



# In-Class Critique

## "This is when I quit...Just for a second"

I'm inclined toward pessimistic thoughts. I can talk myself out of doing almost anything with a belief in futility. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that I don't have a lot of faith. With that comes a tendency to keep to myself, make decisions based on ease or laziness, and sit in the ruts. This way of looking is a form of preservation. I'm not an outgoing person, so staying away from the world is a way to manage feelings of being overwhelmed, angry and depressed. Part of the problem in staying shut off is that those feelings of pessimism become my story. They become justified and realized. Sometimes I wonder if living in a big city amplifies these tendencies –easier to disappear into the crowd, be anonymous, skip out on things because there will always be something else to come along.

There's a line from the story *Araby* where author James Joyce writes "Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger." I've recited the line so many times it feels like a cliché to refer to again. It is about the moment when idealization and reality meet; confrontation with a truth about the world that doesn't match what we want to believe. The thought is heavy with hope's defeat, but it is also a moment of recognition. *Araby* ends with those words; the narrator's feeling of being duped. But what happens next? What is the narrator to do with his desire, now broken?

I hadn't thought about those words from *Araby* for years, but in looking at Wendy Coburn's Anatomy of a Protest at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery they came back to me. They came back deeply with the wonder of where to go from here, what to do with the thoughts and assertions the exhibition puts forth -perhaps most importantly, with the question of how to believe, how to have faith. At the core of Coburn's exhibition is the video *Slut Nation: Anatomy of a Protest*. I was primed that the video was incredible, but there wasn't any explanation as to why. Such claims typically get my suspicions up, and ready for disappointment. I went into the exhibition with almost no information aside from the title. I

still not sure I know what I'm in for. The video is a documentary of sorts analysing Slutwalk Toronto, and some of the key characters in its march. The video makes connections and observations on specific people from the march, bringing in a conversation about social justice, surveillance and state-sanctioned provocateurs. The Toronto Slutwalk began in 2011, partially as a response to a police officer publicly saying "women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized." The Slutwalk Toronto was the first event of what quickly became a global grassroots series of marches to counter the abuse of language and power, and to oppose the blaming women victimized by sexist culture.

In *Slut Nation* Coburn powerfully tells the story from her point of view. She tells us about her interest in the Slutwalk stemming from activism as a queer feminist. Her words are strong and clear, her voice is soft. She speaks powerfully in ways that are at times humourous, or matter-of-fact. There is a sense of ease and honesty. Her voice and cadence are important to note, there is a humility present, an invitation to listen to her story, to ask questions. Within minutes of the video starting I feel my eyes well up. I wonder if it is from what I am watching, from hearing that other people are moved by it, or if I'm just having a bad day.

Coburn tells us a summary of the story to come and then proceeds to expand on those details. Her story starts with observations on four key people marching in the Slutwalk. These people -characters, caricatures even, form a small theatrical troupe within the march. The observations start simple, noting their costume, and the fact they all carry two-sided signs attached to badminton rackets. She speaks of the way protest signs often say one thing while alone, but when clustered together in constellation tell a bigger story. In this case that story, or part of it, is a story to confuse and undermine. The characters hold signs with slogans such as "slutty is what slutty does," "how slutty are ya now," and "big slut after-party." The messages seem unclear and a little confusing in comparison to some of the more standard feminist or didactic signs. Given the nature of protests and what we know of them, being confused by a slogan here and there is not that surprising. Regardless, the signs the four characters hold give pause, just enough to break up the prevailing narrative of the march for someone looking closely enough.

Coburn remarks on the costumes of the characters and their overall demeanour. Again, neither quite fit with the march as a larger entity. Their wardrobes include garish running shoes, leopard-spotted pants, a yellow pirate shirt, a cape of strung together plastic bottles, and even costume changes throughout the event. They are there to party, yell and to attract attention in a way that the other participants are not. And it works. They provide something for the media to focus on, which in turn shapes how the public sees and interprets the event. They provide a spectacle, something dramatic and funny. As the story unfolds the characters hit the news. These de facto clowns represent the march. Through repeatedly

It is not an exact quote, but Coburn asks “did you ever notice details that made you feel crazy? That made you feel paranoid, afraid or really, really angry?” With some deeper digging a few dots are connected, and some unsettling questions are asked. The video connects the characters to questions of the G20 protests in Toronto. When the summit was on, anyone with a TV or computer encountered stories of police abuse. I remember watching cop cars burn on Queen Street, abandoned. There was no one there to stop the burning. I appreciated the poetry of burning police cars, but was confused. With all of the protests going on why did police decide to leave the cars burn? The burning cars acted in the same way the characters of the Slutwalk acted. They painted a portrait of a movement, childish, inarticulate and theatrical.

Coburn notes the players in the game, slyly saying “I see you” as the video rolls. She recounts the faces of those characters, their theatre, and their tactics as being everywhere. Their faces are recognized in G20 media footage. When Coburn asks the Slutwalk characters “are you with the police?” there is no response. Instead, one by one they quietly disappear into the crowd. With each character queried another disappears. In questioning their motives the characters go blank. They turn from rowdy and outgoing to expressionless and silent.

The scene these characters act out disrupts faith in the movement. They instill paranoia, uncertainty and hopelessness –everyone becomes suspect. The provocateurs distract and plant seeds of mistrust. Coburn notes they demonstrate the distance between here and justice. On TV the soundbite they provide makes opposition to inequality look ridiculous. To the people in the march, to people that want a better world, those three words “I see you,” acknowledge the characters’ role in planting feelings of futility, anger and pessimism.

As a companion to the video, Coburn exhibits a series of objects and photos. She recreates the badminton racket signs (albeit with different slogans,) and photographs piles of clothing from each of the characters in the story. The costumes lie wrinkled and inanimate. The sneakers, bubble wand, pop bottles and sunglasses are documented as though pulled directly from the prop bin of a theatre. They speak of the theatre of life, the stories we tell, and how they are told. As engaging as all of these things are, for me the most crucial work of the exhibition is the video. When the video winds down I am left in tears. I feel sad and angry, not hopeful for the world. In seeing the exhibition I wasn’t looking to be entertained. I didn’t know what I was in for. I left wondering what to do with the information, unsure of how to work with its assertions.

I’m sitting here thinking about this work, looking for some kind of hope in its message, some assurance or reason to believe with righteousness. I don’t think art is meant to instill these

some of the best art leaves us wanting. It offers unanswered questions and sparks dialogue or ideas without removing the possibility for ambiguity. In this case, I'm left with want for justice; hungry for a different world. That phrase from the video, "I see you" repeats. Coburn's insight and analysis is sharp. In pointing out those characters, in revealing their actions and making connections she speaks of awareness. She recognizes and challenges the prevailing narrative. By pointing to the strategies of distraction I think she leaves viewers a little bit smarter.



#wendy coburn #art #toronto #infiltration #queer #protest

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