

Commitment and Isolation

By Edward Lucie-Smith

As a result of my article about the critic's position, I received an impressive post—and, so far, no anonymous letters. Two of my correspondents raised points which are so interesting that I would like to discuss them here. One asks me whether the critic should not commit himself firmly to those artists he finds congenial, in fact, whether he should not renounce the effort to look at everything with an equally sympathetic eye. The other asks me if the critic can truly communicate what he sees, if one man's reaction isn't as good as another's. The answer to these queries, as to all truly interesting questions, is at once "yes" and "no".

Perhaps I can explain myself more clearly if I take a current exhibition for my text—the large show of "Brazilian Art Today" which is now on at the Royal College of Art. It was immensely enterprising of the people concerned to mount this exhibition, but it does present the critic with certain special problems. Chief of these is the fact that (while we may know something about modern Brazilian architecture) modern Brazilian painting is almost unknown to us in England. There is, one might think, a great opportunity facing the critic, and a great challenge. Yet, as one looks round the walls, one begins to despair. The exhibition suits the large gallery it is shown in quite admirably. Anyone who goes to it will receive an impression of great vitality unleashed. But what happens when the visitor begins to look at the pictures in detail? The truth is that he finds them very difficult to see as individual works of art. It is the *coup d'oeil* which counts, to look at the pictures one by one is almost too demanding.

It is demanding because there is so little to guide the spectator. For the most part, these pictures are abstract. Many are in the cousinage of Abstract Expressionism. If one knew all about these artists—their development, their influence one upon the other—one might be ready to attempt an interpretation of these enigmatic works. Most of all, what one lacks is not specific knowledge of the modern Brazilian painters, but knowledge of the context. How are these pictures used? What are the aesthetic assumptions behind them? We may make an informed guess, on the basis of what we know about modern art in general. But we cannot be certain about our conclusions. Above all, we cannot opine to be very specific. The pictures are us out of countenance. It is as

if we had gone to see Siena before the art-historians got there.

As it happens—and still sticking to the theme of modern Brazilian art—London was treated to an entirely different approach to the whole problem in an exhibition which has just closed. This was the show devoted to the Brazilian sculptor Camargo at the Signals Gallery in Wigmore Street. This enterprising gallery exists to promote a particular cause: that of kinetic art. On this occasion it devoted a whole issue of the news bulletin which it runs to an explanation of Camargo's work. The bulletin spoon-feeds us. It gives us not only all the details we need about the artist's career, but helpful hints as to what he is about. A photograph of a cloud formation is set beside a photograph of a white relief which resembles it. There is an article on "Modern Physics in Brazil" to help to nudge us in the right direction. There is even a little poem by Jose Garcia Villa, which runs as follows: "Hush! (snow-verb)". After all this it would be difficult to refuse to form some kind of judgment of Camargo's work—perhaps without even seeing the sculptures themselves. In fact, conclusions are a little too insistently demanded of us, and we arrive at the conclusion before we have really absorbed the impact of the work of art.

And this brings me back to the point at which I started—my two correspondents and their questions. I will take the second question first—the matter of judging, and the communication of judgment—because it is a trifle the easier to deal with. On this occasion my correspondent seemed to hold the view that all communication was difficult, and that the communication of pleasure was impossible. The critic, he felt, had no right to assume that his judgment was of greater worth than anyone else's. All reactions to a given work of art were to be regarded as equally valid. This point of view has not been without its distinguished supporters. A first experience of the exhibition at the Royal College of Art would seem to bear him out.

With nothing to get hold of but the work of art itself, the critic is helpless to communicate his reactions, or even to define them. He is reduced to the level of pure sensibility. And this is very often the level of the ordinary gallery-goer—the man who has just wandered in to the National Gallery to see a few pictures. How, for example, will the "Baignade" by Seurat strike him, if he knows nothing about Poussin, and nothing about Seurat's later development into Pointillism?

Yet is the critic really as helpless as this, even among a host of unfamiliar Brazilians? As soon as we think of it we realize that he cannot be. It is not only that he has a certain amount of general knowledge to fall back on—he also has something else: the habit of

organizing what he sees becomes knowledge. A by hook or by crook, communicated. The critic lies not in his sensibility, of using it—his way of if you like. He is able to This is a power which he us, but it is one which trained. If you add to the faculty a certain amount, the critic is already beginning away from the man-who-about-pictures-but-knows-y

The question of communication results is more difficult—say that it remains impossible. I think, we ought at least the social function of art, all works of art are used, in the way we expect. What tries to get across is how—he tries to tell the spectator beside him what this particular work of art can do, specifically, for the man who looks at it. In fact, what enlargement it has to offer him. And this involves, as I have said, not only explanation, but judgment. Until the critic has formed his judgment, he cannot explain. The explanation proceeds directly from the process of judgment making distinctions.

And this, in turn, brings me to the question of sympathies. How far should the critic deliberately limit himself? Should he set up standards, and admire those artists who conform to them? In a sense, this is just what he must, for a critic needs his points of reference, absolutes. Yet one of these absolutes must certainly be the demand for growth, for change. The critic's sensibility is, above all, trained to respond to how much we have been altered by experiencing the work of art before us. The greater the change, the greater the work of art is likely to be. This does not mean that the critic becomes simply a recorder of his own inconsistency. He must respect those critics who are not afraid to modify their opinions (Bernard Berenson was one of them). But we expect these changes to be part of a continuous, steady process. The critic's real absolute is not a single fixed point, but the line along which he moves. In this case, to move also means to expand.

"SALON

INAUGURADO

Arte Moderna
"raisons" foi visitada, por cerca de 1000 pessoas, a entrada custar 10 mil cruzeiros. Na pintura e escultura, tendências contemporâneas contavam. Além de sua república, esteve presente na Camargo e Jorge, especialmente os trabalhos de Vieira, Abração Pinheiro e esculturas de Francisco Stockinger radicados na cidade, ainda este ano destacaram foram Gendries, Gino S. último já esteve suas no acervo do Srs. Mario L. Indácio Cardoso

Sérgio de viag

Depois Bial de sucesso em Brasil o próximo de mente real mais recente Moderna, venda de suas obras, a do Times, o crítico brasileiro de sua obra a escultura