime region. Atlantic Realism was guided under the hands of artists like Alex Colville, an artist who would be involved in the formation of Grenfell. On the one hand, modernism was being stressed in the NL provincial agenda to economically advance. On the other hand, traditionalism in both focus and skill-sets, via an offshoot of the Atlantic Realist influence, dominated at Grenfell. This occurred at the time via a scholarly conjunction with the historic source of Atlantic Realism at Mount Allison, in Sackville, New Brunswick, the other notable art school in the maritime region. Michael Coyne, a Mount Allison alumnus, who trained under Colville and acted as the first director of Grenfell, and local NL and Labrador artists such as Christopher and Mary Pratt, who had made their names as Atlantic realists training at Mount Allison advised on the formation of Grenfell. Also, Mary Pratt served on the Provincial Task Force on Education in 1973 and was Chair of the founding committee for the program (Stamp, 2003).

The visual arts program that was developed for the then nascent Grenfell Campus (at that time a two-year liberal arts education feeder institution to the main university campus in St. John's) offered a certain cachet value in that it was one of its first degree programs. Thus, art education could now be seen as essential in the cultural and economic diversification of the province, counteracting the centralization of education that had occurred in St. John's. This economic diversification and educational development were promoted as a way to challenge Corner Brook's history as a one-industry town— a town planned in the Garden City style/movement around a British-owned pulp and paper mill in the 1920s, one that was still the main employer in the town in the 1980s.

The founding of the Grenfell art program fit a number of mandates: provincial cultural diversification; educational employment and development of an alternative campus (with the arts fitting that "alternative" mandate); a proto-nationalist mandate in creating an "at-home" art program; a counter thrust to the conceptualism of NSCAD by focusing on Atlantic Realism and technical skill development based on Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) (Grubbs, 2012) principles; and a Bauhasian foundational model of learning and divisions, over NSCAD's more theoretical focus. Additionally, Grenfell would serve as a source location for future artists and art educators trained within the provincial milieu— something numerous provincial government reports had advocated, and smaller private schools had been attempting in the province for decades (Stamp, 2003).

This history had a significant impact on the subsequent design of the visual art program. Edith Goodridge, along with a number of others, was involved with the early outreach program of the Continuing Education and Art Extension Services programme of MUN, which, from the 1960s into the 80s, functioned as the key art education outreach and training tool in the province. Artist Don Wright arrived from Toronto in 1967 as a specialist to further develop the Art Extension Services (Creates, 1990). Wright developed the Artist in Communities summer program, in which he and others travelled to isolated communities and facilitated art workshops for both children and adults. This included showing people how to make prints and draw, while using the environment around them and traditional stories as source material. This would help to create a long-term cultural focus that continues to validate these types of artistic expressions as "home-grown."

This program, in turn, allowed Wright to bring artists to the province to teach and lead workshops, thus helping to create a new community of visiting and settling artists via the outreach teaching process (Creates, 1990). In a very prescient way, Wright was an early environmental and socio-political artist in the province. This Art Extension Services program development created an expectation that any future expansion of an art school and theatre program would occur in St. John's with the protean structure and rooms in place for this development. Nevertheless, this was outweighed by political ambitions and the need to build regional support in Corner Brook under the then Premier Brian Peckford. A former rural high-school teacher from an outport working-class background, Peckford was a promoter of NL interests over outside interests. The Grenfell art program's formation also caused battles and infighting between departments and schools at MUN and these would spill out into, at times, acrimonious criticism over the siting of the new program.

The mandate to build an arts school had been spawned by the modernizing campaigns championed by earlier provincial leaders like Joey Smallwood. In this context, Wright started the first art classes for children and youth. Wright and others saw the need for a printmaking facility, a key modernist device, as Walter Benjamin had noted, in making reproducible art works accessible and affordable to the masses in modernity – and shifting the focus away from the aura

of the singular work to serial reproducibility (Creates, 1990). This led to the founding of St. Michael's Print Shop, the first purpose-built artist support studio in the province designed around printmaking (<http://stmichaelsprintshop.com/>). Printmaking also became an integral part of the extension services program, laying the groundwork for a cultural focus in the province towards the accessibility of printmaking and its role as a key artistic expression of provincial culture, yet one centred in St. John's.

Under the policies of Peckford's Conservative government, which focused on turning to inward development of the province's resources and a promotion of its culture over outside interests and views, the development of the Grenfell program meant that the former cultural hinterland now became an artistic hub. However, since the island's historical focus had always been on St. John's, initially faculty reported that students were often discouraged, by both art teachers and school guidance counsellors, from attending the nascent program instead of the more popularly known NSCAD.

The simultaneously founded Grenfell Art Gallery that was affiliated to the new art program, had a mandate to develop students' educational knowledge via challenging exhibitions, while also fostering community support via summer exhibitions. Under directors like Colleen O'Neill, Gail Tuttle, and later Charlotte Jones, it hosted some of the more radical exhibitions in performance and video art through the 1990s and 2000s. This was a more artist- and student-driven mandate for educational development, and it is now the key exhibiting space in the province for the work of provincial and Canadian First Nations, Metis, and Inuit artists, all of whom had largely been ignored or placed in an ethnographic collecting "sphere" in St. John's. This remote teaching gallery challenged the conservative exhibitions of the provincial art gallery, which at that time was located in the main campus of MUN. Under its long-term director Pat Gratten, the provincial gallery remained focused very strongly on Atlantic Realism, representational and mimetic art, historic NL works, milder abstraction, and in support of the print traditions. Indeed, the early provincial collection lacked any strong conceptual or video art, with only one video artwork existing in the collection in 2010.

Thus, the non-intended consequences of the development of Grenfell then was a more experimental cultural focus on the West Coast of NL, with an art education-centred art gallery largely controlled by directors operating independently from, and outside the expectations of, the art scene of the cultural capital of St. John's. Yet, the art gallery also challenged the visual arts program to which it was attached, whose curricular design was more conservative. While no allowances had been made for schooling in video art, installation, or performance art classes in the design of the art program itself, over time exhibitions at the gallery exposed the students to these media. The visual arts program had been designed to consist of a rigorous multi-skilled training program with the highest studio course requirements at the time in Canada. Students were to be accomplished in a number of studio areas. All students (who were at first largely drawn locally from the province) entered via a strict portfolio submission process, and progressed via a cohort system of like-minded students, with no allowances initially for part-time study.

Drawing was understood as foundational to other areas. It was mandated as a core course for all students for the first three years of the four-year program. In turn, the art history program had been initially designed by a non-art historian studio faculty member along traditionalist lines, with standard survey-style courses that stressed the "masterworks" via connoisseurship, with no mention of a Visual Culture Art Education approach (VCAE) (Grubbs, 2012).

Additionally, the art instructors at Grenfell who were largely, due to the needs of hiring qualified personal to teach at the university level, from outside of the province, created a faculty

whose outlook and own exhibition record tended to be off-island rather than on-island. This countered the historic thrust of the 1960s MUN extension services, which had brought in artists who were enamoured of provincial culture and came for the environment and artistic pursuits, rather than employment and teaching opportunities. These circumstances led to a certain cultural divide between the East and West coasts of the province, one that oscillated between the traditionalism and historic semiotics and landscape/environment focus in St. John's in the east and the CFA approach of Grenfell in the west, and the further isolation felt by Labrador. Nevertheless, there were outreach attempts belatedly attempted by both sides to bridge the geographic and ideological divide between Grenfell and the capital city. There was some animosity that the faculty were largely drawn from outside of the province, as a number of aspiring artists in St. John's and local professionals thought the positions should go to them, although they lacked support qualifications like Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degrees.

This unique situation had a significant impact on art education in the province. Whereas historically a number of art teachers had come out of the NSCAD art education program, they dominated the early secondary school art education scene. Gradually as students migrated from the Grenfell program with BFA's, and then completed degrees at MUN's Faculty of Education leading to teacher certification, the Grenfell students have come to dominate as art specialist teachers. In turn, this created a self-feeding loop into the Grenfell program, with graduates who have become art teachers now promoting the program over NSCAD. Former graduates have become a recruitment tool, with secondary students becoming aware that they can stay on island, gain both a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Visual Arts) and a Bachelor of Education degree, and gain employment as well. Thus, the original cache of having a degree-granting program in Corner Brook came not only to be a signifier of the modernist ambitions of NL as it became tied into a larger federalist structure, but had a much larger than anticipated cultural and educational impact on the province.

The Visual Arts program discovered an ongoing semi-hostile environment and divide, particularly from many in St. John's who felt the program belonged there. Rather than acting as a part of the cultural diversification of the province and its education programs, it was seen instead as divisive by some to the art scene, creating two differing sets of "artists." Along with this, Grenfell continues to confront the 19th century notion of the starving artist, with some guidance school counsellors and parents actively discouraging students from pursuing visual arts. This is largely due to the perception of economic hardships and lack of employment opportunities, which the province had suffered from until the advent of major oil production off its East Coast. In turn the provincial curriculum, during periods of economic downturn, has swung hard away from the arts to support "core" disciplines and the sciences and business/trades education.

In some ways, these historic concerns about employability were echoed in the initial design of the Visual Arts program at Grenfell, as the program originated in a period when Regan-omics was a key concept even in Canadian politics. Thus, a DBAE approach (Grubbs, 2012) seemed suited to justify potential employability of graduating artists (whether as art teachers, designers, architects, commercial artists, or curators, etc.) A foundational year was seen as core to installing basic skill sets and a primary background that would be useful in a variety of areas and pursuits. These courses led to distinct disciplinary fields that followed a strict traditionalist pattern (painting, photography, sculpture, and drawing as the other core disciplines, with a focus on printmaking).

While individual instructors at Grenfell might put in place projects supporting textile and video art occasionally, the core courses, as well as the hiring practices for faculty, remained fairly tightly focused on DBAE (Grubbs, 2012). Indeed, for many students, the art history

classes, especially courses like the *Anarchism and Art*, or the art history supported *Art Space* events were where they first had the opportunity to experiment freely without curricular restrictions on installation, video, performance and graffiti work. The initial DBAE focus also meant the program graduated largely teachers and technical students and commercial artists, with only a limited number of students going on to do MFAs. However, the forces of contemporary art caught up with the program, with students and some faculty, creating access to other art forms or pushing boundaries in their classes causing the program to slowly change.

As noted above, some felt that the St. John's centralized art scene would be important to the success of the program and that it would flounder being in a smaller city with no major galleries. The counter to this argument was utilization of Harlow, a campus donated to the university and located 30 minutes outside of London, England. This was where visual art students voluntarily enrol in three art-history/studio hybrid courses during 12 weeks in the summer. It exposes students to the hottest contemporary art market in the world, and places them headlong into an extreme culturally immersive program that combines their studio work (along with holding an exhibition of the work they generate while in England at a gallery there) with a visual cultural program of study.

Conclusion

Negotiating this terrain between the traditional and contemporary as an art educator can be difficult. Moreover, nurturing a future generation of educators and artists to surmount these issues, while providing awareness of them within the context of the global art market, can be a minefield. Tradition and the contemporary collide when students suddenly enter the dynamic of the London art world. Yet, the play has produced amazing results culturally. Walking this tightrope provides a model for an emerging generation who have to be increasingly more multi-cultural and internationalist in their views.

As such the development of the Grenfell post-secondary studio arts program, a program now graduating the majority of students who go on to become art educators both within the community and in the schools in NL, provides an interesting micro-model in which to explore the political dynamics of art educational practice and artist training. Grenfell emerged within the shifting tenets promoted by provincial ambitions, and its development reveals the role of art education as a suturing mechanism in the conflict between traditionalism and the necessities of globalism. Set in a regional context this history provides a cautionary tale relating to the vagaries of promoting artistic traditionalism over contemporary meta-modernism, and indicates the role of art in the classroom in reflecting global society at large.

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