



Kansainväliisen taidearvostelijain liiton AICA:n Suomen
kansallinen osasto

Finnish National Section of the International Association
of Art Critics AICA

Section nationale Finlandaise d'Association Internationale
des Critiques d'Art AICA

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"Criticism and cultural identity"

Intervention

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Peter Schjeldahl has given a straight diagnosis on what it is that is paralyzing Nordic art.

According to him, our art is suffering from a weak and defective identity. The symptoms of our art crisis are, for example, a hypo-critical attitude, cynicism and cliquishness. The unclear and imperfect identity of Nordic art seems, in the light of this study, to be due to the Nordic people being indifferent to their inheritance left to them by their old masters.

The other reason for the crisis could lie in the fact that the State in the Nordic countries has assumed the role of protector. This has created an artificial situation. It is a situation which is in principle, admirable, but in practice depressing. "That their careers receive support is a great thing for artists; it is also nice to see governments using art as a diplomatic export - good as happened in the USA 'Scandinavia Today' program. However, this bartering of art draws its independence into a questionable situation and the meaning of artistic expression grows cloudy."

The judgments expressed here by Schjeldahl are, he thinks, competent "at least in those areas of art he is familiar with." And that is an important qualifying remark. For if he knew, for example modern Nordic music, he probably wouldn't call it weak. And what about literature? For our part, this is vital. New York's principal newspapers rated the Finnish National Opera's visit to the Metropolitan as being of the highest quality. Moreover, the new Finnish music was said to be a renewal of the traditional.

Has it so happened then - as regrettably it often does - that the doctor has visited his patient but had too little time to make a proper diagnosis? Thus, the diagnosis has been a hasty one and the treatment instructions given as mere routine.



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Accordingly, could we have lost Nordic art's inheritance? Perhaps the renaissance of Edward Munch has created new romantic expectations of a special munch-art-egoism in Europe and the United States. To me, our own attitude towards the legacy of Edward Munch is far more natural : his importance has been recognized here for decades.

Nevertheless, it seems that our younger artists are getting their shapes and ideas from a vague international bank of ideas; isn't this in fact an exact following of the Munch inheritance of "dashing into the empty space which the rebellion has created" And wouldn't art then be - to quote Schjeldahl - "in its own conflict, essentially national - in the sense that people generally understand the word. The young artists of the Nordic countries do have at present their German, Italian and American heroes. This raises certain problems, not in the least because different kinds of style-material have been freely mixed and perhaps the identity and connection of the materials to their original history and the then prevailing value-systems has not always been understood. But the dialectic is working.

In a sense, the "Scandinavia Today" program gave a contradictory impression of Nordic pictorial art's 'national task' and meaning. Art has been approved as an accessory to diplomacy and so takes on a status-value. But Nordic artists are not - as Schjeldahl thinks - dependent on their national task or function. And neither is Nordic art.

It was, perhaps, a surprise to many people that the exhibitions were arranged and organized solely by the artists and their unions. This is a particularly Nordic phenomenon and has its own history of development. We have lived, here in Finland for example, through periods of national romanticism and national emphasis. But, with the arrival of the 50's, our art took on a low profile and the State's interest in supporting art was minimal.



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Only that art which had a clear status-value received any support. 'Maecenas' work has never thrived here in Finland; neither have the taxation laws encouraged many sponsors of art. Trade in art-works began in the sixties and, at the same time, the character of art became more like merchandise. The artist started to depend on the prevailing - and fortuitous - quotations of art works on the art market. Thus, the artist soon started to support this existing source of his livelihood but received nothing in return. In the sixties, the radical art generation united behind new professional and cultural policy aims. The significance of this artists' freedom movement was that it represented an attempt to make the artist free of the kind of compromises that were draining the vitality of art. And free also of compromises with the state. Salaries for artists - in part realized, artist pensions, an exhibition compensation system and a large studio building project started by artists were the results of the artists' non-compliant stand. In addition this period also saw the publication of art magazines and books. At present, the artists' own unions have founded their own gallery work and also handle the selling of works of art. Thus, they are competing directly with the commercial galleries. As well as this, many artists are using their energy in so-called public education work. All these developments have resulted in the power of the state being ^{showed} halted since the new type of artist would be difficult to deal with.

Taking this line to the end is a question of art's destiny and, in the Nordic countries, the work is unfinished and its results can only be evaluated after years or decades. But there is no return to the past.

Finally, I can't refrain from quoting the words of the late Finnish art pedagogue, Unto Pusa. He observed that we would "have to start cultivating art from a totally new base. And the old rule is that the cultivation must be wide as well as good. And our practical experience is that it needs about a thousand



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put to work before a sovereign master is born. And Pusa
goes on : " the critics are expecting something marvellously
ingenious, super-human; large and frighteningly brilliant,
and they cannot see the broad scope of the aims of contempor
ary artists."

So it is essential that art has been created, and is still
being created, and that this process can be continued.