

Cultural Dislocation Syndrome

BY FRANCESCA VIVENZA

Introduction (to wine)

We go to the local liquor store (LCBO) and choose a bottle of wine, which is already part of a selection picked for us by government experts.

Instead of:

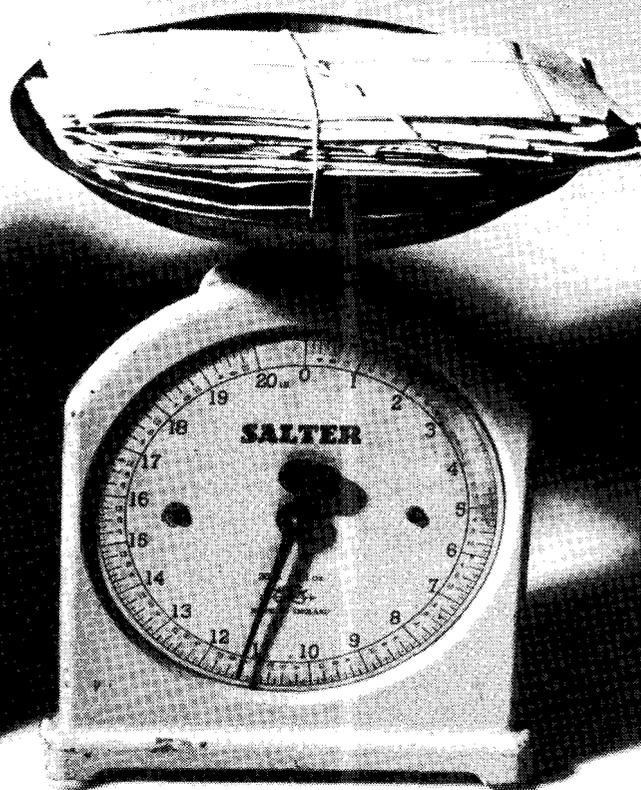
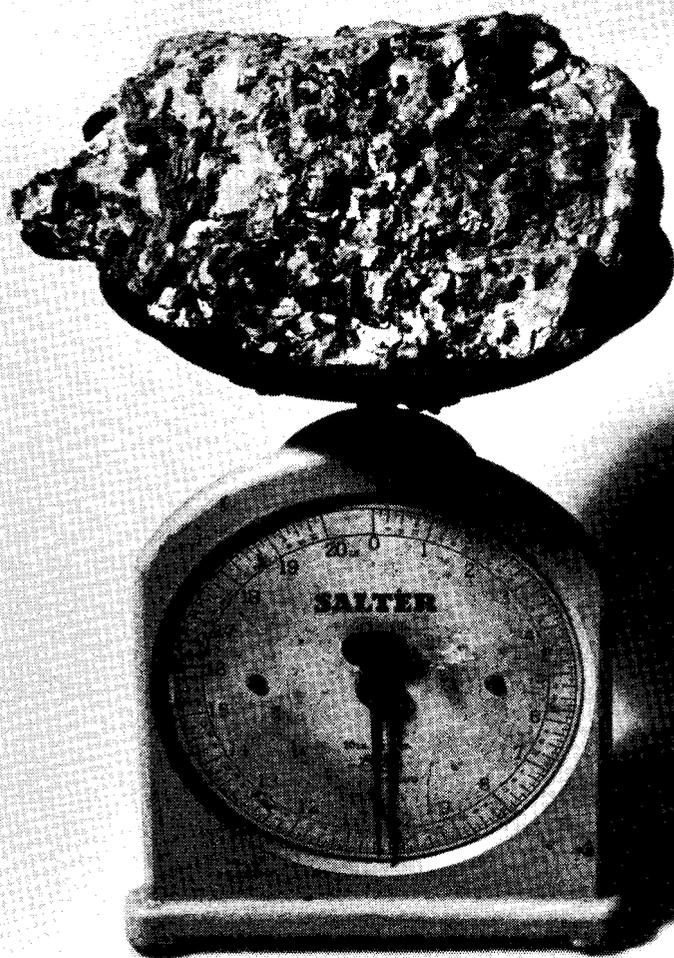
A friend in Italy suggests that I visit the place where her family buys wine. An appointment is made by phone. A two-hour drive is needed to get to the farmer's house. There, different bottles are opened to taste. "Salame" is served. While tasting the wines, other customers — friends of the farmer — come by and join me:

a soccer star, the Archbishop of a Latin American country. Whoever stays long enough is invited out for lunch. We eat truffles and try several varieties of wine. My kids get their share of truffles and wine. The farmer pays the bill.

Comparables

The Trojan Horse, Toronto

Pink and green words projected on a dark background. The audience is told the immigrant woman (from the Azores?) lost her gloves in the to-her-unknown American-made washing machine. *The Immigrant Woman, And Her Basic Needs, As Seen*



By The Sympathetic Art Community. I feel sweaty, and must leave. Do I fit that image of basic needs?

The Rivoli

Warm dampness in Spadina reminds me of Spring in Milan, with the similar (international) whiff of smoke from passing motors. Inside the Rivoli an artist colleague refers to me as "this lady ..."

The same story repeats itself in different locations and on different occasions: myself, out of place in the already alienated art environment. Or... is it impossible to cross that blurred cultural area I inhabit without trespassing on it?

Cultural dislocation: mine — or whose?

The Italian Riviera

Hot July day, on a train to Genoa with my kids, I wonder why it is almost always impossible to have proper seats. Boys spot my daughter and ask my son questions in English about her. She looks annoyed, finds a supplement to the communist daily *L'Unita* and cuts herself off from the commotion.

The issue is entitled "Vissi D'Arte..." ("I lived for art. Splendors and miseries of beautiful Italy"), 96 pages, seven articles by women and 23 by men. An advertisement by Banca Commerciale opens the magazine with a picture of a work by Ceroli and the message: "A bank that lives the culture of its own times." The articles are on tourism, museums ("Thou shalt covet thy neighbor's museum"), contemporary art ("Kultura anzi kolossal"), archives ("Scripta volant"), public libraries, archaeology, business ("Leonardo val bene un new look"). An advertisement by ItalGas closes the issue — a lit modern lamp hangs from the ceiling of a chapel of the Academy of Sciences in Turin.

When in Genoa, we visit the display where my uncle's philosophy books — published during fascism, and now under plexiglass — are opened at censored pages: page after page of thick black lines. My kids must understand where we come from.

Meditations

Writing down these disjointed allegories and recollections, I start to understand my reactions to artworks using the struggle of "other" people; it is, I think, a just, but patronizing moral indignation.

There is a difference between the participatory activities I have read about in "Breaking Chains" (the article that triggered the thoughts behind this writing, in "Women and Literacy" *CWS/cf*, Vol. 9, Nos. 3 & 4), and the sympathetic intellectual attitude expressed for a restricted audience only, and emerging from a theoretical art discourse.

What happens when a "different" culture presents itself at the same level as the local one? Toronto has experienced — and actively interacted with — an official imported Italian culture exhibited in public and private spaces. Yet there are a handful of Italo-Canadian artists (poets and architects) who go on working in Toronto with little understanding and recognition from the local cultural community.

Different cultural attitudes might be explained by a different perception of reality. Coming from an old country with a troubled history and all that goes with it — languages, religion, geographical connotations, food and wine — my knowledge of reality is rooted in multi-levelled and often tragic pirandellian absurdities. Uncomfortable, I stand in my never-never land: the local culture

I live in is rightly busy in shaping and protecting Canadian culture; the world I come from often sees art as the cemetery of culture — works of art as tombstones. Metaphorically, I stand in front of my own tombstone wondering if there is a way out of the cemetery I know, and if it is worth struggling for (my?) art as Canadian artists do for theirs. Does it make any sense to ask for a grant, or to exhibit if my works speak another language? Here, I cannot buy wine in any other way than the one offered to me by the LCBO. Fortunately, or unfortunately, I know of other ways.

In trying to give a meaning to our ephemeral presence on this planet, we are always looking for answers and solutions to basic concerns. Science is concerned with reaching a knowledge of mathematical beauty about the beginning of the universe. There are concerns for a cleaner environment, concerns about the status of women, concerns for a more just society. What we find is the smaller in the small, doubts as answers, dichotomies in beliefs, specific disagreements in a general agreement — a fragmented and fractured world.

In these splintered directions, I find myself in the doubtfully advantageous position of being an immigrant woman artist: to be able to see possibly more, but less clearly, than those who know only one culture. I have the uncomfortable privilege of remaining constantly at the edge of Canadian culture. And I say an immigrant woman — not a man — because being a woman means participating in an already blurred world. But, perhaps, because the blurred world is becoming our strength, women artists have started to present in their works challenging possibilities. In fact, I would like to say with Carla Accardi that to dismantle the heroic gesture of art-making, to lead it back into the daily lived, is part of woman's history. It is in this history that I see the possible future of art-making, and might find common ground with my Canadian professional peers.

PAT WHEATLEY

A Subversive

That other who
lurked in the shadows of your childhood
taking your mother's attention
with hidden laughter
squatting on the desk now
asking to be milked of
green poems

She's hunched before it
a machine
you can't fight
seems to get into bed with you
and all through the night you hear

squeaking
as it deals in
words or worse
symbols
disappearing at a touch —
as it clicks digestively

chewing in its operating system
the cud of
revolution.