# the something else NEWSLETTER

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## Mediocracy: Getting the Arts Past the 1980s

### by Dick Higgins

A fairly optimistic article appeared in this newsletter in 1970 which later became a pamphlet from a small press, "Towards the 1970s." A good deal of what it said would happen did, in fact, occur. Dance achieved a new centrality, there was less formal and more content innovation in poetry, visual and sound poetry became normative, performance art was established, and music continued to progress towards the ancient Boethian concept of *Musica speculativa,* which had been more or less ignored as a possibility in western music since, say, Cerone's *El melopeo y maestro* of 1613. The 1970s may have been a mess politically, but they were not too bad for the arts. Masterpieces were made, but that is another story.

Now we are faced with a very different situation and a frankly decadent decade, one in which the very taste for excellence seems to have disappeared. Since that taste is what allows the surfacing of innovation in art, innovation has become hidden, as if marked by some cosmic rubber stamp "FOR SPECIALISTS ONLY." We are living in a mediocracy—rule both by the media and by and for the mediocre, to the benefit of the pseudo-cultured and to the detriment of the common people who are, ultimately, the rest of us. This is not just a conservative period: political conservatism may or may not be accompanied by cultural retrogression, just as political liberalism is no guarantee of artistic innovation or progress. Our educational deterioration, so much in the newspapers, can only partly be explained on economic grounds. Our liberal arts courses are taught by certified and professionalistic hacks, and they have only themselves to blame that the young, who usually are inclined to take chances, won't take a chance on their curricula. This causes the young audience to decline, and the older sophisticated audience cannot regenerate itself. The infrastructure of our arts has, thus, begun to deteriorate to an alarming degree. But before we can look at this, we must look at the media aspect of the situation.

Many things can, of course, be covered by the term "media, from oil or acryllic paint to "poetry or "music or "intermedia to the mass media. But when the emphasis on mass media became so overwhelming during the 1970s, a certain deterioration of the will to do the best work possible took place, since such things are inherently out of bounds for media whose job is not to present the best work available, but to sell soap or other "product; you sell more soap when you reach more people, and art which imitated, while pretending to exploit, the exploiting media, actually *was* exploited by it, in a sort of perversion of McLuhan's dictum that the medium is the message. The prestige of the media was such that at least *resembling* the media was a way to appear modern – thus the prestige of video art. Video art had existed in a positive way in the 1960s, and people such as Stanley Vanderbeek or Nam June Paik in the USA or Michael Morris in Canada (now in Berlin, Germany) did exciting work; but in the seventies it lost its soul (at least for now), and now it is, par excellence, the domain of the grant-guzzling mediocrat. Just now there seems to be a direct proportion between intelligence and the degree to which a person ignores television of *any* kind, art or otherwise. We need activism, and TV is passive.

I cannot speak to the rise of women in art, which seems to be a result of the women's movement; most of women's art appears to be for women, and that is something I am not. But I can observe that *most* – not some but most – of the best new thinking in the arts just now is being done by women. Perhaps one can also point to an unusually large number of fine male and female artists who are openly homosexual in their subject matter, presumably a result of the gay liberation movements. That seems healthy, since it was missing or repressed for so long. As for black, hispanic, oriental and native american liberation movements, their priority is not, at the moment, in the arts; it may be that at some point this will be part of their need, and they will help lead us out of the mediocracy. We shall certainly welcome them then. We need their fresh perspectives too.

In the past and even into the 1960s not only was there more private patronage for the arts than today, both individual and from foundations, but also commercial outlets – book publishers and stores, art galleries and theater producers, etc. – could take chances which would be impossible in 1983. Twenty years ago you could go to places like the Castelli Gallery and see the superstars of the day. In 1983 you go to the Castelli Gallery or to the Mary Boone, one of its latest clones, and all you see in "product," plain and simple. You might as well stay home. Literature is in an even worse situation. Our large publishers are parts of conglomerates which look to the bottom line before all else, so the editors are understandably afraid of taking chances. It is many years since a serious book got a major award. Guggenheim grants used to come to independent artists almost as a matter of course. In 1981 and 1982 about 95% went to academics; perhaps only an academic could afford the secretarial time meeded to fill in the forms, but, more likely, the judges and the panels assume that there is no life outside academia. That does not bode well for our arts. No serious person could buy an art work from the Castelli or Mary Boone Galleries, purchase an award-winning book, or take in earnest anything said by the recent recipient of a Guggenheim grant.

As for public funding, today in a sense it is not insignificant. But, in scholarship and broader culture, our National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grants seem more designed to keep the mediocrats in power in Washington and in our universities than to fund cultural research which really *needs* doing. Doubt me? Get the NEH pamphlet, "Research Materials Program, which contains the grant application forms and look them over critically. One must make a *social* justifi cation for all grants (even art history grants which benefit the public in the long run, but seldom in the short), must provide twenty sets of xeroxed applications and substantiating materials, must work up budgets more suited to team projects than individual one, locate panels of experts on whom the NEH can call to verify the respectability of one's project (at least there's some little justification for that one), and then one must *normally*, it says, find matching funds: the result is to send all the scholars scurrying to the same few sources of matching funds, taking time away from his or her research and delaying it. Abolish the program? Of course not; expand it, reform it, and make it more professional and less professionalistic. National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grants are better, but not by much. There too the tendency is to overstress accounting, and to create teams where individuals might do the work better. All of this cretes the necessity for someone we need but should not: the professional fundraiser, who gets a commission out of the grant, and who speaks the language of the mediocrats. Somebody has to pay the fundraiser, and in the long run it is the public, by way of inflated budgets, wasteful overheads and, worst of all, worthwhile projects which are not done. The best artist or scholar is seldom the best fundraiser.

Where are conditions any better? Try Canada, where the the population is just over one tenth of the USA. Canada has about the same number of first rate writers as America, not per capita but overall. Is there something magical about the canadian soil? That's doubtful, much as canadian writers like to praise "the canadian experience. What it is is that the Canada Council has been run well by peer review for the past twenty years or so, their literature program has been particularly well run, and now the canadian people are benefiting from it. Their music scene is also, in proportion, better than ours, and, though their visual arts have problems (mostly an inadequate private sector), it is not too bad. The system is an elite one but is benign and responsible to the people in the long run. It works; we could learn from it if we were not so narcissistic. The fact is, art doesn't just arise; it develops where it is wanted.

Of course a great deal of magnificent work is still being done by americans – but it is seldom seen in America. At no time since the 1920s have so many american artists been living in Europe. No longer is it because Europe is cheaper or more "cultured" as a whole. Today it is because one sees more professionalism there than here among the people who run the cultural organizations, thus creating the matrix for important things to happen for a large public. Our professionals are more "professionalistic" than serious; they have degrees but neither knowledge nor understanding. Great museum shows can happen in Europe which include recent arts but which could never happen here, for instance, the "Für Augen und Ohren" show in Berlin, on the interfaces between visual arts and music over the centuries and up to the present. There was competence at every stage. No way could that happen in America, not even in New York: our arts personnel have degrees but not expertise – they simply would not know how to put together such a large-scale conceptual undertaking. Mediocrats cannot handle such things. In Europe the museum directors have faces and personalities, while ours are merely spokespersons for boards and panels. When nobody rules, nothing worthwhile gets done. Even the art collectors in Europe have

more genuine taste and information, so, if you want to see the best of American art from the 1960s till now, you must go to Berlin, Aachen, Cologne, Darmstadt or Vienna. Our museums get only the second best. Who loses out? The american people, of course. It is, after all, our art, our culture. But while the europeans know us and, above all, our language, which gives them access to those of our works and ideas which they find valuable, rather few of us make regular use of even one of the europeans' languages, which means that we are usually cut off from those of their works or ideas which *we* need.

Even if we did know a european language, usually we have very little theoretical grounding in our arts training. In Germany, Art History is a *required* subject in all academic high schools. The long-term result? The german art scene is currently the best in Europe. Think about that. In american high schools our students are given, at best, a few hours a week to splash some paint around. On the higher levels our art schools teach art as craft, like basket weaving, not as a craft- and-culture mesh, and we americans usually make perfect idiots of ourselves (with some exceptions) when we discuss these things. Ever seen an american artist (or even, usually, an american critic) on a panel with european colleagues? It's usually pathetic. The american chatters about what Bill and John and Joan are doing, while the europeans discuss cogent ideas cogently. Not that the opposite would not be an equal danger – too much theory, too little practice. That happens, but it's rare. More usually the american retreats into our current favorite myth – the Myth of American Originality. It goes "Only americans can do original work, because europeans are too weighted down by tradition." What makes it seemingly tenable is that americans only see some token amount of first-rate european innovative art, Beuys for example among the germans, while Vostell or Diter Rot, who have had major museum shows in most european countries, have yet to have major american museum shows. Not that we need be Europe-crazy – our best artists are as valuable as those from Europe, our art scene is by no means the worst in the world, and our best artists usually have access to the necessary ideas from Europe or *both* Americas. But our public and *most* of our artists have become distressingly provincial since the great days of the 1950s.

The result of all this is, of course, a terrible move away from excellence, among our artists, writers and public, not to mention even our composers. I could go on in this vein for some time, pointing to the inadequacies of our poets and readers, to our theater which has dwindled away to insignificance from the fervent years of the 1960s, to our dancers who know their bodies well but not the dance. In music the situation seems to be slightly better, but not much. But I would rather use what space I have left, after this bleak picture, to say what I think needs to be done.

First of all, we have to scrap the mediocrats' approach. We have to reward excellence without going to a superstar mentality, and we have to take care that at all times all the possibilities are covered. We must *use,* not just learn, languages beside English. We must start with a healthy degree of skepticism, questioning our myths and the status of the beneficiaries of the mediocracy in these 1980s. We must recognize that elites have their uses, in producing real expertise and professional innovation. We must scrap our dependence on panels and boards where a succession of individuals can function better (let someone pick something that he or she *really* wants to fund, not just something that nobody has too strong an objection to); the role of panels should be to evaluate the performance of directors in the long run, not to assume the directorial role. Being democratic at every stage of the process robs people of the excellence they deserve, and that is *not* democratic. Particularly we must be skeptical, in education as well as the arts, of those whom the mediocrats have rewarded with academic degrees that only perpetuate the mediocrats' control. We should depend *much* more on the obviously gifted amateur: great artists, critics and scholars are usually of this kind. A college should be ashamed, not pleased, if more than a certain percentage of its teaching personnel have PhDs, not only in the arts, and for an arts organization to list the PhDs of its staff is a guarantee that it cannot be relied upon for professional perspective. "Back to basics," the current educational reform slogan, really means "back to what the mediocrats say is basic," and is a move towards even greater mediocrity. Basics should be what actually *is* basic to our cultural and art needs, which is a knowledge that no PhD can guarantee. All that a PhD means is that some-

one has successfully dealt with the mediocracy through some years of graduate school, which may qualify such a person for being a fundraiser, but it means just that many years of insulation from the actual art or intellectual community outside of academia.

We must cultivate a taste for excellence wherever it is encountered. We should avoid art works which are merely au courant, knowing from bitter experience that art works shown at such galleries as I have mentioned as examples, or touted in the mediocrats' (advertisers') art magazines are probably going to bore us to the point of tears, that books praised by the *New York Times Book Review* are likely to be published by the big corporations and to be rather silly in the long run. We should cultivate our tastes and perspectives, make these worthy of our dependence on them, and throw out most of the cultural bric-à- brac which we have accumulated – dull books, hollow art, respectable but unplayable phonograph records and cassettes – and allow ourselves more depth. We should look for small, interesting-sounding concerts or performances and avoid those which some critic liked but one knows one wont't, look among small and often local art galleries for those that buck the institutional taste, and support the organizations which sponsor such things. Often we will pay more, but we will get more satisfaction.* We need not go to the extreme "underground" unless we want to – there are excellent things for all of us, if we will but search them out. Better to be an honest, self- determined highbrow than a bored, pretended middlebrow. "Classic" need not be a put-down term as it so often is just now. We are the ones who decide anew, for every generation, what is and what is not a "classic." We do this every few years except when the academics and, now, the mediocrats are in control – those are always the dullest of times, in any case. In our education we do not need what Carlyle called the "dry-as- dust" experts; we need ourselves, communicating directly with past and present, bearing in mind that the present is the only time we will ever know at first hand, so the present arts are our living heritage, for better or for worse. It gives a certain thrill to recognize one's own voice in a present art work which only the greatest voices of the past can match, so we must inform ourselves enough to recognize that voice.

But as for the arts of these 1980s, they are, frankly, an expression of the current mediocracy and inferior to the arts of the 1950s, 60s and 70s. So who cares where they are going? Their only interest is not intrinsic but projected historical – we can look for the germ of a better 1990s in them, for the potential for new ways and forms of seeing and hearing and thinking of things. Great changes are needed now, as always; and great works will hopefully happen in due course. But we must now create the enabling structures. We must not simply accept what art we have (it's no worse than what we deserve, if we do) but must earn the arts which we want.

3. July, 1983
Barrytown, New York

* I did not mention literature here because, after founding and running Something Else Press from 1964 to 1973, it might seem too partisan to point out how, in recent time, the small presses have had to pick up much of the load of quality publishing which was previously done by larger firms. However, the biggest inhibition on larger sales was from our public not understanding that small press books cost more because production runs are smaller, so unit costs are higher. Besides, many (not all) small press books are intended for re-reading by the same person, not for throwing away, so that both physically and editorially, we had to put more into a book. Even so, a good book remains a pleasure on second reading, while most "trade books" do not, but are like cotton candy, fading away as one eats into them. In the long run, the well-chosen small press book is a better buy. One should never buy a book that one doesn't mean to read twice; that is the secret of real economy here.

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