

A LONG DISCUSSION NOT ABOUT MASTER-PIECES BUT
WHY THERE ARE SO FEW OF THEM: PART I
1983

Everything is against them.
– Gertrude Stein

The quality of new art has been declining for fifteen years. There are some probable reasons for this, but none which finally explain the fundamental fact of why. There have been almost no first-rate artists in this time. Neither do similar reasons explain why there were so many in the late 1940s and early 1950s and the late 1950s and early 1960s. Despite all that's wrong in this society it's the responsibility of the new artists to occur. The explanation that the times and the society are bad is pointless. Probably they have always been and the issue is whether too bad or a little better. The reason for doing nothing is always wrong. There is also the responsibility of the older artists to uphold a high quality. At present they do this in their work, but not otherwise. This can be considered later. The presence of good artists is exceedingly given by themselves; it's the ultimate, obdurate fact. Reform may allow new artists but not necessarily. It has been shown many times that more money or a greater audience guarantee nothing. Wide or narrow, the condition in which art is made is much more important. There is a limit to the use of art and art doesn't tolerate frivolity and abuse.

The most general reasons for the present difficulty of art and for recurrent difficulties are pretty obvious, even trite, but considering the meager knowledge that I plan to complain of they must be stated. One of the main attitudes of the present is that the past is merely a toy store, so some history is necessary. Later I want to emphasize that most of the past is inaccessible to us.

In the last two hundred years or so the society has changed from a rural one to an industrial one, and the economic leadership from the top of the one to the top of the other. At the same time the population has grown unimaginably. The majority of the society, as the descendants of peasants, brand-new people who remember little, has had to be educated. There were not enough educated people to do this; the group was originally very small. As they taught their much more

numerous successors, the level couldn't be maintained, until finally only bare information was taught, if science, and academic nonsense, if the arts. In Texas I once went with a teacher to a lecture by a woman well known there for having taught "creative writing" in high school for a lifetime. Her idea of creative was not even rudimentary; for example, decorate the sentence and never simply say "it's raining." Two hundred younger teachers listened to her impoverished schema, understanding, by their questions, even less. Presumably the next day they went to work and taught four thousand students less than that. This is the fundamental knowledge of the society. And some of those students will go on to become rich businessmen, a few the trustees of museums and universities, or politicians. So similarly there is always a lower rising wave curious about art who remember less. And now even artists.

Education is the ultimate problem in the United States, and in Europe too, although better there. It's the ultimate problem of civilization and everything depends on it, certainly politics and the wars. The Europeans were ignorant and foolish enough to almost destroy each other over matters already obsolescent, and so damaged the world's only high civilization. This left the world to two large and backward nations bent on being equally ignorant and foolish, and more conclusive. The United States was not so great in the last century, but seems to have been better then than now, with much discussion of purposes and some sense of communality. Now the literature seems that of another country.

Ever since Bernini, no first-rate artist has worked for an institution. Religion as an institution was no longer credible to serious artists. It's to the credit of artists that for them dying institutions invalidate themselves earlier than for others. Many artists continued to believe in a personal variant of Christianity, but religion was no longer an advance in the understanding of humanity and of nature. By now religion is just another

superstition. Before Bernini religion was the nature of the world and of man, and for the most part, despite corruption and suppression, its morality and cosmology opposed commerce and mundane power. For a century there has been no counterforce to power and commerce, nothing to say that the existence of the individual and of the world, their relationship, that between individuals, and activities which signify these, such as art, are not a matter of business and are not to be bought and sold.

Religion was good riddance but art, architecture, and music no longer had an institutional support. They could only make and sell and so live within the context of commerce. As the distance increased from the standards of the church and of the nobility, and with the increasing ignorance, there was less and less restraint upon the businessmen, the final one being that it's after all necessary to understand and maintain the value of the commodity. Today art is only a cut above being an ordinary commodity and close to being manipulated as any compliant commodity should be. An example of a functioning restraint, indicative of a better civilization, is the usual town planning and building in Europe. Something there, perhaps preference and tradition, but also such implementation as taxes and laws, keeps the developers from being as destructive, as wasteful, as monstrous, and as vulgar as here. Something keeps the place cleaner too. I was delighted that in the new book on her, Frida Kahlo said that the United States looked like a chicken coop. Houston is a country coop, a bare yard with feeders and waterers sticking up, and New York is a city coop, a "dense-pack" commercial operation.

At best there's nothing wrong with commerce. And it's hard to overrate the importance of economics. Business is often straightforward, and as a source of income for artists, if matter-of-fact, it's best. Demand is a reality. Business is much preferable to patronage by the central government's bureaucrats or by the often appalling nouveaux riches and their kids,

rotten before they are ripe, as Diderot said of the Russians improved by Peter. But buying and selling and even raising or making essentials is just that. It's a necessary basis for civilization, even a part, but it's not civilization itself. There's no real way to glorify business, just as it's hard to glorify eating and sleeping. Business doesn't deserve the power and prestige surrounding it. Business is only business.

Commerce is nearly the only activity in this society. Even the central government is an aspect of commerce, by selling weapons, an outrageous and despicable business. Virtually a whole civilization, new knowledge and attitudes, must be built to oppose commerce. This counterforce has to be new, can't be one or all of the ever more debased religions, which are too ignorant to be ethical, political, or even "spiritual." The opposition can't be an institution but must be lots of diverse and educated people arguing and objecting. These people must have real knowledge and judgment and they must have an influence upon the less educated majority. Art of a high quality should be part of the opposition to commerce but art is close to being forced underground by it, as architecture has been recently, and music and dance throughout this century. And also too much of science, although there is more opposition and more issues in science than elsewhere. For a century there have usually been two versions of each art, one real, but poor and underground, and one fake, although rich and conspicuous. The latter ingests the former as needed.

And so there's a vast ignorant populace just making a living and watching TV. In the United States there are few purposes, concerns, plans, agreements, or even disagreements. There is hardly any politics and that little is only about how to divide the existing pie. A hot issue is how many MX missiles to build and how to arrange them. By contrast, Italy, which, according to the Americans, is supposed to have a bad government, pretty much has real parties, real divisions, real issues,

and so real politics. This results in a weaker, smaller government and not in a carnivorous eagle or an omnivorous bear. Also the Americans don't notice that Italy doesn't fall with each government but lasts very well. The Italians live better and north of Rome the country looks infinitely better than the United States. South of there the developers lay waste as usual. Next to the bomb the bulldozer is the most destructive invention of this century.

Art used to have issues, as Barnett Newman called them. For fifteen years the issues have grown fewer and weaker. Now we're all supposed to be "doing our own thing." Art will become the occasional gesture of the isolated person. It's considered undemocratic to say that someone's work is more developed or more broad in thought or more advanced, as complex as that term may be, than someone else's. It's not nice to say that my work is better than yours. This vapid attitude is part of the same throughout the society. The one small idea in this attitude is that art should be democratic. But politics alone should be democratic. Art is intrinsically a matter of quality. A commitment to democracy in politics is included in the synthesis that is very good art. One ploy in the ongoing destruction of democracy in politics is to pass democracy along to weak groups and activities that are irrelevant to the politicians. If a serious chance for democracy arises in the central government everyone is horrified. The states should have been happy with revenue sharing, despite its ambiguities, and seized it and run to freedom. Instead, everyone, top to bottom, is fearful that Reagan will cut their subsidy. Anyway, in art and elsewhere, everyone is not equal and it's hypocrisy and confusion to pretend so. Let the governments allow the citizens to be equal as citizens in the places where they live. Quality of thought and effort, except in the role of citizens, is not part of this. It should be rewarded, not denigrated.

Activities are supported by money and the amount of that is determined by the attitudes of those who have it. Teachers

of all kinds are poorly paid, usually below the most ordinary jobs. Recently *The New York Times* said that public school math teachers start at \$13,000 a year. After twenty-five years they get \$25,000 a year, and of course that's really \$13,000 or less due to inflation, the government's hidden tax. And then there's the awful open tax. An assistant professor in the Department of Architecture at Columbia gets \$20,000 a year, below the garbage collector, who makes so much noise at night. In 1983, a full professor there, senior and well known, got \$30,000. This is what the trustees and the administration of Columbia think they're worth. And the rest of the society, low as well as high, thinks the same. The legal and business professors receive that for a few lectures. Someone said on this subject, "The reason that academic politics is so nasty is because the stakes are so small." An old and different example of mine of Columbia's failure to be an institution of higher learning is the bad, seemingly commercial buildings it has built for itself, while having a reputable Department of Architecture. There's a trustee . . . How can one believe in the integrity of such a university? New York University destroys the neighborhood surrounding it like any developer. All departments not commercial, excluding sports and science for technology, are present as conventions. They are the usual decoration. And, as the "postmodern" architects are showing, decoration should be cheap. Schools, colleges, and universities should be the heart of the opposition to commerce and thoughtlessness, but they're not; they're deeply part. A recent maneuver in the devaluation of education in the universities is to deny tenure and so force many professors to go to another university with little or no increase in pay. They are replaced by younger, cheaper teachers.

I plan to lambast art critics later, but want to say here that one reason art criticism is so bad and irrelevant is that it is extremely badly paid. Now and then someone sensible comes along, but is soon gone, while permanently there are Barbara

Rose and Hilton Kramer, two critics whose mediocrity I'm sufficiently sure of to mention. Art criticism could be a necessary and interesting activity; for this there must be professional critics with integrity. It takes at least a month to write a good article for an art magazine, for which, I think, the critic gets around \$500, which multiplies to \$6,000 a year, \$8,000 if they moonlight.

The last general point is that few understand how past and over the past is. But also that the present is presently the past, and all that's good that arrives there should be conserved assiduously. The people most fond of symbols from the past are also the ones most heedless of its reality. The guy in Tucson with the Spanish Colonial tv set is the one who bulldozed the adobe houses in the old part of town. This tourist's view of the past devalues issues and reality in the present. It fits that conservatives in the United States are not real conservatives. (Liberals are not liberals, either.) It's necessary to life to understand the past and preserve it; it's life to do something now. There is a fine statement by Henry Thomas Buckle on the assimilation of the past to the present, written in the past, in 1861:

. . . we, separated by so long an interval from those great feeders of the imagination, who nurtured our ancestors, and being unable to enter fully into the feelings of poets, who wrote when nearly all opinions, and, therefore nearly all forms of emotion, were very different to what they now are, cannot possibly sympathize with those immortal productions so closely as their contemporaries did. The noble English poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is read more than ever, but it does not colour our thoughts; it does not shape our understandings, as it shaped the understandings of our forefathers. Between us and them is a chasm, which we cannot entirely bridge. We are so far removed from the associations amid which

those poems were composed, that they do not flash upon us with reality and distinctness of aim, which they would have done, had we lived when they were written. Their garb is strange, and belongs to another time. Not merely their dialect and their dress, but their very complexion and their inmost sentiments, tell of bygone days, of which we have no firm hold. There is, no doubt, a certain ornamental culture, which the most highly educated persons receive from the literature of the past, and by which they sometimes refine their taste, and sometimes enlarge their ideas. But the real culture of a great people, that which supplies each generation with its principal strength, consists of what is learnt from the generation immediately preceding. Though we are often unconscious of the process, we build nearly all our conceptions on the basis recognized by those who went just before us. Our closest contact is, not with our forefathers, but with our fathers. To them we are linked by a genuine affinity, which, being spontaneous, costs us no effort, and from which, indeed, we cannot escape. We inherit their notions, and modify them, just as they modified the notions of their predecessors. At each successive modification, something is lost and something is gained, until, at length, the original type almost disappears. Therefore it is, that ideas entertained several generations ago, bear about the same relation to us, as ideas preserved in a foreign literature. In both cases, the ideas may adorn our knowledge, but they are never so thoroughly incorporated with our minds, as to be the knowledge itself. The assimilation is incomplete, because the sympathy is incomplete.

Obviously, we understand much, and profoundly, in past art and architecture but it is a delusion to believe that we understand everything. It's not possible to understand everything about art and architecture even if it's done now. The full meaning of what's seen fades quickly. The intrigue of an old

style partially supplants the relevance of the present but much is lost. In art and architecture it's impossible to use forms from the past. They become symbols, and not profound ones either, but on the order of the Spanish Colonial TV set. "Form" is a wobbly word to use because form and content is a false division derived from another false division, thought and feeling. Certainly form and content, whatever, are made of generalizations but also they are made of particulars, obdurate and intimate. The particulars tend to escape later understanding. The only instance in which the past is more than usually relevant to the present is when the continuity is very strong, bringing the past to the present. This may be the case in the language and literature of Iceland. It might be so in the architecture of Italy. But few artists and architects now have any experience of even the recent past. Despite differences, we – Europeans, European Colonials, Japanese, and others – grow up in the middle-class industrial society, all with the same government education. The poor are just poor and the rich only have more expensive symbols.

The most recent situations in art and architecture depend on the exploitation of history, done by some who are ignorant and naive for a corresponding audience, but worse, done by some who are cynical. If something new is to look important it has to look like something that has become important, which takes time. The work of Matisse and Newman, of most good artists since Bernini, cannot at first have looked important in this extrinsic sense. Instant importance is a lot easier to make than real importance and far easier to sell. David Rabinowitch said about this air of importance that it's the essence of academicism.

The audience only remembers that the art resembling what they are looking at is reproduced in all the books. They don't realize that the work in the books was new and original, and cannot be a type. They don't understand that the type has been produced afterward by a few second-rate artists and many

mediocre ones, the whole declining steadily to banality, pedantry, and insincerity. The public doesn't know, for example, that after Kirchner and Nolde, whom probably they don't know by name, there have been hundreds of painters flailing Expressionism, so that when they see Baselitz whipping a dead horse they expect it to stand up, or at least roll over. His paintings are larger than those of fifty years ago, the brushwork is looser, "more abstract," and the figures are upside down, an innovation almost equal to Christo's idea of wrapping everything up. The brushwork in the paintings by Baselitz is thoughtless, passionless, flaccid, and is a parody of Expressionism. There's almost no structure and color. I was told several years before the present fashion that Baselitz was a unique German manifestation, a case of *Angst*. But there's no *Angst*, only platitudinous complacency.

The last subsidence into academicism was toward the end of the 1950s. This academicism was incongruously made from the work of the truly "Expressionist" painters among the artists in New York. Aside from secondary reasons, commercial and social, this brief decline was due to the usual tendency of a situation to decay as more people become involved in it and as time reveals misunderstandings. There were three groups involved. First there were a few artists, Kline, Motherwell, and Guston, aware of many but not all of the prevailing problems, who were prompted into good work by Pollock's existence and by the presence of other very independent artists who were first encouraged by his work: Rothko, Newman, Still, and de Kooning. And Gorky was important. Kline, Motherwell, and Guston did good work for only a few years in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a common occurrence, and then lapsed into a high-level academicism, a combination of confusion and patness, as the excitement of the time wore off and perhaps because Pollock died. This academicism is the result of their attitudes toward their problems since all aesthetic problems can be solved, and are not properly "problems," but aside from

that the academicism is the result of these unconsidered problems. For these artists and at first for the viewer, excitement overcame the formal uncertainties, but calm exposed them.

Too much in Kline's work and Motherwell's was just an enlargement of elements in their early work. Kline enlarged and simplified the forms that he liked most in his small representational paintings. He did not solve the problem of the naturalistic space which accompanied the black structures but just cleaned up around them. When he desired greater complexity or some color, the contradictions ruined the paintings. Motherwell painted large Cubist collages originally pasted small. The first *Elegies* are good thanks to the scale and vigor, which caused a preliminary suspension of inquiry as to what the background might be. In the later less eager paintings the large black shapes pull away from the background. Art is supposed to hang together. In Kline's later paintings the large shapes sink naturalistically into the background. In contrast, a main aspect of the work of Pollock and Newman is that there is no foreground and background. De Kooning's work, like Kline's and Motherwell's, had contradictions which grew but these were less harmful because the shapes were smaller. His work also declined some in the late 1950s.

The second group is the younger artists who developed work based on that of the older ones, which seldom works. While much was good, it wasn't good enough. The work was somewhat easygoing and was backward in relation to Pollock and Newman. Some of these artists are: Norman Bluhm, Ernest Briggs, Lawrence Calcagno, Herman Cherry, Edward Dugmore, Friedel Dzubas, Sam Francis, Helen Frankenthaler, Michael Goldberg (who is really one of the third group and is my definition of that academy), John Grillo, Grace Hartigan, Julius Hatofsky, Al Held, George McNeil, Fred Mitchell, Joan Mitchell, Jules Olitski, Stephen Pace, Pat Passlof, Milton Resnick, Robert Richenburg, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Frank Roth

(also one of the third group and much worse than Goldberg), Ed Ruda, Hassel Smith, and Jack Youngerman. Some of these painters are overrated but many are underrated. It's ironic that most of these artists who are neglected now are much superior, not the least in honesty and purpose, to the young or new artists imitating them.

The third group was a plethora of outright followers, to me virtual copyists, who were ordinarily dogmatic as to the true art. Dogmatism increases as ability declines. The leading galleries and critics were interested in nothing but "Abstract Expressionism." Martha Jackson showed many of this third group. Exceptions, such as Chamberlain's first show there, were begrudged; Rauschenberg's rooster was just passing through. Max Kozloff thought that every "Abstract Expressionist" was a fragment of the True Cross. A show of Rauschenberg's at the first Stable Gallery, where there was once a very good show of James Brooks's paintings, was hardly mentioned in print even though it was during the time of his best work. Ad Reinhardt was a geometric anathema. Even Newman was considered heretical; Davis and Albers were outsiders as usual.

This first lapse into academicism was never complete and was quickly stopped by the activity of the late 1950s and the early 1960s. Unfortunately some decent artists became neglected in the recovery. The present decline, the relapse into academicism, was slow and easy. It didn't come in the prior and obvious guise of followers and copyists but came in the guise of the avant-garde, facing forward while marching backward. Much work in the late 1960s was only superficially new and inventive. One of the tendencies of all times is for radical ideas to be adopted and then toned down, to be incorporated into the conservatism they denied. Also new ideas are often used as an excuse to continue old ones – a new guise. Allied to this is the tendency in this century for art to collapse into fragmented representation or into the literary. Art that

was made to be direct is pilfered for art that is made to be indirect. This watered-down referential art is the academic art of this century, the correlation to the academic art of the last century, the genre, the portrait, and the history paintings based slickly on David and Ingres. Well, the seemingly new and the tiresomely old work of Joseph Kosuth – a definition is a photograph is a table – and Jan Dibbets – a polder photographed awry – was the beginning of fifteen years of banality. I don't want to write this history in this long and general article, and it's boring and perhaps unnecessary; it's even harder to imagine a history of "Photo-Realism."

Expressionism is not an important idea in the art of this century, since it is the weakest attempt to deal with the disintegration of traditional representation, in fact a reactionary one, being just a distortion of the picture. If Munch is an Expressionist, which is doubtful, he and de Kooning are the only ones first-rate. Soutine is just a nice unhappy succulent artist. Kirchner, Nolde, and Kokoschka are secondary. Rothko, Still, and Newman are not Expressionists. Neither is Pollock, since in no way is his application of paint a representation of nature; it's dripped paint, a phenomenon, itself new and in a context entirely new, completely opposed to the old confusion of nature being what it is felt to be.

Many artists recently are similar to Baselitz. I haven't seen enough paintings by some to be critical nor do I want to describe the artists one by one. Neither is the present fashion a novelty; there has been a new fashion biannually for fifteen years. The present characteristics in common are the constant derivation, usually blown-up, and the crassness of the execution. Schnabel is better than Baselitz but his work is derivative from "Abstract Expressionism" and inferior to a hundred artists of twenty-five years ago, some good and many still alive. There's a little art brut and primitivism, neither new, for innovation. Schnabel and his audience are ignorant of the past situation as history, which leads to worse, a cultural ignorance shown in

their acceptance of the stale eclecticism. Chia is rehashing academic mythology, including Picasso's waltzing Hellenistic figures, bad when Picasso did them and decadent in the first place. A great deal of expensive oil paint makes an impasto, another guaranteed symbol that is colorless, leaden, and boring. Such work has always been around; only its size is new, derivative many years later from Newman, Pollock, and the others. The same with Clemente. There's nothing new in the affected primitivism, only that it's blown up. The kitsch Classicism of Garouste is that of a Sunday painter of thirty years ago in the Washington Square Outdoor Art Exhibit. Finally, the worst paintings, historical only in regard to 1930s magazine illustration, but mentionable as the ultimate in vapidly, hopefully, are those of David Salle.

An article by John Russell on some of these artists in *The New York Times Magazine* is a good example of complete critical failure. The article was simply a report and in that misleading. The nationalism in some of the German work is very reactionary, and is also kitsch, and should not be discussed as just one more artist's fancy. The *Angst* also. There was no discussion of the elements of a painting, such as they are. One of the worst paintings I've ever seen in all respects is one by Anselm Kiefer in the Venice Biennale of 1980. The busts of German cultural heroes were lined around a room. Everything was badly painted on purpose and colored the brown which children get when they mix all the colors together. Perhaps it's a parody of nationalism but I think not. If not, the painting is support for the most destructive force in the world, an obsolescent force like that of the Empires of the First War, and similarly set to explode as it collapses.

My guess as to the commerce in this art, said to be at a peak in ferocity, is that while the dealers awe the buyers with the high prices, said to be around \$40,000, they in fact undercut the prices of serious and established artists selling for somewhat more. The gain in this is that the dealers sell more

of the new work than the old for a while. But then they must undercut that. This process is typical commercialism. Finally the standing of serious art is destroyed and the dealers must isolate their product and give it other attributes. Usually it becomes a new type, better for being popular. *Oklahoma!* is not music, it's musical comedy.

Some of the present artists think of art as a career – which it shouldn't be in the usual sense – some seem to be exploiting the situation in a businesslike way, some are perhaps genuinely naive, but some are cynical. This attitude was introduced into recent art by Andy Warhol, who probably brought it from the commercial art in which he worked. First, art is business. Second, give the people what you think they want. You assume you and the public share similar desires – success, fame, and money – and also share clichés. Third, you are to be loved and admired for admitting that you're no better than they are, and even praised for admitting to hungers such as success and to being a little awful. Eugenio Montale wrote in 1962, about when "Andy" came along, that "it is no longer a matter of insincerity, but of a boastful declaration of universal ignorance."

Art has not yet been converted into commerce but architecture has, perhaps at a specific date, with the death of Louis Kahn. As I've said, real music and dance have long been underground: samizdat is part of their nature. All that's above ground is Bernstein for one and Balanchine for the other. A couple of years ago, for example, my children and I saw a ballet by Balanchine about Noah's Ark, an original subject, narrated by John Houseman. It was embarrassing, boring trash, and to the children as well. This is the art of the late hero. Serious music and dance exist of course, since all of the arts are necessities for some, but they exist only on the periphery of the society and with difficulty. As for architecture, commerce is more important than it is in art because architecture is utilitarian and because there is not a clear boundary between architecture, which is intentional, and just building, which is

expedient. Architecture was already a very small portion of all building, even less if all of the new skyscrapers are considered merely vernacular. Almost all so-called architects are now openly commercial. Yet a person can begin, work, make money, become successful and still keep the original purpose in mind. It's not hard. But now the only purpose is money and success. Philip Johnson said in a vulgar interview in *Skyline*, excerpted from *Hype* by Steven M.L. Aronson, "I resent people thinking *I'm* that way, but I suppose they're right, that I'm a success because I work at that as the aim, whereas any artist worth his salt should work at art, and not the way Warhol does and Stern does, for success as a thing in itself." What's the point and why should anyone admire that success? As in serious music and dance, real architects exist but are kept down, can't build, and are used to lend a little intellectuality to the main activity, in case some demented businessman should suspect that a building could have meaning.

The architect and the client, the corporate businessman, are to become alike, equally mercenary and ambitious. Johnson says, "I'm *for* sale, I'm a whore. I'm a practicing architect. I work for money for whoever commissions a building from me." The businessman should not be bothered by the nature of architecture; sell him only the status and symbols that he sells others. Helmut Jahn sells the businessman in Houston, whose name I justly don't remember, a skyscraper that Jahn must know is naive, a gaudy derivation of a 1920s skyscraper that was then a corrupt mélange of Classicism and modernism. The businessman says it's a symbol of his business and of Houston. It's a symbol of Jahn's cynicism, perhaps ignorance, and of the businessman's profound naiveté and ignorance.

The Americans invented the strip city after World War II thus destroying the civitas and the whole visible history of American towns. This is unique to this country and is one of the great changes and tragedies of the century. Robert Venturi assumed that the people liked the strip city and its silly symbols;

he certified it as natural and took orders for more. The strip city is a development, even before the present developers, that was probably not considered or wanted by anyone, like most great changes. It's not a desire of the populace. At the same time, there began the arbitrary rejuvenation of the old downtowns, a desire of businessmen. Both developments are wasteful and destructive. They are one of the main economic efforts of the United States since the war. This perversely emulates the destruction and lucrative reconstruction of Europe.

These attitudes resemble Warhol's, including "love me cause I'm awful and admit it." Johnson says so disingenuously in the interview: "Didn't know I ever did design a 'Philip Johnson Building.' You know, consistency is one thing I've never been accused of." And, "But if you come to Philip Johnson, you don't know *what* you're gonna get, but it's gonna be damned exciting."

The misuse of history is fashionable also among the architects this year, but "*En los nidos de antaño/No hay pájaros hogaño.*" The use of classical forms is the most popular. But a genuine use of classical structure and elements did not survive the Baroque. In fact the art and architecture of Greece and Rome never reached the point of revival. There was only a beginning in the work of the Renaissance architects, usually working for the Church, the original symptom of the decay of the classical era. The connection was fatal and the changes of the industrial period destroyed the little that was genuine. Classicism was superficially revived in the last century by the bourgeoisie imitating the earlier nobility. Classical forms were not understood, just used, often as an eclectic element, although the work is often well done, unlike now.

During the 1920s and 1930s Classicism was used by new institutions, usually national, anxious to establish their seniority, always in a very dry, pedantic manner, devoid of all quality, somewhat geometrical because of remote modern

tendencies and because, more importantly, the forms were not understood. In Europe this is Nazi and fascist government architecture. Here it's government architecture. An example is the old National Gallery of Art. A new example is the new National Gallery. At the same time there was a prettier architecture, based on geometricized Gothic forms and with much, mostly decorative, taken from modern architecture. These are the skyscrapers built by routine architects, despite the existence of Sullivan, Wright, Mies van der Rohe, and others of such ability. These debased buildings are now the models for even more debased skyscrapers. And now the entire shape of the building is glibly geometricized. And recently the symbols of the past are simply pasted on. Further, even the idea of the skyscraper is debatable. Usually they are conspicuously unnecessary, they cannot be economical, and always the taxpayer is paying for the corporation's expensive status symbol. The skyscrapers are the sour cream of a skim milk society.

The new use of Classicism isn't even three-dimensional, the essence of Classicism. It's all paper cutouts. Michael Graves reproduced the patterns of the modernized Classicism now called art deco, including garlands, on the façade of his building in Portland, Oregon. This is inane. The building is all wrong. The main pedestrian entrance is small while the automobile entrance is huge and faces the park, presumably the better view, an arrangement which could be described as "popular" since most suburbanites enter their ranch houses through the garage and kitchen, saving the parlor door for the last judgment. The lower tiers, the main box, and the two upper tiers exceed even the banality native to modern ziggurats. The dark glass necessary for the dark patterns further darkens a gloomy climate. Someone working there says: "When people say that this is the world's tallest basement, they are correct. To work in here is very depressing. If you can figure out how to get into the building you're a genius. It's very difficult to tell

where the entrances are to the front and to the back of the building." Robert Venturi and Robert A. M. Stern use derivative patterns and cutouts to establish status. The source of this is the developers after the war, who designated the cost of their expensive ranch houses by the complexity of the front door: two columns and pediment, plain colonial; a schematic portico, the English gentry; a whole portico, the English nobility. Venturi, the sophisticate, is responding to the greater wisdom of the worker, who likes and lives in one of the houses that the company he owns built.

Contrary to his published remarks, Philip Johnson is amiable. I criticize him especially because he is the chief and the spokesman of the "postmodern" movement, and because I know his buildings best. Johnson stuck a pediment, already misused two centuries before, on top of the AT&T skyscraper. This indifferent box resembles a standard apartment building of the 1930s and similarly has no proportions whatsoever. The office tower sits on a schematic interior of a cathedral, which is open all around to the street. Geometricized Romanesque columns, square in plan with inverted corners, called a rabbet in furniture, substitute for Corbusier's *pilotis*. In the front there is a tall arch of eighty feet, vaguely Gothic in proportion and with a rolled edge, which is one column disengaged from the many that constitute a pier in a Gothic cathedral. This is flanked on either side by three lower rectangular bays formed by the square columns, each outlined by the rabbets. The bays are taken directly from the generalized, geometricized, debased Classicism of the 1920s and 1930s. The upper part of the open cathedral has large round windows punched into it, probably derived from the Duomo in Florence. The enclosed lobby within the open space looks like Lenin's mausoleum, except that the centerpiece is a priapic capitalist monument rising from poinsettias. The cathedral is expensively veneered to imitate stone blocks, as is the tower. Attached adventitiously to the back of this

laughable, embarrassing, and bewildering pile is the long half of a galleria.

Even worse is Johnson's Republic Bank Center in Houston. Most of the buildings in Houston have the visual interest of weeds in a lot, but this one fails to achieve this appearance. There are two buildings side by side, one a skyscraper derived from the step-shouldered buildings of Amsterdam and the other a small building the size and shape of perhaps the Duomo in Milan. Every skyscraper needs a chapel. An arch similar to the one cleaving the AT&T building occurs in the position of a portal to a transept in the free side of the cathedral. The same arch is opposite in the free side of the skyscraper. The "transept" goes through both buildings. This is excruciating. The skyscraper steps back many times and atop these corners and along the roof of the cathedral there are small elongated pyramids, geometricized pinnacles. It's like decorating with tin cans. The scale of these and of the setbacks and of the whole is very weak. A recent article in *The Kansas City Star*, under the headline "Houston Skyscraper Recalls an Earlier Age," provided further information on this building as to its necessity — "... Houston leads the nation in vacant office space ..." — and its reason for being: "... Republic Bank ... was looking for a way to boost its visibility." "We really didn't have any recognition," explains Marilyn Pharr, a bank spokesman. She said bank executives "decided it had to be something distinctive but didn't want to be in the race for the highest building"; and as for sophistication, "The design, from New York architects, Philip Johnson and John Burgee," was chosen by the bank's chairman, Ronald Brown, "who has spent much time in Europe and 'likes cathedrals and something that makes a statement,'" Ms. Pharr said. Capitalist realism.

Johnson's water garden in Fort Worth is almost as bad as the Center. With one of the loveliest problems in the world to consider and with a whole city block for the garden, there is

no invention. The whole area is terraced at about eighteen-inch intervals in an enlargement of the scale model of contours, eighteen inches replicating a quarter-inch of styrofoam. The representation of the project in the architectural office, which is what the client sees and buys, becomes the existing work, a duplication of the model or drawing and not architecture. This is becoming common. I. M. Pei's new National Gallery probably looked so good in the drawings that those had to be reproduced. The building has the acute angles and the linearity of an isometric projection. All of Johnson's buildings look like models. Other architects quickly debase the already corrupt. On the main square of Providence, Rhode Island, Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum are building an even more schematic façade derived from Johnson's building in Houston derived from Amsterdam, with steps and a similar arch near the top: the design is old-fashioned, supposedly to suit the context of Providence's older buildings, a major selling point. Of course it suits nothing, being bad. At the bottom is a poor man's version of the bays and round windows of the AT&T building. Back of the façade, extending to the next block, is a glass building, closet modern. Alongside is another galleria. I'm trying to be serious and write about art and architecture but what I'm really writing about are mimics, kitsch versions of everything in real art and architecture, a second world. I need a verbal four-wheel drive so that "good, middling, and bad" can be switched from high range to low range. It's not powerful enough to say that these architects are bad.

I was in New Orleans in the winter and was shown a concoction amidst the skyscrapers called Piazza d'Italia, done by Charles Moore assisted by Ronald C. Filson. It can't be said that there is a piazza, but the clearing, such as it is, is in front of a pile of ruins, cut-out, pop-up Classicism, a stage set of columns in artificial materials: the Ionic capitals are bent stainless steel. Filson said that the purpose of the piazza and the

ruins was to make the Italian Americans feel at home. It's hard to imagine that many have a domestic regard for columns, usually never having been to Italy, where columns are not so common anyway, especially steel ones. Filson suspects that the Piazza d'Italia is corny but justifies it as what the Italian Americans want. How does he know? This attitude is patronizing, of course. The second justification, before I fled, was that American public spaces are not used and that the project was an attempt to revive one. The United States has had useful public spaces, even important political spaces, for most of its history. Those spaces were superseded or destroyed by the strip cities and the downtown skyscrapers. The architects and the developers, not the people, made the barren spaces among the skyscrapers. The assignment of Classical ruins to the Italian Americans is a typical and cynical misuse of history, both in intent and as to knowledge. The history is that of the tourist brochure, of kids in the fifth grade, of T.V. History becomes more succinct all the time. Incidentally, Stern claims to have invented an "Italian American style."

Much is made now of the catchword "postmodern," which includes more every day. This term has been made by changing the meaning of the word "modern" from "now," which is all it ever meant, to a meaning as a style, which the word cannot mean, since no style can include such diversity. Wright, Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier are thrown together and tossed off as being "modern." This "modern" means only earlier and by now opprobriously established, and "postmodern" means modern. I've thought of an even better label, "post-contemporary." "Postmodern" is being used to obscure the issue of quality by claiming a presentness and a popularity supposedly superior to that of acknowledged art and architecture, no matter how good they are and in fact regardless of their pertinence, democracy, and acceptance so far. This is cant. It's hypocrisy to seem to criticize the work of the recent past, especially by ascribing spurious purposes and meanings to it,

while indiscriminately mining the greater past. It's setting up a straw man to supersede to identify "modern" with the "International Style," a commercial simplification of Mies van der Rohe's work, made by the same architects, Johnson for one, who now say that the style is cold and repetitious, as they made it, and that it must be replaced by another, hopefully diverse and entertaining. The elaboration of the term "post-modern" is not due to real change but is due to naked fashion and the need to cover it with words. Bob Tiemann said to me lately that he was told, "Quality isn't an issue anymore: it's who it's for." Johnson says, "Form is arbitrary."

Since there's a limit to what has been done in the past, there is a limit to eclecticism, and so the search for variety becomes desperate. The newest discovery is of "regional styles." The clichés of a region are incorporated, again debasing forms originally debased. In Santa Monica the firm of Carde Killefer has built a store with a false front derived from false storefronts. This "style" is accompanied by the same hoopla: "the people want it," "they recognize it," "it's suitable for the site," and "it fits." Also "it's not cold" and "it's not international," "it's local." Well, it's not local. A genuine interest in a region is very different and is not incompatible with originality. The use of available materials is crucial and as a concern exceeds the "look of the old West," which was made by planks and frames from Georgia. A building should not be an intrusion on the landscape or on the existing buildings, which must be considered with both respect and skepticism. None of these requirements is a barrier to originality or a justification for ignorance. Considerations of place, climate, materials, available labor and technology, cost, and certainly usefulness and function are informative delights and not burdens. *Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci*. The main implication in eclecticism, its poverty, is that there are only so many styles and periods and no more, one or several of which is chosen. Mysteriously, eclectic work always corresponds to what has

already been done. But, instead of all the possibilities appearing only in Banister Fletcher, they are infinite and what has been done has the proportion of stars to space. Choosing a style is common in art too, as the recent “Expressionist” painters show.

Tradition in art is to create, not to revive.

– Josef Albers

Art should never try to be popular; the public should try to make itself artistic.

– Oscar Wilde

... every effort for progress, for enlightenment, for science, for religious, political, and economic liberty, emanates from the minority, and not from the mass.

– Emma Goldman