

Has Modernism Failed?

“Individualism: Art for Art’s Sake, or Art for Society’s Sake?”

By Suzi Gablik

Anyone trying to face the full reality of modernism can still get caught, even at this point, in the cross fire between its admirers (those who defend abstraction and art-for-art’s-sake) and its detractors (those who believe that art must serve a purpose or be socially useful). The instability of art in our times, the confusion over what its purpose is and to whom, by rights, it should be addressing itself, have become, in recent years, a new Spenglerian darkness. In England, for instance, ever since the manifestations of anti-modernist outrage several years ago over the price paid by the Tate Gallery for a brick sculpture by Carl Andre, the snarling and ranting at certain kinds of late-modernist abstract art have hardly ceased; at that point the public, the critics, and David Hockney were all united in their savaging of monochrome canvases and the poor, scandalous bricks.

Those who defend modernism claim that art need not serve any purpose but should create its own reality. (The composer Arnold Schoenberg went so far as to declare that nothing done for a purpose could be art.) Abstract art brought into being not only a new aesthetic style, but also a change of understanding regarding the very *raison d'être* of art itself. For the committed modernist, the self-sufficiency of art is its salvation. Aesthetic experience is an end in itself, worth having on its own account. The only way for art to preserve its truth is by maintaining its distance from the social world—by staying pure.

Quite deliberately, during the high period of modernism between 1910 and 1930, art cut itself loose from its social moorings and withdrew, to save its creative essence. The “dehumanization” of art that took place in the early decades of this century was very much a response to the artist’s spiritual discomfort in capitalist and totalitarian societies alike. As Kandinsky put it, the phrase “art for art’s sake” is really the best ideal a materialist age can attain, for it is an unconscious protest against materialism, and the demand that everything should have a use and practical value. In opposition to materialist values, and because of the spiritual breakdown which followed the collapse of religion in modern society, the early modernists turned inward, away from the world, to concentrate on the self and its inner life. If valid meaning could no longer be found in the social world, they would seek it instead within themselves. In the thinking of most early-twentieth-century artists, a work of art was an independent world of pure creation which had its own, essentially spiritual, essence. The artist saw himself as a kind of priest who divined the interior soul, or spirit. Kandinsky and Malevich and many other early modernists had a concept of life which was essentially transcendental, although not tied to institutionalized religion. “Art no longer cares to serve the state and religion,” Malevich declared. “It no longer

wishes to illustrate the history of manners; it wants to have nothing to do with the object as such, and believes that it can exist, in and for itself, without things.” The attitude of art for art’s sake was essentially the artist’s forced response to a social reality he could no longer affirm.

This “inward turn”—the conviction that self-fulfillment was to be found in the encounter with oneself—inspired, in the early period of modernism, almost a theodicy of individual being; for many artists at that time abstraction was no less than an aesthetic theology. (Malevich went so far as to claim he saw the face of God in his black square, and Theo van Doesburg declared that “the square is to us what the cross was to the early Christians.”) This notion of the artist as the last active carrier of spiritual value in a materialist world remained attached to all abstract art until the end of Abstract Expressionism. Mark Rothko claimed, for instance, that if the spectator read his paintings solely in terms of spatial and color relationships, then he had failed to understand them. “You might as well get one thing straight,” he once told an interviewer. “I’m not an abstractionist . . . I’m not interested in the relationship of color or form to anything else. I’m interested in expressing basic human emotions . . . And the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows . . . they are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them.”

The Abstract Expressionists considered themselves as still belonging to a spiritual underground in the heroic tradition of Kandinsky and Malevich. “So long as modern society is dominated by the love of property,” Robert Motherwell wrote in 1944, “the artist has no alternative to formalism. Until there is a radical revolution in the values of modern society, we may look for a highly formal art to continue. . . . Modern artists have had to replace other social values with the strictly aesthetic.” Even in its most abstract form, modernism was self-consciously dissident, setting itself against the social order and seeking its own freedom and autonomy. The bourgeois might identify himself in terms of a role requiring that he orient his life around money, but the modern artist sought his identity through opposition to a society that offered him no role he was willing to accept. The original meaning of the term *avant-garde* implied a double process of aesthetic innovation and social revolt; it took the form of an estranged elite of artists and intellectuals who chose to live on the fringe of society.

During the 1960s and ‘70s, however, late modernism began to cast up increasing instances of a self-referring formalism which denies to abstract art any kind of dissident role or meaning within the social framework. The stylistic innovations of the color-field painters who emerged around the critic Clement Greenberg—Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski—are only aesthetic; they harbor no revolutionary pretensions, no religious fervor, no remnants of transcendence hung like clusters of ice on the very trellises of dawn. Greenberg in particular rejected the notion that there is any higher purpose to art, or any “spiritual” point to its production. Art only does what it does: its effect is limited and small. It is there to be aesthetically ‘good.’ Only the ‘dictates of the medium’—pure paint and the flatness of the picture plane—were held to be worthwhile concerns for painting. The very idea of content was taken to be a hindrance and a nuisance, and looking for meaning was a form of philistinism. The work is a painted surface, nothing more, and its meaning is entirely an aesthetic one. Stripped of all experience except a variety of painterly effects, and devoid of communication, however, it came

to seem as if the pig in the pigment were missing (if I may borrow a favorite phrase from the writer William Gass). (As always, within our complex modernist scene, there are countervailing instances, exceptions to the rule of what I am saying—artists like Dorothea Rockburne in her *Angel* series, and Brice Marden in his *Annunciation* pieces, who continue to work close to the spiritual heart of abstraction.)

In a sense, then, for the committed modernist, the audience doesn't really exist. Barnett Newman always claimed that the real reason an artist paints is so that he will have something to look at. Once, when an interviewer asked the painter Clyfford Still whether he was concerned that his work reach the people, Still replied, "Not in the least. That is what the comic strip does." "Then you paint for yourself?" "Yes." Creation, then, is pure freedom, and art must justify its own independent existence, in contrast to what Baudelaire called the "forced labor" of professional life. For Still, and other artists of his generation, painting was the one act of ultimate freedom that could transcend politics, ambition, and commerce. The shrewd and self-effacing painter Jasper Johns, when he was asked early on in his career about the strong public response to his work, replied, "Well, I liked the attention. And I thought it was interesting that other people had a reaction to my work, because prior to that time I had assumed it was mostly of interest only to myself."

Such remarks would probably have mystified a Renaissance artist, who was always acutely aware of the particular patron who commissioned or bought his work. In *Lives of the Artists*, Vasari recounts how Michelangelo was beset on all sides by the public demands on his time and talents. Pope Clement wanted him to paint the walls of the Sistine Chapel; not only did he command him to paint the Last Judgment, he also determined that it should be a masterpiece.

Meanwhile, Michelangelo was also being pressed in a troublesome way to execute the tomb of Pope Julius. Then, in 1534, when Pope Clement died, Pope Paul summoned him to enter his service, and when Michelangelo refused, he became angry and said, "I have nursed this ambition for thirty years, and now that I'm Pope am I not to have it satisfied? I shall tear the contract up. I'm determined to have you in my service, no matter what."

Until we come to the modern epoch, all art had a social significance and a social obligation. To suggest that classical art was concrete but indentured (in the sense of the bondage attaching to a public task), and that modern art is free but abstract, is merely to point out that impulses to autonomy and individualism run counter to processes of socialization and tradition. It is to raise the question of whether the modern artist has enough power over circumstances, and the means within himself, to resolve this contradiction. No longer compelled to direct art toward the collective ends of society, he must—if he can—distinguish himself through outstanding uniqueness. But this emphasis on uniqueness has hindered the development of any collective style—in the face of such continuous questioning of all aesthetic modes and norms, modernism has never established a style of its own. Ever since the advent of romanticism in the nineteenth century, singularity has been the norm instead of, as in the past, mastery over technique, or skilled knowledge. The overarching principle of modernism has been autonomy. Its touchstone is individual freedom, not social authority. Liberation from rules and restraints, however, has proven itself to mean alienation from the social dimension itself; and perhaps the time has come when a more circumspect state of mind may perceive the need to

strengthen art against its present condition of arbitrariness and fragility. As for the idea of freedom, we ought perhaps to examine it now more closely, to see whether it does not have a perilous shadow side that is leading only to “the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with self,” which Christopher Lasch writes about with such pessimism.

The most widespread attack on modernism and on the whole notion of art for art’s sake has always come from Marxists, for whom the idea of art’s function as something purely aesthetic and individual, and without external attachments, is spiritually sterile and corrupt. It represents the devitalization of culture in the final stages of capitalism, when the social-functional aspect of art dries up because the bourgeois artist sees art as a private activity, as part of the quest for self-realization, and as a means for the release of the individual from traditional restraints. In these terms, to know oneself becomes an end, instead of a means through which one knows the world.

True art, Marxists argue, examines the social and political reality behind appearance and does not represent it abstractly, divorced from appearances and in opposition to appearances. Marxist aesthetics demands that art illuminate social relationships and help us to recognize and change social reality. For art to be a social force, it must have a wide audience, and it must pass judgment on the phenomena of life. It must have as its subject the social world. Marx constantly stressed that art has a human social reality and must be integrated in a world of meanings—it is not a separate reality.

Both these positions—art as the expression of the individual or as the fulfillment of social needs—seem equally intelligible, but their conflicting demands at this point frame a major crisis in our culture: truth to the self or truth to the values of society. The sensibility of our age is characterized by this dilemma. When we assume either of these positions, we feel, more and more, that we are somehow being mutilated. We cannot satisfactorily adjust ourselves to either position, since each of them renounces what the other retains. Nor can their contradictions be resolved unless we manage to achieve some consensus as to the role art actually plays in modern society. Certainly the notion of things having no meaning outside themselves—of being valuable for their own sake—is relatively new, and we must see ourselves as light years away from the time, for instance, when art was used as a pedagogic tool for the church to illustrate religious stories, in an era when few people could read or write. Now, as Andy Warhol says, artists make things for people that they don’t really need.

As the most outspoken feminist/socialist critic in America, Lucy Lippard has always gone against the tide, arguing against formalism even when it was unfashionable to do so, and insisting emphatically on art with a message. Devoted herself to social and political issues, she has been one of the people seriously worried over the shift from radicalism into aestheticism that has characterized so much late-modernist art.

Finding little middle ground between purely aestheticized art and social propaganda, she states, “I’d like all artists to be socially responsible whatever their art is. But it is not easy to figure out one’s individual options between the extremes of total immersion in the queasy ethics of the art commodity system or furious rejection of all that it stands for.”

Lippard was among the first to perceive a widespread disaffection among artists refusing to accept the restricted optic of art for art’s sake, or the dominant control of

the gallery system over our access to art. “While some artists have never questioned the current marginal and passive status of art,” she writes in her most recent book, *Overlay*, “and are content to work within the reservation called the ‘art world,’ others have made conscious attempts over the last decade to combat the relentless commodification of their products and to reenter the ‘outside world.’” In the late ‘60s, after a period in which most avant-garde art was drastically divorced from social subjects or effects, many artists became disgusted with the star system and the narrowness of formal ‘movements.’ They began to ask themselves larger questions. When they looked up from their canvas and steel, they saw politics, nature, history and myth out there. Lippard’s previous book, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, was a chronological history of the period 1966 -1972 when many artists, seeking alternatives to painting and sculpture which might provide a chastening corrective to the opportunism and callousness of the marketing system, developed new modes such as conceptual, antiform, earth, process, body, and performance art. (These will be discussed in chapter three.) Immateriality and impermanence were the main strategies used to dematerialize art so it would no longer be a ‘precious object’ and thus alluring to the market—after all, you can’t really sell an X trodden into dusty grass in Africa, or parallel chalk lines drawn for two miles in the Mojave Desert. The paradigmatic figure who provides Lippard with a model and occupies a place of honor in her writing is Robert Smithson, who was a pivotal figure in the development of ‘site sculpture’ made for specific outdoor locations. His most well-known earthwork, the “Spiral Jetty,” was a reclamation of disused land in the Great Salt Lake in Utah, and part of Smithson’s importance for Lippard is that he was the one artist of his generation concerned with the fate of the earth, and the artist’s political responsibility to it. Lippard first became politicized herself by a trip to Argentina in 1968, when she talked to artists who felt that it was immoral to make art in the kind of society that existed there. Since then, she has attempted, in all that she does, to reverse the modernist notion that you have to give up art to be in the world or give up the world to be in art. In her own mind, there is no confusion as to whether the essential qualities of art lie in formal organization or in communication. She has passionately championed antinuclear and antiwar art, black and feminist art, and mass-produced art (in the form of printed matter and pamphlets) in short, unself-centered art that is frequently indigestible by the market but still hopes to change the social system.

Similar debates over ethics and aesthetics, instigated by Marxist critics, took place in England during the late 1970s, eventually taking on the dimensions of a fierce civil war much as, in *Gulliver’s Travels*, the Big-endians and the Little-endians disagree over the proper way to break an egg. There has always been a tradition of hostility and suspicion toward avant-garde and experimental art in England, notably in the writings of Sir Ernst Gombrich, Sir Kenneth Clark, and John Berger (although I don’t mean to suggest that any of these writers are linked by a common point of view). In the late 1970s, however, a new group of neo-Marxist writers emerged as the self-styled emissaries of cultural change. They expressed their indignation at the fecklessness of art under capitalism, while simultaneously proclaiming a crisis in contemporary art. Primary among these younger critics were Peter Fuller, a declared disciple of Berger’s, and Richard Cork, former editor of Studio International and art critic for London’s Evening Standard. Fuller’s main claim is that art has become malignantly decadent under monopoly capitalism, and rendered impotent by advertising and the media, while Cork was especially active during the late 1970s in

organizing exhibitions intended to present an alternative to modernism, “to rap the hegemony of painting over the knuckles,” as he chose to put it. Both condemn the practice of formalist abstraction as an impotent form of intellectual elitism deprived of all possible meaning.

One of Cork’s exhibitions, entitled *Art for Whom?* and held at the Serpentine Gallery in London in the spring of 1978, investigated the possibilities for artists of working within more ‘egalitarian’ contexts than are available through galleries and the dealer system. Factories, hospitals, schools, libraries, pubs, football clubs, bingo halls, street corners, and town halls, according to Cork, are some of the options open to an artist prepared to forgo the artifice of the gallery ambience and willing to make art for ordinary people instead of for other artists. All the work exhibited the idea of community and group experience, a principle of social integration as distinct from the idea of personal self-expression. There were posters to save Bethnal Green Hospital from budget cuts, a work by Conrad Atkinson intended to bring to public attention safety issues with respect to iron-ore workers, a community scheme in which artists collaborated with children in Islington to design decorations for the walls of their school building. Taking us back to familiar, social reality was Cork’s way of refuting what he considered to be the vacuous irrelevancies of late modernism’s bricks and stripes, indeed of all art which, like the owl, does nothing for a living but hoot.

Another point of Cork’s is that critics should actually articulate a direction for art to pursue. One of his major complaints has been that most artists today want to retreat into some kind of inner sanctum, some private world of the imagination. It behooves the critic to intervene in this state of affairs, as a corrective measure, and to insist that “artists start to reverse their deadening tendency to address each other alone ... without ever affecting the lives of those outside.” The avant-garde, according to Cork, are united by their refusal to work for anyone apart from themselves, and cling like drowning castaways to the raft of what they quaintly call “creative freedom.” Art must now discard the incestuous tactics of “stylistic infighting” and begin instead to convey meanings to “a public whose needs have been neglected for too long.” It should belong once more to the mass of people rather than to a dwindling elite.

More recently, two lesser-known critics writing in *Art in America*, Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard, claimed that the neighborhood arts movement is in fact the basis of a new avant-garde. The community artist is the one type of artist at this point who has successfully resisted the values of the marketplace, offering up his skills in the service of the community. Only the community artist avoids the role of “Sleeping Beauty,” to which other kinds of artists in our society are condemned since they are always waiting to be “discovered.” Their whole mode of life is devoted to preparing for this discovery. By not waiting each day to be discovered, the community artist is able to use art to transform the experience of a community. But, like the earlier avant-garde, they too are subject to the old debate of “Is it art?”, since what they do may be too useful and therefore too much of a departure from the art-for-art’s-sake norm.

I do not wish, myself, to be cast in the role of defending modern art against any of these one-sided views; but the fact is, I incline very much toward Marx’s view that capitalist society, although it has gone beyond previous societies in economic development, and still further beyond them in science and technology, cannot hope

to produce art equal to that of certain earlier forms of society since capitalist production, because it stresses the profit-making value of art and turns it into a form of merchandise, is hostile to the (spiritual) production of art. (The Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter once remarked, in a similar vein, that the stock exchange is a poor substitute for the Holy Grail.) Marx's main criticism of capitalism was that it crippled man because of its preponderance of economic interests; and he observed, more than a century ago, that "a writer is a productive laborer not insofar as he produces ideas, but insofar as he enriches the publisher who publishes his work." There was no 'art world' in Marx's time, but the comment is equally apt in relation to contemporary artists and their dealers.

If the artist's role has become marginal in modern Western society, it is not because modern art is intrinsically defective; it is because our society has divested art of all but aesthetic value, just as it has deprived us of meaningful spiritual experience. If the discord between the artist and society in modern times is to be seen as a defect, it must be understood as a social problem, due not to any defects inherent in art, but to defects in the value system of modern society. Marx felt that the supreme value of a work of art, its ultimate aim and reason for being, is achieved along with and through other values: social, moral, and religious. But modern life has by now largely deprived us of belief in these values. As many writers have pointed out, the real problem of modernity has proved to be the problem of belief, the loss of belief in any system of values beyond the self.

In traditional societies, the individual lives submerged in tradition which is, for him, immutable reality, transmitted from a venerable past; the individual does nothing on his own account, apart from the social group. Indeed, nothing is more terrible than to be cast out of the collective and to remain alone. It is hard for us to realize that modern Western notions of the individual, his selfhood, his rights, and his freedom, have no meaning in the Orient, or for primitive man. Self-seeking and the pursuit of profit are now seen as the natural characteristics of man, not as part of an historical process. Primitive art, however, is never personal. It doesn't reflect a private point of view; it isn't innovative, or produced for a market. Medieval society, to cite another instance, placed art at the service of religion. The artist exalted the dominant values of his society, and society in turn recognized itself in an art that was expressive of its values. Both had a concept of man which was essentially a religious one. Religion, ritual, and art existed primarily to support the social order.

Modern capitalist society, on the other hand, has been largely an object of dislike by its artists. Our great art has almost never been socially celebrative; it has been overtly hostile or coldly indifferent to the social order. Not only have we been living for some time now without any shared ideal, we have largely been living without any ideals at all. The paradoxical truth of individualism is that it can only progress at the expense of the strength of common beliefs and feelings. Our one common belief at this point seems to be that no one can be made accountable: any form of limitation is experienced as a prison. These social and psychological facts have dislocated artists from their embeddedness in the real world. Gustave Flaubert (the patriarch of our alienation, according to Jean-Paul Sartre) wrote in one of his letters, "I'm frankly a bourgeois, living in seclusion in the country, busy with literature and asking nothing of anyone, not consideration, nor honor, nor esteem. ... I'd jump into the water to save a good line of poetry or a good sentence of prose from anyone. But I don't

believe, on that account, that humanity has need of me, any more than I have need of it.”

For better or worse, modern consciousness is solitary, consequent to the disestablishing of communal reality. It is the most intense form of individualism the world has ever known. Modern life is lived in a world turned upside down, in which we are painfully aware of our separateness but have lost sight of our connectedness. This fact expresses, however paradoxically, the reality of our social situation: the most fundamental assumption of modernity, as Daniel Bell has pointed out, is that the social unit of society is not the group, guild, tribe, or city, but the person. That the contemporary bourgeois artist, as a result of these historical processes, sees his relation to art as an individual, and not as a social, relation is inevitable. Individualism and antitraditionalism are one and the same psychological force.

But does the isolation of the modern artist’s work, or his personal loneliness, deprive his accomplishment of social meaning? Not according to Harold Rosenberg, who remarked long ago that “the individual is in society; that goes without saying. He is also isolated and, like Ivan Ilyich, dies alone. I find it no more noble or picturesque to stress the isolation at the expense of participation than to stress the sentiment for the social at the expense of isolation.”

Marxists, on the other hand, reject the nonconformism and isolation of the modern artist as expressive of an abnormal and warped relationship to society, a form of negative interaction that implies personal moral and psychic degeneration. Modern art, because it is primarily an elucidation of the artist’s inner world, is seen as too narrow, and incapable of expressing deeper social values. The English neo-Marxists have denigrated artistic freedom as a mere figment of bourgeois ideology and have attacked individualism as “the most tacit and virulent assumption in art.” According to Peter Fuller, the contemporary artist’s freedom is, in any case, illusory, since it is restricted solely to aesthetic questions. It is, he claims, “like the freedom of madmen and the insane; they can do what they like because whatever they do has no effect at all. ... They have every freedom except the one that matters: the freedom to act socially.” It is easy enough to attack the restless vanity of capitalist culture under the umbrella of radical Marxist aesthetics, but the fact remains that the great art of recent centuries has emerged largely under capitalism, and not under socialism. Socialist systems have not been notable for achieving better art than market systems, they just grant the individual less freedom and restrict his powers of choice.

There is a crucial sense, however, in which Peter Fuller is right: if the artist has total freedom, if art can be anything the artist says it is, it will also never be anything more than that. The real crisis of modernism, as many people have rightly claimed, is the pervasive spiritual crisis of Western civilization: the absence of a system of beliefs that justifies allegiance to any entity beyond the self. Insistence upon absolute freedom for each individual leads to a negative attitude toward society, which is seen as limiting to one’s projects, and ultimately constricting. We need not be Marxists to perceive the extent to which overweening narcissism, compulsive striving, and schizoid alienation have become the dark underbelly of individual freedom in our society. There is no doubt that even freedom can become desolating, that after a while, even the artist may not know what to do with it. In a word, we can no longer really avoid the whole question so poignantly put by Peter Berger of whether the modern conception of the individual is a great step forward in the story of human

self-realization, or whether it is, on the contrary, a dehumanizing aberration in the history of mankind. At the very least, it is a phenomenon with a very short history that has not been essential in the past to human survival, or to a rich human culture—and with the backfire of scrutiny, we may yet come to see that it may prove inimical to both.

If the great modern enterprise has been freedom, the modern hubris is, finally, the refusal to accept any limits. If previous societies were formed on the limitations of man's destiny, our own suggests a definition of life which meets with no limitation whatsoever, and allows the individual, as a result, to abandon himself to himself without any communal obligation that might regulate freedom and prevent it from becoming narrow and selfish. Our present predicament rests on whether we can find some way of balancing the desire for individual freedom with the needs of society - whether, at this point, we are able to shake ourselves free from modernist notions of uninhibited individualist innovation, which have become a sterile monotony. There is no doubt that the consequences of exaggerated individualism which disposes the individual to isolate his own interests from the mass and to leave the rest of society to look after itself are being questioned on all sides. In the words of Daniel Bell, "We are groping for a new vocabulary whose key word seems to be limits: a limit to growth, a limit to the spoliation of the environment, a limit to arms, a limit to the tampering with biological nature." The real question, however, is whether we will also set a limit to the exploration of cultural experiences. Can we set a limit to hubris? The answer we give to these questions, according to Bell, could resolve the cultural contradictions of capitalism, and of its deceptive double, the culture of modernity.

Once we have seen how much art and society are correlative, perhaps we can find a position of equilibrium between the two extremes of Marxist socialism, which tends to ignore the aesthetic character of art, and an aesthetic formalism that treats art as socially unconditioned and autonomous. What is required is some sort of reconciliation, not a fixture at either pole. Even just specifying these extremes, setting them side by side as I have tried to do here, is enough to evoke all the difficulties attached to giving any workable definition—that is, one that might be held more or less consciously by everyone—as to how art should function in modern society or what it is for. Socialist art deprives us, on the whole, of formal and aesthetic qualities, being strong on message but often weak as art; whereas formalism obliterates meaning and purpose, often to the point of transforming meaninglessness itself into a primary content. Neither of these roads has been able, in our own day, to reach the transformational center from which redemption comes; but this is another question, of which more later.

A few artists working today have managed, all the same, to move beyond a socially indifferent formalism toward a more community-oriented framework, without any sacrifice at the level of aesthetic quality. One of these is John Ahearn, a New York artist associated since 1977 with Colab (Collaborative Projects, Inc., a group of young dissident artists who came out in favor of art as a radical communications medium rather than as a circular dialogue with the traditions of the past). Ahearn casts life-sized portraits of neighborhood groups and families in the South Bronx, which succeed in combining a powerful level of aesthetic expression with an energizing social meaning: the conviction that both art and society concern everyone. For Ahearn, sculpture is a form of art which can appeal to a wide public. He has set

up working “studios” in unusual places like elementary schools, nursing homes, and bowling alleys, where he casts directly from live sitters—who nearly always receive a sculpture in return for their participation. The finished portraits are luxuriously hand-painted; imbued with an almost visionary radiance, they express a passionate openness to the world, and love of it.

One of the intentions of the Bulgarian-born Christo, famous for “wrapping” objects, buildings, and landscapes, is to stimulate others to collaborate in his art. But, as he says, after the strains and complexities of dealing with the world which the realization of any of his major projects entails—the construction of *Running Fence*, for instance, involved half a million people—having an exhibition in Soho seems like a holiday. The artist, Christo claims, used to be the man who put things together, until the Victorian age, when they became specialists, like horse-painters. Today the art world manipulates all art into a make-believe reality. His own projects are far from specialized; they take place outside the art world and often require environmental studies, legal battles, material production in factories, and the mobilizing of thousands of volunteer labor forces. Getting it all together is a collaborative effort on the part of many people, and energy for the work is drawn as much from the community as it is from the artist himself. When *Running Fence* was constructed in California, a twenty-four-and-a-half-mile length of white nylon had to be stretched across land belonging to ranchers, most of whom were initially hostile to the project. Part of Christo’s “work” involved winning them over; it took nearly a year to convince sixty families to let their land be used, but in the end they gave him not only the desired permission but also immense support, promoting press conferences themselves to defend the project publicly.

The collision of so many highly contradictory currents at the end of the 1970s produced the cultural whirlpool from which a pluralist ethic, with its appetite for all-encompassing multiplicity, was able to emerge. Pluralism is one way the dialectical contradictions of modernism get erased. Now, as we advance into the 1980s, we find ourselves surrounded by all the disorder of our unresolved intentions, at the same time that we are besieged by all that is possible. But, as I shall argue in a later chapter, the danger is that when everything becomes art, art becomes nothing. For how can we ever succeed in forming a concept of something which is so totally open that all attributes apply to it equally? The 1980s so far have led us to the discovery that the craving for unlimited freedom may be ultimately entropic. It deprives art of direction and purpose until, like an unwound clock, it simply loses its capacity to work.

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