

*English Translation of the Anecdotal Narratives
in John Armstrong & Paul Collins's:*

Academy Caochangdi

Academy, Caochangdi (2011-12) is a silent, 65-minute video which records the comings and goings on a flooded side street in Caochangdi, a market village in the north of Beijing. Caochangdi is undergoing tremendous change due to its designation as an official 'art zone' with newly constructed gallery compounds, artist residencies and restaurants. The side street in the video is located in a gated gallery compound.

In the video, cars, bicycles, motorcycles and auto rickshaw delivery vans drive down the street through the water. Pedestrians use stepping stones to avoid getting wet when obliged to wade out into the water to get around the gate.

Thirteen English or Chinese texts flow through the video and present anecdotal meditations on art and art education.

Length: 65 minutes

1.

We had spent an entire week working in our studio on the outskirts of Caochangdi, venturing out only for lunches and dinners at one of the few restaurants in the village that make certain concessions to the growing number of Westerners arriving daily. Welcome though these culinary compromises were, they were not enough to stave off those gastric troubles that always plague us when we travel to hot climes with iffy hygiene. An excursion to the more Westernized 798 Art Zone, a little closer to the centre of Beijing, was called for. 798 is saturated with galleries and cafés, bars, gift shops and other boutiques selling art and schlock. A veritable carnival atmosphere reigns here, in sharp distinction to the rougher, muddier, more frontier-like ambiance of Caochangdi.

We dropped into a restaurant-bar-art bookshop with a decidedly hip ambiance. Shunning the crowded, air-conditioned interior, we chose to sit in the inner courtyard under a canopy of poplars, the cicadas chirping madly. We ordered panini and the local Vichy water. As we munched our sandwiches, the only clients in the courtyard, a young Chinese couple entered. Bumping into my chair, the man excused himself in English. He was dressed in modish geek-chic with the requisite thick, horn-rimmed Buddy Holly spectacles. His companion was got up in Japanese-influenced kawaii style; like a schoolgirl way behind in her studies, pretty in pink. They sat down and proceeded to consult their personal devices: he, a Darth Vader-like PC laptop, she multitasking on an iPad and an iPhone sheathed in pink silicone with pronounced rubbery bunny ears — so popular in Beijing in this Year of the Rabbit. Before they could order, she indicated that they should move inside. Leaving the courtyard, we saw them choose a table directly behind the plate glass from where they had been sitting previously. She indicated to the man where he should sit. Once they were installed, she got up again and motioned that they should trade places, which the man willingly did. Finally settled, they returned to their screens and all communication between them ceased. Unless they were communicating with each other over their devices, which is not impossible.

After a while, the man got up and came out into the courtyard to smoke a cigarette. He asked where we were from, and I asked him the same. He had just completed art school in Singapore. When he learned that we were both art school instructors, he asked us if he could show us his work. Pulling an iPad from his satchel, he proceeded to show us reproductions of his large paintings. They featured masked, manga-like figures engaged in various ritualized activities, floating on Abstract Expressionist-influenced, dripping, monochromatic grounds. I mentioned Joan Miró's work of the 1960s that uses similar figure-ground relations. I then asked him whether he was aware of Inuit imagery, to which his paintings and drawings had an uncanny resemblance. He handed over his iPad, and I went to a site featuring Inuit prints, notably the work of Pudlo Pudlat. I was pleased to see a certain look of amazement cross his face as he discovered that his work had reason and resonance beyond the immediate sphere of influences to which he was subject.

2.

I started teaching studio art at a large school with many art and design programs, such as animation, illustration, and fine arts. I worked exclusively in the fine arts program, but many of the faculty were cross-appointed to several programs. The shared consensus among this faculty was that art training should be founded on the careful and repeated observation of the human figure, still or in motion. I taught drawing, and the established curriculum focused on drawing the nude figure in traditional media, such as charcoal, Conté crayons and pencil.

After following the curriculum for most of the term, I felt that students were ready to venture outside the drawing studio. The college was located in the suburbs, and the studio building was surrounded by parking lots filled with student and staff vehicles. Beyond the sea of cars was a forested ravine system, and beyond that loomed 1960s-era, exposed-concrete apartment buildings, which were generally rented out to students. A large drainage ditch in which tall reeds grew bordered the campus.

I asked the students to cut a reed from the ditch and use it as a pen with ink. While this tool was admittedly awkward, it had expressive potential. Their three-week project was to make a variety of drawings that depicted the vehicles in the college parking lots and the vista of suburban development around us. At the end of the term, two of the students were pleased with this turn in the curriculum. The rest of the class told me I had deprived them of three weeks of proper education.

3.

In the mid-1980s, Denyse was a student in two of my painting classes. Some years later, on a visit to Philadelphia, she arranged for us to meet for a drink one evening and listen to jazz. The club had a house band, and the evening was devoted to trumpet improvisation. To one side of the stage stood a long line-up of trumpet players who would come to the stage one by one and play a song with the band. Over beer, Denyse, who was then a professor at Tyler School of Art, said that it was only after teaching for several years that she realized that her own professors must have had lives apart from working with their students at the art college.

4.

Ravneet, a senior painting student, developed a series of paintings over two years, based in part on traditional South Asian *mehndi* henna patterns applied to the hands and feet of couples about to be wed. I encouraged Ravneet to apply the conventions of henna decoration to more contemporary subject matter, and she responded by saying that this was something she would have to think about.

Ravneet worked in acrylic on canvas and maintained a palette of muted earth tones applied in semi-transparent washes or by using her fingertips. One looked through the surface of her paintings to layers of buried information just perceptible beneath the surface, as though looking at skin. There was great subtlety in her work. She also copiously and, to some, incongruously added sparkles to her paint — which appeared to be at odds with the tone-on-tone subtlety of her paintings. In a class critique, a student asked Ravneet why she always added the “jarring” sparkles. Ravneet replied, “Because I am Indian.”

5.

For seven years, from kindergarten through grade six, Dorothy Medhurst was my art teacher. Miss Medhurst first honed her teaching skills under the aegis of Group of Seven painter Arthur Lismer. She was a teacher whose ideas, methods and generosity later made her the subject of a film, *Notes on Seeing*. She was, without a doubt, one of the great women of my life. Once a week she would lead us on foot through the treed streets of the Annex to the Royal Ontario Museum. We would arrive in the morning, before opening hours. After depositing our coats and boots in the cloakroom, we would be given the run of the place. She encouraged us to wander though the museum as we chose, to interest ourselves where we might, paper and pencil in hand, from dinosaurs to butterflies, mummies to medieval armour, Chinese artifacts to Haida totem poles and dioramas depicting First Nations family life. She would wander around herself, browsing the collection, then helping us to focus, encouraging us in our growing enthusiasms for this or that display case. I remember being particularly interested in the geology galleries, spending many a morning looking at displays depicting the creation of the Great Lakes, dug out by the migration of the glaciers; or the upheaval of mountains through the play of tectonic plates. I learned that the very ground on which we were standing had a history. The idea that the planet's history was tellingly, forensically inscribed on its surface, down to its very core, was an image that informed my later art practice. The word “stratum” continues to hold for me an almost incantatory quality.

6.

After an inspiring lecture from one of our graduates, Wei Jia asked me if there was any tell-tale sign by which I could predict if a current student might succeed as an artist. I replied that while one can't predict the future, all our successful grads worked constantly, even obsessively, on their artwork while they were students. Wei Jia then asked me if any students who were more relaxed towards their art production had succeeded as artists.

7.

On the outskirts of Nîmes, Roger co-founded an art centre in the mid-1980s that hosted artist residencies, exchanges with international public galleries and an annual video festival — in addition to serving as a commercial gallery. Roger also published a quarterly art review. All of these activities took place in a converted eighteenth-century winery with a tall and spacious gallery in what was formerly the production facility.

In 2006, we had a show at the gallery, and Roger assisted us with the elaborate installation. More than 60 paintings hung on one wall in a grid, floor to ceiling. It was delicate and often frustrating work to get the anchors properly positioned in the rough plaster-on-straw walls. We worked above, Roger below, holding the ladder and generally assisting. To further complicate matters, Roger chain-smoked, making it difficult for us to concentrate or even see.

While at lunch after two days of this, I suggested to Roger that perhaps he shouldn't smoke so much.

"And why not?" he responded.

"Well, for one, you'll live longer."

"And what makes you think I want to live longer?" Roger replied, in a matter-of-fact manner.

8.

I was in the Gulley Jimson phase of my art career. I had set up a painting studio in an old hen house full of “bricks and broken glass, and an old garbage can,” on the rue de Charonne. I had the use of the space in exchange for work building models and prototypes for the adjoining design studio. I also found occasional work in a woodshop across the road, run by an amiable English expat through whom I was also finding work painting apartments — by far the smelliest and least agreeable job I ever had. With a young wife and a newborn baby at home, and having just finished another dusty, noxious apartment job, I was at the end of my tether, feeling that something definitely had to change.

I decided to look for work teaching in an art school. I wrote a fine letter that described not only my experience as an artist, but also set out a number of course outlines and generally showed that I had the semblance of a pedagogical philosophy and method. I sent the letter, I recall, to 25 art schools in France. Lo and behold, the letter landed on the desk of the director of a reputable American art school in Paris on the very day when he was looking for a person to teach painting to adults in the night school. As it turned out, not only did I enjoy teaching, but I was, for a few receptive personalities, good at it. The money was insufficient to allow me to stop scrambling, working on apartments, and doing other odd jobs, but it gave me a hint of respectability and social standing and did eventually lead to a teaching position in the French Beaux-arts system.

Gulley Jimson is the painter protagonist of Joyce Cary's novel *The Horse's Mouth*, portrayed on screen by Alec Guinness. He is a charming, irreverent but conniving, hell-bent artist, ready to use his friends or anyone else for a pint or a bob that will buy him a little peace and canvas to get on with his work. I would not go back to those febrile days of uncertainty. Gulley would surely choose to throw a brick in the general direction of my head. Or hit me up for a loan.

9.

In 2010, I was invited to the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City to do a workshop that explored our collaborative artwork with a group of art and design students. As a starting point, I chose one of our past projects in which we separately photographed agreed-upon subjects in our home cities, Paris and Toronto.

Referencing Burt Bacharach and Dionne Warwick, I titled our workshop *Walk on By*, with the idea of encouraging the Mexican students to look at their own city. The students would work in groups of two or three, but go out separately to make photographs of their day-to-day environment, retracing their commute to school. The themes for the photographs were to be drawn from the names of stations on the Mexico City subway (although they were asked not to go to the actual station they chose), and I gave the students extended contextual descriptions of each station name, which I took from the transit system website. The names of the stations refer to Mexican geography (including the station's location), history (Pre-Columbian, colonial or modern), and Catholic saints and rituals (Rosario, La Pas, Mysterios).

The students all chose subjects that addressed colonial history and the role of the Catholic church. Once the groups met and juxtaposed their photographs, the students were amazed by the often uncannily parallel responses they came up with, and by the fact that the project encouraged them to look at the potential in the familiar. I was struck by the strident anti-Catholic sentiment in their work, in what is considered a very Catholic country.

10.

After a rather disheartening morning in the midtown gallery district, Dan and I set out to have lunch downtown, near the galleries we planned to visit later that afternoon. Dan suggested a restaurant that featured, on an ongoing basis, geometric abstract paintings done by one of our professors from art school. Retired from teaching and in his 80s, the professor also exhibited in a commercial gallery, but his work no longer enjoyed the attention it once did. Although it is always a surprise to come across an accomplished painting in a restaurant, the setting carries a certain down-market stigma.

We found that the installation of his artwork in the restaurant was done with tasteful economy: four mid-sized paintings dominated one long wall of the restaurant, and the facing wall was bare. Each of the paintings hung directly above a table. And each table had an elaborate floral arrangement that partially obscured the lower portion of the paintings. Three of the paintings had an arc of splash marks on them, most likely from tomato sauce. On the first painting, the stains could likely be wiped off the impasto oil paint surface. However, on the other two, the stains were on areas of unpainted hardboard, making the paintings very difficult, if not impossible, to restore.

In his earlier work, the professor created patterns in the sanded layers of off-white oil paint that would entirely cover his paintings. The best way to restore these paintings was simply to lightly sand the paint surface until the underlying paint appeared clean and fresh — something he would do in a gallery just before every exhibition opening.

11.

When I was a student, I read Alfred Barr's biography of Henri Matisse. Barr's treatment of Matisse is painstakingly researched, and sticks closely to the material facts of Matisse's production: his chronology, exhibitions, influences, sources and stylistic evolution. Barr recounts that at an early stage in Matisse's career as an artist, and at a time when he could least afford it, he purchased a small Cézanne Bathers — a painting that he never sold, no matter how stretched he was financially.

From my summer job in 1976, I saved \$3,000 to cover my expenses, both tuition fees and living, for art school that year. On my way to school in late August, I stopped by a commercial gallery in Montreal that represented the estate of David Milne — an artist whose work I greatly admired — and they showed me a still-life watercolour priced at \$500. I didn't buy the painting, but as fate would have it, I had \$500 left at the end of the school year.

12.

COPE was the didactic buzzword back in 1966. I remember the entire staff of our small school solemnly standing before our class to announce the new method of learning: COPE. An acronym for "Collect, Organize, Present and Evaluate." This was to be the watchword in our approach to new knowledge and the world in general. Sometime after this fateful day, we were taken on a field trip to the Art Gallery of Ontario. Arriving at the gallery, we were ushered into a room just off the Walker Court, full of flashing stroboscopes and the remnants of what was described to us as "a happening." In the middle of the room was a temporary cabin-like structure made of shiny, two-way mirrored Mylar that distorted our reflections and shimmered when we touched it. The floor was strewn with streamers, and though we'd missed the party, a palpable festive energy remained, making us all a little giddy and silly.

After viewing a number of other pieces that day, including a brushed metal *Walking Woman* by Michael Snow, we headed back to school. A thought that struck me as momentous at the time flashed into my head as I was standing on the threshold to the basement art room.

"Art is that which the artist declares as such."

These are the very words that came into my mind. I remember mouthing them. Even then they sounded pompous to me, coming as they did into the head of an 11-year-old, though I was proud at how learned and true and adult they sounded. I tried them on my friend Phil. He accepted the proposition as reasonable and then returned to the drawing he was working on.

13.

Near the end of his artist talk, Michael Snow screened his 2001 video *Waiting*. In the video, Michael is sitting in a parked car outside of a service station, waiting. We see only the artist's hands on the steering wheel, his fingers drumming impatiently. The running time is displayed beneath the title in the video's opening image: 20 minutes.

While the video was playing, Michael mused that he has often thought of buying his own video camera but never got around to it. The likely reason for this, he explained, is that he gets someone else to do the shooting so he can perform in the videos.

An audience member then asked Michael what role traditional art training played in his work. Michael said that he liked the question and went on to recount that he first worked as a painter in the late 1960s. He grew dissatisfied with what he considered the derivative nature of his paintings. He characterized the main thrust of his work as being "more performative, dealing directly with myself." He then summed up his decision to stop painting. "I lost the thirst."

Academy Caochangdi (2012) is part of Armstrong & Collins's exhibition *Corner* — on view at General Hardware Contemporary, Toronto from 13 September through 13 October 2012.

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