

During the Eclipse

Carter Stone and Wolfgang Paalen

C. S.: Why after all did you begin to write on art instead of sticking to painting?

W.P.: It seemed more important to me to try to clarify a little the present confusion in matters of art than to paint a few more or a few less pictures.

C.S.: But as a painter wouldn't you, even unconsciously, take the side of that particular direction in painting to which your own work belongs? For example, wouldn't you naturally take the standards of the School of Paris for the standard of painting itself?

W.P.: I don't see how I could, since nothing has ever existed that could be called the "School of Paris."

C.S.: What do you mean?

W.P.: The "School of Paris" was only a slogan invented by picture dealers jealous of the dressmakers. They, too, wanted to establish a luxury article marked "imported from Paris."

C.S.: But all the same contemporary art did know its apogee in Paris.

W.P.: As a matter of fact it did. Only one must not mix things up. It is precisely because there people were not interested in a Parisian art, because there, better than elsewhere, it was understood that modern art is in essence international, that Paris could become the cultural capital, the artistic centre of the world. There were, of course, other good reasons besides why a great number of artists from all over found their most favourable climate there. However, others and some of the most influential - Kandinsky, second only to Picasso, and Klee and Moore for example, were not formed in Paris. The last century is different; then there did exist a distinctly French school.

C.S.: It is true, of course, that any artist essentially limited by national qualities or defects belongs to the past. Which doesn't prevent there being, as long as there are tourists, people who will paint the little Indian with the big cactus. At home too, there is a kind of crustacean walking backward toward an "American art," but certainly tomorrow no one will think of art in terms of European or American.

W.P.: The same chauvinistic tendencies always flourish more in time of war and more than ever now that the lack of understanding of the function of art adds to the general intellectual confusion.

C.S.: Certain critics pretended to explain that function by sociological analysis. I know they did not succeed, because instead of developing the Marxist concept, they applied it rather mechanically. That is, they overlooked the reciprocal interactivity between the intellectual interpretation and the material transformation of the world, they hypnotized themselves with an economic a priori as arbitrary as the old spiritualist a priori. After all it is due to the imagination of some individuals that economic conditions have ever changed and go on changing. Why not admit that the dance of the primitive hunter which exalts his courage is as important for the material result of the hunt as his knowledge of arrow-making?

W.P.: The very idea that art does not evolve in a metaphysical vacuum but has something to do with the society in which it is produced seemed absolutely luminous after the ineptness of the idealistic aesthetic theories. Thanks to this discovery critics with historical pretensions believed themselves clever in replacing the Monkey Theory: art as an imitation of nature, by the Mirror Theory: art as a reflection of society. What a discovery that the masterpiece of Seurat, *A Sunday afternoon at La Grande Jatte*, has something to do with the Sunday walks of the Parisian bourgeois of the end of the nineteenth century! Thus being able to discern a few figures dressed as bourgeois in the pictures of Seurat and others, there were penetrating critics who jumped to the conclusion that these pictures reflect bourgeois leisure.

C.S.: But art is nevertheless always conditioned by society?

W.P.: Naturally. Every activity of an individual is always, directly or indirectly, conditioned by surroundings. Economically art is always conditioned by society, whether society favours, ignores or even oppresses it. But that does not mean that an individual cannot put himself out of an accepted standard society, that he cannot work in large measure on concepts radically different from those around him. As a matter of fact it is in that way that the few heroic individuals, precursors and discoverers in whatever field, have always worked. And instead of losing themselves in subtleties as to what can and what cannot be defined as "reflection" or "social reaction", our critics should have seen the tremendous significance in the principal characteristic of all modern art, that is that it has been created outside of contemporary society. It is obvious, at least for anyone without dogmatic spectacles, that from Shelley to van Gogh all creative artists have worked if not against at least outside of bourgeois society. The bourgeois of the end of the nineteenth century did not recognize his Sunday promenade in the Grande Jatte¹; he did not recognize himself for the good reason that the statuesque people of Seurat had as little to do with him as the people of Poussin with Greece, or the Negroes painted by Picasso with those of Africa; which of course the critics of his time understood when they found Seurat's people more like Egyptian statuary than like their Parisian contemporaries.

C. S.: It wouldn't seem then, that because Cezanne had an immoderate taste for apples, nor because his subconscious was overcome by changes in the import duties on agricultural products, nor because the enlightened bourgeois was being converted to vegetarianism, that fruit predominates in his paintings. And it isn't, perhaps, any more intelligent to infer from occasional representations of bourgeois leisure by impressionists and neo-impressionists to ideological parallels of these painters with bourgeois society, than to infer a special taste for music and for pipe-smoking from the fact that the cubists painted so many pipes and guitars.² But the question remains why such a painter at such a time prefers certain objects rather than others for his plastic meditations.

W.P.: I think the question is not well put under that form. One should rather ask how such a painter uses such an object as a painter. The why of a very personal choice escapes us, as it perhaps escapes the painter himself. It is evident that there is a connection between horsebreeding in Tuscany and the equestrian battles painted by Uccello, just as there is between the leisure of Parisians and certain works of Seurat; that does not mean to say that the art of Uccello was essentially conditioned by horses, any more than that of Seurat by the bourgeoisie, but only that certain of their works, among other things, presupposed the existence of horses and of the bourgeoisie. Manet, the least audacious of the great painters of the second half of the last century, was the only one to participate to a certain degree in the life of the "society" of his time and to paint a contemporary historical subject. However, his *Execution of the Emperor Maximilian* is manifestly inspired by reminiscences of Goya, and not by any specific interest in the event. And one would come to rash conclusions about the bourgeois manners of the day if one were to assume they were reflected in the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, forgetting that this picture repeats one of Raphael's compositions. Renoir's paintings "reflect" much more Watteau and Fragonard than contemporary content, just as there is more relation between the nudes of Cézanne and of El Greco than there is between a nude of Cézanne and one by Renoir. Instead of making false connections between the plastic interest of a painter in a subject and his "social reaction", it is necessary to understand that, by their very indifference toward the subject as such, modern artists

¹ It is forgotten today how recent the great renown of Seurat is. He did not sell his masterpieces; La Grande Jatte remained until 1925 in the possession of Lucie Cousturier, his pupil, who still in 1926 speaks of Seurat as of a "great unknown painter". Seurat, by Lucie Cousturier, page 7 (Ed. Cres, Paris 1926).

² It may be said in passing that none of the founders of cubism smokes a pipe or plays the guitar.

express their disdain for present society. Of course, for a thoroughgoing analysis of the art of a period it is indispensable to find its connections with the ensemble of problems, economic as well as intellectual. Only it is better not to make such connections than to make false ones.

C.S.: It is easy to see that modern art has survived not because of, but in spite of capitalism, and this does away with the stupid reproach that the innovating artist works only for millionaires. It is no more intelligent to reproach painters with working for the rich because under the present system their works become sometimes the object of commercial speculation, than to reproach Marx with having written for book collectors because the first edition of his manifesto sells today for more than a thousand dollars.

W.P.: There was perhaps too much excitement over the fact that before the war there were, in the whole world, a half-dozen good painters who managed to earn almost a tenth of what a movie star gets. One forgets too easily that except for these men, other painters of equal worth lived and still live miserably; that it is not even enough, for a painter, to have gained a worldwide reputation in order to live modestly from his work.

C.S.: While the bourgeoisie, at its height, paid its own artists well. At the same time that Monet, van Gogh, Gauguin and so many others who have made the history of art were more or less starving, Meissonnier, Kaulbach and other forgotten coiffeurs were paid enough to live like princes. It has been very well said apropos of the Vanderbilt collection that with a fraction of the amount which that collector spent for nameless daubs, there could have been made one of the most beautiful collections of nineteenth-century painting. It is not as bad now because commercialization has made enough progress to make profits even on modern art, and capitalists have discovered the trick of avoiding the income tax and at the same time playing Medici by founding museums. Nothing is lost, since at a given moment the museums can be transformed into agencies of imperialist propaganda.

W.P.: Not to be able to do anything, yet at least to change this state of things does not mean that we are dupes.

C.S.: And art for the masses?

W.P.: There can be no art for the masses as long as art remains practically inaccessible to the masses. In the actual state of affairs the masses have as little means of knowing works of art as they have of many other good things. Brancusi told me one day how delighted he was at the reaction of some workers seeing his sculptures. Instead of quibbling as to whether people would understand or would not understand, it would be better to ask how many people have a chance to see the work of the greatest sculptor of our time. Here as elsewhere it is much less a problem of production than of distribution; it doesn't involve producing a pseudo-proletarian art but finding practical means of making authentic works available.

C.S.: But it certainly won't be through the routine of the galleries or the mentality of the picture dealers.

W.P.: The picture dealers, neither worse nor better than other businessmen, can't do much; for an art outside daily life, they were the indispensable intermediaries.

C.S.: Why "were"? Do you think they aren't any more?

W.P.: As a matter of fact, I believe that if not their days, at least their years are numbered.

C.S.: But who will replace them?

W.P.: The picture editors, bookstores, libraries and lecture rooms. Tomorrow pictures will be edited like books, or, if you prefer, good cheap reproductions and television will do for the propagation of painting what records and radio did for music. In the same way for sculpture new material and processes of reproduction will permit an edition in quantities, a mass production anticipated by casting. In that way it will not be in the lowering of the standard of artistic production by enterprises of the department-store type, but in finding

adequate means for the mechanical multiplication of works of value, that art will reach the masses.

C.S.: But doesn't it seem likely that like books, the bestsellers will be mostly vulgar and mediocre things?

W.P.: Probably, but the artist will not need to make bestsellers in order to live from his work. The problem is in finding the material possibilities of producing and the means of communicating for those who have something to say; one will never be able to stop people prostituting themselves.

C.S.: The public likes the immoral artist and moralizing art, just as it is bad lives that make the good biographies....

W.P.: The artist should learn his responsibilities; he must learn to respect himself and to make himself respected. The days of intellectual bohemianism are over. Those who think themselves the court jesters of the century finish as buffoons. The examples are under our noses. On the other hand, since we don't ask for quixotic martyrs, the line of demarcation up to which the artist can collaborate with society or refuse his collaboration remains difficult to trace.

C.S.: For example?

W.P.: The artist ought to refuse any order or offer that does not leave him perfect liberty of expression. He ought to refuse to collaborate in all political or commercial enterprises which treat art as a means only and not equally as an end. That obviously excludes propaganda activities for any cause whatever, and commercial enterprises like advertisements or fashion magazines, etc.

C.S.: But if he can't live by painting?

W.P.: Then he ought to do something else. Marx said once and for all: "the writer must live to write, but he should not write to live."

C.S.: But perhaps it is a little too easy for you and a few others who possess a minimum of material independence to have those rigorous principles.

W.P.: I would not presume to speak of these principles if I had not had the experience of being forced to abandon painting for some time. But as the artist who prostitutes his art to earn his living stops being an artist, it is better, however hard such an alternative may be, to renounce temporarily one's art with the hope of taking it up again intact, than to lose integrity. For art does not forgive.

C.S.: In other words, Cocteau making publicity poems for silk manufacturers or doing reporting, stopped being a poet, therefore it would have been more intelligent to be a merchant or a reporter once and for all.

W.P.: And more honest. The writer or painter who sells his name for commercial use is in disloyal competition with journalists and artisans. I say artisans, because it is an abuse to speak of commercial artists. The fact that there are some that are more gifted than certain painters, does not alter the fact that the work has to do with a category which passes after the artist, in the same way that the industrialist who exploits commercially the discoveries of a physicist passes after him.

C.S.: But what about the ideologic participation of the artist in war? What about the influence of war on art?

W.P.: For the artist who has to go to war, there is no more art, and for art there is no uniform. War never resolves any problem of thought and for all those who have anything serious to do it is only a stupid or disastrous interruption. It goes without saying that every human who is not a monster of egoism is profoundly affected by it; artists at least as much as others. But as it is the very function of art to vanquish chaos, a work is only valid in the measure in which it goes beyond wars or other individual or collective calamities. The abstract painters who under the influence of war retrogress to realism, by that prove only that they have nothing more to say. The works in which the war will be the most

profoundly vanquished, will not contain an allusion to this war, any more than the really revolutionary works contain red flags.

C.S.: Then you think Rene Daumal is right in saying, "there is no more a war poetry than a cold-in-the-head poetry"?

W.P.: It couldn't be better said. In the age in which we live now one must be a hypocritical opportunist or simply an imbecile to glamorize it artistically, or to proclaim a "war art."

C.S.: It was the same spectacle during the other war. The intellectuals howling with the wolves, in confusion, in cowardice, in opportunism; in order to submerge us the minute the war is over and the fighting spirit doesn't pay any more with pacifist protestations.

W.P.: The truth, the mental reflection of reality, cannot belong to anyone entirely and exclusively, but each one who is capable of seizing a facet of it should testify honestly to what he sees. That doesn't mean only those who are called to testify at the bench of history; there is in every sincere testimony, in whatever domain it may be, a unique and irreplaceable value for the whole of human experience. The sincerity of the artist consists, not in copying the reflection of the world on his retina, but in testifying with sincerity to all his sensations, without letting a selection be imposed on him among them by any considerations exterior to the work. It is impossible to insist too much on this point in days of matchless false-witnessing.

C.S.: But isn't it sometimes more heroic to fight than to occupy oneself with art?

W.P.: When the house is on fire it is more urgent to play the fireman than the architect, but without architects there would be no house to save, without art there would be no culture to defend. Heroism can only be judged individually. If it was at one time heroic to volunteer to fight in Spain, it was for certain others as great a struggle, as heroic, to paint in Paris, or to write in New York. As on the one hand, without ideas there are no humanly valid actions, and on the other hand, it is the actions to which they lead that decide the value of ideas, we do not admit any hierarchy of importance between the thinker and the fighter, between the artistic discovery indispensable to man's knowledge of himself, and the scientific discovery indispensable to his knowledge of the world. But it has also to be said that the artists themselves have not yet become very well aware of the importance of their role. Outside of their realm most of them are often selfish, narrow-minded people incapable of cooperation.

C.S.: You have a high opinion of the importance of art.

W.P.: Quite right. And I believe that there are still only too few people to understand it. For lack of objective criteria, the best critics have limited themselves to treating art in an artificial isolation while painters seldom know how to translate their experiences in words. The meaning of artistic activities has been understood better than ever before by the great philosopher of our time, when in *Art as Experience* he laid the foundations of a true modern aesthetic. But this monumental work, as its title indicates, is limited to bringing to light the objective value of artistic experience as such, without establishing criteria of objective values within art.

C.S.: What exactly do you mean by objective? If it is impartial, I must say that I have never met anyone who is entirely impartial, and I think no one can be.

W.P.: Agreed, and that is exactly why we need objective criteria. Although the problem of communication and of verification presents itself differently for art, one must not forget that neither are scientists impartial, but that it is science which exists only so far as it is impartial. That is to say that scientists, however partial, however passionate they may be for their personal convictions, depend on a system of collective control which does not permit them to confound their desires with the facts. "Objective" means what is communicable and verifiable.

C.S.: Yes, but can there be such criteria for art? Haven't they been vainly searched for since Plato?

W.P.: There you fall into a common error. You confuse objective and absolute. What men have tried to find since Plato and have never found, for good cause, are standards of absolute aesthetic values. They could not be found for the reason that an absolute is an abstraction to which nothing existent corresponds. If I give the measure of an object in inches or in meters I make an objective statement because there are all over the world men who use these measures; on the other hand, if I say of the same object that it is beautiful or ugly, I make a subjective declaration, for it is possible that no other person will agree with me, even given that there exists today any general accord on the use of these terms. But the two statements have their sense. While to ask if the object be big or little, beautiful or ugly in itself, if it possesses an absolute size or beauty, is senseless, for a thing cannot be big or little, beautiful or ugly except in relation to some other thing. Which, for the terms big and little, is proved by their linguistic origin; but one could prove as well that the terms beautiful and ugly (as well as the concept "absolute") are the products of a long historic formation and not cognitive aprioris fallen from the sky. As a result, to ask if there be an absolute beauty, though inaccessible and imperceptible to us, is equally senseless, because the term beautiful is only definable so far as it is derived from perceptible things.

C.S.: In other words, here as elsewhere it is the nature of metaphysical thought to first make abstractions which by definition cannot be applied to anything that exists, and then to be afterwards astonished that nothing which exists can be defined by them.

W.P.: Yes. It is only necessary to have understood this to see that there could not be, in art, pure or absolute forms. As each form, colour, each expressive element, is only discernible in relation to other forms and colours or expressive elements, to speak of plastic means in themselves, is only to continue the ancient confusion between the absolute and the objective. The neoplasticists and their defenders made this confusion, and believing they had discovered the means of absolute plastic value, believed that the artist possessed objective means. These means, obtained by the renouncing of any given particular form, were to permit the expression of the platonic essence of things, "the pure form until then veiled by an extrinsic content." In brief, the purist abstract painters wished to paint noumena instead of phenomena, and it was certainly an advance since the non-existence of noumena obliged them to invent something. Only it led them to exclude as plastically improper almost all that makes the interest of art. And that is why the effort of its great precursor, dead so recently, insofar as it was an attempt to establish a sort of categorical imperative of plastically pure expression, was doomed to failure; as much as that effort contributed otherwise to the liberation of painting.

C.S.: But isn't abstract art scientific in the extent that in analogy with the method of science, which is a system of logical relations, it formulates relations of colours and space which do not contain references to the accidental aspects of the exterior world?

W.P.: The analogy is false, for art can only make configurations of qualities, it cannot formulate logical relations. The elements of the most abstract painting, which does not contain any apparent reference to the external world, are nevertheless perceived not as logical relations, but as colours and forms; for relations cannot be perceived, only conceived. The work of science is the quantitative coordination of relations; the work of art is a rhythmic configuration of qualities. For art there cannot be then elements of expression which are emotionally neutral, while for science a sign is valid only so far as it is emotionally neutral. In other words, since in terms of feeling there appears as form what in terms of logic appears as sense, it is impossible for art to limit itself to the formulation of relations (that is to say, to be scientific) as it is impossible for science to express sensations of quality. One must insist on this point, for as long as that confusion persists, there can be no real understanding either of the function of art or of science.

C.S.: But if art has not the means for objective expression, how could there be objective criteria for judgment of aesthetic values?

W.P.: Art with subjective means expresses qualitative structures, while science with objective means formulates relational structures. But once qualitative structures have been organized in a work, that work can be put in relation with other structural organizations. There are no aesthetic laws absolute and inherent in art itself, but we can establish systems of verifiable values, that is to say objective values. The means of expression of the artist are subjective, but their result can be objectively judged.

C.S.: Admitting that there can be, as a consequence, objective criteria for aesthetic judgment, won't their practical application remain the most summary, since there are not two spectators in the world who see the same picture exactly in the same way?

W.P.: As there are no two things exactly alike in any field, I don't see why there have to be spectators with exactly identical reactions. The fact that physics no longer admits anything but a relative simultaneity does not keep the watch from serving to objectify our concept of time. It is neither possible nor necessary that I have exactly the same sensation as some one else before a green spot, it suffices that we have sensations enough alike as to designate it as such.

C.S.: And the color-blind, the Daltonists?

W.P.: We are all Daltonists for the owls and the bats, if it is true that they see infrareds, but we do not paint for owls and bats nor for the minority of those among us whom we call Daltonists. The fact that there are people who can understand each other in very complicated optical and auditive rhythms, the fact that man will remain always the supreme unit of measure for man, suffices to make our communications capable of reaching a fairly large number of other men.

C.S.: Accordingly the very fact that a juxtaposition or succession of forms that are too alike keeps us from discerning them, that we perceive only variations, might justify the new in art - and would suffice as objective justification of the value of original invention!

W.P.: Certainly, once the question is well put it is not difficult to see that art has better things to do than to interpret and to reflect things that exist without it; that it does not limit itself to expressing the felt quality in reality, but participates in the very making of reality.

C.S.: Doesn't this lead to a new concept of reality?

W.P.: I think so. It seems to me that we have to reach a potential concept of reality, based as much on the new directives of physics as on those of art, a concept that I call *dynatic*³ (from the Greek word *dynaton*: the possible). A Philosophy of the Possible which would understand art as a rhythmic equation of the world, indispensable complement of the logical equation that science makes. For only the cooperation of the two will be able to create a new ethic capable of finishing with metaphysical and religious obscurantism. It means dissociating once and for all imagination and metaphysics; to understand that imagination creates reality as much as it is created by reality, that the images of art are neither vain reflections, nor blueprints for tools, but blueprints for man himself.

C.S.: And you believe that you will be allowed to be a philosopher and a painter at once? _

W.P.: I don't think so at all, but I can take the consequences.

C.S.: You're not a pessimist?

W.P.: Why should I be? When in the middle of wars and reaction the intellectual eclipse seems almost total, the new spirit like a traveler arriving in the night, neither seen nor known, installs himself; it is useless to guess his face, he will become one with the day.

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³ From which the name of the art review *Dyn* is derived.

