

# Art: Reviewing the above statement

by Grégory Battcock

*These 14 non-objective artists are against the war in Vietnam. They are supporting this commitment in the strongest manner open to them, by contributing major examples of their current work. The artists and the individual pieces were selected to represent a particular esthetic attitude, in the conviction that a cohesive group of important works makes the most forceful statement for peace.*

Robert Huot  
Lucy Lippard  
Ron Wolin

Well, I'm not so sure. Apparently what we are being told is that when artists are against the war in Vietnam, they just continue to paint their pictures. By painting their pictures, they are indicating their opposition to the war in Vietnam in the strongest manner open to them. On the other hand, the above statement suggests that, by contributing the paintings, the artists are supporting their commitment. But, as we know, they haven't really contributed the works, since if they are sold, the artist receives his usual percentage.

This isn't an easy review to write, especially since I'm reviewing the above statement rather than the exhibition itself. The statement could be either one of two (or more) things. It might simply be muddled and ambiguous—stocked with energy and good will more than anything else. Or it might represent a very new, radical view of the art exhibition process, and the resulting categorization of sympathetic esthetic attitudes. The statement is, at the same time, an antinomy—a contradiction between two apparently equally valid principles. But it is the last part of the statement that is

the most difficult to understand. Why does a cohesive group of important works make a forceful statement for peace?

If indeed the exhibition of a cohesive group of important works makes a forceful statement for peace, would not an exhibition of wearing apparel by, let's say, Cardin, Gernreich, and St. Laurent, presented under a similar imprimatur, make an equally forceful statement for peace? Or how about an exhibition of pastels and watercolors offered under the same circumstances by the National Society of Bird Artists? What would be the story if the best wine merchants and importers got together and offered a tasting of their finest vintages to oenophiles and claimed the whole affair is really a protest against the war in Vietnam? Keep in mind that in each of the three examples I offer above, the participants were selected mainly because together they represented a particular esthetic attitude. (There's no reason why they shouldn't.)

Well, the alarming thing about all this, I'm beginning to think, is that such demonstrations may really be useful, legitimate protests against the war (or whatever). And it's alarming because it's all based on snob appeal, on old-fashioned principles of restriction and exclusion. These are, at the same time, the suburban principles that have helped keep Ossining-on-Hudson white, right and rich throughout these turbulent years. They are the principles that keep the Jews out of country clubs and that tolerate the "IF YOU'RE GAY PLEASE GO AWAY" signs outside straight bars. The point is, look at us and our exclusive, cohesive esthetic atti-

tude. If you like what you see you will oppose the war (or buy Secret deodorant, or whatever). We are, as usual, being sold a package. The modern philosophy of Madison Avenue and the packaging technologist has become everyday fact.

Another suggestion seems to be that the artists are telling us that by very virtue of their own esthetic attitude they ALONE oppose the war. The suggestion implies that artists who support other esthetic attitudes therefore do not oppose the war. And, to go one step further, there is definitely the implication that should a lesser artist have gotten himself in the show, the strength of the PROTEST AGAINST THE WAR ITSELF would have been diluted, and its integrity tarnished. Surely this is an unacceptable attitude, and reminds me of a little story.

Several summers ago I decided to accept an invitation from the Mattachine Society to go to Philadelphia on a bus to picket Independence Hall in a demonstration calling attention to official discrimination against homosexuals. I dragged along two friends, got up at six, paid \$5.00 and got on the bus and proceeded to Philadelphia. However, once we got there we weren't permitted to join the picket line, if you can imagine. Though we obviously shared the political commitment of the entire group, and wished to express our dissatisfaction with a democratic system that tolerated discrimination against persons holding sexual views that weren't entirely in agreement with the majority, we were not welcome. The reason: our attire. The chick wore sandals without stockings. I didn't have a jacket or tie, etc. In other words, because our esthetic attitude (if you can call it that) did not

conform to the views of the aunties running the affair, we weren't allowed to join them in expressing support for a common belief. We ran up against just what we went to protest—artificial discrimination based upon superficial, personal and irrelevant criteria. And they were convinced that, should we have been included in the picketing, we would have brought disgrace to THEIR (not our) cause.

Well, the point of my remarks (and, I suppose, of the above story) is that anything worth protesting nowadays involves artificial, hypocritical and stupid refusal of one side to recognize and accept the worth, existence and integrity of another. So, what happens if our protest itself involves the same sort

of behavior? Quite simply, I don't know the answer. After all, we do not judge the validity of a man's pronouncements by his own behavior. And, in this instance (the protest of the war in Vietnam), is not ANY form of opposition welcome?

The exhibition, entitled BENEFIT FOR THE STUDENT MOBILIZATION COMMITTEE TO END THE WAR IN VIETNAM is at PAULA COOPER, 96 PRINCE STREET (One block south of Houston, two blocks west of Broadway). Telephone: 725-1627. Hours: October 23 to 31, 2 to 9 p.m.

Incidentally, the exhibition is really very good indeed. Most of the works included are major ones. Some artists in the show are: Donald Judd, David Lee, Robert Murray, Doug Ohlson and Carl Andre.