

The Education of the Un-Artist, Part I

(1971)

Sophistication of consciousness in the arts today (1969) is so great that it is hard not to assert as matters of fact

that the LM mooncraft is patently superior to all contemporary sculptural efforts;

that the broadcast verbal exchange between Houston's Manned Spacecraft Center and the Apollo 11 astronauts was better than contemporary poetry;

that with their sound distortions, beeps, static, and communication breaks, such exchanges also surpassed the electronic music of the concert halls;

that certain remote-control videotapes of the lives of ghetto families recorded (with their permission) by anthropologists are more fascinating than the celebrated slice-of-life underground films;

that not a few of those brightly lit plastic and stainless-steel gas stations of, say, Las Vegas, are the most extraordinary architecture to date;

that the random trancelike movements of shoppers in a supermarket are richer than anything done in modern dance;

that lint under beds and the debris of industrial dumps are more engaging than the recent rash of exhibitions of scattered waste matter;

that the vapor trails left by rocket tests—motionless, rainbow-colored, sky-filling scribbles—are unequaled by artists exploring gaseous media;

that the Southeast Asian theater of war in Vietnam, or the trial of the “Chicago Eight,” while indefensible, is better theater than any play;

that . . . etc., etc., . . . nonart is more art than Art art.

Members of the Club (Passwords In and Out)

Nonart is whatever has not yet been accepted as art but has caught an artist's attention with that possibility in mind. For those concerned, nonart (password one) exists only fleetingly, like some subatomic particle, or perhaps only as a postulate. Indeed, the moment any such example is offered publicly, it automatically becomes a type of art. Let's say I am impressed by the mechanical clothes conveyors commonly used in dry-cleaning shops. Flash! While they continue to perform their normal work of roller-coastering me my suit in twenty seconds flat, they double as Kinetic Environments, simply because I had the thought and have written it here. By the same process all the examples listed above are conscripts of art. Art is very easy nowadays.

Because art is so easy, there is a growing number of artists who are interested in this paradox and wish to prolong its resolution, if only for a week or two, for the life of nonart is precisely its fluid identity. Art's former “difficulty” in the actual making stages may be transposed in this case to an arena of collective uncertainty over just what to call the critter: sociology, hoax, therapy? A Cubist portrait in 1910, before it was labeled a mental aberration, was self-evidently a *painting*. Blowing up successively closer views of an aerial map (a fairly typical example of 1960s Site art) might more obviously suggest an aerial bombing plan.

Nonart's advocates, according to this description, are those who consistently, or at one time or other, have chosen to operate outside the pale of art establishments—that is, in their heads or in the daily or natural domain. At all times, however, they have informed the art establishment of their activities, to set into motion the uncertainties without which their acts would have no meaning. The art-not-art

dialectic is essential—one of the nice ironies I shall return to several times hereafter.

Among this group, some of whom do not know each other, or if they do, do not like each other, are concept makers such as George Brecht, Ben Vautier, and Joseph Kosuth; found-sound guides such as Max Neuhaus; Earthworkers such as Dennis Oppenheim and Michael Heizer; some of the 1950s Environment builders; and such Happeners as Milan Knížák, Marta Minujin, Kazuo Shiraga, Wolf Vostell, and me.

But sooner or later most of them and their colleagues throughout the world have seen their work absorbed into the cultural institutions against which they initially measured their liberation. Some have wished it this way; it was, to use Paul Brach's expression, like paying their dues to join the union. Others have shrugged it off, continuing the game in new ways. But all have found that password one won't work.

Nonart is often confused with antiart (password two), which in Dada time and even earlier was nonart aggressively (and wittily) intruded into the arts world to jar conventional values and provoke positive esthetic and/or ethical responses. Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, Erik Satie's *Furniture Music*, and Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* are familiar examples. The late Sam Goodman's New York exhibition some years ago of varieties of sculpted dung piles was still another. Nonart has no such intent; and intent is part of both function and feeling in any situation that deliberately blurs its operational context.

Apart from the question whether the historical arts have ever demonstrably caused anybody to become “better,” or “worse,” and granting that all art has presumed to edify in *some* way (perhaps only to prove that nothing can be proven), such avowedly moralistic programs appear naive today in light of the far greater and more effective value changes brought about by political, military, economic, technological, educational, and advertising pressures. The arts, at least up to the present, have been poor lessons, except possibly to artists and their tiny publics. Only these vested interests have ever made any high claims for the arts. The rest of the world couldn't care less. Antiart, nonart, or other such cultural designations share, after all, the word *art* or its implicit presence and so point to a family argument at best, if they do not reduce utterly to tempests in teapots. And that is true for the bulk of this discussion.

When Steve Reich suspends a number of microphones above corresponding loudspeakers, sets them swinging like pendulums, and amplifies their sound pickup so that feedback noise is produced—that's art.

When Andy Warhol publishes the unedited transcript of twenty-four hours of taped conversation—that's art.

When Walter De Maria fills a room full of dirt—that's art.

We know they are art because a concert announcement, a title on a book jacket, and an art gallery say so.

If nonart is almost impossible, antiart is virtually inconceivable. Among the knowledgeable (and practically every graduate student should qualify) all gestures, thoughts, and deeds may become art at the whim of the arts world. Even murder, rejected in practice, could be an admissible artistic proposition. Antiart in 1969 is embraced in every case as proart, and therefore, from the standpoint of one of its chief functions, it is nullified. You cannot be against art when art invites its own "destruction" as a Punch-and-Judy act among the repertory of poses art may take. So in losing the last shred of pretense to moral leadership through moral confrontation, antiart, like all other art philosophies, is simply obliged to answer to ordinary human conduct and also, sadly enough, to the refined life-style dictated by the cultivated and rich who accept it with open arms.

When Richard Artschwager discreetly pastes little black oblongs on parts of buildings across California and has a few photos to show and stories to tell—that's art.

When George Brecht prints on small cards sent to friends the word "DIRECTION"—that's art.

When Ben Vautier signs his name (or God's) to any airport—that's art.

These acts are obviously art because they are made by persons associated with the arts.

It's to be expected that in spite of the paradoxical awareness referred to at the beginning of this essay, Art art (password three) is the

condition, both in the mind and literally, in which every novelty comes to rest. Art art takes art seriously. It presumes, however covertly, a certain spiritual rarity, a superior office. It has faith. It is recognizable by its initiates. It is innovative, of course, but largely in terms of a tradition of professionalistic moves and references: art begets art. Most of all, Art art maintains for its exclusive use certain sacred settings and formats handed down by this tradition: exhibitions, books, recordings, concerts, arenas, shrines, civic monuments, stages, film screenings, and the "culture" columns of the mass media. These grant accreditation the way universities grant degrees.

So long as Art art holds on to these contexts, it can and often does costume itself in nostalgic echoes of antiart, a reference that critics correctly observed in Robert Rauschenberg's earlier shows. It is self-evident in later Pop painting and writing, which make deliberate use of common clichés in content and method. Art art can also assert the features, though not the milieu, of nonart, as in much of the music of John Cage. In fact, Art art in the guise of nonart quickly became high style during the 1968-69 season at the Castelli Gallery warehouse shows of informal dispersions of felt, metal, rope, and other raw matter. Shortly afterward, this quasi-nonart received its virtual apotheosis at the Whitney Museum's presentation of similar stuff, called Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials. A hint of antiart greeted the viewer in the title, followed by the reassurance of scholarly analysis; but far from fomenting controversy, the temple of muses certified that all was Cultural. There was no illusion about that.

If commitment to the political and ideological framework of the contemporary arts is implicit in these seemingly raunchy examples, and in those cited at the beginning of this account, it is explicit in the bulk of straightforward productions of Art art: the films of Godard, the concerts of Stockhausen, the dances of Cunningham, the buildings of Louis Kahn, the sculpture of Judd, the paintings of Frank Stella, the novels of William Burroughs, the plays of Grotowski, the mixed-media performances of E.A.T.—to mention a few well-known contemporaries and events of achievement. It is not that some of them are "abstract" and this is their Art or that others have appropriate styles or subjects. It is that they rarely, if ever, play renegade with the profession of art itself. Their achievement, much of it in the recent past, is perhaps due to a conscious and poignant stance taken against an erosion of their respective fields by emerging nonartists. Perhaps it was

mere innocence, or the narrow-mindedness of their professionalism. In any event, they upheld the silent rule that as a password *in*, Art is the best word of all.

It is questionable, however, whether it is worthwhile being *in*. As a human goal and as an idea, Art is dying—not just because it operates within conventions that have ceased to be fertile. It is dying because it has preserved its conventions and created a growing weariness toward them, out of indifference to what I suspect has become the fine arts' most important, though mostly unconscious, subject matter: the ritual escape from Culture. Nonart as it changes into Art art is at least interesting in the process. But Art art that starts out as such shortcuts the ritual and feels from the very beginning merely cosmetic, a superfluous luxury, even though such qualities do not in fact concern its makers at all.

Art art's greatest challenge, in other words, has come from within its own heritage, from a hyperconsciousness about itself and its everyday surroundings. Art art has served as an instructional transition to its own elimination by life. Such an acute awareness among artists enables the whole world and its humanity to be experienced as a work of art. With ordinary reality so brightly lit, those who choose to engage in showcase creativity invite (from this view) hopeless comparisons between what they do and supervivid counterparts in the environment.

Exemption from this larger ballpark is impossible. Art artists, in spite of declarations that their work is not to be compared with life, will invariably be compared with nonartists. And, since nonart derives its fragile inspiration from everything except art, i.e., from "life," the comparison between Art art and life will be made anyway. It then could be shown that, willingly or not, there has been an active exchange between Art art and nonart, and in some cases between Art art and the big wide world (in more than the translational way all art has utilized "real" experience). Relocated by our minds in a global setting rather than in a museum or library or onstage, Art, no matter how it is arrived at, fares very badly indeed.

For example, La Monte Young, whose performances of complex drone sounds interest me as Art art, tells of his boyhood in the Northwest when he used to lean his ear against the high-tension electric towers that stretched across the fields; he would enjoy feeling the hum of the wires through his body. I did that as a boy, too, and prefer it to the concerts of Young's music. It was more impressive visually and less

hackneyed in the vastness of its environment than it is in a loft space or a performance hall.

Dennis Oppenheim describes another example of nonart: in Canada he ran across a muddy lot, made plaster casts of his footprints (in the manner of a crime investigator), and then exhibited stacks of the casts at a gallery. The activity was great; the exhibition part of it was corny. The casts could have been left at the local police station without identification. Or thrown away.

Those wishing to be called artists, in order to have some or all of their acts and ideas considered art, only have to drop an artistic thought around them, announce the fact and persuade others to believe it. That's advertising. As Marshall McLuhan once wrote, "Art is what you can get away with."

Art. There's the catch. At this stage of consciousness, the sociology of Culture emerges as an in-group "dumb-show." Its sole audience is a roster of the creative and performing professions watching itself, as if in a mirror, enact a struggle between self-appointed priests and a cadre of self-appointed commandos, jokers, guttersnipes, and triple agents who seem to be attempting to destroy the priests' church. But everybody knows how it all ends: in church, of course, with the whole club bowing their heads and muttering prayers. They pray for themselves and for their religion.

Artists cannot profitably worship what is moribund; nor can they war against such bowing and scraping when only moments later they enshrine their destructions and acts as cult objects in the same institution they were bent on destroying. This is a patent sham. A plain case of management takeover.

But if artists are reminded that nobody but themselves gives a damn about this, or about whether all agree with the judgment here, then the entropy of the whole scene may begin to appear very funny.

Seeing the situation as low comedy is a way out of the bind. I would propose that the first practical step toward laughter is to *un-art* ourselves, avoid all esthetic roles, give up all references to being artists of any kind whatever. In becoming un-artists (password four) we may exist only as fleetingly as the nonartist, for when the profession of art

is discarded, the art category is meaningless, or at least antique. An un-artist is one who is engaged in changing jobs, in modernizing.

The new job does not entail becoming a naïf by beating a quick retreat back to childhood and yesterday. On the contrary, it requires even more sophistication than the un-artist already has. Instead of the serious tone that has usually accompanied the search for innocence and truth, un-artisting will probably emerge as humor. This is where the old-fashioned saint in the desert and the newfangled player of the jetways part company. The job implies fun, never gravity or tragedy.

Of course, starting from the arts means that the *idea* of art cannot easily be gotten rid of (even if one wisely never utters the word). But it is possible to slyly shift the whole un-artistic operation away from where the arts customarily congregate, to become, for instance, an account executive, an ecologist, a stunt rider, a politician, a beach bum. In these different capacities, the several kinds of art discussed would operate indirectly as a stored code that, instead of programming a specific course of behavior, would facilitate an attitude of deliberate playfulness toward all professionalizing activities well beyond art. Signal scrambling, perhaps. Something like those venerable baseball aficionados in the vaudeville act that began, "Who's on first?" "No, Watt's on first; Hugh's on second . . ."

When someone anonymous called our attention recently to his or her slight transformation of a tenement stairway, and someone else directed us to examine an unaltered part of New York's Park Avenue, these were art, too. Whoever the persons were, they got the message to us (artists). We did the rest in our heads.

Safe Bets for Your Money

It can be pretty well predicted that the various forms of mixed media or assemblage arts will increase, both in the highbrow sense and in mass-audience applications such as light shows, space-age demonstrations at world's fairs, teaching aids, sales displays, toys, and political campaigns. And these may be the means by which all the arts are phased out.

Although public opinion accepts mixed media as additions to the

pantheon, or as new occupants around the outer edges of the expanding universe of each traditional medium, they are more likely rituals of escape from the traditions. Given the historical trend of the modern arts toward specialism or "purity"—pure painting, pure poetry, pure music, pure dance—any admixtures have had to be viewed as contaminants. And in this context, deliberate contamination can now be interpreted as a rite of passage. (It is noteworthy in this context that even at this late date there are no journals devoted to mixed media.)

Among the artists involved in mixed means during the past decade, a few became interested in taking advantage of the arts' blurry boundaries by going the next step toward blurring art as a whole into a number of nonarts. Dick Higgins, in his book *foew&ombwhnw*, gives instructive examples of vanguardists' taking positions between theater and painting, poetry and sculpture, music and philosophy and between various intermedia (his term) and game theory, sports, and politics.

Abbie Hoffman applied the intermedium of Happenings (via the Provos) to a philosophical and political goal two or three summers ago. With a group of friends, he went to the observation balcony of the New York Stock Exchange. At a signal he and his friends tossed handfuls of dollar bills onto the floor below, where trading was at its height. According to his report, brokers cheered, diving for the bills; the ticket-tape stopped; the market was probably affected; and the press reported the arrival of the cops. Later that night the event appeared nationally on televised news coverage: a medium sermon "for the hell of it," as Hoffman might say.

It makes no difference whether what Hoffman did is called activism, criticism, pranksterism, self-advertisement, or art. The term *intermedia* implies fluidity and simultaneity of roles. When art is only one of several possible functions a situation may have, it loses its privileged status and becomes, so to speak, a lowercase attribute. The intermedial response can be applied to anything—say, an old glass. The glass can serve the geometrist to explain ellipses; for the historian it can be an index of the technology of a past age; for a painter it can become part of a still life, and the gourmet can use it to drink his Château Latour 1953. We are not used to thinking like this, all at once, or nonhierarchically, but the intermedialist does it naturally. Context rather than category. Flow rather than work of art.

It follows that the conventions of painting, music, architecture, dance, poetry, theater, and so on may survive in a marginal capacity as

academic researches, like the study of Latin. Aside from these analytic and curatorial uses, every sign points to their obsolescence. By the same token, galleries and museums, bookshops and libraries, concert halls, stages, arenas, and places of worship will be limited to the conservation of antiquities; that is, to what was done in the name of art up to about 1960.

Agencies for the spread of information via the mass media and for the instigation of social activities will become the new channels of insight and communication, not substituting for the classic "art experience" (however many things that may have been) but offering former artists compelling ways of participating in structured processes that can reveal new values, including the value of fun.

In this respect, the technological pursuits of today's nonartists and un-artists will multiply as industry, government, and education provide their resources. "Systems" technology involving the interfacing of personal and group experiences, instead of "product" technology, will dominate the trend. Software, in other words. But it will be a systems approach that favors an openness toward outcome, in contrast to the literal and goal-oriented uses now employed by most systems specialists. As in the childhood pastime "Telephone" (in which friends in a circle whisper a few words into one ear after the other only to hear them come out delightfully different when the last person says them aloud), the feedback loop is the model. Playfulness and the playful use of technology suggest a positive interest in acts of continuous discovery. Playfulness can become in the near future a social and psychological benefit.

A global network of simultaneously transmitting and receiving "TV Arcades." Open to the public twenty-four hours a day, like any washerette. An arcade in every big city of the world. Each equipped with a hundred or more monitors of different sizes from a few inches to wall-scale, in planar and irregular surfaces. A dozen automatically moving cameras (like those secreted in banks and airports, but now prominently displayed) will pan and fix anyone or anything that happens to come along or be in view. Including cameras or monitors if no one is present. People will be free to do whatever they want and will see themselves on the monitors in different ways. A crowd of people may multiply their images into a throng.

But the cameras will send the same images to all other arcades, at the same time or after a programmed delay. Thus what happens in one arcade may be happening in a thousand, generated a thousand times. But the built-in program for distributing the signals, visible and audible, random and fixed, could also be manually altered at any arcade. A woman might want to make electronic love to a particular man she saw on a monitor. Controls would permit her to localize (freeze) the communication within a few TV tubes. Other visitors to the same arcade may feel free to enjoy and even enhance the mad and surprising scramble by turning their dials accordingly. The world could make up its own social relations as it went along. Everybody in and out of touch all at once!

P.S. This is obviously not art, since by the time it was realized, nobody would remember that I wrote it here, thank goodness.

And what about art criticism? What happens to those keen interpreters who are even rarer than good artists? The answer is that in the light of the preceding, critics will be as irrelevant as the artists. Loss of one's vocation, however, may be only partial, since there is much to be done in connoisseurship and related scholarly endeavors in the universities and archives. And nearly all critics hold teaching posts anyway. Their work may simply shift more toward historical investigation and away from the ongoing scene.

But some critics may be willing to un-art themselves along with their artist colleagues (who just as often are professors and double as writers themselves). In this case, all their esthetic assumptions will have to be systematically uncovered and dumped, together with all the historically loaded art terminology. Practitioners and commentators—the two occupations will probably merge, one person performing interchangeably—will need an updated language to refer to what is going on. And the best source of this, as usual, is street talk, news shorthand, and technical jargon.

For example, Al Brunelle, a few years back, wrote of the hallucinogenic surfaces of certain contemporary paintings as "skin freak."

Even though the pop drug scene has changed since, and new words are necessary, and even though this essay is not concerned with paintings, Brunelle's phrase is much more informative than such older words as *tâche* or *track*, which also refer to a painting's surface. Skin freaking brought to picture making an intensely vibrating eroticism that was particularly revealing for the time. That the experience is fading into the past simply suggests that good commentary can be as disposable as artifacts in our culture. Immortal words are appropriate only to immortal dreams.

Jack Burnham, in his *Beyond Modern Sculpture* [New York: Braziller, 1968] is conscious of this need for accurate terms and attempts to replace vitalist, formalist, and mechanistic metaphors with labels from science and technology like *cybernetics*, "responsive systems," *field*, *automata*, and so forth. Yet these are compromised because the reference is still sculpture and art. To be thorough, such pietistic categories would have to be rejected totally.

In the long run, criticism and commentary as we know them may be unnecessary. During the recent "age of analysis" when human activity was seen as a symbolic smoke screen that had to be dispelled, explanations and interpretations were in order. But nowadays the modern arts themselves have become commentaries and may forecast the postartistic age. They comment on their respective pasts, in which, for instance, the medium of television comments on the film; a live sound played alongside its taped version comments on which is "real"; one artist comments on another's latest moves; some artists comment on the state of their health or of the world; others comment on not commenting (while critics comment on all commentaries as I'm commenting here). This may be sufficient.

The most important short-range prediction that can be made has been implied over and over again in the foregoing; that the actual, probably global, environment will engage us in an increasingly participational way. The environment will not be the Environments we are familiar with already: the constructed fun house, spook show, window display, store front, and obstacle course. These have been sponsored by art galleries and discotheques. Instead, we'll act in response to the given natural and urban environments such as the sky, the ocean floor, winter resorts, motels, the movements of cars, public services, and the communications media . . .

Preview of a 2001-Visual-of-the-USA-Landscape-Via-Supersonic-Jet. Every seat on the jet is equipped with monitors showing the earth below as the plane speeds over it. Choice of pictures in infrared, straight color, black-and-white; singly or in combination on various parts of the screen. Plus zoom lens and stop-action controls.

Scenes from other trips are retrievable for flashback cuts and contrasts. Past comments on present. Selector lists: Hawaiian Volcanos, The Pentagon, A Harvard Riot Seen When Approaching Boston, Sunbathing on a Skyscraper.

Audio hookup offers nine channels of prerecorded criticism of the American scene: two channels of light criticism, one of pop criticism, and six channels of heavy criticism. There is also a channel for recording one's own criticism on a take-home video cassette documenting the entire trip.

p.s. This, also, is not art, because it will be available to too many people.

Artists of the world, drop out! You have nothing to lose but your professions!