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MA 1714

Robert Motherwell

A PERSONAL EXPRESSION

NOTE: (The following lecture, delivered under the auspices of the Seventh Annual Conference of the Committee on Art Education, sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, was delivered on the afternoon of March 19, 1949, in the auditorium of the Central High School of Needle Trades, New York City. ~~The lecture was written in haste all through the night before; there is scarcely a sentence in it whose formulation seems to me sufficiently exact. I can accept its general presentation and emphases; but perhaps there is some value in its unconscious theme, the affirmation of life.~~ ~~The present version is slightly revised; the substance is the same. R.M.)~~

~~any~~ First, I want to apologize for speaking here today. I - no more than artist - believe in these forums, either that they are very pleasureable to participate in or that they can accomplish very much. I ought to be painting in my studio, where the dramas that interest me take place. ~~I expect to leave here frustrated and tired, too excited to feel at peace. I do not even know why I was chosen to speak; I knew no one concerned in this affair and if, as I have heard, the theme of these conferences is 'Art and the Unity of Mankind,' I have no ideas on the subject: it does not move my imagination. Besides, I believe that the artist's problems are the same as every man's. Sometimes artists are more conscious of these problems - though certainly not everyone who calls himself an artist is - and plainly from certain points of view someone other than the artist is more competent to speak... I accepted the invitation today for tactical reasons, from a sense of intellectual responsibility. When the artist refuses to speak at these forums on art, they are generally taken over by professional 'horners in.' I hope, though I may not succeed, that I will mislead you less. Yet on the level that art interests me, only the poet has an adequate rhetoric.~~

(historical) *

I suppose that I was asked to speak to you here today because I am sometimes taken for an 'intellectual' among the artists. If you do not mind, I will take this for my subject. I feel pretentious in speaking of anything but my own experience.

I doubt if very many people regard my painting as predominantly intellectual. I should guess that when it moves anyone, it is because of its moral struggle. For the rest, when I look at my painting as detachedly as I can, it appears to me as warm, sensual, 'silent,' and felt, all qualities related to its internal morality. Aesthetic decisions in the process of painting are not primarily aesthetic in origin but moral, and nowadays largely negative. One might say today that the morality of a picture is unusually dependent on what the artist refuses to accept in it as bearable. Modern pictures - 'abstract' ones, that is - tend to be the residues of a moral process.

But such pictures are also assertions of positive values, conscious or not - presentational structures (in the language of modern logic) there ~~has to be~~ to be felt. In my own work, for instance, sometimes there is humor, a kind of blague as a critic recently wrote, with

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with different ranges of reference, technical, social and perhaps even met² physical - I am not sure. Sometimes my essential loneliness creeps into the work, or ~~my~~ anguish. But I try to suppress these qualities. It is more seemly to keep one's suffering to oneself. I resent it when I see that I was unable, on ~~the~~ occasion, to muffle the shriek that lies deep in nearly everyone. My main effort is to come into harmony with myself, to paint as I breathe or move or dream, to make works that are as natural in their execution, as inevitable in their ultimate form as a stone or a wall. To realize such an ideal is a life-long task.

I take neither my subjects nor the modes of painting them from the world of intellectuals. I have been mainly a lyrical artist, a 'poet,' if you like, with occasional dramatic or satirical overtones. I loathe every form of ideology - politics, religion, aesthetics, domestic relations. I am interested in persons who are independent moral agents. Most 'intellectuals' I have seen were quite properly labelled by a friend of mine, Harold Rosenberg, the poet, as 'a herd of independent minds.' But I also dislike painters who talk as though they were carpenters or some other kind of craftsman, who speak as though art is not a question of inspiration - of something in you that rises as simply, beautifully and unpredictably as the flight of a bird.

I think I have been accused of being an 'intellectual' on other grounds than my painting. I have been extremely active, but perhaps psychologically it is incidental that the actions have been in relation to art. My father was an active man, a banker, who wanted me to enter a profession, medicine or law. I resisted, though I knew he was concerned with my welfare, because I wanted to be a painter. At the same time, I had no means to resist, because I wanted only to be a 'modern' painter - in those days, fifteen years ago, I was greatly taken, as I still am, by the work of Henri-Matisse - and I knew no 'modern' painters nor how to begin. It was only eight years ago, when I was twenty-six, that Professor Meyer Schapiro kindly introduced me to the Parisian surrealists, who were beginning their exodus to New York; they treated me tolerantly and I was able to begin to paint.

In the years between the ages of seventeen and twenty-six, under an unspoken agreement with my father, I studied philosophy in various universities and travelled, here and abroad. I had begun my studies with literature and art, but even in those days I quickly understood that they cannot be taught academically. I chose philosophy instead. The Greeks and the early Christians, the continental Renaissance philosophers and the British empiricists, and moderns such as Charles Sanders Pierce and Alfred North Whitehead, who was still living in Cambridge when I was at Harvard, became my constant companions and ingrained in me a humanism that remains a basic element in my feelings. Otherwise I think these studies had little effect on my attitudes toward painting - modern French poetry was more decisive - except in incidental points: ~~such as~~ for instance, the possibility that if you understand modern relational logic, the structural basis of Mondrian's painting may be more easily described. Still, the thing to do with a Mondrian is feel it, as we all know. Plainly philosophy itself is not a proper subject for painting - not even Raphael could manage it.

Perhaps the chief advantage of a liberal arts university education is learning to express oneself readily in language. From the outside world I learned the importance of this as a weapon; and I would be untruthful if I say that I regret, on the whole, having been armed.

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and
The struggle of each new generation of 'modern' painters is to make the 'modern' world felt, to capture the youngest generation, who are always humanity's hope. This struggle takes place, especially where *ever* English is ~~the language~~ spoken, in a culture dominated by words. Everything is done through the word: the man who writes about the artist gains position and livelihood; the artist himself is treated, as the case may be, as gentle or unmanageable, but in any case as not knowing what he is doing, as inarticulate in words, ~~that is to say~~, as if they were the same thing! I cannot help believing, ~~extreme as the statement may seem~~, that what the art situation in America needs most is to get art away from the universities and museums back into the hands of painters and poets, as has been the situation for the past century in France.

*(asterisk) **
In the past four years I have been able, thanks to the good faith and courage of my publishers, Messrs Wittenborn and Schultz, to edit for younger people books by artists or their intimate friends - by Guillaume Apollinaire, Piet Mondrian, Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, Louis H. Sullivan, Wassily Kandinsky, Max Ernst, Hans Arp, and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler. We now have in press a large dada anthology, with contributions by Marcel Duchamp, André Breton, Tristan Tzara, Francis Picabia, Kurt Schwitters, Paul Eluard, Max Ernst, Hugo Ball and many other dada poets and painters, as well as a survey of modern French poetry, Marcel Raymond's 'From Baudelaire to Surrealism'. ~~the latter because~~ I believe the role of poets in making the atmosphere of ideas in which the école de Paris worked is underestimated here. Ultimately I should like to see in print in good English translation every major document in relation to modern art - fauvism, cubism, de Stijl, expressionism, futurism, dada, surrealism, constructivism and the other movements and principal individuals, here and abroad, in 20th century art. If I may exaggerate for emphasis, the purpose of this publishing activity is obvious, to ~~render unnecessary the reading of secondary writings about contemporary art.~~
academic

It is true that
Artists have their faults in writing of ~~their~~ art. They are often ignorant of, or indifferent to other contemporary expressions. They stack history as much as they can, often in a shocking manner. There are several scholars here in New York, such as Mr Barr or Professor Schapiro, whose knowledge of the history of 20th century art ~~beggers~~ that of any artist in its objectivity and detail ~~ness~~, and in its scholarly responsibility. ~~This is more ought to be said.~~ Yet there is some sense ~~that~~ - one that I cannot adequately formulate - in which the statements of ~~the~~ artists themselves constitute the literature that is most inspiring to other, and especially younger artists, as though dreams related were a more direct route to another's mind than an analysis of ~~the~~ behavior; and it is ~~the~~ young artists and poets, not scholars or historians, whose wants I have had in mind in editing the 'Documents of Modern Art' series. ~~But~~ One never knows for certain what another's needs are, but I cannot believe it has helped American artists ~~in the recent past~~ to have been in general so provincial. Certainly my own ignorance ~~has~~ hindered me.

*(asterisk) **
If I may move on to another controversial point, which also ought to be more adequately supported, but which at least I can offer ~~an~~ an opinion, it seems to me that there is no important museum collection or large annual exhibition of contemporary art in America - it is here that one sees the influence of the official and scholar -
and power

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that is anything but a deformed exhibition, in its omissions and emphases, of what is living in our art - if I may distinguish between art and what passes for art. Some day, when we are all dead, the truth will be known; as Apollinaire said, 'do not tell me there are today various other schools of painting in whose images humanity will be able to recognize itself. All the art works of an epoch end by resembling the most energetic, the most expressive, and the most typical works of a period... who would dare to say that the dolls that were sold at bargain counters, around 1880, were shaped by a sentiment akin to what Renoir felt when he painted his portraits? No one perceived the relationship then. But this only means that Renoir's art was sufficiently energetic to take hold of our senses, even though ... his conceptions seemed absurd and foolish.'

... In America the chief sources of obsolete standards in relation to living art have been the university and museum; this would not be important if their influence were inconsequential, but it is important and constantly spreading in a country in which everything becomes subject to 'education.' Yet precisely what is 'modern' in art is its assault on what is dead in immediate experience, and an affirmation of what is alive. Perhaps the university and museum ought to be taken over by artists! Or at least restricted to situations in art at least thirty years old! Perhaps then we artists could breathe. We are fed up on being bullied in terms that belong other times and places. One might say as a joke that it is the artist, not the historian, who takes time seriously. Just as one might say that is the 'abstract' artist ~~for the moment~~ who is making the ~~effort~~ effort to recover concrete ~~experience~~ experience, ~~to humanize the world~~. The work of nearly every painter 'picturing' (in the old-fashioned sense) is filled with despair and a sense of decay, with death. The art that interests me asserts man's ~~moral~~ moral courage, intellectual daring, radiant sensuality; perhaps this 'abstract' art understands death better...

It is not often that one finds in the academic world a scholar with the imagination to penetrate a world of absolutes ~~living~~ beyond the struggle to survive materially, no matter how socially modified at base - plainly 'abstract' art is concomitant with a certain condition of society - a world in which there are few usable precedents or props, which is its own invention, and not without desperation. Art is a form of action, a drama, a process. It is the dramatic gesture itself, not, in modern times, a religious content, that accounts for art's hold on the minds of men. One enters the studio as one would an arena. One's entire character is revealed in the action, one's style, as we say, which differs from individual to individual, and from tradition to tradition. ~~It is the acts of individuals that sustain us.~~ Of course everyone undergoes risks just by living. From one point of view, the artist's function is to give each risk its proper style. In this sense everyone should be artist.

Discussions of the artist's social responsibility are gratuitous, no matter how 'abstract' his work. He lives in the same social relations as everyone else, and responds according to his character. The 'abstractness' of modern art has to do with how much an enlightened mind rejects of the contemporary social order. It also has to do with an effort to find a more adequate expression of subjective experience than what one sees in the street, or ~~on~~ on the table.

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(astute) ✱
With four other 'abstract' artists, William Baziotis,

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David Hare, Barney Newman, and Mark Rothko, I have formed a little school of art at 35 East 8th Street. Clyfford Still, who wanted to join us, was unable to find a means of living in New York City. ~~He has been unable to find a means of living in New York City. He has been unable to find a means of living in New York City.~~ The way to learn to paint - to begin one's orientation, I mean - is to hang around artists. We have made a place where young people can do so. We regard 'courses' in art as they are generally taught as devices for concealing oneself from oneself. We talk to the students as we do to one another, trying to break down ignorance and clichés, encouraging each individual to find his own expression of his inner life. This kind of teaching must be done by artists. No one else 'reads' plastic expressions quickly or subtly enough.

Still, in a basic sense art cannot be taught and we do not try to. ~~But~~ Paradoxically it can be learned, in the beginning from other artists, and then from oneself. We have tried to provide a congenial atmosphere ~~for~~ for novices before they enter the arena. They are mostly on their own, but on occasion we are able to give them courage, ~~and understanding~~. I believe that they enjoy being around us. They know that we love them because they love art, that we sympathize with their struggle, which is identical with our own. There is little more one can do for ~~another person~~ *younger people*.

On Friday evenings we invite other artists to talk about whatever they like - among them have been Adolph Gottlieb, Willem de Kooning, Hans Arp, Ad Reinhart, Fritz Glarner, John Cage, the composer, and Richard Hulsenbeck, one of the founders of dada. There is ~~also~~ a general discussion afterward. These meetings are open to the public.

(asterisk) *

I suppose it is these various activities that have given me the name of being an 'intellectual.' Perhaps they make me so indeed. But I resent the invidious implications of the word in American society, the belief that an artist must be feeling imbecile or ~~possibly~~ ~~probably~~ not an artist. I have no desire to act as, and particularly to be known as an editor or teacher, ~~with the same intention as this school~~ ~~has~~. I am also aware of my inadequacies in relation to these activities. I resent the external disciplines that they involve, and above all the loss of time from my own painting process. I ~~am~~ anxious to return to it, perhaps altogether. Yet I do not regret my innocence in supposing that an artist might be something of a scholar and a gentleman. The Chinese have thought it necessary.

Now I must beg your pardon for how elementary and simple my discourse has been. It is because I have been speaking of my relations to the external world. My inner world is more complicated, and consequently difficult to express. That is why I invented my art. In this sense art is a necessity, a natural outgrowth of ~~the~~ man's life.

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