

KAFKA ON CAMPUS, SANITY UNDER SIEGE

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I

Jerry Zaslove's installation at the Simon Fraser University Gallery, *The Insurance Man: Kafka in the Penal Colony*, embodies Zaslove's reflections on institutionalized barbarism and Franz Kafka's prose. Seeing space devoted to the tangible actualization of Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* evokes in me a tangled mass of responses that are at once personal, terrifying and, ultimately, hopeful.

The installation is an accumulation of images, objects and signs quoting passages from *In The Penal Colony*. The exhibition is the making literal and concrete the printed word. Although Zaslove is not a religious artist, there is a religious quality at work here. Jesus Christ is the word of God made flesh. Zaslove's installation is the words of Kafka made genteel chamber of horrors. As Zaslove puts it, "We reader-spectators are distant from the torment machine and yet are inside it..." The place of refuge from harried campus life becomes the site where we are ambushed into empathizing for the real-life victims from whose agonies Kafka distilled his fiction.

Through the continuity between the excesses of authoritarian colonialism and violence to the body, Zaslove presents a colportage array of mementos, souvenirs and text. He explains, "We see Kafka's texts on the walls inside our head where writing is". The incongruent assembly of items interwoven by Kafka's text beckons us to live Kafka's narrative. We are drawn in in much the same way effective prose or

cinema can, to the deranged mind, become a central motif of perception and thought. Whereas I doubt it loomed large in Zaslove's intentions, this theme is where his installation addresses my deepest pain, my worst fears and my own experience before the law.

II

Comparable to the irony indwelling Kafka's penal colony occupying the art gallery of a modern university, deceptively civilized-looking surroundings mask the nature of the modern courtroom. Fine wood furnishings, spotless carpeting, flags and comfortable seating obfuscate the fact that this is an arena where profound violence routinely transpires. Men and women are deprived of their freedom for years, even lifetimes, life savings are wiped out, marriages torn asunder, families destroyed, reputations ruined and, in some places, people are still sent to their deaths. Occasionally, something approximating actual justice is dispensed. Twenty-eight years ago when in a state of sleep-deprived psychosis and in the wake of surrendering my life to Jesus Christ, I cracked up in the home of my then girlfriend, causing minor damage to her household. I was arrested and sent by court order to Colony Farm for a 30 day psychiatric evaluation to determine if I was competent to stand trial. Originally established in the 1940s as a 'veteran's unit', Colony Farm housed the beleaguered souls who lacked the requisite insensitivity to participate in wholesale butchery or had been brain damaged as a result of trying to. Eventually, Colony Farm became a hospital and prison for the criminally insane.

I was released after ten days of detention and treatment. Despite a rapid return to a normal, productive life and my by then ex-girlfriend's wishes to the contrary, Crown Counsel declared that they would seek to have me found not guilty by reason of insanity and sent to another psychiatric facility for a year. My lawyer assured me that if I copped a plea, I could instead go to a prison work camp for two years. For 29 months I reported weekly to a bail

office as Crown Counsel, without a witness hostile to me, dallied about setting a trial date.

Two days before my trial was to commence, with my re-incarceration a seeming certainty, my lawyer phoned to inform me that Crown Counsel had dropped the charges against me, that there would be no trial—as if I hadn't been through one already. I'd toured one of our province's own 'colonial' torture machines and had seen how its tentacles permeate the highest levels of bureaucratic society.

III

Zaslove's materialization of the textual is a metaphor for alchemy. It aligns his installation, in spite of itself, with a form of radical optimism by way of a symbolic manifestation of the miraculous. This is a non-stereotypical reading of Kafka. With *In the Penal Colony*, Kafka intimates the possibility of escape from conditions of senseless cruelty through the character of the explorer. Following Kafka, Zaslove has engineered a vicarious experience of a torture machine we are free to leave with the same ease with which we exit a metaphor. Central to the installation is, I think, the idea that even in the farthest reaches of secular despair, hope perseveres. Respective to the vestiges of the miraculous in the installation, I'm not suggesting that Zaslove is advocating a symbolic reading of Kafka. He isn't. Yet the process of transposing one form of codification into another, in this case the linguistic into the palpable, seemingly brings to Zaslove's mind and, subsequently, the associations he imparts to us, an aesthetic methodology rooted in the manipulation of text, objects and images that cumulatively take on symbolic significance. As we grope toward making sense of the installation in its bewildering totality, our thoughts may be drawn inexorably toward symbolic readings. The enduring power of the metaphorical that is endemic to all art insures that the aesthetic can never be removed entirely from the symbolic. Neither the installation nor the personal anecdote I have related here belong to a reader-response hermeneutic. Rather, in keeping

with Walter Benjamin's maxim that there is no document of civilization that is not also a document of barbarism, both the installation and my appraisal of it are, at their roots, exegeses on the bureaucratized continuum between rationalism and the barbaric. Symbolically laden hermeneutics are, admittedly, a personal inclination of mine but in this instance, I hope, grounded in the bedrock of the following: "If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again," (2 Corinthians 5:13-15).