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## National Endowment for the Arts: News Articles (1980): Article 06

Ronald Berman

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## Art vs. the Arts

Ronald Berman

**I**BSEN, who was one of the heroes of modernism, endowed it with a passionate belief in artistic sensibility and social purpose. The artist was defined by his opposition to middle-class society. The theme of *An Enemy of the People* became that of our century: "The majority never has right on its side. Never, I say! That is one of these social lies against which an independent, intelligent man must wage war." It was a theme that suited the modernist movement, which was made up so largely of exiles. And it reflected historical circumstances as well, for poets, painters, and novelists worked in opposition to the values of the majority.

There has been a spectacular change at our own end of the 20th century. Art is now defined in terms of middle-class values and aspirations: it is the pursuit of the majority. Current dogma, selected almost at random from the media, from publications of arts institutions and of government, assumes that art is socially useful. It asserts that art should be universally accessible. It argues that distinctions of quality are invidious, a theme which makes possible the relationship between art and politics. In the view of its institutional patrons, art serves a mass electorate. It provides "experience" and "activity" for that electorate. This view prefers to leave to history Ibsen's conviction that art opposes social values. It finds equally disquieting the Freudian suggestion that art proceeds from impulses which are the opposite of civic.

If art has become bourgeois, the artist has not. The enemy of the people is now not so much against the majority as he is against social order; or at least against the kind of social order we have. The artist thinks of himself as a political revolutionary. The function of his art is to express a position on public issues and to serve ideas. Also, to embody a particular kind of alienation, and to show that the aesthetic object is less important than the personality shaping it. The two sets of ideas are contradictory but not exclusive: the most established of museums will exhibit the blank canvas or empty frame which is a calculated insult to

its own existence. By so doing, the institution exhibits its social responsibility (or responsiveness) and the artist his revolutionism. None of the values involved seems to have much to do with the practice of art.

The belief that art is a form of permanent revolution is probably as useless as the idea that it serves social values. In both cases the practice of art serves external ideas, and the object of art comes to represent something other than itself.

That art represents the General Will is a credo of public relations. But it is taken seriously enough, and has effects on artistic thought and activity which are serious enough to change their definition. One of the better sources for the argument that art is a public utility is the *Congressional Record*. Congressional debate on the National Endowment for the Arts has been conducted in a variety of moods since 1965, the year the Endowment was founded, but its common theme has been the public value of institutionalized creativity. Perhaps the most crucial of congressional debates were the authorization hearings held in both House and Senate in 1973, for it was then that support for the arts first decisively defeated its opposition. It was not a matter simply of the roll-call but of the thrust and conclusion of argument: here for the first time adherents of publicly supported art made a case which overwhelmed their opponents. That case was both ideological and political. To support federal patronage was no longer a matter of apologizing for high ideals. The tactics used were no longer those of smuggling in cultural support among other and higher proceedings. At this point in our cultural history a number of things, as in a chemical precipitation, became instantly plain.

Institutionalized art has in the 70's become economically important. That fact was indicated by the heavy representation of municipal lobbies in the wings. Perhaps more important, a cultural shift of major proportions has occurred. It was no longer necessary at hearings or on the floor of the House and Senate to defend art as a minority interest but as the vocation of a large and formidable constituency. Two other things were suggested by the tenor of congressional debate: that art had become identified with values previously confined to education or religion; and that art (or the arts,

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which are very different) had taken on bureaucratic shape and political identity.

In opening the debate in the House of Representatives, John Brademas invoked President Nixon's statement that the arts provided us with "the intangible but essential qualities of grace, beauty, and spiritual fulfillment." The interpretation of that rubric by Congress turned out to be a paradigm of a larger cultural process. On the floor of the House, Congressmen summarized countless arguments and affirmations provided by local and national lobbies for the arts. The main argument was that government should extend its social and educational programs, and that support of the arts and humanities was part of domestic support in general. Contingent arguments were intended to show that, for the arts particularly, there was a direct connection between the appropriation of funds and the resolution of one or more social problems. And nothing could indicate better that art was a political commodity than the recognition that its support pleased important constituencies.

The argument for the support of the arts had little to do with the actual creation of aesthetic objects and even less with scholarship, criticism, or training. Artistic activity was perceived—and defined—as the institutionalized expenditure of funds provided by the federal government. This distribution was hallowed by the intention of providing artistic experience to hospitals, urban ghettos, rural regions, community centers, and various agencies of welfare.

The social functions of art were emphasized in their variety, the debates suggesting that art displaced adolescent violence and anomie, encouraged craftsmanship, discouraged crime, and offered new opportunities for employment. Art was an alternative to drug addiction, an auxiliary to prison rehabilitation, and a solution to the problems of old age. Exposure to art might relieve inner-city tensions and possibly improve the tone of the adversary culture. Most appreciated of all was the effect of art—or the distribution of funds in its name—on regionalism. Hundreds of associations had sprung up under the influence of federal support of the arts, and they were necessarily connected to the economic life of congressional districts.

It was not mentioned but it was generally understood that these associations were composed of two new and important groups. The first was made up of traditional patrons of the arts, and of those who aspired to patronage. They had found that organization into public corporations relieved them of the personal responsibility to contribute funds while it maximized their influence on government policy. Since this group tended to be affluent, educated, and socially conscious, it was involved also in traditional political activities: the trustee of an association sponsoring the arts would typically have a previous connection with fundraising. He would have experience and weight in civic affairs. But now, instead of taking on the

burden of solicitation or of personal contribution, it was possible to exert leverage on the operations of government. To be a member of a State Council on the Arts was to receive substantial amounts of federal funds, and to have a voice in their distribution. Local sponsorship and patronage were extended into the mutual relationship of Congress and a constituency.

The second group was bureaucratic, composed of men and women who found new administrative careers created by the distribution of public funds. The expertise required is not entirely artistic: Dick Netzer, in *The Subsidized Muse*, states that lobbying for additional funds is a primary function of State Council staffs. Both groups, the members and the staff, lobby in another sense, which is to identify the regional support of art with direct social service. As they define what they do, art takes on the shape of domestic assistance to selected constituencies.

**D**URING the debate, the language of congressional discourse concentrated on numbers and participation. "Thousands of people, and whole communities" were the object of federal subvention. It was consistently stated that the benefits of art were in fact social, and that their civic effect was nowhere better shown than in the diffusion of money and programs among the young, the disadvantaged, and minorities. The remarks of one Congressman give an exceptionally useful sense of art as a social activity. It is a local service directed at an important constituency:

Iowa has one of the highest percentages of population aged 65 or older. It is therefore particularly fitting that the Iowa Arts Council this year provided assistance to the Iowa State Commission on the Aging for a senior citizen arts festival, an event which proved highly successful and which I hope will be repeated yearly. We have an immense reservoir of training, experience, and talent in older Americans—upon retirement they have increased time to devote to these talents, to their crafts and hobbies. The federal, state, and local programs in the arts should take particular cognizance of their needs and their potentialities.

It was a representative statement; others claimed the same kind of benefit, and made the same assumptions about the ends and means of artistic activity and support.

Political discourse needs to be discounted because it always implies social benefits. But there are in speeches like the above two things that ought not to be explained away as the normal exaggeration of congressional salesmanship. The first is the tactical end of distributing funds to constituencies in the name of art. The second, less political, is more important: it is the redefinition of artistic activity. That redefinition was provided by the various lobbies for art upon which congressional committees rely almost absolutely. The bureaucracy of art—members and staff of State

Councils, the National Endowment for the Arts, and House and Senate committees—believe that the primary purpose of the support of art is the distribution of funds. They believe in *programs* rather than *grants*. A grant is specifically designed to produce a particular effect; a program means only to be an instrument of equity. Most people prefer programs, because stipulated amounts annually are conveyed to all interested parties, which eliminates application, competition, and uncertainty.

The debates summed up issues connected not only to the support of art but to its practice and definition. The language of social piety tends to disguise a profound problem of interpretation. It is plain that artistic activity is no longer thought of as professional activity. It has in fact become the opposite, a form of middle-class relaxation. The "democratic" assumption is that we are all artists, while the populist assumption underlying it is that activity is its own end. This has a superficial resemblance to the Victorian idea that art exists for its own sake, but is very different. The implication of activity being its own end is that standards are superfluous: art is anything with creative intentions.

I THINK that at least part of the new definition of art becomes clear through its new political identity. It is indispensable to begin consideration of that identity with the difference between art and a term that has come to displace it, "the arts." Art means creativity and refers itself to the history of achieved things from Altamira to the present. "The arts," a phrase which has become an essential part of the vocabulary of policy, is used generally to imply creativity while promoting the ideas of the congressional debate that I have described, and the subsidy of associations, bureaucracies, and institutions. It means the distribution of funds for purposes *felt* to be artistic.

Some of the most praiseworthy efforts of the National Endowment for the Arts have gone into the maintenance of institutions. But a certain moral—and artistic—cost has been involved. I am not speaking simply of the diversion of funds for lobbying or other aspects of political reality. In the fourteen years since the inception of this agency, and after the expenditure of the better part of a billion dollars, we are hard put to name a single work of art worth recollecting that it has made possible. Nor can we associate its support with any great enterprise in training or apprenticeship. Nor can we connect that support with a productive idea affecting the understanding of art either by artists or their audience.

The NEA represents "the arts" rather than art, which is understandable given the fact that it reflects the will of its constituency. And "the arts" stand for the distribution of funds rather than specific accomplishments; the subsidy of associations promoting themselves as well as their purposes;

the relationship of the private sector of patronage to government; the use of art for social purposes; the satisfaction of particular constituencies.

Those constituencies are larger than one might think. There are 25,000 members of Actor's Equity and about 15,000 amateur theaters. The Bureau of the Census states that there are now more than a million people who identify themselves as artists by occupation. Artistic identity is having something of a boom. Without being simplistic, one can say that is probably because many vocations, like teaching, have been devalued; especially those dealing with cultural affairs. Competing institutions of culture have declined—religion, for example. And, as social status has become a matter of self-ascription, artistic *character* has become enormously popular. The use of the phrase "creative" has changed in an interesting way: it has been removed from the realm of achievement and applied to another realm entirely. What it means now is an attitude about the self; and it belongs not to aesthetics but to pop psychology.

There has been a natural overflow from the promotion of "the arts." More or less without a stop we are informed by the new class of government patrons that art is a universal good. One of the few activities of government not criticized by the media is its cultural subvention. And, of course, the availability of funds always draws into existence those able to benefit from them.

Yet actual creativity is hard to find. I have asked a deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts why that agency risked so much resentment by refusing to give more than 2 or 3 per cent of its annual budget to individual artists. This policy has made it easy to attack NEA for its subservience to institutions, and for its plodding subsidy of production and performance. The reply was that there are not enough good artists in the United States to justify giving them more than 3 per cent of NEA's annual funds. The million citizens characterizing themselves as artists for the census—joined by many more than a million to whom the arts are less than a vocation but more than a diversion—have creative intentions. But they cannot paint.

The politics of "the arts" is clearly a cycle: funds are distributed to organizations created by the distribution of funds. Netzer's *The Subsidized Muse*, which is the best study of the economics of government patronage, states flatly that State Arts Councils "may be regarded as costly sops for Congressmen determined to spread federal largesse widely and thinly, and as a means of creating a nationwide corps of lobbyists for NEA." There are of course other social purposes: in a piece in COMMENTARY, Samuel Lipman\* observes that "arts funding is seen by politically and socially activist groups as providing the means of increased visibility for their causes." Other benefits have been the prestige conferred by artistic purpose; significant

\* "Funding the Piper," *Music*, January 1979.

numbers of administrative jobs; and the connection more firmly established between arts and good causes.

Support of the social theory of art derives not from the congressional imagination but from the influences shaping it. If art means middle-class associations like State Councils, and ceaseless promotion of activity, then Congress will support that. If art means the diversion of funds to the young, the old, or minorities, then Congress will find that too acceptable. The arts constituency determines finally what the definition of art or of "the arts" will be. And that constituency has in the most determined way exempted artistic activity from critical standards. Art is whatever is done, whether crafts, hobbies, or simply the display of intentions. It is an ennobled form of middle-class entertainment.

Modern art has long been noted for the strenuous attempts of artists to offend the bourgeois imagination. But in the 70's, at least, art behaves as if it were anything but the culmination of the modernist movement. It is a radical product consumed by a distinctly un-radical class. An enormous amount of artistic activity has now been concentrated into performance, production, and other middle-class modes. The models are the Kennedy Center and Wolf Trap Farm, large establishments heavily supported by government, corporations, and foundations, and offering a combination of mass-audience programs and enough adversary culture to stay ahead of the media. The 60's may have radicalized art and its discourse, but the 70's have given it back to the middle class. It is difficult to talk about contemporary art as if it still had anything to do with modernism. Music, drama, dance, and exhibition are now the major modes, while the art of ideas matters far less than it used to. Poetry, for example, is now limited to the academic audience, although in the earlier part of the century it had a much more formative role. The performing arts now dominate and they represent the new role of social art: an auxiliary to daily life provided by the mutual operations of large institutions.

It makes no sense to be ungrateful for performance and production, or for the fortunate survival of civic benevolence. But subsidized events for large audiences tend inevitably to become a kind of cultural welfare. They are designed for the largest common denominator, and frequently translate art into another idiom.

The nervous attitude of art critics toward corporate support of performance is based upon suspicion of the profit motive. There is no denying that the sponsors of mass-audience culture have their own interests in mind. Texaco has stated that its support of the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts is based upon economic facts: the opera audience is loyal and buys Texaco products; a significant proportion of the 400,000 shareholders in the company own stock because of their interest in its cultural activities; the opera audience is "upscale" or composed of those with discretionary income;

and the audience is politically sophisticated, receptive to the corporation's side of controversy involving energy, taxation, and regulation. But it is a truism that sponsorship is a matter of self-interest. What is more significant is the relationship between corporate and public ideas about culture.

THE most interesting thing about corporate support for the arts is not the profit motive but something that might be called the cultural imperative. A survey of corporate backing of the performing arts in *Advertising Age* claims that "corporate involvement in social, civic, and cultural activities" is now routine. That support is not related directly to sales; corporations too have visions of social mobility, and derive the same benefits from patronage as traditionally accrue to individuals.

Corporations have performed a sense of their place in society, and within culture. As we frequently see in televised commercials, corporations no longer exclusively try to make sales. They present interminable displays of their social conscience; of the love and loyalty and services they live to confer. The usual perception is that corporations are trying to sell themselves instead of a product. But even that is not really accurate. Corporations may be trying to sell themselves—and to buy respect—but they are even more insistently trying to articulate what they believe are common values. Their nervous affirmations of clean water for good fishing or new forests for the next generation rest on the understanding that democratic institutions are involuntary social arbiters. If they do not affirm certain ideas they may be accused of opposing them. Corporations undertake to support whatever ideas are popular, vaguely moral, and untroublesome. They may even believe some of these ideas. They can certainly interpret the *Zeitgeist* as well as art critics.

It is necessary to observe, if only parenthetically, that corporations are now at the stage of structural development implying cultural support on a large scale. They employ many people in offices of public affairs which are subordinated to ideas about public relations. There is a good deal of ready money available because the tax code exempts 5 per cent of profits for charitable donations. Corporations have come to resemble State Councils on the Arts, maintaining bureaucracies devoted to the distribution of tax-free funds. They are vulnerable to local pressures, especially in metropolitan areas: corporate officers maintain the same position, and must perform the same largesse, as entrepreneurs did before them. But they can only live up to social expectations by dispensing tax-free corporate donations.

The managerial class has the same mind-set as those who define cultural values in utilitarian terms. Art as a diffuse social activity fits the corporate idea about its own place in democratic society. That kind of art is universal and uncontroversial. It begins with a head start since intellec-

tuals and the media find it difficult to quarrel with support of "the arts." There are more than political benefits, for executives are assured that they exist culturally. In an age in which cultural issues matter as much as political issues, that is an advantage.

There is an especially revealing passage in the survey of *Advertising Age*:

There is no doubt, as former CBS president Frank Stanton pointed out to the 25th anniversary conference of the Public Relations Society of America, that the essential values of the public "are most clearly evident, and in some instances evident only, in the arts—in music, the drama, and the dance, in the architecture and design and in the literature of the people and of the times."

When critics of corporate patronage hunt for the profit motive they overlook what Stanton calls "values" and what others have described, according to *Advertising Age*, as the "community" or even the "communion" that the corporation pursues with its customers. The corporation goes so far as to hope for "involvement with a customer as a total human being"—which is somewhere, one supposes, between a theological and a matrimonial relationship. The corporation believes, probably rightly, that the educated middle class has a morally positivist understanding of culture. Art, in that understanding, reflects the orderliness and intelligibility of life. It celebrates social beliefs and reinforces individual self-esteem. And, since it is just about the only aspect of industrial democratic life to have retained ritualistic, mystical, and even holy elements in its character, it is beyond criticism.

Performance is seen by its sponsors as an occasion of social solidarity. It is superego art. We can never be sufficiently reminded that it brings people together, is accessible to every mind and sensibility, has moral and therapeutic benefits, and implies the common taste of a mass middle class.

WITHIN the social definition of "the arts," distinctions are invidious: Warhol matters so long as he is a celebrity; the same can be said of Rubens. Not since the happy ending of *King Lear*, provided by Nahum Tate for the Enlightenment, has the interest of the audience been so solicited. The age of reason preferred a world without tragedy—and so it got philosophy. At the end of Tate's version of *King Lear*, Kent, Gloucester, and the king retire to a monastery while Edgar marries Cordelia. It is a triumph of poetic justice. The implications for us are fairly clear. When production and performance are tailored to a theory of what the public taste demands, good art will not necessarily be rejected, but bad art will certainly become accepted.

The consumption of bad art has been made easier by its sponsors, its production by other factors. There have been a number of theories for artistic decline, especially in painting. The most visible

attack on painting recently has been Tom Wolfe's *The Painted Word*, and in that book the blame is put pretty squarely on the devil's work done by criticism. In Wolfe's view—and although the book is outrageously funny, its message is serious—movements or mini-movements like Op and Pop art follow the temptations of ideas. An idea is broached by a critic, and a market created on the spot as artists try to embody it, sell it, and live up to its philosophy. But if anything, the critics of contemporary art (like those of the movies) seem to be better than their material. It is not that ideas are bad, but that contemporary art seems to be dominated by ideas which are second-rate. It might even be said of much of our art that it works without ideas; that it has become technique without a motive.

One of the most interesting of cultural facts to be recognized by government is the separation of art not only from theory but from the discourse of other disciplines. In splitting its patronage between arts and humanities, the federal government has acknowledged the preferences of opposed constituencies. One Endowment deals with books and ideas, with scholarship and research, with the theory and criticism of art—and that is the Humanities Endowment. The Arts Endowment deals only with what is left. What is left includes a good deal, about twenty different activities from dance to folk crafts. It ranges from the subsidy of the housewife who played the piccolo in Leadville, Colorado, immortalized by a Committee on Appropriations as the ultimate object of federal patronage, to the subsidy of the Metropolitan Opera. But what is left needs to be measured against what has been left out.

At least in government, which is not a bad indicator of social preference, the disciplines of thought have been removed from those of "activity." The arts are perceived—and legislatively defined—as the realm of "experience" or of sensation; as a form of entertainment; and as a diffuse activity which is its own end. Government is sometimes all too good an indicator: it reflects in this case the separation of art from sustaining thought, a separation as important as that which has been discerned between science and its opposing cultures.

Within the world of art itself there has been a separation of word and act. Scholarship takes place in universities and deals with the dead. The criticism of art takes place in the media, and is practiced there by those who believe that art and its social context are identical. If there is a universal theme to media coverage of the arts it is that the amount of money distributed to constituencies, institutions, and approved social causes defines ideal "support." As for the practice of the arts, that has become our largest amateur activity.

FOR about a century and a half the professional artist has viewed himself (sometimes rightly) as untutored genius, social

critic, political savant, existential philosopher, and in half-a-dozen other roles. These have set him off from the rest of bourgeois society and made him its greatest critic. But the quality of enabling ideas has fallen off since Shelley said that poets were the unacknowledged legislators of mankind. Modernism arose, in part, because of artistic hostility to bourgeois values and because of the hostility of those values to art. But the world depicted in the novels of Sinclair Lewis no longer exists. The middle class has long since put up the white flag and embraced the creed of its conquerors. Ibsen would find unrecognizable the new situation in which art is the most honored of all civic activities, and in which the idea of "creativity" is the most honored of all motivations.

The desire of modernism to offend the middle class was subordinate to the production of work which meant more, and contained more, than the reflection of what it hated. Oscar Wilde wrote that only bad artists had ideas or "character": the good ones "exist simply in what they make, and consequently are perfectly uninteresting in what they are." The moral for us is somewhat ambiguous, for it suggests that artists express feelings about bourgeois society in lieu of actual creativity. By now artistic alienation should have run its course, like all other inspirations. But the world of the 70's is still being addressed by art as if it were Victorian; either the sins of the father are being visited upon the third generation, or those of the artist upon his audience.

The visual and dramatic arts have in the last two decades accomplished something self-defeating. They reflect social ends and political arguments so perfectly as to become what they represent. It has been often observed that Dickens invented some of the most stupendous bores in literature. But his bores are fascinating. The paradox of art is that it must recognize some difference between the model and the work. If it didn't, then there would not need to be any work, only a model. By refusing to distance itself or complete an act of interpretation, art becomes what it loathes. If it remains a pilot-fish of the bourgeoisie, then its movements are restricted to the path of the beast it feeds on.

Resentment, ugliness, and absurdity are major motifs of the art of the 70's. But it is after all self-defeating for painting and drama to have become resentful, ugly, and absurd.

Jacques Barzun in *The Use and Abuse of Art* describes the exhibition of works molded in human excrement; the artist who exhibited himself, framed by plastic testicles, as he reclined in a coffin; and a third who "cut off pieces of his own flesh and photographed them." Daniel Bell in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* describes the transformation of drama from rhetorical to visual art:

In the "Destruction in Art" symposium held in

the Judson Church in New York in 1966, one of the participants suspended a live white chicken from the ceiling, swung it back and forth, and then snipped off its head with a pair of hedge clippers. He then placed the severed head between his legs, inside his unzipped fly, and proceeded to hammer the insides of a piano with the carcass. At the Cinémathèque in 1968, the German artist Herman Nitsch disemboweled a sheep onstage, poured the entrails and blood over a young girl, and nailed the carcass of the animal to a cross.

Aristotle, who saw a good deal of drama, and said that spectacle was the weakest part of performance, evidently didn't know the half of it.

The late Harold Rosenberg wrote of the German arts festival Documenta 5 that it was momentarily captivated by the current prestige of mental illness. Since madness has been adopted by therapy as a more authentic condition than sanity, and by radical politics as the result of cultural repression, it has become a recurrent theme in painting. The theme of "self-expression" at Documenta 5 took the idea of the self to be that of pop psychology, i.e., a dramatization of ascribed feelings:

Genuine schizophrenia shaded off into "artistic" or drug-induced imitations in galleries of photographic horrors involving fish heads, genitalia, evisceration, blood-stained religious vestments, and crude crucifixes, plus photographic portraits of the artist gagged, gashed, and split in two.

Art shares in the general illiteracy of intellectuals, and ideas generated by the social disciplines articulate its resentment. To some extent the motives are political: not simply to attack bourgeois taste but to reject and devalue those standards which imply the existence of a legitimate social order. But there is a particular vulnerability in the visual arts that cannot be explained entirely in terms of political beliefs or social resentment.

THE explosion of cultural criticism from Ezra Pound to Lionel Trilling left the visual arts untouched. But the effects on the arts of literacy were profound. Malraux suggests in *The Voices of Silence* that the paintings of the past three centuries cannot compare with what was done before that time; and it might be said, with less exaggeration, that nothing before 1920 can compare with the criticism after it. The number of poets in that period who were intellectually significant for culture at large as well as within their vocation was extremely large. That number included Pound, Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Robert Lowell. As men of letters their only competition can come from the greatest of the Romantic poets. Poetry either resisted ideology, as in the case of W.H. Auden, or transcended it.

From 1920 on it has been characteristic that critics like Trilling could work in fiction, and that poets like Auden could master criticism. But the

visual arts, and too much of drama, have separated out from the unified movement of modernism, and treated technique and politics as if they were ideas.

The story of the arts is that of two decades. Painters were in the 30's no more inherently vulnerable to the Popular Front than were poets or novelists, but they did not resist it as well. They were bemused by the high status of official culture under Communism, and have indeed never recovered from the attractions of that notion. Artists became identified with the cause, and art was understood to be a technique expressing political belief. Writers had begun to circulate nationally, to infiltrate universities, and to work out their independence, but artists concentrated into a single and much smaller society in which it was difficult to be different. There were no Orwells in the visual arts.

The 60's completed what the 30's had begun. The political failure of radicalism led it to a sustained and successful attack on the cultural realm. Nowhere was the cross-fertilization of political and artistic culture better shown than in the symbols of dissent: guitars, rock music, acid art, and other modes of technique linking expressiveness and dissent. The sensibility of the 60's linked political righteousness to the capacity for emotional response. The combination of the two was often called creativity. It was in the 60's that radicalism confused its style with its accomplishment, and artists confused themselves with the work of art. And, of course, a lot of people confused themselves with artists.

It has been said that modernism contained the seeds of its own destruction, which seems probable enough. But the definition of art as a political ideology or a social attitude was a product not of modernism but of the 60's. The modernists attacked the middle class because art stood for values which the latter seemed not to understand; the burgeoning of artists who hate art derives from other motives. If, as *Advertising Age* reminds us, even corporations realize that "the essential values of the public" are "most clearly evident, and in some cases evident only," in art, then the war on aesthetics becomes politically understandable.

In defense of the artist's resentment of art the claim is routinely made that freedom finally does imply an end not only to objective standards, but to moral or imaginative constraints. Perhaps. But Harold Rosenberg describes an instance which puts that conclusion in some doubt. Jean Toche, who defines his own artistic genre as the composi-

tion of manifestoes and provocations, was accused by the Museum of Modern Art of vandalism because it removed an inscription spray-painted by another "artist" on the *Guernica* of Picasso. Toche was supported in this gesture by over a hundred teachers, critics, and curators who denounced the museum. Which leads one to reflect that it may be difficult to decide what is the *Mona Lisa* of this art form, the sledge-hammering of the *Pietà* or the explosion of the Parthenon.

UNFORTUNATELY for all of us, the visual arts insist on defining themselves in terms which are derivative. Giant excavations or earthworks become a "statement" about the landscape; miles of white sheets strung across the countryside imply the "labor" of all involved in the enterprise. With every step that art takes toward "dialogue" with the times, it moves closer to a position abandoned with great indignation more than a century ago. "Dialogue" is, after all, a kind of synonym for the "communion" which the corporation seeks so passionately and so advisedly with its clientele. It makes no difference that it is recommended to us by the current avant-garde. As a matter of fact, in *Artculture*, Douglas Davis suggests that the "dialogue" of artist and society is essential. We are back to the argument, already old in Plato's *Republic* and even there unconvincing, that art ought to be socially responsible. Its new responsibility is predictable: "The 70's" Davis says, "are a decade in which appalling truths have finally become clear to large masses of people, from the poisonous quality of the air we breathe to the stupendous revelations of corruption that accompanied Nixon's resignation." The function of art is to interpret those truths to us. That seems to be exactly what modernism was trying to kill off when it declared its social independence. By labyrinthine ways a century of frantic contemporaneity has found itself back to square one. The artist thinks of himself as a revolutionary, but addresses himself to approved social truths.

Government has defined the arts as non-intellectual activity for the majority. Sponsors from the private sector think of art as a repository for social values. And artists are guided by ideas or sub-ideas which fit rather nicely alongside these definitions. It is not only that a common danger is posed by the attack on quality and standards: government betraying its impatience with any obstacle to majority participation, and artists asserting that standards are relics of a dead past. The sum of attitudes from opposing sides is that art has no particular value in itself.