

"TAKE THE PEOPLE TO ART"

—John Reed

It has recently become a habit—almost a fashion in some quarters—to insist that art should "return" to realism and that no artist is worthy of the name unless he immediately adopts this slogan.

When such an outcry as this is made there is usually something in it, but unfortunately this "something" isn't always as superficial a quality as is the intelligence of those who are liable to be most vociferous about it. This leads to regrettable misinterpretations and misunderstandings—nor do we have to look far for them in the "realism" movement as, unless I am mistaken, they are all very much to the fore in the first number of Australian New Writing.

Now there can be no doubt that New Writing represents a very real impulse in the community, and this being so, it is all the more important that the character it achieves should not be permitted to become artificial by misguided direction or uncontrolled irresponsible enthusiasm.

On the subject of guidance, it is of course inevitable that one turns to the editorial Foreword, which most admirably states that "Writers cannot be developed without freedom to express themselves, dealing with the real problems of society, the hopes, passions, beliefs and sufferings of humanity." Who will deny this or who will not respond to the art which truly springs out of this freedom? But then why spoil the good effect of such a statement by implying praise for the contributors for not being concerned with "love, landscape or lotus bloom." The lotus bloom can probably be thrown in (or out) without much argument, but what is wrong with love as a subject for the poet? Has it suddenly ceased to be one of those "passions" of humanity which the editors have just been proclaiming? Or why should the landscape vanish as an actuality of the world

about us? For instance, is the soldier-poet who for the first time experiences the terrific impact of Central Australia's stark reality or the equally stark but totally different reality of New Guinea, debarred from writing a poem inspired by either of them? Surely the implications in what the editors say only have to be made clear to be made at the same time quite invalid.

But this is by no means all, as the editors appear to adopt Noel Hutton's unfortunate article, "Art and the Working Class." The general theme is that modern art is no good because it is not universally understood.

One of the few valid statements Noel Hutton does make is that "The sickness of our society is visible in the extremely low cultural level of our people," and from that statement can be built up a complete refutation of most of the article while at the same time putting forward some legitimate constructive suggestions.

Now surely if the cultural level of our people is low, that would suggest itself as a possible reason why modern art does not "make sense" to the people? Surely that is an idea at least worth exploring; but Noel Hutton thinks otherwise and places the full blame on the artist for not producing work accessible at this "low cultural level." We are told that 100 years ago art did make "sense"; but, of course, this statement is entirely inaccurate as the progressive artists of that time did not make "sense" at all—as, for instance, Turner, Delacroix, Courbet, etc.—and the same has been true throughout most periods of history, except where the artist has been integrated with society, as was apparently the case with the ancient Greek artists, and as is the case to-day with the artist in native races.

The truth of the matter is this: that arbitrary dogmatising about the modern artist, as Noel Hutton does, doesn't in the least help either the artist or the people and, to say the least of it, is an extremely naive and undialectical approach.

Is it then possible to contribute something of greater value than Noel Hutton has done to a problem which undoubtedly exists and the clarification of which is of vital importance to both artists and people?

I would say that such a contribution could not be made by ranting about the modern artists, but could be made by attempting to understand them a little.

It is no doubt possible—if you wish to do so, as Noel Hutton does—to refer to the moderns as decadents, but before using that term as applied to an artist, it would perhaps be as well to understand what it means, and that is this: an artist working in a period of social decadence, nothing more. And that, of course—contrary to Noel Hutton's implications—casts no slur on the artist.

Shouldn't we—rather than take Noel Hutton's crude view of the position—look at it in this way: decadent capitalist society has provided no place for the truly creative artist, who consequently, and by historical necessity, has been forced into a position of comparative isolation. But this isolation has been by no means barren—Matisse did not "jettison the wearisome craftsmanship which requires the artist to build up his figures by mass and light and shade" (Matisse, who happens to be a particularly expert craftsman and was employed by the Louvre in that capacity). On the contrary, historically his function has been to expand the technical and æsthetic resources of the artist and, in effect, to make available for the artist of to-day and to-morrow new sources of self-expression which will eventually become—in fact already are—embodied in the great tradition of art.

Noel Hutton is rather too impatient for sudden revolution in art and overlooks the developments over the last 15 years or so, which have in fact seen a gradual but very definite reintroduction of "subject" as a vital element, and a relative abandonment of the abstract.

And not only is "subject" returning into its own, but equally undoubtedly the modern artist is coming more and more closely into touch with the people. With the precipitation of the capitalist crisis, the orientation of the modern artist—led, shall we say, by Picasso—swung closer and closer to the people, that is to say, from the artists' side; but so far there has certainly been very little swing from the people's side, for the very good reason that, as Noel Hutton says, their cultural level is low, and for the

added very good reason, which, of course, Noel Hutton doesn't say, that virtually nothing is done about it.

And that is the whole point: instead of laying down the law for the artist, why not advocate educating the people so that they can appreciate the artist? Not only "Take art to the people" but, equally if not more important, "Take the people to art." Do you say one-sidedly "The scientist must work in terms the people can understand"? or do you rather say "Educate the people so that they can fully appreciate and utilise what the scientist has to give them"?