

# **Art as a Form of Action**

Excerpt from "The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art" by Mark Rothko

## **ESCAPISM**

Art has often been described as a form of escape from action. It has been pointed out that the artist, finding the practical affairs of the world too unpleasant, withdraws from the world of true activity and ensconces himself in a world of the imagination in order to exempt himself from this unpleasantness. The world of true activity is usually considered that one which occupies man-either communally or individually-with the satisfaction of his bodily needs. The staving off of physical starvation or discomfort is considered the proper world of realistic action. With the rise of the standard of living the number of things which satisfy the physical needs of man have been greatly expanded. Originally these needs might have been called: food sufficient to satisfy hunger, shelter to protect him from meteorological inclemencies, and clothing to stave off pneumonia. Today a man cannot live, however, without a tile bathroom, without sanitary plumbing, without a vacuum cleaner, and without a well-appearing suit, nor can a woman without innumerable changes of costume within and without every season, and without innumerable gadgets and time saving devices. These time saving devices are to contribute to leisure, which is to be occupied with the satisfaction of the aesthetic impulses. Leisure requires its ornaments; it must first of all be attractive. Finally, the participation in the production and distribution of these innumerable gadgets has been gradually drawn into the sphere of man's realistic needs which originally had been satisfied by the most elementary provision of food and clothing and shelter. Any person who spends his life in the production or acquisition of these said embellishments pertaining to the physical needs is pursuing a life of action. And it may be pointed out that the life of our nation as a whole is a tale of triumph and tragedy and unremitting toil in the pursuit of this reality.

This presupposes, of course, that the bodily needs are the core of existence and that other needs, if any, will be automatically satisfied. This assumption is contradicted by the fact that in those social classes where the possession of these goods is easy, one finds the greatest preponderance of ill health. No other class in the world is so beset by neurological disturbances, so-called imaginary disturbances, which science has recently found often more destructive and less

subject to cure than "real" ailments, which are considered legitimate. The subordinate class, which is willing to lay down its life presumably to make all those needed items more available to all of society, is a much healthier class. Why? Because these people, by the very fact of their idealism, are really fulfilling a need as great as that of the physical needs. Idealism here forms a kind of action which takes its place side by side with other self-expressive forms of action without which man cannot continue in good health.

Art is such an action. It is a kindred form of action to idealism. They are both expressions of the same drive, and the man who fails to fulfill this urge in one form or another is as guilty of escapism as the one who fails to occupy himself with the satisfaction of bodily needs. In fact, the man who spends his entire life turning the wheels of industry so that he has neither time nor energy to occupy himself with any other needs of his human organism is by far a greater escapist than the one who developed his art. For the man who develops his art does make adjustments to his physical needs. He understands that man must have bread to live, while the other cannot understand that you cannot live by bread alone.

Art is not only a form of action, it is a form of social action. For art is a type of communication, and when it enters the environment it produces its effects just as any other form of action does. It might be said that its use as a means of social action is dependent upon the numbers which it affects. From that point of view, Maxfield Parrish is the most social of artists and therefore the artist who most deserves the esteem of society. Needless to say, this sort of a measure will lead one to the most absurd conclusions. When the artist produces something which is intelligible only to himself, then he has already contributed to himself as an individual, and with this effect has already contributed to the social world (just as we benefit ourselves, and therefore also society, when we eat). In other words, society benefits every time an individual improves his own adjustment in the world, for however we look at society, the empirical measure of society's welfare is the aggregate good of its constituents. How far a single impulse can extend in its effect is unpredictable. One minute stimulus can be more far-reaching, can affect the course of society more significantly in a single minute than a thousand other stimuli-whose effect is more obvious-might over a hundred years. The satisfaction of personal needs is therefore never an escapist form of action. In its effect, it is closer to natural action than a hundred acts of philanthropy and idealism which concern themselves with the needs of others. Who is to say which of the personal needs are more pertinent to society?