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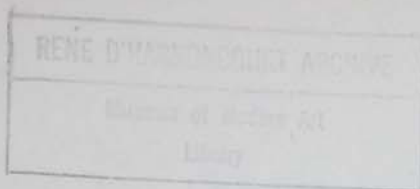
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A STATEMENT ON MODERN ART

by

The Institute of Contemporary Art

BOSTON

The Museum of Modern Art

NEW YORK

Whitney Museum of American Art

NEW YORK

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A STATEMENT ON MODERN ART

THE Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, all institutions devoted primarily to the art of our time, have joined in the following statement of general principles governing their relation to contemporary art. This statement is made in the hope that it may help to clarify current controversial issues about modern art, which are confusing to the public and harmful to the artist. Its object is not to bar honest differences of opinion, but to state certain broad principles on which we are agreed.

The field of contemporary art is immensely wide and varied, with many diverse viewpoints and styles. We believe that this diversity is a sign of vitality and of the freedom of expression inherent in a democratic society. We oppose any attempt to make art or opinion about art conform to a single point of view.

We affirm our belief in the continuing validity of what is generally known as modern art, the multiform movement which was in progress during the opening years of the twentieth century and which has produced the most original and significant art of our period. We believe that the modern movement was a vital force not only in its pioneer phases, but that its broad, everchanging tradition of courageous exploration and creative achievement is a vital force today, as is proved by the continuing capacity of the younger generation of artists to embody new ideas in new forms. At the same time we believe in the validity of conservative and retrospective tendencies when they make creative use of traditional values. We do not assume that modernity in itself is any guarantee of quality or importance.

We believe that a primary duty of a museum concerned with contemporary art is to be receptive to new tendencies and talents. We recognize the historic fact that the new in art, as in all other creative activities, is appreciated at first by a relatively small proportion of the public; almost all the art of the past hundred and fifty years now generally accepted as good was originally misunderstood, neglected or ridiculed not only by the public but by many artists, critics and museum officials. We place in evidence the careers of Blake, Turner, Constable, Delacroix, Corot, Millet, Courbet, Manet, Whistler, Monet, Cézanne, Renoir, Rodin, Gauguin, van

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Gogh, Eakins, Ryder, not to mention the leaders of the twentieth century. We also recognize that some artists of unquestionable merit never become popular, although their work may eventually have a widespread influence. We therefore believe that it is a museum's duty to present the art that it considers good, even if it is not yet generally accepted. By so doing, we believe, the museum best fulfills its long-range responsibility to the public.

We believe that the so-called "unintelligibility" of some modern art is an inevitable result of its exploration of new frontiers. Like the scientist's innovations, the procedures of the artist are often not readily understood and make him an easy target for reactionary attack. We do not believe that many artists deliberately aim to be unintelligible, or have voluntarily withdrawn from the public. On the contrary, we believe that most artists today desire communication with a receptive audience. The gap between artist and public, in our opinion, has been greatly exaggerated; actually the public interest in progressive art, as proved by attendance at exhibitions and by attention in the popular press, is larger than at any previous time in history.

We believe in the humanistic value of modern art even though it may not adhere to academic humanism with its insistence on the human figure as the central element of art. Art which explores newly discovered levels of consciousness, new concepts of science and new technological methods is contributing to humanism in the deepest sense, by helping humanity to come to terms with the modern world, not by retreating from it but by facing and mastering it. We recognize the humanistic value of abstract art, as an expression of thought and emotion and the basic human aspirations toward freedom and order. In these ways modern art contributes to the dignity of man.

Contrary to those who attack the advanced artist as anti-social, we believe in his spiritual and social role. We honor the man who is prepared to sacrifice popularity and economic security to be true to his personal vision. We believe that his unworldly pursuit of perfection has a moral and therefore a social value. But we do not believe that unreasonable demands should be made on him. Though his spiritual energy may be religious in the broadest sense, he should not be asked to be priest or saint. Though his art may symbolize discipline or liberty, he cannot be asked to save civilization.

Believing strongly in the quality and vitality of American art, we oppose its definition in narrow nationalistic terms. We hold that American

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art which is international in character is as valid as art obviously American in subject matter. We deplore the revival of the tendency to identify American art exclusively with popular realism, regional subject and nationalistic sentiment.

We also reject the assumption that art which is esthetically an innovation must somehow be socially or politically subversive, and therefore un-American. We deplore the reckless and ignorant use of political or moral terms in attacking modern art. We recall that the Nazis suppressed modern art, branding it "degenerate," "bolshevistic," "international," and "un-German"; and that the Soviets suppressed modern art as "formalistic," "bourgeois," "subjective," "nihilistic" and "un-Russian"; and that Nazi officials insisted and Soviet officials still insist upon a hackneyed realism saturated with nationalistic propaganda.

We believe that it is not a museum's function to try to control the course of art or to tell the artist what he shall or shall not do; or to impose its tastes dogmatically upon the public. A museum's proper function, in our opinion, is to survey what artists are doing, as objectively as possible, and to present their works to the public as impartially as is consistent with those standards of quality which the museum must try to maintain. We acknowledge that humility is required of those who select works of art, as it is of those who create them or seek to understand them.

We believe that there is urgent need for an objective and open-minded attitude toward the art of our time, and for an affirmative faith to match the creative energy and integrity of the living artist.

The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston

JAMES S. PLAUT, *Director*
FREDERICK S. WIGHT, *Director of Education*

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

RENE D'HARNONCOURT, *Director*
ALFRED H. BARR, JR., *Director, Museum Collections*
ANDREW C. RITCHIE, *Director, Department of
Painting and Sculpture*

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

HERMON MORE, *Director*
LLOYD GOODRICH, *Associate Director*

March, 1950

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Mar. 29, 1950

March 29, 1950

Mr. James Thrall Soby, Director,
The Museum of Modern Art,
11 West 53rd St.,
New York 19, N.Y.

Dear Jim:

Many thanks for your good note of March 25th. Mrs. Richard S. Meredith has not yet called but Allen Porter's office has already been in touch with the members of the conference of obstetricians. If she should call me I shall of course be glad to help her and put her in touch with Allen.

Dear Rene:

I hope you were as delighted as we were with the editorial and the articles on the agreement between the three museums which appeared in the New York Times on Tuesday. I could not help feeling like an impostor to see my name where yours really should have appeared. The statement is really a wonderful job and I hope that it will get similar attention from other papers. In general I am pretty optimistic about its effect. However, this optimism does not include Miss Genauer.

Best and thanks.

With very best regards,

Faithfully yours,

AS ever,

Rene d'Harmoncourt

Mr. James Thrall Soby
29 Mountain Spring Road
Farmington, Connecticut

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JAMES THRALL SOBY
29 Mountain Spring Road
Farmington, Connecticut

Allen Parker

Mar. 25, 1950

Mr. Rene d'Harnoncourt, Director,
The Museum of Modern Art,
11 West 53rd St.,
New York 19, N.Y.

Dear Rene:

An old and dear friend of ours, Mrs. Richard S. Meredith, whose husband is one of the best obstetricians in New York, is in charge of entertaining the wives of the members of an international conference of obstetricians in New York from May 15 to 19. She is trying to arrange visits to the museums, and has already made arrangements with Francis Taylor for the ladies to go to the Met. She also wants to take them to our Museum, and I've asked her to 'phone you about it.

Hope you won't mind. I know it's the job of the Secretary's office to arrange these matters, but since Tom Braden's departure, I'm not sure who is in charge of that office. Anyway, if you wouldn't mind talking to Mrs. Meredith and referring her to the proper person, I'd be much obliged. She's a marvelous person and a staunch friend of museums in general.

Best and thanks.

As ever,

Jim

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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Date February 3, 1950

To: Mr. René d'Harnoncourt

Re: Statement

From: Mr. Alfred Barr

Dear René:

I think Lloyd's idea of a news release is an excellent solution if it is possible to accept it.

Monroe and Porter can fill in the interchange of exhibitions. Perhaps the following sentences would give a juster impression of our relationship with Boston:

"The three institutions, all of which are devoted primarily to contemporary art, have for a number of years been cooperating in various activities. The Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, originally a branch of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, became an entirely independent institution in 19 . Since then the two institutions have continued to interchange exhibitions. The Institute has taken in all (xx) exhibitions from the Museum of Modern Art. The Kokoschka exhibition shown at the Museum of Modern Art last summer was organized by the Boston Institute which is also sending to New York the exhibition of Edvard Munch scheduled for this spring. Next season the Institute will.!"....."

Perhaps we should mention publications also.

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Suggested news release

The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, have issued a joint statement of the general principles governing their relations to contemporary art. A copy of this statement is enclosed.

The three institutions, all of which are devoted primarily to contemporary art, have for a number of years been cooperating in various activities. The _____, _____ and _____ exhibitions organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art have been shown also at the Museum of Modern Art, and the _____, _____ and _____, exhibitions organized by the latter have been shown at the Institute. Next season the Institute will show the Arshile Gorky memorial exhibition arranged by the Whitney Museum, and the following season these two institutions plan to cooperate on an exhibition of post-war tendencies in American art. The Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum recently announced closer coordination of activities in the American field. All three institutions plan further cooperation along these lines, as they believe that by such cooperation they can best use their resources for the benefit of the public and the living artist.

Representatives of the three institutions have been meeting recently to discuss common objectives, and these discussions resulted in the statement of principles which is enclosed.

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CC: Mr. Nelson Rockefeller
Mr. René d'Harnoncourt
Mr. Thomas Braden

Mr. John Jay Whitney
May 17, 1949
Page 3

F111

by Lloyd Goodrich, half by myself, with the help and editing of
Jim Saxe, Denise Barr and the two Boston gentlemen, Henry Plaut
and Taylor.

May 17, 1949

It is intended to be constructive and positive although
certain elements of construction are present incidentally. In
regarding the statement we had in mind the general state of popular
opinion as well as the articles of Taylor, Goodrich, the recent
Boston statement, and above all, the Boston statement.

Dear Jock:

I cannot agree at all with the two trustees who felt
that the statement would be of little interest to our audience.
The Boston statement circulated in 1937. It was a
very "three-institution" statement
about modern art:

It is true that this was precipitated by the article
"Revolt in Boston" in Life. I told Plaut I thought he ought to
do something to repudiate the article, but he said that they
could not do that. (One of their trustees explained later that
they were simply afraid to antagonize Life.) Plaut did propose,
however, that in order to "clarify the confusion," the Whitney,
the Museum of Modern Art and his own institution prepare a
joint statement. He made this proposal to the Whitney Museum
too. We both, ie. Goodrich and I, responded privately that
such a statement would involve a virtual reversal of the Insti-
tute's statement of the previous year. Plaut, without saying
so explicitly, implied that such a reversal would not be dis-
agreeable to Boston. (The same trustee above mentioned said
that Boston definitely wanted to revise and correct the
"misunderstanding" of its earlier statement.)

After careful consideration, the Whitney staff and
ourselves decided that it would be advantageous to us to accept
Plaut's suggestion if we could get away with a strong, affirmative
statement which, at the same time, would be tantamount to a
neutralization of Boston's manifesto. Confidentially, we also
concluded that such a three part statement would serve to isolate
the Metropolitan, or at least Francis Taylor in his below-the-belt
campaign against modern art. Plaut and Taylor have been quite
close, especially through their Atlantic Monthly connection. (As
you may remember, Weeks of the Atlantic Monthly, publishes Taylor's
books, published his recent article attacking modern art, and had
an active hand as a trustee of the Boston Institute in writing
its manifesto in which modern art and, by implication, our Museum,
were attacked.)

The above is very briefly the background.

The statement which we have drawn up was written half

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Mr. John Hay Whitney
May 17, 1949
Page 2

by Lloyd Goodrich, half by myself, with the help and editing of Jim Soby, Hermon More and the two Boston gentlemen, Messrs. Flaut and Wight.

It is intended to be constructive and positive although certain elements of counterattack are present inevitably. In preparing the statement we had in mind the general state of popular confusion as well as the articles of Taylor, Kirstein, the recent Life statement, and above all, the Boston statement.

I cannot agree at all with the two Trustees who felt that this statement would be of little interest to our members. The Boston statement circulated in some 15,000 printed copies, was very widely quoted as far away as Switzerland, Italy and Germany, and definitely gave the impression that modern art was on the run since it had been repudiated by one of its champions. Throughout the country the statement was taken as a crack against our Museum. Therefore, I believe a great many of our members would read a positive statement signed by the three museums with interest. I know that the press would be interested in it. I believe it would have a very strong and salutary effect.

Nelson has been over it and made several suggestions which I brought before the staff committee on the day before the Trustees meeting. He wanted to take out the phrase "by reactionary propaganda" on page 3. The committee willingly agreed. He also wanted to take out the adjective "reactionary" near the top of page 3. The committee of six did not feel that this was wise since the adjective was exactly what they meant.

Nelson also wanted to eliminate entirely the paragraph about the Communist-Nazi attitude toward modern art. I submitted his suggestion to the committee and found that they were very strongly opposed to its omission because of the demagogic propaganda appearing in the Hearst and McCormick newspapers, the State Department's suppression of the exhibition of modern paintings two years ago, the recent attacks on modern painting by Congressman Dondero of Michigan (a McCormick stooge) on the charge that modern art is Communist. Dondero has repeated these charges on the radio this very morning, CBS, 7:45 news. Dondero is reported by CBS to have charged that modern art was Communist propaganda, and that critics who support modern art should be attended to. I consider this potentially a very serious propaganda line, and think that in our statement we should point out that the modern art which people such as Dondero call Communist and want suppressed is hated and actually suppressed in the U.S.S.R.

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Mr. John Hay Whitney
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I particularly wanted to know the reaction of the Boston representatives to the proposed omission of this paragraph. I found both Plaut and Wight were very positive in wanting it kept in. Plaut remarked that only recently the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Boston Museum had angrily accused Rouault of being a Communist on the basis of his pictures.

I agree with Nelson that we should most scrupulously avoid calling people with whom we disagree Communist or Fascist. We are not doing this in this statement. We are simply defending modern art against the charges that it is Communist (cf. Dondere and the Chairman of the Boston Museum Board) or Fascist (Rebsjohn-Gibbings) by pointing out that the leading enemies of modern art in the 20th century have been the Nazis and the Commissars.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Nelson, who, I think, is so reasonable and has such good political sense, that he may be persuaded to reconsider his opinion. René d'Harnoncourt tells me that he is, in any case, reexamining the paragraph he questioned. Perhaps some change of phrasing would meet his objections.

Sincerely,

s/Alfred H. Barr, Jr.

js

Mr. John Hay Whitney
630 Fifth Avenue
New York 20, New York

AHB:jws

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JAMES THRALL SOBY
29 Mountain Spring Road
Farmington, Connecticut

Feb. 3, 1950

Mr. Rene d'Harnoncourt, Director,
The Museum of Modern Art,
11 West 53rd St.,
New York 19, N.Y.

Dear Rene:

Alfred 'phoned to speak about the statement which our Museum, the Whitney and the Institute in Boston are to issue signed by staff members.

Much as I believe in the statement, I emphatically believe that I shouldn't be one of the ones to sign it, as I told Alfred. It seems to me, as I've said several times before, that it just confuses things when I appear as a sort of ex-husband of the Dept. of Painting and Sculpture. We couldn't very well avoid this, when the Dept. had no director and I had to pinch hit in various ways. But now I think now that the sooner I disappear in any capacity except that of Trustee, the better for all concerned.

My own opinion is that the statement would mean most if you and Alfred sign it, or you, Alfred and Andrew if we can have three signatures to the Whitney's and Boston's two.

Best, hurriedly,

Jim

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THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART
138 Newbury Street
Boston 16, Massachusetts
Telephone: KENmore 6-5688

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 West 53 Street
New York 19, New York
Telephone: CIRCLE 5-8900

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
10 West 8 Street
New York 11, New York
Telephone: SPing 7-C770

500328 - 20

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, have issued a joint statement of the general principles governing their relations to contemporary art. A copy of this statement is enclosed.

The three institutions, all of which are devoted primarily to contemporary art, have for some years been cooperating in various activities. A number of exhibitions organized by the Museum of Modern Art, such as those of Henri Rousseau, Elie Madelman and Ben Shahn, have been shown also at the Institute of Contemporary Art. Last summer the Oskar Kokoschka exhibition organized by the Institute was shown at the Museum of Modern Art, which this spring will also show the Institute's Edvard Munch exhibition. The Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum recently announced closer coordination of their activities in the American field. The Whitney Museum and the Institute of Contemporary Art plan to collaborate in an exhibition of post-war tendencies in American art during the season 1951-52. All three institutions plan further cooperation along these lines, as they believe that by such cooperation they can best use their resources for the benefit of the public and the living artist.

Representatives of the three institutions have been meeting recently to discuss common objectives, and these discussions resulted in the statement of principles which is enclosed.

Enc.

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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Mr. Nelson A. Rockefeller
Mr. John Hay Whitney
✓ Mr. René d'Harnoncourt
Mr. Thomas Braden

Date May 7, 1949

To:

Re: Joint statement by Boston Institute,

From: Mr. Alfred H. Barr, Jr.

Whitney Museum, Museum of Modern Art

Here is a draft of a joint statement for possible use by the Boston Institute, the Whitney Museum and ourselves.

The statement was prepared by Lloyd Goodrich and myself after two meetings: the first with Harmon More, Director of the Whitney Museum, and Jim Soby; the second, an eight hour meeting with, in addition, Messrs. Plaut and Wight of the Boston Institute, at which a draft was gone over carefully.

This is not proposed as a final draft since the Boston Institute may wish to make further revisions. These should be at hand shortly, but I am sending you the enclosed version now for your consideration since we do not expect the Institute's changes to be considerable.

Lloyd Goodrich feels certain that the Whitney Trustees would approve the signing and publication of the draft pretty much as it is. Mr. Plaut also believes that his Board will not insist upon further changes -- you will remember that it was on the Institute's initiative that we started work on this statement with our Board's approval.

It might be desirable to have the statement ready for our own Trustees' consideration on Thursday.

Mr. Plaut had thought of issuing the joint statement in the form of a release, but both Mr. Goodrich and I think it would be better to have the statement printed for circulation to our lists of members, etc., and the press --

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a more effective form for the neutralization and supersession of the Boston Institute's statement of last year.

Mr. Plaut, and possibly Mr. Wight, expect to meet with Messrs. More, Goodrich, Soby and Barr on Wednesday, May 11, before Mr. Plaut sails. Therefore, it would be convenient if any suggestions for major changes that occur to you could be given to me before the meeting on Wednesday.

The Wednesday meeting would presumably bring to a final draft the statement so far as the three pairs of staff representatives are concerned. We may also assume that the Wednesday draft will incorporate any Boston or Whitney changes. If our officers then wish to clear this statement at our Trustees meeting on Thursday, publication fairly soon thereafter would be possible.

Following the meeting on Wednesday, I will put the matter of further clearing in the hands of Mr. Braden, our Secretary.

P. S. I have forgotten to mention the question of signatures for the published statement. The Boston statement was signed by President Aldrich and Director Plaut. I am not sure who should sign this new statement, but it should bear the signatures of responsible authorities, possibly the three Presidents.