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AMBIGUITY IN ART

by

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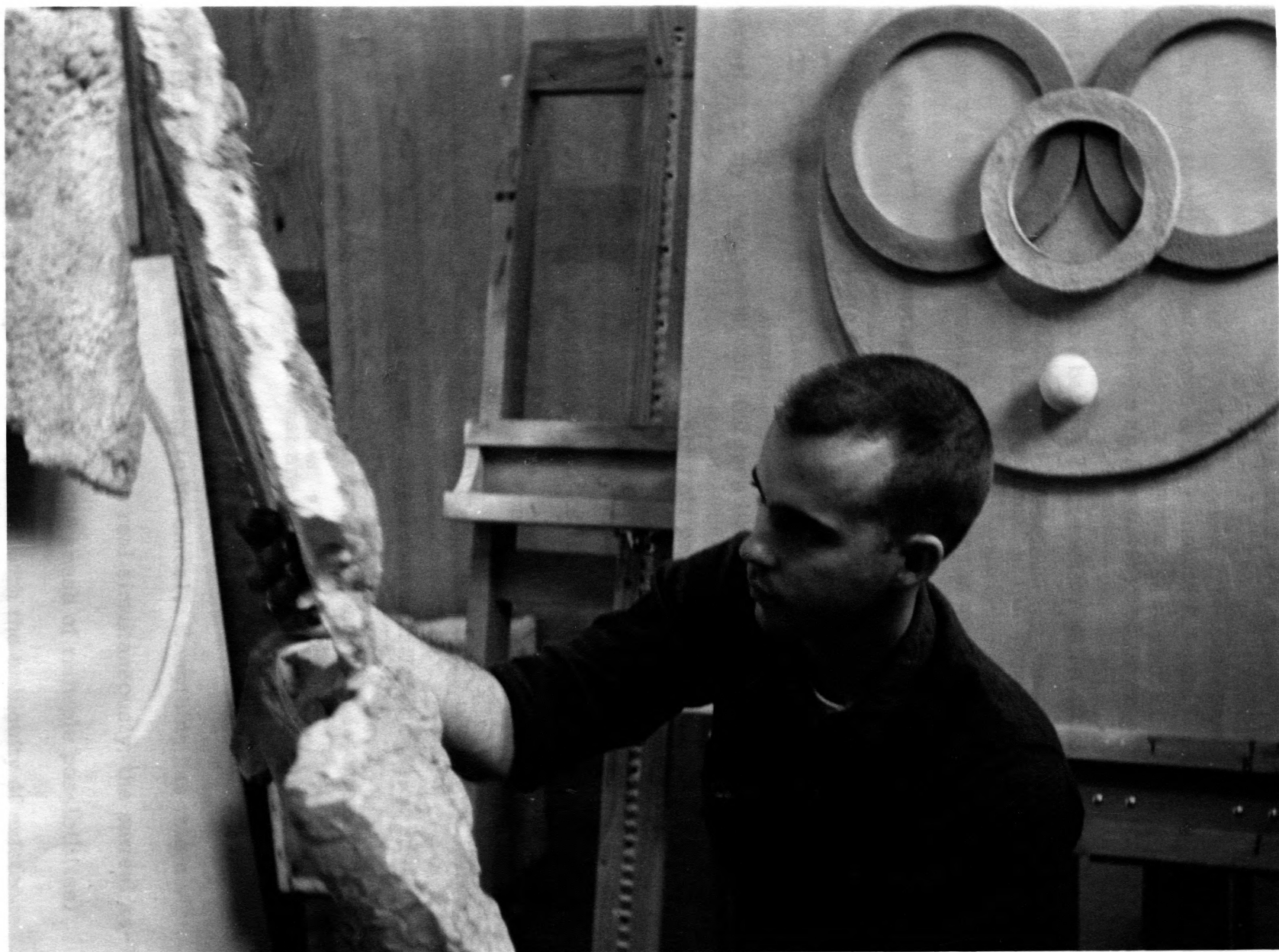

Major Professor

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PLATE I

The candidate in the studio.



INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest tasks that man has is to understand the world. In order to write a thesis of a creative nature it is the first and most difficult task of the artist to stop and take an accounting and inventory of himself-- who am I? what am I? what do I believe? and what, as an artist, am I doing in and through my work? It has been my intent in this paper to develop my philosophy of art (and life), to attempt to answer the questions above, and, in doing so, to either strengthen or discard my beliefs and opinions and, therefore, to give greater depth and clarity to my work.

This process involved the determination of what I felt to be basic characteristics of my work and myself and then the investigation of their scope and validity in the development of previous art periods and their evidence in the art of the present. The most basic and common characteristic of my work is summed up in the word "ambiguity" and its ramifications. The word ambiguous, by definition, means: (1) Doubtful or uncertain, especially from obscurity or indistinctness; also, inexplicable. (2) Capable of being understood in two or more possible senses; equivocal. I feel that artistic expression basically deals with the search for that which is real and that which is unreal to the artist. So, what is reality and what are those things or states that constitute unreality? The problem with defining reality is that it is actually inseparable from that which is unreal or appears to be unreal. Everything has this curious interplay of both being real and not being real simultaneously; the surreal aspect of existence, or the ambiguous (in the sense of multiple possibilities) permeates everything. This thesis will deal with the ambiguity of existence

and interpretation with regard to the part it plays in creative graphic expression.

One of the circumstances that most substantiates the validity of my statements in this paper is that the ideas, experiences, viewpoints, and beliefs that I had brought to some sort of previous formulation have been mentioned in most of the research I have done for this thesis. In other words, I have arrived at the conclusions by myself and with my own thought processes derived from my own experiences; and I have lived my life accordingly. My art and my existence are inseparable. Knowing that what I feel is valid for myself, further exploration in reading and personal experiences have confirmed that these concepts and the manner and substance of their expression are not only valid for me, but are also valid as artistic expression-- this being due to the universality of the underlying concept.

¹ Mervyn Levy, ed., *The Pocket Dictionary of Art Terms*, p. 8.

DEFINITIONS AND PROCEDURE

The content of this paper is achieved through the approach used in structuring and organizing my visual expressions: that of defining, destroying, rebuilding, and defending. To begin, it will be necessary to define three periods or movements in art. Surrealism generally believed in (the lower-case word will be used as I will not be referring to it in the proper noun sense as to denote a "school", but in the universal sense to denote an underlying basis of philosophy and life): the importance of dreams and the subconscious life of man; the denial of contradictions or paradoxes since the human mind is capable of attaining a state where opposites are harmonized and unified into one force (the resolution of dream and reality as being "absolute reality" or surreality); the role of chance in daily existence and in the determination and progress of human affairs; the existence and distinction between the self and the ego; and the liberation of the artist from the "rules" of art. These underlying beliefs of surrealism are as evident now as they were in the 1920's and 1930's. Formal Abstraction: The creation and organization of shapes, lines, and colors which have no apparent counterparts in nature.¹ Abstract Expressionism: Producing relatively fortuitous abstract effects whose patterns and designs suggest to the painter the basis of a more consciously controlled completion.²

¹Mervyn Levy, ed., The Pocket Dictionary of Art Terms, p. 9.

²Ibid., p. 11.

Present movements in art since 1940 have been a revolution against the concepts that began in 1870 and reached a climax in the 1930's. It is the concepts of this period of 1870-1940 that covers what I call "Formal Abstraction". It is a decadent period because it became formalized and then categorized. Categorization, possible only upon retrospect, involves a completion of development in toto. Its precepts and involvements have assumed their rightful place as a period-- developed from the previous period(s). Therefore, categorization is the result of a perspective-development-evaluation sequence and as such is positively indicative of the art movement's own integral completion and the resultant evolvement of subsequent means of expression and criticism. Categorization is complete when a period can be, in a strict sense, formalized. When it can be performed by the artisan's completion of a set of rules and results in a "satisfactory" example of the goal of the period; when it can be made, and not discovered, and cannot be developed without destroying its integrity; then it is academic with all the deadness that the word connotes. Formal abstraction is dead.

Abstract Expressionism, now declined, has served a very vital precursory role in the present freedom of the art-object. (I feel that the movement was the inevitable evolution of art from formal abstraction because of formal abstraction's emphasis upon man's relationship to his world in a perceptual sense and man's role of interpreter of that world of perception.) The evolvement of the spontaneous highly subjective approach and the role of chance occurrences produced new form and extreme freedom of artistic vocabulary.

I believe the foregoing examples show an evolvement of purpose and/or

HISTORICAL TRACING

The period of formal abstraction, beginning with Cézanne, embraced most important is the increasing requirement of man to create, and also his need to experience the creative production that cannot be personally fulfilled. Due to the complexity of socio-psychic existence of this age, man also needs to both express and to comprehend simultaneously at more than one level of meaning.

"The Temptation of Saint Anthony") and others working in a similar vein in antiquity; Odilon Redon ("Anemones", "Conch Shell"); Duchamp ("Fountain", "A Bruit Secret"); Gauguin ("Decorative Landscape-- 1888"); Dadaism (Man Ray-- "Metronome", M. Ernst-- "Fatagaga", Hans Arp-- "Colored Wooden Forms, 1917"); Futurists, and their attempts to capture the uncapturable concept of motion as revealed in the mechanistic-environmental revolutions occurring during their time (G. Balla-- "Dog on a Leash"); Surrealism; Miro since 1925; Kurt Schwitters and the Mertzbau school; Dubuffet ("The Beard of Computation", and the recent L'Hourloupes series); and also a great number of works and artists since 1955, including Johns ("The Flag"), Stankiewicz ("Kabuki Dancer"), Keinholz ("The Beanery"), and Robert Morris (The Dwan Gallery Show). The common basis of reference for this generalized but valid sequence is that of the intentions and percepts of the artists, and not necessarily the period during which they worked. The common factor in the work of these men and movements is that of ambiguity.

UNDERLYING BASIS FOR CREATIVE COMMUNICATION

I believe the foregoing examples show an evolvement of purpose and/or

See Arturo B. Fallico, Art and Existentialism, pp. 1-2.

direction in art which is resultant from the basic drives of man. There is also the innate existence and necessity of these drives to be expressed and accepted. Also important is the increasing requirement of man to create, and also his need to enjoy or vicariously experience the creative production that cannot be personally fulfilled. Due to the complexity of socio-politico-economic existence of this age, man also needs to both express and to comprehend simultaneously at more than one level of meaning.

Ambiguity deals with duality. How is this expressed in painting? In painting one is dealing with time, space, time-space, shape, form, color, direction, and basically and most important of all-- the object.³ One finds himself revolving around the object and is confronted with certain questions: What is the essence of the object? What is its relation to time? to space? to its environment? to other objects? to itself? to the observer? and to the artist grasping with these questions in a subjective and/or objective manner?

In order for an art-object to be formulated by the artist, to subsequently be produced, to be received by observers, and then to continue its role of communication, there must be deep or strong forces at work on the part of the artist in producing the art-object. These forces must be evident in the art-object itself and therefore also evident to the observer. It is characteristic of a work that if it does not contain the property of such forces it cannot have, or continue to have, a prolonged existence as an art-object-entity. Since the art-object cannot possess this property if its producer-originator could not or did not endow it

³See Henry Clay Lindgren and Donn Dyme, *Psychology: An Introduction to the Study of Human Behavior*, pp. 6-8.

³See Arturo B. Fallico, Art and Existentialism, pp. 1-2.

with such, then what is the property's nature? I believe it is, on the part of the artist, the ability to have and to communicate through his work, those ideas, values, symbols, and concepts which are psychologically meaningful and capable of reception by the observer. This nature or depth of communicative meaning in an art-object can only be arrived at through the honesty and sincerity of the artist in dealing with his thoughts, ideas, and motivations. It has been long suspected and is now definitely known that the conscious states of man's being are not sufficient to explain him to himself and to others. His subconscious contains a larger and, especially, a more authentic or accurate part of his being. It is known that our conscious speech and our daily actions are usually in contradiction with our true selves and our deepest desires.⁴ The neat patterns of human behavior have been found to be patterns formed by social forces rather than by our desires, temperaments, or inner psychological selves. The discovery that we are more sincerely revealed in our dreams and in our purely instinctive actions than in our daily exterior habits of behavior shows the validity of this level of consciousness in communication.

Most laymen, and all too many artists, are either unaware of their subconscious existences, or, if they are aware, they expend more of their energies than they realize in their efforts to suppress this type of subconscious thought process. Each clings to his consciousness because it is dominated by system. It is a consciousness that is safe, manageable, tidy, and reassuring-- only noticed when

⁴See Henry Clay Lindgren and Donn Dyme, Psychology: An Introduction to the Study of Human Behavior, pp. 6-8.

it becomes disturbing. Out of fear and misunderstanding each attempts to minimize the subconscious, or to disregard it altogether, whenever he can. The frightening revelation of abysses that defy the human understanding is dismissed as illusion, and the artist is regarded as a victim and perpetrator of deception.

However, it is not the artist alone who feels and is aware of the "nightside" of life, but also the seers, prophets, leaders, and the enlighteners. However dark and terrifying the "lower world" may seem, it is not altogether unfamiliar.

Man has known about it from time immemorial; for the "primitive" man today it is an unquestionable part of his picture of the cosmos. It is only the "civilized" man who has repudiated it because of his fear of superstition and metaphysics, and because he strives to construct a conscious world that is safe and manageable. Yet even now, the artist catches sight of the omniscient "spirits and demons and gods". He is the civilized man who sees something of the same psychic world that strikes terror into the savage and the barbarian.

ASPECTS OF AMBIGUITY

Thus far it has been established that ambiguity in painting deals with the duality of the artist and the object, and that for an art-object to exist, by definition, it must communicate. A painting is a form of communication that is constantly reaching out to find a response. I do not believe that this communication is achieved largely by pictorial rhetoric or by the manipulation of seductive paint surfaces. Nor does a painting "work" because it is born of theatrical props, beautiful subjects, or memories of other paintings. All of these aspects might

⁵ William G. Stewart, *Gloom, Doom & A Glimmer*, p. 3.

I am that grey thing...
 the back walks...
 the bushes.

I am that grey thing that never looks backward
 or lightly,
 or long.

I walk with you, my friend, and wonder,
 how you wonder, why you never will speak.

I trail you, my friend, with footsteps,
 Silent footsteps, like the fog in the night.

I am that fog gathering greyly at midnight

I am that shadow, scaring children at night

I am that evil, that always goes with you

why do you wonder? My friend...

I am you.⁵

ASPECTS OF AMBIGUITY

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⁵William G. Stewart, Gloom, Doom & A Glimmer, p. 3.

astound or assist, but they will never alone communicate the emotional content or exaltation of life, which is, by definition, the task of the artist.

The Myth

So then, for the art-object to be communicative, it must establish contact with an area of human understanding which underlies that of our well-ordered consciousness. It was noted that the existence and "reality" of the subconscious has been recognized by men since primitive times. There has never been a primitive culture that did not possess a system of secret teaching. These cultures have used men's-councils and totem-clans to preserve the meaning of hidden things that lie apart from man's daytime existence-- things which he has always known to constitute his most vital experiences. Knowledge of these events or "states" is handed down to the younger men in the rites of initiation. The rich mythology of antiquity is a relic of earlier experiences in human development.

There is, therefore, no reason not to expect the artist to resort to mythology in order to give his experiences a more "real" and fitting expression. The primordial experience, the subconscious, is the source of his creativeness. In itself it offers no words or visions; it is a vision seen "as in a glass, darkly"; it is a deep presentiment that strives to find expression. Since any one particular expression of these ideas from the subconscious can never exhaust or exactly grasp the possibilities of the vision, the artist must resort to imagery--imagery that is difficult to handle and full of contradictions--in order for him to express the weird paradoxicality of his vision.

Ode to French Horn & Sex

Tonight it is a cold and lonely night.

The wind has died and it is in a way beautiful
as you.

My heart dies and the days pass...

Not that they go quicker - but easier.
I feel throbbings down deep, my love
Something there longs to be released.
Manifestations of hue upon papers.

The heat seeps as sleep creeps over me.
Expressions of sorrow - bitter sorrows and long longings

Sway and be lifted up
Lift your inner-inter soul
as your body falls.
Pulsations sweep softly all around.

The horn moans, rising or falling lifting
Majestic & Thrilling & Sorrowful
Heart and soul are transported for a brief
all too wonderful eternity.

The Horns fade a thousand miles and a hundred worlds away.
...Suspense ah! ,
but knowing

With this men die and
With this men live forever.
Cascading crescendos of burnished-copper webs
sparkle and weave and dazzle and cover
one with pure unquestioned existence...⁶

Psychology can do nothing toward the elucidation of this imagery except bring
together materials for comparison and give us a terminology for its discussion.

According to this terminology, that which gives rise to the vision is called the

⁷C. G. Jung, "Psychology and Literature", from Brewster Ghiselin's The Creative Process, p. 218.

⁶Stewart, op. cit., pp. 8-9. Outline of Abnormal Psychology.

collective unconscious.⁷ The collective unconscious is a certain psychic disposition shaped by the forces of heredity; from it consciousness has developed. It is known that in eclipses of consciousness--in dreams, narcotic states, and cases of insanity--there come to the surface psychic products or contents that show all the traits of primitive levels of psychic development. Mythological themes clothed in modern dress also frequently appear.⁸ Whenever the collective unconsciousness becomes a living experience and is brought to bear upon the conscious outlook of an age, an event takes place which is a creative act of potential importance to everyone living in that period. It produces an art-object that contains a message for generations. The relating of an "absolute" such as the collective unconsciousness to the individual's subconscious, and the subsequent rejection of the depth of assumed validity attributed to the logical intelligence allows the art-object to assume self-identity, therefore, it can extend itself far beyond the personal life and scope of a man to a plane of true objectivity or universality.

The Paradox And The Absurd

Related to the term ambiguity, and relevant to its discussion with regard to creativity, are the terms paradox and absurd. A paradox is an assertion seemingly contradictory in itself, or opposed to common sense, but which is, in fact, is definable, classifiable, or noticeable except by contrast with something else.

⁷C. G. Jung, "Psychology and Literature", from Brewster Ghiselin's The Creative Process, p. 218.

⁸See Gardner Murphy, An Outline of Abnormal Psychology.

true. An absurdity is an assertion which is contrary to reason, opinion generally held, common sense, or that which seems to be incongruous (i. e., containing inconsistent or inharmonious parts or qualities).

Conceptual-Interpretive-Duality

The conceptual term which seems to best encompass the above two definitions is that of conceptual-interpretive-duality. The idea seems to occur in a wide variety of ways in the inseparable polarity of opposites, or in the mutuality and reciprocity of all the possible contents of the consciousness. It is easy to see theoretically that all perception is of contrasts-- figure and ground, light and shadow, clear and vague, firm and weak. The edge-of-extent of one object is one-and-the-same with the edge and extent of that of the object(s) surrounding it. Is the inside edge of a doughnut its hole, or is the outside of the hole the doughnut?-- they are one-and-the-same. The conceptual-interpretive-duality concept involves the principle that all qualities and opposites are not disjointed, but polar; they do not encounter and confront one another, but are exfoliations from a common center. Ordinary thinking conceals polarity and relativity, because it employs terms (literally the terminals, ends, or poles) and neglects that which lies between them. Now, consciousness or sense perception is always a sensation of contrasts. It is a specialization in differences, and nothing is definable, classifiable, or noticeable except by contrast with something else. But man does not live by consciousness alone, for this linear, step-by-step, contrast procedure of recognition is inadequate for organizing or understanding anything as complex as the human body, much less the cosmos!

Since it is necessary for the artist in his creative expression to expend that which is, for him, most deep and sincere, then the true objectivity of man lies in his subconscious. Further, the subconscious, when it does become expressed or evident in the tangible art-object, has shown or presented itself in ways or conceptions that appear to the conscious to be ambiguous, paradoxical, absurd, or incongruous. It is evident, then, that there will be no singular or absolute manner in which the art-object acts or has effect upon the observer(s). Divergencies should arise in the interpretation of an art-object, and there should be differences in resonances provoked within the observer by the action of the work. I feel that the diversified extent of beneficial responses to the art-object by the observer is indicative of the validity of the work as a communication form, and therefore of the depth and success of the creator as an artist.

...the possibility of the schema's arousing such a broad range of associations, depending on the emotional vocabulary of the viewer, is a sign of its power to communicate human passion in a truly abstract way, while never losing its specific identity as a pictorial statement. The exposure is one of sensibility, rather than of literal imagistic intent, and therefore engages the viewer in its meaning rather than declaring it.⁹

To paraphrase Cocteau: Before certain artists we simply respond...the part of ourselves we least understand recognizes something valid, and unless we work with this instinct, as well as with our intellects, we are mere husks.

While art-objects do imply a rationally-conceived ulterior motive by means of their very existence, and while any creative or imaginative act or expression is Process.

⁹Stewart, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
 Frank O'Hara, Robert Motherwell, p. 19.

the result of prior effort and activity, even the willing, of the conscious,¹⁰ then the underlying source of the vision of the work must be subconscious or nonrational or, even apparently, irrational. The artist does not seek a miracle by miraculous means, by automatism, or by mechanical techniques. He simply confines himself to the structure of the human "vital being" as philosophy and text-books of psychology describe it.

IT HAS BEEN THE FIRST DAY...

It has been the first day

Pure unfiltered sheets of sunshine cascade from
a blue blanket

the whole world lies silent

soaking, oh-so-slowly this life from above

I lie there on the ground; myself a part of all this

and

myself apart from all this

The whole world around me ebbs and flows with
life. and. soon these pulsations pick me up

too and my body sways in rhythm with the world

Warmth flows over me mingled with the opiate of
crushed grass in the sun.

I melt and my soul seeps down to some roots below.¹¹

¹⁰See Henri Poincard's famous treatise "Mathematical Creation" from The Foundations of Science. Reprinted in Brewster Ghiselin, ed., The Creative Process.

¹¹Stewart, op. cit., p. 7.

¹²Marcel Jean, The History of Surrealist Painting, p. 207.

¹³Ibid., p. 207.

Perhaps the most lucid explanation of the multiplicity of interpretation is contained in the "paranoiac-critical method" of Salvador Dali. This definition is somewhat difficult to understand because it is paradoxical, and all of his terms are more or less contradictory: "Paranoiac-critical activity: spontaneous method of original knowledge based upon the interpretative-critical association of delirious phenomena".¹² He has also defined it as "A spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based upon the critical and systematic objectification of delirious associations and interpretations".¹³ Critical paranoia might be compared to an image-interpretation test, a test repeated interminably, and invariably producing different results. This is to say that a given reality suggests two, three, or more different ones (depending on the individual's imaginative capacity), each one as acceptable as the original, since each variation can be perceived and accepted as real by others. For instance, one can see, or persuade others to see, all sorts of shapes in a cloud: a horse, a dragon, a human body, a palace, a face, and so on. Any aspect of the physical world could be treated in this manner. From this the conclusion must be that it is impossible to depend upon immediate reality per se, as it may represent or mean anything at all. Seen in this way, critical paranoia is not only a creative "method", in which we can easily recognize a "means of forcing inspiration" as in the gazing at old walls advocated by Leonardo, but is, in addition, an attempt to disorganize the outside world as an impetus toward

sample of the subjective submersions becoming an objective reality. True crea-

¹² Marcel Jean, The History of Surrealist Painting, p. 207.

¹³ Ibid., p. 207.

disorientation and reorganization. From a pictorial point of view, Dali's paranoiac-critical method achieves concrete form in the process of the double image. From the double image one passes to the multiple image, in which the same picture can represent several different images at the same time. One may at this point question whether or not the absolute freedom of interpretation and creation represent, ultimately, nothingness. If it were possible for a person to do exactly what he wanted to do (and it is not, except for suicide), then his activity would inevitably be devoid of any sense or form. This answers the question. A state of nothingness cannot occur due to the very concept of the object, which presupposes the idea of an obstacle, (i. e., it constitutes a closed unity resistant to our imagination and our desire to alter it at whim--the unity and consistency are the essence of the object). It is within the object's manner of resistance and its means of forming a closed unity that endless variations result. An object may take on a thousand different forms, but it invariably expresses the concept of the closed, the resistant, the unified; therefore, as soon as a reality shows a regular pattern and begins to possess a constant rhythm, it has the capacity to become an object. The ideas and contents of the unconscious mind can impregnate certain areas of the conscious mind so strongly as to be forced to materialize themselves in the shape of images and objects (for the artist), concepts (for the philosopher and the mathematician), and of delusions and hallucinations (for the insane). In any case, it is an example of the subjective subconscious becoming an objective reality. True creation or creative freedom, however, while it is the struggle to liberate oneself

from a fixed and determined "past reality", is still and at the same time based upon another determination-- that of its own future.

Gestalt

I feel some mention should be made in this paper of the Gestalt school of psychology, since it does shed some light on the concept of imagination and therefore upon creativity. Form, structure, relationship, organism, part-whole systems, and gestalt (or closure) is basic for the product of imagination and for its process. To see star groups, or constellations, instead of unrelated stars, is the gist of closure. It is the confluence of elements. Since imagination only regroups sensory material, a new and fertile pattern of thought may come from a conceptual "reslicing" of the universe into fresh classes and the making of new combinations of them. The gestalt school has especially emphasized the importance of closure or structuring in insight. Insight is an imaginative way of learning or problem solving, in contrast to the blind way of trial and error. Beyond sensation and even simple perception, involving the correlation of current sense data and that of past experience, closure is a basic property of mind. It is the ability to separate a figure from its ground, to formulate a gestalt, or form, or to identify an entity. (It is the principle in operation in seeing three separate dots as the corners of a triangle.) Thus it is the ability to combine parts or elements into a whole, to integrate systems. It is also the converse ability to identify parts or elements in the whole, to fragment or differentiate systems, and to shift from one whole to another-- to re-structure a system.

AMBIGUITY NOW

The surrealists were not describing human experience-- they despaired of understanding anything so complex and variable. All they were interested in doing was showing a kaleidoscopic view of life, a new arrangement of signs, or an unexpected set of formations which might cast new lights or shadows on life, but without thereby deciphering it. I feel that some of the limitations of the scope and experience of surrealism have been overcome by the breakthrough in vocabulary given to us by Abstract Expressionism. This breakthrough gives liberty to the expression of experiences that were too mentally inaccessible to the surrealists. This freedom of vocabulary, along with the advance, influence, and acceptance of Freud and psychoanalytical knowledge, has made the area of personal experience an open field for the creator. This new freedom still works toward not answering the questions that one may have, but hints at suggestions, presents aspects and interpretations of the question and possible personal answers, and poses other related questions.

The succession of art movements, beginning with the liberation by Dada, then Surrealism, Cubism, Formal Abstraction, Abstract Expressionism, assemblage, junk sculpture, Pop, Op, kinetic, Concrete Expressionism, and Ob, have led to the variety of art directions existing today.

There are other manifestations of ambiguity apparent today-- in social revolutions and ideas, in drama, in literature, in poetry, and in our most basic everyday associations with our fellow-men as revealed in our speech patterns and constructions.

Camp

The social revolution of Camp probably began with Duchamp's sending a both self-revealing humor of Picasso and Joyce. Humor can be directed, as a commonplace and "despicable" piece of art to an exhibition (the urinal) as an anti-art gesture toward modern sculpture. The idea that gave his gesture an identity and a validity as an art-object was that the object really was beautiful in itself and was probably better executed technically than much of the other contemporary work submitted. The term Camp originated in homosexual slang and is used to denote a man who, say at a party, will act more effeminately than he usually does, making an insiders' joke with the other homosexuals in the room. Its more general usage applies to any art or art-form in which the artist exaggerates his own traits in conspiracy with his audience. For example, an eight-hour "underground" movie by Andy Warhol is boring, but his friends are delighted to understand that Warhol meant it to bore. Or a fashion designer will have an elephant's foot for an umbrella stand in his salon.

The significance of the "camp" movement lies in the idea of observer participation. This can be trivial (as when its rapport is in the shallow smirk of its participants-- a characteristic of the faddish pop culture), or mediocre (as in op art), or significant (as in some of the more serious "happenings", in participant-oriented kinetic sculpture and paintings, in contemporary drama (Marat/Sade), or in the highest plane of intellectually-participating art-objects).

Humor

14 "American Humor: Hardly a Laughing Matter", Time, March 4, 1964, p. 46.
Another aspect of art that I find very relevant to my work is that of humor.

Contemporary humor in art-expression is one of subtlety and irony. Irony is directed against others, humor is irony directed against one's self. It is the self-revealing humor of Picasso and Joyce. "Humor can be dissected, as a frog can", E. B. White once warned, "but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind."¹⁴ The death of laughter is too much understanding-- audiences do not laugh because they understand, but because they know and accept. The dominance of "black humor" so evident today is not basically for laughs; humor is no longer its goal, but a means to a goal. The ultimate effect is not frivolity, but bitter pessimism. The penetration of good contemporary humor and the perpetuation and appreciation of historical humor are evidence of the truths that are revealed. Humor is related to puns, enigmas, puzzles, oracles, tricks, coincidences, paradoxes, and premonitions-- all of which are means of satisfying our permanent appetite for a miracle; for the wonder-working in the usual. The clown is but a poet who does not speak.

Verbal Communication

At the present there is a paradoxical simultaneous-simplification-complication in our living that is most basically illustrated in our verbal means of communication. This is seen in the growing use of tonal inflection to imply and to cause others to infer from the literal meaning of the words actually

¹⁴"American Humor: Hardly a Laughing Matter", Time, March 4, 1966, p. 46.

spoken the exact meaning of what the person who is speaking is thinking and the meaning he is trying to communicate. Another relevant aspect seen in the role of communications today is the use of the pun. Here a word can acquire by its sound, by the emphasis verbally given to it, and by its position in the construction of the statement, aspects of meaning necessarily at two levels simultaneously, and sometimes at three or more. The one primary difference between the use of inflection and the use of the pun in communication would be the addition of humor into the latter.

Novelty

Novelty, being related by many people to humor and being a prerequisite for the existence of an art-object, should be mentioned. The word novelty has two meanings, often confused: (1) the commercial-- oriented toward shallow newness that is "new for its own sake", and (2) that of being new through innovation-- a connotation of validity or importance. Novelty is incidental to all invention, but the creative impulse is no mere appetite for novelty, for it is highly selective. It is so even when governed by no consciously explicit idea of its end. The selective process is evidence of an implicit end. However, the emotion is for a time the only clue to the nature of this end. The end to be reached, then, in any creative process, is not whatever issue the ego or accident may decree, but some specific order urged upon the mind by something inherent in its vital condition of being and perception, yet nowhere in view.

SUMMATION OF THE RELATION OF THESE IDEAS TO MY WORK

In art, all things are possible. This can occur because in art the disparate elements are not combined in logic, which can join things only under certain categories and with due regard to the law of contradiction. Components are brought together in the art-object in terms of an experience-- an experience that ignores logic, except perhaps as another field of experience. Intuition exceeds the bounds of logical intelligence. Experience means conflict,¹⁵ our natures being what they are, and conflict means drama. Dramatic experience is not logical. It may be subdued to the kind of coherence that we indicate when we speak, in criticism, of form. Indeed, as experience, this conflict is always a logical contradiction, or, philosophically, an antinomy. Serious art deals with the fundamental conflicts that cannot be logically resolved. We can state the conflicts rationally, but reason does not relieve us of them. Their only final coherence is the formal re-creation of an art-object, which "freezes" the experience as permanently as a logical formula, but without, like the formula, leaving all but the logic out.

I consider all of my work (except drawings) to be assemblages, since painting is too much pure illusion with not enough concreteness, and sculpture is too concrete and too exclusive of painterly aspects. I work with new materials and techniques and with new and different concepts and values, because I feel them to be the most "right" for me. I feel a vital concern for the creative potentials of experience of contemplating the work. His answer to the question of what does

¹⁵ I feel the "system of cosmic order" is a balancing and shifting of internal conflicts and reactions.

inherent in materials. Rather than representing a fact or illusion, narrating a story, giving vent to frenzy, or commemorating an event or person, my art-objects are an uniquely organized presentation of materials which is all in one-- the object, the image, and the content. The "lost and found" object is an intimate part of the visual vernacular. Its familiarity can have a positive impact upon the observer if he sees it re-used in a creative and decontextualized way. It presents tactile and visual impressions that enrich our awareness of objects that might otherwise not even be known or recognized as existing. Everyone can see what a collage, construction, or assemblage is made of, can recognize its elements, can ascertain that they are borrowed from something or somewhere else. Yet the "haunting" attraction, far from disappearing, becomes even more intense. The strength and power of associative idea-objects and the resultant image-impressions formed by juxtapositioning, plays a large part in my work. Ambivalence, the simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person, or action, is for me requisite and observable in most of my work. The observer can either be strongly pro or con (and best of all, both at once) and my work will be successful for me. There must be an attraction in the art-object that is strong enough and on a deep enough level that, even if one is repelled by the work, he cannot leave it. The confrontation of the observer with the art-object must become an experience. He either gets some type of answer, or obtains a satisfaction from the experience of contemplating the work. His answer to the question of what does the work mean or do to him may not be answerable verbally (dependent upon his personality, his frame of mind, and the level of communication of the work) or

the answer may differ from that of the artist or of some bystander. Indeed it should. The art-object, which concretely presents itself as based or intended for one conceptual idea, can convey another or several others; but the whole of its multiplicity will be contained within a general theme. A cluster of meanings contained within a single art-object is far from arbitrary. In the Rorschach test, for instance, one participant may interpret an image symbolically, while another participant will envisage entirely differently. However, the two different visions are derived from more general systems which may embody yet other types of interpretation. Both surrealism and psychoanalysis have shown us that what is often called a personal symbol, occurring in the dreams and art-objects of one person, is really universal. Myths and religions are the common denominator of all men. A work of art is always made by a temporal man who catches in one moment of time the color of that moment as well as its eternality. The only way an upcoming movement in art can be successful is dependent upon, and related to, how well it grows out of a deep understanding of tradition as a source of innovation, standards of value, and content. I feel this involvement will be a contemporary outlook which recognizes that life is chaotic, even absurd, but which nonetheless allows for meaningful decisions and the possibility of momentary transcendence. These are qualities which are true to human experience. A man does what he has to do and asks those questions that are a part of himself. The form, content, or quality of those questions depends on the sincerity, depth of understanding, sensitivity, and intelligence of the querist.

PRESENTATION OF THESIS ART-OBJECTS

PLATE II

"Inner Form #2"

(expanded polystyrene, latex, polymer, 32x23)



PLATE III

"Bronze Form"

(expanded polystyrene, fiberglass, lacquer, 45x69)



PLATE IV

"Pillage"

(expanded polystyrene, oil, polymer, 102)



PLATE V

"Variable Field"

(expanded polystyrene, enamel, 60x48)



PLATE VI

"Three Forms on a Field"

(expanded polystyrene, latex, oil, leather, 24x36)

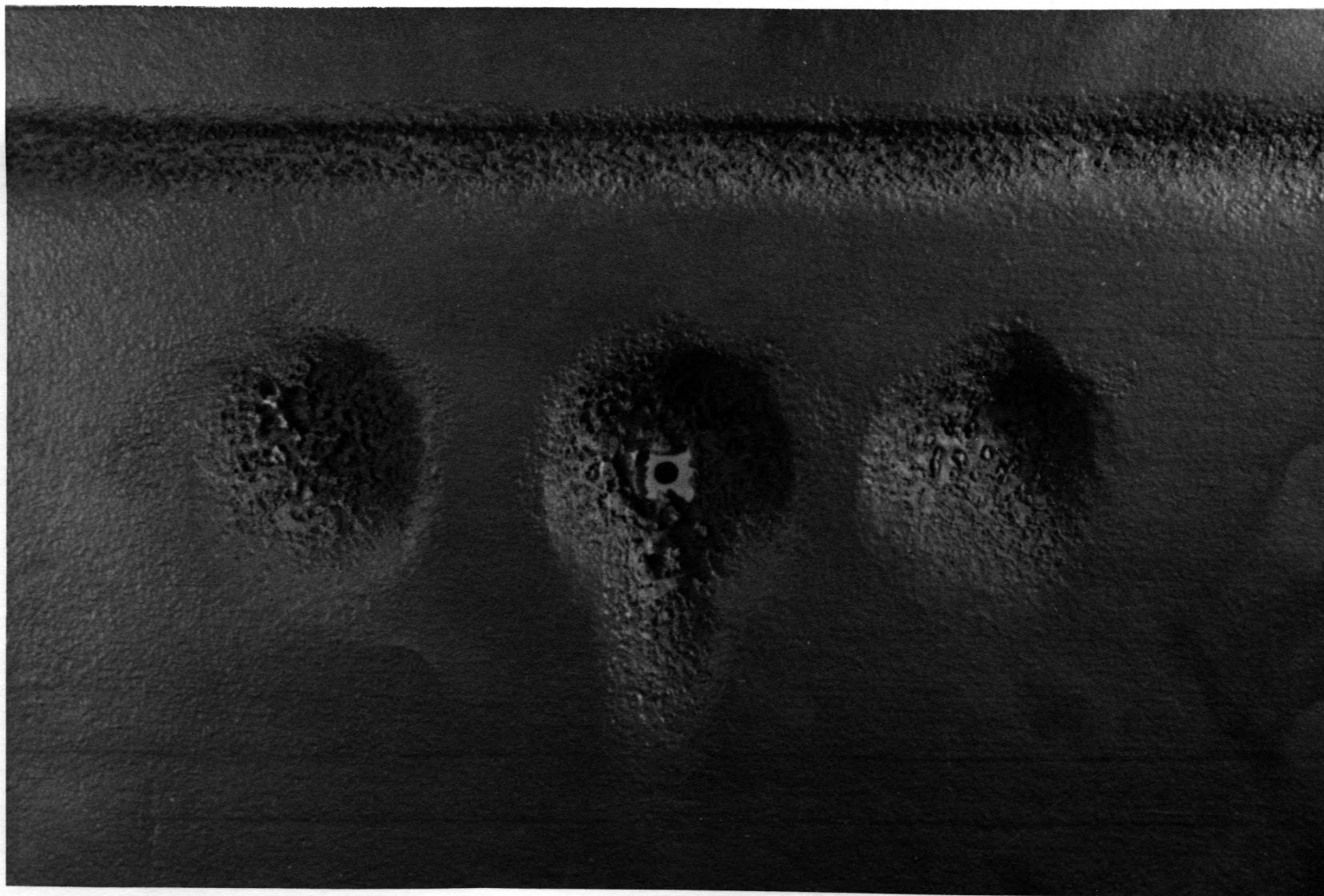


PLATE VII

"Break"

(iron, epoxy, expanded polystyrene, lacquer, polymer, oil, 45)

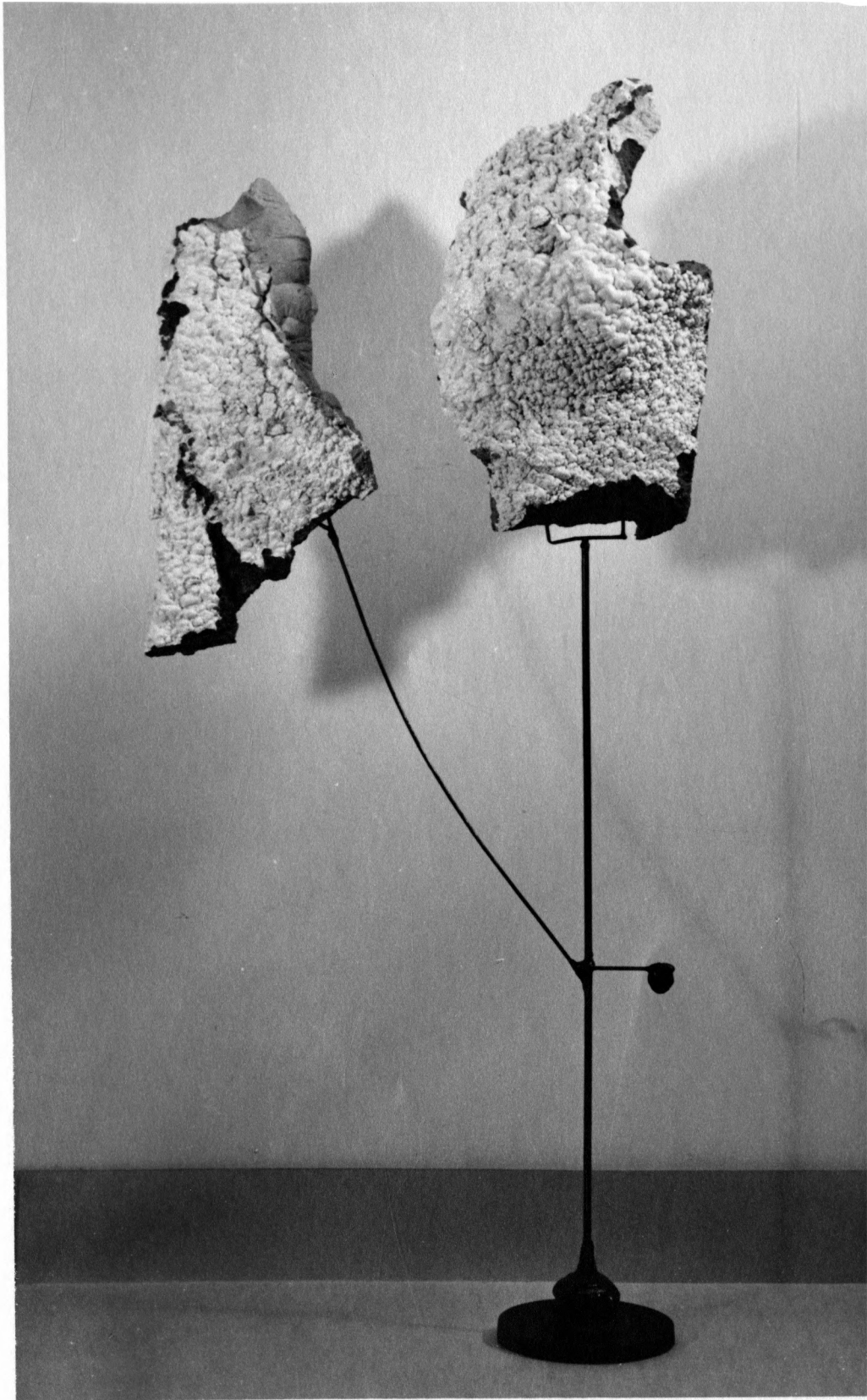


PLATE VIII

"Scream"

(expanded polystyrene, fiberglass, lacquer, oil, 62x77)



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AMBIGUITY IN ART

by

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B. S., Arkansas Polytechnic College, 1964

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Art

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1966

The intent of my thesis has been threefold: to establish on paper my present philosophy of art (and life); to explore through writing and research my beliefs and opinions and, therefore, either to confirm and strengthen them or to discard them; and to try to shed some light upon the questions-- Who am I?, What am I?, What do I believe?, and What, as an artist, am I doing in and through my work?

I have proceeded into this task by first evaluating myself philosophically, and my production artistically and aesthetically. I then determined the common factors and qualities. After deciding that the most persistent and accurate term for my work and myself was that of ambiguity, I composed by free-association a nucleus of thoughts and ideas relevant to my goal. The past year and a half was then spent in reading and researching on the concept of ambiguity. For the visual-presentation portion of my thesis, there has been no shift or turning in order to produce works suitable for an elaboration of written material, or vice versa. The written portion is a distillation of the essence of my convictions, and these are synonymous with those concepts that have guided me and been the source of my art-objects.

I have noted a historical trace of persons and movements in art that exemplify the occurrence of the concept of ambiguity both above and below the surface of art history.

The concept of ambiguity is that of the underlying basis for creative communication. Basically it involves the multiplicity of reality, of perception, of the object, of the drive to create, of the source of creative vision, of the expression of creative vision, of the produced creative result, of the reception of the vision from the art-object, of the interpretation of the result received, and of the

importance, significance, and necessity for multiplicity to exist in all of these aspects.

Other aspects of ambiguity are shown and discussed to establish or strengthen the validity of the concept. These are: the myth; the paradox; the absurd; the development of my theory of conceptual-interpretive-duality; the Gestalt school of psychology's findings concerning imagination and the theory of closure; Camp; pop culture; humor; everyday communications on the verbal level-- puns and inflection; novelty; and evidences in current art movements.

The thesis is completed by the discussion and summation of all of the foregoing ideas with regard to my work, the external structure and content-ideas of my art-objects, the importance of ambivalence to myself and therefore to the art-object, and the necessity of the ideas presented in the paper to the existence of whatever art movement will arise from artists involved in the chaos of the present.