

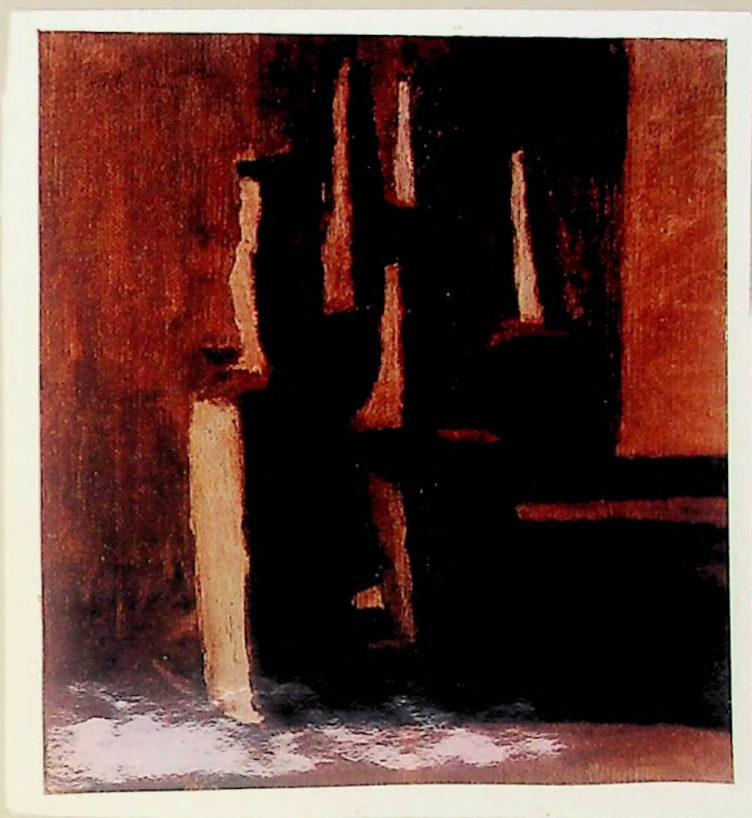
THE Big "T".

by

Kevin Gill

B I B L I O G R A P H Y.

<u>TITLE.</u>	<u>AUTHOR.</u>
George Grosz.	Hans Hess.
A Big Yes and A Small No.	George Grosz.
A Painter Speaks to Painter.	Hans Richter.
Morandi.	Guido Guiffre.
Metaphysical Art.	Massimo Carra.
Voice of America Information Agency.	Interview.
David Hockney.	David Hockney.
Honore Daumier.	Robert Rey.



still life

Morandi

I N T R O D U C T I O N .

This essay is an attempt to understand my own attitudes towards the artist in Society through two 20th. century artists with opposing view-points. These artists are George Grosz and Giorgio Morandi. They lived in very similar political and social environments, Grosz in Germany and Morandi in Italy. Grosz reacted in what he felt to be the only socially responsible way while denouncing artists who choose any other role. But despite his denunciation artists continued to develop their own individual style. Morandi was just such an artist. Unlike Grosz, Morandi does not appear in his work to be politically motivated, yet my instinct is to argue that his art is socially responsible. It is interesting that Grosz's art deteriorated when he turned to still-life, landscape etc. It appears that Grosz needed a political and social aspect for his work to have quality of conviction. The quality of Morandi's work however, shows that this conviction is not necessary to produce good, valid, socially relevant art.

If I can understand the attitude's of these two artists then perhaps I can avoid some of the pitfalls and more easily find my own beliefs. By investigating their lives I have discovered some of the possible events which may have formulated their opinions. It is important not only to know what they believed but why also. As, however, they were both deeply committed to a visual medium it is more important to look at what these artists have done than listen only to what may be their misconceptions. So the illustrations are a vital part of this essay, as these images are the legacy of two mens lives.

The individual eventually has the choice to accept or reject these images as being relevant or not and all these words cannot convince one who will not see but only show the direction in which to look.

This essay is laid out in three main parts:-

Part 1: Deals with Grosz and his life.

Part 2: Morandi.

Part 3: Deals with some questions which arise from the lives they have led.

GEORGE GROSZ.

George Grosz was born in Germany in Berlin on 6th. July 1893. His Mother was a cook in an army mess and living in such close proximity to soldiers may partially or totally be responsible for his strong dislike of the military way of life. Compared to the heroes in the comics which the young Grosz was so fond of, the soldiers with whom he was living must have seemed very dreadfully dull and the stupidity of one officer who awarded Mrs Grosz with a medal for her cooking must have been typical of the ambiguities which played a large part in developing his anti-establishment attitude, which was later to become so obvious in his work. Though it would appear that it was at this young age that the seeds of cynicism were sown, alongside this growth however blossomed forth a belief in the romantic west of the comics. His imagination charged by these penny dreadfuls, telling cowboy adventure stories, created a chivalrous land of opportunity which in error he came to know as America.

He was expelled from a regimentally run grammar school for striking a teacher, making him the hero of his classmates and placing him in the unpleasant position of having to choose a career and so his first reaction to authority was a doubled edged blade. His decision to become an artist was equally rebellious as it did not conform to the pattern of behaviour expected of him. The gift of a natural draughtsman and an active imagination was his road to salvation away from a pensionable post of a policeman or railway clerk. "Who" Grosz asked "did not envy the artist!" Attending the Academy in Dresden and meeting all the harsh disciplinary demands of the institution he accepted the old fashioned teaching and stuffy academic attitude until he grew friendly with some of the students and became familiar with the movements of the day. He had wanted to be a Genre Painter but was now being influenced by those around him. "Grosz even became the sole pupil in a very nearly defunct class of composition, where history painting was still taught. He wanted to be a painter and carried in his head the pictures he wanted to paint; military pieces with resplendent uniforms." "But to the true academician, Genre Painting is only a debased form of grand History Painting. This he learned when one day he brought a portfolio with assorted battle pieces to his professor, who informed Grosz that only elevated thoughts could develop an elevated style. Such great thoughts could only be found in the Bible, and in classical antiquity, but never in the present. Grosz attempted a Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, but he realised that this kind of subject did not move him. He concluded that such elevated thoughts were not in him because they were not of his time. Baudelaire's dictum - that a painter must be of his own time:- had become axiomatic with young artists, and had spelled the death of ideal academic art. Grosz, discovering it for himself, drew the logical conclusion."

With a Diploma and Certificate of Merit he moved to an Art School in Berlin which was more open to modern influences than the Academy. He was a country boy let loose in a big bustling city and he started to portray what he saw; a social aspect began to creep into his work and in a letter he writes of "his social democratically infected anti-militarist brain which is badly affected by the uniforms.." Where Grosz's "social democratically infected anti-militarist brain" suddenly appeared from is as much a mystery as his change of attitude towards uniforms. In a very short time he changed from wanting to paint uniforms to despising them and yet when the first world war broke out, he volunteered to join the army.

contd.....



Pandemonium

George Grosz

It is felt that his volunteering stemmed more from a limited choice of regiment than patriot fervour as he almost certainly would have been conscripted. He served for less than a year and was given an honourable discharge for medical reasons. His short stay in the army brought him close enough to the front line to smell the rotten bodies caught in the barbed wire and this, added to the organisation of the army left impressions which show in his work. His drawings become chaotic, violent, political and quite often directly connected with war.

Shortly after leaving the army although arguing constantly over policies he became a regular contributor to ~~the~~ left wing periodicals. His main link with the Communist Party seemed to be that they were anti-establishment. He did not share their idealistic beliefs in the working class and was pessimistic of their chances to gain power but found that they offered him a way to bring his drawings to the public. He made friends with the two Herzfelde brothers who were starting a pacifist periodical and eventually in 1919 the three of them joined the Communist Party. The two brothers were optimists and kept the pessimistic Grosz from falling into complete despair.

It is difficult to assess the effect of the Herzfelde brothers on Grosz. He shared the same enemies but had belief in very little. Grosz felt that if mankind had a redeeming feature he could not find it and so it was obvious that he would eventually drift away from the brothers and the Communist Party. While they worked together it is possible that Wieland Herzfelde guided Grosz through some of his best work, constantly reassuring that his drawings were needed and relevant in the troubled society they shared. Grosz tried to understand the function of art and from this grew a wish to destroy it. In 1925 himself and Herzfelde took a stand against art for arts sake.

The following is a quote from an article in an almost manifesto manner "There are still artists who deliberately and consciously attempt to avoid tentiousness, remaining silent in the face of social events, not taking part, not accepting responsibility. As far as art is practised for it's own sake, it propagates a blase indifference and irresponsible individualism. The artist cannot withdraw himself from the laws of social development - today the class struggle. A detached stance, above or on the side lines still means taking sides. Such indifference and other worldliness supports automatically the class in power - in Germany it's Bourgeoise. The artist today can only choose between technical construction and propaganda in the class struggle. In either case he will have to give up pure art! "

GIORGIO MORANDI.

In the year 1890 three years before Grosz was born, a man who was to become a "Pure Artist" was born in the small town of Bologna, Italy, this man was Giorgio Morandi. Several of Grosz's paintings had definite Metaphysical influences and so I feel almost certain that he would have been familiar with Morandi's work as it was exhibited with the paintings of the leaders of the movement De Chirico and Carra. Well then! did Grosz have Morandi in mind when with Herzfelde he wrote this article? This is very unlikely as at the time of writing Grosz would hardly have considered Morandi as being important enough to have earned such attention! But first who was this man Morandi?

Morandi lived a rather uneventful life in comparison to Grosz. As a schoolboy there is nothing to distinguish him from his classmates. After leaving school he worked in his father's business for a year before going to the Accademia di Belle Arti of Bologna. While attending the Accademia he saw the first reproductions of Cezanne's paintings which were to have a powerful impact on him and an effect on his work which was to last for the rest of his life. He also studied Giotto, Masaccio and Paolo Uccello in Florence. His study of the contemporary painters was just as avid as that of historical ones and so would indicate that he was aware of Grosz's work just as Grosz was of his. A combination of traditional and modern values complimentary in their treatment are the results of these studies. Morandi's desire to learn of modern painting movements was shared by most of the artists at that time and perhaps the developments of the printing process and the availability of reproductions created a new awareness of the possibilities of learning not only from the past but the present also. This awareness brought Morandi into contact with the work of the Futurists and Metaphysicalists. In nineteen fourteen he met Boccioni and Carra who were two Italian painters who had signed the Futurist Manifesto and was also given a teaching position in the elementary school of the Commune of Bologna. The following year he was called to the army but like Grosz served for a very short time, six weeks, and was then sent home gravely ill. It is unfortunate that I cannot find more details of Morandi's attitude to conscription as one tends to wonder what brought on this sudden illness. As with Grosz I find myself asking was it merely physical conditions or their mental attitude which created these illnesses.

In 1918 Morandi became acquainted with the Metaphysical Works of De Chirico and Carra and had started to paint in a metaphysical style himself. He met De Chirico while both of them were copying a painting of Lorezo Lotto in the Galleria Borghese showing that De Chirico and Morandi shared this eagerness to combine old and new. He began to exhibit with Carra and De Chirico and renewed his activities in engraving and etching which he had begun before he was conscripted to the army. Up to this his subject matter had mainly consisted of landscapes, still-lives and a small number of self portraits. During his metaphysical stage he concentrated on still-lives and when he eventually left aside the metaphysical tendencies and began to develop his own style his subjects were mainly still-lives and landscapes. Morandi slowly introduced a formula to his way of living which he followed without very much deviation for the rest of his life.



Still life

Morandi

He spent most of the year in Bologna living with two sisters, teaching etching at night and by day painting still-lives in his studio where very few were admitted he chose to be a recluse and lived an almost monastic existence. This way of life stemmed from painting and if he travelled it was usually to see and study the work of other artists or to use the landscape in his own work. He followed this pattern for the rest of his life and the only thing of note which occurred in his life are the awards which he won for painting and etching making him known as one of Italy's foremost modern artists.

If Morandi was aware of Grosz's article then there was no perceptible reaction in his work at that time and the only messages he has left are his paintings and etchings and so one must explore these for a clue to the man's philosophy. In his book "Metaphysical Art" Massimo Carra, son of Carlo Carra, says of Morandi "he was never-given to writing statements or articles and is represented here only by reproductions". Morandi's life was an echo of his work and he put all his understanding into a visual medium, and pigment cannot easily be translated into words. Morandi himself had little faith in words and when interviewed for an American Government Information Agency he spoke of the problems of translating one method of communication into another. "Remember Galileo - the book of Philosophy, the book of Nature, are written in letters alien to our Alphabet. These letters are triangular, square, circular, spherical, pyramid shaped cones and other geometrical forms. The Galilean thoughts are very much part of my long-held conviction that the images projected by the visible world, i.e. the conventional world, are expressed in words with great difficulty, if expressed in words at all".

So Morandi as far as Grosz was concerned in 1925 was "not accepting responsibility". Morandi was not painting political pictures. Or was he? At this point three questions come to mind;

- 1) Is Grosz right when he says that as an artist one has a responsibility to be socially relevant?
- 2) What is socially relevant Art?
- 3) Is Morandi's Art socially relevant.

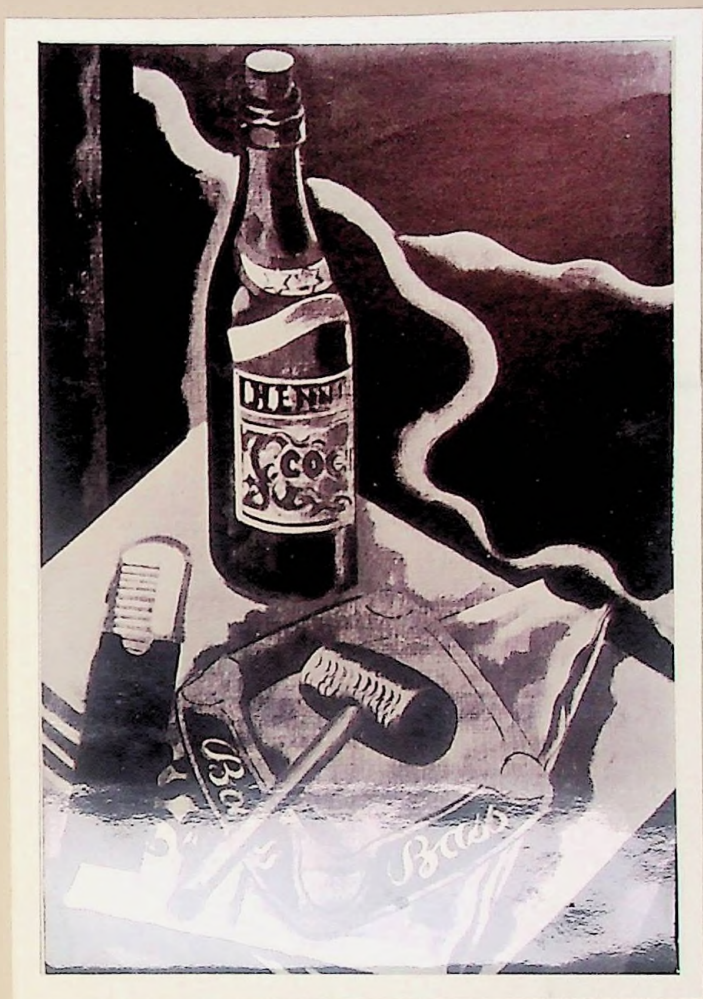
1) IS THERE AN ONUS ON AN ARTIST TO BE SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE.

It would appear from Grosz's attitude that he felt there was an onus on himself as an artist to be socially responsible. He tried to make others share this attitude and encouraged them to participate in activities similar to his own. That later in life he reversed his social philosophy may perhaps indicate that his convictions were not laid on solid foundations. Quite often people who are not fully convinced by their own arguments try to convince others and in this exercise hope to find support for their convictions. While reacting to authority, a great deal of his commitment may have sprung from his needs to be in vogue with modern trends. Morandi on the other hand was able to withstand this pressure.

Each person has a responsibility to society and an artist has only an equal amount. I do not believe in artistic responsibility except in a visual context. The only difference between an artist and a farmer or a labourer is that one has a visual education or awareness and one does not. Does a visual education give an insight into the affairs of party politics? I feel no particular enlightenment or ability to educate in any field other than the one I have studied.

2) WHAT IS SOCIALLY RELEVANT ART?

Grosz was of the opinion that only art concerned with the party political situation of the time was relevant but as he came to realise it is dangerous to think only in terms of immediate results. The only way to assess the effect of art on society is to stop the practice completely but all efforts to curb the direction of Art have always been opposed bitterly and it thrives even under suppression. Can art be socially relevant? My answer is yes! But it is really a matter of faith because there is no conclusive evidence. The effect which art has on society is not direct or immediate and Grosz expecting to see the results of his work on society became frustrated and for periods of time lost belief in Art completely. Count Kessler a diplomat of high rank and admirer of Grosz's work wrote in his diary of Grosz; "Art for Art's sake does not interest him at all. Grosz argues that art as such is unnatural, a disease, and the artist a man possessed. Mankind can do without art. He loathes painting and the pointlessness of painting as practised so far". Considering that during the time Grosz was publishing his political caricatures the Nazi's were gaining more power, it is no wonder that he was becoming disillusioned as the only reason he had to produce art was quickly losing its validity.



still life

grozy

3) WAS MORANDI'S ART SOCIALLY AND POLITICALLY RELEVANT ?

During the time Grosz had drawings of topical, political subjects printed in magazines he was obviously working in a socially relevant way. But for him to consider this to be the only role open to artists who were socially aware was rather narrow minded and opinionated. Though much less startling and immediate, Morandi has a relevance which is of a deep and spiritual nature; Morandi coldly assessed while Grosz emotionally reacted. The calmness in Morandi's work is self imposed while the confusion in Grosz's is spontaneous. Morandi's became more clear, simple and serene as did his understanding of life and though Grosz found it technically easier to portray the chaos and ugliness of men it only increased his own personal confusion. Guido Giuffrè said of Morandi's work "Events and disasters only appear as a melancholy echo, a kind of tender destruction which seems to restore man to himself, persuading him of his indestructability at a time when everything seemed to be destroyed". It has been said of Grosz that his drawings are portraits of Germany in the 1930's and if this be true then Morandi was a portrait painter whose work, with the exception of style can not be confined to a time or place. In 1942 Brandt wrote of Morandi's paintings of 1918 to 1929 "They are resurrected not reproduced, their evidence is a spiritual one". If Morandi is portraying life then surely this is of relevance to society, and particularly if he understands what he is portraying. Grosz was so confused himself that he reminds me of a child who drops a coin into a sandy bottomed pool and rather than feeling around carefully disturbs all the sand with frantic groping making it more difficult to see clearly.

Eleven days before Hitler came to power Grosz moved to his land of dreams - America. The Americans hailed him as a satirical cartoonist but Grosz's attitudes had changed completely. It is hard to understand this switch-over, perhaps all his boyhood ambitions which were linked with America came back. If so they were as much a disappointment to him as America itself. He tried to become the Genre Painter he had always wanted to be and contradicted most of his earlier statements. "I love art above all I always wanted to be a painter that I succeeded in my drawings, has nothing to do with their contents ...". Unfortunately Grosz was wrong because having become completely disillusioned with the effectiveness of the propaganda element in his work he turned to painting nudes and still-lives which were not near the quality of his earlier work. Grosz suffered from a lack of understanding of his own work, though he occasionally did use his wickedly acid line to create his ugly beauty. "Count Kessler speculates on Grosz in his diaries" devotion of his art to depiction of the repulsiveness of bourgeois philistinism is, so to speak, merely the counterpart to some sort of secret ideal of beauty that he conceals.....". Count Kessler understood Grosz's work better than Grosz himself and a large amount of his problems arose from his efforts to understand in a literal rather than painterly fashion.



Still life

Morandi

Grosz's still-lives, landscapes and nudes were technical exercises while Morandi's were spiritual explorations. Guiffre said of Morandi ".....while everything around him took on an uncontrollable rhythm, he understood that the only authentic response was fidelity to himself, trusting that man would finally control events according to his stature....." When Grosz found himself amidst the ".....uncontrollable rhythm....." he panicked like a drowning man and while he splashed up a great deal of good work he wasted some very valuable energy.

It is unfair to judge both Morandi and Grosz by the same principals. Grosz should be judged as a political/social commentator, while Morandi as a broader instrument to understanding the nature of life. However it is possible for an artist to survive judgement on both levels. Honore Daumier was just such an artist. "As both an artist and a compassionate human being....." Robert Rey says of Daumier "He vividly portrayed the forces in conflict". Did Grosz's concern to help society stem from compassion? - It would appear that he acted more out of a sense of duty than real compassion and this I feel is the kernel of Grosz's problem in finding true fulfillment in his work.

This was not intended as a Grosz versus Morandi essay but an attempt to understand the role of the artist in today's Society. I would now like to clarify some points:- There is no one way artists should react in order to be socially responsible! It would be impossible to completely fulfill an individual's personality without also being socially responsible. Conviction seems to come out as being one of the most important facets of an artist. While not claiming that artists should be completely detached and live on a different level from the majority of people I would stress the dangers of limiting the function of Art.

Again I emphasize the importance of looking at an artist's work rather than what they have said.

"It is good advice" David Hockney says "to believe only what an artist does, rather than what he says about his work..... people interested in painting might be fascinated by an artist's statements about his work, but I don't think one can rely on that alone to learn about an artist's work, which is all trial and error."



Painter of the Hole

Spooz.