

ART, POLITICS AND EVERYTHING ELSE.

Discussions about art and how it's located in relationship to other human practices like politics, philosophy or economics, are fraught with misunderstanding arising from the fact that the word 'art' is being used in as many as a dozen different senses. According to the dictionary definition, art is skill. This definition is clearly not good enough for us. The Oxford Dictionary has a sub-division in its definition in which fine arts are defined as skills of the mind and the imagination and this seems closer to a definition that we could use. But it seems to me that, at this late stage, we need a closer definition still. The issue is something of a crucial one. Ideas ranging from those declaring art to be dead to those declaring art to be sacrosanct are plentiful about us. The concept of what imaginative skills are, and of how they are best deployed in the present historic situation, seems to demand that 19th Century dictionaries should be up-dated, if only because, in the last hundred years, a great deal has happened in art and this throws a great deal of light on how artists situate themselves and how they identify their definitive skills.

If there is a blanket humanist process of civilisation in which art, politics, philosophy and so on are all part of the same operation, then definitions should be kept open-ended. It would seem to be an impediment to be too rigid in drawing a line dividing art from, say, philosophy. "I can take D. H. Lawrence," says Claire Tomalin, in a recent broadcast, "as a novelist but not as a prophet" - and in saying so she would seem to exemplify the arbitrariness of dividing lines between literature and prophecy, thus between art and philosophy. How paltry, we might

say, to divide Lawrence thus. Only when we come down to the difficulties of practice under that all-inclusive humanist banner do we come up against the question of precedence: precedence in the provision of money to areas of need; precedence in the application of principles; precedence in the application of selection and censorship. Are poets convulsed with erotic violence to be asked into the schools? (Poetic vision collides with the vulnerability of children). Should we finance art which is incomprehensible? (Principles of creativity collide with principles of communication). Should we expect art to serve a cause? (Individual freedom collides with collective interest). Does the man who pays the piper really call the tune? If not, should he, and if he does, may we not be stuck with the top twenty, and if that happens does it matter? We find that the humanist blanket is fallacious. We are not all guided by the same all-inclusive humanism. Under the blanket quite radically different ideas of what comes first separate themselves off from one another with vigorous speed. Definitions are needed. Thus we need a much closer definition of what we now mean by art. We had best arrive at this by looking, as honestly as possible, at what art is trying to do for us, at what art is doing for us, at what the art of the past is doing for us, and what art has ever done for humanity.

I would offer this definition:

"Art is the skill of examining and expanding the range of our perceptions by the making of artifacts." This is what it does. This is what it always has done. This is what it will continue to do, probably whether we require it to or not.

Thus art is different from philosophy because philosophy must aim at demonstrable certainty, whilst the perceptions, which feed philosophy, must be open to all possibilities. Similarly, art is different from science.

Thus art is different from morality because morality must reject evil which the perceptions must explore. Thus art is different from politics, at any rate as politics are practised currently, because politics operate through collective agreements while the perceptions operate through the senses of separate individuals who remain the sole authority on their own sense-experience.

Art is different from entertainment because entertainment must ultimately give pleasure and much pleasure arises from a sense of security. Art shakes the sense of security perpetually by peppering society with the unfamiliar. Entertainment bows to the demands of the public who may not want to have their consciousness examined or expanded. And art is different from design because design must not intrude in the efficiency of things in their common usage whilst the perceptions betray their function if they accept the restrictions of any such decorum.

This is not to say that art may not erupt in any of the areas to which it is alien. Louis Armstrong, a violently innovatory artist, arose in the world of entertainment and continued to function as an entertainer all his life. Many designers were, despite their calling, artists. Robert Adam would seem to exemplify this in a quiet way and Antonio Gaudi in an extremely obtrusive way. Similarly, the doctor R. D. Laing proves to be an artist, the philosopher Sartre proves to be an artist, the philosopher Neitzsche proves to be an artist, the Marxist

Brecht remains, beyond all his intentions, an artist, because he, like all these people, had made, at some time, in some part of his mind, the initial decision to give his perceptions full play and to turn in a complete account of their sense-experience.

Art is where you find it. Often the last place you're likely to find the perceptions being extended is in the compartment marked 'art', which may have been frozen into stasis by devices like Standards of Good Taste, Proven Criteria, the Maintaining of Tradition. In the drawer marked 'art' there may well be no art at all.

For the expansion of the perceptions is an activity, not a quantity. Finally it doesn't fit in drawers or compartments and it perpetually redefines the spaces in which its artifacts are to be displayed. Art must not be confused with the history of art. Neither must the financing of an activity be confused with the preservation of a collection. The War Office doesn't maintain The Imperial War Museum. The Science Museum isn't maintained by scientists. Similarly it should be seen that the maintenance of museums and those performing companies whose function is preservation, is not to be confused with the financing of art. Otherwise it becomes possible that the artifacts of the past, being familiar and secure, are being crammed into the drawer marked "art" so that the activity of art, the professional expansion of the perceptions, a risky business which, of necessity, deals with the unfamiliar, won't be missed.

It should perhaps be emphasised that imagination is as much a part of perception as is the accumulation of objective experience. The visual artist will visualise, that is enjoy a

retinal experience of his image, sometimes in very general terms, sometimes in detail, before he portrays it. The deaf Beethoven could obviously hear his music whether or not it was played. Imagination is, then, perception deployed, as it were, in reverse. Instead of the experience being received by the perceptions outside the individual and then transmuted to the brain, the experience emerges in the brain and is filtered out through the perceptions to the world. Whether the information originates inside or outside the individual, the medium is the five senses. It is perhaps because of the pre-eminence of the senses in perception and in the skills attending perception that the English are, as a nation, sceptical of art. We are a society of phlegmatic islanders governed by a puritanical utilitarianism. Sensual life must always be carried on obliquely to actions of rational necessity. Thus we drink to relieve tensions and anxieties. Thus we eat to satisfy our hunger. Thus we make love to relieve our frustrations, or to procreate. Thus we make art to compete with our skills, to use up our leisure, to argue our politics - any purpose but the exercising of our senses. That the value of full sensual experience, from the pleasures of the table and the bed to crucial levels of schizophrenic vision, is intrinsic and axiomatic, is something which escapes us.

In defence of my definition I would like to discuss the work of two artists who would seem to illustrate it suitably. We only have time for two. First, I want to discuss Peter Paul Rubens, the painter. Rubens would seem, on first glance, to illustrate every contention of Marxist structuralism - a man

thrown up by the worst aspects of feudal monarchy, deifying the power figures of his time, lauded and pampered to the ultimate degree of corruption, celebrating an oppressive system as though it were a pantheon of the gods, orthodox to a degree, a nobleman's whore. But we have to consider why we are still interested in Rubens, to the tune of a million pounds, even though we have forgotten completely the aristocrats who employed him; and why we are interested in him more than we are interested in any others among his contemporary court painters. It is precisely because Rubens was an artist and most of the other court painters were not. Far beyond the immediate illustrative function of his pictures Rubens sensed and gloried in maturity. He presented not so much the Queen, but full-grown full-blown woman, archetypally; not the King but mankind in the prime of his days; not the palace estate but high summer, and he presented it with such powerful opulence that he can, even now, nauseate those who like their eroticism to be spare and cool, those who feel some need to identify health and beauty with chastity, those who can't stand to have their Judeo-Christian notion of the flesh-as-corruption blown so completely to bits. André Gide incited some scandal for his 'Fruits of the Earth' in the early 20th Century. The so-called palace lackey Rubens put a near identical proposition before humanity two hundred years earlier by giving full rein to his perceptions and extending ours.

Secondly I would like to discuss Molière, another court favourite Molière extended the labyrinths of farcical plot to exercise his searching mischievous spirit. Thus he enabled himself to make a spectacle of the capers he could cut around the ossified, stabilised, standardised, static perceptions of

the Royal Family.

Similarly Goya played upon his patron's stupidity whilst Shakespeare gives us, in the relationship of the jester to Lear, a microcosm of the way in which an artist under the most oppressive patronage may still avoid capitulation into the role of entertainer or propagandist.

Now an artist is normally so preoccupied with the sharpening of his senses and the notation of his sense experience that he has little energy left to ensure that the movements he initiates are ultimately resolved in the direction he would prefer, as a citizen with moral and political attitudes. Charlie Parker, the alto-saxophonist, had absolutely no idea that his curious brand of lyric melancholic violence would spread within twenty years into a social attitude and thence into a spontaneous cultural upheaval that rocked the foundations of government. Currently the practitioners of open-field composition are not too precisely concerned with whether or not their excursion into non-linear, non-vertical, and non-centrifugal forms will have an immediate effect on philosophical models of reality or on political patterns of social organisation.

The political function of the artist is perpetually to stir the waters. Usually he leaves it to others to direct the stream.

The perpetual political message of art is that at no point can we ever say we have arrived at a formula for living, quite simply because new information is coming in all the time.

Occasions when the artist's sense of emergency propels him to direct assault on public apathy like, for instance, the varied forms of didactic art, the Dada movement, the Futurist movement.

the Surrealist movement, or the underground of the late 60's and early 70's, are comparatively rare. Customarily, the new information is offered and society's organisers can deploy it in their own good time.

Or reject it, and this they commonly do, firstly because the uncontrolled play of the perceptions may well erode a political ideal before that ideal has been practically achieved. Thus Marxist states are intolerant of art simply because socialism has not yet been established and all new notions appear as revisionism. Secondly the rejection of art may occur because a power-group that has risen to predominance through competitive excellence in a fixed scale of values sees no reason why it should lose power simply because the canons of excellence on which its power rests have been outdated by art. Thus the English Literature departments of this country reject art preferring to bundle it off as something else called the Avant Garde, or Modernism, as though art in the 20th Century were any different from the art of the past. The information is different, but the function of art is the same. It remains what it always was - the amplification of the perceptions by artifact. Thirdly, and, I think, most importantly, art may be rejected on a point of principle. People may say that the extension of perception is, in fact, less important than justice, than democracy, than the problem of the starving, than the maintenance of an organised society, than the pursuit of freedom, than pleasure. Less important than truth. Less important than the establishment of some common and stable standard of right and wrong. So these licentious voluptuaries should be brought home to roost and made to function, like everyone else,

according to the collectively decided needs of society. People who reject art for either of the first two reasons commonly claim to be rejecting it for the third.

My argument against such claims and such people is this: that the notion of life as a process of survival guided by need is negative when set against the notion of life as a process of discovery guided by energy and joy. I believe most profoundly that a life lived in rigid confines, however fair, secure or even pleasurable it may be, has somehow betrayed its definitive nature to such an extent that it has ceased to function as a life and will, in time, find some way of ending itself. It is my belief that the rigid confines of the chamber in which we currently dwell are formed by a concept of human nature as need.

Functional architecture is based on an examination of and catering for human need. Thus it is based on the notion of life as need. It therefore typically incurs the spontaneous antagonism of those people most aware that they have been wrongly defined. That instead of being spoken to they are being catered for. That the designer, instead of showing them a human face is showing them a series of statistical calculations in which the citizen, a boundless radiation of imaginative impulses and unanticipable decisions, has been assumed to be a unit, a defined and contained entity who can be deployed in calculations like units of money or electricity.

The notion of human nature as need, like any fixed concept of human nature, can only be surmounted by allowing those who are willing to try, to deploy their humanity, which is to say, their awareness, in continuously and relentlessly varied ways. Such people I call artists and, unless they are more successful than

they have been to date, our notion of ourselves as closed units of need will remain intact and will bring about our suicide as a species quite simply because there is no particular reason why we should continue to take the trouble to live. Life is a process of becoming. If we have decided what we are, becoming becomes impossible. So does life.

Now this last is a belief and it is necessarily subjective. What is objective in this situation is for our society, as represented by yourselves, to decide whether or not it wants art, and then to come clean about it. If you think of art in terms of the definition which I offer you must realise that art, of its nature, ceases to take place if conditions of restriction are effectively imposed. If such restrictions are attempted, art must surmount them, cheat them, flee them, or cease.

I am not here and now asking this society that it should necessarily embrace that which must eventually alter its premises, although I clearly believe that it is to everybody's urgent benefit that it should. All I ask, for the time being, is that the society, late 20th Century free-trading democratic England, recently the predominant world power and prominent in the confrontation between the worlds of Marxism and competitive capitalism, should let me, a would-be artist, know where he stands. To do this you will have to decide whether art is really what you want, keeping it in mind that if you wish, as political representatives of your communities, to filter art through lenses of your own devising, then art is not what you require.

Then I shall know fairly what many artists fear, that I am

really the man for the job that you want doing, that you require an entertainer, a decorator, a social-worker, a therapist, a preservationist maybe, but you don't want me.

Far better that society should realise that it has become very dull, for all its violence and its political instability, and it is a dullness that can't be rectified by a merry tune and a dab of paint. It is from the eye of society that the light has gone. Whilst its surfaces may be animated and bright, society's depths are dull as old mud. Far better that society realise its right to art and muster the minimal courage necessary to tolerate a discipline in its midst from which civic control must be withheld. Far, far better to look upon such a risk as an adventure in which human possibilities are deployed in an ever-expanding process of amazement, in which catastrophes are experienced as release, in which disruption is deployed as an opportunity for the creative generosity which is the only version of human nature we should tolerate.

Thus, if state patronage is to continue usefully, the administration must be placed far more securely in the hands of artists or staff who are artist-appointed. Far from being an anti-democratic measure this would ensure that local authorities who, by now, have decided that art is what they want, are indeed getting art for their money and the best available. Thus a specialist profession would be granted the functioning autonomy currently afforded scientists and historians who are financed without being told what they may or may not discover. Thus artists are enabled to discharge their proper function as members of society.