

Beyond a Consensus Ideology

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The position which I am about to take is idealised. I would be the first to admit that the self-serving interests of the commercial art market will at best modify - and at worst negate - what I am about to propose. And yet I believe that we are at a major turning point in the recent history of art. If we - as art critics - accept the implications behind the fundamental changes that are taking place at this time, then there is a reasonable chance that we will be instrumental in bringing about a more universal, democratic and global understanding of art.

For much of the past century that understanding has been governed by Modernism. The Modernist Movement - and by this I mean its critical interpretation more than artistic practice - has led us to order our perception of art through certain specific criteria. Modernist art was essentially formalist and, in its concern with visual language, it specifically denied any relationship with the real world. It was also an exclusively Western art, but one which sought to create an international monopoly. It was a conception which created the illusion of consensus and in so doing it created the possibility of making immediate value judgements. Many of these judgements were made in haste, but became enshrined within the cannon of Western culture. Above all, the onus for evaluating the worth of the evolving Modernist avant garde came to rest with the commercial market. Here the intrinsic worth of art came to be equated with its financial value. Quite independent of the aspirations of the artists themselves,

art increasingly came to be seen as a commodity to be manipulated for the benefit of the new bourgeoisie. And in seeking to define an orthodoxy by which to limit and control the supply of art as commodity, so the art market devalued any art that failed to perform within its own narrow - and essentially arbitrary - criteria.

Whether or not one accepts that the market substantially corrupted the course of 20th century art, the fact remains that this market-led construction was essentially allied to Modernism. And for reasons of its own making, Modernism - in both the critical and historical sense - is now dead. The formalist well on which Modernism drew has run dry. But the important question - which so far as I can see remains unanswered - is what will follow? The so-called Neo-ist movements of the 80s and 90s - neo-conceptualism, neo-pop, neo-geo - do not answer this question. Neo-ism is nothing more than a tired, cynical reworking of Modernist strategies, encouraged by a market that is desperate to maintain the illusion of a continuing avant garde in order to serve its own commercial ends.

The term which I have found myself using to describe the true situation which we are now facing is International Pluralism. Pluralist: because - as I am sure we are all aware - there can be no sense of one dominant avant garde in a Postmodernist situation. Internationalist: because the nature of communications in the late 20th century leads towards the possibility of making all art available to a global audience. But the implications of International Pluralism are not so obvious and I would like to devote the remainder of this paper to outlining what I believe some of those implications to be.

In the first place, International Pluralism must inevitably challenge the linear development of art as proposed by Modernism. By this I not only mean the particular historical development which took place within Modernism, but **any** sense of art progressing from one generation to the next. With no sense of a dominant avant garde, there can be no **one** prescribed direction for the artist to follow. There must a true pluralism, the pursuit of many directions simultaneously.

Inevitably, formalism cannot be regarded as a primary criterion for International Pluralism. It follows that we cannot therefore make critical judgements solely on the basis of visual language **per se**. We can, however, judge the appropriateness of language in respect of an artist's commitments - that is to say, language must become subservient to the artist's chosen message or content. This leads us to understand that a consideration of content must again enter our understanding of art. In other words, International Pluralism reintroduces the sense of art being about the real world.

In the absence of a consensus ideology, International Pluralism relocates the responsibility for determining the nature of art and returns that responsibility to the individual artist. Modernism stressed the relationship of the artist **within** the movement, as if the artist's strength relied upon his individuality being submerged within the common philosophy. International Pluralism must deconstruct this relationship and re-present us with the artist as a self-determining individual.

But if the individual has no responsibility to a consensus ideology, he must accept his responsibility to the immediate culture. The individual does not exist in a cultural vacuum. The nature of International Pluralism therefore reveals itself as regionalist, with each artist having the freedom to reflect upon the social, political and cultural issues of his own immediate time and place.

The responsibility of the critic, therefore, is to accept that art will come to reflect the diversity of world culture. Art has an important role to play in challenging the prevalent tendency in the 20th century for certain cultures - predominantly Western culture - to dominate at the expense of all others. In the terms of this Congress, we must learn to direct our attention away from the centre and turn instead to the art of the periphery.

It is interesting that art has arrived at this position at this particular time. We don't need reminding that the political changes that have taken place in the past few years are leading to the lowering of barriers between East and West, and North and South. And I doubt that we also need reminding of the threat which this implies to indigenous cultures. We cannot, I believe, accept the suggestion that the lowering of political barriers could lead to the idea of an homogeneous world culture. We must fight to preserve - indeed to treasure - the inheritance of surviving indigenous, regional *values and* traditions. And I believe that art has an important role to play - not only in keeping those cultures and traditions alive - but in helping to bring them into global consciousness.

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On the nature of art forms which might serve that end, I believe we must set aside further expectations inherited from Modernism. If nothing else, Modernism had a certain drama. It presented us with a constant evolution of new and challenging formal solutions, which were both exciting and seductive. It is unrealistic to demand that International Pluralism will offer such immediately dramatic possibilities. There is a sense in which the purely formal permutations have already been exhausted. If new formal advances are still to be discovered, then they will be made with small steps and not with the giant leaps which we have come to expect. But then I ask you consider whether the art which preceded Modernism was ever concerned with such giant leaps. Indeed, the critical models to which International Pluralism must return are remarkably similar to those which survived in the West (at least) for 500 years before Modernism. Until our own century, Western art was regionalist. Even in our own century, art beyond the narrow confines of Modernism has remained regionalist. Such art addresses social, political, spiritual, and humanist concerns which remain uniquely part of the time and place of its making. And yet, such is the strength and value of art, that it ^{- not always, but often} is able to transcend its own regionalist aspirations and talk directly to us even though we may live in quite different circumstances.

The art to which I am referring under the title of International Pluralism, will of course no longer be circumscribed by the geographic limitations of the Western tradition. It will inevitably include the art of the former Soviet Republics, of South America, India, Japan. Its forms will be diverse - bewilderingly so - and the effort of coming to terms with such a plurality of traditions will be enormous, but it will be an effort with its own rewards.

and I think it is one which has not yet been explained in this congress.
There is one final conclusion which I want to raise. I began by suggesting that my position was somewhat idealistic, but I believe that the greatest threat to the realisation of a true International Pluralism is the art market itself. Pluralism - and the abandoning of a consensus ideology - will destroy the art market as we know it, for the market depends on promoting a clear and unchallenged view of what is acceptable in contemporary art. But it can only maintain that illusion artificially and then only with the collusion of its critics. As soon as we admit that no criteria can exist for uniquely determining a new avant garde, then the market must collapse. Once again, I would suggest that this only returns us to a relationship which bears strong comparisons to that which existed between art and its patrons immediately prior to the mid-20th century. It is not, I believe, a situation which we need to fear - unless, of course, one is a dealer. I would add that I am, of course, only referring in this context to the dealers who are manipulating only at the very upper end of the contemporary market.

I am not naive enough to suppose that such commercial interests will dissolve without a fight. The market has already proven that it is quite able of conspiring to corrupt the history of art for its own ends. Therefore I conclude with a challenge. My challenge is addressed to all critics and it is this. Let us abandon the spurious equation that the market attempts to promote between intrinsic value and financial worth. As critics, let us have the courage to support and champion art without first considering its position within the commercial hierarchy. Let us have faith in art with all its diversity and potential for conflict. ^{and misunderstanding} Let us not ask is this the approved art of the sale room, but instead ask if this art genuinely helps to illuminate and enrich the world in which we live just that little bit more.