The Fly and the Elephant

Virgil Hammock

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other hand, comparative "crudeness" may be distinguished from "virility" only by the bias of our terminology, and may represent a possibility of development and refinement beyond the impetus of an art showing the effects of over-sophistication. With Colin Campbell, this could be the case.

The works I have discussed were mostly produced some time ago: True/False, Real Split and the "Art Star" pieces in 1972; and Janus and This is the way I really am in 1973. I have preferred to limit the discussion mainly to those pieces, in part because I feel surer of my own reactions there, and in part because the critical issues on which the question of quality pivots remains the same in the more complex works that follow. It may be, however, that in these works we see, not only an enrichment that carries the art definitively beyond the limits of performance, but also a measure of resolution of those aspects that still cause anxiety. I find these indications most strongly in Love-Lite of 1974 where the artist reads sections of love letters sent to him by various people, as an accomplishment to images of landscape and an apartment within which a figure can be seen indistinctly. The fragments of visual and verbal narrative interact in a way that can be very beautiful. The fundamental seriousness and emotional distinctiveness of the earlier work remains, but in a mellower form that may almost consistently transcend the residue of overstatement.

THE FLY AND THE ELEPHANT

By Virgil HAMMOCK

The following text was presented at the A.I.C.A. meeting held in Dresden, September 1974.

There are two kinds of imperialism — one is economic and the other is cultural. While both are, of course, bad, the latter is far more insidious. As long as a country is able to hold on to its cultural identity, even if it is physically controlled by another nation either by the force of economics or actual occupation, it is a nation, but lose that identity and you lose everything. Is there really such a thing as national identity in this age of internationalism? The answer must be an unequivocal yes. The visual arts are international in many ways, in Western society mostly in form, but the artists are not. What makes a Dürer or Cranach German, or a Van Gogh Dutch? Is it the language they spoke? No, not really, because it is not necessary for me to understand either German or Dutch, but I can enjoy the works of these artists, but neither must I understand these languages consistently transcend the residue of over-sophistication. With Colin Campbell, this could be the case.

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ing because many of our public galleries are

directed by non-Canadians or Canadians who,
at best, are somewhat ashamed at not being an
American, all of whom show little inclination
either to show or learn about Canadian art.
To be fair, a recent example is the choice of an
American as the new director of the Winnipeg
Art Gallery, picked by a selection committee
of Canadians, all of whom are themselves
members of the Board of Directors, because
they could not find a suitable 'qualified' Cana­
dian. One cannot blame the American who took
the position, only the mentality of those who
picked him. For the record, the man who this
new director replaces, a European who held the
position for twenty years, had one of the most
dismal records of showing Canadian content
and contemporary content in his gallery in the
country. He exceeded the Montreal Museum of
Fine Arts' 

I shouldn't be unduly hard on the art galleries
because the same mentality extends through­
out the arts in Canada as was again recently
shown when our Stratford Theatre picked an
Englishman to be its new artistic director for
their production of the musical 'Billy Elliot;
that Englishman could not be found for the job.
The list goes on and on. Theatres import featured
American and European actors and actresses,
which is just as well because most of our
theatres are not doing Canadian plays anyhow.
Our orchestras are conducted by third-rate
European conductors playing programmes
almost totally devoid of any Canadian content,
even though I must admit our major orchestras
sometimes have the services of first-rate for­

gn foreign conductors while they are waiting to get a
job with a major American orchestra. Our own
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movement and was later proved wrong. I am reminded once more of the parable of the Emperor's New Clothes. And who's the fool here, the honest conservative critic or the myopic camp follower, who is too much the coward to have any opinion? Fortunately, not many people read art magazines and if they did, many would find that they couldn't understand them anyway, as many articles appear to be written in tongues, a language so clouded by jargon that only the initiate could possibly understand and they would likely need the latest copy of the art critic's lexicon.

Let me return to my own problem. Every time that I travel, be it to Europe, Africa, Asia or another country as close as the United States, I am reminded of how really unique Canada is, but so often when I see Canadian art it has the same dulling sameness of other 'modern' art that I have seen all over the world. I really don't believe that there is so much a world-wide brotherhood of artists as there is seemingly a loss by many artists of an ability to understand their own environment. I am not suggesting that all Canadian landscape, the Group of Seven have already done this with predictable dreary results, or that they should stop learning from history, but I am suggesting that they gain some pride in their own ideas and that some of these ideas might be supported by our critics. As for the critic in a country such as Canada and the rôle that they can play in the forming of a society that can be proud of its own culture, there must be some basic rethinking, as well. First as a profession in Canada, it is practically nonexistent. Criticism in Canada is not so much a lost art, Northrop Frye and Marshall McLuhan excepted, as one that has never been found. People with little or no background on the subject write columns in newspapers that offer little above the pedestrian level; our art magazines, with exceptions, offer little more than quasi-scholarship and at best a pale imitation of the worst sort of American criticism, which is very bad indeed. Oh Lord, where are our Ruskins, Baudelaires and Apollinaires now that we need them! I wouldn't want to look for them at this meeting; we seem to be too busy trying to figure out if the Emperor is wearing a two or three button suit.