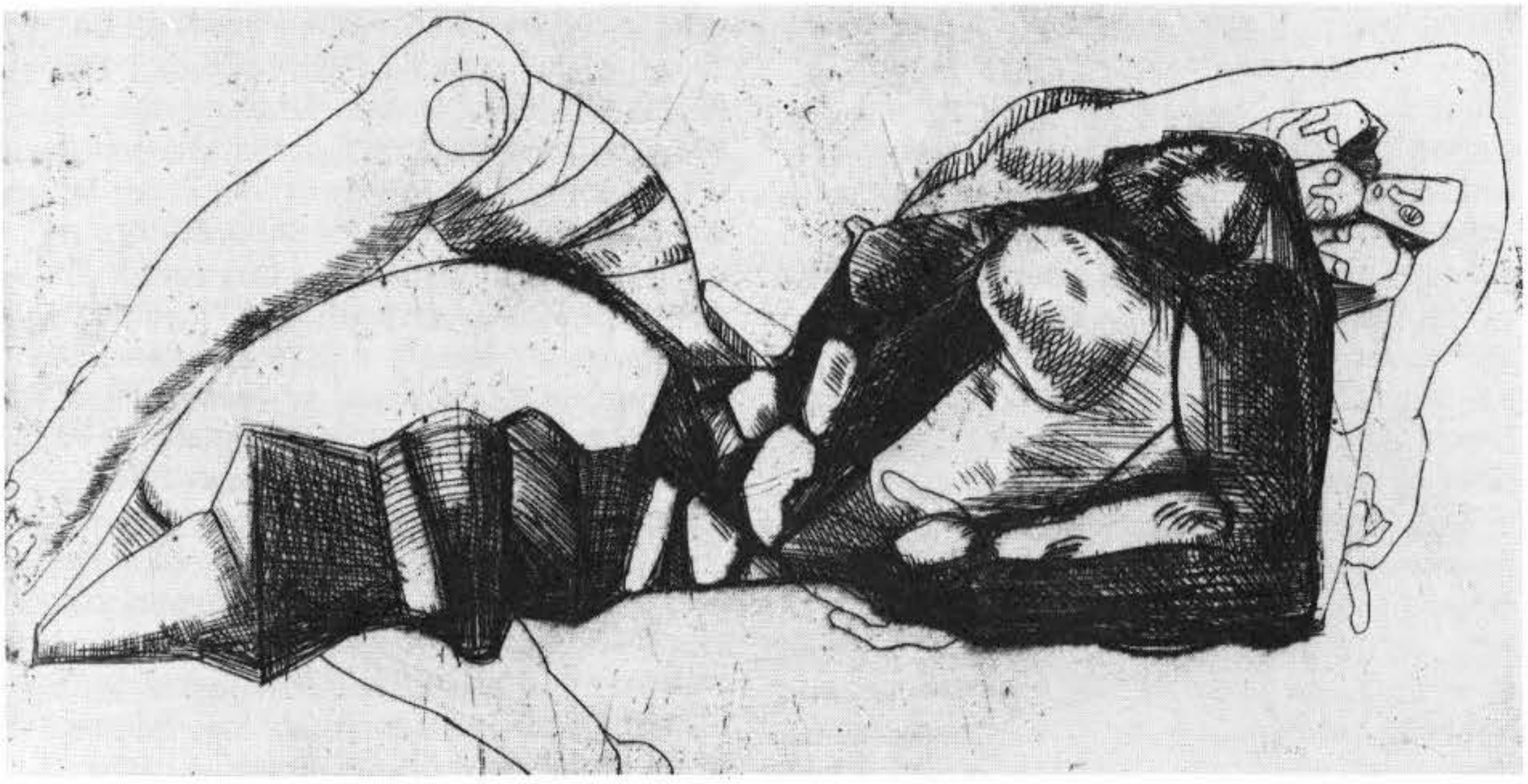
КОММЕНАРИИ ПО ПОВОДУ ПРЕДСТАВЛЕННЫХ РАБОТ

COMMENT ON THE PAPERS
by Stefan Morawski

No marxist could deny the relevance or the force of the argument made by Epifanio San Juan's paper. Its postulate and the normative judgment that follows seem to me irrefutable. Art is certainly implicated in the tensions of class struggle, and art should therefore become consciously engaged.

A one-sidedness occurs in San Juan's exposition, however, which is due to just its passionately militant character. The framework of marxist criticism is in my view much broader and richer than is encompassed here. In this sense, I would wish to add some reservations to the San Juan paper whether at the outset or perhaps better at its end. My first reservation would link with his own able exposition of the notion that "art cannot be divorced from the social praxis." One must ask whether a manifest political engagement is a principle applicable for all historical situations. In particular does this mode of commitment prove most wise—and if so, how?—outside the Third World, where admittedly the class struggles are intense and heightened and so consuming that the artist's role within the socio-political context becomes much more significant. I find that in the rest of the (non-socialist) world the artist's political engagement where it occurs is indirect and counter-alienational. It appears as a kind of criticism of our civilization and culture on grounds of defunct values that have not been superseded. Alas, I must add that in the socialist countries the artists are prevented from expressing their political dedication freely. Neither in the Soviet Union nor in China are artists allowed, as envisioned by Marx, to functon as the partners and co-builders in a genuine socialist democracy.

I have a second major reservation, not unrelated: the San Juan paper exalts the functional approach to the degree that the genetic analysis, the explanation of why artists in the Third World adopt one or another approach, is almost wholly omitted. He cites three alternatives which are however by no means exhaustive; and much more needs to be said about their context and suppositions. I do not believe the genetic approach to the problem would lead San Juan to become more tolerant and indulgent. And, indeed, I share his militant norm with respect to Third World artists. But a genetic attention would result in more understanding for the positions of Villa, Senghor, and others. This explanatory attitude would no doubt also lead to modification in his functional approach, for from the interplay of the two approaches would appear certain merits that adhere to even a mystified humanistic protest against a particular evil. For instance, it's simplistic to regard acclaim for the principles of "negritude" or "the mystery of creation" as mere reactionary and imperialist-influenced thought. One might more effectively find in them a rebellion which has become distorted. San Juan mistakenly appears to believe that his normative judgment, which is justified—surely today's artists ought to realize that their place should be



Drawings and Prints by Ernst Neizvestny, Soviet sculptor. Courtesy: The New York Cultural Center.

consciously at the side of the working people of the Third World—can properly lead to a wholesale rejection and abandonment of all other artistic attitudes. That slogan of politics, "who is not with us is against us," applies most awkwardly in the aesthetic domain. This is even true at a time of fierce fighting for national and social liberation.

A third and last reservation: San Juan does not say what values are provided by the poetry of Jose Garcia Villa. While one may demand an openly engaged, political art in the given historical moment, any marxist scholar will also be obliged to lay bare the work's dialectical antinomy between Its ideological and its strictly aesthetic counter-alienational components. One must say that only the greatest artistic masters have managed to benefit their art when they have directly espoused the socialist cause. Much more commonly, what is gained by the artist in social ideological merit is at the cost of a loss on the creative side; and the reverse is often also true.

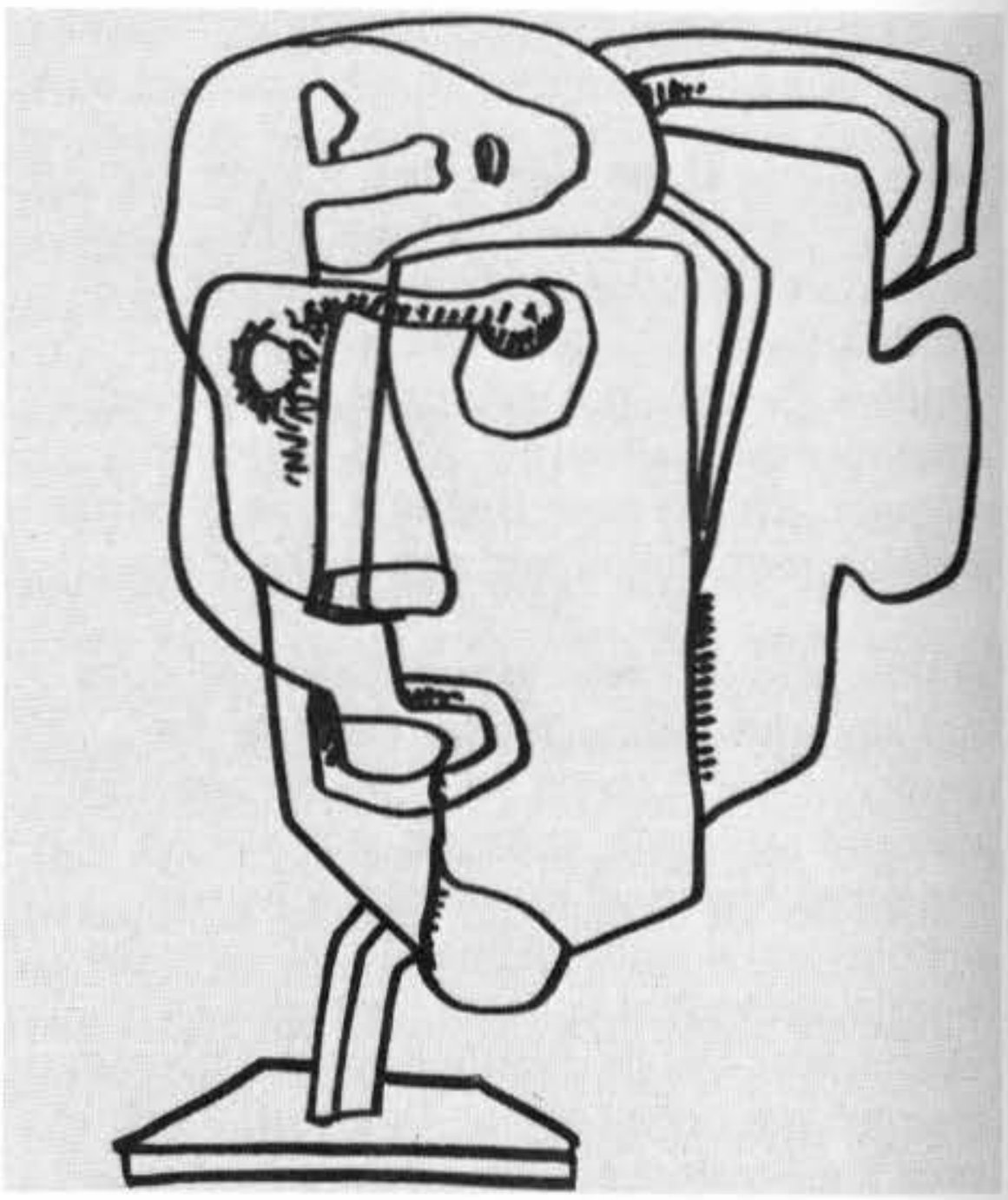
Coming to Norman Rudich's paper, I have a quarrel not with certain omissions but with some statements. There is no univocal treatment of the value of the aesthetic in the marxist tradition. Indeed, the treatments range from on one side the reduction of aesthetic values to their ideological content, to on the other side the identification of the aesthetic domain with a "concrete utopia" (Ernst Bloch's term). Rudich more closely approximates the latter tendency, and my sympathies go that way also. But I believe it is mere arbitrariness to regard the aesthetic realm as providing the freedom of man's species-essence. Rudich's distinctions (labor: power; science: knowledge; art: freedom) seem very tempting at first glance, but marxist scholarship raises several objections. (a) Freedom, in the Marxian and marxist world view, is expressive of man's ideal as a total social being; (b) the full, rich human essence has to be realized and embodied in the aesthetic realm but also in other domains; (c) many persons will doubt whether art, as we know it and Rudich discusses it, will last until communism when any and all labor should or could be creative (Marx is rather vague about this future). In a word, Rudich misleadingly compartmentalizes the Marxian notion, and this confuses the idea of disalienation, which in turn does have a direct and close relation with the notion of freedom as the human goal.

Where Rudich emphasizes the generic subject, he stands centrally in the marxist tradition. I believe the notion has been much more amply and penetratingly analyzed by Caudwell and Lukács than by Girnus, quoted here. But given this fundamental premise of the artist as generic subject, I do not understand the sudden fixing, in Rudich's next pages, on politics as the central dimension and channel through which is expressed one's "achieved humanity." First, if artists do in fact achieve objectification as "subjects transcending themselves historically," one should

calmly and with great care analyze the ways (how different they may be!) in which this process occurs. And the little Joyces and Kafkas should be treated more seriously, without an à priori contempt and condemnation; they should be regarded as among the possible productions of an alienated time and of the revulsion against it. Second, Joyce and Kafka, who did not produce a socialist art, should be considered at least equal to Brecht, O'Casey, or Neruda from the standpoint of their "achieved humanity," that is, in their challenge to the bourgeois world, in their grasp of its evils, in their *No!* which resounds at least as strongly as Aragon's *Yes*. To put it another way, "the true innovators" cannot be graded according to a limited, political yardstick, nor by a positive ideological response to the marxist world view. There is innovation and innovation. To cut off (with whatever praise) Joyce and Kafka from this domain is to make of marxist criticism a caricature. The realm of art is *polyvalent*—one can readily admit that in some historical moments, Brecht's message and appeal is unquestionably more important and far-reaching than, say, Kafka's. But from this circumstance no one may conclude that Kafka's work is bereft of enduring artistic and humanistic values. For this reason, Rudich's final rejection of Ionesco and Faulkner seems to me a sheer incomprehension of the intricate, complex struggle which the contemporary artists wage in a world riven with contradictions. We enjoy an invaluable, immortal heritage of the contribution of the classics from Aeschylus until Goethe, but it is also the case that for us living today, Ionesco, Faulkner, and Beckett matter much more than do these classics. Each of them gives drama to a struggle—undoubtedly mystified, from the marxist standpoint, and yet poignant and artistically ingenious—against the decadent bourgeois culture of our days. Their catastrophism or pessimism, their clever play with reality, bear witness to the inhumanities of this century, the problems and conflicts of which cannot be faced through Rabelais or Shakespeare unless these old masters are modernized.

In sum, I must say that Rudich does not satisfactorily define the peculiarities of aesthetic value from the marxist standpoint, and his sudden leap from the generic-humanistic equivalent of art to its political engagement seems, by his own premises, to be unwarranted.

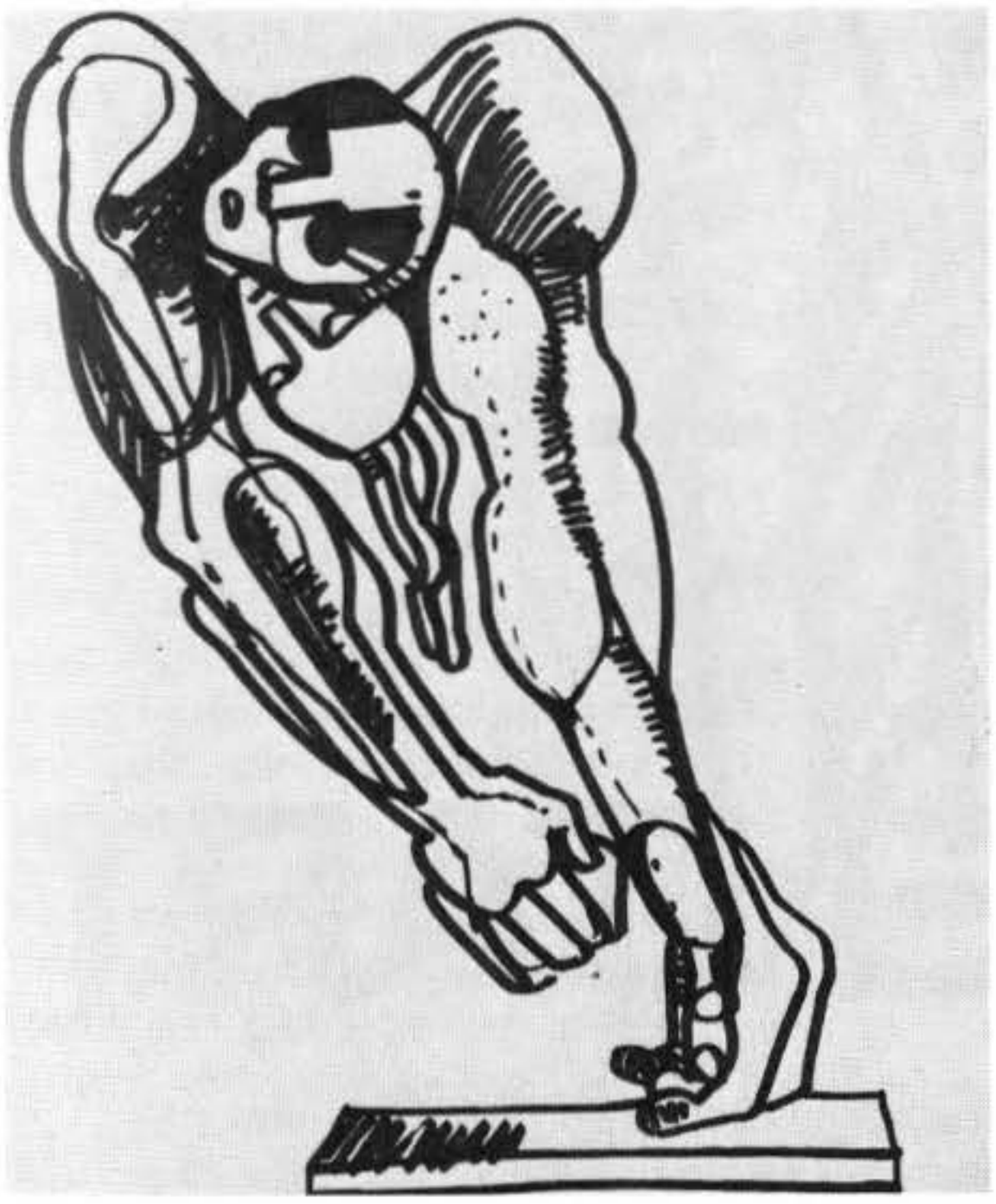
George Dickie's comments show that he has largely misunderstood me, particularly the last two sections of my paper. Let me reformulate, on the strategic plane, the aim and line of reasoning in my paper. I turn in my last section to the *functional* aspect of the avant-garde. What precedes this part (which is admittedly rather sketchy) is a treatment of the *structural* aspect—but the *problem* tackled is no different. As I use the functional approach it is a marxist description, as Professor Dickie has observed in emphasizing my attention to the interface of happenings and conceptual art and the class conflicts in present-day societies. In other words, in the one section of my paper where I do take up the functional aspect of today's avant-garde, I unmistakably discuss its socially symptomatic character in a way which is in the



Drawings and Prints by Ernst Neizvestny, Soviet sculptor. Courtesy: The New York Cultural Center.

marxist tradition; and it is superfluous and unhelpful, in my view, to assert in every section of every paper one writes one's unifying methodological premises and general philosophical foundations. Professor Dickie will surely agree that this is an uncalled-for demand upon a line of argument. It would make a coherent attention to problems and topics impossible. I should perhaps add that I see no conflict between empirical, structural analysis of a problem and a marxist framework; while the framework need not always be foremost.

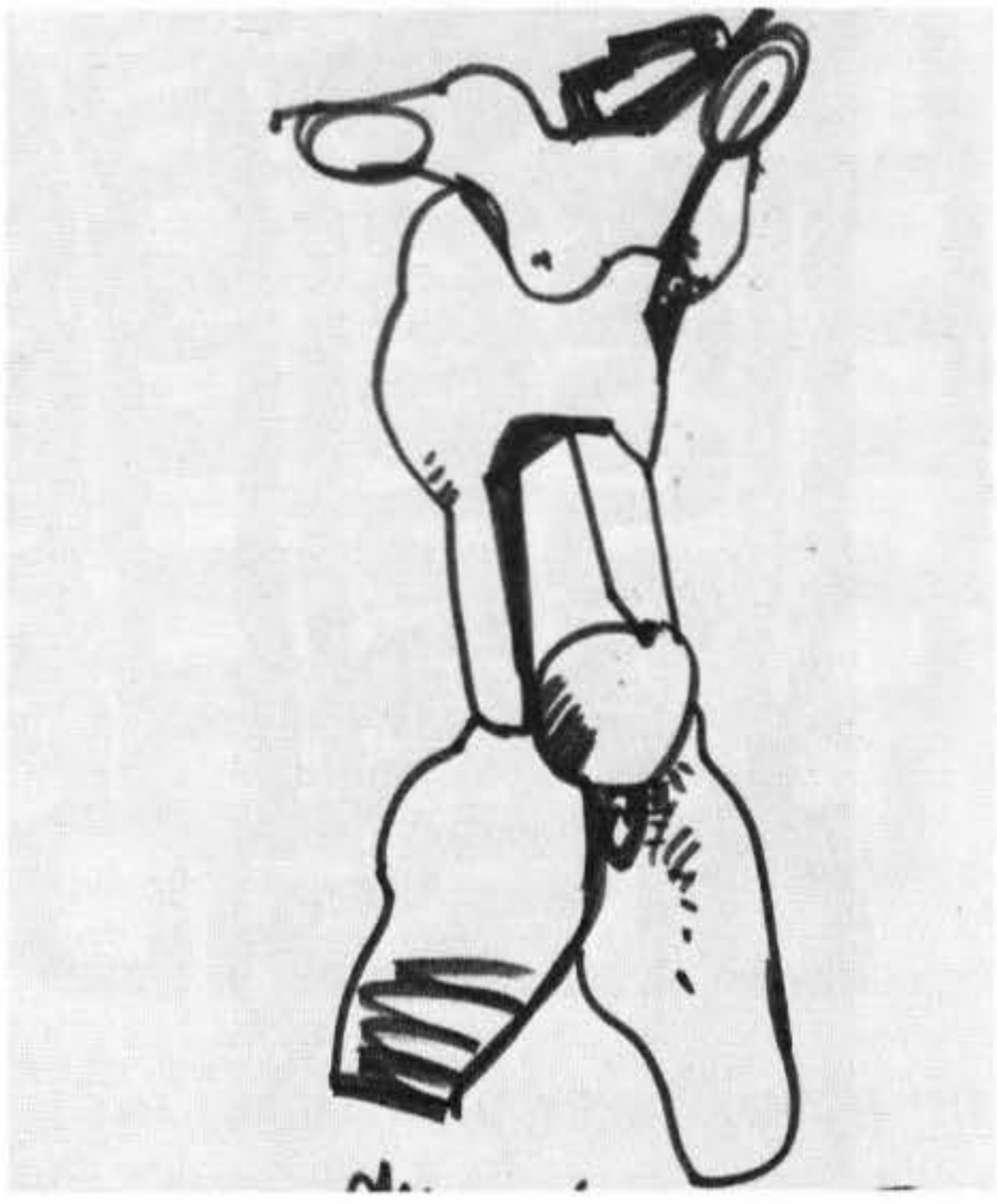
Yet there seems to be a difficulty in accepting my findings. I have not made my argument that happenings and idea art evince a rebellious function in the social dimension. How can we know that this is at any rate their intention? By reading—as not everyone seems to have done—the many and explicit manifestoes of these tendencies. Beyond the intention is the artistic practice. Especially the French and West German happenings are positively eschatological in their rejection of the existing world. They continue the tradition of dada and surrealism, which of course were social-revolutionary in thought. Idea art, at first glance, might seem to embody only an artistic, intellectual rebellion. But I see in it also an embodiment of despair over the problematic character of the artist's activity, as society has come to contain the artist.



Drawings and Prints by Ernst Neizvestny, Soviet sculptor. Courtesy: The New York Cultural Center.

There is also a strong parallelism between the happenings and the tendencies of the youth subculture. It may be that as an outside observer I'm differently sensitive and responsive to the happenings development in America: I see it as a cunning effort to lift post-industrial civilization into a category of play. Its acceptance of this alienated reality is only seeming, its attention to junk, anomie, homogeneity, accidentality, and the like, when matrixed with playfulness as it is, is witness to an attitude of concern and of underlying refusal.

Certainly Dickie is mistaken when he thinks I look for or require a direct correlation of the recent avant-garde with class conflicts. In a way, Dickie's is the mirror-reverse of the expectation stated by San Juan. However, I indicate no more than that the post-industrial societies, deeply laced with conflicts, stimulate their artists to rebel, in ways which are not only artistic but also social. And how does Professor Dickie think that the new phenomena of culture can arise, and have their effect, entirely in the realm of the arts and without a wider human and social reach? A broad civilizational understanding is required. Precisely this need led me, as a marxist, to inquire whether the avant-garde's iconoclasm was not more than only artistic. If Dickie wishes to argue on behalf of the sheer aesthetic autonomy of recent developments I should like to read his argument; but I think it cannot be done.



Drawings and Prints by Ernst Neizvestny, Soviet sculptor. Courtesy: The New York Cultural Center.

The final section of my paper is much too brief but I wanted at least to hint at the marxist utopian vision, and to suggest its correlations with the vision of the recent avant-garde. I did not fully identify my own position with any single speculation of Marx (or of these artists), and I thought I made that clear. To do justice to all these problems requires another, much more ample essay. □