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An Editorial on the Artist and Society

By Phong Bui

There has always been a great schism between those celebrated artists who receive extraordinary rewards and those artists that bring forth major works while struggling, unrecognized, in miserable poverty. The cause of this discrepancy throughout history is not entirely inexplicable. Many patrons spend considerably more money on collecting antiques than on commissioning or purchasing contemporary works of art. Some simply lack the discrimination and courage to support unknown artists. Others, perhaps after bursts of enthusiastic patronage, offer meager support once their fleeting interest passes. In either case, it is nearly impossible to decipher those different conditions without resting on the sole strength of the work of art.

In our own time, we have seen many artists who, having attained a certain degree of fame, cease their efforts to create great work. That is to say, in order to fulfill a desire to remain in vogue, they attempt to appeal to their collectors or dealers by repeatedly exploring the same identifiable style. Not to mention young artists who, while still in graduate school, adopt an impeccable business-mindedness and create works that cater to the quick thrill of novelty. (In fact, I'm vehemently against those corporate policies, implemented by highly reputed art schools and universities, the so-called "open studios," where dealers, curators and collectors wander freely, commandeering young artists before they can experience the struggles so necessary to gaining maturity.) As Willem de Kooning once brilliantly commented, "The desire to create a single style beforehand is a mere apology of one's own anxiety." We have also witnessed, however, a handful of great artists who are able to sustain the inner focus and growth that their work demands, in spite of fame. Similarly, we are aware of the disproportionately large number of artists who, in their reluctance to be part of pervasive critical dialogues—artistic, social and political—attempt to protect themselves by embodying the role of "underappreciated genius" as a defense mechanism. Finally, there are a few who firmly believe—in keeping with the romantic spirit—that genius thrives best in poverty. They perceive adversity as the most fertile atmosphere for generating masterpieces.

Nonetheless, in spite of differing circumstances, we know for certain that all artists inherently wish to relate to the aesthetic realm as an autonomous domain, coordinating their cognitive and moral faculties while performing distinct roles of their own in the life of the mind.

Let us go back to the end of the 18th century, when the cultural and intellectual unity established by the Renaissance began to disintegrate after the French Revolution. For nearly four hundred years, the given practice of an artist had been that of standardized

291 Church Street, New York, NY 10013
t. 212.431.5270 f. 646.827.2487
info@apexart.org www.apexart.org

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apprenticeship with a known master, which included repeated interpretation of familiar subjects such as Greek Mythology, The Bible, or, occasionally, historical events and portraiture. (I am aware that I'm not including the development of landscape and still life painting in the 17th century, which had a great impact on the genesis of modern art.) As the aristocracy and the church lose their authority to the rise of the middle class, the artist's role diversified, the work becomes more secular, and subject matter is chosen from a mutable everyday experience. What was once a static patronage system—which included the Duke of Urbino, the de Medicis, the Corsinis and the Vatican—has been replaced by a new patron-artist relationship which allows the artist more autonomy, such as Gertrude and Leo Stein, Claribel and Etta Cone, John Quinn, Walter Arensberg, Katherine Dreier, Peggy Guggenheim, and in our recent decades, John and Dominique de Menil, Joseph Pulitzer Jr., etc (Again, I'm aware that I'm skipping through several centuries, and forgive me if I leave out many other patrons' names due to my short-term memory.) In addition, although the changes may not seem radically different to some of us, the impact had inevitably changed with various directions that lie beyond the artist's old habits and commitments. Still, there will always be a division between those who insist on adhering to preexisting models (creating work that can depend on some sort of stability) and those who are receptive to the constant flux of social and aesthetic changes. Just as the Renaissance invention of perspective and the study of anatomy altered the course of Western art for nearly five centuries, one dares to say that Cubism and Surrealism will have the same resonance for Western art many years to come. Similarly, just as much as Modernism believed in the big narrative, Post-Modernism now finds refuge in small and fleeting events of everyday life. While the Modernists lamented with weighty doubts and existentially reexamined Western philosophy, the Post-Modernists are now ready to decentralize that source of thinking. Based on the new modes of production and technologies that belong to the third phase of capitalism, Frederic Jameson's 1984 volume *Post-Modernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, which was considered a classic Marxist analysis, systematically pointed out the clear break from Modernism: the rise of a multinational, consumer culture that coincided with Reagan's inflated economy, and the quick spread of globalization in every walk of life. Instead of deriving its agenda from the study of literature or art history as Modernism did, Post-Modernism's main source of focus stemmed from history and sociology. This is one of the reasons that no specific style of art or movement has monopolized the art world since Post-Conceptualism.

In the last two decades we've experienced the confidence of artists coming from Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and Africa, who don't feel pressured to simulate and assimilate to the West's establishment of aesthetic, or respond to its art historical lineage. The artists, in turn, import fragments of their own cultural heritage, sometimes infusing it with current social and political concerns.

The negative side of this global exchange, as articulated by the 18th century British poet, Dr. Edward Young, in his famous aphorism, "Why is it that we're all born originals but die as copies?" is that there are too many impersonal and sentimental off-shoots of artificial readings in which form and content seemed to be mistaken for sensationalism. In the same way our culture gets confused about the difference between knowledge and information, or about lived versus hypothetical experience. As we become increasingly dependent on standardized modes of learning, the whole critical discourse of art institutions, curators, collectors, dealers and critics alike becomes a predictable homogeneity.

One wonders if such predictable homogeneity will imperil the artist's inner sense of freedom and ambition, which parallels inner as well as outer circumstance. To every artist, freedom means the inseparable relationship between the individual and his/her social aspect. While the former yields towards the unaccountable flow of images and ideas that get transformed through the movement of hands into an artwork, the latter is connected to his or her sense of verve and spontaneous receptiveness to everyday events and social surroundings.

Should practical aims and fixed notions of style, equated by the artist's desire for success, be regarded as the debasement of art in contemporary culture? All we know is that the polarities are subject to certain changing views about the relationship of the imaginary and the real—the "romantic" vision meets the tangible contemporary reality. This line of questioning is, of course, reminiscent of the writings of Diderot and Baudelaire, both being intensely concerned with the nature of art and the role of the artist in society. For Diderot, the artist is the great model of the natural, productive, and self-fulfilling individual. By following an impulse, working from inner necessity, though guided by an ideal truth, the artist is able to move toward a gradual perfection, which could only be achieved through the creative process. Like the poet and thinker, the artist works in solitude allowing feelings and thought to be brought into a harmonious unity. Therefore the artist is fully aware of self-imposed controls and idiosyncratic tendencies, leading to an ultimate realization of individuality and freedom, which in turn inspires others. Baudelaire was obsessed with the idea of the enduring quality of the art of his time. He believed that for a work of art to attain a permanent, eternal element which belongs to all time, it must express the actuality of something felt of the moment. It is only then that the criteria for the universal and the particular are negotiable. Not only can the artist bring forth a synthesis of verve and judgment—a fusion of the inspired and the rational—but the artist's autonomy will be protected, thereby reaching the moral conscience of the art viewing public.

In the Salon of 1845 Baudelaire attacked the Bourgeoisie, yet in the Salon of the following year, he dedicated his homage to them, and declared that artists must depend on the Bourgeoisie because they possess a certain civic virtue. Here I will leave you with de Kooning's witty remark, "For milk to become yoghurt, it needs culture."

Phong Bui is an artist and the publisher of the monthly journal *The Brooklyn Rail*