

Big finance threatens art in America

By playing the money game, is art becoming a 'slave of the system'?

IN 1976 big business in America set aside more than 250 million dollars for the funding of art alone.

In the same year over 29 000 United States corporations became patrons of the arts, including huge multinationals such as IBM, IT&T, Coming, various oil companies and others.

Questions have recently been asked in America as to what the effects of this kind of funding have on the art world and the development of the nations' culture.

Although most agree that subsidising the development of a nation's culture is of great importance, there are definite drawbacks when it is subsidised by big business.

The business syndrome in America lays stress on achievement and economic growth. From this point of view the most successful members of society are those controlling the vast corporation or those who have 'made it' in the public realm.

It is the corporations who are most interested in keeping this belief going and who are the financiers of huge exhibitions at the biggest art galleries in America.

This brand of philosophy, one would expect, would not do too much to foster new ideas in the art world.

As well as funding these public exhibitions the corporations are also major purchasers of paintings and works of art. For example Pepsi Co's art collection includes people such as Louis Nevelson, Alexander Calder, Jean Dubuffet, Moore and David Smith.

Some of the corporations also sponsor state-wide art competitions. Prizes are awarded and large quantities of the work are bought by the big businesses.

The significant point about this support by the corporations is that most of them stipulate that donations be restricted to tax-exempt organisations so that practically all of the money spent is tax deductible.

Corporate support is more than double that given by the Federal Governments' National Endowment for the Arts. The public relations factor is an important consideration for the donors. Most see themselves as leaders in society and therefore feel it their duty to support the cultural life of the nation. Concern over public image is clearly implied.

Some corporations' relationships with the arts is less subtle than merely giving financial support. Spring Mills textiles for example introduced a series of textiles using designs adapted from art works at the Metropolitan Museum. The artists concerned received royalties for these designs. Polaroid encourages renowned photographers to use their product and then uses these photographs in their adverts.

This emphasis on the financial aspect of American cultural life has had several quite serious repercussions in the art world. The stress on achievement and financial gain has created a crisis for the artist whose values have become distorted. Motives for creating art have become altered as people become more and more consumed with the feverish desire for money — lots of money.

Radicalism and innovation are slowly dying down, the major cause being the increasing dependency of artists on the bureaucratic machinery which governs the art scene in America. Art has become a commodity, to be marketed and sold to the consumer. The system goes further than merely organising and administering art, it directs the aims and ambitions of the artists who wish to gain recognition. Because the major concern of artists is to sell their work, articles must be produced which appeal to the values of the consumer, and the patron. The traditional role of the artist in society is that of critic. Artists have always had the freedom to comment on the weaknesses and evils of the society prevailing at the time. Artists cannot continue to do this and still expect to subsist out of the society which he is condemning, conformity has now replaced avant-gardism.

The artist, in contrast to the corporate and business values of the rest of society, has always represented a spiritual attitude or consciousness. This attitude no longer exists as Art has become "Big Business". "Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art" (Andy Warhol).

In order to "make it" in America one has to have a dealer who acts as an agent on the artists behalf. The artist is sold to the public and to the patrons — namely the corporation. All the artist has to do is carry on producing enough work for the dealer to sell. The value of art is no longer judged in the context of art — it is judged in terms of the price it can fetch.

The collective corporate consciousness of America has succeeded in destroying individuality almost completely. "Cash, I just am not happy when I don't have it. The minute I have it I have to spend it and I just buy stupid things". Warhol's attitude epitomizes that of many artists today. One no longer has to be aesthetic to be an artist.

Success in terms of financial status is more important than success in terms of art. If art doesn't sell then it is worthless. It is no longer fashionable to create art that fulfills the spirituality of the artist. "The victories of progress seem bought by the loss of character"

Once artists give up their autonomy and become compliant employees of the corporations, they have lost their identity as artists. For they can no longer be the conscience of the people once they are slaves to the system.

An EXHIBITION by VICTOR GORDON



sponsored by the
da VINCI tobacco co.

Art at culture day expresses common community problems

ART is a very powerful means of expression and effectively highlights problems facing people in their struggle against oppression.

Community organisations and youth groups from all over the Western Cape came together to present a cultural day, "Ukhanyo", at the St. Frances Cultural Centre in Langa, Cape Town, last month.

Groups that participated came from Guguletu, Elsies River, Mitchells Plain, Lanover Park, Bestehuwel, Paarl and Landsdown where there are community organisations of differing strength.

Through the medium of plays, music, poetry and dancing the groups reflected the problems ex-

perienced in their areas and how these could be overcome.

"Although the groups reflected different forms of problems, a number of common features show that we all live under the same system", an organiser said. "By bringing together people from different areas, we are trying to break down some of the barriers created by the system. This also stimulates groups to produce work reflecting the struggles taking place in the townships so that it is accessible, acceptable and appeals to the oppressed masses", she said.

The programme included traditional art forms such as dancing and singing. The preservation of

these traditions shows a continuing resistance against the domination of a so-called 'superior culture'.

Plays dealt with various problems: the importance of approach when interviewing people for questionnaires on specific problems; the present council farce, a society which creates skollies, the traumas of suffering under the Group Areas Act, the hardships faced by an 'Indian' woman and her 'African' boyfriend because of their desire to marry.

Some read their own poetry and the audience sang 'Freedom songs'. The day concluded with the singing of the National anthem 'Nkosi Sikelil Africa'.