The Tower of Babel
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Citer cet article
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, everyone thinking how 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 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 next going to turn — instead of trying to express anything profound, beautiful or sublime. A good example are the American Edward Ruscha's autobiographical 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. A result has been that it has split up into the borders of film. Then scrutinize them according to the rules of film criticism. However this does not happen. Films, music, Whatever else it may be, art is always a faith­

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 striking examples of this movement 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 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. To some people even the fact that this ridiculous history a mandate to reduce art making to a
discipline is next going to turn the subject matter. They are simply a collection of directions, encroaching on the territory of blinded people to the fact that this ridiculous history is a mandate to reduce art making to a

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