

THE ARTIST IN OUR SOCIETY

R. M. SHAW.

BY contributing to the discussion on Picasso I feel I must enter a controversy which embraces the whole of our attitude to art, the role of the artist and the future of art. Before defining my own attitude it is essential to remark on the previous contributions.

In the main I agree with John Oldham's analysis, but find the most vulnerable part his definition of art. In his lecture, from which the article was condensed, Oldham said the definition was not to be taken as all-embracing, but was used in lieu of a better one to apply to the subject at hand. Failure to stress this in the article drew hair-splitting attack. In any case, I have yet to see art defined to satisfy more than a handful. Art is usually defined by writers and critics, seldom does the thinking artist attempt the definition; if he has a clear conception of what art means to him it is enough, without courting certain misunderstanding and misrepresentation. However, in spite of the admitted inadequacies of Oldham's definition, I think all the elements withstand scrutiny. Here is the definition: "Art is that particular quality attached to the products and activities of man which gives us an emotional and intellectual stimulus distinct from the material use-value of the work."

Paul Mortier says baldly, and with cavalier reasoning "such a definition explains nothing!" He asks "What is that particular quality — can it be assessed objectively?" and says "No, because an intellectual and emotional stimulus is by its very nature subjective." This statement is shown to be meaningless when we consider the fact that a stimulus depends upon a stimulating object, and therefore must be to that extent objective.

Quoting from John Oldham, "If a musical composition is just an arrangement of notes which brings out fully the quality and beauty of the notes themselves, and which doesn't attempt to reproduce anything exactly from life, we can still admire it even though we are not great students of music." Paul Mortier says "Such a statement will bring ready applause from the art-for-art-sakers and the bourgeois press who are constantly hammering at us, etc. . . . to admire music which is just an arrangement of notes, etc. . . ."

I don't see why that makes the statement wrong. I say the statement should bring ready agreement, if not applause, from any thinking person, but apparently any statement acceptable to the art-for-art-sakers, etc., right or wrong — is not acceptable to Mortier, who says also that to have any (my emphasis) validity as art, music must mean something. I am curious to know, therefore, whether some of Bach's delightful arrangements of notes which merely bring out their quality and beauty, and which in some cases were intended as exercises to limber up the fingers, are excluded now, after so many years.

Paul Mortier says "John Oldham's confusion is revealed more clearly in the tail of his definition, 'as distinct from the material use-value of the works,' which Oldham exemplified by saying that one chair may have use-value plus art-value and another merely use-value. There is no confusion in this simple statement, and when Mortier says Oldham is perhaps suggesting that only such handicrafts have a use value, he is inferring that Oldham meant 'a novel, a painting or a symphony' have no use-value. This is an absurd piece of hop-step and jump reasoning. Oldham's statement merely calls for a necessary or expedient separation of the two qualities for the sake of clarity.

Paul Mortier's article has a one-sided approach coupled with an over-eagerness to find a hostile inference in Oldham's definition. If unfortunately Oldham's article led anybody to believe that he advocated formalism above other forms, it was because in advocating a broader approach to forms of art other than one's own particular conception, it is necessary to justify formalism at a particular period in the development of our art. Again, the hostile reader could easily jump to the hasty conclusion that because formalism or Picasso is the particular subject of the article, it is the particular love of the writer.

Len Fox justifies Kartun's statement "forty years of barren experimentation with form in which the most talented (modern) artists have indulged in their despair with the world in which they found themselves," by saying it depends on which way one interprets the statement. Taken in or out of context, Kartun's statement is open to criticism, for it does infer that the experiment "indulged in" by the most talented artists was barren. It is significant that Kartun recognises that these were "most talented" artists. It is precisely because of their success in enriching our knowledge and understanding of the scientific aspect of graphic expression by experiment that they are regarded as talented masters. We can't have it both ways; if an artist spends his life studying and experimenting with form successfully it is surely a sound contribution.

Len Fox's statement that "their experiment has largely been a negative one based on despair with the old world" is not wholly consistent with fact. It is true that we can find artists to fit this conjecture, but it is by no means the rule. There are dozens of crackpots and hopefuls still experimenting with perpetual motion, and some scientists and doctors spend their lives experimenting with apparently obscure problems. It is easy to criticise them for this if they don't discover anything, but their critics would be the first to claim them if they succeeded. The capitalist system, with its absurdities and injustices, has, by forcing experiment in order to survive, improved mechanical, industrial, medical and unfortunately war techniques. Why is it wrong, or incon-

sistent, when great discoveries are being made in all these fields, for some artists to do likewise in their field? Kartun is not even justified if Len Fox's interpretation of his statement (taken in context) is correct—viz., "attacks modern artists . . . because many of them have let a gap grow between themselves and ordinary people." In the graphic field, as in any other, the work of the craftsman in relation to the ordinary people depends largely on his capabilities. One of the most common fallacies about the man labelled "artist" is that he can interpret and draw anything and everything, get any effect demanded of him, and in any medium. Whether we revere, understand, or get-anything-out-of Picasso's work today does not alter the fact that for many years he has been concentrating on and experimenting with a form of art which is the antithesis of a popular, people's art (just as the scientist in sound radiation is the antithesis of the composer of popular jazz or patriotic songs). Isn't it a rather naive attitude to expect him, because he has joined the Communist Party, blithely to enter a field in which he would probably be at sea? It requires more than a social conviction to produce pictures which sing successfully the glories of the popular movement of France. This is the job of the artist whose natural tendency is to depict his social convictions and the aspirations of the people. There are scores of artists who do this far better than Picasso would. Picasso has shown where his loyalty is—and I think he is the best judge of his capabilities and his sphere in art.

Len Fox's reasoning is suspect when he quotes Oldham's quote that "like all first-rate artists, Picasso is above classification; he is, I think the spirit and moving force of our epoch" . . . and then assumes that this infers Picasso is above criticism. To assume this is a piece of loose thinking for the sake of gaining a point. If a man is said to be above classification, it does not follow, by any logical stretch of the imagination, that he is said to be above criticism. John Oldham was quoting from a progressive artist who has high standing in this community. He did not, I think, infer that he agreed with this rather extravagant assessment of Picasso's value, but quoted it to indicate the influence Picasso has exerted on many, if not most contemporary artists.

The foregoing arguments are not intended to suggest that Communist artists, or any others, should follow Picasso. But it is a plea for all Communists to understand the problems of the artist under capitalism — especially in their own country — and, if they don't, to avoid making statements which tend to alienate the artist sympathetic to our political and social ideals. That, I feel, was the moral behind Oldham's contribution.

Most artists in Australia are conditioned under the bourgeois conceptions of art, and to believe that these can be swept away by a phrase or two is entirely to underestimate the task; and, I believe,

incorrectly assumes that all art forms and art standards endorsed by bourgeois artists are bad.

It is our job to influence the trend of contemporary art in this country towards a realist approach, and to convince the contemporary artist that art is not the prerogative of the intellectual, or the depicting of beauty and happiness alone in a society where ugliness and viciousness are merely highlighted by those dubious little bits of beauty. But how are we to succeed if we tear down everybody else's standards like a bull in a frenzy? We destroy all the logical arguments we know we possess by using such ineffective methods.

Artists who are sympathetic on political issues, and who are beginning to understand our point of view on aesthetic issues, would be driven away if they read such a downright unqualified statement as *Pravda* editorial, reprinted under the heading "Soviet Fine Arts," in the *April Review*. The article infers that in the Soviet all forms of art other than social realism are frowned upon, and reviled. This may be so, and it may be expedient in the Soviet to be so downright, basing the attitude on their experience, conditions and needs; but it is by no means a justification for taking the article right out of context (we are not very cognisant of the art movements in the Soviet) and making a bald statement of it in the *Review*. The obvious inference is that since we reproduce it from *Pravda* we agree with it and suggest its application here under entirely different circumstances as correct (especially following the controversy over Picasso in recent *Reviews*). The statement that "Soviet realistic fine art is the most progressive art in the world. That is why it is acquiring, not accidentally, a noble high calling. The democratic public abroad speaks with admiration of the works of our masters, seeing in their works lofty themes and mature craftsmanship" does not apply here, although it may be correct for many other countries more centrally situated than we are. It is doubtful whether anybody in this country, progressive or otherwise, knows more than a few reproductions of recent Soviet works, let alone names of the Soviet masters mentioned. This is merely further evidence of the necessity for some expert commentary on such articles from *Pravda*. If we are to influence the contemporary artists of Australia towards realism, I think we should try to understand their conceptions of art thoroughly before we attack them. If we do, we are doubly armed. We can't tell artists what they should do, but we can and do expect them to listen to reason.

A work of mankind does not possess an art value except in relation to a man-made standard, and I suggest that any product of mankind which satisfies any of the mental and spiritual aspirations and needs of an individual has art value for him. On the intensity of its influence upon the individual will depend its art or aesthetic rating for him and on the number of people who react in the same favourable way to that product of man will depend its art rating for society.