

A GENERAL DEMAND FOR ART

“Liberality! We want not Liberality. We want a Fair Price and Proportionate Value and a General Demand for Art.”

—William Blake.

OVERLAND's slogan has always been, in part at any rate, “Bias Australian”. But this doesn't mean that we are “little Australians”, puerile isolationists or nationalists with an ingrained complacency about our own traditions and life. The corrective, if one is needed, lies in the other half of our slogan: “Temper Democratic”. No culture exists in a vacuum, and for the culture we want to develop there must be links both with what is happening elsewhere and with the broad democratic movement in our own country.

The democratic movement? What the hell is the democratic movement? And, specifically, how do you link a literary magazine with it?

These are necessary questions for anyone to ask. They'd be a lot harder to answer if we hadn't already published fourteen issues. If you look back through them you'll find many examples of bad writing and bad editorship, bad reasoning and dishonest ratiocination. But you'll also find that we have tried to say that the proudest claim of the Australian is that he has built a country where the dominant conviction has never died that authority must be challenged, oppression and discrimination opposed; a country where it has been assumed that progress is based on the sacrifices, example and aspirations of the common people; a country whose social dynamic is plebeian in origin and is, or should be, egalitarian in operation.

Therefore Overland has always sought to link itself with the labor movement. We have tried to find readers and subscribers among working people, and contributors too. We have tried to promote a kind of two-way traffic, between the labor movement on the one hand and “intellectuals” and middle-class people on the other, to the mutual advantage of both.

Put crudely, we would like to show trade unionists and politicians and rank-and-filers and ordinary people who just want a better deal how vastly their struggles can be aided, how richer life can become, by enlisting the processes of art.

“The labor movement is a mere machine unless it is concerned with the quality of our social life”, the brilliant English working-class critic John Berger wrote recently. “As a matter of mere survival, the labor movement must fight for the priorities of life and against those of waste, competition and destruction. It should fight more stubbornly, engendering a mood which sees it as intolerable that beautiful cities and adequate education and

accessible art-values should be regarded as utopian luxuries, while nuclear weapons and Black Knight rockets and advertising wars are regarded as necessities . . .”*

One has only to turn to the record of the sacrifices made by working-men in Australia a hundred years ago in the establishment of the mechanics' institutes (see Janet Howard: “The Urlyou Tradition”, Overland No. 9) to see that the man who pioneered the Australian labor movement regarded the arts as one of the most urgent and vital goals which they and their class had to attain, even if today their standards seem to have often been naive and uncritical.

How tragically different today! All sections of the labor movement are gasping for new ideas, but no section is grasping for them. The intellectual, be he from the ranks of the working class or not, is generally despised and rejected; and, what is worse, mistrusted. Probably no labor movement in the world has spurned ideas, particularly new ideas, as the Australian labor movement has.

The situation is vastly aggravated in this country by many factors. Some of them are Australian factors, such as the historical evolution of the labor movement and the fact that we are a small country into which is poured an overwhelming mass of canned and crated “culture” from abroad, thus preventing the development of creative artists and creative thought.

But some of the factors are common to many countries. With the steady automation and monopoly-tendencies of the means of mass-communication has gone what Berger calls a “debased Philistinism which has pervaded the labor movement at every level.” The enormous excitement of the creative urge, the enormous impact of the creative act, is missing just where it is most needed.

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This is no exhaustive analysis. There's much more to be said and many qualifications to be made, no doubt, of the position as outlined. Solutions will never be found without discussions and forums for discussion.

So, since we're not complacent and self-satisfied, and since we're not frightened of discussion, let's

* See Berger's important article “Art and the Community” in *The New Reasoner*, No. 6.

discuss these problems in terms of what is happening in Australia today.

What about the hostility of the labor movement to the intellectual. Who is at fault where, and what can be done about it?

What concrete ways are there to break down the hostility between the labor movement and the artist? And, since this is no alternative to direct support for art and artists from public bodies and governments outside the labor movement, how to achieve this as well? Some interesting ideas came from the questionnaire this magazine circulated to significant figures in the arts last year.

How can we promote good design and good taste in everyday life and in the schools? How to help people to see beauty in their life and in their living? What more powerful instrument of counter-attack against the dreadful cult of unreality and barbarous distortion of values represented by so many books, films, radio and TV programs, newspapers, furniture designers, house builders, and pap-merchants generally!

And when we ask for commitment for the artists, what does this mean? If you start asking for "commitment" in literature, where do you end up? What is the real significance for us of the vast and real cultural upsurge in the Soviet Union, its which Professor Manning Clark has drawn attention in his recent articles? What is "reality" and what is "truth", in a given social and political situation?

To what extent can our writers and artists adequately grapple with this new country of ours? How much and how little should they seek to

adopt and manipulate from overseas? What is the current reality in this country, anyway? In its history, its traditions, its attitudes, its present relative prosperity, it is a country and society quite unlike any seen before. But how different is it? To what extent are artists, whether of left, right or centre, seeing it through distorting mirrors because of shibboleths, laziness, or plain lack of contact and sensitivity?

These questions, and the many more like them that could be asked, aren't high-faluting. On the level of an "engaged" art, the way forward lies in trying to answer them. And Overland exists to help that process.

"The strongest argument against modern mass entertainments is not that they debase taste—debasement can be alive and active—but that they over-excite it, eventually dull it, and finally kill it; that they "enervate" rather than "corrupt", in de Tocqueville's phrase. They kill it at the nerve, and yet so bemuse and persuade their audience that the audience is almost entirely unable to look up and say, "But in fact this cake is made of sawdust."

Richard Hoggart: "The Uses of Literacy."

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