

PAINTING AND THE CHANGING ROLE OF ART

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CHAPTER ONE

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF ART AND DOES IT CHANGE ?

It is necessary to find out what the role of art is in order to see whether it changes. The role of art can be taken as synonymous with the words, 'function of art'. The role of art and the art work itself are inextricably linked. If we look at the role of art as analogous to a wheel we can look at the argument thus : the wheel exists in order to roll. Its function is to roll. The wheel's function of rolling informs us about its existence. Function and the wheel's existence cannot be separated. The role of art and the art work itself are inextricably tied.

Is the style of a work of art dependent on the role of art or vice versa ? An art work and its style cannot be separated and neither can an art work and its role. Thus it would seem that style and role are mutually dependent. To be specific if the Egyptian style was not rigid, conventionalized and hieratic but rather the lines were loose, more natural and playful, would it still perform the same role ? The first style evokes a serious, almost didactic feeling, the second would generate more joyful, appreciative feelings. Egyptian art is serious, didactic, illustrative. It was an art designed for the dead. Therefore its style suits its function.

The phrase, the role of art, means the function of art : what

art does, what role it plays in the community. For example, 'art expresses man's inmost feelings' or 'records the observable world' etc. The role of art is, as shown, tied to the art work and to the style of the work. Styles change throughout history and thus it would be easy to say that the role of art changes. But art is also involved with perception and it is perhaps that which changes rather than the role of art.

Perception is generally taken to be how man sees and interprets the world. In terms of that definition, perception is tied to society, and thus it would change with society. If it is perception that changes, the history of art shows the artistic and physiological evolution of man and the way he actually sees the world, i.e. the Egyptians actually saw human anatomy in that strange way. If perception changes, it is possible that one has to accept the theory of Evolution as it pertains to art : that art evolves and develops along with man (T. Munro)¹ This means that man's perception progressively improves as he evolves and thus the Renaissance was a 'Rebirth", a step forward for mankind. This, as will be shown later, is not necessarily tenable. It means in a sense , that a great deal of modern art has to be seen as regressive.

The dictionary definition of perception however, describes it as a passive act of recognition without interpretation. Interpretation or the judging of people, things, events, is tied

¹ Psychology of the Visual Arts edited by J. Hogg, p. 39

to society and its particular beliefs and needs of that time. Thus perception is not tied to society and does not necessarily evolve along with it. On the other hand, if the style of art and thus the role of art is dependent on society and its beliefs then it would seem to be more likely that it is the role of art which changes, rather than perception.

WHAT DOES CHANGE ?

In order to define this more clearly, we are going to first look at the precise definition of perception ; then see whether the style of art and thus the role of art is dependent on society, then look at this dependence historically. According to the Shorter Oxford Dictionary the word is derived from the latin percipere and means "the taking cognizance of objects in general ; occasionally practically equalling consciousness." "the action of the mind by which it refers its sensations to an external object as their cause"; "the intuitive recognition of a moral or aesthetic quality."

Following on this, we could say that perception is a conscious (but not willed) and intuitive act of seeing which involves far more than the mechanics of retinal images being received by the brain. Perception is an essentially passive act ; it involves recognition of an object but does not imply judgement or interpretation. Perception is the means by which we identify the image received by the retina. It is the passive recording of data. An idea arising out of this data is the act of conception. In other words, perception is not the way

we interpret the things we see but simply what we see in the first place. In other words, we perceive and know we are perceiving a chair or a table ; we perceive and know we are perceiving a good or a bad quality.

Apart from the impact of Man upon his environment, the world about us has not changed in recorded history. A tree is still a tree, a rock remains a rock and so on. Physical reality has remained constant. What seems to have changed, on the evidence of history, is our interpretation of our world. This suggests a change in our ideas rather than perceptions.

IS THE ROLE OF ART DEPENDENT ON SOCIETY ?

Each society has its own particular way of viewing things, its own value system. And society and art interact.

.... the artist is said to acquire and express in his works, often without realising it, the ideology and economic interests of his social class and the system of which it is a part. (T. Munro) 2

.... the idea that socio-economic factors influence art and attitudes towards art is now generally accepted (T. Munro)

Thus the **attitudes** of society as well as its changes are reflected in the work of art and the role of art is dependent on its society. Egyptian art sought to achieve a complete representation of man and thus depicted him in an anatomically incorrect way : frontal torso, face and legs in profile and so on.

² ibid, p. 40

³ ibid, p. 40

Trees and other objects were depicted as being smaller. Are we to believe that this was actually a reflection of Egyptian perception or was it a symbolic convention ?

H. A. Groenewegen-Frankfort states that

The pose ... is a device to give maximum clarity to the three-dimensional figure ..⁴

According to Arnold Hauser, Egyptian art was a matter of intention, a renunciation of illusionistic techniques in the service of uncompromising clarity, expressed through conventions. He maintains that these conventions had nothing to do with ability.

.... that aesthetic intentions must be in accordance with practical desires. The well-known plaster-casts-possibly slightly touched up death-masks - which have been discovered in the workshop of the sculptor Thutmosis in El Amarna prove that the Egyptian artist was also able to see things differently from the way he was in the habit of representing them.⁵

This naturalism is also shown in minor works from Nigeria and Peru (Gombrich). Egyptian art served that society's religious concepts, according to Groenewegen-Frankfort.

.... No appeal to the imagination of a spectator was ever intended : the purpose of the scenes was to provide for the dead a permanent presence of the facets of daily life, clearly stated as typical occurrences.⁶

Art was also in service to religion during the Middle Ages.

⁴Art of the Ancient World - Groenewegen Frankfort and Ashmole, p. 30

⁵The Social History of Art - A. Hauser, p. 33

⁶Art of the Ancient World - Groenewegen Frankfort and Ashmole, p. 40

In the opinion of the early Middle Ages, art would be superfluous if everyone could read and follow an abstract chain of reasoning ; art was originally looked upon just as a concession to the ignorant masses who are so easily influenced by impressions of sense. ⁷

The typical simplicity of representation in the two-dimensional figures must have been an aid to the didactic function rather than being a result of two-dimensional perception. Thus the themes and styles must have been determined by society. Since style is linked with role, we can conclude that the different art styles reflected a change in role rather than a change in actual perception.

The Theory of Evolution on the other hand, as it pertains to art, is supported by such people as John Dewey. Art evolves with man and the Renaissance and its illusionistic devices mark an important step forward. This means however, that a great deal of Modern Art must be dismissed as "regressive from an evolutionary standpoint" as Desmond Morris said. The emergence and decline of Greek art must be ignored, however, or the Middle Ages must be regarded as a period when man recuperated after his evolutionary efforts. Palaeolithic art reveals observational abilities that we have only recently begun to appreciate. The camera has revealed that the Palaeolithic artist observed a horse's gait far more correctly than we. Perhaps we are in fact all regressing ? Or is it that each civilisation is merely different ?

⁷ The Social History of Art - A. Hauser, p. 115

A. Ehrenzweig, a noted psychologist influential in the modern art field, disagrees that modern art is regressive. To him, the artist has elevated the textures of the background into the main structure of the composition displaying the undifferentiated vision of the child and revealing an important part of his character and his psyche. (vide Pollock and Kline).

The artist's spontaneous and chaotic handwriting is considered far more characteristic of his personality than his more deliberate large-scale forms. 8

An area in which the Evolutionary theory is most propounded is that of spatial organisation : that we are recording in art an increasing complexity of spatial awareness : that it is not the objects we see differently or progressively better but the way we organise things in space. This argues a physiological development in the brain, rather like a computer improving the organisation of its data.

But as shown, artists were bound by their society. Most of the early societies wanted comparatively simple works ; they sacrificed complexity for clarity. It has been shown that the artists compliance with this had nothing to do with ability. When circumstances allowed it, as in the prosperous period of Greece and Renaissance Italy, artists explored increasing complexities with intensity but returned to simpler styles when ideas changed.

⁸ Psychology and the Visual Arts - edited by J. Hogg, p. 128

It is tempting to think of Greek art and the later Renaissance as being developments in a mainstream of Art since they are concerned with the illusion of depth where before the picture surface was allowed to remain flat. It has been shown however, that this is not necessarily true when viewed historically. It seems instead that there was an internal development in each culture : a flow from a geometric style, to stylization, to naturalism and so on. Clearly over such a relatively short space in time, these changes could not be evolutionary. Hauser states with regard to Crete :

Always keeping close to nature, Cretan art returns from a predominantly geometrical formalism, probably still influenced by Neolithic tendencies, by way of an extreme naturalism, to an archaistic and somewhat academic stylization. Not until the middle of the second millennium, at the close of the middle Minoan period, does Crete discover its own naturalistic style and reach the climax of its development in the sphere of art. Then, in the second half of the millennium, Cretan art loses much of its freshness and naturalness, its forms become more and more schematic and conventional, 9 stiff and abstract.

In Greece, the rise of humanism, the rationalistic, individualistic spirit of the age freed the arts from the confining demands of religion. This allowed artists to explore the beauty of the human figure without any other consideration.

Hauser states :

Their real aim and object is to achieve the perfect presentation of the human body, an interpretation of its beauty, a comprehension of its sensible form, free of all magical or symbolic implications. 11

⁹ The Social History of Art - A. Hauser, p. 47

¹¹ ibid, p. 67

¹⁰ —.

Artists were free to explore an illusionistic representation for the first time. The growth of trade and wealth allowed art to become independent. People could afford the luxury of a "purposeless art" (Hauser).¹² Art was therefore free to explore avenues new to man.

The idea that the complexity of spatial organisation is related to changing social conditions rather than to an evolutionary process is supported by the similarity in the prevalent social conditions that gave rise to the arts of Greece and Renaissance Italy. In both societies it was a time when trade flourished, ideas and discoveries challenged the status quo and beliefs in rationalism and humanism arose. It is further supported by the return to two-dimensional representation by some modern artists. (Cubism, Abstract EXpressionism).

Another hypothesis is that with a largely uneducated populace such as that of the Middle Ages, who needed teaching, clarity of presentation must have been a consideration. The creation of depth by illusionistic devices introduces complexity and perhaps confusion. As has been pointed out, clarity was the main aim of most two-dimensional representation. An educated person will tolerate more complex situations due to his training although even he finds two-dimensional "comic-strip" presentation easier to perceive. Gombrich states this is due to the greater simplicity of the message to the brain.¹³

¹³ Art Perception and Reality - E. H. Gombrich, p. 74

¹² A Social History of Art, A. Hauser, p. 72

Fewer connections are made to the encoded schema which he says store the images in the brain. This simplicity speeds up recognition and aids clarity. In a more educated, wealthier society, the artist is freer to explore more avenues in art, to indulge himself in complex relationships. In the Italy of the sixteenth century, patrons - even churchmen - were worldly, well educated people who probably did not consider the ordinary man's ability to grasp the new works.

Thus it seems that social conditions affect the role of art, the style of art and with the latter, the complexity of spatial organisation. When society changes, these change, whereas perception, as it is defined here, remains the same.

CHAPTER TWO

DEFINITIONS OF THE ROLE OF ART AND A HISTORICAL SURVEY

From writers such as Kenneth Coutts-Smith, Guy Brett, Roy McMullen, Ernst Fischer, Ernst Cassirer, Fred Gettings and so on, one gleans many definitions of the role of art.¹⁴

Some see it as a means of coming to terms with the human condition by recording it ; a sort of dialogue with nature in which artists objectify mankind's pre-occupations and fantasies and thereby render them harmless. (Jung, Guy Brett). Others as an organisation of the world and man's experience. (Cassirer).

Art can be a means to the maturation of society, to mastering nature (the objective world) and by some alchemical

¹⁴ Kenneth Coutts-Smith "The Dream of Icarus - Art and Society in the Twentieth Century".

Guy Brett - "Kinetic Art, the Language of Movement."

Roy McMullen - "Art Affluence and Alienation."

Ernst Fischer - "The Necessity of Art."

Ernst Cassirer - "Language and Myth".

Fred Gettings - "You are an Artist."

process, developing social relations in the world. (Brett, Fischer). Again it is stated that by this process art becomes a medium of change, transforming the world and man ; that the very act of consciously abstracting from nature changes the consciousness of the people receiving the work of art. (Sartre and reflective consciousness, Jolandi Jacobi)¹⁵

Art is communication, an expression of an intense inward vision, an inward compulsion (Kandinsky). It has been seen as an attempt to interpret our environment meaningfully as a system of signs representing reality (Fischer).

Art can be an attempt to penetrate the mysteries of the world or to express an inward search for wholeness (James Joyce, Fischer, Gettings). It can also be an attempt to render reality in symbols that refer back to the collective unconscious conceived by Jung. He states that it is the universal significance of a work of art that makes it important. The artist can be seen as a shaman, as an interpreter of reality and truth (Coutts-Smith, Linda Nochlin)¹⁶

Some of these concepts are applicable now, some historically, as will be investigated below. Generally it has been said that Primitive art is magical and priestly ; classical art is an attempt to discover emotive symbols for

¹⁵ Man and his symbols - edited by Carl Jung

¹⁶ "Realism" - Linda Nochlin.

reality and modern art a confrontation with reality whereby the art work becomes an object or a part of reality itself.

What was the interpretation of reality of Palaeolithic artists ? They were bounded by the physical needs of their life, their environment. The majority of their energy was spent in efforts to stay alive. Animals were of paramount importance. Stone Age man's outlook on life is generally termed zoomorphic or animal-orientated. Man is hardly ever depicted or if he/she is, it is without features or individual characteristics.

Their art, deep in improbable caves is alive, vigorous and jumbled. For instance, the "Wounded Bison" from the cave at Altmira, Spain.

... the keen observation, the assured, vigorous outlines, the subtly controlled shading ... the power and dignity of this creature. 17

The role of art in this time is assumed to be religious or magical. It is art as magic, a communication of intense inward vision. Roy McMullen says of primitive societies that

... such disciplines as poetry, music, the dance, painting and sculpture tend to merge in a sort of continuing grand opera dedicated to magic, religion, ancestors, survival and social cohesion. 18

With Palaeolithic art the question of Audience arises. With whom were they communicating ? Certainly the role of

¹⁷ "The History of Art" - H. W. Jansen, p. 19

¹⁸ Art, Affluence and Alienation - Roy McMullen, p. 32

their art was not decorative (Hauser) as who would brave the depths of the caves for merely a casual glance? Also many pictures were superimposed on others on the same spot while leaving open expanses of cave wall around them. Presumably the pictures were meant as communication with spirits, either of the animals to be killed or a possible God of hunting. Hauser in fact suggests that to Palaeolithic man, images were consonant with reality, which is supported by Cassirer's view of the mythic consciousness as defined in the last chapter. Certainly it is accepted that the pictures were meant to ensure a good day's hunting much as voodoo claims that sticking pins into a wax model of a victim after certain preparations, ensures the latter's death or serious illness, although of course, the intent was vastly different.

Mythical thinking is concerned with the intense experience of the moment. Palaeolithic Man's reality is said to consist of a progression of these moments. If the proceeding points are true however, mythical man must have been able to abstract enough in his thought to know that his action of drawing the beast would have the desired effect. It is possible of course that all these assumptions are invalid and that he merely drew the pictures for fun or some other inscrutable purpose. Perhaps there was no definite intent at all. The magical theory is certainly one that fits the facts, however. It best explained the obscure placing of the pictures, the jumble of superimpositions, the brilliant, intense naturalism.

Mythical thinking can lead eventually to abstraction and linear or logical thinking. It seems to be human nature to abstract a pattern out of various intense experiences and apply it to the next. There is however, a diminution in the quality of the experience at the same time because abstraction leaves behind the original experience, develops on its own and comes to stand between one and the experience. This also means that man's oneness with nature, his closeness is diminished. It seems that by the time the early civilisations appeared, a schism had already been created in man's alliance with nature. Perhaps civilisation is just that, a separation from nature and the beginning of man imposing his will on the world around him, as opposed to living in harmony with nature.

Hauser :

... the suppression of direct phenomena and experiences by thought and interpretation, accentuation and exaggeration, distortion and denaturalisation. 19

By the end of the Palaeolithic in fact, Hauser notes that all three basic types of representation had been developed : naturalism, pictographic signs and the abstract ornament. Neolithic farmers began to tame their world and themselves and represent reality in terms of symbols.

In Egypt, art had mainly a priestly function, it accompanied the Dead, supplied pictures of the Dead Pharaoh's material possession and occasionally depicted the Gods. It

¹⁹ The Social History of Art - A. Hauser, p. 12

was a symbolic rendering of their world closely tied to their religion, in other words, magical.

In Crete, art was more public with decorative murals depicting dolphins or pictures of Cretans at play (frescos at Knossos). The Cretan civilisation seems to have been extraordinarily frivolous compared to others in those times, however. Their erection of palaces as opposed to fortresses seems an indication of their relaxed and secure frame of mind. Their goddess or snake priestess as Groenewegen-Frankfort calls her, appears mainly in statuary, signet rings and seals rather than any major art form which indicates a lack of religious emphasis.

... artists revel in the beauty of natural forms, in colour and movement, but no single memorable act, whether of poetry, political wisdom or military valor, 20 was ever rescued from oblivion.

In fact, Cretan art could be termed impressionistic when viewed in terms of their interest in such things as the capturing of fugitive movement.

the freedom of movement that seems to belong to the 21 world of play rather than to serious effort.

In Crete, not only a ritual intensification of life was aimed at but, in religious terms, the mystic union with the divine source of life. The scenes of worship suggest that this union was experienced 22 dynamically in sacred dances.

20 Art of the Ancient World - Groenewegen-Frankfort & Ashmole, p. 119

21 ibid, p. 122

22 ibid, p. 129

The Cretan role of art would seem to be a combination of priestly, magical and decorative concerns.

Generally, the art of the early civilisations can be said to have retained a partially magical or priestly role. It was a visual expression of their religion, their world-view. The images themselves were very often venerated (for example : the early cult statues of Greece).

The early civilisations retained an irrational element that is said to be a balance between the conscious and the unconscious, the rational and the irrational, a recognition of the beast in man. Egyptian Gods and pharaohs had animal symbols and were often depicted with them, for example King Cephren's head :

... enfolded by the protective wings of Horus, 23
the divine hawk.

Some of the Greek myths portray the half-man, half-animal : the centaur or even the God, Pan. As the rationalising process continued, these concepts and myths ceased to play an important part in their lives.

One could say that the role of Greek art was : an expression of their religion (cult-statues) ; an exploration of perfect beauty through proportions and anatomy ; an exploration of emotion through anatomy and gesture. The

latter can be seen in Hellenistic art which was "art as a mirror", illusionistic and imitative of nature. Hellenistic artists like those of the Renaissance seem to have also enjoyed the technical processes for their own sake.

Christian art retained pagan elements for a long time and used old forms for a new instructive purpose. The style is simplified to serve the didactic role, the clarity which was mentioned in the first chapter. As mentioned, perception tests by psychologists have shown that the simple outline is far more readily perceived than a full drawing, despite the latter's recognition value.

The Renaissance can be termed the subjugation of the natural world in which the role of art is the clichéd "mirror of nature" and where the artist is exploring a technical virtuosity. Hauser sees similar social conditions lying behind this so-called "rebirth" and the growth of Classical Antiquity. Renaissance art is nature once-removed ; the re-introduction of the rational element led away from the mystical rapport with nature of earlier times, and has stultified our vision for many years.

Even now, with the experiments that abound, people generally demand a pretty mirror in which the world is re-iterated and shown to be solidly and dully there without the "imposition" of any personal whim or even vision on the part of the artist.

It seems from the influence of religion and philosophical thought on art, it is not man's visual perception which is changing but rather the needs of each civilisation ; and it is the role of art which changes in order to meet those needs.

With the discovery of the electron and the proton (not to mention the quark !) scientists have proven that at any one moment, the internal structure of an object is only a probability. (Theory of Probability). In fact, Heisenberg in his Principle of Indeterminacy has shown that an electron cannot be observed without altering its behaviour, thus making it unobservable.²⁴ This has destroyed two basic tenets of art : that what we see around us is reality and that this reality is observable. Thus reality becomes fluid and,

the universe begins to look more like a great thought than a great machine. 25

This is part of the problem that faces modern artists. Psychologists state that what we see is not necessarily related to an external reality. Colin Wilson in his book "The Occult", states the need for us to tear away the curtain from our eyes so that we can see more fully. He says it is our inertia alone which prevents us from utilising all our faculties or maintaining a heightened awareness.

In the light of the new discoveries, the role of art in the twentieth century would seem to have moved away from

²⁴The Dream of Icarus - Kenneth Coutts-Smith, p. 61

²⁵ ibid, p. 62

restating the world as it is, into exploring another 'reality'. But what is this other reality? Perhaps Jung was right in postulating a universal unconscious and a system of archetypes to which we all relate. This other reality could also be the world that is within us, the subconscious, the world that allows us to relate to the images of Kandinsky. Heisenberg states, on the basis of his scientific experiments, that man confronts himself alone.

Post-Renaissance art can be seen as the exploration of technical virtuosity and expression. It is only in the twentieth century that the ground shifts, the previous artistic vocabulary becomes inadequate and the new is sought.

It is not man's perception (perception here understood to mean : the act of receiving visual stimuli and recognising it to be what it is, i.e. a tree is seen to be a tree) that actually changes, but man's interpretation of it, his conception of his reality. Art is inextricably bound up with society and its philosophical, scientific and religious ideas, as has been shown.

Scientific discoveries in the twentieth century have revealed a world different from the previously accepted one. Thus we are now responding to a different situation and have to find a new way of expressing it. A new method of expression implies a new attitude to art and thus the role of art must again change.

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT IS OUR PRESENT SOCIAL REALITY ?

Most writers are agreed that twentieth century man is suffering from alienation.. Alienation from himself, from others, from society, even from his own history. There is a crisis in values ; an upsetting of old norms similar to that of the Renaissance. But in the twentieth century, we do not have the civilisation of Greece to fall back on, to provide us with a vocabulary of forms with which to develop a new future. Instead, artist's have rummaged throughout all history for generative themes. This is symptomatic of anxiety.

The turn of the century saw the introduction of many new things which shook the foundation of accepted reality, all produced, surprisingly, in an environment of relative social stability.

1900 Max Plank - the Quantum theory

Sigmund Freud - Interpretation of Dreams ; (Jung)

Edmund Husserl - Logical Investigations

Pavlov - experiments with conditioned reflexes.

Wright Brothers - flight.

1905 Einstein's theory of relativity

Fauves - Matisse / James Joyce - Dubliners

- 1908 Henry Ford - model T car
Cubism - Picasso and Braque
Schoenberg - atonal music
Frank Lloyd Wright - Robie House
Dixieland Jazz Band
- 1910 Russell and Whitehead , Principia Mathematica
Kandinsky - first abstract work
Adolf Loos - Rational Steiner House
- 1913 Niels Bohr - Theory of atomic structure

Radically new departures occurred almost simultaneously in art, science, technology, philosophy, mathematics, 26 political theory, entertainment ...

Then came the wars which destroyed established life-styles. For instance, in England people refer nostalgically to the elegant Edwardian era as immortalised by Dornford Yates. This sharp break with the past was accompanied by pessimism, for instance the comment of Nietzsche's that termed the crisis "a devaluing of all values." It seems that modern society has not yet succeeded in filling that gap. Jung states that man is a historical creature and that this break is a symptom of our alienation.

At present there is an almost hysterical idolising of all that is new. Each innovation, valid or not, is hailed as the new course, the new direction out of the morass of doubt and anxiety. People try to place yesterday's events in tomorrow's history book. Critics such as Harold Rosenberg state that in

²⁶ Art Affluence and Alienation - Roy McMullen, p. 13

art, a redefinition of criteria is needed in order to judge a work. This may be true but his statement suffers from the implication that he is the man to do it which is not perhaps acceptable. It seems more probable that, given time and discussion, new criteria will arise spontaneously with the new work being created to meet society's needs.

New artists, not yet fledged from the academies, are rushed out of obscurity in the name of opportunity and progress. Each new direction in art is hurriedly explored, thrashed out and abandoned. The world seems hungry for new leaders in every department of life but cannot wait for them to emerge. Such forced gestation must result in still-born genius.

Similar to the rush towards the future is the one to the past. Mircea Eliade says that a symptom of modern anxiety is our obsession with the past. While we do not have a "Greece" to fall back on, recent centuries are explored with fervour for lessons to apply to today. Unfortunately there are very few which are not outmoded or inapplicable. It would seem the twentieth century is condemned to finding its own formulae with little help from the past.

This could be a liberation, a severing of bonds leading to freedom but unfortunately human reaction to anxiety and change is to hold onto outmoded forms, to become reactionary and repressive. Academies become institutionalised, institutions become revered and some think that the only

spontaneous act left is that paradox of negation : violence. Escalating repression leads to increasing violence. Society has become automated and individuals reified. Humans have become cogs in a universal factory. Rationalism, the work ethic, compulsive materialism; the harnessing and "control" of our environment has led to the loss of ourselves and our world.

Modern man does not understand how much his rationalism (which has destroyed his capacity to respond to numinous symbols and ideas) has put him at the mercy of the psychic underworld.²⁷

While modern man strives to be rational, his irrational side erupts in violence. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Nineteenth century) was one of the first to state that alienation is a central problem of society, and other thinkers of the twentieth century have followed suit. : Sartre, Jung.

It is possible that our alienation is a response to leaving behind the natural world and not acknowledging our irrational natures. If we reverse the process, we may rid ourselves of anxiety. If we rid ourselves of anxiety and fear we would perhaps be free to take advantage of our new liberation. We could try to come to terms with our new reality.

In the search for the new, perhaps an attempt is being made to swallow doubt. Some artists are trying to take advantage of our lack of history and are trying to create new forms to

²⁷ Man and his Symbols - Carl S. Jung. p. 94

meet the new situation (for example : Kandinsky, Pollock, Rothko, Matta, the Kinetic artists). But there is still too much desperation and not enough time being allowed for new ways to evolve. After the rush of 'isms', artists do not know in which direction to travel. Perhaps an answer lies in trying to develop a new attitude.

The past has a lesson for us in mythical thinking which is very close to what some modern artists (such as Franz Marc and his mystical unity with nature) have found as their personal solution.

A characteristic of man seems to be the need to relate outside of himself, to identify elsewhere. This underlies his search for some solution to the crisis in thought, attitude and philosophy that modern man is undergoing. Colin Wilson states that we are capable of experiencing true reality, and that we occasionally do so when we are most involved. This again relates to mythical thinking as defined by Ernst Cassirer who states that the mythical consciousness rests on intensity of experience. Colin Wilson further states that when we are most involved, we use more of our potential. Roy McMullen says that man seeks wholeness, that he is not just an isolated individual, and that he can achieve this wholeness by identifying with that of others.

Art can be used as a means to this merging which is however

double-edged : to relate to the hero and yet at the same time to lose oneself. The masses by indulging in art can vicariously experience another's reality without real risk. An artist and a true seeker cannot. He, like the shaman, has to confront reality himself and alone. Our reality is both the directionless society we live in and the ambiguous reality of the scientist. The modern artist must try to reconcile the two.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHAT IS ART NOW ? WHAT IS GENERALLY CONSIDERED TO BE THE
ROLE OF ART NOW ?

Science has changed man's conception of reality and thus influenced philosophy and the arts. Man's attitude to the cosmos has changed, he is no longer the master, he no longer dominates. While he presumes space flight to be a symbol of his transcendence of nature, it has only made real the awesomeness of the universe. Indeed the very uncertainty of the fabric of reality has increased man's feeling of isolation and alienation. Man no longer takes the world for granted ; he must seek to comprehend it, not merely record it, and to find his place in it.

Our retinas record a factual physical world which scientists say has only a limited basis in fact. They conceive of reality as :

.... bundles of abstract events, possibly
discontinuous and finally unknowable. 28

Aniela Jaffe states that :

.... a new, totally different and irrational reality has dawned behind the reality of our 'Natural' world which
is ruled by the laws of classical physics. 29

Irrational because it is unknowable.

WHAT THE ROLE OF ART WAS

Previously the role of art has been varied but generally

28 The Dream of Icarus - Kenneth Coutts-Smith, p. 108

29 Aniela Jaffe, Man and his Symbols, Carl. S. Jung, p. 261

it has dealt with the observable world. Cave painting was basically mystical, priestly, an attempt at a direct, magical control of the world. Egyptian art was illustrative and magical, Crete decorative. Early Greece was religious, then became decorative, illustrative and priestly as in the Parthenon. They also recorded observable reality. The Middle Ages returned to didactic, religious and decorative art.

The Renaissance glorified in technical achievement, in producing a mirror image of objective reality, a record. Post-Renaissance continued this record. In the twentieth century, changes occur ; the artist records not only objective reality but his response to it. Cubism breaks down previous conceptions of the art work and the previous single standard to measure and judge art becomes pluralistic. Cubism coincides with a growing awareness of the changed nature of reality itself. The role of the art work as a record of reality has also been usurped by photography.

PAINTING MUST REFLECT THE NEW SITUATION

Naum Gabo stated very early in our century that :

the philosophical events and the events in science at the beginning of this century have definitely made a crucial impact on the mentality of my generation. 30

He stated that painting must reflect the new situation.

(in order to remain relevant ?)

³⁰The Dream of Icarus - Kenneth Coutts-Smith, p. 106

Leo Steinberg in the Partisan Review, said succinctly :

It has been suggested that the very conceptions of twentieth century science are finding expression in modern art. The scientist's sense of pervasive physical activity in space, his intuition of immaterial functions, his awareness of the constant immutability of forms, of their indefinable location, their mutual interpenetration, their renewal and decay-all these have found an echo in contemporary art. 31

Technology has played its part in the changed world-view and in fact, for a time philosophers found its intrusion hostile. Artists such as the Futurists glorified it and awarded it supremacy. Then technology became merely another medium. (for instance, Flavin and his use of the neon light). Now, technology, art and science interact.

THE TURN TO ABSTRACTION

Our world is one of essential paradox, duality, ambiguity with which artists are trying to come to terms. The role of man himself is changing and thus the role of art. The response of artists has been to return increasingly to Abstract art, that which is non-figurative, and reject a literal representation of the exterior world.

Historians perceive three trends in modern art :
Expressionism, Abstraction and Fantasy.

Expressionism is traced through Van Gogh, the Fauves and

31 The Dream of Icarus - Kenneth Coutts-Smith, p. 166

Matisse, Roualt, the German, Die Brücke, individuals such as Soutine and Beckman to Der Blaue Reiter and Wassily Kandinsky. Kandinsky, attributed with the first abstract painting in 1910 is also the start of Abstract Expressionism which leads to America, Action Painting and Jackson Pollock. Expressionism is defined by H.W. Jansen as :

... the artist's emotional attitude toward himself and the world.

An involvement with the "human community."³²

To Picasso is attributed the start of formal abstraction with his interest in simultaneity and an autonomous, faceted picture surface. Mondrian is deemed to be his successor, leading to Suprematism, Constructivism, Purism, the more recent Hard-Edge works and Conceptual painting. Abstraction is defined by H.W. Jansen as :

a concern for the "structure or reality "
"the formal structure of the work of art" ³³

Abstraction is often said to be concerned with sub-atomic reality as in the work of Pollock.

Fantasy works have as their predecessors Fuseli and Goya, leading to the hallucinated space of De Chirico ; Paul Klee and his interest in Child Art ; Duchamp and all the artists of chance : Dada and Surrealism ; Jean Miro. Fantasy is defined by H.W. Jansen as :

³² The History of Art - H. W. Jansen, p. 520

³³ ibid, p. 520

.... the realm of imagination, especially its spontaneous and irrational qualities.

an interest in "the labyrinth of the individual human mind" 34

These categories are not seen as irrevocable. The work of individuals may overlap the boundaries. For instance, Picasso's Three Dancers is seen as Collage Cubism whereas his work of the 1920's showed an interest in classical realism. Picasso is, fortunately, very hard to categorise at all.

REALISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

While there are realistic trends (veristic surrealism) especially in the 1920's and 1930's, it is proving difficult to maintain. The reality they depicted was uneasy, hallucinated. Of the Neo-Expressionists who favoured a distorted realism, Haftman says :

In general we may say that with all their 'realism' these painters do not so much describe reality as question it. 35

Representational art proved inadequate as a vehicle for new forms. 36

While Abstraction is seen as the main vehicle for art in the twentieth century, it is interesting to consider that this Neo-Expressionistic unease may be the very bridge needed to enable people to understand abstract works and the problems

³⁴ The History of Art - H. W. Jansen, p. 520

³⁵ Painting in the Twentieth Century - W. Haftmann, p. 323

³⁶ ibid, p. 321

and concepts with which they deal. Generally, the Public seems unaware that their concept of reality should have changed and thus lack comprehension where abstract works are concerned.

ABSTRACTION AND THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

It does seem that Abstraction, whether expressionistic or formal is closer to the spirit of our new reality.

Alfred Manessier, a young French artist for one was :

... driven increasingly to the use of abstract signs.³⁷

Abstract artists :

.... began to formulate clearly what in the past they had only dimly suspected, namely that abstract painting was also concerned with the creation of realities ; harmonic realities existing in their own right, and expressed by structures of form and colour ; psychic realities expressive of man's inner world ; and realities relating to the outside world, reflecting modern scientific insights. 38

Modern art is basically intellectual. It is against the sensuality of previous art as Hauser says. Artists wish to escape the complacency of the Impressionistic epoch. They wish to create their own language based on line, tone and form. They began to interpret the visible world in terms of modern discoveries. Abstract Art, however, really only came into its own after 1945.

³⁷ Painting in the Twentieth Century - W. Haftmann, p. 318

³⁸ ibid, p. 315

The abstract artist is also concerned with a pictorial equivalent for equilibrium :

to achieve a harmony which is the ultimate and self-sufficient formula of the spirit and hence a visual equivalent of the balance achieved by man in the universe. 39

EXISTENCE AND ESSENCE

In terms of Coutts-Smith's definition in the "Dream of Icarus", two trends are discernible in Abstract art : Art of Existence and art of Essence. Art of Existence is when the art work is an object in itself, objective, non-symbolic and in which the artist remains anonymous. Most of which are stated claims in the work of Rauschenberg.⁴⁰

The art of Essence is when the art work is symbolic, aiming at depicting psychic energy or the structure of matter, the inner soul of the psyche or the world, The art of Existence can be conceived of as outward form, that of Essence as inner meaning.

The art of Existence includes such styles as that of Colour Field painting as exemplified by Mark Rothko. These artists were interested in the evocative power of expressive colour but they had no symbolic referents as such. Some of Pop Art can be included, under which category Rauschenberg and Cage are sometimes placed, and Conceptual Art : the 'Environments' of such artists as Flavin.

³⁹ Painting in the Twentieth Century - W. Haftmann, p. 343

⁴⁰ Modern Art : A follett-larousse Concise Encyclopaedia, p. 200

The artists of Existence seem to be retreating from reality because it is ungraspable and unobservable. Thus they concern themselves with outward form ; which is reflected in other disciplines :

... the 'uncertainty principle' marks the limit of the scientist's interest in the electron's exact nature and location in space. In all disciplines, the essence of things seem to be more than ever out of the human mind's reach Philosophy and Science are more pre-occupied with systems and mechanisms of functioning. 41

The art of Essence is concerned with dynamic energies, with molecular or sub-atomic structure. Artists of Existence are concerned with producing a record of their own perceptions, or a record of their mark, their passage, as the only true statement left in art. Artists of Essence on the other hand are concerned with recording their psyche, or creating symbols for an unknowable but an intuitively grasped reality. Essence has been previously seen as being tied to the academic approach, to the production of 'significant form' as defined by Wofflin, and therefore, tied up with realism which has been proved inadequate. If Essence is concerned with the structure of matter and symbols however, and Abstraction art is concerned with the structure of matter, then such work as Jackson Pollock's, which is certainly not academic, can be defined in terms of Essence.

Pollock with his dense weaving of colour, his externalisation of the changed structure of matter, produced images which relate directly to current concepts in Physics. Energy itself became the subject matter of painting. 42

41 The New Avant-Garde : Gregoire Muller , p. 6

42 The Dream of Icarus - Kenneth Coutts-Smith, p. 171

The whole canvas becomes a symbol for the unknown. Art is now confronting reality. Jung states that, at bottom, we are all simply carbon, thus in painting molecular structure, in being concerned with energy, the artist paints not only the universe but himself. This brings one back to Heisenberg's point about man confronting himself.

INTUITION IN ART

The intuitive element in the art of Essence cannot be ignored. Pollock's method of painting shows the influence of Automatism. Surrealism has declined as a style except for that form exemplified by Joan Miro, but its most generative influence was that of Automatism. The Follett-Larousse encyclopaedia defines it as :

a technique of drawing or painting which dissociated conscious associations from the performance of the pen or brush 43

Pollock in fact spoke of being so totally immersed in his work that he was not conscious of what he was achieving until a 'get acquainted time'. His subject matter is psychic energy.

Psychologists say that correspondences can be found between the relativities of the world and those of the psyche. Coutts-Smith suggests that :

⁴³ Modern Art : A Follett-Larousse Concise Encyclopedia , p. 16

in order to render the objective world naked, one must also strip oneself naked. 44

which brings us back to the confrontation of self. Pollock saw the paint which he dribbled from cans and flung as

... a storehouse of pent-up forces for him to release. 45

He was totally committed to the act of painting which led to the term Action painting, synonymous with Abstract Expressionism.

In psychological terms the Surrealist's representational images were from the 'preconscious', whereas the images of Pollock come from a deeper level. In giving an external form to these inner impulses, man is said to overcome his alienation.

THE UNITARY AIM IN MODERN ART

Modern artists perceive and aim at the 'one life', the 'one reality'; their goal is the achievement of unity with the centre of all life and things. Art has become mysticism. (Klee, for instance, spoke of the 'Primal Ground')

This unitary aim does not preclude more objective, formal works. Mondrian spoke of wanting to express :

.. the plastic equivalent of universal truth. 46

and

to penetrate nature in such a way that the inner construction of reality is revealed to us. 47

44 The Dream of Icarus - Kenneth Coutts-Smith, p. 78

45 A History of Art - H. W. Jansen, p. 540

46 A Concise History of Modern Painting, Herbert Read, p. 197

47 ibid, p. 198

His pictorial expression of this aim was in direct contrast to the later Pollock or even his contemporary Kandinsky : He saw his rigid verticals and horizontals as expressing the equilibrium of the universe and his precise placing of the primary (pure) colours underlined this. His precision in placing these colours, Jansen says, is unrepeatable which is a measure of his genius. This is, however, an intuitive element which is an intrusion of the psyche into what was supposed to be a purely objective style.

Kandinsky's aim was similar but his style was far more painterly.

his aim was to charge form and colour with a purely spiritual meaning (as he put it) by eliminating all resemblance to the physical world. 48

His colours are symbolic, yellow being considered earthy and shrill, blue contemplative. By careful placing he made them resonate. While he avoided any representational images, his work can still be considered figurative in one sense, a view supported to a certain degree by the words of Picasso :

Nor is there any 'figurative' and 'non-figurative' art. Everything appears to us in the guise of 'figure'. 49

Kandinsky's geometric forms : the triangle, the circle, can certainly be viewed as figurative.

Mondrian and later Malevitch conceives of painting as an active surface however, which is a concern for outward form and therefore Existence whereas Kandinsky's work is definitely symbolic and therefore an art of Essence.

Haftmann reiterates the unitary view, seeing a leit-motif of the twentieth century to be

to restore unity with the world of things on
a universal plane. 50

This sounds in many ways like a continuation of nineteenth century thought. (Nietsche and the mystic oneness). It is interesting to note that Classicism as opposed to the nineteenth century Romanticism, defines balance and its achievement as :

... the neutralisations of conflicts in a mid-point.⁵¹

Considering the conflicting world we live in and its abundance of paradox, this seems like a rather relevant theme. The french artist, Alfred Manessier stated :

Non-objective art seems to me to provide the contemporary painter with his best chance of gaining access to his inner reality and of grasping the awareness of his essence, indeed of his Being. I believe that only by starting from this reconquered position will the painter be gradually able to find himself, to rediscover his powers and to strengthen them to the point where he can reach the reality of the outside world. 52

This statement not only affirms the belief in Abstract art or non-objective art but displays the concern for the role

⁵⁰ Painting in the Twentieth Century - W. Haftmann, p. 374

⁵¹ ibid, p. 343

⁵² ibid, p. 372

of the artist that arose after World War II.

THE CRISIS IN THE ROLE OF ART

Society believed that the artist had a choice in his representation and he was accused of not caring enough for his fellow man. Art was seen as hermetic, specialised, designed for a limited audience. Harold Rosenberg calls this a mystification process designed to give art more weight (a trend echoed in other disciplines) The gulf between the artist and the general public was wide.

A committed art arose, socially orientated and representational by its very nature. But as has been stated, this new realism withered and artists were drawn back to abstraction as the most valid artistic form of the twentieth century.

The true socialist art, that of communistic countries was shown to be an arid academicism and artists returned increasingly to their individual paths. Abstraction has remained the main vehicle of expression, and yet, in the 1950's a group of young artists arose who felt the lack of representational images.

The proliferation of visual images, what Andre Malreaux calls the museum without walls challenged the artist.

What value is art if it remains unvisited in the museums while the general public feasts on trivia? Artists also found the new images stimulating. They began to incorporate commercial images into the work, very often using the methods of the media to do it, e.g. the silk-screened images of Rauschenberg. Most historians agree that social comment is not the main aim of this Pop Art (derived from the world Popular) although it does seem a by-product.

Pop artists :

exposed the swift corruption, the meaningless din as well as the unexpected beauty - the result of mere chance and therefore 53
meaningless itself.

Sometimes termed the New Realism, work such as Roy Lichtenstein's comic-strip pictures catches the spectator's attention by its very familiarity. These painters felt that a picture was not :

essentially a flat surface covered with colours ... 54
but an image wanting to be recognised.

Another movement that started in the 1950's was Op Art (Victor Vasereley) Cerebral and systematic, it explores, in a non-figurative way, the effects of optical illusions. Thus illusionism has been recombined with realism but in a twentieth century format.

there is no doubt that these strongly marked trends in the most recent art are evidence of the painter's desire to come closer to the visual forms of contemporary reality. 55

53 Painting in the Twentieth Century - W. Haftmann, p. 375

54 A History of Art - H. W. Jansen, p. 541

55 Painting in the Twentieth Century - W. Haftmann, p. 377

But can these artists really come to terms with reality or are they dealing with ephemeral aspects in their concern to grab the spectator's attention and thereby justify themselves as artists ? Given the previously discussed nature of reality, the latter would seem to be true. Also most of Pop Art seems to be concerned with Art of Existence ; a retreat from reality into outward form. Pop Art seems to lack internal resonance. While it may have a momentary impact through its recognition value (comic strips) it does not transport one beyond oneself and thus is not memorable.

Op Art as a trend seems more valuable since it creates a certain intellectual pleasure in its surface vibration. It also extends our vision of the visual world but does not touch any deeper psychic level (the necessity for which however, is a matter of opinion). Being essentially an illusionistic play on the surface of the canvas and a non-symbolic objective art, it could be termed an art of Existence.

DEEPENING CRISIS SINCE THE 1960'S

Since the 1960's the further extension of the boundaries in art have meant that the standards for aesthetic judgements have to be continuously redefined and in fact there is a deepening of the crisis in the role of art.

Harold Rosenberg :

Everyone knows that the label modern art no longer has any relation to the words that compose it. To be Modern Art, a work need not be either modern nor art ; it need not even be a work. A three thousand year old mask from the South Pacific qualifies as modern and a piece of wood found on a bench becomes art. 56

The Happenings Group is part of Conceptual Art, that which concentrates more on ideas than the art work. It is exemplified by Joseph Beuys who sees art in the intention of the moment. Beuys is witnessed paddling through a river in his clothes. This event, while having a certain surprise value, seems an act of ultimate negation. In seeking to expand the concept and the role of art, these artists have made it life which may be true but we are left without a method of communication or of expressing meaning.

The urge to endow works of art with a new authenticity by blurring the distinction between image and reality. 57

One is left only with the act, a chimera.

Herbert Read suggests that the use of commercial imagery has led the artist away from the inward looking tendency of the 1950's to an

.... awakening (of) the spectator's sensibilities to time, space and material..... 58

Certainly these artists have a great deal of theoretical backing for their actions, the Art and Language Group in England went as far as replacing painting with documentation. But where do we go from there ? A bonfire ?

While seeking the total obscuration of the artist as unnecessary to the understanding of the art act, modern artists resent their relegation to a peripheral role in society. To overcome this, they seem to want to force the spectator to

57 A History of Art - H. W. Jansen, p. 543

58 A Concise History of Modern Painting - H. Read, p. 306

respond to their work. They want painting to step off the walls, to invade space, to be noticed at all costs (even to the loss of meaning ?)

Gregoire Muller states :

At this point, physicality becomes a main concern ; for a piece can only be experienced validly if it is 'no nonsense' and if it is present in actual space and time. 59

The ultimate in a physical art is seen in Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty - Great Salt Lake, Utah. Artists such as this say they are making spectators face abstract problems. It is a pity this requires so much verbal communication to make the spectator understand this. Fine art has become literature.

Arguing somewhat against himself, Gregoire Muller says :

It is a known fact that an actual "thing", whatever it is, never faithfully reflects its concept. Since the time of Plato, philosophers have been concerned with the gap between the world of ideas and the world of reality. 60

This was stated in connection with the work of Sol Lewitt. It negates, however, right at the beginning, the avowed intent of these artists to reach out directly and intelligibly to a wider, if unprepared public. Having accepted that there might be a gap between the idea and its concretisation, they go ahead to try and prove themselves wrong by presenting the concretisation anyway.

59 The New Avant-Garde - Gregoire Muller, p. 8

60 ibid, p. 11

Of Spiral Jetty, Gregoire Muller states :

The perception of this piece implies the understanding
of a development in time. 61

or

its geometric configuration is a symbol for evolution. 62

It seems more likely that a member of the Public would merely remark on the oddly-shaped, man-made basically non-functional landmass and leave it at that. The artist has created another mystifying code and has widened the gap with the public by relying on the latter perceiving an abstruse concept. Granted, there is more chance of Spiral Jetty being noticed as a physical reality than a canvas but its full concentric impact is only discernible from the air (as shown in photographs) which again limits its audience. Their art seems remarkably like an attempt to play 'God' or what the Greeks would have termed hubris.

The so-called anonymity of the artist is notably lacking in Gregoire Muller's book. It is denied by artists posturing in every photograph and in their dramatised, carefully shaded portraits.

It is possible that the public does not necessarily ignore the picture on the wall. The extension of visual imagery by means of reproduction means that a far greater section of the public are aware of pictures in the first place.

61 The New Avant-Garde - Gregoire Muller, p. 86

62 ibid, p. 91

The fault seems to be merely in the lack of discrimination and the surfeit arising from popularisation. Most people admit Van Gogh's place in the annals of art history but he has been virtually 'flogged to death' by his admirers.

Robert Smithson has created a work of Existence. It is an actuality, it has objectified reality. And as previously defined, it retreats from reality in a show of outward form.

An attitude to life which is generally applauded is one of courage and strength. This does not imply retreat, retreat from such a challenge as that which has been set before us in the twentieth century. Thus art of Existence does not seem an adequate method of dealing with our new reality. The art of Essence, or that of inner meaning, in attempting to come to terms with something admittedly unknowable and ungraspable, is far more exciting as a step into the unknown itself. It seems a more positive and hopeful attitude to take and, even if wrong, seems more constructive than a nihilistic and despairing approach. This art at the same time seems to be far more evocative, it seems to reach into deeper areas of one's being.

A work needs numinosity. Jung suggests that it is when art deals with the archetypal that it is at its most effective, that it reaches a universal level, touching all men.

If this is so, then it seems unnecessary to force one's art on the public. It has also been suggested that a work of art, if valid, creates its own public.

Roy McMullen talks of there being several kinds of art : Popular, Folk, Primitive, Traditional, Museum and Modern. These fulfil different kinds of roles, for instance in Popular art, the artist seeks to express the opinions of the public rather than his own. Art here then assumes a decorative role, further supplied by commercial images (tiles, curtains, etc.)

THE ROLE OF MODERN ART

What has happened to the role of modern art ? To a certain degree it does seem to be big business; it has become a commodity but there are a great many functions it is no longer fulfilling.

Art is no longer entertainment - films and the mass media have taken over.

Art is no longer didactic - the education systems have eliminated the need for that.

Art is no longer decorative - commercial art provides the patterns we need.

Art is no longer representative - photographs fill that role.

Art is no longer a record - photographs and other media also fill that role.

Art no longer reflects nature or reality - nature or reality is ungraspable and unobservable.

The role left to modern art seems one of mysticism : for art to stand as a symbol for the spirit of man in a world where he is surrounded by material things, a reminder of what lies beneath the surface. In other words - art of Essence.

If an art work cannot be reality or a record of reality in a literal sense, it can stand as a metaphor for it. In fact it can still be said to be helping gain mastery over the world. Haftmann states :

... we must make such images if we are not to be overcome by fear, by the terrible impotence of our imagination, by the void that we can no longer arbitrarily fill with traditional images. 63

Our reality is now unknown and therefore fearsome. By making symbols for it, we can control our fear.

The artist becomes the mediator between man and his world - an interpreter of reality which means man has returned to the shamanistic role of primitive society. Man as a whole seems to be seeking a return to a more "primitive" attitude which is not internally divided and externally alienated.

Herbert Read sees art becoming an interdisciplinary activity :

... Man's alienation, his inability to relate spirit and material, or to comprehend the totality of his world, In this divided world, art still stands as an activity without predetermined confines.

63 Painting in the Twentieth Century - W. Haftmann, p. 374

When this open brief is accepted negatively, it leads to the dead-ends and the triviality that have characterised much of recent art. Taken as a challenge, it could forge a new and expanded concept of art as an interdisciplinary activity, bridging fields of knowledge and linking man's polarities ; his intuition and his intellect, chaos and order. 64

Picasso saw himself as an interpreter, as continuously interacting with reality in his work. As a mediator, the artist is forced into a relationship with reality that is essentially primeval (or mythical). Art has become hermetic, art has become essence, creating symbols for an unknowable, ambiguous reality. Art is a bridge between disciplines, it can aid man in his search for wholeness. The artist is an interpreter, a mediator, a shaman. Art is concerned with myth.

CHAPTER FIVE

ART AND MYTH

In 1943, Matta implied that modern art, while coming to terms with the new scientific concepts, would be forced into a mythical attitude.

the contemplation of these scientific conceptions of reality and of the images released by their shock could build up in the unconscious a mythical ground that would enable the artist to transpose our scientific reality into a mythical dimension. 65

Thus art becomes myth, but what is myth ?.

WHAT IS MYTH ?

There have been many different theories and schools of thought about myth, a discussion which continues to this day. The importance of looking at this area has arisen from the fact that Primitive man has not experienced the same dislocation from reality as modern Western man, (when primitive man has been left alone). Philip Freund states that myth was previously conceived as divine revelation. In the 18th century it became barbaric superstition, in the 19th century, poetic and creative stories as opposed to reality, then myth became successively, primitive science, actual history, related to dreams by Freud, a pragmatic ordering of the world by Malinowski. Meanwhile

⁶⁵ Painting in the Twentieth Century - W. Haftmann, p. 329

"primitive" societies view it as a living reality, representing an even greater reality.

Myth is at present generally conceived as mere stories arising out of each particular culture. Ernst Cassirer, Mircea Eliade, M. Leenhard, E. O. James see myth as representing an ultimate reality through a symbolic form of expression which is at the same time, one and the same thing as that reality.

Cassirer :

(the primitive) reveals reality to himself and himself to reality in that he lets himself and the environment enter into their plastic medium in which the two do not merely make contact but fuse with each other. 66

Myth is exemplary, sacred history as opposed to factual history. By imitation man rises out of himself, he detaches himself from profane time and magically re-enters a greater period - the lost Paradise of so many myths and cultures. Paradise is synonymous with immortality, spontaneity, freedom, ascension to heaven and an easy meeting with the Gods, friendship with animals and knowledge of their language.

Jung states that myth is concerned with archetypes that are vitally important to our mental health and that it has been the demythologisation and secularisation of the world that has led to our alienation.

The element common to all myths according to Edward Beuss, is that they deal with the knowledge of the unknowable. 67

Underlying the outward form of the myth, is mythic consciousness :an attitude to life and reality which seems relevant to us now. Reality in the 20th century as we have discussed is ungraspable, unknowable. Thus we have returned to the same state as primitive man. We, as they, wish to comprehend our world, master it and also, as Mircea Eliade suggests, move into a different plane of existence away from our mortality. He suggests that we are motivated by awareness of being "devoured by time" 68

Mythic consciousness is characterised, according to Ernst Cassirer by a total identification between image and reality, an undifferentiated vision typical of the aesthetically inclined, according to the psychologist, I. L. Child. The image genuinely contains the power and significance of the whole. The particular is seen in the whole (pars pro toto) and thus the image or the experience becomes a metaphor.

For the mythic consciousness, the immediacy, the intensity of the moment is overwhelming.

the sensible present is so great that everything else dwindles before it. 69

Time is suspended. After the experience, the image, or

67 Myths and Realities - John L. McKenzie, p. 183

68 Myths, Dreams and Mysteries - Mircea Eliade, p. 242

69 Language and Myth - Ernst Cassirer, p. 32



order gains an objective reality. Experience leads to
action :

the tension finds release as the subjective excitement becomes objectified. 70

Reality becomes a series or progression of separate, clear, mythical images which can change because they are always conceived in the present.

The image arising out of the mythic experience is one of distillation from the intense experience.

the mental view is not widened but compressed ; it is so to speak, distilled to a single point. Only by this process of distillation is the particular essence found and extracted which is to bear the special accent of 'significance.' 71

And this essence stands for and is the whole. It is a symbol and yet more than a symbol since the word symbol implies a separation from reality. Myth is also connected with the expression of a divine principle, mostly known as Mana which is not physical and yet is present in everything. It is similar to energy.

John McKenzie in Myths and Realities states that myths cannot completely express transcendental reality since they reiterate the phenomenological world. He says that myths do not reach the divine but bring the divine down to man's level and thus become acceptable to man. If we could reach

⁷⁰Language and Myth - Ernst Cassirer, p. 33

⁷¹ibid, p. 90

the divine however, it would no longer be divine, or on the other hand, we would be divine. One can only attempt an approximation.

Millar Burrows :

it implies, not falsehood but truth an insight more profound than scientific description and logical analysis can ever achieve. 72

Mythical thinking has been dismissed by many as being of a lesser order than logical scientific thinking. And yet, many writers have shown that they are basically, though not entirely, similar. It has been said that mythical thinking is intuitive whereas scientific thought deals with the facts. Robin Horton in his anthropological study of the "Kalahari World-View" shows that the original formulation of a scientific concept is often entirely intuitive in its conjunction of entirely disparate sets of data. He also shows that the higher order of scientific conceptualisation often has very little relation to the original data at all.

Edmund Leach, another anthropologist, concurs, stating that primitive thought is merely expressed in more concrete terms than science. Thus it seems that mythical thinking is equally as valid as scientific, if not more so for artists, for who can express the irrational rationally? By developing a mythical attitude, one may produce works that can evoke a response from an image laden public. It is a hermetic art, certainly but

⁷² Myths and Realities - John McKenzie, p. 90

not necessarily invalid because of that.

There are a number of modern artists who by their attitude to their work, could be considered mythical: Franz Marc who spoke of achieving a mystic unity with nature ; Paul Klee and his primal ground ; Kandinsky called his work a spiritual expression of the cosmos ; Hann Frier 1948 worked from tension of the moment ; Dubuffet and his poetic metaphors ; Jackson Pollock and his total immersion in the moment of his work.

CONCLUSION : A HYPOTHESIS

We have seen how social conditions affect the role of art, the style of art and the complexity of spatial organisation. As society changes, so does the role of art. We have looked at this historically : the function art fulfilled up to our present time. Today, new discoveries in science and the other areas have changed our ideas and our reality. This has resulted in anxiety and confusion. A crisis has arisen in the role of art ; artists are trying to make themselves more meaningful in their community, in a world where meaning has to a large degree vanished.

A great many traditional roles have been usurped ; we are left with two directions : an intuitive, hermetic art or an art that becomes reality itself, an outward form.

The first fulfills an ancient role of making images for the

unknown, a means to mastering our world, magic ; which is essentially a primitive attitude. This is an art of essence, symbolic, intuitive, seeking the meaning beneath things. It confronts reality and questions it.

The second is an art of existence which is non-symbolic, concerned only with outward form, a mark of one's passage, because reality cannot be observed or recorded or grasped. Thus the art work becomes the object itself or is reality itself. Artists place their work physically in space and demand that the public contemplate the questions it poses. This is negated by the form never quite clarifying the concept it expresses. Thus they create an outward form of reality and any deeper meaning is left unexplored. It has no deeper meaning than its existence. This is essentially a retreat.

Both directions imply attitudes of mind : the art of essence is hopeful ; it assumes there is meaning to be found and expressed. The art of existence is more negative, assumes there is no meaning and conceptualises art in outward form.

But as we have seen, our reality and our understanding of it is very similar to that of primitive man. And mythical thought is not so very different from some of the most important areas of scientific thought. In a time when art cannot ignore science, this mythic consciousness is not out of place. One

can distill the intensity of the moment and extract from it a significant image that is both reality and a symbol for it (pars pro toto). This would be an art of essence, a confrontation of reality whether that reality is internal or external. One would work in relationship with reality and thus overcome one's alienation. The artist has become shaman, interpreter, mediator. The art of essence evokes a response ~~on~~ a deeper level than that of existence and because such an art work is intuitively grasping and expressing the unknown, the role of art becomes one of reconciling man to his new reality.

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