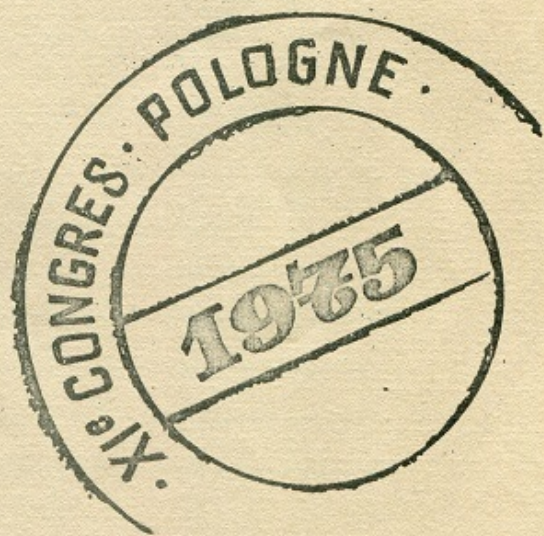


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THESES ON THE FAILURE OF
COMMUNICATION IN THE PLASTIC ARTS



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by

Kenneth Coutts-Smith.

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That we are currently experiencing a crisis in art is self-evident; however, the nature and scope of this crisis is not clearly understood. Evidence may be discovered daily for this contention throughout so-called "western" society in varying aspects of the social response to art. There has been a marked shift in the nature of this response during recent years, and the most significant factor of this shift consists in what one may describe as a general lack of confidence in both the nature and the substance of contemporary artistic expression.

The appearance in journalism and popular literature of extended "critiques" of the art-scene¹ is now echoed by somewhat confused searching for motives, roles and justifications within the art-community itself. This was demonstrated at the recent conference of the American Association of Museums held in Los Angeles last June, at which meeting the general tenor of discussion proposed that art institutions and the phenomenon of art itself have now become completely out of touch with the society as a whole.

"A large proportion of the public, 99.9 percent, sees the whole of contemporary art as a conspiracy...(and it is true that) among the 100,000 people in the (art world) subculture there is an amazing degree of agreement...the purpose of modern art is to validate the careers of curators...(The) subculture validates itself rather like a religious group validates itself." Michael Compton (Tate Gallery).

"Art museum-going doesn't belong to the habits of the working class." Pontus Hulten (Centre Beaubourg).

"The museum idea (in the minds of the people) is still that of a space where eternity unfolds, and we are seen as the guardians...And we are at fault for that." Werner Hofmann (Kunstmuseum, Hamburg).²

If we are to consider the creation and contemplation of works of art as an activity that transcends the concerns of a self-enclosed dual subculture consisting of, on the one hand, the producers (the artists) and, on the other, the "support system" (collectors, dealers, critics, teachers, curators)³, then clearly we must recognise a developing fragmentation of communication between "art" as a whole and

and "society" as a whole.

The current level of inquiry into this problem appears, however, to be obscured by vested group assumptions and interests. Artists, for example, have recently become more conscious of their role as producers of a certain type of consumer property. This awareness, though, has overlaid, rather than displaced, the old avant-garde imperatives of behaviour and belief.

The result is less the development of a straight-forward supply and demand ethic (though there is evidence of this)⁴ than the growth of a confusion of roles whereby the traditional bohemian concepts of genius and inspiration justify and obscure an increasing reliance on status, career success and profit.

One sharply defined aspect of this type of thinking is the dualistic desire on the part of the artist to escape from both a "corrupt" gallery and promotional structure and the "practical" imperatives of a market economy, yet, without recognising the nature of art in a capitalist society, demand at the same time rewards from that society in the form of state or institutional support. One can note the various recent attempts to implement such a policy by the incorporation of various protective and professional artist's associations, "unions", pressure groups and bargaining units.

Within the support system, the curatorial and academic sectors begin to depend more and more heavily upon institutional privilege. Here the rewards and obligations of membership in the subculture become increasingly enclosed and reified in institutional life (museum, university, cultural body, etc.). Also the fact and rank of membership in the esoteric society of the subculture assumes the aspect of a very powerful bargaining counter in the larger bourgeois status and prestige stakes. Yet, just like the artist, but in perhaps not quite so naive a fashion, the average member of the support system is obliged to pay at least lip service to the visionary, spiritual and "idealistic" traditions of bohemia.⁵

The collector, of course, does not suffer such a constraint. But he does have more at stake in terms of investment than the physical objects he has bought. He also possesses a "property", and thereby both gains and obligations, which he might not consciously acknowledge, being also the victim of the myths of the avant-garde. That is to say, those areas of the subculture (individual artists, dealers, critics, museum trustees, institutional boards of governors, etc.,) that he has also succeeded in "purchasing" through his patronage and his cultural donations.

Outside of the support system, bourgeois society increasingly projects (through journalism, the media, etc.,) its own contradictions onto the contradictions of the art world, and laments the passing of the traditional value-confirmations that

culture has historically performed for the bourgeoisie. The proletariat in capitalist society stands outside of this question in that art (and "culture" as a whole) represents, for them, bourgeois property perhaps desired under the exigencies of the myth of upward mobility.

Without question, fundamental changes are presently taking place in our collective thinking about the role and function of art. From the end of the nineteenth century until a few years ago, the modern mainstream of art remained more or less a homogenous whole, and the social role of art appeared reasonably well defined. It echoed, above all, an optimistic and expansive view of bourgeois material life and society, awarding it a "spiritual" justification. The symbolist and expressionist tradition confirmed the romantic and individualistic concept of man, in competition with his fellows, asserting his personal ego in the face of both society and the cosmos. The constructivist to kinetic substream has celebrated the material and technological appropriation of the world.

The last decade, however, has evinced an increasing dematerialization of the physical presence of art, and a parallel breakdown of the bourgeois tradition of confidence and optimism. Many commentators have recently turned their concerns to this development; indeed, the situation has now arisen where hardly any member of the art subculture has not voiced pertinent questions in one form or another. Yet the issues remain obscure, the central problem undefined. How can this be so?

It is the belief of this writer that, as a result of art-historical conditioning, the art subculture's sense of its own identity has subsumed and overlaid its awareness of society as a whole, the ~~the~~ existence and structure of the subculture has become confused with the existence and structure of larger class groups in society. As a result of this, commentators have searched into the form and myth of the historical art-community. Blinded by a self-validating system, they are, of course, looking in the wrong place and posing the problem in an inverted manner.

It is impossible to seek the explanation for the dematerialization of art inside an enclosed art subculture; but rather one must examine the sociological evidence of mutating class society. It is impossible to criticize the art subculture for appropriating culture to its own esoteric purposes, as popular bourgeois thought appears to do; but rather we must observe the coalescence and stratification of the art world as a consequence of the independent collapse of bourgeois values. In other words, it is necessary to reverse the direction of criticism from that to which we have become accustomed.

The following text is therefore offered as a tentative attempt to sketch out some of the sociological aspects of this problem. Considering the vast areas of interest before us; and considering the nature of this presentation, an aphoristic form of assertion rather than supported exegesis seems appropriate, and therefore we

examine
shall ~~consider~~ various aspects of this question as separate and condensed thesis statements.

The Theses.

1.

Art, both in its broadest and its most generalised category as well as in its specific individual detail is an expression of a faculty in man that we label aesthetic response. Our popular⁶ understanding of this term is, however, fragmented by semantic confusion and the sheer weight of myth built up by art-history. When we consider the word "aesthetic", we still oscillate between Kant's definition ("the science which treats of the conditions of sensuous perception")⁷ and the platonic vagaries of the concept of "taste, of the perception of the beautiful in nature and art."⁸

We have been conditioned to understand the aesthetic function as a special activity somehow invested in or developed by special people, and this privileged insight and activity is performed by the skilled individual on behalf of the community as a whole. In this line of thought the artist is invested by society with a kind of quasi-priestly function. Close examination reveals, however, that this "sacerdotal" activity, just as with religious mediation, actually serves a small, elite and dominant section of society, not the whole community.

Class interest has defined both the interpretation of the concept "aesthetic" and the interpretation of the role and function of art in society. Stemming from an Idealist base (using this term in its strict philosophical sense) art has historically been placed at the service of the invisible. The deliberate mystification of the true spirituality of man (i.e., his unique ability to humanize his environment and to create himself⁹) has led to the almost total appropriation of the aesthetic faculty as property.

2.

The aesthetic faculty, together with its product, the specific object in which it is embodied, form the general phenomenon which we call art. It is interesting to note, however, that the term "art" as we presently understand it only became common usage, and thus appeared in dictionaries, towards the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Previous to this date the word "art" denoted various strict and defined technical aspects of the painter's and sculptor's craft. It cannot be co-incidental that the concept "art" as a special activity, and the developing sacralization of that concept, parallels the bourgeois appropriation of art both as cultural property, the possession

of which confers prestige, and as investment property, the possession of which embodies wealth and power.

A structure system of considerable privilege and prestige (and prestige, it must be remembered, is also property) has come about as a result of the fact that art has recently begun to occupy an increasingly important sector of man's collective psyche. It appears to be occupying the gap left vacant in the human mind as a result of the decline of religious faith. However, the natural progression of this historical development has been inhibited by the fact that this sector of human behaviour has not truly seized control over its own activity.

By means of a network of myths and self-validating structures within the bohemian subculture we term the avant-garde, a consciousness of art arose whereby it was secularized but remained at the same time at the service of the invisible. All human activity in the feudal world was placed at the service of God: we have yet to complete the successful post-feudal transformation of human activity to the service of men.

A Hegelian insistence that art is a manifestation of an Ideal struggling to assert itself in this world still remains deeply embedded in our understanding of art. The platonism and theosophy of the symbolists, of Kandinsky and Mondrian, still (but often unconsciously) reverberates as echoes in our contemporary thinking about art.

5.

The bourgeois appropriation of art has relied upon two myths, nurtured by the history of art, and reconfirmed by art-history.¹¹ They are, first: the myth of the artist as visionary, that is to say, the excavator of realities behind appearance, the interpreter to a metaphysical world, the exemplar of a desired state of aesthetic grace, and second: the myth of the artist as rebel and hero, which manifests itself as the "savage messiah", the passionate individualist and the noble non-conformist.

It is because these two myths have penetrated so deep, have penetrated to a point where they have become canonical, accepted as absolutes, that the capitalist appropriation of the avant-garde has been so complete. The relegation of art to a subculture and its petrification into a dual commodity-producer structure and support system is merely the final stage of that appropriation.

That the two myths of bohemia eminently serve the interests of capitalist ideology is evident. One, by claiming that art is the expression of the Ideal, reconstitutes the religious opiate in a crassly material society, and the other confirms the ideological centrality of the laissez-faire idea of man as a competitive creature, struggling to dominate rather than to co-operate with his fellows. Both these myths serve to

divisify society to the ultimate benefit of class dominance.

A new factor has recently entered into the process, however, which we may describe as the demise of the avant-garde. This is no doubt the logical development of a petrification caused by the overloading of the art subculture with institutional and market pressures, in other words, the result of the inevitable solidification and bureaucratization of the support system.

This has caused the artists to become fully aware of the appropriation and institutionalization of art (a process to which they had previously been blind); and the obvious extension of this awareness was that, for them, the myths began to erode and gain transparency. Quite clearly, once the producers abandon belief in the mythical imperatives of the avant-garde, the whole structure collapses. The bourgeoisie, for their part, bitterly condemn the artists for their heresy, and are deeply shocked that culture now appears to be failing to sustain their myths, myths so necessary to their identity and psychological justification. They are especially upset in that the artists have consistently upped the ante in recent years yet now are failing to deliver the cultural confirmation for which they have been so well paid.

4.

The general experience of crisis manifests itself in the sensation that the whole structure of cultural tradition upon which we have based our conceptions of art and aesthetics is crumbling. The concurrent anxiety is intensified by the fact that this structure of tradition is frequently thought of as somehow comprising eternal verities, and that art consists of intuited revelations of "absolute" aspects of some fundamental "human condition".

The truth, of course, is that this "tradition" is actually the concretization of attitudes and assumptions engendered in mutating class society. Our present idea of art is less than a hundred years old; the concept of the artist as a special being, a visionary, a mediator, is a product of the Renaissance. The whole period of art in the modern understanding of the term spans the period of the emergence and rise to domination of capitalism.

The idea that art is an expression of basic or eternal verities is a mechanism which reinforces (without clearly asserting) the assumption that "bourgeois" values in art are not class values at all, but comprise a series of absolutes. In this matter, art is presented as further evidence to the central ideological contention of bourgeois society that the actual existing system is a universal and natural vision of man and the world.

In order to obscure the fact that the content of art is thus rendered static, the

form is subjected to violent and continuous metamorphosis. The logic of the perennial

avant-garde, an ethic of constant change and formal progression, developed from its late nineteenth century inception to its recent concretization into the status of a necessary and absolute condition of art.

This myth, of course, parallels and reinforces the economic myth of technological growth and continually expanding Gross National Product. One might almost say that the "tradition of the new" comprises a sort of artistic Keynesianism.¹⁴

5.

The logic of a perennial avant-garde has conditioned us to a constant flux, to a linear progression of formal superimpositions, school giving way to school, ism to ism. We naturally stand confused when this process inexplicably and unexpectedly appears to run down. We have thought of art as constantly pushing further out into new areas of sensibility, and the old Humanist idea of man gradually rolling back a perimeter of darkness and ignorance which circumscribes him still remains fundamental to most of our thinking about art. In short, we have considered art as the poetic and spiritual analogy to man's on-going struggle against, and dominance of, nature.

Now, however, though possibly too late, ecological imperatives cause us to question the wisdom of the physical appropriation of the world. Are we now equally questioning the correctness of the mental appropriation of the world through art? For this, surely, is the role that art has traditionally performed. We possess through the act of depicting; we exert power over objects by naming them. There is a whole world of potential property over which simple economic power cannot gain control. Transform this world into sacralized objects through art, however, and it becomes possible to buy and sell these analogues, to possess them and to hoard them, to manipulate them for the private benefit of individual power and wealth.

The demise of the avant-garde depends no doubt to some extent upon the capitalist appropriation of art and its co-option into the sphere of consumer goods. To see this, however, as the prime cause of the present collapse of confidence in art as an institution is an error; the expansion of the art-market is more in the nature of a symptom. All the same, a great many artists, in disgust with blatant manipulation, have turned away from the production of objects that can be bought and sold; and the dematerialization of art, together with the concomitant displacement of the aesthetic centre of gravity from the sensual plane to the conceptual plane, is an integral part of this process.

Nevertheless, the market hegemony over art is not easily broken, since the market itself is not an isolated factor, but only one, albeit major, facet of capitalist society as a whole. As the artist abandons collector-dealer patronage so he must fill

victim to institutional patronage, no matter how it be veiled in the form of grants, fellowships, teaching posts and the like. And, beyond this factor, lies his continuing allegiance to the surviving avant-garde myths, and his resultant weakness in the face of the media and other forces which directly control these myths.

For instance, we have frequently observed during recent years individual artists who, as direct, conscious and committed political action, have abandoned traditional object-orientated art for conceptual process art. Desiring passionately to protect their vision and sensibility from being placed at the service of capitalism, they have attempted to develop areas immune to appropriation. But an ironic paradox traps them. In order to develop an audience they are constrained to depend upon the media. The exigencies of communication demand a competitive network of success or notoriety. Conceptual and process events need to be documented, their very ideological or anti-bourgeois content is meaningless without media dissemination. Yet such dissemination inevitably arrives, under present social conditions, at conventional artistic fame and prestige. But, prestige is property, and its possession raises the very social problems the exercise was intended to avoid.

The central problem with which we are concerned lies less with the artist's relationship with the market, irrespective of how gross and blatant that market has become, but rather with the persistence of outdated aesthetic imperatives. The avant-garde as a period is now clearly over: it lasted roughly one hundred years. Its characteristics comprised a complex of ideas rooted in the basic conception of the artist as rebel and hero.

Posterity, no doubt, will not observe the separate fragmented groups and schools which obsess us, but will note an overall period like the Renaissance or the Baroque. The avant-garde began more or less with Rimbaud's lettre de voyant of 1871 and came to an end a little more than a decade ago. We can note that the last heroic figures in this tradition were of the generation of Jackson Pollock, Alan Ginsberg and Dylan Thomas. Though this period is now closed as a viable structure of cultural assumptions, the majority of artists still seem to be only dimly aware of this fact, and very few indeed among them have yet begun to emancipate themselves from the basic myths and behavioural patterns which have held sway throughout the whole modern movement.

6.

During the industrial revolution man finally achieved the capacity to begin to exert total power over his environment. Nevertheless, a completely dualistic habit of mind remained in force: the aesthetic statement of this fact constitutes the Romantic Movement. At the point when man began to exert effective control over his external space, he also began to take the first steps of exploration into his internal

space. The increasing materialization of the world is paralleled by the discovery of man's subjectivity.

Yet, it seems, the same premises were not applied to the two spheres of activity and experience. An ambiguous structure was set up, the consequences of which we are still experiencing. The end of the eighteenth century marks the beginning of man's attempt to humanise his control of political and economic life, a necessary consequence of the materialization of the world. Man begins to recognise that history is a matter of human will; yet, as the physical world yields transparency to his assertion of independence from theism, the newly-revealed psychological world surfaces in all of its opaque mystery.

Metaphysical justification for the world was transformed from the theological plane to the aesthetic plane. As the divine became subsumed into the sublime, the two central myths of Romanticism (the idea of individual genius and the imperative of inspiration) laid the ground for a bourgeois ideology of art. And Hegelian Idealism was quick to provide authority and confirmation for this developing ideology.

7.

The role demanded of the artist began to exhibit certain ambiguous characteristics. First with the poets of High Romanticism, later with the painters, the artist was encouraged to assume a certain role in society wherein he became a sort of catalyst embodying rebellion against the restrictive behavioural morality which was developed by the bourgeoisie as a cohesive factor for that particular period. It became necessary, in order to sustain the myth of individual free enterprise, to elevate a social type who stood above the common run of men and who assumed the authority to ignore accepted canons of behaviour.

The idea of artistic license provided a necessary safety-valve in a restricted society, and it quickly manifested itself in the appearance of the self-proclaimed aristocrat of sensibility, the dandy, who first surfaced in the person of Baudelaire, and whose thin and attenuated contemporary descendant is discovered in Andy Warhol. The dandy's self-confirmation required, however, the solidarity of a self-validating system, thus leading to the formation of a specific and unprecedented subculture, the realm of bohemia.

Bohemia provided the platform for this emergent artistic solidarity, but it also provided the germ plasma in which the myths of bohemia could breed, develop and finally completely condition the artistic subculture. ¹⁵ The crucial myths formed in this manner: and the one upon which perhaps all the others depended - still depend - is the idea of the artist's "progressive" revolt against bourgeois society. This belief holds that the artist, as a result of his special intuitive and inductive talents, transcends and

opposes middle-class culture, and that he is the bearer of a prophetic vision and voice which probes into and reveals the real world obscured by crass materialism. Naturally, his private life and personal behaviour must reflect this belief.

The reality, of course, is that the bohemian usually reverses the proposition: the assumption of license in social behaviour is held to be the proof of special talents. He pursues, not a total, but a limited rebellion, one consisting in the main of a rejection of the behavioural and sexual imperatives of the petit-bourgeois, while he remains at the same time materially dependant upon the favours of the class he despises.

And it is in this last word that we can observe the true bohemian ethic revealed: for, essentially, this ethic is one of contempt. Despite the idea of ~~the~~ bohemian progressiveness, the subculture exhibits essentially reactionary characteristics. In opposing the crude materiality of the industrial revolution and consolidating middle-class mercantile culture, bohemia interprets the enemy of the human spirit as emergent mass-society and industrial technology, thus identifying the twin bugbears of the subsequent avant-garde, those bugbears which still haunt the nightmares of the so-called "Humanistic" tradition.

8.

Bohemia does not hold up a vision of a truly humanised society, but presents an ideal that is the very negation of society: it assumes the primacy of the personal view of a subjective, private and idealised world. Art is understood as a function that relates strictly to the separate and alienated individual.

The bohemian does not reject the actual historical forces that have reified him, but he responds merely to the symptoms of those forces; and so mistakes and confuses the nature of his social position. He becomes mystified by the very myths of bohemia. Instead of recognising the cause of alienated mass-society in the capitalist economic system, he merely observes and condemns the results of that system. Technology itself is seen as the major element that is hostile to the spiritual integrity of man, rather than the social relationships imposed upon technology. It is not the bourgeois capitalist ethic that is declared to be lacking in just and equitable human relationships, but all social ethics. Finally morality itself is discarded under the imperatives of subjective experience, the egoic assertion of the individual over and against the totality of society.

Bourgeois ideology, through its institutions (academies, universities, schools, media-structures) defines art in such a way that the progressive artist is increasingly separated from society, but is at the same time blinded from that fact. The content of art is isolated from the immediacy of social content. The idea of art-for-art's-

sake condenses as a palliative ideology to the artists' contradictory relationships with society.

Art-for-art's-sake also serves and defines a new type of consumer, one who regards the created object as embodying special qualities which he alone, as a connoisseur of taste and discrimination, is able to appreciate. The collector's point of view becomes finally as élitist as that of the bohemian, operating also as a type of compensation for a "spiritual" vacuum in society, as a counter to social alienation. But here, of course, we are dealing with an alienation experienced by the privileged rather than the disadvantaged.

It seems that there are two distinct types of collectors, or rather levels of collecting, one surpassing the other. Both have their distinct functions, and both have a clearly defined effect upon the art-world. They constitute two separate wings of activity in the support system, which, if not clearly separated and comprehended, result in apparent contradictions within that system. Much present confusion results from a lack of distinction of these two levels of activity.

The basic level of collecting constitutes the act of taking possession of the physical presence of art, the object itself, as a sign for the individual collector's wealth and prestige. It is through the ownership of works of art that he expresses the fact of his personal power, and thus identifies his rank among his peers. The art-object here is not considered as embodying any special characteristics or content beyond social prestige and the confirmation of shared values. The art-object is regarded essentially as an objet de luxe, a sphere of property desirable beyond the normal symbols of success embodied in possession, land, houses, jewels etc.,

The growth of middle-class patronage superseding the older ecclesiastical and princely patronage created a factor which developed in complexity from the mid-nineteenth century onward: a network of dealers and galleries constituting a special art-market, a market which was quick to enter into a feedback relationship with the artist, and thus effect the content of art.

The classic collector during the nineteenth century (and indeed still today) was satisfied with what one might call established art, socially acceptable old-masters and salon painting. The "content" of such works invariably reinforced the mores of established bourgeois society. This type of collector was a follower of fashion rather than an individual who imposed his taste in any way upon the market.

However, under the exigencies of the ethic of competition, there was always the collector who wished to go beyond his fellows in a demonstration of taste and discrimination, in an affirmation of his self-declared rank which he understood as justifying him to transcend and exceed the traditional mores of his class. The assumption of membership of a capitalist elite is reinforced by the possession of more refined objets de luxe. The possession of these objects, in turn, confirms

and consolidates the assumption of that rank.

The necessity for more rarified objets de luxe, ones moreover which did not offend sensibility by incorporating as content the moralistic (and plebian) idiom of the general middle-class, led logically to the appearance of an art without content, a pure art of property. Art-for-art's-sake had also the advantage in that it operated as a social force in two different directions. For the artist it helped apparently to solve the contradictions inherent in his position. The substitution of style for content allowed the challenge of a seemingly radical activity without the usual concomitant risks of such an activity. It was possible to be in the revolutionary forefront of artistic development without sacrificing participation in the material rewards being offered by the newly-developed art-market.

For the collector, it provided similar advantages in that a "radical" front could obscure (even to the individual concerned) his actual motives. But the main advantage was that the substitution of style for content permitted the development of a pure commercial product, the analogue of stocks and bonds, where value was not so vulnerable to depreciation as a result of shifts in taste. To the material manifestation of power was added the very welcome bonus of profit. Pure painting possessed, as the impressionist market quickly demonstrated, a certain absolute value, while genre painting fluctuated as the middle-class mores of a particular epoch were superseded. The idiom of art-for-art's-sake rendered the art-object into a consumer good, and subjected it to the controlled and profitable sphere of speculation.

Yet the very success of the emergent capitalist appropriation of the art-market conditioned a series of on-going counterattacks from the territory of bohemia. The position of the artist was contradictory in the extreme, indeed it still remains contradictory in this regard. He needs the art-market for survival, for exposure, for success and prestige, yet he desires (and the myths of bohemia reinforce this desire) an absolute autonomy from, not merely the market, but also society as a whole. After all, it is he who creates the product, it is he who is the "genius", the unique being touched by special gifts and thus elevated above common men.

Clearly, this special being cannot regard himself as a simple craftsman, a technician, a mere tradesman producing a consumer good. The special being's product must be a very special product indeed. And thus art with content was constrained to give way to art with a special sort of etherialized content. The Hegelian Ideal returns once more in a new guise, transformed by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Art begins to be regarded as a form of metaphysical inquiry, as an attempt to reveal a postulated transcendental world obscured behind the mundane world of appearance.

The moment of symbolism demonstrates the rupture of bohemia into two camps: the avant-garde, who appear on the stage as a conscious force and who subscribe to the

to the transcendental theory of art, and the academicians who conceive of themselves as embodying and objectifying the virtues and the basic assumptions of middle-class society, such virtues and assumptions being regarded as the finest flower of liberal Humanism. The academicians soon, however, abandon bohemia, and are subsumed into bourgeois society as highly respected craftsmen producing a necessary product which embodies the dominant social ideal.

But the avant-garde was soon to observe the sacralization of art being appropriated by class society. For it is at this point that the second, more complex type of collector that we have postulated enters the game. Once a capitalist has amassed a certain quantity of wealth as to make the personal concept of money superfluous¹⁷, once all of his conceivable material needs are fulfilled to excess and the struggle to gain power and prestige is consummated, then often a sense of alienation begins to fill him. His brutal materialism has closed religion to him; anyway, from his specific position he can most likely see through the pretensions of churches and cults. Yet, there must be something else. The myths of bourgeois society insist upon the world being a "spiritual" entity, man a "spiritual" being; and, powerful individual though he be, he cannot escape these particular myths.

Wherein can he find this promise fulfilled? Nowhere in his society, which he is cynical enough to recognise as the brutal structure that it is. But outside of society somewhere? And, what does he find outside of society but art? There, perhaps, can be found those ultimate values, the final verities, the possession of which will provide consolation for a lifetime of hard work, of struggle - and necessary acts he would rather not remember, but which he performed for the good of his class, himself and his own.

This new type of "collector" goes beyond the mere hoarder, the speculator, in that he does not attempt simply to buy individual works of art, but art itself. His acquisitive instinct constrains him to attempt to purchase eternity. He endows museums and foundations, he searches after the latest and most subtle manifestation of the absolute, not so much to possess the unique object in which it is enshrined, but to buy a specific grace which emanates from it.

This collector does not stand outside of the central core of the art-world, as does the simple acquirer of art, but he buys himself into membership of the community of artists, into the charmed circle of the saints and martyrs of his cult. He becomes a crucial, perhaps the crucial, member of the art subculture support system. His wealth has opened the door to the ultimate rank, the hierarchy of talent which lies beyond that of wealth. He becomes a creator in his own right, an artist, for his very whim impinges upon art-history; he is able to condition form and content. **Midas has transformed himself into Daedalus.**

And the artist, of course, has acquiesced. The specific sacralization of art

which the artist saw as confirming his power, his unique mediatory faculty, has permitted the final appropriation of art. First art-works became a consumer property, now the very idea of art has become a possession.

9.

Capitalist appropriation that takes place on the aesthetic plane echoes the classic models with which we are familiar on the economic plane: the appropriation of the market, the appropriation of ideology. We can also observe the phenomenon of imperialism applied to the cultural domain in the appropriation of resources.¹⁸

For a long time culture was traditionally conceived as being the unique possession of a Euro-centric civilization. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, any artefact produced by a society other than those rooted in the Mediterranean graeco-roman-judaic tradition was considered a mere curiosity, an interesting or barbaric object. The first non-European art to achieve recognition can be charted in the impact of Japanese woodcuts upon the generation of the impressionists. This experience was not only to restructure European ideas about spatiality, but it was also to open the floodgates to a wave of stylistic innovation dependant on the creative forms of many cultures separated in space and time.

It is interesting to note that the impact of ethnic and so-called Primitive art on the modern movement from its inception in expressionism and proto-cubism, parallels the capitalist appropriation of art. We are conditioned to regard these events as consisting of a series of ethnographic influences flowing in, from outside, to the European centres of the avant-garde. Reflection, however, reveals that the reverse process was the true one.

From the turn of the century until very recently, Eurocentrism, aided by new media and print technology, has rummaged into every known culture, historically as well as geographically. It has appropriated, consumed and transformed, for its own purposes, oriental art, tribal art, pre-Columbian art, historical and pre-historical art from the paleolithic period onwards, folk art, naive art and popular art. Not satisfied with this cultural colonisation of non-European sources, it has also turned in on itself and ransacked children's art and urban folklore as well as contemporary and proletarian popular imagery. It has even co-opted the mysterious landscapes of the pathological, of l'art brut and the paintings of the insane.

Eurocentric culture has not respected, it has not recognised, the enormous geographical and historical sum-total of culture that it has recorded. Rather, it has consumed these cultural resources, it has attempted to appropriate them as cultural property for itself.

When art is rooted in the matrix of a social culture, when it is recognised as

a social act, when it is responding to the currents and experiences of real life, lived authentically, then it is constantly being fed with new energy, being enriched with new human passions. But when art is separated from society, divorced from experience, then it is constrained to fall back upon itself. In ignoring life, art is forced to feed upon art.

We may propose here an analogy with the idea of entropy. During the period of the avant-garde, art constituted a closed system. Creative energy, in the form of cultural impact, could not enter from outside, from the real-time life of society. The on-going energy of art was restricted to an input from static and frozen extra-cultural and historical sources. In such a situation we very quickly note that the Museum Without Walls becomes exhausted. The modern movement has now digested every corner of recorded time and space. The energy flow begins to drop to zero. The heat-death of bourgeois art is accomplished.

10.

Despite everything that we have just stated, it is impossible to regard art as a mere product of social conditioning, to consider it as nothing more than the objectification of a dominant class ideology. Certainly the relationship between art and society is crucial, even if only because art is a social phenomenon: yet, to think of art under present social conditions as being merely the ideological expression of bourgeois class consciousness would seem to be a gross simplification. With such an assumption, we would fall into a crude determinism of the type that ignores the presence of a dialectical interchange in ^{maintaining} that the economic substructure completely and unidirectionally conditions the form and content of the social superstructure.

We have rejected the idea that art is the expression in society of transcendental absolutes as being the construct of a particular form of class consciousness, as being a symbolic justification and reinforcement of certain aspects of bourgeois ideology. Nevertheless, with all our present activity and concern in and around the arts, with our very presence here at this Conference, we appear constantly to re-affirm our belief in art as a fundamental aspect of the phenomenon of existence. Were we to recognise that art is restricted to being a mere aspect of the social superstructure, then it would seem that we would be less passionately ^{ly} involved in the subject. By extension, it is hard to accept the judgement that, as members of the support system, as critics, historians, curators, we are mere victims of careerism within the art subculture.

It seems, therefore, that everything hangs on the question of art as an expression of fundamental absolutes, the manifestation of basic verities. If the idea of the

transcendental presence of art is not acceptable, then is there any other type of absolute which we can understand as being central to art itself? I believe that there is. And, furthermore, it appears that an alternate conception of art as an absolute function has been available to us for some time. But the sheer weight of myth, both in bourgeois society and in the avant-garde, subscribing to the idea of the essentially transcendental and mediatory role of art, has obscured this conception until the present moment.

Perhaps part of the problem lies in the fact that we do not habitually make a clear distinction between art as a physical presence and the aesthetic impulse of the individual, we do not habitually make a clear distinction between the product of art and the process of art.

Art as a physical presence is clearly enshrined in class culture. The specific art-object and its embodied content (whether generalised, as in the affirmation of an ideology, or particularised, as in the illustration of moral precepts and attitudes collectively understood) are subject largely to social conditioning. The dominant values of a culture are bound to impose themselves upon art-as-product, even if they are expressed, as they frequently are in the avant-garde, as a literal reversal of those values. In the extreme conditions that presently pertain, where the optimism and confidence of bourgeois ideology is crumbling away, yet the concomitant capitalist economic system remains relatively strong, we would expect to note the stripping off of "value" from art, the evaporation of inherent meaning and content, and the trans-
ition of the object to a pure consumer product.

And this, of course, is exactly what we have observed during the recent past. The formal mainstream of "western" art has reached an apotheosis wherein content has now been completely cancelled by style, where the medium has usurped the message. The symbolism of this fact was embodied in the movie The Clockwork Orange, where Kubrick's great contribution to Anthony Burgess' extrapolation of the human consequences of capitalist society was in his perception of a future condition where modern art had become the ultimate consumer product, and where individual human experience could only appear valid through the mediation of the media. Little Alex's claim that the "world only seems real when I viddy it on a screen" is the ultimate alienation which is echoed by a world that appears to be totally designed by Vasarely and Allen Jones.

Art, however, is a social phenomenon, and a specific object becomes art only when it enters the social sphere, when it impinges upon society and enters into that psychological space that society has set aside specifically for "art". It is debatable whether the secret art-object, one created by an unknown person in isolation and remaining unexhibited, is "art" in this sense. Such an object has not yet entered into and energized social space.

Yet such an object is most certainly an expression of the aesthetic faculty, for the individual aesthetic response to experience does not demand the dimension of social acceptance, of collective myth, for it to manifest itself. The aesthetic^{experience} of course, cannot be said to take place completely outside of society, for the specific individual who experiences and expresses his aesthetic faculty is clearly a product of society. However, this experience can, and usually does, operate tangentially to society.

The bohemian and avant-garde position which we have so far discussed only in terms as to the extent it has been conditioned by bourgeois society, is also the manifestation of a revolt, albeit an incomplete one, against bourgeois society. As bourgeois society jelled into its modern form (which form would seem to be its final transformation scene on the historical stage) so the artists, from the point of Romanticism onward, responded to the increasing reification of human relationships. The artist's instinctive expression, the intuitive, half-understood content of his work, was finally the affirmation of his individual human dignity in the face of a society that was becoming increasingly alienated.

The rejection of the fundamental processes whereby people in society are turned into objects constitutes, historically, the individual artist's heroic stance. His creative acts, to the extent that they eschew compromise with public taste, do not merely affirm his attempt towards a personal seizure of individual human dignity; they also provide a focus for collective human assertion in the face of an inhuman society.

However, those heros^o were sufficiently conditioned by the dominant social ethos to be unable to make their rebellion complete. In opposing the capitalist values of bourgeois society, its mercantile ethic, they were still too conditioned by the weight of historical assumptions to affirm, in opposition to the autonomy of profit and product, the autonomy of man. They were unable to project alternatives that were not mystical in nature.

In rejecting the crude materiality of bourgeois society, they resurrected the "spirituality" of an alternate world to the physical, they laid claim to a "higher" court than the human. Symbolism, justified in turn by the Idealism of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Bergson, reinforced by the European discovery of Buddhist and Hindu thought, offered a theosophical alternative to the Christian tradition that had become, for the avant-garde, compromised by its alliance to capitalism. This tradition, overtly in the case of Kandinsky and Mondrian, covertly in the case of Malevich and others, became one central thread that has descended down modern art-history to its recent re-affirmation in the work and platforms of such artists as Ad Reinhardt and John Cage.

A separate and parallel thread proposes an alternative, non-spiritist, Idealism, that of an atavistic regression to primitivism, evocation and magic. The psycho-

analytic discoveries of Freud imply the uncovering of vast territories of the irrational over which man is constrained to assert his reason, in the pathology of which he is required to rediscover his health. In this regard psychoanalysis is a science. Yet the arts have, by and large, succeeded in making a magic out of the late nineteenth century "discovery" of the irrational. At a point when art was groping for a different type of justification exterior to man, the discovery by both psychologists and ethnologists of the primitive offered an artistic ideology separate from theosophical idealism.

This ideology would maintain^a that art forms the link between society and its own atavistic roots. The artist, hankering after a mediatory role but shunning that of the priest, found that he could accept the mantle of the shaman. In the expressionist tradition that surfaced as an alternate face to mystical symbolism, and which spreads down to our own time with its last feverish blaze in Abstract Expressionism, the artist assuages his identity by claiming to be the spokesman for the ineffable, to be the navigator of the collective unconscious.

Both the theosophical and the irrationalist tendencies seek for reality in their respective ways within the essentially unreal. They postulate absolutes that are either obscured or perverted by the existence and form of modern society, and they propose, as alternatives to the world, a mystical union with absolutes or a surrender to irrational forces that are conceived as being larger and more enduring than man.

The third thread that makes up the skein of the modern movement in art is the only one which contemplates the idea of the primacy of man in the world. But, in neglecting to observe existing society as a class phenomenon and in accepting by default the bourgeois ideological contention that what are actually the products of class society are fundamental human traits, this trend has observed the drama of man in the world with despair and irony.

For a brief, extremely brief, moment at the point of cubism, an ideology of art appeared that gave primacy to man in the world, to the structure of his perceptions, to the analysis of his sensibility, and, at the same time, celebrated man's centrality with optimism. The long and private struggle of Cézanne to transcend the abstracted product of art-for-art's-sake and restore art to the total human experience was climaxed in those crucial five or six years.¹⁹ But the brutal reality of capitalist society, exploding in the 1914-18 war, was to shatter this fragile optimism; and, from that point on, this tendency was to collapse into itself and be transmuted into the despairing protestations of Dada.

In focussing our attention for so long on the products of art, and, as specialists, permitting ourselves to be mesmerized by the self-validating structure we call art-history, we have neglected to consider the process of art. In scrutinizing the content of art for those assumptions which may be capable of explaining the power and dominance

of the aesthetic impulse, we have rejected the two separate currents of transcendentalism and irrationalism. But, if we observe the process of art historically, we note that this has generally been conceived as constituting the mechanism of the mediatory role we have already examined. In rejecting Idealism, we have obviously negated the possibility of such a role. In the one tendency which has so far awarded primacy to man in the world, we clearly would not expect to note mediation taking place. Here the process of art is reduced to the mere emotional expression of the fact of alienation.

However, another basic concept, one alternate to the idea of the aesthetic function as mediator, can be presented; and we here propose it as the assumption that will become central to any future ideology of art. It is an assumption that maintains the centrality of man in the world and society, and which strives to mould the world and society to the scale of the individual human dimension. It is an assumption that will heal the split between art and society, in that art will become a dominant function within society.

It is a very simple assumption, one discussed already in aesthetics to some degree,²⁰ but one that is only just recently coming to consciousness in the actual creative milieu of living art. It was first proposed by Marx in the 1844 Manuscripts in the passages where he defines labour as the central factor by which man has historically humanized his environment and himself. The basic proposition is that, through the function of work, man has separated himself from the mute world of nature, and instituted the on-going process of humanizing and creating himself. Marx saw labour in its un-alienated, un-coerced form, as the force through which men, above and beyond the fulfillment of his needs, develops his society, domesticates the world and humanizes himself. At a level beyond the fulfillment of needs, work becomes pure work, it becomes creative work; it becomes art. The impulse towards this creative work is the aesthetic impulse. Art is the product of this work, and it is in this product that man celebrates and reaffirms his humanity.

If we are to develop an art that will restore dignity to the human individual, an art that will celebrate man, then we must develop an art that will echo the lived realities of our time, that will assist in the transformation of our society. We have lost confidence in an art that appeals to eternity in order to avoid commitment to the present world. Marx argued that capitalism was hostile to art; since the social relations of capitalism are anti-human, it clearly was opposed to the essential affirmation and self-creation which art represents.²¹

But art need not much longer remain the victim of capitalism. What is now required is a critical consciousness dedicated to developing an art along the terms proposed by a humanistic ideology of art. The collapse of Idealism as a central tenet

in art is due largely to the substitution over the years of the idea of art as a conceptual activity for the old idea of art as a sensual activity. A tendency towards an art of analysis now provides the possibility of our freeing ourselves from the outworn dictates of the avant-garde myths.

We have concerned ourselves here essentially with the problems of art in the advanced capitalist countries. Elsewhere, the situation is, of course, different. But, even in the countries that are currently engaged in building socialism, the problem remains acute. We cannot here enter into a discussion of specific problems and achievements in socialist countries, but we may affirm the existence of a parallel crisis in art. Art as a viable expression demands a certain climate to flower, it must grow organically as the expression of man's deepest sense of his humanity and dignity. It cannot flourish as the product of a theory. Social Realism, thus, cannot be considered the art form of socialist man; it is a transitory form, a pragmatic form. It has an immense value at revolutionary or pre-revolutionary moments in history; as a factor in propaganda, as a tactical device to consolidate class-consciousness. Its pragmatic visibility for the solidarity of the dispossessed, for instance in the current Freedom Wall Murals in the Chicago South Side, is incontestable.

Yet we cannot anticipate that Social Realism will provide the basis for a future truly socialist art, since the content and the context are necessarily schematicized and structured. It contains the possibility of embodying the idea of a fully humanised society, but it cannot embody the essence of a fully humanised society. Art still remains, as it has in the past, the incarnation in a tangible form of the essence of a human experience.

The development of a post-capitalist, of a socialist art, requires an aesthetic devoted to transcending alienation in society, it requires an aesthetic devoted to the concept that man is both the creator and the guardian of the world. A progressive socialist art cannot deny its past in art, it cannot deny its roots in the bourgeois period of the avant-garde. It must transcend these roots, while possessing the charity to celebrate those predecessors who struggled for a vision of man in dignity.

Art in the socialist countries has perhaps not yet had enough time to completely free itself from the heroic period of the avant-garde. It seems that we all face the same essential problem: that of emancipating ourselves from the myths of the avant-garde, of developing an art dedicated to the affirmation of man in a humanised world.

Finally, we cannot impose a theory upon living art, for, in that way we surely murder art. We can propose our theory, and observe whether living art incorporates it into its organic life. We can observe whether there are independent signs of activity that parallel the theory. Is there a glimmer of light pointing to the future from the present crisis in art, one that seems to echo certain aspects of our theses. In the

fact that the long tradition of Dada through Fluxus to Conceptualism is now operating less from despair than from a concrete social analysis? Can we anticipate that our present theses will receive a measure of support from that emergent wing of conceptualism that is entering into a direct ideological social relationship with the world, that has identified and defined itself as a sociological art? Are we on the threshold of an art which celebrates living, breathing, feeling men, men in social relationships, rather than an art which proposes an abstract, invisible realm of ideas, haunted by incomplete man in isolation?

Winnipeg,

August, 1975.

Footnotes.

1. e.g. Tom Wolfe, The Painted Word, New York, 1975. Books such as Gerald Sykes, The Perennial Avant-garde, Sophie Burnam, The Art Crowd, and Robert Fraught, The Art Game, are essentially documents internal to the art subculture.
2. Quoted by Leroy F. Aarons, Syndicated column, T.P.N.S., July 1975.
3. The majority of collectors remain outside of the subculture as consumers of art. A small, but extremely influential minority of collectors, however, enter into positions of considerable influence in the support system. See Thesis 8.
4. For some time now art-schools and University art departments have been emphasizing art as a career rather than a vocation. In many areas, particularly small city North America, many students now regard the visual arts as providing ~~perhaps~~ the next fastest method of ascending the class ladder to that offered by Show-Biz and the world of entertainment.
5. Factual (or persuasively claimed) acquaintance with major mythical figures of the international art-world provides the certainty, in the academic arena, of acquiring senior and profitable posts in teaching, curatorship etc.
6. In the actual world of art (in contrast to scholarly circles) terms such as "aesthetic" are understood in their popular rather than in their strictly philosophical sense.
7. E. Kant, 1781. Crit.R.V., 21.
8. The definition is Baumgarten's. It became generally accepted in art and dilettante circles in Europe after the 1820s.
9. "...the entire so-called history of the world is nothing but the begetting of man through human labour, nothing but the coming-to-be of nature for man, he has the visible, irrefutable proof of his birth through himself, of his process of coming to be." Karl Marx, Econ. & Philos.MSE., trans.Martin Milligan, Progress publishers, Moscow 1959, p.106.
10. "Art: The application of skill to the arts of imitation and design, Printings,

Engraving, Sculpture, Architecture; the cultivation of these in its principles, practices and results; the skilful production of the beautiful, invisible forms. This is the most usual modern sense of art, when used without any qualification. It does not occur in any English dictionary before 1890, and seems to have been chiefly used by painters and writers on painting until the present century." The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, O.U.P., 1971.

11. We would wish to make a distinction between the "history of art", those events that took place within social space and time, and "art-history", a self-validating academic structure which constitutes a rich breeding-ground for class-orientated interpretation and myth.
12. The mythic elevation of the avant-garde "maverick" designed to justify the ethos of capitalism reaches the extent of placing the artist into the category of folk-hero. The myth of Jackson Pollock, for instance, places him somewhere in the same territory of romanticised bandits and gangsters. The story of Abstract Expressionism becomes a sort of highbrow Bonnie and Clyde.
13. "To maintain itself, the bourgeoisie must bring everyone to admit that the actual economic, social, and political system is the only valuable one - a unique, universal and even natural vision of man and the world. This ideology is not presented as simply that of a dominant class, but rather is put forward as the ideology of all members of the society, thereby denying the existence of separate classes who have opposing interests and who are continually at odds." Ecole et luttes de classes au Quebec, trans. Marg Bacon. This Magazine Vol 9 No. 2, Toronto August 1975.
14. The analogy becomes even more apt when one considers how certain State Bodies (British Council, Canada Council, etc.,) pump an annually increasing budget into the support system to ensure high artistic employment and productivity.
15. Bohemia, of course quickly developed a closed system which, from a certain point of view demonstrates almost tribal characteristics in the matter of cultural transmission from one "generation" to another. This has ensured its remarkable persistence and resilience. Particularly if one considers that it required that it be bloated to "Woodstock Nation" dimensions before the internal solidarity began to crumble.
16. One dominant anti-technological thread charts a type of utopianism which spans the period in art from the Nazarenes, via the Pre-Raphaelites, the Arts and Crafts Movement down to the Bauhaus. With the dissolution of Bohemia, this has now spread out to form the vast artisanal network of Hippiedom. Its present patent "ecspicism" upon an ecological crutch reinforces one's doubts about the progressiveness of this tendency during its avant-garde manifestation.
17. One can clearly observe this process taking place where the collector is a inheritor rather than the personally-aggressive smasher of wealth; an example of a "later stage" of the process. It may be possible to draw an analogy with advanced corporate capitalism demanding a more obvious mystical content in art than that required by the 19th century monopoly and robber-baron capitalism.
18. We are concerned here with ideological rather than "tactical" imperialism. Capitalist culture, of course, also ~~vajlds~~ vajlds cultural imperialism on a tactical level when it considers that it is likely to gain a political advantage. For example, consider recent revelations concerning the involvement of the C.I.A. in the promotion of Abstract Expressionism as a cold-war gambit. See: Max Kozloff, American Painting During the Cold War, Artforum, May 1977, and Eva Cockcroft, Abstract Expressionism, Person of the Cold War, Artforum, June 1974.
19. We except here Futurism and Constructivism, since clear idealistic and mystical overtones were frequently evident. Russian Constructivism offered a brief special case; but this trend at its most humanistic (e.g. Tatlin) approached a true melding of art and engineering. The implications were never developed, however. Constructivism, apart from this, appears, when it is not subservient to a mystical idealism, to fall into mere decoration.
20. e.g. Alfredo Sánchez Vázquez, Art and Society, Essays in Marxist Aesthetics, Mexico 1965, New York 1973.
21. Karl Marx, Theories of Surplus Value, Moscow 1963, Progress Publishers, Part 1, p. 285.