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**THE RELATIONSHIP AND COMMITMENT OF AN ARTIST TO
HIS OR HER SOCIETY IN A REVOLUTIONARY ENVIRONMENT**

(RESEARCH ESSAY)

*Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of*

MASTER OF FINE ARTS
Rhodes University

by

JACQUELINE JONES

December 1988.

for Peter

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my warmest thanks to the following people, without whose help this essay would not have been possible: to my supervisor, Erda Verwey, for her constant personal interest, time and effort; to Melissa de Villiers, for her proficient proof reading; to friends and family for their support and above all, to my husband, Pete, for all his help and encouragement - tolerance and love.

The financial assistance of the HSRC towards the research done for this work is hereby gratefully acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this work, or conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not to be regarded as those of the HSRC. I am also grateful to Rhodes University for their financial support.

A Note on War Poetry

*Not the expression of collective emotion
Imperfectly reflected in the daily papers.
Where is the point at which the merely individual
Explosion breaks*

*In the path of an action merely typical
To create the universal, originate a symbol
Out of the impact? This is a meeting
On which we attend*

*Of forces beyond control by experiment -
Of Nature and the Spirit. Mostly the individual
Experience is too large, or too small. Our emotions
Are only 'incidents'*

*In the effort to keep day and night together.
It seems just possible that a poem might happen
To a very young man: but a poem is not poetry -
That is a life.*

*War is not a life: it is a situation,
One which may neither be ignored nor accepted,
A problem to be met with ambush and stratagem,
Enveloped or scattered.*

*The enduring is not a substitute for the transient,
Neither one for the other. But the abstract conception
Of private experience at its greatest intensity
Becoming universal, which we call 'poetry',
May be affirmed in verse.*

T.S. Eliot

(Taken from *Collected Poems 1909 - 1962* by T.S. Eliot. London, 1970:
Faber and Faber p.229)

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INTRODUCTION

In *Aesthetics after Modernism*, Peter Fuller writes that "good art can only be realized when a creative individual encounters a living tradition with deep tendrils in communal life" (Fuller, 1983: p.36). Yet Francis Bacon believed that "the suffering of people and the differences between people are what have made great art, and not egalitarianism ..." (Brighton and Morris, 1977: p.234 and 235).

If it is true that art was once an integral part of society and reflected the aspirations of the whole community, its effect on society today has become marginal. Throughout history, especially since the emergence of Romanticism in the nineteenth century, the relationship between art, the artist and the public has become more and more tenuous. The spread of capitalism has resulted in widespread changes in methods of production, literacy, and industrial and technical development. Societies have become so diversified that today art no longer expresses the values and spiritual concerns of a unified society, but rather the individual or the small group. Given this, it has become impossible to return to a system of shared values and beliefs. To preserve some kind of 'truth', art has become a self-evolving activity, autonomous from political, social and economic concerns, and the term 'art for art's sake' is synonymous with many artists working in western capitalist societies.

However, since the development of the political ideologies of socialism and Marxism in the nineteenth century, this marginal role has been challenged by those determined to establish a

relationship between art and the masses. For many Marxists, the style of Social Realism has long been regarded as the most suitable means of expression. But since Stalin's abortive attempt to turn art into propaganda in the 1930's and 40's, the concept of Social Realism has expanded to include various stylistic innovations in modern art. Today, with recent developments in Postmodernism, there seems to be very little difference between Social Realism and Formalism. Since the 60's and 70's, however, a more radical Marxism has emerged which sees the very practice of art as emblematic of 'decadent' capitalism. This school believes that art is entirely permeated with ruling class ideology and sees in art only a cognitive function - that of effecting radical social and political change. For this purpose, these artists have embraced the mega-visual world, ostensibly to rid art of its 'human expression.' These Marxists have yet to replace 'bourgeois art' with a better alternative, and what they are doing amounts to the same apparent nihilism that the capitalist culture industry has reduced art to in the twentieth century.

Marxist theories and aesthetics have nonetheless had a profound influence on western artists working in countries during political and social upheaval. At first glance, Marxist demands for an art deeply rooted in society seem to neglect individuality and personal expression. Since artists (and art) are *partly* bound by ideology and preconceived notions of art, it is difficult to come to terms with such demands. But the contradiction that exists between subjective artistic creation and the harsh reality of social and political violence, forces those concerned to examine more closely both the nature and purpose of art and the artist's accountability in a changing society.

To determine the responsibility of the artist to society, a historical survey is useful but inadequate. Finally, one is faced with questions concerning the very nature of art itself. To

this end, Marxist theories (although complex and diverse) have been invaluable, because they have carefully unmasked many of the myths that surround art and artists today. By examining the various attitudes and theories concerning the role of the artist in society, this essay attempts on the one hand to overcome the contradiction that faces most artists working in western capitalist societies (especially during times of upheaval) - or at least find a compromise. On the other hand, it also seeks to defend those who have not succumbed to 'pressures' to be more politicized, critical and 'relevant', and have continued to work with conviction and dedication to the ideals that inspired them to create art in the first place.

As this research evolved out of a personal need to resolve the dilemma facing artists today, I have used the South African situation as a premise for an analysis of the ongoing debate between 'art for art's sake' and 'art for society's sake'. Although I write about 'art' and 'artists' in general, I refer particularly to white western artists (and black artists involved with the western tradition) and the 'fine art' practices, especially painting. The scope of the essay is extremely broad and for this reason many issues/aspects are dealt with cursorily. For similar reasons, and because I am partly bound by existing definitions concerning the nature of art, the conclusion arrived at is personal, but nevertheless opens the door to further study. Wittgenstein once said: "the limits of my language are the limits of my world" (Burgin, 1986: p.160). However, Victor Burgin writes that,

"From the horizon..., the view is of another world, one which includes elements of the previous one, but is no longer contained by them"
(Burgin, 1986: p.160).

Chapter One

In Europe and America, the struggle between 'art for art's sake' and 'art for society's sake' has enveloped the development of modern art. However, South African artists, like some Mannerists in the sixteenth century, have been content to borrow the stylistic devices of earlier avant-garde artists, but have not shared the same iconoclasm and social concern of some of these movements.

In South Africa, the system of apartheid - the notion of 'separate development' via the Group Areas Act - has effectively shielded whites from the social and political hardships that have beset other South Africans. It was only in the 1980's with certain developments and changes in the political and cultural arena, that artists, particularly white artists, were forced to face questions of accountability.

In the 1950's, the establishment of the Polly Street Art Centre in Johannesburg enabled black and white artists to meet and work together, giving some white artists the opportunity to share the black experience. This centre was eventually closed down by the West Rand Bantu Affairs Administration Board and, since then, the government's enforced policy of separate development has ensured that whites have been effectively 'cut off' from social and artistic interaction with blacks (Sack, 1988: p.15 and 16).

This isolation from the cultural, social and political life of the townships allowed white artists

to evade the issues caused by apartheid, and to pursue personal and spiritual concerns in their art. Most were content to study and assimilate the concerns and styles of American and European mainstream art, and many adopted the American critic, Clement Greenberg's maxim that it was not *what* one painted, but *how* one painted that really mattered; that the greatest art relied on its medium and a "pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colours, etc" (Hall and Ulanov, 1967: p.151). Yet, whether their work was highly abstract, expressly figurative, or both, most white artists continued to focus on the personal and the particular; their work appeared to be indifferent to the harsher realities of the South African apartheid system and the growing racial confrontation. In the Sunday Express (18th February, 1979) Joyce Ozyński remarked that white artists were insensitive to what was going on around them and that, unlike literature, protest and shared suffering were notably absent in the work of white visual artists (Verster, 1979: p.26). While this statement was equally true of work of some black artists at that time¹, there was evidence of growing socio-political awareness among black artists in the 60's and 70's.

The increased political censorship of black art, enforced legislation restricting the rights and movements of blacks, and the appalling conditions in the townships, gave rise to the Black Consciousness movement in the late 60's. Subsequently, many of the cultural groups that grew out of this movement were banned by the 1970's. During the period leading up to the education crisis of June, 1976, some artists like Lionel Davis and Winston Saoli were detained or imprisoned; others, including Dumeli Feni, Gavin Jantjes and Louis Maqhubela, went into exile (Sack, 1988: p.17).

¹ Since many black artists rely on the white buying public for a living, the critical edge is often removed so that their art responds to white definitions of what black art should be.

Black art during this period reveals two tendencies. On the one hand, artists tried to reflect the oppressive social reality through anguished, violent images like Dumile Feni's *Fear* (1966) or Benjamin Macala's haunting, ghost-like *Head* (1969). According to Steven Sack, this 'tortured, introspective' art is at its best a scathing criticism of the living conditions caused by apartheid but, at its worst, a 'self-pitying, sentimental' art (Sack, 1988: p.17). On the other hand, artists like Fikile Magadlela, Thamsanqwa Mnyele, Ezrom Legae and Dikobe Martins responded to the political oppression by offering images of hope rather than despair; instead of reflecting reality as it was, they tried to create a new reality through surreal, mystical symbolism and allusion. Legae's *Chicken Series* (1978), for instance, was inspired by the story of Steve Biko, but the artist has used chicken and egg imagery to express a new awakening black consciousness, instead of more overt political content (Sack, 1988: p.18). Apart from these two tendencies, the increased politicization of artists was also evident in the growing number of explicit political posters, such as those produced by the Community Arts Project (CAP)¹ in Cape Town.

Although such political sentiment was largely absent in the work of white artists, there were some artists (Michael Goldberg, Paul Stopforth, Robert Hodgins and William Kentridge, for instance) who felt the need to depict and/or comment on social and political issues.

In July, 1979, at a conference² in Cape Town, two resolutions were passed which helped to

¹ This centre was established in 1977.

² This conference, on the state of art in South Africa was organized by the Michaelis School for Fine Art and convened by Neville Dubouw. Papers were delivered by the country's leading artists, writers, poets, and academics, and it led to others like it in the 80's.

change firmly entrenched ideas regarding the educational opportunities for blacks, and the responsibility of artists working in a country during political and social change:

1. This congress notes with serious concern the neglect of state support in the field of art education and training for all the people in South Africa. As a matter of urgency it requests all colleges and schools of art to be opened to all people in South Africa and that an effective system of bursaries accompany such legislation to enable the largest number of people to take advantage of such opportunity for art education.
2. This congress notes that *it is the responsibility of each artist to work as diligently as possible to effect change towards a post apartheid society*. It urges artists to refuse participation in state sponsored exhibitions until such time as moves are made to implement the above - mentioned change.(my emphasis)

The above resolutions were submitted in the names of Cecil Skotnes, Bill Ainslie and Andrew Verster (State of Art in South Africa, 1979: cover).

To cater for the obvious lack of educational facilities for black artists, more art centres and art departments in black teacher's training colleges have subsequently been established. Increased support¹ for these organizations by a number of patrons and sponsors has made

¹ Local and foreign support from governments, church bodies, the corporate sector and trusts has enabled artists to pursue directions other than commercial ones. All support is viewed in relation to its political backing, and art training centres, exhibitions, and the promotion of art have become increasingly politicized activities (Sack, 1988: p.24 and 25).

experimentation with new ideas, materials and ways of expression possible, and various workshops have provided opportunities for the cross - fertilization of ideas and experiences. Most centres have inherited the artistic traditions of Polly Street and the ELC Art Centre at Rorkes Drift, but have also assimilated influences from America, Europe and Africa. Naturally, considering the political climate of the 80's, the 'pressure' to produce politicized work has been enormous. Artists working in community-based centres are expected to express the desires and aspirations of the people in the community and this has led to a 'tug o' war' situation between fine art and 'community art'¹. Bongiwe Dhlome, one of South Africa's leading black women artists and one of the directors of the Alexandra Art Centre², explained that buyers were indirectly responsible for the 'political sloganeering'³ apparent in many works by black artists, because they tended to ignore non-political or 'Americanized' art (Smith, 1986: p.18).

However, not all 'political' art is sloganeering. Because much black art has been produced in the townships, the relationship between art and experience has often been preserved and some powerful work responding to and reflecting the chaotic and often contradictory conditions in South Africa has come to light in recent years. The widespread exposure of such work by

¹ 'Community Art' can be defined as 'useful' art - didactic, economic or propagandistic.

² This centre was established in 1986 in Alexandra and Bongiwe is best known for her political woodcuts.

³ Dhlomo explained: "... as the political situation gets fiercer, [black artists] are expected to carry the banner for the liberation struggle in one hand while holding on to the goat-hide skin of their ancestral roots in the other" (Smith, 1986: p.18).

black artists through exhibitions¹, mural projects², street art³, and political posters has inevitably stimulated greater socio-political awareness amongst black and white artists.

Critics⁴ have also played an important part in stimulating political awareness by denigrating the so-called 'Formalist' tradition and criticizing work which *appeared* to be irrelevant to the more urgent and pressing issues of the day.

However, it was the declaration of the first State of Emergency in June, 1985, that finally forced artists to come to terms with "...the potentialities within the distortions and entanglements of the identity that history has forced upon us" (Powell, 1985: p.18).

The word 'revolution' gained its modern sense from the French Revolution and implies the overthrowing of an old order to bring about a "wholly new social order" (Williams, 1976:

¹ For instance, in 1985, the Tributaries Exhibition was held in Johannesburg. Ricky Burnet, the organizer, selected work from blacks and whites from cities, towns, rural areas and the homelands. All the works were displayed in the same exhibition space and attracted much attention. In 1988 a long awaited exhibition of black South African art, "The Neglected Tradition", was shown at the Johannesburg Art Gallery.

² This artform has been revised and promoted by the recent exhibition of mural art at the Market Galleries in Johannesburg.

³ Such as that made in Mamelodi, Soweto and Alexandra in 1984.

⁴ One thinks here particularly of Joyce Ozyński and Ivor Powell whose comments and criticisms in the Weekly Mail arts pages have provided valuable material for this study.

p.229). In South Africa, the liberation struggle¹ has largely been influenced by Marxism². Marxists argue that because art is embedded in social and political reality, it must play a more active role in a changing society, and the revival of interest in Marxist theory and aesthetics in recent years has provoked artists to question their responsibility to society.

In the western tradition, the artist is responsible to nobody but her/himself, but with an upsurge in political violence and unrest in South Africa in the 80's, the view of art as autonomous from political social and economic concerns was (and still is) seriously questioned. However, debates over the purpose of art, the artist's accountability, and form and content are not confined to the South African situation. Theories concerning purpose, values and aesthetics have been debated and developed since the eight century A.D., and these concerns have often become major issues during periods of social and political upheaval. A possible explanation for this was offered by the sociologist, Emile Durkheim.

¹ Although South Africa is in what one might call a 'pre-revolutionary phase,' the same arguments are applicable.

² Within the Marxist camp, there are numerous and often conflicting ideas and interpretations.

"Marxism is not one, but many things, but what, in the Western context, it is normally thought of as being is a political theory about the injurious nature of capitalist society and how it is to be overthrown. In its simplest, most general form the policy for change encompasses the organisation of those who do not own the means of production, and who, as a consequence, suffer, so as to disappropriate those who do. When this is achieved, the objective is to establish the means of production as belonging to everyone and, as a consequence, to establish a classless, non-hierarchical society. In this way the fragmentation and consequent debilitation of man, which occurs in class-based societies, is to be replaced by the full potentialities of rounded, humanised social man...

"Within Marxism there have been numerous theories about how this wresting of power from the dominant, bourgeois class is to be accomplished" (Taylor, 1978: p.59).

Durkheim believed that, in a revolutionary environment, old groups tend to break down and the individual is 'cut loose' from collective or existing norms and values which had previously satisfied his/her needs and desires. This loss of consensus (which is often only semi-conscious) leads to a state of confusion and anxiety which he called 'anomie' (Popenoe, 1971: p.379). The threat to one's physical well-being (because of the threat of violence) and the increased possibility of death adds to these feelings of anxiety, and stimulates a heightened perception of socio-political conditions in one's environment. Whereas Durkheim sees this state of anomie as undesirable because of the pain it causes, Jean Duvignaud, a French sociologist, sees it as a vital factor in the creation of new forms; a 'stimulus' to engage in a "quest for community" and new meaning between art, artist and society (Popenoe, 1971: p.379). During times of upheaval, the dynamism and changes that occur on a political and social level have ramifications for the individual that can work themselves out on an unconscious level. An artist becomes aware of a well of collective feeling that can connect him/her to self and society and, because there is a lack of confidence in the values and norms of the existing order, the artist is freer to experiment, challenge, and move beyond the comfortable perimeters of accepted tradition (Duvignaud, 1972: p.58-59).

Although Duvignaud states that this state of anomie is not the only cause or condition of artistic creativity, he points out that the great creative periods nearly all coincide with such periods of disorder. The dynamism and changes that take place in a revolutionary environment stimulate the creation of new form and content which is systematically exploited and used during periods of calm (Duvignaud, 1972: p.59 and 142). Raymond Williams supports this view and wrote, too, that, "the storm - clouds that [gather] around the political sense [of revolution] become fresh and invigorating *winds* when they blow in almost any other direction" (Williams, 1976: p.230).

Another interesting and valid correlation between revolution and the avant-garde artist¹ has been made by Robert Williams: for the avant-garde artist the process of artistic innovation can provide a vehicle for immortality² because, by creating a new style, the artist gains a reputation which will live on after his death. Moreover, the artwork itself will live on and become an object of contemplation for others. Periodic artistic innovation can also make rebirth possible within the artist's own lifetime, because it allows the artist to metaphysically transcend the world of everyday reality into another world where total affirmation is possible.

Likewise, for the political revolutionary, similar concepts of immortality apply. To create a new utopian society, the political activist is prepared to risk everything, even death and imprisonment. His/her memory, however, will be immortalized after the revolution and may even be memorialized. Active involvement in revolutionary events can also inspire a sense of rebirth, of shedding old moulds and discovering a new self. For the avant-garde artist who becomes involved in the exhilarating events of a revolution, chances of immortality are, therefore strengthened³. (It is not surprising that many second-rate artists have used a revolutionary situation to become recognized and remembered.)

¹ Because of the significant influence of American and European avant-garde theories, especially those of Clement Greenberg in the 60's and 70's, most South African artists assume an avant-garde status/position.

² Williams identifies three views of immortality that are applicable: One (derived from Greek and Christian thought) acknowledges the existence of another perfect universal realm which can only be entered spiritually; another, more secular view, is that we live on in the memory of others; and finally, there is the view the anyone can achieve immortality through longevity (with the help of medicine and good health) (Williams, 1978: p.16).

³ It is important to note, however, that while the avant-garde deliberately seeks ways (through art) to transcend the world, this drive is often not conscious for the political revolutionary because he seeks perfection in the real, material world and believes that a perfect society can be attained once the existing order is overthrown or transformed.

However, the increased tension and violence in South Africa in the 80's has stimulated artists to question preconceived notions of autonomy and individuality; to seek ways to overcome this dilemma; to become more involved in the political and social processes of change; and thereby bridge the gap between the artist and society. Artists have inevitably been influenced by Marxist demands for a socially relevant art. There has been a tendency to reject abstraction and Formalism¹ because these styles are, according to some, 'escapist,' 'frivolous' and 'irrelevant,' synonymous with the decadent, white capitalism. The Formalist tradition, according to the art critic Ivor Powell², has to do with the personal and particular and the "autonomy of individual consciousness in making the world for him or herself" (Powell, 1986: p.18). Works in this tradition apparently fall far short of interpreting the world we actually live in.

During the last three years, a wave of new 'relevant' art has swept the South African art world. Along with the 'back to Africa' trend³, artists tried (and are still trying) to imbue their work with a political message and meaningful content relating to the issues of the day⁴.

¹ Formalism refers to the abstract and experimental modes of representation developed in the West in the twentieth century. It has also become a catch-phrase used by Marxists to describe art produced under capitalism, which they regard as empty and meaningless.

² In this article, titled "Nel's stylish as ever, but dated", Powell labelled Nel Erasmus's work 'irrelevant' because it failed to measure up to current trends promoting relevant socio-political subject matter (Powell, 1985: p.18).

³ This affected everything from clothing, hairstyles, furniture and decor, to music, dance, theatre and, of course, the visual arts.

⁴ It must be noted, however, that a number of artists continued to work as they always had, and it was mainly the younger artists who sought ways to express/reflect 'relevant' content.

There has been a definite¹ shift towards a more figurative mode of representation in many of the works exhibited since 1985. Powell describes works of this period as 'painterly', 'expressionist' and showing a socio-political awareness in both spirit and subject matter, and many revealed a "Bacon-like² fascination with anger" (Powell, 1985: p.21).

However, this awareness was not explicit; it was mostly expressed covertly through symbolism, irony, and allusion, and some artists, writers, critics and academics rejected this mode of representation because it was "still bound by the orthodoxies of Formalism" (Ozynski, 1986: p.21). In her review of an exhibition, *Lusts of the Beast*³, the critic, Joyce Ozynski made it quite clear that she thought the style of Social Realism was a more appropriate means of expressing and reflecting reality:

The taboo on realism and narrative art has robbed all but the most independently-minded artists of a more appropriate means of incorporating and expressing their experience. The fear of Soviet Realism or pre-Impressionist modes hangs over artists like a paralysing cloud (Ozynski, 1986: p:21).

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- 1 The return to a figurative mode of representation is in keeping with the international Postmodern trend towards a more figurative art. In many ways, it is a compromise between the Formalist tradition and Marxist demands to create a more socially engaged art.
 - 2 He refers here, of course to the figurative expressionist works of the British artist, Francis Bacon.
 - 3 This exhibition was held at the Market Gallery in Johannesburg, Artists were invited to respond "in a neo-conceptual mode" to a speech made by P.W. Botha about what constituted reality in South Africa (Ozynski, 1986: p.21).

Yet this dogmatic demand by some Marxists for a 'narrative Soviet Realism'¹ echoes the narrow prescripts placed on artists by Stalin in Russia in the 1930's and 40's, as well as Hitler's persecution of modern 'degenerate' artists. The rejection of the concerns of Formalism for a 'narrative Soviet Realism' implies dictation of a style which could result in the same sterile, propagandist academism. Even in the Marxist camp there are few artists who still believe that good art contains explicit propaganda (Wolff, 1981: p.87).

Marxist idealism in the form of propaganda calls for a particular political stance against capitalism based on the assumption that, because of it, society is on the brink of imminent disaster (Swingewood, 1977: p. ix). Propaganda, then, denies the existence of individual ideals and values and, in this way, conflicts with basic human rights and freedom. As Willem De Kooning said: "The group instinct could be a good idea, but there is always some little dictator who wants to make his instinct the group instinct" (Chipp, 1968: p.560).

Propaganda expresses the desire to manipulate public opinion (the masses) and it relies on statistics to reveal basic collective needs and opinions. Jung explains that "although the average size of stones in a heap may be five centimeters, one will find very few stones of exactly this size in the heap" (Jung, 1978: p.245). If the individual in society cannot use freedom (although this is relative) to create something meaningful, what does it matter if s/he wastes away under a communist or capitalist regime (Jung, 1978: p.245).

For this reason, many artists have refused to bow to the 'pressure' to create a socially

¹ This term is difficult to define. But put very simply, it is representational art as opposed to non-representational abstract art. At its best it is a realism in which fantasy, stylization, and every possible freedom of expression play a very important role; at its worst it becomes nothing more than an illustrative stereotype, modified to suit the needs of the popular masses and used in accordance with the present stage in the class struggle.



engaged art and have continued to pursue the process of individuation and explore personal and spiritual concerns¹. These artists have to suffer labels such as 'irrelevant', 'capitalist' and 'racist'. In 1987, Colin Richards, lecturer of fine art, wrote: "Most of us are familiar with the notoriously fickle line between self-affirmation and denial of the 'other', or the point at which respect for difference curdles into racism or sexism, or when standing on one's rights means standing on somebody else's head" (Richards, 1987: p.82). While one rejects the notion that artists are somehow emotionally and spiritually superior to others, one is hostile to the way that the artist has been, in Sanguinetti's words, "kicked in the arse to the front of the stage to act the free man" (Brighton and Morris, 1977: p.222).

It is difficult, therefore, for the artist working in a revolutionary environment to escape feelings of guilt. S/he is still faced with the dilemma - responsibility to society or responsibility to the self. Ultimately s/he is forced to question the very nature of art itself. For this purpose, a brief historical survey of the relationship between the artist and society is important. This study will not determine the artist's responsibility, but, by establishing what it has been, it will be possible to come close to resolving the contradiction that exists today.

¹ This does not necessarily mean that they are not socially or politically aware!

Chapter Two

The relationship between the artist and society has always been extremely complex and cannot be explained in such simplistic terms as 'art for art's sake' and 'art for society's sake.' Throughout history, art has generally been a means of communication between the individual, society and an unknown or universal realm. However, the success of such communication depends on the nature and stability of the society in question.

When societies are held together by a strong system of beliefs and cultural values, military power or magic, art can become an integral part of life. Because the artist shares the values and beliefs of the community, society satisfies his/her basic material and spiritual needs and art, in turn, reflects the community's highest social and spiritual aspirations (Duvignaud, 1972: p.23). It is generally assumed that in primitive and archaic societies, for instance, art formed part of the ritual experience of the community. Artistic creation was not a self-conscious individualistic experience but, like magic, it was a means through which the community and the artist could participate in, or communicate with the realm of the unknown.

This is equally true of those societies held together by strong central beliefs such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Medieval Christianity. However, since the rise of humanism¹, the system of shared values and beliefs has gradually given way to individualism and a variety of

¹ Humanism refers to an interest in *man*, human activities, and human self-development (Williams, 1976: p.122).

cultural values and attitudes. When the artist loses this sense of fusion with society (and the world) the relationship between the two begins to change. The spiritual beliefs and values expressed through art are no longer synonymous with those of the whole society, but rather, those of the individual or of small groups. When this happens, new theories concerning the responsibility of artists and the purpose of art evolve, the earliest of which can be traced back to the Greeks.

Plato exiled artists from his ideal state because he believed that artists had no wisdom or natural genius. He had little regard for painters, sculptors, and architects because they had to get beyond mere imitation - to him, painting was an imitation of an imitation of ideal forms- the visual arts were deceptive because they were thrice removed from the ideal¹ (Nahm, 1975: p.60). He rejected the objects of mimetic art because "absolutely beautiful forms are not copies of living things or nature" (Nahm, 1975: p.64). To accommodate artists however, Simon Morley explains that Plato identified the existence of a universal realm in which absolute self-identity could be realized. Through inspiration or divine - madness, artists could then 'grasp' this ideal and bring it to the surface by using simple and abstract forms (not real forms). In this way, artists, could transform the world by rising above the world of appearance, and inspiration becomes the critical condition necessary for the creation of art (Papadakis, 1988: p.31). On the other hand, Aristotle's attitude to art was more probable in a secular materialist world: he rejected the existence of a universal realm of truth because he believed that the world apprehended by the senses *is* true reality. He proposed instead the theory of mimesis/imitation, which proposes that art works are essentially generated by the copying or imitation of appearances involving a series of choices - choice of materials, choice of subject-

¹ Ideal forms, according to Plato, could only be grasped by the mind through philosophy and thought.

matter - and is a complex process using both theoretical and practical knowledge. Imitation is bound by the conventions of the medium, but, because this medium is worked by individuals and is open to the particulars of context, time and space, it undergoes continuous development. The guiding principle in it, is common-sense awareness of the world and participation in it with others. It therefore assumes that the basis for a work of art lies in the study of the stereotypes of a particular medium so as to provide building blocks for an expansion of knowledge in general (Papadakis, 1988: p.28). In this way art can lead man to the 'truth' and, furthermore, it is also a source of pleasure¹.

Aristotle also introduced the concept of 'katharsis' - the purging of passions and emotions through art - and inevitably, these expressionist theories, as well as the view that one can derive pleasure from a work of art or use it for didactic educational purposes, have since influenced the role of art in society.

However, for Aristotle, art was not concerned with frivolity, propaganda, or particular historical data. Rather, its purpose was to reveal fundamental universal truths to all mankind. Thus, both Aristotle and Plato proposed the conception of a perfect realm of truth (one ideal and the other material) and an experience that is essentially creative. These theories were adapted in the fifteenth century by Alberti, and later, Renaissance artists combined the theories of creativity and mimesis.

Although elements of modern aesthetic philosophy can be traced back to the Greeks, our view of 'art' evolved out of the philosophies of art developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was only in the nineteenth century that works of art became 'acts of self-

¹ This idea, that the arts provide pleasure, was adapted in the eighteenth century.

expression' and the visual arts - architecture, painting, sculpture - seceded Abbé Charles Batteau's original list of seven fine arts to become 'art' as we know it today (Burgin, 1986: p.148).

Kristeller explains in *The Modern System of the Arts* that, in the Middle Ages, the concept of 'art' retained much the same meaning that it had possessed in Antiquity - shoe making, cooking, grammar and arithmetic were no less 'artes' than painting¹, sculpture, dance and music - and the only connection between the modern system of arts and art before the sixteenth century is an organic one (Taylor, 1978: p.40). Because Christianity formed a strong cohesive force in society, works of art were permeated with the religious iconography of Catholicism. Christian realists changed Plato's theories so that everything manifest became symbolic of the divine.

Discussions in art were concerned with theological and doctrinal issues, and technique. Even in the Renaissance, problems in art were indistinguishable from those in science, and greatness in art was seen to be perfection of technique and representation. Adkins Richardson writes:

"For [Leonardo] the suggestion that a panel painted by a routinely competent artisan might not be art would have been meaningless. Such transcendent, exclusive concepts of value did not exist for the quattrocento... art was invented by a later industrial age" (Taylor, 1978: p.40).

¹ The arts were divided into the 'liberal' arts (that is, skilled activities that were considered an intellectual form of work) and the 'mechanical' arts (those activities which were primarily manual skills). Painting and sculpture belonged to the latter category (Burgin, 1986: p.143).

Indeed with the resurgence of humanism during the Renaissance, reason and philosophy began to replace faith and mysticism, and, since the Middle Ages was the last bastion of a spiritually unified society, the relationship between the artist and society gradually began to change. With the spread and growth of capitalism¹, societies became more and more diversified and art was no longer a product of a society with shared symbolic beliefs and values.

As the Catholic faith weakened, Renaissance artists were freer to explore the realm of science and nature; to perfect and idealize it. There was a renewed interest in the art of Antiquity, and artists like Leonardo da Vinci did not limit their talents to the visual arts alone. Those who were talented began to enjoy greater prestige and were courted by wealthy patrons, the church and powerful mercantile families like the fifteenth century Medici's in Florence. For the first time, artists began to be seen as those set apart from society who are especially gifted to see things that other people cannot; the myth of the artist-genius was born. The official elevation of fine arts above the crafts², with the formation of the Academy in France in 1648, gave rise to a new elitism in art.

To justify the new elevated status of artistic activity, a new artistic vocabulary concerning

¹ The spread of capitalism and its subsequent growth has been linked by Max Weber to the spread of Protestantism. He wrote "that belief in the value of hard work as a kind of salvation exercise, belief that worldly prosperity is a mark of God's favour, belief in the exercise of free will - all these religious attitudes of Protestantism helped foster the rise of an economic system demanding hard work, thrift, initiative, competition and acquisitiveness" (Popenoe, 1971: p.392).

² Peter Fuller points out that the separation between arts and crafts - the separation between the mimetic and figurative arts and the ornamental and decorative arts - led to an ever - decreasing 'aesthetic dimension' which was further accelerated by changes in the nature of 'work' in the nineteenth century. Art no longer penetrated all aspects of social life and gradually became marginal to society (Fuller, 1983: p.19).

aesthetics¹, value and purpose was invented. In the absence of any previous theory on painting concerning these issues, the art theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries turned to classical theories on poetry and rhetoric². From Horace they gleaned the concept that painting was an illustration of text and from Aristotle, that painting must imitate "men as nobler than they are" (Burgin, 1986: p.145). Thus the tradition of history painting³ evolved and during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some of the great monarchs of Europe coerced artists into producing propagandistic works glorifying king and state. In France, for instance, Louis XIV brought the arts into the service of the state by controlling the Academy. He used art to enhance his own prestige and absolutism, and thereby maintained stability in society. At first he favoured the austere, stately classicism of Poussin, but later preferred the style and colour of the Baroque painter, Rubens.

The power and grandeur of the art of this period lay in the power of the king, but, after his death in 1715, the highly ornate and frivolous Rococo style became synonymous with the courts of his successors Louis XV and Louis XVI. These kings lacked the strength and idealism of their predecessor, and art no longer served to glorify king and state but, instead, to delight the senses of a new society of aristocrats and wealthy upper - class bourgeoisie. These new patrons preferred the seductive canvasses of Francois Boucher and the charming work of Antoine Watteau to the propagandist art of the age of Louis XIV. Art became more elitist and

¹ The term 'aesthetics' was first used by A.G. Baumgarten in 1750, and meant "an inquiry into the nature of sense perception" (Verstraëte: s.n. p.2).

² These theories were applied to the visual arts.

³ Nicholas Poussin (1594-1665), the first director of the Academy in France, sought inspiration from Antiquity and favoured rationality, restraint and order. To him, "the first requirement, fundamental to all others, is that the subject and the narrative be grandiose, such as battles, heroic actions, and religious themes ... Those who choose feeble subjects [genre] find refuge in them because of the feebleness of their talents" (Gardner, 1970: p.194).

the artist pandered to the tastes and desires of a privileged minority. Beauty was no longer ostensibly concerned with 'truth' but instead with 'taste' and 'pleasure' (Verstraëte, s.n. p.8).

This attitude of 'art for art's sake' has its roots in Aristotelian theory. Unlike Plato, he believed that inherent perfection can be extracted from imperfect objects, and later Plotinus added that the arts are holders of beauty and add where nature is lacking (Burgin, 1986: p.147). So when Batteau published his book *Les Beaux Arts Reduits un Meme Principe* in 1747, the liberal arts became "the selective imitation of nature to provide that which is beautiful" (Burgin, 1986: p.144). Later, in *Laocoön* (1766) Lessing declared that painting can only express visible beautiful things in beautiful attitudes. According Burgin, this attitude can be identified in the twentieth century with Clement Greenberg's Formalism (Burgin, 1986: p.147) where "only the 'dictates of the medium' - pure paint and the flatness of the picture plane - were held to be worthwhile concerns for painting ... and its meaning is entirely an aesthetic one" (Gablik, 1986: p.13).

By the middle of the eighteenth century, however, anything Rococo or Baroque¹ was attacked because it lacked *moral* content. The rise of rationalism and the spirit of enquiry of the Enlightenment gave rise to a new desire for moral and spiritual regeneration which culminated in the French Revolution of 1789. Already the writings of Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) had fired the imagination of the public, artists and writers. He wrote that the new drive towards perfection and the general improvement of man made it necessary for thinkers of the Age of Enlightenment to look back to the utopian reality of the Greek Golden Age. Denis Diderot (1713-1784), who emerged as one of the most powerful critics of the times, believed

¹ At the beginning of the eighteenth century, there was a growing preference for the sumptuous flair of Baroque art, particularly the work of Rubens.

Diderot (1713-1784), who emerged as one of the most powerful critics of the times, believed that painting should move people spiritually but that such an emotion should be "tempered by some grand moral idea" (Cobban, 1969: p. 245). Initially, he was easily impressed by Greuze's simple, rustic realism clouded with superficial, crude sentiment, but when he saw Jacques-Louis David's *Belisarius Begging* at the Salon in 1781, he believed that he had found a painter at last who could marry content and form, and evolve a style for elevated and moral subject-matter.

David strove to educate the public through his art and evolved an elevated Neoclassical style to teach political, democratic ideals such as freedom, justice, courage and patriotism. Using well-known, heroic, classical themes, David tried to create an art for the people to give it a social purpose¹. Beauty in art became associated with 'morality'. However, it had already been discovered that 'beauty' was historically relative and therefore the classical ideal of beauty belonged to a particular time and place (Gardner, 1970: p.642). David and his followers never questioned the "social utility of academic organization and academic teaching" (Eitner, 1970: p.118). Instead, they tried to impose the classical concept of beauty on art and coerce artists into conforming to the new style. The new Institut National (formed in 1795) was simply a change in political leadership and most artists expressed the new republican ideals through traditional images, subjects and stylistic devices. The form of art that really moved the people emerged briefly during the revolution in the form of festivals and victory parades. Although

¹ The use of classical motifs and forms required a certain knowledge of Antiquity - and the masses were largely uneducated. David's art was as elitist as that of the Rococo era.

Neoclassicism did, for a brief moment, fulfil the demand for a new social function in art¹, history painting survived in France after the revolution, but under new masters. David, once the revolutionary anarchist, became Napoleon's Premier Peintre. Art, once again, became the handmaiden of the state (that is, Napoleon). Today history painting - 'the imitation of men as nobler than they are' - survives in the form of Zhdanov's² Social Realism where men are depicted "*in the course of their revolutionary development*" (Burgin, 1987: p.146).

The French Revolution had done little to relieve the economic lot of the masses or their position in society, and was simply a re-affirmation of middle - class determination. Art was still synonymous with the elitist ruling class and during the nineteenth century the gulf between artist and society widened. But the political revolution of 1789 also paved the way for a later artistic revolution - Romanticism - and the modern concept of art is based on the development of Romanticism in the nineteenth century. Romantic avant-garde artists strove to change the social role of art through changes in content and form. They were influenced by writers like Kant and Rousseau who believed that genius was a gift of nature and that art was human nature itself³. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, artists began to reject the

¹ Taylor argues that new theories of art run concurrently with the desire of the revolutionary class to assimilate the life of the ruling class. The concept of 'art' is changed to suit the activities and mentality of the average middle-class. Art no longer reflects the established order (as it had done during the reign of the Ancien Regime in France) but becomes the aspiration of the emerging bourgeoisie (Taylor, 1978: p.44 and 45).

² Zhdanov was Stalin's cultural minister and "Zhdanovism" is the term used to describe the Social Realist art produced in Russia under Zhdanov during Stalin's oppressive regime, from the 1930's until Stalin's death in 1953.

³ The text *On the Sublime*, attributed to the Greek, Longinus (died 273 A.D.), had been published in the sixteenth century. In it, he sought to identify the sublime quality found only in great art - one of five features was *vehement emotion* (Burgin, 1987: p.148). Moreover, in *The Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), Edward Younge talked about the "quasi - biological nature" of art and claimed that an *original* springs from the roots of *genius* (Cobban, 1969: p. 275).

view that art could be taught through rule and method and sought freedom from the Academy to express themselves through creative intuition¹. It was this notion of individuality-expression of the self - that fed Romanticism in the early nineteenth century. "...Ideal beauty," wrote Blake, "... is Born with us. Innate ideas are in Every Man, Born with him: they are truly Himself.... Man is Born like a Garden ready to be planted and Sown. This world is too poor to produce one Seed" (Eitner, 1970: p.123-4).

Artists, therefore, tried to express *themselves* (and their new ideas) through the creation of a new pictorial language². Some used traditional forms or symbols in a new way, while others fused thought and image into one vision. Either way, the *symbol*³ became the vehicle for communicating 'truth', and 'imagination' was linked to the notion of 'spontaneous creativity' (Burgin, 1986: p.143).

However, the social political revolutionary ideas that inspired the Romantic avant-garde artists⁴ in the first half of the nineteenth century, were forgotten by the 1880's - an artistic

¹ While some formed communities and sects (like the 'primitifs' in the 1790's) many isolated themselves and worked on their own.

² Painting was still a representative art.

³ Burgin used Goethe to define 'symbol' as "essentially an extra-discursive form, albeit it may appear clothed in the substance of language, whose effect is to obtain the separation of subject and object, establishing an instantaneous and complete communication on the basis of *rappport* rather than cognition" (Burgin, 1987: p.155). A relationship exists then between the object of art and the viewer - not object of art, viewer and world - and is understood through intuition. (Says Terry Eagleton, ..."either you saw it or you didn't...") (Burgin, 1986: p.156).

⁴ The avant-garde artists were those who sought revolutionary changes in art from about 1900, in, for instance, the destruction of illusory space and genre, distortion of form, and the creation of a deliberately flat picture surface. Avant-garde artists changed art from the illustrative and picturesque and gave it a new language (Rosen, 1984: p.134).

revolutionary no longer had to be a political revolutionary as well¹. If Romanticism was a reaction against Neoclassicism (the Academy) and the wealthy bourgeoisie, it was also a reaction against the growing monopoly of capitalism, mechanization and industry - the dehumanizing aspects of profit - making and the means of production. Artists withdrew into 'bohemia'² to seek 'truth' in art. The Greek universal³, which was fixed and finite became transcendent, and through spontaneous expression, artists became the mediators of transcendent 'truth', inspired and semi-divine (Burgin, 1986: p.30). Morley writes that inspiration came to be seen as "wisdom incarnate" (Papadakis, 1988: p.31) and art became autonomous - raised to the level of the absolute along with religion.

Nineteenth century Neoclassicism and Romanticism, although traditional opposites, therefore both represent a retreat from reality in that the former aspires to exalt pure logic and thought as something separate from the world and the latter separates the artist from society and turns him into a human god (Finkelstein, 1947: p.169).

By 1850, many of the attitudes of Romanticism had become respectable; subjective expression of emotion and inspiration became widely accepted (Rosen, 1984: p10). Even Courbet, the Realist painter, who was encouraged by the socialist thinkers Champfleury and Proudhon, to create an art for the ordinary people, strove for the greatest objectivity in representation, so

¹ This is a generalized statement because there were, of course, those artists who were committed to political and social revolutions, like the Russian avant-garde.

² fictional artist's retreat

³ Christian belief in the unique personality of individuals was not in accord with the Greek universal type. While Plato believed that God's universal laws were fixed and could not be changed, the Alexandrian, Philo, believed that this order could be changed according to God's will. This belief in 'miracles' has, according to Nahm, "enveloped the thought of the West upon the subject of artistic creation" and "... the aesthetic miracle [becomes] the creation of unique and individual works of art" (Nahm, 1975: p.14).

that the painting became an expression of himself in his own time. He rejected dramatic, idealized subject matter and insisted on painting the real world as it appears to the eye. In doing this, he relied not so much on the *subject* of the painting but on *painting* itself as a transcription of the experience of things. This did not mean a lack of concern for *what* he painted but rather, an acceptance of visual reality and the belief that it could be transcribed into 'art' by manipulating the medium (Rosen, 1984: p.152 and 177).

By the end of the nineteenth century, art which had once permeated all aspects of social life, became a form of retreat or escapism from the harsh realities of the world. Even the Symbolist movement proved no substitute for the loss of an art which was once an integral part of society, expressing shared values and beliefs (Fuller, 1983: p.10). "How, without a religious iconography, could the painter appeal beyond 'the gross senses'?" (Fuller, 1983: p.22). Art no longer permeated the fabric of society or expressed its highest spiritual aspirations, and 'truth' was vested in the genius of a few gifted artists alone. Peter Fuller sees the loss of aesthetic function in society as the prime cause of the 'general anaesthesia' that threatens art (and life) in the twentieth century (Fuller, 1983: p.22).

Once the invention of photography had taken over numerous functions of art, and science had 'proved' that reality was transitory and relative, the artist finally turned his/her back on society. Inevitably, the aesthetics of art (form, space, line, composition) or 'art for art's sake,' became a major preoccupation of many artists in the twentieth century.

The rapid succession of 'isms' in the twentieth century reflects the lack of unity in many societies. It also reflects various attempts by innovative artists to fuse the transcendent with the real. But by the middle of the century, as Simon Morley puts it, artists finally moved

towards the "high peaks of metaphysical speculation" and attempted to "remake themselves in the ideal - to recreate themselves from nothing, [to be] wholly original." This extreme Romanticism finds expression in the work of the Abstract Expressionists, and in Rothko, the last desperate attempts are made to fuse the sublime and the real (Papadakis, 1988: p.31). However, this ethic is forgotten after 1960 when Late Modernism splits into two directions: on the one hand, the Post-Painterly Abstractions (Frankenthaler, Louis, Noland, Stella and Olitski) explored the formal devices of painting and it becomes simply an "irreducible, irrefutable, object" (Fuller, 1981: p.84 and 85). On the other hand, Pop artists (Lichtenstein, Johns) embraced the mega-visual world and celebrated it.

Championed by the critic Clement Greenberg, these artists were not interested in revolutionary ideals, religious aspirations, or any aspect of transcendence; nor did they believe that there was any higher purpose to art beyond an aesthetic one (Gablík, 1986: p.20). Victor Burgin writes:

"What began as an emphasis on imagination - a creative faculty which seeks to *transgress* the given orders of representation - by degrees became a form of self-hypnosis in the service of the *status quo* ... artists 'express themselves' by means of beautiful shapes and colours ... [which] can be claimed to 'express' anything whatsoever - 'higher' realities, the 'human essence'" (Burgin, 1986: p.157).

However, in *Art, the Enemy of the People*, Roger Taylor argues that the view that art reveals universal 'truths' is a culturally conditioned expectation and not some innate "human-ness" expressing itself in the midst of bourgeois dehumanization. The promise of "absolute spiritual

fulfillment" through art is a process whereby the bourgeoisie is able to exhort the economic base (upon which their material security rests) to work towards social cohesiveness. While avant-garde appears to be anti-society, it was only allowed to exist in accordance with bourgeois ideology (as long as their role is marginal, they pose no threat to the established order) (Taylor, 1978: p.46). Even Clement Greenberg admitted that the avant-garde has always been attached to a cultural elite "by an umbilical cord of gold" (Hall and Ulanov, 1972: p.152). This 'elite' has of course rapidly dwindled¹ in the twentieth century.

Today artists find themselves confused with no traditional style or cultural set of values that can be trusted. Old ideas and philosophies are vague and questionable and, with societies in a continual state of flux and change, artists find themselves alone, condemned to invent his or her own destiny. However, because artists still depend on society for their livelihood, art and culture, in the West, have become more and more bureaucratic and managerial, "characterized by mass consumption and economic self-seeking" (Gablik, 1986: p.6).

Since the rise and development of socialist ideologies in the nineteenth century, however, various attempts have been made to create a more meaningful relationship between the artist, art and society. In this century the most notorious attempts were made by Hitler and Stalin in the 1930's and 40's. As Napoleon and Louis XIV had done before them, these totalitarian dictators tried to manipulate and control the arts for their own political ends.

Like the Soviets, the Nazi's despised abstract and non-figurative art. German Expressionism, Dada, Surrealism and all kinds of abstract art were denounced as Jewish or Bolshevik and degenerate. Hitler declared that these artists were " ... fools, liars, or criminals who belong in

¹ Peter Fuller talks about the "shrinking squirearchy" (Fuller, 1981: p.59).

insane asylums or prisons" (Chipp, 1968: p.474). He demanded instead from artists, a true germanic art that even "the lowliest stormtrooper" could understand; an art "for the people" (Chipp, 1968: p.482). German socialist art became a mixture of well - worn classical motifs mixed with heroic themes of blood and soil, family and duty. Instead of provoking enquiry and change, this kind of art gave Germans the illusion that they lived in a stable, serene world, and in Germano Facetti's words, "seems like a cross between cheap Hollywood spectacular props and clumsy exercises in neo-classicism" (Taylor, 1968: p.144).

In Russia, the term 'Social Realism' was first conceived in the 1930's when it became the official Soviet form of art under the cultural dictatorship of Zhdanov¹, Stalin's right-hand man. It evolved out of a desire to create a 'new' art for a 'new' Socialist Society (Vázquez, 1973: p.19). In the statutes of the First Congress of Soviet writers (1934)², it was concluded that "Socialist Writers' Realism ... demands of the artist a truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development" (Arvon, 1973: p.86). The rigid ideological and formal restrictions placed on artists were, however, a contradiction of the original Marxist - Leninist aesthetics. Lenin³, for instance, did not envisage such narrow control over themes, styles and form. In his *Party Organization and Party Literature* (1905) he wrote: "There is no question ... that in this field greater scope must undoubtedly be allowed for personal initiative, individual inclination thought and fantasy, form and content" (Vázquez, 1973: p.14). Instead of creating a 'new' realism to serve Russia's new socialist society that could reflect reality with all its "dynamism, development, and internal contradictions"

¹ Zhdanov played much the same role for Stalin as Colbert had for Louis XIV.

² The principles adopted at this congress were, of course, applicable to the visual arts as well.

³ Lenin's theory of art as "monumental propaganda" became the philosophical base of Stalin's Social Realist doctrine (Vázquez, 1973: p.15).

(Vázquez, 1973: p.19) Social Realism became simply a "new content pumped into old form" (Vázquez, 1973: p.20). Facetti explains that artists were expected to glorify the Party and its leaders, and praise the heroic working classes. Paintings had to express utopian socialist ideals and moreover attack the enemies of the party (Taylor, 1968: p.1441). While the culturally backward public and peasantry were being urged to give up the values of the old ruling-class, they were being fed with drab gilt-framed propaganda oils, painted in the same sterile nineteenth century academic style that was synonymous with bourgeois capitalism (Berger, 1969: p.48). "It's the same old story," wrote Engels, "form is always neglected at first for content" (Harap, 1949: p.54).

Furthermore, the complete rejection of innovative form in favour of didactic socialist content, marked the end of a truly dynamic revolutionary art that had been fostered by revolutionary fervour in Russia from 1905 to 1925, especially after the Bolshevik takeover in 1917. Many artists who had been involved in revolutionary art movements in Paris, Germany and elsewhere (for example, Kandinsky, Gabo and Pevsner) returned to Russia after 1917. Together with Tatlin, a Constructivist, they were involved with abstract experimentation to create a functional art in service of the people. After 1921, when Lenin introduced his policy of 'monumental propaganda', many of these artists left Russia.

Although the narrow constraints of Zhdanovism were officially abandoned for "a variety of styles and forms of artistic creation" at the congress in 1956¹, Social Realism is still the official form of art in Russia and China today, because the cultural bureaucracy created by Stalin has remained unchallenged. The style still demands the absolute primacy of social and

¹ After Stalin's death in 1953, de-Stalinization was made official at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956.

political content, and has become an ideological weapon in the struggle against western Capitalism (Arvon, 1973: p.96-98). Patrick Carpenter explains:

"We have confused the ideas which gave rise to the slogan of one of our cultural congresses - "Grasp the Weapon of Culture ". This slogan has now been largely repudiated by our writers and artists who have realized that culture is far more than an immediate political weapon, but *it is an idea which is still widely held by Party members and leaders*" (Brighton and Morris, 1977: p.214). (my emphasis)

During the 1960's, the western artist's apparent complete lack of commitment and responsibility to society as a whole came under attack from, most notably, the Marxist camp. Although there were a number of visual artists working 'outside' Formalism¹ in the 50's and 60's, the American government, previously hostile to Abstract Expressionism, turned it into a cultural weapon in 'The Cold War' against the Soviet bloc nations². Abstract Expressionism was heralded as the 'triumph' of American painting and became the *art officiel* (Fuller, 1981: p.79). All western art was labelled as 'decadent' 'individualistic' and 'antihumanist' (Chipp, 1968: p.459).

The terms 'art for society's sake' defined art as either reflecting an integrated, meaningful relationship to society on the one hand, or an isolated, insensitive individualism on the other.

¹ After the Second World War, many painters returned to the figurative tradition and this 'humanism' has been revived in Postmodern Painterly Expressionism.

² In America, Fred E. Busby of Illinois and George A. Dondero of Michigan ruthlessly attacked modern artists for being 'subversive communists' (Chipp, 1968: p.460). See also Peter Fuller, *Beyond the Crisis in Art*, pp. 78 - 82.

These extreme positions frame a major crisis for the contemporary western artist. To adopt either position, however, is unsatisfactory because "each of them renounces what the other retains" (Gablik, 1986: p.25). Since the 1960's, Marxist critical writings and aesthetics have changed and developed - but they have been invaluable as they have re-evaluated the position of the artist in society as well as provoked thought about the very nature of art itself.

Chapter Three

Most of the developments that have taken place in art since the 60's¹ have been influenced by Marxism², and particularly by the writings of a new generation of western Marxists³. By studying the critical writings of earlier Marxists⁴, and returning to the original ideas of Marx and Engels, people like John Berger, Ernst Fischer and Henri Arvon⁵, have re-examined the cognitive and aesthetic function of art in order to define a 'true' Marxist aesthetic. Interpretations of Marxist aesthetics have varied considerably, reflecting both splits within Marxism and a need to respond to changing circumstances. Often, "as in *Gulliver's Travels*, the Big-Endians and the Little-Endians disagree over the proper way to break an egg" (Gablik, 1986: p.27).

Broadly speaking, these Marxists have challenged the autonomy of art and the notion that

¹ These developments have occurred mainly in Europe and America.

² A definition of Marxism appears on page 10.

³ This revival began in Europe and America in the late 60's and 70's with the Chinese and Cuban Revolutions, the American New Left, Feminism, and the events of May, 1968 in France (Arvon, 1973: p.vii).

⁴ Theorists like Lukacs, Korsch, Gramsci, Adorno, Marcuse, Horkheimer, Rosdolsky and Benjamin, whose major works were written in the 20's and 30's and who opposed the Social Realist doctrines of Stalin and Trotsky, had a profound influence on the work of more contemporary Marxists (Swingewood, 1977: p.vii).

⁵ In an extended essay like this, it is impossible to examine the various tendencies within the Marxist camp. These writers have different and often opposing points of view but differ from reductionist Marxism in that they do not reject the 'bourgeois' art tradition, but use it instead as a basis for a new socialist art.

because it transcends time, place and history, artists themselves are free from political, social and economic considerations. A study of art and artists in particular *socio-historical* contexts, has exposed the ideological nature of art. Marx wrote in his *Preface* (1859) that "...the mode of production of material life, conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (Wolff, 1981: p.76). Works of art are not precious self-contained, transcendent products of unique, individual genius. They are the results of specific socio-historical conditions and express the ideas, values and conditions of existence of particular social groups (Wolff, 1981: p.49).

Artists, then, are not as 'free' in the West as they like to believe they are. To view art as separate from politics is itself a political viewpoint (Nairne, 1987: p.164), and directly or tacitly this position supports the status quo. Because the artist is ideologically bound s/he cannot produce art that is entirely free from social concerns or class interests (Vazquez, 1973: p.17).

Opinions concerning the extent to which art and artists are socially, economically and politically conditioned have varied, and depend, according to Janet Wolff, on the nature and conditions of cultural production and the nature of society itself¹ (Wolff, 1981: p.85). There are various ways in which ideology, or the values, ideas and beliefs of the dominating social group, are mediated through a work of art: commercialism, cultural institutions and censorship all play an important role in determining the final form of cultural products.

¹ Although the ruling ideologies are mostly those of dominant social groups, these ideologies are not always the same. Sometimes conflicting ideologies exist within the dominant social group. For instance, in South Africa, amongst the dominant white group, there are various ideologies such as that which exists between the English- and Afrikaans speaking groups.

In the West particularly, the production of art is greatly influenced by commercialism. Art is still regarded as a precious object possessing an 'aura', and has become a marketable commodity. Wealthy buyers regard the possession of art as a status symbol or an investment. Since the artist depends on society for his/her livelihood, the avant-garde artist, who is traditionally hostile to the status quo, has frequently succumbed to public taste. Often the critical edge of the work is removed to make it more 'palatable' and those works that *are* truly critical are rendered innocuous by consumption.

Control is also exercised by gallery entrepreneurs and curators of museums who determine who shows what and where; thus 'new' artists often find it difficult to gain access to these complex, elitist systems if their work is too critical and/or not marketable.

Censorship is another powerful force that encourages conformity, and in some countries the state is quick to repress - by force if necessary - any subversive artwork that fails to conform to given norms or openly criticizes the state¹. Despite the strict censorship laws in South Africa, however, few painters or sculptors have actually come into conflict with the authorities. Because art and artists have assumed such an autonomous role, the state does not seem to fear its *visual* artists. The opposite is true of writers like Breyten Breytenbach, Jan Rabie and Andre Brink. If nothing else, then, totalitarian² governments do fear their artists,

¹ In South Africa with the continuing battle between 'Western Christian Civilization' and 'Communism,' everything from literature to theatre, painting to multi-racial sport has been probed and scanned for traces of the "devil's plotting" (Verster, 1979: p.25).

² Totalitarianism has often been accused of curbing the freedom of the individual, but although many Western countries boast a democratic government, it is true that much of the world's population live under relatively repressive political systems. The freedom associated with so-called 'democratic' states is marginal.

embrace and confine them.

Furthermore, a work of art is mediated through the aesthetic conventions and codes which transform ideology in a particular way. These are handed down through art schools, colleges and institutions. Ideology, then, is not simply reflected in a work of art, but is transformed by complex social processes and aesthetic conventions - that is, art tradition. Whether artists reject this tradition or not, their relationship and involvement with it is inescapable (Burgin, 1986: p.158).

Artists, according to Marxists, are therefore not free, nor are they the only receptacles of creative imagination, specially endowed to see things that other people cannot. Marx believed that under capitalism art becomes an exclusive activity, because the division of labour is such that the ruling classes have appropriated 'art' and transformed it into a commodity. Romanticism, moreover, was the result of an emerging bourgeois individualism in the nineteenth century. He maintained that all forms of work were potentially creative and that one day, in a communist society, all men (and women!) would become artists (Vázquez, 1973: p.286).

However, perhaps because he could never fully explain why Greek classical art continued to 'move' him, he separated art from work and accorded it *relative autonomy* from society's 'economic base'¹.

In Marx's view, therefore, art can play a political part in the *en masse* commitment to organizing and shaping the world. By examining the socio-political reality behind appearances

¹ This notion was developed by Marx and Engels in a letter written in 1890, to indicate that some practices and structures are not entirely determined by ideology (Wolff, 1981: p.80).

and by exposing and passing judgement on existing phenomena, art can help us to recognize and change the social reality¹.

To become a force for social and political change, art must have wide audience. Thus many Marxists regard the style of Social Realism² as the most suitable means of expressing this 'reality behind appearances,' rather than abstraction, claiming it can easily be understood by the masses. But Stalin's abortive attempt to control art by prescribing rigid rules for form and content was largely repudiated by western Marxist aestheticians. When content dominates form (as it so often does in Social Realist works), form cannot change, and a dry, sterile academism results. Contrary to the old belief that new form is determined by new content, they believed that innovative form would determine new content. "Once form is freed of constraint ..." wrote Henri Arvon, "... the content should likewise be freed of its confining social and political limitations" (Arvon, 1973: p.97).

Consequently, western Marxists rejected the overriding *propagandist* function of Soviet Social Realism. In *Art and Revolution*, the British Marxist, John Berger, defines what he calls 'short-term' and 'long-term' art. While the former is necessary to spur people to action, its effect is immediate and temporary. Stalin's art policy failed because he blindly followed Lenin's suggestion that all art be 'monumental propaganda'³. Oil paintings, sculpture, and certain graphic works are not appropriate forms for propaganda because they can only be seen by a limited number of people. Film, political posters, booklets, theatre, song and declamatory

¹ According to Marx, social revolution begins when the "material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production" (Wolff, 1981: p.76).

² A definition of Social Realism appears on Page 15.

³ Lenin's wife has since written that Lenin had not intended his essay *Party organisation and party literature* (1921), to apply to fine art (Berger, 1969: p.54).

poetry are far more suitable forms for protest because they can reach a broad audience (Berger, 1969. p.54 and 55).

While a view of what one might call utopianism or idealism is necessary in work of art, 'long-term' art must also *embrace the contradictions of existing reality* so that it can inspire increasing self-awareness of the *reality within objective reality*. Certainly aesthetics play a vital role in a propaganda poster, and those that embrace broader themes (like 'freedom' , 'peace', 'unity') do have lasting effect. But because the content is usually predetermined (that is, bound by didactic party idealism), it often dominates form, and the true transformative power of art is limited. The new Social Realism must go beyond mere representation. It must express the *essence* of objective realities in their relation to *man* and thereby reveal the dialectical development towards change in society, and the contradictions that exist in capitalism. By moving from the particular (objective) reality to the universal (human) reality, true realism transcends objective reality (Vázquez, 1973: p.58).

For that reason, these new Marxist aesthetic theories embraced the formal innovative developments of some early twentieth century movements, recognizing, firstly, that avant-garde movements had developed in opposition to the values of capitalist society and secondly, that many artists (Kandinsky, Malevich and Tatlin) shared Marxist-Leninist revolutionary idealism (Vázquez, 1973: p.36).

However, some Marxists, like Vázquez, still insisted that despite the need for innovative form, *figuration* must never be abandoned. A distinction was still drawn between 'boundless' Social Realism, (as opposed to Stalin's Social Realism) and non-figurative, abstract art. Geometric abstraction, Abstract Expressionism, Colourfield painting, Op and Kinetic art, for instance,

were rejected because in these styles the image of man had disappeared completely. Nevertheless, according to John Berger, the rejection of the use of abstract forms to express 'reality behind appearance' ignores most of what has been discovered about the process of perception since the last century¹. Child art, folk and tribal art, and other forms of decorative art also invalidate this assumption. In most cases, abstraction uses the real world as a point of departure.

On the other hand, 'Zhdanovism'² has been criticized by some western Marxists as being dull, 'documentary naturalism.' Naturalism, unlike realism, is unselective and imitative and strives to produce a replica of objective reality (Berger, 1969: p.50). Yet, the distinction between naturalism and realism is tenuous. It is difficult to imagine, for instance, that anyone, no matter how hard s/he tries, can copy straight from reality because objective observation is mediated through subjective sensibility. Furthermore, this distinction was first made in the nineteenth century when 'art' came to mean something quite different. The mimetic tradition, developed since the Renaissance, was rejected for 'self-expression' through symbolism, or the manipulation of the art medium. Roger Taylor explains:

"the problem of producing a likeness is that of working out *what* one has to put down in two dimensions that will produce a sense of equivalence to what one has observed in the scene to be painted. This problem cannot be solved without resorting to invention. If 'creative man' is not some bogus, precious concept, it must apply surely to inventive activities of

¹ In *Man and his Symbols*, Carl Jung explains how archetypal symbols and signs are intuitively understood. See also Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* and *The Sense of Order*.

² A definition of Zhdanovism appears on page 25.

this sort" (Taylor, 1978: p.6).

Therefore, if one accepts Taylor's argument, Stalin's Social Realism might not be a suitable form of expression for the concept of 'art' (for western Marxists), but it is nonetheless art.

Since the rejection of 'Zhdanovism,' the difference between 'boundless' Social Realism and Formalism has become blurred. Even in 1951, Willem De Kooning wrote:

"There are as many naturalists among the abstract painters as there are abstract painters in the so-called subject-matter school" (Chipp, 1968: p.560).

Furthermore, with recent developments in western and Soviet art, Postmodern figurative art seems to be a compromise between 'art for art's sake' and 'art for society's sake.'

In many ways, western Marxist aesthetics have retained a pre-conceived notion of what art means. That is, art is still regarded as a *relatively autonomous* form of creative work, distinct from other forms of labour. Works of art (painting, sculpture, certain graphic media) are different from popular art forms (comics, posters and the media) and have an efficacious effect of revealing transcendent 'true' reality 'behind appearance'. Therefore, despite efforts to create an art for the masses, western Marxism is as much a preservation as a destruction of bourgeois capitalism (Taylor, 1978: p.87). It allows the western artist to enter the liberation struggle (thereby fulfilling the need to be 'useful' in society) without renouncing his/her

preconceived notions of art. Unlike more radical Marxism¹ (based on the theories of Structuralism² and the work of the French communist philosopher, Louis Althusser) many western Marxists and East European Marxists have tried, like Lenin, to preserve the 'fine art tradition'.

'Structuralist' Marxists rejected the humanist basis of Marxist aesthetics because they believed that, far from being relatively autonomous, all art is permeated with capitalist bourgeois ideology; cultural unity is not based on a form of 'active consent' on the part of individuals, but rather, ideological control is a completely unconscious process (Swingewood, 1977: p.82). "Man' is a myth of bourgeois ideology," writes Althusser. "Marxism - Leninism cannot start from 'man'. It starts 'from the economically given social period'; and, at the end of its analysis, when it 'arrives', *it may find real men*" (Wolff, 1981: p.129).

In their efforts to find 'real men'; Althusser, Metzger, Burgin and others have rejected bourgeois 'man' and his art (that is, painting, sculpture, and other forms of fine art) because both Formalism and Social Realism are mediated through Romantic individualism; humanism is the central concern in art. Cultural praxis, therefore, cannot be used as a means of changing the values and ideas of society because it is 'tainted' with ideology. Instead, people like Victor Burgin and Barbara Kruger prefer the matted or slick surfaces of photography and

¹ Simon Morley writes that the 'structuralist' Marxists who emerged in the 60's and 70's, were influenced by Marcel Duchamp and the writings of Jacques Derrida, and have tried, like Plato, to put art back 'in the service of the mind' (Papadakis, 1988: p.31).

² The writings of Lyotard, Buren, Foucault, Levi-Strauss and others have influenced more and more artists and critics during the last two decades.

other mega-visual aids, where there is little or no trace of the human hand or aestheticism¹.

According to Peter Fuller, what they are doing is no better than what monopoly capitalism and advertising have done to mankind in the twentieth century (Fuller, 1981: p.260). While certainly the impasse of fine art in the 60's and 70's was largely due to the extreme individualism of Late Formalism in America, this is no reason to reject painting or sculpture because of its individual expression. If the Russian avant-garde helped pave the way for Stalinism by glorifying the heroes of the revolution and by declaring "art a religion and themselves supreme deities with total power in the artistic universe they inhabited" (Williams, 1978: p.21) the new 'structuralist' Marxists, by denying this idealism, are unwittingly paving the way for "*Absolute Stalinism*" (Fuller, 1981: p.253).

Morley writes that if western art in the last two decades is anything to go by, these Marxists have failed to provide a viable alternative to the 'myth' of Romanticism, but they still demand that we bury ourselves with these 'myths' (Papadakis, 1988: p.32). 'Pop Art,' 'Art Povera,' 'Post-object,' 'Conceptual Art' and the 'de-aestheticized' painting² in the 80's are no

¹ These artists, and others like them, believe that human feeling or expression transmits hidden coded messages (ideology). Therefore, they believe that an art truly involved with society must begin "not with the good old things, but with the bad new ones" (that is, photography). This assumes, of course, that somehow artists who use processes like photography are freer than those who use traditional art practices (Burgin, 1986: p.37).

² Janet Wolff believes that the ideological nature of art can be changed by *reworking* aesthetic codes and conventions (Wolff, 1981: p.119). But the 'New Painting' of the 80's seems to be nothing more than another attempt to get onto the art market 'bandwagon'. Tony Godfrey points out that most of the 'New Painters' are young and that their work is selling "like hotcakes" (Godfrey, 1986: p.14). Attempts to undermine existing conventions are often futile and reinforce the status quo. In South Africa, Penny Siopis also tried to reveal the way in which ideas and emotions are coded in a painting so that they may perpetuate racist or sexist stereotypes (Korber, 1988: p.5). But her work appeals mostly in its opulence and sensuality and the iconography becomes secondary to the aesthetic pleasure it offers.

substitutes for the rich cultural heritage that has evolved over the last few centuries. For Peter Fuller, "buildings in the shape of oxo cubes, hotdogs or hamburgers ... will never equal the well of human achievement manifest on the west front of Chartres Cathedral (Fuller, 1983: p.37).

By rejecting 'bourgeois' art, 'structuralist' Marxism condemns artists to eternal obscurity and ineffectual dabbling. According to John Berger:

"The new reductionism of revolutionary theory ... sees [paintings] as only a visual ideology of a class. [It] eliminates art as a potential model of freedom, *which is how artists and the masses have always treated art when it spoke to their needs* ... Ideology partly determines the finished result, but it does not determine the *energy flowing through the current*" (Wolff, 1981: p.70). (my emphasis)

Although the Marxist, Herbert Marcuse, never found the appropriate means to 'negate' 'bourgeois' art culture, he nevertheless rejected anti-art manifestations' and 'dada-esque activities' because they deprived "art of the very form in which it can create that other reality within the established one - the cosmos of hope" (Fuller, 1981: p.30). If the art of the past can succeed in communicating to us as we are now, art, although partly determined by ideology, *cannot* be bound by it. Art does have an expressive emotive power ¹ (or essence, transcendence, 'moments of becoming', expression, call it what you will), and this power is

¹ Leaders of totalitarian societies have recognized this power and have tried to use it to their own ends. In western countries (and South Africa) however, few artists have come into conflict with the authorities because, quite simply, they are not a threat (as art plays such a marginal role).

transmitted through artistic activity ¹ and not mechanical means. The organic practices of painting, sculpture and drawing are vital processes which must be re-examined rather than rejected.

To this end, the work of 'structuralists' Marxists has been important and their efforts to expose the myths surrounding art and artists have not been in vain. Art has built up a golden cage of aesthetic vocabulary to convince the world that it has some extraordinary god-like power and contains intangible truths. With Late Modernism, art practice became completely divorced from reality - a means whereby the artist *alone* could transcend the material world. Artists have always been concerned with 'self-expression' but it was only with Romanticism that expression became the essential component of art, and later the entire content of a painting.

The role of the artist in society, therefore, has become marginal, and art, because it is regarded by the cultural 'elite' as a precious commodity created by some unique individual, has become the handmaiden of fashion and taste. Because of its assumed autonomy, art indirectly supports the status quo, as it fails to attack the real enemy in the hearts and minds of the people (that is racism, sexism and consumerism).

The capitalist 'culture industry' (mass media, magazines, radio and television) serves only to 'lull' masses into conformity. It serves the same propagandist function as Stalin's Social Realism by entrenching existing values and ideals. The best art 'for the masses' that western capitalist societies have managed to offer has been cheap escapism, a temporary respite from

¹ Peter Fuller defends artistic 'expression' in an essay titled *In Defence of Art* (1979) (Fuller, 1981: p.230-264).

the harsher realities of life. Communism too, with its particular brand of utopianism, offers blind idealism to carry on living. The concept of 'mass culture' (both capitalist and Marxist) is a denial and threat to the very freedom and dignity to which all men/women strive.

Therefore both fascism and communism aim to manipulate the masses into conformity 'from above' by satisfying 'false needs.' Art becomes a form of escapism from the banal and dehumanizing aspects of work/labour; a means whereby the worker can replenish his/her physical and psychological strength.

[Mass culture] ... legitimises bourgeois democratic and totalitarian domination, [but] as a [Marxist] theory, it is vacuous, ideological and contemptible " (Swingewood, 1977: p.123).

Only when a work of art is no longer suitable for consumption, or when it no longer serves ideological ends, can it possibly achieve significance and play a more positive role in society.

Conclusion

If 'revolution' implies a complete new social order emerging out of the ruins of capitalism, then it is not revolution but rather *reform* that is needed at all levels of society.

The notion of 'mass culture' or an 'art for all' is based on the assumption that the dominant ideology in a capitalist society maintains social cohesion by working one way, from above. That is, a powerful social group forces their particular class consciousness onto a large, unsuspecting passive mass (Swingewood, 1977: p.79).

Contrary to contemporary Marxist thought, however, domination is not exercised only from above, but rather from within, through a complex system of "relations between private institutions of civil society, bourgeois ideology and working - class organisation and leadership" (Swingewood, 1977: p.x).

Therefore, although the relationship between ideology and art (and artists) is inescapable, neither can be *reduced* to ideology alone. Both art and artists *are relatively autonomous*, and it is precisely *because* of this that art can oppose dictation, oppression, and injustice (quite ironically, the best examples of Social Realist works have been produced in the West and not under communism) (Gablik, 1986: p.31).

Artists committed to change, however, do not necessarily have to abandon art and run about

making banners and posters denouncing capitalism and the government¹ (anyway, methods of silencing such 'dissident' behaviour are swift and effective). This type of activity does not count for much in the way of real change which can only come about within the hearts, minds, attitudes and practices of all people in society. Besides, since photography and the mass media have taken over all the direct propagandist functions of art, painting, sculpture and other forms of fine art no longer seem to have any 'useful' function as such. According to Patrick Proctor, the distinction between political power and artistic power is paralleled by the distinction between strong feelings and deep ones. What is left to painting is the expression of *deep* feelings ... either one is a revolutionary or an artist: either is a full-time occupation ..." (Brighton and Morris, 1977: p.232 and 233). Harold Rosenberg and Robert Motherwell support this argument explaining: "If one is to continue to paint or write as the political trap seems to close upon him he must perhaps have the extremest faith in sheer possibility" (Chipp, 1968: p.490). Today it is precisely this "sheer possibility" that we must believe in.

Artists, therefore, cannot change the world, but the dynamism and heightened sense of freedom in a revolutionary environment can 'inspire' them to re-examine the relationship between art and society and ultimately, the *nature* of art itself. In this way, artists can explore new ways to bridge the gap between art and society so that art can play a more vital role in a changing world.

A historical survey has shown that more often than not, art has been a means of

¹ Some more radical Marxists believe that a truly Marxist art is only possible in a new socialist society; the 'aesthetic' must be suspended till such time, and art must become, instead, effective propaganda.

communication and/or transcendence. It has been an affirmation of man in the broadest sense - an attempt to fuse the 'real' with the 'unreal,' the 'known' with the 'unknown'. Even the Abstract Expressionists tried to transcend the world of indifference and 'remake' themselves in the ideal: for instance, Jackson Pollock talked about being *in* his painting (Chipp, 1968: p.548). But the supreme failure of artists to express a *universal* ideal through representation proved that if painting becomes an unconscious act, representation cannot originate in the artist but supposedly moves *through* him/her¹. Artists are not demi-gods, but rather (as Plato believed) 'vehicles' through which an ideal *could* be represented on the surface picture plane or in a material form. But if artists cannot entirely control representation, the union between the real and ideal is impossible. However, Morley writes that it is precisely this failure, this paradox - that reality and the ideal are a contradiction - which makes 'great' art. The *expressive attempt to realize some kind of order reveals a sense of unity and form* (Papadakis, 1988: p.32). Procter explains:

The *possibility of triumph*, against all the odds of failure (and failure in a [supposedly] useless activity must be more terrible by far than in a useful one), is precisely what makes [art] worthwhile (Brighton and Morris, 1977: p.232). (my emphasis)

In this way, images can move and excite one despite their historical context. The disturbing grandeur of the Gothic cathedral is an expression of an unrealized human order that is perhaps unattainable (Duvignaud, 1967: p.118). While the content and form of an artwork may be bound by conditions of production, the *expression* of that work can transcend history. But

¹ Because artists are relatively autonomous, representation does not consist entirely of ideology.

this expression cannot be confined to that of the individual.

'Expression' originally referred to the expression of the *subjects* (or people) in an artwork and it is only since the nineteenth century and Romanticism that artists have been preoccupied with the expression of the *self*. Most Marxists however, advocate a return to greater objectivity in art so that it can become more universal. If great art embraces the contradictions of our time and comes close to expressing humanity in its broadest sense, artists must broaden their concept of 'artistic expression'; 'universality' can only come about when there is a *balance* between the real and the transient, mind and spirit, body and soul, subjective and objective experience. Besides, "you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (Lee, 1960: p.35). Lucy Lippard also explains:

"I'm always saying that a politically conscious art has to come from lived experience - by which I don't mean you have to be bombed to make art against bombing, but that some part of you has to be able to envision being bombed, rather than just to make pictures of it. *If we can't imagine or image a person out of work sleeping in the street, shot down resisting eviction, tortured by police state, what hope have we of providing counter visions*" (Nairne, 1987, p.166).

If it is 'expression' in art that succeeds, despite the socio-historical context of an artwork, in communicating to us as we are now, Late Modernism was doomed to failure because it lacked

a *subject*¹. Art needs the power of the *image* to go beyond mere decoration. For those concerned about the marginal role of art in society, *humanist - based Marxist art theories* (as opposed to Stalinism and 'structuralist' Marxism) have been important because they have encouraged a more objective figurative approach to art. Therefore, with the influence of Marxism in the West and the resurgence of humanism after the Second World War, there has been an increasing emphasis on figurative representation, especially in the 1980's.

Like Romanticism, which by the 1850's had become 'acceptable', the need for a socially engaged art has become virtually unquestionable today. Most artists have recognized the power and necessity of figurative references to reach a broad audience.

If religion can cut through class barriers and change people's lives spiritually, art, because it also deals with human values and relationships, is capable of effecting inner change. It might not have the same charismatic effect on people as does religion, but it can entertain, enlighten, excite, 'move', anger, destroy illusions about the world around and within, and create new visions of hope. If art can 'move' just one person to become more aware of his being in relation to the world (spiritually, emotionally or intellectually), art is a small but positive force in society.

Art, then, can offer - in John Berger's words - a 'potential model of freedom' based on the *individual's broadest possible perception of the world and humanity*. In a revolutionary society such as ours in South Africa, where everything is black or white (that is, capitalist or

¹ If Courbet's work lacked a subject (that is, the subjective expression of the people he painted) the Abstract Expressionists lacked both subject and image, and with the Post-Painterly Abstractionists, art became flat, empty Formalism.

Marxist) alternative visions can play a vital role in the reaffirmation of mankind.

No political revolution has ever achieved a utopian society and it's unlikely that such a society will ever exist. As long as society has such a variety of beliefs and disparate systems of values, it will always be impossible for artists to express the universal aspirations and values of a particular historical milieu (Duvignaud, 1967: p.41). However, this does not mean that we must stop striving for perfection, even if it continually eludes us. The greatest art expresses the *attempt* to achieve universality and unity (collective ideals), and in a revolutionary environment, the artist can more readily tap the collective emotions and spirit of people in society. The feelings aroused during such periods also inspire experimentation, and innovative forms are created to express the new aspirations and concerns of a changing society. Art is an affirmation of life, humanity and the values of individuals in given societies.

However, the more overtly political a work of art, the more it reduces its potential to transcend socio-historical praxis (Fuller, 1981: p.14). One cannot demand responsibility of art by prescribing ideals or dictating form and content. Nor can art be constrained by commercialism. Both reduce the capacity of art to offer alternatives to the banal, dehumanizing aspects of capitalism and the 'culture industry.' But it must be remembered that many Marxists who take great pains to explain why the practice of art, if not committed to 'the struggle' or *political* change is futile and representative of ruling class values, are often philosophers, critics and writers committed to Marxism and *not art*! If these people were practicing artists they might have different views. While commitment to change in the political structure is a worthy cause, artistic commitment to change at a deeper, more permanent level is no less admirable.

Victor Burgin writes:

"It wasn't that you struggled for the glorious day of the revolution and then when the morning breaks, the blood coursing in the gutters, capitalists swinging from lamp-posts, then you have a new art for a brave new world; it's rather that you struggle for change within the institutions that you're in every day" (Nairne, 1987: p.191).

Gustav Metzger, a British artist, has written that art used for direct social change and actions to change the structure of the art world are both *reformist* activities rather than revolutionary. These attempts often serve to consolidate the existing order because the art world is ostensibly hermetically sealed against social involvement (Brighton and Morris, 1977: p.220). But this ignores recent developments in art where the definition of what constitutes art has been extended to include *all kinds of artistic activity*, including so-called 'popular art' or 'kitsch'. Art is becoming more integrated at different levels of society and its effect on people is therefore less marginal. Besides, reductionist, anti-art manifestations deprive art of the very means whereby it can provide a countervision. While it is important to put the mind back into art, one must never lose sight of the imaginary¹.

Therefore, to bridge the gap between art and society, we should aim to make art available to a broader, more classless audience, and, "for an art that blows peoples' minds," as John

¹ This was one of the main concerns in the conflict between Bertold Brecht and George Lukács in 1930's. Both were eager to fight fascism but, while Lukács was keen to preserve the tradition of art and change it, Brecht rejected all forms of bourgeois art. According to Lukács, Brecht failed to recognize the difference between scientific and artistic reflection of reality and, therefore, "failed to see the importance of the imaginary in art" (Arvon, 1973: p.110).

Hoyland, the British abstract painter puts it:

I keep reading this boring Leftist dogma by Richard Cork about the needs of the working classes and the necessity to make art with a social message.

How sure is he that he and others like him represent the aspirations of the working class? I prefer to think of people as individuals and perhaps what we really need is to have an art which *blows peoples' minds and expands their vision*.

People of all classes have no problem with all kinds of music. And society is practically held together by music and dance.

If Richard Cork and his kind really cared about the masses then they should attempt with characteristic zeal to explain the art of today to a wider audience. That is their job. The purpose of a critic is not to tell the artist what the content of his work should be; nor is it to decide what is socially relevant. For myself I would like to be able to make paintings that are as beautiful, as moving and as soulful as the best music of today. Or would Mr. Cork like to suppress music also? (Brighton and Morris, 1977: p.233). (my emphasis)

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