On the Beauty of Our Perpetual Marginality, and Why it Might be Time for All of Us to Figure Out Our Position on Social Housing

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Two years ago, I made a conscious choice to involve myself in formal politics. I have always been a political artist. Then I was approached by a local, leftwing municipal political party that more or less aligns with my lefty beliefs, and was asked to run for their executive. It seemed like: PUT UP OR SHUT UP.

In the party, there are labour people, teachers, social workers, nurses, groundskeepers, activists, international development workers, retirees, academics, unrepentant Maoists, airline ticket agents, childcare workers, a couple of construction workers, really old folks, an increasing number of young’uns and… no theatre people. HARDLY ANY ARTISTS AT ALL.

I went in with an agenda: Hammer home to a lefty party that culture isn’t a frill. And it all can’t be about people suffering either. Art is bigger than that, and it’s IMPORTANT.

And then I realized: I’m better at some of this than many of the people around me, who’ve been doing it for YEARS.

Not because of me, but because of WHAT WE DO.

[reading body language, making a good speech, being funny in serious situations, working a room, knowing how to become present, listening, letting what you are offered affect what you do or say next, organizing events, knowing where to put the lights, being funny, busting ass for little or no money]
That’s POLITICS.

It’s also THEATRE.

And I believe the things that make us marginal are, in fact, our greatest assets. This marginality must be used, celebrated, exploited, INSISTED UPON because it is our USELESSNESS that makes it possible for us to say something that might actually MATTER.

This marginality is what makes us USEFUL.

[to not know where the next job is coming from, to not feel like what we do is valued, to not know what will happen in the next moment, and to be willing (forced?) to live present inside of that]

It is our GREATEST ASSET. And, in the midst of politics’ stridency and its artificial and transparent theatrics, this is a PRECIOUS COMMODITY. We know how to make shit up FOR REAL.

I believe we POSSESS THE MEANS to affect the direction of our society. Yes. WE DO. Why are we HOARDING IT—our marginality, our dexterity in the moment, our willingness (curse) NOT TO KNOW?

And yeah, the meetings are DEADLY BORING. But SO WHAT?

A small price to INVOLVE OURSELVES in other people’s lives, in our neighbourhood/city/province/nation’s SHARED LIFE. And it’s about MORE THAN FUNDING (but it’ll likely help that, too).

Because by joining CIVIL SOCIETY we can help our allies to EXPRESS THEMSELVES BETTER, and help them understand the value of NOT KNOWING. And they might just start to understand WHAT IT IS THAT WE DO, which can’t hurt when we ask them to support the investment of our shared resources in US.

Because it’s about services for autistic kids, libraries, and the very idea of public, which—I believe—is UNDER ASSAULT ACROSS THE WORLD.

Charlie Angus, Andrew Cash, Tyrone Benskin, Brian Topp (is he an artist?), Elizabeth Ball, and many others—GOLD STARS FOR YOU.
A couple weeks ago I sat at a table and listened to a local groundskeeper union rep articulate so clearly the byzantine system that guarantees that the folks doing the work of maintaining our public schools have little to no say in HOW THAT WORK GETS DONE.

My cohorts (comrades? ha!) around me mostly tried to prove they were on his side, to show that THEY KNEW. I tried to listen. It was me he talked to most. Because MY JOB IS TO SHOW UP.

YOURS, TOO. Right?