

# Probing the Psyches of 29 Artists

By Andrew Hudson

"THE VANGUARD Artist: Portrait and Self-Portrait" by Bernard Rosenberg and Norris Fliegel (Quadrangle Books) is a study of 29 successful New York artists. The book is composed around quotations from "informal depth interviews" which the authors, a sociologist and a psychologist, had with the artists in 1961 and 1962.

Even though it may have given rise to a greater candor in their remarks, I think the anonymity granted the artists lessens the book's interest. The anonymity is only partial, anyway. We are told that seven were women, 19 were abstract expressionists, 5 more or less realistic painters and the remaining 5 sculptors—two of whom specialized in "junk sculpture." An occasional detail gives a clue to who is speaking; and at times, one recognizes a certain artist's way of talking.

Various general findings come out of the authors' attempt to arrive at some kind of common denominator. All the artists felt that New York and its abstract, a-historical hurly-burly had been a stimulus; they found there a community of people who shared or understood their philosophy, something that was lacking elsewhere in the country. And the lack of bourgeois values in their surroundings, thanks to the exodus of the middle classes into the New York suburbs, had been congenial to their pursuit of revolutionary ideals.

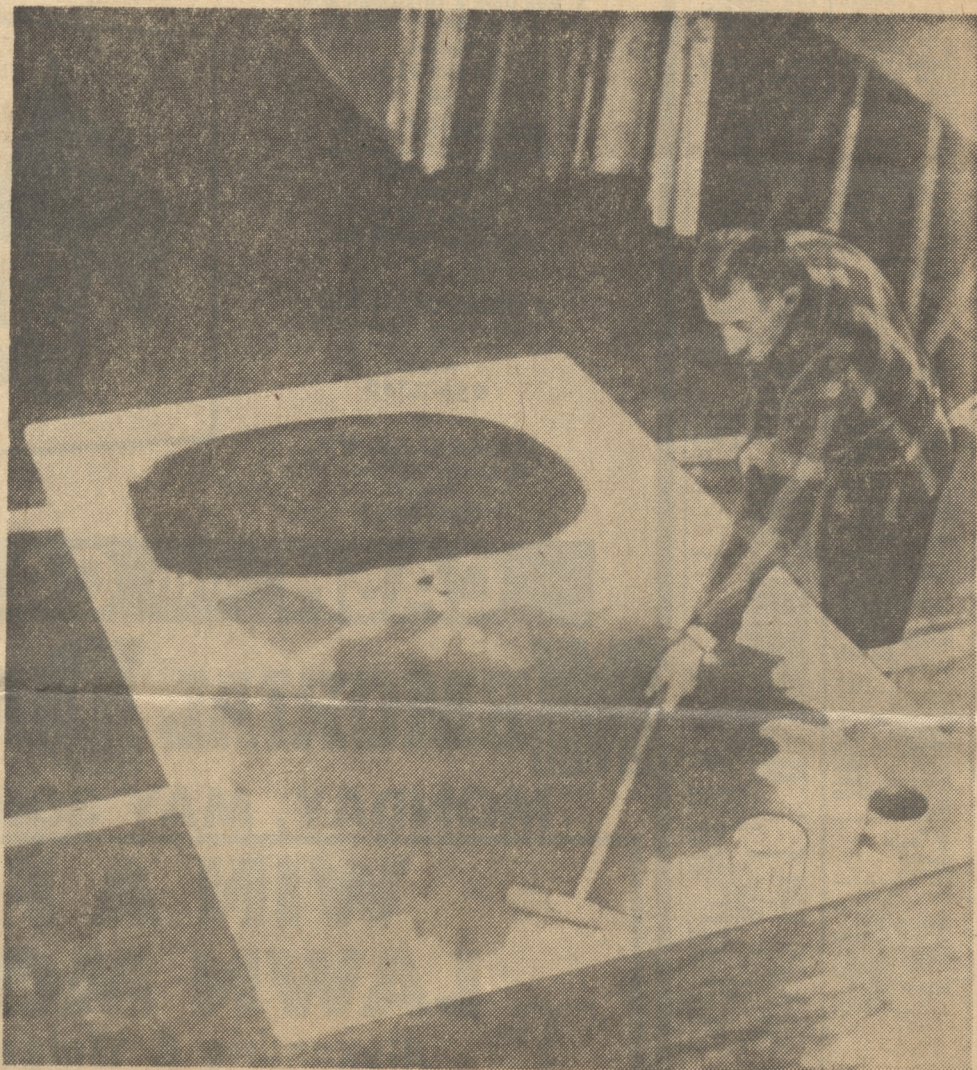


Photo by Rudolph Burckhardt

Adolph Gottlieb at work.

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THE MAJORITY of these artists came from lower-middle class families and were encouraged by their parents to express themselves artistically, as individuals, when they were children, but were discouraged from taking up art as an adult career because of the difficulty of "making a living" at it. They finally broke with their families' way of life for one that seemed more meaningful.

The authors throw in an additional suggestion that the artists' determination, and often their search for the "perfect" work, may have come from a wish to please "an ideal father-figure."

The artists disagreed on the usefulness of formal education or art training, but were unanimous on the necessity of confronting true works of art—though some of them didn't venture into museums before their 20s.

They stressed the need for "character" ("What you do with the talent is the thing . . ."); for "a special kind of caring" about plastic relationships; for intelligence ("being open to possibilities in some ordered way that you can use"); for solitude, privacy; for the courage to be "always pushing it further" in order "to find that next place you've never been to yet"; for a tough ego ("you have to feel that in some way you're absolutely marvelous"); and for sufficient confidence to afford doubts about what they were doing.

Underlying all this was their urgent need to paint or sculpt: "You need to have to do it. You have to have to do it. If you can't live without

doing it, you're a natural. If it's anything less than that, you're better off teaching high school."

WITH THE CHANGE in the art world, and their present success, they saw a danger in having too much attention paid to their work. Demands of the market had to be kept from interfering with the natural growth and change of their art. And new work was accepted far too quickly, with museum surveys of "what's been produced in the last five minutes."

Even if an artist decided to "go underground" to safeguard his privacy, the museums' "adept assistant curators who try to come up with something new" would also "go underground" to hunt him out.

In general, the artists were appalled at the attitude of the younger generation, artists hardly out of school who aimed at instantly "making a career" in art, and who would go about buttonholing collectors and millionaires. To them, this seemed a long way from Jackson Pollock's "long formative period"; the old advice of their teachers that "It will take you 20 years to be a painter"; and their own ideal of creating their own values rather than acquiesce in those of "the powers that be."

These interviews were conducted before the big onrush of "Pop art." To those artists interviewed who survive, the present-day art world must seem even more appalling.

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SELDEN RODMAN'S  
"Conversations with Artists"  
(Capricorn books) which—if  
my guesses are right—fea-

tures several of the same artists as above, is much more spicy. These interviews with, or comments, by 35 painters, sculptors and architects date from 1956.

Names are mentioned with gusto, as artists of many persuasions recount gossipy anecdotes and pass caustic comments on one another's work.

The names of Jackson Pollock (who was interviewed eight weeks before his death), Ben Shahn (whose work was extensively written about by Rodman prior to the interviews) and Larry Rivers (recently boosted by Art News) are much in the air.

Among the more provocative comments are: Lipchitz on teaching — "Teaching is death. If he teaches, the sculptor has to open up and reveal things that should be closed and sacred"; and Gottlieb on the relation between artist and art audience—"I'd like more status than I have now, but not at the cost of closing the gap between artist and public. I'd like to widen it!"

We also get: Pollock on Rivers — "corn, real corn"; Rothko on Shahn—"essentially a good journalist"; David Hare on Henry Moore—"I always feel that he's tired"; Frank Lloyd Wright on Philip Johnson's Glass House at New Canaan—"Is it Philip? . . . And is it architecture?"; and Johnson on Wright's house, "Falling Waters" with its waterfall — "The only thing it does is make you want to pee."

THE ANECDOTES include one from Lipchitz about Soutine's reaction to his first big sale in Paris: "He immediately hailed a taxi and shouted 'Nice!' He got there, too—for about \$500."

There's also a story from Calder about the day a friend took him and Miro, who was then without a studio of his own, to see "an almost perfect studio" in the south of France, only for Miro to become utterly absorbed in a piece of pale blue cardboard in the bottom of an apple crate.

And Shahn tells of Calder being asked officially wheth-

# artists

er he'd be willing to make a mobile for the Guggenheim Museum out of pure gold. " 'Sure,' said Sandy, 'why not? And then I'll paint it black.' "

Rodman does an excellent job at conjuring up the artist in his surroundings to give us a flavor of the man.

And he had several adventures in the course of the interviews. There's an uproariously funny account of a sleepless night spent in Philip Johnson's guest house, which proved to have been built for design rather than for comfort.

Perhaps no moment is quite as poignant as that at the end of Rodman's visit with Jackson Pollock (after they had to break into his studio because he lost the key.) Pollock, who had arrived at an impasse in his work after a period of tremendous productivity, and virtually hadn't painted for two years, pointed to his remaining paintings, saying, "These are securities. They're all I've got left." And he leaned out of the window, murmuring: "Painting is my whole life . . ."

Other artists interviewed in this readable book include Baskin, Graves, Hopper, Kline, de Kooning, Lebrun, Levine, Rivers, Smith, Steinberg, Tobey and Wyeth.

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OF INTEREST — George Levitine, Professor of Art History at the University of Maryland, will lecture on "Courbet" at the National Gallery at 4 p.m. today.

The Northern Virginia Fine Arts Association is bringing the Virginia Museum's Artmobile II — with an exhibition of English Conversation Pieces" by Gainsborough, Romney, Hogarth and others from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon—to Fairlington Methodist Church, 3900 King st., Alexandria, Monday and Tuesday, 12-5. The Artmobile will be at Springfield Shopping Center Wednesday and Thursday, 12-5, 7-9 p.m.

Registration for this year's Outdoor Art Fair (June 4-12) sponsored by The Washington Post and the D.C. Recreation Department, will be held at 15th and E Streets nw. (opposite the Commerce Department) from 2 p.m. Thursday through Saturday noon during daylight hours. For copies of the rules, call RE 7-1234, ext. 388.

Coolidge High School announces its Fourth Annual Art and Book Festival, open to area artists, to be held June 18-21. For information, call 829-3767 or TU 2-4590.