

IMPRIMIS

"But Is It Art?"

by Arianna Stassinopoulos Huffington Author, *Picasso: Creator and Destroyer*

Arianna Stassinopoulos Huffington is a writer, lecturer and broadcaster. Born in Greece, she was educated at Cambridge and there became president of the famed debating society, the Cambridge Union. She has appeared on numerous television programs in the U.S. and Great Britain, including a series she recently hosted, "From the Heart." Her many books include *The Female Woman* (translated into 11 languages, 1974), *After Reason* (1978), *Maria: Beyond the Callas Legend* (1981), *The Gods of Greece* (1984), and one of the most talked-about biographies of recent years, *Picasso: Creator and Destroyer* (1988). Her next book, *The Fourth Instinct*, will be published shortly by Simon and Schuster.

Preview: *It's an old adage that if you want to gauge the health of a nation like America, you must look beyond its political power and its economic resources to its culture.*

Art is one of the most powerful and moving forms of culture we know. But in looking at the art world today, what we see all too often is merely cynicism, nihilism and exploitation.

"Is this really art? Is there no connection between art and morality?"—these are the kind of questions we are asking with increasing frequency. This Imprimis issue addresses them in no uncertain terms. Mrs. Huffington's remarks were delivered during Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar, "Culture Wars" in March 1992.

In the fall of 1989, 14 photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe were sold at auction at Christie's for \$129,690. In the same week, 23 Mapplethorpe photographs were sold at auction at Sotheby's for \$396,275. Art dealers were furiously bidding against each other for photographs of leather-clad men and cropped close-ups of an "obscene" nature. Once more, hype is confused with art in the "bazaar of the bizarre" that our culture has become.

At the height of the controversy surrounding Mapplethorpe's photographs, the Whitney museum took a full-page ad in the *New York Times* to protest the cancellation of a Mapplethorpe show by the Corcoran Gallery in Washington. "ARE YOU GOING TO LET POLITICS KILL ART?" the ad asked in block letters. A Mapplethorpe photograph of a tulip was used for illustration.

Of course the trustees of the Whitney knew

as well as the rest of us that Mapplethorpe's fame and his one-man shows at the Whitney and other venerable institutions around the country were not based on his photographs of flowers. But the trustees also knew that the ad would have been self-defeating in terms of garnering public support if it were illustrated by one of Mapplethorpe's photographs celebrating sadomasochism, which Mapplethorpe, in a farewell interview before he died of AIDS, described as sex and magic.

Yet it was precisely these photographs of torture and degradation that put Robert Mapplethorpe on the map, otherwise known as "the cutting edge" of art—what our culture decides is worth exhibiting, reviewing and talking about. If art is in danger of being killed, as the Whitney ad implies, it is our culture, not politics, that is the culprit. In fact, Congress is not the right forum for this particular debate. The larger issue is not what art is supported by public funds, but what art is encouraged and rewarded by our culture.

At the moment, art that deals with rage, violence, disgust and brutality rises to the top. The message from the art world is clear: life is rotten, human beings are rotten, love is rotten, society is rotten. Art that may show the darkness but also gives us a glimpse of the light beyond is seen as too "soft," too unrealistic.

What Tom Wolfe said in *The Painted Word* is even more valid today: "If a work or a new style disturbed you, it was probably good work. If you *hated* it, it was probably *great*.... To be against what is new is not to be *modem*. Not to be *modem* is to write yourself out of the scene. Not to be in the scene is to be *nowhere*." As a result, the art world has for years now been stuck in the very *modem* and very adolescent

stage of rebellion.

There is another world—of light, spirit, harmony and truth that seems foreign to our contemporary culture. Schumann said in the 19th century, "To send light into the darkness of men's hearts—such is the duty of the artist." He would be hard put to find many such artists thriving today.

In all the huffing and puffing and booming of art that celebrates darkness and inhumanity the same note is struck: how powerful the work, how exquisite the technique! The fact that adding elegance to brutality only helps to desensitize us to its reality is glossed over. And our response has nothing to do with defending our civil rights and a lot to do with losing our capacity to be shocked.

There have been great photographers who have captured strong images of violence and cruelty intending to shock us, often to shock us into action—such as Jacob Riis with his pictures of New York slums, or Lewis Hines with his pictures of children working in coal mines.

But when we detach ourselves from the brutality and admire the technique, we are conceding that human beings are inert things to whom you can do anything—sometimes in the name of art, sometimes in the name of sexual kicks, sometimes in the name of the state. It is a concession we cannot afford to make—the first step on the road to Auschwitz and the Gulag Archipelago.

Discussing the arts controversy on "Phil Donahue" two years ago, I told Tim Rollins, a young artist on the panel who works in the South Bronx helping children transmute

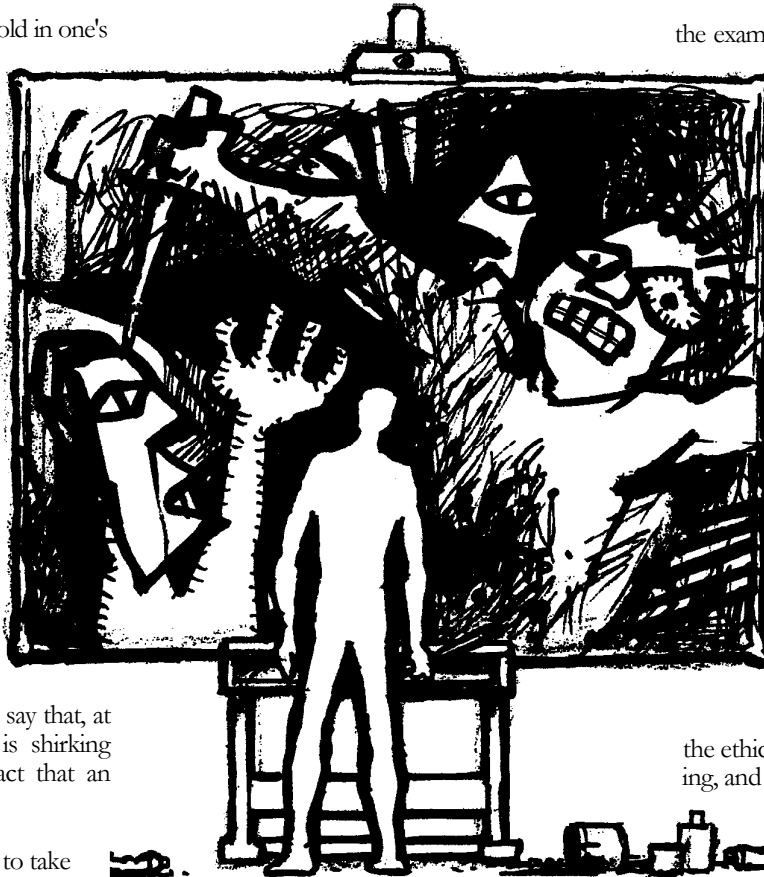
violence into art, that Robert Mapplethorpe might have benefited greatly from working with him. He replied that Mapplethorpe's violence was between consenting adults. I asked him if he also thought that the consent of his followers in Jonestown exonerated the Rev. Jim Jones.

"Jim Jones," he answered, "was not an artist." This is a succinct expression of the feeling prevalent in our culture that there is one moral standard for ordinary mortals and another for artists.

"Just pronounce the magic word, 'art,' and everything is OK," wrote George Orwell 45 years ago in an essay on Salvador Dali. "So long as you can paint well enough to pass the test, all shall be forgiven you." And then he made the ultimate pronouncement not only on Dali but on the whole debate on art and morality:

"One ought to be able to hold in one's head simultaneously the two facts that Dail is a good draftsman and a disgusting human being. The one does not invalidate, or, in a sense, affect the other. The first thing that we demand of a wall is that it shall stand up. If it stands up it is a good wall, and the question of what purpose it serves is inseparable from that. And yet even the best wall in the world deserves to be pulled down if it surrounds a concentration camp. In the same way it should be possible to say, "This is a good book or a good picture, and it ought to be burned by the public hangman.' Unless one can say that, at least in imagination, one is shirking the implications of the fact that an artist is also a citizen and a human being."

Our culture would do well to take Orwell's words to heart. The rest of us have a duty to distinguish constantly between the true and the false. And perhaps to follow



the example of the small boy in the fairy tale who had the courage to cry out that the emperor wore no clothes.

Our secular culture is finding it increasingly hard to satisfy on a purely aesthetic diet the spiritual instinct in us that longs for a larger meaning. With an almost pathetic desperation, we overestimate the significance of everything "artistic," including Andy Warhol's cookie jars, with ever-diminishing emotional returns. But aestheticism—the notion that all of existence can be sanctified as an aesthetic phenomenon—is exhausted. Its champions, still dominating the art world while fighting off a nasty case of existential dread, have failed to recognize that it is the connection between the

aesthetic and the ethical that gives art its dignity, its meaning, and its power. It is not an explicit socio-realistic connection made by the artist, but a connection made within ourselves when art pierces through all the crusts of our narrow interests and preoccupations and liberates the truth and the vision of wholeness we carry within us.

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