

Preface

In the heat of the debate over the new taxation laws, Sherman Lee, director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, is said to have taken the stand that collectors ought to be permitted to make tax deductions for art donations to museums but that artists ought not to be allowed to make similar deductions. In other words, Mr. Stockbroker would derive radical economic benefits from his love for art while Alexander Calder, who could deduct only the cost of materials when donating a work to the Museum of Modern Art, would not.

This position is typical of an attitude that might be described as "Capitalistic Platonism": the artist who cannot avoid getting his hands dirty while he is producing a work of art is understood to be clearly inferior to the buyer/connoisseur/manipulator of art, the white-collar guy who watches, as opposed to slaving over, matter.

Something tangible they want, those tax-deducting people, artists' labor they need, those tax-deducting people, because they usually do not want to buy something considered mere spirit, a fugitive phenomenon—as a prominent collector put it, pointing at some light environment that did not incorporate the usual objects, "What good is it, you can't buy it!"

The blue-collar/white-collar dichotomy is traditional. One of Leonardo's main arguments for the superiority of painting over sculpture is that the painter hardly gets his hands

dirty and listens to music while working, while on the other hand the sculptor sweats and aches in his dusty studio creating his artistic children.

Kenneth Baker, a young critic whom I respect, expressed to me his doubts about the value of the physical participation of the audience in art. It is his view that physical participation keeps the audience from thinking. I conclude that Mr. Baker believes that only the thinking man is a noble man and that insights that come during physical involvement are by definition inferior to insights that result from contemplation. Kenneth Baker seems to have decided that the physical involvement of author and audience during environmental/elemental events results in the eventual politization of that audience--again because the audience does not have the time to sit back and think.

Let me very simply make this rejoinder: as much as one can doubt the validity of physical and emotional involvement, one can equally doubt the validity of an elitist attitude toward art and life. We all know there are just as many white-collar bandits as there are blue-collar criminals. The select audience that the elitist artist (and historian and critic) dream of can be a bunch of snobs as easily as it can be a group of sensitive beings. The idea of excellence as an exclusive value is basically royalist, a funny concept by any standards of sanity and social responsibility. Excellence ought to be apparent in the environment rather than hidden in a private jewel box.

Sometimes I get to feeling that some creepy creature of an intellectual must have invented what is a typically American psychosis: a sense of guilt about planning an environment for many, of undemocratic treason in seeking the betterment of everybody's environment. The feeling that it is every citizen's right to mess up his share of the country is the stepchild of an old-fashioned liberalism. If you adherents of such a liberalism want to argue what follows, be welcome. Despite all the actual and the potential and desirable social changes that may occur, the artist is still a person trained and willing to shape small or large objects, stretches of land, small or large portions of the environment, small or large portions of open minds. Aside from expressing spirit through matter and using the senses as doors to the mind, the artist has another subversive talent: the ability to express maximum "content" by minimum means. He makes something out of nothing, or nearly nothing. The artist can be considered a brilliant economist.

I understand that a major reason why the art-appreciating part of society will tolerate and possibly admire the artist is that he can make a sheet of paper rise in value from a fraction of a cent to a million dollars. Since this neat trick is true materialistic magic, it earns the artist a place in society that is close to that of the quack who showed Rockefeller the black, all-purpose cure that turned out to be oil. The jester-artist is not only entertaining, he is economically useful; investment in him capitalizes quickly, provided the target for investment has been chosen carefully, whether by instinct or expert scrutiny. The right

kind of painting is a stock certificate that can increase its value much more rapidly than any other. The tickle of speculation in art exceeds that of horse betting in refinement and sophistication.

The artist catering to the tastes and expectations of the chosen few is a pitiable creature. Artists' obligations lie elsewhere. Villages, cities, regions, states, countries, continents have been turning ugly since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Planning of large change in the provisions for physical living has been left to architects with limited sensual imaginations. The architecture of the mind that is produced by "the media"—newspapers, radio, television—is the work of "professionals" with equally limited creative capacities. The artist-planner is needed. He can make a playground out of a heap of bent cans, he can make a park out of a desert, he can make a paradise out of a wasteland, if he accepts the challenge to do so.

It is obvious that traditional ways of planning or non-planning have proved disastrous. Harlem borders on the Upper East Side, and despite all the print and planning it is as horrifying as ever.

In order to enable artists of the future to engage in large-scale planning and shaping of tasks, art education has to change completely. At this point art schools are still training object-makers, who expect museums and collectors to buy their products. Art education has to point out first that the artist is not Alcibiades the elaborate wonder but

public property: his talent is owned by many just as a gardener's talent to grow flowers belongs to many.

The artist who designs environments on a large scale does not rule out other kinds of artists. He does not even rule out traditional forms of art. Dialectics of object versus phenomenon, of core things versus surrounding space, will continue, but borders have to open up completely and prejudices must be torn down. The feeling of guilt about planning for others has to be replaced by the pride of being an expert contributing things and ideas that others cannot contribute.

Elements and technology are the means that permit the revival of large-scale artistic activities. Wind may be considered the new siccative, while fire is a new gel. Technology permits the artist to talk to many, design for many, and execute plans for many. It's time now to do more than project: it's time to act.

The role of the artist in a reshaped society and a related new environment can be understood more clearly if we think of him not as an artist but merely as an expert economist of sensually perceptible means. Beauty can be understood as the accomplished highest economy of means. Aesthetics can be considered a set of economic principles. The beauty of a living environment stands for the economy of a living environment of health, comfort, and the balance of psychophysical powers. A freshly painted house is more likely to please its inhabitants than a house with a wrinkled and

greasy skin. A freshly painted apartment is more likely to make its inhabitants proud than a smoky, stained hole. A photograph that shows its subjects clearly and in vivid colors is more likely to make people feel that they belong together than a washed out, vague shot.

In addition to exercising his existence/moral-spiritual presence, a traditional role of the artist is caring about, and working on, the physical environment.

Another traditional role is education, with an emphasis on furthering everybody's creative talents.

A third role, also traditionally rooted, is preparing, maintaining, and regenerating occasions of pageantry.

Fourth role: performances in various arts and their coordination and integration.

A fifth and relatively new function is understanding the phenomena, rules, and aesthetic-sociological consequences of ecology—a dialectic exchange between man and his environment.

Sixth: rediscovering nature and the elements as a fund of forces that support man, that are not inexhaustible, that can be coordinated with the seemingly adverse effects of technology.

Seventh: bringing to the media as institutions desperately needed imaginative spirits. As a set of possibilities, the media have a chance for positive communication among billions of people.

Eighth: opening up and making habitable new spaces, such as the sky.

I am happy to concede that within and beside these categories there may be a little room for "art" and its habitual ways or the traditional hokus-pokus of an "art world." Ideally this art world will turn into a world of art where everything means something, in which there will be enlightenment of the artist, as well as of his audience, beyond becoming famous, beyond wielding power, beyond charming the mod masses.

Otto Piene