

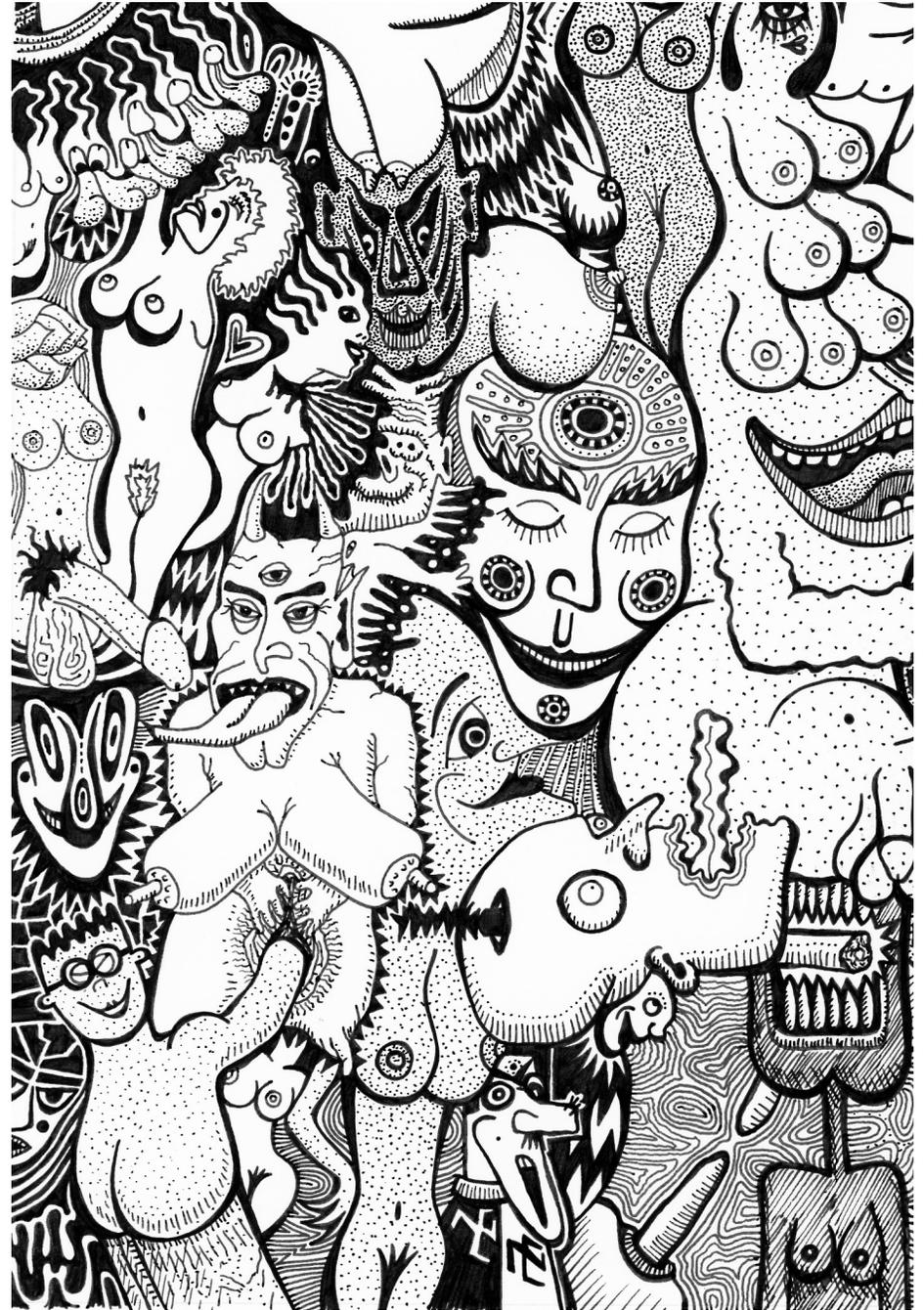
THE COMBINE PLOT



Frank Moore began doing private, erotic performances in the early 70's, which have developed into long ritualistic pieces, public events, experimental theater, and tacky and outrageous cabaret, as seen in the film "Mondo New York". Moore creates books, videos, and musical recordings as well. He has taught at U.C. Berkeley and is an N.E.A. Fellowship recipient.

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For months I have been thinking about writing a piece about what I call the plot of fragmentation. It would be about the aspect of the plot that focuses on making us think that to do anything meaningful, to be an effective force for change, you have to reach a large number of people, commonly known as THE MASSES or THE MASS MARKET. I was going to talk about how this aspect of the plot has limited art by making artists and galleries think that to reach this market, or at least a fraction of it, artists have to reach levels of educational, technical, and marketing skills which are set by, and acceptable to, the real world of mass communications.

Moreover, the subject matter was set to certain “in fashion” areas such as AIDS, feminism, the homeless, the environment, etc...what are “in fashion” subjects keep changing every six months or a year (obviously, the homeless people did not get homes nor did people stop dying of AIDS...rather, the glamour attention-span wears off and the focus quickly switches before things crack through the surface into the uncomfortable depth of universals where issues explode, leaving us trying to live together).

This aspect of the plot leads artists on a chase of college degrees, of skills to operate high-tech art-making machines, of money or positions that will give them the opportunity to do art, even when the style, the subject matter, and maybe the content of the art is dictated by this chase, by the combine plot.

This was what I was planning to write about. I was going to call it THE PLOT OF BIGNESS. But the plot has overtaken me during my thinking about the article. I see in the press that Sen. Jesse Helms and Rep. Dana Rohrabacher have nominated me, along with Annie Sprinkle, Karen Finley, Johanna Went, Cheri Gaulke, as well as other unnamed artists, to be the next target in their war on art. By doing so, Dana and Jesse have given us artists a platform from which to fight the plot. Because doing battle with the combine plot is one of the main functions of an artist, I am flattered to be nominated as one of the top ten on the new McCarthy hit list. I was feeling left out. All my heroes in the past were banned, jailed, harassed for their work. Artists such as Finley who I respect have been fighting the censors for years. My ego was crushed when I saw Rohrabacher on CNN label Annie Sprinkle a threat to the established moral order. After all, my work is as threatening as hers. But days later, someone sent me the NEW YORK CITY TRIBUNE (Feb. 5) special report that named names, and my name was there. What a relief! I only wish Dana and Jesse had invited me to testify. Jesse, I am available.

I know the last paragraph sounds like light humor...not taking the war seriously. It is a serious war with the high stakes of freedom and liberty for everyone. But you must understand the nature of the combine plot. It does not under-

stand humor or the personal level. It can crush you if you operate by the mass rules and try to fight it on its terms. But once you drop out of the mass headset, the plot becomes very fragile, very threatened. This is why the plot's Helms is after me and you. Because of this, my article is forced to take on a larger scope and a certain nonlinear quality. Please bear with it.

To understand what is really going on under this “sex” witch-hunt, it is important to understand the nature of the general plot of fragmentation, the combine plot. I took the word “combine” from the novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey. In the book, the combine is a fear machine network which secretly installed pacemakers of fear, doubt, and mistrust in almost everyone in childhood. This made people much easier to control. It isolates people into cells padded with fear and doubt, making the people part of the combine. There are some misfits whom the combine missed with its fear pacemakers. In others, the fear pacemakers blow their fuses. These people without the fear pacemakers are very dangerous to the combine because if they are not checked, destroyed, discredited, isolated, or enfolded into the combine, they can show others how to blow out their own fear pacemakers, can show others how to be free humans linked to other free humans. The combine rarely has to directly destroy the misfits itself. Just direct eliminations would reveal the existence of the combine. So such direct eliminations are kept to the minimum. The real tool of the combine is a vague sense of uncomfortableness, of inferiority, and of mistrust within the victims of the combine. The setting of the novel is a mental ward in which most of the patients are self-committed. They believe themselves weak, unable to cope with the outside world. They believe the fear comes from themselves, not from the pacemakers. They just have to start believing in themselves, and they could pull out the pacemakers and walk out of the hospital. But every time they reach this threshold of freedom, the combine, by clever remote manipulation, turns up the vague uncomfortableness and mistrust. The victims themselves do the destroying of the misfit either in themselves or that con man pied piper who laughs at their fears and limits, who shows them the way to freedom. It is the victims who do most of the censoring.

One of the main functions of art is to be that misfit who reveals and fights against the combine, to show the way back to freedom and self-trust. This misfit function of art is the real target of this attack of the combine in the form of Jesse and Dana.

The sexual layer of the attack is a misleading ploy. As Lisa Duggan says in her excellent article in the October 1989 ARTFORUM on the history of this attack of art, “sex panics, witchhunts, and Red scares are staples of American History...they have been enthusiastically taken up by powerful groups in an effort to impose a rigid orthodoxy on the majority.” Understand, each of the layers of

the attack are important and must be met directly and with full-force. The use of sex censorship to disguise political censorship is recent in our history, starting in the 19th century. It is based on our puritan national background. It depends on the belief that sex is somehow innately bad, or at least suspect. So if you want to shut someone up, it is easier if you can paint the issue in sexual terms...better yet, in terms of sexual deviance. Then the people who should stand up and full force beat back this threat, are strangely silent, strangely half-hearted. My liberal Senator Alan Cranston replied to my letter about the Mapplethorpe/N.E.A. issue by saying he (Cranston) is totally against Helms' attempts at censorship, but that the N.E.A. did make mistakes which needed to be looked into, making sure it does not happen again. With friends like this, who needs Helms!

THE VILLAGE VOICE defended my work from Helms just on the grounds that I am physically disabled. I have not figured out the logic of that even now. Duggan says, if you are banned as sexually deviant, "No one will defend your action, only your right to due process and a good lawyer."

There is a martial arts principle that when you are attacked, that is the point that you have most force potential. This is because you can combine the opposing force with your own, and reshape this new, more powerful force into your advantage. Helms has given us an opening to create a greater freedom. I refuse to defend my work from charges of obscenity. There is no such thing as sexual obscenity. It is an undefinable concept invented to limit freedom and to promote the established moral order. If I protest that my work is not obscene, I would be admitting the valid existence of sexual obscenity. There is nothing wrong with using sex, nudity, and all the bodily functions as art. It is time to do away with the legal concept of sexual obscenity once and for all...and for good. Dana and Jesse are just giving us artists an opening to accomplish this.

But sex is just the top layer of this attack. Sex is what Communism was in the McCarthy Era. In the 50's, people thought those who were blacklisted for being Communists or fellow travelers somehow deserved to be blacklisted, were asking to be blacklisted by going too far. People thought it was O.K. to sign the loyalty oath, O.K. to not hire the blacklisted, O.K. to play along with the corrupt system...O.K. because they were not and never had been Reds.

But what they did not understand was that the real focus was not Communism, but controlling power. The same is true today. Let us peel away the layers.

I have not heard anyone talk about the visual beauty of "Piss Christ"...only about Serrano's right to do "obscene" and "blasphemous" art. In our society in which the church and state are supposed to be separate, any attempt by the governmental agency to label images and subjects as "blasphemous" and "sacrilegious"...

or, for that matter, "sacred" and "holy"...and act upon these labels, is intolerable. Religious material has been traditionally a rich vein of artistic inspiration, whether the art itself is religious, anti-religious, or using symbols from religion in a non-religious context. This is a basic artistic and religious freedom which must not be taken away.

Why Serrano is on the hit list is because his images are seen by some to be anti-Christ or anti-Christian. I think this religious layer of the attack on artistic freedom is as deep, if not deeper, than the sexual layer. In the "Name Names" special report on "Funds Descending into Cesspool of 'Art' Filth," the right wing N.Y.C. TRIBUNE listed five objectionable performance artists (Annie Sprinkle, Karen Finley, Johanna Went, Cheri Gaulke and myself). An interesting pattern appeared. All five use trance process in our art; all five can be considered to be shamanistic. By reading this article, it became clear that this layer is not a coincidence. There are many artists who use sex and nudity in their art. What set these five apart is their use of trance, of ritual, of the body, of taboo to create a magical social change. This is also true for the "Modern Primitives" exhibition. What this reveals is that "sexual obscenity" is just a cover for the religious, artistic, and political battles. We are on the list not because we are sexually obscene...but because our intention is not to just sexually arouse. And that is what is threatening to the combine.

Under this religious layer, there is the political layer. As V. Vale and Andrea Juno, whose RE/SEARCH PUBLICATIONS is under the Jesse/Dana investigation, said in their open letter in the S.F. CHRONICLE (March 23, 1990): "Art is not always comfortable to society. One of the major powers of art is to stimulate dialogue on psychological and other issues society neglects...is it just a coincidence that the victims on Helms' 'investigation' are all members of oppressed communities? Mapplethorpe was gay, Annie Sprinkle, Karen Finley (Cheri Gaulke), and Johanna Went are women dealing frankly with sexuality. With such groups now finding their voices in society, it must strike fear in the hearts of Helms and his ilk." It is important to see the attack as a tactic in the movement to "Repress anything controversial: to get rid of the 'fringes' and purge the country of eccentricity, cultural diversity and minority identity," to again use the words of Vale and Juno.

Truth is the N.E.A. controversy is just a move in a game for political power. It is not really about defunding the N.E.A.. Even though the N.E.A. does a lot of good, it is one of the best ways that the combine powers have to control the arts. The issue of defunding the N.E.A. is a ploy to direct the attention of both artists and the general public away from what is really going on. Dana and Jesse, and the forces behind them, have no intention of cutting or killing the N.E.A.. It would make no political sense. It would be like a drug pusher threatening to cut off the junkie's supply. The pusher will not permanently cut off drugs to the junkie...

unless it is as a warning to other junkies. The drugs are the pusher's control over the junkie. The N.E.A. money is the medium of the combine's control over artists and their art.

The threat of killing the N.E.A., the cutting funds, creates a manageable flap to focus people's attention upon, to drain artists' protesting energy into, and to set up a dummy issue. Then when the peak of outrageousness in this media event has passed, a "compromise" is offered. The N.E.A. will not be done away with. There will be money for the arts. Artists will be painted as winners. Of course, there is a price for this "victory". The "compromise" will be new rules, both spelled out and hidden, willingly accepted by artists. These rules, these fears, these limits will make artists agents for the established order. This is the real goal of the combine.

This real goal and the basic dishonesty of the plot that Jesse and Dana represent becomes increasingly clearer the closer we look under the surface. In the CNN piece on his attack on Annie Sprinkle, Dana said he does not want to censor this "obscene" art...he just wants artists to do this kind of art on their time and money, not on the government's. This would be outrageous in itself. But it is a lie. The real goal of this attack is to make all art, not just N.E.A. funded art, the agent for established order, to deball all art, to tame down all art.

Annie, Vale and Juno, and some other artists on the hit list have not received a penny from N.E.A. money. The Kitchen, which does get N.E.A. funding, did not use any of that money for the Sprinkle show. Dana's logic for wanting to cut the Kitchen's government funding is: since the N.E.A. sponsors some of the Kitchen's programs, it enables the Kitchen to produce on its own other shows, some of which may be objectionable to the N.E.A./Combine. Since the N.E.A. indirectly supports these independent productions, it can express its displeasure of these independent productions by cutting the funds to the offending gallery or artist.

We have seen this line of mislogic before. What comes to mind is the forbidding of federally funded family planning centers from talking with their clients about the abortion option. After all, historically in America, abortion and birth-control have been tied with obscenity.

The message is clear: eliminate controversial, experimental, and avant-garde art. This purely artistic level of the attack by those who do not care about art is revealed in the TRIBUNE article. The elimination of the politically and artistically controversial work is to make the N.E.A. into a vague system of rewards and punishments based on "correctness" ... be it political, religious, artistic, or sexual/moral. The example of this reward/punishment system is the threat by the



N.E.A. to withdraw a \$10,000 grant to ARTISTS' SPACE for a show about AIDS because of an essay in the catalog criticizing Jesse and other public officials. The N.E.A. chair John Frohnmeyer tried to justify this by saying, "Political discourse ought to be in the political arena and not in a show sponsored by the endowment." This outrageous attempt to limit the scope of art makes it clear that John is no friend of art. It is also clear that obscenity and N.E.A. defunding are smoke screens.

Let me put it bluntly. What we have here is another McCarthy era. Jesse is losing his favorite enemy, the Communists, which he has used as an excuse for trying to limit personal freedoms. Dana needs an issue to make his reputation on. And John just wants to keep his job. When the outside enemy began to crumble with the Berlin Wall, they looked inside for new enemies to sink their teeth into. First, they focused on the war on drugs. Although that was a good start for invasion of privacy with drug testing and "Just say no" ... after all, drug pushers make

great bad guys ... it was too limited. Same was true with abortion. But suppression of expression under the guise of a war against obscenity opens a wide range of possibilities.

Understand, I am using Helms, Rohrabacher, and Frohnmayer as symbols; as they are using me and the other artists on the hit list as symbols. And frankly they are easy targets. They are dishonest men who do not really care about art or morality. They are not the real culprits. The real culprits are us artists, us liberals. It was us who opened the door to the Helms attack by surrendering the artist's control of art over to what is called "politically correct." When feminists tried to ban artists such as Karen Finley from art shows because of using objectionable words and images, when blacks, gays, and the disabled tried to change the stereotypes by trying to censor them out of existence, it gave Helms the opening he needed. The only real way to get rid of evil, bad, stupid stereotypes and ideas is to give them freedom of expression in an open marketplace of ideas where all ideas have equal access to people. This requires the trust and the faith that the truth will be ultimately chosen.

I am a slow typist. As I write this, events have overtaken me. The combine has struck again with its remote control of fear and with its drugs of bigness and money. The Cleveland Public Theatre Performance Art Festival had invited me to do my "Journey to Lila" ritualistic piece with audience participation. Two weekends before I was to perform, the city's vice squad sat in on the festival's show of Annie Sprinkle and made it clear that if she did certain things which are regular parts of her art, she and the director of the festival would be arrested. For personal, practical reasons, Annie decided to change her act.

We should be outraged that the vice squad came. We should be outraged against the government undercover spying on art and theater, against the use of a bad law in a manner it was not intended, against what makes it impossible for us to see truly free art and theater in this festival. There was a lot of pressure on me from the festival director to not be unreasonable, to give up control of the art over to some political game.

(I need to make a distinction between the festival and the Cleveland Public Theatre. The festival is an event that takes place at the theatre for two months, once a year. The festival director, Tom Mulready, is not a regular member of the theatre organization's staff. Any references here to the festival and/or its director refer only to the festival and its director and do not reflect in any way on the Cleveland Public Theatre or its director and staff. I found the Cleveland Public Theatre Director and staff to be a great example of what a group of people can do when they are committed to art.)

The law was used in a very strange way. The law says performers and their audience cannot touch one another on certain so-called erogenous zones. In ritualistic audience participatory performances in general and in my work in particular, this prohibition destroys any hope of doing the work. As I write this, I do not have copies of all of Cleveland's laws that are wrongly being applied to works of art. I do not know if there are laws in Cleveland against nudity in performance. But it is clear it is not possible for me to do the art without getting arrested or seriously compromising the integrity of the art. I am not willing to do this. I am willing to be arrested for the art.

I would understand if the director did not want to get arrested along with my company. After all, the curator in Cincinnati is facing a possible five-year sentence for having the Mapplethorpe exhibition. Most people do not have that kind of courage. If that was the fear, I would have created with the festival an artistic protest against the law that would have neither broken the law nor compromised.

But it was not fear of arrest, but the fear of losing funding, fear of how the festival would look, fear of inconvenience. The focus was how to protect the festival, its size, its importance, its financial health. What was right for the art was forgotten. In fact, both the art and the artist became nuisances to be dealt with, to be sacrificed. The headset is it is the duty for artists and for every citizen to obey the law, even admittedly unjust laws. After all, it was stated by the director that he, Mulready, is not Martin Luther King. King, Jefferson, Gandhi, and all of the artists and just plain folk who broke unjust laws in order to evolve things to a better place are turning over in their graves. This is one of the main functions of art. It was stated by Mulready that it is impossible to present in Cleveland what is presented in big cities such as New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco ... but we have also done the same performances in small cities such as Denver, Buffalo, and Rochester.

He said it as if this situation is acceptable, if regrettable, in the Midwest. This attitude places the festival in the role of being the agent of the established order, rather than on the side of change. I was told by Mulready that this kind of art would be shown privately in Cleveland. But the festival could not be remotely linked to it unless the art is mutilated to fit the status quo. I kept being told to think of what the festival gives me and the other artists in terms of money and exposure. I should not blow it. What is forgotten in all of this is if the art is not intact, if the content of art is not firmly in the hands of the artists, then artists, art festivals, art galleries and theaters, and even art itself will become just window-dressing for the established order. I am thinking of the artists. If I gave up control of the art directly or indirectly either to the vice squad or this festival, I would be putting a frame of untruth around the artists and the audiences of the Festival. I will not do that.

After two days of pressuring me to change my performance, Mulready suddenly reversed his position. He did not do it from a flash of integrity, but because he was getting pressure from both inside the Cleveland Public Theatre and the national art community. I did the performance as it was originally created without incident.

The combine plot has Mulready hooked on the drug of bigness, on the funding habit. In our talks on the crisis over my performance, things were talked about in terms of how big the festival was, how the funding could not be risked now that the Festival has reached this level of size and importance. Hidden within this is the pacemaker of fear that the combine can use by remote control. This drug of bigness is why, to get N.E.A. money, artists are signing what amounts to a loyalty oath to the established order, agreeing to not do patently offensive work. The combine can only pull off this slow giving up of the artists' control by using the drug of bigness and the pacemaker of fear.

It is easy to get hooked on the drug of bigness, as I found out when I received an N.E.A. fellowship for \$5,000 in the early 80's. I had been doing art, performance and theater for about ten years with little or no money. So the N.E.A. money was just extra money. I soon noticed the work shifted from human-intensive to a more money-intensive focus. This shift was slight because I work on a small grassroots scale. But the scale began to expand. In a way, this expanding scale was fun, exciting, glamorous. But the change did not organically come from the art. Moreover, as my N.E.A. year drew to a close, I became more and more anxious about where I would get more money, thinking about applying for more grants, worrying about what I could not do if I did not get more grants. All of this took away from the art. It made me much more vulnerable to compromise, much more likely to become a part of the combine. The old richness of possibilities and alternatives began to dry up, being funneled into a possibility of grants. One day I began to wonder how I could have done art for all those years, and now I was full of fear. I decided to not play the grant game.

If this addiction can happen to an artist like me, who operates on the small scale, I can only imagine what a temptation of addiction someone like the festival director, Mulready, has to cope with. But when the drug of bigness and fear of losing funds compromise art, it is time to protest ... it is time to bring it all back down to the basic core of the artistic experience which is the art coming directly through the artist to the society without any censoring influences, so that art can cause evolution in the society. It is extremely dangerous when artists sign loyalty oaths to the established order to become paid agents, when art festivals and galleries find it acceptable for vice squads to spy on art and theater, to use blue laws to forbid art.

To fight back this full-scale attack on creative expression, the attack that may surpass that of the McCarthy era, we artists must be willing to make sacrifices to become independent of the combine. Many galleries and performance companies have died when their grants were cut. This is because bigness and money-intensive art which grants promote drain possibilities from us, blind us to the possibilities that are outside the combine. It has become increasingly important for us artists to start devolving art back to the human personal scale and away from high-tech mass bigness. This devolution will create alternatives that our society needs, and which is the function of art.

I usually perform at grassroots spaces which have created independent alternatives to the combine. For example, Karen Briede ran a multi-level visual and performance gallery in Denver. She brought in nationally known but controversial artists by using the money she made in her hair salon. She was always selling art to her hair clients. She now is having nationally important exhibitions in her apartment in Chicago. In Seattle, A.F.L.M. (A FLIMSY LACE NIGHTIE) is doing the same thing by being a coffee house during the day and a gallery by night.

In these and other similar small places, cutting-edge art finds homes because people like Karen personally take risks for the art. But as Martha Wilson of FRANKLIN FURNACE has shown, it is possible for established galleries to show controversial art. It is extremely important that both artists and art administrators be willing to lose everything, including funding, in order to save freedom. This is the only way we will win back our full freedom from the combine, take back our full range of possibilities.

I want to close this by quoting from a letter from Kyle Griffith, an author. The Combine "is counting on the majority of creative people to stay on the sidelines until the anti-art movement gains real support among the general public, saying 'Well, my work isn't that controversial, so why should I take the trouble to support a bunch of really hard-core people who are deliberately asking for trouble from the blue noses, anyway?'" The combine plot "encourages consumer art while discouraging all art forms that turn the consumers of art into artists themselves. What people like you are REALLY being attacked for is drawing the audience, the art consumer, into the creative process."