

The Great Ontario College of Art Sit-In

"The Great Student Sit-in Swings On," blazoned the full-page headline of the Friday, February 23, 1968, edition of the Toronto Telegram. The photograph accompanying the story was dramatic. Spread over the full width of a page, it showed a mass of students gathered in OCA's auditorium. In the centre a number of students were playing their guitars. Most were smiling. The caption read, *"Some students play guitar, others play cards or Chinese checkers as the Ontario College of Art student sit-in attracts 600 demonstrators to the combination cafeteria-auditorium yesterday."* (The photo in this memoir page is only part of the Telegram's full-side picture, and too big a file for the platform I am using. But take a close look and you will see me upper left top, between male and female students. I am looking at the camera). It was my first taste of media's ability to manipulate truth, later to become known as "Fake News."

The story itself began with a sub-head of, *"500 still boycotting their classes."* The story was written by Robert Sutton, a Telegram staff reporter.

The furor all began when OCA principal Sydney Watson fired long-service teachers Aba Bayefsky and Eric Freifeld, whose appointments commented Watson, "were impossible." Both Bayefsky and Freifeld claimed secret deals were being forged by college management to drastically alter the drawing and painting curriculum. Both were summoned to the principal's office and given sealed envelopes in the presence of all department heads and a student council representative. Inside the envelopes were their dismissal notices. Drawing and painting students alleged that their number of hours of instruction were to be cut to a point in which the course would become meaningless. Principal Watson denied any such secret curriculum deals and the fight was on. Many claimed the resulting protest had support of eighty percent of the student body. Student leaders from the University of Toronto, York University, Ryerson, Centennial College, and Glendon College, agreed to meet and offer support for the OCA protest. Brian Switzman, vice-president of the Canadian Union of Students, pledged support of other student-faculty groups. The "Sit-in" was on, after all, this was the sixties and sit-ins were very popular.

Principal Watson faced angry protesters and mass picket lines according to the newspaper report. The truth, however, was that only about 120 members of the drawing and painting department objected to the administration's curriculum changes. These 120 represented no more than ten percent of the college's 1030 students. In fact, the whole process of curriculum change had been democratically presented to the Student Council as part of an overall reform proposal. Drawing and painting students, however, were not represented because drawing and paintings students, by their own choice, had remained absent from participating in the Student Council. For some reason they did not want to be part of the democratic process for curriculum reform.

The student protest did not fare well with Toronto's business community either.

One Toronto design firm jumped at the opportunity of free publicity by publically claiming that OCA graduates were worthless. Hugh Spencer of Arthur & Spencer Ltd., sympathized with the student uprising and pronounced, *"I can't afford to hire Ontario College of Art graduates because they are of no commercial value."* He made another even bolder claim that OCA *"had become isolated from the mainstream of life."* It was a cheap shot based on media-hype about a protest that was essentially the doings of a small group of students who had chosen not to resolve matters democratically. Most students featured in the impressive photograph of that day's Telegram knew little about what was going on. Most students were in the auditorium only to have lunch and no doubt as an added attraction, enjoy a rather festive

break in current events. Many students, as well as members of management and faculty and other college associations, condemned the demonstrations.

When a protest march was organized to travel to the Ontario Legislature just a few blocks from OCA, the event drew many students simply because it looked like an anti-war demonstration complete with a ceremonial black coffin. It was "in" to march in any anti-war demonstration during those years. It made for good media as well as a great way to spend an afternoon away from classes. Some thought the unexpected revelry of the protest would get a spot in Canada's history books. We never got that spot. Most of us have forgotten the march. How do I vividly remember this protest?

I was there when it happened.

But I was too busy with my yearbook.

I was able to recall all these details with accuracy because I still have that page from the Toronto Telegram in my personal files. My experience with media manipulation was educational to say the least, because at the time, I knew many of the students in the photograph were *not* protesting. They were having lunch. It was more like a "mass eat-in," an event that occurred in our college every noon hour. If you look carefully at the photograph, there are three students standing at the back of the "Great Sit-in." They were Barry Grant, a female student whose name escapes me, and me in between looking towards the camera. The three of us were on our way to the yearbook production room under the stage. The only way to get there was through the auditorium. Thus I was frozen in a press photographer's attempt to create an impressive panorama for a protest that never really was. About a month later, despite reports by a local businessman that the college was "bankrupt of thought in the curriculum," and as he continued to boast that "his five European-trained designers employed by his firm were far superior," the Ontario College of Art, that *infamous rebel art school*, presented the local, national, and international design community with an award-winning yearbook that silenced many critics and boosted each OCA graduate's chance to get a job and build a successful career in the visual arts.

Lesson learned: beware of what is called "News."