

# POLITICAL ART AND ARTFUL POLITICS

by Vukan Kuic

We speak as readily of the art of politics as we do of the art of cooking or writing, and what we have in mind in each case is what the French call *savoir faire*. This sense of "art" claims excellence for the activity of which the term is predicated, and since to know what to do and how to do it makes perhaps more difference in politics than in anything else, this well-established usage seems unobjectionable. And yet, praising politics as an art is somewhat misleading and may have disastrous consequences, because politics is not really an art, and its excellence is in some essential respects diametrically opposed to all but the most limited sense of "art."

Cooking is indeed an art, but we may do better contrasting politics with poetry or composition or painting, that is, the so-called "fine arts," which most philosophers see as our way of rising above our earthly daily experiences. For instance, Schelling describes a work of art as "the infinite finitely represented." Similarly, locating its essence in what he calls "style," Goethe believes that art penetrates "the essence of things, insofar as it is granted to us to know this in visible and tangible forms." Croce may be said to translate that thought into Italian when he proclaims that "an aspiration enclosed in the circle of representation—that is art." And Maritain may be said to do Croce one better when he asserts that a true "work of art . . . will deliver to the mind, at one stroke, the universe in a human countenance."

This transcendent character of art is further confirmed by the requirement of "otherness" involved in its evaluation. In the case of cooking, the proof is in the pudding, not in the cook. In the case of fine arts, however, this requirement is, appropriately enough, doubled and applies not only to the artist but also to the beholder of art. In order truly to enjoy a work of art, we are told by wise philosophers, we must not even covet it, let alone consume it. Consumption or covetousness make it impossible to appreciate "beauty," regardless of whether one thinks that it is found "in the eye of the beholder" or in the thing itself.

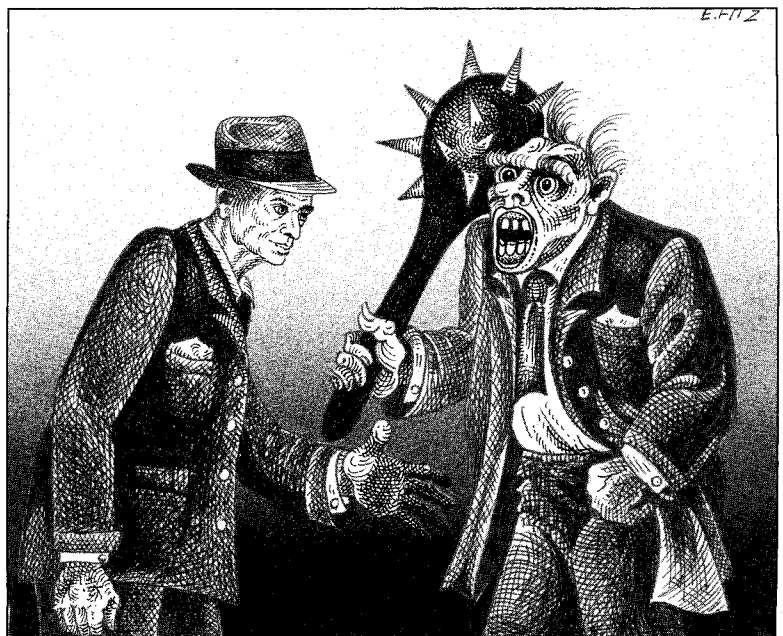
Tolstoy expresses doubts about "beauty" as a valid aesthetic standard and resignedly concludes that "we call 'beauty' that which pleases us without evoking in us desire." But that is precisely what "the beautiful" meant to Plato. In the *Symposium*, at the end of a sumptuous banquet, the guests, without desiring any, are able to contemplate the sheer beauty of artistically arranged baskets of fruits. Indeed, as Yves R. Simon has suggested, "To describe aloofness as the privilege of the aesthetic eye is almost the same as to give a definition of beauty." Politics, as we shall see, enjoys no such privilege. In politics, neither the actor, "the artist," nor the beholders of his action can ever remain aloof or unaffected by its "product." In contrast to art, politics is not about essences but about existence.

Of course, in real life, not even the most successful forms

of art attain the ideal of total detachment from daily and indeed political reality. Thus while all may agree with Ernst Cassirer that art is a "symbolic form," which in its own way gives us access to another "reality," this by no means guarantees that all will judge particular works of art in the same way. Even if everyone shared the same definition of art, there would still be plenty of room for disagreement about whether particular works satisfied that definition and about who was qualified to pass aesthetic judgment.

To know good art is never easy, but an "artist's artist" should be able to recognize it. A Phidias would know whether a piece of marble of a certain shape is a work of art, and a Michelangelo and a Rodin would probably agree. A young playwright would be lucky if he could submit his work to a Shakespeare, a budding poet to have his read by a Goethe, a neophyte novelist to have his judged by a Tolstoy, any musician to have his composition listened to by a Bach, and so on. A master artist not only is capable of creating what gives us pleasure without stirring desire, but he also knows exactly what he is doing. And because he can thus look at his own work and see that it is good, he can also tell about the work of others. To be and to know at the same time is said to be a divine privilege. Working in its shadow, the human creator, the master artist, must therefore be the best judge of art.

The second best judge of art would appear to be the professional critic who, while he may not be capable of producing great works, has devoted his life to trying to grasp what is intelligible in art and wants to let the rest of us in on it. Academic teachers of art history and philosophers specializing in aesthetics, as well as journalists covering the arts all perform this valuable service of fostering appreciation of art among their fellow citizens. Unfortunately, to distinguish a good from a bad critic may sometimes be



Vukan Kuic is a professor of political science at the University of South Carolina.

## ADAM AND LILITH

by Thomas Fleming

It was in a place for lunch last week—  
Oh potted plants, oh bentwood chair—  
I saw her there, I did not speak  
but watched to see if she would stare.

She did, and with just those lowered eyes  
I knew, tried to make up her mind,  
(the waitress waved aside the flies  
and cleared the tea and lemon rind);

My wife ordered lunch, I nursed a drink.  
Our talk went stale, the children fussed.  
I leaned back in my chair to think  
of times and tide and wasted trust.

Of is and are, of was and were—  
the difference tense and number make—  
the she-in-me, the me-in-her  
that neither one of us can break.

I am not talking now of love,  
but what a man like Paul might term  
a fact of life: we make part of  
each other's apple, each other's worm.

The things we ought not to have done  
will keep some corner of our minds:  
how her hair is burnished in the sun  
that blinks between the wooden blinds,

Such nonsense as a wrinkled dress  
(yes, you can bring the check now. Please.)  
her lips, shy still and lipstickless,  
her awkward grace of growing trees—

Gymnasts out of step with the wind;  
add in a box of unfinished verse  
and letters, long since left behind. . . .  
what absurdity to rehearse.

Now I'm past thirty—it's fifteen years—  
two half-grown children and a wife  
(her boyfriend orders two more beers)  
more than I deserve of life,

And although I'm as happy as I ought  
and have no leisure to regret  
the battles of the flesh we fought  
so long ago, and yet and yet.

this respect the critics are not much different from the artists. For even among the greatest artists some leave much to be desired as human beings.

History and society at large have been dismissed often enough as less competent judges of art, but such dismissal proves ambiguous. No one can deny that judgment about what is beautiful differs widely from place to place and over time, or that some artists achieve fame only posthumously while others are soon forgotten. For instance, the music of Gustav Mahler is today appreciated much more than while he was alive, and the same goes for the paintings of Paul Gauguin. And were it not for the movie *Amadeus*, few people today would recognize the name of Salieri, once considered a great composer. In the past century or so, Impressionism, Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, Neo-Classicism, Primitivism, Futurism, Imagism, Minimalism, and so on have all come and gone, to mention only the better known schools—or fashions—in art.

But is society to blame for this rapid and perhaps erratic turnover? New styles are invariably introduced by artists themselves, and critics have a lot to do with their social acceptance. With greater or lesser degree of inertial resistance, society simply seems to go along. In considering the validity of sociohistorical judgment in art, however, we should also note that, albeit again on advice from experts, modern societies especially have provided generously for the preservation of works of art done in every style imaginable. Displayed with pride in museums of art, these collections testify to an undercurrent of deeper understanding of the place of art in communal life. Thus Tolstoy certainly is right when he observes that art is a necessary condition of human life, which has in all societies and at all times exacted great sacrifices.

The most suspect aesthetic opinion would have to be that of the so-called independent-minded individual who insists that he needs no guidance because he knows what he likes. This seems to be a special problem in modern mass democratic societies whose ethos encourages assertion of omnicompetence by "the man in the street" and produces what critics have called "mass culture" characterized by wholesale "lowering of standards." Among writers who have addressed this problem, we find T.S. Eliot and Irving Babbitt, as well as Tocqueville and Henry Adams, all of whom have complained about the decline of "high culture" in modern times. But the new "popular culture," including the hope of spreading ever "higher" culture among the masses, also has its highly articulate defenders. Herbert Read and Susan Sontag, Richard Hoggart and Edward Shills, among others, have variously questioned the validity of the distinction between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" culture. Film is as legitimate an art as theater, they say, and so is the music of the Beatles compared to that of Beethoven.

While it may not be exactly the same as going to a live Philharmonic concert, listening to records is a genuinely aesthetic experience. While the working classes have always possessed a vital culture of their own, modern technology—helped by certain appropriate sociopolitical adjustments—now holds out the promise of a universal high culture. As Read puts it with some exaggeration in *To*

---

harder than to distinguish good from bad art. There is always the possibility that a competent critic may have some personal ax to grind or has decided to put his pen up for sale. We must never forget that love of art and beauty is not the same as love of justice and fellow man. But note that in