

ART--  
A THESIS OF REACTION

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## PREFACE

Some preliminary remarks should be made concerning the nature and purpose of this thesis. In order to avoid misunderstanding, it should be noted that this thesis is primarily studio oriented. It is a product of those things which have been read and profited from to the extent that they can be absorbed and assimilated into the writer's own thinking for his own use. It is not a record of those studies or a critical analysis in the common sense, although a great deal of critical thinking has occurred. By the use of historical analysis, this thesis will illustrate the justification for the artist's complete right to pursue even the most radical or extreme activity in an effort to evoke the creative act.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ART--A THESIS OF REACTION .....	1
PRESENTATION OF THE THESIS ART OBJECTS .....	24
ACKNOWLEDGMENT .....	39
LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED .....	40

## ART--A THESIS OF REACTION

Nowhere in the history of human knowledge is there a paradox equal to that of the development of art. In most fields of intellectual endeavor there is a continuum; a gradual, methodical building from a lesser state to one of more complete dimensions. In such cases the present generation can use the work of its predecessors as a foundation on which to build. That pattern is repeated again and again, resulting in a definable, logical, nearly predictable transition from one period to another. It is an intricately woven tapestry in which past, present, and future are so interdependent that they are necessarily combined.

To those familiar with such order, transition, and dependability the picture presented by the development of art must seem bizarre and upsetting. Art seems to be nurtured by reaction rather than progress. A comparison of movements or schools which are historically joined continually reveals a lack of continuity. The reliance upon reaction or negation is obvious when the declarations of Mannerism with their affected, superficial attitudes so completely violate the representation of the ideal and monumental as proclaimed by the High Renaissance; or when Cubism proclaimed the ultimate art formula based on form, only to have Surrealism eliminate Cubism's principles of form as necessary for content. This situation is particularly evident since art has gained its own identity and is no longer the tool of religion and other societal institutions. Instead of a logical continuum based on progress, one finds art characterized by the unpredictable, the random, and the unexplainable. Seemingly from nowhere a school appears and very quickly reaches its zenith; and before the historians, the critics, and the public can grasp its significance, it has already fallen into decline. The only common element shared by the many schools is a fundamental dependence on

the law of reaction as opposed to that of progress as their reason for being. Thus, the condition of art gives every indication of being permanently unstable.

The fundamental problem posed by such a condition is that it resists any rational attempt to understand art's basic motive or to establish a consistent criterion for value. The dilemma is intensified when one realizes that the implications of the disparity exhibited by succeeding movements is almost trivial when compared to the radical change in the entire nature of art in the 20th century. The incredible inconsistency found when comparing the tradition of art prior to the 20th century and that since is so severe that the dilemma demands inquiry.

It might be thought that a concise definition of art would give some starting point or common ground in such a morass of subjectivity. However, the futility of such an attempt is soon apparent. Every definition so far has proven inadequate. A definition which is explicit in one case is found totally lacking in another. If one accepts Wyndham Lewis' definition that "art is to depict reality,"<sup>1</sup> it soon becomes apparent that one is lost in a maze of ambiguous and conflicting definitions, for what is reality to one person certainly is not to another. Or if one ascribes to Klee's "to make visible,"<sup>2</sup> then apparently one must include the scrawlings of monkeys and the lifeless stamp of the machine, or the creations of Nature. If one modifies this with the amendment that art must be made by man, then obviously everything man makes is art--a sidewalk, cherry pie, or the bomb. If in an effort to become more explicit one tries to add more words, suddenly whole areas of art activity are excluded by the definition. There

<sup>1</sup> Wyndham Lewis, Time and Western Man (London, 1927), p. 290.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Klee, Pedagogical Sketch Book (New York, London, 1953), p. 45.



is no need to be redundant. All definitions fail because of the nature of the phenomenon. Since art is governed by reaction, its definition is in a constant state of change; it is expanded every time a new school or attitude comes into being. How can one equate Michelangelo's "David" with Duchamp's "Fountain," or Rembrandt's "Night Watch" with Warhol's "Campbell Soup Can?" The definition of art somehow involves man, his ability to perceive, and some inner necessity to isolate those perceptions and make them visible. The manner in which these are combined, however, is left uniquely to the individual.

With the failure of the definitions to establish a consistent feature in all art, it might be thought that the area of aesthetics or the evaluation of the art object itself could clarify the confusion and aid one's understanding of the phenomenon. However, once again one is doomed to failure. Obviously the quality or value of an object is not in the object itself, but rather in the assessment and evaluation of it by a rational human being. Some aestheticians claim that the art object has an intrinsic value in itself. However, it seems impossible that even that conclusion could be reached without involving man's perception and rationality. Man must, in fact, derive this conclusion; it is not self-evident prior to comparative experience. With this in mind there are only two reasonable criteria for assessing the value of an art object, both of which center on man. One is the proposition that the judgments of man are the manifestations of some higher or absolute authority. The other must insist that the rational judgments of man himself are at least consistent.

If this first proposition is the case, it follows that there should be some, if only one, underlying principle which is common to all movements and attitudes recognized to date as art. Of course, if the understanding of the



common principle imposed by some higher authority is beyond comprehension, obviously it cannot be discussed, and one is left with only those factors which are discernable. Since it is generally recognized that there is no single adequate definition of the term "art" and in the light that there are so many totally conflicting attitudes as to the use of the art elements--line, shape, value, etc., and an equal amount of disagreement as to the relative value of those various uses, it is the fate of art to rely, by necessity, on such possibilities as order, presence, mood, or vitality as its common principle. It is immediately apparent that all such words are completely open to a host of subjective uses and interpretations. If it is the case that no such "common" word can show the "common" relationship of all works of art and by so doing, fully demonstrate and support the idea of the "absolute," then one is left solely with its alternative--in this case, the rational and perceptive powers of man.

The alternate premise assumes that there is some similarity in the thought process of man as a whole and, therefore, a similarity in the value of judgments occurs. This shaky premise is founded on the assumption that there is something uniquely consistent about the nature of all men's rationality and perception; that there is a similarity not in "what" but in "how" every creature under the title Homo Sapiens, from Cro-Magnon to Modern Man, thinks. This has nothing to do with absolute ideas as such, but rather "truth" or "reality" as man is able to perceive and describe it. Here again one quickly falls into subjective interpretations as to the nature of reality and value of truth.

It might be thought that the inability to establish a concise definition or consistent aesthetic criterion delegates art to a condition of impossible understanding. Because such elementary concepts are generally

considered fundamental to understanding, one might be tempted to end the inquiry. There is, however, a simple and direct means of determining the basic motive of all art, and by so doing, establish a consistent feature which pervades the whole phenomenon.

Since the reactionary nature of art in general is personified by the extreme disparity between art produced prior to the 20th century and that produced since, it seems reasonable that a comparison of those periods would illuminate not only their gross differences but also their similarities. Further, if such a comparison revealed a common motive in all art, then, the conflict between the past and the present would be brought into proper perspective and the general misunderstanding which surrounds art could be lessened. The differences representing art prior to the 20th century and that after are readily apparent.

Traditional art has always had a common denominator or generally agreed upon standard which dictated, in a general sense, the activity of all the artists of an age. When one of the "great" artists of an age would create something of value, it would become the model for all other artists engaged in the fine arts. The artists, critics, and public all accepted the same general standards as determined by the art products of an age's great innovators. Since actual experience with the work or product was limited, the society relied on its literate members to define art; using such a definition as a guide, the lesser artists attempted to imitate the great art products of the age. The position of the literary establishment became central to the growth of art and evolved to a condition in which the literary establishment was not only the accepted but the necessary intermediary between the activity of the innovator and society at large.

Prior to the 20th century, such attempts to formalize were quite valid

because art was based on the imitation of a particular product or attitude. Once this product or attitude was conceptualized and standards of value established, then any work's value was determined in direct ratio to its accuracy of approximation. Due to a lack of exposure and education, society had to be told what art was and, even more important, what art meant. The intellectual and physical distance between the innovator and the rest of society required an intelligent, sensitive middleman if there was to be any valid communication. The societal situation demanded that art standards be derived from art products through the medium of a literary establishment.

The art of the 20th century has presented quite a different picture. The most obvious characteristic has been the lack of a common denominator or of a generally agreed upon standard. Quite often the lament has been that "anything goes." The nature of art has made such radical and rapid changes that the literary establishment has hardly been able to evaluate one attitude before being obliged to re-evaluate the same attitude. Seemingly all categories have broken down; even such previously separate areas as painting and sculpture have lost their singular identity. In such an atmosphere even attitudes proclaiming "anti-art" have been declared. The simple and direct means to a definition or standards which characterized traditional art has been replaced by a multiplicity and ambiguity which has forced an inquiry into art's dilemma.

It is apparent that the general characteristics of the two periods are so conflicting that it would be foolish to compare their art products. There is no need to wade through hundreds of years of art history piece by piece; a reasonable explanation for art's general condition and the illumination of an all-inclusive art motive can be quite simply derived. These explanations can be elicited by the simple comparison of the contrasting means to art as

practiced by the innovator and society at large. As teachers, critics, historians, and museum directors may all be grouped in the category of established art, what is said of one will generally apply to all. This group may be collectively called the "word cult." They are the official spokesmen for the culture and as such, their involvement with art is an intellectual one. Through the process of detached rationality they conceptualize art and determine its definition and meaning. Words are their means to art value. Their method is to intellectually derive a composite idea of art, critically assess value, and establish principles for judgment. It is their societal function to talk and write critically about art. Since they are the spokesmen for the established idea of art, they must, by necessity, view art in terms of the past; that which is formalized and categorized; that which is no longer in conflict; that which can be explained and taught. Anything which radically threatens the past or challenges the existing criterion must necessarily be resisted. Their entire view of art depends upon a consistent relationship between the art products and the derived criterion or current definition of art.

Since all of the "word cult's" judgments and definitions concerning art come after the creative act, it is apparent that they must view art in terms of a product. The innovator's art product is the "word cult's" primary means to art.

In stark contrast to the "word cult's" justification of art is the means to art as practiced by the innovator himself. He is not primarily concerned with art as a product but rather as a process of evolving relationships--a state of flux. Whereas the "word cult" begins with an art product and derives a meaning, the innovator initiates a process which is meaningful in itself and evolves toward a product. By being unintimidated by the static idea of

"art," the innovator may, through his process, realize a product which is wholly, or at least partially, out of the realm of "art." For the innovator the act itself is its own justification or spokesman and its own condition for value. For the practicing artist art is the translator of experience which must draw from, and gravitate toward, life; it cannot "live" on the refined diet of the cultural gourmet. In the light that all art begins with the creative act, it is useful to declare the artist's primary tool for initiating his creative process; the tool is negation or the "anti-thesis."

It must be made clear from the beginning that "anti-thesis" is not synonymous with "anti-art." The act of negation is a positive attempt to re-define or re-order "art"; or to expand the possibilities of art. Those who concern themselves with the anti-thesis are just as aware as the conservatives of art's past, but they are more concerned with art's potential; what art can be. The nature of the anti-thesis is to attack the established idea of art, not art itself. It is impossible to attack something as ill-defined and arbitrary as art. It is contradictory to attack art with artistic activity, since each attack merely leads to an expanded definition of the phenomenon. Apparently, the only way to successfully destroy art is to completely ignore it.

The anti-thesis is concerned with art as a vital, emerging, ever-unfolding force which parallels life--art being born before it becomes institutionalized. The innovator's only guideline is an inner necessity based on experience. It is not a question of whether or not that which results is "good," "mediocre," or "bad"; or even if it is "art." The "word game" is left to the "word cult."

Art has always been determined by the exceptional individual using the principle of negation to define a particular age. A civilization's art



objects, historical sequence, and value judgments have always resulted from the sheer force of the great personalities--the will of the exceptional individual. As Wyndham Lewis expresses, "A very small number of inventive, creative men are responsible for the entire spectacular ferment of the modern world."<sup>3</sup>

Every great age has been deominated by such individuals. Conversely, those periods lacking such men have been relegated to the fate of mediocrity and darkness. The illustrations are numerous; the Renaissance with Michelangelo and Leonardo from whom scores fed and gained strength, and in turn were fed upon; the Golden Age of Greece with Sophocles and Plato and others; or by contrast, the Dark Ages and their darkness. It is when the great personality begins to assert his will that a phenomenon occurs in the mind and spirit of an age, and in the case of art, the latest link in the expanding definition occurs. History is by and large a record of the exceptional individual who, contrary to all reasonable evidence, finds it necessary to strike out alone in order to illuminate.

Although the evolution of art history depends largely on reaction or the anti-thesis as used by the exceptional individual, it does not follow that art's history is totally without pattern. Because of the careful work of the chronicler, one is able to use art's products to discern a very clear and revealing sequence in the development of art. Such information is not apparent from the study of art standards or aesthetic criterion, nor from the results of an attempt to fit art into a consistent transition depicting progress. It is by examining art's products and comparing the pictorial motive in each period that the pattern appears. Whereas minor deviations occur in art prior to the 20th century, it is apparent that the pictorial

<sup>3</sup> Wyndham Lewis, Time and Western Man (London, 1927), p. 141.

motive remains the same from classic times. After the turn of the century, however, one can observe a radical change in the pictorial motive which produced an incredibly diverse art product.

The art of Western Civilization has been dominated by a "retinal" fixation; a fixation which ruled until the 20th century. Being a highly literate culture, it has had great faith in what could be seen. Of all the senses, the sense of sight has been the primary means of perception; art until the 20th century had been almost purely a "retinal" affair. When this habit was coupled with the Renaissance tool of objective rationality, it was quite logical that the civilization would create an art produced by the objective mastering of object reality. The work of Albrecht Durer is a prime example of an attitude which was capable of rendering the most minute detail; of the attempt to observe the environment and imitate it with meticulous precision. The art of Western Civilization desired to master what could be seen, and even though personal visions occurred, the constant motive was physical reality. The artists continually looked for tools, such as perspective, anatomy, or the theory of light dispersal, to aid them in their depiction. All the innovations which occurred were concerned with subject matter, the general trend being from objective point-of-view toward subjective expression. Such artists as Goya, Turner, and Delacroix merely gave a more subjective interpretation of object reality than their predecessors.

However, at the turn of the century there was an aesthetic revolution which caused a complete cultural reorientation. With the appearance of Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and the work of Cezanne, art moved into a second phase. The new phase was still object motivated but differed from its predecessor because of the artists' concern with methodology.



The efforts of such artists as Monet, Seurat, and Cezanne made it apparent that the object could be seen with the mind as well as the eye. Their rational techniques were developed in an attempt to understand, not merely to imitate. Impressionism was a bridge which combined the physical perception of the eye with the mental perception of the brain and resulted in paintings which illustrated not only what was "seen" but also what was "known." The concern with methodology was evidenced everywhere; Suprematism and Rayonism in Russia, Vorticism in England, "De Stijl" in Holland, Cubism and Fauvism in Paris, and Futurism in Italy. These and minor movements such as Orphism, Simultaneism, and Constructivism all came into being as the perceptual revolution exploded.

Although the methods of exploration differed, all of the movements were motivated by an intense desire to depict what was known as well as what was seen. Futurism was motivated by the abstract concept of dynamism; Fauvism was exploring the use of color for its own particular value rather than just as a supporting ornament; German Expressionism was delving deeply into man's motives in an attempt to discover his elemental nature; and Constructivism was concerning itself with pure form relationships. The artists were dedicated to dissecting every traditional value and discovering a new language for expressing the experiences of an emerging age. It became the role of the Cubists, particularly Picasso and Braque, to illustrate the emerging role of art and perhaps the alteration of all facets of life in the new age. Cubism had refused the ideas of conventional beauty, the imitation of nature, the illusion of space through perspective, and had broken up form in such a way as to portray inner visions of reality. Although the movement was still object-motivated and as such relied on "retinal" perception, it, nevertheless, planted the first fertile seeds for an art in which negation

was the rule, not the exception. Cubism left no doubt that man was creating a world in which form was relative; time, space, and motion relationships were radically altered, and the culture was moving from the domination of the perceptual power of the eye toward the unification of the senses. By substituting multiple facets of the object simultaneously for the singular point-of-view, Cubism displayed aspects of the object all-at-once rather than the solitary point-of-view of perspective. The method implied accelerated, almost instant, movement and encouraged mental participation with the work by the viewer. The second significant factor was the introduction of collage. By using actual objects or "real" reality and emphasizing tactile quality, the Cubists caused physical movement by the viewer who reacted to touch and participated with art. The implications of these innovations are astounding; Kineticism, Ready-mades, Assemblage, Pop Icons, and art "events" with direct viewer participation were suddenly possible means to art. Probably more significant, however, was Cubism's realization that value must be derived from relationships rather than previously imposed standards.

If Cubism left any doubt that art was dedicated to the principle of negation, the Surrealists and the Dadaists did not. The range of art possibilities rapidly expanded as the Surrealists substituted imagination and fantasy for the previous rationality. All a Surrealist like Dali had to do to render Cubism's rational method impotent was to juxtapose logical parts in an illogical whole. However, it was the Dadaists, particularly Marcel Duchamp, with his use of the Ready-made, that destroyed the myth of traditional aesthetic values and rendered obsolete the fundamental idea of academic training and talent as absolute prerequisites for "art."

In less than thirty years the entire tradition of making art was completely redefined; its fundamental means and motives radically altered. Art

had been liberated from a static condition to a state of flux involving primarily perception and participation. Relative unity became the new dynamic. The demands of an accelerated world in which the only constant factor was change, necessitated the dominance of the anti-thesis in art.

Probably the clearest evidence of the general adoption of the anti-thesis as a means to art can be found in the proclamations and work of Marcel Duchamp. Through Duchamp one finds concrete proof that art is not just entertaining new thoughts to be assimilated into the old structure but a whole new way of thinking; the concept of the anti-thesis is being distributed for general use.

Duchamp's artistic development showed a precocious talent for drawing and the rapid assimilation of the art attitudes of the recent past. At the age of fifteen he was an Impressionist as is illustrated by his 1902 "Landscape at Blainville." In two short years his portraits and landscapes showed the unmistakable influence of Cezanne. Toward the end of 1906 his work exhibited the bold and discordant colors of the Fauve school; so bold, in fact, that his work was almost closer to German Expressionism. The Fauve technique continued to dominate his work until 1910 when he became associated with the Puteaux group which included his brothers, Jaques Villon and Duchamp Villon, Leger, Gleizes, Delaunay, and others. The group considered themselves to be "reasonable" Cubists and remained at all times separate from Braque and Picasso who were introducing wood, sand, printed letters and other "unartistic" elements into painting. By then Duchamp had abandoned the bold color of Fauvism and began to work in the muted and flat broken tones of Cubism. His works of 1911 and 1912, particularly "Sonata" and "Portrait of Chess Players," were well received by the Puteaux group and quickly established the young Duchamp as one of the better contemporary

painters, despite the fact that he was only twenty-five years old.

Duchamp was developing an increasing prejudice against the "professional" side of art, and his friendship with Francis Picabia helped intensify that feeling. His total embrace of the anti-thesis was not complete until the 1911 performance of Roussel's "Impressions d'Afrique." Duchamp attended this performance with Apollinaire, Picabia and Buffet, and its intellectual content was the catalyst needed to unite him once and for all against the safe and the accepted. This performance revealed "a universe governed solely by words and which in the absence of any clue to the contrary seemed to be systematically given over to caprice."

Paralleling the development of Duchamp's personal philosophy is a significant change in attitude of a much broader nature. The epoch was one of fantastic change and was characterized by political upheavals and the widespread breakdown of traditional ideals and beliefs. The spiritual unease and social chaos that followed could be detected in every aspect of societal activity and was particularly evident in the arts. Poets and novelists sensed the coming destruction of the old order and such literary figures as James Joyce and Gertrude Stein set out to forge the new tools with which to create an entirely new kind of literature. In music, the harsh dissonance of Stravinsky's Sacre du Printemps caused the audience to riot at its 1913 premiere, and the 12-tone technique of Arnold Schonburg challenged the conventional harmonic scale.

Until Duchamp's time, change had never manifested itself in such an extreme way. Prior to that era, an innovator would attract the establishment, suffer some inconvenience, and eventually see his efforts rewarded by a reform of the system. The modern spirit, however, would not compromise.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Lebel, Marcel Duchamp (New York, 1959), p. 7.

It was no longer a question of modifying the system but consciously destroying it. This problem was a burning issue, and it determined the whole range of Marcel Duchamp's activity.<sup>5</sup>

Duchamp was living in an age when anything which grew old was subject to suspicion. Most of the great personalities of the modern movement, such as Lautremont, Jarry, and Rimbaud, had died young and helped create the myth of youth and integrity. They were never forced to "sell out" to the cult of "beauty" or reduced to mere shadows of their former selves by time. The fate of an older man, even a genius, was the vulgar acquiescence to decrepitude and betrayal. Even the Renaissance giant Michelangelo had spent the last years of his life trapped in doubt and obscurity, longing for death. Michelangelo, who had devoted his life to the search for beauty and the glory of art, had concluded that all art was "no more than a distraction which hindered the human soul."<sup>6</sup> Genius belonged to youth--and a young Duchamp set out to destroy the solidly established attitudes of Cubism.

Duchamp had arbitrarily decided that enough had been said about Cubism and he was determined to end these discussions by going it one better. All that was needed was to recognize Cubism's deficiencies, provide for them, simultaneously making the whole concept obsolete. Instead of circling an immovable object, he introduced a kind of movement which was entirely unknown until then. In a 1963 interview Duchamp explained that his problem was "kineticism-movement."<sup>7</sup> By making the object itself appear to move he

<sup>5</sup> Robert Lebel, Marcel Duchamp (New York, 1959), p. 11-12.

<sup>6</sup> Cecil Gould, An Introduction to Italian Renaissance Painting (London, 1957), p. 137.

<sup>7</sup> William Seitz, "What's Happened to Art," Vogue, February 15, 1963, p. 112.



passed from "semi-realism" directly to a non-figurative expression of movement. In his "Nude Descending a Staircase" the combination of Cubism and Futurism had a tremendous shock effect--so much so that "The Nude" was removed from the Salon des Independants as heretical and insolent. This would not seem absurd except that both the Cubists and the Futurists, at their beginning, were determined to upset every accepted concept of art. To be entirely revolutionary and disturb completely all the standards was their primary aim. What was once the rebel had become the establishment.

It is interesting to note a possible paradox of reaction. Duchamp set out to destroy Cubism, not extend it. And yet, his "Nude Descending a Staircase" is given at least possible credit for extending the movement from the analytical phase to the synthetic phase.<sup>8</sup> This, once again, points out the inconsistency of art and the unpredictable nature of the anti-thesis.

By painting the "Nude Descending a Staircase" Duchamp illustrated how the anti-thesis can negate a movement or an accepted and established idea of art. However, many people still claimed that even though a movement could be destroyed, there, none the less, still existed some underlying aesthetic basis which the destroyer depended upon as much as did the destroyed. It took only one year for Duchamp to answer those doubters.

From approximately 1913 on, Duchamp became preoccupied with the juxtaposition of mechanical elements and visceral form. These elements were combined into psychologically human machines which, when presented transparently, one could follow, estimate, and predict their function. This was art's first sojourn into the realm of inter-subjective relationships and allowed Duchamp to set up a means of communication which, until now, was totally unheard of in art. By conceiving works such as "Bachelor Apparatus"

<sup>8</sup> Robert Lebel, Marcel Duchamp (New York, 1959), p. 11.

Duchamp was now advocating an art which was beyond aesthetic formula and was concerned with everyone's fundamental preoccupation. The anti-thesis was not totally achieved, however, until his introduction of the "Ready-made."

The Ready-made was actually born when Duchamp mounted a bicycle wheel on the top of a stool in 1913. The wheel was not chosen for any aesthetic value, but because it was ordinary and could be replaced by thousands of others just like it. Duchamp left absolutely no doubt concerning his intention when he declared, "A certain state of affairs that I am particularly anxious to clarify is that the choice of these Ready-mades was never dictated by any aesthetic delectation. Such choice was always based on a reaction of visual indifference and at the same time on a total absence of good or bad taste...when all is said and done, a complete anaesthesia."<sup>9</sup>

In 1917 Duchamp exhibited a urinal which he called "Fountain" and signed it R. Mutt. This was followed by "Fresh Window," an ordinary window, in 1920 and "Why Not Sneeze?" in 1921. The latter was a bird cage filled with sugar cubes which had a thermometer poked among them. The cage could not be lifted as the sugar cubes were made of marble. How did Duchamp justify these objects in which he had reached the limit of the unaesthetic, the useless, and the unjustifiable? These ordinary manufactured objects were elevated to the position of art because Duchamp chose them; it wasn't important if he actually made them or not.

Duchamp had not only eliminated the aesthetic as necessary for a work of art, but also man as a craftsman and modulator of materials. The subject for art was no longer a question--any ordinary, banal object could become art by the artist merely choosing it and isolating it from a random, chaotic environment. Art had now been pushed from the esoteric to the exoteric, and

<sup>9</sup> Walter Hopps, Marcel Duchamp (Milan, Italy, 1964), p. 22.



for Duchamp, at least, shed its anachronistic shell.

If one attacks such traditional standards as the technique of making art, the old means will simply be replaced by a new one. However, to replace the illusion of an "object" with the object itself and thus eliminate the necessity for any so-called "talent" is indeed revolutionary. To reduce the production of a work of art to mere perception would, for many, be a forewarning of the end of art. And, of course, it is the death of art, as art has "died" many, many times. It is also the birth of art as it has been and will continue to be reborn again and again. Out of the death knell sounded by Duchamp's anti-thesis has grown an expanded awareness as to what art can be, and out of this new soil has grown a number of contemporary innovations, the most obvious of which is Pop Art.

The obvious legacy of Duchamp is clearly illustrated by the whole aura surrounding the Pop "movement." Like all innovators, Duchamp was not concerned with a precluded art product, but with a process or attitude. His process was characterized by a receptiveness to all ideas; a "playing" with relationships which entertains the constant possibility of change. Without his declarations negating traditional training and talent as absolute prerequisites for art and without his elevation of the common object to the status of art through perception alone, it is doubtful that the "pop attitude" could have asserted itself so strongly. By eliminating, or at least minimizing, the influence of traditional training and judgment in determining art, Duchamp helped create an atmosphere in which all ideas could be freely explored--an atmosphere not limited to the sphere of "good judgment." The healthy lack of self-consciousness which pervades "Pop" is evident by its ready assimilation of commercial techniques into the production of the work and the choice of popular sources as a stimulant. By exploring the

possibilities of the banal and the commonplace and by the conscious exploitation of the anti-sensible, the pop artists have given concrete evidence of a fundamental change in art attitude. Any stimulant or technique is a possible avenue to art, regardless of its position on a prior value scale.

Further evidence of this fundamental change in attitude may be observed in an altered public itself. The current art viewer is not waiting to have art predigested and evaluated by the literary establishment, but is eager to experience and evaluate art for himself. The activity of the "avant-garde" no longer shocks society or meets severe resistance but rather finds a literate, receptive audience that is willing to experience art and base its judgments on that experience. In growing numbers a diverse cross-section of society is flocking to museums in order to have direct contact with art. As society becomes more receptive to the evolving process of art, the artist finds himself propelled to the center of societal activity. He is no longer limited to the singular sphere of making art, but is influencing every area of societal perception, including fashion and entertainment. Such direct communication between the innovator and the society at large has created a mutual respect and helped to eliminate many of the barriers and misunderstandings once so prevalent. The aura of "openness" has allowed the reconciliation of the public and art and has eliminated the dependence on a middleman or translator. Although there have been such benefits as additional aids and grants or the building of more museums and cultural centers, these rewards are secondary when compared with the artist's opportunity to actively participate in a vital society and the public's chance to have direct and immediate experiences with art. It is undeniable that such circumstances have created a cultural rapport previously unknown in art.

What has been the cause for such a drastic change in the value system and, therefore, the arts? It has been the transition from a tradition based on the "work ethic" to a state which, by necessity, is motivated by "play." Since all perceptions are the result of the experiences one has with the environment, it must follow that if the environment is radically altered, then so are the ideas and, eventually, the values. Such a change has occurred in 19th and 20th century Western Civilization. The industrial and technological revolutions have totally restructured the environment and, therefore, the ideas and values of the culture. Prior to the industrial revolution, the civilization was dominated solely by the "work ethic" or the performance principle. "Behind the performance principle lies the fundamental fact of scarcity, which means that the struggle for existence takes place in a world too poor for the satisfaction of human needs without constant restraint, renunciation, and delay. In other words, whatever satisfaction is possible necessitates 'work'...."<sup>10</sup> The products of the art world could not have escaped such implications because the influence was fundamental; the performance principle not only dictated what was thought, but further "how" the entire process of thinking itself was structured. With the coming of the industrial revolution the fundamental fact of scarcity was rendered less potent and the cultural motive gradually became pleasure. The pleasure principle is responsible to the concept of "joy" whereas the performance principle is realized by "toil." The polarity of the views is more apparent when it is realized that the general result of "joy" is receptiveness as opposed to "toil" and productiveness.

The decadence often attributed to the art of the 20th century Western

<sup>10</sup> Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization, (New York, 1962), p. 32-33.

Civilization may merely be a premature judgment which is possible only because of a failure to comprehend a radically altered environment and, therefore, a changing value structure.

A reality once dominated by the performance principle may be losing its necessity because of the incredible capacity of technology to satisfy fundamental wants and needs without undue delay and toil. If this is true, then it is possible that man is free for the first time in history to explore his faculties and potentialities without the intimidation of necessity; that is, the realities of the new age are to be liberated, not mastered.

Our society may be moving toward a type of freedom in which the repressive burdens of uncompromising productivity are unnecessary, and as a result, society may also arrive at a relative value scale in which display and imagination can operate fully toward the free manifestation of human potentialities. The freedom and joy previously the privilege of geniuses and "decadent" bohemians may now be available to an entire society.

The role of the artist in such a society must also be altered. If society no longer needs art "products" to satisfy its perceptual demands and, as a result, becomes involved in process, then the nature of the art itself must change. The artist may now move from the Ivory Tower to the control tower and, in so doing, cease to furnish a refined diet for a cultural elite and begin a new role of perceptual training. There is good evidence that such a transition is occurring. Art has recently expanded to include such "events" as Happenings (the environmental synthesis of theatre and the visual arts) and the Auto-Destructive art performances at which art is created and is destroyed as an event.

These examples illustrate the attempts of artists to expose the public to art experiences from which they are free to assess their own value based

on their particular experience; this is fundamentally different from the artist having an experience, formalizing that experience in a work, then having the public view the work in a detached manner wholly unrelated to the experience. In the former example, the viewer is allowed to participate and assess value; in the latter situation, however, the viewer must necessarily be dominated by the artist's opinion of value. The advantage of the "art as event" approach is that the public is allowed to use all of the senses, not just the eyes. By the unification of the senses, the public is beginning to develop perception in depth, or more nearly total, as compared with the solitary point-of-view which resulted from the rationalization of a merely visual object. By becoming involved in the process of art rather than just the product, the public has the opportunity to develop insight. Being involved with the process makes the particular "content" secondary; for the consciousness itself is an inclusive process and not dependent on content for value; the consciousness does not postulate the consciousness of anything in particular. By the artist introducing art as a medium of experience, the levels of "high brow" and "low brow" or "fine arts" and "popular" no longer apply in the same way; each individual is permitted his uniqueness to the detriment of no one.

Western culture has discovered the plastic image in which all the senses co-exist in a unified field. Each object or set engenders its own unique relationships. The abstract visual order has shifted from a rational involvement with a purely "retinal fixation" to participation in events using all the senses.

Because of technology the 20th century is an age in which the concepts of time, space and matter have been radically altered, and the accelerated rate of change has created a universe of relationship rather than a world



of things. Meaning has changed form. That which was contained and conveyed has been supplanted by that which can be observed when two or more properties are in a certain spatial relationship. Sequence has yielded to the simultaneous and structure to configuration. Reality is no longer a static condition merely to be understood, but rather a juxtaposition of events demanding to be participated in and experienced.

The increased receptivity which characterizes 20th century art has created a condition that permits compounded art possibilities. Because of the use of the anti-thesis by an increasing number of practicing artists, the stimulants for a "vital" art are multiplied fantastically. In an age where the "work ethic" or product has been replaced by the "play ethic" or process, the fundamental motive for art has become the rule rather than the exception. Perhaps artist Robert Rauschenberg best stated the painter's case when he said, "When I reach a stage where working in a certain way is more apt to be successful than unsuccessful--and it's not just a lucky streak--when I definitely see that this is the case, I start something else. Usually while I'm working one way there's another attitude that's growing up, a reaction to what I'm doing that almost may be the reverse of it."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Dorothy Gees Seckler, "The Artist Speaks--Robert Rauschenberg," Art in America, May-June, 1966, p. 84.

## PRESENTATION OF THE THESIS ART OBJECTS

"What is to become of painting if the critics withhold their lash? As well might be ask what is to become of mathematics under similar circumstances, were they possible. I maintain that two and two the mathematician would continue to make four, in spite of the whine of the amateur for three, or the cry of the critic for five.... Let work, then, be received in silence, as it was in the days in which the penmen still point as an era when art was at its apogee."

J. McNeill Whistler



PLATE II

"Listen"

(oil on canvas, 48x44)



PLATE III

"The Now"

(mixed media, 36x48)



PLATE IV

"Number Four"

(construction, 19x17x11)



PLATE V

"The Mamas & the Papas"

(acrylic on canvas, 28x28)





PLATE VI

- "Dance"

(mixed media, 18x18)



PLATE VII

"Family Portrait"

(assemblage, 25x21)





PLATE VIII

"Norma Jean"

(collage, 44x36)





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ART--  
A THESIS OF REACTION

by

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B. A., Kansas State University, 1966

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

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Historians are generally agreed that art is a phenomenon unlike most areas of human knowledge. Its development appears to be a series of random, unrelated events, rather than a transitional continuum exhibiting progress. Because of art's reactionary nature, most attempts to subject it to the scrutiny of rational inquiry and understanding have failed. Even such fundamental concepts as a concise definition or reliable aesthetic criterion have proven elusive. The reactionary nature of art has reached such radical extremes in the 20th century, however, that the dilemma demands inquiry.

If by comparing the attitudes of traditional art with the radically conflicting views of the 20th century one could derive a common art motive, then the disparity between the past and present could be put into proper perspective and the general confusion surrounding art lessened.

Comparing the two periods revealed a fundamental dichotomy--a conflict between art as an established concept or "product" and art as an evolving "process" of relationships. The polarity of the two views was resolved, however, by the realization that all of art's major innovations resulted from the application of the anti-thesis or "process" of art by exceptional individuals. The reliance of the innovator on the anti-thesis to redefine art has been art's basic motive for change in all periods.

Historical sequence has shown a radical change in art attitudes beginning with the 20th century. Hundreds of years of domination by a "retinal fixation" were suddenly ended and art possibilities were increased by the incorporation of ideas and imagination as means to art. A complete cultural reorientation occurred with the previous static order being replaced by a condition of flux. Because of the efforts of such artists as Duchamp, art

was liberated to a condition which permitted the exploration of any idea without the intimidation of "good" judgment. Duchamp's proclamations negating traditional training, talent, and standards as absolute prerequisites for art dispersed the power of the anti-thesis for general use and allowed art to shed its anachronistic shell.

Such radical changes in attitude could not have developed prior to the 20th century. Due to the industrial and technological revolutions, 20th century society was experiencing a radically altered environment. Because technology could satisfy wants without undue delay and toil, the society advanced from a value system based on a "work" ethic to one based on "play." It is inconceivable that art could have escaped the implications of such circumstances.

For the first time in history man could play with his mental and creative faculties, free from the intimidation of necessity. It became possible for the privileges once permitted only geniuses and "decadent" bohemians to be available to the entire society. The process to art which was once an exception had become the rule.

The increased receptivity which characterizes the 20th century has permitted compounded possibilities for art. Because of the adoption of the anti-thesis by an increased number of artists, the stimulants for a "vital" art have been fantastically multiplied.