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Art Is Long, Art Is Short

by WALTER BATTISS

IN the net of thought remain fragmentary memories of art's experience: the fat belly of Silenus and the wet mouth of an Hemaphrodite, silent columns beside a silent sea (Greece); the dancing thighs of Dionysus painted in the damp tombs beneath the warm corn of Tarquinia (Etruria); Christ the Pantocrator (Byzantium); the red Old Bitch (Rome); Michelangelo's bodies turning into the restless snakes of Aesculapius, Leonardo and Raphael prettifying a gaunt religious theme, Piero della Francesca enthroned in his cobweb of Perspective capturing the Queen of Sheba (Italy); a feline Rembrandt moving through the shadows and sometimes making self-portraits with a half-face surviving, the other part eaten by the crabs of darkness (Holland); an Academy of rotting Society, and Sickert's "Noctes Ambrosianae" (England); Bondin, "Le Roi des Cieux" (France); Van Gogh a Pharaoh worshipping the Sun (Arles); Cezanne's playbox of cones, cylinders and balls (Aix); Picasso dissecting a wether with a pigeon's feather (Paris); Matisse cutting paper leaves, shells, rabbits, dolls; Dali the Ostrich in the Desert gobbling watches; Klee twittering on his branch; Mondnan making helicopter strokes up and across in the breeze of Jazz; Leger the Plumber with his anthropomorphic leadpipes; Giacometti the Mummy stretched on the white rack of time; Jackson Pollack, Jack the Dripper dripping condensed milk and treacle over string, wire, shells and pebbles (U.S.A.);

A bicycle ride over burning tar on a canvas on the floor by a student of the Royal College (U.K.); Slashed holes in canvas by Fontana (South America and Italy) — considered O.K; "Thorned Condition" empting on metal by Cattaneo (Johannesburg, S.A.) — also O.K.; Landscapes and Portraits painted by nonentities now Non-U; Finally Tachism and Non-Art is Art!!!

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All this is the innocent world of art I know. Beyond its friendliness, its playfulness, its triumphant truth, its graceful whims and fancies lies an alien world of daily horror, murder and death. This alien world of land, sea and air and all forms of life is physical. Should I stop, out-of-breath, to contemplate this world its seductive beauty calms, and the Old God who made It is approached through prayer: Yet in the very act of enjoying these rare moments of bliss they are succeeded by shivering thoughts that one will be punished and pay a stiff price for an authentic pleasure.

One is in a world of men inventing a machine called Civilisation. They make cities, then they destroy them.

I am in the machine of Civilisation: there are many voices shouting — Noise is Life. Money covered in Blood is the Heart's Desire. Ripe, hot flesh for sale at the Cabaret. Yes, yes, this is the Gay Life. In the moments between come blasts of Propaganda to throttle thought. Man must not think!!

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In the kaleidoscope of confusion which we call Daily Life remains the hope of youth and dreams.

Youth comes to us with shining eyes and a deep faith. Must one enlighten them and blight them? What is Education? To capture the dream one must pursue Science or Art.

To understand art requires a lifetime of study but by some curious freak of creation it is possible to make art without any formal education. Civilised man cannot forgive the primitive cave-dweller and the modern child for making an authentic art without the need for civilisation and education!

As the child grows he accepts influences. Later, if he is gifted, there is the Art School where he can learn techniques. If he has something to say he ultimately has to learn his own way of saying it. Education cannot help him. He may avoid the cancer of fame and success. The artist fears fame and success. He must seek instead a fierce poverty to preserve his art. Art hurts.