A GENERAL DEMAND FOR ART

"Literally! We want not Literality. We want a Fair Price and Proportionate Value and a General Demand for Art."

—William Blake

O VERLAND'S slogan has always been, in part at any rate, "This Australian." But this doesn't mean that we are "Little Australians," par excellence imperialists or nationalists with an ingrowing collusiveness about our own traditions and life. The contrary, if it is needed, lies in the other half of the slogan: "Imperial Democracy." So culture exists in a vocation, and so the real function of education is to develop there must be inculcated with spirit is happening together with the broad democratic movement in our own country.

The democratic movement? What the hell is the democratic movement? And, specifically, how do you write a literary magazine with it?

These are necessary questions for anyone to ask. That's a lot harder to answer if we hadn't already published fourteen issues. If you look back through them you'll find many examples of bad writing and bad editorial, bad reasoning and dishonest misconception. But you'll also find that we have tried to say that the present claim of the Australian is that he has built a country where the dominant conviction has never died that authority must be challenged, opposition and discrimination opposed: a country where it has been asserted that progress is based on the sacrifice, example and aspirations of the common people; a country whose social dynamism is plebeian in origin and is, or should be, egalitarian in operation.

Therefore Overland has always sought to link itself with the labor movement. We have tried to find readers and supporters among working people, and contributors too. We have tried to promote a kind of two-way traffic between the vital movement on the one hand and "intellectuals" and middle-class people on the other, to the mutual advantage of both.

Put crudely, we would like to show trade unionists and politicians and anti-warists and others through whom you've dealt with many examples of bad writing and bad editorial, bad reasoning and dishonest misconception. The labor movement must fight for the principles of life and against those of waste, exploitation and destruction. It should fight more stubbornly, engendering a mood which tests it as formidable that beautiful cities and adequate education and accessible art-values should be regarded as utopian luxuries, while useless weapons and black Knight rockets and fighting wars are regarded as necessities...

One has only to turn to the record of the acts made by working-men in Australia a hundred years ago in the establishment of the "mues," the "art" institutions (see Janet Howard, "The Urban Tradition", Overland No. 8) to see that the men who pioneered the Australian labor movement regarded the arts as one of the most urgent and vital guises by which they and their class had to affirm, even if today their standing seems to have often been naive and utilitarian.

How tragically different today! All sections of the labor movement are gaps for new ideas, but not section it grasps them. The intellectual, he from the ranks of the working class or not, is generally despised and rejected; and, what is worse, misgirted. Probably no labor movement in the world has spurred ideas particularly new ideas, as the Australian labor movement has. The situation is vastly aggravated in this country by many factors. Some of them are Australian factors, such as the historical evolution of the "labor movement and the fact that we are a small country crab which is pointed, an overwhelming mass of capital and of culture "from abroad, thus preventing the development of creative art and critical thought. But most of the factors are common to many countries. With the steady automation and monotonous sameness of the mass-communication has gone what Berger calls a "debased Philistinism" which has prevailed the labor movement in every country. The enormous excitement of the creative arts, the enormous impact of the creative arts, is missing just where it is most needed.

This is no exhaustive analysis. There's much more, much more, and many qualifications lie to be made, no doubt, of the position as outlined. Solutions, as we've mentioned, are not found without discussion and forums for discussion.

So, since we're not complacent, and self-satisfied, and since we've not fragmented or dissolved, let's

* see Berger's important article "Art and the Community" in The New Reasoner. No. 8.
discuss these problems in terms of what is happening in Australia today.

What about the hostility of the labor movement to the intellectual. Who is at fault where, and what can be done about it?

What concrete ways are there to break down the hostility between the labor movement and the artist? And, since this is no alternative to direct support for art and artists from public bodies and governments outside the labor movement, how to achieve this as well? Some interesting ideas came from the questionnaire this magazine circulated to significant figures in the arts last year.

How can we promote good design and good taste in everyday life and in the schools? How to help people to see beauty in their life and in their living? What more powerful instrument of counter-attack against the dreadful cult of unreality and barbarous distortion of values represented by so many books, films, radio and TV programs, newspapers, furniture designers, house builders, and pap-merchant generally!

And when we ask for commitment for the artist, what does this mean? If you start asking for "commitment" in Literature, where do you end up? What is the real significance for us of the vast and real cultural upsurge in the Soviet Union, which Professor Manning Clark has drawn attention to in his recent articles? What is "reality" and what is "truth", in a given social and political situation?

To what extent can our writers and artists adequately grapple with this new country of ours? How much and how little should they seek to adopt and manipulate from overseas? What is the current reality in this country, anyway? In its history, its traditions, its attitudes, its present relative prosperity, it is a country and society quite unlike any seen before. But how different is it?

To what extent are artists, whether of left, right or centre, seeing it through distorting mirrors because of shrubbalettes, laziness, or plain lack of contact and sensitivity?

These questions, and the many more like them that could be asked, aren't high-faluting. On the level of an "engaged" art, the way forward lies in trying to answer them. And Overland exists to help that process.

“..."The strongest argument against modern mass entertainments is not that they debase taste—debasement can be alive and active—but that they over-excite it, eventually dull it, and finally kill it; that they "enervate" rather than "corrupt", in de Tocqueville’s phrase. They kill it at the nerve, and yet so bemuse and persuade their audience that the audience is almost entirely unable to look up and say, "But in fact this cake is made of sawdust."

Richard Hoggart: "The Uses of Literacy."