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By Nicholas NORDENSON

Harold Rosenberg's most recent collection of essays was 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 way of thinking, so that they no longer merely live our lives; instead we are all of us making history, all of us playing our roles in an inevitable 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 now going to turn — instead of trying to express anything profound, beautiful or sublime. A good example are the American Edward Ruscha's photographic books, produced early in the nineteen sixties. Five 1955 Girlfriends consists of five very ordinary portrait photos 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, for how they relate to two thousand years of Western art making. The photos would have appealed to Ruscha because they were taken merely to record information, without any of the ordinary art overtones. He claimed (Artforum, February 1965) that the photographs he uses are not 'arty' in any sense of the word, that photography is dead as a fine art". However, he considers his photos to be "technical data like industrial photography". He continues: "I want absolutely neutral material. My pictures are not that interesting, nor the subject matter. They are simply a collection of facts...". The artist is able to claim from art history a mandate to reduce art making to a neutral presentation of arbitrarily selected information.

Another danger of this history consciousness is that an obsession with the temporal axis has blinded people to the fact that this ridiculous tower of babel has spread its branches in all directions, encroaching on the territory of countless other disciplines. The other axis — where the plastic arts stand vis-à-vis all other areas of human activity — have largely been ignored, allowing artists to cross borders and enter into the realm of countless other areas. One of the most effective movements has been that artists who are free of objects are also free to move outwards in all directions. This message continues to be loudly broadcast.

Borders are problematic. Exactly where the line is drawn always seems an arbitrary decision; things are generally very similar both inside and outside. The artist must be prepared to face up to the criticism of the critics who have crossed borders. The answer is to be that art has lost any sense of what it is or why it is. If people had a reason for this lack of purpose.

Whatever else it may be, art is always a faith. Duchamp succeeded in destroying it far more effectively than he could ever have imagined would be possible. The plastic arts have crossed borders into countless different areas, but the region they once occupied stands barren, deserted.