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THE TOWER OF BABEL

By Nicholas NORDENSON

Harold Rosenberg's most recent collection of essays was published under the title, *Art on the Edge*. This title expresses the author's concern that the plastic arts are close to "the edge that separates them from the crafts, commercial design and the mass media". Rosenberg is being generous in his diagnosis. In recent years the plastic arts have been crossing borders as if they didn't exist, followed closely by critics, collectors, dealers, museums and art historians alike. The latter group are possibly the prime culprits.

This century has seen the eruption of a mass consciousness of history. Marx changed people's ways of thinking to the extent that we are no longer merely living our lives; instead we are all of us making history, all of us playing out our rôles in an inevitable class struggle. Similarly artists are no longer making art: instead they all too often spend their time trying to make their contributions to art history. This is evidenced by the current obsession with precise dating, often to the day.

The dangers of this history consciousness are manifold. Artists are forever trying to second guess in what direction this increasingly absurd tradition is next going to turn — instead of trying to express anything profound, beautiful or sublime. A good example are the American Edward Ruscha's *antiphotography* books, produced early in the nineteen sixties. *Five 1955 Girlfriends* consists of five very ordinary portrait photos of five women, the common link being their chance encounters with the artist. Unless one is a student of the history of women's hair styles, the photos are of almost no interest, except for how they relate to two thousand years of Western art making. The photos would have appealed to Ruscha because they were taken merely to record information, without any of the ordinary art overtones. He claimed (*Artforum*, February 1965) that the photographs he uses are not "arty" in any sense of the word, that "photography is dead as a fine art", that he considers his photos to be "technical data like industrial photography". He continues: "I want absolutely neutral material. My pictures are not that interesting, nor the subject matter. They are simply a collection of *facts* . . ." The artist is able to claim from art history a mandate to reduce art making to a neutral presentation of arbitrarily selected information.

Another danger of this history consciousness is that an obsession with the temporal axis has blinded people to the fact that this ridiculous tower of babel has spread its branches in all directions, encroaching on the territory of countless other disciplines. The other axis — where the plastic arts stand vis-à-vis all other areas of human activity — have largely been ignored, allowing artists to cross borders and enter into the realm of countless other areas. One of the primary messages of the conceptual movement has been that artists who are free of objects are also free to move outwards in all directions. This message continues to be loudly broadcast.

Borders are problematic. Exactly where the line is drawn always seems an arbitrary decision; things are generally very similar both sides of a border, making it hard to discern just when it has been crossed. Borders are elusive — they exist, nevertheless. If I go far enough south from Montreal, I will eventually find myself in the United States. No matter how arbitrary the exact location of that border might seem to be: it's there none the less. And it's no good my claiming that I'm still a Canadian, though travelling in the U.S.; the fact remains that if I'm in that territory, I'm subject to the laws of that territory. If an artist crosses a border into another discipline, that artist must be prepared to face up to the criticism of the areas into which he or she has crossed, not hide behind the cloak of art history, art criticism. It is not necessary, for example, to prove that the films of Bruce Nauman are outside the borders of the plastic arts (although that is true); all one need do is point out that they are within the borders of film. Then scrutinize them according to the rules of film criticism.

However this does not happen. Films, music, theatre, poetry, philosophy, sociology, even anthropology: all have received wide acceptance as being plastic art, and one has to ask why. How has it come about that dealers and critics alike have applauded loudly as the plastic arts have spread out in all directions? The answer has to be that art has lost any sense of what it is or why it is. If people had a common notion of what art is, this sprawling out just would not be possible. The remainder of this article will attempt to find some of the reasons for this lack of purpose.

Whatever else it may be, art is always a faithful social barometer. It accurately reflects the society that produces it. The lack of direction and purpose, which now plagues the plastic arts, can also be found in society in general. Art was once a force in society, marching confidently forward. That force has now split up into small isolated bands of warriors, marauding across the countryside and attacking anything, going off in all directions, not even knowing why. This phenomenon is no less apparent in science. When Leibniz codified science in the 17th century, it was a unified army, conquering in service of both man and God. Now it serves neither man nor God, but itself. A result has been that it has split up into isolated groups of specialists, no longer knowing what their collective aim is, or what each isolated group of them will attack next.

This is not to infer that science and art are remotely similar, although art has been forced to follow science down the same road. Science is materialism, the empirically observed world; art, on the other hand, has its roots in metaphysics and religion. Science has so completely eclipsed religion and metaphysics that art has found itself without its very reason for existence. Art without a metaphysic is like a river without any water. After some time has passed people forget — or aren't interested — that water once flowed. They see this river-bed without water and it appears absurd, it seems to have no reason for being there. In 1963 Robert Morris made a sculpture which he claimed had no aesthetic quality or content. With our linear view of art history, the acceptance of the premise that an object with no metaphysic, no meaning outside of a formal art context, this acceptance that such an object is still art is the acceptance that art does not exist. God is dead; high art has also perished.

This does not mean to say that Western man has lost a metaphysical side. As high art surrenders itself to science, so popular art is flourishing, and increasingly being added to school curricula. As Christianity fades, a multitude of religious sects spring up. The cynical view of mankind held by an increasing number of scientists, which thinks of us as being little more than temporary, absurd machines, is only an opinion; it doesn't actually take our humanity away from us. Science, and mankind that believes implicity in its own ability, is forever being dragged back by the other half of human nature, which is pessimistic, lacks self-confidence and wants to belong to some kind of superior being.

In 1916, a group calling itself Dada set out to try to destroy art. The most influential artist to be associated with that group was Marcel Duchamp. He claimed that anything an artist chooses to call art becomes art, that everything an artist makes is art. This ridiculous definition has in the last few years become generally accepted by the art community. Hence, when in 1967 Claes Oldenburg was invited to show in a New York sculpture exhibition, he suggested calling the whole of Manhattan his exhibit. He was presumably unware that an Italian artist named Manzoni had already claimed the entire world as his work of sculpture some eight years earlier.

If everything is now art, then of course art does not exist. By so changing the definition of art, Duchamp succeeded in destroying it far more effectively than he could ever have imagined would be possible. The plastic arts have crossed borders into countless different areas, but the region they once occupied stands barren, deserted.