

Gottlieb Finds Today's Shock-Proof

Audience Dangerous

Sunday, July 31, 1966

THE WASHINGTON POST

The Washington Post, July 31, 1966

Growth of Democratic Art Lowers Standards And Deprives Younger Painters of Chance To Be 'Outcast', He Tells Interviewer

How has the New York art scene changed since the 1940s? Is there still an elite audience for avant-garde painting? Or has the increase in size of the art public caused a decline in artistic standards? Should an artist criticize his own work and have a sense of art history? Should he try to be in the public eye—or go "underground"?

These are some of the questions discussed by New York artist Adolph Gottlieb in an interview with Washington Post art critic Andrew Hudson in his vast sky-lit studio in New York.

HUDSON: What do you feel about the New York art scene as a whole? —You've

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lived through the development of it. How do you feel about it compared to the early days when you were unknown and struggling?

GOTTLIEB: Well, I have mixed feelings about it. I think that as a result of what's called the cultural explosion it's a marvelous time for young artists, in one sense—but in another sense, it's a dangerous time for young artists, because we have a vast new audience which is not very knowledgeable: they're receptive, and the situation for the young artist is permissive. This may

center. But I think in the 1940s, with what happened in American painting, this dominance was broken.

I keep being asked the question, was it easier or more difficult in those days? And I would say definitely it was more difficult. For example, when we were starting out, there were only a few galleries in New York, and to have a one-man show was an important event. By virtue of having a one-man show, an artist was recognized, and the competition was extremely intense, to try to get shows. Today, almost anyone can have a show; you don't have to have much ability.

I think what has happened is that with this permissive attitude and this large public that is not knowledgeable, there's been a lowering of standards. We used to feel that if we were painting for anyone, it was for an elite. When we couldn't sell paintings, the audience consisted of a small group of people who were friends — artists, writers, and intellectuals — these were people who came and looked at our work and reacted to it. The question of buying wasn't particularly

dealers and museums. As far as my own work is concerned, I'm still struggling to realize things which are difficult in art because I think this is the nature of art—to find the difficulties. And to try to overcome them, and not paint down to anybody's standard, but maintain the highest possible standard that I can set for myself. This has always been my method of operation, to set up my own standards, which I try to make as high as possible.

HUDSON: You once said something I thought was marvelous, about the beginnings of the New York School — that you felt you just had to make a statement and hope it would become art; it didn't look like art to start with. Do you have a similar feeling every time your work changes?

GOTTLIEB: Not only that, but every time I do a painting. When I start a painting,

you can assume that by definition it's going to be a work of art because it's using paint on canvas, but whether it's going to become something which succeeds in expressing a particular feeling that I want to express is always a question until not only the work is finished, but there is a response to it, a reaction to it.

HUDSON: From you, or—?

GOTTLIEB: Both. I have to react to my own work in a critical sense and as a spectator, and then my reaction can be corroborated by other people.

HUDSON: Do you find you have to allow the picture a certain time before you can see it objectively as a spectator?

GOTTLIEB: Sometimes, but there are certain times when a thing comes off, and the painting almost paints itself, as it were, and I have a sensation as I'm doing it, and

as soon as it's finished, that this has really come off, and it presents me with a surprise and this is the sort of moment that I keep struggling for . . .

HUDSON: The surprise?

GOTTLIEB: Yes. Here is something that really almost fell onto the canvas by itself as if some unseen hand were guiding my brush, and it happens like a miracle. It's a very happy moment!

HUDSON: You said earlier—before we started recording—that you put the paintings up around the walls to look at them in case you want to rework them. That means that the first time around you didn't feel this happened the right way?

GOTTLIEB: Well, actually I do this now because I have a studio where I have space in which to do it. I never before had such a large studio, and I never had the opportunity to compare my paintings until I had an exhibition. However, I can make the comparison in my mind, if I look at the paintings one by one, for example. But it's nice to have them around.

HUDSON: I think it's true



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The question is, how long some of the young artists who are making hay now will be able to survive. Because that, ultimately, is always the problem of the artist—to survive, not only in his own time but for as long as possible.

I think the public doesn't realize that it was made possible for the young artists today to function as freely as they do largely because of the efforts of the older generation, and that it was the older generation who fought all the battles that prepared the way.

HUDSON: You mean, so that the audience would accept things which shocked them?

GOTTLIEB: Right. So that now you have a situation where you can no longer shock anyone. The audience is shock-proof, and artists have this great freedom.

I think also there is a tendency to forget that what happened in the 1940s was something for which there was no precedent: America becoming the art center of the time. Up to the middle 1940s, the dominant art center was Paris, and Paris existed as a colonial power in the art world. It was an imperialistic attitude, and everybody outside of Paris was in the nature of a colonist: we all had to pay our respects to Paris and acknowledge the fact that it was the

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HUDSON: Do you think there still is an elite?

GOTTLIEB: I think the question whether there is an elite or not has become blurred. This is what happens when you have the spreading of cultural values over a large area: a lot of values become blurred. There was a great deal of discussion about this — I think about ten years ago — as to whether there should be a sharp distinction between a mass culture and a high culture. It seems that everything is tending now toward a mass culture.

HUDSON: With the artist, too—?

GOTTLIEB: Especially with the young artist. They certainly don't seem to make the distinction that we made about the two cultures. Personally, I still feel there is a distinction, and that what I have to say is something that is not for a mass audience, even though it may be exposed to a mass audience.

HUDSON: Has it had any effect on you, the change of the New York scene? Do you feel now that you're well known and successful — that there are more pressures on you in regard to your art—or have you managed to keep them off?

GOTTLIEB: I've always taken an independent attitude toward the art market and to

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Photo by Marvin P. Lazarus

Adolph Gottlieb . . . the problem is to survive.

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in a way that if you have paintings together they criticize one another.

GOTTSLIEB: Absolutely.

HUDSON: I like what you've said because I've always felt the best artists had to be good at criticizing their work. Most artists are hopeless at criticizing their paintings.

GOTTSLIEB: Well, it would be terrible if an artist had to determine his next move by what a critic says—he has to be his own critic. And this means that he has to not only have an eye, and a sense of esthetics, but he also has to have a sense of the historical significance of what he's doing because he has to know how he stands in relation to his immediate predecessors and other artists.

HUDSON: Who are they, for you? Who do you feel strongly about?

GOTTSLIEB: Obviously it's the preceding generation, the great French painters. In this country, of course, it was the older generation, the American scene painters and the social realists — I opposed them—and in Europe, it was Matisse, Picasso, Derain, Braque, etc. whom I admired.

HUDSON: Do you have a special feeling about Miro? Your work is in some ways strongly reminiscent of Miro.

GOTTSLIEB: Yes, I have a great fondness for Miro. I've always admired his work. I've almost never seen a painting of his that I didn't like. But my greatest respect goes to Cezanne and the Cubists.

HUDSON: To go back to the present scene, how do you feel about the art that's come afterwards? Do you feel that there are some younger painters who are continuing with artistic values?

GOTTSLIEB: Yes, but I think the situation today is similar to the period when Surrealism became important in France and Europe and the only painters who were able to continue working in the tradition of Cubism were those who were the originators and initiators of the movement. It wasn't possible to have a really significant second generation of Cubist painters. What happened was that the younger painters who were able to contribute something went into another direction, which happened to be Surrealism. And I think a similar thing has happened today: that the so-called New York School, or Abstract Expressionists, consisted of a group of painters who were about my generation and they are the legitimate practitioners of their concepts. But

of Abstract Expressionism, it became rather academic.

HUDSON: A sort of manner . . . ?

GOTTSLIEB: Yes. It was like Andre Lhote doing Cubist paintings of football games, and it became second-rate, and it was necessary for painters to develop other ideas. Now, I think the point is that Surrealism also had certain popular elements that could appeal to a large public like the postcard color, the use of realistic, naturalistic techniques, as in Dali—so that this was a kind of dilution of the values that had existed; there was a lowering of the standard that Cubism had. It just so happened that it wasn't possible to do anything, to use Cubism as a springboard, let us say. I don't think any movement ever is a springboard for another movement.

HUDSON: It has to start again.

GOTTSLIEB: Yes. The tradition of modern art is a tradition of revolution: there's one revolution after another—for better or for worse. And I think that's what we have today: there's been a revolution, the older Abstract Expressionists can legitimately continue working in their way, but young people have to find some other way.

HUDSON: Do you think sometime or other there'll be another revolution somewhere?

GOTTSLIEB: There is one now and there will be others. I think that one of the problems is that today what we are witnessing is the development of art in a democracy, and this never existed before. The idea of a democratic art which can reach many people ultimately must be a notion of some kind of mass culture. And this is the dismal aspect.

I don't know if it's possible for artists to feel that they can even go underground any more. We felt that we were living in an underground; we felt that we were a bit outside of society and, in a sense, outcasts. If such a mood could develop among artists, this would be a good sign—but I haven't seen any signs of it. They all want success more than achievement.

I think one of the sorriest examples is that of two young artists—who I guess are taken rather seriously — recently collaborated on a scheme to use a computer to find out what people really liked best. The computer told them, for example, what color combinations people liked best, what shapes they liked best—and on the basis of this information they jointly made an object. I think the idea was

has happened in the past with artists who are serious and independent.

What's unfortunate is that nobody seems to be in a position to make a criticism of what's going on, about standards being lowered, and having false ideals . . . We have a lot of young critics, and the young critics feel that the way to succeed in their own area is to espouse and support whatever it is that's catching on, and if they can be the first ones to proclaim it, they can then become another Clement Greenberg, perhaps. They try to ride on the tail of whatever seems to them to be the art which is viable at the moment.

You have a situation in the art world that's become like show business; and, after all, if you're in the museum field, or if you're an art writer, there has to be a great deal of grist for your mill. You've got to be putting on shows all the time, which will draw the public in; and you also have to have new material to write about. Suppose that you were convinced that in the last 30 years or so there were only a handful of artists who were making an important contribution, and these were the ones who were worth discussing. You wouldn't have much to write about, let us say, if you were writing for a magazine.

I think that at least two thirds of the vast new art public that we have today has never made a serious attempt to study art; they only know about art because they've started going to some exhibitions in the last three years, and they've read some reviews in newspapers or art magazines. And that's their total knowledge . . .

But, of course, I don't have a really objective view of what the art situation is. I think that some of the dealers might be in a better position to evaluate: they see the artists coming in with work all the time.

The other thing is that I don't really care too much, because there isn't anything that at my stage of the game I can do about it—I have to concentrate on continuing to work out my own problems. In other words, my path has been determined over the years: I believe the only thing I have to do is stay with my own direction.

HUDSON: That's the only thing you can do.

painters. What happened was that the younger painters who were able to contribute something went into another direction, which happened to be Surrealism. And I think a similar thing has happened today: that the so-called New York School, or Abstract Expressionists, consisted of a group of painters who were about my generation and they are the legitimate practitioners of their concepts. But when so many young painters became involved in trying to carry out some of the ideas

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HUDSON: That's the only thing you can do.