

From Saints to Excrements

"Since standards are wanting everywhere nowadays, we must have lost ourselves in this long sought breadth without having experienced the new dimension. In the course of time and with the means of physics and mechanics we did, in fact, achieve some astonishingly successful results; but at the same time we let our psyche more or less wretchedly wither away and go to ruin, and thus obstruct other possible means of access to the deeper strata of human existence lying within us."—Johannes Gachnang, Introduction to the *Documenta 7* catalogue (Kassel, 1982), xxviii.

Imagine an art connoisseur around 1300 A.D. describing the glorious procession of burghers carrying Duccio's *Maestà* altarpiece into the cathedral while loudly criticizing Dante for preferring the lumbering figures of Giotto which lacked even Cimabue's or Simone Martini's courtly elegance. Or in the 1450s another critic praising the enamel-like quality of the Richard II portrait in the Wilton Diptych while objecting to the 'degrading' naturalism in Konrad Witz's Geneva altar. In both cases, these critics would have missed the great movements toward a deepening complexity of physical reality which art was going to explore in the subsequent centuries. Most critics of 20th century art wishing to define trends within an ever increasing disarray of unpredictability may have missed the boat trying to separate quality works from a host of irrelevant and thoroughly inept junk art.

It thus seems significant that the essays in the present issue of *Athanor* deal with solid topics and avoid artists whose iconography is obtuse and imagery chaotic.

As we approach the end of the Millenium, a panoramic sifting of major cultural turning points is in order. What is and will be worth chronicling, who and what will disappear in the dust bin of history? Which highly praised works have already ended up in cavernous museum depots, and what will be discarded by the grandchildren of fashion-struck collectors? Finally, how does 20th century art stack up against the cultural energy of the last nine centuries?

From the beginning of the Millenium to a break around 1500 A.D., the arts strived toward enlightenment, offering the viewer specific information as well as proofs of wealth and status within a relatively stable, identifiable context. All objects—be they aquamales, shields, banners (painted e.g. by the van Eycks), tombs, stained glass, statuary—served a purpose, be it an encouragement to devotion, a display of refined practicality or an intent at self aggrandizement. The houses of the burghers, the mansions of the powerful, were built to last, ornamented with frescoes, tapestries, enamelled floor tiles, etc., all fabricated with accomplished knowhow. The Renaissance

brought a blast of secular themes, allegories, emblems and a tremendous surge of graphics, much of which is artistically mediocre. Financial well being and the increasing importance of art as a status symbol lowered the quality of portraits, house altars, sculptures and pottery further. All these artifacts were still technically proficient and could, such as in the temporary triumphal arches for Maximilian I by Dürer and Hans Burgkmair, reach the upper limits of skill and iconographic variety.

From the 17th through the end of the 19th centuries the demand for privately owned art increased geometrically. Artisans churned out copies of paintings, produced innumerable family portraits and still lifes, some of which are said to have served as appetizers in opulent dining rooms illuminated by highly elaborate candelabras. These artifacts including bibelots in ivory, polished minerals, silver and gold, were still technically irreproachable and based on disciplined apprenticeships or rigorous training in Academies or Ecoles des Beaux-Arts. Treatises ranging from color theories, gilding, lace patterning, the rendering of any possible facial expression, appeared by the dozen. Manuals with examples for furniture design, garden sculpture, beakers, ornaments and gazebos provided guidance to even uninspired artists and eased the choices for patrons. Migrant painters found a fertile market in the colonies where they added portrait faces to puppet bodies and produced works now prized for their naive, charming ineptitude.

By the 20th century—and certainly after the breakwater 1913 Armory Show in New York—the industrial nations became a single cultural bloc offering a global encyclopedia of artistic choices, in fact Malraux's *Musée Imaginaire*. Contacts between intellectuals, scientists and artists speeded up. Photography and film, which amazingly are still not recognized as perhaps the most solid and major art forms of this century, allowed for an ever more precise transmission of images. Actual artifacts were shown side by side at international exhibits, world fairs and the rapidly emerging private galleries which eventually took over the art "market." Einstein's theories, Freud and Jung's explorations of the subconscious, the disasters of World War I, the rise of Fascism, World War II, Viet Nam, portrayed in photographs and films of corpses in muddy trenches, or rice paddies, acted as fundamentally unsettling forces and put into question the traditional anthropocentric imagery with its socially and aesthetically clear messages.

This new disconnectedness produced a frightening flood of choices in which the lines between potent and decipherable messages understood by the intellectual elite, and an undisciplined chaotic search for empty originality or totally personal confessionalism became blurred. The original heady sense of a new de-traditional approach such as Gaudi's rubberized concrete, Picasso's disruptive space-time, Duchamp's exploration

of chance, collages and sculptures made from flotsam and jetsam, and eventually Tinguely's self-destructive constructions broke down all traditional assumptions. By the second half of this century—for the first time—the artists faced unlimited freedom and a public demand for exquisitely absurd originality. Any viewer with the critical eye honed by innumerable examples of human creativity will, at first, be stunned walking through any of the large contemporary art shows such as the Biennale in Venice, or the Documenta in Kassel. The works are shockingly seductive, their impact often almost physical with bits and pieces of rocks, packaged with string, refuse with aggressive angles hammered together, rusty sheets of iron splattered with cracking paint, drift art picked up from the cultural beach. It is strange that by the following day there are barely any memories, short of a taste of dreary despair.

How could this happen? A flood of publications has made art from all periods and places eminently available from Benin bronzes, Inuit sculptures, Bulgarian icons, artifacts from all corners of the globe, to thousands of ideas spewed out by design firms. Responding to this immense ever-present vocabulary, invention of new images, making a statement in a culture overwrought with slogans became difficult. Confronted with an avid group of status seekers, some willing to buy in bulk, responding to names *en vogue*, the gallery owners stalked the lofts looking for instant sensations. Important messages enunciated by Malevitch, Picasso, Jackson Pollock, the color fields of Rothko, the worlds of Germaine Richier and Louise Bourgeois began to be replaced by shrill, ever more obtuse outbursts of forced originality. The mostly visually uneducated patrons, who in previous centuries had cooperated with artists and architects were now snowed under by waves of critics judging the saleability of works. Art entered the columns of the *Wall Street Journal* and helped to support firms specializing in investment. Auction houses provided safe purchases filtered through the eyes of badly-paid interns. Gallery owners strained to group bizarre imageries, turning them into trends such as Minimalism, launching, for instance, Judd's badly nailed plywood artifacts as sculpture. Yearly, new personalities exploded on the 'scene,' were swept up by collectors and disappeared. The grandchildren of surrealism such as Peter Phillips, Allen Jones, even Wayne Thibaud, the Matisse collage followers such as Matt Mullican's cutouts and Mangold's Xs, Joseph Kosuth's upside down Netherlandish female portrait plus text, Carlo Mariani's and Stephen McKenna's neo Ingres-Poussin assemblies of gods and artists, innumerable collages reminiscent of Schwitters and Hermann Hoeh, an avalanche of inept abstract expressionism satellites of Rauschenberg and Sam Francis, boring imitations of Claes Oldenburg, Klaus Staeck's Lichtensteinisms, A.R. Penck's plagiarized Keith Harings, Long's tedious Jasper Johnsian *Mud Circle*, Ludwig Gerdes's sterile perspectives, all of them mediocre, irrelevant, dead-on-arrival pieces, in short, all these desperate tabulations of creative coma left one with a sense of bewildered despair. Documenta 1982 from which some of the above artists are culled, also included texts. Much as basically non-musical rap has replaced rock and roll, "visual" artists—or are

they writers, aphorists, poets—jettisoned imagery and replaced it with plaquettes with a few words, numbers, dates or larger lettered statements. Creators such as On Kawara, Hanne Darboven, Jenny Holzer, Rémy Zaugg seem out to prove that the power of language which can only be distorted to the point of becoming ludicrously irrelevant are killing an out of control imagery.

As a collector walking through exhibits, I always search for works I might negotiate to buy. Among the hundreds of dismal efforts at the 1982 Documenta, I'd only have considered works by Anselm Kiefer, monumental and relevant, and a humble poetic landscape by the barely known Dutch painter Hans van Hoek. Everything else was grating, badly manufactured, compositionally questionable, impossible to live with, its purpose little more than to *épater le bourgeois*.

In this minefield of frustrating, often junky, art three areas have remained solid, namely earthworks, photography / film, and the yet to be discovered "hidden" first rate works. While the portraits of the presidents at Mount Rushmore are overblown Victorian busts, the *Spiral Jetty* of Robert Smithson or the titanic reshaping of a volcanic landscape by James Turrell as well as other earth works going back as far as the mythological designs on the plain of Nazca are as symbiotically integrated with the soil as the giant meteor crater in Arizona. They appeal to archetypal wonder, and demand a response. The same is true for photography and the best films. Each of these two art forms requires technical expertise, circumspect knowhow, careful mapping of emphases and a definable message. Beginning with Atget, Stieglitz, Ansel Adams, Werner Bischoff and including directors of cinematic events such as Eisenstein and the creators of films such as *La Dolce Vita*, *Apocalypse Now*, *The Piano*, as well as recent carefully-researched period pieces, photography and film have fulfilled the age old demands on art, technical competence, a balanced composition, a clearly enunciated message defining a philosophy or sometimes eternal problems. A story, carefully framed, presented with virtuosity, confronting us with lasting, often archetypal images and situations would have delighted Bernini as well as Wagner.

Finally the most neglected segment of valid statements within the 20th century art consists of several hundred "hermit artists," accomplished practitioners whose works have only been shown and acclaimed locally and have never reached large urban centers. Not yet fashionable masters such as Lucien Freud, some photorealists, sculptors in obscure locations, are waiting to become trendy, and to be catapulted into the global scene. They will be bought by a public which for several decades has not been allowed to greet desperate attempts to shock with derision, or to reject strenuous provocation. The artless *Piss Christ* or the certified, nicely-labelled canned excrements of an Italian artist may in the end serve as fertilizer for a new and at the same time age old vision of humanity relevant to a public exhausted by visual cynicism. As to the eminently forgettable art junk, most of it is so ineptly put together, it will simply disintegrate. The few important statements will survive and serve as a reminder of the difficulties facing artists who had to handle untrammeled, uncritical and absolute freedom.

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