

## BOOKS

## An Appel a Day

Alfred Appel rethinks modernism

## The Art of Celebration

By Alfred Appel Jr.  
Alfred A. Knopf, 246 pages;  
\$35 cloth.

EVER SINCE such landmark studies of the United States as Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, scarcely a decade has passed without at least one commentary that changed the way we thought about ourselves and our world.

The tradition has escalated in recent decades. In the 1960s, Vance Packard, in his bestselling book, *The Hidden Persuaders*, revealed how advertising influenced our daily decisions. In the 1960s, Eldridge Cleaver, in *Soul on Ice*, showed us what white society looked like through the eyes of someone growing up black. As we entered the '70s, Alvin Toffler, in *Future Shock*, predicted how the dynamic changes in technology would affect our lives, while Paul Ehrlich, in *The Population Bomb*, discussed the problems of overpopulation—and the list goes on and on.

Now Alfred Appel Jr., in *The Art of Celebration*, attempts to enter the ranks of this illustrious group by exploring our attitudes toward modern art. Although the subject is usually considered obscure, solipsistic, ironic and nihilistic, Appel believes that the work of many modernist writers, painters and musicians is uplifting, life-affirming and ennobling.

Appel's premise, although stated in the first chapter, is eloquently summed up toward the end of the book, and it is the rallying cry he hopes to instill in the reader—and certainly there is an evangelist's fervency quivering through his playful prose. Describing a Mondrian painting, Appel asserts that works of art "must stand on their own as uplifting objective correlatives for our need, our search for order, psychic ease, calm, and renewed strength."

This is an important statement, and it is made not only as a corrective to the prevailing attitudes toward modernism but also to how those attitudes spawned the current solipsistic, self-referential, ironic, nihilistic art of postmodernism, specifically the mind-game methodology of the deconstructionists.

Properly illustrated, with many of the art pieces reproduced in color, the book is composed of 32 short chapters in which Appel attempts to prove his thesis by analyzing, reinterpreting and prais-

ing more than 100 of his favorite works of modern art, literature and jazz in contrast to those artists and works he considers pessimistic and despairing.

Appel places the artists in one or another of two opposing groups. His favorites, those whom he judges to be life-affirmers, include writers Vladimir Nabokov and James Joyce, painters Henri Matisse and Paul Klee, sculptors Constantin Brancusi and Gaston Lachaise, photographers Edward Weston and Lewis Hine, and jazz musicians James P. Johnson and Teddy Wilson.

## THE ART OF CELEBRATION

TWENTIETH-CENTURY  
PAINTING, LITERATURE,  
SCULPTURE, PHOTOGRAPHY AND JAZZ

ALFRED APPEL, JR.



In the group he opposes are writers T.S. Eliot and Franz Kafka, and the painters George Grosz and Andy Warhol.

As integral to the book as the illustrations and ideas is Appel's style. It is not dry and professorial but full of jokes and puns as he mixes informal diction and slang. Believing that art should promote enrichment through a playful open-mindedness in the viewer/reader/listener, Appel brings the spirit of play to his interpretations as well as to his style. This spirit goes hand in glove with the organizing principle of the text—the endless connections Appel makes between the individual pieces of art under consideration, connections that accumulate into a more and more complex web.

As a writer who has struggled to promulgate a concept of art similar to the one Appel espouses, I find his premise not only welcome but also revitalizing, and I cheer his courage to make such a statement in the face of current facts and dogma, both in the academic and art worlds.

But as I read the book, I was struck by an arbitrariness in Appel's interpretations. It quickly became apparent that Appel personifies everything he sees. He must find recognizable shapes in every painting, and so his interpretations take on the aura of a child naming the different objects it discerns in shifting cloud formations. Such practices, while delightful in the young, in adult art critics make for nothing more than titillating mind games, with little or no regard for the creator and his intentions, which is the very defi-

nition of deconstructionism, the "obscure, solipsistic" approach to creating and appreciating art that Appel categorically opposes.

Even Appel's playful prose soon palls, becoming more and more forced, as if he were straining for effect like a second-rate comedian trying too hard to be funny. For all his good humor, Appel takes his puns too seriously, suggesting that they have a significance in the scheme of things that goes beyond their cleverness.

APPEL exults in the color yellow, declaring that its identification with sunlight provides it with a symbology that is life-affirming, healing and renewing. He then seeks to prove this interpretation every time he encounters the color in his favorite works of art. He forgets, however, that one of the most telling uses of yellow in modern literature was made by one of the writers he abhors, T.S. Eliot. In Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,"

*The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,*

*The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,*

*Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,*

*Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,*

*Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys, . . .*

*Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.*

Here yellow is not the color of renewal or healing, but of pollution and strangling self-absorption.

In a similar manner, Appel's estimate of Jasper Johns' "Painted Bronze" sculpture fails to appreciate all the piece's ramifications. Appel places pop artist Johns in the enemy camp and dismisses what he finds to be Johns' sneering irony at items from our everyday world in his "twin bronzed Ballantine ale cans" set firmly in a rock pedestal. But by bronzing the cans and putting them in a context other than the ones for which they were intended, Johns, although gently ironic, made those items artifacts of our culture which are as exotic as any found in early Egyptian and Han Dynasty tombs, and he thereby uplifted the commonplace to the marvelous, making us see the throwaway objects of our daily lives in a new and ennobling way.

Such examples, of which there are many, demonstrate the arbitrary nature of Appel's arguments. Even Appel's choice of life-affirming, nonironic artists invites disagreement. He praises Paul Klee's playfulness and use of primitive forms, finding Klee "jaunty" and "confident" and the work of his last years constituting "a lucid and bracing statement of comic faith." But he ignores (or is ignorant of)

Continued from previous page

such Klee works as "The Twittering Machine"—the depiction of three wacky-looking birds whose images seem fashioned out of a metal clothes hanger—which shows the painter ironically, even mockingly, commenting on the uselessness of our technological civilization.

The painting also shows Klee pursuing what is generally considered his most typical theme—how human weakness and folly manifest themselves in a seemingly endless variety of ways. Many of Klee's paintings show archetypal scenes about the human condition, presented ironically as well as comically. Appel fails to realize that Klee's attitude, while superficially humorous, is essentially satiric.

George Grosz, whom early in the book Appel uses as a prime example of the nihilistic painter, was also a satirist, although one of a much more savage nature than Klee. Still, Grosz was not nihilistic. As a satirist he was ridiculing the corruption he saw in 1920s German life, but since satirists are by definition moralists, Grosz's pictures of Germany's dark side implied that the vices he was painting could be remedied.

And this is where Appel's greatest error occurs. In setting his two groups of artists in opposition to each other, he takes too simplistic a stance. He makes everything either black or white and so overstates his case. He fails to see that artists he labels nihilistic or despairing are attempting to discover human nature by exploring our dark side.

So Franz Kafka, another of Appel's prime targets, was searching with religious fervor for a glimpse of the godhead in our world. That he didn't find it does not mean that he was nihilistic. His understanding, which involved spiritual regeneration by coming to terms with human limitations, is almost synonymous with the kinds of things learned by the main characters in Greek tragedy who, wiser and resigned, succumb in the end to the power of the gods. And surely Appel would not place Sophocles, Euripides or Aeschylus in the enemy camp!

Such limitations of argument as those listed above suggest a simplistic, "Pollyannaish" attitude behind Appel's thesis. This seems painfully true when he places the Joseph Conrad of *The Heart of Darkness* in the enemy camp. Yes, art should be life-affirming and in the end serve the community. But one of the ways it is an "objective correlative of our need" is that it probes the nihilistic shadows that are projected by the sunlit buildings which uplift our spirits.

Whether Appel changes our attitude toward (and our expectations of) art only the hourglass of fashion will show. But it is a shame that so noble and important a thesis should be marred by so fanciful a set of proofs.

MORTON MARCUS

Continued on next page.