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Albert Bush-Brown

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President Albert Bush-Brown

The Need, the Act, and Affirmation

There are many paintings I enjoy more than the Guernica, but none, I believe, is so well qualified as Picasso's work of 1937 to stand as the master image of that twentieth-century period when I became more than physically and emotionally conscious of the world in which we live.

Seeing it today in the Museum of Modern Art, you and I might pick at compositional flaws, even regret passages where pallid expression fails to sustain the urgency of the drama; we regret those especially if we know that the mother with the dead child on her lap possessed Picasso so that only the later bitter, violent sketches, "After-Guernica," rid his hand of the image, a handkerchief torn from teeth that clenched it in agony at her loss.

Despite the criticisms we make, Guernica claims our attention. It offers necessity as a source for order; the act as a means of expression; affirmation as a moral statement.

When the Luftwaffe strafed the peaceful Basque capitol, Guernica, no metal toreador was broken, no bull coursed the streets throwing distruction from his horns; no horse was gored by a spear. All that is Picasso's Spanish allegory about a nasty world were brute beast in a macabre bullfight triumphs over the graceful toreador, where evil destroys art. Tortured ugliness -- the strident silhouettes, the contorted features, the fractured planes, and dismembered volumes -- in that night scene of anguished women and burning houses, is an indictment.

It is not a pleasing work of art; it is meant to displease: to alert us, in the only way we can be alerted -- through art, to the tragedy we may inflict.

Guernica was painted at a time when WPA painters were decorating serene and pastoral scenes in our post-offices, sculptors were making blank-faced inconsequences of Grecian-heros, like Prometheus, and architects worried more about entasis and iconography than circulation. The need for art was seldom less well-understood than it was in that period of American Federal support of it. Art was decoration, or, worse, the styling added to a package, a building or an automobile.

Whether the American ideal was the coonskin-hatted frontiersman or the dark-suited organization-man, art in America has arrived less because it meets a central need than because it serves some non-aesthetic purpose. John Adams, early, thought it might be deferred until he had established a government that would enable his sons to amass sufficient wealth to permit their sons, in turn, to cultivate the arts. Deferment and consequent slum have been the history of each American city, except as urban reform becomes politically expedient. To look back in nostalgia for a Williamsburg has been more habitual than to essay an American Chandigarh or Brasilia.

Today offers no better prospect. Although we have a statute authorizing 40,000 miles of Federal highways, the bill develops no management capable of delivering another Merritt Parkway. Of the three bills, now in Senate committee, that propose Federal support for the arts, the most munificent one would offer 100,000 dollars to each State that provides matching funds of its own, amounting to a nationwide total of 10,000,000 dollars, less than the amount required to build ten miles of superhighways. Those bills were proposed in an atmosphere of political concern for taking amateur theatrical and musical performances to rural

portions of States; in an atmosphere of distrust for those private institutions and their leaders who have already built a record of professional education in the visual arts and have informed people about it. Most of all, the bills think of art not as necessary, but as recreation for an automated society where the uncultivated have leisure.

To think of art merely as amateur recreation at a moment when dollars are flowing abroad, when the European Common Market products are cutting into our overseas markets, when good design has transformed the Japanese product, is to ignore the role of art in America's economy; we neglect it at our peril, as European automobiles recently proved to us. To think of art merely as amateur recreation at a moment when the physical aspect of our cities is one of decay, when the old seats of government and culture stand in fetid air and foul streets, when populations have fled to stratified, dispersed suburbs, will cause us to miss many opportunities for giving our institutions for communication and transportation the locations and forms that can inspire a pluralistic community to civic action.

This is no time for detached objectivity; merely to record our temper and habits in statistical surveys is to continue the American habit of masking our apprehensions. We bury our terrors beneath reams of fact. That we are apprehensive, we know. We are no longer at liberty to hope that what we believe about the future will come true. It is now everyman's business to become informed about what <u>can</u> happen and, therefore, in the probability of man's misuse of fire, what is unalterably destined, regardless of personal ideals, hopes or desires. Lurid evidence points to a national experience of culture and sadism, marital fidelity and illicit relations, creation and vandalism, honesty and dishonesty, idealism and materialism, while, overall, the near-ultimate weapon is poised: so complex in its mechanism, so remote in the authority that controls it, that we can hardly inform ourselves about how it can be controlled.

As our society moved from the monism of agricultural and commercial ancestors to the polyglot pluralisms of an industrialized society now engaged in supplying services, and apprehensions increased, the posture of the fashionable artist was one of retreat, first from literature, so that his themes were not taken from narratives, whether Biblical or classical; next from the object. Liberation from the object soon became, in the fifties, liberation from nature, from society, and from any art already accepted. The canvas and even a building's site, more recently (for architecture has historically followed the painter's suggestions about geometry, light and space), have become the arenas in which to act. The canvas or site is regarded not as a plane ready to receive a space where an object, real or imagined, might be placed, or a closed building might be located. We have not pictures but events, action-images that record a painter's furious encounter with a canvas; we have not buildings but discontinuous frames, the result of marking a path through space. And, in each case, the spectator is asked to forego the pleasure of witnessing how an artist has transformed his experience and to enjoy merely his skirmish and action. Thus art has retreated not only from literature, from nature, and the object, it has also recently retreated from social need and moral judgment to a point where the act itself, as in pantomime, figure skating, or dance, is the only gesture on the canvas or in the building.

Having separated themselves from need, to concentrate upon the act, several of the more fashionable artists recently have ended with what Harold Rosenberg once called "apocalyptic wallpaper." It is the reigning fashion among students at the lesser schools of design. They mistake the act, which can be wonderful, as in ballet, for the mere sensation of being in action, for tap dancing or twisting, whatever it may be. Since they have isolated themselves from need and the transformation of experience, there is nothing to be communicated. In

the presence of line alone, considered merely as thin or broad calligraphy, or perhaps as the swaths of soulages , painting for them has been reduced to a spontaneous gesture on the canvas, often crude, even vulgar. Since so little is to be communicated by these tracks of personal struggle, a unique way of applying paint, whether by dripping or by rolling an automobile or nude figure across a canvas is as much sought for as a unique signature.

But what is an ACT? An act is not a matter of personal taste. It stems first of all from a NEED that more than one man senses. The need must be generalized. That was the function of the classical literatures painters once followed; it was also their approach to nature and the object: to find in light, hue, and value ways for presenting their experience.

Besides being generalized, the Act an artist once depicted, as his way of transforming his experience, was also a moral statement. To see the explosion of bombs over trenches as the opening of a flower of heroism, the Futurist, Marinetti, had to obliterate from his thoughts the moral condition of that act of destruction. He had to eliminate from his vision everything except form, ignoring the pathos that gives Guernica its poignancy precisely because Picasso made a moral judgment.

Third, an Act -- far from being some spontaneous encounter with canvas, or stone, clay or concrete -- gestates. Perhaps, there are moments of conscious choice, but there are also moments of decision that are called from cultural memory, as the bullfight was called to serve as vehicle in Guernica. The bullfight, combined with a pitiful electric light bulb, supply the iconography and therefore that part of the moral meaning that comes from the subject, rather than the form. The Act of design was neither spontaneous nor objective.

Moreover, it is an AFFIRMATION. True, hurt and misery are Guernica's theme, but its mirror returns a horrifying reflection to man's basest inhumanity.

It protests man's morbidity, suggests thereby that man is tenderness as well as might, ought to create community, not destruction.

That is a worthy reminder for those artists, including architects, who have pounced upon a morbid image as though, by broadcasting it, they were expressing the twentieth century. How do we know a century? By what its poets, artists and musicians said, painted and composed. You know the Byzantine Sixth Century because of the Ravennate mosaics; they are, for us, a key to Justinian and Theodora, confirming what Procopius wrote about them. In that sense, art does not reflect life so much as life emulates art, aspiring toward a monarchical image, or a military one, a religiously ceremonial one or a democratic, managerial one, and architecture, a molder of institutions, augments the possibilities of emulation by providing the vessel in which the Act occurs.

Thus, to ask particularly, by presenting a constant NO! in these spontaneous skirmishes, (a negation of form, as though line were the only way to release power from pigment), in positing a constant "I AM!" instead of a communal need for moral affirmation, is the abstract expressionist reflecting his times?

May I suggest that we are not reflecting the spirit of an age; we are creating what history will read as the spirit. We ought not to choose a model from some fashionable modern work merely because it is the newest, for our task is not to reflect 1962 but rather, to create it. We ought to have the courage and will to AFFIRM our own experience, of man, of nature, and what they may be. We must win for ourselves the right to our own vision, our own style, arising from the Need we feel for art, the Act that transforms our experience, and the Affirmation we would declare: the grace that is possible to man, his humor, his hope, his trust -- and his need among the objects we create, whether city or printed card, for a beauty that ennobles him.

When it was announced last Spring that I would join you here, the editor of the ARchitectural Record asked for a statement about my plans for the Rhode Island School of Design. What was written then you may find helpful: "I intend to develop Rhode Island School of Design's unique personality, a four-year college dedicated to immersing imaginative students daily in the adventures of design, so that they all understand the new scale of artists' responsibility: the urban community, whatever part each contributes."