

very rich and rich, young and not so young, but mostly American—who have come here “to study art” (if they went to a private school) or “to learn about art” (if they are pretty girls, as a few of them are). None of these people, as far as I have been able to determine, is aware that the elusive reality of which they seek to acquire a traveler’s knowledge, as though art were a fact of geography and education a discounted railway pass, is a cultural promontory that runs through the expanse of skill, such as that of a nonpareil barber, and the depth of luxury, such as the pleasure of being shaved in bed.

It is a truism tending toward banality that, during the centuries that made Florence what it was, art was craft. The artist’s divine gift was but a fanciful way of invoicing the artisan’s rare skill, another way of counting the cost of—and paying for—the frescoed ceiling, the family portrait with the angels, the inlaid commode, the marble *putti* in the ancestral chapel. Of course, this form of accounting is older than the Renaissance, as witness the origin of the word “talent” in the Greco-Roman monetary unit, but it was here in Florence that the system was properly modernized and streamlined. Here Orcagna, Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, Donatello, Uccello, Gozzoli, Verrochio, Pollaiuolo, Ghirlandaio all started out as apprentice goldsmiths. Here you could get your mistress painted snacking on almond macaroons with the head of John the Baptist in the foreground, and pay with a credit card.

Which brings us round to the equally venerable and corollary truism, this one concerning indulgence, dissolution, and all manner of unspeakable sumptuousness and naked luxury. Take a city of top information-age entrepreneurs with hardly an ethical scruple between them, add innumerable *Talenti* and *Buontalenti* in place of the sad little Ms. Guice, and instead of a sniveling article in a *Condé Nast* publication you get one of the longest chapters of Western civilization, say, 1246 (*Santa Maria Novella* begun) to 1580 (*Palazzo Uffizi* completed). It is obviously true that, in those days, even as art was craft, profligacy was aesthetics, more was more, and “simplicity,” in the words of the Russian proverb, “worse than theft.” Which did not mean, however, that everybody simply got drunk every night and made merry by leafing through pornographic magazines. For not only isn’t luxury necessar-

ily enfeebling, it isn’t always a precursor of debauchery. Besides, how surely do the ways of austerity lead to vigor? And how good a safeguard against bestiality is discomfort?

Every great truism can only benefit from a timely and judicious inversion, and it occurs to me that, as the American boys and girls arrive in Florence to learn about art, they ought to be told that they are barking up the wrong tree. Because in the closing years of the 20th century, craft—not art—is art. Painters, poets, playwrights, philosophers are now a dime a dozen, thanks to the universal system of liberal education, while the skills of a professional barber, an accomplished baker, or a distinguished restaurateur are now as rare, as valuable, and as imperiled by the scruples of those who would not be known as sybarites as the talents of artists and writers in the darkest, hardest, meanest, least civilized or indulgent ages. Those who have no sympathy for the decline of such skills, and no will to save them through individual acts of

patronage at the risk of being themselves considered decadent, can never acquire the knowledge of the genesis and procreation of talent known as the Renaissance, for which they have come here.

But instead of sympathy, passivity. Instead of absorption, blinkered, slavish diligence. Instead of Florence, a bottle of Coke and three straws. And finally I begin to dream of addressing these bejeaned Savonarolas, these top information-age entrepreneurs of the future, through a megaphone from the Arnolfo Tower down to the Piazza della Signoria. You want to learn about art, boys and girls? Then patronize an expensive barber, for God’s sake! Buy a pink crocodile suit, have a master furrier make you an opera cloak trimmed in sable, have fresh *millefoglie* in bed every morning. Try not to order pizza by the slice! Who knows, perhaps the day will come when somebody suggests that you should get a Gulfstream, and you will answer that you’ve decided to get a valet instead, an old Florentine who is simply the Machi-

The Carolina Computer Initiative

by Harold McCurdy

“The computer initiative requires all incoming freshmen beginning in the year 2000 to have an IBM compatible laptop computer”

—*The Daily Tar Heel*

The former UNC, now IBM University,
Has lately decreed
That every freshman by the year 2000 must have a laptop
To be degreed.

It won’t be necessary to attend on-campus classes,
But, so as to sell
Enough IBM compatibles, it will be necessary
For enrollment to swell.

Once registered and correctly lapped, students
Can choose to go home
Or over the whole internetted planet
At liberty roam.

On campus, in big buildings with big computers,
There will be space
For grant-swinging internetted researchers
To interface,

To interface and at a safe distance
Confer degrees
On never-seen, but IBM-authenticated,
Shortchanged AB’s.

avelli of the straight razor. *That* would show education!

Andrei Navrozov is Chronicles' European correspondent.

Letter From Lagado

by John N. Frary

Revolution in the Air



Thanks to a November election upset, Kafka, South Dakota—home of Lagado University—is poised to become *the* vanguard college town of 21st-century America. Joe Steele, a Lagado University English Department adjunct running as a candidate of the Farmer-Activist-Worker-Grad Student Alliance (a coalition of the Revolutionary Democratic Workers' Party, the Workers' Party of Democratic Revolutionaries, the Party of Revolutionary Democratic Workers, and Democrats Working for a Revolutionary Party), mobilized the youthful idealism of Lagado University's junior faculty, students, and "residuals" (i.e., dropouts, resident recidivists, unemployable graduates, coffeehouse proprietors, stranded folk singers, and other university hangers-on) behind a program of dynamic change that overwhelmed three-term Democrat Lee Bronstein.

Professor G.S. Stodgett, Kafka's only registered Republican, declined to nominate himself for anything.

Steele seized the moral high ground at the first campaign debate when he charged Mayor Bronstein with insensitivity. Scoffing at his opponent's spluttering protest that "I am, too, sensitive," FAWGSA's nominee demanded to know *exactly* how sensitive and, when the man stammered unconvincingly that he was very, *very* sensitive, scornfully pressed him to explain "on what grounds a white male heterosexual could possibly claim to be 'very' sensitive." Joe then cut abruptly through Bronstein's panicky babbling to flourish a sheaf of affidavits attesting that the wretch had used the "eenie-meenie-minie-moe" formula several times while enrolled at the Eleanor Roosevelt Kiddie Kollege in 1951. A tempest of hisses and catcalls swept the mayor from the dais, and he declined to

participate in further public debates.

From that point on, it was all downhill for the incumbent. His attempt to regain lost ground by belatedly insisting that Joe Steele was also a white male heterosexual backfired when the latter denounced him for resorting to the tawdriest of negative campaign tactics. Noting that Bronstein's charge was ancient history—he had long since made a public apology for his heteromale whiteness—Steele declared that "it is time to put the past behind us and move on."

Pressing his advantage, Joe exposed the Bronstein administration's failure to diversify the town government's personnel profile. The "liberal" Democrat attempted to defend himself by claiming that there were only 35 Afrofamilies living in Kafka and its three adjacent counties, but the challenger struck back with a relentless attack on the administration's failure to diversify the population of the city and promised a vigorous national recruitment campaign to ensure that the children of Kafka could grow up in an inclusive demographic configuration reflecting 21st-century America.

On September 20, things took a disastrous turn for the Democrat when the Omnium Gatherum of People Unwhite produced irrefutable evidence that there were thirty-six Afrofamilies in the region and condemned him in the severest terms as a racist bent on deliberately marginalizing Kafka's Afropopulation. Bronstein's bleating apologies were unavailing. His campaign staff deserted him *en masse*.

Addressing a meeting of the LU Women's Studies Coven at Wiccalatry Chapel on September 23, Joe brandished a list of 258 employees of the Kafka Municipal Sewage Authority who were known associates of Bible-thumping, churchgoing, hymn-singing, extreme ultra-right reactionary fundamentalist Christian theocrats. The mayor's countercharge of "McCarthyism" was promptly denounced as an example of negative campaigning, a mean-spirited ethnic slur on Joe's Irish heritage, and a vicious slash at the self-esteem of all the little children with Celtic forefathers. When Bronstein protested that there were only 38 employees on the KMSA payroll, Joe pounced on this evidence that his opponent was a self-confessed enemy of the environment and promised an emergency bottled spring-water program until adequate provision could be made to ensure a pure water supply for

all the little children of Kafka.

A week before the election, FAWGSA unleashed a posse of LU Psychology Department memory-recovery specialists on the Jill & Jack Municipal Day Care Center. Seven hours of intensive, non-stop interaction sufficed to elicit testimony that the kids had been forced to watch Bronstein disembowel a hippopotamus with a letter opener while bugging an anaconda, chewing the leg off a slow loris, and singing the *Horst Wessel Lied*. The accused immediately attempted to impugn the veracity of the children by arguing that: an anaconda is physiologically unbuggerable; the witnesses have no idea what an anaconda is; and it is impossible to sing and eat a slow loris simultaneously. Bronstein's attack on the children only enraged Kafka's voters further, and his rout became definitive. On October 30, he hastily packed his bags and fled to Mexico, followed by the imprecations of his wife and daughters.

On November 5, the new mayor-by-default announced that Pyongyang had agreed to become Kafka's sister city. From noon of this same day, the clocks on the town hall and in all municipal offices were synchronized with the North Korean GMAT zone. Members of the LU community who have business with the municipal government have been notified that today is tomorrow after 10 A.M., that the lunch hour for municipal employees is now between 3:00 and 4:00 A.M., and that the city's offices will be closed at 7:20 A.M. All this will require some adjustment, and it is not yet clear what effect it will have on response times to fire alarms, but few in the Lagado community will deny that this long-overdue program for decentering Western colonialist chronometry is a powerful model of thinking globally, acting locally. (An initiative along the same lines is contained in Municipal Order #13 of November 23, ordaining that all birth certificates for city residents must be revised to accord with the Chinese custom of dating birth from conception.)

On November 6, the new administration—demonstrating an ambidextrous capacity for thinking locally, acting globally—established the Kafka Municipal International Affairs Office. Plans for aid to Cuba are already being laid, and an invitation to January's formal mayoral inauguration has been sent to Fidel Castro.

On November 7, the new municipal calendar was implemented, designating 1999 as Kafka Year I, eliminating Sun-