СМЕЛОСТЬ И ПАРАДОКС СОВРЕМЕННОГО АВАНГАРДА

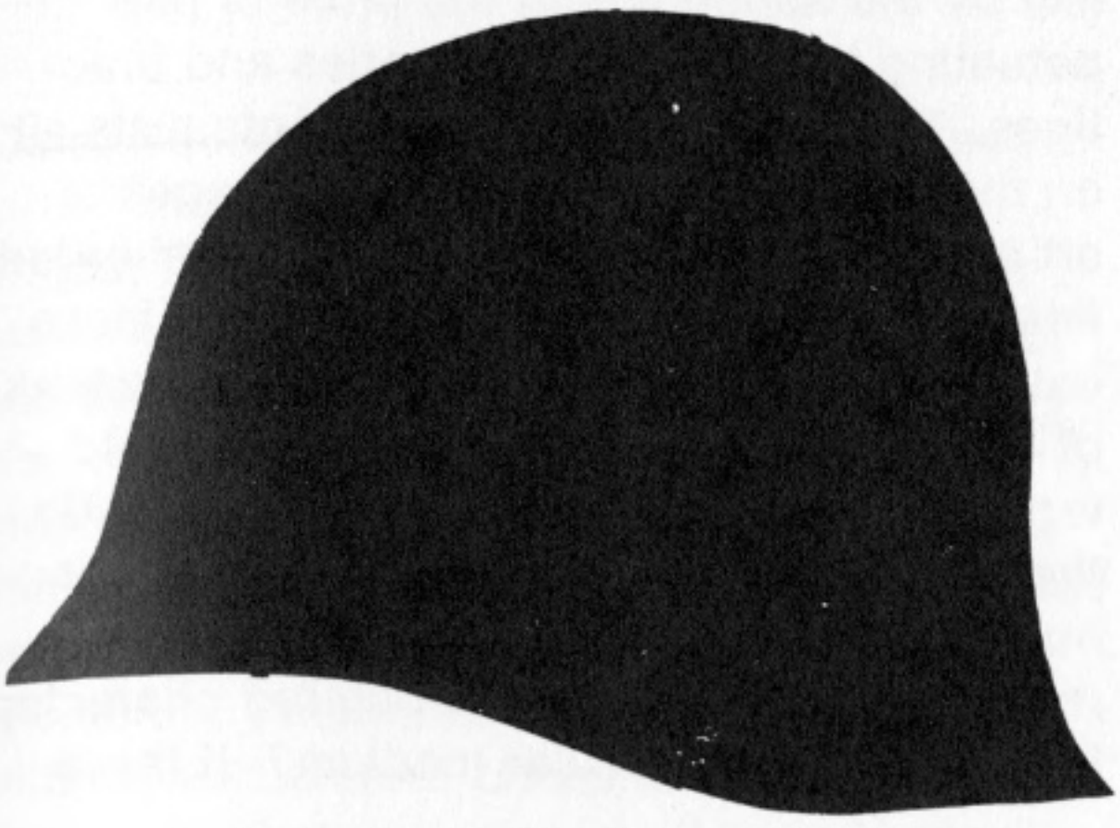
CHALLENGE AND PARADOX OF THE RECENT AVANT-GARDE

Statement by Stefan Morawski

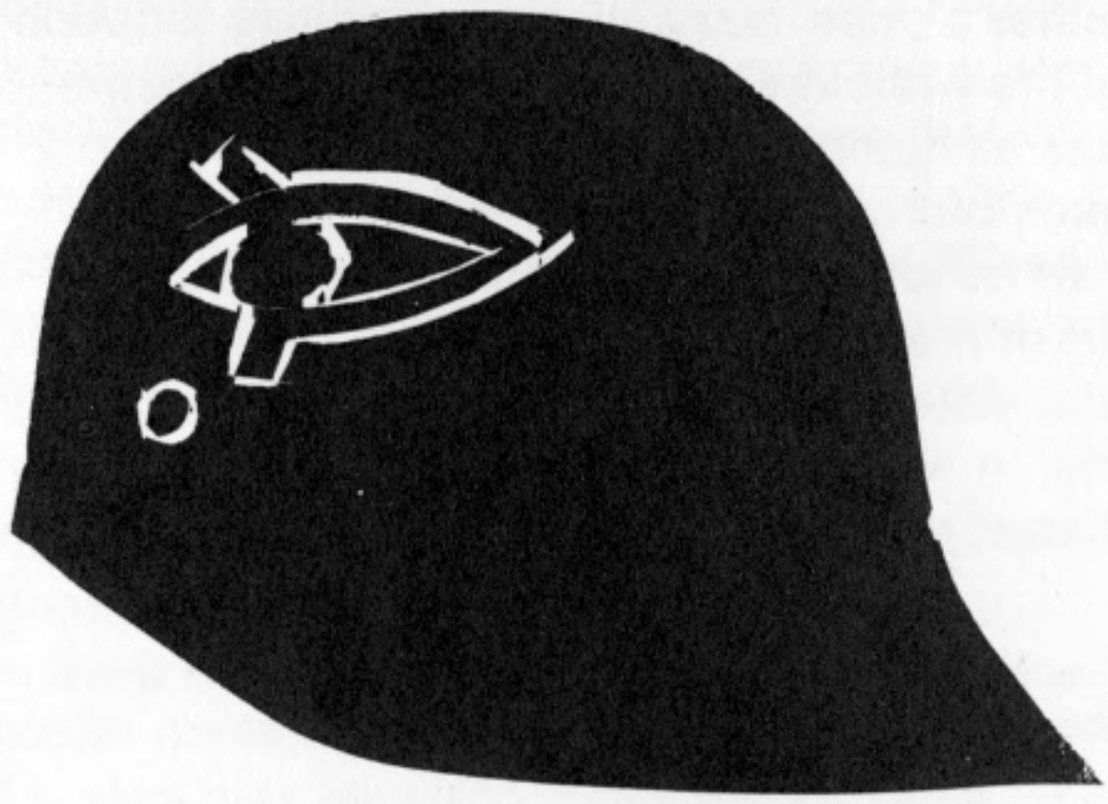
Philosophers and critics of the arts, and the artists especially, will almost unanimously agree that whether in Europe or elsewhere, the established and inherited aesthetic categories are today almost impossible to reconcile with the aims and production of the recent avant-garde. The character of the rupture which is marked, the seriousness of the challenge which is issued by the newest and least precedented arrivals to the scene of aesthetic phenomena, surely forbid us to denigrate the current avant-garde as merely a part of another phase in the cyclical process which sees once-accepted paradigms of artistic taste lose their prestige while new styles become ascendent. No, this is not the usual shift in appreciation of valuational qualities, while the more fundamental, historically constituent assumptions and attributes remain more or less fixed. The constituent elements of art as it has been established through centuries are thrown into question. The recent avant-garde has rejected form, it has rejected expression, it has also rejected technique (skill), much as the classical avant-garde of earlier in our century (1907-24) had abandoned the ideas of beauty and the representation of reality. Likewise discarded is the venerated three-part model of the aesthetic transaction, which consisted of (a) the artistic creative act, (b) the mediating work of art, and (c) the more or less adequate response to the mediating object. Nothing said or undertaken in the Renaissance era or the Romantic Age offered a challenge of similar magnitude to the previous ideas and practice of the arts.

The start of the present axiological crisis of art may be dated back about fifty years, to Duchamp and Dada. Only in the aftermath of World War Two, however, has the situation grown acute. Of course, mimesis—the representation of reality—was impugned early as a constituent element by Cubism and Fauvism, by Kandinsky, Malevich, Klee and other painters; as it was in other fields of the arts by Imagism and Joyce, by Craig and Meyerhold and Piscator, by Corbusier and Schönberg. But the categories of form and expression were more obdurate, and mimesis won a new vitality with the development first of cinema, then of television. Literature and drama also continued, on the whole, to rely on mimesis. Because the crisis of the fundamental values which constitute art thus mounted relatively slowly, we may, I think, best approach the problem in its latest phase. I judge happenings and conceptual art to be the phenomena most suited to our discussion, just because they are the furthest out from previous models of what art should be. May I also add a word as to investigatory policy here: if the "anti-art" movements we examine should prove to be well-founded, we must be completely prepared to draw the consequences and therefore to abandon the inherited ideas and model of what aesthetic thought and praxis can be.

Happenings aim to do away with a mediating work of art, and likewise to eliminate an indi-



Cover of *Spektrum 58* by Hap Grieshaber, detail.
Courtesy: Margot Fuerst and *Graphis*.



Cover of *Spektrum 58* by Hap Grieshaber, detail.
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vidualizing technique of expression. Is this achieved? We may say they present us with a demarcated flux of events having an aleatoric or "chance" character. Still, within its limits of time and place a happening does bear comparison to an aesthetic object. Although its ephemerality clashes with the prevalent idea of a durable work of art, what the audience experiences both artistically and paraartistically is the happening as a whole, in other words, an object. However slackly put together, some sense of the composition and arrangement of this whole emerges. The throwaway look is a product of artistic purpose. Even with behavioral semi-acting, with anonymous mannerisms, with random placement of the physical materials, an expressiveness of the whole comes through, which, however feeble, has yet a specific "face." An artistic individuality emerges at last because a selection of objects and patterns occurs using collage, decollage and matter-of-factness which conceals symbolism. The work of Wolf Vostell, Allan Kaprow and J. J. Lebel in Germany, the United States or France demonstrates these traits despite differences. Because form, expression, even some kind of specific technique survives, their work is finally as much paradox as challenge. Challenge, because happenings take for granted that the artistic inheritance is not adequate to the horrors of modern society nor to the aims of those happeners who would otherwise be traditional artists today; and the significance of what they do in rebuff of settled aesthetic ideas is not to be ignored. And paradox, because the rebellion is contained. The categories they attack are not overthrown.

Conceptual art is similarly rebuffed. Its rebellion is more ambitious; it seeks to break with physical reality entirely, simply planting its ideas in receptive minds. And yet, the conceptualists must rely on objects, and some degree of technique, to convey their messages. They may decry the art audience but they seek exhibitions and need catalogues. Steering away from life, they draw in science and technology. They want a metalanguage rather than the language of art but their training in philosophy and science is inadequate to give them more than a token acquaintance of this field of reference. What results from their conceptualizing are ready-mades organized in the way of zero art, accompanied by very ambitious and symptomatic declarations.

Here is the last possible gesture of digging out from the old aesthetic citadel, undermining it. Conceptual art, like happenings, fails of this purpose. Hoping to expose and supersede the quandary and helplessness of the artist in advanced societies, the reification of art as a consumption product, they only move to the borders. The "anti-art" rebellion fails because it is still undertaken by the rules of the citadel. There is as yet no propaedeutic,

constructive notion with which to start really afresh, at some remove from the practice which has both nourished and circumscribed artists in the past. What would be wanted is either a "new aesthetics" or perhaps a notion of life without specifically aesthetic phenomena as components. Instead they have used such blurred phrases as "art as life" or "art as idea," or, still more confusedly, "the art of life" or "the art of ideas." For example, either a happening is fully integrated in life, in which case it loses the claim to any art status, or it is a "rival" world particularly structured in the life context, in which case it falls among the phenomena of art. As the situation stands, life activities are named art-like by the happeners at the price of perpetuating the older art categories and practices. Both happeners and conceptualists sit on the fence and straddle the languages of art and life; they want to escape the inherited aesthetics but have nothing to replace those categories with. They don't hesitate to speak of artistic intent but don't ask what the old term means in the context they indicate. Do they want to resuscitate creativity? Of a general sort or of a particular kind? Will the result have a specifically structured character? Does it need a particular medium? If these

One of the woodcuts from *Spektrum 58* by Hap Grieshaber. Courtesy: Margot Fuerst and *Graphis*.

questions and others aren't coped with, the paradox which is the recent avant-garde cannot effect a revolutionary breakthrough.

These equivocations of the avant-garde point in two directions. Traditional art is reaffirmed, in its least dynamic aspects, but the aspiration of many to go beyond the society and art of class-conflicted industrial society is also evident. Thus happenings are ludic, playful, as well as often atavistically magical and ritualistic; they express alienated attitudes but also a momentary presentiment of dis-alienation; simultaneously they reconcile us with a civilization of chaos and meanness and they resist that quiescence. Conceptualism is similarly ambivalent. It suggests the artist's superior intentions, his detached independence, but also his recognition of the place of science and technology; the very helplessness, the nothingness of art is affirmed with a forceful gesture. Both movements emerged, had to emerge, in the affluent nations on the threshold of the post-industrial era, where old afflictions persevere to mingle with new ones, and the old uncritical faith of the artist in the givenness and adequacy of whatever artistic tradition is at hand has given way to fundamental questioning of the worth of the art object in a world where human lives have been so impoverished of fulfillment and meaning. The recent avant-garde demystifies contemporary appearances, but, lacking constructive alternatives, it mystifies the way out of the labyrinths.

My view, in brief, is that the crisis of aesthetic values is proven—aestheticians should not give attention only to the succeeding schools of paradigmatic preference, they should seek to rethink the fundamental axiology, to see what is recurrent and possibly even permanent. The extravagant gestures of the avant-garde do not entitle us to dismiss them as frivolous or decadent, as have some Marxist-inclined authors (and others too). I see in conceptual art and happenings rather a result of advanced technology, signalling both progress and distress: a dialectical and ambiguous combination of affirmation and protest, with its source first in the civilizational stage, and (in its present examples) only secondarily in the character of the given social system. We cannot, to be sure, overlook its social protest; on the other hand we cannot arbitrarily measure its kinds of protest in competition with the methods of social realist literature and art. Not only are the origins in different times and places, a fact which makes us reflect that we must see what becomes of the aesthetic categories of socialist countries as they too eventually pass into post-industrialism. (I am not arguing that social realism is becoming obsolete; on the contrary, I would suggest that the conditions are not yet at hand for its fullest development; but that is a thesis I cannot pursue here.)

Most of all, it seems that the paramount question for Marxists would be not one or another preference of artistic means, but how social conditions will develop so that all persons may be creative at least in some degree. The issue is above all the fulfillment of the potential of humanity; and this surely means, among other elements, that what we today know as art and as work must be integrated (insofar as possible) into an organic whole. While Marx's writings on this matter are not without difficulties, his vision of the richly human communist individual of the future surely includes artistic creativity which is extended to everyday activity. And even if such passages could not be found in Marx: a vital marxism of our days must cope with the exhaustion of past congeries of value, the challenge of new tendencies in many fields, the prospect of a total revaluation of what is given and the possibility that art in its traditionally sanctioned and conserved sense, as a progressive forerunner for humanity, is dwindling and vanishing.

It may be that the human being who is the laborer and consumer in modern industrial societies, and who is regarded as a clockwork performer by those who stand at the Great Control Boards of these societies, may be disappearing. This same human being may become a liberated *homo faber et ludens,* one who works and plays in an integrated way. If this occurs, it will mean a kind of return, at the highest possible stage of social advancement, to the peculiar creative syndrome at the origin of civilization, when we will have, instead of art as a separate and even isolated mode of culture, rather a combination of creative work and of creative communication reliant on a variety of symbols. If this outlook has any merit then we may conclude that, together with their contradictions and ambiguities, the happenings and conceptual art are an early symptom of a new cultural epoch. □