

Feudal struggles from the art school front lines

June, message on answering machine, 'James could you come and do a day sessional teaching each week?'. Great! That will be good, to follow up the last few years. August, still no news from school, wondering if it's still happening. I think semester starts up again this week doesn't it? No contract yet. That's normal. Message on voicemail, 'James don't worry, the contract is in the mail. Can you come in on Thursday instead of Tuesday?' Sure. Wednesday afternoon, message on voicemail, 'James, we've just been instructed by the deputy director (a.k.a. head accountant) money is needed from the art school to pay for the new 'industry focused' production school thus we no longer will be employing sessionals this semester'. Shit! I was looking forward to that and less than one day's notice. What's up with that? With my tail between my legs I ask for my hours back at the restaurant. Which is bloody embarrassing and they must be sick of me doing this by now. Back at art school the students have kicked up a major stink about these budget cuts with solidarity from the international student body. Protests, meetings and lists of demands ensue. They hold daily sit-ins in the finance department and demand that finances and funding are made transparent. The international students threaten to withdraw their fees unless demands are met. Thursday the following week, an article is published in *The Australian* and the finance department finds \$35,000 from somewhere and reinstates sessional staff. The following Monday, message on voicemail 'Can you work on Thursday?'

Cut back to the painting department, everyone is energised, feeling like they have had a victory. I think to myself, the current situation can stay a float for a little while longer. But I'm happy to have some hours none-the-less. Lots of catch-up with students and tracking their progress. I get asked to fill in for another sessional for the rest of the semester. Many tutorials and staffroom lunches follow. Lots of talk about obsequious mismanagement, how this 19-year-old 1st year student just published his own full-colour art and fashion magazine called *Slave*, and grievances about goings on. As we count the eighty dollar kitty we have just raised that morning to pay for catering for the painting department exhibition, we wonder about the government announcement of spending the six billion dollar budget surplus on defense and border protection. Porn, fetish, fashion and celebrity are everywhere in the studios and I kind of feel my general interests are a bit outdated.

News flash! Roving gangs of semi-organised crime are stealing equipment from campuses across town. An honours student gets \$6000 worth of stuff stolen and has to get a small bank loan to repay the school, and two more data projectors go missing from the gallery.

More news from Canberra! Legislation resulting from Brendan Nelson's report (Minister for Education and Training) has been passed in the House of Representatives. Funding to tertiary institutions for

the education of an individual student across all fields of study will be reduced to \$9000. Further bad news! A 30% increase in HECS fees, each university and course will choose what levels of full fee paying students are made available and the introduction of voluntary student unionism and individual contracts for staff (undermining unionised salary agreements). Further nasty threats follow! If this legislation is not passed in Senate and made into law they will become a footnote of the AWA funding agreements. Meaning, thou shall comply or universities will not get any government funding what so ever. Shit! The school is looking at a 35% funding cut next year. Shit, it probably won't be able to operate at all. There are whispers of closure, liquidation or, worse, amalgamation with Melbourne University.

October 16, national day of strike for tertiary education employees. At the union organised picket line I think, I shouldn't really be here considering I'm a non-unionised casual. I feel strongly about the bigger picture so I participate. A great rally attended by two to three thousand tertiary staff, we heard positive reports about union breakthroughs in the sector and we walked to the treasury gardens for a sausage sizzle. The rally was greeted by seven members of the young liberal party who yelled abuse, picked fights, threw punches and screamed about their rights to pay. I couldn't understand why any 20 year old would think this crap. Anyway, some get arrested for assault and are taken away in a divvy van. Despite the fact that this was the first day in Australian history that no classes took place across all universities (even in NSW where it is now illegal to strike) nothing was reported on that evening news. Yesterdays rally gets page four in today's newspaper. There is a big picture of myself and a fellow lecturer listening tentatively at the rally, surrounded by red placards. Later that day at the restaurant, my boss pins the picture up on the board at work and calls me a communist. But I think he is proud.

Next Tuesday morning back at VCA, I read the Melbourne University student magazine *Farrago* because I find out one of the young liberals from the other day is also running the student union. By the looks of things, he is doing a fine job at completely mismanaging things. He has appeared in the Supreme Court for fraudulent use of union funds, non-attendance of council meetings and undermining council procedures and regulations, generally making a mockery of collectivity and organisation. I hope his daddy is proud. I feel incredibly sick and gulp down my coffee. To boot *Farrago* is now filled with institutionalised homophobia, xenophobia, sexism and greeny bashing. At the cafeteria I chat to another sessional, employed three hours a week in the sculpture department who is also acting 1st year coordinator. She says the administrator of the art school has just asked her to assess students work for nothing.



Left: Christopher Hill's installation for the 2003 Victorian College of the Arts graduate exhibition. **Below:** Kain Picken's.



Later that evening, the painting department throws its annual party. Prizes are given out such as best non-use of studio, most minimal and best avoidance of paint awards. It's great fun; some 2nd years do spoken-word performances which are angry and heart-felt, and one very quiet student from Singapore does a routine based on the *Australian Idol* contestant, drag queen Courtney Act. Totally sharp and risky as well as sending up the whole 'I'm untalented but I'm desperate to be famous'. 1st year students rap to Cypress Hill and Le Tigre. Lots of dancing and acceptance and I'm struck by such unbridled levels of creativity and libido. It makes me think I was so uptight in the mid-nineties.

The following Thursday, lunchtime staff meeting. We get a wrap over knuckles from the school counselor about being too critical and judgmental and we all get defensive. We hear that the Director is in Canberra lobbying for more support and the official friends of the school are VIPs at President George Bush's lunch in Canberra. I think, it's a bit of a worry leaving things up to the people who lunch isn't it? There's talk the Liberal Party are paying off the four independent MPs who hold the balance of power in the Senate. Head of school mentions four million has been given to a naval college in Hobart etc... It seems like only a matter of time for access to education to be completely bought and sold by a few individuals just so the hegemony can continue. We also hear that the art school has the full support of a One Nation Senator from Queensland who still thinks education should be free. Later on that afternoon, opposition Senator for Education, Labour MP Jenny Macklin, walks through the painting department promising to make funding and education an election issue.

Later that day, the 1st years show their video projects. There are love scenes between a seagull and a crow, mockumentary boy bands, Hitchcock

chase scenarios, young teenage boys pretending to drive their big brothers' cars, fragmented gossip and slowed down bubble gum chewing. Two more weeks remain of the semester and students are busy finishing things. I felt a bit useless as there is not much time for talk anymore and so much is going on. Assessment follows. On November 11th Melbourne University Council declares it will not assist VCA with funding shortfalls next year. I guess that threw Plan B out the window. Plan A, to shift its funding from the federal Ministry of Education and training to a more independent communications and technology portfolio, will have to do. At the end of semester staff meeting there was a genuine consensus the department is in an advantageous position to employ sessionals next year. Whether or not work is available (as much as I need it) teaching only those who can afford to pay isn't really my idea of utopia. It was alarming to witness how quickly things can change in just twelve short weeks of one semester.

Legislative changes to the higher education sector resulting from Robert Nelson's report will be put to the Australian Senate November 28.

Post script:

During the last sitting of parliament for 2003, recommendations from Robert Nelson's education report were rushed through the Senate around midnight on December 5th. Despite major opposition from Labour, the Greens and the Democrat parties, the four independent MPs passed the proposed bill with few concessions.

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James Lynch is a miserable Scorpio whose daily emotions of cynicism and idealism break the register. In 2003 he was a sessional lecturer at the Victorian College of the Arts.