

Sculpture panelists debate future of public art

BY LOUISE SNIDER

One of the liveliest artistic debates to stir Oakland County in years erupted at the Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum in a panel discussion, "Public Sculpture: Reassessment for the '80s."

Michael Hall, head of the sculpture department of the Cranbrook Academy of Art, chaired the panel composed of Fred A. Myers, director of the Grand Rapids Art Museum; Robert Pincus-Witten, art critic and scholar; Linda Cathcart, curator of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, N.Y.; and Wolf Von Eckhardt, architecture editor of "The Washington Post."

The participants agreed that there has been an enormous increase in federal and state appropriations for arts and humanities.

HOWEVER, CONTROVERSY AND DISCUSSION centered about two questions: (1) What kind of art should this money buy? (2) Is there danger that government funding will be tied to restrictions which will foster a narrow regionalism rather than encourage purchase of the "best art available at the time?"

Von Eckhardt proposed, "The time has come to rethink the mission of the arts, especially the visual arts and our environment."

"It's been the American way to make a mess and go West and start over again... It's time that we have a purpose or a thought... We've come to an inner need for continuity," he asserted.

"It's no accident that 'Roots' is a best seller. The middle class too is searching for ancestors, for something to relate to," Cathcart said.

Artists must create places that give people a sense of identity, he said. He quoted from the psychiatrist Erik Erikson who said that identity is something you give to your environment and then it gives it back to you.

Von Eckhardt summed up his position that appropriations for art for public buildings should go toward art which gives a community "the heart-felt symbol for the identity of that neighborhood."

PINCUS-WITTEN ADDRESSED HIMSELF to the issue of the type of art that is being produced. He questioned the validity of constructivism and expressed doubt that such sculpture (introduced in the 1910s by Tatlin and Gabe in Russia) could express the aspirations of contemporary artists.

In support of his view he presented examples (in slides of work by artists who have rejected the constructivist tradition and explored other options.

These examples included cloth sculpture which can be "folded up and stuck in a drawer," earth works, environmental optics, hyper-realistic sculpture, personal statements which are reconstructions of private experience and sculpture which reflects the artist's concern with examining "entropic relations."

Still another option, the behavioral orientation of the artist, was presented in a slide which showed the sculptor, Vito Acconci, biting his own arm.

'I am against perpetuation of introspection which has alienated the artist from society. The art world today looks like a mass group therapy session. . . .'

-Wolf Von Eckhardt, architecture editor, Washington Post

Von Eckhardt questioned the relation of such art to humanistic ideals and aspirations. He acknowledged a popular demand for art, but "not for people biting themselves . . . but for new optimism. We want to be lifted out of the miseries of the day."

He predicted "If you (the artists) can't come up with anything better, the money is going to dwindle."

Cathcart responded, "Art should be representative of what's being made." She asserted there should be all kinds of public sculpture.

Michael Hall interceded and questioned the "perils of creating a regionalism."

Pincus-Witten who defended the avant-garde, said, "I would rather throw my lot in with the difficulties of this art."

However, he agreed that some extremes, such as that of Acconci, would not have any "long historical sense of associations" and might be better for private performance rather than public.

He said the notion of regionalism (as

he sees "the avant-garde marching further and further on and no following behind."

"The artist has to show us where we're going," he said. "The question is, who decides who the artist (who gets the public commission) is? The questions' been put into the machine-ery known as 'the establishment.'"

Here Von Eckhardt condemned "the star system and the obsession with originality." He quoted the statement of architect Miles van der Rohe that "I'd rather be good than original."

Audience sentiment seemed to endorse government support of the arts but balk at any kind of control.



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