

# THE WALRUS

## THE WALRUS BLOG



### Maze of Knowledge, Entry Five Cents

BY HOLLY JEAN BUCK • JULY 22, 2008 • 5 COMMENTS



Last Saturday, Toronto was enveloped in muggy greyness. I was riding my bicycle along Bloor Street West, after being doused in unspectacular rain in High Park, and the street was less appealing than usual. Two women were yelling at each other outside a store with sad appliances in the window, the kind of appliances that break when you get them home; the police were cordoning some building off; and the whole street—which occasionally vibrates with a kind of transglobal charm—was entirely charmless.

“Amazing knowledge!” a man called from the sidewalk as I rode past. I laughed, and kept on down the block to the Salvation Army, where all the summer dresses were polyester testaments to humanity’s ability to create dreadful fashion; the kind of fashion that evokes a physical response, a shiver or a cringe. Stepping back out into the humidity, I followed my curiosity, and walked my bike up the block.

“What kind of amazing knowledge?” I asked the man.

“No, a maze of knowledge. Entry five cents.” There was a table on the sidewalk with a smiling woman and a yellow piggy bank. They were positioned in front of a door with black curtains. I rummaged through my pocket for a nickel and the man waived me along. “It’s free for people with purple shoes today.”

“I guess it must be my lucky day.”

He handed me a miniature red lamp; a reading-lamp the size of my palm, and assured me he’d watch my bike. He advised me to look for angels inside. Then I parted the curtains.

It was remarkably, utterly black inside, and the space—I couldn’t tell how vast or small — was filled with a sound that was like the ocean, except deeper and darker, more curious, with more of an edge. An industrial ocean? I have no idea. It served mostly to seal the space. I had to train my light carefully upon the floor, for there was a labyrinth of books to navigate. They were stacked four or five high, and I stopped occasionally to glance at them, as one must when navigating a maze of knowledge. I picked up Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* to see what Sartre had to say for himself: something about anguish and freedom, some kind of phrase that sounds meaningful on the page but does not stick in the mind. There were tomes of mathematics and titles on happiness and great classics and children’s stories in this maze of knowledge, and when I worked my way into the depths of it, there were chairs resting empty in the center. A chalkboard tablet upon one of the chairs asked me: How many angels are watching you? Sweeping my tiny light around the room, I saw them: luminous white faces rising from the walls, soft-white-ethereal upon the darkness. Their faces were so benevolent, yet compelling, that I began to cry. Radiant faces—[the artist](#) had truly captured the essence of “angelic.” How much time do I spend navigating this smog alert of a city, never noticing the angels? How is it that I came to take the banality of the urban landscape as a given? Dazzled and dazed, I wandered back out onto Bloor Street.

When was the last time art ever did anything for you? I mean, really touched you? Think about it. It is perhaps easier with music, or with writing; I can easily name things I’ve listened to or read lately that were moving. Art is a little bit funny; it often takes place in a different sphere, in a certain staged way, inside a frame; it rarely grabs you off the street and compels you to listen. It doesn’t always make a concerted effort to engage; it has its realm, its frame, and its power is more-or-less neutralized by this. But, as I was reminded of this weekend, “art” can and does exist everywhere.

“There is the need for an understanding of art that goes not only beyond pleasant aesthetics, but beyond even typical ideas of creativity and imagination, direct engaging with the civic sphere,” writes [Darren O’Donnell](#), the artist behind the maze of knowledge who grabbed my attention from the street, in his book [Social Acupuncture](#). “An aesthetic that can work directly with the institutions of civil society—an aesthetic of civic engagement. An aesthetic that says: Okay, so you want to make culture and creativity a central part of civic life? Fine. Then I want in on the institutions that form—at ground level—the fabric of the city. I want to use these as material in my art practice.” Civic engagement, and art that takes place not in its prescribed sphere, but in the fabric of the city, can be healthy for the individual—at the very least, it can at least lift one out of urban ennui and alienation. But engaging art can also be healthy for the entire society. Like the physical body, the social body has flows of energy that can become unbalanced or blocked: artists, as social acupuncturists, can be part of the effort to restore health to the whole system. In describing his work with social acupuncture as part of the [Mammalian Diving Reflex](#) collective, O’Donnell writes:

I wanted my work to affect the world, touch people’s lives directly and contribute to a healthy functioning social sphere. To tell intricate representational stories of love, death, and loss, trying to express some universal sentiment, more and more seems an act of complicity with a depressing status quo. But the paradox of political art, at this time in history, is that, for the most part—and excepting some of the more gruesome details—everybody pretty much already knows the scoop. Or, at least, everybody who’s going to drop in on one of my shitty little plays already knows. ... People will be grateful for my efforts to speak politically, not because I’m making any dents in the way things are but because those fellow travellers are relieved to hear someone say it onstage. But while providing a little entertainment for the converted doesn’t tend to linger. Instead, social acupuncture offers the opportunity to directly engage with social flows, applying the same principles as real acupuncture, only the terrain is the social body instead of the physical body.

Often, it is easy for me to be cynical about the potential for art—and in that I include writing, music, etc.—to make any real difference in this challenging twenty-first century terrain. Poetic terrorism and culture jamming can too easily be relegated to youth; brute reality kicks in... but for once, this week, I don't feel complete despair about art. O'Donnell's book, and words, are credible because he's actually out there engaging. It is not theory and ideals but experience that shapes this work: phrases about "short-circuiting familiar social networks and formations to create something unexpected," or "an artistic civic engagement that uses the city as raw material," take on genuine meaning when you've just been pulled over and engaged by chance. Furthermore, O'Donnell is honest, prescient, and refreshingly cutting about the landscape we are in: "the world is a collapsing shit factory." At the same time, the possibilities feel endless.

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Accepting the Possibility That I May Ruin My Eyes: Reading in Darkness (featuring the Maze of Knowledge) is part of a the [Toronto Free Gallery](#) project called the [Toronto Free Library](#) ("an exhibition that imagines Toronto as a community bonded through books"). Artists Lillian Chan, Petrina Ng, Darren O'Donnell, and Danielle Williams worked on the project; the hauntingly beautiful angels were done by Toronto artist [Lillian Chan](#). It runs until July 26 at 1277 Bloor Street West, and I hear that on Sunday July 27 they will sell the books for charity. Come and engage.