

Some one at the Art Gallery of Ontario – this was during the Matthew Teitelbaum years, when that gallery's interest in Canadian art was at its nadir – was told to dispose of copies of videotapes that Curnoe had donated (perhaps there were duplicate copies, or perhaps because this was evidently just a document of an artist taking with friends, they thought it had no interest, I really don't know). But the person sent me the video instead of disposing of it. I decided that, before the tape disintegrated, I would transcribe the dialogue. Here it is.

GREG CURNOE

Greg: My name is Greg Curnoe and at the present time I am forty-four years old and will be forty-five in November of 1981. I am a fourth generation Londoner, I've lived in London all my life. Obviously I've worked out of London. I'm a painter and a writer and many of my ideas come out of things around here. This was an unusual position to take in the sixties. It may be still an unusual position to take, but it seems to me to represent in Ontario something about Canada, because I don't think of this as a country with abnational culture so much as a country that has a lot of local cultures.

My background in southwestern Ontario was one of comic books primarily and Big LittleBooks and to some extent children's books, many from England, like Treasure Island and Kidnapped. So I read books that had pictures with them. Of course the comic books were a very large part of it you know, kids at that time traded comic books. I think it's not done quite the same way now, as we would trade with friends. So that was my visual background. That was where it started in terms of drawing. And that was the basis of a lot of my drawings. I started out by drawing cartoons, and that's what you see in a lot of my drawings, in a lot of my paintings too, you see that element in it. I try to illustrate stories. I just try to go by the connections, the things that we have in common, or the things that I draw that connect with something intangible.

Greg:

There's no connection with the story at all, none at all.

Other:

Well I just wondered what two of the three of them referred to.

Greg

They don't refer to anything.

Greg:

Sometimes I consciously make connections, but it always works.

My mom was always interested in painting, as she had done some painting off and on. My father showed me how to draw a ship from head on and he also showed me a little bit about perspective. Very early on at home I played with plasticine or clean clay, that's what I used all the time, and also did drawings. There was something very sympathetic there with my parents because I always had the stuff. I remember my dad's fedora. The sign of being grown up of course was wearing a fedora and a suit. It's funny that I've never owned a fedora before.

One of the most important things in my development has to be when I went to BealTech. They encouraged the reading I was doing outside of school. They told me about James Joyce, modern writing and modern music. You know, I was a nineteen year old and had this guy Herbener saying you've gotta listen to the Bartok string quartet because that's what you've gotta listen to. And I did. John O'Henry was telling me about things happening with the surrealists and the dadaists and all of that. They obviously taught me at a time where I was ripe for these kinds of influences, when I found out that artists were not people who painted lighthouses and sold them in Nash Jewelry. When I found out that artists did more than that, that artists were actually people who got into controversies who did what they wanted to do; when I found that out everything just opened up for me. I learned that you didn't have to grow up .

I went to work in the school of art for a summer. I worked in the colour shop there and took some of the classes, but I also was connected through the mainstream of Ontario culture through the Group of Seven. A.Y. Jackson had been there as well as David Milne. I was assimilating a lot of the current ideas that were going on in art, but I was also putting in very personal subject matter and very local things as well. I would have to say that my training at Beal Tech was much more advanced than the training I had at the Ontario College of Art. Of course I feel strongly about the College of Art.

I was 25 years old and I'd been to art school and I had failed. I failed to get a degree so I came back to London and rented a studio. Then the problem was to try and have enough of an income to afford the studio and to afford to do my work. That was something that became difficult, very difficult. As I say I taught children's art classes and worked in the post office in the winter. I worked in the City of London's Engineering Department and Surveys department one summer. I worked in a Coca Cola truck as a helper and I also worked on the assembly line at Westinghouse building transformers. What I was always looking for was some kind of part-time job that would enable me to paint most of the time and work for a short period of time. That was very difficult to find. In 1964 I began to sell my paintings. Since 1964 I've earned my living basically from selling my paintings. It was a difficult thing to maintain. I've had to want to do it very badly. When I was at the College of Art I learned to fight verbally with people in positions of authority. In 1960 I did a one-man show at the Richard Crouch Library. Mike Woodward came out, I had known him for a while. He came out and interviewed me and did some coverage of that show. There was some controversy involved with that show.

Mike Woodward: Greg, this is just an ordinary ticket window, why is it in the exhibition?

Greg: Well mainly because I want to put it in here. Because it's the kind of thing you can take part in. I put it right here, and people walk up. The kids like it; they like to take tickets. That's nice. It's better than having you just look at it on the wall.

Mike Woodward: Then the ticket window is better than a picture of the ticket window.

Greg: Well I think that this is a thing you run into a lot, particularly in theories of art, where you find people representing, making allusions to things. This is enjoyable as a working process if you like that, but I personally feel - - - let's not beat around the bush, if you're going to give a person a ticket window - - - give them one. Why bother painting one, it takes a lot of trouble and a lot of work.

Mike: What about this piece with all the no's on it. Were you trying to kid anybody with that?

Greg: No, maybe I was, it's hard to say. There it is, what are you going to say about it? Some people will think I was kidding them, some people won't. As it was I just wrote 'no' on a painting I was doing

and the no speaks and it comes out and it says it. You can't be more explicit than that.

Well I think you have to remember that I've always been relatively young and relatively inexperienced. I probably still am. And that comes out there. I was just doing this stuff. I was not particularly sophisticated in the sense of being worldly and I'm not now. In 1960 I think I filed my first business income tax form. I think I made twenty dollars. It has been very gradual and it was a little bit of a conceit to call myself a professional artist at that time; it just wasn't quite right. I was establishing a career but I wasn't making much money at it. Then at a certain point, after I had been working long enough people could see I was serious. In 1966 I think I received my first Canada Council Grant. That helped me because I received grants over a period of years which helped me to establish myself. Self employed people like us always live in a depression climate. If the money stops coming in there's no income. There is no security at all.

In 1967 or 1968 I was driving along this street and I saw this factory for sale. I thought this is fantastic and thought about it and thought about it. We were looking for a place because we were paying rent on two places, so I approached Jake Moore, who is a friend of ours about it and he agreed to work out something with us to help us get it. That kind of support came at a crucial time and enabled us to buy a place which then had potential. We had an architect friend to help us to come up with a design and we were able to build an addition right on the roof. The place turned out to have terrific potential.

This is a beautiful place to live because we're on the flood plains and down below us they are in the process of converting it to a park and my kids have lots of places to go. It's just generally a very nice area to live in and it is unusual to live in this area of the city with a wooded area behind us, which is what we have in a way. Then we have Victoria Hospital which is sort of an ambivalent kind of a building to live around. It's neat in one way that everybody is sort of connected to it. My mother was born in Victoria Hospital, I was, my dad was, and all of my children were born there. The big Victoria Hospital painting with the numbers on it is done taking its cues from popular imagery. The popular image in this case would be the newspaper news photograph, which would show something had happened. The big Victoria Hospital painting is like that only with a whole lot of numbers, each with a specific incident that happened over a period of two years.

I've been called a pop artist early on, I was called a conceptual artist, I've been called a realist, I've been called a reasonist. I've called myself that, which I don't mind. That was a term that was made clear that it was not meant to put my work in a box but to state what it came out of, which was my own innate environment.

This place is where I collect stuff, I just have stuff around and it's material I actually use. There are books and records, all kinds of stuff. I just like to be surrounded by interesting things, which is what this is about. This studio is a carry over in many ways from my studios downtown which were a living quarters for me before I was married with all my stuff in them. Well this isn't a living quarters exactly and there is a split now between some books that are in house and some books that are in here but this still has that about it. This is a living space in a way too, or a space where I can come and do research. My libraries are important to me and the records are very important to me, as things to think about, as research. So all of that is in here, it's a place where I do other things as well. It's not just an artist's studio, because I don't just do painting. I write, and play in a band.

When people ask me what I do I have a difficult time replying. I do a lot of different things and they're all connected. What people understand mostly is that if you're self employed you earn your living at what you do; they understand that. I've had people work for me around the house that I know who understand the fact that I'm a self employed artist and I make my living at it and I have a lot in common with a lot of small businessmen for that reason. That's one way of being around it, just look at it in

economic terms.

The bicycle print was a real tour-de-force that becomes clear now, but was also a real gamble. It was very expensive to produce, and the idea of doing a print on large sheets of plexiglass which in themselves were quite expensive was also a gamble. Then to print a thing where you really couldn't make a mistake once you got going, and you also didn't really feel free to throw things out if you did make a mistake on it. That was what made it very dicey too, so what was terrific was that we brought it off, and the print turned out the way it did. The icing on the cake was that it was financially successful. I'd been planning on doing a large bicycle print for a long time, in fact the first watercolour print of a bicycle I did full size was a working drawing for a bicycle print on paper. Then the notion of the plexiglass came up, and then the fool-the-eye stuff came up and I was advised to do it on paper as it would sell better. I'm very glad I did it in plexiglass as it made it, it just made the print.

My paintings and the other attitudes have all become so interconnected it's difficult to look at the work. People can't look at the work without thinking of the attitudes behind and around it. So really it's not that pure, that clean a distinction.

We have regular club rides, our bicycle club. We go out in the summer, spring and fall. We go out on Saturday mornings, most of the year it's at about 8 in the morning. They're friendly rides, where you just go out and tour around the countryside. The area you see is circumscribed by the distance you can ride in the morning, so we really get a pretty good look at southwestern Ontario. We see very beautiful countryside. It's very beautiful country around here. We go as far away as Tavestock and Stratford and get to visit all the villages and stop off for tea and things. The bicycle club is called the London Centennial Wheelers and is a very interesting club because it has a real cross section of people on it who get together for these rides. It's really a very democratic organization, almost as democratic as the Nihilist Spasm Band.

Around 1965, I was telling you about what kind of a gathering place the studio was, and very early on I remember Don Vincent among others used to get people playing tin cans with brush handles and making a lot of noise. You know you have to understand that there was a whole lot of people around and out of that grew the Spasm Band and it's just a bunch of people who wanted to make noise together. That's what it is, I'm not so sure it's music, it's gone on now for 14 years and sometimes it's fantastic. When the band is on we're one of the best bands in the world. When it's bad it's terrible.

I've been doing a series of paintings of bicycle wheels for quite a while, and they're circles of course that have been divided into segments. I thought after a while, well this is interesting, I think I'll just do a schematic drawing of a bicycle wheel. In other words reduce it into just a circle divided into segments, which is what it is, in the painting anyhow. Then I thought I was going to flatten it, make it into an ellipse, so I talked it over with Murray Favreau. He taught me how to do it with a string. I'd known something about that but he told me how to do it properly. So what we have on film is the first large version. I'd been using templates for the small sketches, but that was the first large version of this flattened circle which basically comes out as a bicycle with watercolours. Doing that painting was a coming together of a whole lot of sketches and ideas and I'd looked through all the previous sketches I'd done of shapes like that and colours and it was all coming together. Every time I'm doing a painting I don't know what the hell I'm doing. I mean I always am starting all over again. It's not something I can do and just go back and do it all over again and do another one just like it - - - it's not like that. I'm very suspicious of painting something for an audience. I don't want to get caught in that trap because the very freedom I have comes from my simply doing things and people wanting to see what happens and getting nervous and seeing what happens next. To turn around and to start to paint a product that people will like gets rid

of that sense of freedom which I'm very lucky to have. If I'm compelled to paint something I'll paint it regardless of whether it will sell or not. I tend to get suspicious of things when they do sell, not when they don't sell. I've been reading through a lot of my colour charts and I have a very big palette of watercolours from different manufacturers. I've just been putting together colours, either going for complimentary colours beside each other or complimentaries across each other, or warm colours and cool colours and all kinds of arrangements like that, just putting them together to see how they look. One of the first things that is interesting about the way this thing is painted is that I took the easel and made it into a table so the paint wouldn't run and I'm using a paper called harumi paper which was formulated by the conservators of the National Gallery of Canada and it's made in Canada and the interesting thing about that paper is the way the paint dries. It dries with these funny puddles on it. That's what gives the finished painting that appearance is that the painting was painted flat, the watercolour has dried in that funny puddly way. There isn't that much in the way of dripping, because it's done flat. There's nothing like working with material. The ideas and everything are terrific and sketches and everything are fine but basically it comes down to what you do and when you do it. You can't really plan it. You gotta just do that. At least that's how I work. What I had to think about was how I want this background to work and how do I want these colours to look beside each other. I want to make sure that every colour is as interesting as I can find. I want to make sure that every colour is bright and has a good feeling and looks good. Those are the kinds of things I was thinking about. Then I had to break up those segments around that wheel in such a way that the ones where the wheel is squashed in tend to be smaller, so I made those ones double width so they would all be roughly the same area because I didn't want to have emphasis anywhere. I wanted the whole thing to be all roughly the same. That's what I was thinking about, trying to keep that right, trying to keep that whole thing going right like that. How am I going to put this colour down, then figure out if this colour is going to be right or if this colour is going to have a nice contrast. That's what I was thinking about when I was doing it. That was going through my mind exclusively.

There is something physical, actually physical, that happens to you when you look at two very bright complimentary colours beside each other, like red and green. If they're both equally bright, and of an equal tone, then they vibrate, and that's what has always fascinated me is that you do get a physical thing happening in your eyes. There's something about the cones being fatigued or something like that, I'm not exactly sure what happens. That's always been done in my work, using colour in that way so that it's extremely strong. It's obvious that there are things about things that make them into art. For instance if a painting is put on stretch canvas it becomes legitimate art. Or if you put a gold frame or something or a hardwood frame or an art light, it becomes art. And I've always been very conscious of sometimes using that stuff. Who would think that anybody would be interested in a bowl of oranges on a table, what a dumb subject, and you can look at Chardin and you can look at all kinds of arts and I haven't done very nice things with them, but who would think that anybody would be interested in that. You can always say that about anything. Why in the world would anybody want to paint that, it's so ordinary. Or it's so bizarre. That's somebody saying that who isn't interested in what's being painted. They're just not interested.

People can come on and say oh that's no good, I could do that or anybody could do that usually don't do it, so that the people that don't do anything don't take any chances and don't get criticized. It's the people who do things that do get criticized and the people who say to them I could do that are of no consequence; you just disregard them, it doesn't matter.

When I'm working and people come in and look at what I'm doing I think their comments are very important. Basically I want them to be positive. I want them to say what they like, not what they dislike. I guess that's the case with reviews too. It's very nice when some people see and work things that I haven't seen. That's obviously very helpful. It's important to get a thought out response, not the kind of thing that someone says 'are you serious?' That's not really of very much value. What you want is a

thoughtful response where someone looks at it and says what they think about it and sees some connections to other things or makes them think about something else, and when they are original and revealing and things I haven't heard before that's terrific.

Greg: The viewer suggested that it was an inadequate way to express what were very profound feelings he thought because in the one about Jack Chambers all he did was describe the day of his death. I just described what the sun was like, what we were doing, and it seemed to me to be really important to do that, even important to remember that.

My wife Sheila she really likes colour, so she will say things about the colours I'm using quite frequently. She'll remark on them and it will be pretty involuntary, you know it will just come out, it'll be pretty nice.

Sheila: But you're not sure what you're going to do with that.

Greg: No, this side's going to be a different colour, and it'll be a lighter colour. I think probably it'll be...

Sheila: A blue...

Greg: No, I think it'll be an orange, a real orange.

Sheila: Oh, really.

Greg: Maybe a real orange.

I'm reluctant to answer any questions about inspiration but I guess I can tell you what doesn't work. What doesn't seem to work are things that you set about too deliberately or where you have a really good idea where you say 'oh that will be a good painting'. It's not the kind of a thing where you say 'oh I've got it.' You don't do that. For me it takes a long period of time, it takes a lot of ruminating or thinking, and you sleep on it a lot, and it comes together and you realize what you have to do next. That's how I do my paintings and that's what my life is about, an accumulation of things. I think I'm saying things that are important to other people, I think I'm making comments on things that happen and I think that's of some importance or I wouldn't bother to exhibit that. The public has a very short memory and fashion is really a big element in Canadian art anyway or English art in particular. Fashion is a very big outlet and artists are forgotten very quickly. The difficult time is around the age of 40-45. You have to sustain it and your work has to remain interesting, and I don't know if my work has or not. What I find interesting is going back to the fifties to look at these things with some distance on them. So already that's happened a bit where some of my work has become historical a bit in the sense that it's twenty years old. That's very interesting to get that look at things, but I don't think or think about what's going to be thought about in the future. Nobody has any control over what happens, all I can do is do what interests me and what reflects where I am, so at the very least people will see that. They will know that's what I'm trying to do. I am trying to avoid a mannerism and posing. I would like my work to be seen as fairly genuine, that's how I would like it to be seen. That's one thing that is very important to me.