"The artist is valuable to us when he turns up virgin soil, when he intuitively breaks into a sphere where logic and statistics would find it hard to penetrate..." LUNACHARSKY. (1)

* RICHARD CORNISH is an artist, and part-time lecturer in History of Art, Aesthetics and Philosophy at the National Art School in Newcastle.

Picasso is dead.

For artists a certain security has been lost. At the topmost parts of their heads they know now that they will have to create the future of art themselves -- if they can. That no one, not even those who are seemingly immortal, can do it for them.

We now look at Picasso’s paintings differently. Awareness of his death puts his work in a new light. Complete now, it
can evolve no further. No small word or deed of the artist can influence it. Picasso's creative overflowing has become contained by time and history.

Like a fountain in Malaga bursting water that has now become frozen.

Changes in our understanding of the artist's work will in future come from outside -- from society and its shifting values. Much of the meaning of Picasso's work will be governed by interpretation.

The artist is more vulnerable than is often thought. His work is in a sense open-ended. For example the sixteenth century Mannerists have risen in importance only with the frustration, anxiety and intellectualism of the twentieth century. El Greco's greatness for us now lies in the similar despair of our two centuries. Other artists like Murillo have fallen in significance as the twentieth century has come to suspect sentimentality... Once dead, then, the artist becomes more than ever prey to varieties of interpretation, with no right of reply, tossed about by prevailing social currents.

The more significant an artist is, the more he is a gauge of the thought and feelings of his time. Picasso is tremendously important. He starts in his youth as a virtuoso, doing magnificent things in paint; eventually to become the acknowledged master in the West until he dies at the remarkable age of ninety-one (two years older than Michaelangelo; eight years younger than Titian).

Picasso's life and art range over a violent and dynamic era. Interwoven between his creations in stone and paint and ink are the smoke and groans of world wars, shattering discoveries in science, resistance and revolutions, Dada and Surrealism, the new permissiveness and the old conservatism. Picasso lived through it all. He was forced to find harmony in an age that forbade it.

In this he is similar to Bertolt Brecht. Both artists in their epic scale parallel the age they lived through. Both were strangely instinctual, sensitive to the desperation in their changing world. To the black alienation of the pre-war years, to the masses of European victims, and all the horror fading in the new exhilaration of peace and hopes for a new world.

Hope was as sweet to Brecht as a plum tree and a son, to Picasso as a young girl dancing in blue air under the curve of her skipping rope.

Both were filled with an essential humanity. Picasso was part of a generation that could be considered courageous. As an artist he faced problems that now seem insoluble. Born in the last century and maturing in the 1920s, his generation formed in the visual arts the main aesthetic modes that are still with us. Picasso, Munch, Kokoschka and Matisse, Leger to Braque, Chagall, Dali through to Klee and the Constructivists ... they had courage because they tackled all the new subjects of art, and with a bold and forceful imagination.

Picasso was one who could encompass within his range all the new developments, in a way and on a scale that now seem impossible. We seem to have had a failure of nerve. The new iconoclasts are so often technological specialists, followers of fashion, or simply splashing around in their own therapy. Sociological developments have put new pressures on style and manner. As capitalism commercialises and commodity-ises all the little fragments of people that are left. Picasso protested against this:

"Nowadays, people talk about painting in the same way as they do about mini-skirts. Next season it'll be longer, or it'll have a fringe." (2)

The value of Picasso for us is that he is an example of a man of passionate creativity, of vast synthetic genius, of great humility. As an artist he could move between great emotional and conceptual extremes -- could sing a hymn to man, feel personally violated by injustices. He painted harlequines and sadness, in reds and blues he could combine lyrical revelations of love with the moist truth of sex. He was stimulated by the power of paradox, the processes of death, of steel and battle, of white mornings and darkness. The bullfights and the bull-fighter, the tension between female and male. Albanian landscapes and the fine features of a wife. His definite blacks. Even in his old age he could be moved by a child learning to write. The lines of Brecht's praise of learning could be put under many of Picasso's paintings:
"My young son asks me 'should I study history?'
I tell him 'no, what is there to learn?
Bury your head in the sand, my son,
maybe then you will not burn...
No! my son, study mathematics,
study French, study history,
Learn!'"

In Picasso there is the same kind of human tenderness, so rare in painting now. It is the positive refusal to be brutalised.

Another quality of Picasso that is important to us in the movement comes from his method of spiritual survival. Between the lover and the rebel (both romantic in basis) is a deeper, blacker persona -- the jester. Not the comic anglo-saxon kind, but Spanish and dressed in the color of shadow, covered with stars. Brecht too played the part of the clown, but he kept mainly to the sardonically grinning revolutionary-cum-scientist. Picasso's use of a jester persona helped protect him from the harsh angles of his age. As his friend Paul Eluard wrote:

"It is the harsh law of men to keep themselves untouched in spite of wars and wretchedness, With his persona Picasso could joke, be witty about himself, create paradoxes with a smile on his face. Do tricks with his pen, or with electric torches in the air, for films. Or he could make parodies of great artists of the past, amusing himself with imitations of their styles, as comic comment. He did this most of his life. And he performed for the press with a true jester's irreverence for authorities.

In another sense, Picasso can be likened to Charlie Chaplin. Both created a persona of the "little man" -- pulling larger immortals down to earth and to human scale. Chaplin satirised Hitler while Picasso did a portrait of Stalin, the man of steel. But Picasso would often drop the jester's mask and revert to the moral seriousness of the indignant romantic -- as in the Guernica, Korean massacre, war and peace themes. Perhaps Chaplin's tramp is more objective than Picasso's jester -- we are not interested in Chaplin's private life as we are in Picasso's. The mask of the painter is more metaphysical.

Picasso's masks and guises were so fluid that he is hard to pin down. At times the persona is extremely Spanish, and mystical. As he follows the processes of life and death, of sexual vigor and ageing, of individuality and role-playing, we are often not sure which side he is on. Optimism and life force or the other? He seems so often to come out in a jesting statement on the side of anarchy and death. But his contradictoriness seems to be a method for challenging our presumptions. Again he can be compared with Brecht in his intensity:

"He who is defeated cannot but discover wisdom. Hold on to yourself and sink, be afraid, but sink. At the bottom the lesson awaits you." (4)

Both artists prise with their imaginative fingernails into the shell of appearances -- to dig into the essentials of things. Often intuitively, without the aid of accepted logic or "sense." They use their persona to investigate processes, and how these are related to human values. Like Chaplin's, their approach is profoundly dialectical.

The tragi-comic mask of Picasso the jester helped him to survive, to remain intact during one of the periods of most total fragmentation known to man. When even to face reality required tremendous courage. Picasso is reported to have said:

"One has the impression that everyone is horribly afraid of reality. If there's the tiniest bit of it people are horrified and get rid of it..." (5)

Caught between violent pressures the artist has often been violent on himself. Hence the enormous number of suicides since Van Gogh blew his brains out in the yellow cornfields of southern France. Industrialisation brought romanticism and despair. It may seem strange to say that one of Picasso's great virtues was to have survived, and in that survival to have continued to create. Like most of the romantics and their subsequent schools, Picasso felt like an exile in the twentieth century. An emigre without a culture or a people. And classless. For one short period he seems to have found authenticity and transcendence in the French communist party. They were good years when he said:

"I ... found the best people there ... I have always been an exile now I am no longer one ... I approached the commun-
ist party as a child might approach a fountain." (6)

And he no doubt was moved by his friend Eluard’s lines:

“‘They were only a few over the whole earth each thought himself alone. They used to sing, they were right to sing, but they sang how people pillage -- how people kill themselves...’” (7)

We don’t know how long the depth of feeling lasted, how long Picasso found himself a place in the communist party. There were problems on both sides. Many of the French Stalinists were pursuing a line of moralising naturalism in art and seemed insensitive to Picasso’s predicament as an artist and a man.

Yet a great part of the conflict lay with Picasso himself. He was a rebel rather than a revolutionary. An anarchist before a Marxist. He had spent most of his life being “against” various forces, and had less clearly defined what he was “for.” Picasso’s rebellion was mainly instinctive.

John Berger (8) has rightly described him as a “vertical invader”; he had great talent and was threatened by all forms of violence. Picasso was an anarchist twisting and turning to find transcendence. His rebellious qualities never had the reasoned edge of Brecht’s. While he passionately followed the threads of processes he could never use Marxist schema for interpreting them. Except for what began with cubism -- and this is a mighty exception -- there is little concrete system-building in Picasso’s work, very little creation of new conventions for others to follow and take the next step. There is more emphasis on “Picassoness.” There are great innovations in stylistic expression of course, but he never became, as Brecht did, in Marxist terms, an architect of the new sensibility.

In a way Picasso was still vulnerable despite his jester’s persona and his passionate romantic indignation. Berger’s argument is that Picasso should have left the decadence of bourgeois Europe and gone to the third world, there to participate in the new flashes of reason and revelation among people in their anti-colonial struggles. There he could have found the themes of which his genius was capable. Picasso’s art needed great themes.

Among Picasso’s last great work is the artist and his model. He began the series in 1954 and each painting forms a history -- of frustration and despair. The model that stands omnipotent before the artist and is unattainable. She is immortal beauty, yet the old artist can only concentrate on trying to draw her, instead of loving her in flesh. Art is here portrayed as single-minded, yet life is complex and rich. The whole series is an expression of the vanities of vanity. There in black ink is a revealing of conscience, of one to whom the whole world has gone stale. In each subsequent drawing the artist becomes more and more absurd. First he adds a mask (showing too how conscious Picasso was of his persona); then the model too puts on a mask. Thus they stare at each other. Paradoxes in identity and in life are suggested. At the end of the series the artist becomes a baboon, seated impotently in front of marvellously naked, unreachable beauty.

The artist with all his talent and cunning has been reduced to pure instinct, to desperate stupidity. It reminds one of the lines spoken at last by Shakespeare’s Prospero:

“Gentle breath of yours my sails Must fill, or else my project fails, Which was to please. Now I want Spirits to enforce, art to enchant; And my ending is despair...”

Was Picasso finally despairing? Was his massive outpouring of drawings, sculpture, paintings a form of ceaseless activity without making significant discoveries? The artist himself once claimed he had discovered nothing. Was this an expression of despair? Yet in a world of evolving one-dimensional people, Picasso is an example of a man who could still -- in an individual way -- enjoy the totality of processes. This seems to me a profoundly hopeful thing.

FOOTNOTES

(2) “Picasso Says...” p. 114.
(4) p. 233 (translated from French).
(5) “Brecht,” by Ronald Grey, p. 84.
(7) Ibid.
(8) Ibid.