

# Essay

## Rehumanizing Art

### I. The Art Object

In the dictum *art pour l'art* two essential components of the artistic process are missing: namely, the artist and the audience. Art for the sake of art glorifies the work of art as an object while at the same time devaluing the persons involved in aesthetic experience. The result in the twentieth century has all too often been the creation of depersonalized, dehumanized art. A more personalized, rehumanized art is only possible if the aesthetic orientation upon which much modern art is premised is rejected and a new aesthetic orientation is set forth which attempts to reconnect the art object with both the artist and his audience. In the following I will be mainly concerned with offering a critique of art for the sake of art as one of the dominant aesthetic tendencies in the twentieth century rather than with discussing the extent to which this tendency has influenced the work of individual painters and poets.

When I speak of *art pour l'art*, I refer to any tendency which views art as an end in itself and isolates aesthetic experience from other types of experience. While I agree that aesthetic experience can be valued for its own sake and that works of art in which the primary purpose is to arouse a purely aesthetic response can certainly be valid and interesting on their own terms, the problem is that by confining itself to purely aesthetic experiences, art for the sake of art unnecessarily limits the range of human experience which art is able to explore. There are other possibilities for art and if these possibilities are to be explored, a wider point of view is necessary, one which focuses its attention not only on the work of art, but also on the artist and his audience. *Art pour l'art* asks us to be content with the experience of the art object as an end in itself. The work of art is a self-contained reality which need not point beyond itself either to the experience of the artist or to the experience of the audience. Matisse reportedly dismissed a viewer who complained that he had never seen women who looked like the ones Matisse painted with the words, "I don't paint women; I paint pictures."

There has been a tendency in modern art and literature to push this sense of the art object as a self-contained reality to its logical conclusion (a *reductio ad absurdum*?). The work of art alone is real in the sense that art does not, indeed need not, connect up with any reality outside of itself. Thus the modern painter asks us to confront not a representation of reality, but concrete reality itself in the form of "real paint on a real canvas." The modern poet presents us with "landscapes of real words" rather than with words which represent real landscapes. The metaphysics are irrefutable: a work of art has its own reality; poetic language is itself a part of experience. But the question which this aesthetic point of view leaves unanswered is this: what should be done with all of those other human experiences which *art pour l'art* has ceased to be a spokesman for?

A rehumanized art has the potential of becoming one way among many of exploring all those dimensions of life--and they are legion--which modern art has been obliged by its own aesthetics to neglect. An art which is both personal and human goes far beyond the notion that one of art's chief functions is to simply explore the neglected dimensions of art as an end in itself. The twentieth century has given us painters who have expanded our awareness of the various ways in which paint (and other materials) can be applied to a canvas as well as poets who have deepened our appreciation for the rich possibilities of language--all of which is fine

for people who are primarily interested in paint and words as aesthetic ends in themselves, that is, for painters and poets, or better, for painters' painters and poets' poets. Perhaps this accounts for why artists themselves seem to be the only ones who are really appreciative of modern art. How could a nonartist possibly maintain an interest in an art produced by artists for other artists, an art which deliberately cuts itself off from any type of experience other than a purely aesthetic one?

The tendency of modern art to regard art as an end in itself and to divorce art from the larger issues of life can only lead to a dull and lifeless aestheticism. The irony, of course, is that modern art is itself a revolt against the dull and lifeless aestheticism of the past. On the one hand, art is boring when it insists on absolute conformity to suffocating traditions. Any movement to free art from traditional rules and conventions can be applauded as both necessary and invigorating. But art is also boring when it sees its only function as the breaking down of those traditions. In either case, technique draws attention to itself; a concern for form, whether traditional or *avant garde*, prevails over a concern for substance or content.

While in the past the overconcern with technique led to conformity and academicism, in the present it has led to the opposite: an originality defined almost exclusively in terms of original techniques rather than original ideas. Instead of using art to expand our awareness and sensitivities, the temptation is for artists to become preoccupied with demonstrating their own cleverness and showing how skillful they are at using their tools. They are like those personal computer owners one meets so frequently nowadays who will bore a listener to tears talking about all the intricate operations his computer is able to perform without once mentioning what he is using his computer to accomplish. In art, too, the concern for the hardware of the art object itself has all too often taken precedence over a concern for the software of human experience.

The emphasis on "originality"--which often means little more than a refusal to follow convention--leads to art which is dominated by style and fashion. Art becomes fad. This decade such and such a style is in; the next decade it will be out. Art which defines itself primarily in terms of originality of style is doomed to eventually--and inevitably--become old-fashioned. Art which is connected with life endures. The classics continue to appeal because, regardless of the forms they employ (which in some cases are milleniums out of date), they are still able to move people. They have a communicative power between artist and audience which transcends time and fashion.

The high propriety modern art so often places on the art object itself denies such communicative power as a matter of principle. The solution, of course, is not a return to the strangulating conventions of the past, but rather a synthesizing of the traditional communicative possibilities of art with the total freedom of style which the twentieth century has made possible. The result might be an entirely new aesthetic orientation with broader possibilities than anything that has preceded it. Progress often proceeds in spirals, returning to where we were before, but at a higher level, informed even by those points of view which we have reacted against. Certainly communicative painters need not feel obliged to do only representational paintings; communicative poets need not write only in rhymed verse. But the fight for freedom of style is no longer an issue in art. There are no more rules to be broken, no more conventions to be overthrown. Artistically speaking, the artist can do what he pleases. There's no point in flailing one's arms at the air--the artist is free. The essential question now is this: what will the artist do with that freedom? Will the adolescent rebellion of modern art eventually lead to greater aesthetic maturity?

Does the move to rehumanize art, to reestablish art as a mode of communication between artist and audience mean that the work of art itself should be neglected? Certainly not. The better the craft, the better the communication, provided of course that craft does not come to be regarded as an end in itself but is seen as the means, the vehicle, by which communication takes place. Personally, however, I would prefer to read bad poetry which is connected up with life in some meaningful way than perfectly constructed poetry floating around in the netherworld of high aesthetic principle. I would even be willing to hold out for the idea that for poetry to be good it's gotta be a little raw--it can't be overcooked. Like a Japanese teacup or a good Delta blues song, a poem or a painting needs some rough edges to preserve its authenticity. Otherwise art becomes artifice. I'll take the handmade Japanese teacup with all its irregular surfaces over the smooth, machine-perfect one that sits on a department store shelf any day.

It may turn out that artists attempting to communicate rather than to simply produce aesthetic objects will eventually find it necessary to create works which are quite different in both form and content from works which are and have been produced as ends in themselves. One important consequence might be that communicative artists will be less tempted to try to pass off confused and confusing obscurantism as aesthetic sophistication. Artists may also be more interested in producing art which is simultaneously more accessible intellectually and more demanding emotionally. Intellect and craft are important, but then, so is communication.

What is objectionable in art pour l'art is not what it has actually achieved, but rather its reductionism, its tendency to focus its attention primarily on the art object itself as seen in isolation from everything else. Yet by reintroducing artist and audience as human elements in aesthetic experience, the work of art is not ipso facto devalued. Rather, the work is reabsorbed into the artistic process as a medium through which communication can take place between people.

## II. The Artist

Art pour l'art, having stripped art of both artist and audience, was left with only one component of the aesthetic experience: the work of art itself. The critical theory corresponding to the "art as art object" point of view (particularly the "New Criticism") saw the work of art as an integral and self-contained whole, embodying within itself everything necessary for its understanding and interpretation. The artist and his times were thought to be irrelevant, as was any influence or effect the artist's work might have on others or on society at large. In a sense, art--like science--was to be "value-free." In science, what matters are the facts, not the scientist who discovers them or the consequences which follow. In art, what matters is the work of art, not the intentions of the artist who creates it or the response it evokes in an audience. If art has any value, so the proponent of art pour l'art might argue, that value must be defined in purely aesthetic terms. The human factor must not be allowed to taint "pure art."

Fortunately, artists seldom go about creating made-to-order works designed to meet the critics' specifications. To cite but one example, the Beat Movement in American literature was, consciously or not, a sustained assault on the move to detach art from life and experience. Kerouac's novels gain in value once one knows something about the man who wrote them and the people he associated with. Allen Ginsberg's poetry can hardly be understood without knowing something about what was going on in American in the 1950's and 1960's. Biography is important. Social milieu is important. They are important because life is important. And the only art which can regard them as unimportant is an art which is no longer

concerned with life, an art which is too preoccupied with itself to look outside of itself--in short, art pour l'art.

Artists are almost always judged more on their capacity to create art than on their capacity to experience. The artist supposedly justifies being called an artist by producing art objects. We want to see what the artist has to show for himself, what his efforts have produced. The idea of an artist who simply experiences yet produces nothing is an anomaly--but an interesting one. In "The Domain of Arnheim," Poe asks, "Is it not indeed possible that, while a high order of genius is necessarily ambitious, the highest is above that which is termed ambitious? And may it not thus happen that many far greater than Milton have contentedly remained mute and inglorious?" The sage is higher than the artist precisely because everything he experiences is art. What need is there for him to create art? He practices *weo wu wei*--doing without doing--and maintains a Zen-like silence.

The parameters of those who choose to speak, of those who choose to create art, lie at two extremes. At the one extreme is the self-absorbed artist who spends the bulk of his time locked up in his studio contemplating pure aesthetic forms, never opening his window even once for a breath of life from outside--the equivalent in the art world of the philosopher in his ivory tower. Another tale of Poe's, "The Oval Portrait," when stripped of its gothic trappings, provides an interesting paradox. In the story, an artist forces his beloved to sit as a model for excessively long periods of time while he paints her. The beloved sits because she loves the painter. The painter paints because he loves his art. Weeks later, the beloved is visibly pining away, but the painter is determined to finish his painting. Just as the last brushstroke is applied to the canvas, the artist, in awe of his own skill, cries out, "This is indeed Life itself!"--only, as Poe relates, to find his beloved dead.

At the polar opposite of the self-absorbed artist is the artist such as Neal Cassady, who becomes so wrapped up in the possibilities of life that he never gets around to producing more than a work or two. Of Cody (the semi-fictional character patterned after Cassady in several of Kerouac's books) Big Sur records, ". . . I can see from glancing at him that becoming a writer holds no interest for him because life is so holy for him there's no need to do anything but live it, writing's just an afterthought or a scratch anyway at the surface--But if he could! if he would!" Cassady's output was understandably miniscule. More rare are writers such as Thoreau who, despite having written enough to make possible a 20-volume edition of his collected works, could still write without contradiction: "My life has been the poem I would have writ, / But I could not both live and utter it."

Thus on the one hand, for the artist who approaches his work like Poe's fictional painter, art kills experience. On the other, for the artist who approaches his work like Neal Cassady, experience kills art. To avoid heading towards one extreme or the other, art needs to be informed by experience, while at the same time not permitting itself to be swallowed by it. I do not mean to imply here that the artist has to confine himself to relating the autobiographical details of his life, but rather that through his art the artist is able to grapple with the problem of what it means to be alive and what it means to be human. The artist who limits his inspiration to the four walls of his studio or study may eventually end up with an aesthetic vision limited by those same four walls. (And what of the poet who looks for inspiration in a dictionary?) The other sort of artist, the Neal Cassady type whose home is the open air, runs the danger of seeing his art evaporate into that same open air. When art is both experiential and communicative, however, utilizing the work of art as the medium is non-art, non-communication. But as work of art lacking an experiential *élan vital* is simply dead.

What ramifications might a rehumanized art have on the notion of art as a profession? The professional artist who spends the bulk of his time in the actual production of works of art runs the danger of becoming detached from the everyday world of experience, and his art too runs the danger of becoming detached and uninteresting. Like the scientist, he is able to observe all there is around him with a cool and passive eye. But he is an observer, not a participant. An artist whose art is connected with life and not simply with more art has to be willing to get his hands dirty in the everyday world--and his art will reflect his involvement. It will speak of and to his activity; it will not simply be an aesthetic fix or an escape from life as it is. The kind of activity need not be specified. For some artists, activity may mean social or political activity; for others it may mean holding down a job and raising a family. As a man whose activities have included all of these, American poet Gary Snyder insists that art is a vocation, not a profession:

I fear that too many poets in America today are hung up on the idea of "poet"--they have the idea that poetry is a career. There are some schools that actually try to produce people with poetry degrees. (That is a funny transmission of creative writing skills with some kind of careerism that I don't quite grasp.) It's all right to teach language arts, but poetry is a vocation--you have to be called to it. (From an interview in the East West Journal, August, 1977)

Technique--how to create an art object--can be taught. How to breathe life into that object--to use it as a vehicle for communication among people cannot. When asked what a person should do to become a great writer Melville did not answer, "Go to creative writing school and learn all about technique and craft so that the publishers will be impressed and will publish your work and one day you will become rich and famous." He said simply, "Live."

When the artist attempts to see his art in terms of his own life, the fame and financial reward--or lack thereof--which artists and poets receive for their efforts is a moot issue. Art is a calling, not a profession. For the sake of his art an artist may want to find a means of support other than his art. The artist may begin to see himself less as the impersonal producer of art objects and more as a living individual whose life does not imitate art, but whose life is itself a work of art.

### III. The Audience

In its preoccupation with art as art object, art for the sake of art loses sight of the experiences of both the artist who produces works of art and the audience to whom the works of art are presumably directed. The work of art comes to be regarded as all-important, either as an aesthetic end in itself or, often simultaneously, as a commodity. Whereas in the past art was produced for and consumed by a cultural elite, art in the twentieth century has been democratized. And, unlike the artist in the Renaissance who could be reasonably assured of both an audience and an income, the professional artist in the twentieth century--like everyone else in society--is obliged to survive through competition. Professional artists must compete for the patronage of grants and endowments, for the attention of collectors, critics, gallery owners, and publishers--that is, for an audience.

One consequence of the democratization of art is that art has become accessible to a wider audience, to a mass audience. Mass audience developed hand in hand with the rise of industrial society and other mass entities, such as a mass labor force and a mass market. Chamber music, produced in an intimate setting for a known audience, came to be replaced

by the impersonal symphony with its large concert halls and rows of faceless listeners. Electronic mass communication achieves even greater anonymity by completely severing any personal ties an artist might have with an audience.

A mass audience is by definition a depersonalized audience. The artist creates a work of art to be consumed by persons he neither knows nor cares about in any significant way. And the audience as well is less concerned about the artist who produced the work than about the work itself (except perhaps to the extent that the media has succeeded in making the artist into a celebrity). Mainly, however, for both the artist and the audience it is the object--the work of art--which counts. The tendency to view art as a commodity intensifies the trend begun with the industrial revolution: if consumer products could be produced for the masses, why not art?

The serious artist, of course, is not interested in producing art for the masses. Rebelling against what Ortega y Gasset calls the "hyperdemocracy" of the masses, characterized by the inability on the part of most people to clearly distinguish between what is really good in art and what they simply like, the serious artist prefers a more discriminating audience--all the better if it is one with both aristocratic tastes and aristocratic bank accounts. What the people comprising such an audience get in return for indulging in art they themselves often find incomprehensible is an aura of sophistication and the potential for a high return on their investments.

Art pour l'art is certainly not the same as art pour l'commerce, although sometimes one wonders. Assuming that in purely aesthetic terms the experiences of viewing a painting and of reading a poem are of relatively equal value, why is it that the fate of a good painting is often to be sold at a fabulous price and eventually given prominent display in a museum, while the fate of many a good poem is to end up unread in a bound volume on a reference shelf in the basement of a library, the poet having been paid off in contributor's copies? It is still possible for a painter living exclusively off his painting to dream of becoming a wealthy socialite, whereas the poet who tries to live exclusively off his poetry will always be confined to either the garret or (with its cheaper rent) the gutter.

If aesthetics alone cannot explain the discrepancy, perhaps the law of supply and demand can: the painter produces a unique concrete object which accrues in value with time; the poet, who traffics in ephemeral images, does not. Strip modern painting of its market value and its audience might very well dwindle to that of poetry's. To even things up a bit perhaps poets should be encouraged to stop sending their manuscripts to literary journals and auction them off to private buyers instead. A limited edition of 500 signed copies of a poem with illustrations engraved, à la Blake, around the borders would reach as much of an audience as most literary journals and make better collectors' items to boot!

The artist who retreats in disgust from the commercialism of both mass and "aristocratic" art is nonetheless likely to retreat even deeper into the pit of pure aestheticism. Only by eliminating all that is human in art is it possible for a pure artist to produce pure art for a pure audience. It is precisely all this purity which--again in the words of Ortega y Gasset--results in the "dehumanization of art." "Pure" art depreciates human subjects and the notion of art as communication in favor of "pure" aesthetic relationships and forms. Instead of writing poems using language as a medium of communication, language becomes an end in itself and poets write poems not about events, ideas, or values, but about language itself. John Cage once defined poetry as having nothing to say and saying it. The artist is free to follow his aesthetic whims, be they sublime or simply erudite, enlightened or deliberately obscure. The super-elite artist will likely have a super-elite audience mostly comprised of people committed to

similar aesthetic ideals as himself, assuming of course that he can find an audience at all. A peculiar aberration of the twentieth century is the solipsist artist--the artist who ends up producing works solely for himself, works which only he, an audience of one, is able to understand and appreciate. Julia A. Galbus writes in her article, "The Rehumanization of Art," "It is a short step from refusing to be intelligible to the masses, to being unintelligible altogether."

If art in general and poetry in particular are to reconnect with truly appreciative audiences some aesthetic other than art pour l'art will need to be found, and more attention will need to be paid to both artist and audience. Instead of seeking out either a mass or an elite audience, a poet might be well-advised to first seek out what Gary Snyder called a "natural audience":

The natural audience is your immediate community of friends and associates, who dig what you say to them, with them, back and forth. Poetry is communication and sharing; it is a public act and a public art. It isn't necessarily a nationwide or international art. The measure of poets is not how much or how widely they're published; ultimately, what's more important is the role the poetry plays starting from their communities, rather than some abstract thing. (East West Journal interview)

The familiar dilemma of the artist having to prostitute his art if he or she is to be commercially successful is a dilemma only when a mass or elitist audience is being sought. The artist who produces art for a natural audience has something to communicate. Success is defined by the quality of the communication which takes place between individuals--between the artist and his audience--not by the quantity of persons involved. In this context a work of art might be judged not on the basis of its abstract aesthetic properties, but rather on its power to communicate. Art for the sake of art is replaced by art for the sake of communication, which is in fact the method by which a lot of good art has always been produced. The idea that the consciousness of the masses needs to be raised to the point that they can truly appreciate "serious" art is valid only insofar as the artist sees his work as having something to communicate. The rest is pure condescension. The artist who smugly refuses to talk about his intentions in creating a work of art--about what his art "means"--certainly is not interested in communication. Poems should ultimately mean as well as be if they are to do more than simply show off a poet's concern for technical sophistication or aesthetic purity.

One need not be limited exclusively to a natural audience, however. Snyder goes on to say that the immediate community is the center from which good poetry can ripple out into the world at large: "The center is the people you know; out farther, it's harder to hear the voice. So we print books: if the song is really a good song, the voice reaches a long way." Provided he is more interested on communication than in celebrity or money, the poet may find that he can reach his natural constituency more easily through hand-distributed photocopies, local publications, perhaps even newspapers again. By reestablishing itself at the grass roots level, poetry also has the potential to reestablish a place for itself as an indigenous part of culture, avoiding both the commercialism and the elitism implicit in many current approaches which attempt to disseminate art from the top down rather than from the ground up. Poetry just might eventually come down off the shelves of libraries and be put once again in the hands of the people.

--Richard Evanoff

## Krud Beergut, Jr.'s PROBLEMS PAGE

Dear Krud,

I want you to know that we have been watching your publication for quite some time now and are outraged at the risqué poems and indecent stories you so frequently publish. That Printed Matter has always published work of questionable literary merit is beyond dispute. However, if you continue to print material which is not only in poor taste, but also offensive to the high moral standards of the world community which we represent, we shall take legal measures to have your poetic license permanently revoked.

Jelly Feelwell  
(Citizens for Uprightness  
in Literature)

Dear Jelly,

Whenever a writer writes a story or a poem, it is always impossible to anticipate how the audience will receive it. A serious writer does not write to shock, he writes what what he truly feels needs to be said, no matter what the reception or the consequences may be. Concerning the specific material which you consider risqué, I think we would all be better off if you would take it and stick it where the sun don't shine.

Dear Krud,

I am pleased to announce the huge success of our latest marketing endeavor: generic poetry. The poetry comes under plain white cover and is sold in supermarkets everywhere. "Read While You Feed" is our motto. We have at last succeeded in getting poetry off the dusty library shelf and back to the bright, clean supermarket shelf where it belongs (right next to the frozen foods at most outlets, with copies also available at the checkout counter).

Our problem is this: we pay our authors well for the privilege of not seeing their names in print. Recently, however, some of our regular contributors have once again begun sending their poetic tidbits off to small press literary magazines where their names sometimes even appear on the covers! I keep telling these writers that in a couple of years I'll have led our company into the Fortune Top 500,000 and we'll all be rolling in it. What do these egotistical poets want anyways: paying readers and financial security, or bylines and starvation?

Billy "Fats" Reynolds