

287 T331

M0056563NC



THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

WHO IS ART FOR?

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO:

THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART & DESIGN & COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES

AND

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF FINE ART  
DEPARTMENT OF SCULPTURE

BY

DAVID BYRNE

APRIL 1985

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS ..... I  
INTRODUCTION ..... VI

Chapter:

I Minority or Mass Art ..... 1  
    Art and Reproduction .....  
    Art turns in on itself .....  
    Authentic art for authentic people .....

II Individual and Collaborative Art ..... 17  
    Art about society .....  
    Art about the individual? .....

.....  
BIBLIOGRAPHY ..... 35

ILLUSTRATIONS

No.

1. PAT PURDY AND THE GLUE SNIFFER'S CAMP by Stephen Willats ..... I
2. THE FARM by Joan Miro ..... II
3. HEAD OF A CATALAN PEASANT by Joan Miro ..... III
4. STILL LIFE WITH AN OLD SHOE by Joan Miro ..... IV
5. MORI EL MERMA by Joan Miro ..... V

## INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I am concerned with a question posed for the artist today, namely, 'art for art's sake' Or 'art for society's sake'. Many would argue that art has arrived at a stage whereby it finds itself separated from society as a whole, and is thus accessible to only a small minority who have been admitted into its sanctuary.

This, to my mind, is a reasonable observation and begs the question, 'What is to be done?' Is there any virtue any longer in working on an individual basis in an attempt to communicate individual experience to an audience, which perhaps can't even see or appreciate what the artist is saying? To what extent should the artist compromise his work in order to communicate to an audience of that nature? Again, many would feel that if the compromises are too great, art itself would eventually suffer and, as a result, society in general would end up the poorer.

On the other hand, it has been argued that today, in a mass-media dominated society, there is a danger of people becoming totally controlled by the products of the dominant culture and that art, in its present state, is doing little or nothing to alleviate that process. Artists are asked to become much more socially conscious and attempt to communicate to the audience on a level which they can identify with.

This is an ongoing problem which, in this thesis, I have not set out to solve. However, I have tried to outline the circumstances and to present an analysis of those circumstances by referring to some of the critics who have, in one way or another, attempted to tackle this problem.

Later on, I have given two main examples of artists who, to my mind, illustrate the two polarities in terms of methods and approaches to their work, but are united in their concern for the communication of ideas which can find a concrete form in the eyes of people.

Both approaches are valid when seen from their respective positions. Whether artists decide to work as individuals separate from society or in close collaboration with society is largely up to the way they feel compelled personally or instinctively. But what artists must be careful of is the too hasty reaction to theories handed down by the critics, as the history of twentieth century art can be seen in terms of reactions set against actions. That is, for example, how one day painting should be flat and, the next day, should have the illusion of depth.

Still, the ongoing debate as to the role of the artist in society is an important one of which artists should take serious consideration.

---

CHAPTER I

MINORITY OR MASS ART

Art and Reproduction

In Western culture for very many centuries, painting, sculpture and architecture predominated visual communication. The main reason that these three arts held such a monopoly was that they had been sponsored by some of the most powerful elements in society, namely kings, princes, aristocrats, the Church, merchants, national governments and city councils. However, in the mid-nineteenth century, changes began to occur with the onslaught of the Industrial Revolution. This led to the development of a capitalist economic system, in the West, which initiated the emergence of an urban, consumer society.

The emergence of this urban consumer society brought along with it a situation where art could no longer dominate visual communication, (nor indeed any other form of communication), but, instead, the mass media rose to the position of supremacy. This transformation has come about largely because of the rapid development of technology, amongst other things. For example, Peter Fuller would argue that our present cultural crisis can be traced back into the decay of religious belief, and the change in the nature of work which took place with the Industrial Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most profound technological change which has imposed the supremacy of the mass-media on the fine arts is photography and its ability to be published on such a mass scale. Prior to the invention of photography, painters, for example, enjoyed a monopoly over the creation of coloured images. With the advent of photography and its subsequent reproductability, literally millions of extremely high quality colour images could be reproduced and disseminated among the masses. Photography is probably the single greatest contributor to the upheaval which art experienced in the mid-nineteenth century.

One of the first people to realise the potential impact of photography and reproduction on the state of the fine arts as they had been previously perceived was Walter Benjamin. In his essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', he points out that because of mechanical reproduction, the work of art reproduced becomes more and more the work of art designed for reproductability. He points out that since technical reproduction had reached a sufficient standard, it was capable not only of making available all works of art to the public but also of causing the most profound change in the impact of these works on the public. He talks about the uniqueness of the original work of art, which is determined by its specific presence in time and space.

"This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence."<sup>2</sup>



This 'uniqueness' of the art work is essential to the idea of its 'authenticity'. The authenticity of the original work of art is paramount to its quality of uniqueness, as it cannot be reproduced and, at the same time, retain this quality. Authenticity may be determined through chemical analysis and other similar techniques, such as research into the place of origin of the work of art. For this reason, the state of authenticity of the work of art is outside the sphere of reproductability. However, when confronted with mechanical reproduction, things change. Firstly, mechanical reproduction is independent of the original art work. Photography, for example, can bring out aspects of the original previously unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens, thus changing the spectator's conception of the original. Secondly, mechanical reproduction can place the copy of the original into countless new situations, which were previously inaccessible to the original art work. Mechanical reproduction enables the audience to meet the art work halfway. To cite Benjamin's example -

"The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room." 3

Benjamin argues that because the work of art is brought into previously unreachable situations through the aid of reproduction, that the quality of its presence is depreciated. The quality in question is, of course, its authenticity. Since the authenticity of the art work is made up of its duration in time and its testimony to the history which

it specifically experienced, then what is lost through reproduction is the 'authority' of the work. The element which is lost is termed the 'aura' of the art work. And Benjamin declares,

"that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art." 4

For him, this realisation has repercussions which stretch far beyond the realm of art, namely -

"the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition". 5

He sees this development as a good step, because the shattering of tradition is a renewal of mankind, owing to the fact that although the 'aura' of the work is lost in the confrontation of the reproduction by the viewer, in his own situation, the art work reproduced is somehow reactivated.

Thus the social significance of mechanical reproduction is inconceivable without its destructive aspect, namely the destruction of the traditional value of cultural heritage.

Benjamin also argues that the contextual integration of art in tradition finds its expression in the idea of the 'cult'. The earliest art works functioned in the service of ritual and the works of art subsequently have not seperated themselves from this function, when seen in terms of original art works with an aura. With the advent of mechanical reproduction and photography, art was confronted with a crisis and reacted with a theology of art, namely 'art for art's sake'.

This gave rise, he suggests, to a negative theology in the form of the idea of 'pure art', which not only denied any social function of art but also any categorising by subject matter. He sees, on the other hand, that mechanical reproduction can emancipate the work of art from its 'parasitical' dependence on ritual, because when the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, then the total function of art is reversed, for instead of ritual, art can begin to be based on - politics.

Art Turns in on Itself

What Benjamin described as a 'new theology of art', namely, the idea of 'art for art's sake', which, according to him, was a reactionary expression of artists to the impending crisis brought about by the development of the age of mechanical reproduction, is, in effect, one of the central issues in the continual debate concerning modernism. On the one hand, there are those who defend the 'art for art's sake' thesis, (ie formalism, abstraction or indeed any personal expression), and, on the other hand, those who insist that art must serve a purpose or be socially useful.

Among those who defend modernism and claim that art need not serve any purpose but instead should create its own reality, Suzi Gablick cites the example of the composer Arnold Schonberg, who went so far as to declare that nothing done for a purpose could be art.<sup>6</sup> Probably the greatest exponents of this position emerged during the 1960's and 1970's, centred around the critic Clement Greenberg. These included people like Kenneth Noland, Morris Lewis, Helen Frankenthaler and Jules Olitski. These painters harbour no revolutionary ideals nor religious fervour. In fact, their only concern is the 'aesthetic'. Greenberg rejects all claims of any purpose to art or any spiritual point to its production. It is there to simply be aesthetically good. Art's effect is limited and small.

According to him, flatness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art. Modernist painting should, therefore, orientate itself to flatness as opposed to anything else. This view he endorses with the suggestion that the enclosing shape of the support was a condition that was shared with the art of the theatre; colour was a condition shared with sculpture as well as the the theatre. Thus, Greenberg makes the statement -

"It was the stressing, however, of the ineluctable flatness of the support that remained most fundamental in the processes by which pictorial art criticised and defined itself under Modernism. Flatness alone was unique and exclusive to that art." <sup>7</sup>

This self-definition of painting, which he encourages, this tendency of each art to render itself 'pure', and in its purity, finding the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as its independence, is exactly what Benjamin found so distasteful because it led to an art which was introspective and self-referential. Also, while Benjamin encourages the detachment of art from tradition, Greenberg goes to great lengths to stress the continuity which exists between Modernism and the tradition from which it is seen to emerge. While Modernism may mean a devolution, an unravelling of anterior tradition, it also means its continuation.

"Modernist art develops out of the past without gap or break, and wherever it ends up, it will never stop being intelligible in terms of the continuity of Art." <sup>8</sup>

He affirms this point further on by saying,

"Nothing could be further from the authentic art of our time than the idea of a rupture of continuity ... Without the past of art and without the need and compulsion to maintain past standards of excellence, such a thing as Modernist art would be impossible." <sup>9</sup>

However, while Greenberg's formalism represented nothing more than the 'dictates of the medium', and the very idea of the communication of meaning, or the existence of any social significance were denied, another form of abstraction had previously existed which did lay claim to such views. Exponents of this position included artists like Kandinsky, Malevich and, later, Mark Rothko. For artists like these the attitude of art for art's sake was more or less the artist's forced response to a social reality he could no longer affirm. Thus, early modernism, (1910 - 30), cut itself away from society and withdrew into itself as a response to the spiritual discomfort felt in capitalist and totalitarian society. For example, Kandinsky felt that art for art's sake was the best ideal a materialist age can attain, for it was an unconscious protest against materialism, and the demand that everything should have a use and practical value. This opposition to materialist values, which drove these artists to turn inwards and concentrate on the self, could be seen as a response to the collapse of religion in capitalist society. One person who sees this as the case is the critic Peter Fuller. Fuller argues that the causes for this situation where artist has turned in on himself and apparently away from the rest of society, had its roots in the disruption of the shared symbolic values of society, which he claims began in the Renaissance, and the radical change in work which was brought about by the subsequent Industrial Revolution.

"If it were permissible to psychologise historical processes, I would say that, in the Renaissance, the 'structure of feeling' changed : emphasis shifted from a sense of fusion with the world (originally the mother) towards 'realistic' individuation, and recognition of its separateness. Science began to travel along those paths which eventually led to the discovery that the world was not created by a feelingful mind well-disposed to, and in effect a projection of, ourselves, but was rather 'the chance product of natural processes.'" 10

Prior to this time, Fuller argues, that society had been 'spiritually unified', in the sense that ordinary people had the opportunity to exercise their own personal creativity in their daily work. There had been less of a division between artist and craftsman. This division occurred, according to him, with the rise of industrial capitalism, the spread of the factory system, and the emergence of a working-class. These developments expunged the 'aesthetic dimension' from everyday life. 11

However, although, at this time, that the 'aesthetic dimension' was forced to retreat from the lives of ordinary people, art, he argues, persisted. Except, now, instead of it being an element in ordinary people's lived relationship to their world, it had become the pursuit of a minority of 'artists', in his words, 'certain creative men of genius'. 12 The new task of these artists lay not in the arena of life as lived but rather in the creation of other realities within the existing one. Realities set apart from the one which all men experienced.

"The painter has long since ceased to be primarily the decorator of architectural space, or functional objects like pots and boomerangs: Rather, with the assistance of focused perspective, he became the creator of a painted world in an illusory space behind the picture plane: A human god, in fact. Aesthetic form acquired its autonomy from, and indeed opposition to, life as lived." 13

But how could these new realities fill the void left by the loss of the 'shared symbolic order'? How could the artist appeal to society as a whole when he no longer had a religious iconography which was recognised by all? Some painters, like Turner, had studied nature in the belief that through it they could find God, but as the nineteenth century progressed, and the realisation that nature was not the work of the benign creator dawned, this hope began to fade. When it seemed that nature could provide no alternative to the loss of the symbolic order, the 'aesthetic dimension' began to retreat even further into the 'illusionary' space behind the picture plane.

Fuller believes that Modernism manifested a progressive, voluntary relinquishment of divine power. Illusionary worlds could simply not be created because of the loss of the shared symbolic order, (which was destroyed by the decline of religious iconography), and the subsequent failure to find a substitute in nature. Thus, there was a surge of emphasis placed on painting's roots, which lay in decoration and sensuous manipulation of materials, in the belief that these elements could provide a replacement for the lost symbolic order.



Fuller goes on to exemplify Kandinsky in this instance, by declaring that he,

"replaced the pathetic fallacy with the art fallacy: the belief that abstract forms and materials could palpitate with his spiritual sentiments." 14

Suzi Gablick suggests that Kandinsky and Malevich alike held this view, that they saw themselves as kinds of priests who divined the interior soul or spirit. Their art was an independent world of pure creation which had its own, essentially spiritual, essence. They held a concept of life which was essentially transcendental, although not tied to institutionalised religion. She cites the example when Malevich declared,

"Art no longer cares to serve the state and religion, it no longer wishes to illustrate the history of manners; it wants to have nothing to do with the object as such, and believes that it can exist, in and for itself, without things." 15

But, for Fuller, the greatest painter in late Modernism who exemplified the final loss of all residues of nature, and illusion of natural space, in the interests of using pure colour and form as a means of expressing his inner self was Mark Rothko. Rothko said of his work,

"I'm not an abstractionist, I'm not interested in the relationship of colour or form or anything else. I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions. And the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows they are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them." 16

Authentic Art for Authentic People

In her essay 'Art for Art's Sake, or Art for Society's Sake' <sup>17</sup>, Suzi Gablick asks whether we should choose between both these positions, namely: art as the expression of the individual, or art as the fulfilment of social needs. She feels that we are being somehow drawn in two by this dilemma,

"When we assume either of these positions, we feel, more and more, that we are somehow being mutilated. We cannot satisfactorily adjust ourselves to either position since each of them renounces what the other retains." <sup>18</sup>

She goes on to point out that these contradictions cannot be resolved unless first we manage to begin in some way to define the role that art actually plays in modern society. She stresses that the idea of art having no meaning outside itself, of simply being valuable for its own sake, is a new idea relatively. But is the thesis 'art for art's sake' so terrible? As we have already seen, Fuller seems to think so. For him, it is an expression of the loss of the shared symbolic order, which society once possessed in full, and now has resulted in the disintegration of what he calls the 'aesthetic dimension' from the daily life of mankind. Certainly Greenberg doesn't seem to feel any remorse. For him, 'art for

art's sake' is an expression, simply, of the definition of art, namely that which is particular to its specific art. But for the Marxist critic, Adolfo Sanchez Vasquez, there is no apparent contradiction. According to him,

"Man elevates and affirms himself in the process of transforming and humanising reality, and art satisfies this need. That is why there is no such thing as 'art for art's sake', nor can there be; there is only art by and for man." 19

Vasquez sees nothing as over-riding the supremacy of art. For example, he warns that we should not be taken in by the limited idea that art should be conceived of as merely ideological or sociological in function. For him, art, while perhaps having an ideological content, only has this in the proportion that ideology loses its substantiveness by being integrated into the new reality of the work of art. In other words, ideological problems dealt with have to be solved artistically. If the work of art is to be reduced to mere ideology or a form of knowledge, then one has forgotten that the work of art is above all else, a creation, a manifestation of the creative power of man. The work of art does not depend on either the ideology that has inspired it or its function of reflecting reality. Instead, it is independent. It has its own reality, and the ideology that it expresses or the reality that it reflects is integrated into it. Thus,

"If, as Marx said, technology is an opening to the essential forces of man, then we have even more reason to say that so is art, whether it be ornamental, symbolist, realist or abstract." 20

When it comes to the problem of applying this conception of art to the dilemma from which we seem to be suffering today, Sanchez sees the problem as extending beyond the boundaries of both artist and public.<sup>21</sup> He claims that it is far too simplistic a view to blame either the artists of our time or the present-day public. Rather, he off-loads the responsibility on the socio-economic relations embodied in the capitalist system, which have turned against art and thus have harmed not only the public who are kept in a reified, alienated state, (and kept from properly enjoying true human products such as art), but also the artist, because his ability to communicate to large audiences has been seriously diminished. Instead, the public is fed with a mass - art.<sup>22</sup>

"A profound manifestation of the hostility of capitalism to art is the fact that in bourgeois society the artist is necessarily divorced from the masses because he cannot descend to their level, and the masses do not want to raise themselves - nor can they - to the level of art; artists today cannot hope to share their art with the millions of human beings kept by capitalism in a reified state."<sup>23</sup>

However, for Vasquez, while he is sympathetic to both camps, (artists on the one hand, and consumers on the other), condition, he does illustrate some kind of responsibility applicable to each side. Artists, he argues, in their endeavour to assert their independence and subjectivity in a reified world, have ended up by destroying any bridges which would have made communication possible. On the other hand, the consumers, because they have fallen into a state of profound alienation as human beings, have lost the ability for true aesthetic appreciation. This, he says, cannot be excused

by the suggestion that it is simply the fault of modernism, which because of its emphasis on abstraction as opposed to realism, is not attempting to communicate anyway. No, he says, because those same people who oppose modern art oppose all true art, regardless of its being realist or abstract, modern or old.

The division between artist and society for Vasquez is a condition which is particular to this point in history and will not necessarily always be the case. Although, at the moment, the ability of art to communicate to large audiences is seriously diminished, this may not always be the case. For him,

"Art, in essence, is neither elitist nor hermetic" 24

And, when the time comes that the majority is no longer in an alienated and reified state, they will be able to recognise the true value of art properly. When this situation comes about, it will not reflect the state of spiritual impoverishment, characteristic of the success of mass-art, but rather it will be the manifestation of the enrichment of human sensibility in general and aesthetic sensibility in general and aesthetic sensibility in particular. 25

Of course, the most obvious problem here is how exactly does this new society come about, where the majority no longer are incapable of enjoying or indeed feel a need to enjoy a truly human art? Nevertheless, present day capitalist society does pose the dilemma between an art for a minority or a mass-art. Vasquez asks us to remember that every true work of art, by its essence, continues to establish a human dialogue across boundaries of time, class or nationality. Thus, in his view, the response to the dilemma is,

"A rejection of the dilemma itself; neither minority art nor mass art, but art for all, that is, for all who feel the need for a human appropriation of things and who find in the aesthetic relationship a way of profoundly satisfying that need and, in the aesthetic object, a human utility." 26

So, as we can see, for Vasquez the dilemma is not as Suzi Gablick would have it, namely, that the artist should choose between working for 'art's sake' as opposed to 'society's sake', because for him there is only one true art - an art which establishes a truly human and consequently aesthetic relationship with objects. Rather, for him, the only dilemma is the choice between true art (minority art) and inauthentic art (majority or mass art). The problem posed for the modern artist, really, is the struggle to make an art which is neither elite and only for the initiated, nor a mass art which obeys the economic and ideological demands of capitalism and is interested only in mass consumption. This kind of art must address itself neither to a privileged nor an alienated public, but to the people, because it would be an authentic art capable of reaching all people who are willing to recognise it for its true human value. 27

NOTES

CHAPTER ONE

1. Peter Fuller, 'Aesthetics After Modernism', Writers and Readers, London, 1983.
2. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', (Modern Art and Modernism, Open University, 1982).
3. Ibid p.218.
4. Ibid p.219.
5. Ibid p.219.
6. Suzi Gablick, 'Has Modernism Failed?', Thames and Hudson, 1984, p.20.
7. Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', (Modern Art & Modernism, Open University, 1982, p.6)
8. Ibid p.9.
9. Ibid p.10.
10. Peter Fuller, 'Aesthetics After Modernism', (Writers & Readers, London 1983, p.19).
11. 'Aesthetic dimension', (a term borrowed from Herbert Marcuse). Fuller defines this term as the creative relationship between imagination, intellect, heart and hand. His source for the term was Marcuse, 'The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics', (London: Macmillan, 1979).
12. Peter Fuller, 'Aesthetics After Modernism', (Writers and Readers, London 1983, p.21).
13. Ibid p.22.
14. Ibid p.28.
15. Suzi Gablick, 'Has Modernism Failed?', Thames & Hudson, 1984, p.20.
16. Ibid p.22.
17. Ibid p.20.
18. Ibid p.25.
19. Adolfo Sanchez Vazquez, 'Art and Society', Monthly Review Press, London 1973, p.44).
20. Ibid p.41.

21. The dilemma to which I refer is whether or not art can reach a mass audience or, instead, is forced to remain the domain of a minority set apart from the mainstream of society.
22. John Walker, when talking about the mass-media, cites a few interesting observations. Mass-media are orientated towards huge audiences, and because 'success' in the media is often measured in quantitative terms, their cultural content is low to medium in character. It is assumed, he says, that an item which appeals to millions is representative of the lowest common denominator of taste. Also, the mass-media reproduce dominant ideology, ie conservative and counter-revolutionary and, thus, encourage passivity and apathy. Culture associated with the mass-media tends to be of low quality, bland, escapist, standardised, stereotyped, conformist and trivial. In short, mass culture is seen as 'opium for the people', a means by which masses are manipulated and diverted in their leisure hours in preparation for their daily work in factories and offices or as a compensation for unemployment. John Walker, 'Art in the Age of Mass-Media', Pluto Press, London 1983, p.18.
23. Adolfo Sanchez Vazquez, 'Art and Society', Monthly Review Press, London 1973. (p.260)
24. Ibid p.262.
25. This view was shared by Leon Trotsky. According to him, art must be given a sympathetic atmosphere in order to flourish and will eventually find its own way to the masses as they become more developed and enriched in a truly human way. Meanwhile, bourgeois art must be tolerated and allowed to develop towards the masses. When it reaches them, both art and the masses will have fundamentally changed.  
"Art cannot live and cannot develop without a flexible atmosphere of sympathy around it ... When that time,



which is not immediate, will come, and the cultural and aesthetic education of the working masses will destroy the wide chasm between the creative intelligentsia and the people, art will have a different aspect from what it has today."

Leon Trotsky, 'Literature and Revolution', Modern Art & Modernism, Open University, London 1982. (p.211).

26. Ibid p. 264.

27. John A. Walker comes close to this view of the value of authentic art when he objects to the notion of pluralism in modern society which proposes the idea that fine art is just one cultural activity among many others existing today (ie mass-media). He stresses the importance of recognising the real difference between fine art and other kinds of culture.

"Fine art, for instance, is distinguished from the rest by its greater degree of independence, individuality, personal expression and hand work. It is therefore more varied, more formally inventive and, in some cases, more critical than the mass-media ... For these reasons, it still seems legitimate - and desirable - to regard fine art as a rather special branch of human culture."

John A. Walker, 'Art in the Age of Mass Media', Pluto Press, London, 1983. (p.90).

...the immediate, all-time, and the cultural and economic  
...of the working class and the people, and will have a different  
...the working class and the people, and will have a different  
...the working class and the people, and will have a different

...the working class and the people, and will have a different  
...the working class and the people, and will have a different  
...the working class and the people, and will have a different  
...the working class and the people, and will have a different

## CHAPTER II

### INDIVIDUAL AND COLLABORATIVE ART

...the working class and the people, and will have a different  
...the working class and the people, and will have a different  
...the working class and the people, and will have a different  
...the working class and the people, and will have a different

...the working class and the people, and will have a different  
...the working class and the people, and will have a different  
...the working class and the people, and will have a different  
...the working class and the people, and will have a different

### Art About Society

I have tried to illustrate in the previous chapter various reactions to the dilemma in which we seem to find ourselves today, namely, 'art for art's sake' on the one hand and 'art for society's sake' on the other. These reactions differ, ranging from Benjamin's view that art should break free, (through the medium of mechanical reproduction), from its traditional dependence on ritual and redefine its function, orientating itself towards politics, to the opposite extreme where Greenberg argues that art has no social function nor should it have. For him, the only function of art is that it should be aesthetically good. For Vasquez, we see that there is no such thing as 'art for art's sake', because there is only a true art which is made by men for men. He does not recognise the products of the mass-media as being true human expression but rather a kind of sub-art suitable only for a society which has fallen into a state of profound alienation.

Nevertheless, a lot of people today feel helpless in a world dominated by the mass-media and feel that artists can no longer remain set apart from what is happening in a mass-media dominated culture. One person who argues strongly in favour of artists challenging this situation, as opposed to the apparent indifference towards social

responsibility, is Lucy Lippard. For her, art need not be powerless and socially impotent - as it seems to be under the domination of the mass media. She sees the monopoly of the gallery system as one of the forces governing the inability of art to reach large audiences.<sup>1</sup> When a work of art is out of the artist's hands, she argues, it may be transformed beyond reproduction in several ways -

"framing it wrong, hanging it in a bad light, putting it in a bad light, mystifying or neutralising it."<sup>2</sup>

It's not enough to produce art, the artist must also take control of the means of its distribution. Thus, she identifies a recent trend in art which she calls 'activist art'. Activist art is, on the one hand, based on subversion, (trying to constantly undermine the effects of a dominant mass-mediated culture), and empowerment on the other, (the ability to affect how people see the world around them).

For Lippard, just as political and economic democracy are considered human rights, so too should the idea of cultural democracy be a right, a right to make and be exposed to the greatest diversity of creative expression. She makes the point that the dominant culture of capitalism affects all of us while serving very few of us. A real democracy would encourage artists to speak for themselves and for their communities. For her, self-expression is a prerequisite of self-empowerment. However, this doesn't mean that everybody has to make art. It means simply that art is at its most powerful if it is understood in the broadest possible sense and accepted as a possibility by everyone it touches.<sup>3</sup>

Activist artists, she says, tend to see art as a form of exchange, as a mutually stimulating dialogue, rather than as a specialised lesson in beauty or ideology, coming from the top down. Its form is largely process-orientated. It must consider not only the formal mechanisms within the art itself but what audience and what context it is intended for. Furthermore, how will it reach them and why? One form in which activist art has found expression is community art. This approach is collaborative in essence and its meaning is directly derived from its use-value to a particular community. In Lippard's own words, 'the needs of a community provide artists with both outlets and confines'. One such artist who has chosen to work through the medium of photography is Stephen Willats.<sup>4</sup> As might be expected from artists who choose to work close to the community, Willats is very articulate, paying as much, if not more, attention to the theoretical and critical appraisal of the subjects which he has chosen as he does to the actual execution of the works themselves.

Peter Fuller draws our attention to the fact that, as a result of the idea of 'form following function', (which developed in late modernism), architecture in particular developed an anti-ornamentalist programme. This resulted in the use of synthetic and unaesthetic materials, standardisation and repetitive, rectilinear forms in the environment. He quotes Mies Van der Rohe as saying that the individual is losing significance, his destiny no longer of interest. Authors in all fields of decisive achievements are impersonal and, for the most part, unknown. They are part of the drive towards anonymity. Fuller says that people now inhabit, not houses, but 'machines for living in', and, in his view, it does not work.<sup>5</sup>

These are the type of issues which Stephen Willats has taken up and explored in his work. Willats describes the emergence of what he calls the 'new reality' which, in his view, is authoritatively shaped and controlled by institutions which have the function of manifesting the ideological foundation of our culture into people's daily lives. This 'new reality', he says, is the product of planning - namely, how people should live in the urban setting, that is, to be controlled by higher authorities which have emerged as institutions. So, right from the start there is a division between the planners (minority) who determine the condition in which the public (majority) are going to live.

"For decision-making, responsibility has been put in the hands of the professional, the specialist, the planner, the architect, the social worker and associated experts who impress their social consciousness onto the actuality of other people's physical and social reality." 6

Institutions, he argues, have the explicit function of preserving the status quo, which is determined by the possessors of decision-making power. These institutions are legitimised by the rest of society as vested with expert authority and knowledge. Their authority is reinforced by the distance created between themselves and the people their decision will affect. How these institutions shape the physical make-up of the 'new reality' can be described in four broad areas.

1. Maintenance and preservation.
2. Enforcing norms and codes of behaviour.
3. Providing a point of reference.
4. Providing idealised symbols for people to emulate.<sup>7</sup>

One ideal type, which is projected through the media to the individual is the living space. By shaping the living space in line with the projected ideal types, an ideology can be ever present, and, thus, what goes on can be under the constant shadow of society's institutions.

Willats argues that the basic constructs in people's consciousness of themselves is moulded by that part of the environment in which they want to be most free and expressive. Because living spaces are physically inflexible in terms of structural mass, the inhabitants must adapt as soon as they move in, and the resultant feeling of restriction and passivity is strengthened by the rules and regulations that accompany the life within its confines. In his own words,

"For the housing blocks' interiors do not adapt themselves to the inhabitants' requirements. They cannot influence the planning of their own living spaces. They can only modify its surfaces and position objects within it to state their own identities and values."<sup>8</sup>

For Willats, not only has the layout and shape of houses been predetermined but also, in a way, the content has been shaped. The media projects models of idealised ways of life which are to be emulated, and these are presented to people as desirable attributes, ones which they themselves should have. In short, people will acquire these attributes by making similar arrangements with objects in their own homes.

According to Willats, art as it functions traditionally within the gallery system has become 'object based'. In fact, this situation which he describes corresponds to Walter Benjamin's reference to the 'uniqueness' of the artwork, which in turn determined its authenticity. And when the work is taken out of its original context, its authority is lost.

Willats describes how the professional builds his authority through being seen to have special knowledge about a highly defined area. The more the artwork is separated from the real world outside, the more obscure its references become. Thus, the professional can gain a greater degree of status. Because artists have almost totally removed themselves from the world as lived outside, the angers, tensions, and fears of people living in housing estates are not culturally expressed through the artwork. Perhaps one reason for this is as Lippard has said,

"often the artist's lived experience bears little resemblance to that of most other people." 9



If artists do not soon get involved in helping the expression of those feelings which exist in such situations, they themselves may find themselves passive also and risk losing all chance of cultural influence and significance.

But first, a form must be found in order to accomplish this task. This cannot be object based as seen in museums, but rather it must be directly connected to the outside world as an interactive process through time, between the artist and the situation which is being expressed in the artwork. Its function is a political or sociological one to create a counter-consciousness, which enables people to organise and control their own lives, rather than submitting to an institutional higher authority.

"Counter-consciousness is self-organising, relationships between people are self-determined and formed from what they can mutually establish as their priorities and needs." 10

The form which Willats has developed involves a cooperation between himself and other people who agree to engage in externalising their own reality. This involves approaching the people with whom he wants to cooperate and then explaining his intentions to them. Because people are reluctant to get involved in something they do not understand, Willats has to find a means which they can employ with him, in order to enable them to externalise their own reality and place their own references into the work. He has employed various techniques for this purpose which include recorded interviews, photographs, documentation of people and their environments, and the collection of people's

discarded rubbish for recycling into the resultant artworks. What is externalised from these processes creates an array of interrelated elements, derived from the reality of participants, which can be drawn upon. The audience then, in turn, can make their own associations between these references, quotations, photographs, rubbish etc and thereby use the work as a vehicle for looking again at their own reality. The power of these pieces to influence the audience's perception resides in their direct reference back to an actual reality. Thus, the audience's actual reality is linked to the symbolic reality suspended in the work and this, in turn, is connected to the actual reality of the participant. So the participation of the audience in perceiving the work is essentially 'active', in essence, because it is the audience which makes the associations between the various elements in the work and in their own reality.

For such an active participation in the work to be initiated, Willats uses the 'question' as a fundamental mechanism to begin the interaction between the audience and the participant's reality. The question is a product of the mutual cooperation between himself and the participant. Willats hopes that this technique will result in a coherent resistance to the determinism of the 'new reality'.

One such collaborative artwork which Willats undertook was entitled 'Pat Purdy and the Glue Sniffers' Camp'. This project took place on the Avondale Estate at Hayes in West London (January-September 1981). He had met the leader of the unofficial tenants' association, Mrs. Briggs, who had set it up to try and combat the immense miseries that existed there.

he found himself very interested in the younger people living in the estate because they had never known any other environment in which to live. Through Mrs. Briggs, he met Mrs. Purdy who suggested that her daughter Pat might be interested in cooperating with him and he began working with her subsequently. Like all his works, he was willing to adapt his own intentions to collaborate with the participant.

"As with all my works, while I have a general idea of its direction before I meet people, the outcome is always a result of what is mutually established." <sup>11</sup>

What transpired from his discussions with Pat was the importance of the area lying adjacent to the estate, known as the 'wasteland'. He discovered that the youth of the area had built camps on this land and had used them for 'glue sniffing'. He then set about photographically documenting Pat's environment and made a number of tape-recorded discussions. He also collected discarded objects which he found in one particular camp which was of special interest to Pat. He felt that the tensions which existed in the area required a statement which was an immediate confrontation, hence the embodiment of the discarded objects in the work. He then asked Pat, for the same reasons, to write her own quotations straight onto the photographic panels connected with the wasteland. Pat and he executed the finished work at his studio, where Pat directed what objects should be integrated into the work. The work was completed largely according to Pat's specifications.

The structure of the work entailed four functions which the wasteland had for Pat, which formed a sequence of states in the work:- 1) Relieving tension, 2) Establishing self-identity, 3) Expressing own values and 4) Formation of a community. Each state was made up of a tryptich, the left panel focussing on a particular pressure emanating from the 'new reality', the right hand panel expressing the freedom found in the wasteland and the middle panel being located on the boundary between the two realities. On the lefthand panel, a question triggered the journey between the inner tension of the 'new reality' and the freedom of the wasteland, and then as a feedback into the 'new reality'. The boundary was the crossing point for the individual into the wasteland and transported objects that were agencing activities there. The journey through the estate boundary was a loop into which the audience actively entered, constructing their own model of counter-consciousness, from the experiences and references presented by the two opposing realities. 12

Other similar works which Willats produced were 'The Kids Are in the Streets', (Brixton, 1982), and 'The People of Charville Lane', (West London, 1981).

Art About the Individual

Earlier on, I mentioned the point that Lucy Lippard makes concerning the fact that a real democracy ought to encourage artists to speak for themselves and for their communities. Presumably, she means something rather specific when referring to 'communities'. However, one can't help but be left wondering what most great artists of the past and present who have largely worked on an individual basis have been doing - perhaps exactly what Lippard stipulates. A case in point is Vincent Van Gogh who felt nothing but the greatest compassion for the downtrodden and the destitute. His friend, Van Rappard, when talking about his paintings, such as 'Interior with a weaver', (July 1884), bears testimony to this.

"How often do I think of the studies of the weavers which he made in Nuenen, with what intensity of feeling did he depict their lives, what deep melancholy pervaded them." 13

At another stage in his life, Van Gogh himself showed his deeply felt convictions for his fellow man -

"I wanted to express how those ruins show that for ages the peasants have been laid to rest in the very fields which they dug up when alive - I wanted to say what a simple thing death and burial is, just as simple as the falling of an autumn leaf - just a bit of earth dug up - a wooden cross." 14

Sanchez Vasquez notes that the driving force for Van Gogh had been a defiance, an incorruptible faithfulness to a vital need to create in accordance with an inner rather than an external impulse. But his rebellion against the constraints of his time was not without cost, as he shows,

"The history of art in the last third of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, shows as the terrible price that the greatest of artists have had to pay for their rebellion: hunger, misery, suicide or madness." 15

Nevertheless, artists like Van Gogh followed such a path because of their absolute conviction and belief in what they were doing. There can be no doubt that people like Stephen Willats share a similar conviction, when they are trying to establish once again a link between truly human art and the audience which enjoys it. But reservations must be held when Willats asserts that,

"The artwork as a means of initiating change in the social perception of its audience has no private function, only public." 16

There are an abundance of aspects to the human condition, one of which is how people in general perceive those particular conditions which tend to dominate their daily lives. But, among people in general, there exist individuals who have a perception of the world peculiar to themselves, which they feel a vital need to express on an individual level. For these individuals, the creation of art is not only a means

of communicating their view of reality but also as a means of self-exploration and discovery. This is not to say that their work cannot also initiate social changes in the perception of its audience. Who cannot be moved when confronted with the sincerity of one of Van Gogh's self-portraits? As Mark Roskill put it when talking about his letters,

"No-one halfway alive could be untouched by the joy of living that breathes in the slightest of them." 17

Jon A. Walker, when commenting on artists who emphasise individual concerns and cultivate personal visions, makes the point that, in certain cases, this can be a strength and, as a result,

"Unusual areas of human experience are explored which otherwise would be ignored altogether." 18

A case in point is the artist Joan Miro. Miro had started out working from nature. The world of mountains, animals, birds, insects, flowers and the stars never ceased to enthrall him. However, his desire to realise descriptions of nature in landscape rapidly became transformed into the visions of his imagination. His last literal landscape was entitled 'The Farm' (1921-22). It contained many poetic references in the clear definition of form, buildings, plants and the various tools and animals of the farm, but he also added strange new associations. 19 For example, the sun, set in a clear blue sky, has an echo below in the black circle

which surrounds the foot of a giant eucalyptus tree. There are deliberate statements in form and colour which create, by cross-reference, a visual and conceptual unity within the composition. The painting is a shadowless description of those things which surrounded him and interested him most. Consequently, they become prototypes of forms that appear as symbols throughout his later work. For instance, a ladder set against a wall is the first appearance of an obsessive sign that reappears later, as the symbolic 'ladder to escape'. Manuel Gasser describes the break from a literal description of nature, in this picture, to a more subjective reaction by noting that,

"We realise that the Catalan farmhouse was not painted from nature or memory, but in a state of hallucination." 20

This break from literal imagery was helped by Miro's association with the Surrealist poets (during the early years in Paris) such as Antonin Artaud and Robert Desnos and also the painter Andre Masson. They evoked in him a desire to create a style in which images were no longer literal but became forms with significance in the world of dreams. Miro himself said that they encouraged him

"To enter into states of hallucination ... I began gradually to work away from the realism I had practiced up to 'The Farm', until in 1925 I was drawing almost entirely from hallucinations.

At the time I was living on a few dried figs a



day. I was too proud to ask my colleagues for help. Hunger was a great source of these hallucinations. I would sit for long periods looking at the bare walls of my studio trying to capture these shapes on paper or burlap." 21

The paintings that come after this have been called 'dream paintings'. This is not because they were literal accounts of his dreams but because they had their origin in the subconscious and were produced with the greatest possible spontaneity. His friends at the time found in them new and revolutionary forms of expression which were in no way merely vague abstractions. These works conveyed the sensation of mysterious cosmic events. Among them are large blue paintings expressing great atmospheric depth. One of them, for example, bears the title, 'Head of a Catalan Peasant' (1925) but the head is minute, disjointed and floating in the depths of a vast blue sky with stars, some white and others black. The largest white star has a black, comet-like presence beside it. Through this work, there is a dreamlike mystery, rather than logic, which feeds the imagination. And Miro says this about his association with the Surrealists,

"What did Surrealism's influence on me consist in?

In an urge to do away with pictorial reality." 22

Neither was Miro's work totally divorced from what was going on around him in the world. His next important development came in the mid-1930's when a sense almost of clairvoyance entered his work. Although

he has always been essentially a private individual capable of shutting himself off from the outside world and, as Gasser points out 'always keeping out of politics', he was nevertheless often at hand to react promptly to any convulsions in the events of his time. At this time, he became obsessed with visions of strange, prophetic horror, obsessions which continued until after the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, with extreme violence in paintings such as 'Woman's Head' (1938).

This painting presents us with a female form which has become frightening and vicious like a bird of prey. After the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, Miro reacted with strong protest and accusation in some works. 'Still Life with an Old Shoe' and 'The Reaper' bear witness to this change. The former painting contains the symbol of the prongs of a fork buried in an apple, the twisted shapes that suggest skulls and skeletons, above all, the gaudy, shimmering colours with the night-black forms and spots portend menace, tumult, torture and death.

Like Picasso's 'Guernica', 'The Reaper' was painted for the Spanish Republic's pavilion at the World's Fair of 1937 in Paris. It worked on people like a scream. It was Miro's first commission of such monumental size and was executed with passion.

Later, towards the end of his life, Miro was to engage in what was to be probably the most explicitly political of his works - again concerning political turmoil in Spain. When, finally, Franco's

dictatorship came to an end, Miro was approached by young actors and dancers who asked him to join them in the preparation of a theatrical performance which was to be a grotesque caricature of the dictator. Under the direction of Joan Baxiro, they set to work. Miro agreed to design the costume and backcloth for the show, and to help construct figures that were to dance and act in the performance. A big cast was assembled and, in a barn in the Catalan hills, the large ferocious creatures which were to appear on the stage were constructed according to Miro's designs. The chief character impersonating the dead dictator was superbly sinister. He was like a reincarnation of Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi, a sinister figure of whom Miro had already made a series of wonderful grotesque paintings some years before. The first performance of the work 'Mori el Merma' (Death to the Venom) was done at the old Liceo Opera House in the centre of Barcelona, (May 2, 1978). The opening was a tremendous success, with an audience of all ages and all levels of society.

The pretentious monsters that dominated the stage were Franco and his wife, who appeared beside him in a white robe splashed with colour and who wore a red mask, bulbous and strongly resembling some ridiculous animal. They and their courtiers were eventually reduced to misery by an army of nimble creatures who moved and made noises like birds and insects of the countryside, overpowering the monsters by their agility.

It was inevitable that a theme so close to the hearts of the audience, described by noise and actions rather than words, produced with brilliance and in spectacular costumes and colours should receive riotous applause. After Barcelona, the company was invited to perform in Paris and, later, London, as a symbol that Spain was at last free from Fascist misery.

Thus, Miro is an artist who not only can look in upon himself to describe his own subjectivity but also can appeal directly to an audience, of whom he speaks as,

'The mass of people, whom I have always had in my thoughts.'<sup>23</sup>

Footnotes

1. Suzi Gablick, Has Modernism Failed?, p.26.
2. Lucy Lippard, 'Activating Activist Art', Circa Magazine, No.17, p.13.
3. Walter Benjamin would probably go even further than this when he declares, "What matters therefore is the exemplary character of production which is able to induce other producers to produce, and second, to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers, that is readers or spectators into collaborators."  
Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', Modern Art and Modernism, p.216
4. John A. Walker makes some important observations regarding how photography has traditionally been used and how it might be used as an enlightening device within the community.
  - a) Amateur photographers are not interested in depicting the world truthfully. Emphasis is on the beautiful, the picturesque, idealised and cosy views of the world. It is built on the work/leisure distinction - practiced in times of leisure and rarely at work to document poor conditions etc.
  - b) For practitioners, photography is an innocent pastime. For multinational companies who supply the equipment, it's in their interest to maintain this view and ensure that it remains indifferent to politics and social problems. Thus, photography, although being popular in the sense of being by the people, is not truly popular in the sense of serving their long-term interests.
  - c) Photography in the hands of police, army and the press, serves as an ideological weapon which facilitates social control and domination.
  - d) Community photography can show how photography can be used to document social issues and problems. It can develop a critical perspective in relation to the images of the mass media and above all it places the means of visually representing the community in the hands of the community itself.Lived experience is transformed by the camera, and this point is hammered home passionately by Benjamin,  
"It can no longer photograph a tenement block nor a refuse heap without transfiguring it. It goes without saying that it is unable to say anything of a power station or a cable factory other than this: What a beautiful world!"  
John A. Walker, Art in the Age of Mass Media, p.100  
Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', Modern Art & Modernism, p.215.
5. Peter Fuller, Aesthetics After Modernism, p.27.
6. Stephen Willats, The New Reality, p.3.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid p.7.
9. Lucy Lippard, 'Activating Activist Art', Circa Magazine, No.17, p.16.
10. Stephen Willats, The New Reality, p.15.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid p.20.
13. The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh, p.61.
14. Ibid, p.28.
15. Sanchez Vasquez, 'Art and Society', Monthly Review Press, London 1973.

16. Stephen Willats, The New Reality, p.16.
17. The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh, p. 11.
18. John A. Walker, Art in the Age of Mass-Media, p. 49.
19. Miro had been very interested in linking painting to poetry, as well as music. Roland Penrose writes, "Having lived close to nature in the countryside of Catalonia, he realised that there were two main sources from which he must gain nourishment, the primitive, pantheistic wonders of nature and the mercurial brilliance of words."  
Roland Penrose, Monographs on Miro, London 1980.
20. Manuel Gasser, Miro, p.14.
21. James Johnson Sweeney, 'Joan Miro, Comment and Interview', Partisan Review, 1948.
22. Manuel Gasser, Miro, p.16.
23. Ibid. p.48.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Benjamin, Walter

'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'  
Modern Art and Modernism

London

Open University

1982

Fuller, Peter

Aesthetics After Modernism

London

Writers and Readers

1983

Gablik, Suzi

Has Modernism Failed

London

Thames and Hudson

1984

Gasser, Manuel

Miro

London

Blandford Press

1966

Greenberg, Clement

'Modernist Painting'

Modern Art and Modernism

London

Open University

1982

Hunter, Sam

'Visionaries'

Art Forum

1982

Lippard, Lucy

'Actuating Activist Art'

Circa Magazine

no. 17

Roskill, Mark

The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh

London

Fontana

1983

Sweeney, James Johnson

'Joan Miro, Comment and Interview'

Partisan Review

1948



Vazquez, Adolfo Sanchez

Art and Society

London

Monthly Review Press

1973

Walker, John a.

Art in the Age of Mass Media

London

Pluto Press

1983

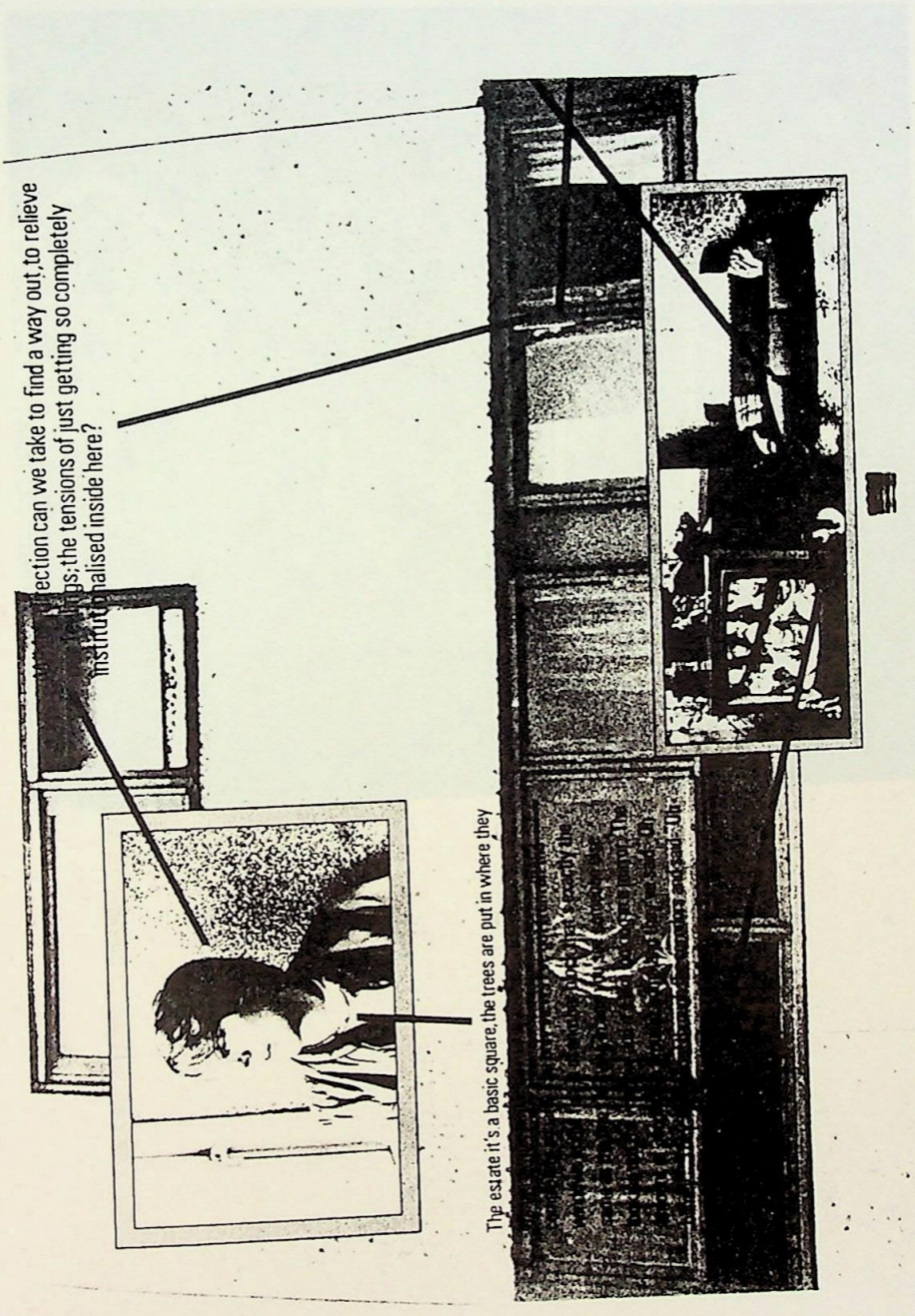
Willats, Stephen

The New Reality

Londonderry

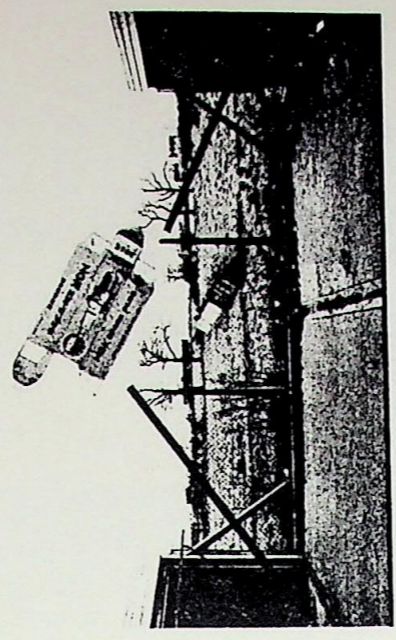
Orchard Gallery

1982

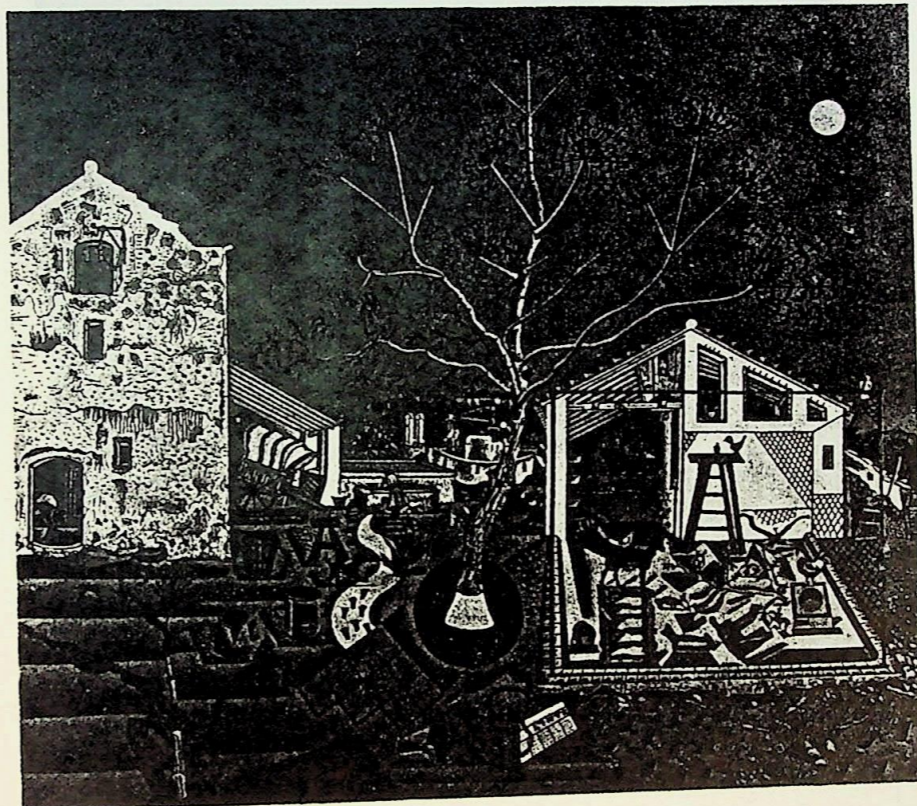


action can we take to find a way out, to relieve  
 the tensions of just getting so completely  
 institutionalised inside here?

The estate it's a basic square, the trees are put in where they



I.



II

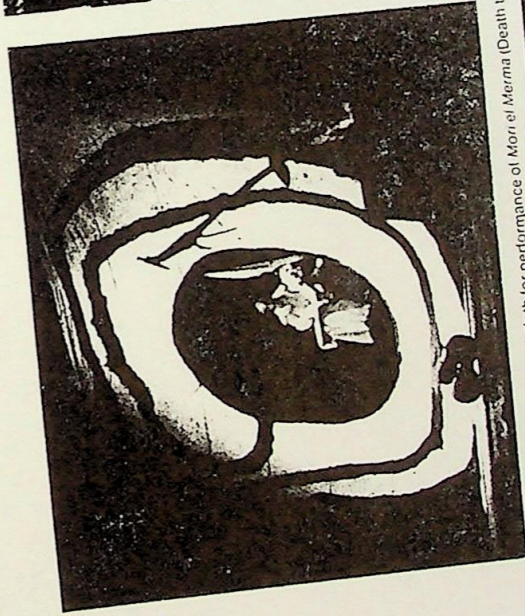
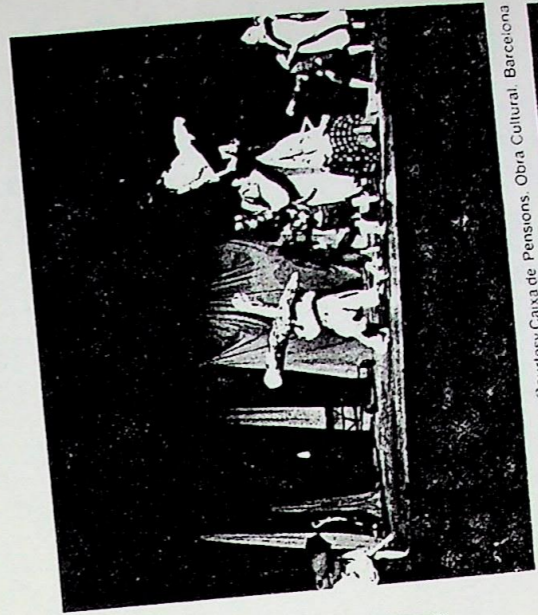
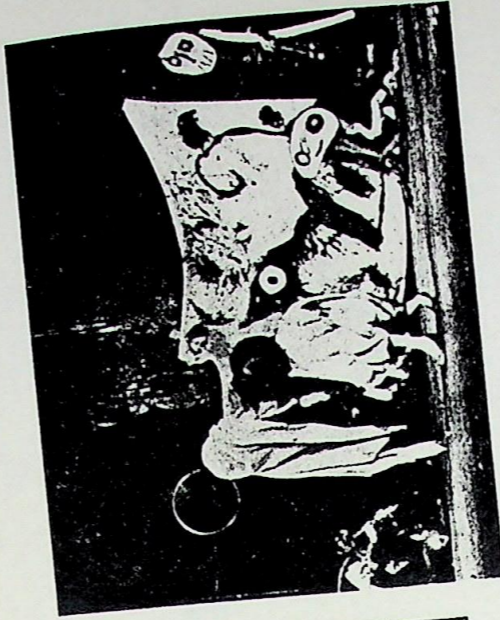


III

II



IV



Joan Miró, costumes and backcloth for performance of *Morri el Mermat* (Death to the Venom) by the La Ciaca Theatre Troupe, Barcelona, Spain, May 1978, preparation and performance views. Courtesy Caixa de Pensions, Obra Cultural, Barcelona.

Joan Miró, costumes and backcloth for performance of *Morri el Mermat* (Death to the Venom) by the La Ciaca Theatre Troupe, Barcelona, Spain, May 1978, preparation and performance views. Courtesy Caixa de Pensions, Obra Cultural, Barcelona.