

# Art for art's sake, money for God's sake!

by William Dodge

One of the more visible concerns of the new generation of artists is to free their work from the money sector. By its nature, much of the art being made now is antagonistic to the giant multi-national corporations that are quickly becoming the art's prime source of patronage.

As the emphasis of contemporary artwork shifts away from traditional objects like paintings and sculpture to more ephemeral action-oriented performance pieces, it is forced to move outside the traditional institutions that want to deal with art "objects" as exchangeable commodities.

A large "alternative" gallery system has developed across the country to accommodate this art activity but ironically, this gallery system depends heavily on state funding. Regular art publications are printed by these galleries despite their small operating budgets. Many of the galleries themselves have turned into production spaces, offering artists a place to do their work on a co-operative basis.

Given the increasingly impermanent or unportable nature of contemporary art and its forms of presentation, how does it fare with a corporate institution like the commercial press?

In many art centres, unfavourable reviews from established newspaper critics are often greeted by the art community as a "thorny crown" of distinction, a sign that the work has something relevant to say.

## **The chronic complaint centered on the limitations of space and language inherent in the commercial press and its apparent inability to herald new directions in the art world.**

Like any other commercial product competing in the marketplace, newspapers try to appeal to as many consumers as possible. With the maintenance of big circulations foremost in mind, whatever ideology the press supports generally caters to the common denominator of values held by their readership.

In many newspaper operations, you can be a sportswriter one day and an art critic the next. With a firm grasp of journalist prose you may even live to be one of the profession's versatile "old hacks." Highly-valued by editors, these craftsmen know how to salt and pepper any subject for the daily press.

"By definition, the popular press supports the status-quo," says Peter White, a former Globe and Mail arts critic now of the Glenbow Museum in Calgary.

In Halifax recently to attend a convention of the Universities Art Association of Canada (UAAC) and International Association of Art Critics (IAAC), White acted as chairperson for a panel discussion on Contemporary Art and the Plight of its Newspaper Critics.

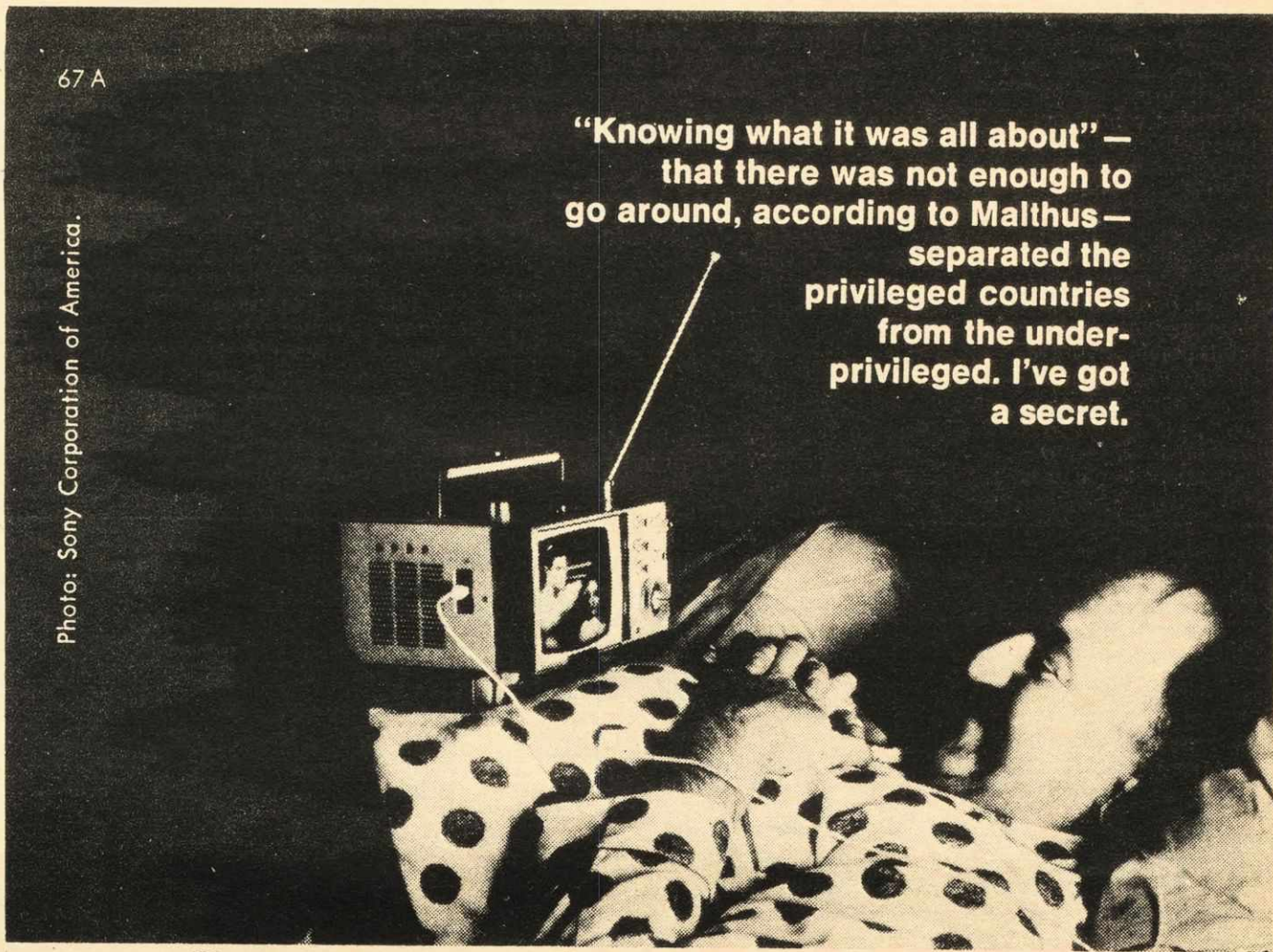
The chronic complaint of critics sitting on the panel centred on the limitations of space and language inherent in the commercial press and its apparent inability to herald new directions in the art world.

The majority of panelists agreed on two basic principles in the art of art criticism; first, that respect is essential, you can hate someone with respect, and second; stand by an opinion, it's better to create a debate than to patronize.

White maintained that any space given to arts reporters in the press is usually proportionate to the amount of advertising that pays for it. He attributed the statement "modern art is a fraud and that's your job" to a Toronto Globe and Mail editor, who, at the time he said it, was talking to a summer applicant for the job of arts critic.

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Photo: Sony Corporation of America.



**"Knowing what it was all about" — that there was not enough to go around, according to Malthus — separated the privileged countries from the under-privileged. I've got a secret.**

Laurent Lamy, critic for the past eight years with Montreal's French language daily Le Devoir, said the closest he comes to his newspaper's editorial office is the next door neighbour's house. Once a week through a friendly arrangement, Lamy's neighbour drops his story off at Le Devoir on the way to work.

"The situation for an art critic is unbearable but it is a situation that must be tolerated," said Lamy. "Choosing to exclude and newspapers offer limited space for illustrations. . . The critic is often forced to popularize, or closer to the French meaning, 'vulgarize' his story's content by using simplified, cliché-ridden language."

"I try to meet works of art on their own terms," said Nancy Tousley, free-lancer for the Calgary Herald. "Language is a big problem. Sometimes I feel more like an interpreter or consumer advisor than a critic. . .

"One essential ingredient is a deep commitment to the value art has in society," said Tousley. "I don't think we can accept the kind of simple reporting that is really just an extended public relations piece."

Georges Bogardi, free-lancer for the Montreal Star, said the art page should not be a slavish following of the art events in town

"We're all snobbish," said Bogardi. "I'm not ashamed to admit a newspaper is a gutter. After all, art criticism is interested in genealogy, who derives from whom. . .

"We mustn't become a public service or an art police," he said. "Finally the question of whether something is or isn't art, is uninteresting."

Art reviewers can be readily identified as the nimble-witted authors of the "pan" or "rave" but art critics, those aiming more towards historical background and explanation, are seldom seen expounding their ideas in the commercial press? Is their work too removed or unentertaining for that average person in the back street that newspapers try to reach?

In contrast to the commercial appeal of journalist's prose, Canadian philosopher and media critic Marshall McLuhan remarks in Understanding Media (1964) that "the first item in the press to which all people turn is the one which they already know about."

Though panelists acknowledged the difficulty of fitting their particular information into the press, few of them questioned the difference between art "reviews" and art "criticism," or the social function of the medium itself.

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