The Fly and the Elephant

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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 opening of the new life.

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 sure 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 perception, but a new and distinct level of emotional directness that has been suggested by the earlier works. 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 accompaniment to images of landscape and an apartment within which a figure can be seen in a mellowed 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 politically controlled by another nation either by the force of economics or actual occupation, it is a nation, but loose that identity and you loose 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 to enjoy the works of these artists, but neither must I understand these languages necessary for me to understand either German or Dutch to enjoy the works of these artists, but neither must I understand these languages necessary for me to understand either German or Dutch to enjoy the works of these artists. Of course, the United States has no monopoly on imperialism. In the visual arts since World War II, the U.S. has been the most important centre in the world. With Canada being the U.S.'s closest neighbour and a majority of its people sharing a common language, we could hardly escape its influence.

It is not my purpose here to belittle the very real accomplishments of American art. I believe, as do many, that its very success spelled out its eventual failure. The rebellion was replaced by big business and genius by profit. Nor do I wish to give the idea that much of the art of the Communist world is any better because it has not been tainted by the influence of private enterprise. It seems to be that in the non-capitalist world bureaucrats replace capitalists as the tastemakers, but the end result in either case is not art. In fact, very seldom does direct government intervention in the creation of art, no matter how laudable its motives, result in anything remotely memorable, much less important in the history of art. Of course, there were the Russian experiments of the period immediately following the Revolution, but we all have a pretty good idea of what happened there and, eventually, it was the West not Russia, who benefited from the truly original genius of her artists, whose work is in the opinion of the most important group of artists in the first half of this century. Even so, most other modern nations have an even worse record as far as government interference in their art goes. Examine, for instance, the official art of the Soviet Union, which seems to me to have failed to find the individuality that the United States did during the period of Fascism or for that matter, the art in the People's Republic of China today. I would have to admit that many of the examples that I have named have had different functions than that of so-called High-Art, but I would draw to your attention how elegantly the art becomes, Grant Wood to Dürer, speaks of German spirit or what better spokes-

man is there for the French Revolution than David.

During the world-wide Depression of the 1930's the United States did provide a measure of economic aid to many of the artists without a great deal of interference under the terms of the I.L.R. or Works Progress Administration. The vision was not there to continue nor did they even bother to care for the works that were produced under this programme, as recent research has pointed out.

I have called this paper 'The Fly and the Elephant' and for good reason. I have stated that the United States coughs, Canada catches pneumonia. What this means in simple terms is that while we are a large country in area and natural resources, we have a small population in comparison with our neighbours to the South. But what is more important is the economic power of the United States and its control of secondary industry over the whole North American continent, which reduces Canada somewhat to the status of a banana republic, although a favoured one. Canada was never conquered by force of arms, but by the forces of economics and our culture, such as it is, programs the culture of our nation to stave off this invasion. Culture in Canada is something like the Canadian Edition of Time Magazine, eight pages of Canadian news, or the more euphemistic term, Canadian content stuffed into the American Edition. The problem is that many of our children grow up thinking that their country is an insert. Thank God for Watergate, because it has given Canadians, as well as Americans, a chance to rethink their values. But, before I am given the label of a typical anti-American, and one of the worst kind, an American anti-American who, rather than protest to the forces of politics and dogma, show more zeal than those born to the faith, let me say, right now, that one of the shames of our country is the wasted effort by many of our artists and intellectuals in becoming professional anti-Americans rather than professional pro-Canadians. In fact, I believe there is a good living to be made in Canada as a professional anti-American. Certainly there are a number of second-rate artists in Canada today whose only virtue seems to be being born in Canada and they are making the most of it. Even failed exiles have returned after years in the United States and are now back in the Canadian flag while singing the national anthem in an attempt at a new career.

A major problem in Canada is in communications and the control of the media. Most Canadians watch American television, which is readily available to most of our population again many watch the American product because it is thought to be 'better,' as are American magazines, books, movies and popular music. Although at best a subjective judgment, I would use the word easier in this case, as the American mass product makes, as it does in the United States, a number of our Canadian children grow up thinking that America is the nation for them, and that Canada is just an insert. Once again, I would remind you that I don't want to demean the real American accomplishment in the arts and many other areas, but these are not the things that are bombaraded into our minds by the media. It is the destruction of our culture that is the real danger for the future of Canada. Canadians have a better picture of American Society than they do of their own and this includes the arts. One of the problems in thinking yourself or your culture second-rate is that they very well may become just that, second-rate. Art galleries in our country feature exhibitions by European and American artists at the expense of our own artists. This is not surpris-

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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 I should modify my criticism of the art galleries somewhat because at times the problem is at a level other than the director. Sometimes it is the professional staff, curators and so on or the Board itself, who have a lack of confidence in Canadian culture and themselves. One does not only hold oneself responsible for the art gallery, he is responsible for the whole of Canadian 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' Canadian. The new director replaces, a European who held 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. I should note that the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts is the only major gallery in Canada which has directors completely Canadian. One should not blame the European, it is the mentality of the Board who have the power to make appointments. The same mentality extends throughout the art world, from the art gallery, to the schools, to the universities, to the movie industry, to the radio and television. A Frenchman running a Canadian art gallery can only be explained by French influence and the weakness of the Board of Directors in many cases. Similarly, the Stratford Theatre is run by a French Canadian, a man who has made no attempt to work with Canadian content, even though he was picked by the Board of Directors because they had no reason to look elsewhere. The Stratford Theatre is one of the few Canadian arts institutions that are not controlled by the United States.

I should not be unduly hard on the art galleries because the same mentality extends throughout the arts in Canada as was was again recently shown when our Stratford Theatre picked an Englishman to be its new artistic director for that theatre. To be fair, the Stratford Theatre is one of the few Canadian arts institutions that are not controlled by the United States. European conductors playing programmes in Canadian theatres are not doing Canadian plays anyhow. It is difficult to blame the European for this because the same mentality extends throughout the art world, from the art gallery, to the schools, to the universities, to the movie industry, to the radio and television. A Frenchman running a Canadian art gallery can only be explained by French influence and the weakness of the Board of Directors in many cases. Similarly, the Stratford Theatre is run by a French Canadian, a man who has made no attempt to work with Canadian content, even though he was picked by the Board of Directors because they had no reason to look elsewhere. The Stratford Theatre is one of the few Canadian arts institutions that are not controlled by the United States.

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. I should note that the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts is the only major gallery in Canada which has directors completely Canadian. One should not blame the European, it is the mentality of the Board who have the power to make appointments. The same mentality extends throughout the art world, from the art gallery, to the schools, to the universities, to the movie industry, to the radio and television. A Frenchman running a Canadian art gallery can only be explained by French influence and the weakness of the Board of Directors in many cases. Similarly, the Stratford Theatre is run by a French Canadian, a man who has made no attempt to work with Canadian content, even though he was picked by the Board of Directors because they had no reason to look elsewhere. The Stratford Theatre is one of the few Canadian arts institutions that are not controlled by the United States.

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The visual arts, as I stated earlier, are regarded by many as a universal language, whereas the written work is, by its very nature, more nationalistic, at least by group — English, French, Russian, and so on, but in any case, even the best novel written in Greek and presented to me in that language, remains, if you pardon the pun, Greek to me, while it is possible for me to look at a painting from another culture and think that I am in full understanding of it. I think tonight, because I believe that you need to know more than just the formal aspects of the visual arts to understand what a particular culture's art is about. Why was the art of the North so much different than that of Italy during the Renaissance? It was not lack of skill on behalf of the Northern artists, as was once thought as the derivative title Flemish. It was a matter of ideas, and in Canada, art historians, but, rather, a fundamental difference between the cultures that was manifest in their art. It is still the same today. Pop Art that was done in England or France a few years ago was, and is, very different than the American model, as was Abstract Expressionism in its various national modes, and any critic who can't see these differences is either blind or stupid, likely both. These differences are formed by the national character of the artists, and when strong, as was the case of American artists in the past 1945 period, made for a vivid and immediate impact. Where art in the United States has nearly the same impact as art in Canada, stems from its success in our country, and we are hardly alone; we tend to follow American art fads about three paces behind the Bandwagon. Where art is at its weakest, is where it blindly copies without understanding. Pop Art is more than a part of this kind of art in Canada.

And this, friends, is where we as critics come in. This sham, third rate, art is usually lauded in official and critical circles as being up to date, with it, and the rest of the crap that we are all too familiar with, but the truth is often better, in a feeble attempt to appear up-to-date. None of us want to appear the provincial or the critic who ridiculed anything art.
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 non-existent. 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.