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 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 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 fragmentation of visual and verbal narrative interact in a way that can be very beautiful. The fundamental seriousness and emotional directness of the earlier work remains, but in a mollified form that may almost consistently transcend the residue of overstatement.

THE FLY AND THE ELEPHANT

By Virgil HAMMOK

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 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 the language itself or the cultural context in which it was created.

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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 sure, there are some exceptions. One of these is the appointment 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' Canadian. 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 and was excused by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

I shouldn't be unduly hard on the art galleries because the same mentality extends throughout the arts in Canada as was again recently shown when our Stratford Theatre picked an Englishman to be its new artistic director for thirty thousand dollars. Here the Canadian couldn't 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, although I must admit our major orchestras sometimes have the services of first-rate foreign conductors while they are waiting to get a job with a major American orchestra. Our own talents in the arts, and they are considerable, are allowed to drift off to other countries to gain fame in the very places from which we feel it necessary to import talent.

There are some, and I would count myself among them, who would insist that there is enough 'good' art in Chicago and art that can model, as was Abstract Expressionism, and historic, nor should there be. It is not possible for me to look at a painting from an example. At the University where I teach we take our students on a field trip to Chicago to see the 'great' art at the beginning of their third year. Since coming on the faculty in 1970 I have advocated changing the field trip from Chicago to Ottawa, our capital and home of our National Gallery and collection, as well as Montreal and Toronto, our two largest cities both of which are boxes of bodies and have no one to overlook it. In Chicago and Minneapolis (which is visited on the way) combined there is exactly one Canadian painting, a rather beat-up Riopelle in Chicago. There is no shortage, however, of American art, both contemporary and historic, nor should there be. It is not surprising then that our students come away from our school knowing more about American art than their own and when they look for examples to emulate it is to the south that they look and not to their own history or even to their own peer group. What is surprising, however, is that what little support I get for the change in the programme comes from some of the Americans on the staff who can understand the value of students learning from their own national artistic heritage, while many of the native born Canadians on the staff will not support the change because they say that this type of education is important. This, of course, is international. It may not be as surprising as I think if you realize that these people are themselves products of the kind of education that I have just described.

Another situation that I know makes a Canadian shake his head is the refusal of many Canadians to identify themselves as Canadians. We'll call ourselves English-Canadians, French-Canadians, Welsh-Canadians, Ukrainian-Canadians, Polish-Canadians, Irish-Canadians, German-Canadians, the list is limitless. Always a qualiter before the word Canadian, as if by itself it is not enough. Remember that the United States has nearly the same number of native born Canadians as it has citizens willing to call themselves Americans. A better simile for the purpose of this meaning would be that very seldom when one approaches a Frenchman and asks of him his nationality is the answer, 'I'm a Hun.' In Canada, however, one finds many generations of native born Canadians holding on, for dear life, to obscure ethnic customs of the old country. In my own city of Winnipeg groups of citizens spend a great deal of their time organizing and putting on ethnic festivals, dressing up in ethnic costumes that the natives in the old country wouldn't put on to one that does not, and probably never did exist. Cultural identity in Canada becomes even more elusive when the people in that culture cannot even identify themselves as Canadians.

The visual arts, as I stated earlier, are regarded by many as a universal language, whereas the written word is, by its very nature, more nationalistic, at least by group - English, French, Russian, and so on, but in any case, even the best well written art, like Greek and Roman, is realist and their time might be better spent forming their own identity rather than holding on to one that does not, and probably never did exist. Cultural identity in Canada becomes even more elusive when the people in that culture cannot even identify themselves as Canadians.

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 that we are often overlooked by people who do not have the time, or even the desire, to try to bring this art into the public eye. We tend to follow American art fads about three months behind the Bandwagon. Where art is at its weakest, is where it blindly copies without understanding and we have had more than our share of this in Canada and in Canada stems from its very success in our country, and we are hardly alone; we tend to follow American art fads about three months behind the Bandwagon. Where art is at its weakest, is where it blindly copies without understanding and we have had more than our share of this in Canada.

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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 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.