VOYAGER

Albrecht Dürer, William Hogarth and Patrick Mahon with Stowaways

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PREFACE

Engaging artists as exhibition curators is both a strategy and methodology, a means to broaden the interpretative potential for the museum. There is a history of such projects at the McMaster Museum of Art, and in this case the invitation to Patrick Mahon was prompted by a multi-part project he undertook for the Kamloops Art Gallery in 2008, entitled *Drawing Water*. For one of the components, Mahon selected Kamloops collection works that resonated with his studio practice and on-going subject interest, but not simply as a thematic selection where water is a compositional, pictorial element. He spoke of his intention "to join the aesthetic and the social, and to link an historical subject of expressive inquiry with contemporary environmental concerns." [i]

There is also the tantalizing impossibility and contradiction in the selection of works, the graphic rendering of a fluid state. This opens up a challenging metaphor; not the raison d'être for museum collecting, but the meanings and significance that can be harvested and explored through association and juxtapositions that need not conform to time (period) or style, although these organizing principles constitute the accepted bedrock of art history. The resulting categorization cannot be so rigid and authoritative because artists form and express ideas, raid styles, disciplines and media, and can achieve unexpected results. In the context of Mahon's McMaster project and thinking, the work of art arrives/appears as the voyager with a message from a "then" to the "now," yet in a complex relay system: it needs to be decoded.[ii]

To continue, the voyager embarks on an arduous and dangerous trip into the unknown: the destination is not necessarily known at the outset. Richard M. Kain's 1947 book on James Joyce's 1922 novel *Ulysses* is titled "Fabulous Voyager." Joyce's *Ulysses* is widely regarded as a critical modern work of art—yet with deliberate references to Greek mythology—and a complex and radical syntax (for some, chaotic) that takes us deep into the nodes of human experience and thought. It is not surprising that NASA named their deep space probe program "voyager" (and also used in the title of the last *Star Trek* television reboot).[iii] Voyager 1 (of two) was launched on 5 September 1977 to gather and transmit data from Jupiter and Saturn and their planetary systems. Its primary mission ended in 1990 when the last images, a "look-back" at our Solar System, were transmitted. Voyager 1's instruments have been systematically shut down in order to conserve power, but the voyage continues: on September 12, 2013, NASA confirmed that Voyager 1 had reached interstellar space a year earlier.[iv] If we are to extend this as a metaphor, its function will alter from instrument to "signal," as it will run out of power and data transmission capacity around 2025-2030. A 12-inch gold-plated copper disk was placed on the probe at launch, which contains "sounds and images selected to portray the diversity of life and culture on Earth."[v] This cultural-social component on a scientific mission is more than a human conceit or folly, and more a projection of hope that there is intelligent life out there. By "earthly accounts" the silent run to a likely suspect planetary system supporting intelligent life could take 40,000 years. Ultimately, it is more about us than "them"—that "we" matter, the proverbial "message in a bottle." One way to interpret this is as an act of art, akin to Mahon's "Stowaways"—his inclusion of small private message objects by thirteen artist-peers—the messages within the signal, within the project-probe. –*IH*

LE VOYAGEUR & NONSUCH

My early life was not spent in proximity to the sea—unless the proverbial 'sea of wheat' that surrounded Winnipeg in the 1960s and 1970s can be said to count. Nevertheless, I spent each summer by a fast-moving river where my family had an aging motorboat. The boat was a yellow and white fiberglass affair that, even in those days, was neither impressive nor speedy. But it enabled the exploration of the Winnipeg River system, and sometimes for one to pull into a sheltered spot to jump over the side to swim, or to lounge about listening to their own voice echoing off the water and the rocks.

The yellow boat became our family's nautical vessel when my parents purchased it with a small cottage in the early 1970s. It was kept in a creaky boathouse and in order to be used had to be hauled up and down a boat slip on a dolly; this required heroic hand cranking at the end of a hot summer day. As with most recreational vessels of the sort, it had a brand name (which I cannot recall), and also a specific model name. The latter was supposed to be 'Le Voyageur,' but unfortunately prior to our owning the boat, the letters 'o' and 'y' that once sleekly connected the capital 'V' and the 'ageur' had gone missing. So, ultimately the vessel came to be christened the 'Lev ageur' by one of our clever friends, and even though the name sounded like a lost Semitic-French literary figure (and not a boat), it stuck.

Inasmuch as I am nostalgically recollecting 'our boat,' I do not claim vast experience with or affinity for such crafts: I have done little sailing, have never taken a cruise, and the boarding of a vessel to view icebergs off the coast of Newfoundland remains a fantasy. Strangely though, another of my most compelling early-life experiences was set aboard a water vessel—a replica of a small ship, a ketch called the Nonsuch, which had sailed from England to the 'new world' in 1670 under the flag of the Hudson's Bay Company.

In the year 1970, the company's 300th anniversary, the ketch was replicated, and was then sailed around Plymouth, England, and the Great Lakes and off the coast of Vancouver, before being trucked on its side—it was only 60 feet in length—to a purpose-built museum in Winnipeg. As a summer worker, I was hired to assist with the 'refitting' of the tiny ship. Among my many tasks, I had to sand and varnish the wooden hull, repaint the hand-carved rails and the figure-bedecked portholes, and tar the rigging that one climbed to reach the 'crow's nest.' I cannot say that as a result I dream of real ocean-going voyages, but even now I sometimes find myself, in an unexpected daydream, atop the mast of a seventeenth century ketch, surrounded by the darkness of a cavernous, unfinished museum building, mutely gazing down at the intricacies of a carved wooden ship resting curiously on a concrete floor, sixty feet below.

ABOARD A CRITICAL VESSEL - WITH STOWAWAYS

As a contemporary artist, I am interested in my own role as a social critic; a producer of images and artifacts that have the potential to acquire some capacity as critical currency. With a nod to Albrecht Dürer's works in the exhibition, I am also fascinated by the idea of the artist as a suspicious or foolish figure in culture. Sebastian Brant's notion of a 'ship of fools' from the late fifteenth century, on which no social being could avoid potential inclusion, and the idea of the suspect character of the artist-rhetorician himself, are rich preoccupations for me. In the context of our culture where the relationship between aesthetics and critique is often misunderstood and undervalued, and art's function as a commodity appears to undermine its capacity for truth-telling, I conceive of artists as significant passengers on the 'ship of fools.' Although William Hogarth, whose wonderfully provocative and

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De iracundia ex leui causa.
Assiduis flagris tardū qui pungit asellum:
Sepius ad longas corruit auriculas.
Ira breuis furor est/nil indignatio prodest
Sincerę mentis est inimica minax.

Irasci si-
ne causa.

Vince iras aīmq3
tuum qui cetera
vincis:
Impedit ira ani=
mū ne possit cer=
nere verū. Iratus
nil nisi crimis lo=
quit. Debet ho=
mo lentū vehe=
mens equitare iu
mentum.

Hic fatuus semper pigrum conscendit asellum:
Turbida quem motu concitat ira graui.
Latrat & exclamat circū se more canino:
Nec verbū placidū toruus ab ore vomit.

xxxii.q.vii.
quid in noib9
Sapiētie. xiii
Ad. Roma. ii
Hierę. xxix

LEFT:
Albrecht Dürer
Of Taking Offense at, but Learning From Fools,
c.1494
woodcut: 11.7 x 8.4 cm

OPPOSITE TOP LEFT:
William Hogarth
Industry and Idleness, Plate5: The Idle 'Prentice turn'd away, and sent to Sea, 1747
etching & engraving
plate: 26.5 x 35 cm

OPPOSITE TOP RIGHT:
William Hogarth
The Times, Plate 1, 1762
etching & engraving
plate: 24.7 x 30.8 cm

widely collected eighteenth century works are also included, might argue against the notion that art's marketability and critical potential are at odds with one another.

My work as an artist normally involves graphic practice, often hybridized materially and spatially, and generally engages in contemporary critical and aesthetic commentary. Among my influences are historical art and craft practices, the works of other contemporary artists who employ graphic strategies (Sigmar Polke and Dieter Roth, for example), and the practices of my artist colleagues and peers. Many of my fellow artists are not engaged in overt visual critique in the manner of William Hogarth, but I observe each as having integrated some form of critical gesture within his/her work, while plumbing the capacity of aesthetics to challenge, invert expectations, elicit wonder, and propose transformation.

The Dürer print entitled *Of Taking Offense at, but Learning From Fools* has particular significance in that I think it describes engagement with the works of artists in the modern world and my new wall sculptures that make graphic reference to some of the selected Hogarth prints. In addition, there is a set of small "stowaway" objects/artifacts/studies by thirteen invited artist colleagues; objects of their choice. While small things, they have a representational capacity regarding the respective practices (and lives) of those artists, and are welcome if consistently surprising company for me and, presumably, for the viewer, on our voyage.

DÜRER'S VOYAGERS

Four woodcut—illustrations for Brant's *Ship of Fools/ Narrenschiff*—are attributed to Albrecht Dürer. The book, which first appeared in 1494, shared intentions with other texts of the time where moral teaching was emphasized through overt references to the inevitable effects of immoral living. Images, both textual and pictorial, of human folly were presented as exemplars of the results of misguided behaviours and attitudes. Interestingly, the allegorical idea of a vessel loaded with careless people, with irresponsible and otherwise undesirable types, was not new in Brant's time.

Conjecture exists as to whether the practice of launching troublemakers aboard a real ship may have actually occurred in the fourteenth century, in the area "from Holland to Austria... The most famous of such ships was said to have started a cross-country journey from Aachen (Aix-la-Chappelle)."[1] Whether factual or not, by the time Sebastian Brant determined to picture such a vessel for means of social persuasion, the 'ship of fools' had become allegorized so that it was then understood as a potential bearer of *all* humanity. In view of the then commonly held moral imperative to live wisely or suffer the consequence of one's folly, it had become an image for the masses.

Dürer's works share the narrative and pictorial tone of the 112 pictures in the Narrenschiff, which was produced by a group of five artists. The titles alone give the flavour of Brant's program: *Mocking of a Good Deed*[2]; *Of Hasty Tempers*[3]; *Of Old Fools*[4]; *Of Taking Offense at, but Learning From Fools*[5]. These works are an overt reminder to me that the critical role of visual art, and perhaps especially graphic (print) art, in moral teaching in the West was of great significance prior to the Modern period. Nonetheless, in more recent artworks, including modern ones, artists often take a critical position intended to challenge, provoke and to *remind* us, culturally-speaking, in order to influence our thinking for values-related purposes. The fact that the rhetorical approach of much Western art has moved away from a didactic or teaching role while still maintaining some form of fixation on the moulding of society is fascinatingly complex and significant. For while artists may not have remained dedicated to direct moralizing and unambiguous critique, it can be argued that, in the period since pre-Modern art involved itself in the formation of the 'good' society, Modern art's role has not fundamentally strayed. But it is also clear that artists now engage in the 'ethical side' of their programs through a language that is complex, indirect, and sometimes ironic.

The critical and ethical-minded role of art is evidenced in graphic works and the conscious engagement in such strategies as negative critique, satire, and parody. Picasso's *The Dream and Lie of Franco* (1937), and Leon Golub's *Wasted Youth* (1994)—both in the McMaster collection—employ a rhetoric engaging subtle irony. Of greater interest to me in this context are the William Hogarth etchings which include powerful examples of social criticism and trenchant, while often humorous, visual commentaries. Although directed at the situations of the day in eighteenth century England, they are compelling for us early in the twenty-first century, too.

HOGARTH'S COMPLEX VOYAGES IN THE CIVIC WORLD

William Hogarth (1697-1764) was the most celebrated British engraver of the eighteenth century. His pictorial narrative aimed at social persuasion—a method now unfamiliar to us. Series such as *The Harlot's Progress* (1733-34) and *The Rake's Progress* (1735),

depict actual figures of the day within extended narratives that engaged period viewers through their reality-TV-like appeal (while still confronting social mores). Allegorical works such as *The Lottery* (1721) and parodies like *The Lecture* (1736) provides a feast of visual commentary. A glance across the expanse of these black and white works suggests that Hogarth was a maker of images who was filled with both humour and venom, while still apparently harbouring a soulful interest in the well-being of the society that surrounded him.

Hogarth's works do not generally betray a preoccupation with the 'voyaging' that operates as a metaphorical linkage in this discussion, but a print entitled *Industry and Idleness, Plate 5: The Idle 'Prentice turn'd away, and sent to Sea* (1747) does utilize the nautical world as its backdrop. One of a series of twelve images, the work is part of a narrative sequence that, according to historian Mark Hallett, "manipulate[s] powerful stereotypes of commercial virtue and masculine fecklessness, and that clearly mediate(s) the hopes and worries of an emergent bourgeoisie in the city."[6] In the image, which is part of what Hallett refers to as a "pictorial conduct book... a graphic satire,"[7] we observe the fate of the slothful 'idle,' who are part of the plebian culture to which more industrious types have become blind. Here Hogarth portrays sea-going as an activity of apparent last resort for the rejected. A view of the entire series suggests that Hogarth thought that the 'virtues' of the commercially successful ought themselves also to be subject to critical scrutiny and perhaps consequential measures. Indeed, Hallett suggests that we could "interpret (the whole series) *Industry and Idleness* in two rather different ways—as a pictorial conduct book that appropriated the themes of popular culture for bourgeois ends, and as a satiric series that consistently calls into question the values of commercial culture"[8] Inevitably, though, *Plate 5* emphasizes the idea that to be 'put out to sea' is the fate of the unsuccessful: a heartless sentence meted upon those unfortunate enough to be rejected by an increasingly corrupt civic community.

The spectrum of Hogarth's graphic works conjures the social anxieties and political challenges for England during an era that was burdened by the Seven Years War, from 1756 to 1763. The war involved the majority of the world's powers of the time, from Europe, North and Central America, and the West African coast, and saw Britain experiencing a crisis of stability to which Hogarth responded. The most urgent reference to that context shown here is *The Times, Plate 1*, (1762), which Mark Hallett says, "offers an extended allegory of domestic faction and international crisis. The scene is city representing Europe in the throes of the continuing Seven Years War."[9] The sort of double-edged capacity of Hogarth's images to function as socially inscribed allegories and as psychologically-charged tableaus is powerfully operative in the work as well. And the image also had the potential to engage the anxieties of the target audience to which it was being marketed. As Hallett notes, "the print's urban consumers, even as they appreciated that the scene functioned as an allegory of Europe's devastation, would have also been keenly aware that it more immediately conjured up the horrific image of their own capital city, London, as a place eaten by fire, overrun by the mob, ravaged by decay and littered with the abject bodies of women and children. *The Times* deliberately tapped into the deepest anxieties of Hogarth's affluent urban consumers about their own city."[10]

This character of William Hogarth's program, its ability to offer to those with the means to purchase, images of a troubled world both seductive and disturbing, bespeaks the remarkable efficacy of the artist's work as a form of 'currency.' His graphic depictions were made for consumption as cultural goods, for purchase by those who could afford them and their messages. As such, his works would have become private artifacts to be held onto and even, ostensibly, 'domesticated.' Yet surely they would not have become completely untroubling to their owners — given their chaotic scenes and their capacity to implicate those with social power as well as apparent power over images themselves.

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