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## The Painter's or Sculptor's Commitment'

# Can He Show It?

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NEVILLE DUBOW

THE CONCEPT OF AN ARTIST'S political or social commitment (by which one means his active participation through his art form in political or social ideologies) has become, for some intellectuals anyway, a kind of cultural sneerword: vague and sweeping references tend to be made about artistic freedom. On the other hand there are those for whom commitment is an essential concomitant of meaningful art.

On both sides no distinction is likely to be made between the various art forms, their peculiar terms of reference or their formal problems. My intention here is to examine briefly the case of contemporary visual/plastic artist—the painter and the sculptor—and perhaps to rephrase the hoary question of 'whether the artist should be socially committed' to 'can he be socially committed'; to which the rider 'in such a way as to make this commitment effective' may well be added.

All art forms interpret life but their problems of communication are not the same. For instance, despite the phenomenon of obscurantism the contemporary writer still deals in symbols and images which are capable of specific and explicit reference. Visual art used to be capable of this; but in so much as the role of the artist in society has drastically changed this is no longer the case.

Let me explain briefly what I mean:

Historically the artist has always been committed to the extent of being almost a propagandist of sorts. Because he had at his disposal the most effective form of communication—that of creating visual images in a world that could seldom read but always see—he became the key figure in putting across the Word. The Word might be that God was Divine and that good people went to Heaven and the bad went to Hell; or it might be that the power of the King was eternal; or that Man was the apogee of Nature's curve and gods were fashioned in his image.

Basically the artist as propagandist perpetuated an existing order; he was the consolidator of an Idea rather than a giver of a new one. Of course one had the 19th century satirists who attacked an existing order; but they put nothing new in its place and in any case by the time of the 19th century the artist's position was already beginning to change. For, as we all know but do not think about as much as we should,

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with the development of the technology of mass communication and of the susceptibility of the masses to receive its media, the role of the artist has changed in the most fundamental way.

WHAT WAS FORMERLY his province alone has been increasingly usurped by the printing press, then photography, then radio, cinema and television. No longer the sole dealer in recognisable imagery, the artist turned in upon himself and began to make a whole new series of visual discoveries which pushed back the boundaries of his art to unrecognisable limits. Associative imagery, the use of recognisable images, for so long the backbone of the artist's credo has, while not entirely been discredited, given way to the related phenomena which deal in non-representational rhythms and forms *dictated by purely pictorial and formal, not social, forms*. A contemporary work of art thus may well have content, it need not necessarily be abstract; but it is a formal content, not a literal one.

It is not my purpose here to applaud or condemn this. It is a historical fact which has to be faced and most of the serious modern artists in the world today are affected to a greater or lesser degree by the fact of abstraction, by the switch of attitude to the recognisable symbol.

Now where does our serious committed modern artist with a social conscience come in? He wants to stir men's consciences; he wants to tear down current attitudes by exposing them through his painting. How does he do this when his vocabulary is no longer accessible to the ordinary untrained person. Take Picasso's 'Guernica', for example. What does it really mean to the man in the street? What does it really mean to the intellectual? Is it not true that any written account of the Spanish Civil War would stir men to anger, to despair, infinitely more than 'Guernica' even though it might fascinate as a piece of modern painting? So, if this is a protest on Picasso's part it is a highly personal one confined for its appreciation to a so-called elite and then appreciated more as a painting than as a protest. Or take this case: I know an excellent, intelligent artist who is most sympathetic to progressive thinking. After Sharpeville I asked her how it had affected her art. She replied that some months after she had looked at work she had done at the time. She realised only then that there was something depressing and sad about the figures in her paintings but she doubted if anyone else could recognise it as such.

There you have it—a private, almost subconscious protest was made but as a public protest the work was ineffectual. The vocabulary of her art could not allow

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# TRANSITION

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it to be anything else. This, then, is the problem. In Russia, which has never had a strong painting tradition except in the perpetuation of Byzantine iconography, an answer has been found. But this has involved turning its back on every painting development of the last 80 years and I don't think any serious artist in any part of the world is happy with it, as art. So the artist, irrevocably involved in the modern movement, thus finds himself in a terrible dilemma. How does he reach an audience without compromising what he believes to be his integrity as an artist? How does he get to a public which can be reached far more effectively by other means? How does he attempt to make a social statement *using an art form which is no longer capable of making specific statements.*

I DON'T BELIEVE THERE is any simple answer to this. It is reasonable to expect that an artist who feels strongly about a situation should want to make his comment or derision or protest felt in terms of the form in which he is most articulate—his art. Whether this gesture reaches out any further than to satisfy his own conscience is the real issue and on this really depends the answer to the question of the effectiveness of social commitment. If the artist is to play any kind of role in adding his weight to the moulding of a new society a synthesis must be achieved; a synthesis between form and content, between message and means; a synthesis which has hitherto been achieved by few. The Mexican muralists achieved it and so did some of the between-the-Wars German satirists.

Will the emergent African states achieve it? Can they succeed, artistically, where Russia failed? I believe they might and here's why: like Russia of the twenties here is a need for artists to play a vital educative role in stating visually the 'line' of development. But, unlike Russia, there exists in East and West Africa a rich tradition of art with a vocabulary of symbols. And, moreover, this is a tradition, or perhaps a series of traditions, which, by virtue of its directness, its evocative power, its instinctive grasp of decorative and physical essence is peculiarly 'modern'. (Let us not forget that the discovery of 'primitive' African carving by the Paris avantgarde of the turn of the century was a tremendous influencing factor on the course of 20th century art).

In the industrialised West the artist as a social instrument may well have had his day. In an emergent and let us hope non-totalitarian Africa in which the classical conditions of enlightened patronage and artistic activity towards a common purpose are established, there will be room for him. And if there is it might not be too much to hope for an African Renaissance of purposeful figurative art on lines similar to, and perhaps a scale larger than, the Mexican heyday of Rivera and Oroscó.

Who knows? But it seems likely that if the artist again works freely in a tradition which is both artistically valid and universally comprehensible a bridge is going to be built founded equally on the banks of artistic intention and mass comprehension: a bridge which will permit the artist not to cross over more than half way and allow him to retain his essential identity, his essential freedom, that is, in the process. ●

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## The Martyr PART TWO

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J. T. NGUGI

HE CAME TO HIS OWN ROOM. All the other rooms belonging to the other workers had stopped smoking. The lights had even gone out in many of them. Perhaps, some were already asleep or gone to the Reserve (Native Reserve) to drink beer. He lit the lantern and sat on the bed. It was a very small room. Sitting on the bed, one could almost touch all the corners of the room if one stretched the arms afar. Yet it was here, *here*, that he with two wives and a number of children had to live, had in fact lived for more than five years. So cramped! Yet Mrs. Hill thought that she had done enough by just having the houses built with brick.

"*Mzun sana, eh?*" (very good, eh) she was very fond of asking. And whenever she had visitors she brought them to the edge of the hill and pointed at the houses.

Again Njoroge smiled grimly to think now Mrs. Hill would pay for all this self-congratulatory piety. He also knew that he had an axe to grind. He had to avenge the death of his father and strike a blow for the occupied family land. It was a foresight on his part to have taken his wives and children back to the Reserve. They might else have been in the way and in any case he did not want to bring trouble to them should he be forced to run away after the act.

The other *Jhii* (Freedom Boys) would come at any time now. He would lead them to the House. Treacherous. Yes! But how necessary.

The cry of the owl, this time louder than ever, reached his ears. That was a bad omen. It always portended death—death for Mrs. Hill. He thought of her. He remembered her. He had lived with Memsahib and Bwana for more than ten years. He knew that she had loved her husband. Of that he was sure. She almost died of grief when she had learnt of his death. In that moment her settlerism had been shorn off. In that naked moment, Njoroge had been able to pity her. Then the children! He had known them. He had seen them grow up like any other children. Almost like his own. They loved their parents and Mrs. Hill had always been so tender with them, so loving. He thought of them in England, wherever that was, fatherless and motherless.

And then he realised, all too suddenly, that he could not do it! He could not tell how but Mrs. Hill had suddenly crystallised into a woman, a wife, somebody like Njen or Wambuu, and above all, a mother. *He could not kill a woman.* He could not kill a mother. He hated himself for this change. He felt agitated. He tried hard to put himself in the other condition, his former self and see her as just a settler. As a settler,

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