

## NOTES FROM A MANUAL LABOURER

The word "Art", like the word 'Love' is pregnant with potential misunderstanding; it has become so wide and vague as to have no specific meaning and carries with it instead a variety of undefined emotions, feelings and expectations. It is a hallowed word; semi-religious; full of mystique. I don't understand 'Art'.

I'm a painter: what I do is push sticky stuff around a surface; my language is line, shape, texture and colour. It is a vocabulary that allows me to conduct a conversation about my relation to the world: about me and other; the concrete and the spiritual; the real and the imagined. When I paint the problems are technical: the mastery of my chosen medium, the choice of visual quality. I don't think about 'art'.

Neither did Michelangelo; he called himself "an interior decorator" and his writings are full of the physical and technical problems involved. The idea of an essence of art abstracted from a substance of form and craft is a twentieth century invention and it is one that troubles me.

However, I am also an Art Historian (and perhaps this explains my confusion, since some would say that it is impossible to be protagonist and critic) and the history of Modernism makes it perfectly clear how this distillation of Art to essence has come about: the reaction against outmoded and restrictive convention towards the end of the nineteenth century. The realization that so-called 'primitive' art could have intense power, leading to a period of almost euphoric experimentation until Modern Art eventually argued itself into a philosophical corner: Art can be anything- indeed, it need not be anything at all: Marcel Duchamp declared it to be an act of choice. Joseph Beuys designated all life as art..

If Art is anything you want it to be, there is little more to say; I cannot attack or defend it. It becomes like a game of football in which, not only the conventions of the game are abandoned, but the rules themselves. New rules are invented on all sides: you don't need a ball; you needn't play on a pitch and you don't need to play in conjunction with anyone else. The result is a

sort of formless chaos where all structure is abandoned in favour of wordy polemics over the very nature of play itself.

It is easy to understand the modern attraction to the purely conceptual: we are not, despite all our media, a visual society and our education does not, on the whole, give us the right equipment for dealing with painting and sculpture. Television teaches us to pull out the kernel of idea from what we see and throw away the skin of form. The slow, deliberate scanning of an image in terms of its visual form that painting requires is alien to our culture; although we have no problem in accepting music directly in terms of its own particular language of expression, in front of visual art the analytical mind dominates our understanding at the expense of the direct, visual experience. (this is the same problem people encounter when learning to draw) Most commentators and critics are trained in language and ideas and therefore it is no surprise that they should lay heavy emphasis on the Concept or Idea at the expense of the substance.

Thus, an exhibition I visited consisted of small piles of rubbish swept from designated areas of a city. This is called 'Art' and falls respectably within the areas of modern debate and attracted perfectly serious critical attention. I do not wish to dispute the validity of such work nor of the dialogue that it might create- it is the term 'Art' that confuses me.

I believe 'Art' to be something elusive, I do not believe that you can set out to produce it: it is an event or state, something that happens between a work and a viewer where the work transcends its physical nature to become a spiritual presence. An exercised craft provides the disciplined fabric and language in which this may happen; in a similar way that Zen is not flower arranging, making tea or archery, but those disciplines form a path to understanding.

I believe that we should stop talking about 'Art' and begin thinking about painting, or drawing, or sculpture and pay more attention to the plastic qualities of these languages, the teaching and learning of the skills involved. The Visual Arts are about visual form; as with all forms of artistic expression, they

provide a convention with which to express ideas and they have to be primarily judgeable in terms. of their language. This is a cry for a discipline of form which we can share, public, critic and producer alike; it is a cry for a humility of aim through which the spiritual force, that eventual mystery that imbues truly great work, might manifest itself; in the words of T.S.Eliot:

*“There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions  
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.  
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.”*