The Tower of Babel

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THE TOWER OF BABEL

By Nicholas NORDENSON

Harold Rosenberg's most recent collection of essays published under the title, Art on the Edge. This title expresses the author's concern that the plastic arts are close to "the edge that separates them from the crafts, commercial design and the mass media". Rosenberg is being generous in his diagnosis. In recent years the plastic arts have been crossing borders as if they didn't exist, followed closely by critics, collectors, dealers, museums and art historians alike. The latter group are possibly the prime culprits.

This century has seen the eruption of a mass consciousness of history. Marx changed people's ways of thinking to the extent that we are no longer merely living our lives; instead we are all of us making history, all of us playing out our rôles in an inevitably class struggle. Similarly artists are no longer making art; instead they all too often spend their time trying to make their contributions to art history. This is evidenced by the current obsession with precise dating, often to the day.

The dangers of this history consciousness are manifold. Artists are forever trying to second guess in what direction this increasingly absurd tradition is next going to turn — instead of trying to express anything profound, beautiful or sublime. A good example are the American Edward Ruscha's anthropological books, produced early in the nineteen sixties. Five 1955 Girlfriends consists of five very ordinary portrait photographs of five women, the common link being their chance encounters with the artist. Unless one is a student of the history of women's hair styles, the photos are of almost no interest, and it is hard to discern just when it has been crossed. Borders are elusive — they exist, nevertheless. If I go far enough south from Montreal, I will eventually find myself in the United States. No matter how arbitrary the exact location of that border might seem to be: it's there none the less. And it's good news, my claim of what art is, this sprawling sense of what it is or why it is. If people had a common notion of what art is, this sprawling mass consciousness of history would have been crossed.

Borders are problematic. Exactly where the line is drawn always seems an arbitrary decision; things are generally very similar both sides of a border, making it hard to discern just when it has been crossed. Borders are elusive — they exist, nevertheless. If I go far enough south from Montreal, I will eventually find myself in the United States. No matter how arbitrary the exact location of that border might seem to be: it's there none the less. And it's good news, my claim of what art is, this sprawling sense of what it is or why it is. If people had a common notion of what art is, this sprawling mass consciousness of history would have been crossed.

However this does not happen. Films, music, photography, art history, even anthropology: all have received wide acceptance as being plastic art, and one has to ask why. How has it come about that dealers and critics alike and the films of Bruce Nauman are outside the borders of the plastic arts (although that is true); one need do is point out that they are within the borders of film. Then scrutinize them according to the rules of film criticism.

However this does not happen. Films, music, photography, art history, even anthropology: all have received wide acceptance as being plastic art, and one has to ask why. How has it come about that dealers and critics alike have applauded loudly as the plastic arts have spread out in all directions? The answer has to be that art has lost any sense of what it is or why it is. If people had a common notion of what art is, this sprawling out just would not be possible. The remainder of this article will attempt to find some of the reasons for this lack of purpose.

Whatever else it may be, art is always a faithful social barometer. It accurately reflects the state of the social, philosophical, even anthropological: all have received wide acceptance as being plastic art, and one has to ask why. How has it come about that dealers and critics alike have applauded loudly as the plastic arts have spread out in all directions? The answer has to be that art has lost any sense of what it is or why it is. If people had a common notion of what art is, this sprawling out just would not be possible. The remainder of this article will attempt to find some of the reasons for this lack of purpose.

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