

Lucy Lippard, 'Hot Potatoes: Art and Politics in 1980' (1981)

From *Block*, 4 (1981), pp. 2–9.

Every summer I sit down and try again to write about 'art and politics'. Every summer, the more the possibilities have expanded and the changes been frustrated, the harder it gets. Despite years of 'art activism' the two still crouch in separate corners of my life, teasing, sometimes sparring, coming to grips rarely, uneasily and without conclusion or issue. Even now, when many more visual artists are informed about radical politics, when 'political' or 'socially concerned' art has even enjoyed a doubtful chic, artists still tend to think they're above it all and the Left still tends to think art's below it all. Within the feminist art movement as well, polarities reign, although because of its fundamental credo – 'the personal is political' – they have different roots, and different blossoms.

I wrote the paragraph above in the summer of 1977, two years before the cusp of 1980 where I stand now. Things haven't changed much. Contrary to the popular image of the wildeyed radical, artists are usually slow to sense and slower to respond to social currents. Yet perhaps in response to the anti-60's economic backlash that has only recently reached the artworld in the guise of punk and/or 'retrochic', it does seem that an increasing number of young artists are becoming concerned with social issues – though often in peculiar and ambivalent ways. I tend to be over-optimistic, and at the moment am obsessed with the need to integrate ivory tower and grass roots, particularly within the 'cultural' and 'socialist' branches of feminism. So I could be wrong, as I was when I hoped for too much from the conceptual third stream around 1970. But first, a little history.

A Little History

Art and politics as currently defined can't get together in America because they come from opposite sides of the tracks. Art values are seen by the Left as precisely bourgeois, even ruling-class values, while even the most elitist artists often identify vaguely – very vaguely – with an idealized working class. Or perhaps painter Rudolf Baranik's way of putting it is fairer: 'Art both serves and subverts the dominant class of every society. Even the most passive or subservient art is not the precise carrier of ruling class ideas, though in every way the ruling class makes an effort to make it so.'¹ Art may feel trapped in the ivory tower, now and then complaining bitterly, now and then slumming for a while, but it lets its hair down selectively so only a chosen few can climb to its chamber. Politics has other things to think about, and aside from occasional attempts to knock down the tower, is little concerned with what goes on inside it. At financial crises, politics may solicit money and propaganda from art's liberal conscience, which also provides cocktails and imaginative bursts of energy until 'too much time is taken away from the studio'. Caught in the middle of all this is the socially conscious and sometimes even socially concerned artist.

The American art world where most of these forays take place, is a curious barnacle on capitalist society that imagines itself an esthetic free agent. The art world has been wary of politics since the late 40s, when artists were in danger of being called before the House Unamerican Activities Committee if their work was too comprehensibly 'humanist.' In 1948 a soon-to-be-famous painter and a critic jointly declared that 'political commitment in our time means no art, no literature.'² Variations on this position dominated the next twenty years, only a few hold-outs insisting that 'painting cannot be the only activity of the mature artist' (though continuing to support the separation between art and politics).³

American art subsequently became a world power precisely by severing itself from politics (read Left politics, since the center and right are just presumed to be 'society' or 'life'). By the late 50s, the New American Art – abstract, and therefore, paradoxically, far more socially manipulable than representation – sidled forth from the tower to issue internationally impressive 'breakthroughs'. Those who had initially objected to its red range began to like warm colours when these could be paraded as testimony to the glories of esthetic freedom in a democracy. No one seemed to notice until the later

60s that artists had lost control of their art once it left the studio – perhaps because the whole experience was a new one. Some American artists were enjoying for the first time a general prestige. In the process of acknowledging that content in art was inseparable from form, many also fell for the next step (offered by critics who had been ‘political’ themselves in the 40s) – that form alone was the only possible content for ‘important’ or ‘quality’ art. This recipe was swallowed whole in the period between Korea and Vietnam. How, after all, could pure form be political? How indeed. The problem seemed solved as the international ‘Triumph of American Painting’ paralleled the triumph of American multi-nationals. Again, in all fairness, it should be noted that the artists themselves were rarely if ever aware of these implications, and when they were, their extraordinary esthetic achievements could be identified, as Irving Sandler has said, as ‘a holding action on the threshold of resistance.’⁴

All this time there was a good deal of banter about the superior ‘morality’ of American art as compared to European art; yet political morality – ideas affecting culture from the depths rather than on the famous surface and at the famous edges – was all but invisible in the art world. For a while the yacht was too comfortable to rock, even though it was still too small to accommodate the majority of the artist population, not to mention the audience. By the mid-60s, the small number of highly visible artists who had ‘made it’ offered a false image of the future to all those art students rushing to New York to make their own marks, and to have nervous breakdowns if they didn’t get a one-man show within the year (I say one-man advisedly, since the boys suffered more than the girls, who had been led to expect nothing and had to cultivate personal survival powers).

Throughout the 60s a good healthy capitalist dog-eat-dog competition flourished with the free-enterprise esthetic. More or less abruptly, at the end of the decade, reaction set in, taking the form of rebellion against the commodity the art object had involuntarily become. Conceptual art was conceived as a democratic means of making art ideas cheap and accessible by replacing the conventional ‘precious object’ with ‘worthless’ and/or ephemeral mediums such as typed sheets, xeroxes, snapshots, booklets, streetworks. This coincided for obvious reasons with the conscientious downward mobility of the counterculture and the rhetorical focus of the often academic New Left. It was crowded in the streets in 1970, what with the blacks, the students, the antiwar movement, the feminists, the gays. Art felt like one of the gang again, rubbing elbows with the masses, fighting a common enemy. After all, despite the elitist fate of their art, artists can easily identify with oppressed minorities whose civil rights are minimal.

But wait. The enemy looks familiar. It is the hand that feeds us. We were picketing the people we drank with and lived off of. We were making art in a buyer’s market but not a consumer’s market. We were full of ‘mixed feelings’, because we wanted to be considered workers like everyone else and at the same time we weren’t happy when we saw our products being treated like everyone else’s, because deep down we know as artists we *are* special. What we (artworkers) wanted, and still want, as much as control over our labour power and over the destiny of our products, was *feedback*. Because art is communication, and without contact with its audience it becomes the counterpart of a doorhandle made on a Detroit assembly line. (I have this vision of a 1990’s artist seeing a film of a Soho gallery in the 70s and finding herself unable to recognize her own work – just as the factory worker would not be able to distinguish her doorhandle.)

A little dissent goes a long way in the art world. By 1971 the ranks were dissolving back into the white-walled rooms. Pluralism reigned and there was more room at the top. For the most part this pluralism was healthy, though attacked from the right as a fall from grace, too democratically open to mediocrity; and from the left as a bribe, too tolerant of anything marketable, a confusion of the issues. Dissent was patronized, patted on its ass and put in its place. Those who were too persistent were ghettoized or, more subtly, discredited on levels they were never concerned with. After a brief flurry of Women's Art and Black Art shows, the institutions subsided to prepare for a backlash campaign. Yet one thing that the art activism of the late 60s and the increased (if intermittently applied) theoretical awareness of the 70s did accomplish was a fairly thorough purge of the 'my art is my politics' copout, which encouraged Business as Usual and blocked all avenues (or alleys) to change. We were all aware by then that every move we made was political in the broad sense, and that our actions and our art were determined by who we were in the society we lived in. (This is not to say that most of us cared to think about these insights.) We were also beginning to realize that conceptual art (the so-called movement, not the third-stream medium) had, like the dress and life styles of the period, made superficial rather than fundamental changes, in form rather than in content. When we trooped back into the galleries, back to a Soho already cluttered with boutiques and restaurants its residents couldn't afford (a far cry from the Artists Community envisioned around 1968) we bore this new burden of awareness. We could no longer seriously contend that because art tends to be only indirectly effective, artists should be exempt from all political responsibility and go bumbling on concerned only with their own needs. (Yet again, this is not to say that most of us cared to act on these insights.)

If my Art Isn't my Politics, What is?

One point at which art and politics meet is in their capacity to move people. Even though communication with non-buying or non-writing viewers is an unpopular or unconsidered goal in the high art world, art that has no one to communicate with has no place to go. Contemporary criticism has offered no solid analyses of the artist's exile status, nor any sophisticated notion of art's audience – either present or future/ideal. We might get further faster by asking ourselves as artists and artworkers: who are we working for? The accepted avant-garde answer has long been 'for myself', and 'for other artists.' These responses reflect the rugged individualist stance demanded of American (male) artists and the fundamental insecurity of an artist's existence in a society that tolerates but does not respect cultural activities and practically denies the existence of cultural workers. Reaching a broader public, aside from its populist correctness *and* aside from the dangers of esthetic imperialism, might revitalize contemporary art by forcing artists to see and think less narrowly and to accept ideological responsibility for their products. By necessity, the feminist art community has made important moves toward a different conception of audience. Perhaps this is what Jack Burnham meant when he saw feminism as offering a potentially 'vernacular' art to replace the 'historical' art that has dominated modernism.⁵ (My dictionary's first definition of vernacular gave me pause: 'belonging to homeborn slaves.') Although it was still possible in 1977 for *Studio International's* special issue on 'Art and Social Purpose' to ignore feminism, this has

been a central concern of the most original feminist artists and writers for some time. Feminist artists are luckier than most in that we have a constant dialogue between a network of intimate art support groups and the rest of the women's movement, which is dealing with non-art issues in the real world. (An example is the current campaign in New York of Women against Pornography.)

Yet the 'high' or commercial art world's lack of respect for a less than classy audience whose tastes differ from its own continues to be conveyed through its patronizing (and, alas, matronizing) accusations that any popular work is 'rabble-rousing' and 'crowd-pleasing'. The institutional reception, or lack thereof, given Judy Chicago's monumental and collaboratively executed sculpture *The Dinner Party*, and the overwhelming enthusiasm it has sparked in non-art-world audiences, is a significant case in point, which I've treated at length elsewhere. Suffice it to say that the notion that elitism is necessary to the survival of quality is tendered by the same liberals who deny all evidence of repression in America and continue to defend the superiority of a capitalist democracy.

For all the Global Village internationalism supposedly characterizing the 70s, in 1980 most artists are still working for exactly the same economically provincial audience, 'It's a free country'. We are supposed to recognize that personal tastes differ. In the high art world, however, 'quality' is the status quo. It is imagined to be permanently defined by those controlling the institutions. While stylistic pluralism has been encouraged in the 70s, deeper divergences from the mainstream are still not tolerated. Given the reigning criteria by which lousy art cast in the proper mould or accompanied by the proper prose is consistently hung, bought, approved by the most knowledgeable professionals, the issue of quality seems irrelevant. Since quality comes from art, and not vice versa, the question is, how do we arrive at an art that makes sense and is available to more, and more varied people, while maintaining esthetic integrity and regaining the power that art must have to provoke, please, and mean something?

For better or for worse, most people go through life without even wanting to reach the inner sanctums where art coyly lurks. What the ruling class considers 'low art' or 'bad art' plays a role in the lives of many more people than 'high art' does, and it is this need that new art is trying to tap. Right now, only the lucky few get 'good art' or are educated to recognize it, or decide what it is. (Recently feminists, Marxists and third-world artists have been trying to re-educate ourselves in order to avoid seeing with the conditioned eyes of the white capitalist patriarchy.) But are we really so lucky? How much of the avant garde high art we see gives us profound sensuous or intellectual pleasure? How often do we lie to ourselves about our involvement in the art we have convinced ourselves we should like? How many sensible middle-class people devoted to the survival of 'good taste', as intoned by the powers that be, secretly pine for the gaudy flimsiness, the raucous gaiety of 'lower class' culture? Judging from the popularity of such art from other, more 'primitive' or ancient cultures, of Pop Art, 'camp' and the whole punk or New Wave phenomenon – quite a few.

Is There Art Post Life?

In the 70s it became critically fashionable to call art 'post' anything that peaked in the 60s: 'post studio', 'post conceptual', 'post modernist', 'post minimalist', even 'post

modern'. (Where does that leave us?) Maybe in the 80s we'll just find out that 'beyond' was nothing but a vacuum. Or a void – as in a *tabula rasa*, which is not a bad thing, especially when things need cleaning up as badly as they do, now. For some of us who lived through the 60s and have spent the last ten years waiting for the 70s to stand up and identify itself, the 70s has been the vacuum. It was only in its past three years or so that it got it together to pinpoint an esthetic of its own, and this it did with a lot of help from its friends in the rock music scene, not to mention S & M fashion photography, TV and movie culture, and a lot of 60s' art ideas conveniently forgotten, so now eligible for parole. As we verge on the 80s, 'retrochic'⁶ – a subtle current of content filtering through various forms – has caught up with life and focuses increasingly on sexist, heterosexist, classist and racist violence, mirroring, perhaps unwittingly, the national economic backlash.

(Some parenthetical examples of retrochic in case it hasn't spread as far as I'm afraid it has: an exhibition of abstract drawings by a first-name-only white artist gratuitously titled 'The Nigger Drawings' for reasons so 'personal' he is as reluctant to murmur them as he is to wear black-face in public; this was studiously defended as 'revolutionary' by a young Jewish critic who has adopted a pen-name associated with Prussian nobility. Or a male Canadian rock group called 'Battered Wives', who could be speaking for all such 'artists' when they explain 'the name is symbolic. It doesn't mean anything;' the group sings a song called 'Housewife' – 'she's a housewife/Don't know what to do/So damn stupid/She should be in a zoo.' Or a beautifully executed and minutely detailed 'photorealist' painting called The Sewing Room dedicated to some poor soul named Barbara, which depicts a pretty middle-class sitting room in which a workclothed man gorily stabs the lady of the house in the neck).

Some of its adherents seem to see the retrochic trend as a kind of acatatic but dangerous drug not everybody has the guts to try. It has been called a 'DC current that some people pick up on and others don't', that combats '60s' tokenism' and is 'too hot to handle.'⁷ Some retrograde punk artists share with the Right Wing an enthusiasm for the 50s, which are seen as The Good Old Days. They are either too young, too insensitive or too ill-informed to know that the 50s were in fact Very Bad Old Days for blacks, unions, women (viz. the crippling and deforming fashions like stiletto heels, long, tight skirts and vampire makeup) and for anyone McCarthy cast his bleary eye on. The earth-shaking emergence of Rock 'n' Roll notwithstanding, it was also a time of censorship in the arts, of fear and dirty secrets that paved the way for the assassinations, open scandals and quasi-revolution of the 60s.

Punk artists – retro and radical – also trace their bloodline back to Pop Art and Warhol (though the latter epitomized the scorned 60s) and to Dada (though it's not fair to blame a socialist movement for its reactionary offspring). The real source of retrochic is probably futurism, which made no bones about its fundamental fascism and disdain for the masses. Violence and bigotry in art are simply violence and bigotry, just as they are in real life. They are socially dangerous, not toys, not neutralized formal devices comparable to the stripe and the cube. So I worry when a young artist whose heart and mind I respect tells me he's beginning to like the reactionary aspects of punk art because he sees them as a kind of catharsis to clear the decks and pave the way for change in the art world. At this point, as in the idealization of the 50s, I become painfully aware

of a generation gap. The anticipated catharsis sounds like the one I was hoping for in 1969 from conceptual art and in the 70s from feminist art.

And if retro-punk is too hot to handle, where are all those burned fingers? Most of the hot potatoes seem to have been cooled to an acceptable temperature and made into a nice salad. If Warhol is king of the punk party, the real retrochic heroine should be Valerie Solanas – the uninvited guest, whose ‘Scum Manifesto’ was too hot for *anyone* to handle.

I hope retrochic is not the banner of the 80s, but merely the 70s going out on an appropriately ambiguous note, the new wave rolling on and leaving behind an ooze primed for new emergences. I have nightmares about a dystopian decade dominated by retrograde fascist art which, while claiming on one hand to be ‘space age social realism’⁸ manages on the other hand to be just Right for up-and-coming extremists, for those people who simultaneously jerk off to and morally condemn violence and bigotry. The living rooms of the powerful, however, will not be hung with blurry photos of gum-chewing sock-hopping terrorists torturing each other. The establishment’s taste in politics and art do not coincide any more than does that of the artists themselves. With a nod to upward mobility, one can probably expect to find hanging over these mantles the same good solid bluechip formalism associated with the 50s and 60s, which continued to be successfully promoted and sold throughout the 70s. Inflation encourages such acquisitions, and the SoHo boutique mentality will maintain its strongholds. Or perhaps the art of the 80s will be a hybrid of the 70s progeny: impressive acres of coloured canvas and tons of wood and steel functioning as covers for safes full of money and dirty pictures, with give-away titles like *Snuff*, *Blowupjob*, *Monument to a Rapist*, *Faggot Series*, *Kike I*, *Kike II*, *Kike III* and so forth – a charming and all too familiar blend of the verbally sensational and the visually safe.

There is, I’m glad to report, another, more hopeful side to all of this, which is subtly entwined with the above. The pivot is an ambiguous notion of ‘distancing’. We critics have been talking about ‘distancing’ or ‘detachment’ or good old ‘objectivity’ with admiration since the early 60s, applying it in turn to Pop Art, Minimalism, Conceptual Art, and now to performance, video, photography and film. Irony is usually an ingredient, and if we’re seeking a *tabula rasa*, irony is a good abrasive. But irony alone, irony without underlying passion, becomes another empty formal device. Today ‘distancing’ is used two ways, which might be called passive and active. Distinguishing them is perhaps the most puzzling aspect of today’s esthetic and moral dilemma.

The passive artists tend toward the retrochic extreme. They are sufficiently ‘distanced’ (or spaced out) to see offensive racist or sexist words and images as a neutralized and harmless outlet for any perverse whim; after all, it’s only Art. (They are not usually so far gone, however, as to use such epithets outside of the art context – in the subway, for instance.) These artists would subscribe to the formalist maxim ‘If you want to send a message, call Western Union’, and they tend to have great disdain for old-fashioned radicals (like me) who take such things seriously.

The active artists also use distancing as an esthetic strategy, but to channel social and personal rage, to think about values, to inject art with precisely that belittled didacticism. Instead of calling Western Union, these artists hope that they will be able to put their message across by themselves. They often use understated satire or deadpan black humor to reverse offensive material and give it a new slant. The younger they are, the

rougher they get, and sometimes the cycle reverses itself and it's difficult to distinguish earnestness from insanity.

Passive or active, the crux of the matter is how do we know what's intended? We're offended or titillated or outraged; now we have to figure out whether it's satire, protest or bigotry, then whether the intended content has been co-opted by its subject matter. These are questions that must be asked about much of the ambiguous new art. These are questions particularly important for feminists working against, say, pornography and the violent objectification of women, and for blacks working against racists in liberal clothing.

For example, when a woman artist satirizes pornography but uses the same grim image, is it still pornography? Is the split beaver just as prurient in a satirical context as it is in its original guise? What about an Aunt Jemima image, or a white artist imitating a black's violent slurs against honkies?

Answers, though not solutions, have just been proffered by two leading and very different practitioners of social irony. Yvonne Rainer, who works from a Brechtian viewpoint, treated sex and female nudity with humour and 'distance' in her films until she realized from audience responses that the strategy wasn't working. At that point she became convinced, according to Ruby Rich, 'that no matter what techniques surrounded such a depiction, no matter what contradictions were embedded in the presentation, nothing could ever recoup the image of a woman's body or sexuality bared.'⁹ Similarly, black standup comedian and pop hero Richard Prior has just vowed publicly to give up a staple of his routines – the word nigger. 'There was a time', he says, 'when black people used it as a term of endearment because the more we said it, the less white people liked it, but now it seems the momentum has changed . . . There's no way you can call a white person a nigger and make him feel like a black man.' Asked why whites are getting so fond of the word, he replied, 'I don't think enough of them have gotten punched in the mouth.'¹⁰

Distancing, it seems to me, is effective only if it is one half of a dialectic – the other half being intimacy, or approaching, or optimism. You move away to get a good look but then you move back toward the center where the energy is. This seems to be the position of a number of younger artists whose often para-punk work bears some superficial (and perhaps insidious) resemblance to retrochic. An increasing number are disillusioned with what they have found in art and the art world (including the alternate spaces and the current dissenters): 'Embrace fearlessness. Welcome change, the chance for new creation . . . There is no space for reverence in this post-earthrise age. We are all on the merit system. The responsibility for validity is the individual artist's. The art critic is dead. Long live art.'¹¹ To which I would holler Hallelujah, but not Amen.

Some young artists are working collectively, making art for specific installations, public places, or for their own breezy, often harsh little shows in flaky impermanent spaces (the model for which may have been Stefan Eins' idealistic if not always fascinating 3 Mercer Street Store, and now his more fully developed Fashion Moda in the South Bronx). One of the most talked-about exhibitions last season in New York was 'The Manifesto Show', collaboratively organized and open to friends, invitees, and off-the-street participation, through which it organically almost doubled in size. There was no single, recognizable political line, but a 'social and philosophical cacaphony'¹² of

specific statements, rhetoric straight and rhetoric satirized, complaints, fantasies, threats – some more and some less geared to current art attitudes. Distancing techniques were used against themselves in self-referential hooks into content from art, as in Barbara Kruger's contribution, which began: 'We are reading this and deciding whether it is irony or passion/We think it is irony/We think it is exercising a distancing mechanism/ . . . We are lucky this isn't passion because passion never forgets.' There were also the unselfconscious atypically straightforward works that said what they meant and meant what they said. And there were Jenny Holzer's dangerously conventional collages of propaganda with lethal reminders built in for anyone who swallows them whole ('REJOICE! OUR TIMES ARE INTOLERABLE TAKE COURAGE FOR THE WORST IS A HARBINGER OF THE BEST . . . DO NOT SUPPORT PALLIATIVE GESTURES: THEY CONFUSE THE PEOPLE AND DELAY THE INEVITABLE CONFRONTATION . . . THE RECKONING WILL BE HASTENED BY THE STAGING OF SEED DISTURBANCES. THE APOCALYPSE WILL BLOSSOM.') The message seems to be *think for yourself*.

This up Against That

Those invested in a perpetual formal evolution in art protected from the germs of real life won't like my suspicion that the most meaningful work in the 1980s may depend heavily on that still pumping heart of 20th century art alienation – the collage esthetic, or what Gene Swenson called 'The Other Tradition'. Perhaps it will be only the alienated and socially conscious minority that will pursue this, and perhaps (this demands insane heights of optimism) the need for collage will be transcended. Obviously I mean collage in the broadest sense, not pasted papers or any particular technique but the 'juxtaposition of unlike realities to create a new reality.' Collage as dialectic. Collage as revolution. 'Collage of Indignation.'¹³ Collage as words and images exposing the cultural structure of a society in which art has been turned against itself and against the public. Martha Rosler, for instance, sees her sarcastic narratives (book, video, performance artworks) as 'decoys' that 'mimic some well-known cultural form' so as to 'strip it of its mask of innocence'. And the media strategies for public performance used by west-coast feminists Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz (with the 'social network' Ariadne) juxtapose two kinds of image within the context of street, shopping mall or press conference. The first is an image of social reality as we all know it through TV and newspapers. The second is that image seen through a feminist consciousness of a different reality – for instance looking at the media coverage of the Hillside Stranglers murders in Los Angeles, analysing its sensationalism and demeaning accounts of the victims' lives, then offering an alternative in the form of a striking visual event ('In Mourning and in Rage') and controlling the subsequent media interpretations. The public thus receives, through art, information contrary to that which it sees as 'the truth' and receives it in a manner that is striking and sufficiently provocative to encourage reconsideration of 'the truth'. Ariadne's media strategies obviously have limited means at their disposal, but their performances have played to audiences of thousands and have an impact only professional artists can bring to bear.¹⁴

The attraction of a collage esthetic is obvious when we realize that most of us, on the most basic level, exist in a downright Surrealist situation.

Consider the position of an artist in a society that perceives art as decoration or status symbol, investment or entertainment.

Consider the position of a visionary artist in a society devoted solely to material well being.

Consider the position of a person making impermanent objects of no fixed value in a time of inflation and hoarding.

Consider the position of an artist labouring under the delusion that individuality is respected in an age of bland, identical egos.

Perhaps most Surrealist of all, consider the position of a feminist/socialist/populist artist in a patriarchal capitalist marketplace.

Now What?

After the pluralism of the 70s, the 80s are going to have to make art that stands out in sharp relief against our society's expectations for art. Artists are just beginning to understand the flood of new media available, after a decade of enchantment with their novelty. Comprehension of 'the nature of the medium' may sound like an echo of formalist dogma, but if the medium is one whose nature is communication – the video, the street performance, posters, comic strips, graffiti, the ecologically functional earth-work, even photography, film and that old but new-for-the-visual-artist medium, the book – then such comprehension may have more impact on audience and on art. We are supposed to have grown up absurd already. Yet through the 70s I've asked myself why the hell these new mediums were the vehicle for so little socially concerned art. If there is all this rebelliousness and unease among young artists about how the art world treats art (and there is) why are such appropriately outreaching mediums so little explored and exploited? Why is there such a dearth of meaningful/provocative and/or effective public art? Has distancing gone too far? Have we gotten carried away? Spaceage objectivity over our heads? Over and out?

I hope we're not just doomed to follow the bouncing ball through endless cycles of romanticism/classicism, subjective/objective, feeling/intellect, etc. If the 60s proved that commitment didn't work, the 70s proved that lack of commitment didn't work either. The 80s decade is coming into a legacy of anxiety, of barely articulated challenge to boringly predictable mainstream art. It is going to have to restore the collective responsibility of the artist and create a new kind of community within, not apart from the rest of the world. The danger on all esthetic fronts is the kind of factionalism that already divides the politicized minority within the art world. Too many of us spend our time attacking everyone else's attempts at relevance while paranoically guarding our own suburban territories. There is an appalling tendency to insist on the need for theoretical understanding of the artist's position in a capitalist society and simultaneously to destroy by 'logic' every solution offered. It is all too easy for any intelligent observer to be devastatingly cynical about Marxists making abstractions, artists made vulnerable by working at the same time in communities and in museums, feminists riding the women's movement to commercial success and getting off there. The denial of support to an artist or group who is trying to work out of this dilemma we all share, the questioning about presentation, form, and motivation when it appears

that communication *is* nevertheless taking place, all this merely recapitulates the competition that maintains the quality-based 'high art' world.

Merely opportunist as some of it may be, art with overtly social content or effect still poses a threat to the status quo. And, ironically, no group is so dependent on the status quo as the avant garde, which must have an establishment to attack, reverse, and return to for validation. It is true that most politically aware artists and artworkers would sooner give up politics than give up art. Embedded in the whole question of why more visual artists aren't more committed to combining form and content in more interesting ways is the tabu against 'literary' art. Artists emphasizing words and ideas over formal success have been seen since the 60s as traitors to the sacred modernist cause; just as the Dadas and Surrealists are not considered serious contributors to modernism even when their *contributions* are considered serious. This sort of prejudice has been blurred by the mists of pluralism, but it remains as subtle conditioning. Because visual art is about making things (even if those things have no 'pictures'). And this is what visual artists justifiably don't want to give up. In the late 60s we got sidetracked by the object/non-object controversy. Sheets of paper and videotapes, though cheaper than paintings and sculptures, are still objects. Conceptualism, we know now, is no more generically radical than any other *ism*, but it's no less art.

Another major question we have to ask ourselves as we enter the 80s is: *why is it that culture today is only truly alive for those who make it, or make something?* Because making Art, or whatever the product is called, is the most satisfying aspect of culture? Its subsequent use or delectation is effective only to the extent that it shares some of that intimacy with its audience? Even as a critic, I find that my own greatest pleasure comes from empathetic or almost kinesthetic insights into how and why a work was made, its *provocative* elements. So the necessary changes must broaden, not merely the audience, but the makers of art (again a fact the feminist art movement has been confronting for some time over the issue of 'high', 'low', craft and hobby arts). Maybe the ultimate collage is simply the juxtaposition of art and society, artist and audience. Maybe that's what a humanist art is – it comes in all styles and sizes, but it demands response and even imitation. It is alive.

For the vast majority of the audience now, however, culture is something dead. In the 50s the upwardly mobile bourgeois art audience (mostly female) was called the 'culture vultures'. They didn't kill art but they eagerly devoured it when they came upon its corpse. As Carl Andre has observed, art is what we do and culture is what is done to us. That fragile lifeline of vitality, the communication to the viewer of the ecstasy of the making process, the motive behind it and reasons for such a commitment can all too easily be snapped by the circumstances under which most people see art – the stultifying classist atmosphere of most museums and galleries and, in the art world, the personal intimidation resulting from overinflated individual reputations.

What, then, can conscious artists and artworkers do in the coming decade to integrate our goals, to make our political opinions and our destinies fuse with our art? Any new kind of art practice is going to have to take place at least partially outside of the art world. And hard as it is to establish oneself in the art world, less circumscribed territories are all the more fraught with peril.

Out there, most artists are neither welcome nor effective, but in here is a potentially suffocating cocoon in which artists are deluded into feeling important for doing only

what is expected of them. We continue to talk about 'new forms' because the new has been the fertilizing fetish of the avant garde since it detached itself from the infantry. But it may be that these new forms are only to be found buried in social energies not yet recognized as art.

Notes

1 In conversation with the author. In this and other conversations and writings over the years, Baranik has been a rational radical voice in my art-and-politics education.

2 Robert Motherwell and Harold Rosenberg in *Possibilities*, 1 (1948).

3 Ad Reinhardt, *Arts and Architecture* (January 1947). Many of the ideas in this article have their source in Reinhardt's ideas and personal integrity.

4 Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting* (New York: Praeger, 1970). Max Kozloff, William Hauptman and Eva Cockcroft have illuminated the ways in which Abstract Expressionism was manipulated during the cold war in *Artforum*, May 1973, October 1973 and June 1974.

5 Jack Burnham, 'Patriarchal tendencies in the feminist art movement', *The New Art Examiner* (Summer 1977).

6 I don't know who coined the term 'retrochic', but it was used frequently during the controversy over the 'Nigger Drawings' show at Artists' Space, NYC, 1979. A classic practitioner is Norman Mailer, who in his 1957 *The White Negro* praised two hoods who had murdered a store owner for 'daring the unknown' in an 'existential' act, and who later said he 'felt better' after stabbing his own wife.

7 Douglas Hessler, letter to the editor of *The SoHo News* (21 June 1979) in response to a piece by Shelley Rice (7 June 1979) which bemoaned the prevalence of 'apolitical sophistication'.

8 J. Hoberman, 'No wavelength: the para-punk underground', *The Village Voice* (21 May 1979).

9 Ruby Rich, in *The New Art Examiner's* special issue on 'Sexuality' (Summer 1979).

10 Richard Prior, quoted by Richard Goldstein in *The Village Voice* (23 July 1979).

11 Lauren Edmund, review (in the spirit of) 'The Manifesto Show', *East Village Eye* (15 June 1979).

12 Peter Frank, 'Guerilla gallerizing,' *The Village Voice* (7 May 1979): 95.

13 'Collage of Indignation' I and II were the titles of two separate exhibitions of art for social protest, the first a painted-on-the-spot collage in 'Angry Arts Week', 1967; the second a show of commissioned political posters at the New York Cultural Center and other locations in New York, 1970-71, organized by myself and Ron Wolin.

14 For more on Ariadne, see *Heresies*, 6 (1978) and *Heresies*, 9 (1980).