

PLURALISM AND THE END OF IDEOLOGY IN ART

I would like to begin by defining what I mean by the words pluralism and ideology in the title of this article. Pluralism is a word generally used by art writers, unfortunately including myself, to describe any art work that cannot be conveniently placed in some other 'ism' or pigeon-hole. Ideology simply means a strongly held belief in some theory or system generally along economic, political or spiritual lines, but certainly not excluding art theories. I believe that almost all successful art of the late 20th century in Western society, including recent art in some European Marxist societies, has become a market commodity propelled more by the forces of international Capitalism than any strongly held political or artistic ideals.

By successful art, I do not necessarily mean 'good' art, although some commercially successful art can be very good indeed. Once again much depends on definitions. Good art may have moral value or it may be called good because of some shared idea of what good art is. Because both moral values and ideas of what constitutes artistic 'goodness' tend to change with the passage of time, Victorian ideas of morality and the academic art of the salon of late 19th century seem irrelevant today, although French academic painting does seem to be making a comeback; perhaps the trend of many North American and European artists and dilettanti of dressing from head to foot entirely in black is expressing some strange longing for a return to Victoriana--I cannot think of any other reason for so many of my friends dressing like undertakers.

Of course, the belief in a free market--full-blown laissez-faire Capitalism--is a kind of ideology, but one based purely on profits and the bottom line; surely this is no place for art or, at least, art as I understand it. It would not be so bad if the artists themselves were the Capitalists, but more often than not, the artists are the producers rather than the profit makers. They are the shoemakers and not the company that sells the product--in short they are the proletarians and certainly in no way a dictatorship of the proletariat. Ideologies of the type that I am referring to need not be shared. There are religious ideologies, nationalist ideologies and artistic ideologies to name only three. What these kinds of ideologies share is the fervent belief of the ideologues who follow the dictates of their various philosophies. Art has had idealism at its roots for a very long time--be it the idealism romantic nationalism, or love. The painters of the French Revolution such as David or of the Commune like Delacroix or Courbet, believed in something more than 'making it'; artists like Egon Schiele or Modigliani believed in something quite different, but they pursued their idealism with equal fervour. The American critic Douglas David has hit the nail on the head when he states, about Courbet: "The Hollywood view of the artist as childlike naif--a view cherished by too many curators, critics, and collectors--is a particularly pernicious form of paternalism, which robs the artist, in this case Courbet, of his humanity, his natural right to be a citizen."¹ I would be hard pressed to think that Jeff Koons believes in anything other than 'making it' and, to the shame of us all, he does so with ugly art.

Where did it all go wrong or was it ever right? How were artists' dreams turned into cash for the free market system? It is not though all artists were virgins--many got into the beds of these merchants of commerce willingly--but is just that most of them did not know that they were supposed to ask for money. Why do paintings end up selling for forty million that are by artists who could not give their work away while they were alive? How is it that collectors are able to sell for a fortune work that they bought for a pittance while the artists, who created the work, receive none of the 'capital gains'? In fact, is any work of art really worth forty million dollars? An even better question is: should any individual, much less an institution, have forty million dollars available to spend on a painting? Obviously, the money is out there and there are people willing to spend it on art.

A more serious issue raised by the recent record dollar sales by auction houses around the world is the removal of many works of art from the public domain to private collections; works sold from these private collections, which should, in my mind, be going into public institutions too frequently are remaining in private hands. The many examples of this happening in England over the last few years can be directly traced to weak government legislation and the political dogmas of Thatcherism. In the United States some public art galleries have been selling

off valuable parts of their collections in an effort to remain solvent in the face of rising costs and reduced government and public support. Canada has not escaped the trend; a number of works of art have left the country when public galleries could not match the dollar value placed on them by our Cultural Property Review Board; their owners were then free to export them to willing buyers abroad. When events like these happen, the art world is a poorer place for everyone except, perhaps, the super rich.

The world movement to a free market economy has not been missed by many younger artists of the current generation. They have, after all, grown up in a world very different from the first fifty or sixty years of this century. Younger European and North American artists have enjoyed, with troubling exceptions such as Vietnam and Afghanistan, freedom from war and ever continuing prosperity and they see no reason why they shouldn't have, as we say in North America, 'part of the action'. In the United States and Canada part of the reason why many artists seem to lack what I would call an ideology of real conviction, is the fault of art education. It is possible to get a degree in art in North America without having to face any other issues than those of art itself. [Here I am referring to the classic idea of 'art for art's sake' rather than in the broader sense of the word art.] Even in the context of art taught in the universities, students can, and do, fail to relate courses that they take outside of the art department to their art. This is generally because 'elective' courses are chosen by the students from a smorgasbord of offerings often for no better reason than that

they fit into their timetables or that they are easy to pass. Worse still, art professors themselves often actively discourage students from taking difficult, or too many, outside courses, as this will take 'time away from their art'. Art professors and their students are victims of similar backgrounds; it is a pure case of the blind leading the blind and it is no surprise that many younger artists have little or no social conscience and that their main desire seems to be to 'make it' at any cost. This desire, of course, is no different than that felt by many university graduates in other fields from medicine to business. Why should artists be different?

Pluralism seems to be a synonym for confusion in the art world. While many artists want to be successful at any cost, they really do not know where to start. There does not seem to be a right way. Nearly anything goes or, at least, it seems that way. There is no single dominant school in contemporary visual art at the international or national levels, but that does not mean that anything that anybody does receives acceptance--quite the contrary; being in the wrong place, at the wrong time with not quite the right art, still results in rejection. The freedom that today's artists enjoy is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it is attractive not to be restricted by a repressive academy, but, on the other hand, not having limits to what you can do, can result in artistic inertia--with such a wide choice, one often chooses to do nothing. In Pluralism everything is left to personal interpretation and in such a world the act of criticism becomes very difficult, if not downright impossible. Bad art, done badly, is hailed as being anti-traditional. Appropriation art--which

would be called plagiarism, or worse, in literature--is greeted in the visual art world as clever. Graffiti done by a semi-literate is regarded as the works of a genius.

The great Austrian Marxist philosopher Ernst Fischer has written: " In a decaying society, art, if it is truthful, must also reflect decay. And unless it wants to break faith with its social function, art must show the world as changeable. And help to change it."² While I agree that the first sentence of the quotation--much of today's art does reflect a decaying society--I have difficulty with the rest of the quotation, especially the last sentence. There seems to be a notable lack of a desire to change society on the part of many of the really successful artists of today. In fact, they seem to rather enjoy wallowing in the sty with the rest of the pigs. What has happened to remove romantic idealism from so much of successful contemporary visual art? I would place part of the blame, quite early in this century, at the feet of such elitist art writers as Clive Bell who wrote in 1913: " The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant. For, to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation."³ or, continuing with Bell, " To associate art with politics is always a mistake."⁴ and finally, from the same book, Art: " ...I doubt whether the good artist bothers much more about the future than the past. Why should artists bother about the fate of Humanity? If art does not justify itself, aesthetic rapture does."⁵ Thinking such as this

certainly lets artists off the hook of any kind of social responsibility.

On the flip side of the coin, is the writing of the Soviet philosopher Gyorgii Plekhanov who wrote, at almost exactly the same time as Fry's Art, around 1912, with equal fervour and, in the end, with equal inaccuracy: "We have said that there is no such thing as a work of art completely devoid of ideological content, and also that not every idea can serve as a theme for a work of art, or truly inspire the artist. Only that which promotes communion between men can be the basis of a work of art."⁶ It is obvious that both Fry and Plekhanov cannot be correct. It is interesting when two writers of opposing political views such as Fry and Fischer use the same artist or group of artists, such as they do with the Impressionists, to prove their theories. Only the art remains physically constant in such philosophic battles proving that art is in the eye of the beholder; in some cases, it appears that the beholders are blind to the obvious.

The wholesale sell out of the so-called leading edge of contemporary art is, to my mind, a relatively new phenomenon. Of course, there have always been cases of artistic Dr. Fausts willing to sell their souls to mercantile Mephistopheles. The major problem with many modern artists selling out in the first half of this century, is that nobody was buying. It is easier to be a hero in the absence of a good offer of solid cash for your integrity. The American first generation Abstract Expressionists are a case in point. They viewed themselves, in the beginning, as part of the Romantic tradition. They were Promethean heroes

battling artistic demons in their studios. Their paintings, their visions, were just too big, they thought, for individual collectors. Many of these artists were reformed Socialists who, before the Second World War, were active members of the Artists Union and the Communist John Reed Clubs, but, in the light of the Cold War and disillusionment over the Stalinist purges of the late 1930's, patterned themselves as heroic individuals in the mold of Ayn Rand's Howard Roark, the fictional reactionary architect hero of her novel The Fountainhead. How wrong they were. They were hugely successful, in spite of themselves. They were heroes not to the proletariat, but to the super-rich capitalists who saw modern art as a way of buying their way into 'culture'. Modernist's art as exemplified by Abstract Expressionism and the later Post-Painterly Abstractionists [the Greenbergians] was certainly no threat to their capitalist buyers who, while congratulating themselves on their good taste, were able to purchase art that complemented their furnishings. I do not mean to imply that the Abstract Expressionists did not have what they regarded as serious 'content' in some of their paintings, but this content was not seen by many of the collectors who bought their work. The Post-Painterly group, however, did in general regard their work as 'contentless' and as pure art for art's sake. Many of these artists followed the dictates of Clement Greenberg, another reformed Socialist, who in his post-war rewrite of modern art history preached a new purity for art: an art free from the realities of our far too real ugly world. The real damage that art writers like Greenberg did was not in their championing of attractive abstract art, but in their

attempts, which were largely successful, to de-politicize art and artists in North America. In the beginning political values in art were replaced by high moral values, that were above the nitty-gritty realities of the everyday world, but unfortunately these high values have now been forgotten and replaced by a 'valueless' art and artists who are more interested in their careers than any moral values. This is true, I think, because the first generation of post-war American abstract artists were artists who were, in general, repudiating their past as Socialists, or who were at least socially minded artists. The artists of today's generation in North America and Western Europe have no such past to overcome and accept both the revisionist writings of North American modern art history and late Capitalism as gospel. Wolfgang Fritz Haug in his Critique of Commodity Aesthetics states: "Capital, with art at its disposal, not only shows off as a connoisseur and admirer of Fine Art but also, in its esoteric interests, adopts the lofty illusion that it is the highest creation of the human spirit, and not profit, which is its determining aim. Thus everything good, noble, beautiful and great, seems to speak for capital."

While it is true that many artists have sold out at the altars of Market Capitalism, and many others would, if they could find buyers, there is another more insidious problem with today's art world. Artists in our society who do see themselves as social reformers, or those that want to see their art used to change the world we live in, are inevitably absorbed by the very forces they try to change. There is nothing that the Capitalist system is not willing to buy and once bought put into a place where it

can do no harm-- a 'public' art gallery or a private collection. How much better, and effective, is this system than to try and repress artistic expression as has been done repeatedly in non-Capitalist societies. No bull-dozing avant-garde art exhibitions in advanced Capitalist countries--just buy the stuff and, at the same time, to show what a good sport the society is, embrace the artist, but never, never take the artist's ideas seriously. Examples abound: Italian artist Piero Manzoni canned his own excrement and sold every can. Austrian artist Rudolf Schwarzkogler painfully amputated his own penis, an inch at a time, while carefully documenting the whole messy operation (he died as a result) and the art world loved it. American artist Cris Burden had himself crucified across the back of a Volkswagon--and this is only one of many equally masochistic stunts by the artist--and to what end? He was written up in art magazines and was invited by different art galleries to 'perform' in them. Another American artist, Vito Acconci, spent days under a wooden cover in a New York art gallery masturbating--his famous seed piece--and ended up being profiled in The New Yorker magazine. The irony in all of this that not one person in a thousand--no ten thousand, if that--in North America would know of these artists and their 'heroic' actions. Andy Warhol is an altogether different situation. He was the perfect artist for the 80's: famous for being famous--the closest thing in the visual arts to a Rock star; but it was not his art, which truthfully is not very good, that made him famous, but his persona. After all, it is the free enterprise system that makes the art world possible and what do artists know about the 'real' world?

It seems to be a bad thing for art when a kitsch cookie jar owned by Andy Warhol, but changed by him in no way, sells for a lot more money than one in a thousand artists can sell one of their paintings for. It seems hopeless when some artists seem willing to lay down their lives, or at least disfigure themselves, for art and nobody really cares. To anyone with any intelligence it would seem that if you cannot beat them you might as well join them. This does seem to be the case for many successful artists, and artists who wish they were successful, in today's victorious Capitalist society and who can blame them? Why should artists be possessed of moral values that their own governments and societies have long since abandoned?

And where are all the art critics?

I will tell you where most of them are. They are providing promotion flack for commercial art galleries and individual artists. Have you ever noticed that feature articles and reviews of exhibitions appear in art magazines at the same time as the exhibitions are actually on, and that there are full page advertisements for the artists by their galleries in the same issue, and that the articles and reviews compare the artists with the invention of sliced bread or, in some cases, the Second Coming? Amazing coincidences are they not? Art magazines and journals are not newspapers; in Canada there is usually a lead time of several months between the writing of an article and seeing it print. Of course there are many good critics who practice honest criticism. The American critic Donald Kuspit writes powerfully about what he calls 'promotional criticism' in

his article Art, Criticism, and Ideology which is included in his new book The New Subjectivism: Art in the 1980s:" Now promotional criticism is a way of making culture gratifying, of telling us that what is aloof and 'high' can in fact be intimate without losing its distance and disinterestedness. Promotional criticism accomplishes this by being at once shallow and intricate, making the culture accessible through wit but never articulating its inwardness, the depth of thought that in fact makes it high rather than low culture. It thus establishes culture as an object of belief rather than analyzes it as an object of thought. Promotional criticism never bothers to question its own presuppositions--never bothers to ask why we want to have art to believe in, what the promise or 'salvation' inherent in that belief is."⁸

Is there an answer to these problems or have I just given a litany of unsolvable artistic woes? The easiest way out of this article would be to offer no solution and this is probably the correct answer, but as I do believe that fools really do rush in where angels fear to tread, I will throw out a couple of ideas. Let me start by saying that I do not think that artists should be forced to be Social Realists in the service of some political ideology be it on the Left or Right. Most politicians and political theoreticians of every political stripe have seen visual artists as mere illustrators of their ideas. When I was involved with political movements as a student in university I was always asked to paint the placards or the posters using the rhetoric of the movement's 'leaders'. This was not exactly what I had in mind when I set out to change the world. I thought that I

should illustrate my own political ideas, however tedious they might be. The public, in its wisdom, ignored my clarion call for social reform. After a dozen or so years, it finally dawned on me that the people who needed social reform, or who were at least reformable, did not go to art galleries, attend openings and, least of all, read art magazines. Reformable is a key word here, as the people who do all of the above, firmly believe that 'they' do not need social reforms; in fact, it is they who generally form the status-quo and have the most invested in having the status-quo remain as is. A lot of art and a majority of artists, critics, curators and museum directors serve, or as should I say, service, the status-quo, be it the status-quo of Market Capitalism or State Socialism. There are very few workers, single mothers, members of visible minorities and unemployed people on the boards, or who are even members of major 'public' art galleries. Attendance at major public art galleries in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in Canada and Western Europe is limited by high admission charges. At five or six dollars per head, a poor family might choose to buy food rather than enriching itself with a visit to the Museum of Modern Art. But, you say, Wednesdays are free! I might be missing something, but I have not noticed great armies of the poor marching on our galleries and museums on free days and that is because these institutions, by their very nature, exclude the poor who lack both the education and the motivation to want to go to these places. Contemporary art remains a mystery to them and, I might

add, to many of those who do attend openings and regularly go to art galleries and museums in addition to the vast majority of the rest of society.

Is one answer then, to educate everyone about the values of contemporary visual art or should the art be changed to match the values of the general public? Of course education about the visual arts would be useful for any society attempting to understand itself. However, I would suggest that all the education in the world about what passes for contemporary art today, would do little to change the general public's antipathy to it unless there are some fundamental changes within the art movement. In particular, we who work in the visual arts must bring humanity back in to the teaching of art history and criticism. This humanity must replace the elitist ideas of art for art's sake and put art in the centre of human endeavours. The art of the past has not changed. What has changed is our way of looking at it. We have taken the humanity out of it and replaced it with formalist dogma. Most big A art today, however, is simply not relevant to a very large majority of the public; they do not understand its nuances or values. But complete understanding of something is not necessary for something to be right and desirable; what is necessary for art is that it be truthful. Truth is, of course, a matter of judgement, but it is the way out of the problem that I have articulated in this essay. There is the line from Hamlet: "To thine own self be true,..."; I am sure this is good advice, although difficult to follow.

This 'truth' of which I speak is actually 'honesty'. Any other 'type' of truth can lead to disaster. Political follies,

much less holocausts of all kinds, were done in the name of 'truth'. I am sure that many artists and critics believe in the tenets of pluralism, if there are any, and regard themselves as enemies of Corporate Capitalism. They would see pluralism as a method of achieving artistic individuality rather than an aesthetic vacuum. Some of these same people would likely feel that ideology of any kind is something to avoid, but in particular, they would see political ideology as nothing less than heinous. And they would all see themselves as truthful or honest.

What kind of honesty am I speaking of? What is this self-knowledge that I, and Prince Hamlet, look for? I believe that the visual arts are very minor players on the world stage. Today's art is not very likely to prevent or stop wars, end poverty, feed the hungry or solve any myriad of social woes, in fact, it is more likely to aid and comfort those who cause the problems of society. Do you remember those old newsreel films of Hitler sitting enraptured while the Berlin Philharmonic played Beethoven's Ninth Symphony? Do you think that Hans Haacke's painting of Margaret Thatcher, Taking Stock, has had any effect on the British Prime Minister? It is not for a moment that I would doubt either Beethoven's or Haacke's sincerity, but it seems that the world goes on its merry way regardless of art. I am not suggesting that these two powerful artists should have done something different. Indeed, the person who should have done something different was Hitler; had the Vienna Art Academy's entrance requirements been less stringent the world might be a very different place. Hitler would have been just another or

totally forgotten artist. It does make a strong case for open enrolment in art schools.

If we know that as artists and writers we are powerless, then we are free to be ourselves--it is that famous artistic license that we are supposed to possess. It means that artists as different as Chardin and Kollwitz or Morandi and Beuys were doing the same thing and doing it well. We may be powerless, but we need not be visionless. We can look and do and that is enough. It does not matter that our best efforts are often ignored, overlooked or not understood. What does matter is that we continue to pursue the truth. While I am not happy about the state of the visual arts and its apparent capitulation to Market Capitalism, I am sure that art, real art, will survive. The current vanguard will hopefully go the way of Mao suits, hula hoops, pet rocks and the Edsel. The buyers of their works will be left holding the bag in much the same way that Dutch speculators in the Tulip market were in the 17th century. Lao-tzu put it all into perspective in the Tao Te Ching:

True straightness seems crooked.

True wisdom seems foolish.

True art seems artless.⁹

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1. Douglas Davis, Artculture: Essays on the Post Modern (New York: Icon Editions, Harper and Row, 1977), p. 7
2. Ernst Fischer, The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Approach (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1959), p. 48.
3. Clive Bell, Art (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958) p. 27.
4. P. 24
5. P. 160
6. Georgii Plekhanov, On Art For Art's Sake, from Art and Society (1912); in Marxism and Art, ed. Berel Lang and Forrest Williams (New York: David McKay Co., 1972). p. 90.
7. Wolfgang Fritz Haug, trans. Robert Bock Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) p.129.
8. Donald Kuspit, The New Subjectivism: Art in the 1980s (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1988), p. 479.
9. Tao Te Ching, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 45.