Changing

Change and Criticism: Consistency and Small Minds*

You could not step twice in the same river; for other and yet other waters are ever flowing on.

HERACLITUS

The past should be altered by the present as much as the present is altered by the past.

T. S. ELIOT

In the midst of the flux and transitional confusions that characterize advanced art, a contemporary art critic's major preoccupation must be how to establish criteria flexible enough to encompass rapid and radical change. He must decide how to handle a change of mind (his own as well as the artist's), how to distinguish between innovation and novelty, derivation and originality. The question "Is it art?" is no longer paramount. The ramifications and refinements of Duchamp's fifty-year-old assertion that anything is art if the artist says it is, have made the query beside the point. The question boils down to "Is it good art or bad art?" and also, perhaps, "Who are the artists?"

* Reprinted from *Art International,* Vol. XI, No. 9 (November, 1967).

The "tradition of the new," by now taken for granted, has drastically altered the roles of both critic and artist, and accordingly, the critic's relationship to the artist has also changed.

For example, today's emphasis on a highly conceptual art has produced more artist-writers than usual, and they often produce full-length essays rather than the traditionally isolated "statement" or autobiographical fragment. The writing artist is doing the same sort of thinking on paper that the critic does, employing the same sort of dialectical process through the same articulation and conscious understanding of the issues, though his *self*-criticism will lead to action. In his work, the artist reserves the right to change his mind; in his writing too, he can provide his own context and maintain a rare independence from the stream of critical opinion. There is a certain amount of competition involved, which can be hard on the critic. The artist's published material, out of the horse's mouth or not, must be rigorously dealt with by the professional writer, who must beware of taking all of an artist's assertions of purpose or influence at face value. It is, after all, forgivable for an artist not to know or care about his historical debts, but it is unforgivable for a critic not to recognize the exhausted or undeveloped form, the degrees of influence and originality.

T. S. Eliot wrote that the critic must have above all a "very highly developed sense of fact," and that interpretation "is only legitimate when it is not interpretation at all, but merely putting the reader in possession of the facts which he otherwise would have missed." [1] When the artist publishes his own intentions, the critic is spared a certain amount of interpretation, but since these intentions are part of the facts the critic must acknowledge (he need not approve the results), it is important for him to have some contact with the artist. There are dissenters who feel that the dangers of knowing an artist personally outweigh the advantages of a stimulating dialogue. Yet lack of such dialogue creates a highly artificial situation. The best that can be said for criticism—at heart a secondhand métier, entirely dependent on the works in question—is that

[1] The Eliot quotations used here are from two essays: "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and "The Function of Criticism," *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960), pp. 3–22.

it enables the practitioner to participate in, consider at length, and transmit or articulate the issues brought up by the art itself, rather than dumbly "appreciating" (or dumbly following the artist's lead either, for that matter). Straight man or not, the critic cannot be starry-eyed about the Creative Artist. On the contrary, the most valid reason for contact between critic and artist is that the critic becomes close enough to the art-making experience to understand and tolerate as well as admire the whole complex situation in which the artist operates; he becomes familiar enough to criticize instead of simply to like or dislike, to create his own ideas instead of simply to judge.

On a fundamental level, the critic's right to set himself up as judge should be questioned. What judgment he makes should be not on the values of the stylistic direction as a whole, which is out of his hands, but on the degree to which the individual work or concept furthers or alters that whole. Analysis and comparison of intention and relative achievement as well as of the works produced are invaluable. It is often said that a judge should be aloof, detached, objective, disengaged, not involved with criminals; but the critic must be immersed in the art underworld and know all the prevalent attitudes, events, relevancies, and irrelevancies in order to develop his "sense of fact" in relation to the current situation. For he records rather than reforms, discusses rather than disposes. His criteria depend on perception, not preconception. A judgment on contemporary art is *tentatively* true, like a scientist's law and unlike a legislator's law. The critic's judgments are entirely different from the court's. The courtroom judge decides whether a particular act has broken a prescribed law. But since the artist himself legislates as to what constitutes art, the critic's role is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Criticism has little to do with consistency; for consistency has to do with logical systems, whereas criticism is or should be dialectical, and thrive on contradiction and change.

Thus the contemporary critic's real task is not simply a superficial combination of the historian's and the aesthetician's. Categorization, placement, attribution, and the stabilization of universal criteria are secondary to constant adjustment, im-

mediate recognition of change within the art itself. The art under scrutiny should even be reflected in the critic's approach, whether or not it is wholeheartedly endorsed. It would be ridiculous to write a line-for-line, shape-for-shape formalist analysis of a Rauschenberg or a Dali or a LeWitt, or poetic paeans about a Judd. Rigid style, like rigid preconception, is a threat to perceptive criticism. One must approach new concepts without asking that they measure up to standards applicable only to their predecessors or their opposites. It is more dangerous to know what you like than what you don't like. Awareness of contemporary attitude, mood, issues, must be backed up by a set of working criteria, constantly in the experimental stage, which emerge and change, though not radically, with each new work confronted. If I could not enjoy very different kinds of art, based on very different values, if my criteria were fixed for once and for all, I would feel cheated. But such experimental criteria must be backed up by as much intellectual rigor as can be mustered, and that indefinable faculty, "a good eye," and, finally, must rest on a solid foundation of looking, of having looked at all kinds of art, not just what one expects to like. The critic forms his own ideas of recent history before the historians have their "distance."

Art history profits from, and is often patronizing about, criticism's mistakes. A contemporary critic takes risks, and sacrifices the possibility of eternal rectitude to the less dignified task of eternal revision. (Though it should be said that all history is in fact contemporary history because it is written in the present and is a product of all the interests and preconceptions of the present.) The rewards of contemporary criticism lie in the act of looking at art and allowing oneself time to experience and reexperience it, to think, consider, articulate, vacillate, and articulate again. Contemporary criticism is no place for someone who hopes to be right all or even most of the time. Bewilderingly rapid and not always significant change encourages an illogical criticism that sets up a dialogue between historical and visual fact and opinion in some sort of "open form," rather than establishing a pedantic system that allows for no variation and is perfect only in its restrictions. It is this endless self-correction that is the most interesting aspect of art

writing. Oscar Wilde called criticism the highest form of autobiography. I should hope it would not be autobiography, or self-expression, but autodidacticism, a demonstration of the learning process in print, and, ideally, a demonstration of the extent to which the art discussed is stimulating.

The art scene itself is an endless self-corrective process; its workings are more evident the more it accelerates and condenses. Today movements are just that; they have no time to stagnate before they are replaced. Much current art is made in reply to issues raised by previous art. This self-critical aspect need not be strictly evolutionary, but can instead be seen as a continuous lattice of interrelating unlike elements. The connecting grid consists of the ideas and articulations that a new art can force from a constant observer—a substantiation of the "ideas in the air," and their relation to the unlike objects—the art. The critical lattice (a four-dimensional one, including the time element) shows not only how the various arts looked when they were first seen, but their interrelationships and possibilities at the time; it can chart the structural growth of these possibilities.

A style or so-called movement emerges, crystallizes, splits into several directions over this period. As it does, the critic too finds himself divided. At the beginning of a "trend," similarities are stressed. The critic's job is to document the emergence of a common sensibility or style. As the style becomes more widespread and visible, the *differences* between the works and intentions become more important. It is not unusual to have to revise or contradict oneself on points one knows to have been correct when written but which have since become elementary, irrelevant, or even inaccurate.

The issue is change and degree of change. The "sense of fact" can be overdone. Teutonic scholarship is not necessarily germane. Aesthetic value is not based solely on consistency, the "mark of small minds," but on the flexibility that is a basic component of originality. In the historical sense, everything is derivative; immaculate conceptions are entirely absent from art history. Yet a group of artists may begin to work spontaneously and independently in a certain direction, responding to as yet undefined issues, *without* any conscious influence from

earlier movements. The best of the primary structures have been related to all strict, classical, geometric art of the past. And they do relate. Nevertheless, the rejective trend took more impetus from recent painting than from earlier sculpture, and the break made with earlier relational geometric art was actually radical. Again, a matter of degree.

From the other extreme, there are always isolated lesser artists who have, say, made target paintings years before Jasper Johns. But Johns's recognition of the target (and his number, letter, map paintings) as two-dimensional subject matter for a two-dimensional surface, and all the attendant ambiguities, was innovatory. Before Johns, the target as a design could be traced to innumerable prototypes back through ancient times. After Johns, the target became an idea to be reckoned with, and as it turned out, a fertile one, formally and conceptually. The new, even when it is not tremendously valuable in itself, always contains the possibility of significant change.

Change of course is not necessarily progress. This too must be a critical preoccupation. Immediate acceptance of the new for the sake of novelty alone is condoned only by journalists whose interest lies in the sensational. In fact, there comes a time for all critics (usually after they have been writing prolifically for some time) when they confront a trend to which they are congenitally unsympathetic and to which they cannot respond. No one critic, no matter how well informed and catholic in taste, can develop standards that will prepare him for all aesthetic events.

Yet I must admit to a conviction that if something is new, "catches on," and becomes relatively widespread, it is likely to be valid, and will probably have unforeseen and positive results, even when the initial manifestation seems superficial or dangerously exciting. When a new idea resolves or stimulates ideas already held by a number of other artists, then it is probably an innovation and not mere novelty. While there is no infallible test for originality, one of the best indications is a work's ultimate influence on the art that succeeds it. Originality could be called novelty that endures through influence and provides enduring aesthetic or intellectual satisfaction in itself.

Thus the artists themselves are generally the best judges of innovation; if a contribution is picked up and carried on (by means of opposition as well as acceptance), it is likely to acquire substance and become important to the continuity and eventually to the history of art. A gimmick, a mere novelty, exhausts itself quickly, often helped along by minor artists who recognize its capacity for easy adaptation. It is frequently alarming to find out what work does not survive a short period like five years, which artists can go no farther with their one original idea. Some may be resting on their laurels, others have been carried beyond their ability by a single situation.

Innovation can be corrupted, or hidden, too. Some potentially major contributions never become influential and are recalled long after the fact when related events occur, as prototypal. There are cases where an original work leads to other innovations that eventually overshadow and surpass it. It is not uncommon for a good, but not great, artist to make the original step which provokes several masterpieces by others and changes the course of history. Yet he will be "neglected" in favor of the real masters who not only perceived the originality of his step but understood and were capable of extending its consequences far more profoundly. Finally, only a masterpiece remains as satisfying in its originality long after the original aspects have been extended by other work. And masterpieces, perhaps for this reason, tend to come at the maturity rather than the inception of a trend or style.†

Originality not only can be but should be a basic criterion for aesthetic judgment. Effects and methods in art do get exhausted. Someone painting today like Rembrandt (who always seems to be the painter brought up by reactionaries, justifying Duchamp's note for a ready-made: "Make an ironing board out of a Rembrandt") is what Rembrandt would have been had he painted like Raphael. He would not have been Rembrandt, and the neoacademic painter today who retains some of Rembrandt's style is no one either, certainly not Rembrandt.

The element of originality is not always related to surprise,

† I realize now I could find examples both to prove and to disprove this statement. It is an impossible generalization.

but it often is. Surprise does not have to be shock or a *nouveau frisson*. At times it is part of that deeper satisfaction that results when something expected turns up in an unexpected guise, the best example being in music, when an anticipated final note is worked out in an unusual way; while the rhythm satisfies the expectation, the solution itself affords new pleasure. Within the system of radical change dominating the art world at the moment, the alert and well-trained observer is rarely surprised by the new or original in its general occurrence; the next logical step or reaction to current styles is usually at least vaguely predictable before it has become wholly visible. What is surprising is the specific manifestation. The artist's individual genius, his solution to that next step, no matter how logical it seems after the fact, never ceases to surprise me.

The novelty of Pop Art, for instance, has been so disturbing to some observers that they fail even now to see the originality achieved by several of its makers. The reversal of taste afforded by Pop and by the sensibility of which Pop was the first obvious manifestation is still good for an argument, is still touted as a distasteful aberration promulgated only by those critics whoring after the approval of collectors and Loose publications. This, in spite of the fact that anyone in close contact with the work of younger artists cannot help seeing its very broad effect on both abstract and figurative art. I have felt, in turn, that Op Art, prominently billed as Seitz for sore eyes, was an uninspired product of artificial insemination. Yet recently I have had to note that certain aspects of perceptual abstraction formulated by lesser Op artists are being rethought to more original ends by younger abstract painters and sculptors, which bolsters my conviction that if it seems new, it has a good chance of being valuable.

I am aware that in advocating change and novelty, I am setting myself up for all those timeless shots at contemporary critics as opportunists, faddists, public relations men, and historical illiterates. Actually, I should be one of the last to deny that knowledge of historical method and an eye to broad historical pattern are valuable for contemporary criticism. But utter dependence on historical method in a time of such great change encourages premature decisions and categorization and

results in intellectual stagnation. One cannot set up critical systems when the recent past is constantly altered by the immediate present.

Critical ambivalence toward change arises from the fact that it is easier and usually more satisfying not to change one's mind according to the changes in the art, but to retain fixed criteria, to mark out one area of study and bury oneself in it, continuing to discuss and explore minutely that single area, than to have to look up with new eyes as new works appear and subtly alter the boundaries of that area. The critic who out of moralist and loyalist zeal confines himself to one strain of art, remaining Fogg-bound from all other tendencies, is a masochist, resigned to looking at art he cannot allow himself to like (on top of the general limitations everyone has in view of personal capacity for enjoyment and stimulation). Worse still, he is likely to find the artists he has fixed upon departing from the status quo, outdistancing him, and forcing him to extremes of syllogism in order "logically" to defend his stance.

While I deplore the economic and social pressures of change on the artist, I cannot join the doom-sayers who seem to feel that Art has been destroyed by the present sensibility. Younger critics and artists have matured in a period accustomed to rapid change. Observers in and out of the art world complain about the speed and apparent heedlessness with which aesthetic decisions are made, demonstrated, exhausted, or continued into new manners. The person who suffers most is the artist, but it is also the artist who takes the responsibility, insisting upon a quality and intensity that is extremely difficult to maintain. The result of many complex factors within the art world, the so-called cult of the new is actually a cult of the difficult.† One artist around thirty feels that ten years is as long as such a pace can be kept up within the high standards he has set himself. While most don't go that far, the prevailing replacement of styles and concepts is a result of that pace.

Rapid change also produces its share of easy art—Good Design and retrograde potboilers with a vast area of attractive, unambitious art in between. A tremendous amount of medi-

† See pp. 112–119 of this book.

ocrity is publicly exhibited today, as often in the museums as in commercial galleries and tourist traps. And there is a ridiculous overemphasis on "names" in the center of the advanced art world, a willingness to forget that the best artists make some bad paintings, that a good painter is not necessarily a great painter. In this regard, formalist criticism, based on the impersonal analysis and comparison first advocated by literary critics like Hulme, Eliot, Richards, and Leavis, in the early part of the century, was particularly valuable when it appeared around 1960, for it called attention to the individual properties of works, artists, and periods, and forced the mind and eye to work together, omitting extraneous speculation and emotionalism and purging art criticism of most of the permissive lyricism and literary generalization of the 1950's.

Formalism's specificity did a good deal to clear the air and to bring the critical method closer to the antisentimental approach of the art, though its major drawback was a tendency to eliminate from its evolutionary systems an increasing amount of the better art being done. Ironically, after a brief flirtation with the hardest, coldest, most detailed formal analysis, most younger critics have moved back toward generalization and a broader approach, at times incorporating conceptions filtered in from other, extra-art realms. Much recent writing retains its art for art's sake backbone without expending much descriptive energy on the analysis of single works. Rapid change and preoccupation with the new encourages generalization because a general approach is more flexible. Flexible ideas, in turn, contribute indirectly to change by their openness.

One need not *like* the new. The well-informed, "well-seen" reader need only disagree intelligently. Yet far more common is the armchair amateur who comes to new art and its commentary bowed under preconceptions of unchanging definitions of Art and Beauty. He does not understand the new because he is voluntarily unequipped to understand, and he will rant about how the cult of the new is being put over on him, forgetting that only the ignorant are easily "put on." Such a reader prefers to swallow the word of anyone who supports his initial distaste for the new. Worse still, he loses sight of the fact that the crux of these issues lies not in what is written

about them, but in what has been accomplished in the work written about. Some of the most avid fans of *The New York Times*'s senior critic have never seen nine-tenths of the art he writes about. Such a reader will resist the invitation to dialogue implicit in good criticism; he will look for the passive entertainment he is accustomed to getting from the mass media rather than the active pleasure of participation in intellectual pleasures. As Wallace Stevens once wrote: "No one tries to be more lucid than I. If I do not succeed, it is not a question of my English nor of yours, but I should say of something not communicated because not shared."

I, for one, would rather supply an arena, in which my own and others' opinions can meet, than make taste. The kind of criticism I like is not "educational" in an all too common sense of "educational." That is, it does not tell people how to think, or how to act as though they have thought, but shows rather than tells and explains. Criticism should not have to interpret, except in Eliot's sense of interpretation as presentation of less accessible facts. Freedom from interpretation provides freedom for clearer statement, aimed at those who have looked at enough art and paid enough attention to read that statement. Unfortunately, Art Education and criticism geared to "appreciation," to the formation of its audience's taste, rarely meets the intellectual standards necessary to stimulate ideas of any profundity and endurance, ideas that will prolong and intensify the art experience for the viewer. Too much journalism and educational writing attempts to be enjoyable instead of thought provoking. It founders in superficiality and oversimplification; at the other extreme, much specialized criticism is confused, rhetorical, and heavy-handedly "scholarly." The ideal medium might be the "literary sensibility" which, unlike journalism, "is geared to the timeless. . . . It is willing and solicitous to allow things their complexity, and to respect the irreducibility of much of the best art to anything like simple statement or basic English; and it is really concerned with pleasing one reader only: its owner, with his uncompromising demands on his abilities." [2]

[2] John Simon, *The New York Times*, August 20, 1967, Sec. 2, p. 1.

How much the nonprofessional art audience gains from the most thoroughly considered discussion of specialized issues is another story. For, like the making of art, criticism is basically self-indulgent. The artist does not set out to change the visible world or reform taste; his expansion of how people see or his comments on the world are by-products of the initial impulse to make art. One of the casualties of a preoccupation with the new is Communication, as the word is understood by teachers and television moralists. The responsibility of even the most casual art observer and reader of criticism to think, to look thoughtfully, is practically unacknowledged. The burden is left on the critic's shoulders, and if the critic shrugs it off in order to settle down to serious work, he cannot be blamed. If he is to face issues directly and honestly rather than through a simplified veil of explanation to others, he will open doors only for those who want them opened enough to push a little. Difficult art generates ideas and issues difficult to articulate. If criticism really comes to grips with these ideas, it is not likely to be particularly entertaining. A committed, and even professional, audience is ultimately the committed critic's only audience.

Heroic Years from Humble Treasures: Notes on African and Modern Art*

To the contemporary eye and sensibility, traditional African sculpture is extraordinarily beautiful. We are blasé about its exoticism, or barbarism, having often surpassed these ourselves by now; we take for granted its plastic force, and cannot fully share the experience of the French artists around 1904 who were discovering it for the first time, any more than we can plumb its originally intended depths. But we can easily share the attraction to such a dramatic, nonnaturalistic rendition of natural forms, all the more so since familiarity with contemporary abstract art has accustomed us to its subtleties. The African artist is perhaps the purest exponent of "significant form," and while his choice of these forms is symbolically determined, it led away from the naturalism with which the Western artist had come to a dead end. It signaled the vitality of a formal tradition, broadening the possibilities of art. The greatest lesson primitive sculpture had to teach the European artist may have been the ability of abstract and geometric forms to convey emotional force.† A general rather than a spe-

* Reprinted from *Art International,* Vol. X, No. 7 (September, 1966).

† Although here in New York one has only to walk a block—from the Museum of Primitive Art to the Museum of Modern Art—in order to