DILEMMA IN ART CRITICISM: A PROBLEM FOR TODAY

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis poses the problem of the failure of formalist criticism to deal with artworks of the last ten years. In order to examine the root of formalistic attitudes there is an examination of different notions of time; their relationship to notions of history, in particular art history; and how these in turn relate to the function of the avant-garde, and avant-garde criticism. The conclusion of this work emphasizes the necessity of the co-existence of different strategems of criticism; and the pressing need for the critic to examine new critical approaches to maintain his credibility as interpreter of recent art works.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Within the last ten years formalist art criticism seems to have reached a point of crisis. The crisis, as witnessed by a break, not only in the art forms produced but in the assumptions and intentions of the artists involved, has only belatedly been felt within the dependent field of interpretation. Indeed, only certain writers have become eloquent about the inadequacies of methods at their disposal, and attempted a drastic reappraisal.

Indeed, Susan Sontag in 1966, in her critical essay, "Against Interpretation," expressed such doubts about the value of interpretation at all;

> In some cultural contexts, interpretation is a liberating act. It is a means of revising, of transvaluing, of escaping the dead past. In other cultural contexts, it is reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling ....
>
> Today is such a time, when the project of interpretation is largely reactionary, stifling.[1]

The most dominant and influential critical writing in the visual arts during the years immediately preceding Sontag's essay was formalist. It seems probable then that the main direction of her argument was against formalist criticism. In 1971 Jack Burnham defined formalism as: "Inherently a conservative theory of art, in the Hegelian sense, it

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[1] Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation and Other Essays (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1966), p. 7.

expects a constant evolution of new and significant art images logically connected with the past."[2]

He described briefly its application by Heinrich Wolfflin, Maurice Denis, Gestalt psychologists such as Kohler, and more recently critics such as Clement Greenberg. Generally, he found it to be a "very linear view of Hegel's dialectic, which, in fact, anticipated not the mildly and pleasingly unexpected, but the radically unexpected."[3]. Perhaps the most interesting argument he presented was his description of formalism as a mythic form, in that it depended on belief for its continued existence. Reiterating Sontag's general dissatisfaction with existent formalist critical procedure, he claimed that, "Its deterioration began when sufficient numbers of artists sensed that its premises had been exhausted."[4]

The bias of this study is that of an artist. The views held are those of an artist criticizing certain aspects of criticism. Briefly, it is metacriticism, but with a purpose that Sontag expressed clearly:

> Indeed we have an obligation to overthrow any means of defending and justifying art which becomes particularly obtuse or onerous or insensitive to contemporary needs and practice.[5]

This, then, outlines the strongly felt need to reassess the place of

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[2]Jack Burnham, The Structure of Art (New York: George Brazillier Inc., 1971), p. 37.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid., p. 36.

[5]Sontag, Against Interpretation, p. 5.

formalist criticism.

In a brief review of chapters subsequent to this statement of the problem, the writer will examine different modes of time, and give examples of contemporary artists' greater awareness and use of time with their work. Following this will be an examination of the concept of the avant-garde, in relation to modes of time, primarily its principal qualification as an historical phenomenon. Renato Poggioli quoted Massimo Bontempelli as defining avant-garde art as, "An exclusively modern discovery, born only when art began to contemplate itself from a historical point of view."[6]

Following is a section on avant-garde, primarily formalist, criticism as it has stood until recently. It will be examined how formalist criticism relates to a profane sense of time. A groundwork of references in the second chapter, relating to profane, sacred, actual and virtual time may at this point clarify the ideas. Profane time, as the anthropologist Mircea Eliade[7] elucidated, refers to chronological everyday, ordinary time. As a mode, it is a sequential and linear, assumed by Darwin, and applied broadly in other fields, at later dates, for example, by philosophers such as Spencer and Marx in his dialectical materialism. It seems to underlie the importance of developmental theories generally. It relates directly, as will be discussed in a later chapter, to the rise of the concept of avant-gardism. In Chapter 6,

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[6]Renato Poggioli, The Concept of the Avantgarde, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (New York: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 14.

[7]Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961).

the thrust of previous arguments arrive at their most important point. The assumption of an historical interpretation as the primary interpretative mode is questioned. The possibility of a works transcendence of the historical time continuum (triggered by a strong aesthetic experience), is postulated.

In the last chapter, the context is related to the work, modifying the concept of transcendence. The pressing need for broadening of interpretative schema is expressed in recognition of a need for a new kind of criticism which Burnham called "post-formalist criticism."

Observing Sontag and others, who also feel the exhaustion of current criticism, Burnham wrote:

> Within the last five to ten years some art historians have begun to support an 'against interpretation' doctrine, through which works of art and perhaps the lives of their originators are studied as sacrosanct texts.[8]

Rightly, he criticized their attitude, as an avoidance of a problem which still remains open. Sontag, however, did advocate a returning to the immediate sensuous reaction to the work. "In place of a hermeneutics, we need an erotics of art."[9]

It is felt that objective systems must be put in relation to a subjective response. As Sontag stated: "Interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there."[10]

And yet, this has not always been so. An example is the English

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[8]Jack Burnham, The Structure of Art, p. 37.

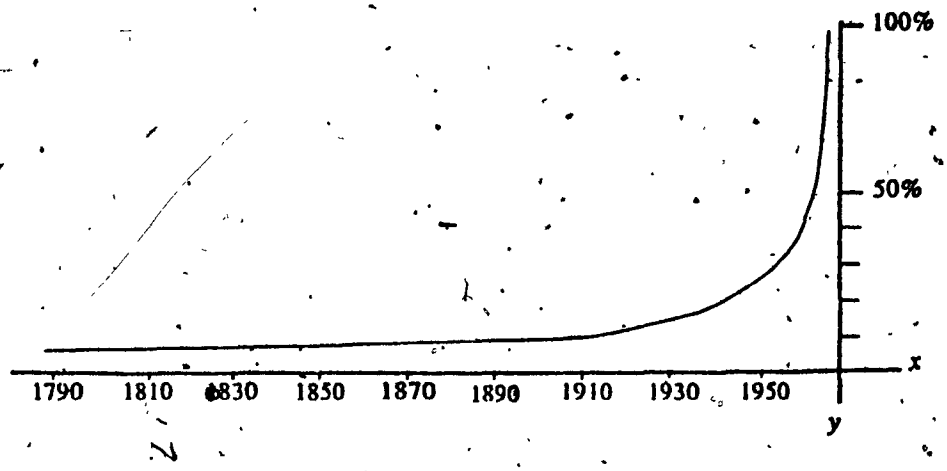
[9]Sontag, Against Interpretation, p. 14.

[10]Ibid., p. 13.

critic and painter, Patrick Heron, in The Changing Forms of Art. He used both descriptive and analytic language in a way that is not overtly systematised and which relates to specific works. The result is that the reader has a desire to see the work. A case in point is his discussion of Vlaminck's work, La Gare d'Auvers-sur-Oise (1920).[11]

Historically, this dissatisfaction with criticism generally followed a period of both formalist criticism and formalist art. It coincided, as Burnham indicated in the following diagram, with a rise in historical consciousness in the making of art.[12]

Figure 1



Rise of Historical Consciousness in the Making of Art

With the rise in awareness of the historical continuum of developing art forms among artists, there is also a rise in historical

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[11] Patrick Heron, The Changing Forms of Art (New York: The Noonday Press, 1955), p. 132.

[12] Burnham, The Structure of Art, p. 47.

transgressions of that continuum. "... and quite obviously, Duchamp was the first artist to employ historical transgressions as a matter of strategy."[13] Transgressions, Burnham elucidated, are motivated by the realization that art history is a mythic structure prolonged by belief in it. From the diagram, then, one could deduce that present-day art is less formalistically predictable. The rise of linguistic conceptualism in 1967 or 1968 has verified this.

Burnham cited Brian O'Doherty as one of the first critics to seriously question the present rupture between art and art history. O'Doherty's outline, in 1969, of the possibilities confronting the Art World was:

I. Dialectical History and the post-modernism of (particularly) color-field painting.

II. Object and Conceptual Art, and the anti-historical landscape (also Process Art) on which order is circumscribed with various modalities of chaos, and vice versa.

III. Art generally identified with the future, roughly grouping Kinetic and Technological Art, in which the technological imperative and social ideas are frequently cited.[14]

Evidently, it is the rise in importance of the second of these categories which is at the root of the realization of the inadequacy of present interpretative systems. Proportionately, there are less significant artists working within a recognizable dialectical framework than there were ten years ago. It is in relation to this that Eliade's

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Brian O'Doherty. A panel discussion at the University of Iowa, May 10, 1969. (Emphasis added).

sacred and profane time become useful as descriptive tools. And it is because of these non-historical works which are happening now, and indeed because also of any potent work done at any time, that it would seem that the artist, in his strength, tends to sacred time as a modality of his work, in spite of whatever historical (profane) connotations it may have. Concurring with this, Burnham cited George Kubler's observation: "... works of art do not exist in time, they have an 'entry point'."[15]

The contemporary artist, Mel Bochner asserted in 1974 that the aesthetic experience exists outside ordinary profane time. "When you're interested in art, you're interested in the exchange that occurs when you stand in front of a work, alone, and look at it. It is atemporal."[16]

Although Eliade's two modes of time were differentiated in order to describe customs, beliefs and myths in primitive societies, there is reason to believe that the two modes also exist in modern society, although in more complex forms; an assertion that has been made by Claude Levi-Strauss, and reiterated by Burnham recently in a chapter in The Structure of Art called "Art History as a Mythic Form." It seems clear, then, that although it is less of a pure situation, one can still refer to the polarity of the two modes of being, the sacred and the profane within contemporary society.

Within an interpretative framework the contention could be phrased

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[15]Burnham, The Structure of Art, p. 36.

[16]Mel Bochner, "Mel Bochner on Malevich: An Interview by John Coplans," Artforum (June 1974): 61.

thus: for, critics to consider works of art, either strictly as stages in a dialectical continuum, or, as aesthetic items as part of society's production, is to deal with them strictly on the level of the profane. But surely art should be considered more in terms of a transcendent experience? This is the crux of the argument.

The relationship of interpretation to art education is at one and the same time both extremely simple and complex, tortuous and indirect. On a broad level, the activity of criticism plays a didactic role in society generally. It provides references and parameters for critical appreciation. The production of sophisticated catalogues and booklets, which are a regular part of a museum's activity, are made to make the work not only more accessible, but also to educate. The critic's role, both as author of these booklets, of newspaper reviews, and of books of critical essays, is not just to inform, but also to enlighten. And, as is stated by Arthur Koestler, interpretation is at the core of education.

And in a narrower context (and by this is meant the context of educational institutions rather than the public at large) the approach to interpretation as a problem bearing directly on art education, is paramount in both studio and art history courses. Burnham quoted Levi-Strauss's insistence that the plastic arts rely upon organized conventions in order to be understood as art.[17] Learned systems of plastic values are a direct result of the kinds of interpretative schema used. The form of the art object is inextricably bound up with

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[17]Burnham; The Structure of Art, p. 8.

mental frameworks, attitudes, expectations and both cultural and private backgrounds, and is articulated as communication in the form of descriptions and interpretations.

At university level, at the centre is the subject matter. There is, ideally, a mutual educating of both teacher and students. Northrop Frye spoke of the need of the teachers and students to escape "the role of teachers teaching and students learning," in order to try to "come together in a common vision of the subject presented to them."[18] Articulated interpretation may be a means to open up such a dialogue. Arthur Koestler, reflecting this opinion, reminded us that: "The essence of teaching is not in the facts and data, which it conveys, but in the interpretations that it transmits in explicit or implied ways."[19] But until there is a satisfactory and suitable interpretative approach, much very recent art may not be seen, or their propositions even discussed within higher educational institutions. And this may be to the mutual impoverishment of students and teachers, and a cause of unnecessary conservatism in such institutions.

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[18] Dr. Northrop Frye, "The Ethics of Change," C. B. C. Publications (Toronto, 1969): 6.

[19] Arthur Koestler, "The Ethics of Change," C. B. C. Publications (Toronto, 1969): 7.

CHAPTER 2

SACREDNESS, VIRTUALITY, AND ART

In his observations of primitive societies, the anthropologist, Mircea Eliade, developed the theme of sacred and profane time. The time of festivals (mostly periodical) he describes as sacred time. Early man, through these festivals, rejoined his origins, began 'anew'. Thus, Eliade defined this mode of time as "circular, reversable and recoverable,"[20] in that through the periodic festivals early man could reactualize the original time. Further, he characterised it as an "eternal mythical present."[21] It exists in itself and for itself, and is conceived as a now that may expand infinitely. Man, to the extent of his regaining this state of being, has a religious sense.

At the other end of this polarity, he described profane time as simply: "... ordinary temporal duration in which acts without religious meaning have their setting."[22] Unlike sacred time, it grows from past to future, and is therefore continuous.

The societies on whose observation he based this concept, identified totally this religious feeling of sacred time with the form of the

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[20] Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, p. 72.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

festivals. One was a direct expression of the other. And the most evident way of describing and transmitting beliefs was through myth.

Burnham, on the basis of Claude Levi-Strauss's idea that unconscious mental processes are the same in both modern and primitive societies, said that we also have mythic structures, but which are more complex and subtle: "We are just learning how they (mythic structures) operate in our society."[23]

In the same way, it may be postulated that sacred time in our society, manifests itself in subtle and complex ways. As Eliade has observed, modern society has been successively desacrilized. Traditional and religious conventions have, generally, lost their meaning in this society. The mode of 'sacred time' with its religious sense is much less evident. But concerning a concrete manifestation, he indicated that among other attitudes, such as the love of nature, it is in the practice of the arts that he found a sort of "non-sectarian cosmic religiosity."[24] He referred to the artist's adventures into the depths of his own psyche to free himself of a surface appearance of things.

Of the artists who risk these intense plunges into self-search which put into question familiar ways, there are those who produce what subsequently is recognised as avant-garde art. Linking this with the idea of a "non-sectarian religiosity," it is perhaps no accident that Zen Buddhism's influence has been such a fruitful stimulus for many

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[23]Burnham, The Structure of Art, p. 39.

[24]Mircea Eliade, Myths, Rites, Symbols, Vol. I, eds. W. Beane and W. Doty (New York: Harper, Row Publishers, 1976), p. 126.

experimental artists, such as John Cage or Jasper Johns. For Zen, stressing the inwardness of experiencing, has a broadness which goes beyond the outward forms that characterise many more conventional religions. What Zen seems to propose, ideally, is that every ordinary act take on an extraordinary and personal significance. To realize this, it is necessary to attain Satori, a word whose translation most closely corresponds to 'enlightenment'. Zen suggests that the profane can be impregnated by the sacred at any moment, according to one's state of enlightenment. Indeed, Zen is considered by its followers to be a release from profane time. Alan Watts claimed that until this becomes clear:

> ... it seems that our life is all past and future, and that the present is nothing more than the infinitesimal hairline which divides them. From this comes the sensation of, 'having no time', in a world which hurries by so rapidly that it is gone before we can enjoy it. But through 'awakening to the instant' one sees that this is the reverse of the truth.[25]

Carl Jung was quite definite that the experience of Satori can and does happen within our culture. "I have no doubt that the satori experience does occur also in the West, for we too have men who scent ultimate ends, and will spare themselves no pains to draw near to them."[26] It is because of his researches in psychotherapy that he was able to qualify this by saying: "But they will keep silent, not only out of shyness, but because they know that any attempt to convey their

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[25] Alan Watts, The Way of Zen (New York: Pantheon, 1957), p. 199.

[26] D. T. Suzuki, An Introduction to Zen Buddhism, foreword by Carl Jung (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 25.

experience to others would be hopeless."[27]

Jung believed this feeling of hopelessness stems from the great reverence for objective truths that rational materialism brings with it in our culture. However, he hypothesized that certain works, such as Goethe's Faust, Nietsche's Zarathustra, and Blake's works were: "The first glimmerings of the breakthrough of a total experience in our Western Hemisphere."[28] Perhaps the visionary quality in these works which was so far from day-to-day considerations prompted Jung to quote these writers.

Within the visual arts in very recent years, Burnham suggested that the artist, Dennis Oppenheim, was acting as Shaman in an attempt to return to a former time, analogous to the sacred time of reactualizing origins in primitive societies.[29] To substantiate his argument, Burnham quoted certain art works such as the video-taped transfer drawings which Oppenheim made with his son and daughter as a method for entering into his own past, and also the very Proustian work including a bath of turpentine whose smell triggered memories of his days as an art student. Burnham questioned why artists, only now, seem to have been released to explore directly their own sublimations and psychodramas, and concluded that until today, "... in retrospect it appears that the restrictions of

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid., p. 26.

[29] Jack Burnham, "The Artist as Shaman," Arts Magazine (May-June, 1973): 42.

the art context never allowed for it."[30]

However, the analogy of Oppenheim's procedure with primitive society is not meant to imply that these works are any more sacred than others. It is simply used to underline the sacred aspect of all art.

Speaking of art works generally, Susan Langer, in Feeling and Form, developed the concept of 'virtual' and 'actual' time and space. Actuality, as its name implies, refers to profane time or space. Art, she stated, does not treat this mode at all. Virtuality, on the other hand, could be described as the outward manifestation, generally in an art context, of the inward feeling of sacredness. A sculpture or painting inhabits virtual space; a piece of music; virtual time. Langer referred to this quality as:

> ... the primary illusion of all plastic art ... it is limited by the frame, or surrounding blanks, or incongruous other things that cut it off .... yet it cannot be said to divide it from practical space -- the created virtual space is entirely self contained and independent.[31]

Describing early architecture such as Stonehenge in terms of its sacredness, Langer called it, "... a religious space." She identified it also as a "... virtual realm ... the heavenly bodies would be seen to rise and set in the frame it defined."[32]

Conventions about form in art have been questioned successively in this century. Indeed, Burnham has said that such formal transgressions have been a necessary aspect of the myth of art history. As

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Langer, Feeling and Form, A Theory of Art (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 72. (Emphasis added).

[32] Ibid., pp. 97-98.

a result, there has been a great deal of both playful irony, and more determined radicalness in the approach to frames of any kind. One has only to be reminded of Rauschenberg's more aggressive painting, with projecting or hanging objects. But this also happens when Pirandello uses the whole theatre as a stage, or when Kaprow makes a happening involving the audience. In becoming participants, the audience becomes part of the work's virtuality. Although many works seem to blur the boundaries between art and life, often by introducing chance into the work, or by working outside conventional boundaries, a perceptive consciousness can recognize the qualities of virtuality. But it has become increasingly true that artists also engage our perception of time in a way that has not been done before. Douglas Davis referred to this in his book, Art Culture (1977) when he wrote:

> Since Picasso and Gertrude Stein, it is banal to say that the contemporary experience of the world is spatially complex. Our sense of time is open and abstract -- to the point where we are willing to allow for reversals and curvatures as well as sense the movement of time across sequences and spatial segments beyond our immediate experience. Performance, film and video (most of all) serve this cycling, pressing sense of time moving on.[33]

For example, Hans Haacke has produced a body of works which accept in their structure the changing of organic and inorganic materials through time. An example is his Grass Cube (1967).

Robert Morris elaborated on a new attitude of using time within art works:

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[33]Douglas Davis, Art Culture. Essays on the Postmodern (New York: Harper and Row, 1977); p. 37.

> Now images, the past tense of reality, begin to give way to duration, the present tense of immediate spatial experience. Time is in this newer work in a way it never was in past sculpture ....
>
> Some of the thrusts of the new work are to make these perceptions more conscious and articulate.[34]

And Michael Cain, in his work, intended to:

> ...provide environment phenomena which are flowing at a different rate than the phenomena that we are accustomed to, so that an alternative time experience opens up.[35]

Even more clearly, Ian Wilson, in describing his intentions, seemed to be reinforcing Eliade's concept of an eternal mythical present:

> And so the idea I'm concerned with is transcending particular time and particular places. I try to preserve an idea by making it mnemonic, so that you can preserve it by remembering it.[36]

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[34]Robert Morris, "The Present Tense of Space," Art in America (Jan.-Feb., 1978): 70.

[35]Michael Cain, Time, a panel discussion, ed. Lucy Lippard, Art International (November, 1969): 21.

[36]Ian Wilson, Time, a panel discussion, ed. Lucy Lippard, Art International (November, 1969): 22.

CHAPTER 3

SUBJECTIVITY AND HISTORY

Kierkegaarde described internal history as the only true history.[37] The reason, he held, is that internal history takes into account the freedom of the individual to choose his actions. The subjective nature of experiencing is considered only in this sense of history.

Susan Langer gave as an example the notion that a lyric poem "is a genuine piece of subjective history."[38]

At the beginning of this century Henri Bergson developed the theory known as creative evolution, based on the power of the individual to choose between alternative courses of action at different moments in time thus consciously creating his own evolution. Inevitably his influence on writers and artists was very great. But where action for the individual is unconscious and conditioned, he is subject to external history.

Bertram Morris explained that the reluctance of philosophers generally (except certain ones such as Tertullian, Kierkegaarde and Sartre) to give attention to internal history, is due to the apparent

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[37]Soren Kierkegaarde, The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaarde, presented by W. H. Auden (Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 87.

[38]Langer, Feeling and Form, p. 268.

senselessness of experience. Consequently, the philosopher, according to Morris, "seeks a model for experience in its most meaningful form — and that model is [external] history."[39]

The theory of evolution, as expounded in Darwin's influential work, The Origin of the Species, being a tool for describing biological development in general patterns, assumed external history. Herbert Spencer, however, the first important philosopher to base his work on an evolutionary standpoint, foresaw the danger of this theory being construed teleologically, or used to project determinist viewpoints. Later Karl Popper pointed out how, as a general vision of the world, the theory of evolution is incomplete.

> For Darwin's theory of natural selection showed that it is in principle possible to reduce teleology to causation, by explaining in purely physical terms, the existence of design and purpose in the world.[40]

A fossil, a residue of a former living entity, is for the evolutionary biologist, a code of invaluable information on that life's form, at a specific point of time in the past. Tracing all these points, what is deduced, providing there is sufficient information, is the external history of an evolving life form. For man, a more complex form, the cultural changes would also contribute to external history. Within the recent past, the social, cultural and political changes provide the bulk of information for constructing history. Claude Levi-Strauss contrasted

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[39]Bertram Morris, "Dewey's Aesthetics," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol. 30, No. 2, 1971, 192.

[40]Karl Popper, Objective Knowledge (Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 267.

synchronic societies which are primitive and resistant to change, with diachronic societies, which are modern and changing.[41] Diachronic societies have a sense of their own history, and feel the need to record and preserve their own past. This is, then, external, objective history.

Part of the recording and preserving of cultural values is through art, giving us art history. As Burnham has indicated in his diagram, reproduced in Chapter 1 of this study, artists today have reached a higher point of historical consciousness than ever before. He has elaborated on art history as a mythic form:

> Chronological homogeneity is equally necessary for sustaining the art historical myth. There cannot be more than one art history, since a second would produce conflicting mythic structures.[42]

But perhaps the same fossil which has served as an example to prompt this elaboration on external history can be considered in an alternative way. If the viewer sees it simply as a form, present and complete, the signification of its past life does not obtrude on the present experience of it. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in a similar example on trace on a table, stated:

> This table bears traces of my past life, for I have carved my initials on it, and spilled ink on it. But these traces in themselves do not refer to the past; they are present; and insofar as I find in them signs of some 'previous' event, it is because I derive my sense of the past from elsewhere, because I carry this particular significance within myself.[43]

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[41] Burnham, A Structural Approach, p. 41.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, A Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1962), p. 413.

Merleau-Ponty criticized scientific objectivity as both naive and dishonest because:

> ... they take for granted, without explicitly mentioning it, the other point of view, namely that of consciousness, through which form the outset a world forms itself around me and begins to exist for me. To return to things themselves is to return to that world that precedes knowledge ...[44]

Concerning the domain of art history, Leo Steinberg deplored restriction to objective criteria:

> In protecting art history from subjective judgements, we proscribe the unpredictable question into which value and personality may enter, but which pertains to art because of art's protean nature.[45]

Thomas Munro thought that the field of aesthetics either ignores or treats in an oversimplified manner subjectivity in the arts. He said that: "No one can deny that the subjective phases of artistic production and appreciation are of central importance."[46]

The artist, even within the most specific of contexts, is face to face with the subjectivity of his own choices. The result of the choices he makes, as internal history, becomes a generator for what will be either considered as external history, or else simply is private, or forgotten, or lost. Thus, where there is freedom of choice there will always be an element of unpredictability. And historians can easily inadvertently falsify the metaphysical spirit in which works are produced

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[44] Ibid., p. ix preface.

[45] Leo Steinberg, Confrontations With Twentieth Century Art (Oxford: University Press, 1972), p. 311.

[46] Thomas Munro, Oriental Aesthetics (Cleveland Press of Western Reserve University, 1965), p. 71.

by ignoring the fact that the artist is in front of, to a certain degree, the unknowable which cannot produce an automatic response. As an example of this kind of distortion, Thomas Munro criticized the historian Focillon for explaining the sequence of styles as due to art itself. (The sequence he gave is from Giotto to Masaccio and on to Leonardo). Munro objects because from the standpoint of the artist, the traditions of his own art are "... parts of the social and cultural environment,"[47] and therefore need a more holistic consideration.

Focillon's way of considering art development in this example seems very close to the notion of art history as a mythic form that Burnham analyses. In the art of this century, Burnham identifies formalist criticism as a criticism that reinforces the idea of art as myth. Distinctions of what is, or is not 'modernist' or 'mainstream' or 'high art' become crucial to formalists. Barbara Rose quoted Clement Greenberg, one of the most important formalist critics, as championing colour-field abstraction because it is "... the 'mainstream' style, the only legitimate heir to abstract expressionism, and by extension, the school of Paris."[48]

Further, Burnham mentioned the failure of formalist criticism in dealing with certain aspects of art. Thus he stated, concerning Paul Gauguin's painting, the Spirit of the Dead Watching (1892):

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[47] Thomas Munro, Evolution in the Arts and Other Theories of Cultural History (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1953), p. 432.

[48] Barbara Rose, "The Problems of Criticism Versus the Politics of Art," Artforum (April, 1969): 44.

> Most critics are content to describe the painting in terms of its composition, and to quote Paul Gauguin's letters on its symbolist implications. But clearly the two aspects have to be brought together.[49]

Burnham explained why formal transgressions (transgressions of formal rules in art) are necessary in order for art to provide sustinance for a mythical form: "Formal transgressions are based on literary and plastic innovations which perpetuate the illusion of historical change."[50]

With this kind of transgression, he contrasted another that which he called 'historical transgression'.

> ... historical transgressions are essentially structural disruptions subverting the temporal myth of art; that is, they destroy the illusion that art progresses from one stage to the next through time.[51]

These transgressions, however, are not socially acceptable in the same way as formal transgressions because they break the myth structure. Burnham says that apart from Duchamp, conscious realization of the historical myth began to appear with linguistic conceptualism in 1967 or 1968. However, there was also the work of Yves Klein in France, Piero Manzoni in Italy, and isolated works such as Robert Rauschenberg's Erased De Kooning (1952) before this.

The possibility remains that apart from these examples (and no doubt others could be added) there are crucial moments of special significance in many artists' work which do not fall easily into

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[49] Burnham, A Structural Approach, p. 71.

[50] Ibid., p. 47. (Emphasis added).

[51] Ibid.

identifiable continuities. Moreover, these moments often provide the impetus for a body of important work later. They may be considered as significant moments of internal history. The sudden breaks and intuitive bursts of Malevich may illustrate the idea. And yet every artist must have experienced that moment, after long frustration, of suddenly realizing how a work should be continued. He acts on it with an energy and assurance that only the inner resolution of conflict releases.

Arthur Koestler provided a possible explanation for this lack of emphasis in critical circles on the importance of sudden changes of direction, or accelerated development in an artist's work. "Because visual discoveries are so difficult to verbalize, we have hardly any introspective records of painters' moments of truth."[52]

However, the avant-garde, the central generator and rejuvenator of art in contemporary times, is continually urged on by these intuitive moments of the most creative minds in this domain.

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[52]Arthur Koestler, The Act of Creation (London: Hutchinson, 1964), p. 395.

CHAPTER 4

THE AVANT-GARDE: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Gombrich, speaking of the fallacy of equating change with progress in the arts, urged that:

> ... we must realize that each gain or progress in one direction entails a loss in another, and that this subjective progress, in spite of its importance, does not correspond to an objective increase in artistic values.[53]

Only within specific short periods does art give the impression of being cumulative, of having progress. One might call to mind periods such as that of classical Greece, or Italian Renaissance. (Leonardo da Vinci said that it was a poor student who did not surpass his master).

However, whatever impression one might have of progress, it is modified by our response to the works with the passing of time, briefly, by our changing consciousness. For the works must have the power to elicit a strong aesthetic response in order to retain their distinctive quality as art. If they fail, as Eitner stated:

> They, however rare and precious, however well-intentioned, however interesting as documents, die, once their historical moment has passed, and become, at best, fodder for historical research.[54]

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[53] E. H. Gombrich, The Story of Art (London: Phaidon Press, 1963), p. 3.

[54] Lorenz Eitner, "Art History and the Sense of Quality," Art Int., Vol. XIX/5 (May, 1975).

Art, then, is under continual pressure to reaffirm its freshness of vision in changing cultural conditions. This freshness of vision, regardless of aesthetic or other value judgements made, is the monopoly of those artists that are most ahead of their time. And where artists have a consciousness of this role of being at the forefront of artistic search, formal invention or a new change in attitude, they are part of the avant-garde.

The avant-garde is a concept at the heart of the idea of contemporary art. To it one looks for the purging and renewing of art forms. Before 1880, the idea of the avant-garde as an instrument for change, in particular social change, was prominent. At this point the avant-garde notion was not just restricted to art, but also encompassed the more utopic political movements. In 1925, Henri de Saint Simon, in an imaginary dialogue between artist and scientist, had the former proclaim, rather idealistically:

> It is we artists who will serve you as avant-garde ... the power of the arts is in fact most immediate and most rapid: when we wish to spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them on marble or on canvas .... What a magnificent destiny for the arts is that of exercising a positive power over society, a true priestly function, and of marching forcefully in the van of the intellectual faculties ...[55]

After about 1880, the idea of the avant-garde remained only within art. At times, as with the surrealists, in particular the poet Aragon, there was an attempted merging of artistic and political avant-gardes, but in general when we speak of the avant-garde, we are

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[55]Henri de Saint-Simon, Opinions litteraires philosophiques et industrielles, Paris 1825, cited in Donald D. Egbert, "The Idea of Avant-garde in Art and Politics," The American Historical Review 73, No. 2 (Dec. 1967): 343. (Emphasis added).

referring to the artistic avant-garde.

Renato Poggioli has outlined the development of the avant-garde in art as stemming from the romantic idea of a movement. A movement, he stated, is an ongoing dynamic workshop, whose production relates to a central idea, attitude or ideology, which tends to as yet unknown ends. It is a centre of activity and energy. Contrastingly is the older idea of the school which, being static, classical, and offering a system to work by, is the antithesis of the avant-garde.

Poggioli insisted that a central idea to "avant-gardism" is its own self-consciousness as avant-garde, and of seeing itself from a historical viewpoint. The consciousness becomes a conditioning factor. Further, he identified four major motivating forces behind avant-gardism. These are: activism, antagonism, nihilism and agonism.

First is activism, which he said, is just sheer energy exploding in a particular way.

> Indeed the very metaphor of "avant-garde" points precisely to the activist moment (rather than the antagonistic). Within the military connotations of the image, the implication is not so much of an advance against the enemy, as a marching toward, a reconnoitreing or exploring of, that difficult and unknown territory called no man's land.[56]

Second is antagonism, a reaction against something before, be it previous art and its values, or be it against bourgeois and social values.

Third is nihilism, which he describes as a transcendental antagonism. It is the belief in the worthlessness of all present

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[56]Poggioli, The Concept of the Avant-Garde, p. 28.

values. It involves the effort to subvert and overthrow them.

Fourth and last is agonism, which deals with the self-ruin or self-destruction of the artist.

It would seem to me that the first two, activism and antagonism, must relate directly to particular historical contexts, especially antagonism. The last two, nihilism and agonism, seem relatively more irrational.

As an example, one might find a high degree of nihilism and antagonism in many of the sardonic and outrageous Dada gestures, principally in their performances in the Cabaret Voltaire during the first World War. A certain work of Francis Picabia consisted of a toy monkey with the words "Portrait of Cezanne, Portrait of Rembrandt, Portrait of Renoir" written around it. Marcel Duchamp's readymades, in this context, also have been nihilist and antagonist, although in the light of subsequent developments in art, that nihilism seems less now. Agonism, one may particularly find in the self-tortured angst of different forms of expressionist art. Vincent Van Gogh's self-portrait after cutting off his ear can be linked up with self-mutilating performances within recent years of Chris Burden, Auschwager and Gina Pane. Activism is strongly characterised by Marinetti in the first Futurist manifesto, with its glorification of speed and movement generally, and his celebrated declaration that a modern racing car was more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace, in particular.

Experimentalism underlies these rejuvenating art forms:

> One of the most important aspects of avant-garde poetics is what is referred to as experimentalism, for this, one easily recognises an immediate precedent in romantic aesthetic

> experimentation, the anxious search for new and virgin forms, with the aim not only of destroying the barbed wire of rules, the gilded cage of classical poetics, but also of creating a new morphology of art; a new spiritual language.[57]

This vision of rules, or norms as being restrictive and unnecessary are probably the natural result of political and social assumptions of a laissez-faire stage in capitalist democratic evolution. Thomas Munro, in talking of a naturistic view of the arts (in avoiding preset purposes) says this was particularly true of Romanticism within our own cultural tradition, and Zen Buddhism outside this tradition. This encourages impulse and intuition in the arts. Politically, it demands more laissez-faire, and a hands-off policy by government and institutions (in determining art's content, not in its financing).

This tendency within the social structure is that of the individual breaking away from a collectivity, which is seen as a conformist and bourgeois monolith by the artist. Yet, avant-garde art, as Poggioli has so astutely indicated, enjoys the paradoxical situation of unconsciously paying homage to the ideals of freedom in democratic capitalism, in taking up an anti-democratic, anti-bourgeois stance. He claimed (although for the more aware artists this is probably false) that the avant-garde does not:

> ... realise that it expresses the evolutionary and progressive principle of that social order in the very act of abandoning itself to the opposite chimeras of involution and revolution.[58]

Avant-garde art generally is only possible within laissez-faire

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[57] Ibid., p. 57.

[58] Ibid., p. 106.

bourgeois societies with little direct government control. One has only to refer to the Chinese or the Soviet's use of the arts as a direct political tool, or Nazi Germany's repression of avant-garde artists as 'decadent', to realize this. However, the recent overnight razing of Montreal's outdoor art exhibition, Corridart, in 1976, by the City of Montreal should be enough to erase complacency of our own society's cultural impermeability.

Experimentalism, therefore, according to Poggioli, is the main internal lever towards change, and renewing of the avant-gardes' vigour. The art movements of the first twenty-five years of this century, following one after the other in quick succession, seem well to bear out this judgement.

However, this has been questioned within the last twenty years by the artist, Allan Kaprow, who claimed that some movements' claims to experimentalism are but a masquerade. True experimental art, according to his definition, must start in a sort of personal chaos, and, in fact, is rare. It must start in a peculiar quality of not knowing, a sort of inspired ignorance. Resuming more recent art movements, he contends that most contemporary art is 'developmental' rather than 'experimental', since it develops ideas that have already become art history. He seems to claim that it is this very self-consciousness as art history which is inhibiting true experimentalism and true avant-gardism. "But if something were to occur in which the historical references were missing, even for a short time, then that situation would become experimental:"[59]

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[59]Allan Kaprow, "Experimental Art," Art News (March, 1966): 62.

Later, he prescribed a method of working to the artist, which seems, perhaps, to be an anti-method.

> The thing to do is to take the bull by the tail and try to swing it. Instead of beginning with styles and techniques, it becomes necessary to violate one's beliefs regarding the very nature of art, it becomes necessary to destroy as many distinctions as still exist in the idea, necessary to let loose with confusion and insecurity.[60]

It is significant that these two contrasting views of avant-garde art, that of Poggioli and that of Kaprow, come from a theorist on art, on the one hand, and from an artist, on the other. The artist, Kaprow, senses the great danger of the artist proceeding rationally, with an inordinately high consciousness of art history, and prescribes a return to sources at all costs. The unconscious, the unknown automatic procedure are seen as necessary, part of the exteriorization of the self, which must be carried through to the very form, the reforming of the language of art itself.

More recently Burnham has observed that certain artists, such as "... Kosuth — like Daniel Buren and a few others — has partially revealed the bankruptcy of historical avant-gardism mainly by demonstrating that avant-garde art operates by transparently logical mechanisms."[61]

In what sense, then, is the avant-garde historical? Is it's motivation strictly historical, as is stated by Poggioli, or is it a sum of complex motivations? It seems that the most fruitful area of probing

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[60] Ibid., pp. 78-79.

[61] Jack Burnham, "Problems of Criticism, IX," Artforum (Jan. 1971): 40.

might be in the motivation. Some art is developmental because its intention is to consolidate. For example, it is difficult to see some minimal painting without referring back to Mondrian or Malevich. This might be a faulty projection on some artist's work, such as Barnett Newman or Ad Reinhart, but others, such as Fritz Glarner, or Guido Molinari, refer openly to Mondrian as a root source.

Other art is motivated more by society, a more personal or metaphysical vision, or life generally. The form it takes on is a function of the motivation. The influence of the past is more taken for granted. Dr. Dubos, extrapolating from the field of psychology, claimed that, anyway, the past survives within us, independently of will. Speaking of a culture generally, he said: "It incorporates in its structure, all its past; and its responses to any new experience is therefore conditioned by the past."[62]

On an individual level, Dubos held that this assertion also holds true:

> The historical accident that Freud dealt mainly with a certain type of patient whose illness originated from subconscious mental processes has obscured the more interesting and more important truth that the past survives in all the attributes of the body and the mind, in health as much as in disease.[63]

So, experimental art, although not concerned with prolonging any myth structure of art history, does, in retrospect, fit into a historical scheme where an exclusively historical interpretation is pressed.

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[62] Dr. Dubos, The Ethics of Change, C. B. C. Publications (Toronto: Best Printing Co. Ltd., 1969), p. 65.

[63] Ibid., p. 22. (Emphasis added).

Moreover, the impression that art is either wholly "developmental" or wholly "experimental," is, for the most part, false, where there is an easy dialogue between the inner and the outer parts of the artist's being. The artist, Robert Barry, in 1969, implied in this written statement, that life is the important influence on his work, not previous art.

> Making art is not really important. Living is. In my mind art and living are so closely interlocked ... Fortunately — in recent years — the term "art" has lost any solid meaning. I guess if I call something art, I am saying: "Look at this thing, consider it carefully and that is all it means."[64]

And yet Barry cannot be unaware of the art context, and by extension art historical context, as the parameter within which he works.

It seems that the evolution of the arts have, according to individual personalities and differing historical moments, been, by turn, influenced by different factors; art history, social or political problems, personal crises, or more general influences. On the one hand, an artist may look on art as his profession, and on the other, as his way of life. The question is of the greater or lesser magnitude of the separation the artist holds, psychologically, between his art, and his living processes. As Rosenberg and Fliegel suggest, there cannot be a total separation without impoverishment. "... aesthetics implies ethics: abdication of one spells abandonment of the other."[65]

The field of interpretation, therefore, must be careful, in the

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[64] Robert Barry, Conceptual Art, ed. Ursula Meyer (New York: Dutton, 1972), p. 39.

[65] B. Rosenberg and N. Fliegel, The Vanguard Artist (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), p. 238.

application of its various methodologies, not to overlook this, sometimes self-evident, and yet other times tenuous, connection between an artist's work and his life, in the often too-easy projection that art proceeds according to its own exclusive rules.

CHAPTER 5

INADEQUACIES OF FORMALIST ART CRITICISM TODAY

> The proper object of criticism is not the thing, the art object, but the entire aesthetic field. The critic is not a participator in this field, but stands outside it, and performs an educational rather than a judiciary role.[66]

However controversial this may be, presented here is Berleant's summary of the critic's role, as reflective of this writer's premise that by definition, it should not impinge directly on the artist's activity. Renato Poggioli wrote:

> Unfortunately, avant-garde criticism, instead of working autonomously alongside avant-garde art, has too often let itself be determined, in both the negative and positive way, by the avant-garde spirit.[67]

The avant-garde critic, he said, far from being a passive extension of the art he observes, sees his own writing as part of the activist thrust. He amplified:

> Critical judgement ... instead of tending toward a conscious reconstruction of the ambiance of the works, or towards an intelligent interpretation thereof, has preferred to develop the subordinate tack of controversial polemics, of propaganda for, or against.[68]

Poggioli, writing these words in 1968, about the time of the

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[66] Arnold Berleant, The Aesthetic Field: A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1970), p. 81.

[67] Poggioli, The Concept of the Avant-Garde, p. 150.

[68] Ibid. (Emphasis added).

first widespread appearance of conceptualism, might have been referring to the exhaustion of formalist criticism, as the current criticism of the avant-garde.

The formalist tradition of criticism, as described by Burnham, is essentially a mechanism for reinforcing art history as myth. The premise of Maurice Denis, in 1890, that a painting was simply a flat surface covered with colours arranged in a certain order, preceded (with Wilhelm Worringer's Abstraction and Empathy), and prepared the way for early abstract art (Wassily Kandinsky, Kasimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian). This, later, allied to Gestalt psychology, emphasized the perceptual relationship of the parts to the whole, and provided the justification for formalist criticism. However, Burnham claims that this actually provided the framework for the strengthening of a mythic pattern. As with all mythic forms, it depends on belief. Further, he says, later artists themselves began to instinctively formulate the rules according to the historical myth, and started, "filling in necessary terms of the logic-structure."[69] What Allan Kaprow called "developmental art" (see Chapter 5), would seem to be this filling in of the missing parts of a logic structure of recent art history as a mythic form.

Burnham thinks that chronological homogeneity is a necessary part of sustaining art history as myth. The reason is simple. Without homogeneity there may be conflicting myth structures, which would cancel each other out. Therefore, to work as myth, there can only be one myth structure, and the simplest one is homogeneous. In being chronological

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[69] Burnham, A Structural Approach, pp. 32-43.

and homogeneous it reinforces the myth of progress. Certainly, in North America, the dominant critical influence in the years immediately preceding 1968, was formalist.

Clement Greenberg, probably the most influential formalist art critic within the last twenty years, is rich in allusions to the chronological homogeneity of art, in fact he consistently emphasizes its continuity. "Art is, among many other things, continuity."[70] "Modernist art develops out of the past, without gap or break, and wherever it ends up, it will never stop being intelligible in terms of the continuity of art."[71] He referred to the art of the last century for traceable influences of a single direction.

> ... by the middle of the nineteenth century all ambitious tendencies in painting were converging (beneath their differences) in an anti-sculptural direction.[72]

However, when one remembers that he is somehow ignoring Corot, Delacroix, Gericault and Courbet, one is brought back to Burnham's reminder that like all myths:

> ... the concept of style and art history possess vitality and heroism as long as they remain lived ideas; once opened to close examination in the face of contradictions, they dissolve before our eyes.[73]

In the present context of art, of the many sudden historical transgressions of artists within the last ten years, Greenberg's thesis

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[70]Clement Greenberg, Modernist Painting: The New Art, ed. by Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1966), p. 110.

[71]Ibid., p. 105.

[72]Ibid.

[73]Burnham, A Structural Approach, p. 43. (Emphasis added).

is no longer tenable. Indeed, a careful observer would realize that his out-of-hand rejection of Marcel Duchamp as an important artist, was suspect. Typically, his rejection is related to his notion of "quality."

> The notion that the issue of quality could be evaded is one that never entered the mind of any academic artist or art person. It was left to what I call, the 'popular' avant-garde to be the first to conceive it. That kind of avant-garde began with Marcel Duchamp and Dada.[74]

Certainly one cannot reproach Greenberg for his consistency in the expression of his belief in the primacy of "quality" and "taste" as a measure of particular artist's contributions. Within his writing, and verbal statements, phrases such as these are not just common, but are the basis of elaborate discussion. "Things that purport to be art do not function, do not exist, as art, until they are experienced through taste."[75] "What counts first and last in art is quality; all other things are secondary."[76]

This form of approach to the work does not, however, seem to be a search for quality in a broad sense, but is, inadvertently, a means of maintaining and strengthening belief in a mythic view of art history. His rejection of Duchamp seems to be less concerned with quality than with maintaining homogenous continuity in his view of art history. Other art which he cannot account for in terms of continuity, he simply

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[74]Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde Attitudes: New Art in the Sixties," Studio International (April, 1970): 145.

[75]Ibid., p. 142.

[76]Clement Greenberg, "Abstract, Representational, and so Forth, Art and Sculpture," Critical Essays, 1961 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972): 133.

calls "novelty art," or "... just phenomena, not art."[77]

In view of this, he seems to be using the term "quality" to define and underline continuity. If this is so, he is defining "quality" in terms of profane time, of duration, of linear development. But surely "quality" should be used, not to reinforce a concept of profane time, but rather the work's sacredness; an important point.

Burnham, in his critique on the notion of "quality," concluded:

> The word 'quality' seems to be used as 'beauty' once was; as the veritable 'last word'. You had to be sufficiently perspicacious, sensitive, intelligent and moral ... to know what it meant ... the word is therefore a cop-out, and put down, and code term for what is 'in'.[78]

The following quotation from Greenberg, referring only to those works with "quality," projects a sense of easily intelligible chronology of events which, in its oversimplification, simply reinforces a mythic of art:

> It would take me more space than is at my disposal to tell how the norm of the picture's enclosing shape or frame was loosened then tightened, then loosened once again, and then isolated and tightened once more by successive generations of Modernist painters; or how the norms of finish, of paint texture, and of value and color contrast were tested and retested. Risks have been taken with all these not only for the sake of new expression, but also in order to exhibit them more clearly as norms.[79]

Indeed, in his reference to "norms" and "testing" and "retesting" there is the added suggestion of the scientific myth in art making, which, for most artists, is highly misrepresentative of their procedure.

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[77] Greenberg, "Avant-garde Attitudes," p. 145.

[78] Burnham, "Quality and the Art of Hitchhiking," Arts Magazine (April, 1975): 64.

[79] Greenberg, Modernist Painting, p. 106.

Another critic of this period, Harold Rosenberg, projects a similar impression of homogeneous chronology in his simplifications, which can only be seen as further reinforcement of art history as mythic form. Rosenberg often seems to see the avant-garde as an instrument to reinforce the illusion of continuity.

> Oriented towards the future, avant-gardism is a mode of sensibility that experiences existing entities as foreshadowings — it sees in Cezanne an anticipation of cubism, in a cubistic painting, an early phase of an art that will grow increasingly mathematical.[80]

The speculative spirit within this statement is strong enough to leave the unspoken question, "Of what is our present art a foreshadowing?" lingering in our minds. This tendency (to consider recent art as pattern rather than a number of transcendent experiences) seems to confirm that the critic, at least, the formalist critic, is by the nature of his profession, situated in profane time.

Elsewhere, Rosenberg's projections tend specifically towards the unknown future.

> A vanguard painting is not only itself; it contains the paintings that will be influenced by it. Should there be none of these, the significance of the painting shrinks to zero.[81]

If one accepts this, one can never know what a vanguard painting is, as one never knows if it will influence other paintings or not. One can only know what a vanguard painting was. But the implication is that, with sufficient information and understanding, one might attempt predictions of at least the next logical step. Burnham claims that Greenberg

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[80]Harold Rosenberg, Discovering the Present (London: University of Chicago Press Ltd., 1973), p. 77.

[81]Ibid., p. 78.

approaches this.

> Thus given the experience, sensitivity and insight to be able to deduce the causal course of art history, even as a dialectic, one could, without claiming extrasensory powers, anticipate the future. But, as a Quality-monger without equal, Clement Greenberg has come seriously close to it.[82]

To accuse Greenberg of a Marxian or Hegelian view of history does not in the least refute his success in choosing artists who "do solve the problems" defined by the historical succession of styles.

Rosenberg generalised insistently on his view. "The twentieth century artist acts on the basis of a consciousness of history."[83] "In the sixties, meaning lay in the idea of winning a place in art history."[84]

> Consciousness of art history rules the art of our time, and is the key to what takes place in the galleries of New York, Los Angeles, Paris, Warsaw, Tokyo ... often, as in over-all abstraction, the art-historical reference is the only reference.[85]

These statements, representative of much of Rosenberg's thinking, can be discussed from two points of view: those of the artists who conform to this notion, and those who do not.

First, if artists were interested in gaining a place in art history, they are, as Burnham says, "filling in the necessary terms of the logic structure" of the historical myth. Second, is Rosenberg right in assuming that consciousness of art history will unfailingly motivate an

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[82] Burnham, "Quality and the Art of Hitchhiking," p. 65.

[83] Harold Rosenberg, Discovering the Present, p. 318.

[84] Harold Rosenberg, The Dedefinition of Art (New York: Collier, 1972), p. 232.

[85] Harold Rosenberg, The Anxious Object (New American Library, 1969), p. 26.

artist to want to win his place within it? Evidently, Rosenberg is assuming more passivity in the artist than he should expect. For where there is consciousness of something, one cannot count on passivity. Indeed, recent years have born out that the high degree of art historical consciousness has resulted, on the contrary, in the artist's excluding as far as possible the art historical reference, and strengthening other kinds of references. Hence the recent historical transgressions of the linguistic conceptualists, and other artists who refuse to reinforce the mythic aspect of art history.

But quite apart from these recent historical transgressions (which simply serve to make this critical problem unavoidable) the consciousness of the artist is at least partly "anti-historical," at the inception of a new thought, insight, attitude or procedure. It is this which allows him to break away; this is also affirmed by Poggioli's "antagonism," as part of the avant-garde motivation. At the precise moment of action, such art can only be seen as "anti-historical." Its later implications cannot be known. As the sociologist Jean Durignaud stated: "Art is only rarely the representation of an order. It is more the permanent and anxious contestation."[86]

Rosenberg tries to overcome this by seeing this revolt as part of a tradition which, once again, suggests that behind the revolt there is homogeneous chronological continuity. He stated:

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[86]Jean Duvignaud, Sociologie de l'Art (Presse Universitaire de la France, 1965), p. 34.

> Within the tradition (of the New in Art), there exists a continuing strain of revolt, against society, against the orders of the mind, against all existing conditions of life and work.[87]

For Rosenberg to identify each revolt as being part of a tradition, is perhaps to tame the revolt intellectually; but, in reality, these revolts did exist as breaks, not as the continuation of a tradition. Can one call a revolt traditional without devaluing the significance of words? Perhaps the real issue is that the admission of breaks would threaten the mythic form of art history.

As has been said earlier, recent artists have provided a break with this form in trying as far as possible to exclude the historical reference, and strengthening other kinds of references. This threatens the mythic form because as Burnham stated: "The more the history of art is connected to other areas of human development -- the more unsatisfactory it becomes as a mythic creation."[88]

Lawrence Alloway, speaking of formalist art criticism generally, and Clement Greenberg in particular, considered the exclusion of the artist's statements as indicative of the tendency to also exclude references to other areas of human development.

> The words of artists are not introduced as evidence, because individual intentions and opinions count for little compared to the momentum ascribed to 'modernist' art as an evolutionary line.[89]

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[87] Harold Rosenberg, Concepts in Art and Education: Art Criticism and Its Premises, ed. George Pappas (U.S.A.: McMillan, 1970), p. 369.

[88] Burnham, A Structural Approach, p. 37.

[89] Lawrence Alloway, "Artists as Writers, Part One, Inside Information," Art Forum (March, 1974): 28.

Once one has identified certain formalist critics, certainly Greenberg and Rosenberg, as essentially critics acting as mythmakers, their statements become simpler to assess. The necessity to assess them arises at this point in time because the critic can no longer rely on the artist's complicity in the process of maintaining the myth. One has to admit that, after all, the development of art does not have an internal logic which is independent of other areas of human development. More broad, more valid today, is Leo Steinberg's attitude:

> Considerations of 'human interest' belong to the criticism of modern art, not because we are incurably sentimental about humanity, but because it is art we are talking about.[90]

Hirsch, in the context of literary criticism, wrote in 1967 of the danger of the exclusion of the writer as interpreter of his own work, also in an effort to broaden criticism.

> For, once the author had been ruthlessly banished as the determiner of his text's meaning, it very gradually appeared that no adequate principle existed for judging the validity of an interpretation. By an inner necessity, the study of 'what a text says' becomes the study of what it says to an individual critic. It became fashionable to talk of a critic's 'reading' of a text. The word seemed to imply that if the author had been banished, the critic still remained; and his new, original, ingenious, or relevant 'reading' carried its own interest.[91]

Yet this is a reality that artists also have had to deal with, and as Rosenberg admits:

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[90] Leo Steinberg, Confrontations With Twentieth Century Art, p. 81.

[91] E. D. Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation (Yale University Press, 1967), p. 3.

> Such ideas [the submergence of the artist's experience] are, of course, the specialities of critics and art historians, and the basis of their status in the art world.[92]

Museums also are reinforcing the active role of the critic as a determiner, not just of meaning, but of decisions about new directions in art, in giving them power of decisions about who should exhibit.

> Someone in Artforum discussed an exhibition arranged by a female critic that achieved a 'total style', and thus led to the conclusion that it is the critic who is in fact the artist, and that her medium is other artists, a foreseeable extension of the current practice of a museum's hiring a critic to 'do' a show, and the critic then asking artists to 'do' pieces for the show.[93]

Gombrich claimed that critics are inclined to see art as "specimens" for future museums, asking only that an artist's work represent a new style. He added a sober afterthought: "In the absence of any more concrete jobs, even the most gifted modern artist sometimes falls in with these demands."[94]

Recently in an interview, Jime Dine, with great honesty, revealed that the origin of his fifteen year preoccupation with the bathrobe paintings, was influenced by his pretentions as an avant-garde artist.

> In the 60's I had achieved a certain notoriety as a so-called avant-garde artist, and a lot was expected of me. So you see, if I was going to do a self-portrait, I had to find some avant-garde way of doing it. Well, I just couldn't put the figure in it, because I was afraid of being called retrograde. It was a fear of being called a sellout. So I found a different way of doing it.[95]

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[92] Rosenberg, Dedefinition, pp. 195-6.

[93] Ibid., p. 198.

[94] E. H. Gombrich, The Story of Art (London: Phaidon Press, 1963), p. 446.

[95] John Gruen, "Jim Dine and the Life of Objects," Art News (Sept. 1977): 38.

A few years further back in time, Hodlin mentioned the influence of the polemics of abstract versus figurative on Oskar Kokoschka. "This kind of criticism has unfortunately lured such an artist as Oskar Kokoschka into the area of fruitless polemics."[96]

As well as the art historical myth, the consumer-society ethic, Leo Steinberg suggested is at the heart of the polemics of the avant-garde critic.

> ... the reductive terms of discussion that continually run them (Pollock, Louis and Noland) series, are remarkably close to the ideals that govern the packaging of the All-American engine. It is the critic's criterion far more than the painter's works which is ruled by a streamlined efficiency image.[97]

The artist, consequently, until he banishes the critic as determiner of the meaning of his work, is in a fragile position. Before, the artist was left more in his private world of images. But now there is a hyperactive system of communication. With every exhibition there is a catalogue; with every catalogue, a statement; with every statement and exhibition, a critique, or article; and all this, with slides and photographs, become the means to further exhibitions. It is hardly surprising then, in these more and more elaborate interpretative structures, that the artist has felt it necessary to include written statements within the work itself, as have done many conceptualists in recent years. Nor is it hardly surprising that artists are using the media as an art form, in face of the choice of accepting its implications passively or

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[96] J. P. Hodlin, "German Criticism of Modern Art Since the War," College Art Journal, Vol. 17, No. 4 (1958): 376.

[97] Steinberg, Confrontations With Twentieth Century Art, p. 79.

participating and subverting it as a secondary structure. This more recent "tougher" stance in attempting to banish, or at least "short-circuit" the critic as interpreter, only confirms the suspicion that the artist cannot be considered as a totally passive participator in social structures. He has in part relinquished if belatedly, the possibility of presenting and interpreting his own work. Simultaneously, he tends to reject the formalist reinforcing of art as myth, to strengthen references to human development in other domains, and in some cases to reach over recent art history to more root or primary sources of experiencing.

This more recent art has, consequently, made more demands on the spectator imbued with the historical myth, in asking him to discard previous ideas about art, and in many cases to return to more primary kinds of experiencing, just in order for him to perceive what the work contains, or is.

CHAPTER 6

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE

There is a quality of looking that separates the genuine experience from a learned, conditioned, or stereotyped reaction. Qualifying this, Lucius Garvin wrote:

> The aesthetic attitude is passive and receptive, of course, but it is, to use Gotshalk's phrase, more than a 'stupid staring'. His staring which is emotionally oriented, inviting the object to present, not just itself, but its charm or repulsiveness, its warmth, or its coldness, its special import for the sensibilities.[98]

Evidently the viewer's mind must be open, or such experiencing cannot happen. He must approach with the attitude of expecting nothing, and with the risk of having to discard, or suspend, some previous notions.

Elisa Steenberg identifies two predominant assumptions on aesthetic experience:

1. The aesthetic experience is a psychic event related to an object.
2. The aesthetic experience involves an experience of value, and thus constitutes the psychic basis for a specific category of valuation (meaning to value, to enjoy or not to enjoy, as different from, to evaluate, to judge) of an object (from positive to negative).

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[98] Lucius Garvin, The Paradox of Aesthetic Meaning: Reflexions on Art Education by Suzanne Langer (Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 70.

> As used in this discussion, an experience of an object means the perceptual content of an object. An object is anything that can be seen as an entity by a subject. The term thus applies not only to physical objects and simple stimuli, but also to mental images, acts, etc.
>
> The perceptual content of an object includes what is denoted as sensuous and as cognitive elements respectively.[99]

Although perceptual content may include cognitive elements, it must be further clarified that cognitive elements that are interpretative are secondary to the initial experience. Further, if interpretative frameworks do not grow out of a receptivity as to what the work has to offer, they may be prejudicial to it.

Arnold Berleant argues for a point of view which grants the primacy of perception over cognition in aesthetic experience.[100] He considers art non-cognitive and pre-analytic, and that it denies a place in the immediate aesthetic experience to "meaning." For cognition forms the basis of a complex of comparisons, classifications and value judgements.

The question of receptivity raises the problem of previous knowledge. For, to be perfectly receptive it is implied that one would have to have no knowledge. The quality of receptivity would, rather, have to be arrived at through a temporary suspension of previous knowledge, a capacity of perception, which, if not naive, may be considered child-like. That this capacity is a great rarity can be witnessed by the difficulty with which major breaks in art evolution have been

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[99]Elisa Steenberg, "The Scholar's Object: Experience Aesthetic and Artistic," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1971: 49.

[100]Arnold Berleant, Aesthetic Field.

assimilated. It has even been noticed that it has been artists who have been the initial and the most vehement repudiators of another artist's breakthrough.

But, returning to the idea that openness in perception requires a suspension of previous knowledge irrelevant to the reading of the work, Fallico stated:

> To see the art-object, one must be able to not-see the world. To see the Mona Lisa, one must be able to not see the wood, the paint, and the canvas as such; to hear the music, one must be able to not hear the sounds as sounds; to see Hamlet, one must be able to not see the stage as stage, not see Lawrence Olivier as Lawrence Olivier.[101]

In the light of the literal character of works such as John Cage's three minutes of silence, or Pollock's drip paintings, one must disagree with his thesis of not hearing sounds as sounds, or paint as paint. But the principle holds true that, in spite of blurring of boundaries, the art work exists separate from the everyday run of ordinary events, even if it may include them, as does Cage. This has been characterised earlier by the dichotomy of actuality and virtuality, as described by Langer, or the analogy of profane and sacred time described by Eliade. Virtual time or place is sacred and is that which includes the art work.

One must, then, be able to perceive the work in its most primary state, as basic sensorial information about itself. To see it only as either a confirmation or rejection of something outside itself, or any other association, is to question its possibility as stimulus for a pure "psychic event," as Steenberg calls it.

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[101] Arthur Fallico, Art and Existentialism (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1962), p. 31.

Merleau-Ponty recognized the necessity of suspending relationships, in order to perceive purely.

> It is because we are, through and through, compounded of relationships with the world that, for us the only way to become aware of the fact is to suspend the resultant activity, to refuse it on complicity ... or, yet again, to put it out of play.[102]

Speaking of the aspirations of phenomenology, he said earlier:

> It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin, and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide.[103]

As an example, the contemporary American artist, Mel Bochner, speaks of the impact of Malevich's paintings: "The immediacy of confronting these paintings is the immediacy of confronting another mind."[104]

But, to Malevich's notebooks he objected that:

> I find all those charts to be a mental whirlpool that suck you down into didacticism. It's remarkable to me the amount of irrelevancy when applied to the immediacy of the paintings.[105]

Never as much as today has the naked experience been subverted so widely by the use of the media; catalogues, slides, verbal descriptions, whose use, with the kind of critical writing discussed in the last chapter, very often project art as a kind of mythmaking activity. The obvious counteraction to this tendency is the return to that direct

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[102] Merleau-Ponty, A Phenomenology of Perception, pp. xiii and xiv preface.

[103] Ibid., p. vii preface.

[104] Bochner, Bochner on Malevich, p. 63.

[105] Ibid.

experience. Bochner rightly said:

> You can't stand in front of a work of art, and speak, even to yourself, about that experience. There is no instant replay. There's a direct interaction. Now that direct interaction, in a lot of art theory today, is being denigrated — because, I think, there appears to be the possibility of surrogate experiences of that interaction — you know, reproductions, multiples, media.[106]

Perhaps an older form of surrogate is that of verbal and written interpretations, limited to their own language and method. Surely these interpretations, in order for them to be understood as complementary to the direct experience, rather than surrogates, must be related to that initial experience.

Berleant, talking of theories stressing the communicative, symbolic, emotive and cognitive aspects of art, objected to this practice on the grounds that:

> Each theory commits the identical logical error of equivocation, by replacing the explanaraum, that which is to be explained, with a surrogate that represents it inadequately.[107]

Jean Cassou, former chief curator of the Musee Nationale d'Art Moderne, saw this tendency on a social level, as the projections of a "consumer society":

> Its merchandising culture treats works of art as objects, alienates them from the subjective experiences that brought them into being, and packages them for consumption, as 'cultural goods'.[108]

But in front of the work, what may the spectator experience through this "staring" (in Garvin's phrase) that is emotionally

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[106] Ibid.

[107] Berleant, Aesthetic Field, p. 20.

[108] Rosenberg, Dedefinition, p. 204.

oriented? What emerges? Some works instantaneously may elicit responses of pleasure, curiosity, discomfort, frustration, or a host of other responses, varying with the individual viewer. Others, probably the majority, may not register any conscious or noticeable reaction.

Of the works that strike strongly, there may be a process of response, perhaps astonishment, curiosity, admiration, and pleasure. Maybe the process might work slowly in one's layers of consciousness, until one is drawn to go and see the works again, to see if they will shed some more of their mystery. (Leo Steinberg told of revisiting Jasper John's first exhibition much in this spirit).[109] And a work that encourages one to reflect more about it, and know its interpretations, its biographical and artistic context, its intention, etc., a work that, even in revealing more, withholds a store of future experiences, must surely be considered the normal process of perception of a strong work.

But it is through the initial experience, and the internal reflections which it calls up, not through the secondary stimuli of interpretative writing, that a work may be said to transcend its context. It seems, as one views a late Rembrandt self-portrait, that one does not need to know anything about Dutch burghers to react positively. Arthur Koestler proposes a period-frame through which one may view a work of art.

> Thus we look at an old picture through a double frame; the solid gilt frame which isolates it from its surroundings, and creates for it, a hole in space; and the period-frame in our minds which

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[109] Leo Steinberg, The New Art, ed. by Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1966).

creates for it, a hole in time, and assigns its place on the stage of history.[110]

Now the notion which is being proposed is that the period-frame disappears for a work that, to the spectator in his one-to-one confrontation with it, truly transcends its historical origins. It becomes immediate and contemporary in impact.

Huelsenbeck's remark is in accord with this, referring to Dada generally: "What Dada was in the beginning, and how it developed, is utterly unimportant in comparison with what it has come to mean."[111]

When the term "contextual transcendence" is used, it may be understood to stand for the transcendence of historical context. The term, historical context is used, both inclusively of the general historical moment in which a work was made, and the particular art-historical context, in the sense that a movement is part of art history. It can be seen that the idea of context relies on a continuous everyday, in a word, profane, sense of time. The possibility of transcendence lifts the subject into a state of mind more akin to a religious attitude which one can call sacred.

Eliade has referred to "The eternal present which precedes temporal experience." He refers to celebrations and rituals in archaic cultures as a means to reach back, in a mythological sense, to the

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[110] Arthur Koestler, The Act of Creation, pp. 406-407.

[111] Robert Motherwell, ed., Dada Painters and Poets. Did Dada Die? A Critical Bibliography compiled by Bernard Kaysel, p. 321.

original time, in order to be renewed.[112]

In a chapter which may prove to be prophetic in one of the possible directions of theoretical discussion on art, Eliade refers to the modern artist as:

> One force in our society where the areligiosity is now balanced by a return to more primary origins, archetypal configurations, and, indeed, a non-sectarian 'cosmic religiosity'.[113]

Eliade refers to the artist's adventuring into the depths of his own psyche to free himself of surface appearance of things. He, in particular, singles out Brancusi for his attitude of veneration towards stone (in which he finds a strong parallel with attitudes of neolithic man).

Similarly, Burnham refers to Dennis Oppenheim as an artist working as shaman because Oppenheim recalls, through his work, an earlier primordial time, symbolically an act of transcendence. What Remembrandt has succeeded in doing with the spectator, in transcending a time span, Oppenheim acts out himself. Thus contextual transcendence may be described as a relationship between the viewer and the work.

For example, African masks had a significance for Picasso and Matisse at the beginning of the century, which was not the same as for others living in Paris at that moment. So the contextual transcendence of the masks was not something absolute, but a description of the relationship between the particular viewer and the particular work. The

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[112] Mircea Eliade, Myths, Rites, Symbols, p. 220.

[113] Ibid., p. 126. (Emphasis added).

first example of a late Rembrandt self-portrait as having contextual transcendence, is then a personal relationship between the spectator and a Rembrandt. But this relationship may be such a generally agreed upon relationship within a certain society, or sector of a society, that it becomes assumed, and could be called a cultural image. Now where this assumption is not questioned by a renewing and reassessing of the initial experience, there is a reinforcing of the mythical form of art history.

To demystify the work, one is called back to the experience. A personal viewing of it is necessary. Merleau-Ponty, insisting on the personal quality of this relationship, writes:

> The very experience of transcendent things is possible only provided that their project is born, and discovered, within myself. When I say that things are transcendent, this means that I do not possess them, that I do not circumambulate them; they are transcendent to the extent that I am ignorant of what they are, and blindly assert their bare existence ... The fact that I am capable of recognising it as attributable to my actual contact with the thing, which awakens within me, a primordial knowledge of all things, and to my finite and determinate perceptions being partial manifestation of a power of knowing, which is co-extensive with the world, and unfolds it in its full extent and depth.[114]

Generally, the problem of interpretation which emerges from this discussion could be formulated as the distance it creates between spectator and object or event, as a unique exchange. In the last chapter, it was argued that formalist criticism in recent years was taking on a myth-reinforcing role, emphasizing continuity rather than transcendence, upheaval or any kind of a break. It tends to represent

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[114] Merleau-Ponty, A Phenomenology of Perception, p. 370.

a gloss which creates, as Bullough calls it, "psychical-distance," between the spectator and object or event. The resulting "overdistancing" tends to prevent the possibility of a unique experience.

However, contrary interpretative structures, as Burnham pointed out, could break down the absolutist nature of formalist interpretation. For there cannot be conflicting myth forms within a culture. It is in this sense that there follows a discussion on the possibility of multiple interpretations.

CHAPTER 7

IMAGE AND INFORMATION

In a theoretical passage in Hirsch's Validity in Interpretation, discussing the difference between significance (response) and meaning, Hirsch projected the problem as one of great simplicity, giving as example:

> When someone says, 'my response to a text is different every time I read it', he is certainly speaking the truth; he begins to speak falsely when he identifies his response with the meaning he has construed.[115]

Meaning, then, Hirsch asserted, is something inextricably tied to the object, a sort of constant.

> The goal directedness of mental acts, by virtue of which something can remain the same for consciousness even though one's perspective, emotion, state of health, may vary, is particularly important in consideration of meaning.[116]

However, in application, it may be seen that what is theoretically simple may be practically very complex. The difference between meaning and significance becomes indeterminate. The problem opens up, as towards meaning, where there is no convenient key to unlock the door. Does a work of art have a specific meaning? If so, whose? Is it the artist's? If one accepts Marcel Duchamp's assertion that the

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[115] E. D. Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation, pp. 38, 39.

[116] Ibid., pp. 37-38.

artist works as a medium drawing from his depths, or T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, who say it is independent of the author's control, and leads an after-life of its own, then the artist or author cannot be the final authority in definition of meaning. Is the meaning changeable even for the artist? Or does the artist's meaning matter? Bochner's statement on Malevich, in favour of the "immediacy" of the paintings, over the writings, seems to indicate that Malevich's written revelations of meanings do not matter, at least to Bochner. And what if the author's meaning is inaccessible? It seems that the power of suggestion, of the unclear but potent symbol, has its own arguments over the specificity that meaning seems to suggest as necessary. It is the implication of footnotes, references and critiques that are outside the works natural framework that raise the problem.

Garvin stated:

> To transgress the boundaries of the work of art is to destroy 'aesthetic immediacy'. Thus we are told by McLeish that a poem should not mean, but be. If meaning is to be aesthetic, then it must perforce remain within the object. But in that case, paradoxically, it ceases to be meaning — or at least meaning, meant by the object.[117]

In the opening page of Saint Exupery's The Little Prince, an interesting example of this problem of immediacy versus meaning is put forward. As a child of six years old, he drew a picture of a boa constrictor swallowing an elephant, whole, which he reproduced thus:

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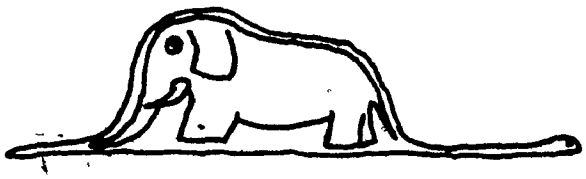
[117] Lucius Garvin, The Paradox of Aesthetic Meaning: Reflections on Art, p. 64.

Figure 2

The grown-ups, on being asked if the drawing frightened them, answered, "Frighten? Why should anyone be frightened by a hat?"[118] Forced to explain, he drew this:

Figure 3



In effect, his second drawing created the context in which the first one was to be seen. It acted in the same way as written, and verbal information associated with art works, which become a conditioning factor in the perception of the work.

Referring to the phenomenologist assertion, mentioned in the last chapter, of the necessity of the suspension of outside knowledge and relationships, in other words, the attainment of a child-like state of perception, in order to contemplate the work, it seems that a tremendous

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[118] Antoine de Saint Exupery, The Little Prince (New York: Harbrace Paperbound Library Inc., 1971), pp. 3-4.

problem arises. It seems that the phenomenologist point of view can only be idealistic, and rarely attainable. This has been underlined by Nicolas and Elena Calas:

> As Gilbert Ryle has pointed out in his devastating criticism of phenomenology: 'When someone looks at a plate, tilted away from him, and sees it as elliptical, all that he is doing is seeing a plate that has an elliptical look'.[119]

It is the respective due of certain conceptual artists to have recognised that the role of art writing is a problem within, if not all recent art, much of recent art criticism. Any context-making writing performs the same function as Saint Exupery's second drawing. It is a demystification of the first drawing. It clarifies meaning. But it could also be a mystification. And this is the crux of the problem. Imagine the case where Saint Exupery, instead of making a second drawing, had left the room, and another child, for whatever mischievous reason, had filled in thus:

Figure 4

then the adults could only feel confirmed in the opinion that it represented a hat.

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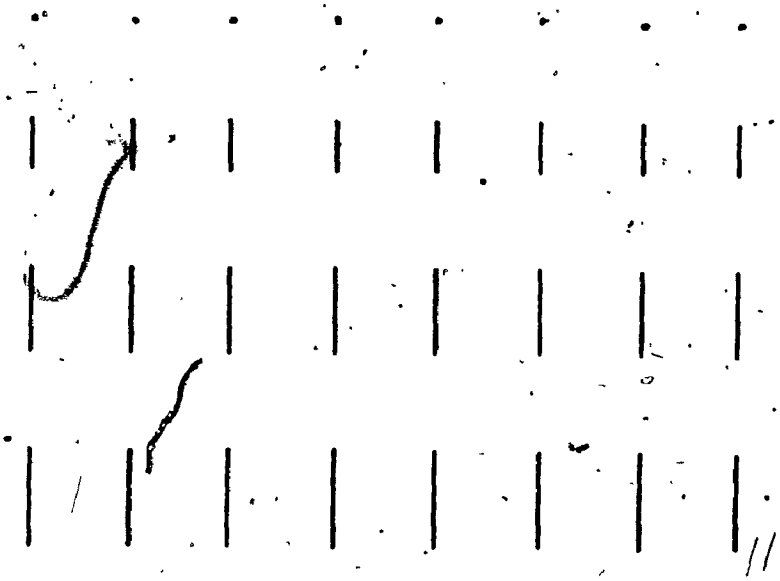
[119] Nicolas and Elena Calas, Icons and Images of the Sixties (New York: Dutton 71), p. 252, quoted in Gilbert Ryle, The Concept of the Mind (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1959), ch. 7, No. 3.

The analogy is clear then, that the ambiguous art work, like the drawing of the elephant, is open to context-making. And it is he who succeeds in making the context who will condition how the spectator views the work.

Certain conceptualists, for this reason, try to keep the context-making within the work. They attempt, in being their first interpreter, to focus on the problem of interpretation. Saint Exupery, if he had operated in this way, might have included his second drawing with his first one.

In 1968, Douglas Huebler made this drawing:

Figure 5



It seems clear, in descriptive terms, that one is looking at a series of points, and lines of various lengths, arranged in rows. However, he included, beneath the marks, the words:

Top Row. The ends of eight 1" lines positioned at 90° to the picture plane.

2nd Row. Eight 1" lines positioned at 30° to the picture plane.

3rd Row. Eight 1" lines positioned at 60° to the picture plane.

Bottom Row. Eight 1" lines positioned on the surface of the picture plane.[120]

Once one has read this, it modifies totally the perception of the signs, and is a clear indication of how a few words can provide a context which may determine how an art work is read.

About his work, Huebler said:

> What I say is part of the art work. I don't look to critics to say things about my work. I tell them what it is about. People deny words have anything to do with art. I don't accept that. They do. Art is a source of information.[121]

The idea of art as information is dependent on the diminishing to zero of the aesthetic response of the spectator. Burnham claimed that:

> The conceptualists have objectified the dissemination of art information — that is to say, the best have rethought the artist's role relative to media, museums and collectors.[122]

The problem up until recently seems to dwell in the openness or ambiguity of much abstract art being done. The spectator, under these conditions, feels the need for an intermediary, if not to describe, to at least reveal some hidden relationship, or provide some kind of interpretation. What he wants clarified is the meaning. It is the

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[120]Ursula Meyer, Conceptual Art (New York: Dutton and Co. Inc., 1972), p. 136.

[121]Ibid., p. 137.

[122]Jack Burnham, "Alice's Head, Reflections on Conceptual Art," Artforum (Feb. 1970): 43.

ideal conditions for critics to flourish. As Burnham stated: "All non-objective art depends on a meta-language support in the form of the artist's or critic's elaborations as to its meaning or intrinsic content."[123]

Quite apart from the more serious writings on art, one has only to observe the plethora of publications, conferences and communications of various sorts, to surmise that the works have become the (sometimes out-of-focus) focal point of a fast-growing media network within the context of art. It may be that this is reflective of consumer-societies generally, in that the packaging tends to outweigh the product.

It seems, however, that the reaction among artists to this situation could be defined by two very different attitudes to the notion of "immediacy." On the one hand, there was the sudden amplification of this notion. Christo's wrapped cliffs on the Australian coastline, Heizer's desert earthworks, or Smithson's spiral jetty seemed so breath-taking in dimension that the initial response was to preclude the need for interpretation. Their intention seems to be for their work to take on the vastness of natural phenomena. They tend to McLeish's description, "they do not mean, they are." As Gregoire Muller pointed out, referring to Heizer and De Maria:

> Their art, even when suitable for the artistic system as it now is, does not require the understanding of the artistic tradition to be appreciated; rather, it is necessary to forget completely what one knows about art in order to experience their works.[124]

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[123] Burnham, Structural Approach, p. 59.

[124] Gregoire Muller, The New Avant-garde (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), p. 27.

On the other hand, other artists, such as Huebler, Haacke, Kosuth, Ramsden, On Kawara, have diminished the "immediacy" to seemingly innocuous lists of dates, typed words on paper, postcards. Huebler's drawing is an example. Mel Ramsden, in 1967, raises the problem of ambiguity and context-making, even while satirizing previous painting, by presenting a square canvas painted uniformly black beside a text saying: "The content of this painting is invisible; the character and dimension of the content are to be kept permanently secret, known only to the artist."[125]

The question of context-making, by notes, texts and critiques, whether it is by the artist or another person, also questions how separate or "sacred" a work can be, in relation to daily events. However, the context changes with time, and when the work remains interesting or important, it is digested by and becomes part of the context-making mechanisms. The radicalness of the step that the linguistic conceptualists took is that, if the work does survive, part of the context-making, such as the words under Huebler's drawing, will survive with it, much as the words on the shovel of Marcel Duchamp have survived with the shovel. Duchamp's reasons for the words may have been poetic. But one cannot say that of the conceptualists mentioned above, whom one can sense, want a purge within the art system.

The intention seems to be to redirect the attention of the spectator from the work's physical immediacy (for what immediacy is there in a paper pinned on a wall) to the context in which it was done. In

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[125]Meyer, Conceptual Art, p. 204.

other words, an examination of the context of how we read art, has been given primacy over the sacred object. Because they are no longer bringing us to worship at the shrine of the temple, but rather, are questioning the mundane and secular operations of that temple, both in its social and political implications, they seem to be acting as artists as social scientists, even as the Dadá artists acted as artists as social agitators. Indeed, Hans Haacke's works, investigating social and economic systems, using visitor questionnaires and economic charts, with political implications: "... resemble those of social scientists sufficiently to make comparison both provocative and illuminating."[126] But the problem must be urgent if the artists owe their importance uniquely to asking the right questions at the right moment in time; all questions, it is to be noted, which insert themselves ordinarily into a "profane" rather than "sacred" schema. Revealing art's mixed nature, Geoffrey Hartman gave as an example, Kafka's story of leopards which repeatedly broke into the temple to drink the sacrificial oil in the chalices, until finally, this became an accepted part of the ceremony.[127] Profanation had become part of the sacred, in the same sense that questions on the nature of the context had penetrated the inner sanctum of that context. Everything seems to indicate then, that in the short run, the context is an unavoidable supporting determinant, in spite of whatever impressions of natural phenomena that works of Heizer, Christo or

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[126]Howard Becker and John Walton, Hans Haacke. Framing and Being Framed (New York University Press, 1975), p. 145.

[127]Geoffrey Hartman, Structuralism, ed. by Jacques Ehrmann (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1970), p. 157.

Smithson may project.

In view of this, the last chapter's discussion on "contextual transcendence" must be made more complete. To recall the example of a late Rembrandt self-portrait, if one says it has contextual transcendence, it seems that this is another way of saying that it has, for the viewer, a present significance, and furthermore, that he is able to perceive its meaning. Perhaps its very distance from him in time has made it possible, contrary to the works discussed above, to see it not just in terms of its tightest and most immediate context, but in a more holistic way, in which a kind of total symbol or spiritual essence is more obviously disengaged. Picasso and Matisse, in spite of the general opinion of their time, were able to find a significance for the African masks they saw within their present cultural and historic moment. It would seem, therefore, that Historicism, which has now evolved an emphasis on the unbridgeable gulf between one culture and another, is, to this extent, erroneous. Hirsch concurred with this in stating: "The radical historicist is rather sentimentally attached to the belief that only our own cultural entities have "authentic" immediacy for us."[128]

If one considers a text or a painting, or indeed, any art work of another epoque, and one's relation to it through whatever it might offer in terms of immediacy or thought or reflexion, one is always faced with some aspect of a contemporaneous view of it. For we, the spectators, in spite of our efforts, cannot totally abstract ourselves from our own present context. Pushing this idea to its logical conclusion, Hirsch,

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[128]E. D. Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation, p. 43.

referring to the philosopher, H. G. Godamer's theory, stated: "For in view of the historicity of our being, the rehabilitation of [a text's] original conditions is a futile undertaking."[129]

One might therefore question the notion of restoration of art works; that what is being restored is not necessarily the original appearance of a work, but through contemporary scholarship, the idea of how the original work might have looked. The greater the need for restoring, the greater the scope for remodelling it along contemporary thought. And, indeed, some of the changes may have been very great. (In the extreme, Marcel Duchamp, in pinning a moustache on the Mona Lisa, and adding some letters below, could be regarded as having made a pastiche on rehabilitation).

Somehow, then, when work transcends its context, it is not perceived in quite the same way, for the viewers are living in a different social and historical reality, whose perspectives academic research can only try to correct. One can be informed of the reality in which the work was produced, but this is already being once removed from an "immediate" aesthetic reaction. The "immediate" aesthetic reaction is a present contemporary relationship. Works of primitive cultures, presented as the "art" of this or that people, were actually seen by them as objects fulfilling definite functions, more closely interrelated to the essential belief structure of their society than "art" is to us. The masks that Picasso and Matisse so much admired were, for them, a contemporary event. The transcending relationship, therefore, does not

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[129] Ibid., p. 247.

mean that the same object will denote the same psychic event for contemporary viewers. Borges, in one of his stories, relates how a certain Pierre Menard set out to rewrite Don Quixote word for word. His intention was for the text to be identical to that of Cervantes, yet not a copy, but a new creation. And different it was, for as Borges said:

> Cervantes' text and Menard's are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer. (More ambiguous, his detractors will say, but ambiguity is richness) ... The contrast in style is also vivid. The archaic style of Menard — quite foreign, after all — suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his forerunner who handles with ease the current Spanish of his time.[130]

In this light, then, one could agree with De Nicolas, who said that man is, "... understood as the context-maker, and context-knower: culture is the institutionalisation of sets of contexts."[131] Indeed, the example of Huebler's drawing shows conscious recognition of this.

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[130]J-L. Borges, Labyrinths (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 69.

[131]Antonio de Nicolas, "Crisis in Identity," Main Currents in Modern Thought (Nov.-Dec. 1974): 48.

CHAPTER 8

THE DILEMMA IN ART CRITICISM

What seems to emerge from this discussion is that, as well as the mythic form of formalism, there is the appearance of a second and opposing mythic form, generally denoted by a conceptual approach. The first assumes historical continuity, even where there are breaks, tends to refer to former art for sanction, works within purely "visual" boundaries, and tacitly acknowledges authority on some other level, such as critics, writers and historians, to determine the work's meaning. The second tends to be anti-historical, espouses readily knowledge from all other areas of human endeavour towards a clarification of "content," tends to question or even ignore boundaries of what is, or is not "visual," tends to reject or short-circuit outside authority on interpretation of the work. On the one hand are artists such as Cezanne, Picasso, Matisse, Miro, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Pollock, Kelly and Stella, to give a few examples. On the other hand are Duchamp, Yves Klein, Manzoni, Christo, Kosuth, Oppenheim, Haacke and Huebler.

It seems that the second mythic structure grew very rapidly into prominence, within the last ten years, while the first seemed to lose ground. This did not concern the artists so much as the critics and historians generally, whose task it was to make some sense out of developments. Evidently they had grown used to more certitude, more

stability, and a feeling of objectivity in their capacity to make judgements, and, in that sense, either ignored the change, or were dismayed enough to cast around for new critical approaches.

The assertion that there were two mythical structures seems to be confirmed by the very fact that there were so negligibly few artists who spanned both simultaneously (although several have changed from the first to the second after minimalism).

It seems that this appearance of radicality was strongest at the emergence and first recognition of conceptual art, ten years ago. But since then both mythic structures have tended to weaken, and with it the idea of the avant-garde. There has been no new avant-garde movement since then, simply more performance art, more video art, more art books, more post-modernist sculpture, as well as more formalist work. Generally, conceptual artists continue to do conceptually-oriented art, and formalist artists continue to do formalist-oriented art. Their premises do not seem to be deflated on either side, and the outcome is certainly not clear from this writer's point of view. Each seems to act, to a certain degree, as a measure of the other's shortcomings. It is to be speculated that with the gradual loss of a general belief structure in either conceptual or formalist art per se, there will be more cross-fertilization. Indeed, there is evidence of this. Klaus Rinke's drawings and performances unite both impulses. Robert Morris' work has had, also, elements of both. In certain geographic regions, for particular reasons, one might predominate over the other. For instance, in Italy the political and social climate has favoured a predominance of conceptual art.

In view of this, it seems that the critic must search for new methods, for the survival of the credibility of his function. It would seem that mythmaking must be replaced by demystification, an observant, holistic view of events and attitudes. Each critical approach, taken by itself, seems, somehow, to only denote part of the meaning, and, where applied insensitively, may miss the meaning totally.

Carl Jung has written:

> A story told by the conscious mind has a beginning, a development, and an end, but the same is not true of a dream. It's dimensions in time and space are quite different; to understand it you must examine it from every aspect.[132]

The possibility of approaching art work in this spirit might be contemplated. And shortcomings of present methods must be examined.

It has been seen how certain formalist criticism functions as a reinforcement of a mythic view of art, and simultaneously has been instrumental in context-making up until the recent refusal of artists to continue working within this assumption of context. Hence, formalism's failure as an absolute method. As a single interpretative approach, it becomes tyrannical, finally, in its insistence on the autonomous evolution of art, ignoring links and interdependence with other disciplines, and indeed, of society generally. Would the most ardent formalist critic dismiss Barnett Newman's "Lace Curtain for Mayor Daley" as just phenomena? This work reveals the limitation of a purely formalist reading of his production generally. It seems to be most beneficial when considered one approach among many, which means a

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[132] Carl Jung, Man and His Symbols (London: Aldus Books in association with W. H. Allen, 1964), p. 28. (Emphasis added).

loosening of its myth-making aspect.

The interpretative methods of structuralism maintain a more purely neutral and descriptive position towards the work. In Germany and Austria, in the 1920's, a loose group which became known as Strukturforschung, under the leadership of Kaschnitz, explored the use of structuralist methods towards interpretation of art. Part of their contribution was to insist on "an integrative and holistic viewpoint, maintaining that the reality of the object consists in the full texture of all its relations with its environment."[133] Further, it was considered that anything which obstructed the view of the various relationships of the object,

> ... whether as the result of ignorance, or — as in positivism — of methodological prejudice, flattens out, impoverishes and necessarily falsifies our understanding of it. (Falsifies, inasmuch as a reduced view is not simply a portion of the larger whole, quantitively diminished, but qualitatively unchanged, but a distortion, since the balance between the parts is arbitrarily upset).[134]

It is for this reason that Kaschnitz objected to the prevailing terminology of art history of that time, "... most especially those of Wolfflin, and to "style-criticism" in general."[135]

To return to the example of Barnett Newman, it is interesting to observe how Rosenberg, when writing about him, dwelt longest on those

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[133] Sheldon Nodelman, "Structural Analysis in Art and Anthropology," Structuralism, ed. by Jacques Ehrmann (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1970), p. 81. (Emphasis added).

[134] Ibid., p. 81.

[135] Ibid., p. 83.

formal qualities which imply a style-continuity in art. In a chapter titled, "Icon-maker, Barnett Newman," he opened: "The late Barnett Newman worked with emptiness as if it were a substance. He measured it, divided it, shaped it, coloured it ..."[136] And, some pages later, after only passing references to Newman's metaphysics, he says: "Formally he placed himself in the line of Mondrian's organization of rectangles separated by bands of different widths."[137] Rosenberg's references, in this chapter were to Cezanne, Kandinsky, Picasso, the Bauhaus, Mondrian, Albers, Reinhardt, Rothko, Gottlieb, Still, Dostoevsky and the Bible.

It is interesting to note how this contrasts with an article by Nicolas Calas entitled "Subject Matter in the Work of Barnett Newman," where his work is seen in more holistic terms, which expand from the appearance to the metaphysical preoccupations and back to the descriptive appearance of the work. Calas referred to other art, but through meaning, not style.

> Gazing at a kouros we feel the impact of Parminide's dictum that man is "all in the now" ... Let us compare the kouros to Giacommetti's dissolving figure ... In a series of paintings called Onement, Barnett Newman separates the Now into left and right.[138]

Calas included as references, Sung paintings, Zurbaran, kouros, Giacommetti, many references to the Bible and to Newman's own statements. Neither articles gave in-depth descriptions of individual works.

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[136] Rosenberg, Dedefinition, p. 91.

[137] Ibid., p. 96.

[138] Nicolas Calas, "Subject Matter in the Work of Barnett Newman," in Minimal Art, ed. by Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton and Co. Inc., 1968), pp. 109-110.

As an example of a description of a single work, it will be apparent that Patrick Heron's description of Vlaminck's La Gare d'Auvers-sur-Oise (1920) was profoundly formal, but without the mythmaking aspects which tarnish most formalist criticism. While being a formal description of the internal structure of the painting, it is felt as a personal viewing of that work, not as an applied theory. In concentrating on the "seeing" of the work, and on the necessity of the interdependence of parts, Heron reflected also much of the painting's "immediacy." It is also to be noted how the words lead the spectator to look at the painting more closely, to the point where he feels compelled to continually refer to the reproduction as he reads.

> Where would the slimy greenish-browns of the foreground in La Gare d'Auvers-sur-Oise land us if the red bricks on the right hand corner of the station, the white of the foreshortened station wall, the sudden cobalt stain on the horizon (between houses), the stroke of red under the chimney of the further house and the white streak on the yellow road, to the right of the two figures, were missing? Of course, this is a picture which, in more respects than one, is nicely poised on the brink of catastrophe. The box-like station building is set bang in the middle of the canvas and has to act as the main connection between the plane of the sky and the equally uneventful plane of the station yard. Incidentally, Vlaminck uses his signature here as an important factor in the pictorial structure: a notice-board or a post of another human figure would have to be introduced at the bottom-right hand corner if the signature were to go: its presence helps create the space we feel circulating about the two figures, a volume of air and light which we sense as existing between the two buildings, connecting them, yet holding them apart. Without the signature this space would disappear and the blue stain at the horizon between and beyond the two houses would lose its distance and cease to be the focal point, the point of the greatest recessional depth. We should immediately be confronted with a meaningless symmetry, empty of any significance of organized space or pictorial depth: engine steam would stand opposite the single cloud; engine and train opposite distant house; railway railings opposite yellow road and figures; telegraph pole opposite the further of the station building's two chimneys. As it is, all this is averted by the signature at the

> right, and the hint of wires through the steam at the top left. Nevertheless, Vlaminck has had, as usual, to break the back of the horizon.[139]

It is only after this initial discussion (which continues a little longer with considerations of brushstroke and planes), that Heron made comparisons with the use of the plane by Cezanne and the cubists, and the use of brushstroke by Utrillo, Soutine and by Vlaminck himself in other works.

In terms of a holistic approach, structuralism has been attempted as a methodology in Burnham's The Structure of Art and applied to works by, among others, Kosuth, Huebler, Oppenheim, Haacke, Morris, Flavin, as well as Pollock, Stella, Louis, De Kooning, Mondrian, Duchamp, Gauguin and Turner. It would appear to suffer from three major drawbacks. The first, which Nodelman warns against, is the unsuitability of applying a methodology which has been evolved for approaching works in an unknown context, which one could grasp as a whole only because one stood outside it. He stated:

> It is obviously impossible to view as a whole in this sense -- in the full range of its actions and in the mutual implication of all its parts -- a culture of work of art within whose value-system one is oneself plunged, of which one has an inside perspective, and whose most vital aspects can hardly be brought into explicit consciousness and rationally examined, simply because they are pervasive, forming an unspoken background for conscious activities and opinions.[140]

The second criticism is that the method reveals so little of the essence of the work, and becomes the almost ostentatious demonstration

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[139] Heron, Changing Forms, p. 132.

[140] Nodelman, Structuralism, p. 81.

of a method, that the reader has no idea of any kind of personal relationship the writer has with the work. This no sense of its "immediacy" imparted, nor any notion of transcendence. Nodelman warned, once again, this time against the insistent exclusion of subjectivity:

> The concrete execution of such an objective structural analysis is of course not so simple, for subjective attitudes banned from one level of thought have a way of reintroducing themselves into the argument of another level.[141]

This was born out by Burnham's selection of works to be analysed, which were preponderantly of the last ten years, and of a conceptual nature, including at the end, a separate chapter on Marcel Duchamp. This cancelled out the impression of objectivity of the separate individual analysis of particular works. Perhaps it would have been more informative if this kind of subjectivity had become part of each analysis.

The third drawback is that the neglect to deal with the internal relationships of parts, as Heron has done with the painting by Vlaminck, gives no idea of any kind of formal necessity in the work:

However, it is, on the positive side, perhaps a heroic, if unsuccessful, attempt to solve the very difficult problem of finding an interpretative framework which could include both the historically-transgressive works of the last ten years, and the earlier abstract works (the two mythic structures). But perhaps this attempt falls into the same error of absolutism that formalist criticism made.

About a work such as Huebler's drawing, discussion on the reasons for its 'diminished' immediacy, and eventually the context to which it

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[141] Ibid., p. 83.

refers, and in which it has been inserted seem necessary. Such a strategy, without violating the principle of starting with direct description of the formal qualities, would be seen to naturally lead in a different direction from the analysis of Heron on Vlaminck, which entailed a longer and more involved discussion of the appearance of the work.

The conclusion of this paper urges the careful consideration of each individual work before a particular strategy of interpretation is embarked upon, without any attempt at exclusion of the personality of the interpreter. It seems also that, in view of the process of disappearance of some works from our consciousness, and reappearance of others (through often as simple a matter as the choice of who the critic or historian decides to write or not to write about) the sense of "immediacy," or aesthetic experience of the object or event, in order to deal with the phenomenon of contextual transcendence, must be considered paramount. This is because the contextual transcendence of a work means that it has retained its aspect of sacredness.

It seems that the way out of the impasse demands that the interpreter have an ability to come to some authentic personal relationship with the work, an ability to grasp essential relations both within and outside the work, a wide diversity of knowledge in domains outside art but which might be useful in understanding the work more fully (apart from a wide knowledge of art itself), a grasp of different interpretative methods, and the erudition to know when to use them without falsifying the work. It seems appropriate at this time of enquiry to quote Nicolas: "Man increases his freedom by shaking the determinism

of single-context structures ... he becomes fully human by embodying the human condition of his time."[142]

Finally, no one prescription can be offered. It is felt that the field of art criticism has reached a point where it must embark on a period of introspection and examination of its own methods and their limitations, of the causes and results of their use, and a courageous enquiry (in what might be academically termed as "adventurous") into new approaches.

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[142] Nicolas, Main Currents, p. 48.

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