

Rochester Institute of Technology

RIT Digital Institutional Repository

Theses

4-1-1985

The Artist in Society

Ann DeMarle-Pollak

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.rit.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

DeMarle-Pollak, Ann, "The Artist in Society" (1985). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the RIT Libraries. For more information, please contact repository@rit.edu.

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

THE ARTIST IN SOCIETY

By

Ann DeMarle-Pollak

April 1985

APPROVALS

Advisor,

Fred Meyer:.....

Date:.....5/15/85.....

Associate Adviser,

Dave Dickinson:.....

Date:.....5/15/85.....

Associate Adviser,

Ron Padgham:.....

Date:.....5/16/85.....

Assistant to the Dean

for Graduate Affairs:.....Fred Meyer.....

Date:.....5/17/85.....

Dean, College of

Fine & Applied Arts:.....Dr. Robert H. Johnston Ph.D.....

Date:.....5/28/85.....

I,.....Ann De Marle-Pollak....., prefer to be contacted each
time a request for production is made. I can be reached at the
following address.

May 10, 1985

A puzzled monk once said to Fuketsu: "You say truth can be expressed without speaking, and without keeping silent. How can this be?"

Fuketsu answered, "In Southern China in the Spring, when I was only a lad, ah! how birds sang among the blossoms!"

Zen Teaching

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vi
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. SQUARE WITHIN THE CIRCLE.....	4
III. SEVERING THE MYSTICAL TIE.....	7
IV. THE PATH TO UNITY.....	11
THE PAINTINGS.....	15
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	23

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1.	Morning Doves	15
2.	Through the Keyhole	16
3.	Wave	17
4.	Inside/Out	18
5.	Untitled	19
6.	4:15 A.M.	20
7.	Midnight	21
8.	That Evening	22

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper is dedicated to my husband, Tom. He is my companion, teacher, and inspiration without whom I may have forsaken my dreams long ago. I would also like to thank Fred Meyer whose encouragement prompted me along my path. My appreciation goes warmly out to my family. They patiently suffered through my insanity making this all possible.

I

INTRODUCTION

This is a technological era: a period in which funding for the arts is cut, art education is considered a frill, and artists are forced to earn "their living at something totally unrelated to art."¹ Many people feel no need to include artistic expression in their lives. There is a widespread fear of being creative illustrated by the common excuse, "I can't even draw a straight line." Hand in hand with this fear is a general distrust of art and of artists as "peculiar, eccentric, and anti-social."² This point was reinforced for me this summer while leading a group of students through the Memorial Art Gallery. A student adamantly refused to enter the room containing contemporary art. Upon questioning, she stated that the art work was "all a joke, anybody could do it."

The dismissal of art as purposeless by our society is highlighted by society's delight in technological progress. The beginning and end of our lives is now accompanied by the latest in modern life support systems that have the potential of giving to others our choice of life or death, and hence, our dignity. Our food is derived from synthetics causing

¹Donald Holden, Art Career Guide, 4th ed., rev. (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1983), p. 70.

²David Mandel, Changing Art, Changing Man (New York: Horizon Press, 1967), p. 91.

widespread cancer. We travel in "precision driving instruments"¹ with hydropneumatic leveling systems, automatic climate control, and electronic cruise-control units. Meanwhile the workers who produce these marvels are reduced to robots. Our children are encouraged to enter into the worlds of computers and engineering, but denied livelihoods in less practical fields. Even our ultimate threat, a nuclear disaster, is a technological product.

In the twentieth century there is a division between the spiritual and the material world. The spiritual world is ruled by intuition, creativity, and the emotions. The arts, religion, and childlike exploration are the roads inward to this domain. The material world is governed by the intellect and reason. Science, technology, and education are its major highways. Homo sapiens are unique in their ability to inhabit both realms. When these two kingdoms merge, man is at peace with himself and his environment. If either world dominates the other, we live in a world of chaos.

How did this imbalance between the arts and technology occur? I do not believe technology is primarily at fault. I do believe that art is a remedy to many of the ills caused by our one-eyed perspective. However the cure cannot be prescribed until the disease is properly diagnosed. This thesis is an attempt to render such a diagnosis using history

¹Mercedes-Benz Advertisement, Time (April 1985), p. 10.

as its tool. Two relevant time periods will be examined and compared with the present. The first period shall be that of Cro-Magnon man and primitive societies. Here art was vital to everyday being. The second interval is the juncture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. It is at this point that the spiritual-material split occurred. Through these comparisons, I hope to clarify why I am a painter.

II

SQUARE WITHIN THE CIRCLE

The way humanity perceives itself and this planet determines the destiny of art for each generation. Egotism, disguised as individuality, is a concept that governs present society. Self-improvement books fill the bookstores. Advertising sings out, "You, you're the one!" and assures us of our discriminating taste. Competition is applauded and encouraged for bringing out the best in us. From this vantage point, it is difficult to comprehend a people who viewed the individual as subordinate to the group.

This attitude belongs to primitive man, whether Aborigine of recent times or Cro-Magnon man of 30,000 years ago. For these people understood the self as:

. . . spilling out into the world beyond the confines of the experiencing body and echoing back again from other selves .
. . . interpermeating other selves in a relationship in which subject and object are no longer distinguishable.'

This communal sensitivity did not end with the tribe. It traveled beyond to include the natural and spiritual world. Modern man sees himself as if a square outside the circle of the earth and the heavens. Primitive peoples saw themselves as

¹The Primal Vision, quote in Ferdinand Anton et al., Primitive Art: Pre-Columbian, North American Indian, African, Oceanic (Baden-Baden: Holle Verlag GmbH, 1967; reprint ed., New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979), p. 265,

a square within a circle. Past and present, ancestors and antelope, mountain and man were all part of one mysterious whole. Art was an essential ingredient in this oneness. It was not an activity set apart and needing interpretation. Painting, sculpture, dance, and song were all methods to communicate with the unseen spirit world. It is believed that artists were the shamans of Cro-Magnon society. Since artists had the ability to create, they were the link between mortal and spirit. However this is supposition and the situation may have been similar to Aboriginal affairs in which:

. . . there is no division between painters and non-painters. While some win a name for themselves for their skill, . . . there is no exclusive group or caste of artists. Every man is potentially a painter and many of them are in fact.¹

In either case, art was powerful. Today we take for granted that an image is merely a representation. To primeval peoples the image was the being it portrayed. This reality was not achieved through realism. The primitive artist was more interested in producing the essence of his subject, an impression of its vital life force, than a physical likeness. Capturing the spiritual and transferring it to the material was art's purpose. This was possible since prehistoric man felt part of the world, not apart from it.

Modern artists still strive to bridge the material-spiritual gap. Sculptor David Smith in speaking of the

¹Robert Edwards and Bruce Guerin, Aboriginal Bark Paintings (Adelaide: Rigby, 1969; reprint ed., 1970), p. 10.

contemporary artist has said:

His new position is somewhat that of primitive man. He is not the scientific viewer of nature. He is a part of nature. He is the nature in the work of art.¹

Unfortunately the priorities of the twentieth century are no longer those of primitive man. Money determines our future. It, along with technology, is the talisman we wave to insure prosperity and keep death away.

¹David Smith, "Second Thoughts on Sculpture", quoted in Readings in American Art Since 1900: A Documentary Survey, ed. Barbara Rose (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), p. 191.

III

SEVERING THE MYSTICAL TIE

When did the shift occur in humanity's vision? Why do we envision ourselves as isolated individuals instead of members of a unity. Consider the Dark Ages. History paints a black canvas of this period: emotional, unenlightened humanity with no rational sense. Look, however, at the Romanesque and Byzantine cathedrals. These were planned and built by master masons and embellished by painters, sculptors, weavers, metalsmiths, and stained glass workers. In these equivalents of museums of art, dignitary and peasant came to worship. As with primitive man the people "perhaps, liked to believe that the golden effigy of St. Foy was the saint herself."¹ This alarmed many who feared idol worship. So was born the Iconoclastic Controversy within the Catholic Church. In the settlement of the Council of Nicae of 787, one gains a perspective of art's role in the Middle Ages:

We . . . define with all certitude and accuracy that, just as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross, so also the venerable and holy images, as well in painting and mosaic as of other fit materials, should be set forth in the holy churches of God and on the sacred vessels and on the vestments and on the hangings and in pictures both in houses and by the wayside. . . . For by so much more frequently as they are seen in artistic representation, by so much more

¹St. Foy was a young Christian martyr executed by a Roman governor. There is a church dedicated to her in Conques, France. She is referred to in P.A. Tomory, Foundations of European Art (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1969), p. 73.

readily are men lifted up to the memory of their prototypes and to a longing after them; and to these should be given salutation and honourable reverence, not indeed the true worship of faith which pertains only to divine nature, but to these as to the figure of the precious and life-giving cross. . . . For the honour which is paid to the images passes to that which the image represents.¹

Art was a tool fostering communion with the divine. In an illiterate era, it was also a vehicle for teaching. Yet artists did not enjoy an elevated status. They were often nameless craftsmen unlike our present artistic elite. During the Dark Ages specialization was unheard of. A painter might be commissioned to paint an altarpiece one week and a helmet the next. Much of an artist's talent was spent decorating common objects; in fact, the London painters' guild was a branch of the saddler's guild. Many guild clauses were aimed at preventing fraud. Painting an unsafe saddle so that it appeared sound would be such a case. Other regulations restricted the substitution of diluted or cheap pigment for more expensive gold-leaf or lapis lazuli. Seldom do today's art buyers question an artist's choice of materials. Witness the work of the Abstract Expressionists. It challenges restorers to keep the paint from cracking off the canvas.

The artists of the Middle Ages were held responsible for their work because art was entwined with daily living. The division of art and life began to occur in the Gothic era and the

¹A History of the Iconoclastic Controversy, quoted in Herbert Read, Art and Society, 2nd ed., rev. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1950), p. 61.

Renaissance. Humanism--a philosophy that focuses on the primacy of man, drawing its strength from Greek and Roman thought--is primarily to blame. Tired of holy wars and schisms within the Church, Europeans grew disillusioned with Catholicism. Money, once a means of exchange, became a commodity. It replaced God as a power source. In this new arrangement, ancient Greek and Roman rationalism set the ideological standards. The material world became the only certain world. This outlook led to two very distinct changes for the artist.

Elevated status was the first change for the artist. Through the influence of classical literature, the artist came to be regarded as an intelligent gentleman. Castiglione in 1508, speaking of learning to draw, illustrates the transfer of attitudes:

. . . nor are you to be surprised that I should suggest this quality which today may seem mechanical and hardly appropriate to a gentleman. Yet I remember having read that the ancients, especially throughout Greece, desired that the noble children should be set to work at painting in the schools as a thing both wholesome, honest, and necessary and this occupation was afforded a high place among the liberal arts. For it was forbidden by public order that it should be taught to slaves.¹

The rise of the artist, seemingly beneficial, restricted art's audience. Fine Art aligned itself with the powerful but few. Crafts belonged to the common people. With the advent of the

¹Lateninische Schriftquellen zur Kunst in England, Wales und Schottland vom Jahre 901 bis zum Jahre 1307, quoted in Andrew Martindale, The Rise of the Artist in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1972), p. 103.

Industrial Revolution even the craft-commoner bond would dissolve. The world, however, is shared by all; the disruption of the art and humanity connection leads eventually to the plastification of our modern environment.

The second major change for the Renaissance artist was due to mankind's pull away from the mystical world. One point perspective, a means of fixing place and time, effectively brought painting down to worldly realms. *As Renaissance man became more dependent on the material plane, art became more realistic. Growing out of this desire for realism, oil usurped tempera as the medium of choice. Tempera, better suited for creating flat surfaces and bright color, reinforced a painting's otherworldliness. Oil was wonderful for modeling space and suggesting reality. As painters' materials changed, subject matter changed. Painters turned to Greek and Roman mythology for their images. History paintings were considered the pinnacle of artistic expression. Madonnas and Christ Childs were still produced, but they had been reduced to mere histories. Realism severed the artist's tie to his mystical self, disposing of the voice of the emotional and divine. The artist was no longer the messenger between the heavens and humanity. In actuality, the artist and art had lost their power. Art degraded itself to a decorative, literary function dependent upon technique. Advertising is a modern child of art in these roles.

IV

THE PATH TO UNITY

Rationalism strangled man's view of himself as one with the universe. Humanity has mutated into a mass of isolated individuals. Monetary power replaces divine power. Since this is the only world we are sure of, one must grab all one can from it. Progress presides. Competition is its handmaiden. Science and technology are the means to foster growth on this level, even to the point of destroying the natural environment and our fellow man. If art's true purpose is to connect the great web of the mystical unconscious, modern man is no longer interested in art. Art does not fulfill technological man's gameplan.

Need the outlook be so bleak? The sciences of physics, psychology, and biology are beginning to see the world as the artist always had. Quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity are breaking apart the notion of a one-level universe to that of a multi-level universe. Jung postulated the existence of the collective unconscious, thereby rediscovering the unity of mankind. Biologists are beginning to comprehend the division of the brain. Each hemisphere of the brain is dependent on the other. The right governs our emotional, creative self. The left is responsible for the rational, intellectual self. Can it be much longer till

society understands the significance of these discoveries? We need both--psyche and intellect, art and science--to survive.

There are layers upon layers of human and spiritual understanding to be found within the arts. It is from this wellspring that I choose to quench my thirst. In so doing I hope to enlighten others to the sacred nature of existence. Each painting is drawn from a source deep within my being. The ancients personified this source and named it the Muses. The Muses and I confront the blank canvas; drawing lines, adding washes. Forms emerge sometimes only to be rejected and reformed. A dialogue transpires that ties me into the mystical realm of creation. My desire is to provoke a mood, an essence of reality. Like the primitive artist and the medieval image makers, I find abstraction more appropriate for this purpose. Flat, subtle color reveals eternity. Yet hints of real objects can be a key for the viewer to enter a painting. Still it is the spirit--the illusion, not the physical manifestation, that I seek. As Robert Henri has said:

Reveal the spirit you have about the thing, not the materials you are going to paint. Reality does not exist in material things. Rather paint the flying spirit of the bird than its feathers.¹

I wish to set the spirit soaring; unbound, unbridled, and unfettered. Art is a necessity in a technological world. It may

¹Readings in American Art Since 1900: A Documentary Survey, ed. Barbara Rose (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), p. 38 quoting Robert Henri from an address at the School of Design for Women, Philadelphia, 1901.

be the only path we have back to the unity of man and the divine.
This is why I paint.

The Master Kosen drew the words "The First Principle" which are carved over the gate of the Oaku Temple in Kyoto. He drew them with his brush on a sheet of paper--later they were carved in wood.

A pupil of the master had mixed the ink for him, and stood by, watching the master's calligraphy. The pupil said: "Not so good!" Kosen tried again. The pupil said: "That's worse than the first one!" and Kosen tried again.

After the sixty-fourth try, the ink was running low, and the pupil went out to mix some more. Left alone, undistracted by any critical eye watching him, Kosen made one more quick drawing with the last of the ink. When the pupil returned, he took a good look at this last effort.

"A masterpiece!" he said.

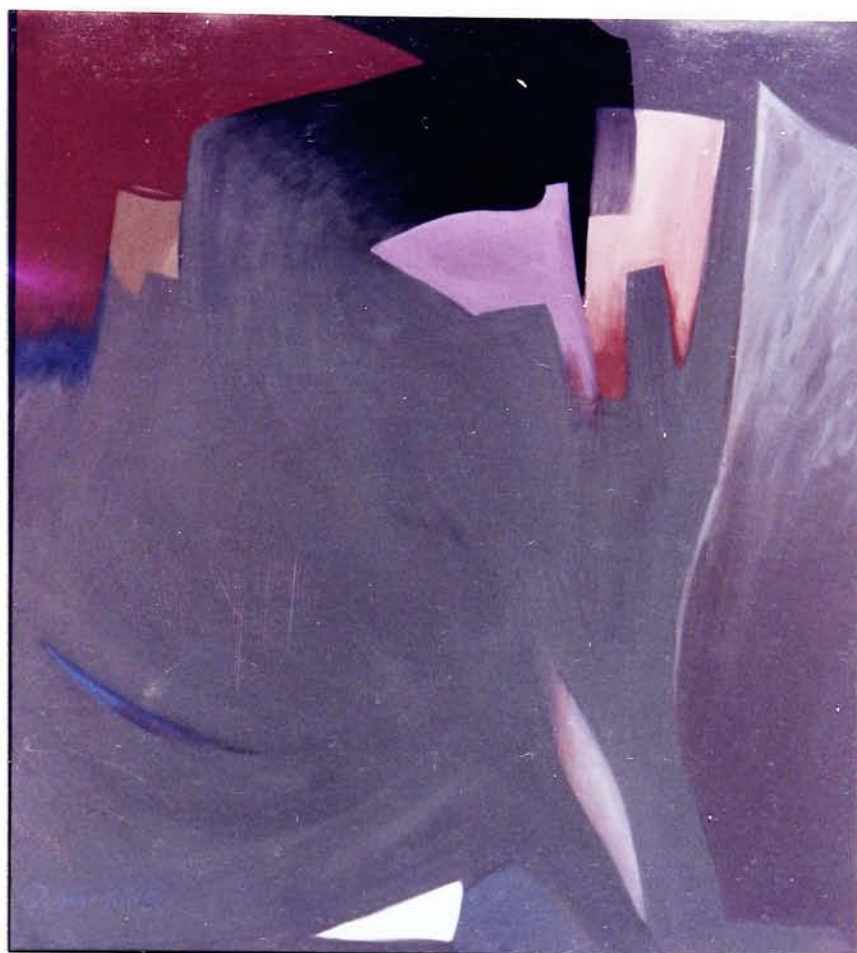
Zen Teaching

















SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anton, Ferdinand; Dockstader, F. J.; Trowell, M.; and Nevermann, H. Primitive Art: Pre-Columbian, North American Indian, African, Oceanic. Baden-Baden: Holle Verlag GmbH, 1967; reprint ed. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979.
- Arguelles, Jose A. The Transformative Vision: Reflections on the Nature and History of Human Expression. Boulder: Shambhala, 1975.
- Collier, Graham. Art and the Creative Consciousness. Foreward by Rene Hugghe. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972.
- Coutts-Smith, Kenneth. The Dream of Icarus. New York: George Braziller, 1970.
- Edwards, Robert and Guerin, Bruce. Aboriginal Bark Paintings. Adelaide: Rigby, 1969; reprint ed., 1970.
- Fisher, Leonard Everett. The Art Experience: Oil Painting, 15th-19th Centuries. New York: Franklin Watts, 1973.
- Holden, Donald. Art Career Guide. 4th ed., rev. New York: Watson-Guptill, 1983.
- Houston, Jean. Life-Force: The Psycho-Historical Recovery of the Self. New York: Delacorte Press, 1980.
- Mandell, David. Changing Art, Changing Man. New York: Horizon Press, 1967.
- Martindale, Andrew. The Rise of the Artist in the Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1972.
- Pfeiffer, John E. The Creative Explosion: An Inquiry into the Origins of Art and Religion. New York: Harper & Row, 1982.
- Read, Herbert. Art and Society. 2nd ed., rev. New York: Pantheon Books, 1950.
- Rose, Barbara., ed. Readings in American Art Since 1900: A Documentary Survey. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968.
- Smith, Marian W., ed. The Artist in Tribal Society: Proceedings of a Symposium at the Royal Anthropological Institute. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961.

Tomory, P.A. Foundations of European Art. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1969.

Wilson, Frank Avray. Art as Revelation. Fontwell: Centaur Press, 1981.