

ly subverted the notion that art--whatever it is--somehow resides in the object. While it's true that some did, Smithson or Kosuth for example, I don't think that the intervening years have proved that partial victory to be stable. By the same method which the early conceptualists used to de-reify art, we have now marketable objects. That attack flopped in the face of the ruling systems of production. In Oppenheim's show for instance, many works were proudly lent to the exhibition by their owners--works possessed as entirely as any painting. Conceptual art has become the art which is as thoroughly reified and object-centred as the art of the past, while at the same time proclaiming its supposed radical freedom. An art of baloney in chains. The actual economics have proved stronger than the first naive attack which artists made. But the old argument about reification being an evil process--is it true? I don't think it's that simple anymore. In exteriorizing anything, any intention, any desire, we must reify it.

Although this sets up a situation which can be easily manipulated in ways we're all somewhat aware of, the process of exteriorizing/reifying makes it possible to view the once entirely personal as "other;" through the process of its reification, a transcendence of self is possible. And as Marcuse has pointed out insistently, critique is possible only when transcendence is possible. Transcendence is the critique of positivism. The object, the words of a conversation, the memory (however distorted) of a past become a foundation upon which we can build, while simultaneously undertaking repairs.

Certainly it's an error to mistake the art for the object, but the art is not the intention either. The structure of art is its own history--which has always manifested itself through objects. I think that what has happened in our society is that the object-hood of art has become alarming to us because the economic relations of that society--internalized as a whole apparatus for interacting with the world--has laid all the weight on that one aspect. The scales are unbalanced; and they will not change easily.

Andy Patton

#### A.C.T. at OPTICA: REPLY

In his essay in the September 28th edition of Artists Review (A.C.T. at OPTICA), Philip Monk wears the hot colours of an engaged critic, defending certain developments in contemporary painting, including the work represented in the exhibition for which the essay was originally written, and castigating conventions and attitudes he perceives to be used up and worn out. For this he deserves our attention; critics warmed by commitment, and willing to justify their basis or choice, are rare.

Monk is unequivocal about his artistic preferences. Over sensibility he affirms methodology, over subjectivity objectivity. More particularly, he affirms a systematic kind of painting that espouses a "dialectical interaction with materiality (or its equiva-

lents in paintings - surface, structure, context and systems of ordering"). That is to say he writes as an apologist for a conception of art that is not only highly rational, but also inconsistent on the conscious suppression of will and impulse in favour of prescribed rules for procedure based on controlled chance and other sorts of programming. The work of Ric Evans, John Howlin, Robert McNealy and Sam Perepelkin, the artists represented in the exhibition, is seen to be of this persuasion. However, the rationalism Monk attributes to these artists is not shared by the majority of Toronto painters and their audience. For the latter, colour blooms for its own sensual sake (rather than for reasonable purposes, such as coding or spatial clarity); personal expression is the aim and the accolade; and the philosophical underpinning is metaphysical.

Monk argues that the so-called formalist tradition into which this sort of painting falls is depleted and suspect. More often than not it produces painting representing no more than the decorative husk of what was once vital and compelling. By way of explanation, he writes that "both subjects - artist and spectator - have been formed by a specific historical reading and by the social conditions of modernist art in general and the Toronto art scene in particular in its capitalist milieu."

Monk's aesthetic is highly principled. It is governed by a rigorous objectivism reinforced by a Marxist-based understanding (he quotes both Marx and Lukacs) of art as an activity definable in sociological terms. His favouring of objectivism in art cannot be faulted, nor his view, now widely accepted by even the most romantic artists, that art is in certain ways shaped by social circumstances. But what is one to think when he draws on these, to reach conclusions about artistic excellence, as when he asserts that works of art that reject expression and subjectivity in their intention and execution have a validity which other works lack because they more truthfully "serve knowledge of the objective conditions of reality." Is this an argument for the logical evaluation of art by dialectical and sociological means?

I believe it is. Moreover, I believe it is misguided. Not even Arnold Hauser wished to argue from such a platform, for as he came to realize the appreciation of excellence ultimately depends on inevitably vague criteria to do with creative handling. In other words, on standards having little to do with personal philosophies, good intentions or dialectical inquiry, but everything to do with the infinite complexity of the artistic process. One need only to reflect on history. The emergence of Courbet and realism, for example, in no way undermines the quality of Delacroix's work of the same moment. And Tatlin's innovations with abstract constructions in no way devalue Malevich's preceding, and very different, experiments with abstraction in painting.

That much painting done under the label of formalism is specious, is not to be doubted; nor that more interest could be paid to work that is avowedly objective in outlook. But to argue that the results of one must necessarily be superior to the results of the other for dialectical reasons is to apply an objective methodology with insufficient attention to the nature of art.

John O'Brian

Reply to John O'Brian

John O'Brian has replied to the reprint of my catalogue essay (A.C.T. at Optica). The polemical thrust of the essay demanded a response. Given the nature of art and criticism in Toronto, present writing can only be polemical, and given the nature of the catalogue essay -- to be a short introduction to the work of the four artists (not an apology for these four artists specifically) -- the writing fell into a rhetorical structure appropriate to the mode. One issue O'Brian analyzes is my "aesthetic" which he calls "highly principled. It is governed by a rigorous objectivism reinforced by a Marxist-based understanding (he quotes both Marx and Lukács) of art as an activity definable in sociological terms." I might wonder what distinction can be made between an aesthetic and a critical activity since it was the latter in which I was engaged. My aesthetic response is one thing, my critical response another. O'Brian, on his part, confirms the "nature of art" conceived through historical reflection. Yet a rigorous, rather than laissez-faire, attitude towards history is a critical tool for understanding art within the totality of its context.

I do not deny the specific nature of the experience of art in the mutual engagement and responsiveness of the work and the spectator. I do assert, however, that at a certain moment one can question the underlying assumptions, the unconscious motives in art as in any other experience: art is not a privileged site for our experience. We might ask what are some of the non-artistic conditions that infiltrate art's own formal laws and techniques. This is an enterprise Theodor Adorno has carried through in another abstract art, that of music. Of this art, Adorno wrote that "he [Adorno] could not deceive himself into thinking that this art--in which he had been schooled--was even in its pure and uncompromising form excluded from such an all-dominating materialization. For precisely in its endeavor to defend its integrity, music produces within itself traits of that very nature against which it struggles." Two points are important here: firstly, that an abstract art is capable of sustaining this type of analysis; and, secondly, that this analysis was necessary for one who was trained in this art and which art was the compelling musical form for his experience.

Furthermore, I assert that this critical activity is not a sociological enterprise which becomes either vulgar Marxism or an analysis divorced from the specific history and context of the object under discussion as in Tom Wolfe's journalistic wanderings through art. The formal means of abstract art undergo an analysis not only the content. This is not a formal analysis per se as we know it, but an analysis of unconscious content in form. Art absorbs into itself, in its concrete object, or in the creative aesthetic of the artist, or in the acceptance, understanding or interpretation of the spectator, the specific or overdetermined contradictions of a period. For example, we all know the analysis that Clement Greenberg made of modernist painting based on the philosopher Kant's

self-critical activity. In 1965, Greenberg wrote:

*The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize itself -- not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. Kant used logic to establish the limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old jurisdiction, logic was left in all the more secure possession of what remained to it.*

Yet, what if Kant's turning logic upon itself resulted in methodology alone and empty formalism, and how did this correspond to the historical context in other domains? Modernist painting, as compelling as the argument and enterprise was, has revealed itself to be empty formalism - no matter what ethical argument Michael Fried was able to muster for it. In terms of philosophy, Adorno has suggested that it was the sciences that compelled philosophy to turn into a formal science itself. Philosophy without "substantive insight (must) confine itself to the methodology of science, call that philosophy, and virtually cross itself out." Modernist painting indeed has crossed itself out and with its doctrinal interpretation crossed out the content of that abstract art with a subject matter.

What were the limiting conditions of Kant's thought in a period that has determined what is still our general aesthetic? I quote Fredric Jameson since he sums up the matter and relation succinctly for my purposes:

*According to Kant, the mind can understand everything about external reality except the incomprehensible and contingent fact of its existence in the first place; it can deal exhaustively with its own perceptions of reality without ever being able to come to terms with noumena, or with the things-in-themselves. For Lukacs, however, this dilemma of classical philosophy, to which Kant's system is a monument, derives from an even more fundamental, prephilosophical attitude toward the world which is ultimately socio-economic in character: namely from the tendency of the middle classes to understand our relationship to external objects (and consequently our knowledge of these objects) in static and contemplative fashion. It is as though our primary relationship to the things of the outside world were not one of making or use, but rather that of a motionless gaze, in a moment of time suspended, across a gap which it subsequently becomes impossible for thought to bridge.*

This is the moment of Greenberg's aesthetic. The quotation explains how Greenberg can discuss the aesthetic experience, as he has recently, as "cognitiveness without cognition," that is, a structure of cognition without any content for cognition. Similarly, it explains Michael Fried's "static and contemplative" relation to the contextless work of art. In his polemic

against literalist art (i.e., so-called Minimalist art), he stated that:

*This preoccupation [with the duration of experience in literalist art] marks a profound difference between literalist work and modernist painting and sculpture. It is as though one's experience of the latter has no duration -- not because one in fact experiences a picture by Noland or Olitski or a sculpture by David Smith or Caro in no time at all, but because at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest. . . . It is this continuousness and entire presentness, amounting to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness.*

Fried's concentration on presentness and instantaneousness is that example of "a motionless gaze, in a moment of time suspended." His is a consciousness unable to engage the work of art in a reality in which it has a context. He therefore can talk of quality, taste, excellence, aspects of a work that come into existence from a privileged approach to the work of art.

Minimal art, itself, is not far removed from the same critique that is made of modernist art. It too eschews content on the basis of presentness although presentness of another temporal dimension. Adorno's comments on substantive philosophy are appropriate in relation to Minimal art and an art based on phenomenology: "Where present philosophy deals with anything substantive at all, it lapses either into the randomness of a weltanschauung or into that formalism, that 'matter of indifference', against which Hegel had risen. There is historical evidence of this in the evolution of phenomenology, which once was animated by the need for contents and became an invocation of being, a repudiation of any content as unclean."

On the objective rationality of my criticism or of the work in the exhibition, I admit the rational appearance of the art under discussion. (I do not, by the way, find these artists to be the visual correlative to the best of contemporary thought.) The examples of my quotations from Sol LeWitt, however, unmask this dependency on rationality. In my essay, I quoted LeWitt's negative statement that "rational judgements lead to rational judgements" and the sentence in the original statement before this, which I did not quote, read: "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists." My whole last paragraph disputes a rational totality. The concluding sentence, "Rather than treating the world as a totality in identity with the human subject, the present work pursues reality in a non-identical and discontinuous manner," may be taken as an implicit measure to judge the works in the exhibition. At any rate, it is a statement of my critical intent -- which is not an "argument for the logical evaluation of art by dialectical and sociological means" (O'Brian).

My views on subjectivity and objectivity are expressed in the current issue of Parachute (no. 12) and need not be rehearsed here. The analysis there concerned the contemporary

critique of subjectivity as leading to the notion of the centered subject or ego and a transcendental consciousness. An historical analysis of subjectivity in relation to Romanticism also might be made since O'Brian raises the question of "quality" and "excellence" in relation to a Romantic artist, Delacroix. The necessity of Romanticism and subjectivity can be seen historically. How did the defeat of the revolutionary hopes after 1815 and the betrayal of the revolution in the Restoration and bourgeois reaction necessitate the removal to the mental world from the actual world of revolutionary action? In other words, how do we explain the subjectivity of Romanticism in terms of the alienation of the artist? We cannot separate this question from the notion of the Romantic artist's "artistic excellence."

What I concern myself with, or hope to, in my criticism is what is possible given our present historical reality. And because our art is predominantly abstract with its own seeming laws, artists should not forget the historical dimension of their lived experience or creative activity. I show in a review in this issue that Fabio Mauri follows one direction possible in contemporary art. Rather than the artist creating myths (the Romantic stance; and the modernist conception of phenomenological essence is only an abstraction of this idea of origin, a conception which we find in recent sculpture especially), the artist is engaged in demystification. It is a question of ideology, of that which forms the limits of our experience, the limits within which we conceive the "nature of art," as O'Brian states the term. If I am to be an apologist, it is for an art that concerns itself with substantive content (and this is not contentful formalism) and a newly established relationship to a public, a hermeneutic situation of which I perceive the possibility in art today.

Philip Monk

Name	_____
Address	_____
City	Prov. _____
Postal Code	_____
Individual	_____ (\$10.00)
Institution	_____ (\$20.00)
Send to:	Artists Review 424 Wellington Street West Toronto, Ontario M5V 1E3