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Action painting

Hermann Nitsch

After the second world war there emerged a form of painting that did not seek to represent anything, that did not seek to reproduce anything that already existed in nature. Instead, concrete events took place within the pictorial structure, on the canvas itself, and these events, or else their effects, were placed on show. Paint was not seen in terms of colour harmony but as a concrete substance, as a paste or a fluid, to be smeared or poured on. The results obtained were governed by the gestures and the motor activity of arm and hand movements, there was scratching and wiping, substances, fluids, colours were sprayed, thrown, poured, etc., on to the canvas. The visual impact of the action itself was no small part of this art, because many painters produced their works in a genuine (sensual) state of excitement and selfrelease. The beholder who reacts positively can grasp through form the excitement of the process of creation. To make concrete processes, and their effects, visible demands an intensified sensual awareness in the maker as well as in the beholder, making formal use of a new effect which many objects and events possess. This means drawing on, drawing out, a particular section of the spectrum of sensual feelings. An elementary sensual experience is thus made available to painting. This perception of an elementary sensual fact is paradoxically the consequence of a deeper, wider, more sensitive and more fully conscious sensual awareness. A deeper sensual awareness of the world around one automatically brings with it an expansion of consciousness. Art informal harnessed to form, and rendered conscious, those values of sensation which normally remain on the threshold of consciousness. It is only through art informal that humankind has matured to the point of consciously noticing a part of the sensual nature which previously registered only subliminally, although it could be awakened through the associative techniques of dream, memory, poetry and myth. The sensual intensity of verbal images, precipitated by the word, is an important component of literature (lyric poetry). Subliminal emotions are made conscious through form, made accessible to subsequent registering. This delayed awareness of previously subliminal material became a significant aesthetic event, i. e. became form. There came into being an art which concerned itself directly with the deeper strata of the psyche, and which indeed served as an outlet for them. Repressions transformed themselves into art. These endeavours, which emerged practically all over the world at the same time, although of course with the most varied local colouring, were the main preoccupation of tachism. Now that we can stand back and see tachism, and the whole of art informal, in some perspective, and now that we have the reinterpreted consequences of tachism to deal with, we are acquiring a vantage point from which we can gain an overall view and see that the painters of that particular tendency are united by nothing so much as by this unavowed hankering for their «animal nature». They are united by a lively interest in their own sensuality and their own drives, an interest in inner reality. They all turn the unconscious outwards and make it conscious through form. The first tachist informal works embodied the eruption of sensuality in compositional schemes inherited from earlier

painting, but later this formal constraint was gradually cast aside and the automatic, seismic record of a sensual upheaval became more and more the vital thing. Joy in the dynamic, concrete event of destruction came to the fore. Paintings were torn up and destroyed, there was a desire to do away with the pictorial format itself, the consequences of tachism seemed to be manifest in isolation. It seemed that all pictorial creation was to end in the intoxication of confronting the concrete, confronting the real. The innermost, perhaps unrecognized desire of the tachist lay in the realm of the dionysiac, of dynamism. It lay in an abreaction which embraced the deepest layers of the psyche and made them conscious. The excitement, the surge of pleasure, the shedding of inhibitions, the ecstasy, the resolution of deep-lying blockages, had to express themselves visually. It was in keeping with the character of tachism to be a dramatic, expressive mode of utterance. Action painting laid claim to duration, opened up a new dimension by moving in the direction of the theatrical performance, the dramatic event. Art informal took a turn towards the theatre, where in changed circumstances it found and still finds its essential mission in the manifold phenomena of the happening and above all in aktionismus.

Just at the time when I introduced the formal use of reality into my theatre project, I came into contact with tachism, which at that time was just past its peak. I at once grasped this phenomenon, with all its implications, because it fitted in with the results I had obtained with language as my starting-point, and it also came close to dynamic dramatic expression. I then set out to pursue more intensively, and more analytically, the pouring, spraying and splashing on of liquids. From this there developed the painting of the O.M. Theater, a form of action painting which possessed a dramatic function by virtue of the fact that a specific length of time was occupied by often ecstatic processes of production (I poured only red paint on to vertical surfaces and on to horizontal surfaces). I regarded this painting, into which the spectators were often drawn, as a litany-like play event within my theatre, which expressed itself through my painting in public.