

THE UNIVERSITY AS TASTEMAKER

by Joseph Ishikawa

In the April, 1957, issue of ARTS, its managing editor, Hilton Kramer, discusses with coherence and mature thought the Illinois Biennial, viewing with some suspicion the fitness of universities to give dynamic leadership in the formulating of our cultural life. I do not often find myself in disagreement with Mr. Kramer, but without assessing the Illinois Biennial, I am impelled to question the validity of his fear of the consequences of "the cultural purposefulness of the universities which is all set to preside over the artistic life of the next generation. . ."

If it is true, and certainly the evidence is very meager, it would be the most stimulating development in the history of art patronage, for it would mean that for the first time in our civilization, patronage would be based on motivations other than the traditional ones of prestige, power, propaganda, profit or the desire for material possessions. . .or worse, uninformed philanthropy. From the standpoint of the professional artist of some ability, he may have reasonable assurance of attaining some recognition without being subject to the criteria of commercial galleries, which, however high-minded in purpose, must consider saleability; he would have a degree of freedom from the capriciousness of critics, who influence museum directors and private patrons; he would be independent of museum directors, who in their attempt to educate must consider the limitations of the laity; he would have the opportunity of have the opportunity of having his work judged more carefully than it is in juried exhibitions, where jurors often are cavalier in carrying out the duties of selecting an exhibition and frequently are guilty of cronyism, though usually without intending it. In short, he would have the maximum opportunity to have his work judged for its own sake.

I do not mean to imply that commercial dealers are without souls; as a matter of record, almost every commercial dealer has an intense loyalty to each artist in his stable which transcends commercial considerations. But as businessmen, they are, with few exceptions, necessarily conservative and cautious in taking on untried talent. More-

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over, indifferent work by a good artist is pushed as hard as his quality work; the dealer's concern is more with the artist as a producer than with the product. This is laudably humane but contradicts the idea that a work of art is an independent entity which should be judged for qualities inherent in it. The dealer not motivated by business considerations is usually one with an axe to grind which obscures the objectivity required of one who would be tastemaker. In its worst form, this attitude leads to fanaticism.

Nor do I mean to imply that critics are drunk with their obvious power as tastemakers. However, the medium of criticism is the printed word, and a work of art, even that which is anecdotal, cannot be easily translated into the literary. A greater handicap is the physical one faced by many reviewers who are compelled to cover up to fifty exhibitions a week which makes impossible more than a cursory glance at works exhibited. The judgment of such a critic is often blunted and can only be compared to the insensitized taste of a winetaster who drinks the wine instead of spitting it out. For the critic who is not compelled to put in this much legwork, there are only two responsible publications of much influence, Mr. Kramer's ARTS and the ART NEWS, both of which must use in capsule form the material hurriedly gathered by legmen in order to justify the use of the carefully considered articles such as the one which provoked this dissertation. ART IN AMERICA is not so restricted, but as a quarterly it does not pretend to give full coverage of the art scene.

Nor do I mean to brand jurors as scoundrels. However, in the case of the multiple juror system, work selected and prizes awarded usually represent compromises. Single jurors often have blind spots. All jurors are handicapped by having to examine a vast amount of work in a limited time; all inevitably must be governed to some extent by local conditions, space available, quality of work submitted which substitutes comparisons for standards.

Neither do I mean to impugn museum directors as spineless pawns of popular taste and/or tyrannical trustees and/or opinionated benefactors and patrons. Traditional-
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ly, the art museum has been the most objective performer of the function which Mr. Kramer fears will be usurped by the university. As such, it is the best we have, but is it the best possible? As an institution which must show a certain amount of traffic in its annual report as a measure of successful operation, part of its activity must be to offer entertainment as well as education. Often education is subordinated to entertainment and in any case must have a high degree of palatability; appeasement of the public is often confused with service to it. An even worse attitude is that expressed by the now-retired director of one of the nation's leading museums that he was not interested in public relations as much as in private relations, namely with potential benefactors and patrons who might be expected to give sizeable contributions provided they were offered a program sugar coated to their tastes.

Nor for that matter are trustees necessarily narrow-minded bigots. Many, indeed, are knowledgeable and dedicated individuals with a genuine concern that the museum be a vital service institution in the community, and to this end they are sacrificially generous with their time and monetary gifts despite no remuneration other than the satisfaction of performing a civic service. But it is a rare board that does not have at least one overly vocal person who feels that his smattering of knowledge and community prestige gives him license to act as guardian of the "public welfare" with no pause to reflect on what the "public welfare" might be.

University art departments and galleries are manned by human beings no less susceptible to human error than any of the others who to greater or lesser degree control the destiny of the contemporary artist. On the other hand, they are less likely to be motivated by self-interest or to be tempted to further personal causes at the expense of the creative artist or his potential audience. Because the possibility of error cannot be eliminated in any human endeavor, purity of motive is an important consideration. Whatever their fallibilities, university professors by and large are informed people moved chiefly by the desire to seek out and to establish standards valid for our age. However much the universities seem to "have abandoned their strict

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commitment to the past 'in its closed historic shape'. . ." as Mr. Kramer quotes Alfred Kazin, the fact remains that the past has not been ignored but is used as a valuable tool to assess the present and to give it perspective. The Kazin-Kramer statement is undoubtedly correct, but only the most conservative can argue that this has not been a healthy development on the part of the universities. Indeed, the ability of our institutions of higher learning to make such a break with the classical concepts of education would seem to preclude the possible development of a static cultural bureaucracy. Culture in the European sense used by Clive Bell and quoted by Mr. Kramer, does lead to snobbery, but the universities in the past half-century have labored to alter the traditional idea of culture as a veneer of sophistication, transforming it into one of the dynamics of our society. "Cultural purposefulness" in this latter sense is nothing to fear.

But there is no indication that the universities are organizing to utilize this "cultural purposefulness" as a force in determining our artistic life. A basic assumption in Mr. Kramer's fear is that the Illinois Biennial represents a trend among our universities, that it is a foretaste of such development. But the very fact that the Illinois program is an isolated one makes it newsworthy. Most universities and colleges which have exhibitions at all attempt to reflect New York exhibitions, and certainly this was true also of the early exhibitions staged at Urbana. It goes without saying that New York cannot be ignored, but any institution which seeks to augment the New York scene deserves our applause and gratitude.

A major exhibition of contemporary art of the magnitude of the Illinois Biennial is attempted with regularity by only one other university, the University of Nebraska, which has been doing it for half a century. Both of these institutions carry on a program of smaller exhibitions throughout the year. In common with scores of other educational institutions with exhibition schedules from little Beloit to the giant universities such as Michigan and California and those with outstanding art departments as Iowa and Colorado, they utilize exhibitions as an important teaching

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tool, not only to give art majors breadth and perspective, but also to expose future leaders in the professions, sciences, industry and business to an aspect of culture that was denied their parents during their educational pursuits. In the process, they have become vital art centers serving the community at large off the campus as well.

Even if it were true that the Illinois show forecasts a trend, it is ridiculous to fear that ". . .the universities will be exercising an unprecedented bureaucratic control over our cultural life." Ignoring the fact that bureaucratic control would not be unprecedented, it seems unlikely that such control, even if sought, could be developed by our educational institutions, which do not share a common viewpoint in most fields and certainly not in art. Moreover, within a given art department, instructors are more often than not at variance with their colleagues and with their department heads; department heads more often than not act independently of the dean; all pretty much have views divergent with those of the board of regents or board of trustees which in the final analysis hires them. Nor are members of the board as likely to exercise their influence on any given department as are trustees of an art institution who correctly feel that their concern is directly with art, but often with mistaken zeal allow their concern to interfere with the executive powers of the director. University trustees and regents are concerned with the whole university, and the chain of command is such that the danger of their control of any given department is remote.

Certainly I share with Mr. Kramer the apprehension of "certain intellectual proclivities which sooner or later will intervene decisively between the spectator and the work of art." But I fail to see that the educational aim of universities which may lead to this is any worse or as bad as the various aims of other vested interest groups which lead to the same pitfall much more directly. If there is a stress on programmatic exhibitions by universities (and there is nothing inevitable about such a development), I can only point out that probably, at a conservative estimate, 80% of the exhibitions in museums and commercial galleries are programmatic though of course this has nothing to do with the merit of individual works. If universities tend to

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organize programmatic shows, they are at least more concerned with the "how" and "why" rather than with the "who" and "what" -- the processes of creativity and the reasons behind them rather than with reputations or themes.

There is better music composed in the universities than outside of the campus; there are better plays written within academic walls than are produced by Broadway or Hollywood, however ineptly they may be performed. A large proportion of our major artists are university teachers, and while some have found the security of the academic world stifling to the creative process, a good many have found it a healthy climate, at the same time making a real contribution to the campus community. There is a strong possibility that if the universities would budget sufficient funds, they could stage exhibitions equal to or better than those shown in the specialized institutions, and, in so doing, they would only augment, not supercede, the exhibition opportunities now available to the creative artist; in turn, the viewing public would gain another dimension. The value of such augmentation far outweighs the remote danger of the universities' seizing "bureaucratic" control over our cultural life.

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