

● *Sister Corita, a native of Iowa and a member of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, teaches art at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles. Though perhaps best known for her imaginative and colorful print designs (several were displayed at the Vatican Pavilion of the New York World's Fair) she is also a painter and a muralist. (She decorated one of the walls of the entrance hall of the Vatican Pavilion.) A collection of Sister Corita's works will be on exhibit at the Morris Gallery in New York City this month. Adolf Gottlieb, a New Yorker, went to Paris at the age of seventeen because at that time (the twenties), he says "everybody who wanted to be an artist had to go to Paris." He finds, however, that today the center of gravity in art has shifted to New York. Mr. Gottlieb is a major reason for the change. He is one of the world's leading abstract expressionists and earlier this year won first prize at the São Paulo Biennale, a highly competitive and respected international exhibit. Ned O'Gorman is the moderator in the following discussion:*

What is art?

SISTER CORITA: If we call the person who is working at making things the artist, then the things he makes are art. He looks all around him and takes what interests him. Maybe this all happens subconsciously, or at least not with full consciousness. He doesn't say, I intend to make a picture, but as he looks, things get into him and he can accept them or reject them, depending upon what kind of a person he is. He is part of the stuff that is the material. It's hard to separate the material from the person making it.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I have a rather relativist point of view about art. Art to me is a process of self-discovery and I try to grow in conjunction with my paintings. Of course, I could make some generalizations, but I think that from my point of view, art is the expression of a person, which he makes as an individual. At the same time, if it merely expressed the uniqueness of the individual and weren't somewhat universal it wouldn't be very interesting.

SISTER CORITA: Could you explain what you mean when you say art is a process of self-discovery?

GOTTLIEB: I think I get an image which comes to me in some way that I don't understand. I have a special feeling about it, and when I get it down it seems to cor-

respond to a certain feeling I have. My intention is to make this feeling clear to myself and then if other people react to it there is communication. I am not interested in communicating with the masses, just with the few who will react to my work more or less in the same way I react to it myself.

SISTER CORITA: Do you think some people feel that it's important to communicate with the whole mass of people and others feel it's necessary only to communicate with a very few?

GOTTLIEB: Well, I think it's part of a very conscious act which is against our mass culture. If I could communicate the way our mass publications do I would feel that I were not an artist, that I was trying to reach some sort of common denominator, the lowest common denominator. That's what I think mass culture does, and I think that as an artist I ought to fight it.

SISTER CORITA: I think there's a difference between what you mean as an artist and what I mean as a school teacher. We work at art on two very different levels. I am a school teacher. I can understand what you're saying, but I feel very different. My job is very different. My business is to infiltrate the masses.

GOTTLIEB: I'd like to explain why I cannot become committed to your point of view. I feel that the artist must be dedicated to the highest standard of his work. And a teacher must be dedicated to teaching. I know that I've stepped on many toes by saying that I don't understand how someone can be a dedicated artist and a dedicated teacher at the same time. I think the two are mutually exclusive. I have done very little teaching, or anything else on the periphery of art, since I felt they would interfere with my painting. I think dedication in art means that one continually aspires to the highest possible standards, in the sense that a scientist tries to preserve the integrity of his field and work for the discovery of things about nature in the field of science.

SISTER CORITA: I always feel I'm a kind of bridge between my students and artists. I try to find out, as much as I can, what people like you are thinking. If I get a chance to talk to you — great. If not, I read what you have to say and look at what you're doing and try to understand it from the context of all the other things that are happening in the whole world. I try to see what this does to you and what you do to the rest of the world.

GOTTLIEB: Yes, I think that the whole process of art educa-

tion in this country has been developing an understanding and appreciation of art. In fact, it's been accelerating and snowballing, so that there is now a rather vast audience in the field of painting and also in acquiring things. Maybe someday we'll reach the point where, as in France, when a young couple gets married, they have to have an apartment, a bed, and a painting. (Though now I guess they have to have a rug, too.)

SISTER CORITA: Do you think there is any possibility that the ordinary things around us, which are now appearing in painting as art (whether you want to call it art or not), may be subtly working on the taste of people, putting questions in their minds about what they see everyday?

GOTTLIEB: I think your question is, do people become more at home with art as a result of seeing pop art which relates to everyday objects. I don't know — I don't want to make a value judgment about pop art. But I think that most of the artists of my generation, who are practicing today, helped educate people by sending paintings all over the country to exhibitions. This has done more to create an art public that understands something about painting than almost any other activity.

SISTER CORITA: Would you say that the artists of your caliber and your generation are working from the top down, through exhibitions or what-have-you, and that pop artists are working from the bottom up? Do you know what I mean?

GOTTLIEB: I think I know what you mean, but this happened once before during the period of social realism. Then the Communist party had a great deal to say about what was happening in art and they laid down the dictum that if the ideological concept of a work of art was what counts, they could determine what the proper content of the art was to be. It was to be something intelligible to every person. Of course, the stress was on the working man, and labor and anti-officialdom. I must say that I always felt very antagonistic to this point of view. If pop art were to try to perform that kind of function I think it would be worse than the social art that the Communists ordered, because the Communists at least were trying to make people unhappy about the imagined blissful state of capitalism. But pop art is trying to make people happy with Brillo boxes and I see that as a great joke.

SISTER CORITA: All right. I want to infiltrate society because the art instinct in man, even if it's only that you get enjoyment from something your fellow man has made beautifully, is essentially in everybody. It is a human thing. It's one of our human capabilities. Some people are more capable than others, certainly. But all the people whose capabilities have been ground under still have latent capabilities, ready to be touched and brought out. This seems to me the infiltration idea, that what you're doing is helping people to use their whole selves better. You know, their bodies, their spirit, their aspirations. I think we need to use all our human equipment, and especially

the kind that helps us to recognize beauty.

O'GORMAN: I had a conversation some years ago with an artist called Tancredi. He said to me, "Je deteste l'objet" — I hate the object. I think that many people who look at modern art are confused because they don't see objects in it. Or if they see objects, they know nothing about them. I think this fundamentally comes down to some notion about nature — not the nature of man, but just the physical universe. I think that's what confuses artists and what confuses the average man when he goes to the gallery. The average man goes to the gallery and he sees these things and he tries to connect them with nature but can't. What is your feeling about nature — nature the object?

GOTTLIEB: I must confess that I get slightly annoyed when people find astral objects and astral bodies in my paintings. Sometimes I can't deny that there is a resemblance — but it is not intentional. When the Whitney museum put on a show called "Nature and Abstraction," they asked for a statement and I told them — I think to their annoyance — that when I'm in the presence of nature, I never think of art, and when I paint I never think about nature. I think I spend more time with nature than many artists I know. I go out a great deal in a sailboat and am very much aware, like a farmer, what the weather is and what it's going to be, and all that sort of thing. So there are other reasons for my not wanting nature to appear in my paintings. I think there are autonomous developments in art and one of the autonomous developments is the exclusion of the object from painting. There are historical reasons for this, I think. I don't like nature in the sense of Paris sunsets and Watteau picnics among well-dressed people in beautiful gardens. If this is nature, it's not mine. The nature I'm involved with is rather brutal and I think that's what nature really is. It's primordial and it's a shock when we face it.

Art and beauty

O'GORMAN: Mr. Gottlieb, would you say that everything is beautiful, that there are no ugly things?

GOTTLIEB: I think visually anything can be beautiful. And if you look at certain everyday objects (the kind the pop artists paint) and find something beautiful in them, that's fine. But if you also know that some false claims are being made about a lot of them as a result of spurious advertising and so on, that's ugly. It's always difficult to keep these two things from colliding. We might say, well, I like New Yorker covers, for example, but I don't think they're art, or they're art on a lower level. I can make that distinction. And I think that is the important thing, that we have to make a critical value judgment about such things. We may like a lot of things that are being done today and continue to like them, and at the same time, if we are critical, we can say, well, it's enjoyable and its amusing and so on, but it doesn't really meet the requirements of work that is on a high level. I think it's safe to say that most paint-

ing being done today will be downgraded as far as critical values are concerned.

SISTER CORITA: Of the two group movements that have moved in since abstract expressionism, one was a kind of return to the figure, which seemed to receive a natural rebuff from everybody. Nobody was really interested in it. And then there's the pop art today. What do you think of all this.

GOTTLIEB: I think that the return to the figure trend had the same weakness that all forms of revivalism have. Among writers there was a tendency a few years ago to say, let's go back to Henry James. That was very much like the British painters in the 19th century who said, let's go back to the period before Raphael—the pre-Raphaelites. They were probably the most successful example of a revivalist movement, but in many ways it was a great failure and the present attempt to resuscitate figure painting, I think, is pretty dead. I think it's obvious already that it hasn't been successful. It can't be successful. It just happens that most people today are not old enough to remember that stuff like this—reams of it—was being done twenty five years ago, when expressionism was a fairly strong force in American painting.

SISTER CORITA: But do you sense any difference between that and the reception from different people to pop art? It seems so much more a positive kind of reception. I can never think of the return to the figure except as a looking back longingly to what had already happened. But I don't feel that way about the pop people. Do you think perhaps people are more receptive today and is there a clue in that?

GOTTLIEB: I look at this phenomenon from a different point of view. What strikes me about it is that we've had a situation develop in which going to the art galleries is a form of entertainment. A fellow can take his girl out on a Saturday afternoon and give her culture and entertainment that doesn't cost anything. Many of the pop artists seem to vie with each other to provide some novelty or new twist of humor. A lot of it is very funny, so that in a way it gets into the entertainment field. Some of the pop artists themselves say that they're really not sure whether they're in the theatre or in the art world. There's an ambivalence there. So maybe in a democracy this is the form that art will take. I don't know that it is the best form, but that's what it seems to be doing.

O'GORMAN: I'm curious to know if you have any sort of prophetic notions about the future of art.

GOTTLIEB: Well, this may sound facetious, but a number of years ago in Provincetown a lady from the Midwest, who was studying with Hoffman, said to me, "Mr. Gottlieb, what do you think art will be like five years from now?" My answer was that if I knew I wouldn't tell her. I would do it myself. Of course since then the situation has changed; the work of my generation has become a bit more set and established and a lot of new artists have come

along, but I think that the only thing I can say with safety is that it's all a question of how many people with talent will emerge. And that's something we don't understand. We don't know what makes one person talented and another not talented. Actually talent is a loose term. I think there are millions of people with talent, but what will count is the people who will change the direction of art and introduce new concepts which will have a structure that will endure. I think that whatever happens will be something for which there is no precedent, so it isn't something you can make a prophesy about. You are bound to be wrong.

O'GORMAN: Have you any idea where painting is going?

GOTTLIEB: No, I must admit I don't observe enough. Trying to see everything now is almost a full-time job, because the galleries are so scattered. Even the reviewers who work at it professionally are not able to. I think, though, that the greatest talent hunt in the history of the world is going on right now.

SISTER CORITA: What do you think is causing it?

GOTTLIEB: Well, with 400 galleries in New York alone each one is looking for a great artist.

O'GORMAN: Is that good for art, this proliferation of galleries and talent hunts and all that sort of thing?

GOTTLIEB: I guess so. Sometimes people ask me what I think should be done about some young person. I say, discourage him, because if he has any talent he'll go ahead and become an artist anyway. Then on the other hand, some people thrive on encouragement. I'm inclined to think, though, that it's a little too easy now. When I started there were hardly any galleries in New York. It really meant a great deal to have a show, just to have a show or even to exhibit a painting or two. Then of course there's a lack of critical standards; there's a great deal of permissiveness, so there are a lot of young artists who are like spoiled children. They can get away with anything and if they get away with it, they'll just continue to get away with it.

O'GORMAN: What do you think, Sister Corita?

SISTER CORITA: I guess I make rash statements because that's how a teacher gets her students interested and I'm tempted to make another one now. To say that art today is moving pictures, or still photography, even, and that maybe this is the new form art may have already taken without its realizing it. But then I don't know about what we have always called painting and drawing. Maybe, as you say, the few people who are really talented will carry them on for fewer people; it may be that moving pictures or photography is the art for many people to see and to make. I think this is a huge area for development, especially as far as spectatorship is concerned. I think we have not yet learned to approach the viewing of moving pictures or television as art. Perhaps in one sense this is what has kept the moving picture good, that we don't think of it as art, or photography, either. We think of it as a very

businesslike thing, and when people are doing their business, like assignments or covering stories, the people who are great do get found. They crop up, to an increasingly recognizable extent, as the best.

O'GORMAN: Do you think it would be bad if art died for fifty years? I think there's a feeling that art should keep on going no matter what, that there must always be artists, there must always be poets, there must always be musicians. But maybe there will be a great Dark Age in American painting and poetry and music; there will be nothing for fifty years and suddenly there will be a renaissance.

SISTER CORITA: Art can't die, anymore than breathing can die; it's just one of the things that man will always do. Unless he's occupied in total war or something, he's going to find a way to do it. But I think, as Mr. Gottlieb says, the thing that is going to happen will be very surprising because we have today the most intensive collection of extraordinary things happening, changing, and always, I think, when art has changed, it's because the world was changing. So now when we have the biggest change bursting on all sides of us, the change that comes in art will be very radical. Maybe the way art has moved into the entertainment field (I enjoyed that statement very much) and the way the film has become powerful, maybe these two things will get together and react with the most respectable or more respected things in art, like painting, and make a new family. Maybe a totally new form. I think that painting at one time asked for the moving picture, and I think the stage asked for the moving picture, both by trying to do things which eventually the moving picture did; because the painting and the stage were asking for these things, the movies got invented, because they were asked for. Maybe the question, is what are we asking for now?

GOTTLIEB: Well, perhaps you are both leading up to the question of whether art is necessary at all, whether people can't get along perfectly well without art. As a matter of fact, we know that most people throughout the world do get along without art. They may exist on a low level, but that doesn't really mean much to them. I live in a small community, East Hampton, and I can't see any evidence of any interest in art there whatsoever. Of any kind of art.

SISTER CORITA: But they're getting along?

GOTTLIEB: Well, they think they are. I think this condition exists throughout the whole country, even in New York, which is the cultural center, perhaps, of half of the world.

The patron

GOTTLIEB: And I'd like to interject another cynical note: Painting and sculpture are the only forms of art that exist as private property. A painting can only be owned by one person. And therefore, the more you get into the area of quality, the more expensive these objects become. They also happen to be the last things that remain which are hand-made by one person, in a way which does not

allow for technological improvements. So one of the requisites for art is a wealthy patron who can afford this luxury, because art is a luxury. Even in other periods, the only people who could afford valuable art were either the nobility or the Church. The rest of the population had a kind of folk art which their craftsmen made for them, and which was on a different level. But the tradition of high art has always existed as something that is either subsidized by the state or by wealthy people; the only exception is that in our time, the artist has become his own patron. We are our own patrons or our wives are our patrons. There is no other patronage today.

SISTER CORITA: Oh, but people are buying paintings.

GOTTLIEB: Yes, they buy paintings. But by a patron I understand someone who not only buys the paintings, but feels a responsibility to the artist, so that the artist can survive. I think that patrons in the past had this attitude. Even though they might have had fights with the artist, they continued to support him, and the artist didn't think he'd have to go out and get a job digging ditches.

There are foundations today which put a certain amount of money into artists, and there is talk about business becoming a patron of the arts, but that's different from the patronage of the past, when patronage either came from the Church or the nobility, the cultivated sectors of that particular culture. I don't think business is one of the cultivated sectors of our culture. It's purely predatory, and if it's to its own interest financially to buy art, either for tax benefits or prestige or publicity, businessmen will do it, but not because they love it, or because it means anything to them.

I can't see any other real source of patronage. I can't see that if the government became a patron it would be any different from business patronage. It would be a large bureaucracy and the only value it would have probably would be that the original artists would have something to fight against.

O'GORMAN: Sister Corita, you have your own form of patronage, in your order, haven't you? You're rather blessed by that. You have a foundation right there that you can work from.

SISTER CORITA: Yes, that's right, and I suppose I'm in a terribly privileged position. In a sense I am supported except that I really make my living teaching, so it isn't exactly patronage is it?

GOTTLIEB: No. But you could always get patronage for teaching before you could get it for art, because everybody thinks that education is great.

SISTER CORITA: Yes, so if we could disguise art as teaching that would be very good tactic.

O'GORMAN: What do you think the Catholic and Protestant Churches and the Jewish religion have done for art? What part is religion playing in art today?

SISTER CORITA: Well, I think religion is in the same condition that Mr. Gottlieb described business or government

as being in. These people belong to the same cultures, and I suppose if anybody can live without art, they can. They've somehow managed to, so here again patronage perhaps becomes a dangerous thing. I think of a church I saw the other day; it's a brand new church and has terribly permanent things in it that were ghastly to look at. At least they were to me, and they were expensive to build. I think this kind of patronage is neither accomplishing what Mr. Gottlieb calls high art, nor is it accomplishing what he calls folk art. In one sense I'd prefer no Church patronage, at least for what goes into churches. I'd like to see the whole building of churches and the finishing of them inside put on the folk art level, and then get the people who worship in each church to do the decoration, which should always be temporary, I think.

O'GORMAN: Do you think the Roman Catholic Church in America has helped to make art in the churches bad? Do you think the Catholic Church in America has done anything for art?

SISTER CORITA: Well, I'm always curious as to who the Church is. Are you talking about the people in the Church, everybody in the Church?

O'GORMAN: The hierarchy, I mean.

SISTER CORITA: Well I think they've helped to make permanent the present situation. Somebody was saying the other day that in the next forty years we will be building as much as man has built since he started to build. And because the engineers are doing such a good job, it's all being built in very permanent, lasting materials, which to me is terrifying. I'd much rather see it a passing, easy thing. So that, I'd guess I would say yes, I think they're doing a bad thing, because they're doing what you're afraid of in patronage, Mr. Gottlieb. They are making permanent a bad situation.

O'GORMAN: Mr. Gottlieb, what do you think the Church, has done or not done in art?

GOTTLIEB: Well, the Church did great things during the Renaissance and then for quite a while after, but in recent times I think the Church has just gone along with the stream in cultural matters, and has not shown any leadership. I'm inclined to think that during the Renaissance the Church acted because the cardinals, or whoever commissioned works, were men of culture and they knew who the best artists were, and what good work was. Now when they did this, the congregations respected their authority, and I think that is the very thing which is lacking today. There is no authority in cultural matters. The authority is purely along theological lines, and I think the Church probably feels it doesn't really need art, except in a very peripheral way. It doesn't matter whether it's good art or not, as long as it has the correct images.

O'GORMAN: What do you think about museums?

SISTER CORITA: I think museums are great. I think they are a much healthier kind of patronage, though maybe they don't exactly act as patrons. They are much healthier

because there is enough rivalry among them, and they are made up of a slightly more informed group, one with more authority in the arts, which provides a space for the painters to educate the rest of us. In that sense they provide something the artist couldn't provide for himself. If there get to be too many, well maybe that's moving in the direction of that next invention.

GOTTLIEB: Museums are all right but when the Metropolitan pays three million dollars for a Rembrandt our culture is being hoist by its own petard, because the only thing they respect is that price tag. But I'm glad you brought up the question of museums, because earlier, I said something about art existing as private property and that only one person can own it. However, ultimately, when an owner dies and his work has to go somewhere it winds up in a museum. Therefore the museums serve as guardians of the culture. I look forward to having my paintings eventually winding up in museums where they will then become available to everybody. The goal of art is to go to the people.

O'GORMAN: I think we might end by asking about where you are and what of the future.

SISTER CORITA: I don't think I can tell what I'm going to do next anymore than I can tell what is going to happen in art, generally. I think the one thing that I have learned is to trust the process. I am only a full-time artist for about three weeks a year, between summer school and fall school, so I probably leap in a much less graceful way than you do, Mr. Gottlieb, from one production to the next. I was curious at first as to what would happen after I got into this pattern, what would happen the next year, for example. Sometimes I think of something that would be good to do when I get around to print-making, but by the time the print-making time comes I can't remember what it was. But the things add up and then somehow I know what to do next, though I don't know it before I do it. I'm not a conceptual worker, I just sort of let it happen, but as I look back on it afterward, I can see what made it happen; it wasn't by chance. Still, I never know what I'm going to do next.

GOTTLIEB: Well one of the things that has always made painting exciting to me, is that I never knew what would happen. I don't know what is going to happen in a particular painting, so it's very hard to say what's going to happen in a group of paintings. However, I do know that since I am a conceptual painter, I have a certain concept that the form that my paintings will take through a reasonable period of the future will have more or less the same form as they do now, with variations. If some drastic change should occur in my life, it's conceivable that my whole concept might change, which has happened in the past. And like the Japanese painter, Hokusai, I feel that it is very good to live long, so you can keep learning and improving. That's the only thing a painter can strive for — to try to get greater perfection.