

Meantime I can do nothing but leave my work to the few and selected ones to judge and discriminate.

Yours as ever,

GABO

DEAR GABO,

It was unnecessary to apologize for the way you explain the constructive idea in art; like all artists who feel and think deeply about their work, you have said things which no critic could say for you, and said them with an eloquence which he might well envy. Certainly I myself could not improve on your statement, either by refinement or addition. All I can do, in this brief reply to your letter, is to anticipate some of the misunderstandings to which your words might be open.

You have done two things. You have shown why your art is called, and rightly called, 'constructive'; and you have tackled the problem of 'communication'—the most difficult problem which the artist in a democratic society has to face.

It is unfortunate that there are many sensitive and intelligent lovers of art, with no overriding prejudice against the modern movement as such, who yet fail to respond to so-called 'abstract' art. They find themselves unable to distinguish between a formal arrangement of line and colour which they rightly regard as merely 'decorative': and a constructed object which has a formal life and independence, which exists with an organic vitality all its own.

It seems to me that we shall have to search rather deeply for the true explanation of this phenomenon. Our modern civilization has to a large extent lost the sense of form—or, to be more exact, the faculty of immediately apprehending formal values. Even in music, where this faculty is absolutely indispensable, a great many listeners get on very comfortably without it, allowing their senses to be flooded formlessly and indiscriminately by the *flow* of sound. Here, where I personally am incompetent, it is possible to see the enormity of the failure: form, in music, is for me a unity only dimly realized, in some few preludes and fugues of Bach, for example. Knowing my limitations in this art, it is easier for me to sympathize with those lovers of art who but dimly apprehend the formal unity of one of your constructions. They see lines meeting and crossing, radiating from certain points, planes intersecting—and there they stop, perhaps secretly

longing for the colour and opacity which you have denied them—for colour is something their atrophied senses can still appreciate.

Why do they stop at that point? My dear Gabo, if we could confidently answer that question we should be close to the secret of the failure of our civilization. We are up against one of the fundamental inhibitions of our society—an inhibition which affects more segments of life than this æsthetic one we are discussing. It affects, most fatally, as I think you realize, our relations with one another—the simple exchange of sympathy and affection, the *reciprocity* which is the secret of social happiness. It is as though a vizor had fallen in front of our eyes, blocking some essential channel of communication. I am speaking in metaphors, but actually I believe that we are dealing with a physiological displacement. Since the triumph of scholasticism in the Middle Ages, the educated classes in Europe have been subjected to an intellectual discipline which has over-developed certain areas of the brain at the expense of others. I can give you the scientific formula for the process: 'The specialized area represented in the forebrain or neopallium, and its connections with adjacent special senses, supersedes and tends in its function even to exclude the reactions which, through the diencephalon, mediate the function expressive of man's organism as a total process.'¹ And this physiologist, who is also a psychologist, then points out that 'this enormous disproportion of function now directed toward the cortical or neopallial segment, due to the preponderant use of the symbol, has made far-reaching and unsuspected encroachments upon the primary feelings and sensations of man as a total organism'. And this is the point which you, as well as I, try to make. You say 'the way in which art perceives the world is sensuous . . . the way it acts in response to this perception is spontaneous, irrational and factual . . . and this is the way of life itself'. Yes, indeed; but it is not the way of life in Europe in this time of Armageddon, which is a time of prejudice, of calculated hatred, of deliberate destruction. For even war, in our 'scientific' civilization, has lost its spontaneity.

I only introduce these larger aspects to show that the problem is not limited to the field of art: we are not opposed merely by a few stupid academicians or jealous rivals: we are fighting a

¹ *The Biology of Human Conflict*, by Trigant Burrow, M.D., Ph.D. New York (Macmillan Company), 1937, p. 117.

mass neurosis which has its roots in the historical developments of the past five centuries. It would therefore be foolish to be very optimistic about our immediate success.

This brings me to the only other comment I wish to make. You betray a social conscience. As a Russian who has experienced in person the terrors and exaltations, the high hopes and frustrations of the greatest social revolution of modern times, you might reasonably have taken refuge in some escapist philosophy. But you still retain a faith in the masses, and you are even confident that these masses would understand and appreciate your constructive art, if allowed a free and unbiased contact with it. To a degree you are perhaps right: I have always found that simple and unsophisticated people have a more natural, serious and sound reaction to abstract art than the neurotic climbers who cling desperately to some rung of the social or educational ladder. But do not ask for the 'judgement' of the masses. That is to encourage the very attitude of intellectual detachment which we are most anxious to avoid. Erect your constructions in public places by all means; but then wait and see . . . The metaphor of the catalyst has been overworked in modern criticism, but it is a very useful one. You must not expect a direct reaction from a work of art in modern society: but dropped like a foreign substance into that agitated sea, it might, without losing either its identity or its purity, effect a transformation both rich and strange.

Yours ever,

H. R.

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO

SENSITIVENESS

SENSITIVENESS, in life as in painting and all forms of art, is incontestably a quality appertaining to the human being who possesses it. It is much easier to recognize the sensitiveness of a human being in life than the sensitiveness of an artist in his work. In life, too, living as we are in a period in which people are