

ASPECTS OF BRUTALITY

ANXIOUS CONCEPTS IN SCULPTURE SINCE 1950

by

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FOREWORD

It would be wrong to suggest that this essay is in any way a comprehensive study of brutal sculpture. Certainly not. There have been many deliberate omissions for reasons which become clear in the text. Very briefly, omissions of certain sculptors and their work are largely due to my wish to avoid repetitive ideas and images.

My view in this essay is to provide a **cross-section** of ideas and works, whereby the reader might gain some insight into the varied nature of this kind of sculpture. Thus, there seemed very little need for endless similarities of concept and expression. It was the diversity which I felt was important.

The chapter which discusses concepts of beauty is also not a comprehensive study. This subject demands more than a humble essay to do it any justice. However, my reasons for touching the vague and controversial outline of these concepts were, primarily, to suggest that notions of beauty as the sole criterion in the judgement of art are too limiting, and, consequently, to introduce the concept of vitalism, which I believe is more valid.

Finally, I wish to mention the personal motive behind this work. Over the years, I have witnessed the emergence of brutal elements in my own work, which I found disturbing at times. I have never been able to answer satisfactorily the criticism I've received. All I knew was that these things came from a very deep source. It

is with this in mind that I embarked on this project, hoping to achieve two things. Firstly, to provide an objective survey of an important development in art, and, secondly, to answer some of my criticism.

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Grahamstown 1985

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

When the Second World War came to an end, the victors celebrated. The vanquished, confronted by the rubble of their broken cities, quietly began to rebuild. With the shadows of Auschwitz and Hiroshima in their eyes they began to fit the pieces of their lives and countries together, aghast and ashamed that such a thing had happened.

The victors went home across the sea. The proud sons of free nations marched through their home towns and were showered with glory and praise. The wild spirit of joy was contagious, but there was a right to such abandonment. The war was over. Good had triumphed over evil.

But even in the eyes of the victors there were shadows. The calamity they had witnessed could not be erased from memory no matter how desperate the celebrations. There was the uneasy thought at the back of their minds that all of humanity, and not just the vanquished, was responsible for what had happened. The shadows grew into a darkness inside the very soul of nations. The unspoken words upon everyone's lips were: It had happened again. Fifty million people lay dead. The slaughter of the First World War, a mere two decades before, had repeated itself. And despite the euphoria

and celebrations, the eternal question echoed from the darkness: Could such a thing happen again?

Mankind began to question its civilization built with brilliance and brutality and destroyed by the same genius. As it picked up its pieces, humanity pondered its destiny.

America, the symbol of western freedom, was soon asking itself the same things again. It began to realise the true cost of promoting its image. This time it was the Korean War and another generation of young men were sent overseas to taste blood. And with this war there was not the same sweetness of victory in the end. The end was a shame-faced affair, a settlement that barely saved America's honour. The soldiers were greeted back with similar pomp and ceremony but a great hollowness was felt by the nation, an emptiness the politicians tried to fill by rhetoric and the sportsmen by achievements. A gloom had descended and the American Way was no longer clear.

America was by no means the only western nation to feel a growing internal dissent. Britain was experiencing its own political and social problems, such as the escalating strife in Ireland and the confrontation with Nasser in the Middle East. Its colonies became trouble spots culminating in the Mau Mau Emergency, whereby Britain relinquished its proprietary hold on Africa. France

was experiencing the same problems in North Africa and Vietnam.*

America was experiencing a breakdown of tradition. The younger generation gazed down the path towards strength, wealth and liberty, with somewhat suspicious eyes. Even the charisma of John F. Kennedy and his energetic efforts to unite the American people failed to gather back those who were straying. To those of cynical yet sharp insight, Kennedy was simply another symbol of American Tradition - he epitomised the view that money begets power.

The fabric of society was disintegrating. Among the creative circles the voice of protest grew stronger and stronger. But it was more than protest that emerged from the lines of song and poetry. It was more than the eternal question of the recurrence of war that glared from sculptures and canvases. It was a deep-rooted fear and rage. It was an exasperated cry against the fathers of a nation who had so blindly followed orders. Art became a vehicle for social and political comment and thus expressed disgust and suspicion whenever it tackled tradition. There was a call for honesty and truth, for

*For the purposes of this essay, however, I should like to concentrate on the American developments since it was in America that so many of the important post-World War II movements in art took place. At the same time it is important to realise that much of what is said in this essay is not peculiar only to America but to other western countries too.

the lie of civilization had been exposed. The artist, who for centuries upheld civilization, now sought to dissect it. Concepts of beauty were dismantled with open contempt.

The strongest reaction came initially from the Beat Writers, such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. In this literature we witness a complete break from those traditions (considered radical in their time) established by Robert Frost, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Steinbeck. Despite the great innovations these writers introduced, they were, in the eyes of the Beat Writers, about as American as root-beer and baseball. The heroes of Hemingway and Steinbeck were dispensed with and in their place came the anti-hero, the ordinary guy liberally endowed with most of mankind's fears and frailties. A good example of this is Kerouac's largely autobiographical novel *On The Road* in which the main character and his friend criss-cross America in an aimless search for kicks. Issues such as homosexuality are confronted without qualms and no apologies are made for an absence of message. It is very difficult to understand much of the disgust and aimlessness of this literature unless seen, as I have tried to do, against the social backdrop. Anne Charters, in her biography of Kerouac, fails to provide credibility for the utterly pathetic existence and death of the man who initiated the Beat Generation. Little depth is shown into a man, who with so many

physical and intellectual assets, chose to opt out; to sponge a meagre existence off his poor and ailing mother, and then at the height of his fame to destroy himself through drugs and alcohol. It is only when reading the words of Kerouac himself that one gains an insight into the dropout mentality that was to become so rampant. One sees a desire for excitement within a drab environment, one senses a longing for meaning. In his poem to Allen Ginsberg, he writes:

- lights out -

fall, hands a-clasped, into instantaneous
ecstasy like a shot of heroin or morphine
the glands inside of my brain discharging
the good glad fluid (Holy Fluid) as
I hap-down and hold all my body parts
down to a deadstop trance - healing
all my sickness - erasing all - ...¹

This loose, colloquial style of expression, known as jive talk, was soon adopted by most of the new American writers and became the language of a whole generation. The mention of drugs is also significant for it was this era that saw the first widespread experimentation with drugs (the worship of guru drug addicts such as Timothy Leary), and the manifestation of the dropout mentality, trends that were to be adopted on a massive scale by the

1. Charters, A. Kerouac, p. 193

Hippie Generation. This in itself was a reaction to the traditional American lifestyle. This protest was to reverberate in the consciousness of the young to the point where protest became a cult. Young people became conditioned into an automatic rejection of prescribed social values and norms. Kerouac's thirst for escape and freedom reflected in his writing became a contagious sickness from which generations were to suffer. His books became Bibles to young people who longed to taste his freedom, not realising its myth. Allen Ginsberg puts down the fear and disgust with vivid perception in his poem Howl:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by
madness, starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at
dawn looking for an angry fix, ...
...who passed through universities with radiant cool
eyes hallucinating Arkansas and
Blake-light tragedy among the
scholars of war,
who were expelled from the academies for crazy &
publishing obscene odes on the
windows of the skull ...²

2. Simpson, Louis. An introduction to Poetry, p. 328

The generation gap began to yawn. Many of the films of this era, such as *Rebel Without a Cause*, reflect an incredible animosity towards the establishment. Figures such as James Dean became cult heroes overnight. It was Dean who coined the phrase "Live fast, die young, and have a good-looking corpse." He lived up to these words when he was killed in an horrific, high-speed car accident, thereby immortalising himself in the hearts of his fans. Elvis Presley spurned all that was considered decent by thrusting his pelvis to the sound of Rock 'n Roll. Musicians and singers mesmerized their devotees. Music wielded a phenomenal, increasing power over young minds. Naturally, it kicked against the establishment. Bob Dylan's reedy voice howled across the land, castigating the warmongers, the justice system, the older generation. With casual insolence he draws battle lines:

Come mothers and fathers,
Throughout the land
And don't criticize
What you can't understand.
Your sons and your daughters
Are beyond your command
Your old road is
Rapidly agin'
Please get out of the new one
If you can't lend your hand

For the times they are a-changin',³

Music had lost its innocence. Social prophecy began to compete with dance styles. Much of the protest was genuine, much was contrived. Either way, it was good business.

At the same time, America was reeling beneath waves of social tragedy. The nation's conscience was prickled by the Negro Riots, and its despair and anger aroused by the assassinations of Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Military advisors appeared in Vietnam in increasing numbers. As during the McCarran - McCarthy years, there was now an intense confrontation between liberal intellectualism and the establishment. Voices rose in pitch to disclaim the very freedom that provided them with pedestals and ears. The warts of the great capitalist society were laid bare - a flourishing bureaucracy, the squalor of ghettos, the escalating racial tension, and the beginnings of real involvement in Vietnam. Serious crime was on the increase. It is interesting to note what Colin Wilson repeatedly states in his book, *Order of Assassins*, where he observes that before 1950 there were relatively few murders arising from a sense of self-fulfilment. The latter half of this century has seen the emergence in western societies of countless acts of mindless violence and seemingly motiveless killing. Wilson quotes figures

3 Dylan, Bob. *Writings and Drawings*, p. 85

which illustrate this alarming phenomenon: "Between 1940 and 1954, crimes of violence rose by 35% in America. Between 1968 and 1970, the murder rate rose from 10 000 to 15 000 - more than 50% in two years."⁴ He suggests that boredom and a repressive society are to blame and closes his argument with these astute words: "If man is deprived of meanings beyond his everyday routine, he becomes disgusted and bitter, and equally violent. A society that provides no outlet for man's idealist passions is asking to be torn apart by violence. When we understand this, the age of motiveless murder will be at an end."⁵

Indeed, society was sick, and the new generation had become thoroughly adept at pointing this out. Likewise, those in authority became increasingly proficient in evading the masses who held up placards drawing attention to every conceivable cause. There were many issues at stake, the most prominent being America's full-scale involvement in Vietnam. The My Lai Massacre, where helpless civilians were gunned down by American soldiers, outraged the world. Again, America began to realise the true cost of promoting its image. But within the country itself there were countless smaller issues to which the rebellious could ally themselves, such as Black Rights,

4. Wilson, Colin. *Order of Assassins*, p. 11,12

5. *Ibid.* p. 248

Women's Rights, Human Rights, the Kent State killings, Woodstock, the Black Panthers, Abortion, Gay lib., etc., etc. Newspapers hounded out the brutal facts and presented them to the public with knightly airs. Each day, America was confronted by proof of its failings and injustices, which resulted not only in the public's morbid fascination with figures such as Che Guevara and the depraved Hell's Angels, but also provided some handy ammunition to fling at evasive leaders. Of course, much of this ammunition was aimed at Nixon and his political hierarchy, who in turn arrogantly continued with their policies. Their attitude was that, despite the awful spectre of Vietnam, nothing could seriously disrupt America's great technological advances and financial growth. In fact, Nixon insisted that he was above reprimand. As he intimated so often, America's name was on the moon, he'd had some friendly talks with Breshnev, and he was pulling the boys out of Vietnam (even though he'd stepped up the bombing of Cambodia and North Vietnam).⁶

But the protest grew. Any political move was scrutinized with grave suspicion. Young Americans felt disgraced. They were concerned about the amount of violence perpetrated by Americans both inside and outside their country, hence the Hippie Generation's slogans of

6. For further reading: Horowitz, David. From Yalta to Vietnam.

"Peace", "Love", and "Flower Power". There was the urge to disassociate themselves completely from the establishment, resulting in thousands of kids flocking to communes where they could experience an alternative lifestyle. But the communes also had their dark side, where often they were simply places of debauchery and heavy drug-taking. One such place was Charles Manson's hideout in Death Valley. This enigmatic leader of a group of hippies, crazed by hallucinatory visions and messages, was to achieve lasting infamy with the Sharon Tate and LaBianca murders.⁷

Such social and political brutality invited aesthetic brutality in turn. As we have already seen, the post-1950 musicians were quick to adopt a revolutionary stance. The mass-appeal of pop and folk music goes without question. There was something quite profound in John Lennon's controversial claim that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus Christ. But in literature and theatre, too, there were some tough statements being made. Playwright Jean-Jaques Lebel exclaims: "It is avant-garde that ... transfigures us and changes our conception of life We no longer paint battles - we wage them The random element, the non-respect for taboos, the broadening of awareness - these constitute an indictment of the falsehoods of civilization Authentic avant-garde art, contrasted with its civilization, is naturally

7. For further reading: Saunders, E. *The Family*.

revolutionary."⁸ There is little doubt about the message conveyed by these words, as there is little doubt about the energy behind the words of Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. Artists were going to rub society's nose in the mess of its own making. Brutality would act as a mirror into which society could confront its rottenness, its hypocrisy, its blatant lie.

Yet by comparison, the fruits of the visual arts were mild. In painting, for example, there was almost open defiance; a refusal to feel anything where feeling was socially demanded. Abstract Expressionism was almost a negation of any social commitment, being in essence a purely arbitrary form of self-expression. The argument that Pop Art emerged as a reaction to the consumer society is too simplistic. The emergence of Pop was a reaction to the Abstract Expressionist demand for an intensity of feeling and pure self-abandonment, epitomised by the work of Jackson Pollock. Pop was also an exasperated swing away from fashionable indignation about commercialism. Viewing the progression from Abstract Expressionism, through Pop, through Op, through Minimal and other forms, one is struck by a general aversion towards an emotional involvement in social issues.

With sculpture the situation was essentially the same,

8. Lebel, Jean-Jacques. *New Writers IV: Plays & Happenings*, p. 13 - 45

although there are no specific movements to act as guidelines. After the Second World War, there was a general dispersion of styles. The sculptors linked to the time between the World Wars, notably Moore, Marini, Hepworth, Arp, Wotruba, Richier, Giacometti, and Gonzalez, were shaped by two common forces which lend their work a certain chronological coherency. Despite their variety of styles, they had all shared a sense of impending disaster after the rise of the Nazi and Facist dictatorships. They had also evolved from a common artistic background in Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. With this background, each sculptor continued in his own way but was, nevertheless, connected to the others.⁹

After 1945, however, there was no such social and cultural umbilical chord to connect the new sculptors. There was only one common truth - their work reflects the character of a vibrant and fast-changing century.¹⁰

Ordered, logical movements had become obsolete. Figures such as Oldenburg and Christo, Calder and Caro, came into prominence, reflecting man's technological prowess in an age of huge dimension, of packaging, of fine scientific balances and steel girders. The very complexity and variety of sculptural techniques and materials was a symbol of the age. The limits had become boundless.

9. Hammacher, A.M. *The Evolution of Modern Sculpture*, p. 266

10. Ibid. p. 267

And yet, amidst all this explosive confusion, amidst the wrapped coastlines and spiral jetties and painted scrap metal, there emerged a small group of sculptors whose vision amounts to more than just social comment. Small in number, and by no means a cohesive group, these artists probed the darkneses of our age and produced works of a brutality never witnessed before in sculpture. These works have had occasional equivalents in painting, Goya and Francis Bacon immediately spring to mind, but never in sculpture. Perhaps there are hints of it in Michelangelo's *Dying Slave*, or Rodin's *Burgers of Calais*, but within these works there emanates a heroic sense of hope and greatness. Indeed, the viewer finds hope and shelter in the work of these masters, a sense of survival that not even the terror of death can dispel. Not so in the modern works of which I speak. The viewer can draw no succour or support from these works or the persons who created them. Whereas Michelangelo and Rodin helped the viewer rise above the debris of human failure, he is now left to confront the terrible truth. Alone.

Not much investigation has been done in this field. Evidence of this can be seen in the scarceness of research material - in many cases large volumes purporting to explain modern sculpture do not even mention the names of these sculptors or their works. And yet, despite an obvious aversion towards this kind of expression by the public and, indeed, historians and critics, the unre-

strained power of this work is quite awesome. For the purposes of this essay, therefore, I should like to consider this unique art form as one worthy of greater recognition. At the beginning of this chapter, I spoke of the shadows in the eyes of man. To investigate the brutality of this sculpture is, in effect, to peer into these shadows.

Brutality is, after all, a fundamental truth of our age.

CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTS OF BEAUTY: THE RELEVANCE OF BRUTALITY

Beauty is not easy to define. Throughout the course of history man has struggled with its evasiveness in an effort to achieve absolute and lasting definition, but to little avail. Beauty remains the great enigma; the veiled fountain-head that eludes even the most brilliant minds. Its obscurity lies in its manifold variety. It has many faces. It may be vast, it may be tiny, geometric or amorphous. Taste for beauty fluctuates. Greek Doric columns were beautiful for their strength and simplicity, while Ionic columns were beautiful for their slender grace.

Each epoch seems to be granted a parameter of beauty, however fleeting, whereby beauty shows man an aspect of itself, a small glimpse of its secret, which man instantly formulates. And just as this is accomplished, it shows another aspect of itself to another generation, which throws everything into confusion. Definitions, therefore, shift with the particular emphasis of each age.

One of the most popular definitions is the classical one. The Greeks liked to look upon beauty as that which is perfectly proportioned, in the visual sense. Hence, they derived ideal measurements for the human figure in sculpture. Phidias, Polykleitos and Doryphoros, all worked to the canon of proportion. In architecture it

was the same. The Parthenon was designed to appear visually correct, rather than mathematically so. For instance, the stylobate and pediments have a slight upward curve which appears straight from a distance. Similarly, the outer columns lean slightly inwards in order to appear vertical from a distance. Beauty was vital to the Greeks. Under the rule of Pericles, no expense was spared in making Athens the envy of the world.

Yet to insist that the Greeks adhered unbendingly to the ideal of visual correctness is unwise. There were many philosophical differences, resulting in argument and speculation. Whereas Aristotle vaguely stated that beauty was indispensable in a work of art (but never analysed the idea),¹¹ Plotinus worshipped Nature as ideal beauty, ideal truth. He regarded Man's theories of art as subordinate to the absolute laws of Nature; that the "criterion of value for a work of art was no longer theoretical truth but ... [natural] ... beauty."¹² Polykleitos was criticised for being too mathematical in his approach. Phidias must have known that there was another dimension to his work than mere proportion. This becomes obvious when we read Plutarch's impressions of the Parthenon sculpture: "There exudes from these mon-

11. Butcher, S.H. *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, p. 43

12. Panofsky, Erwin. *Idea*, p. 190

uments a spirit of youth which has not been affected by time and the images are still imbued with the breath of life, as if endowed with a soul which will never grow old."¹³

Thus, the Greeks themselves realised that beauty meant more than what simply met the eye. And yet, the classical ideal of perfect proportion was to recur in various forms clear into the Twentieth Century. To this day, this simple ideal remains a convenient, if eclectic, formula for beauty.

During the Middle Ages, beauty assumed a spiritual dimension. Paradise was in Heaven and not on earth. Hence the comparatively drab exteriors of churches and cathedrals, and the vast, magnificent interiors. Entering the radiance of mosaics and stained-glass windows, man had a special encounter with God for he had entered His space, so different from the mundane things outside.

The Renaissance is seen as the rebirth of classical ideals. But its beauty is much more than this. The works of Masaccio and Donatello, Leonardo and Michelangelo, transcend anything seen before. They embrace the ideals of science and the metaphysical, of the glory of man and his world. No one viewing, say, Michelangelo's *Moses*, could limit the beauty of this work to proportion only, or the merely skilful rendering of anatomy.

13. Abbate, F. *The Art of Classical Greece*, p. 18

With Michelangelo, as with the other artists of this period, we are forcibly reminded of Kant's suggestion that beauty must have significance; it must speak to man. This philosophy is opposed to that of Nature Worship, in that Nature does not specifically address us in this way. It also ties in with Hegel's belief that art "presents man with himself".¹⁴

But still there was confusion. The more man grappled with definitions, the more complex beauty became. One thing alone was certain - it determined the character of each movement through to the Twentieth Century. It glowed from the dark backgrounds of Caravaggio and Rembrandt, it spoke through the erotic fantasies of Boucher and Fragonard. It existed in Realist Paintings despite their subject matter. Here, Kant's definition of art as the "beautiful representation of a thing"¹⁵, is particularly apt in that it suggests that even the ugly is beautiful in its representation through art.

Up to now, I have been intentionally brief in the analysis of beauty, for reasons that will become obvious. We are able, however, to gain some insight into the impossible nature of beauty, and to realise the impending difficulties in applying this term to much of Twentieth Century art. Perhaps this confusion is best explained in

14. Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*, p. 45

15. *Ibid.* p. 46

this quote which I make from J.W.R. Purser, where he states: "We are prejudiced in favour of certain headings under which alone we will see things as beautiful, and when our eyes are opened to a beauty opposed to our natural taste, we fall into the contradiction of saying that there is beauty in ugliness too. If we are looking for graciousness or aloofness or refinement of mind, and the regular features and attractive expressions that seem to symbolize them, a grotesque, like a gargoyle, will seem ugly; but if we are looking for cunning, malice, perversity, cruelty, the grotesque is our beauty; and because this is not the kind of thing which we usually find beautiful, we feel inclined to say of the grotesque that it is beautiful for its very ugliness."¹⁶

This quote illustrates the basic, subjective confusion which surrounds beauty. It should be accepted, therefore, that beauty can be fickle. It varies not only according to the nature of each epoch, but also according to different cultures. I shall not even try to venture a theory, only to say that beauty, as indeed ugliness, can be found in anything. Confronted by ugliness, we can find beauty even if it is only the reciprocal awareness.

Viewing the vibrant and varied progression of art through the Twentieth Century, it becomes abundantly clear that a more acceptable criterion for the judgement of art becomes necessary. By judging art, we either

16. Purser, J.W.R., B.A. Art and Truth, p. 64

accept it or reject it. By employing the criterion of beauty, art immediately falls into the dilemma described by Purser, thereby making judgement inconclusive.

It is at this point, then, that I should like to introduce a concept which I believe is more acceptable in determining the relevance of a work of art, and to dispense with further conjecture on the nature of beauty. It is significant to note that the originator of this concept is a sculptor, one of deep perception into the nature of creativity.

Henry Moore once stated: "For me a work must first have a vitality of its own. I do not mean a reflection of the vitality of life, of movement, physical action, frisking dancing figures and so on, but that a work can have in it a pent-up energy, an intense life of its own, independant of the object it may represent. When a work has this powerful vitality we do not connect the word Beauty with it.... Beauty, in the later Greek or Renaissance sense, is not the aim of my sculpture.... Between beauty of expression and power of expression there is a difference of function. The first aims at pleasing the senses, the second has a spiritual vitality which for me is more moving and goes deeper than the senses.... Because a work does not aim at reproducing natural appearances it is not, therefore, an escape from life - but may be a penetration into reality ... an

expression of the significance of life, a stimulation to greater effort in living."¹⁷

From this, Herbert Read coins the term **vitalism**¹⁸. When we see Twentieth Century art, (and specifically brutality) against this concept, it assumes not only deeper meaning but a wider acceptance. The basis of acceptance of any art form has always been in conceptions, or rather preconceptions, of the meaning of art. Some of these preconceptions, such as the notion of beauty, need to be broken down. Instead of searching for vague aspects of beauty, we should look for the spark of life. A human being is attractive because of the life force within him. Without that vitality he is a corpse. Similarly, a work of art should possess the same vitality, injected through the fingers of the artist. Without it the work is dead.

Consequently, the relevance of brutal work, within this new context, goes without question. Whether a work be beautiful or ugly is irrelevant, it is the nature of the living spirit within the work that matters.

Society must adapt to this new way of thinking if it is to appreciate much of modern and contemporary art. Specifically, it is important for society to realise the value of brutality in art, especially as a means to

17. Read, Herbert. A concise History of Modern Sculpture, p. 163

18. Ibid. p. 163

social awareness. It is important not to ignore or avoid brutality, but to confront it. Man must develop the courage to learn not only from his beauty but also from his ugliness. By avoiding depressing social issues, man denies himself basic humanity and thus denies himself spiritual growth. It is imperative that man should widen his perceptions to accommodate also the things he does not like, and in so doing embrace life fully.

Yet despite this urgency, brutality in art is seldom understood or condoned. As George Orwell says: "The interconnection between sadism, masochism, success worship, power worship, nationalism and totalitarianism, is a huge subject whose edges have barely been scratched, and even to mention it is considered somewhat indelicate."¹⁹

Art should provide a balance of understanding but is thwarted by its very elitism. While commercial galleries search for fickle beauty with which they can blindfold the wealthy from the realities around them, the general society is fed ample doses of negative brutality in pseudo-art form. The most common example of this is the typical violent movie. Here, brutality descends to the level of pornography, where it is used to exhilarate rather than to inform. The nature of negative brutality, as with pornography, is that it creates a demand for

19. Orwell, S. *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, p. 61

increased doses, as the shock effect wears off. Aside from all the moral considerations, this is quite simply commercial exploitation. By its basic superficiality, it is a move away from art. The public is rendered helpless before the rising tide. Sadly, they have not even the most primitive guidelines of interpretation to go by, guidelines which should have been provided by art. And so society, bombarded by all the trite nonsense, becomes almost animalistic in its lack of vision. As long ago as 1901, Remy de Gourmont, aptly described this transition: "If a civilised society should arrive one day at that state of mind in which novelty is immediately welcomed and enthroned in the place of traditional ideas and mechanisms - if the past were to yield constantly to the future - then after a period of frenzied curiosity, we would see men falling into the apathy of the tourist who never looks twice at the same thing. In order to regain possession of themselves, they would have to seek refuge in a purely animal existence, and civilization would perish."²⁰

Clearly, what is needed in addition to genuine creativity, is a sense of responsibility. Brutality, used positively and intelligently, can be the source of great meaning. Like a firearm, it can be safe or dangerous, depending upon the one using it. Considering the massive

20. Burne, G. *Women and Language, Selected Writings*, p. 133-4

contribution it has made towards shaping civilization, there is no question of its importance. It should be used. It should help man into a state of self-awareness, and not into a state of regression.

Having established the justification for brutality in art, it is time now to look specifically at sculpture. I have already drawn attention to the uniqueness of the brutal sculpture belonging to recent decades. Why is it unique? What separates the contemporary sculptor from his more distant counterpart, knowing that brutality is not special to this age? The answer is simply freedom. The sculptors of old were not free artists, as we find today. There is absolutely no comparison. The modern sculptor's scope of personal, social, and artistic freedom, as well as the multitude of new techniques and materials, belongs only to this century. The station of sculptors up until the Twentieth Century remained virtually unchanged since antiquity. Essentially, they were at the mercy of a limited patronage. Materials were far beyond what they could afford and, thus, the opportunity for making personal statements was rare. It was only the truly great who were able to remove the blinkers shielding their genius. Yet their struggles for artistic liberty are legend. Phidias' thirst for personal expression resulted in his downfall.²¹ Michelangelo, also, was forced, even at the height of his creative powers, to paint - a process he disliked intensely.

21. For further reading: Abbate, op. cit.

The modern sculptor, on the other hand, faces no such deprivations. He is a free man who can say what he likes, how he likes. Wealthy countries have spawned a proliferation of sculptors as a result. Thus, the very real adversity facing sculptors today is that there are so many of them, all with varying degrees of talent. For a talented sculptor to gain recognition in these circumstances can be very difficult, especially in the light of the growing commercialism of the art galleries. This elitism has replaced the church and government as dictator of style.

Nevertheless, there is a freedom of choice today that did not exist in the past, which is the primary reason for the uniqueness of brutality in sculpture. The social and political upheavals of our time have played their part, but it is the right to artistic expression that has allowed their reflection in these works. And it is their basic humanity that shall ensure their importance in the future.

In the next chapter, I will present examples of brutal sculpture which will be seen from both formal and philosophical aspects.

CHAPTER THREE
SPECIFIC WORKS: AN ANALYSIS



Gregory Gillespie. Fragment from a Vietnam Shrine. 1966.

In war it seems the fabric of violence is closely knit. The deeper sources of brutality overlap, they interweave, obscuring each other. Individual acts of brutality blend with others, until the horror is so vast that mankind looks upon the slaughter in terms of per-

centages and statistics, which become meaningless. History is recorded objectively, unemotionally.

Similarly, the depiction of war in art through the ages, from Trajan's Column to Picasso's *Guernica*, has seen the basic realities obscured by propaganda or style. In this sense, Goya is a unique exception.

With Gillespie's *Fragment from a Vietnam Shrine*, we see the emergence of an entirely new interpretation. The statement made here is not one of glory or political sympathy - it is pure, sickening violence causing an intense revulsion in the spectator. Gillespie's approach is entirely representational; it is as if the soldier's head, encased in a glass case, is simply a relic picked up on the battle field. Thus, we see this work as not so much a sculpture, in the formal, traditional sense, but as a found object. We confront the real horror of Vietnam (or any war) in a direct encounter with the dismembered part of only one of its victims. Percentages and statistics disperse in the face of true reality. The reality has its own horrific greatness, as Gert Schiff explains: "This *Fragment* evokes an analogy from religious art: the head of the black soldier, split by a shell fragment and bursting into a magma of blood, can be viewed as a secular counterpart to the imprint of Christ's face on Saint Veronica's veil."²²

22. Schiff, Gert. *Images of Horror and Fantasy*, p. 124

Certainly, we are forced to search very deeply. All our preconceptions of war or art become null and void. We are compelled to formulate new criteria of appreciation, for the conventional criteria do not apply. Henry Fuseli's observation that "Mangling is contagious, and spreads aversion from the slaughterman to the victim."²³ becomes dated and irrelevant. There is no attempt, here, to evoke compassion or loyalties. There is no heroism, no glimpse of victory. We are confronted by a truth, unsoftened by ideals. Gillespie is simply not interested in presenting the horror of war in the form of an issue, social, political, or otherwise. He does not confuse war with conjecture, philosophy, or propaganda. The message is blunt, unmistakable: War, for whatever cause, amounts to this.

Gillespie is intelligent enough to know that explanations cloud the truth and excuse the brutality. In this way, he confronts the same issue as thousands of artists before him, and provides a message that wounds the very soul of man. In this sense, his *Fragment* becomes an icon of war.

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23. Schiff, loc. cit.



Alberto Burri. Red. (detail) 1956.

In Burri's Red, war is seen from a different perspective. The mess of war, the blood and soiled bandages, are presented as a subtle, yet immensely powerful, reminder of the awful waste of life. Burri studied medicine before serving as a doctor in the Italian Army in World War II. He was captured and sent to a prison camp in Texas, where he was called upon to

treat the wounded. The sight of the wounds disturbed him very deeply. The way in which young, healthy bodies were broken and mutilated was something that contrasted violently with his personal and medical ethics. He resorted to painting in order to regain his composure and also to record his anxieties.

After the war, these feelings of revulsion persisted and he gave up medicine for art. His paintings assumed a sculptural quality. Red can be seen as a relief panel. The materials protrude from the surface and are characterised by a strong tactility. Rough textural areas are contrasted with smooth painted spaces. There is a strong pictorial sense of composition; the work can be seen as an arrangement of abstracted shapes. As a formal work of art it is not lacking. But, as with Gillespie's *Fragment*, we are also able to see this work not so much as a formal piece, but as a found object.²⁴ Again, the viewer has a direct encounter with the remnants of war, and Burri's own trauma becomes evident.

Using fragments of sack cloth and rags sewn together with twine, he suggests the aftermath of an emergency operation. Red paint, suggesting blood, seeps through the cloth, making the pertinent statement that the wounds of war never heal. Burri's art can be seen as a kind of visual surgery²⁵ - a valid metaphor for the wounds of

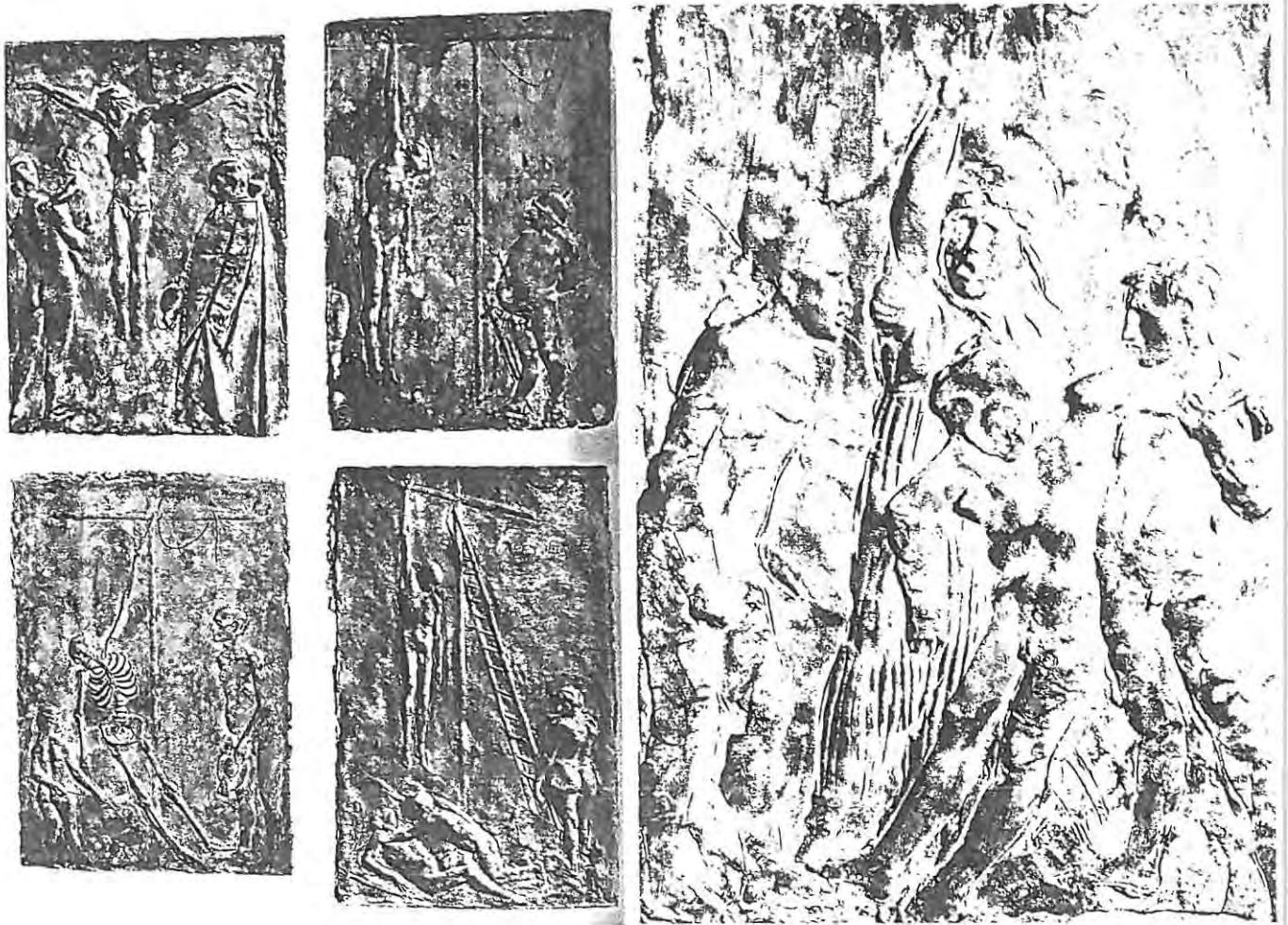
24. Also see p. 30

25. Woods, G. *Art without Boundaries: 1950 - 70*, p. 62

humanity which we try to conceal. But however its message is interpreted, this work owes its power to its direct reference to brutality.

In Burri's other works, first-degree burns are represented by holes made in plastic and metal with a blowlamp. Obviously appalled by the wanton destruction of warfare, his work shows a keen sympathy for the victims of war, but also an underlying anger. In the eyes of a gentle and concerned man, the lie of rhetoric and the tragic outcome of arrogant political manoeuvring, is exposed.

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Giacomo Manzu. Variations on the Theme: Christ in Our
Humanity. 1947 - 1957.

Giacomo Manzu's style, although steeped in tradition, has an innate brutal character that warrants discussion. In the examples shown above, it becomes obvious that he is working within the boundaries established by Ghiberti and Donatello, but equally obvious that there is something that clearly separates him from his predecessors. The difference lies in two distinct areas.

Firstly, Manzu's claywork has a directness that belongs almost entirely to the Modern era. The loose expressiveness of this approach can be glimpsed in Rodin's unfinished studies, such as *The Muse* (c. 1896) and *Flying Figure* (1890 - 1).²⁶ Manzu delights in the plasticity of clay. He heightens the raw effect of this immediacy by contrasting it with areas of meticulous detail. Added to this is his use of line; incisions that lend his work an almost surgical accuracy. In this we must recognise that there is in the physical rendering of his work a brutality absent in the two Renaissance masters. Compositionally, he conforms to the pyramidal structure seen in so many Renaissance works, but conceptually, he differs again.

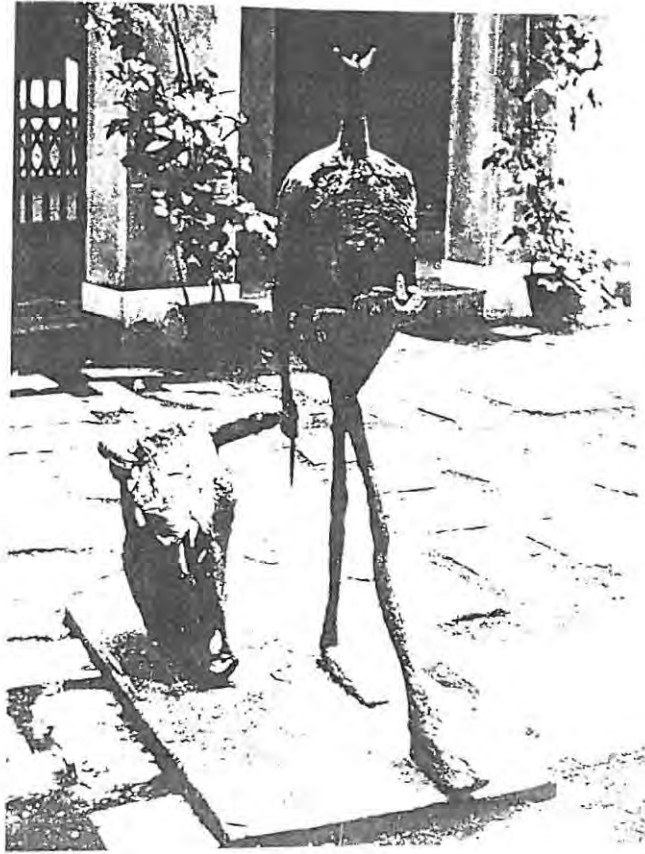
This series of panels deviates quite dramatically from traditional representations of the Crucifixion. Manzu has attempted to relate the event to the modern world, realising, of course, that there are many parallels. In this, he enraged the church dignitaries who'd had a more literal translation in mind. Christ is depicted variously; hanging in mid-air, arms outstretched, but no cross indicated, or suspended with one arm roped or nailed to the Cross. These variations of a barbaric punishment immediately capture our attention. We are made aware of the horror and agony of crucifixion, something for which we had lost our understanding by the

26 For further reading: Abbate, F. *Art Nouveau*, p. 106

repetition of countless identical scenes and effigies. Christ endures the pain until death and the destruction of flesh, whereby he is reduced to a mere skeleton. His agony is watched by indifferent soldiers and church officials (in the first panel, in fact, the official is wearing the customary habit of Roman Catholic clergymen, which leaves little wonder at the anger aroused!). Poor people, a woman and her child, a small boy, a prostitute, offer Christ their compassion but are unable to help, while at the foot of the cross two men engage in a senseless fight. Longinus, who thrust his spear into Christ's side, is wearing a German military helmet. With this shift in interpretation, it becomes obvious that Manzu wanted Christ to be seen as victim of fascism. At the Deposition, for example, there is no cry of sorrow but one of rage and rebellion.

Thus, Manzu removes Christ from some remote time in history and makes Him a victim of mankind's more recent brutality. He assumes the role of a tortured partisan. The refusal of the church to accept this concept inadvertently exposes a religion that has become too steeped in history and tradition.

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Germaine Richier. *Tauromachy*. 1953.

Some of the most unspeakable acts of brutality can be related to ritual or superstition. Whether in support or defiance of ritual, man's imagination soars to grisly heights. As in war, he is released from the normal social restraints. Brutality with regard to ritual covers a vast spectrum; from the plucking out of still-pumping hearts by the Aztecs, to witch-burning, to

muti killings. It refers to Islamic punishments and the torture chambers of the Spanish Inquisition, to the slaughter of Christians in Roman arenas and Jews in Nazi concentration camps.

Man's ritualistic cruelty has not only been reserved for man. Having been granted dominion over all beasts, he has naturally included animals in his religious procedures. Thus, lambs and goats are still fed to sacrificial fires, furs and feathers adorn the bodies of chiefs and shamans. Many of man's more obscure cruelties towards animals stem from ancient ritual. One of these is the ever-popular bullfight.

Along with Giacometti, Germaine Richier has managed to project herself beyond the time between the two World Wars.²⁷ Indeed, with *Tauromachy*, she makes a statement which defies time. Here, she points a damning finger at man's inherent cruelty, not only towards his own kind but to other creatures, too. She challenges his arrogant notion of superiority and, thus, she isolates his greatest wickedness - his manic striving to be superior; to dominate others, whether man or beast. Indirectly, she draws attention to this self-same urge which must have been strong in the minds of Xerxes, Alexander, Julius Caesar, Napoleon, and Hitler. The notion of the super being was not too distant in Richier's memory

27. Also see p. 15

when she made *Tauromachy*. She also suggests the serious mutations religions and rituals undergo in the minds of men, however wise and gentle in their initial form.

In *Tauromachy*, ritual is shown stripped of all its transcendental dignity and reduced to the level of mere human vanity. We see the matador striding across the arena, disdainfully dragging behind him the broken skull of the bull. With these two components, Richier creates a powerful contrast. The credibility of man is pitted against beast. She provides us with a new perspective, a far cry from the conventional image of the heroic, strutting matador being showered with adulation while the bull is unceremoniously dragged from the arena. Thus, man's cherished belief in the victory of Intelligence over Brute Force becomes soiled with hypocrisy. Gert Schiff explains this well: "There could be no more striking contrast than between the nobility bestowed upon the bull's head and the silliness of the human form. The fervent curve of the horns remind us that in almost every ancient civilization they were the most sacred part of the bull's body and the repository of its magic. The sockets suggest eyes full of majesty, the nostrils a tempestuous breath. Not even the cleft that divides the skull can detract from its energy. But this awe-inspiring head is dragged as a trophy through the arena by a grotesque figure. The stride of his clubfoot says: 'Persistence succeeds.' The head-neck compound looks

like a capital I; indeed, it says, 'I!!! and I'm proud of it.' But a large piece of the structural frame sticks out of the open belly. It tells us that his proud hero is nothing but a soulless robot. And the openness of his trunk belies his triumph and equates him with the humblest character in the corrido - the disembowelled horse."²⁸

The ritual origins of the bullfight stem from Minoan and Mycenaean times, where the bull-god was killed to ensure fertility.²⁹ In *Tauromachy*, the irony is huge. The ancient meaning is lost, and in any case irrelevant. The slaying of this bull has not endowed its butcher, or the crowd that hails him, with any special qualities. In his quest for supremacy, man destroys the most beautiful forms around him. But these are vain victories. By destroying the things that exist with him, he destroys himself.

Richier handles the formal aspects of sculpture masterfully. Like Manzu, she works according to tradition, but extends the boundaries into previously unexplored territory. There are glimpses of Rodin,³⁰ but little else to detract from her superlative vision and skill. Every aspect pertaining to the execution of this work is related to its message. The rough,

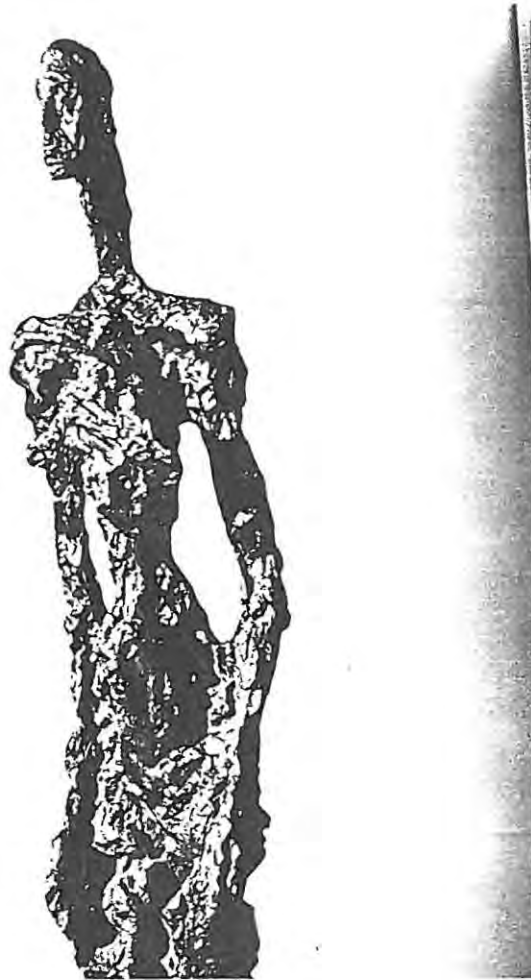
28. Schiff, *op.cit.*, p. 24-5

29. *Ibid.* p 25

30. Also see p.36

expressive handling of clay, the torn and corrupted surfaces, the relationship between the two primary forms - these convey not only a truth towards material, but also a brutal honesty of vision. Because of its three-dimensionality, this work invades our space, forcing its presence upon us. And we, in turn, are forced to consider its message.

* * *



Alberto Giacometti. Lady of Venice, 1. (detail) 1956.

In our time of huge population density, of the dissipation of individuality and family structures, of unemployment and poverty, we need visionaries to show us the way. A sad feature of our age is the individual's isolation within the hostile space of others. People are afraid of each other. They barricade their homes against invaders, they exist for years next to neighbours whom they never greet.

Giacometti is such a visionary. Conscious of his own isolation, he was always obsessed with the idea of spatial relationships. He once wrote: "I whirl in the void. In broad daylight I contemplate space and the stars which traverse the liquid silver around me"³¹ Here, he identifies directly, emotionally, with the emptiness around him and inside him, and his works portray this reality. But it is too easy to attach labels to his work. It has often been claimed, for instance, that he is essentially a realist. This view is too simplistic. Giacometti emerged from Surrealism to establish a unique style, one with diverse interpretations. He disliked classification. His primary motive was to explore space but the work resulting became more than this. His figures, with their agitated modelling, are a solid, outward evidence of an inner turmoil. The emptiness of space around his figures becomes a disturbing spiritual experience, as Jean-Paul Sartre once said of his work: "...out of fullness he creates emptiness."³²

This mention of Sartre is significant. Giacometti was, in fact, a close friend of Sartre's and in many ways his sculpture echoes the sentiments of the Existentialist movement. Although Existentialism enjoyed an immense intellectual influence, Giacometti is without peer in his

31. Read, op.cit., p. 158

32. Read, op.cit., p. 160

efforts to manifest its concepts in art. Herein lies another facet to this diverse and reclusive man. To attach him wholly to any specific movement is, therefore, to strip his work of its wider meaning. As a sculptor, he is almost as isolated as his figures are in space.

In his *Lady of Venice, 1*, this life-size figure stands, gazing forward, in an attitude reminiscent of Egyptian statues. This is said with intent, as Surrealist and Dadaist sculpture had moved a long way from the sculptural integrity of Rodin. Giacometti was aware of this and strove to retain this integrity in his work. Hence, there is a traditional element in his work which shows a respect for the past, and at the same time moves forward. The scale of *Lady of Venice, 1*, shows a departure from earlier works, such as *City Square*, which were only a few inches high. Yet the message is the same. In the agitated modelling, we see the reality of modern living, where people are so often alienated from others. Pathetic, frail, the figure stands helplessly while the forces of life close in from outside. Rather than direct, the brutality, here, is latent. We sense some impending violence, some catastrophic reaction from those tormented by fear, or absence of contact. This suppression of personal freedom reminds us, indirectly, of Nietzsche's theory of an elite minority who are not leaders, nor do they wish to be led. When this minority's freedom is threatened, the situation becomes dangerous.

Colin Wilson explains: "...he (Nietzsche) saw the will to power as an expression of man's striving to become a god. It is this will to evolve that drives the elite like a thorn in the side. In healthy, evolving societies, there is always a place for the adventurer - the man with bold conceptions and the courage to realise them. In a decadent, frivolous society, such a man has no outlet, and the thorn may drive him to destroy other people, or to destroy himself. He feels no compunction in committing acts of violence, because he feels only contempt for society and its values."³³

In this way, Giacometti projects the image of the modern individual, lost and alone in the crowd. This very alienation is a trenchant comment upon a ragged civilization, that for many has become a nightmare.

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33. Wilson, op.cit., p. 42



Jasper Johns. Target with Four Faces. 1954 - 56.

In this work, Jasper Johns expresses a similar anxiety to Giacometti, but perhaps less subtle. Like the other Pop exponents, Warhol and Rauschenberg, he employs the concept of assemblage; whereby he combines two and three-dimensional components, in this case a painted target, comprising encaustic on newspaper pasted on canvas, surmounted by four tinted plaster faces in a wooden box

with a hinged front. While there is the element of Pop Art in this work, in its attempt to raise such mundane objects as a target to the level of art, the basic effect is one of fright. Also on a more superficial level, there is a veiled description of a city existence as closer scrutiny reveals such objects as a laundry ticket, a bank receipt, comic-strip clippings, a torn letter, and a newspaper horoscope. In this sense, Johns conforms to the Pop attitudes. He certainly subscribes to the following remarks made by William C Seitz in 1961: "The current wave of assemblage ... marks a change from a subjective, fluidly abstract art towards a revised association with environment. The method of juxtaposition is an appropriate vehicle for feelings of disenchantment with the slick international idiom that loosely articulated abstraction has tended to become...."³⁴

But with his Target, Johns conforms also to certain instinctive urges, for it is unmistakably fear that dominates this work. We read the target as a man-made object, and the encased heads are life-like enough for us to immediately ponder their plight. We are aware of the incongruity of the four faces; we are disturbed by their truncated shapes and mute expressions. The three-dimensionality of their encasement suggests an awful realness to their imprisonment or blindness. We question

34. Lucie-Smith, Edward. *Movements in Art since 1945*, p. 121

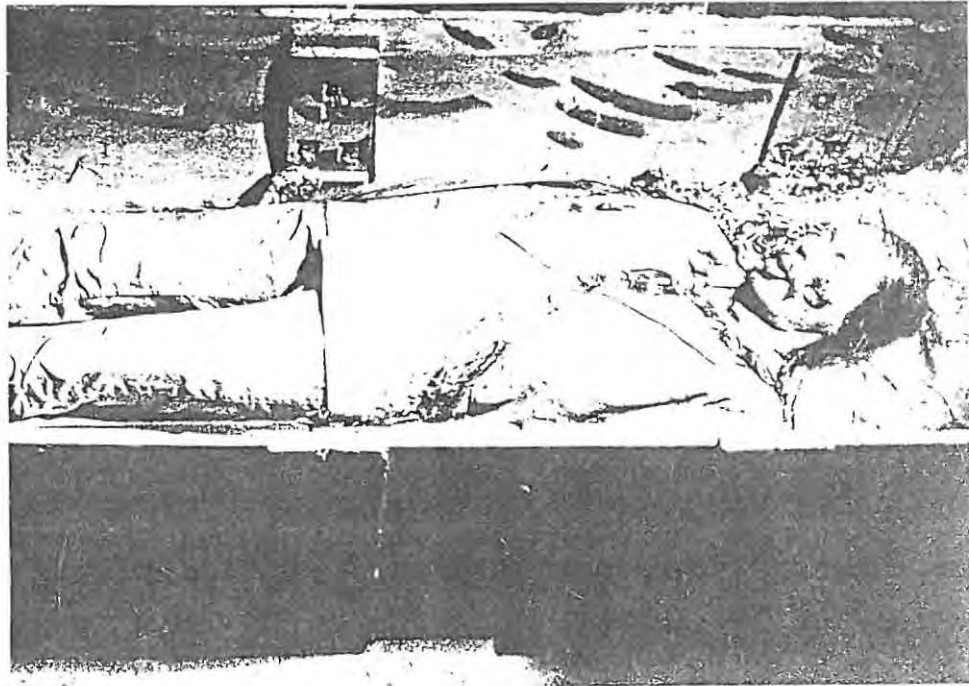
the existence of the target: Do these heads belong to bodies which shall be struck by every shot that hits the target? Schiff points out: "Integrity of our bodies is our most cherished possession, and thus dismemberment is the subject of our most deeply rooted fear."³⁵

At the same time, this work imparts the same message found in Giacometti's work, namely, the indirect suicide mankind is committing by his prodigious procreation and massive urbanization. Why are the four heads exactly the same? Is this not a comment on our passivity towards uniformity? Are we not targets for extinction because of this?

Imprisonment, dismemberment, suicide - the potential consequences of both war and an urban existence. Man perpetuates this fear merely by clinging so desperately to a fatal destiny. His incursions into the territory of other men are done under the auspices of this fear - fear of their incursions into his space and the consequences thereof. He attacks in order to defend. Thus, he builds through fear.

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35. Schiff, op.cit., p. 19



Paul Thek. Death of a Hippie. 1967.

Perhaps no work reflects a portrait of death, and a means of dying so socially relevant to our age, as Paul Thek's macabre composition. As with Gillespie's *Fragment*, the horror is direct. Thek has used life casts and real clothes in order to enhance the sense of actuality. Hence, the spectator confronts a portrait of death in its honesty and simplicity, as one might in a police morgue. The work, seen in the context of contemporary art, might well fall into the realm of Super Realism. There is the obvious attention to minute detail - the artist has gone to the lengths of inserting human hair into the pores of the 'skin'.

But there is considerably more to this work than the simple dressing-up of a life-like resin body. Thek is obsessed with the confrontation with death. He is aware that man evades thinking about the dying body which transports him through life. He is aware of man's desire for immortality, of his longing to transcend the boundaries of his body. In *Death of a Hippie*, he makes a supreme statement of irony, whereby the Hippie, having consumed drugs in order to escape life, embraces death as an alternative. His means of death is ensconced in ritual.

Ritual and the confrontation with death, therefore, play a vital role in this work. The original environmental design enhanced this meaning. Whereas now they merely have the figure lying on the floor, in Thek's original conception it was placed in an architectural encasement and painted pink. The encasement was in the form of a ziggurat with a central opening. The spectator ascended the structure by means of a ramp designed in such a way that the body could only be viewed by one person at a time. The spectator is left alone with the debris of human failure, a point I mentioned earlier.³⁶ He alone confronts the truth, with nothing to lean upon but himself. The very structure of the encasement is ritualistic; it suggests a sacredness. The spectator is subjected to a most intimate experience as he looks down

36. Also read p. 16



upon the Hippie, clad in a suit, head resting on two pillows. The uniform pink coloration of the figure is contradicted only by the blond hair and waxen colour of the face. The belongings of the man seem small and pathetic; they assume their own tragedy. One is sadly reminded of accident victims and their ruined possessions purchased, ironically, to enhance their lives. Small, ritualistic objects lend the man's wasted life some significance. There are thin gold and silver plates attached to his wrist and cheek, another to a long band of hair around his neck. These plates, as well as the cups from which he drank the fatal potion, act as symbolic props. Thus, the work suggests a ritualistic suicide, a self-sacrifice resulting from obedience to an unnamed cult.³⁷

The years since 1950 have seen the growth of innumerable cults. This is a sign of man's impatience and fear. His civilization and his destiny are not what the politicians and priests promised. Many of the disillusioned search frantically for alternative lifestyles in order to escape the relentless cycles of evil and destruction. Unfortunately, most of the cults collapse from within. The hippie cult was doomed to failure by the considerable importance it attached to drugs. Sadly, this discredited what was, in fact, a very healthy swing away from materialism towards a simple, more meaningful existence.

37. Schiff, op.cit., p. 104

But the scourge of drugs annihilated its credibility, not to mention its greatest exponents.

Thus, when looking at Thek's *Hippie*, one is reminded of the dismal deaths of such legends as Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin.

According to Schiff, Thek sees this sculpture as a defiant gesture against Op and Minimal Art. Thek sees this work as a form of social protest. It is a strong comment upon the superficiality of an age which has spawned countless weird religions and fads. And by the very nature of its design, it attacks " ... a society that would make a tourist attraction even of the suicide of a nonconformist."³⁸

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38. Schiff, loc.cit.



Larry Rivers. Caucasian Woman Sprawled on a Bed and
 Figures of Four Hanged Men on Four Rectangular Boxes.
 1970.

Racism is an issue keenly felt by Americans. Their history has shown a violence in this regard virtually unmatched by any other nation. From the near-total annihilation of the indigenous red indians, to the appalling slavery of the negroes in the South, America has transgressed every moral law in this regard.

Consequently, a sense of guilt still hangs heavily on the shoulders of a society that has done much to dismantle the barriers between its peoples. But the scars are there and will not be forgotten.³⁹

Yet this guilt is a healthy thing. It characterizes a society deeply aware of the savagery of its past, and determined not to repeat it again.

Underlying Larry Rivers' *Caucasian Woman*, therefore, is a keen awareness of the hatred and brutality inherent in racism and a desire to lambaste an already repentant society. This work exudes a tremendous persuasive power, and however intellectual and contrived, it displays a rawness of emotion absent in most of his other work (mostly paintings). It has an obvious universal meaning, but becomes especially powerful when seen in the context of American society. Rivers explains how the concept came about: "The idea ... grew out of a SNCC picture I had seen showing a lynching and a lot of white guys standing around smiling. At first I wanted to reproduce the situation. So, I chose to work in 3-dimension rather than canvas to make the event come alive."⁴⁰ Thus, he stuck the plywood figures on rectangular boxes and suspended them from gallows-like crossbeams. A friend suggested the inclusion of a white woman in provocative pose - it was not uncommon for blacks to be lynched on

39. For further reading: Holtzman, A. *American Government*.

40. Schiff, *op.cit.* p. 111

the basis of mere allegations of raping or harrassing white women. Consequently, the presence of the female voyeur amidst the hanged men provides a sickening insight into the sexual fear relating to racism.

Rivers' choice to work in 3-dimension is illuminating. The fact that a spectator is able to move into the sculpture, where he becomes part of its space, immediately lends the message infinitely more power. Rivers also increases the sense of reality by painting the figures of the hanged men directly from authentic photographs, and each figure bears the inscription where the lynching took place, namely, "Mississippi", "Florida", and "Indiana". By the use of 3-dimension and echoing actual events, the artist creates not so much a representation of a lynching, but the brutal reality of it. A reality that cuts to the bone.

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Duane Hanson. Race Riot. 1968.

In theme and concept there are many similarities between Rivers' *Caucasian Woman* and Duane Hanson's *Race Riot*. Both employ the same subject matter, ie. racial violence. And in both these works the spectator is allowed to move freely into the sculpture, to become part of its space. But there are obvious differences in execution.

Since the late sixties, Hanson has become one of the leading exponents of Super Realism. His principal aim is to reproduce reality. This he has achieved by employing a direct-casting method, in which the plaster moulds he takes from live models are coated with resin and

fibreglass. After removing the moulds he works the surface down to a fine finish, achieving results that are stunningly life-like. It is this effect which draws our attention.

However, Hanson is not only interested in achieving a life-like appearance. He is also fascinated by the narrative potential of the figure. Stridently political and anti-establishment, he employs brutality as an agent of expression. Thus, his subjects range from racial violence to horrific renderings of dead and dying soldiers, from motor car accidents to passed out derelicts lying amid trash. Hanson is not interested in subtle statement. His social and political intentions are clear and forced directly on the viewer.⁴¹

In *Race Riot*, which depicts a group of negroes being attacked by white civilians with the help of the police, Hanson's narrative intentions are obvious, but certainly not original. Racial conflict in art was nothing new. But what was fundamentally different was his choice of environment. The sculptor, wishing to depict a social reality, was quick to realise that in order to achieve maximum effect the authenticity of his figures and environment must be as convincing as possible. Hanson, therefore, erected his figures at a real street crossing. In doing this, he imposes his view of social injustice

41. Goodyear, Frank. Jr. *Contemporary American Realism*, p. 213

directly upon the public. Because it is not hidden from view in some gallery, the ordinary people have no escape from it. The sculpture invades their very living space and, thus, eats into their conscience. Society is reminded, in no uncertain way, of the evil which simmers beneath its surface.

Such a work, when seen against the broader context of sculpture throughout history, is very special in that it defies any aesthetic approach. Form and beauty, in the classical sense, become totally superfluous. In this sense, the work of sculptors such as Moore and Hepworth becomes conservative by comparison in that they were striving, in essence, towards precisely the same principles established by the Greeks. Rightly or wrongly, sculptors such as Hanson have, in effect, severed this link.

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Edward Kienholz. *The State Hospital*. 1964 - 66.

Madness has always terrified man. Horrified by its eerie abnormality, he prefers even violence (not realising its intrinsic insanity) to madness, since violence is something he can understand. Man is uneasy in the presence of anything he does not understand. He is nervous before individuality; he shuns those who chase their desires, oblivious of accepted norms, and brands

them as eccentrics. He is unable to accept that the word 'normal' is simply a term applied to common behaviour, and that no one quite fits into its exact mould. The line between eccentricity and madness is indistinct, but once an individual is regarded by society as having crossed into the latter, there is but one solution - shut him away. Out of sight and out of mind.

Andre Breton said in his autobiographical novel *Nadja* (1928): "One ought never to have penetrated into an asylum, in order not to know that one makes madmen there as one makes bandits in houses of correction The newspapers inform us that during the last international congress for psychiatry ... all the delegates agreed to condemn the persistence of the popular notion that today it is still not easier to leave an asylum than, formerly a convent; that people are kept there for life who never had any reason for being there, or who no longer have any reason for being there...."⁴²

What Breton is suggesting here is that it is easier to enter a mental asylum than to leave one, a notion which still exists today, not without some justification. Paradoxically, with psychiatry becoming more complex and diverse, there are now more areas in which a person might be classified as insane.

Having once worked as a nurse in a state psychiatric clinic, Edward Kienholz reacts very strongly to this

42. Schiff, op.cit., p. 60

idea. In *The State Hospital*, he attempts to rid himself of some ghastly memories and in so doing makes a devastating social comment. Executed out of compassion and sensitivity, this work, nevertheless, is one of the most savagely brutal pieces to emerge since the Second World War. Kienholz confronts us with a chilling image of a mental patient in a clinic. He has constructed a deliberately unaesthetic environment, consisting of a cell with all the usual clinic amenities. The cast plaster and fibreglass figures lie on actual hospital beds. The bedpan and hospital table are also authentic items. Thus, the environment is made as authentic as possible. And yet, the figures are quite bizarre. Inserted into the heads are real goldfish bowls complete with live goldfish. The bodies, lying in similar pose, emit a sickly sheen - we can almost smell the putrifying flesh.

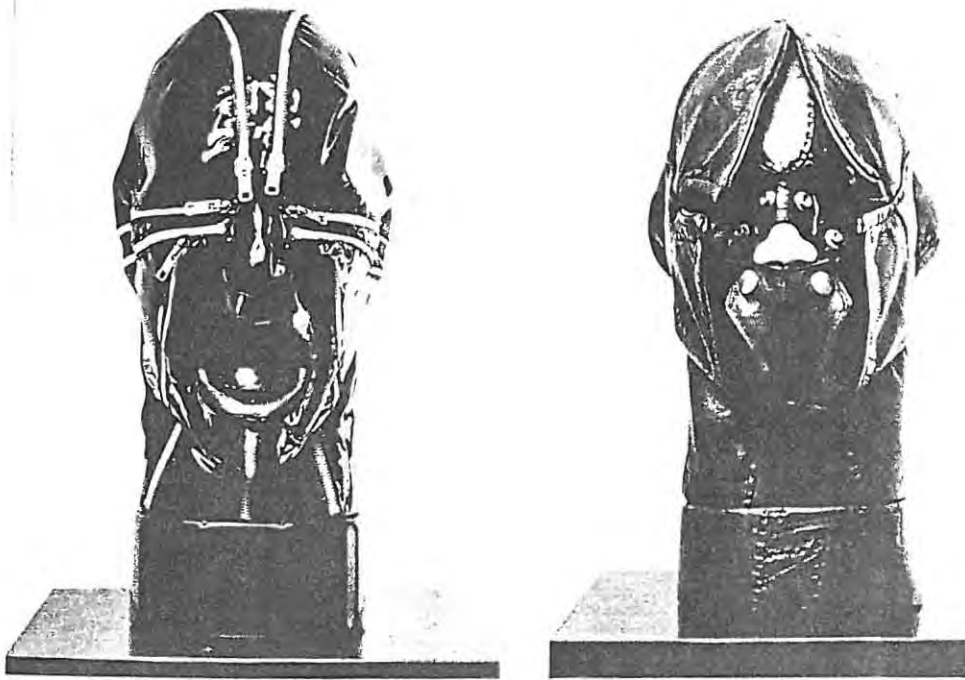
Kienholz discusses the patient: The work is: "about an old man who is a patient in a state mental hospital. He is in an arm restraint on a bed in a bare room There (are) only a bedpan and a hospital table (just out of reach). The man is naked. He hurts. He has been beaten on the stomach with a bar of soap wrapped in a towel (to hide the tell-tale bruises) He lies very still on his side. There is no sound in the room. Above the old man in the bed is his exact duplicate, including the bed But, additionally, (the upper figure is) encased in

some kind of lucite or plastic bubble (similar to cartoon balloon), representing the old man's thoughts. His mind cannot think for him past the present moment. He is committed there for the rest of his life."⁴³

Thus Kienholz explains not only the dilemma of mental patients, but his own trauma as well. We, the spectators, are compelled to enter his nightmare. We emerge from the experience shaken, our perceptions shattered. Although this work is a personal exorcism and (as the words of Kienholz make clear) a rendering of a specific issue, it does, however, embrace a broader meaning. The sculpture shocks us into an awareness of the staleness of our lives. It challenges our superficial values. It shows up the hypocrisy in our admiration of brute strength and cheap glamour, a warp in our nature which results in a hatred for the nonconforming minorities and the neglect of the old and useless.

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43. Schiff, loc.cit.



Nancy Grossman. Heads: Caracas, Mary, M. L. Sweeny.

1971.

As I commented while discussing Jasper Johns' *Target*, man builds through fear.⁴⁴ I spoke of man's fear of the incursions of others into his territory, and the consequences resulting. Amidst the rape and slaughter and looting, which of these consequences does he fear most? Captivity and torture will surely feature prominently. Depriving the vanquished of their freedom is an ancient privilege earned by the victorious. The scourge of inflicting pain upon captives is another obnoxious right. It seems strange that man should chain and maim others with such frequency and relish, when at the same time he is so desperately afraid of the roles being reversed. During the Second World War, many of the Japanese soldiers facing imminent capture committed suicide out of fear rather than devotion to their ideology. One supposes their treatment of Allied prisoners was very much in their minds, and the imagined reprisals became too much to bear.

Nancy Grossman expresses this fear with terrible clarity. In her *Heads*, she distils the essence of a captivity so awful the victims are driven into madness by the harshness of their deprivations. These near life-size wooden carvings, encased in black leather, shock us on a far deeper level than those which have a direct prototype in reality. Grossman gathers and defines the worst

44. Also read p. 49

aspects of captivity and torture, and presents us with images of that complete loss of self-possession experienced in brainwashing, solitary confinement, in madness, or in absolute despair. The scale of the heads and the skilful carving of the visible human features, are elements with which we immediately identify. Hence, our own sensitivity is exploited as we strive to understand the plight of the victims. The precious nerve-centre of man's intelligence and emotions is sheathed in an epidermal prison of leather. The leather blocks eyesight and perspiration. It tightens, by means of zips and seams, over the facial muscles and extends even over the lips, gums and tongue. Only the nostrils are left free to breathe. We sense the utter helplessness of the person inside. Our own breath quickens, as we imagine the person inside breathing frantically in order to scream. We can almost hear the muffled shrieks behind the mouth covering.

With these works, Grossman goes beyond any literal statement. She strikes into the very heart of man's experience, and exposes his basic fears. In doing so, she explains his evolution.

* * *

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Certain sculptors of note have been omitted from this study. As mentioned in the Foreword, my idea for this essay was to provide a cross-section of concepts and works. Thus, sculptures containing similarities in style and content have been deliberately left out. My basis for selection was the chronological order of appearance and not, necessarily, the comparative standard of work. I have given preference to the initiators, and not those who have followed. This is not to deny those followers their importance, however.

Perhaps most notable of the omissions is Elizabeth Frink. There has always been a strong element of brutality in her work, particularly in *Goggle-Head* and *Stalking Bird*. But after careful study, it became obvious that much of what applied to Frink already applied to Germaine Richier, who is the more senior of the two.

Likewise, Daniel La Rue Johnson's relief entitled *Yesterday* has too much of Manzu's technique and too much of Hanson's or Rivers' conceptual approach to warrant discussion.

There were others, too, such as Leonard Baskin and Bruce Conner, but to include all of them would have meant endless repetitions, and I would have strayed from my

original idea which was to provide a simple cross-section.

Another feature of this essay which perhaps warrants explanation, is the presentation of a single work, with not much discussion about the sculptor or his other works. This was done, not only for the reasons expressed above, but also because of certain complex discrepancies which occurred in further analysis, from which arose some problems relating to integrity.

For example, one can question the motives behind much of Kienholz's other work. He became a leading exponent of Funk Art,⁴⁵ a rather inept term used in the sixties which implied a liking for the complex, the sick, the tatty, the bizarre, the overtly or covertly sexual. *Roxy's* (1961) appears on the surface to be pointing an insolent finger at the American Way. The work comprises an ordinary room filled with such mundane items as an armchair, a table and ashtrays, a fireplace, pictures on the wall, including a saluting soldier. The domesticity suggested by these items is devastated by a grotesque maniken in the centre of the room; a matronly female form topped with a bizarre animal's skull complete with wig. One supposes that this work, like *The State Hospital*, is meant to shock viewers into an awareness of the awful staleness of their lives. Perhaps it is a warning to women not to submit so passively to domestication. But

45. Lucie-Smith, op.cit., p. 126

one senses that on a deeper level, this 'protest' has become disorientated. One suspects that Kienholz is not simply chivalrously exposing the warts of the world - he is having fun, at our expense.

Similarly, Bruce Conner's *Couch* (1963) echoes Keinholtz's disorientation. This work, depicting a rotted and dismembered corpse on a crumbling Victorian sofa, makes us question the sculptor's intent. Clearly, the horror has intrigued Conner. In a sense, he is the absent killer. He has become a species of violator; he invades, as does any killer, the body's sanctity. Of course, it may be argued that Conner is simply rubbing society's nose in its own mess. But is this really true? Is it not a case of society's nose being rubbed in Conner's mess? I believe this is so. Too often we allow our noses to be rubbed without question. Looking at this work, we are reminded of Nietzsche's words: "Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you."⁴⁶

Each of the works presented in this essay embodies the concept of vitalism.⁴⁷ Henry Moore talks of a work of art needing to be "a penetration into reality ... an expression of the significance of life, a stimulation to greater effort in living."⁴⁸ The value of these brutal

46. Nietzsche. *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 89

47. Also read p. 24

48. Read. *op.cit.*, p. 163

works is, thus, without question. They are relevant to us now and, indeed, will be to future generations. But perhaps the future will understand their value more than we do. Humanity grows wise only in retrospect.

However, there is still room for much debate as to the approach involved. Ideally, brutal art should force mankind to gaze deeply into himself in order to penetrate his darkness. Hence, the artist who deals honestly with brutality should, in effect, enhance mankind's capacity for love and communication, no matter how horrific the work may be. In other words, such work should have a positive force which offers real alternatives. Admittedly, these are brave and lofty ideals. But even in Gillespie's *Fragment*, despite its colossal pessimism, we gaze upon truth and are compelled, albeit in an ineffectual manner, to question our destiny. To approach brutality in a positive sense requires great courage. To become involved in man's darker side can be disconcerting and painful, and sometimes it can leave a mark on the soul that can never quite be eradicated. Again I quote Nietzsche: "What does the tragic artist communicate of himself? Is it not precisely the state without fear in the face of the fearful and questionable that he is showing."⁴⁹

But there are dangerous shadows, and the artist must beware. It is one thing to look into these shadows; it is quite another to creep into their shade.

49. Fraser, John. *Violence in the Arts*, p. 111

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