

Friday Night Meeting

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Summary: Notes of a Friday night meeting with artist Fritz Eichenberg on modern art, much of which he sees as junk and dehumanizing. Eichenberg says going back to crafts will restore creativeness. (DDLW #767).

In order to clarify the positions taken by THE CATHOLIC WORKER, we continue our Friday night meetings (8:30 p.m.) and in addition there will be Sunday afternoon meetings (2 p.m.) thru August at the Peter Maurin Farm, 469 Bloomingdale Road, Pleasant Plains, Staten Island. (Train, to Pleasant Plains, or Arthur Kill Rd. bus to Bloomingdale Rd. Walk a mile in either case, to reach farm).

Here are a few of the things Fritz Eichenberg said at the Friday meeting, June 23.

If you are an artist it must permeate all you do, everything you think and do and say, eating and drinking. (Of course my notes are inexact and often I put my own construction on what he said.) We cannot be indifferent or dispassionate about art. We must keep our eyes open.

Recently, a Swiss artist at the Museum of Modern Art built up a self-destroying machine, as he called it, and to do homage to it invited the elite, the art critics, etc. Such rubbish as an old bicycle, second hand piano, and other junk were piled in a construction some 25 feet long and 8 feet high. In the presence of the select group kerosine and other inflammatory stuff was poured on it and it was set afire. It began to shudder, to quake, to burn, to consume itself. But of course it could not completely and it got out of hand and the fire department had to be called to finish the job.

Why did the museum give dignity to so foolish a thing? It was a symbol of our foolishness, our waste, our destroying the world and ourselves. Or was it to give a cheap thrill to the 250 elite and to enable the press to talk about the decadence of art and artists today?

Dehumanized

We are all guilty and we accuse modern art of being meaningless. Perhaps there is a sincere searching for truth, not just to amuse. Ortega y Gasset writes about

the Dehumanization of Art. Art is now waggery. Art is jesting, recognized as a farce. To be a farce is its serious intention. It makes fun of itself. Why be scandalized? It is a suicidal gesture. We should think of the intention, not the realization. The intention is to destroy. The young artist wishes to create from nothing. But they must suggest another way, not just protest.

In 1918 there was the Dada school of art. Later there were strange collections of disconnected items arranged in patterns. Those old movements were born out of suffering, out of desperation. But these new movements are born out of boredom rather than a deep indignation or a desire to change things. One young artist of 22 who has had a one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art said he was bored by all the exciting things, and excited by all the boring things. "I am just bored," he said.

The most recent controversy in art journals is between an artist and his patron who paid \$5,000 for a construction which was called 20 H's which was some kind of wire affair made into 20 H's and painted. The patron repainted it to match his décor and the artist published a disavowal of his work because of what he considered a mutilation, and gave himself away by saying that now the work was just \$60 worth of junk, not the \$5,000 which had been paid for it.

Beat

In searching for new art forms, the latest conclusion is that painting is dead. It is as though the artists had plunged through the looking glass like Alice in Wonderland and were in another world. They call the new movement Happenings, and they fling paint around, dance and shout, wear weird costumes, throw the furniture out the window, sleep on the floor, go around dirty and unwashed, stop shaving, etc. They have turned their backs on all tradition. We have done this—this is what we have done to this generation. The way things are going we may have to face life without art. No participation. Idiot boxes from which come pictures and music and voices and poetry. We ourselves are left out of it.

Suffering

Fritz went on to tell us about Daumier, about Goya, Bach, Beethoven, Rembrandt and their lives of poverty and suffering. Right now one square inch of Rembrandt is worth 1,200 dollars, while real estate on Wall Street is worth a dollar and a half a square inch. (This is according to Fortune magazine's figures.) So people are regarding art as an investment. They want to be able to invest their wealth in something which they can carry away easily, a canvas which they can roll up under their arms. It used to be diamonds and gold, but the value of these fluctuates. The value of art increases. So there is a great rush on to invest in art, in all kinds of worthless things that they think will be worth a Picasso sketch very shortly.

The Little Way

What is our responsibility? To go back to crafts. A room which has in it a loom, a piece of clay, a press, some wood for carving and some tools, pen and paper for calligraphy, a mouth organ, wool to knit with,—all these things restore creativeness. It all leads you back to the paintings on the caves of 50,000 years ago, paintings which have never been surpassed, which were done with the blood and the fat for pigment of the very animal they were portraying, with tools close at hand, a stylus made of bones.

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