

Untitled

Derek Simons

I first met Jerry in the early '90s when my close friend and colleague Richard Pinet and I started scheming about doing a multi-disciplinary project on fascism. I say “scheming” because we had no resources: no money, no professional affiliation, nothing. All we had were a bunch of inchoate ideas about how fascism—at that time seen in the triumphant post-Cold War Western world as not much more than a singularly murderous historical curiosity—still had a vibrant if subterranean beating heart. We also felt that there were underutilized and nascent forms of public discourse (including a technological oddity then called the world-wide web) that were arguably anti-fascist in nature and, truth be told, potentially a lot of fun.

Anyway, Richard and I somehow convinced Jerry to come see us in the poorly-heated art studio where I worked at the time. Because there was a life-drawing session going on in the studio when Jerry visited, we had to cram ourselves into an adjacent hallway where we tried to spell out our vision for the project.

Despite the somewhat glaring weaknesses of our pitch, Jerry was immediately supportive. He committed on the spot to providing us with a small but vital cash contribution and permitted us to publicly name the Institute for the Humanities as a partner, providing us with critical legitimacy.

Jerry remained a loyal supporter until the very end of the project. Titled *The Spectacular State: Fascism and the Modern Imagination*, it ran for over 2 months in 1995, with 42 events including lectures, panel discussions, film and video screenings, art exhibitions, roundtable discussions, and a cabaret. Likely much of it would not have happened without Jerry's initial leap of faith.

When I returned to school to do my PhD in the early 2000s, Jerry was a major influence. I can't say that I ever purposefully studied Jerry's writing, but there was some kind of intellectual osmosis that occurred, so much so that reading a paper of Jerry's that he sent me not long before I completed my dissertation felt like sinking into a welcoming warm bath, so similar had my work become to his.

I dedicated my dissertation to two people who had profoundly shaped my intellectual project; one of them was Jerry. I was very grateful that he attended my dissertation defence where I could publicly acknowledge my intellectual debt.

There are two major lessons I feel I learned from Jerry.

One is that there are no absolutes. Jerry relentlessly unpeeled layer upon layer of context and contingency, thereby revealing the inner workings of power.

The other lesson is to trust one's instincts. Jerry was unafraid to embrace something that captured his imagination—as with our fascism project. I suspect that his brilliant and learned mind often foresaw much richer possibilities than the beneficiaries of his instinctive embrace could ever have dreamed up, let alone made manifest. But with his ever-present shy smile, Jerry's melancholic hopefulness cheered on authentic human ambition.

I, and doubtlessly countless other misfits who benefitted profoundly from his support and teaching, and loved his gentleness, kindness, and wit, will miss him dearly.