MENNONITE LIFE

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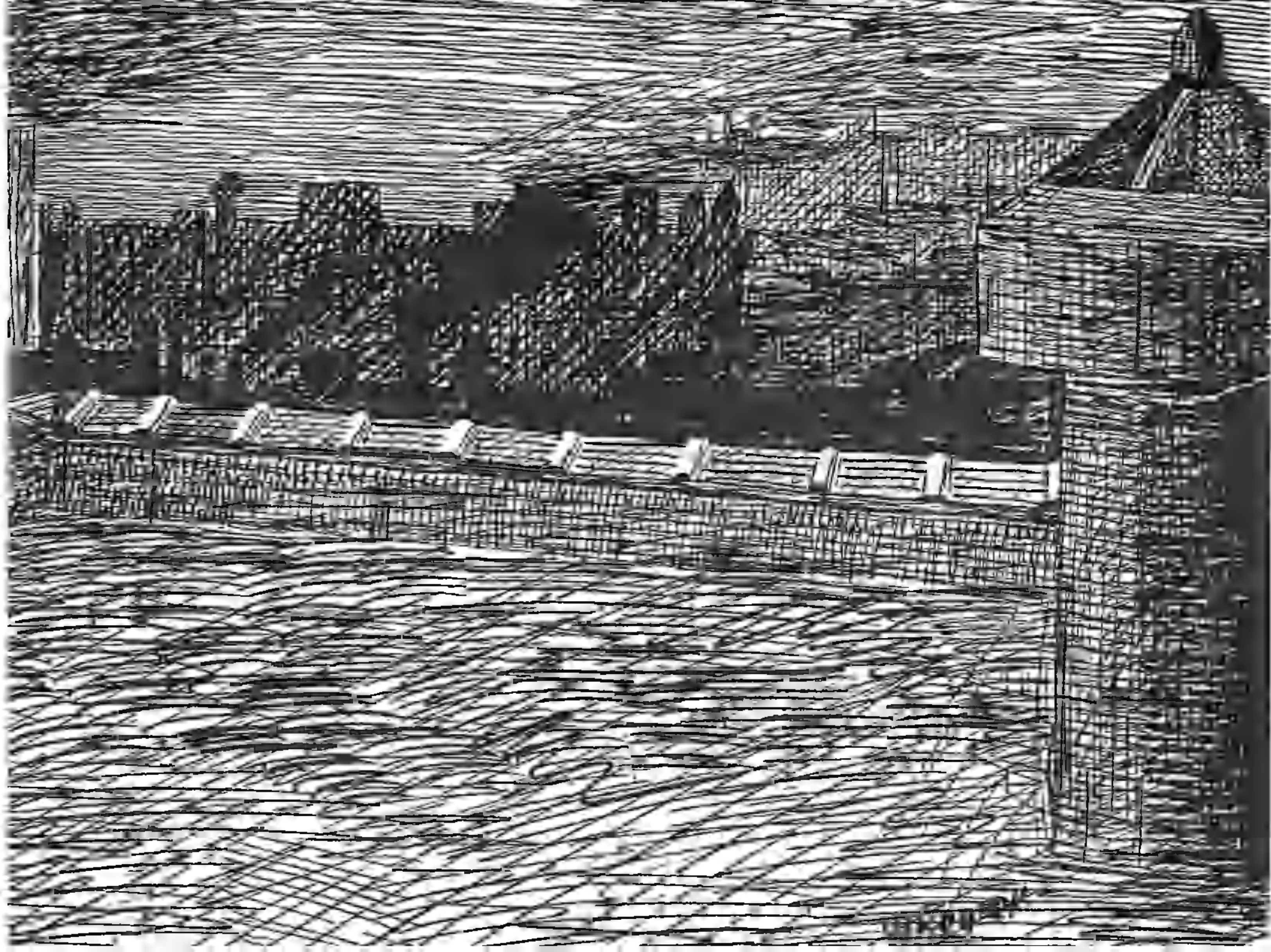

In this Issue

The March 1977 issue of *Mennonite Life* was devoted entirely to a single author, John Ruth, and his Menno Simons lectures presented at Bethel College in October, 1976, entitled "Mennonite Identity and Literary Art." The editors of the March issue called Ruth's lecture "the first sustained Mennonite effort clearly and systematically to understand the deeper meanings of our contemporary love-hate affair with the arts." The discussion goes on, as does, perhaps, the "love-hate" affair with artists who grew out of Mennonite religious culture. Ruth called for Mennonite artists to tell their story: ". . . they will remember who they are, and they will write of what they remember. They will open their mouths in parables, and utter dark sayings of old which they have heard and known." Having made that call, can the Mennonite community live with what the artist offers?

Recently Al Reimer stimulated the Bethel College campus with another Menno Simons Lecture Series on the arts, "Mennonite Literary Voices Past and Present." In his final lecture he spoke of Canadian poets, especially, who as artists, see themselves as carrying a sacred trust but who write from outside the church, removed from the center, interpreters of their own experience. Al Reimer believes the church should hear their critique. It may be impossible to articulate any theory of Mennonite writing or art, especially in the United States, where the network of Mennonite artists seems looser and springs from more diverse backgrounds among Mennonites. Thus, this issue of *Mennonite Life* is not about "Who is the Mennonite artist?" Rather, it is an attempt to showcase the work of some of them, and also to remember their contributions.

Robert Regier's pilgrimage as an artist in relationship with the church, the church college and the world is the content of the lead article. Bob came to the Bethel College Art Department in 1960 and has continued to find ways to "make new" as a practicing artist wherever he finds himself. He shares that pilgrimage with us in the autobiographical article we commissioned for publication in this arts issue. Bob also agreed to do the layout for this issue.

Warren Kliewer, founder of the East Lynne Theatre Company of Secaucus, New Jersey, submitted the article on Karl Eigsti, stage designer. Kliewer noted that as he wrote the article on Eigsti, he "heard echoes of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Representative Men*, in which he treated artists and thinkers not only in their own person but also as signs pointing to much larger issues."

The final section includes poetry by three poets. Poets would prefer to let their poems speak for them. However, in this issue each set of poems is prefaced by an introductory comment which we asked of the poets. Jean Janzen teaches at Fresno Pacific College in Fresno, California, and is publishing her work widely in the United States. Her series of poems grew out of a trip to the Soviet Union. Keith Ratzlaff's prefatory comment introduces his upbringing in Henderson, Nebraska, and in lyric prose shows us one artist's portrayal of his interaction with community. Keith teaches at Central College in Pella, Iowa. Elmer Suderman, retired professor at Gustavus Adolphus College, has a long history of publishing poems in *Mennonite Life*. He notes the importance of that publication history to his poetry career in his comment before the poems.

Raylene Hinz-Penner

MENNONITE LIFE

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Guest Editor
Raylene Hinz-Penner

Editor
James C. Juhnke

Book Review Editor
John D. Thiesen

Editorial Assistant
Dale R. Schrag
Barbara Thiesen

Circulation Manager
Stanley Voth t 20

Cover
View of Chicago through room window
at 20 North Ashland.
pen and ink drawing,
William H. Regier, 1917

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Transitions and Recollections

Some Moments on My Visual Journey

by Bob Regier

The town of my childhood, Mountain Lake, Minnesota, was my summer playground—all of it. The boundaries of this playground were defined by locations of intrigue and adventure. To the north was the dumpground ("landfill" was an unknown term), the lake, and Marten's Creek. The western boundary was marked by Katie's Woods and Schroeder's Pond. A southern expedition would lead to the tracks and the mysterious, abandoned stockyards—mysterious because of frequent evidence of transient habitation the night before. A journey to the east would lead to the school, the watertower, Buhler's Hill. With exceptional resolve and a canteen of water one could continue eastward and reach the "Mountain" that inspired the name of my home town. (Obviously romance overshadowed realism in the 1870's and spared me from growing up in "Midway" or "Mound Lake.") Within these perimeter points were dozens of other gathering places—Epp's sandbox (the largest in town), the locker plant, Reimer's barn, Boxelder Street, Ev and Marty's Drive-in (ten cent hamburgers), Buller's Popcorn Stand, and Worthmore Ice Cream.

Our play was intense, continuous, and constantly in transition. Exploring possibilities was always more attractive than routinizing the new-found options. Pushing the limits of my Erector set with the construction of a motorized crane far exceeding my own height was a single-minded, morning to night activity. Using the crane was a bore. Refining the economic system that would guide the complex, competitive construction of an urban sandbox community was a magnet for the entire neighborhood. Meal breaks were an irritation, and the summer sun always set too soon. However, inhabiting this community and using the new roads and bridges with our dimestore rubber trucks quickly became tedious. One by one our tight-knit enclave of sandbox entrepreneurs would drift away to the attraction of the lake, the drive-in, a game of tin-can alley, or a deadly war game with state-of-the-art, homemade, two-shooter rubber band guns.

I confess to back-pedalling mental tours with increasing frequency; particularly those that piece together the fading fragments of childhood play. It was a happy, trusting time—a time filled with imagination, adventure, problem-solving, and complex collaborations. It was a time when the senses as well as the mind were fully engaged. Television was not a distraction. Each day, each week brought promise and possibility, untested excursions into the world of touch, sight, and sound. Summer was far too short—no wonder I greeted the advent of summer Bible school with hostile resistance! What about Katie's Woods, the lake, the creeks, the fields, the barns? The traverse of that terrain couldn't wait. I knew my priorities. However, my parents knew theirs as well. I never won the argument.

What draws me back to these small-town play experiences—mere nostalgia, a search for clues to self-understanding, speculation about long-lost friends? I'm

not sure. Perhaps all of that and more. There certainly are some intriguing ponderables. One is the fact that three in our loosely-knit play group have spent lifetimes in the visual arts, even though the very first art class in our local school was offered in my senior year. Allan Eitzen is a free-lance illustrator and printmaker in Pennsylvania. Ken Hiebert is a graphic designer/ photographer and senior faculty member at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. My visual pathway eventually led to the art department at Bethel College. Other paths led from the creeks and sand boxes of Mountain Lake to medicine, theology, psychology, and teaching.

Another ponderable is the observation that the moment of invention, of transition, was always the magic moment. "What if" always seemed more engaging than "what is." Stages of design, creation, and formation—whether it be the recycling of clothespins and innertubes for implements of neighborhood warfare or the next sandbox urban development—were always more intriguing than implementation and use. So this backward leap in time and place to my prairie town beginnings has prompted some reflections about personal transitions and magic moments.

Closed to Fish and Open to Water

What is a transition? Dictionary definitions offer slight insight. My most reliable insights into the nature of transitions come from the art process itself. One's strongest work often seems to emerge at transition points, at points when work is evolving—when contradictions are not yet fully resolved, when energy is not yet sapped by consistency. At its point of emergence such work is unfamiliar even to the maker.

Image-making is cyclic in character. A direction reasonably understood, controlled, predictable, and repeatable opens up to uncertain, untried territory. This is an anxious time. The outcome is unknown. Emerging images fail to conform to familiar visual language. Does the image have credibility? Can it be exposed to public scrutiny?

Inevitably, often unintentionally, familiar ground returns. A sustained lack of closure is unnerving. Discoveries are consolidated and routinized. The process that opened closes again. Anxiety is eliminated. Risk abates and mastery returns. Exploration becomes production. Art becomes artifact. The cycle is complete. But intuitively we know that it will begin again. There is no choice. Artmaking is dynamic, not static. It is an unending opening/closing rhythm. Jack Tworkov, Abstract Expressionist painter and teacher compared the art process to a container:

> A container must be closed to what it contains. But it can be open to other substances. A basket designed to contain pebbles may leak sand. A net is closed to fish and open to water, as it must be. To be closed and open is a necessary and simultaneous function of all vessels. A completely closed vessel is the end. A completely open vessel is without substance.[1]

One could add that a completely closed vessel is stagnant and void of life. In artmaking, so it seems, a rhythmic interplay between predictability and surprise is the heartbeat that sustains us. Milton Resnik, another practioner of Abstract Expressionism verbalized the same concept in another way:

> Art without danger is dead. We reduce danger by substituting technique, formula, or style. The moment you have learned how to master something you can't make art. Painting is not doing what you are used to doing.[2]

Fallout, copper etching, 18″ × 12″, 1960

"I have often contemplated art/life parallelisms. Both require the same rhythmic pulse; a pulse that opens and closes, that restlessly bridges knowing and not knowing, risking and consolidating"

Robert Rauschenberg, whose early notoriety can be attributed to his association with the Pop movement of the 1960's, was asked if he knew what he was going to do. His answer was "no." The interviewer re-phrased the question. This time Rauschenberg responded with the observation that if he knew what he was going to do he wouldn't bother going to the studio. For Rauschenberg the art process was without meaning unless the gap between the known and the unknown—the closed and the open—was his permanent place of residence.

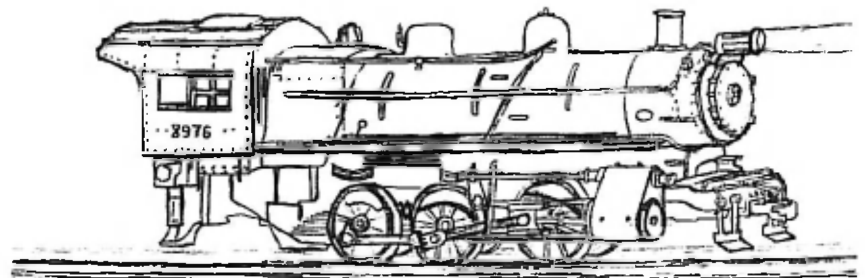
Lionel Trains and Other Fantasies

I have often contemplated art/life parallelisms. Both require the same rhythmic pulse; a pulse that opens and closes, that restlessly bridges knowing and not knowing, risking and consolidating. We have painfully observed lives out of control—vessels that are completely open with no pulsating rhythm that both opens and closes. There is no transition, no in-between, no tension, because there are no polarities. We also know lives that never open. The body breathes but the spirit is gone. Repetition and routine are rarely interrupted by novelty or surprise. Either extreme is seductive. It seems easier to break rather than sustain the tension. Comfort is compelling.

What art/life parallelisms do I see if I mirror my own visual journey? I know that I'm attracted to comfort. I'm mindful of the frequent impulse to abandon the in-between. But I also know that transition points—those times when the pulse can be clearly felt—have been the most memorable points of engagement in my life. They are marked by extra surges of energy. They are times when sleep seems unnecessary, when the next day seems too far away.

The first steps of my visual journey are virtually erased from memory. I know that the act of drawing gave me access to a world of fantasy restrained only by the limits of my imagination. Even prayer could not place a Lionel train under my Christmas tree. But drawing allowed me to possess the most awesome, groundshaking Lionel steam locomotive the annual Lionel catalog contained. One of the surviving Lionel drawings, thanks to my mother, is dated November 11, 1940. This is the date of the tragic Armistice Day Blizzard that swept the northern plains. Within a 24-hour period more than 150 persons had lost their lives. I endured that day of zero visiblity, unrelenting wind and eave-deep snow by being safely transported—through the medium of the pencil—to a world of steam, smoke, and driving pistons.

I was eleven at the outbreak of World War II. It was a time when the meaning of the word "minority" was first disclosed to me. The purchase of war stamps in the local school had become a formalized weekly ritual. On a given day my class marched to the superintendent's office with dimes and quarters. If we were without coins we stayed at our desks while our classmates filed down the rows and out the door. Feigning forgetfulness might have delayed harassment for a week or two, but consistent deprivation of funds finally made the pacifist position of my parents very clear. However, surviving drawings document the fact that I fully participated in the war. I drew aircraft carriers, battleships with guns blazing, B-17's and B-29's, caricatures of Adolf Hitler, and soldiers with fixed bayonets with meticulous detail. They assured



Bob Regier, 1959

my access to the enemy and the implements of war.

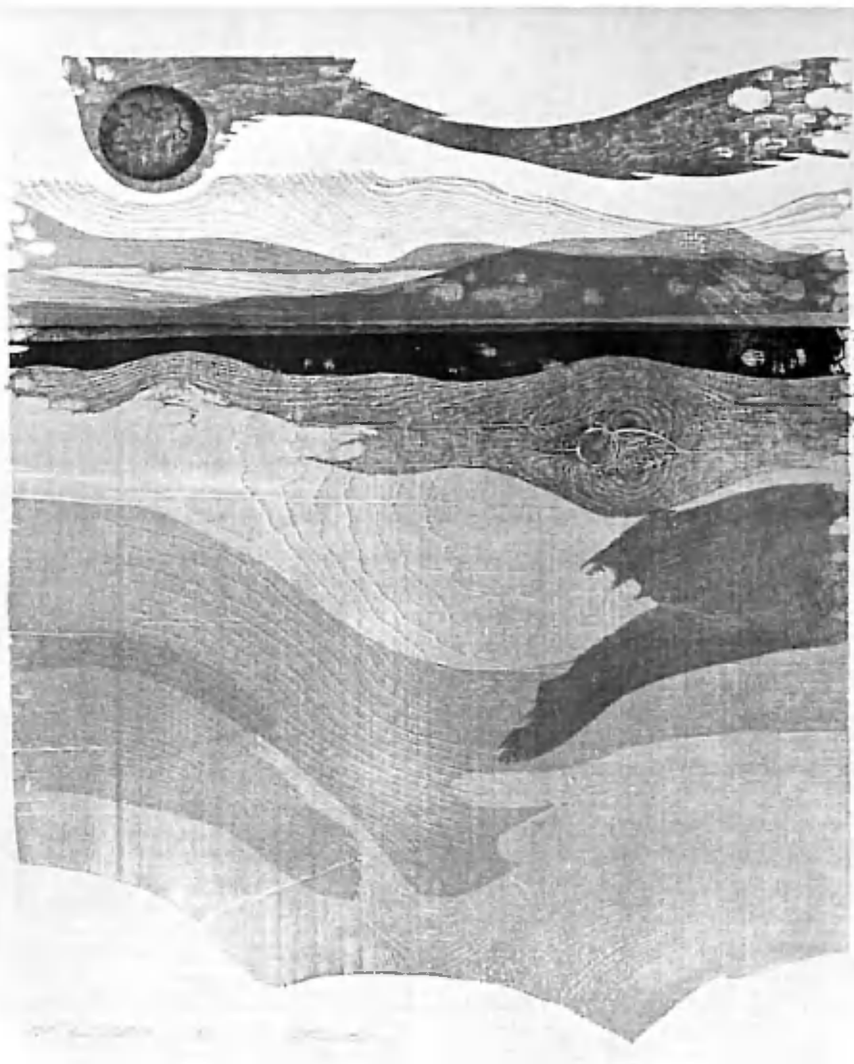
The fact that many of these drawings survived suggests that my parents valued the act of drawing more than its content. This should be no surprise. My father was not a stranger to the visual arts. The son of a Mennonite elder, he left Mountain Lake, Minnesota, for the Art Institute of Chicago in 1917. This fact continues to amaze me. There certainly was no precedent for the rural sons of Mennonite elders to encounter the city for the purpose of exploring the world of art. The pressing necessities of World War I and its aftermath foiled his pursuit of art as a vocation, but my father's visual sensibilities clearly imprinted on his activity as a carpenter-craftsman. During my teen years he patiently taught me the skills he knew so well. More importantly, the indirect lessons unknowingly learned prepared me for the transitions to come. Perseverence and craftsmanship were two of those lessons.

Benton, Bennie, and MCC

Little, if any, research preceded my college choice. My sister, Lola, had attended Bethel. It was our church college. I had little interest in challenging those biases. The fact that art was a strong interest (a major in art was not an option at Bethel) didn't seem to enter the discussion. Consequently, I drifted into a social science major—largely determined by the classes I enjoyed. I pursued an art minor—following, sometimes reluctantly, the firm and energetic mentoring of Lena Waltner. Models to emulate were the regionalists, and so I struggled to appropriate the manicured styles of Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton. I vividly recall the excitement of viewing my first exhibit of original paintings—the work of Benton at the Wichita Art Association Galleries then located on Belmont Avenue. The early fifties were the formative years of a visual and aesthetic revolution in New York and other faraway places, but the threatening reality of a Jackson Pollack or Willem DeKooning failed to reach our prairie campus.

Keeping the art impulse alive during the Bethel years required more than academic channels. The first transition of consequence—one that generated the exhilaration that only transitions bring—was a gift from Bennie Bargen. Bennie was unique, as all who knew him would attest. He was a passionate problem-solver. He was always prepared to explore new paths. As manager of the Mennonite Press he was surprisingly receptive to the first awkward design proposals Ken Hiebert and I offered for use as worship folders. Our proposals were brash, naive, and unsolicited. Bennie should have dismissed our approach with dispatch. Our zeal exceeded our expertise. That fact must have been abundantly apparent. Misgivings that Bennie surely had were effectively concealed. Rather than polite dismissal, he enthusiastically accepted our work and urged us on to further visual exploration. Bennie's faith in our abilities was unjustified. We had no credentials, but he meted out chunks of responsibility and simply assumed that we knew what we were doing. Only in retrospect can I appreciate that critical moment. It marked our passage into the

Flint Hills Journey, color woodblock, 22″ × 30″, 1974



unknown world of printing and graphic design. For the remainder of our Bethel student tenure Ken and I were enthusiastically in the employ of Bennie and the Mennonite Press—a new venture for the Press and ourselves.

The shadow of the Korean War hung over most Bethel students. Becoming a volunteer or waiting for the arbitrary reach of the draft seemed to be the post-graduation options for most of the males. I chose the former and contacted the Mennonite Central Committee. The application form called for a listing of interests. Art and my Mennonite Press experience were at the top of the list, though I suspected that options for artists were nonexistent. Needless to say, the ensuing suggestion that a staff artist position might be created at the offices in Akron, Pennsylvania, was a genuine surprise. There was no precedent for such a position. It would be the beginning of another energizing transition. Equipped with assorted brushes, pens and pencils, Vernette (marriage followed graduation) and I moved to the environs of Akron and eastern Pennsylvania.

In the pre-specialization fifties it was commonplace for MCC to place persons with some promise but little experience in positions of awesome responsibility. Delbert Wiens, no older than I, was researching service possibilities in Vietnam. His intriguing letters from that little-known part of the world were routinely routed through all the Akron offices. Ken and Eleanor Hiebert were assigned to Switzerland to oversee major portions of the Agape Verlag publication project. I discovered that I was to become an expert in printing as well as design.

Within weeks after our Akron arrival I was participating in the decision-making required for the purchase of printing equipment. Within days after its installation I was printing endless stacks of meat canning labels and posing as an expert trainer so that others could soon assume the printing tasks. I marvel at the freedom of the Akron days. Most of my explorations were generously affirmed by William Snyder and others. My colleagues and I were in a joint learning venture. Each new week was unexplored territory. There surely must have been days of boredom and routine. The production of thousands of can labels certainly wouldn't retain elements of a sustained adventure. Time has filtered out the static and routine. Only one dominant impression remains in the residue of Akron memory. It was a time of transition, a suspension between the familiar and the obscure—a time of awakening. It was a magic moment.

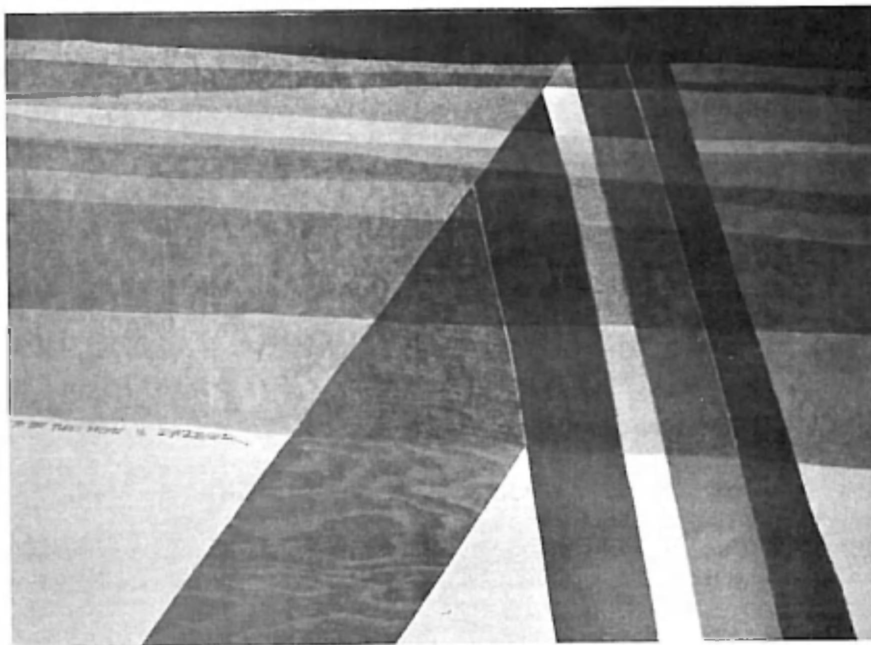
Hometown Caution and McKinnon Spontaneity

The immediate intensity of transitions delays future-thinking. We knew the Akron experience was a temporary one. Yet, the "what next?" question hardly surfaced until it was placed before us by Willard Claassen, executive secretary of the General Conference Board of Education. Another "first" was taking form. New frontiers were emerging in church publication, printing and graphic design. I was asked to consider the first art/design position created by the Conference. By now, however, I was self-conscious about the lack of academic and technical background. The new position was attractive, providing that an academic art program could precede employment. Chicago became our chosen destination. Perhaps I needed to rediscover the ground my father prematurely vacated four decades earlier. We left the ordered landscape of rural Pennsylvania for the disheveled urbanscape of southside Chicago and the Art Institute.

The Akron experience certainly hadn't prepared me for the new encounter with art and artists outside the protective confines of uncritical Mennonite acceptance. The start of this transition was sudden. My first drawing class forced an instant confrontation with alternate modes of visual perception. The instructor, Isobel McKinnon, was a passionate disciple of Hans Hofmann, one of the important influences in the emergence of gestural Abstract Expressionism after World War II. My discomfort grew as well-learned Mountain Lake clarity and craftsmanship confronted the McKinnon environment of spontaneity, gesture, improvisation, and incompleteness. These were qualities at the core of abstract-expressionism and McKinnon's passion. When she urged me to push and pull, to let the line lead to the idea—I was lost.

It was inevitable that the struggle to understand new modes changed the character of my work, perhaps more than those who were waiting at 722 Main in Newton would have anticipated. It wasn't only the influence of McKinnon. There was a daily immersion in art dialogue—in class, on breaks, at lunch, and on the Illinois Central from Adams to 47th Street. It wasn't parochial dialogue, it reached most underpinnings of religious and social assumptions. Participants were fascinating new-found friends, such as Aatis Lillstrom, Vladimir Bubalo, and Sylvia Gross—another Mennonite at the Art Institute. Aatis and Val were street-wise Chicago natives, comfortable and familiar with the McKinnon assump-

To the Plains People, color woodblock, 21″ × 29″, 1977



Vanishing Prairie Series: Clearing the Land, graphite and charcoal, 22″ × 30″, 1988

tions. Sylvia's creative independence and thoughtful conviction left an indelible mark. Efforts to span the polarities among us energized each interactive moment.

The agreement was a two-year schooling detour. I failed to anticipate the degree to which two years resulted in deep emotional and intellectual investment. Leaving without completing the program blocked any sense of closure. Should I have known? What would be the landmarks of my pathway had we stayed four years rather than two? Fortunately, such speculation has dubious value. Our arrival in Newton in 1957 marked the beginning of another threshold experience.

"Family Group" and Chuckles for the Atheist

One of the weekly rhythms in my new world of publishing and printing was the publication of *The Mennonite*. It was a rapid rhythm. Maynard Shelly, the editor, would drop the manuscripts and photos on my desk. Copyfitting and layout followed. The ample latitude Maynard permitted in page layout was extended to proposals for illustration from issue to issue. There was little time for contemplation. The visual material needed to emerge quickly. *The Mennonite* became an arena for spontaneous explorations in visual-verbal connections. But the period of innocence was rather brief. Controversy quickly measures reader ownership in periodicals. This was certainly true of *The Mennonite*. Given the range of theological and social issues emerging in the new decade of the sixties, the current generation of artists may be surprised to know that for a time the issue debated with the most intensity on the letters pages was "modern art."

Being close to the center of controversy was a new experience. Responses were wide-ranging, but mostly negative. My illustrations had the ability to "frighten old people and terrorize little children into behaving." Another reader asserted that "modern art is the antithesis to art as jazz is to classical music, or slang is to rhetoric." Comments accumulated: "It seems that our world is really distorted enough, so we shouldn't be confronted with distorted pictures in the Christian church." "I find it repulsive many times." "Downright ugly!" "It certainly does not seem appropriate for a Christian magazine." "I am deeply hurt by the horrible examples of modern art which have been disfiguring its pages lately." "I heard a man talk about this very thing claiming it was communist inspired. I doubt that but it certainly must put a chuckle into an atheist." "First we object to our trash literature and obscene magazines and then our own church puts out something like this. Disgraceful!"

The author of one of the positive responses was Margaret Rigg, art editor of *Motive* magazine, a publication of the Division of Higher Education of the Methodist Church. She participated in

the dialogue by commending *The Mennonite* for its "frank acceptance of art in all its vigor and fullness, as a means of visual praise, revelation and celebration" and avoiding "watered-down commercialism." The Rigg connection was a stimulating diversion during the years at 722 Main. *Motive*, embroiled in controversy itself for its bold format and fearless discourses on civil rights and other social issues, was regularly publishing work that I had first prepared for *The Mennonite*.

Not all work brought disapproval. A pen and ink drawing titled "Family Group" was quickly generated within the usual brief, weekly time frame for layout and illustration. I no longer recall the article in *The Mennonite* that seemed to call for such an illustration. In ensuing months and years this drawing generated a life of its own. Requests for reproductions were followed by numerous requests for use in other periodicals. No documentation of the pilgrimage of this drawing exists, but hundreds of reproductions were sold by Faith and Life Press. Many mainline Protestant denominations, including the Methodists and *Motive*, reprinted it. Many images before and since, conceived and executed with more care and more thought, have created little or no response. When and why do some images generate a life of their own?

I've had difficulty assessing the impact of *The Mennonite* experience. There was an oblique character to it. Responses were in writing. I don't recall any face-to-face encounters. Perhaps that was fortunate. It would have been too easy to demonstrate insensitivity or arrogance. But the focus on personal visual expression rather than my graphic design tasks planted new ideas for future transitions. One could call timely queries from Bethel College coincidental or providential, but ideas that were growing internally were underscored by conversations with artist/teacher Paul Friesen and Albert Meyer, academic dean. Little did I know that these informal conversations would mark the beginning of a fulfilling, three-decade association with Paul.

Spanning Two Worlds

The profession of teaching had never occurred to me. Yet, the many-faceted dialogues on the nature and function of art that inadvertantly became my agenda at 722 Main seemed to point to the potential of the academic environment, particularly a Mennonite academic environment. Teaching several night classes further fed my interest and curiosity. But I obviously wasn't prepared for full-time teaching. And so the next transition began.

By now we had two children, so an overpacked trailer towed by an underpowered Ford made its way to the northern plains of Illinois. The step into graduate work at the University of Illinois felt at least as long as the step into the School of the Art Institute. There were more than enough distractions. My father was ill with cancer. It was the autumn of the Kennedy assassination—I remember the hour. The course in Gothic art was about to begin. Dr. Rae, in a barely audible voice, announced that Kennedy had been shot. The class was dismissed. We filed from the room in silence. I returned to our apartment and sat transfixed before the TV for the rest of the day.

The long step needed to span two worlds, the studio major in painting and printmaking and a teaching assistantship in graphic design. This combination seemed incomprehensible to most of my graduate peers. The world of so-called "fine art" and the world of graphic design—disciplines that coexisted in the pages of *The Mennonite*—were distinctly separated and hermetically sealed on most university campuses.

Abstract-expressionism was the academic style of the sixties. Its underlying assumptions became the framework for formal criticism. It became apparent, at least at Illinois, that resistance to these assumptions placed a student in jeopardy. For pragmatic reasons, I adopted spontaneity and the gesture—with, however, appropriate Mountain Lake restraint. Fortunately, the lessons of Abstract Expressionism go beyond style. It was important for me to discover that form need not be predetermined. Image can emerge from the process. Act can precede thought. There

1987

photo by Vada Snider

Permanent exhibit, Kauffman Museum

photo by Ken Hiebert

is no "correct" formula for sequencing eye, mind, and hand. Inherent in Abstract Expressionism is the bridging of knowing and not knowing. It embodies the essence and energy of transitions.

> *An idle reflection:* Were patterns of childhood play and graduate work based on identical premises? Has it taken five decades to discover this?

An Eye Patch and Other Thresholds

We left for Illinois as a family of four. We returned to Newton as a family of five. Karen, Steve, and Tim now had to discover their identities as "campus kids." The initiation into fulltime teaching at Bethel during the summer of '65 was dramatic. I entered the classroom for the first time with a patch over one eye—the consequence of a not-so-timely affliction with Bell's palsey. Not all the teaching moments spanning thirty years are as memorable.

Can thirty-year spans retain an element of magic? If magic is released in the in-between, is lengthy Bethel rootedness the end of it? Every Bethel person would likely have a different response. For some, geographic change or the onset of new ventures in the workplace or school, are the necessary transitions. Others can find the needed dynamic in the daily rhythms of familiar environments as well as in the "new adventure." Most of our journeys are a fusion of both.

Hundreds of magic moments at Bethel have sustained me. A few were planned. Most were unanticipated gifts. Who, for example, could have expected the emotional crescendo collectively experienced at The Arts and the Prophetic Imagination symposium? How could I have prepared for the impact of my first visit (thanks to travel interterms) to the Cathedral of Chartres, Corbusier's Notre Dame du Haute, or the hilltown of Siena? How would I have known about the potential of life-long friendships with former students or the shared excitement in their discoveries and achievements? Who could have predicted the afterglow generated by visiting artists such as Margaret Rigg or Clare Romano? Thanks to faculty development funds, intense seminars with artists Jack Tworkov and Milton Resnik were accessible. They were immersions in living history. The indelible marks they left are as vivid as the week in which they were made. I fear that I refer to these marks too often, that the insights gained are shopworn, like an old joke unknowingly repeated.

This recital of Bethel moments is open-ended. To a large degree interaction with friends and colleagues stimulate my prairie interests. They have become a daily and nurturing presence through the mediums of design, photography and printmaking. In the mid-eighties I assumed the role of exhibit designer at the new Kauffman Museum. This was begun with enough naiveté to obscure its complexities. I cannot yet calculate the impact of this venture on my growth and my priorities. It was another world to discover. The intimate encounter with both native-American and immigrant artifacts no longer allows me to define the prairie as space alone. It is *time* and space. The prairie is countless centuries richly layered with natural and human interaction resulting in both continuity and jarring discontinuity. The museum venture was also a step into unknown design terrain that has taught me much about process, teamwork, and serendipity. More than once an unexpected solution emerged from the team process itself. Not all was predetermined with a sharp pencil, T-square, and triangle!

In the Bethel setting little is static. Interaction with the creative and scholarly passions of fellow colleagues, ongoing probes into the meaning and implications of discipleship, a constantly shifting student landscape, the ever-present self-doubt about classroom effectiveness, and one's own struggle to survive as a working artist feeds the dynamic flow. In such a teaching-learning-working setting growth is inevitable. This realization was another of the compelling reasons to choose an artist/teacher vocation.

The gap between the artist/teacher ideal and its reality, however, has brought me to a threshold again. Appropriately, teaching is Bethel's priority. Teaching effectiveness is the standard of measure. Consequently, continuity as an artist is difficult. Some would say impossible. And so one's self-perception as artist as well as teacher often has the elements of illusion. What would continuity as a working artist be like? What would the absence of teaching be like? What would be the losses? I'm not sure. But answers, though elusive, need to be explored.

1989

In an address to students at Harvard the artist Ben Shahn once offered that one should *never be afraid to learn to draw or paint better than you already do.*[3] Perhaps this is not always possible. Perhaps it, too, is an illusion. . . . I hope not.

A Postscript

This is an attempt to articulate only one strand—the visual strand. The result is an inevitable distortion, since strands of a personal journey are multiple, interwoven and inseparable. I'm particularly uneasy about the resulting neglect of family and community strands. At every point—from the sandbox to the Bethel setting—opportunities and choices occurred within the nurturing and corrective framework of family and Christian community. Community was chosen at each transition point, though I knew that the artist-community interaction is not always tranquil. Choosing community is choosing an identity. Choosing community is choosing both freedom and limits. Choosing community is accepting this tension. Sorting and integrating these polar-opposites is an ongoing task.

ENDNOTES

[1]Edward Bryant, *Jack Tworkov* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1964), 6.

[2]From personal journal notes recorded in an Aesthetics Seminar with Milton Resnik, University of Minnesota, July 8-12, 1974.

[3]Ben Shahn, *The Shape of Content* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 131.

Karl Eigsti: Imagination as Motive

by Warren Kliewer

Until very recently three truths were immutable: death is certain, taxes are inevitable, and Mennonites do not become theater artists. But the facts no longer support this third truth. There is a small but growing body of Americans and Canadians of Mennonite background who have made careers in the professional and academic theater as writers, directors, actors, designers, and theater administrators, and who are making major contributions to a traditionally forbidden art form. The most prominent of this group is no doubt Karl Eigsti, widely known and respected in the American theater for his innovative scenic designs.

The fact that such a development has occurred raises fascinating questions. How does one account for this sudden burst of imaginative activity? The formation in 1989 of the Association of Mennonites in the Arts would suggest that the imagination has suddenly become respectable. But how does one derive an esthetic from a theology and from ethnic cultures which for over four hundred fifty years did not encourage the free play of imagination? Or could it be that artistic growth was caused by the good influences of the larger society in which Mennonites now live?

This is not likely. For although great claims have been made for the power of the human imagination, especially by the philosopher-poets of the European Romantic movements, this exalted view was not easily transplanted to America. It is true, for example, that one of our presidents, Thomas Jefferson, greatly admired fine architecture and articulated in his idealistic views on education his reverence for the life of the mind. But we are more likely in this country to elect a Ulysses S. Grant who said, "I know only two songs. One is 'Yankee Doodle,' and I've forgotten the other one." And even Jefferson warned his daughter against "the inordinate passion prevalent for novels," the result of which noxious habit, he assured her, would result in "a bloated imagination, sickly judgment, and disgust toward all the real businesses of life."

It is true that in 1844 in his introduction to *Representative Men*, Ralph Waldo Emerson celebrated the pleasure of "witnessing intellectual feats":

> Foremost among these activities are the somersaults, spells, and resurrections, wrought by the imagination. When this wakes, a man seems to multiply ten times or a thousand times his force. It opens the delicious sense of indeterminate size, and inspires an audacious mental habit. We are as elastic as the gas of gunpowder, and a sentence in a book, or a word dropped in conversation, sets free our fancy, and instantly our heads are bathed with galaxies, and our feet tread the floor of the Pit. And this benefit is real, because we are entitled to these enlargements, and, once having passed the bounds, shall never again be quite the miserable pedants we were.

The audiences that first heard this paean to the imagination probably applauded enthusiastically, as Emerson's audiences always did, and probably continued to warn their daughters never to marry one of those dreamers and their sons never to become one. American audiences are more likely to hear the kinds of lectures Sinclair Lewis put into the mouths of his characters in *Babbitt*, who judge the imagination by the monetary value of artists' creations. "No country," says George F. Babbitt

> has anything like our number of phonographs, with not only dance records and comic but also the best operas, such as Verdi, rendered by the world's highest-paid singers.

And he boasts that

> In other countries, art and literature are left to a lot of shabby bums living in attics and feeding on booze and spaghetti, but in America the successful writer or picture-painter is indistinguishable from any other decent business man.

In George Babbitt's Zenith, the imagination has been tamed. Culture is good for business.

Even if we make allowances for the poetic hyperbole of Emerson and the slangy satire of Lewis, what emerges is a grim dilemma for American artists. The imagination, this uniquely human capacity for knowing the world and finding relationships among the dis-

parate parts of experience, is lauded in theory by the traditions of American thought, but in practice is reduced to a denatured version of itself.

Karl Eigsti deals daily with a specific variation of the American artist's dilemma. A designer of stage scenery, he is acclaimed by critics and regarded by his fellow professionals as a consummate master. Yet the industry in which he has achieved such notable success is plagued by financial anomalies: the large-scale, funded, non-profit theaters have achieved institutional stability while increasingly showing signs of artistic poverty, and commercial Broadway production continues to expand its budgets and income while narrowing its range of interests and its audience. Art and business overlap in American theater. When the economy has the sniffles, the theater shows the symptoms of pneumonia.

In such a decidedly impure environment, how is it possible to be a creative artist? When Samuel Taylor Coleridge defined the Imagination as "the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, . . . a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM," he did not take into account the need to work within a commercial system. Coleridge did not postulate deadlines, labor laws, and budgets. And yet Karl Eigsti has succeeded within that system—so well, in fact, that a study of his career serves as an illustrative study of the way in which imagination works within restrictions. Such a study, even though ultimately an exemplum, begins with biography.

One might as a first step examine Eigsti's apprenticeship, which was a long and productive one. His restless mind encouraged him early to study an astonishingly wide variety of art forms and skills: piano, art history, acting, playwriting, directing at the NYU School of the Arts, and drawing at the School of Visual Arts. He has worked professionally as an actor, director, script writer, broadcaster, lighting designer, costume designer, and theatrical literary manager, in addition to the careers for which he is now known best: scenic designer and teacher.

The fact that he has not lost touch with his Mennonite heritage adds to the rich mixture of his versatility. His roots are in the Bloomington-Normal (Illinois) and Goshen (Indiana) areas. His father, Dr. O. J. Eigsti, was a professor of genetics and a plant-breeder, who taught at the University of Oklahoma, Illinois State University, and Northwestern. From his father, Karl Eigsti inherited not only an understanding of those who spend their lives breeding plants and animals, but also a genetic process for growing seedless watermelons. This man, who grew up in a religious tradition which did not encourage a professional commitment to the theater or the visual arts and who is now cited in Arnold Aronson's *American Set Design* (New York, 1985) as one of America's pre-eminent theatrical designers, is still capable of talking knowledgeably on a regular basis with his Texas and Oklahoma watermelon growers. This designer, who according to Aronson is known for his symbolist and theatricalist designs, still has his feet on the earth—often, literally. He still enjoys that relationship. In an interview with Michèle LaRue in *Theatre Crafts* magazine (March, 1989, pp. 12-13), Eigsti remarks, "In 1968-69, the season I did my first Broadway show, I went from the Guthrie Theatre to Goshen to harvest two hundred acres of seed."

Of necessity, his world ranges from symbolism to business law to watermelon seeds. In America, if not in the older civilizations in the world, theater artists have always had to be financially ingenious and astute. In moving from theater design to his more recently acquired responsibilities for growing and marketing his father's hybrid watermelons, Eigsti says he learned a lot about agribusiness and lawyers and corporations' lack of conscience. But he has always been a businessman of a sort. "You have to have a degree of business sense to free-lance in our very competitive theater environment," he says in the *Theatre Crafts* interview. "I wasn't intimidated by taking on a project in which there were a lot of unknowns: I'd been there before."

A mind that moves adroitly from stage space to visual symbols to acoustics to hybrid watermelons to marketing strategies to the education of young designers—the existence of such a range of abilities raises large questions. How does this quality of mind come to be? Was it something within the individual or in the milieu that made such versatility possible? Can the conditions which engendered this versatility be reproduced for future generations?

One should quickly qualify the inquiry with a clear distinction: Versatility is partly a matter of skill and not necessarily a sign of imaginativeness. For theatrical designers versatility is a normal part of the job. A designer always has to begin by reading the playscript, functioning as literary critic, engaging in interpretive discussions with the director or even the playwright, sometimes going so far as urging major textual revisions upon the creative team. Pre-production work requires that a designer be a skilled draftsman as well as a painter or model-maker or both. The working drawings of modern stage designs often demand that the set designer have the engineering skills one would expect in an architect's office or, in the case of a lighting designer, a knowledge of electricity equivalent to that of an electrical engineer. When a designer works in a small, under-staffed theater (of which there are a great many), the designer must also execute the designs and become crew chief, carpenter, and scenic artist or, in the case of a costume designer, patternmaker, cutter, and stitcher. All theatrical designers, then, are versatile because they have to be. When the normal demands of the work make versatility necessary, it becomes commonplace.

Even taking this into account, Eigsti's versatility is still extraordinary. He goes beyond the usual catalog of technical skills to bring together a high order of literary insight, a characteristic theatrical style, and a firm philosophical viewpoint. Normal designer-versatility does not include these latter qualities. Then add to them Eigsti's twenty-year commitment to the teaching of young professionals, and the questions become even more complex. For professional and pedagogical concerns, though one would hope they might be harmonious, are really not the same at all, and not all designers can comfortably reconcile them. What made it possible for Eigsti? Examining his career in the framework of probing questions seems to lead only to further questions.

Hints of answers may be found in his early education, for in childhood he learned, as we all do, to envision the adult role he eventually fulfilled. He had the good fortune to be enrolled in a public school operated as the laboratory of the College of Education of Illinois State University, and it was in this highly advanced program that he first became interested in theater. In fact, it was a particular teacher, Mabel Claire

Allen, who drew him into acting in children's theater, and then later into juvenile roles in the university theater where during his offstage time he hung around the scene shop and became acquainted with designers and technicians and with the crew work they did.

It should be emphasized that the school presented all the children with many possibilities—artistic, scientific, intellectual. Young Karl was free to select artistic or other options, as were his schoolmates who responded and chose as their natures dictated. The school did not cause him to become artistic. It offered the students an even-handed eclecticism, an orderly array of attractive alternatives.

Coincidence also figured in Eigsti's artistic education. Mysterious and capricious as it is, unexpected opportunity does as much to create artists as does good training and a predetermined plan. This is not to question the depth of the commitment, for after all, coincidence and opportunity bring all sorts of alliances into being, including marriages, religious affiliations, and international treaties. In Eigsti's case capricious luck intervened from time to time and called new directions to his attention. As a sophomore in high school he accompanied his parents to Europe and spent a summer in Belgium and one semester in Geneva. Surrounded by rich European art traditions, he developed a sudden interest in visual art, and this led to serious study of drawing and painting. Coincidence intervened when he had finished his B.A. at American University and was at loose ends after a Fulbright year in Europe. Zelda Fichandler's Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., suddenly needed a scenic designer.

"I was lucky," Eigsti says, emphasizing that he had not been adequately trained for such a demanding job. "I didn't know what I was doing. And at that time nobody else in the regional theaters knew what a set designer does." Though Arena is now one of America's pre-eminent institutional theaters, at that time it too was only learning now to find its way in the dark, and so Eigsti learned along with his employer.

An admirably productive working relationship enduring more than twenty years began thus: by coincidence the candidate and the opportunity happened along at the same time. This was a turning point, not merely a job. "My career," says Eigsti, defining the relationship precisely, "was decided for me at Arena." The implication is that the opportunity created the professional commitment. Carl Jung, cited in Brewster Ghiselin's introduction to *The Creative Process* (1952), refers to a similar reciprocative relationship: "The work in process becomes the poet's fate. It is not Goethe who creates *Faust*, but *Faust* who creates Goethe."

Karl Eigsti, Arena Stage, and their colleagues across the country were unwittingly enacting this drama on an even larger stage. They were not only learning the craft but also participating in the creation of a new profession. As he explains now with the benefit of hindsight, theater design is an art form only forty or fifty years old. In the 1920s and 30s designers were "essentially architects and interior decorators," he says, who created a rectangular space in which actors performed more or less realistic plays. Now, however, theater design has evolved into an art which creates spatial and symbolic relationships which are radically different from those which one expects to encounter offstage. The profession of design now attracts people who are eclectic, people whose primary allegiance is to theater *per se* rather than to visualization. Contemporary theater designers, he says, are "very handy at bridging gaps," and they "cement the relationships between the verbal, the psychological, and the visual worlds" of a complete production. Theater design has become "the process of converting non-visual ideas into visual imagery."

One might emphasize that Eigsti and his design colleagues, in creating a new profession of design, have been engaged in a continuing process of re-educating themselves. The education of the imagination does not culminate in a commencement day, for there is no fixed body of knowledge which can actually or theoretically be mastered. The imagination discovers solutions which are unprecedented because it continually addresses problems which have never come up before.

Language is an important component in Eigsti's artistic process. This is remarkable since many visual artists are wary of verbalizing, preferring to communicate visually. But Eigsti not only loves to talk, he needs to. When the topic is interesting or compelling, there is no such thing as a brief conversation. In Aronson's *American Set Design*, Zelda Fichandler describes the process by which she as director and he as designer arrive at their shared understanding of the design elements of productions. "We argue a lot, we talk a lot," she says. Referring to one production she says, "We just talked and talked and talked about what the central image of that play was. . . . It took us months to find out how to embody it physically." His commitment to language extends even beyond these preproduction colloquies. Even after he had begun to establish himself as a designer, Eigsti worked as an actor and as a director at Arena Stage and as a literary manager for the Lincoln Center Repertory Theater.

In re-examining his background, one might find some explanation for Eigsti's puzzling fondness for language. To the difficulty of working in a risky art form and of creating a new artistic profession, Eigsti brought another intractable reality. The Mennonite world-view, which he inherited by being born into it, has in a few moments in its history looked benignly on some art forms, such as music, but has never encouraged the theatrical or visual arts. Many a Mennonite community, when confronted with a young person considering a professional career in the arts, has been willing to bring heavy-duty censure to bear on that crisis. One would not reasonably expect the Mennonite community to produce a major theatrical designer. And yet it did.

This is not to suggest that Eigsti was oppressed. For him, growing up on university campuses, the severity of the traditional Mennonite view of the theater was softened. In his milieu, he says, the arts were not sinful, and in fact his parents took him to see live theater in Chicago and introduced him to music by enrolling him in piano lessons at the age of five. And yet even in this environment, he says, "You had to find some practical use for your talents. Things you did had to contribute to making a living." To his parents, as to many American parents, a life in the theater did not look very promising.

And yet even though his Mennonite

Set design by Karl Eigsti
for *Speed of the Plow*
Pittsburg Public Theater, 1991
photo by Mark Portland

heritage did not make things easy for him, it also offered a positive response to the tradition: the spoken word. The Mennonite faith is a verbal one, expressing its truths in words, not icons. The theology is bibliocentric, which is verbal. On Sunday mornings the sermon is central, not the liturgy, not the symbol. The spoken word in Mennonite circles is the vehicle by which one worships, explores, debates, explains. If therefore his Mennonite heritage had erected obstacles to his artistic impulses, it had also provided him with an acceptable mode of response to that heritage. If he could not expect his desire to make visual the language of a playscript to be taken for granted, he could take for granted the willingness to verbalize the motive.

Ambivalence is a hallmark of Karl Eigsti's designs. One cannot help wondering whether his existential ambivalence contributes to an artistic strategy, which often produces quite miraculous or magical results. His design for the Broadway production of *Murder at the Howard Johnson's*, for example, showed not only the interior of the building (the primary interest of 1920s designers), but the exterior as well. For a 1974 production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* at Arena Stage, he went further. Twenty feet above a bare stage space he suspended models of a house, a coin, a trophy, a car—icons of the central character's materialistic system of values. The audiences saw the surfaces of things, but through Eigsti's design saw the content of the central character's mind as well. In a bold design for another Miller play, *The Crucible*, at the Fulton Opera House in Lancaster, Pa., Eigsti created walls composed of heavy columns. They were non-specific, as that multi-scene play required, but they also conveyed a visual echo of primitive pylons, such as the rocks at Stonehenge. Karl Eigsti is an artist who sees—and sees *into*—and through his set design enables audiences to do the same. It is an ability probably based on personal ambivalence transformed.

That ability is widely regarded as an integral part of the act of creation. Eigsti regards this as an educational principle as well. Now the head of the theater design department of Brandeis University's professional theater training program, he considers his teaching an extension of his professional life; one art informs the other. From his ability to see surfaces and beneath and beyond surfaces, he has derived a philosophy of teaching remarkable for its benign tone. "My idea is to train them all to be themselves," he says. "I don't have a predetermined idea of where they should go. My philosophy is that each student is not competing but is in an individual tutorial. If someone else is more 'gifted,' it doesn't matter.

He specifically avoids competitiveness, a quality often associated with other major design schools such as Yale School of Drama or New York University. But Eigsti's seemingly gentler mode may ultimately be the most demanding way to teach theater design. For it requires that students know themselves and their own abilities, as was required of him, and that they be constantly open to each situation in which they work.

Theater design is a fluid profession, constantly being changed by the nature of each new assignment and the emergence of unforeseen problems. Each assignment makes an unexpected demand for a new set of abilities. No one designer, therefore, can be a model for all others, for unexpected new problems will call for abilities which the model did not possess. Further, the multiplex world of the theater requires that all participants work in collaboration. The creative and technical problems are so huge that they can be solved only by a coalition of artists, all of whom have different talents and all of whom, being human, are by definition limited. Within this coalition any and all talents, large and small, come into their own, become useful, become valuable. These are the realities of production upon which Eigsti bases his teaching methods rather than on traditional academic competitiveness. He educates students who learn how to collaborate and who expect the unexpected.

In the final analysis, Karl Eigsti does not serve the art of scenic design, nor even the American theater. He serves the imagination. Reluctant like many other dedicated artists to respect departmental boundaries or genre distinctions or the lure of careerism, he throws himself wholeheartedly into designing a set for a Brandeis University student production, and he does the same when designing a multi-million-dollar Broadway show. Art is not only a quantifiable object but also a process informing a way of life. The dedication to this way of life is an artist's response to George Babbitt's trumpeting the monetary value of culture.

But the imagination, says Eigsti, still does have social value. The imagination, as well as the art which results from that process, "gives one the ability to experience without having to pay the consequences." The imagination can lead an individual or a group into a vision of unknown realities, there to explore the undiscovered countries it has never seen, may not wish to move to, but will emerge from richer for having had the vision. It is this which makes an individual dedicated to imagination important to a civilization, this ability to enable audiences to make such explorations. Not having to "pay the consequences," Eigsti says, is true of "not only the negative and tragic things but also the good things you might not have an opportunity to experience." This exploration of the undiscovered always includes a return to daily life. A theater ticket is a round-trip ticket. Imagination gives us, he says, "an opportunity to reach another level outside our daily existence and to incorporate this other level into our daily lives. Imagination enlarges the basis of our existence."

Karl Eigsti has had to make an immense journey from his plain-spoken Mennonite heritage to the rich imagery of his theater designs. While it is probably not true that adversity builds character, it may be true that obstacles stimulate the human problem-solving impulse. Imagination roams, constantly foraging, seeking out new problems to solve, new visions to embody. Four decades after starting his piano lessons, during which time Eigsti continued to play moderately well, he has resumed the study of music. He has enrolled in classes in piano and music theory. Imagination, like Goethe's hero, Faust, searches restlessly, never settling down to say, "Enough. I am satisfied." Does this mean that in the course of time we will witness the debut of Karl Eigsti, concert-artist-former-scenic-designer? It does not matter. American artists, once having come to terms with our society's devaluing the imagination, often focus on the journey rather than the destination. "Americans are always moving on," begins Stephen Vincent Benet's *Western Star*. "We don't know where we're going, but we're on our way!" Imagination likewise does not limit possibilities. Having recently turned fifty-one, Karl Eigsti bouyantly announces, "I'm just starting out!"

Three Mennonite Poets:

Jean Janzen

When we arrived in Leningrad in the summer of 1989, the White Nights had just passed. Our tour group chatted together under poplar trees at midnight, a supper-light at the airport where we waited, the kind of light where you take in the other's face like nourishment before the night. Fourteen years before that, my first trip to the USSR, we travelled in the cold and dark of November, the season reflecting the times. (My poem "This Moonless Night" written a few years later, holds that darkness with its hope of light.)

This tour of 1989 was a kind of review of the 200 years of Mennonites in Russia, the anniversary year. Chortitza, Molotschna, Karaganda, and Frunze all held my family's history, and in the latter two places, the survivors. The darkest of night had passed, but I remembered it—the wrenching, murdering past. I remembered the story of my 14-year-old father weeping as his little brothers clung to him, crying "Don't go!" Unbelievable to embrace the children of these brothers, the first contact of our families in 80 years. Young men and babies with my father's name, the cousins loving to sing, play instruments, and direct choirs just like my father, uncles, and siblings. Glasnost had allowed us into their homes. The moon was full, the night not over, but we could find our way. The road lay ahead, and for the first time in eight decades, we had the privilege of seeing it together.

This moon, usually full, seemed to insist on its presence in the Russian poems. Maybe it became an unconscious emblem, a representation of borrowed light, the way these poems are borrowed essentially from the told experiences of my family. The naked truth is clothed with my protected life, the sun's searing light on the other side of the world. While the morning sun which fills "The Cousins" poem illuminates the joy of reunion and the attitude of thankfulness in my people, this moon keeps raising its enigmatic face—white, silver, gold, changing, but always there. My family's stories are always mine. I see by them.

THE COUSINS

Their hands move across the map.
Here, then here, they say.
Six months on a freight train,
dirt huts on frozen steppes,
the Urals where father starved
to death. Here mother fed pigs,
and here she was imprisoned.
The morning light shifts over us,
Willie's hands so much like my father's,
the fine hairs shining, the curve
of the nails. Here, my father said
to me, a child, breathing beside him:
from Karkhoff to Liebau to Liverpool,
and finally to Quebec, his finger
sliding away over the smooth, pale blue.

*

This Dutch dialect is like a house
I haven't seen since childhood, and we
are reconstructing it with syllables
and hand motions. Beams, struts,
a roof of "Yo" and "Nay,"
timber nearly lost. Now Lena points
past the belching coal stacks—
there is the mine where we worked,
there our first home, fallen
over the collapsing shafts. And there
the tree where we ran and played
with Papa. Papa, who once lay
in a morgue after a beating.
And when he heard voices entering,
he raised his hand. I am alive,
the hand said.

*

Abram has come all the way from Siberia
to meet us. He carries photos.
The album is thin, the pages stacked
with bodies. There they lie
under the muffled ringing of axes,
under moans and mounds and snow,
their pupils fixed like stumps of pine.
The river lies locked and silent,
he says. Nothing but a shriek
of bird, a wing's shadow. Yet sometimes
I hear a creaking, the ice
straining in its gravelly bed.

*

Supper under the summer trees,
melons chilled in well water,
a cup of *kvass* from hand to hand.
Someone remembers a child herding
a flock of geese, or was it
a flight of geese following a thread
of river, tracing it out to sea?
In Willie's lap a mandolin murmurs
the melodies of grasslands, of a windy
sky. Nothing between us now
but our warm breathing, our words
already disappearing.

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Jean Janzen

SILVER APPLES
at the Dnieper River Dam

We know that each bite
holds its histories, both
sweet and bitter,

here at the Dam where water
spills silver in the sun.
We know that the mammoth columns

hold skeletons of people
who fell, famished and exhausted
with labor, men and women

whose names I've heard,
their bodies electrifying
Stalin's world. Fruit

of the harnessed river,
of the stolen light.
Now this thundering,

like a great rumble of laughter.
The spray rises and dissipates
like the blooms in the cemetery

nearby where one stone reads
"No more night" under the dates,
1790-1821, the struggled life

suddenly poured out,
the body's tree planted entire.
Root and crown given up

to the Maker, whose moon
has begun to rise and soon
will rain its silver over all.

UP AGAIN

Cat's wails, sirens,
the breaking of glass,
no matter which city,
means the shattering of sleep.
I awaken to these in Karaganda
and rise from a lake of dreams,
think riots, thieves, the KGB,
but see nothing, only stark
moonlight on pale shards.

Karaganda means "black hole,"
cousin Kolya has told me, these acres
of emptiness over a gutted earth,
coal stacks spewing black ribbons
day and night. Near here
Aunt Margaret and her children
were pushed off freight cars
onto the plains. Autumn 1942,
a dirt hut quickly dug
before the blizzards, a diet
of vermin, and hymns rising
in the dark; tones they clung to
like a rope. Finally a drift
of sleep like threads until
baby's cry, or her own muffled
cry, and she was up again,
bare feet on this cold earth.

Now the cool tile under my feet,
and silence, before I lie down
again into the tidal sounds
of the years, that chain of *Kyries*
and the answering *Gott ist die Liebe*,
moonlit and swirling in the dark.

NOT ONLY THE PLOW

Here by the Dnieper River
our ancestors first
made a living raising silkworms.

After several hard winters,
mulberry trees began fattening
the caterpillars,

and the weaver's shuttles
flew. I try to imagine
my greatgrandfather's hands

gently grazing
the shimmering lengths,
his fingertips purple

with dye, how he saved
the best swatch for his daughter's
wedding dress, for the fine

slope of her hips.
And when they prayed for rain,
it was not for those coarse

stalks of wheat,
as we did, but for the deep
roots of trees,

for that pale green unfolding
so that those ravenous worms
could fill and fill,

then wrap themselves
in threads of sleep,
to be buried in dreams,

to awaken new,
and then to be held
in the soft arms of the air,
amen.

FLYING WITH THE LIGHT

In America geese fly
already roasted to your table,
Grandfather told his restless children.
Even in Kiev, the swirl
of feathers, the golden-crusted thigh,
the promise of a better place.
Now in 2 a.m. moonlight the small plane
lofts us out of Zaporoshya,
over fields of sunflowers and coal mines,
over the pure peaks of the Alataus.
Just yesterday our boat churned
a white wake over the old village
of Einlage. Its rutted streets
lay far below us, its broken
picket fences, mattresses slashed
and stained, and the pear trees
gesturing wildly as they are dragged away.
Now moonlight covers the past
like starched linen. The whole earth
shines and hums in my veins,
and I am giving myself to the cool,
smooth weave of this night,
and to this moon, plump and golden,
flying with its light.

Keith Ratzlaff

The Poet as John Nachtigal

For ten years I've carried around an old tin can key, the kind you used to find soldered to the bottom of coffee cans. I found it hanging on a nail in the old railroad depot in Henderson, Nebraska, the place where I grew up. I took the key then to remind me of John Nachtigal—the man who had lived there and who had died not long before—even though I had never talked to him and really didn't know much about him. Even now I still don't know much, and what I "know" is so embellished that it's hard to find the truth. It's at least partly true that he deserted the Russian Army, probably the Forestry Corps; just when I'm not quite sure, although it must have been around 1920. Supposedly he was afraid all his life that Russian spies would find him, drag him back across the Atlantic, and press him into service again. Maybe that's true, but maybe it's just talk. I know he was a carpenter and built a bungalow on North Main street; supposedly he lost the house in a card game. I don't remember ever seeing him talk to anyone. My mother says with assurance that my grandmother was frightened to death of him.

By the time I was growing up in Henderson, the railroad was long gone and Nachtigal had been living in the ramshackle depot on Front Street since I could remember. Front street is Henderson's main artery—the only angled street in town, skewed against the grain of the street grid, since it follows the line of what used to be the tracks. The depot stood just outside the business district in one of the most prominent places in town. There John Nachtigal gardened a little, kept bees, threw his cans in a pile outside his door and burned his trash in the weed patch between the depot and the high school.

I have in my head only two clear pictures of him. Picture one: When I was little, I went with my mom to deliver a food box to him at Christmas. I remember the cans and weeds, the swaybacked steps of the lean-to porch that Nachtigal—or somebody—had tacked onto the depot. The red paint had peeled and worn to pink. I think I remember him wearing his yellowed BVD shirt with brown pants and suspenders, but maybe not. Maybe this is all a composite of other times and I'm inventing and remembering as I go. I remember a yellow and white cat. Picture two: I was walking home after dark and I looked in the curtainless window and saw him reading a newspaper under a bare yellow bulb hanging from the ceiling. The shadows were hard and his eye sockets and the outline of his jaw were dark. I remember feeling at that

moment both sorry and ashamed for some reason I couldn't and still can't name.

I suppose I keep the coffee can key to remind me of where I come from. A kind of memento, a word which capitalized is part of a prayer in the Catholic Mass, and uncapitalized is a strangely old-fashioned, frilly word that simply means a reminder of the past. In a culture that believes in the transience and marketability of everything, from consumer goods to marriages to world events, it's good to be reminded that to have grown up Mennonite is to be able to look back and find—if not permanence—at least continuity. In a culture that cannot account for death, it's good to have a souvenir—a memento mori.

But it's more than that, I think. I've come to see John Nachtigal's role in my home town as a kind of allegory of the role of the poet in the larger world, as an answer to the question of whether art and artists matter. That Nachtigal lived in the very heart of town, not on the edge of it or on a farm by the river, forced us to think differently about ourselves. We had to include him because he lived with us and we had to account for what it meant to include him. We didn't have to like him or look at him or talk to him, but he made us think inclusively—as a community not a tribe.

Richard Wilbur in "Poetry and Happiness" says "it is possible . . . to write out of one's private experiences of nature or God or love; but one's poetry will reflect, in one way or another, the frustration of one's desire to participate in a corporate myth." Poets can write without audiences; there's nothing inherently communicative about a creative act. But the urge to *make* is still the urge to account for being human. Artists embody their cultures, they can't help it. That's different than being useful but doesn't preclude it. The basic connection between artist and community isn't reciprocal or commercial or utilitarian; poets aren't plumbers (and thank heaven for it). At its core the relationship is wholistic and mystical, the kind of symbiosis you get between the shape of hills and the sky you see them against, or the inseparable bond in the way a curve bends a road. Whether John Nachtigal liked any of us or not I can't say. But he bought his food at the IGA and was buried in the church cemetery. I remember him eating once at the Dairy Queen. If he was ours, in another way we were surely his.

I've written lots of poems that have described John Nachtigal or that have tried to give him a voice. They are almost always ambivalent—someone solitarily trying to justify himself. In a lot of ways that voice has become my own. And I think that's good. The poems don't romanticize him (I think) or me (I hope), unless being alone is a romantic state and I don't believe that. There's nothing romantic about living in a cold depot, or having kids vandalize your beehives because the plaque the bees secrete ruins the finish on the Camaros in the high school parking lot.

During the part of my life I spent growing up in Henderson, John Nachtigal didn't produce anything, like Duchamp who "retired" from art to play chess for the rest of his life—which in the end was Duchamp's ultimate artistic act. Nachtigal was our paradox. He wasn't needed, but he was necessary. His squalor kept us from seeing ourselves as too good, too holy. He didn't tell us anything we wanted to hear. We knew "Nachtigal" meant "nightingale," but we'd never heard one; and we didn't know that it was and is an old-world bird that only sings at night and alone.

Keith Ratzlaff

Letter from a Dry Place

This ailing garden is not
an event, not history.
What I want is small:
one tomato on a white plate
some salt. What I want
tapers off like the morning
into a tethered thing.

The glass in the window
accepts everything and
changes nothing. Not
gulls rising on the heat
not green figs
I planted knowing better.
In a Chinese screen I would
be the one holding a beggar bowl.

When you read this
think of me sitting under
the ungoadable morning
eating a late orange
from the supermarket,
its tough white membranes.

Oh write to me with both hands.
If your letter arrives
in the morning, I will be hoeing
in a far corner of the garden.
A snake will be instructing me
in its low happiness.

The Crippled Farmer Wakes In His Field

and tells his crops he wishes
everything for them—the augerhead
dropping two inches to the left next time,
the huge relief of thanking God for accidents
that do not happen, for anger next time,
more of it, a wrench to pick up
and beat the goddamned auger with.

And the rocks keep melting out of the dirt
as if they were fish or birds
risen from the water with fish
or as if they were only rocks
not causing trouble. Trouble is
not knowing how you got here
not knowing how you got this far
into the cornfield with these legs
and pain and humidity tied
around the stalks and your kids
come out to look for you and
finding you way too easily.

Something Like Grace

The rain stops. Street lights hanging
in the trees will stay that way
for another hour or so, then erase themselves.
Constellations they shaped all night will run off.

On a rise, once, in this same kind of almost light
we stopped above a town whose name I can't remember.
The only thing doing its work that early
was the red pulse of a grain elevator
opening and closing its hand in hope.
It was comforting then to think
that maybe a pilot could be saved by it,
that at the last second he might
bank up and out of his own mistake,
rescued by something like grace.

This morning you are asleep a whole house of rooms away.
It's nobody's fault that if I woke you and asked,
you wouldn't remember that sky and a day
that mumbled into the world the way everything does.
And I won't wake you to see
the traffic coming out of hiding,
or the light galloping in from nowhere.
At breakfast I will only be able to tell you how,
without your seeing it, the sun discovered this town;
how while you slept it rained and stopped.

On Cedar Bluff

Sassafras tries to hide so well
it fails—each leaf split
differently, disguised as an oak
or a face or the state of Michigan.
It shouldn't try so hard.
One mutation might fool us, but not
this many. Diversity comes back
to a single thing, one root
trying to unconvince us.

The cedars here step out into nothing.
Cantilevered over the river
they are safe from us, smarter
than anything else on the ridge.
We try to imagine how perfect
that kind of balance must be:
the ratio of stone-locked roots
to the twist of trunks and air.
It's what we hope survives us.

Even this far out from a town
we belong to, the bells from a school
practise how to ring us home.
They have only one thought—
the same note teaching the air
every day about what is possible.
Today, drinking wine with you on this ridge,
I am learning there is only one
story in the world worth telling:
All his life a man finds friends
and leaves them; he spends all his life
going back the way he's come.

Elmer Suderman

I started contributing to *Mennonite Life* about 1950, writing book reviews, mostly about Mennonite fiction. Since then I've written more book reviews, some articles (seven if my bibliography is correct), some translations, a bibliography of Mennonite novels, and lately dozens of poems. *Mennonite Life* offered me the opportunity to publish and still does. More important, Dr. Krahn and subsequent editors have encouraged me to continue writing. Now I've published in all kinds of journals. My work includes poems (over 200 in about 50 different journals), short stories, critical articles, sermons, and translations.

MY MOTHER AND A PH.D.

My mother came to see me once
when I was working on my Ph.D.
She did not understand why.
"It won't help you plow the land
your father homesteaded.
It won't help you heal the sick.
It will make you sick in the head."

She was right, of course, at least
about plowing the land,
or healing the sick, and sometimes
I wondered if she wasn't right
about it making me sick in the head.

She couldn't understand why I wanted
to read Emily Dickinson or William Carlos Williams.
"Never heard of them," she said
and thought that "Amazing Grace"
was all the poetry anyone would
ever need. "You can sing
'Amazing Grace,' and you can't sing
'So Much Depends Upon a Red Wheel Barrow,' "
which, to help her understand what I did,
I had read to her.

She worried about the two-room
upstairs apartment in which we lived.
"Too small," she said.
"Too many houses here and
too close together. Where do you
plant potatoes?"

She was glad that they at least had had
enough sense to build the university
on a hill. "You couldn't raise wheat or corn
or alfalfa either on that sand.
Too steep to plow."
She was right about that.

KEEPING THE SABBATH

Depression owned our land
and our lives.
On Sundays we went
to church, its clear windows
framing cows grazing winter wheat.

Fragile curtains
through which we could hear
what everyone else
was saying
did not keep us from carrying
on our Sunday School.

Restlessly we waited for the end
of the long sermon,
and after church stayed
to make dates,
decide where to play baseball
or softball
or touch football,
hoping our parents would sleep
as they usually did
and not notice our desecration
of the Sabbath.

Elmer Suderman

OUR PLEASURES ARE SIMPLE
April 28, 1936

Our pleasures are simple.
The rain drifts in from the northwest.
We were afraid
it wouldn't come in time.
It did.

So now we celebrate
watching the slow steady drops
that leave our topsoil
in place,
not carrying it off to the Cimmaron River
then down to the Gulf of Mexico
where it's of no use to us
or anyone else.

So now we celebrate
watching inch-small streams
slowing slipping
around and between the groove
in the tires on the 15-30
McCormick Deering tractor.

The rain drifts in from the northwest.
So now we celebrate
standing by the west window
listening to the rain.
Our pleasures are simple.

the wind wouldn't say no

but it wouldn't say yes either.
sometimes it knew where north was
and pointed its wavering finger
in that direction but then
it would change its mind
and point west or north northwest
rushing into uncertainty
not knowing where it would go
tomorrow or where it had been
yesterday, never willing to say
"this is it   this is it."

Book Reviews

Mennonite Artist: The Insider as Outsider. Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1990. Pp. 60. ($15.00 CAN — paperback)

This exhibition, "An Exhibition of Visual Arts by Artists of Mennonite Heritage" at the Main/Access Gallery in Winnipeg, Manitoba, July 6-29, 1990, and its documentation in this catalogue were sponsored by the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society for the Mennonite World Conference Assembly 12 in Winnipeg. The project was conceived, administered, and curated by Priscilla B. Reimer who also wrote the catalogue essay.

It is to her credit that the circle of support for this project is impressively wide. In addition to many individuals, it includes the Manitoba Department of Culture, Heritage, and Recreation; the Manitoba Arts Council; the City of Winnipeg; and Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada.

Fourteen contemporary North American artists of Mennonite heritage are introduced. With the exception of Irma Martin Yost, representing the United States, all others are Canadian, most from Manitoba, and most are women artists: Dale Boldt, from Saskatchewan; Les Brandt, from Manitoba; Margaret Doell, Manitoba; Aganetha Dyck, Manitoba; Helene Dyck, Manitoba; Leonard Gerbrandt, Saskatchewan; Milly Giesbrecht, Manitoba; Lois Klassen, Manitoba; Ernie Kroeger, Manitoba; Grace Nickel, Manitoba; Susan Shantz, Ontario; Jean Smallwood, Manitoba; Al Toews, Manitoba; and lastly, Irma Martin Yost, Indiana.

Each artist is introduced with one work, a full page color reproduction, which is balanced as it were on the opposite page with a statement by the artist about his or her work, as well as a complete chronology and a photographic portrait. These quotations and statements by the artists are taken directly from interviews conducted by Priscilla Reimer, who emphasizes in her preface that in order to understand a work one must also understand the life of the artist, because "the fullness of being alive affects an artist's work."

Criteria for inclusion in the exhibition were twofold: works by artists of Mennonite heritage, i.e., artists who were "nurtured in the Mennonite tradition," and work that was recent and reflected a broad spectrum of media.

As a result of the second criterion, we see etchings, lithographs, watercolors, acrylics, but also photographs, multimedia works, assemblages, mixed media, ceramics, and works of clay.

Reimer's curatorial premise is that there is a common denominator among these works, that "Mennonitism will have a discernible influence and effect upon the work of artists," because an artist's work inevitably is a reflection of his or her culture. Mennonitism is defined by Reimer strictly in ethnic terms. All these works are representational, figurative, none of them are abstract to the point of being nonrepresentational. All works have strong narrative content—some contain social comment and criticism—which transcends the strictly personal and thus draws in or connects with the viewer.

The title of the exhibition and catalogue express Reimer's interpretive agenda for the artists and their works: that a shared Mennonite heritage is indeed manifest in these diverse works, even though the artist has undergone some degree of alienation or distancing from this heritage.

A more objective title of the exhibit catalogue might be: "Thirteen Canadian artists of Mennonite heritage, with special emphasis on Manitoba women artists, and Irma Martin Yost because she fits the thesis."

Under the subtitle "Used to Be . . ." Reimer begins her catalogue essay with a list of all the stereotypical ingredients of ethnic Mennonitism in Canada, delineating the "inside" of the artist's "shared heritage" without however qualifying time and space in which this kind of Mennonite life took place. This is disconcerting to non-Canadian readers, because the type of Mennonitism described here is not at all as universal as the author, perhaps unintentionally, suggests.

Reimer then offers a two page summary of "Mennonite origins" in order to explain the historically iconoclastic stance of Mennonitism. Again these generalizations should be made specific for Canada. Disregarded is the well-documented fact that there were since the 17th century a fair number of visual artists among Mennonites in Northern Europe before the exodus to North America, who *were* encouraged to study in the art academies of Munich and Berlin and elsewhere, including such a major figure as the etcher Jan Luiken, illustrator of the *Martyrs' Mirror.*

For the uninitiated observer, Reimer includes a brief excursion "Towards an Understanding of Art," stating what art is by explaining what it is not, thus preparing the observer to approach the works open-mindedly.

On the following thirteen pages, Reimer explores the "Aesthetic Ties That Bind," that is, the common themes or concerns at the bases of the diverse works assembled here. She finds "transformations of the mundane," which assist us to reflect about our reality; works which reflect specific Mennonite cultural experiences; the role of Mennonite women; the experience of transition from a Mennonite culture based on the land, to one that is primarily urban; the experience of the sacred. Reimer concludes that the artists and their works presented here are pointing toward "a new understanding of community," one which embraces the artist's vision because it is at once accepting, even celebrating "both unity and individuality, similarity and diversity." Reimer holds that Irma Martin Yost's quilt-based assemblages best symbolize this ideal community. It is no coincidence that both the cover illustration and the last illustration of the catalogue are quilt-assemblages by Yost. There is a strongly feminist slant in Reimer's selection of works and their interpretation which leads her to assert that commonality of themes is distributed along gender lines: "male artists . . . are still 'romancing' the land and the women are asserting their will to freedom." At times her feminism clouds her objectivity and prompts her, for example, to dismiss in one swoop the representations of women by Degas, Renoir, Ingres, Manet, and Rembrandt as "voyeuristic" in comparison to Helene Dyck's rather cool, safely academic "Red Chair" series.

Reimer effectively strengthens her discussion by interspersing quotes by Mennonite artists and writers such as Robert Regier, John L. Ruth, and by the art critic John Berger. Contained in the notes is a valuable bibliography on contemporary Mennonite writing on art and aesthetics. A special list of the artists, their addresses or those of galleries which represent their work, invites and facilitates contact for further information. With this exhibition and catalogue Priscilla Reimer has made a major contribution to contemporary Mennonite writing on art, as well as toward documenting significant work by artists of Mennonite heritage in Canada. She has also created in this publication a very different sequel to the *Visual Arts* catalogue of the Mennonite World Conference 10th Assembly in Wichita. A comparison between these two exhibitions would further illuminate the degree to which artists of Mennonite heritage share discernible commonalities and the degree to which they are part of more general trends in recent Western art history. Even though Reimer's text could have benefited from more rigorous editing and spelling checks, this book is a "must" for all Mennonite cultural workers, for all who wish to stay abreast of the diverse visions these artists express, drawing from shared roots.

Reinhild Kauenhoven Janzen
Curator, Kauffman Museum, and
Adjunct Professor of Art History,
Bethel College
North Newton, Kansas

Mary H. Schertz and Phyllis Martens, eds., *Born Giving Birth: Creative Expressions of Mennonite Women.* Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1991. Pp. 88. ($19.95)

The Committee on Women's Concerns of Mennonite Central Committee put out a call in 1982 for Mennonite women's art and poetry. *Born Giving Birth* is the product in 1991. About ninety works are categorized into nine chapters: Self-discovery; Childhood; Sexuality; Nurturing; Nature; Society; Friendship; Church; and Aging, Death, Resurrection.

Born Giving Birth reads like a letter from a sister. I had varying reactions to the quality and forms of the expressions, but I had consistent identification with the content. Elizabeth Schmidt, in "La Primavera," p. 69: ". . . a sister brought words/ and showers of stories/ and spoke my experience/ into blossoming becoming." Poems like "To Margaret Friesen" by Margaret Loewen Reimer, p. 40, and pictures like "According to the bend of the wind" by Sylvia Gross Bubalo, p. 68, stir feelings in me for which I have not yet found my own words.

Within a color-coordinated cover, between tame chapter headings, out of a treasure of rich images, the following themes can be mined: despair, courage, child-bearing, lack of meaning, alienation from a lover, inferiority, encouragement, limitations, emptiness, breaking away, being used, surviving, memory, sorrow, marriage, contentment, spiritual poverty, beauty, history, loss, political struggle, anger, God's image, being a Mennonite artist, surrender, love, routine, hope.

I wish one chapter would have been on Creating, on Being a Mennonite Woman Artist. Ashley Jo Becker gives this statement in her bio at the end of the book: "I would only stop writing if I were ready to give up my life." Some of the works, under different headings, speak of it: from "Wilma," p. 16, by Elizabeth Schmidt—"By faith, brave Wilma/ (midst mothering,/ milking cows, and feeding mouths/ of home and farm)/ dared pick up a paintbrush/ instead of a dust mop," and, from "He needs my hand to hold," p. 37, by Geraldine Harder—"I ache to be alone,/ to read a book/ or write a poem,/ but I will wait until he sleeps./ I will wait until he sleeps."

Poet and artist Sylvia Gross Bubalo paints this picture of an artist's joy and pain entitled "Floral supremacy," p. 23: "When I was ten, a bantam weight on long/ summer creaks/ from shade-porch chains of slatback/ swinging,/ munching saltbread soft,/ I rubbed the cool/ Indian-beaded curtains from my eyes/ and steamed my breath on leaded glass/ Rose Stover skies/ cloudbeaked by rain hosed down in Hebrew.// I didn't know that girls/ would have to walk three yards behind,/ that only men could grow to be the boy/ Master Painters./ So I swept my contrapuntal themes/ through forms and colors past the whys/ and all protesting,/ accepting textured missions only/ from dimensions/ where there are no lies."

It is a beautiful book, but ambiguous. Consider the title— *Born Giving Birth: C RoEfA TmIeVnEn oEnXiPtReE SwSoImOeNnS.* I find it difficult to separate the superimposed words. Of course, that may be symbolic. Although I appreciate John Hiebert's talents, I wonder if a woman might have produced a design more in line with the straightforward struggles within. Instead of a coffee table book, we might have a sturdy paperback that could be carried in a purse, or a diaper bag.

In a book dedicated to breaking the silence enshrouding Mennonite women's involvement in the fine arts, I wish more had been revealed about the actual problems involved in getting this

book published. The editors say the project "faltered, almost died; but was resurrected and brought to maturity." How did it falter? Was its near death due to disease, attack, or neglect? Was the resurrection a triumph of tenacity, a sign of the times, or a supernatural miracle? This mature book looks like a compromise between artistic criteria, social concerns, and marketing projections.

With points of strength in each of these areas, maybe all sides will win.

Suzanne Lawrence
Hillsboro, Kansas

Michael A. King, *Trackless Wastes & Stars To Steer By.* Scottdale: Herald Press, 1990. Pp. 180. (14.95)

Out of his own pilgrimage to faith and his experience as an urban pastor, Michael King has written a book for seekers like himself. From the closed universe of his Mennonite upbringing, he has come to embrace the world and sought to span the gulf between the two like some cable winder spinning supports from the farther shore.

After examining the trackless scene of today's world of pluralism, relativism, individualism and the loss of authority, King sets a course of explaining the ways of moving between understandings of world and Bible. The limitations of remaining separatist and the dangers of risking being in the world are faced.

Using dialectical reasoning, King looks at critical approaches to the Bible. He considers how a more conservative approach reacts to biblical criticism and suggests with Paul Ricoeur that one may move from a first naiveté to a second naiveté where God still speaks beyond the original situation to our current need.

A third way between naiveté and criticism is endorsed: taking the world into the Bible and connecting Bible and world. It is not easy or facile. How subtly individualism, for instance, hoods our sight.

Taking the world into the Bible is to bring all other mentalities to the Bible. It is a course which must be strengthened by participating in one's Christian, biblically oriented, fellowship. Poems, movies, philosophy, psychology may supplement our understanding, but they must never supplant Scripture. Bible and community point us always to Jesus Christ, the one way who yet always helps us be open to others and other ways. This celebration of a congregation centered in Jesus Christ is King's strongest point, well illustrated by his dialog with his young daughter about her Jewish friend.

Unfortunately, King's argument gets mired in difficult and repetitive terminology. From the beginning page he speaks of a liminal time, moving on to terminology like precritical, critical, postcritical, translationism, plausibility structures, experiential-expressive.

King is widely read, but all the names become an overload. It is annoying to have an author cited in one sentence, with another author in a second sentence clarifying the first author's thought as he calls on Lesslie Newbigin to explain Peter Berger, or John Sanford to explain Carl Jung.

One wishes that he could have paid his debt to his mentors in the introduction and then in his own words told us what he means. When he does so with his own story, his writing is powerful.

It is quite clear what King means in taking the world into the Bible, bringing its structures and thought patterns to Jesus Christ, and yet he seems to suggest that the insights of psychology and the Bible are an either/or as if we must pledge allegiance to the one or the other.

For those of us who grew up in fundamentalist homes and churches, King's Mennonite separatism will have its similarities. Even if "trackless wastes" are not our experience, the stars of biblical orientation and a believing community grounded in Jesus Christ will nevertheless be the stars we need to steer by.

Donald R. Steelberg
Pastor, Lorraine Avenue
Mennonite Church
Wichita, Kansas

untitled
steel and clay, 24" × 14" × 8"
Merrill Krabill
Bethel College