



Judith Brodsky, left, & Zelda Laschever, publishers of a portfolio of prints by NJ women focusing on the theme of womanhood. An exhibition of *Woman* will be at NJ's Newark Museum Mini Gallery through Aug 19.

Arthur Dreeben



June Teller, one of 16 artists included in *Woman*.

Arthur Dreeben

New York Talk Season

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aphoristic paper too fast, too low, and in accented English from behind two pillars—which was too bad because many of his points were well taken, such as these found in an obligingly lent copy: Clement Greenberg's formalism was the application of "theories of societal determinism to superficial or minor innovations in painting." This supposed formalist criticism he used as "a banner for one style" of art, thus locking himself in "with the Bannards, the Boxers and the Bushes, the academy of provincial museums of today. [True formalism is a tool] for serious analysis of the relationship between art and all discourse on art." At present, Baranik said, art is assaulted from many quarters, including "the pro-populists to whom all high art is disposable and who see 420 West Broadway as the Pentagon . . . the dogmatic conceptual artists who confuse the conceptual with the intelligent," and the "vandals" of the left. But Baranik envisions a "socialist formalism" which would value art "as one of the most intense forces in life."

The last presentation was from Dore Ashton, who said "art cures itself periodically with homeopathic doses," but didn't say of what and with what, then followed with the wisdom of Mies van der Rohe: "Form as a goal always ends in formalism. . . . Real form presupposes real life." These remarks, which strike me still as devoid of meaning, were not explained, elaborated or related to any other point, but Ashton seemed to hope we would find them profound.

Then, for the remainder of the evening, panelists sat in a circle crying "Clement Greenberg, ptui! Clement Greenberg, ptui! Ptui!" That is, these noted contemporary art advocates laid every iota of the mistakes, misjudgments, dead ends and fatuities of a generation on the absent but presumably debunked, discredited, dethroned Greenberg and his "incredible power." Let me put it still another way: Except for Davis, who was probably in high school at the time, these people were wonderfully free-thinking—after the fact. Where were they for the 27 minutes in 1969 when 12 MFA candidates and *Artforum* actually believed in Greenberg? Now they are creating yet another fiction, as simplistic in its way as the one about "inevitable progression"—that during Greenberg's reign everyone thought as he thought and did as he said. There were, in fact, nearly as many different kinds of work being done (if not shown) as there are now, and nobody I knew believed that stuff.

By now, of course, critics have learned to kiss every art toad that comes down the pike in hopes that it will turn into a prince, but they themselves are often even less discerning, less independent, and less coherent than their predecessors. As for the artists, today much of the energy they once put into parsing such aesthetic issues is going into feminism—feminism as focus, arena, and vehicle for art. That leaves a vacuum of intelligence and caring in discussions such as these, even among the men. And speaking of the men (and "the nature of the relationship"), Kuspit didn't help matters when, after tugging his forelock to the virtues of feminism, he attacked Schapiro in the tone of a taunting eight-year-old for the "Freudian imagery" of her "cold white pillar." (Whereupon Schapiro sank to the occasion.)

Early in the evening, Davis listed among the blows, losses and dilemmas of formalism today the fact that "Max Kozloff has deserted art for page 10 / WAN / Summer 1979

photography." Judging by this panel, Kozloff knows something.

'Art Writing and Criticism'

The New Museum, New School for Social Research, May 9.

Nicolas Calas, Douglas Davis, Joseph Masheck, Carter Ratcliffe, Barbara Rose; Irving Sandler, moderator.

The New School auditorium is an antiseptic affair after the historic Great Hall at Cooper Union and the raunchy amphitheater at SVA, but its acoustics are much kinder to amateur speakers. If that suggests I'm reviewing these programs as entertainment, I am. Douglas Davis remarked that the panel is itself now "a generic form." It is. A form of entertainment with aspects of performance, promenade, social arena, soap box, forum, and lately, as I said, gathering of lost lambs. This time, though, Barbara Rose came down like a wolf on the fold: "If you publish in an art magazine . . . you are writing ad copy," she said, "and if you don't know that, you're stupid."

It was refreshing to hear that from one who was there, but, as a battered survivor of *alternative* publishing, I must add that the artists themselves demand, beseech, *slayer after*, that kind of "copy" and the "reviews" they pay for with their own ads. (*Arts Magazine* used to give a "review" if you took an ad, but I understand that's no longer so. Now it has to be a half-page ad.)

This time the opening speaker was Douglas Davis, who again opened with a disclaimer: "I'm not sure I belong here; I don't practice art criticism any more." Now he listed the "critical issues raised by recent art" of interest to him as "personality or biography, time, nature, content, artifice, and moral exhortation." Davis misses the "intensity" of Hess, Greenberg and Rosenberg, seeing today "rhetorical and pedagogical finesse, but no passion." (I note in passing the difference between "moral exhortation" and morality. If, for all its moral exhortation, the art world had to be *moral* in its critical, curatorial and publishing deals, it would collapse into a heap instantly—and always would have.)

Carter Ratcliffe presented himself as a "journalist" whose subject is "ideology" which, he said, means simply "reporting . . . even in a theoretical piece . . . what's going on." In his role as journalist he shows "connections between the economic, fashion and style aspects of art." This "prevents a firm ideological position" of his own and is "what's under attack in my writing." (This sounds like another disclaimer—of responsibility for the art he chooses to write about.)

Nicolas Calas began: "Politics and poetry are the two great passions of my life. . . . There is poetry in painting and in words." Then, in almost the same breath: "Aesthetics are to artists as ornithology is to birds. . . . We must rid ourselves of such unnecessary terms as 'aesthetics' . . . 'art for art's sake' . . . and the clichés of gestalt psychology. . . . Modern art must be vanguard art . . . polemical . . . experimental . . . and a continuous struggle, which is the only thing that is interesting. . . . The things that are enigmatic create the greatest impression. . . . The only thing that should remain in the end is ambiguity." And other charming gibberish.

Calas seemed unaware that many of his catch phrases are mutually contradictory, that poetry is aesthetic, that ambiguous polemics are not possible (while ambiguity itself is one of the least attractive mannerisms of modernism—the refuge of small minds), that "continuous struggle" is a big old

bore, that the "avant-garde" is corrupt, and that today art conceived as supposedly avant-garde is banal to the point of asphyxiation.

Barbara Rose's critique of the first three speakers was, "I can see I'm going to be the creep on this panel." Art is not about "fashion, journalism or culture," she said, but about "quality and values . . . things that are very profound and obsessional." As for biography, time, nature and the rest of Davis' concerns, "I already have those in my life [and] my own stories are more interesting" than other people's. Rose is now doing the study of an artist who died in 1936 but will have his first one-man show this year at MOMA. "I stopped writing criticism when I saw it might upset the value of the art market. How could you hurt your friend's career?"

Speaking of criticism, she continued, "How many people in this room read art criticism? . . . I only look at the pictures. . . . The quality of art critics today is very poor and critical judgments are made by dealers, not critics. Economic factors attract a certain brilliance to the marketplace; the dealers I know are smarter than the critics and have begun to curate their own shows, better than the shows in the museums." Clement Greenberg's "excesses made people lose faith in criticism," but he at least "talked about the visual experience of looking at a work of art. Today criticism is redundant and irrelevant and no writer with the talent of a Rosenberg would waste that talent on criticism."

Joseph Masheck vowed that there is "a scrupulous separation between editorial and advertising departments" at *Artforum*, and that he is "really sharpening up the blue pencils" to correct that magazine's famous unreadability. Really, I thought, they should take sharp pencils away from a man who writes the sentences he writes and who says "irregardless." Then I realized that Masheck is actually Steve Martin, "Saturday Night Live" art critic. I stopped trying to make his subjects and verbs come out even, and even enjoyed the parts I understood—two points both true and terrible: "It's easier today to get grants for a videotape of an orange rolling across the table than for serious painting," and, "There are only eight months left to the '70s" (fewer of course by now).

Ray Parker, in the audience, called out to Masheck, "Why don't you make *Artforum* more interesting to look at?" Calas replied, "I find it very interesting to look at—even, sometimes, to read."

Irving Sandler asked Rose to define quality, which she did in terms of "the intuition one has in the presence of a great work of art." Today connoisseurship is deprecated as "elitist," she said, but "some people have spent a lifetime making value judgments in the museums. Like doing push-ups, that's something you get better at."

I guess I sound like I'm not tough enough for the job, complaining and saying I don't understand. But believe me, if that isn't every intelligent remark from three nights of culture mumble, it's close to it. If Alex Katz's building-art-through-criticism were true, we could say now why the art being dished up is so anemic. The only energy came from Rose, who in closing made another apt comment on the current dilemma: "Today the society is avant-garde, experimental, all the things artists used to be. . . . It's almost impossible for the real artists to recognize each other." Meanwhile, I don't think art is built through critics' criticizing—fortunately. ■