

# The Elusive Values:

## A study of contemporary artistic forms

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Perhaps the greatest paradox in modern art, popular or esoteric, is the gap between the sort of music and verse which expresses itself in breathless, banal statements (often, incidentally, employing a diluted version of the poetic diction of the Romantic poets of the last century), and the quiet, withdrawn, secret and mysterious world of Abstract Expressionism and atonal music. It is as if two kinds of art were constantly at cold war with one another, and as if neither knew what war they were fighting in or who were their enemies. There is no communication, either friendly or aggressive, and the reader, the listener, the looker at pictures seems to be in a state of siege which he or she has not chosen and is powerless to explain.

Since communications between these two different kinds of art seem to have broken down so painfully, we are left with the spectacle of a world where man seeks stimulus through art, yet is not prepared to admit that art is, in some sense, amenable to reason, and where most people believe that if you are 'with it', as the current phrase goes, you will be happy, accepted and fulfilled. The Beat poets appear to have taken this dubious credo to its logical conclusion when they seek peace in the oblivion provided by drugs and in a kind of pseudo-mysticism which has little to do either with discipline or God.

Are we then to conclude that this is a decadent, a dead age, a century which is suffering from *accidie* rather than from violence or masochism? I do not myself think so. In Action Painting, Beat Poetry, and so on, I see an attempt to be realistic and honest, and to achieve something which has nothing to do with nihilism or despair. If the old religious and aesthetic labels no longer fit, then it is for those who are articulate to find new ones. We must trace and explore the new developments in painting, sculpture, music and poetry. To put the whole complex matter in the slang of this time—saying 'I don't dig that' is the conversa-

tion of 'squares', and death to any clear or disinterested attempt at understanding or communication.

We may also feel a little hopeful when we remember that though the Nuclear Age is different in kind, as well as in degree, from any previous era, poetry and painting are still working through symbols and traditions which are not wholly strange to us. Thus, Action Painting is the logical conclusion of Surrealism, and Beat Poetry is a development from the Imagists, through Pound and William Carlos Williams. The more academic poets of today bear strong allegiances to the best of the Georgian poets (one thinks, in particular, of Philip Larkin's debts to Hardy's lyrics), while the nature poetry of Ted Hughes has something of the pulsating, instinctual quality of Lawrence's beast poems.

Popular music, exemplified by the weekly Hit Parade, while it displays immense vitality and versatility in the formulation of new dance rhythms, seems, when it is allied with words, banal and lifeless. The words of the songs which Cliff Richard or Adam Faith, for example, sing, owe more to Coward and Novello than to *West Side Story* or *My Fair Lady*. Where songs are really alive today, they tend to be imported from America; our own native tradition seems to be long since dead.

Pop Art, on the other hand, with its humour, gaiety and self-confidence, is essentially contemporary. Painters make their pictures from the familiar objects and images of daily life now—post-cards, labels, newspaper cuttings, advertisements, and so on. If private worlds are being made, then it is not by the Pop artists, but by the self-tormenting aesthetes such as Sutherland, Bacon and Lucien Freud, or the abstract expressionists whose chief influence is Jackson Pollock. Such painters as these, whether they use abstract or representational forms, seem to live in private rooms which are haunted by nameless horrors. Bacon's portraits are hair-raising, Lucien Freud's quite literally and deliberately set the spectator's teeth on edge. Pollock's abstracts often depict a kind of absolute sense of suffering. What all these very different painters have in common is, perhaps, an almost unwilling need to share and communicate their own horrors and hauntings; they have a love-hate relationship with their public, since the subtlety of torment, and the wish to depict it and demonstrate it, is very close to an exquisitely refined sense of pleasure.

In all these media, whether they take the form of Pop painting, Hit Parade songs, or Beat poems, the artistic criterion has been reduced to the personal answer to the question, 'Do I like this?' The enemies of

all forms of artistic expression deplore this situation, and they are surely right—though for the wrong reasons. If the value of a work of art depends merely on whether it pleases me here and now, then all reason, all sacredness, all ultimate aesthetic value is taken away both from artists and from their art. ‘I know what I like’—the old plea of the philistine—has become the implicit and accepted response to all art today which has no uncertainty, no mystery, no appeal which is not immediate, demanding and often crude.

The trouble is that we have lost our grip on traditions which once bore a real relationship to human feeling, experience and aspiration. The Hit Parade singer’s ‘I love you, The sky’s above you’ is a poor substitute for the starkness of the ballads or the directness of the Elizabethan theatre. The cultivation of despair, the artistic exploitation of nausea, nothingness, nihilism, the flight to drugs and drink—these things are reflections on our lives, not merely on our art. If art is the bodying forth, in rare and priceless symbols, of all that is most unique and most human in us, then our art, whatever medium it expresses itself in, must be neither banal, on the one hand, nor esoteric, on the other. Our much-exalted education must preserve and reclaim the sense of wonder, our eyes must not be glutted with cheap untruths, nor our ears with statements and songs which are an offence both to veracity and to passion. We must not be content with ‘knowing what we like’ but with trying to understand what we are, what life is, what man is, and how God deals with us, suffers with us, and lays upon us the responsibility not only of free-will but also of free happiness or free self-destruction. As David Gascoyne once said of the atom bomb, ‘an experience like this is an event in human consciousness.’ It is, thus, in our *minds*, not simply on this tangible planet, that the fact of the nuclear bomb has its existence and potency.

But, as I have suggested already, there are signs of hope. Some of the best Beat Poetry has, rather paradoxically, recaptured not only vividness and originality of metaphor and symbol, but also eloquence and beauty of phrase. Perhaps Gregory Corso is the most gifted of the Beats. His best poems have a childlike nakedness and directness; he captures a complex mood in a phrase, an image, a picture. He expresses yet does not exploit his emotions, and they are always viable in the public world. Here are a few examples:

Death weeps because death is human  
 spending all day in a movie when a child dies.  
(Three)

Leonardo paces his unbearable room  
 . . . holds an arrogant eye on die-hard snow.  
 Raffaello steps into a warm bath  
 . . . his long silken hair is dry  
 because of lack of sun.  
 Aretino remembers spring in Milan; his mother,  
 who now, on sweet Milanese hills, sleeps.  
 No sign of Spring! No sign!  
 Ah, Botticelli opens the door of his studio.  
(*Botticelli's 'Spring'*)

This loving care for the past, this delicate and consummately skilful handling of a few evocative phrases and rhythms seem even more remarkable when we remember their origins. The Beat credo is to opt out of life, to have no opinions, to make use of the stimulus of jazz, drugs and drink. It is strange indeed that such art as Corso's should spring from such a way of life. Non-commitment clearly has its own virtues.

From an entirely different world, the poems of the successful and popular young Russian poet, Yevtushenko, have this same childlike, delicate, innocent quality, a quality which has more to do with character than with aesthetics. As in Corso's work, there is no sentimentality, largely because there is no attempt at sophistication, and sentimentality usually arises from a tarnished sophistication. Here is part of one of Yevtushenko's best short poems, *Waiting*. Its restraint is most tender and effective:

In from the pouring dark, from the pitch night  
 without stopping to bang the taxi door  
 she'll run upstairs through the decaying porch  
 burning with love and love's happiness,  
 she'll run dripping upstairs, she won't knock,  
 will take my head in her hands,  
 and when she drops her overcoat on a chair,  
 it will slide to the floor in a blue heap.

It is cheering and invigorating to know that Yevtushenko's books of poems have sold many thousands of copies in Russia, and that he himself has given immensely successful readings in factories and elsewhere.

From the Beat world of America, then, and from the orthodox Communist world of Soviet Russia, a similar kind of poetry would appear to be issuing. It is a verse based on the fairly free expression of deeply personal experience, and it is an art which values supremely the

polished phrase, the precise and brief containment of feeling. No tricks are played on the reader or listener; he is not forced into the horrors of a private, sealed-off world (as in the paintings of Bacon or Lucien Freud), but rather invited to participate in the artist's most natural impulses, to compare them with his own, and to find pleasure in similarities.

Pop art is also doing something of this, though its appeal is much slicker, more superficial, more dependent on easy sophistication and a rather glib smartness. But the great lack in our art and in our attitudes to art today is a sense of values. To deplore this state of affairs negatively is worse than useless; to exhort artists to return to traditional forms, so that we can apply our old values in relation to them, is stupid as well as pointless. It is a truism that art is always on the move; even when it repeats or re-examines older methods and movements, it is never stationary. The only still centre that art knows is our quiet contemplation of it, and we can only contemplate calmly when our values are settled and when our emotions are not at odds with our reason. Today, there is a definite dislocation between the two, and it is *this*, I venture to suggest, that art itself is expressing. 'Timeless', 'moving'—words like these are counters which have lost their value.

It seems, then, that our education today must teach us something more complex than a rule-of-thumb moral system and a scheme of values based on the idea of the Beautiful. We have got to learn and to teach which of our many kinds of fragmentary and partial art has most relevance to the present time and contains most truth beyond the mere moment. To retreat either into drugs, coterie art, or a series of symbols based on arousing a half-pleasurable horror, is an admission of failure—though it is probably the kind of failure that must occur before a more human, more direct, more faithful, humble and communicable art can be constructed.

Out of all our complexities, we have somehow got to find a simplicity which is based on innocence rather than on slickness, commercialism, or the fruitless exploration of the subconscious. And, perhaps more than anything else, we need to encourage the idea that all men are artists in some form or another. Abstract painting is based on a natural feeling for form, colour and design. It is not chance that the earliest painters in human history used an iconography based on stylization. And finally, we all need to lose our fear of images and symbols. Personal style, in any art, is not self-expression but a fresh formulation, arrangement and presentation of symbols. Simply because these symbols are not aesthetic-

ally autonomous, we must re-examine all the values which we apply to the daily events and actions of life *before* we make these values form relationships with artistic media, signs and images. These signs and images have a delicacy in this dislocated age which sometimes seems to be beyond the endurance both of art and of artists. Yet only an honest sense and application of useful values can preserve their meaning and integrity. And the whole painful responsibility for this is by no means only with the artists.

## Heard and Seen

### ENLIGHTENMENT:

The peculiar and precarious balance between elegance and brutality which is the hall-mark of the eighteenth century took many forms, varying widely according to country and society; but basically the intelligence, the vitality and the ruthlessness inherent in its self-confidence are instantly recognisable, whether in Versailles or the vernacular. By one of those curious coincidences endemic in the muddle of the film-exhibitor's world, adaptations of two of the great classics of the period have reached the London screens within a few weeks of each other this summer, one British, the other French.

Fielding's *Tom Jones* appears in a full-blooded Woodfall production, directed very much in the mid-century manner by Tony Richardson from a first-class script by John Osborne, in variable but, on the whole, beautiful Eastman Colour adorning the camera work of one of Britain's best operators, Walter Lassally, and a score by John Addinsell. *Optimus quisque*, as you will note. The coruscating collection of stars studding the cast list means, in the event, that even the smallest parts are so well acted that the whole film has a homogeneity of style that is only too rare in historical pictures. Voltaire's *Candide*, on the other hand, retains its eighteenth century style but not its manner in the modern version directed, produced, adapted and scripted by Norbert Carbonnaux. Though to be sure this black and white picture begins neatly enough by getting the best of both worlds (even if neither is demonstrably the best of all possible ones) with its credit titles set wittily against dissolving *toile de Jouy* backgrounds; moreover the film opens with a fancy dress dance for Cunegonde in which everybody (except Candide himself) makes a first appearance in eighteenth century costume. This, in a way, makes Jean-Pierre Cassel's brief appearance