

Alan Oldfield: Response to 'The Situation Now: Object and Post-Object Art

Alan Oldfield

As I don't like documents much, I will write briefly about three of the Propositions in "The Situation Now" catalogue. These are propositions 1, 3 and 5.

Proposition 1: The most extraordinary statement appears at the beginning of proposition 1: - "The best artists who continue to paint feel in a liberated situation - they no longer have to carry the whole weight of artistic change". This implication that the role of the artist is one of moral furtherance of the arts, is a surprising one. Artists have always imagined that they are in a liberated situation probably because they have never felt the kind of moral responsibility to change that Terry Smith obviously feels. In the later part of his statement Mr Smith attempts to resolve the artists situation now, viz: " - they are more free to explore the infinite options open within painting". Absolutely right, if we delete the word "more". Artists are no "more free" than they have ever been: in fact the rest of this sentence could be used as a definition of the artist's role.

The remainder of Proposition 1 is rather more difficult, viz: "However they can no longer claim for painting a special status, nor any special concessions". Artists have never claimed special status for painting; the only special concessions which they have continually demanded is that the nature and/or intention of painting(s) be understood, something which many Australian critics, patently do not. He continues "A painting now has to be good/ interesting as art before it is of any interest as a painting" - Absolutely right, but why the word "now". I would have thought rather that paintings have *always* had to be good as art before they were of any interest, whether they were painted by Piero della Francesca or Frank Stella.

Proposition 3: "The basic twentieth century art program of ever-accelerating abstraction is still basic". It is notable that the major art movements of Cubism and Surrealism did not consider themselves strictly abstract (in the sense of "non-figurative".) Neither did the Dadaists nor the extraordinary figure of Marcel Duchamp who is the most relevant of all these to the conceptualists (and who, interestingly enough, is not mentioned by the artists of "The Situation Now".) Neither did the Futurists.

De Stijl was without doubt an abstract (in the usual sense of the word) movement as was Russian Constructivism and Revolutionary Art.

Greenberg thought that Abstract Expressionism was the first *totally* abstract movement, and most of the important movements (with a few notable exceptions) of the last twenty years have been of the "program of ever-accelerating abstraction". However the last twenty years is hardly the whole twentieth century, and many see the most recent abstract movement of Lyrical Abstraction as distinctly "de-celerating abstraction" and backward-looking.

The rest of Proposition 3 depends on the activity of the opening sentence, discussed above. As the key sentence is one of wildly personalised interpretation (or lack of knowledge of art history) so is the remainder of the Proposition. If as Terry Smith (or the Conceptualists or whoever's views these Propositions are) claims the visual arts are dropping the visual I would suggest that somebody finds an appropriate term because talking about "non-visual visual-arts" is going to be very confusing in the future.

Proposition 5: All of this statement is true. "Art-for-arts-sake precious object art has become a commodity within the neo-capitalist system of exchange of which the art market is a ludicrously exaggerated and irrational microcosm". Many artists (particularly in America) have reacted heavily against this, picketing galleries, draping paintings in black, showing in their own studios, withdrawing from the Venice Biennale etc. etc. It might be noted that these demonstrations have generally been reactions to important moral issues, such as the United States' involvement in the Vietnam war, with the "neo-capitalist system" strictly secondary, if related.

That all this is somehow due to, or involved with "art-for-arts-sake" philosophy is of some doubt. One could argue more convincingly that society in general, represented by "art experts" (not artists and their philosophies), is responsible. However, there are myriad ways in which an artist may react and therefore Proposition 5 does not produce an ethical carte-blanche for Conceptualism only.

I would take Proposition 5 even further. Not only has an art market been created which is involved with money-making to an exaggerated extent so also have Fine Arts Departments in Universities been set up to produce experts on the propaganda, understanding and maintenance of these "precious objects" that are rated to end up in National Collections at a ludicrously inflated price.

That "artists - no longer want to be functionaries within such a system" underlines the problem of many artists who feel the system is functioning to restrict artistic innovation". This often produces self-conscious avantgarde work which is big on revolution and low on merit. Greenberg argues that this kind of work is inevitably bad art. In fact the failure of artists to produce a good revolutionary art is glaring: "low-art" mass media forms (such as posters) handle this much better. Critics searching for an innovatory or unconventional art form to vindicate their views on the wider context of society, do not help the situation.

The American painter Ed Ruscha points out that - "the Government does not need artists to maintain its cultural image" (Power Bequest Exhibition catalogue 1971.) Not all artists who are concerned with the ideas found in Proposition 5 will want to dig holes because they are unsaleable: it may not be relevant to their aesthetic. Perhaps these artists would be best advised to stop painting altogether. But then isn't this a bit like throwing the baby out with the bath-water?

Source CAS Broadsheet, Aug/Sept 1971 p6-7

