

NOTES ON PUNK: CEAC and the CRASH 'n BURN

It's important to point out that there was in general a para-Marxist gloss over the entire period – it was a decade that began with Leonard Bernstein's benefit cocktail party for the Black Panthers and ended with the publications *Bomb* and *Fuse*. Were we doing anything that was necessarily, consciously provocative? What we were doing was what was current. For the sake of context, let me digress a little. I can't help thinking that the economic malaise and nihilism of the 70s in the West was both a reaction against the previous decade's utopian failure while at the same time was an interregnum to the rise of global neo-liberalism in the same equal way that the hyperinflation and nihilism of the 1920's in Germany was both a reaction to the catastrophe of World War I and a pause before the rise of political extremism in the form of Nazism and Stalinism. This is equally true of the distinctive art that was made during the '20s and '70s. As we seem to be tiptoeing towards World War III, perhaps more metaphysical, yet awkward, questions should be raised. What is the point of art during global conflict, what does it even mean to be an artist in this situation? These are questions that need constant reappraisal . . . and I'd be a fool to hazard a guess.

Built in 1903, 15 Duncan Street was the final location of an arts organization that had its start in the early 1970s at 4 Kensington Avenue and then 86 John Street. The grand opening was September 18, 1976. While I was entirely involved with 86 John Street (January-September 1976) extensive renovations were happening on the top and bottom floors of Duncan Street throughout the summer of 1976. It was the opening of the CEAC flagship – a four-storey, neo-Renaissance building as it looks today, albeit cleaned up quite a bit, but virtually unchanged from when we occupied the place beginning in September 1976 when we signaled to the Canadian art establishment that we were more than your quaint, little, easy-to-ignore, artist-run centre. We had expansive plans that involved the world. The move to Duncan Street was a ground-breaking event – it was the first time in history that an artist-run centre in Canada purchased a permanent home. (Although maybe Western Front in Vancouver got there first). This was made possible thanks to a \$55,000 grant from Win-tario. (Today that's about the cost of a down-payment on a shoe-boxed sized condo – but back then fifty-five of the big ones was an absolute fortune!) I'm pleased to say that 15 Duncan Street has been designated heritage status by city council in 2019. I understand that to

mean that not only can the building never be abolished, it can also never be altered in any way. I'm investigating the possibility of ordering a plaque that tells our story from Heritage Toronto to grace the front of the building.

One of my duties, aside from mopping the floors and doing paste-ups, was helping to organize the European tours – there were four in total including a presence at Documenta VI – as well as being on the road locally and to the States. Now remember this was before websites, email, texting etc. . . . it was all done by snail mail and surprisingly wasn't that onerous.

Mythologized beyond belief and documented with varying degrees of accuracy on film and in oral histories, the Crash 'n Burn took up residence for a short time in the underused basement of CEAC. Given that many of the bands being formed that spring were made up of art students and their friends, we felt that the [faux] angry personae and [faux] alienation complimented what was happening upstairs. So, when approached by Ralph Alfonso, manager of the Diodes, about using the (underused) basement as a weekly music venue he was given the go-ahead. The Diodes booked the bands and ensured that the weekly permits were in place; the bar was an old door, the beer fridge was a discarded bathtub. Part of my ever-evolving job description included minding the store downstairs and make sure the place didn't burn down.

I'll go so far as to say that if the CEAC hadn't existed the C 'n B wouldn't have happened because the "art world" didn't give a shit. However, after it quickly became the place to be, that's when the pile-on began, immediately followed by tons of back-dating and revisionism. So, take any utterance from artworld figures of a certain age with a gigantic grain of salt – because they all thought we were nuts.

I now believe we didn't shut the C 'n B down soon enough – not because it was attracting limousines – but because it was attracting psychopaths. The violence was ramping up, and to quote Ralph Alfonso, "the ex-con out on parole that smashed the glass front door on the Duncan Street [main entrance] was probably the last straw." It was.

After the closure the space was re-jigged as The Funnel Experimental Film Theatre. I had zero involvement there, so I'll leave their story to someone else.

I'm a product of Roy Ascot's short tenure [1972-3] at the OCA (Luckily, If I may be so bold. And proud of it!!!); that short period turned out Canada's best artists. Except for David

Clarkson, Ian MacKay, and Gerard Pas, what's curious to me is how uncurious the original art students / fledgling punks were about what went on upstairs at the Centre for Experimental Art and Communication (CEAC) – the in-name-only landlord of the Crash 'n Burn. My only thought as to the lack of curiosity is that the College had already reverted to its retrograde approach.

There's a revealing collage of voices in Liz Worth's "Treat Me Like Dirt" that made me laugh out loud but (perhaps inadvertently) sheds light on the origin of much of the ill-will directed toward us from certain segments of the Toronto artworld . . . "Crash 'n Burn represented proletarian performance to them . . ." "The people who owned the building . . . had tons of government money. It was this rich Italian guy, and the family bought the building, and it was all very cutting-edge and weird." "The first thing that happened was the guys that owned the place, or the guys that ran CEAC, took off for Europe for the summer, leaving, like, an accountant in charge." Now, aside from the implied Mafia connection, where does one begin to unravel these fantasies of aristocratic wealth and leisure all the while unnecessarily bilking the government out of hard-earned proletarian tax dollars? There was no accountant, and I forget who was minding the shop. My guess at this late date is that it was probably the librarian/archivist John Faichney and Saul Goldman who oversaw the video operations. Theoretically we were whooping it up on the Riviera; or better yet, to avoid the Mediterranean heat – I guess we were imagined to be breakfasting in London, lunching in Paris, followed-up by sex-parties in Berlin . . . such a lux lifestyle, even then, would have been pretty difficult on my \$75 a week paycheque. We were on tour in Europe – we were working.

At the opposite extreme was the theory that there was some grand conspiracy. The unidentified "we were thinking that the RCMP ran the Crash 'n Burn, or actually, maybe CSIS to keep an eye on the new bunch of radical kids that were up and coming? Oh, yeah, the Crash 'n Burn was a set-up by the Liberal Party. It was in the basement of the Liberal Party headquarters. It was no accident that we were there. That was given as a total fucking set-up. It was an undercover operation to watch potential subversive young people. I don't know if the Diodes were just being suckered."

Okay. A) CSIS wasn't founded until 1984, and B) the Liberal Party was a pre-existing tenant when the building was purchased in early 1976. In fact, we were stuck with them

and their long-term lease (and way-below-market rent). I'm sure the Mounties and the Liberals had a lot more on their plates to worry about than youthful brats with delusions of grandeur and ego-inflating so-called radicalism. We had a brief encounter with the Mounties a year later but that was a different matter entirely, to say the least.

A quote from Sam Sutherland's book (p.131) really highlights the lack of sophistication and the ignorance of advanced art of the time. "CEAC was this weird, radical arts group. Real cutting-edge performance art, early European kind of thing where people would go onstage and cut their fingers off. Really out there." Um, some names please? My guess is these asinine comments were made decades after the "out there" blood sports of Nazi Dog and his ilk hit the stage. With the exception of Steven Leckie (aka Mr. Dog) I can't recall (and I was always there, and for the period in question I actually lived in the building) any members of the various bands ever venturing upstairs. Mr. Dog stood there at the edge of a vast, empty, clean, white space looking like a frightened little boy protecting his genitals.

The only direct merger between upstairs and downstairs was when we took a couple of bands on the road with us. "*February 16 (1977): Whispering (With The Diodes)*" as part of the Applegarth Follies series at the London [Ontario] Public Library and Art Gallery and "*December 16-17 (1977): No Entropy*," a twenty-four-hour performance art marathon at the Alternative Space in Detroit that included The Curse. Between those two gigs we cut a record. "Raw/War" was a 45-rpm collaboration between me, Amerigo Marras, Mickey Skin, and the Diodes. Here's Dot Tuer's appraisal from *CEAC Was Banned in Canada*, published in C Magazine #11, 1986: "[RAW/WAR] Featuring the music of the Diodes, the disc was interspersed with droning statements by Amerigo Marras and Bruce Eves reading from the behavioural manifestos of CEAC and (the British-based performance duo) Reindeer Werk. The record stands today as an example of the incongruity of a highly sophisticated rhetoric pasted onto the extremely raw and naïve sound of hard-core punk. The clarion call of 'no future' became the sell-out of a music industry future, and CEAC's initial enthusiasm for punk revolution quickly became an analysis of consumerist appropriation and disillusionment." All that remains of the heyday of Toronto's musical nihilism is the record Raw/War and a film by Ross McLaren, documenting its excess.

What was interesting about the future of Raw/War were its final destinations. . . . It remains the most sought-after relic from that period and (inexplicably) has gone on to find

homes in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Madrid's Reina Sofia Museum, and the library of the University of Bologna where it was included in the 2013 exhibit "Records by Artists (1958-1990)" . . . and I don't even have a copy. With the inclusion of a little booklet the record became Issue # 8 of Art Communication Edition because we simply didn't have enough time to put together a proper issue of the paper as we were about to fly off to Germany to work with Joseph Beuys at Documenta 6 in Kassel in October 1977.

POST-SCRIPT ONE: From my interview with Denise Benson – Now and Then, Toronto Night-life History (1975-2015) "The 'punks' were largely art students of recent grad, so the scene was, relatively speaking, fairly-integrated for the time. I'd never made any secret of the fact that I'm a gay man and had never felt threatened in any way. Some of the bands attracted a more hardcore following, but I never felt hassled. All that said, I would say that the punk and disco scenes were pretty-segregated. Gays would go to punk concerts because the scene was hot, but not the other way around".

"[However], I don't remember who was playing; it was probably the Diodes because we were friends, had collaborated on a few [things], and I was a fan. During break between sets, I was chatting up a guy I was interested in, and we kissed. This guy nearly freaked out and punched me. There was blood everywhere. I was hauled out through there restaurant, past shocked patrons with forks suspended midair. Evidently, a gang of punk girls beat the shit out of the guy in revenge – my own little Altamont. I still have a scar to prove it."

POST-SCRIPT TWO: My one and only real-life encounter with a very famous (proto)punk was in the early 1980s at a gay bar at the east end (the much more sedate end) of Christopher Street in New York – Uncle Charlies – where I was actually intensely cruised by Lou Reed. Nothing happened, partly because I was with my boyfriend (and future husband) but also because he kind of scared me.

Bruce Eves. April 5, 2026.

(for the April 26 "The Punk Talks Series – History of Toronto Punk" Peach Berserk. Moderated by Liz Worth.)