A HUMANIST OUTLOOK FOR THE CONTEMPORARY ARTIST

THESIS

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By

Judith Garrett Humphries, B.A., M.A.

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The problem being considered in this paper is the alienation of the general viewer from contemporary art. Modern art has become less understandable than ever before to the non-art audience because it has, in many cases, ceased to deal with human-oriented subject matter, and has become detached from life. This paper examines ways in which modern art might be made more accessible to the world through the artists' use of emotion, intuition, intelligence, and other Humanistic elements as content for paintings. It contains a four-part proposal of what Humanist art is. The basic form is the use of rhetorical questions about modern art, leading one to more questions and to a broader, more open-minded attitude toward modern art.
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CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNING: QUESTIONS

The word renaissance means rebirth. When it is applied to that period of history following the Middle Ages, it refers to a rebirth of many aspects of human existence. The origin of those elements of human life which had been lost was thought to have been in Greece in its classical period. The one aspect which sums up all the others and makes all the others possible again, was the rebirth of the concept of the importance of the individual. During the late Middle Ages there was a renewal of interest and study in Latin and Greek literature and culture. As a result, in the Renaissance, the classical sense of the importance of the individual was restored and enlarged to the extent that in the arts, in science, and in letters, the name of the artist, the scientist, the thinker became important. Not only was the work itself respected, but the creator of the work became important as a matter of record, more than ever before in history. Part of the reason for this growth of the individual importance was a way of thinking or a philosophy known as Humanism. Humanist philosophy grew out of the classical studies and an emphasis on human interests rather than, as had been the case in the Middle Ages, on religion and matters of the world to come.
The Renaissance Humanist philosophy, which has evolved but remains largely intact today, spanned all aspects of human existence. It was a belief in the importance of what man did on earth in every area of life. Inasmuch as the Renaissance was also a rebirth of art, the Renaissance Humanism affected art of that time and for all time thereafter.

However, with the coming of the so-called Age of Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, the Industrial Age of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the Technological Age of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Humanist philosophy was supplanted by a growing belief in the importance of the machine and of technology itself. Although these technological advances were indeed made possible by human effort, the process, progress, and the products of science and technology have become increasingly more important culturally than the men and women who made them possible.

This cultural bias, like the Renaissance Humanism before it, has affected art. With a tendency toward technology for its own sake, we grew through art for art's sake, even to art for technology's sake, or in other words, to a pseudo-scientific approach to art as technology and technology as art. This phenomenon grew in part from a need to elevate the importance of art to match what seemed to be the higher level of importance of technology. In this sense, such a trend could be viewed as a defensive move.
In his book, *The Humanist Frame*, Julian Huxley provides the following starting point:

First of all we must give ourselves the semantic reminder that there is no such thing as art. Art is not an entity, any more than life is an entity. It is a word, a general term conveniently but often loosely used to cover a certain rather wide-ranging type of human activity and its products.¹

The modernist trends in art and in its criticism have become less and less human oriented and more and more directed toward investigations and descriptions of investigations of the materials and forms of art. Art has become less engaging of the mind and more retinal, both in reason and reality. In modern criticism, the words describe the formal characteristics of paint, its color and relative consistency, of line, shape, texture, spatial ambivalences and the like. They deal less with idea, the human elements of thought and intent as content, and more with the process and elements employed. The verbalization of the creative process has become very important. Such verbal conceptualization seems to be used by and for people outside of the art process to somehow validate art.²

So, in a sense, the important individual artist has become the superstar of a culture, while remaining mostly an automaton maker of the art object. We know the name of


the artist, we know the style, we recognize instantly the forms of the individual's art. But we rarely ever know the human who is the artist. The main reason for this, of course, is that the artist himself will not let us. Perhaps the risk is too great.

With the technological advances of mass communication, individual communication grew less important. Artists have found more acceptance for work which revealed little personal bias or individual thought and which engaged mainly the senses rather than the brain. Not only is such art easier to understand for those who know the vocabulary of formal principles, it is also easier to look at because an already too stimulated brain does not have to cope with individual idea. It can simply react externally.

And yet, for those who do not know the formalist vocabulary, those uninitiated in art, art has become more and more remote from life and with that less attainable, even alienating. Modern art has become a puzzle unapproachable by all but a few close to the source. For most who are trying to understand modern art, there has arisen the question similar to that which the little boy asked himself about the emperor's new clothes: "What is everybody seeing that I don't see?" If the answer is an honest one, that the content of modern art is modern art, then the next logical question is "Is that all there is?" One might also wonder if it is not perhaps the inherent nature of art that it is incomprehensible to the world from which it grows.
My own study of art, through the making of it, reading about it, and looking at it in museums and galleries has always led to more questions than answers. But I do believe that the content of art can be more than that of art itself. The questions one must ask, those which perhaps all artists as well as writers about art do ask, are those questions concerning the what, who, and why. What, for instance, should art be about? What should its content be? And who should art be for, who should it address itself to? Or should it be directed in that way at all? And why? Why should art be thought of as important at all? Why is there any confusion? Why does it matter?

I want to propose some possible answers. As a beginning for the answer to the question "Why?," I present the following: "Art opens the doors of that other world in which matter and quantity are transcended by mind and quality."³

In the general, art historical sense, the question "Why?" can be answered that art is a reflection of the age from which it comes. The artist, by dealing with very personal matters, inadvertently deals with the issues of his own time.

One must, of course, accept to begin with the phenomenon of the existence of an artist. The artist is the individual who is compelled by some intangible force to

³Huxley, op. cit., p. 29.
make visual statements in the form of art work. I am not sure that this phenomenon is widely accepted. It is perhaps accepted only within those informed circles which concern themselves with art. Perhaps that is why there is even a question at all. Perhaps even artists themselves question their own existence, their right to be called artists, in the classical sense. It is certainly a terrifying notion to the modern artist to think of oneself in the company of Raphael, Titian, Leonardo, or Michelangelo. One tends to imagine there was more reason for art then. It did certainly sustain more visible interest and support.

Today, one finds himself being almost in apologia for art, evangelizing, proselytizing, creating a *raison d'être* for art. Where did it lose its credibility? Perhaps the idea that it has lost its credibility is the reason for the confusion. Since art no longer deals with the glorification of religious ideas and since everyone knows also that there is more to it than decoration, what does it deal with?

The problem is stated well by George Morgan, when in describing the content of the great art of the past as compared to contemporary art, he states the following:

...loneliness and relation, gaiety and despair, effort and repose, discord and peace are the stuff of great art, whether drama, painting, or music. Where the arts eschew the moral realm, therefore they cannot really succeed. But they can maim themselves and make themselves effete.4

Such an idea as Morgan's leads to the next question: "What?" This one can only be discussed in conjunction with the other question: "Who?" Generally, in recent times art has become nonrepresentational and has been more and more directed to other artists. Artists have concerned themselves largely with content which was important only to other artists. Their art has been concerned with the elements and the principles of art itself, and with the various manipulations of the materials available now. The exploration of ideas has been centered around the ideas of these elements, principles, and materials. This is in contrast, for instance, to the ideas of basic human existence, such as were dealt with by the Renaissance masters and all those who followed until perhaps Cezanne emphasized the retinal element.

It is no doubt presumptuous and a waste of effort to assume that one can say what art should or should not concern itself with. What I propose is not any specific What, but perhaps a more thoughtful consideration of Who.

Any discussion of art is going to be at best a spiraling sort of discourse. That is what makes it so endlessly interesting. The artist himself could no doubt deal with any aspect of his own life or of art which he may choose. The proposal I want to make concerning this double question begins with the fact that serious contemporary artists wherever they might be working are directing much of their
attention to what is being said about art by critics, and paying too little attention to what goes on in their own lives.

Accepting the fact that any generalization is equally true and false at the same time, I concede that what I say is also not necessarily true. But, for the sake of the proposal and for argument's sake, I believe that this attention to art as material for art is what has to a large extent produced the alienation from art of all the world except that of the informed. The term alienation is fairly strong, and I use it because I believe that the general observer of a piece of art is often forced into that reaction because he does not understand what the artist is trying to do and cannot simply ignore it or be complacent about it. He feels put down, or put out, or put off, all of which lead to alienation.

There is no explaining why anyone would go virtually unarmed (with information) to an art museum to look at art in the first place. It has become a culturally important, even fashionable thing to do. I question further whether such a person even wants to know more about what he is seeing. Furthermore, is it the responsibility of the artist or the curator to explain? Always there are more rhetorical questions.

This thesis will consist, then, of an examination of the Humanist trends in painting in America since 1970,
citing several individuals whose work seems to best embody the concepts of Humanism for this time. One further question which becomes all-important is how the contemporary artist might produce his art in truth to himself and in a somewhat better communicative form to a world which happens to be watching.
CHAPTER II

CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS AS HUMANISTS

As an introduction to the examination of contemporary Humanist art, I present an original parable.

Gariclides for All or There's Less Here Than Meets the Eye

In the early days of civilization, the makers of gariclides were very important. Since most people used gariclides for spiritual enrichment, the makers were venerated.

As time passed, there was a greater demand for them, as ritual and symbolism grew from restricted religious beginnings to more popular acceptance. People used gariclides in their homes and meeting places, and their use spread into more secular applications, such as personal glorification and mere decoration.

Gariclides became so important to society and their uses so varied that almost no one was without some example of them. And the makers became more and more important and more elevated in social position.

Then the makers said, "Gariclides for everyone," then "Gariclides for their own sake." Pretty soon the people were so awash in gariclides that they became less important. The makers tried to appeal to the masses by glorifying them in the gariclides, but the masses did not understand. They
feared parody and began to shy away from the tradition of having new gariclides.

The makers went on making gariclides, but their clientele was reduced to a small, elite corps who felt that someday gariclides would regain their importance and once again have a real use and real importance to society.

But, sadly, as it turned out, that never happened. The makers continued to baffle and alienate the public.

Now there had been a long tradition of educating new makers. Each new generation learned from the older one, added its own ideas, and evolved rapidly and naturally. This educational tradition was in fact so ancient and so important that even when the public ceased to use gariclides, (that is, the real thing, not mass-produced or home-made -- for you see industry tried to cash in on the bonanza, and many people said to themselves, "I can do that!"), the tradition of educating makers continued.

And pretty soon the process of educating the makers of gariclides became the purpose for their existence. Some even began to study how to be teachers of gariclide makers. The fact that gariclides had little or no meaning to society any more was secondary to continuing the educational process. Each new student was confident that even if he could no longer sell his gariclides, he could at least teach new makers how to make them.
And so it went for a long time. And it happened that the gariclides being made were in fact designed to baffle the masses. So close had the brotherhood of makers grown that only they were able to understand what a gariclide was, what it meant to society, and how it could be used.

And then it happened that the masses of society saw the makers as very different from themselves, special in some unutterable way. So, once again the makers became very important, venerable people, not because they provided anything the masses could use or understand, but because they did not, and still somehow they managed to continue a lively, if isolated and closed, existence.

**Moral:** If you can't fool some of the people some of the time, at least fool yourself.

Perhaps this parable begins to illustrate that the dialectics of form versus content, the system versus counterculture, or machine versus man are old and have become boring. This is so not because they are not relevant topics, but because there are no answers, and there can be no logical conclusions. If, however, an artist deals directly and honestly with the imagery of his personal experience, he exists as an individual human (not a machine), representing neither the system nor counterculture, giving form to a content worthwhile.

There have been many such artists, whom I shall refer to as Humanists, since the beginning of this decade. They have not, however, often been considered by critics to be
innovators or of much importance. Perhaps innovation of form and materials, even innovation itself has become the single most important criterion for judging the importance of art.

Perhaps Humanist art, by comparison to the eloquence and charm of most modernist art, has appeared distasteful, even twisted. Those eloquent modernist movements have often avoided subjective treatment of modern life. The forms are insignificant of modern life to the extent that they are never embarrassing or threatening, but neither do they convey much which is artistically indispensable.

According to Barry Schwartz, author of The New Humanism: Art in a Time of Change, the most thorough if somewhat defensive examination of modern Humanist art to date, there are two options in contemporary art. Option one includes the aloof or cool forms of art which involve mainly visual perception. It takes on a role paralleling science and technology. Option two includes the art which involves not only visual perception, but also emotion and intuition, the two human characteristics which separate us from our technologies. Its role is that of resistance to "blind technocratization" of the human and natural environments.2

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He would include in option two the movements of Surrealism, Expressionism, Social Realism, and Humanism.

Schwartz further complains that the concept of purity in art is used by formalist critics as a pseudo-scientific basis for evaluating art. He states the following:

Art that has messages, meanings, and utilitarian implications is impure, whereas art that leads along the path of formal inquiry and investigation of visual experience freed of all extra-aesthetic implications maintains its purity.  

In support of Schwartz's complaint, Michael Gibson makes the following statement:

The avant-garde today is out to pastiche its methods. The experimental, the esoteric, the investigation of the apparently insignificant detail, all this seems magically right to the avant-garde because it is in conformity with the sacred model of technical research.  

These complaints and the support for them are part of the useless dialectics mentioned before, and even if one is inclined to agree or feel somehow confirmed by them, there comes a point at which they are tiresome and seem self-defeating. However, assuming that Schwartz and his supporters are making valid claims, there can be a more positive approach to examining Humanist art. It does not need to depend on a defensive attitude or on an attack of what seems to be considered non-Humanist art. It seems more reasonable to assume

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that all art is Humanist, regardless of form, because it is made by and for humans. But for this study, the analysis shall be narrowed to American painters in the 1970's who have been dealing with the human elements of emotion, intuition, and intellect by means of the human figure as the primary image.

Only four artists will be examined, from the hundreds of possibilities. These four are fairly well known, though not generally considered Humanists. They were chosen on a subjective basis, in that they demonstrate the various elements of Humanist art which will be stressed. The four are Philip Pearlstein, Alfred Leslie, Horacio Torres, and George Tooker. This will not be an exhaustive investigation of their lives and work, but rather a look at the elements involved which seem best to demonstrate the Humanist's form and content. The references cited in connection with each of the four artists include illustrations of their work.

Philip Pearlstein's visually naturalistic, though not photo-realistic, figures have become quite familiar. Their familiarity and even popularity can be attributed in part to their accessibility by non-art people. There is one point related to the first three artists which is important enough to merit further discussion, but must be mentioned first here. That is the unexplainable problem even a sophisticated art audience seems to have in viewing nude figures in contemporary settings, especially male nudes. For the moment however,
assuming the viewer can look at nudes comfortably, there is a certain prejudice among non-art people as well as among some artists to have more respect for the work which exhibits advanced skill in accurate representation. An abstract artist is often more highly esteemed if he has demonstrated somehow that he can draw realistically. I believe that this prejudice exists even among those snobbish art oriented people who do indeed seem to understand abstract and nonrepresentational art.

This phenomenon of respect for basic drawing skills is very important to the thesis that much of the purely retinal nonrepresentational art is unapproachable and somehow threatening to the average viewer of art.

Pearlstein's figures are presented paradoxically in a cool, detached form by use of warm, very accessible colors and in a technique which is very personal and art-related. However, they are often cropped mid-head or mid-leg or arm, and they are usually presented from an oblique angle. These compositional elements abstract form in that one is presented with a view other than, mainly less than, what the eye would normally take in. One is obliged to treat the forms not so much as certain people in clear situations, but more as human models in studio situations. He is an artist's artist, and yet he remains approachable even by one who knows little about art. He paints or draws exactly and only what he sees, and yet the result is far more than retinal, mainly because human form is involved.
In a recent *Art News* article on Pearlstein's life and work, the final paragraph reads thus: "The question remains: Are Pearlstein's paintings comments on the human condition, or are they frank transcriptions of that timeless confrontation of artist and model?"\(^5\) Pearlstein answers, "All I'm trying to do is to see things as they are."\(^6\) It is his honest attitude and his skill in doing just what he is attempting which combine to give the work much more of an emotional and intuitive content than he deliberately intends for it.

Concerning the problem of the nude in contemporary art again, there are paradoxes which relate to all painters of the human figure. The irrational problem is that even in this world of liberated mores and with thousands of years of precedent, it is not easy for many to accept the nude as legitimate subject matter. This problem is another thesis in itself, but one cannot talk about figure painting without noting the problem of most viewers' difficulty in deciding if a nude is pornographic just in its inherent nature. They seem always to have been considered so by those outside the creative visual world. The Romans draped their copies of Greek sculpture, the Pope demanded cover for Michelangelo's man in "The Last Judgment," and throughout art history one sees artists fighting with this problem. The next artist

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\(^6\) *Ibid.*
to be considered partially solves the problem by use of a narrative/historical context.

That artist is Alfred Leslie. His enormous, much larger than lifesize figures, painted with an even amount of information given to all parts of the figure and background present a different approach to the figure. The information he chooses to present is not dependent on what a camera lens might select, but on choices he makes with his mind's eye. Like Pearlstein, he is painting what he sees, and also like Pearlstein, he uses models in a studio situation. But, the element of his recent work which is important for this study is its relation to art historical sources. He has applied his highly developed style of painting in modern realism to historical subjects. His own statement of intent is clear:

I wanted to put back into art all the painting that the Modernists took out by restoring the practice of pre-20th-century painting.... I wanted an art like the art of David, Caravaggio and Rubens, meant to influence the conduct of people.7

The narrative content of his work is deliberate and human figures are the vehicle. This unashamed approach to deriving content from historical sources introduces the Humanist element which he might deny, but which seems to follow the definition. He does not fear accusations of being derivative because his manner of painting is clearly personal, and the narrative/historical nature of the content

is his modern interpretation. The greatest redeeming feature of his work is that he does it so very well.

Similar in kind to Leslie's work is the work of Horacio Torres. The first most striking difference however is that Torres' paintings are not deliberate attempts to paint what he sees. They are paint on canvas, not imitations of nature. They are historically based like Leslie's, but their connection to history and especially to art history is the painter's approach to the nude, rather than historical narration. He has managed to incorporate the mannerisms of masters from Titian to Cézanne, but avoided those elements not important to modern art. For example, he deliberately avoids obvious content, subject, meaning, and moral value.\(^8\)

He has dared to paint the human figure in the manner of the Baroque masters, while simultaneously incorporating modern elements of cropping the figures, impasto paint, paint splattered and dribbled, canvas showing through, and in some cases, highly abstracted composition.

The general point to be made here is that, like Leslie, Torres allows himself to combine all his knowledge of art history, all his education in art, with all the refinements of his skills as a modern artist and his information about modern painting. There are many talented painters who are handicapped by their art history knowledge and their advanced education in art. The splendor and magnificence of the masters is somehow terrifying and paralyzing.

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 76.
Torres' monumental figurative paintings embrace his background in art history and utilize his modern heritage simultaneously, creating a modern aesthetic connection to Baroque art. The critic most supportive of Torres' work, while he is ignored for the most part by the art establishment, is Kenworth Moffett. Moffett considers Torres our best representational painter today. In a 1975 article in *Arts Magazine*, he states the following:

...his subject matter becomes the Baroque mode itself. By means of his distinctly modern abstraction from the form and subject of this mode -- and he must abstract from the latter more than the former -- he registers our modern distance to the Baroque while making viable a whole range of feeling associated with it.⁹

Like many modern painters who use the human figure exclusively, not by means of a style such as photo-realism or abstract expressionism, but for the power and beauty of its form, Torres does not receive great critical acclaim. He is however widely exhibited throughout the country.

Another point to be made concerning Humanism in contemporary art is that the Humanist view is often so far away from what writers about art and critics consider the avant-garde, that they do not recognize its power to influence and communicate to the ordinary person who may look at it. It takes a strong belief in self and in personal goals for a painter to continue to follow his own vision while he is largely being ignored by the world of art in which he lives.

Another artist who exhibits tenacity and persistence in spite of little critical acclaim is George Tooker, whose surrealistic images are strongly thematic and often very disturbing. His smooth egg tempera paintings depict modern isolated people in a world of confusion and despair. One critic, writing for Art International reviewed Tooker's work by saying, "Those who find this artist's highly literary, even poetic symbols convincing must be impatient with or perhaps ignorant of modernism." This highly sarcastic statement illustrates clearly an important point about the snobbishness of the contemporary art critic.

Contemporary critics rarely acknowledge the modern relevance of literary, poetic, or symbolic content in figurative painting. It is perhaps partly because of the high degree of subjectivity of such painting. It requires more than retinal response, and is therefore harder to deal with, even harder to talk about. It requires a personal, subjective response which would, in a way, cause a critic to have to stick his neck out a bit. Perhaps such a risk is too great, when there is a world of cooler, less demanding, easier to talk about painting. It is always easier to speak about what one sees than about what one feels. Perhaps the writer of that unsigned review is accurate in saying that one who is convinced by Tooker's figures is impatient with modern art. However, being impatient does not necessarily

imply ignorance. It may, on the contrary, mean that the impatience stems from a frustrated familiarity with modern art, a search for more than retinal stimulation. Tooker's tempera surfaces and early Renaissance-like colors are indeed visually pleasing, but one is not allowed to dwell very long on that element because the subject/content is so powerful that it demands emotional response.

These four artists, Pearlstein, Leslie, Torres, and Tooker, have little in common visually beyond the fact that they all use the human figure as a vehicle for other elements. They all, however, do relate to contemporary art through technical means. Pearlstein's and Torres' work relates to modernism in its paint quality; Leslie's in its stark studio situations; and Tooker's in its American surrealism. But by choosing to paint human figures in spite of the contemporary art world's bias against it, they have each, in different ways, affirmed the Humanist idea that the human form and human existence can be the universal means to other ends.

With this information as background, the study will now return to the more general discussion of Humanist art in the 1970's in America.
CHAPTER III

A CHANGE IN DEFINITION

This examination of the subject of Humanism in contemporary art did not begin as an arbitrary choice for a thesis topic. It was begun rather because of a personal need to analyze my ambivalences concerning modern art. I found, by reading Barry Schwartz's *The New Humanism*, that I had been a somewhat reluctant, even a secret Humanist for many years. His book spelled out many of my own frustrations and thoughts. So, my first reaction was a kind of angry agreement with his every point. That anger precipitated my research into the ideas of Humanism. That research eventually led me to a denial of my anger, a most healthy development, all in all. In reading other sources and applying my own evaluation to what I saw as well as read, I came to a denial of Schwartz's thesis that what this world needs is more Humanist art. Indeed, I came to quite a different way of thinking. The following passage from James Rosenberg is a clear expression of my beliefs:

I think that most of us are haunted by a nagging sense that something is wrong with art (and life) nowadays, and that this has something to do with mechanization, loss of feeling, technology, and dehumanization .... But I suspect that saying what's wrong with modern art is in effect too much "formalism" and not
enough "humanism" is not only a staggering oversimplification but is just simply not so.¹

Rosenberg goes on to say that "what we need in modern art (what we have always needed in the field of art) is not more or less 'formalism' or 'humanism,' but simply better work."²

It was no doubt therapeutic for a short while for me to proselytize about art, but it has certainly been more helpful to me to see a larger picture and to remember what I have known before, that one cannot be an evangelist about art. No one can or should ever be converted to any one narrow view of what art is. The entity does not exist as an unchangeable absolute. It is all idea and therefore subject to constant change, so one's feeling about art must also constantly change.

So, for my thesis I chose to present information and original thoughts in somewhat of a concentric form, attempting to ask questions which would lead a reader to more questions rather than to answers.

Going back to those questions, now one can ask what is contemporary Humanism in figurative painting? I believe my answer to that today is different from what it was several months ago. I hope that in a year it will be different from what it is today. For instance, earlier in the paper

²Ibid., p. 114.
I mentioned that modern art is mainly about art. I stated that I believed it could be more than that. I do still believe it can be more than that, but I have come to realize that, in addition to other elements, modern art has to be about art, cannot avoid being so. I realize also that it must be, cannot avoid being, for artists. The qualification for this point, however, is that when an artist is dealing honestly with his own experience, it can also relate to others and can communicate to others what they might never have perceived about their own experience.

So, my own version, then, of what Humanist painting consists of is the following four-part formula: one-fourth retinal; one-fourth conceptual; one-fourth emotional; and one-fourth material. Allowing that any formula for art is silly, this does at least give a basis for talking about what Humanist art might be. One other point, however, is that in disagreement with Schwartz, Humanist art does not necessarily require the recognizable human figure; but this analysis has been limited to that which does use the figure as the basic starting point.

This formula breakdown is for application to the finished work, not necessarily for the creative process of making it, though they are inextricably related. This point is important to the idea that there can be and often is more in a single work than what the artist consciously put into it. The power of a work is not necessarily related to the
artist's intent, and can even be hampered by the artist's having too strong an intent.

The first part of the formula is what is referred to as the retinal. That refers to the purely visual elements, including the formal elements and principles one learns in beginning drawing classes. These are not usually dealt with consciously by the artist, it should be instinctive. But, these elements exist in the finished work, and they can be verbalized in an analysis of the work. The visual elements are indeed the easiest to verbalize of the four parts. As was mentioned before, it is much easier to describe what one sees than what one feels about a work of art. Perhaps Humanist art in general is more difficult for critics to handle because it is only about one-fourth visual. The other three-fourths are much harder to talk about. It is perhaps even considered unprofessional to speak of what one feels about a painting.

The second part of the formula is the conceptual element. That, of course, refers to the idea involvement and can be as varied as human beings themselves. Just the use of the human figure implies many things, depending on the artist's and the viewer's experience. Even when an artist such as Pearlstein says coolly that he just paints what he sees, anyone viewing the work sees more than clinical rendering.

The purely conceptual, without the other three parts of the formula, is usually presented in a verbal form and further
verbalization deals more with the phenomenon than the actual idea content. In figurative painting, the concept can either be implied and therefore dependent on the viewer, such as with Pearlstein and Torres, or it can be much more explicit, as with Leslie and Tooker.

The third part of the formula is the emotional. This element is the one most usually left out of modern art after Abstract Expressionism, which was highly emotional. This is the intuitive, personal involvement of the artist and the viewer, and it is what I believe Schwartz feels is most lacking in what he thinks of as formalist art. Schwartz says:

The Humanist artist is concerned with life as it is experienced; he does not subscribe to the current fashion of separating logic from feeling, cognition from perception, feeling from intuition, and intuition from behavior. His art will generally be representational because his subject is explicit human experience and behavior, the forms of existence. However, the artist is not merely representing what is known, obvious and enduring. He explores values and behavior within a context of confusion, pain, and crisis.3

The art which does not include the emotional is more detached and less revealing of the artist. It is therefore less demanding of the viewer. It is around this point that another problem revolves. Such work does evoke viewer response, which is explicit in its dealing with human emotion, is usually highly communicative. It is accessible, that is its ideas and content are understandable to any viewer. The problem is that such work often deals with heightened

emotion which, while it is understandable, is not necessarily acceptable. That is, for most people it is hard to hang it on the wall and live with it. It often communicates ideas one does identify with, but they may be ones which would be hard to live with daily. Schwartz seems to underrate this problem, ascribing the unacceptability to critics' choices, rather than to the ordinary person's reluctance to deal with emotion.

The fourth element of the four-part formula is the material or technical. Without this element there could be no visual statement of concept or emotion. It is the element inherent in all visual art. The use of the chosen materials is as personal as any part of the formula, and the craftsmanship involved can mean the difference between a good or a bad work, even when all other elements are strong. A badly painted work will not stand up to criticism, no matter how important the idea may be. This element is what separates many otherwise intelligent, highly creative works from the ones which are hung in galleries and lionized. A well painted work devoid of the second and third elements can still be highly acceptable, perhaps more acceptable for their absence.

When, on the other hand, a work is mainly involved with competent use of materials, it becomes art as methodology, rather than art as conveyor of idea. It then communicates very little, especially about the human condition.
In concluding the analysis of the four-part system, two further quotes are of interest. George Morgan adds to Schwartz's ideas on Humanism that a Humanist must have an "unwaver ing concern for man.... Unwaver ing concern for man means that no interest is allowed to displace the interest in man. No work, no achievement, no institution of man may overshadow man himself." And Schwartz says that "the Humanist artist needs the viewer for completion." 5

These ideas, following the analysis of the four-part formula, lead back to more questions, echoing those of the first chapter. Those new questions and some further comments will make up the conclusion of this paper.

4 Morgan, op. cit., p. 27.
CHAPTER IV

THE QUESTIONS CONTINUE

To begin this new set of questions, there are two quotations which state a theme which runs through all the questioning about Humanist art. They give the only kind of answers possible, that is in the form of generalizations.

First, another thought from Michael Gibson:

The artists who have expressed human realities in a way that touches one humanly today are chiefly those who had no awe of power, although they were well aware of the nature and force of this power. Breughel, Rembrandt, Goya, Daumier are the sort of names that automatically come to mind. Their art has a sort of permanent relevance not because it is "art" but because it expresses something essential to being human: love and solitude, suffering and joy. These existential and emotional realities are the substance of life and any "art" that does without them falls short of its potential — is something other than art.¹

Then from James Rosenberg, there is the following:

If "Humanism" means anything it should have something to do with exploring the nature of Man now — not in the Renaissance — and in coming to terms with the condition of life he has created for himself, out of whatever perverse wellsprings of need. This is what every healthy body of art has always done: to find the beauty in the nuts and bolts and junk we live with now, not in the dreamlike and idealized forms of a vanished and illusory Golden Age.²

What these words mean in relation to contemporary art is what I interpret as a personal experience through

¹ Gibson, op. cit., p. 49.
exploration and discovery. The artist must make visual what his mind conceives as important to him alone. The images cannot grow from externally imposed verbal categories, because the best work of any time is outside the categories set down by critics, writers, even teachers of art in any situation.

Alberto Moravia, the Italian writer, wrote this explanation of why he writes, why he must write: "We live in order to know why we live. That is why I write a novel, in order to know why I write a novel. We live for continual discovery." The artist, and especially the Humanist artist, must be about this business of continual discovery, because, whether he realizes it or not he is doing it for many others than himself. He ultimately provides the experience of discovery for all those who cannot or do not seek it individually. And the distinction between experiment and experience is very important in that it is the difference between the scientist in his laboratory and the artist in his studio. Scientific discoveries are the by-products of pure research, whereas works of art must be the end-products of continual experience.

Although I have continued to make a distinction between the Humanist artist and other artists, it is not a distinction which is clear to me or which can actually be made. Such a

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realization leads back naturally to the questioning process, the continual discovery. The restated questions are these:

1. If Humanist art presents images which are more difficult to confront and touch too deeply for one to deal with them, will it not then cause more alienation of the world outside art rather than open art to better understanding by more people?

2. Is it possible or desirable to separate form and content into two discreet entities?

3. Can any art be described as anti-Humanist or even as non-Humanist?

4. Is not all art Humanist in that it derives from some level of the consciousness of some individual?

5. Is there really even an argument for or against different kinds of art?

6. Is it possible for art to have a social force, and furthermore, should it have such an aim?

7. Is it possible for an artist to have the freedom to allow the subject to dictate the manner in which the image will be presented?

8. Is there any difference between what is referred to as Formalist and what is called Humanist art, since they both explore, experience, and construct form?

9. Is one any purer for being more detached and dealing with matter other than emotional experience?

10. Is not all art Formalist and Humanist at once?
11. Is the following a definition of an artist: The one who is either courageous or foolhardy enough to follow a vision for which there are no paths, by-laws, or precedents.

12. Can anyone outside the artist prescribe what the artist must do?

Through all of this, I re-arrive at a new but old position: there can be no useful evangelizing either to non-art oriented people, trying to convince them that modern art is worthwhile, or to artists, imploring them to make art more accessible to more people.

Any art must be first for the maker of it, and it cannot be consciously made more easily understood, like rewriting a paragraph in an essay, because its nature is to present symbols which are ultimately only visual. Anyone who observes the work must accept it on a visual response basis. If the symbols are unclear, it is because the experience of the observer cannot take them in. It is not a problem either for the artist or the observer. Has it not always been the nature of any truly avant-garde art of any era that it will alienate the general viewer until it has been decoded by external forces and placed in appropriate categories? The art has not then become better. It is still the same. But what has occurred is that someone other than the artist has transposed what exists solely as visual communication into a verbal communication which may or may not relate accurately to the work. But, perhaps it is the nature of our time to
require all communication to be transmitted ultimately by verbal means.

Museum curators can give lecture tours through an exhibition and transform, by means of words, the attitudes of the viewers from angry rejection to acceptance. Once they can understand verbally, they can accept visually. Why must it be so? The visual acceptance could be so much more personal and creative a response. But perhaps that is the problem. Visual response requires a creative involvement on the part of the viewer, and he may not be prepared to get so actively involved. If he were willing to be involved creatively, he would probably be making art himself.

These questions seem to have turned into ironies, and the ironies seem to be giving way to self-parody. So, I shall go back for another look at some of the questions I proposed earlier and present some further, concluding thoughts.

In a somewhat naive attempt to decide which of the most current forms of art are Humanist, in order to present a logical paper, I gave considerable thought to those forms. I even, at first, thought of them as trends. But I soon realized that contemporary art is so diverse and so many areas crisscross each other that there can be no such categorizing into trends. That will have to be done at some future time by writers observing from a distance of time and experience. What became rather clear was that contemporary forms, such
as, for specific examples, language as art and generative systems or technology as art, are within the broad realm of Humanism.

Concerning the language as art form within visual art, it seems that contemporary artists somehow have realized the importance of verbalization. The verbalization has largely until now been the domain of the critics and curators. The artists in this realm now use words as integral components of the visual statement. The words can be read for content or accepted visually as form. What the words do is pre-empt the critic's role as interpreter. The words are, even as symbols themselves, a built-in form of interpretation. So a viewer has a choice. He can respond visually or he can decode on the spot, and his response is then more intellectual than visual. Is this not very Humanistic in its dealing with all four elements? The judgment of worth then must be based, as it always has been, on the value of what the words are saying visually or verbally. The idea involved will either be worth the effort or not, the art will either be good or not based on its conceptual content.

As for what is known as Generative Systems, I have come to wonder what all the fear and excitement have been about. The concept of technology replacing the artist is such a silly notion that its acceptance by a large number of people must surely point to a misunderstanding of what an artist can and does do. The evolution of generative systems seems
to be something like this: man versus machine
man demystifying machine
man mastering machine
man imitating machine
man freed from the need to do all of the above

This process simply puts one back where he started, being an autonomous, individual creative force. The process is indeed within the realm of Humanist exploration.

This discourse on the nature of art, directed toward understanding Humanism in contemporary art, has been chiefly undertaken in an attempt to understand my own making of art. Principally, it has grown from the confusion and sometimes non-art productive experience of studying art making in a graduate school. The role of the graduate student/artist is a precarious one, full of hidden pitfalls.

There seems to be a continual flip-flop in attitude from encouraging graduate students to be producing artists and building exhibition records to being willingly experimental in one's work and working in a variety of media and on a variety of concepts. The two sides are not necessarily mutually supportive. My own view has been that, even though my graduate education in art is viewed mainly as a teaching preparation, for which a mature exhibition record is important, I have wanted to work in many directions at once, not necessarily showing that work in exhibitions, but viewing it as a growing process.
I have found that facing the issues I want to deal with in my art has sometimes caused me to make images which are not very pleasant to encounter hanging on a wall. That explains my interest in Barry Schwartz's defense of such highly charged content. But, in my mind, when my art does not deal with what seem to me real issues, it becomes purely decorative, meaning for me of little value.

My art, at times, seems not to be for the wall at all, but for the mind, not for the eye alone, but for the emotions. It is sometimes difficult to look at, but is usually full of information. I have wondered if one must reduce the image to a more detached, cooler form to be more acceptable, sacrificing the impact to acceptability. When I have done that, my teachers have responded favorably to my work.

Although I do paint to communicate, it is mostly to myself that I am speaking, and I am often afraid of letting anyone else know what I am saying. In my work there must be more than paint on the canvas, more than line and texture and the other formal elements. I have come to realize that I must not fear the content and not fear the rejection. I must follow what I have learned through this study: I must do what I must do and take responsibility for it.
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