

SOCIETY influences ART influences SOCIETY

**SONYA SPRY
APRIL 2002**

Cubism, Futurism and Suprematism were not understood. These artists cast aside the robes of the past, came out into modern life, and found new beauty.

And I say:

That no torture-chambers of the academies will withstand the days to come.

Forms move and are born, and we are forever making new discoveries.

And what we discover must not be concealed.

And it is absurd to force our age into the old forms of a bygone age.

The void of the past cannot contain the gigantic constructions and movement of our life.

KAZIMIR MALEVICH 1915 (1)

A CULTURAL AND SOCIAL SEARCH

We are forever searching for some symbolic point from which we can claim that something ended and then something else began; even though there are no clear cut beginnings and certainly no concrete endings. It is this point that almost makes it impossible to place art and social development on two corresponding timelines and conveniently proceed to correlate and compare. It just doesn't happen like that. I have been pondering books for days now and it seems as if I'm further from my goal than ever. I was so naively searching for direct parallels between art and society, society and art with explanatory notes; nice and neatly packaged to compliment the argument. That now seems such an obvious summation. A discussion on the effects of social climate on art and visa versa is hardly going to be submitted as topic for the next social debate and even though it's fundamental relationship is quite predictable, it's story is quite interesting.

We can scan through the millions of famous paintings throughout history and I think, without too much resistance from the critics, we can say that every work of art contains and speaks its own history. There is immediate reference to differing social climates, ideas, dreams and politics, let alone style. The fact that a story is being told helps us realise that art, for as long as the concept has been around, is a perfect medium for the artist to exercise power. They have, without a doubt, the chance to shed light on their own perception and viewpoints. This has always been the case, only the extent to which this was carried out and use of mediums has greatly changed. You can literally pick any point in art history to begin with and you will undoubtedly draw parallels between social and cultural developments. Since this is not a thesis and I have only had a few weeks preparation time I am limiting my discussion to one particular social and cultural manipulator. Technology and the event of mass production. I will narrow that down even further to concentrate on the all important industrial years leading up to Cubism. I can already anticipate the sighs of relief as I now mention that I cannot let it all pass, without touching base with the likes of Robert Rauschenburg, Richard Hamilton and the infamous Pop Art Period.

ART AND THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

Bursting onto the scene in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Impressionism was only the first in a sequence of shattering changes. Cezannes' satisfaction was short lived; "We have to think more, the eye is no longer sufficient, reflection is imperative". (2) This came at a time when industrialism was beginning its climatic surge forward, bringing with it a considerable increase in the tempo of everyday life. Technology, which reared its ugly or glorious head, depending on the artist or social background, seemed to be a constant theme throughout art in the years after 1850. There had been a new fashion set with the exciting event of The Great Exhibition of 1851. A marvel was on display and it wasn't the beauty of the contents of the show but the building itself, Crystal Palace. Following this The Paris World Fair produced something so spectacular that it would change audiences perspective on a mass scale. Nearly a million people rode the lift to the top of the purpose-built Eiffel Tower and experienced Paris, transformed as a new landscape, based on frontality and pattern. Since the Renaissance almost all painting had obeyed the one-point perspective and now and abstraction of flatness as was seen from high above Paris and became certainly one of the new influences that would help shape the art created in the early 1900's. A 'new age' had been born. Not only was the towers height, structural daring and inventive use of industrial materials an astonishment but also the magestic display of technology that shed the concept of 'the machine' in a new light. No longer the 'ogre' of the past but now a man-controlled and obedient object that reflected times of process and progress. "The machine became a part of social experience in 1880 and the people swarmed to the cities to experience this excitement ". (3)

Around 1850, most of Europe had been pastoral and the landscape had dominated painting. Slowly the machine began to invade nature and the humble landscape would soon make way for the excitement and buzz of the metropolis. Van Gogh illustrated a perfect example of this initial intrusion in 1887 with "The Huth Factories at Clichy." (plate 1)

We could barely imagine our own perspective in relationship with the world and its advancements in the years from 1880 and the first decades of 1900. It would have been so radically altered from that of a few years previous that one cannot doubt that it produced as many problems as it did stimuli for artists of that period. There was now the question of how to illustrate the immense shifts in man's consciousness due to the ever changing technology and reflect the dynamics of this new machine age without simply replicating an image of the machine. A convincing answer to recording this process and transformation came with the event of Cubism.

CUBISM

Full of publications and promotions, words and graphics that reflected the times it was little wonder that artists and poets found it impossible to ignore that mass production of print was all around them. The surface of the new Paris was immediately mirrored on the cubists' canvas. This was an entirely new visual field that up until now had barely been explored in the arts. It is now that something very interesting happens. Not only in the arts but also in society. Mass production meant that magazines, newspapers and books now had a wide audience. Earlier they either didn't exist certainly not on such a large scale or the only forms of written communication were accessible to the literate few, who also, ironically had enough money to afford such a luxury. So how was the information received by the general public? Word of mouth was definitely not effective nor reliable enough and so we must now turn to the role of art as communicator and determinator in mass social conviction.

No other painters had previously produced images of such vision without a fixed form. The Cubists were reporting on process, progress and dynamics of their new social climate. After extreme experimental beginnings they eventually linked themselves back to the real world by cleverly taking pieces of real life and incorporating them in the art of easel painting. The collage was to be introduced in the art world. Again industrial mass production was reflected with the emblems of modernity; the newspaper, packaging and advertising, the language, words and signs. What gave the art excitement and freshness was the continual reference and placing of mass produced products in juxtaposition with the hand-made traditional opposites. The comprehensible yet ironic story of a craft rendered less convenient by mechanisation and the growing cost of labour. (plate 2 *Still Life with Chair Caning* 1912. Pablo Picasso). More and more items of luxury were being made on a larger scale and thus a greater accessibility. Times were changing. And fast. And so was the art. "It is above all the furious speed of technological development and the way the pace is forced that seems pathological, particularly when compared with the rate of progress in earlier periods in the history of art and culture." (4)

From Cubism to Futurism and words from Marinetti. Technology had created a new kind of man, a class of machine visionaries. The machine was about to redraw the cultural map of Europe. Machinery was power. It was freedom from historical restraint. Ironically enough, World War I arrived, as if there was a need to test the power of the mighty machine. This would change the life of words and images in art radically and forever. Visions of battles and suffering, patriotism and hopelessness filled the sketchbooks and flooded canvases. War alone, whenever, whichever and whatever its effect on art, is a whole study unto itself and so I leave this misery at this stage and direct my thoughts back to mass production. This time quite a few years later down the timeline.

PRODUCING THE CLIMATE FOR POP ART

Robert Rauschenburg rediscovered that there was possibly something to create from the copious amounts of rubbish and junk that the consumers were eagerly throwing away. I say rediscovered because 30 years before, Kurt Schwitters, a Dadaist, made art from oddments he collected off the street. After all doesn't society reveal itself in what it throws away? It is precisely this point which leads us into the next domain, where mass production is the topic of discussion at an extremely different level than six decades before. It would be this foreground work from Rauschenburg together with Jasper Johns intention, of defending painting in the face of mass-culture, that "set free the attitudes" (3) that made Pop seem culturally acceptable.

The stimulus has inevitably changed because there are now so many other modern apparatus additions to the mass culture. Probably one of the most powerful of these was the television. "From television we receive a stream of images everyday. There is no way of paying equal attention to the entire surplus, so we skim. The image we remember is the one that most resembles a sign: simple clear and repetitious. "Mass production strips every image of its singularity, rendering it schematic and quickly identifiable, so that it resembles a sign. A sign is a command. Its message comes all at once." (3). Richard Hamilton hit the nail on the head when he produced his collage *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* 1956 (plate 3). A crammed packed interpretation of the modern home filled with ironic yet enthusiastic imagery of the new electronic age. What is even more startling, is the gimmicky use of people as product. It is the debut appearance of 'Pop' in art. If we travel a little further in time we delve into the vacuous realms of Warhol where repetition becomes the trademark. He wanted to be a machine. He saw a beauty in the identical replication of the mass product. But it was Hamilton who passed this comment; a statement that openly made it understood that the artist could have control. He said "Pop Art, far from being popular art, was made by highly professionally trained experts for a mass audience. It was done *to* the people."

With all the declarations of what Pop Art should be: witty, sexy, mass produced, low-cost and so the list goes on, the artists were playing straight into the hands of the masses themselves. The restrictions were so great that the end product had to appeal to the senses of the general public. Art is not restraint; Art is free thought. So I'm not totally convinced that the artists were in as much control as they liked to make out in the Pop Art years. I see them as a perfect product of the times. I really don't think that anyone can be in control when they talk of mass, whether it be media, culture, audience, disposal or the massive amounts of money that were to become the price tag of art in the future. 'Mass' for me conjures up a vision of frenzy an "out of control". Just how can anyone control the masses? But this in itself was certainly a perfect reflection of what was happening on a social level. There was a certain kind of freedom. You could choose to choose. There was so much stimulation. All this choice had to change values and perspectives not only in society but in the complete concept of art and what it stood for. Values were judged on a MASS LEVEL and the market place was about to take over. "The rapid development of technology not only accelerates the change of fashion, but also the shifting emphasis in criteria of aesthetic taste. The continual and rapid replacement of old articles in everyday use by new ones readjusts the speed at which philosophical and artistic revaluations occur" (4).

Capitalism is, as far as I'm concerned, a growing threat to our very essence of existence, and what happened to the art world in the 70's and 80's totally highlights the power of greed and control. All works of art, whether politically, socially or simply aesthetically orientated were redefined by the price tag factor. Suddenly the value of the work of art became part of its function. Unfortunately this has had a costly effect on the art world and its meaning. The power of the image to communicate, historically or aesthetically is immediately re-evaluated in a cash value. This was and still is a sign of the times. Its full blown effect we'll have to sit down and study in another 25 years but without a doubt it has meant a whole new approach to the making, presenting and acceptance of art.

SOCIALLY MOVING?

Our media packed, technologically controlled, capitalist 21st century is even more extreme than that from a mere 30 odd years ago. Is it still possible that art can insert images into the stream of public speech and thus change political and social discourse? Many say that mass media has taken away the political speech of art. Robert Hughes goes as far as saying that "Even though we still have political art, we have no *effective* political art. An artist must be famous to be heard, but as he acquires fame, so his work accumulates "value" and becomes, ipso facto, harmless." He further adds that "the difference between us and the artists of the 1920's is that they thought such a work of art could be made. Perhaps it was a certain naivety that made them think so. But it is certainly our loss that we cannot." (3)

If I was to agree I'd lose face in front of my own conscience. I do admit that today political and social art is not effective on a large scale. But then again, was it ever? There has always been a resistance and plenty of criticism thrown at any art that was challenging. Anything that is not immediately recognisable, able to be placed in a box under a certain category. There is always opposition for change. Most acceptance comes years later. Either the artist continually bombards the market place so that their concept is no longer new or the borders are pushed further a field so that the once "challenging" art is repositioned in the safe middle field. There may be differences between artists of today and yesteryear in their use of story line, content, material and medium but the essence remains the same. An artist is an artist and it's not something you can merely duff out like a candle flame. It's your life, your response to your social and political environment, your feelings and emotions, your fears and tribulations. I know I take each day at a time and I strive for that piece that maybe one day "will make a difference." Should I never accomplish that then so be it, but if I was to believe that it was not possible I'd have simply given up yesterday.

Painting is an art: and art is not vague production, transitory and isolated, but a power which must be directed to the development and refinement of the human soul, to raising the triangle of the spirit. The artist must have something to communicate, since mastery over form is not the end but, instead, the adapting of form to internal significance.

Wassily Kandinsky