

Rejecting Retrochic*

Visual artists in this culture tread a thin line, like drivers arrested after one martini. We have this myth that artists are wild, woolly and free—and politically radical. We have this reality that artists are isolated in studios and artworld bordellos and tend to be either unaware or downright conservative. The vectors meet in a middle ground occupied by the art audience. But the audience is invisible to most artists, and in that simple fact lies one of the great failures of modernist art. This basic alienation has, paradoxically, increased since art has entered the fringes of popular culture. These days the audience is being subjected not only to the usual indifference from the art majority, but also to a wave of hostility from an art minority which has been called *retrochic*.

Retrochic is not a style (though it is often associated with "punk art"). It is a subtle current of reactionary content filtering through various art forms. Its danger lies not so much in its direct effect on the art audience as in its acceptance by the art world itself. Too many artists and artworkers seem blissfully unaware of the social ramifications of the notion that art is so separate from life, so neutral in its impact, that Anything Goes in the Galleries because it's Only Art.

Retrochic offers a particularly overt example of how art is seen and manipulated in this society. In the process it becomes an unwitting tool of the very powers it seems to think it's repelling, part and parcel of the national economic backlash against reproductive rights, social welfare and human rights. Neutrality is just what the doctor ordered for the corporate classes controlling art (and the rest of the world). It keeps artists as safely ensconced in their small puddle as nonunionized workers are kept isolated on their assembly lines. As the product of a complex psychological current, retrochic was perfectly described by the punk rock group Devo: "The position of any artist is, in pop entertainment, really self-contempt. Hate what you like, like what you hate. It's a totally schizophrenic position, but that in itself is a principle that most people in the business and outside it don't understand."

So how did Art—popularly associated with communication, enlightenment and uplift—get into this predicament? Precisely by rejecting the "real" and distastefully "commercial" framework within which it operates and turning inward to the point where it no longer knows who its audience is, and by hating that audience it doesn't know for not knowing it.

Art has a kind of permanent innocence in this culture. We expect very little of it. We expect *nothing* of it. We expect *everything* of it. Depending on who we are. Who are we? Who is the art audience? I once called all the major museums in New York City to see if they had done audience profiles. They hadn't. But of course window-shopping—which is what art is about for most people—is not taken too seriously in the real world of Big Business that administers the museums and makes sure what is shown there is oriented to the right people—to the public, but not to the gum-chewing public. The art gallery audience, on the other hand, is in training to be able to swallow anything. And retrochic art is sufficiently

*First published as "Retrochic, Looking Back in Anger" by *The Village Voice*, Dec. 10, 1979, and reprinted by permission.