

THE HALIFAX CONFERENCE

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A Play in Five Acts

by

Craig Leonard

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## Cast of Characters

<u>Carl Andre:</u>	Artist
<u>Elaine Baxter:</u>	Artist
<u>Iain Baxter:</u>	Artist
<u>Joseph Beuys:</u>	Artist
<u>Ronald Bladen:</u>	Artist
<u>Daniel Buren:</u>	Artist
<u>Gene Davis:</u>	Artist
<u>Jan Dibbets:</u>	Artist
<u>Al Held:</u>	Artist
<u>Mario Merz:</u>	Artist
<u>Robert Morris:</u>	Artist
<u>Robert Murray:</u>	Artist
<u>Richard Serra:</u>	Artist
<u>Richard Smith:</u>	Artist
<u>Robert Smithson:</u>	Artist
<u>Michael Snow:</u>	Artist
<u>Lawrence Weiner:</u>	Artist
<u>Seth Siegelaub:</u>	Conference organizer
<u>Translator 1:</u>	Beuys' German translator
<u>Translator 2:</u>	Merz's Italian translator
<u>Translator 3:</u>	Buren's French translator
<u>Students:</u>	A large, unspecified number
<u>Reporter:</u>	From the main local paper

## Scene

Simultaneously, a gallery, the boardroom of a college, and a video control booth.

## Time

1970 and the present.

## \*Nota Bene

An ellipsis symbol "[...]" occurs occasionally in the dialogue of the script. This ellipsis represents one of two things at the director's discretion: (1) inaudible dialogue or (2) a cipher in the script that may be filled in consideration of what seems most reasonable.

ACT I

## SETTING:

We are in the boardroom of a college. The room is furnished with low tables close to the side walls. The tables separate the room in two with a sizable opening down the centre. Panellists are seated in chairs behind the tables and are facing centre. There are water cups, coffee cups and ashtrays placed on top of the tables. Microphones and microphone stands are placed in front of each panellist. There is a video camera at the front of the room, which runs a live feed into a video control booth, out of view. At the back of the room there is the main exit. It is understood by all that the STUDENTS are watching the proceedings via video relay in a location nearby.

## AT RISE:

ELAINE BAXTER, IAIN BAXTER, JOSEPH BEUYS, DANIEL BUREN, MARIO MERZ, RICHARD SMITH, LAWRENCE WEINER, and TRANSLATORS are all seated in chairs, except E BAXTER who is sitting on floor. A REPORTER is present and seated beside TRANSLATOR 1.

## BEUYS

To help us to realize it has special possibilities. Therefore, they are open, and therefore they are old ideas, and therefore they are wise ideas, and therefore they are greater. But, the only moment is that they are fixed. Yes, they're fixed. Perhaps I can make now a very, I think now, begins a speculation. It is not so important now to say,

but I think mankind has the duty to make free this fixation from the animals to a higher level because man has to care for himself to make his mankind on a higher level. That's a term from the consciousness, from the new consciousness...

(turning to WEINER)

What's the term in English? Bewusstseinslenkung.

(turning to TRANSLATOR 1)

Was meint das?

(response inaudible)

WEINER

The new sensibility. The new life sense.

BEUYS

If it is free from the common system, you cannot forget the other riches. You cannot forget the possibilities. If that is true, then it means to say, if no other man cares for this, then for me, I have the duty to care. Yes, and that's a concept, for me, one concept between other ideas.

(pausing to drink from cup)

Yes. It is the same mind, you could say, a new born child is more able to make a good quality artwork politically. That is the same mind in another constellation...

WEINER

But he is less capable of an artist to talk about it. That's the difference. That's the difference: he can't tell you about it.

BEUYS

Sure, that's the difference, but...

That means he's politically irresponsible. Political irresponsibility which is a Marxist crime. Therefore every child is committing the irresponsible.

Yes. Yes.

WEINER

(with raised voice)

Irresponsible! It is political irresponsibility to not acquire immediately the means of political response. No, I'm not being facetious at all. This is very serious.

BEUYS

Yes, but it has nothing to do with anything or interesting bons mots. For me, I think, we have to make experience from the world fully new, fully new. We are captured, I say it once more, in the culture system. Here one asks what is science now, what is...

(aside to TRANSLATOR 1)

Wie heist der Begriff?

(listening)

...concept of the science, the real natural science now, what's the concept of philosophy now, what's the concept of art now and so on.

WEINER

Richard, you are in an interesting position here. Not in the sense of the American Left, but in a sense that you're the only one that would be at all thrown in with making still painting or sculpture. And it puts you in a kind of position and I'd like to hear what your stance on it is. Not aesthetic or anything else. I mean in a social context. Obviously, you believe in what you're doing or you wouldn't do it. And what you do, you generally do well. So, where do you stand, how do you stand?

SMITH

Well, I think to use the force of analogies, if they are analogies, and not fact, I think that probably what I consider that I'm doing is making a small herd of buffalo...

WEINER

Anachronisms? Do you see yourself as making anachronisms?

SMITH

No I don't think that buffalo is anachronistic.

WEINER

No, you meant buffalo as in an anachronistic thing. Buffalo as no longer a thing to eat. Buffalo must be protected. Buffalo must be coddled, must be put on reservations and really kept because they are almost extinguished. So buffalo stands as an anachronistic thing. Do you really see yourself as anachronistic?

SMITH

No, I don't think of it as anachronistic, but in a way, it might be true.

WEINER

Well, okay.

SMITH

No, I wasn't thinking that, but it could be. Any load of things, in a way, one hopes and trusts that one's work is vigorous and can survive, et cetera, et cetera.

WEINER

Do you see anachronism as a tactique? Or anachronism as just an issue? As a justification?

SMITH

No, I see it as, um, I can get myself into a position here admitting I'm an anachronism, which I don't think is totally true. But, in a way, I think it is an aspect of one's activity. Because the things that existed were in the past as the work you've done before and exist in the past and forever impossibly have a kind of inbuilt anachronism.

WEINER

Well, would you agree with me on my position, which is after you make the art, when you make it, it's art. After in any way the culture accepts it, it becomes history, and it no longer is art, it's history. Therefore, once the culture accepts it, it's history. Would you accept that?

SMITH

No, I think that this is up to the individual response. Like certain artworks in the past become solely history, then other artworks you can view as history but can also view them as tired.

WEINER

I'm just curious. I'm not putting you on the spot.

SMITH

No, no. It's, if your response to artworks in the past is consistent, I mean, whether it's a Rembrandt or a ...

WEINER

Jackson Pollock.

SMITH

Or a Jackson Pollock. It's that it is a consistent reaction.

WEINER

But it's also actually about a consistent reaction to any art that is made contemporaneously as well. In that sense, we're all "captured", in Joseph's terms, in how we respond to art that's around. I'm just quite curious that you don't see work that you do as art, and you exhibit it, and it becomes part of the culture, you don't see it changing from art to history?

(addressing TRANSLATORS)

Could you translate that? After art is made and it is exhibited, and it becomes part of the culture, it becomes history and no longer art.

(TRANSLATORS speaking  
quietly to BEUYS, BUREN  
and MERZ)

SMITH

I think that the unsaid quality of art is not that easily lost, when it...

WEINER

I do.

DIBBETS

Or that easily gained.

BEUYS

I think that history is really possessed. I think it not only belongs to the production of artists: the person in the kitchen trying to make the potato ready, it is history. It is a history act. But perhaps it is not in all cases for us to make a documentation from this act. It is history, but I can't understand the distinguishment between very important productions and the normal productions. All human productions become history. But the potato in the kitchen, a normal thing, if a peasant farmer goes with his spade and makes the ground from one side to the other, it has to do with history and not...

WEINER

(loudly)

But that's the change in contemporary art. Previously art was considered to have timeless values, not contemporaneous values. Now we're able to all sit in this room and say something that just two years ago that art becomes history and that's all right and art is on the same level as making a cup of coffee, you would have been called out.

(DIBBETS stands and moves  
to the seat between BEUYS  
and WEINER)

Already, the art being made in the last two years has so  
sufficiently changed the culture that this can be said in a  
public forum without creating a really uproarious screaming  
and yelling that you're destroying art.

(smiling)

That's what the history aspect, the political aspect is.

SMITH

I think that if the "public forum" had a set of different  
constituents, then you would find an amount of uproar.

WEINER

Okay.

SMITH

I think that that's a possibility. But I think in a way  
saying whether a thing is important or not important, it  
still becomes history. I think when one is doing one's  
activity, admittedly, one's self-concept of the time, isn't  
"I'm doing something important. This is going to be the  
most important thing we see this year" or something.

(as WEINER tries to  
interrupt, continuing  
with slightly raised  
voice)

But what I do find is that certain paintings I see are like  
the most important things I see that year, or the most  
affecting things, or something like that. So there are  
qualities in everything or certain objects. I mean you  
could get a kick from a potato.

WEINER

No, no, no. I'm not making a point of it, Richard. I'm just  
rather fascinated by the fact that people are willing to  
accept that art can't become history instantaneously. We're  
in a new culture, and so on and so forth.

SMITH

Well, it's obviously history. Absolutely.

WEINER

This afternoon is now history because it's already been  
going through the...

(looking at the camera)



whole media thing.

SMITH

But that doesn't make it history.

WEINER

It does. It does. Somebody out there already knows it.  
Therefore it's history.

SMITH

History is not something done by...

WEINER

(confidently)

History is something known by interested parties. It is  
something known by interested parties. Not by any quantity  
of qualities, but by interested parties.

I BAXTER

As we know you are interested in words, so you have an  
interest in the words you brought up.

WEINER

As I am an interested party, Iain.

(to I BAXTER)

What are you smirking about?

(hubbub)

BEUYS

(loudly at first)

Ich glaube dass ist nach genau...

(continuing in German  
privately to the  
TRANSLATOR 1)

TRANSLATOR 1

He means that if you're of the opinion that art or anything  
which is produced can become history, or becomes history  
afterward, that doesn't necessary mean that it has lost its  
meaning for the future.

WEINER

No, not at all. It becomes part of the culture as opposed  
to part of one man's making.

TRANSLATOR 1

Yes, it's not so...

WEINER

It loses the individual qualities.

(TRANSLATOR 1 leans over  
and speaks to BEUYS)

BEUYS

(turning to look at  
WEINER)

Yes, good. Okay, fine. Because, therefore, I mean...

SMITH

Your practice can be some form of activity that becomes a kind of thing but it does enter into an economic kind of situation. I was having some work done in studio and I was working and stretching a painting and the guy turned to me and said: "This is your bread and butter. Is this your bread and butter?" And I said: "Yes it is and this week it is your bread and butter." So in a certain way...

WEINER

I can't speak for anyone else left in this room, but perhaps there are artists who have accepted the designation "artist" as an economic survival measure. But they're not quite sure if they're artists anyway. They know that they're involved in culture politic and they know they're involved in culture action, but they don't know if they're artists, but they accept the designation artist as an economic survival method.

SMITH

Well that depends what you're going to put on your passport.

WEINER

I'm not going to put anything on my passport. For real. People aren't interested, generally.

SMITH

It wouldn't be very convincing.

WEINER

That's not on point.

(E BAXTER laughs)

As Carl would say...

(gesturing to the empty  
seat beside him, smiling)

"The one who's better off in society is probably known by  
one's façades."

(silence)

REPORTER

Can you go back to Richard's point?

SMITH

(laughing, while gesturing  
in the direction of  
WEINER)

My point?

(WEINER laughs briefly  
in response, then becomes  
serious)

WEINER

(at REPORTER)

You're not invited to interrupt. It's out of order.

REPORTER

I'm sorry. I shouldn't...

SMITH

(in defense of  
REPORTER)

Why is that?

WEINER

(to the REPORTER)

Well, generally, we've been talking about the intentions of  
art and it's completely out of order for you to interrupt.  
Seriously, were not aggressive, but it is out of order.

(TRANSLATOR 1 leans to  
say something to BEUYS)

BEUYS

Ah, so. What is the question?

WEINER

(to the REPORTER)

Your hands aren't dirty enough.

BEUYS

I think it is really fine.

WEINER

No, I think it is not. His hands aren't dirty enough. We're all here because...

BEUYS

He's a poet.

(laughter)

WEINER

It's a matter of if you have the right to interrupt, then every one of the students in the school has the right to interrupt and you might as well call the conference off. Ya, it's a matter of quantitative things, impossible to let everybody interrupt, so therefore we can't let anybody interrupt. And what's fair is fair.

BEUYS

Yes, but that is a very isolated situation. I think it would be very good for our situation if we could have questions. If the desire came from others to us, I think that's the best situation.

WEINER

Yes and no. Not for a while. I think for awhile more we must talk amongst ourselves, as performers. I meant that's why I came, that's why we all came. We talk all the time in pubs and in bars with outside questions. This is something else, I think. There are many interested students here who would like to talk. Maybe they could even set up a situation, but I don't think it fits here. I mean, I was here two years ago, and I enjoyed talking to the students.

(BEUYS and DIBBETS sit  
uncomfortably)

(attempting to cut the  
tension)

The question is still in the air...

(grinning)

Is the buffalo your bread and butter?

SMITH

Ah...again you're describing the plight of the buffalo?

WEINER

I'm not describing anything. You can say anything you like.  
You don't have to answer.

SMITH

(laughing)

I'd like to see your question in lights.

WEINER

I'm a very bad electrician.

(silence)

SMITH

No, if you're saying, if you're putting forth the fact that  
possibly I'm the last person in the room making  
paintings...

WEINER

(emphatically)

The problem is that you in a sense in a culture, not by my  
standards, nobody's standards, but by a culture's  
standards, you stand as the only person in the room making  
what they would consider immediate recognition as art.  
Immediate recognition. That is the only difference.

SMITH

This is due to, again, why it gets recognized as art. In  
certain ways, if we could get back to buffalos, you can  
only see buffalos on the reservation, and therefore  
painting you can only see at galleries.

WEINER

On the reservation.

SMITH

On the reservation. And so in a way they are protected. It  
is a situation, and I want to say an invented situation for  
my activity, which probably wouldn't be making those kind  
of fragile objects if the situation were to allow to show  
things outside of the reservation. Therefore, this would  
mean a change.

WEINER

You can show them water, but that you can't tell some  
people which way to go or what to drink or anything.

SMITH

But then that's another...

(laughing)

particularizing portrait. An exterior, public situation.

(silence)

WEINER

He just said he doesn't see the problem.

SMITH

I don't... I don't...

WEINER

(loudly)

The problem. The problem. He immediately related it to my problem.

SMITH

I mean I think the problem isn't something that... I mean I think there is a problem.

WEINER

There is the problem.

SMITH

And there is a problem and  
another problem...

WEINER

...not a problem.

(long silence)

WEINER

Hey Ian, you have to make a joke or something.

(light laughter)

It's quarter to six. I think we can adjourn and eat dinner around 6:30 or 7. What time do they eat dinner in Canada, does anybody know?

SMITH

A drink before dinner?

WEINER

Yes, a drink maybe. Let's adjourn. I think it makes a lot of sense.

DIBBETS

(diplomatically)

I think we can have a good conference tomorrow. In a way we are sitting now, how to say, broken by the [...] It does not make sense to force ourselves speaking about things when we are not there at all. I think it is much better to start tomorrow and the conference we want then.

(room chatter, in agreement)

E BAXTER

Would now or later be a good time to talk about when to meet the students?

WEINER

That's your business.

E BAXTER

I mean if there is an opening for the students.

WEINER

I think tomorrow night after everybody arrives.

E BAXTER

Because I think the students would probably want to know when they'd have a chance to...

WEINER

(assertively)

The pretence for us to be sitting here for all this time and not know exactly what's going on, and probably for them to sit down there and not know what's going on really is ridiculous... The possibility is that they treat the students exactly the same as they treat us.

(brief silence)

SMITH

So, it's cocktails.

(WEINER, SMITH, DIBBETS  
rise and exit boardroom.  
Others remain seated.)

(END OF ACT)