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James G. Todd

The University of Montana

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A FURTHER SELF-EVALUATION

(A discussion Concerning Communication Between the Contemporary Artist and His Public.)

By

James Gilbert Todd

B.A., College of Great Falls, 1964
M.A., University of Montana, 1965

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Approved by:

[Signatures]

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

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Date
In 1965, when working on my M.A. thesis in Fine Art, I was granted permission to write a general evaluation of what I felt to be my position as an artist at that time. In this year of 1969, in working on my M.F.A. thesis in the same field, I have been again granted this permission, and so, this, my second thesis, will, in a sense, be a continuation of the first.

Normally, thesis work in the visual arts is restricted to a technical "project" which hopefully represents both the technical and philosophical development of the art student. In reality, however, such projects usually reflect little more than the student's choice and perfection of a technique without in any way indicating why the given technique was chosen in the first place or what ultimate objective of expression it is supposed to serve.

This was my reason for choosing the approach I did in 1965, and it is my reason for choosing it again. Like the '65 thesis, this one will not be preoccupied with matters of data. For the most part, I would like the reader to regard my opinions as personal and oriented from a past of varied reading and thought rather than a two month stock-piling of periodicals and books read only for the purpose of writing an informatively "professional" thesis.

In reading over the '65 thesis, I am struck primarily by two things. The first is the tone of self-defensiveness that runs throughout the paper, and the second is the assumption that the visual arts must
have something to do with communication. Both factors are interrelated. The defensiveness stems from the fact that being a figurative artist in 1965 was regarded by many as being faintly archaic if not outright reactionary. The tide of abstract-expressionism was entering its twilight stage, but this was not yet discernable enough for many of us to feel comfortable in our differences with the movement. It was and still is, to a large extent, the accepted approach of the academies, while the new movements at that time, especially "Pop" art, were suspect of being little more than bizarre fashions that would wear themselves thin only to reaffirm the eternal validity of a purely formal approach in art. This has not occurred, and we are presently witnessing, however long it may last, a sharp conflict between the formalists and, what I would like to term, the "humanists." *

These changes within the last few years relate directly to the question of communication in the visual arts because the formalists are usually unconcerned with whether their art communicates with a large audience, whereas the humanist artist considers the problem basic enough to at least demand his attention.

In this respect, I categorize myself under the humanist rather than the formalist heading, and realize that the same was true in 1965 whereupon I made the assumption about the importance of communication in art that I did.

* I prefer the latter expression over "realist" or "figurative" artist because these words often misleadingly indicate only a choice of subject matter that is not abstract. There are figurative artists who are far more abstract in spirit than certain "non-objective" artists.
In ending my '65 thesis, I admitted that I had been unable to find equilibrium between my search for communication and the necessity of maintaining my personal approach in art. Putting it more candidly, I might say that the content of my art did not seem to be communicating with any larger group than the formalists had at their disposal despite the fact that I was working with figurative subject matter. As a consequence, I have spent the last several years examining what might be the cause of the alienation of the contemporary artist with his public, and found that some of the reasons were more concrete than I had suspected. Ironically enough, the reasons behind the alienation also served to clarify why the lack of communication between artist and public are, for the time being, not completely solvable. Let me elaborate.

From what we can determine, the majority of past civilizations have held religion as their communal pivotal point. Even if these religions were sometimes in part nothing more than a facade behind which the ruling classes maintained the status quo, it seems that the general belief of the people in their religion served not only to give them reason beyond this life to live as they did, but it also gave at least theoretical meaning to most practices within the community. In consequence, everything had a utility or function of one kind or another in direct or indirect service of religion. There was, on the one hand, vulgar utility such as the capacity of a vessel to hold liquid, or of a shoe to protect the foot, and, on the other, religious utility
such as the murals in the tombs of the Egyptian pharaohs, or the
gothic architecture of the Middle Ages whose vertical design, it is
theorized, intended to "pull" the viewer's attention up towards God.
In turn, the artist's patron was either the purchaser of a utilitarian
item, or the priesthood who used his talents in one way or another to
reflect the prevailing religion. The distinction between secular and
religious function in the arts was probably clear to the public and
whatever lack of formal artistic sophistication they may have had, most
everyone in likelihood at least knew what art was about.

In the West, we witness beginnings of the breakdown of this arrangement
roughly about the time of the Renaissance. Two crucial factors began to
occur which seriously impaired the artist's traditional relationship
with his art. The first was the deterioration of belief in established
religion, and the second was the gradual rise of industry. The break­
down of religious belief shifted artistic patronage from the priesthood
to the merchant, and the merchant, by definition, is more concerned
with making money than promoting religious ideology. The ultimate
practical result of this was that the artist in losing religion as a
central theme in his work likewise began to be increasingly left to his
own notions of what to express or not express. Whereas we may regard
this as a boon and form of "liberation" today, it nonetheless accounts
in part for the phenomena of the contemporary artist expressing subject
matter, which is not clearly understood by the general audience.

The common items of utility, or "consumer products" as we would have
it today, were also brought increasingly into relationship with the
merchant. The merchant was coming into control of production through industry and the artisan or craftsman went to work where the key powers of production were located. His once privately owned tools of craftsmanship were gradually brought under ownership of others and were ultimately transformed into machines. It was only a matter of time before the artist would have little to say about the aesthetic quality of the item he produced, or, for that matter, its use.

The general result of this was that the producer of consumer items was no longer "artisan" but simply "worker" whereas those craftsmen who chose to emphasize "aesthetics" as a profession, rather than aid in the production of utilitarian items or consumer products, were no longer "artisans" but "artists." But "aesthetics" as separate from a defined social function are not seemingly understood very well by the mass audience, and this lack of understanding appears to be in direct ratio with the degree of subjectivity the artist expresses in his art. As a consequence, the contemporary artist is caught in the dilemma of either trying to discover educational techniques by which to educate the public into appreciating subjective expression, or by ignoring most of his audience altogether.

In my personal opinion, I doubt highly that this dilemma is going to cure itself in the near future. The means we have taken in the universities to educate the "non-professional" in the visual arts and aesthetics have not worked very well, to say the least. And here I am not speaking of the general public, which for the most part does not have the opportunity to go near a university, but rather the general
disinterest in art by the educated members themselves.

All of this leaves the artist seriously concerned with communication, in the predicament of knowing that his audience is as disoriented from a common viewpoint of understanding art, as his fellow artists are alienated from a common base or social objective by which to express themselves. As a result, any effort to achieve communication must take into account this fragmentation of audience perspective. The artist must know that any common factor found which seems to penetrate beyond the splintered and indifferent opinions of people about art will nonetheless only improve communication in terms of comparative degree, and even that is uncertain. Until history shifts our present societies into concerns which again give people of varied professions a common base or objective from which to interpret one another, it is unlikely that any criteria of communication in art will overcome the fragmented and introverted perspectives that presently exist.

Presently, I have grown somewhat less preoccupied with this conflict. I am settled with the idea that communication is a desirable objective; (and in reality, desired by most if not all artists) but that it probably will not be satisfactorily achievable in our own times. As a result, I feel it would be absurd to worry oneself too intensely with the problem.

On the other hand, potentialities for degrees of communication may exist. For a time, I toyed with the idea of a socialist approach to art, but this eventually seemed futile since socialism, as we know it, has yet to prove itself meaningfully representative of a possible common
base for artistic communication. After a time, I found myself pulling back to a few simpler notions that I held when I was younger.

The first is the recognition that form is content and in discerning a given content the artist had the choice of making it relatively clear or ignoring clarity altogether. I choose to make it as clear as possible.

A second consideration concerns art which seems to possess some degree of "lasting quality." And "lasting quality" appears always to have some components of life enhancement, whatever other components it might possess. In other words, the viewer has to obtain the sense that an art object is essentially affirmative of life. This is not necessarily achieved through a simple choice of "fun" subject matter. That can be little more than banality in some cases. A spirit of affirmation is very difficult to achieve because the artist as a personality must be able to love life, so that this spirit sincerely pervades his work. If this occurs, I believe that affirmation is something that will be instinctively sensed rather than necessarily perceived by the viewer. An affirmative spirit is something that will also permit full choice of content or style. We accept the complaints and rages of an essentially affirmative person because we know that his motivation is to see life at its best, not simply because of a compulsion to wallow in negative criticism to satisfy a crippled psyche. We accept the melancholy of Rembrandt's atmospheres because we know he loved life. Goya's "Disasters of War" are repugnant in their horror, but we know we are witnessing the expression of a man struck dumb at evil because he loved life, and not because he wished to perform visual
sadism on the viewer. Bosch's paintings are rampant with monstrosities, but we know that was not the only side to his view of the world. The nightmarishness of Bosch's monsters balances between the negation of tragedy and the affirmation of comedy. A sense of tragedy, or horror is not a negation of life. It is simply an understanding of and confrontation with its whole meaning.

My third consideration is truthfulness. The artist must earnestly try to find means of expressing what he thinks and feels. We may not always know what we should express in our art, but with time we usually sense when we are doing something that is not akin to our basic make-up. So despite my remarks about the need for affirmativeness in the artist's personality, I would hastily add that it would be better for the neurotic artist to express his neurosis truthfully and well than to cripple himself further by attaching his art to approaches that he considers affirmative, but which he could neither feel nor experience.

In admission of the fact that present day capitalist society is without a communal base by which all people from all professions might understand art, it appears necessary to examine art forms which possess some degree of communicative capacity with the large bulk of the public. If the art object is without practical utility, and appears essentially to be a private statement or expression by the artist, the audience normally demands to know what the artist is talking about. Usually this does not appear possible unless the artist in one way or another deals with recognizable forms.
The second factor that is often demanded in non-utilitarian art is that it at least expresses a positive concern for life whatever its subject matter, as I have already mentioned.

On the other hand, it is clear that these components are easily prostituted by certain artists, and can degenerate into sterile representation and "affirmativeness" that is nothing more than a cloak to blind people from the true nature of things.

But this fact is no argument in itself against recognizable forms or affirmativeness. Sterility and distracting maudlinism are no more the property of realistic than much abstract art. My point is primarily that the demands by the mass audience for recognizability and affirmativeness are neither unreasonable nor illogical. The question in societies, which recognize art as being a mode for private expression, is for the artist to stay true to his private vision without rejecting reasonable demands of the mass audience. I will repeat that in cases where the artist honestly feels that the communication only sacrifices the integrity of his private vision he had best stay with the latter, forget communication problems, and hope for the best.

But in those cases, where the artist thinks that the question of communication can honestly be brought to bear on his private vision, it might well be worthwhile to at least consider the possibility.
One last point. We see around us the rise of what is presently termed "Pop-Culture." It is an obscure culture that takes in everything from the comic strip to the family TV show. It is a culture of the marketplace where art forms are produced essentially in relation to their salability. This has produced the rather unique social situation of people really getting what they want whether it is cheap sex or mindless distractions of an inconceivable variety. The effect of "Pop-Culture" on the traditional arts is that the latter show signs of becoming irrelevant - irrelevant because they have no clear utility, irrelevant because there is no communal base by which to interpret them, and finally irrelevant because there are too many things around which are more "fun" ranging from the living room TV to the brightly colored popular magazines. The traditional artist has not only been not communicating with his public for some time, but shows signs of becoming obsolete in his present form. If nothing else, the dynamics of TV and the movie are more involving for the average man than the static art object can ever hope to be.

I am not proposing that the artist should enter into the ranks of Pop-Culture. It is a culture that so far lacks mind, and, to some extent, even soul. It is too often the leveling of principle for the sake of pleasure and distraction.
What I am saying is that the artist is going to have to examine carefully the failings of his recent traditions which have done much to isolate and alienate him from the social body; be willing if it can be done with integrity, to consider demands which appear reasonably expressed by the audience at large; but do this in thought of himself as being a sensitive agent of expression for what he knows exists in the world, but is not readily perceived by the many. Because if the viewer is unable to comprehend what the artist's sensitivity is telling him, from a social point of view the artist's expression is a waste of time. The artist in brief if intending to communicate must clarify his ideas on the basis of his own artistic vision.

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My thesis project is a mural. The technical aspects bear little explanation. The mural will be painted on a large paneled wall in the Newman Center. Since the wall is wood, it will be covered with sheets of masonite, which will be grounded with a latex preparation. The painting itself will be executed with acrylic media. Acrylic being water soluble demands no additional thinners, and since the mural will occupy the building interior, it seems unlikely that any special finish will be added to the painting surface when it is completed.

Preparations will involve a cartoon primarily for reasons of establishing
general composition and color lay-out. Details will be executed once
the general scheme is finished on the wall surface.

The mural will be painted by me in accompaniment with a colleague,
John Armstrong, a graduate student here in the department. Our painting
styles at the present are similar enough, so that we do not anticipate
difficulties in uniform appearance of the painting. I will plan the
cartoon, but the details of the painting will be done on an individual
basis.

The mural will occupy a single wall, and therefore be flat, 35 feet
in length and 10 feet in height. It will be multi-colored. A series
of photographs representing the work's development will accompany the
written part of this thesis.

There were very few architectural factors, which had to be given
consideration. The most important concerned the left hand corner of
the wall which went above the majority of the ceiling surface bordering
the top part of the mural.
The best solution was to cover the entire upper wall surface, and then work out the composition in a way which would make the elevation a rational part of the entire picture. A tree is painted on the entire left side of the mural. The elevated corner pocket will be filled with tree foliage and several figures.

The general color scheme will be relatively light (green, ochre, sienna, white) since the dominant color of the room is dark brown. Lighting on the mural during the day is direct. There are ceiling to floor windows on the opposite side of the room which permit consistent lighting throughout the day. Five rows of ceiling lamps permit complete flooding of the room with artificial light at night. The row of lights bordering the top of the mural hangs low enough to obscure vision, but there is some prospect that these lights will be raised when the mural is complete.

The illusion of the picture will be essentially three dimensional although a small amount of distortion will occur to give different areas of the picture a slight two dimensional quality to help clarify the overall design.
The viewer stands some eight feet below the bottom level of the picture. The background mountains in the mural are at the top of the picture, so the viewer must look up to see them. Foreground figures, on the other hand, are painted to create the illusion that they appear below the ground level of the viewer. The general impression of the viewer is that he looks up to see the background and "down" to see the foreground as if the ground structure was essentially that of a valley. This creates the partial sensation of standing on an equal level with the mural, which, it is felt, is more comfortable than the strained sensation of having to look up to see everything.

The subject matter will be multi-portraiture of various people ranging among friends, relatives, and acquaintances. The portraiture will be representative, taken primarily from photographs, while the setting and activity of the people will be determined from fantasy.

The objective of the mural is to be neither essentially satirical nor photographic although elements of both will make up the atmosphere of the painting. It is hoped that the painting will accomplish essentially both a detached yet affirmative portrayal of the people involved. This will be difficult because the people represented are those for whom both friendly and unfriendly feelings are held. The final outcome is hoped to lie in a portrayal that is both detached and truthful.

The mural will be executed in thought of the considerations brought out in this paper. The various forms of people will be recognizable, but the interpretation of character will be private in hopes that
the character of everyone will be as honestly portrayed as possible, but without indulging in a categorical type sentiment which portrays personalities as being "good" or "bad." We hope to make them appear human. If this can be accomplished, we trust that the picture will then be essentially affirmative without being sentimental or untruthful. If this is not achieved, the fault no doubt will lie in our incapacity to view people tolerantly rather than a matter of technique.

It is thought that the "family of man" conception, which is the theme of the picture, will relate well to both the church and youth organization atmosphere that prevails in the building. The "family of man" concept is religious by implication without being literally so. This in itself will permit the picture to be in keeping with the church in the upper part of the building, yet allow a secular interpretation of interest to comply with the atmosphere of the recreation room where the mural is located. The fact that the mural will be representational and, hopefully, non-partisan in spirit allows for a broad area of interpretation that will appeal to many types of people. This seems essential since the audience will possess all the variation of education and personality outlook that one finds in most church congregations.

The subject matter and representational treatment seem appropriate for a number of reasons. First of all, the picture is essentially a reaction against much of the art of this century which has done so much to alienate the mass audience from an understanding of the visual arts. The purpose for putting recognizable forms and a
positive spirit for life in the painting have already been discussed. The fact that the painting will exist on public display makes these considerations all the more important. The social significance of this effort lies primarily in a recognition of an increasing willingness on the part of the public to appreciate art which they can understand.

There have been many signs that a segment of the art audience is reacting against introverted and obscure artistic expression. This, I believe, reflects the renewed concern of many people in social problems along with their growing antagonism toward socially uncommitted and uninvolved specializations of all kinds. The arts have been no less guilty of establishing a self interested technocracy than any of the other professions in our society. Mr. Armstrong and I would prefer to have our mural regarded in the light of the social concern of Diego Rivera rather than the subjectivity of Pablo Picasso despite the fact that our present mural is, in any partisan sense of the word, apolitical.

The picture itself will confirm whether or not we succeed in producing something that is both communicative yet representative of our private feeling about the world.

As I mentioned in my last thesis, the thoughts presented here are subject to change and modification. If the reader interprets my opinions as being too categorical, they may be so because my attention is presently devoted to the problems of communication between the contemporary artist and his public. If I later find the above opinions to be too narrow or lacking in insight, I would still consider it to have been worthwhile to discuss a problem that is too frequently ignored altogether.