

THE WRECK OF ART

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Earlier this year the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney put on an exhibition of Warhol portraits. They took the form of photographs scrawled with paint. As photographs they were of little interest apart from the fact that many of the subjects were celebrities, just as you would see in *New Idea*. This was not art in any serious sense of the word. Indeed, the term "contemporary art" has become a contradiction in itself.

One of the portraits was of Henry Geldzahler, a friend of Warhol who did not like the result, exclaiming: "It's nothing but a blown-up version of the Polaroid. You've left out the art!" Warhol is reported to have quipped: "I knew I forgot something".

Andy Warhol was at least a witty man. So was the architect of most of what has passed for art in our century — Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp set the scene when he entered a ceramic urinal in a New York art exhibition in 1917, entitled *Fountain*, signed "R. Mutt". Needless to say there was a scandal, then. The mark of Duchamp's success is that hardly anyone would look twice when passing the same exhibit today. There might be a smile of wry amusement; certainly no outrage.

The revolution that Duchamp achieved was to prove total. Since his urinal, what the Western art galleries have put on is an endless series of variations of his credo, usually ponderous, banal, humourless and, over the decades, showing a marked increase in technical ineptitude.

The credo was directed against the authority of the Old Masters of our culture. It proclaimed that a profane hulk of mass-produced plumbing is equal to a Raphael Madonna. It posed the challenge: by what standards is anyone entitled to claim that the Madonna is more beautiful, more good, more true, more human, more inspiring, or indeed more anything at all? The urinal is at least useful. What Duchamp had done with it is, more over, very clever — note, for instance, the Freudian joke in the signature, a canine play on the German word for "mother".

There are no such standards, so the urinal proclaimed. All values are relative. Everything is permitted if it brings the individual pleasure. In such a world — if we are honest about it — nothing is sacred. This is what I prove in my undisguised and unabashed profaneness. My frankness is a virtue. In our world the task of art is to shock and to amuse. Q E D.

Duchamp put with brilliant economy the essence of the late humanism that was in the process of taking over Western high culture — its philosophy, its literature, its music and its architecture. In art, the most gifted exponent of this view was Picasso. Cubism broke up the forms of reality. The Impressionists had already turned their backs on the moral content of art, removing the human stories. The attack now turned on the formal, perceptual order. Not only are all values relative, there to suit the convenience of the individual but, even more radically, if you believe the world is composed of coherent and absolute structures, look again and you will see that it is not. It too is arbitrary. There is no such thing as truth.

The philosophy at work here was later articulated by the English painter Francis Bacon:

Man now realises that he is an accident, that he is a completely futile being ... All art has become a game by which man distracts himself. And you may say that it always has been like that, but now it's entirely a game. What is fascinating is that it's going to become much more difficult for the artist, because he must really deepen the game to be any good at all, so that he can make life a bit more exciting.

Modern art has had its few very intelligent men like Duchamp, Bacon and Warhol. There is no questioning their intelligence. What is at issue is whether they produced art.

What then is art? The great paintings and sculptures sought out the eternal truths about the human condition. One way of phrasing it was that of Milton: to reveal the ways of God to man. The subject matter tended to be scenes of great moments in a life, turning points, whether of triumph, catastrophe or some testing challenge through which ask such questions as: what is the meaning of this, the ultimate significance, what does it tell me about where I come from, where I am going, and what I should do

with my life, or more particularly what should I do in this kind situation?

Art was centrally concerned with the issue of the "good life", what it might be and how it should be lived. It sought to illustrate what was right behaviour, as opposed to wrong behaviour, in emotionally and morally trying conditions.

Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, in Dresden, to take one example, articulates a law over the right relation to mother and infant. There is complete, tender union, the serenity of an intimacy in which there is no reserve. The painting is morally coercive, in effect pointing the finger at all women, proclaiming that a necessary part of your fulfilment is to be like me, and failure will inevitably bring guilt with it.

At no level is this painting a misty, sweet idealisation of maternal love. There is grief in the face of the Madonna, that her child will soon grow up and leave her, and that, ultimately, an awful destiny awaits him, its tortured finale on the Cross — she foresees the death of her son. In spite of her knowledge, she moves deliberately forward, out from behind the green curtain, into the world. The painting is thus of vocation, her vocation as mother, called to nurture and to love, but also to bear the pain and grief of what is to come. Raphael paints the child with an intense determination in the eyes, and wild hair, looking straight out of the canvas. He was eager to confront his destiny, to get started, although he too knows what it will involve, and his knowledge gives him an almost dreadful poise, as he hovers weightless, ready to take on the world.

Raphael offsets the tragic gravity with the two famous angels at the foot of the painting, shown as naughty imps itching to be off on some prank. One rolls his eyes in boredom, mocking the seriousness above. Together, they bring to the work as a whole the dimension of a cheerful, irrepressible vitality, that of unselfconscious, irreverent childhood. But even they have their tragic undertow: they double as Christ and John the Baptist as young boys, playing together — both will be martyred. The ultimate focus of the *Sistine Madonna* — and this is the hallmark of any great work of art — is on death and its possible transcendence.

In other cultures, the function of art is not essentially different, although nowhere else has a tradition been developed to match the richness and subtlety, the technical virtuosity, of

Western art. The Aboriginal *tchuringas*, for instance, are sacred art objects. Their purpose is to facilitate closer contact with the higher powers, helping both individuals and group maintain the religious order that governs things. They are means for communicating the law.

In our own culture, too, I would suggest, it is the case that anyone who looks seriously at a work like the *Sistine Madonna* — and I do not mean a ten-minute browse-past — cannot help but have his view of important things influenced, and in ways he shall not escape. Some blueprint of truth is being projected. The Russian writer Dostoevsky had a copy of the *Sistine Madonna* — his favourite work — hanging above the sofa on which he died. Furthermore, recognition of real art will make clear what an abomination is the modern product.

Early in the piece, modern art theorised its own degeneration. Edvard Munch painted his Madonna in the 1890s. The subject is a naked woman. Long, black hair swirls crazily, a red beret mimics a halo. Her eyes are black and closed. She is caught in a helpless vortex of anguish. In the face there is a shade of peace, of the end torment, but it is the peace of a corpse — as Munch made clear in an accompanying document. The colours are those of a lurid, perverted sensuality and death. Nothing matters any more, apart from a peaceful death. She is a profane, soulless animal in an empty world, simply wanting to escape her torment. Munch, before Duchamp, is painting against Raphael. His Madonna framed by spermatozoa, and at her bottom left is a hideous embryo: all she can give birth to is death. She cannot even nourish herself. But Munch, at least, is making a bitter attack on his own culture, on what it has been reduced to. This is dead culture.

Modern art has aroused widespread popular resentment. The man in the street suspects that a giant fraud had been perpetrated against him. To date, he has been intimidated into silence by the cultural élites telling him that he is a philistine who should stay in the suburbs where he belongs, and stick to *New Idea* and soap opera. Those élites have celebrated Picasso as the quintessential genius of the twentieth century, paying prodigious sums for their reverence. Yet there is a basic truth to the common prejudice that any six-year-old could do as well.

It is not true at the level of technique — although the same cannot be said for much that has followed Picasso. In terms of content, however, the prejudice flatters modernity's creative

genius, for the young boys and girls in their work would be finding an order in their world, striving for meaningful forms, to make sense of the reality into which they have been born.

Why should any respect be kept for cultural élites — privileged in status, fame and sometimes money — when the works they produce and patronise are not serious, not beautiful, not edifying and not elevating? It is a real rat that has been smelled, like the grotesque embryo that Munch painted into the margins of his Madonna.

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