HERSCHEL B. CHIPP

THEORIES OF MODERN ART

A Source Book by Artists and Critics

With Contributions by
Peter Selz and Joshua C. Taylor

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PREFACE

This book came into being in response to a need, voiced by art historians and students, for access to the fundamental theoretical documents of twentieth-century art. Most of the significant texts originally were published in now obscure publications: ephemeral little magazines, newspapers, or small editions of books. They are thus often extremely difficult and sometimes impossible to find. Although many fragments have been translated with varying degress of fidelity, only a very few have received extensive and accurate translations into English.

Of the texts that are available few have been thoroughly studied, and consequently they have not been utilized to the full extent of their value as significant theoretical documents. It is too easy for an author to use quotations from an artist's writings in order to expand upon his own meaning without having made a careful analysis and evaluation of the deeper meanings intended in the original text. In contrast to the frequent expedient use of quotations from valuable texts, a careful and rigorous methodology is available to and generally used by historians of modern art in treating other materials. It is hoped that the method suggested in the following pages will indicate the possibilities of a more careful analysis and interpretation of these documents.

The texts in this book have been selected on the basis of their value in explaining the basic theories and concepts of modern art. They may deal with an artist's individual struggle with a specific problem or they may deal with the broad ideology of a group manifesto. They are concerned with both form and subject matter, with social and cultural ideas, with the act of painting, and with many other sorts of ideas. Many of them are basic to the development of the concepts of abstract art. For these reasons, a history of theories is not identical with the history of painting, even though the ultimate purpose of studying theory is naturally to illuminate the art. For example, much more space is given to the extensive writings of Maurice Denis than would normally be given to his paintings in a history of art, while two brief sections comprise the best of the rare statements by Georges Braque.

There are several important omissions here which should be treated in separate volumes. The whole of architectural theory is essentially different

from that of painting and sculpture. American art before the Armory Show is basically anti-theoretical and should be studied from a broader viewpoint that would include the social, political, and cultural environment. Contemporary art since 1945 in America and in Europe deserves a separate volume organized differently from the present work, where only a certain few clear directions are indicated. Other omissions may be noted, but the main areas covered by the texts conform closely to the advice of a large number of American art historians on what would be the most useful scope for this book.

The texts begin with the masters of Postimpressionism, Cézanne, Van Gogh, and Gauguin, whose ideas are important foundations for later movements. Impressionism and Neoimpressionism are consigned to an earlier stage of development which the publisher expects to cover in another volume devoted to the nineteenth century. For the sake of clarity the texts are grouped by movements, but the reader is warned to be wary of forcing group ideologies on individual artists. With a very few exceptions (for example, part of Kandinsky's writings appear under German Expressionism and part under Abstract Art), an artist's writings are placed with the movement corresponding to his most creative period. His thoughts at this period are assumed to be of the greatest value as documents, even though his later writings may be more comprehensive in their judgments. In focusing on the period of an artist's greatest artistic and ideological innovations, we quite obviously cannot suggest the subtle influence of other styles and ideologies which may appear throughout a long career. A history of art is the proper place for considering the various periods of a particular artist's career, and the present book should be supplemented by a detailed study of such a history.

The texts in general are arranged in chronological order, but this system is occasionally modified, as with Gauguin's writings, where certain themes seem important enough to be grouped together. Contemporary artists are listed separately as individuals, in accordance with the nature of their ideas. In all cases the date of writing is considered of primary importance and hence it is always cited when known.

It is my hope that by making available these theoretical documents and by outlining a method for approaching them, the study of modern art may be put on a sounder ideological basis than heretofore. It is believed that the careful study of theories and ideologies will clarify the sources and traditions of modern art, and will show how these are rooted in the culture in a way similar to earlier artistic traditions. It may help to dispel the all-too-common popular beliefs that modern art is overly individualistic, capricious,

and irresponsible, or that it is only experimental and problematic, by demonstrating that the freedom, diversity, and ambiguities of art are also the characteristics of the more viable elements of modern life as a whole. The first step in any such study is in the deepest possible understanding of the concepts underlying the art.

For valuable advice and criticism I am especially indebted to the kind interest of Meyer Schapiro. Bernard Karpel and Lucy Lippard rendered invaluable assistance in locating original source material. Also for their interest and assistance I wish to thank: James S. Ackerman, Klaus Berger, Charles Chassé, Mme. Sonia Delaunay, Robert J. Goldwater, William I. Homer, H. W. Janson, D.-H. Kahnweiler, Thomas Munro, Alfred Neumeyer, Stephen C. Pepper, H. R. Rookmaaker, and Vincent W. Van Gogh.

George Wittenborn kindly made available certain English translations of documents first published by him in his valuable *Documents of Modern Art* series.

The idea of this book first was suggested in 1958 by Peter H. Selz, and early plans involved four scholars, Selz, Joshua H. Taylor, Joseph C. Sloane, and myself. Each of us was to prepare the material in his own field. All the other men deserve credit for formulating the basic policies, which were developed and applied by the author. Editing is by the author. All translations not otherwise credited are by the author.

Valuable advice in the preparation of the book was rendered by Walter W. Horn, Editor of the California Studies in the History of Art, and both advice and expert assistance by the staff of the University of California Press.

Substantial financial support for the research on this project was generously provided by the Committee on Research, University of California, Berkeley, and I wish to thank them for their invaluable aid.

Especially valuable assistance in the selection and preparation of the manuscript was rendered by the intelligent and devoted participation of Anita Ventura (Anita Ventura Mozley).

HERSCHEL B. CHIPP

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This book is based on the belief that the writings and statements of painters and sculptors as well as of critics and poets, are valid source materials for a study of the ideas and doctrines of modern art. Artists are considered to be legitimate commentators upon their own art, immersed as they are in the ideas and attitudes of their environment and being the sole participants in and witnesses to the act by which the work of art is created. Indeed, the primary purpose of this book is to supplement existing historical and critical studies by going beyond them in time and by taking as its province the actual ideological milieu of the particular works of art. Problems in the definition and development of art styles are left to other authors; we attempt here to present and study the ideas and conditions current when the work of art was produced. But we can in this one book only suggest the complexity of the several levels upon which these ideas and conditions may influence the inception and development of the particular work of art.

The method proposed, which may seem to some as unduly searching, is, of course, more a guide than a system of investigation. It should be applied, naturally, with the aim of understanding to the fullest the intentions of the writer, both said and unsaid. It should also be applied in a spirit which is sympathetic to the problem of a painter or sculptor who may be expressing himself in a medium in which he may not have had much experience. Even if the study of theoretical documents in terms of their contexts, as proposed here, results in only partial success, still the frequent misuse of quotations out of context might be corrected.

The central problem arises immediately in taking up the study of documents of another age and from a different environment: how should we begin to evaluate these ideas, considering that they have emerged from a cultural context different from our own, that they have been conditioned by complex personal attitudes, and that they have been inflected by the precise situation and the medium through which they are expressed?[1]

[1] A useful guide to the student in analyzing texts such as those discussed here has been developed by Thomas Munro, *College Art Journal* (New York), XVII, Winter 1958, 197–198. His outline poses matter-of-fact questions which, although intended to apply to criticism, are also relevant to theoretical texts such as these. When answered, they can aid in a re-creation of the ideological environment that may add greatly to an understanding of the meaning of the text (see Appendix).

General factors bearing upon theoretical documents of this kind may be summarized under four headings.

(1) The general cultural context of the age and in particular those ideas and theories of greatest interest to the artist, whether they come from science, history, literature, political or social theory, or from other periods of art.

As an example, Henry Van de Velde's theories of the new art, which were basic to the Art Nouveau movement, were deeply influenced by the earlier social theories of William Morris. And Mondrian's adherence to Theosophy while he was painting in a style indebted to Art Nouveau and prior to the development of his characteristic abstract art based on an equilibrium of opposites, is a circumstance of undeniable significance. Also, André Breton's interpretations of Freud and his interest in automatism as manifested in art are fundamental to an understanding of Surrealist theory. None of these examples of the influence of the cultural context upon a particular ideology has been studied sufficiently.

(2) The specific ideological milieu in which the writer formulated and tested his own ideas and thoughts, such as his circle of friends and acquaintances and his contacts with critics, poets, and writers.

For example, Guillaume Apollinaire was a close friend of many artists, including Robert Delaunay; he wrote a poem about Delaunay's paintings and engaged in discussions with him on the subject of the possibilities of expression solely by means of color. Some of his writings on Orphism are indebted to these conversations, and Delaunay's statements were influenced as well.

(3) The medium through which the ideas were transmitted, insofar as it conditioned the intellectual and emotional attitude the writer assumed in addressing a specific audience: his choice of language, his logicality or absence of it, and perhaps even the kind of ideas chosen.

For example, a thought would inevitably be expressed with quite different emotional overtones and intellectual formulations if an artist were engaged in the free-for-all of a spirited argument with other artists at a café than if he were collaborating with an art historian for a monograph on his work. If the former situation occurred when he was unknown except to a few other artists and the latter when he had become an international figure, then the ideas themselves might well have been inflected by the different audience and his different relation to it. In addition, the situation precipitating a particular statement may have been an important factor in determining how and what was said. It may have been a response to an attack, or it may have

been a desire to explain something to the public. In recent years many artists have readily taken up the pen at the request of museum and gallery directors and many have appeared before the public in panel discussions and in film, radio, and television interviews. These and other media act as agents for transforming ideas as they appear in the mind into other forms with different possibilities and limitations. These factors should be considered when one seeks the meaning of the ideas.

(4) The writer's personal qualifications as a theoretician, as they may be conditioned by both his education and past experience with ideas, and his present attitude toward the written or spoken word as a means of conveying intentions.

An academic training may provide either a viable foundation for individual development, as with Henri Matisse, or it may impose rigid shackles that can be broken only by an act of force. Written and spoken ideas may be a fertile source of plastic images, as with Odilon Redon, or they may seem to the artist to pose the threat of "literary ideas" that should be resisted at all costs.

In opposition to our belief in the validity of artists' statements as source material for a study of the meaning of their art, some critics and even some artists are unwilling to consider them in this light. C. J. Ducasse believes that "the artist's business is to practice art, and not to talk about it," and that aesthetic ideas are the proper realm only of philosophers.[2] He even mistrusts what critics say, advising the art-lover to ignore both artist and critic as distractions from what he considers the proper attitude of the viewer, which is simply "listening for feeling impact." Some artists, for different reasons, share Ducasse's suspicion of the artist in the role of theoretician. Cézanne admonished Emile Bernard, even while the young man was completing an article on his painting: "do not be an art critic, but paint, therein lies salvation."

Some contemporary artists (although their numbers are becoming fewer) believe that the sources of their art lie in such a personal area of feeling that no words can touch it, or else they feel that what they do is so different from anything that has been done in the past that no thought can express it. Some are like Houdon, who modestly denied any knowledge of what he called the "Art Terms" used by critics, and who explained that he did not "use the new Dictionary and understand very little these brand new words,

[2] C. J. Ducasse, *The Philosophy of Art* (New York: Dial, 1929), p. 2. Cited with a rejoinder in Charles E. Gauss, *The Aesthetic Theories of French Artists* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1949), pp. 5–6.

ingenious though they be."[3] Hence, he continued, "I leave that matter to the Learned, striving only to do well without aspiring to speak well."

Let us also note that the most common objection raised by some artists to discussing ideas on art is that they "paint them, not talk about them." But it is remarkable how rarely artists' statements deal with so-called purely "painterly ideas" (if, indeed, strictly speaking, there are any such ideas), and how frequently they deal with beliefs, attitudes, and intentions, just as do those of other informed and thoughtful persons who speak of their life interests.

Charles E. Gauss demonstrated his great faith in artists' writings by basing a book upon them, and he firmly answered Ducasse's mistrust by reminding us that an artist is concerned primarily with the creative process and not with aesthetics.[4] He pointed out the chief fallacy of Ducasse's objections: "We do not go to the theories of the artists to find the answer to aesthetic problems but turn to them as materials for philosophic study."

Probably the greatest statement of faith in the value of artists' ideas was expressed by Charles Baudelaire. When defending Richard Wagner as a critic, he wrote these impassioned words:

> I have heard many persons even attack the great extent of his faculties and his high critical intelligence as a reason for a mistrust of his musical genius, and I think that this is the proper occasion to refute a very common error, the principal root of which is perhaps the most miserable of human sentiments, envy. "A man who reasons so much about his art is not capable of naturally producing beautiful works," say those who would thus strip the genius of his reasonableness, and would assign to him a function purely instinctive, and in short, vegetal . . . . I pity those poets whom only instinct guides; I believe them incomplete. In the spiritual life of the initiators a crisis inevitably arises, when they desire to rationalize their art, to discover those obscure laws by virtue of which they have produced, and to draw from this study a series of precepts of which the divine end is infallibility in poetic production . . . it is impossible that a poet does not harbor a critic. The reader will not, therefore, be astonished that I consider the poet as the best of all critics.[5]

The willingness of most modern artists to express their ideas (and the relevance and quality of many of these) bear out Baudelaire's

[3] Cited in *Letters of the Great Artists*, Vol. I, *Ghiberti to Gainsborough*, ed. Richard Friedenthal (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963), p. 240.

[4] Gauss, *The Aesthetic Theories of French Artists*, pp. 5–6. For another defense of artists as theoreticians, based principally upon the writings of Delacroix, Gauguin, and Van Gogh, see Alfred Werner, "Artists Who Write," *Art Journal* (New York), XXIV, Summer 1965, 342–347.

[5] Charles Baudelaire, "Fragments sur le Beau, la Poésie et la Morale," *Variétés Critiques*, II (Paris: Crès, 1924), pp. 189–190.