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'Studio International', Volume 181, No. 933, May 1971

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Virgin soils and old land

Charles Harrison

'The essence of farming on virgin soils is extension; on old land it is intension.' O.E.D.

PREFACE

Six years ago an exhibition of British art by younger artists, 'London: The New Scene', toured the United States and Canada. In its way it seems to have been fairly representative, and I remember feeling impressed at the time by what the catalogue displayed. I feel now a consciousness of anti-climax at the retrospect—partly, I think, through a sense of the impossibility of fulfilment of a certain potential which the 'art of the sixties' seemed to offer, but perhaps principally as the result of a change in the nature of my own commitment, which has itself been forced upon me by the implications of my response to a very different art. To this response, and to these implications, I confidently commit myself, in a manner which I hope this present selection, and my own words which follow here, will fairly represent.

The following text is not intended to 'introduce' or to 'represent' the work, ideas or interests of all, or indeed any of the artists included here. It is merely offered as a guide to my own state of mind at the time when this selection was made and these artists were invited to participate. It should be quite evident from the sum total of what is included here that neither I nor any of the artists represented are making unspecified claims to mutual compatibility in aesthetics, ideas, aims or whatever. The best service the spectator can render to the artist is to approach his work—in the first instance—as an endeavour in some way distinct from the endeavours of all or any other artists.

I

In an article published in *Studio International* in December 1966, the English painter Patrick Heron wrote of 'The Ascendancy of London in the Sixties', and justified it in the following terms: 'It fell to us British to begin the trek back into pictorial complexity and away from that arid "openness" which, in two generations of Americans—the "first generation"... and (far more so) the so-called Post-Painterly Abstractionists—has become at last an academic emptiness. But those of us here who have seen that this re-complication was in fact the *only* way forward have been accused by American critics of retreating into Cubism again . . .'

Recognising that I risk placing myself, where Patrick Heron would place me, among those 'younger British contributors to *Studio International*' who are on what he identifies as an American 'critical bandwagon', I cannot but feel that overcomplication—a kind of formal archness—has been the downfall of much British painting over the last ten years. There has been a tendency for certain British painters to stack up 'smart' images (often carrying implicit claims to 'social' and 'political' relevance), from a rich and complex range of 'cross-cultural' references. Much of this has its source in the Independent Group's activities centred on the Institute of Contemporary Arts in the mid/late fifties, where, among painters, Richard Hamilton was the dominating figure. The ICA's rapid decline into failure and frivolity since its move early in 1968 into truly institutional premises in The Mall is in a sense a symptom of the implications and failure in the long term of those earlier claims to cultural relevance and energy, based upon a *de haut en bas* approach to culture in the broader social context (claims which were themselves not sustained in terms of long-term commitment). The making of Che Guevara posters or Che Guevara paintings or Che Guevara exhibitions would be no reliable testimony to radical intention.

Another related tendency, within 'abstract' painting, has resulted in the production of a large range of formally vacuous images out of a series of 'intelligently manipulated' image-concealing and/or process-describing paradoxes. As Raymond Chandler wrote about Agatha Christie's plots: 'To get the complication you fake the clues, the timing, the play of coincidence, assume certainties where only 50 per cent chances exist at most.'

The best 'younger generation' painting of the last five years (represented, I believe, by a proportion of the works of John Hoyland, Bernard Cohen, Jeremy Moon) has been that which has appeared most open and direct, from the start, about means and ends.

The refreshing virtue of the approach to sculpture which Anthony Caro introduced in the late fifties and early sixties (largely to a small group of acolytes at St Martin's School of Art in London) was its openness—a kind of 'no-cards-up-my-sleeve' demonstration of what could be done, in the name of 'humanism' and in

opposition to the prevailing European celebrations of post-war 'angst'¹, with formal/material conglomerates. The lack of immediately apparent European art history in Caro's sculpture of the early sixties, and in that of those then closest to him, allowed one to enjoy it—as I could enjoy little of the most 'celebrated' contemporaneous English painting—as an antidote to the archness, picturesqueness and incipient naturalism that has tended to vitiate most of even the best English art in this century. There was also at best in English sculpture at that time a sense of rational intelligence at work upon areas of shared concern. (See for instance the writings of William Tucker.)

The advanced sculpture course at St Martin's indeed acted during the first half of the sixties as a lively and self-generating forum for discussion, criticism and working out of new possibilities for sculpture.² By about 1962 a certain definite style—with individual variants—had emerged in the work of at least half a dozen sculptors, all born in the mid-1930s. (The so-called 'New Generation'. To my mind Phillip King and William Tucker were, and still are, the strongest and most independent of these.) Some grand claims were made by interested critics: 'I think certain younger Englishmen are doing the best sculpture in the world today. . . . Given the present situation in New York, I begin to think—actually I began to think of it as a possibility in the Fall of 1963—that it may be up to the milieu formed by the new English sculptors to save the avant garde.' (Clement Greenberg³)

'It seems to me more than likely that we are witnessing, here and now, one of the great epochs in the history of art.' (Alan Bowness⁴)

Subsequent developments have shown, in this context as in others, the rashness of judgements based upon 'new looks'. Caro himself (. . . 'the Moses of British sculpture'—Greenberg) still seems able to draw strength from the 'moral consequences' of a change of habit made over ten years ago; but I feel that his works, and the criteria of formal 'syntax'⁵ by which their quality can be assessed, in fact represent the terminal (high) point of a particular aesthetic rather than the opening up of a new one. It is significant that although many of the most gifted English artists now in their twenties or early thirties (including many of those represented here) passed through the St Martin's sculpture course, almost all found their situation there uncomfortable to a greater or lesser degree. The criteria mentioned above could not relevantly, for instance, be applied then or now to assess the work of Richard Long—a highly influential student among other students at St Martin's—or, indeed, to the 'sculpture' of Gilbert & George. Yet there have been moments when it has seemed as if the reputation of 'New Generation' sculpture depended upon the relevance of these criteria being defended at all costs.

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The source of this 'defensive conservatism' is not far to seek. It is now more apparent than it perhaps was in the early sixties that the radical appearance of 'New Generation' sculpture—its bright colour, flat finish, hermetic/constructive composition etc.—should probably in the majority of cases (again, I feel that King and Tucker at their best are exceptions) be attributed not so much to a purposeful departure from immediately inherited art (specifically 'sculptural') traditions, as to a sense of involvement with problems of colour and shape which the American painters had shown could be the subject of serious concern and the source of serious art. Kenneth Noland's work of the late fifties and early sixties was of particular relevance; but it is worth noting that Pollock was not well shown in England until 1958, and that not more than about half a dozen paintings by Barnett Newman have been seen in public in England to this day (i.e. there's still much American painting from the fifties which can come 'new' to the English public—even to many English artists).

Apart from the evident benefits, this sense of 'affinity' with American painting suggested an 'alliance' at the expense of some other interests. The promotion of the idea of a 'special relationship', between American and British 'modernists'/'formalists', in which the Americans were to be acknowledged to be good at painting and the British to be good at sculpture⁶, helped to suppress information and discussion about issues, outside the scope of formalist criteria, about which there was far more curiosity among younger artists than there was information available.

That the American work shown in London during the sixties was so predominantly 'modernist' has been severely disadvantageous to the younger British artists. My own feeling is that there has been little enough independent painting of really high quality by 'modernist' painters in America since 1965 (if one discounts Stella, as the modernists themselves now apparently tend to do).⁷ And where those American painters emulated in England—as Noland and Olitski are emulated—are represented in so rarified an atmosphere as they are in London (in certain 'colonized' galleries), whatever is learned or borrowed tends to be learned or borrowed uncritically.

The English version of the 'modernist/formalist' versus 'literalist/minimalist' debate—if debate it is—was throughout the sixties characteristically a matter of uncritical loyalty versus ignorant avant-gardism. By the turn of the decade it seemed that London was lagging behind at a time when the works of American artists newly risen to prominence during the sixties—from Morris and Judd through Andre, LeWitt, Nauman, Serra, Kosuth, Weiner etc.—were to be seen outside America in proportion to the openness of the welcome extended in European centres both to them and to their art. The gallery situation in London has been bad for years and is no better now—despite some

promotion of ideas to the contrary. No-one can assess what was lost (in terms, for instance, of what was gained in far smaller European centres like Düsseldorf), between 1965 and 1970, for lack of first-hand experience of work and of direct dialogue between British and American artists, critics, dealers and public outside the domain of modernism ('formalism').

My own 'change' of commitment has been in many ways the result of direct contact with artists, American and British, who do indeed stand outside—I would say stand beyond—this domain.

II

I acknowledge the degree to which distance lends disenchantment to my own view, and I hope I have some grasp of the reasons why. I have found myself at times disinclined to give full credit to artists of real independence whose work I really do enjoy and admire—as I do the best of Caro's for instance—because the climate created by the acceptance of their work has seemed to militate against the best work of a younger generation of artists who could use some support in their own attempts to assert their independence.

One must not, however, forget that the circumstances of art are changed essentially by the making of good art. In the course of my own first attempt to assert some independence for myself, some difference of purpose in what I then wanted to be—an Art Critic—I wrote that, 'For those who have been most closely concerned with the development of British art since the war, it is now too late. The commitments are all to people rather than to paintings, to the image of an organization rather than the force of an idea.'⁸ That ambition of three years ago (of 'wanting to be' an 'art critic') seems now archaic, for reasons which have offered me, like others involved now in art's second order of discourse, the same cold comfort as I thought then to extend to writers I despised (they haven't got any better): '... for his judgements to have weight, the critic must be as committed as the artist to the priority of art'. In a context where a number of artists become increasingly or more explicitly concerned with the function of art, or with the complexity of relations between functions, the critic's concern with the function of criticism might be seen as implying some narrow line dividing their activities; but the 'identification' of this line is itself convention-based. What would need attention would be some claim to be 'on the other side'. Which is to say that one kind of commitment—or self-exposure—is not necessarily reconcilable (or to be reconciled) with the other. The commitment of the artist has, for instance, little to do with catholicism of taste—a 'necessary attribute' of the critic-as-journalist. ('He has few enemies.' Fewer friends?)

But the need is still a need to be true to particular endeavours rather than particular institutions or even people. In any given

situation the finest work may be being produced by artists who are in no sense any longer avant-garde. The selection presented here is not claimed as representative, in any broad context, of the 'best' art being produced in England. On the other hand, the last thing I would personally want to do would be to justify my selection of the artists here in terms of any concept of the common avant-gardism of their activities; I'm confident that few of them would thank me for doing so. But one cannot but be conscious of the irreconcilability of certain different demands (even, and perhaps most explicitly, within the 'selected' situation presented here). The tension between generations has been a factor (and function) in the stylistic development of art since the earliest advent of consciousness of and discussion about stylistic change, and it rarely involves real antagonism or offers grounds for real resentment. But it is the consciousness now of a change not so much in the stylistic appearance as the means of function of art that has made my own ambition so much less secure and my allegiance to a 'generation'⁹ of art so much more so.

The inter-generation situation has now become vexed by a new cause of friction which, like all major forces for change in art, is directly relatable to broader social, cultural and political changes and reconsiderations of belief and purpose. A recent contributor to *Studio International* (who has incidentally been in his time an articulate and sympathetic advocate of 'New Generation' sculpture) found it necessary to write an exposé of what he characterized as 'Forces against object-based art'¹⁰, in which among other unsupportable assertions he claimed an implicit relationship between the book burnings of John Latham and the fires of Nuremberg. The association, particularly in the context of a 'romanticist' declaration in favour of the 'life-enhancing' work of Rauschenberg and Oldenburg *inter alia*, testifies to its author's anxiousness. Latham's purpose—as he has made very clear explicitly and implicitly—has been to criticize the notion of dependence upon precedents, and to question claims to comprehensiveness in any area of knowledge.¹¹ Books were burned by the Nazis for precisely the opposite purpose. Whatever one's view of Latham's work and activity as art I can see no 'humane' grounds for imputing to him intentions which are in any way oppressive; unless of course the sanctity of one's notion of the book as a specific object has come to override one's respect for the notion of human learning in its most constructive sense.

My point in using this instance is to highlight the extent to which an attachment to specific objects has forced artists and writers of a certain 'generation' into an aggressive defence of those same attachments (and the aesthetics which has always justified them) in the face of what they see, with a predictable grasp on only half the truth, as an attempt to wrest these objects from them. They should be able to rest easy. Frameworks are not perimeters.¹² Talk of 'the

siege of the individual by concepts'¹³ amounts to no more than a plea for the return of the good old days when any pretensions to status might go unchallenged through sheer lack of that information by means of which uncharitable comparisons might be made or unfavourable judgements be reasoned.

Whether or not objects will continue to be employed to make art is hardly an issue: one can feel confident that there will continue in the foreseeable future to be some material entities ('objects') which some people will be confident to categorize as 'art'. (I would myself feel very confident that the majority of entities so categorized by the majority of people—myself perhaps included—will continue into the foreseeable future to be specific material entities; and I expect to continue to enjoy the contemplation of them.) The extent to which the applicability of morphological criteria—and in the first instance morphological criteria alone—can usefully be employed now or will usefully be employable in the future as a *sine qua non* for identifying some entity as 'art work', has already become recognizable as a 'crude' (or 'pseudo') issue; i.e. one which merely begs further issues.¹⁴

One of the chief dangers of both 'romanticist' and 'formalist' criteria is that those who employ them can claim with apparent conviction that there are no endeavours in art to which they are not applicable; 'The quality of art depends on inspired, felt relations or proportions as on nothing else. There is no getting round this. A simple, unadorned box can succeed as art by virtue of these things; and when it fails as art it is not because it is merely a plain box, but because its proportions, or even its size, are uninspired, unfelt... The superior work of art, whether it dances, radiates, explodes, or barely manages to be visible (or audible or decipherable), exhibits, in other words, rightness of "form".'¹⁵

I do not question the critic's right to apply formal criteria if he feels them to be relevant; to the vast majority of 'superior' works of art (including, again, the works of many of the artists represented in this selection) I would myself want to apply such criteria—among others. But to dismiss endeavours in the field of art on the *prima facie* grounds that they do not exhibit 'rightness of form' according to a certain sensibility (however educated), is to give criticism a precedence over art which it has certainly not earned in recent years.

'How one does one's singling out determines what he singles out'. A means of approach dependent upon one's response to the questions 'Does it look nice in the sense that I have come to believe works of art should look nice?' and/or 'Does it move me in the sense that I have come to believe works of art should move me?' suggests a means of coping with the unfamiliar which is very heavily dependent upon precedent and very little conducive to reassessment of the means of approach itself. In this case the means of approach is derived from

experience of works of art having essentially stable material and formal constituents. The critic who dismisses 'non-solid-state entities' from the art domain needs, at the very least, some means of knowing ('privately') and denoting ('publicly') what 'entity' he dismisses and what 'entities' he thus implicitly conserves, and why.

To the question 'Must a work have stable material and formal constituents in order to be acceptable as "art"?' the formalist can reply with no more conclusive an answer than that nothing in his experience has led him to believe anything to the contrary. The artist, on the other hand, is in a position to answer the question—at least to his own satisfaction, to the extent that he can ever be 'satisfied'—on the evidence of his own activity as it appears true to his present circumstances. All other things being equal, the circumstances of the artist during his activity as an artist will testify more accurately to the real conditions of art at any given time than will the circumstances of the critic.

Those who dismiss (or even consider) art work with an a priori art-theoretical orientation (and 'presentation') in terms of its 'lack of visual appeal' or for its apparent 'obscurity', never seem prepared to accept (a) that there must be reasons why such work takes the 'form' it does (or doesn't take the 'form' it doesn't)—apart from acknowledging issues beyond these—or (b) that an understanding of, or at the very least insight into these reasons may be crucial to an understanding of and/or sympathy with the work and the issues concerned in it.

The recently appointed Conservative Minister with Responsibility for the Arts in Britain was recently quoted in the columns of *Studio International* to the effect that, 'I think one ought to be listened to by artists if one makes the appeal, and says, "Now will you please take more trouble to make the ordinary person understand something of what you are trying to do".'¹⁶ Lord Eccles and others of his persuasion might be surprised to learn (though we would not) that precisely the same sentiments were expressed by bureaucrats in similar positions of influence both during the Stalinist campaign for Socialist Realism in Russia in the '20s and during the totalitarian campaign against 'degenerate' modern art in Germany in the '30s.¹⁷ Of course all such appeals were made in the name of art's 'spiritual' 'value' to the 'public'. Lord Eccles appears confident that this sense of 'value' is compatible if not directly commensurate with a specific monetary charge to be levied from that same 'public' to enable them to view works of art which are 'public' 'property'. It has even been suggested that the proposed entry charges to be instituted for national museums in Britain will encourage the 'public' to 'value' the art.

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