

## CRISIS IN CRITICISM: Another Look

by Pat Passlof

□ Reluctant to listen to yet another version of the standard critic's disclaimer, "We have no power and no one reads us anyway," I found the New School's auditorium overflowing with an expectant audience which, according to panelist Barbara Rose "did not look as if they were about to ask the usual 1960s question, 'How do I make it?' Did this imply that the audience looked successful? Secure? Sophisticated? Shrewd? Savvy? I did see a lot of familiar faces, and wondered.

The disclaimer was made this night as on the others, but with a difference. My friend Jim Muehleman felt obliged to remind me that painful honesty is in fashion these days. "I am not an idealist," said Carter Ratcliffe. Does it matter, I asked myself, whether or not he means this in a philosophical sense? In support of Barbara Rose's contention that the real critical and curatorial functions of the art world are performed by dealers, Ratcliffe added, "Most dealers are smarter than most critics and . . . they're smarter than a lot of artists, too. . . . If you're going to set up critical values absolutely opposed to Leo Castelli's, you're going to have to set up very [pause] detached ones." Is detachment the new word for failure? Banishment? Sleep? A whole art world winnowed, beaten, sifted, by one such man?

Incidentally, this accolade elicited only one pained protest from the audience: "Everybody knows dealers are assholes, jerks, incompetents, and—and—eunuchs!" (A giggle from the rest who had apparently achieved the requisite "detachment.")

Douglas Davis pointed to a crisis in American art criticism characterized by "rhetorical and pedagogical finesse with no passion at the core. . . . Personality, time, nature, content and artifice" are his issues.

"What's wrong with what Doug wants is that I already have those things in my own life," stated Rose, who finds her life "intoxicating. . . . What I want from art is something I can't think of myself." (What a handy position!) On the other hand, she continued, "If only you, your cousin, and three friends understand your work, you're just indulging in a form of belly-button-lint gazing." Sandler expostulated, "Even Newman's peers didn't understand him!" (I wonder if Sandler has considered the possibility that Newman's peers may have, shall we say, disagreed with him?)

With considerable eloquence, Calas elucidated the satisfactions and nature of understanding modern art, and thus the task of the critic, in brief: to explore and follow the thinking of the artist in order to form a dense image. He described criticism as a continuous struggle, a constant learning; going straight for the intellectual and poetic core of art which is most resistant to discussion and analysis. In doing so, he made criticism seem not a job, not a compromise but a calling worthy of his own extraordinary abilities.

"On those days when I'm doing art criticism," Ratcliffe sees himself primarily as journalist. "The subject matter I report on is art, ideology and art writing itself as manifestations of style." Its extension is "an attempt to question the curious, circular ideology of the art world, which is that being in the art world is better than being somewhere else . . . to show connections between art and things outside the art world—

money or the uses to which art is put by the larger economic system."

Some laughed at Tom Wolfe's *The Painted Word* because it was the kind of "flattened" parody a curious and energetic outsider was likely to derive from the surface evidence. But when we hear the same kind of uninflected views from those privy to more than the exterior of the art-world house, we may have cause to doubt their "intuitions" and some of their other powers as well.

Rose stated, "I believe that art is about quality and value" (thunderous applause). Listening to the rest of her discourse on the "crisis," it became increasingly difficult to avoid the conclusion that, in Rose's mind, quality, taste, value and price were interchangeable, since, according to Rose, all these determinations are made in the marketplace. Pressed to define quality, she said, "Quality is an intuition one has in the presence of a work of art." That sounds good and is hard to argue with because it escapes through the loophole of intuition without actually revealing what the intuition is about. Thus, it can suggest other considerations ("What I can't think of myself," for example) without eliminating that of taste.

Of her colleagues, Rose asserted that "If you publish in art magazines . . . where editorial space and advertising space are in no way differentiated, you are writing advertising copy. If you don't know that, you are very stupid. If you practice as a profession something at which you can't make a living, you're very stupid. Therefore the quality of the people who, at this point, purport to be art critics, is not high. . . . Nobody reads art criticism. . . . I don't. I look at the pictures like everybody else."

Shades of de Tocqueville: "Money is . . . at the heart of everything the Americans do. . . . There is no profession at which a man works except for pay. The American grows accustomed only to change . . . personalities are everything, principles are insignificant."

"If we really take seriously what we're doing, we'd be willing to drive a taxi for a few years." Mashek did not articulate his position well. One senses that he is following an unformed certainty, the location, dimensions and character of which he has not yet determined. Still, his sincerity and urgency engage our interest. We want to know more.

Rose: "If we're going to be honest as critics, we have to admit we don't know everything at the time" (gulp). ■



## New York Talk Season

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Kramer speaks as he writes, cleverly, but, like all *New York Times* critics, is sadly lacking in sensibility. He does at times recognize fribble, but only in its literary, seldom in its plastic form.

Lucio Pozzi is a rapid mumbler. He got off what sounded like some pungent comments, but I caught only: "Our art at this moment seems always to need a caption to be understood. You can't have a show without having to write out a goddam statement."

Irving Sandler said he was willing to take "the risk of being friends with artists," in part because he upholds "the artist as critic—perhaps the primary critic." His fellow critics doubted that, leading Sandler to ask, "Do you at least grant that artists create the context in which their art is discussed?" They didn't, but Sandler insisted: "Critics probably listen more closely to artists" than they realize or admit.

That was the substance of two hours' discussion; the audience went away hungry. As for "the nature of the relationship" between artist and critic, we learned more in the next panel.

## 'The State of Formalism'

Cooper Union, March 21

Dore Ashton, Rudolph Baranik, Douglas Davis, Donald Kuspit, Brian O'Doherty, Miriam Schapiro; Kate Linker, moderator.

The first speaker on "The State of Formalism," Brian O'Doherty, surprised me by being, for all his eminence, another mumbler (or a mumbler on this occasion). Otherwise he had only the news that in the early '70s, formalism "became the 'fall guy' for deficiencies in art."

Miriam Schapiro contributed, "Formal values in themselves are not evil." In fact, "I find them useful," but "they have been used against women." Almost alone among the season's greats in speaking slowly and distinctly, Schapiro may have gone to the opposite extreme, quoting too slowly and distinctly Clive Bell's paean to the "thrilling raptures of . . . the cold white peaks of art," which she termed "a metaphor for patriarchal attitudes." She prefers "the warm red circle of art," where form is "a vessel into which I can pour my content."

From Donald Kuspit, whose ultra-rapid delivery would have defeated material as familiar as "Jingle Bells," I could glean only that formalism is "extremely viable still," that it is "thinking about what art is," and that "Schapiro missed the point."

Douglas Davis declared himself "surprised and flattered" at being invited, because "I spent all my life at war with formalism." Listing his interests as performance, film, video, earthworks, and the like, he asked, "Can we speak of the formal qualities of nature?" and, assuming we could not, urged, "Let us promise tonight that this be the last panel on the state of formalism." Davis, too, was difficult because, yes, he talked too fast.

But then Rudolph Baranik read a complexly → 10

"Battle of the Wilderness," a Civil War mural by Ethel Magafan 33 mos in the making, was unveiled May 6 at the Fredericksburg, VA, Nat'l Military Park. Gen'l Grant's memoirs supplied the scenario: "The woods were set on fire by the bursting shells, and the conflagration raged." Commissioned in 1976 as winner of the Abbey Mural Fund Comptn, the 12x20' mural depicts Grant leading the Union army. Magafan works in Woodstock, NY. An exhibit of sketches, cartoons & photos was at the Midtown Gall, NYC, in May.