

The Human Figure in Art
by Anna Mahler

The University of Chicago invited Anna Mahler in 1962 to give a talk about art. This is, in substance, what she said:

Talking about art is an unsatisfactory, risky business – particularly when the speaker himself toils in this field. For he knows that his judgments are subjective, inevitably prejudiced, as are all aesthetic judgments. But when an artist speaks about art there arises an added difficulty: he realizes that he is just a little wave in a stream with a source lost in times immemorial and moving in an unpredictable direction, a direction sometimes hardly noticeable to himself but irresistible, and which the individual cannot change even if he wished to. Yet at the same time the artist is convinced that the essence of his own work is the product of his own, unique personality, whatever the role of his contemporaries and predecessors may be.

The working artist speaking about art is thus not merely limited by subjectivity, for that he shares with everyone else, but by his entirely personal, special perspective, the point of view he himself has created for practising himself the kind of work he is talking about.

This is the special limitation of an artist commenting on art. For though it is true that the sources of art are deeply hidden, unconscious, vital instincts, these instincts and this unconscious, during the actual working process, pass through a filter of past experience of which only a very small part could be called strictly personal. We are unaware of how much of the past is alive in us even when we believe ourselves to be entirely spontaneous. All we can really know is the result, the visual end-product.

Trying to clarify, after all these precautions, my own experience, to find my own perspective, I am again and again struck by this one fact: since the beginning of this century art in the western world has undergone a change which makes it different from that of all preceding periods – the image of Man, until then the unquestioned principal subject of all artistic endeavour, has almost vanished from the field of contemporary art.

This was a result of an explosion, a revolt which had occurred already before the First World War. Futurism, Cubism, Expressionism – these were the labels of the new schools, and the names of the pioneers and heroes of those movements, at that time deprecated and ridiculed, are now famous: Braque, Picasso, Klee, Gonzales, Gabo, and many others. That earthquake shook up more than the visual arts. Music seems to be abstract by its very nature, but European music was closely tied to the human voice and to the movements of the human body, especially in all those variations and transformations of historical dance forms. Now music became above all a branch of mathematics, a game of numbers which could be neither danced nor sung. A famous musician said that this new music had to be read, not only heard, if it were to be understood. Poetry, and in some cases prose, tried to abolish traditional means of linguistic communication; for example, syntax or any logical grouping of words. One of the new German poets, August Stramm, rejected the word as the symbol of any thing or concept and strung his words together merely according to timbre and rhythmic effect.

The common denominator of this rebellion was the dethronement of Man as the essential element in art. No longer was he the measure of things; now we had an art without Man or, as it were, dehumanized art.

This breaking up of old rules and standards was only the eruption of tendencies that had been fomenting for a long time. The political and social revolution at the end of the 1914-1918 war made these movements, and art in general, especially important. Here was a feeling of liberation, a hope for a new beginning, particularly for young people, following a generation which pretended to know exactly what was right and wrong and had blundered so atrociously. It is impossible today to imagine the strong and fierce wind that blew then, though much has been captured in enduring works, particularly in the early poems by Franz Werfel.

Apart from that there is, of course, the enormous gap between art and science, the difference between objectivity and individuality - what I meant when I spoke about true originality. A scientist makes a discovery and his collaborators and successors can develop it, but the music Schubert never wrote no one will ever write. The painting Masaccio could not paint because he died when he was twenty-eight years old are lost forever. Only one person in the whole world can create this symphony or that painting, this sculpture or that poem. One person only sees and hears the world in that particular medium and possesses those particular means of expressing it.

Great artists have a premonition of the fate of the culture of which they are a part. The real artist is in the advanceguard of his period and has a stronger feeling of what is in store ahead than the average person, and this was so with the revolutionary artists before the first World War. They perceived clearly the imminent end of the bourgeois epoch, and they suffered for their conviction with a total lack of appreciation, material as well as moral. It is a commonplace, but it must be said, that no artist can hope to be appreciated in his lifetime. Success with his contemporaries is rather to be suspected, even though there have been exceptions. Many of the great artists of the Renaissance, for example, were tremendously successful during their lives, though one must bear in mind that there was a great difference between their patrons and those who assume the same role today.

Even though the artistic revolutionaries of our time strove to abolish tradition, they rarely ventured beyond the limit of comprehensibility. Picasso, for instance, did not - witness the remarkable film Clouzot made about him. Here Picasso, with a thick crayon, draws on a transparent, plastic screen; and his compositions are at the beginning clear, simple sketches of ordinary people, in unmistakable postures and relations. This sketch is then, in Picasso's own words, 'destroyed' by continuous stylization, and loses with each one of the many variations more and more of its initial realism, until at last there is only an arrangement of forms where the human figure in the sense of anatomical verisimilitude is barely recognizable, but which has, despite the shocking first impression, human proportions, a Mediterranean balance, a classical atmosphere.

This example illustrates very clearly the difference between, on the one hand, distortion and stylization, and on the other, the total renunciation of the use of the human figure.

Every work of art is the product of stylization, and this includes photography, which is only seemingly mechanical. If there should exist in fact an objective perception of reality - and that is a hoary philosophical problem - it is surely impossible for the artist to achieve it. The same aspect of reality, rendered by a hundred different artists, will appear in a hundred different versions.

But there exists, in addition, a very important factor which has nothing to do with the individual differences of perception and rendering which are common to all men. The artist reproduces Nature as he sees it but he also sees something which the non-artist cannot see. The representation of Nature, seen through the eye of an artist, reveals something of the mystery of all Being. Through truly great art, we participate in the secret of creation, the whole of creation. The chaos of the so-called reality of everyday life disappears and makes room for a deeper, truer reality, a mysterious ordering, which is immediately convincing and which reaches far beyond the limits of the concrete subject which the artist depicts. This is an order which seemingly encompasses and absorbs the whole world, and which transmits, in the most sublime cases of perfection, the almost mystical certainty that the universe makes sense.

The artist's means for this are stylization and transformation, not naturalistic imitation. This is true of the monumental Egyptian figures; for the canon of classical Greek sculpture, which seems realistic but is not; true for the ensuing Romanesque and Gothic periods; for Michelangelo's gigantism; for Rodin's sensitivity,

and for the blissful calm of Maillol.

Nature is the realm of art but Nature must be represented by the work of a human mind and hand. This means stylization, consciously or unconsciously. The true artist will always try to get as close to Nature as possible, not to its surface but to its core, its essence. Art is possible only if the artist is in possession of an image of reality, which here means the same thing as an image of Nature, an image not in the sense of superficial representation, but in the Platonic sense. If he has this, his work will be unique, original, because it will be an expression of his personality; and essential, because the work will reflect more than his limited personality, i.e., it will reflect a universal image of the world, the true, essential reality - in the language of the medieval German mystics, the Ground of all Being. This can obviously be the case only to the degree to which the artist is endowed with talent, experience, and craftsmanship. When so-called concrete, representational art seems boring, it is not because reality is boring but because the representation merely demonstrates the surface, because the essential image of reality is lacking.

Without inner experience of the image, art becomes mere decoration. The absence of this particular mode of seeing, of this vision, which is in each case the property of only one person - of the true artist - differentiates the artist from the craftsman. There are stonemasons, especially in Italy, whose technical virtuosity is greater than that of the most celebrated sculptors of our time - witness the long rows of horrible monuments in Italian cemeteries. But skill and technique are only means to an end, and where the end is unimportant, so are the means.

For all that, the demarcation line between art and craftsmanship is sometimes fluid. Sometimes a stonemason just meant to do a good job, and yet the result was a work of art. Often an artist meant to create something great, and the result was pleasant decoration. When the great religions were alive, they inspired some workers under their spell, who meant to do no more than some modest handiwork, with an inner light, with that vision of the Ground of all Being which I have suggested is the source and touchstone of art. Some of these works still project the power and magic which had their origin in cultural conditions active at the time of their creation, even though these special conditions no longer exist today.

After the Renaissance, and from then on ever more emphatically, the old cultural affinities weakened and dissolved, and the paths of creative art and artistic decoration divided. Decoration is valuable and necessary, it lives on the heritage of the masters, but it cannot add to it because it lacks the fundamental visionary experience and is restricted to the use of formulae.

Where one could find the truly elemental creative force in our times, is hard to say. Certainly, the creative force is still alive, but it can express itself only with great difficulty. What catches the attention now is a kind of self-advertising, public-relations originality, which is not genuinely original. I have tried to stress the importance of stylization and abstraction in art - in all art. Art is indeed unthinkable without abstraction. Even the act of seeing is impossible with obligatorily abstracting from the full volume of perceived reality. But it is just as true to say that there can be no art without Nature, and here I speak of Nature in the vernacular sense, of what exists outside our own body and mind, in contrast to what happens inside us. The relationship between, and constant mutual stimulation of, object and subject, thing and self, is a vital thing. Where this circuit does not work, abstraction becomes a mental plaything, formalism, or geometry, pretending to be art; or it is simply a form of doodling, with meaning, at best, for the doodler alone. The readiness of a great part of the public to accept just about anything that is offered and praised as the latest triumph of progress is touching and disarming, though frequently one cannot help suspecting that this interest, this enthusiasm, means not much more than the fear of missing the most recent sensation or fashionable event.

The preponderance of means over aims has led to technical, mechanical sleight-of-hand and visual trickery, the more jubilantly acclaimed, the more stunning it is. I do not say that some of these productions are not amusing or entertaining, but I cannot call them art. Also, these things do not really surprise me, for I have known them or similar performances since my childhood. I grew up among the battles and scandals of the Cubists, Constructivists, Dadaists, and all those other, similarly styled, movements, which in those days were really novel, provocative and revolutionary. For hours I sat as a little girl in Oskar Kokoschka's studio and watched him paint 'Die Windbraut'. Schoenberg and Alban Berg were intimate friends of my mother, Walter Gropius and Franz Werfel became my stepfathers, Giorgio de Chirico taught me painting, Fritz Wotruba was my teacher in sculpture. Everything I saw in these surroundings seemed new and very interesting to me, but when I began my own work it was not new to me any longer, and I decided to seek my own way, well aware of the danger that it would not look new. The important thing was to be sincere, and to try to express only what I could, wanted, had to say. If I were to look for my sources as an artist, which is not in the least

my intention, they would not be in the atmosphere or in the works among which I grew up between 1910 and 1925. These remarks should at least serve to limit misunderstandings about my own sculpture. Art has many faces. Value is not determined by superficial characteristics but by the ability to reach and touch our innermost feelings.

Even though one does not like to hold forth about art - and I have said that I have no taste for it - it is sometimes unavoidable. For art is important, an indispensable nutrient of life. As soon as human existence is elevated above the purely vegetative, animal level, art becomes a necessity. Artistic production is an instinctive urge. Children bake cakes of moist sand, though they cannot eat them, or they make drawings of something edible and show how it disappears through the mouth into the mysterious inner regions of the body. They do it because, very early, they are puzzled by the manifold experiences and mysteries of life, and this is their reaction, their way of dealing with them. There are those who never lose the pleasure in illustrative fantasy and even hope to penetrate the most profound secrets of creation by giving rein to what was originally a childish urge. They are then called artists. Obviously, however, deliberate primitivism and infantilism are outside the realm of serious art. We are neither primitives, nor children.

The urge to express themselves through pictures disappears in the vast majority when they become adults and when different kinds of works consume their time and attention. But even the most sober-minded among them prefer, when there is a choice, the beautiful to the trite or ugly. The desire for the beautiful would seem to be innate, however different and contradictory the ideas of the individual may be of what beauty is. Through a complicated process, with far-reaching psychological ramifications, Picasso's idea of what is beautiful, for instance, has slowly come to influence the design of wallpaper and other areas of commercial and domestic design. The desire for the beautiful is a strong, vital urge. In a different sphere, it corresponds to the need for stimulation of the nervous system, that atavistic, world-wide compulsion which satisfies itself today mostly through the use of nicotine, caffeine, alcohol and other less socially acceptable drugs. Art is one of these means to gain satisfaction, one of the apparently indispensable means by which the drab everyday-life is made bearable and which provides a transcending force for the average mind, which gives meaning to the human existence.

There are many roads to this goal. The history of art during the past six thousand years demonstrates the wealth of possibilities. At first glance, contact seems easier than ever before. We are flooded by a sea of reproductions, some of them superb, of the art of all periods, from all the regions of the globe. One danger in this is that the exotic, the strange, the unaccustomed, seems important merely because it is different from the well-known. But that is not the whole truth. Reaction against the traditional, in which there was no longer any creative force active, has often mistaken the shell for the core. Things of lesser importance, such as material, surface texture, mechanical effects, optical illusions, and other visual phenomena which are described and illustrated in any textbook of physics or elementary psychology, have been promoted as art. I have mentioned the misuse of scientific information which is far beyond the comprehension of the average art lover. The motivation of this impermissible parasitism seems to be an attempt to propel art to the highest intellectual level, into a domain which is legitimately looked upon as an achievement of the greatest intellectual capacity, almost unreachable, almost beyond understanding, but which is not the domain of art.

Analysis, a basic tool of science, can never replace creativity in art, though it has its use in the hands of the serious critic; and criticism can be important in the context of the activity of the artist. But analytic thinking is totally distinct from the creative urge, which aims for unity. The image, the vision, finds expression through many different means, but it remains One in spite of the variety of its manifestations. It is, in the field of art, the equivalent of what in our thoughts and acts we call truth, the ultimate of what we can fathom of the nature of Man.

No one wishes to plead the case of the worthless old, just because it is old, or of the cheaply conventional. The discoveries and conquests of the revolutionaries and rebels have been valuable, and they are acknowledged as important items in the inventory of modern art. But that does not diminish the claim that art should be and should remain the image and the work of Man, Man the great achievement of Nature, the indivisible, irreplaceable One.