

Some brief reflections on the state of contemporary art.

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In recent times artistic creation has increasingly come to represent both the product of and the necessary condition for research of a many-sided and multi-dimensional character.

During the past 20 years, ^{artists} have been fundamentally preoccupied with the questions which art seeks to answer, and no longer by what it may yield in terms of partial and strictly definable results, limited in both time and space.

Artists are no longer interested in form, but in method. They are constantly being faced with new challenges: firstly, in response to an increasingly far-reaching technology which constantly provokes and fascinates them; and secondly, as a result of the many and varied demands of modern life.

Art has long ceased to be an aesthetic tour de force: now more than ever before it represents a state of mind, an attitude produced by a wide variety of intellectual conflicts, which is thus found to be susceptible to several modes of expression. It follows that the art of today defies any attempt at either classification or strict definition. Since it can be neither captured nor tamed by any known means, art emerges as a particularly elusive beast, susceptible to continuous changes which occur with the impetus of a powerful chemical reaction. It follows that art cannot be exhibited in a museum or gallery or even bought by a private collector without sustaining some damage to its very essence, without it undergoing a sort of alienation. It is an accepted fact that the situation is falsified by both individual and group exhibitions, as well as by the sorting and selection that takes place when works are bought for either public or private collections. These all serve to isolate the product of artistic creation from its natural environment, and by that very act rob it of the true perspective by which its existence is vindicated. Thus the work of art is reduced to a safe investment, an "asset" or a symbol of "security."

What greater scandal can be imagined than to have seen even avant-garde turned into an object of artistic and financial speculation by both "gallery-managers" and even museum administrators: and into an "asset" and a profitable investment by collectors? Indeed, the current cult changes from one year to the next: after "pop-art" came "minimal art", then "conceptual art", and so on. All fell victim to a brainwashing operation by those with vested interests as, with

the most vocal backing possible from the mass-media, each artistic "novelty" was avidly pounced upon: don't miss your chance to jump on the investment bandwagon!

Thankfully, people today are becoming less gullible. They feel that there is something in the air in the art world and are coming to realise that by far the most important developments are those which take place outside the exhibitions organised by museums and galleries. Really interesting things are happening, not only in the studios of little-known or completely unknown artists, but also in those of very famous artists who nonetheless do not wish to reveal their most recent work. The difficulty of imagining the true scale of what is going on is also a product of the strong suspicion shown by young artists nowadays towards all that surrounds them. In former times, for example, they used to make it a point of honour to visit the studio of an older and more eminent artist to exchange views with him. Now this has changed completely, so that without being able to define it more closely, one has the feeling that something big is going on particularly among young artists - like the slow but sure advance of a tidal wave.

We also come across an increasingly powerful rejection of any attempt at classification or labelling. This attitude is a response to the weakening we can observe, on an international scale, of such notions as "style" or "manner", with their 'local' connotations: this situation goes hand-in-hand with the diversification and constant expansion of the range of "methods" available to the contemporary artist.

Seen in this light, creative art cannot remain unaffected by the changes which are taking place in other areas of contemporary human activity: art, too, is constantly being enriched with fresh experience and new ideas.

It follows that the status of art is now in need of urgent reconsideration: in the present circumstances the product of artistic creation can no longer be placed as an object of delight or a showpiece in a gallery, a museum or a collection in the context of which everything is planned, contrived and "set out" so as to lift the work of art out of its natural environment and, in a sense, castrate it. Yet if we abandon our traditional, passive evaluation of creative art for other more active and flexible criteria, we come to appreciate the very essence of art itself and realise the need to encourage artists to undertake joint projects and experiments with those engaged in other fields and activities: only in this way can creative art effectively meet the many-sided

challenges of contemporary life-styles.

How fascinating that all sounds in theory! On a practical level, however, we are faced with large-scale organisation and projects which, in view of the high level of expense involved, must be supported and financed by the State, by Institutions and by Associations. Yet here lies a danger which, although it is of a different kind from the snares set by "gallery managers" and collectors, is nonetheless not to be ignored. Here I am referring to the problem of propaganda: the more or less discreet political and economic pressures applied either by the State or by large business interests. At the moment we are involved in a period of transition and have not yet hit upon the ideal solution. Let me give three examples of the kind of situations we are faced with:

- a) the financing of murals by the "National Endowment for the Arts" in the USA; here political pressure is exerted not by the association itself, nor even by the Federal authorities, but at the very grass-roots level of the community.
- b) in capitalist countries as a whole we see that the traditional collector has to some extent been supplanted by promoters such as the "multinationals", who finance large-scale artistic projects (Kassel, etc), and various other organisations.
- c) the state-controlled finance which is a feature of socialist countries.

In spite of the negative aspects of relying on such sources to finance the arts, they do nonetheless provide the possibility of promoting greater understanding among artists, of encouraging a more searching dialogue, and of promoting more varied and ambitious projects than is possible with individual artists working in isolation.

Without wishing to talk in Utopian terms, our future task must be to reduce to an absolute minimum the negative consequences of relying on finance provided by the State or any other large body, whilst at the same time drawing the maximum benefit from their support in terms of promoting artistic exchanges on an international level; increasing the number of scholarships; making credit more freely available to artists for the pursuit of their work; encouraging them to experiment and ask themselves questions. These requirements are all fundamental to any notion of creative art.

In practically all fields of contemporary activity, the present range of methods and working techniques would lend themselves particularly well to a possible diversification of the conditions

surrounding artistic creation. Indeed, the potential could not be greater. Clearly, we should promote exchanges both among artists themselves and between artists and representatives of other fields and activities: this is not to say, however, that our aim in so doing should be to place as much modern technology as possible at the disposal of artists. Such a goal would severely limit the range of artistic creation. Quite simply, we should aim to keep the artist continually abreast of all that is happening around him, so that he can pursue his work in full possession of the facts. As a shining example of such a corporate approach to creative work we might quote the collaboration between architects, urban planners, artists etc. in environmental planning; this is a field which is currently attracting and warranting financial support on a large scale.

We are currently passing through a crucial phase. The concept of quality in ~~artistic~~ matters of contemporary art is out-of-date, since it was formerly the supreme criterion for the acquisition of a work by a gallery, museum, etc., and has now been replaced by activities of a multi-dimensional, many-sided character.

Things are happening. You can feel it in the air.

Clearly, each country is somewhat different according to the local situation. Nevertheless, the differences are growing smaller all the time.

Creative forces must be both cultivated and conserved, if they are to fully justify themselves. This is the only way to put into practice a concept which has long existed in theory only: that of art not as an object of delight, but as the supreme expression of a wide-ranging social commitment; a guarantee of the respect due to man's creative gifts.