

Trumpeter (1994)

ISSN: 0832-6193

Like a Bird With No Feet: Art Without Place

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About the Author: *John K. Grande*, is a freelance author from whose book *Art and Environment* (published by Friendly Chameleon Publishers, Toronto, 1993) this essay was taken. Reprinted by permission. His latest book is *Balance, Art, and Nature*, forthcoming from Blackrose Books, Montreal, Quebec, in the Fall of 1994.

In seeking to embrace the media myth that market recognition is the only real way of establishing a value for their art, many of today's artists have placed themselves at a great disadvantage. Inadvertently denegrating the very places they come from in the process, the contemporary artists' obsession with marketing usually precedes any desire to seek recognition from one's own specific culture, so powerful has the infrastructure of internationalism become.

As they make the jump to the international market, today's artists have assumed the role of journalists, professional media mongers, hunting down reviewers and features-writers like print-hungry primitives, as if the published article was the only proof of talent. Their shows are analyzed in the international art magazines that have become the Biblical barometers of avantgardism, scrutinized by collectors, curators and dealers throughout the world, seemingly to the exclusion of anything that it is left unrecorded in print. The judgements of these publications, who specialize in the cryptic artspeak Jargon of never-never land, are tantamount to the tablets on the Mount: their word is *the* Word.

As these artists start to reap the rewards of media recognition, they begin to fetch high prices in Tokyo, New York, Paris and Berlin. In subjugating his or her expression to a process of product standardization, recognition and valuation by market forces, most successful, career-oriented artists are forced to abandon any real search to identify with their own culture-specific experience in the regions of the world they come from. In so doing, they lose something very precious. This process of de-culturation of the artist belittles any intrinsic value or holistic experience an artist's expression could potentially offer to the world. Works of art, as well as the artists, become interchangeable potential products, like any other. In part, this divestment of integrity explains the fatally coded, anomalous messages, the stone-washed self-conscious forms of today's art. Many of these artists are only too willing to make clean, altruistic statements about the malaise of problems that beset the world — pollution, over-population, war and famine — by incorporating media documentation, relics and artifacts from oppressed regions and cultures of the world. It gets them into important shows and sells their works to museums. At the same time, they are absolutely terrified of taking any direct action that might improve the ecological or social problems that are occurring in their own backyards.

The dismantling of the Berlin Wall, the re-unification of the two Germanies, Perestroika in the Soviet Union and its consequent break-up, the resurgence of micro-nationalism in Eastern Europe, are all part of the vast social, political and economic restructuring going on in the world. These changes are pointing to currents that are completely different than those that appear on the surface of the New World Order. Regional economies, linked to

a greater world economy, seem to be replacing the mega-structures of the past. For this reason, international post-Modern art is now passing the way of the Edsel because it avoids any future vision, seeks to sever ties to regional culture. The demise of one ideology, communism, also signifies a re-evaluation of another, the West's democratic traditions.

Our legacy of economic progress has created a quantitative, materialist history of art, a history perceived as a successive layering of movements and eras on top of one another in a kind of pyramid of time. The ideology of avantgardism, with its absolute deification of the individual artist, promotes ecosystems of expression that nurture a *Pilgrim's Progress* vision of cultural history. It narrows our vision, blinds us from any real insights into the nature of the human identity.

We generalize and simplify Nature, link it directly to an expansionist illusion that has been our model of history. *New art* is deemed socially relevant by the *culturati* that govern our arts institutions because it represents a break from the artistic traditions that immediately preceded it, and thus encourages market demand for its very novelty. There is a coded *connaissance* of the past traditions that *new art* is supposedly distinct from. This tautological concept of the evolution of art encourages the notion of transgression, of a steady stylistic progression that looks askance to check historical precedent in order ensure its own implicit originality. Socially relevant art is not necessarily ecologically pertinent. A gap exists between the "i-ness" of formalist expression and the more poignant, intuitive side of expression. The latter is ecologically pertinent, cannot be contained by traditional or avantgardist historical imperatives.

The demise of avantgardism in the West, hailed by critics and artists alike, is in the process of taking place. It is only recognized as a hypothetical idea, not a reality, by arts *aficionados*. Even as it is taking place, it is rejected outright by the institutional arts community because it would make a mockery of 20th century art's entire *raison d'etre*, its Modernist prerogative based in linear progress. The mutually exclusive ideologies of capitalism and communism are now coalescing. They no longer exist in a direct, dualistic opposition to one another. A homologous internationalism continues to sweep like a tide to occupy the centre stage. Ecological reform as a process, not simply a product modification, has still not been brought into the equation. This is because it calls into question the very basis of economics, its dynastic structural ethos. Our humanity's unchallenged dominion over our planet's renewable and non-renewable resources must surely end. It will more certainly affect our future survival than fertile agendas of political or economic expansion.

Despite what we are told, economies of scale are indivisibly linked and limited by Nature's resources. If we try to regulate and restrict our economic demands by recognizing quality of life over production and consumption quotas, then we have a chance to safeguard the planet's other species and resources. The same applies to cultures of scale. Inter-related yet linked as a whole, the diversity of human cultures of the world are independent, yet integrated within the greater whole. They are the most capable of maintaining the bio-regional cultural diversity we now possess because they have the greatest knowledge of their respective local ecologies. As these micro-cultures are manageable, both in terms of scale and resources, they are capable of regenerating and controlling their use of, and regeneration of, both human and natural resources. Are we not making a grave mistake in relegating the cultures of the world to a superfluous role, that of the bauble on the tree of mass consumption and resource exploitation? It seems highly unlikely that the peoples of the world really want to live through the authoritarian dictum of this New World Order unless it integrates a cultural and ecological quotient of responsibility into its elegantly charted production and exchange tables. The generalized ideologies of the past, so intensely reliant on a dualist perception of the human will to rationalize all experience into systems, like all manner of political systems, are now losing their persuasive power over the peoples of the world.

The boundaries between Nature and the civilized world have become permeable, constantly shifting entities to the point that we are no longer certain what "true nature" really is. This abstracts any question over the basis of cause and effect in a world undergoing vast environmental disruption. Today's landscape is certainly not a pristine wilderness immune to human intervention, nor a boundless, inexhaustible reserve. In trying to denounce the great gap between humanity and Nature many artists have *framed nature* as readily as any industrial giant exploits it. The result is a lifeless form of art that defines and describes the idea of exploitation without offering any creative solutions. These fatalistic forms of expression are part of our old-fashioned legacy of modernism, of an art whose vision is entangled in a nostalgic vision of the future, not a desire to change things in the present. To recognize our place in the picture of life, we have to be responsible for the ambiguities and uncertainties of true feeling. These cause us to question our basis of identity in relation to the diagrammatic systems of which we find ourselves a part. Any transitional attempts at maintaining out-moded codes of aesthetics are flagrantly short sighted. Like lost souls in a snow storm, we move forward step by step, seemingly unable to see where we are going, only to find we have arrived where we began. While moral, ethical or social questions are well described in today's art, the art is shallow, a literal presentation of material without an intrinsic identification with its material constituents. William Shakespeare described the process of art in *Winter's Tale*, when he wrote:

Yet nature is made better by no mean — but nature makes that mean — which you say adds to nature, is an art — that nature makes.... This is an art which does mend nature — change it rather; but — The art itself is nature..1.

Aesthetic narcissism, the egotistical view that what we create is somehow immortal, eternal and more significant than life itself, reinforces our division from Nature and relegates expression to the role of dogma. Hard as it is to accept, Nature is as much a part of the art as we, and we are a part of Nature. Any attempt to maintain codes of aesthetic narcissism that is part of the necessary exhaustion of identity in a consumer-based society, will ultimately fail. It propagates the naive view that we are somehow immortal, gods of our own creation. In this walk through the dogmatic, the literal character of today's art forms fundamentally bores us because it is tied to our historical legacy of material progress.

Our society's world-view, its history and art, relates directly to the economic context on which its evolution has been predicated. Aesthetic traditions have defined content by measuring subject, symbol or material evidence but their vision of the progress of art is inimically tied to our economic definitions of progress. Traditional and avantgardist forms of art (post-modernism included), for their reliance on a chronological evolutionary legacy of expression, likewise reinforce cultural models diametrically opposed to Nature. They embody notions of individualism that conceive their significance in relation to their relative context within a formal history. By presuming the artist's role to be superior to that of Nature, we have committed a sublime oversight that must change if our planet's bio-culture is to survive. Traditional aesthetics' perceives creation as a hermetic process, defined exclusively by human expression, closed off and hermetically sealed from the world at large. As Friedrich Kiesler once explained on hanging the paintings unframed for Peggy Guggenheim's famed Art of This Century show in 1942,

Today the framed painting on the wall has become a decorative cipher without life and meaning, or else, to the more susceptible observer, an object of interest existing in a world distinct from his. Its frame is at once symbol and agent of an artificial duality of 'vision' and 'reality', or 'image' and 'environment', a plastic barrier across which man looks from the world he inhabits to the alien world in which the work of art has its being..2.

Seemingly incapable of adapting its vision towards an ecological integration, formal art exists in opposition to Nature. The need for evidence, recognition by posterity and nuances of humanity-centred meaning are all based on a dualistic, romantic ethos for expression. Seen in these terms, how different is a post-modern work from a Turner landscape? In the words of James Lovelock,

The Gaia hypothesis sees the evolution of the species of living organisms so closely coupled with the western evolution of their physical and chemical environment that together they constitute a single and indivisible evolutionary process..3.

The history of Western culture is inimically tied to economic progress. Prototypes from the past mislead us as to how artists can create expressive works in the future. The frenetic anxiety in today's art world is associated with the idea that we might as well cash in now, because we do not know what tomorrow will bring. The message has become more important than the medium. This crisis of expression is not always evident, buried as it is beneath the vast volumes of books (themselves now just "products") that reify our Cartesian, quantifiable view of art and history. By manipulating nature through art we have treated it not as an equal partner, the fundamental facet of any economy and a true source for expression, but instead as something to be framed. Nature becomes a device to be used and one of its main purposes is to have a name attached to it.

As internationalism has evolved during our conservative epoch, it has sought to cover up all tracks of cultural specificity, elevating the power of the market over all artists, regardless of national or regional origin. Some artists collude in this process as part of their ongoing search for paternalistic approval from on high. They try their utmost to remove all the fingerprints of their regional and national identities from their works, masking them with the latest didactic, conceptual metaphors of late materialism's ongoing angst. Is this not an incredible oversight?

The hazards of so-called professional arts careerism are now great. Many artists will now spend four days per week on bureaucratic details — arranging shows, negotiating contracts, and giving interviews — rather than on their art. As their latest creations are being shipped from here to there, and presumably everywhere, to fulfill exhibition schedules, the artspeak language of their work holds little interest for their neighbors back home, who would probably breathe a sigh of relief on exiting from an exhibition of their works. The double twist is that in New York, Paris, Berlin and Tokyo, these same works will be considered the ultimate reflection of their place of origin. But as the instant artifacts they create become the latest places to park money, many of these artists perceive themselves to be in a double bind, eulogized and colonized at the same time. As Margaret Atwood states in *Survival*,

A person who is "here" but would rather be somewhere else is an exile or a prisoner; a person who is "here" but thinks he is somewhere else is insane. But when you are here and don't know where you are because you've misplaced your landmarks or bearing, then you need not be an exile or a madman: you are simply lost..4.

The internationally recognized artist is like a bird with no feet, who must circle endlessly in the air, and can never land. In a media-charged world where who we are, what we are, is considered irrelevant, because knowledge of self has no marketable value, evidence reigns supreme. As we increasingly identify with mass market advertising and communication imagery, we simultaneously lose our instinct to feel what is actually around us. To communicate thus becomes to consume. Today's most esteemed artworks likewise reflect the hyper—syncratic metaphors of the mass-media, its anomie as their *sine qua non*. The New World Order's so-called internationalism is displacement through devaluation, exchange without recompense to integral value or resourcefulness. It is a

fatalist nightmare whose effects are now being felt throughout the world.

Art from the older Western nations, the newly created East Block nations, the Third World and primitive cultures, are all equalized through appropriation into the *mainstream market*. As the rate of this appropriation increases, the more fragile cultures of smaller nations and regions are flattened out and steamrolled by the central markets of the more powerful nations. The profound depths of intrinsic cultural value are consumed and depleted, to demonstrate that economy is indeed Lord of culture. The power of post-Modernism, the main market's didactic namesake cousin is, like economy, just the packaging that surrounds and obscures the real value that lies within, namely intrinsic culture. Internationalism is a dilution or distortion of original culture.

The success of some artists is essentially a failing, the subjugation of cultural origins in the face of the devastating effects of global scale economies that parallel a new spirit of conservatism throughout the Western world. This spirit is no less present in the business of Art than it is in the business of Business. In New York, where the spiritual exhaustion of America's own *commoditization* of art has achieved outrageous proportions, a succession of regional movements has been ingested into the main market. Arte Povera from Italy, which used discarded materials as the basis for its art and was originally a reaction to the rampant elitism of the art world, found itself integrated into the New York market. Then Germany's Neo-expressionists, who had, at the outset, sought to maintain their cultural specificity by avoiding the American market, found themselves devoured in the early '80s. They were soon ensconced in a series of exhibitions, including the Museum of Modern Art's Anselm Kiefer show in 1989. Now Spanish art, Australian aboriginal, Russian post-Perestroika art, Native, Inuit and Mexican art forms are undergoing absorption. The voracious appetite of business investors instantly devours the latest products of avantgardism and results in the consequent demise of each ingested "movement". Modern art has become a vast clearing house in a seasonal fashion show where New York gallery labels can jump the prices tenfold. The fusion of art and money have become so strong that the engine driving modern-day internationalism is quite simply greed. The West's great art centres continue to exhibit a kind of Darwinian selectivity, a single crop aesthetic rotation scheme designed to reduce any potentially beneficial diversity of expression to a minimum.

While international acceptance plays an important part in many artist's careers and encourages higher prices, it may not be as accurate a barometer of quality as we tend to think. Canadian-born economist John Kenneth Galbraith was quoted in the September 1990 issue of *The International Journal of Art*:

Some part of the art market, perhaps a large part, is now a manifestation of the classical character of inflation on the speculative level. That is to say prices have gone up for whatever reason. This causes other people to think they're going up more, and so they buy on the expectation and that sends the prices up.... The answer therefore is, yes, these prices (in the tens of millions), there's no question, represent in part a flight from reality that characterizes all speculation.... People who buy art as an investment or capital gain are doomed to see dollar signs rather than beauty or interests..5.