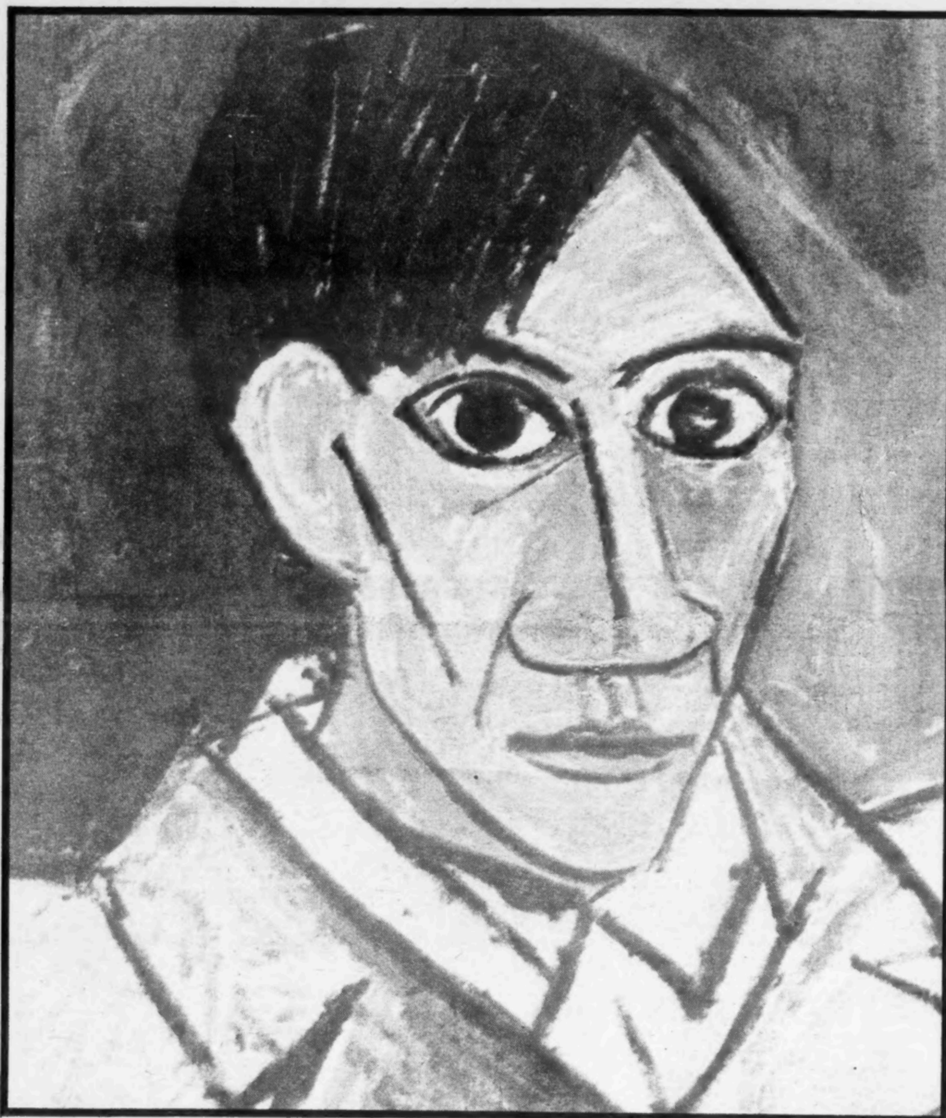
BOSTON AFTER DARK
ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



"Self-Portrait," 1907

A mass for Picasso

It's official: The critic and the public are redundant

by **Kenneth Baker**

Today, any encounter with art is tacitly a reckoning with authority. However conversant you may be with the art of your time, you cannot help wondering, when you face an unfamiliar work, how you are "supposed to" respond. This question, of course, expresses the general awareness that in making his art public an artist wants people to feel or understand something when they see it. But when art is exhibited under official auspices, the artist's intentions are the remotest source of authority impinging on your sense of how you are "supposed to" respond to what you see.

Viewing the works of Picasso currently filling New York's Museum of Modern Art means reckoning with the authority of publicity, of corporate sponsorship, of museum prestige, of academic certification. Fifty-two museums are among the lenders to the show of nearly 1000 works making up "Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective" (at MOMA through September 16). The show is sponsored in part by a hefty grant from IBM, a corporation with more economic power than many of the world's small nations. Logistically, of course, only the combined efforts of so many institutions could make a show of this scale possible. In terms of the viewer's experience, the effect is to put Picasso's work beyond criticism. This seems like a redundant effort in the sense that Picasso's art is so valuable as already to be untouched by any criticism in practical (*i.e.*, marketing) terms. But the psychological effect of the show is to make the spectator feel that his own lowly, unamplified critical impulses are so trivial — that is, so unofficial — that they might as well be forgotten, even by himself. What would be the point of trying to get your own critical perspective on Picasso's art (or any facet of official reality) in the face of so much institutional materiel? Your responses to Picasso's art, which should be the focus of your interest in seeing his work firsthand, are reduced to personal quirks that will never matter to anyone but you. And in the realm of official reality, that which matters only to you matters not at all.

The assumption of the Picasso extravaganza, at least the one with which it operates on its public, is the once-heartfelt bourgeois belief that to be *exposed* to authentic art is to absorb the salubrious effect of aesthetic values. If visitors to the Picasso show do not arrive with such an attitude, they may well learn it in the process of their viewing. Tickets to the show are sold by time of day because of the anticipated volume of spectators.

I was forewarned of viewing conditions by the fact that press credentials had been suspended for the show's run. But I could not foresee the actual ordeal of attendance. I was told I could get a better view of the show by going first thing in the morning, but that wasn't convenient for me, and, anyway, I wanted to taste the conditions under which most people would be seeing it. So I arranged for a two o'clock ticket. Arriving shortly before two at the 54th Street entrance (being used only for this show), I found that the line of ticket-holders extended around the corner of 54th Street, almost to the far end of the Fifth Avenue block. I took my place in line behind rows of suburban matrons with pendulous earrings, and punkish student-types with silver shoes and sunglasses with heart-shaped lenses. Periodically, a museum guard with a bullhorn passed by announcing that this was the two o'clock line, two o'clock only. Feckless hawkers moved back and forth offering Picasso T-shirts, Picasso buttons, Picasso balloons. At least it wasn't raining, or hot. Shortly after two, the line began inching ahead. By the time I reached the corner of 54th and Fifth, the end of the 2:30 line was already alongside. Not far from the entrance, an intense-looking fellow was thrusting printed flyers at the people in line. Thinking they were getting something related to the show, most people took what he was handing out. It was a manifesto written and printed by an artist calling himself "Paul" (founder of the Progressive Art Unlimited Line). "Today," it read, "I am completing Project 68, declaring you a work of art. I am giving you your certificate. Carry it in your wallet with your credit or rip-off card you use to rip yourself off at 18% interest; your draft or suicide card that commands you to kill or be killed for a prefabricated cause; your metal-moving license that permits you to move your car for three years; your money that drives you crazy and devaluates at a rate of 6% to 20% a year. I am giving you the only positive paper that exists. No interest or rip-off. No suicide or killing. No devaluation. No revocation. No time-limit. You will only change from a kinetic creation to a decomposed one at death. This certificate will become more and more valuable as Paul's movement grows and GROWS." Needless to say, I saved the thing, as it was the only evidence of critical thinking surrounding the Picasso spectacular, and evidence too of how a critical attitude is likely to resemble madness in such a context. The suburban matrons were not so broadminded, and littered the sidewalk ahead when they saw the kind of document they'd been handed. On an earlier occasion, Paul had made his point about MOMA's authority by burning on the street a handsigned Picasso print. But even he was swept into the official

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dimension of the situation, becoming the official disgruntled lunatic living artist merely by his persistence in dogging the eager Picasso consumers.

Once inside the museum, it was clear that I would be seeing as much of the crowd as I would of the show. The first-floor galleries, filled with early works, hinted at the scope of the event, and I could tell right away that trying to look at every work was pointless. It was then that the demoralizing logic of the show became clear. On the one hand, you must wait with growing anticipation to get into the show. On the other, once inside, you feel physically and psychologically inadequate even to casting your eyes once on every object presented, let alone to having an experience that might accord with the great claims made for Picasso's art by every aspect of the affair. Any time and energy you devote to a particular work you are aware of withholding from others that might be even more compelling, more memorable, more important to have consumed.

I was at a definite advantage in being taller than many people in the crowd. I could frequently see over the inner layer of spectators shuffling along to the tempo of Robert Rosenblum's taped lecture. Having seen mammoth shows before, I knew that the best approach was to scan the show throughout, simply trusting my eye to be snagged by the works I would most regret having missed. By the time I'd finished the second floor of the show, my capacity for appreciation was utterly spent, but I was on assignment, so I followed the slow flow of the crowd to the end. Blinking with fatigue, I might have been seeing a show of inept forgeries by Paul for all the attention I could pay the great (and routine) Picassos.

The show's scale seems to have been determined by the same logic as its mass-audience presentation. If exposing yourself to one work by Picasso is good, then exposing yourself to a thousand must be a thousand times better. Perhaps this logic makes sense to people in the habit of watching TV and being told what they'll miss if they don't keep watching. But regardless of one's stamina for viewing art or anything else, the Picasso show is a set-up. It sets people up to be frustrated with themselves (for being unable to consume 1000 art objects) and disappointed with art (and the supposedly greatest art, at that) for its inability to reach them under impossible viewing conditions. I was not the only person whose attention moved away from the art and toward my fellow spectators as I advanced through the galleries. As "powerful" as it is, Picasso's work is dead, as are all other objects and works of visual art. It is enlivened only by human attention, by what people do (to themselves, to one another) with it. As fatigue set in, it was a relief to turn from frozen images to living faces and figures – whose animation, by then, seemed much closer to the mystery of Picasso's creativity than did any of his works. It is not just the density of the crowd that makes the Picasso show difficult to see, but the very life of the crowd, which provides an unconscious foil to the exalted commodities and rote attitudes the show is meant to glorify.

I have not discussed Picasso's work because I can remember very little of it that I did not already know before seeing "Pablo Picasso: A Restrospective." As I've tried to suggest, the experience of the show is not really about involvement with Picasso's work, though that is, so to speak, the theme of the experience. Should you decide to see the show, forewarned of its ultimately hypocritical terms, it will help to go prepared with a little critical perspective. Critical perspective on an artist (or anything else) as

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famous as Picasso is hard to come by. Most commentators on the stars are interested in reaping ancillary benefits of their subject's celebrity, regardless of their academic credibility. (The same could not be said so easily of earlier generations' art writers. Alfred Barr's survey of Picasso's art, for example, is free of such self-serving impluses.) John Berger is an exception. His monograph, *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (Pantheon, 210 pp., $4.95) has been timely reissued recently. Calling himself a Marxist, Berger has enough historical perspective not to be awed by Picasso's celebrity, and enough psychological acuity not to envy it. (His book *Ways of Seeing* includes a lucid analysis of the way advertising and publicity mobilize envy as a socially divisive feeling that will prevent people from cooperating to undo capitalism.) He sees Picasso as a victim of his unprecedented celebrity, and the rest of us as well, insofar as the publicity prevents us from seeing the art clearly. Part biography, part criticism, Berger's analysis of Picasso's career understands it as determined by much more than the artist's individual genius. He sees Picasso caught in a compulsion to produce that did not, in itself, tell him what to produce. He was always running out of subjects for painting (hence the large number of paraphrases of works by other artists, to which a large gallery is devoted at MOMA); and he also remarked that he never really decided whom he was painting for. Never losing touch with his prodigiousness, Picasso could never figure out on whose behalf he was to be the vehicle of a creative energy larger than himself. Berger argues that Picasso's failure on this point accounts for the unevenness, the sentimentality of much of his work. He suggests that if Picasso had left Europe, had seen what is now called the Third World, that he might have found the people on whose behalf he could have worked. As it was, his celebrity guaranteed the isolation from society that would determine that he must work for himself or no one.

With wonderfully deft sketches of Spanish and Parisian society, Berger imagines convincingly the circumstances that might have produced an artist of Picasso's inclinations. Without ever speaking deterministically, he evokes Picasso's historical situation in a way that accounts for the outstanding phases and aspects of his work without explaining them away. His book ends with a brilliant series of glosses on some of the artist's late drawings that is an antidote to the sentimentality and sanctimoniousness of so much Picasso commentary, including that of the MOMA's fat catalogue.

There is no brief summation to make of Berger's book, for it is a feat of writing. I can suggest something of its economy and clarity by pointing out that, though it is profusely illustrated for a small book, there is not one illustration that does not figure significantly in the text. Nothing is there for the sake of ellipsis, as in the writing itself; everything is there for a reason. Though scarcely the most exhaustive study of Picasso's career (it was first published in 1965), Berger's is by far the most reasoned, historically informed, and critically sensitive study of the artist's work available in English. ●