COMMENTARY ON THE PAPERS BY
RUDICH, SAN JUAN, AND MORAWSKI
by George Dickie

My appearance here today is a total instance of fraud, because I told Mr. Baxandall when he phoned me that I didn't know anything about the topic. But he didn't seem to mind. So I will try to be accommodating; it was an instance of moral weakness on my part. Later, it occurred to me in my innocence that maybe that's what he wanted.

Professor San Juan's and Professor Rudich's papers are, in a way, very similar. San Juan's paper, however, is essentially a work in cultural history together with a plea for artists to use their work to support the class struggle. This leaves an aesthetician commentator very little to say, because there are no philosophical arguments in the paper to analyze and praise or blame. Of course, there are other characteristics an historian or sociologist might be able to comment on. I am not able to.

Professor Rudich, however, presents a veritable tangle of arguments which invite analysis. Most generally, Rudich seems to want to draw the conclusion that a certain kind of art (that with a particular kind of content) flows from the very nature of aesthetic production. More specifically, Rudich first develops an argument about aesthetic production; second, he makes a statement of the nature of art; third, he develops an argument about art as aesthetic production, contrasts it with art which is not aesthetic production, and concludes that the two kinds of art are very different with regard to their subject matter or content. In both of these arguments it is argued that art under capitalism takes on a certain form and a certain content.

I am not at all sure that I have really understood Prof. Rudich's arguments. My main problem is the marxist terminology, of which I am most ignorant, in which his arguments are stated. I have tried to translate his arguments into relatively ordinary English and to then evaluate them. But since I am not very familiar with the original language, I may be evaluating arguments which I simply made up in the presence of Prof. Rudich's paper.

I shall now try to reproduce Prof. Rudich's arguments as a single, continuous argument consisting of seven propositions:

1. Production, in which the making of the product is not dictated by practical necessity, is aesthetic production. (Justification is the definition of aesthetic production.)

2. Art is the sensuous representation of the affairs of human beings. (Justification is the definition of art.)

3. Art, as aesthetic production, is the sensuous representation of human affairs not dictated by practical necessity. (Justification is derived from 1 and 2.)
4. In order to express himself fully, a person must be able to produce art not directed by practical necessity, i.e., art as aesthetic production. (Step 4 does not appear to be a step required for the larger argument and perhaps I should not have formulated it. Justification: unclear.)

5. Under capitalism, men produce art dictated by practical necessity, i.e., dictated by the market. (Justification of this proposition, presumably, is a fact.)

6. Art dictated by the market is not in accord with generic human needs. (Justification is unclear to me.)

7. This is the main conclusion and it presumably derives from the previous steps: Art as aesthetic production will be art which will accord with generic human needs, i.e., will concern basic economic and social needs.

First, a theoretical point. It is not clear to me why art not dictated by practical necessity, i.e., art as aesthetic production, must concern generic human needs. Why, for example, couldn’t a painter not motivated by practical necessity paint a nonobjective design which has nothing to do with generic human needs? Admittedly, a painter might paint such a design with the practical concern of satisfying a market demand, but then he might not. The main point is that there does not seem to be any necessary connection between aesthetic production, i.e., producing art not under the dictates of practical necessity, and producing art with a particular content. Of course, it might be that the production of art not dictated by practical necessity, together with some other condition or conditions, might necessitate the production of art with a particular content. Rudich, however, does not seem to be arguing in this way.

Second, a factual point. I do not believe that under capitalism, for example in the United States at present, that all art is dictated by the market. Perhaps the great bulk of the art produced in the United States is to one degree or another dictated by the market, but surely not all of it is. It is, by the way, a mistake to speak of the market; there are a number of distinct markets. Even so, a number of artists turn out their work quite independently of a market. Prof. Rudich might decide to say (or perhaps is saying) that some art created under capitalism can or does have the relevant particular kind of content. This weaker claim seems much more plausible than the strong claim that no such art can be produced under capitalism. He is free to make the weaker claim—he could say that some individuals are able to resist the pressures of a capitalist environment and create art not dictated by practical necessity.

It may also seem that Prof. Rudich is also free to make the weaker claim that some art as aesthetic production does not necessarily have a particular kind of content. But if he were to admit this or is saying this, he would lose or loses the special relationship between aesthetic production and a particular kind of content which he seems to be arguing for.

Kaneko Kenzō in Theatre Center production of Abe Sada’s Dog by Satō Makoto. Photo by David Goodman. (detail)
Professor Morawski's paper is quite different from the other two papers in that until shortly before the end of the paper, there is no clue that it has any relation to marxism. In fact, I think the paper would have been more successful if the rather vague marxist speculation at the end had been left off and Morawski's very penetrating analysis of the nature of anti-art developed at greater length. Let me note parenthetically that Morawski's paper would have made a very nice contribution to the American Society for Aesthetics symposium on anti-art last year at the Sarasota meeting.

Professor Morawski's paper divides into four parts. In the first part he discusses the challenge to and rejecting of art by the avant-garde. In the second part he explains why this challenge and rejection fails. In the third part Morawski purports to see the anti-art of the avant-garde as a development within affluent, post-industrial societies which signals a desire "to go beyond the society and art of class-conflicted industrial society," a desire which fails because the avant-garde lacks "constructive alternatives." In the fourth (very brief) part he seems to be saying that marxism provides the constructive alter-native to the desire expressed by the avant-garde (the desire to go beyond the society and art of class-conflicted industrial society), an alternative which will integrate work and art.

I have no quarrel with the first two parts of Prof. Morawski's paper. I believe he is right that the avant-garde fails to kill art and that its own creations turn out to be art. Harold Rosenberg put this matter nicely when he wrote (and I used this quote at Sarasota—and I shall perhaps find an occasion to use it again): "Painting today is a profession one of whose aspects is the pretense of overthrowing it. Once the vanguard myth has faded, the pretense that art is engaged in self-immolation will have to be dropped."

When I get to the third part of the paper, I have a difficult time ascertaining how much of a quarrel I have with it because at this point it becomes very loose and vague. How do we know that anti-art involves a desire to go beyond the society and art of class-conflicted society? Some of the Dadaists seem to have had such desires, if their public statements are to be believed. But what have happenings and conceptual art to do with class-conflict? A given happening might involve radical political elements—guerrilla theatre, for example—but happenings as such
Scene from A Funeral Dirge for An American Soldier, created by Andre Benedetto for the peace movement. Photo by Frances Ashley.

don't seem to be a protest against, say, class oppression. Morawski sees happenings and conceptual art as a symptom of a new cultural epoch. I suppose that he is right, but so far as I can see the new cultural epoch may very well take place entirely within the domain of art without having any broad social connections. Morawski does not produce arguments to support his assertion that happenings and conceptual art are motivated by desire for broad social change. I personally see a broad streak of goldfish-swallowing in anti-art. I would not, however, be so foolish as to say that this is the only thing involved.

In any event, we are brought to the fourth part of Morawski's paper by the alleged failure of anti-art to provide an alternative to class-conflict. In the last page and a quarter of the paper, he indicates what he apparently regards as the proper alternative to the class-conflict against which anti-art supposedly protests. This is the marxist vision of a society in which art and work are integrated into an organic whole, in which artistic creativity is extended to everyday activity.

But what do these slogans mean? How is art to be integrated with steel-making, with clerical filing, with garbage collecting, with teaching logic, etc., etc.? It would be easier to see what these slogans mean if examples could be pointed to. Is either present-day Russia or China a society in which art and work are integrated? Is Poland or Rumania an instance? Or is the state of affairs envisaged yet to be realized? Can it be realized, or can it only be closer and closer approached? If we had a clear idea of what the integration of art and work is, we would be in a position to see if it is a good thing; it might be a very bad thing.

If we had some idea of what the integration of art and work is, then we would also be in a better position to evaluate the implicit claim of the fourth part of the paper, namely, that a marxist regime is the best, perhaps the only way, of achieving such an integration. Perhaps it could be best, or only achieved, by democratic means, by fascism, or by some other political means.

In summary, I think this paper begins with a very nice (and specific) philosophical question—is anti-art art?—and draws some plausible and perceptive conclusions about that question. The paper then attempts to relate these conclusions to some elements of marxist social theory, but I think it fails to make the connection.