FOUNDATION OF EXPERIENCE:
A DEVELOPMENTAL STANCE

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree Master
of Fine Arts

by

Boris Gruenwald, M. F. A.
The Ohio State University
1972

Approved by

Advisor
Division of Art
Table of Contents

Background............................... i
Stands I Take............................. ii
My Work.................................... iii
Photograph of Sculpture Studio....... iv
Photograph of Jail Print.............. v
I. **BACKGROUND**

Memories and experiences stem from childhood. Man has little or no influence over this beginning.

I will try to recollect my state of mind during that time, not so much in the sense of physical existence but rather to reawaken the mental understanding of the world in which I found myself.

As a 6½ year old boy I suddenly found myself separated from my parents in a new city, a new environment, waking up in a different kind of daily order in an orphanage. Since I was not able at that time to understand my situation fully, my ability to readjust and to adopt to the new living conditions was only natural. The child's reality is unquestioning. Life is something the child accepts as a fact, imposed on him by nature, environment and people.

I realized that war was going on, that we had little to eat, that we were restricted in our movements, that we ran into basements for shelter and all these things became daily experiences. It appeared natural, nothing unusual, nothing to be surprised about. I stole free time for games and little pleasures with other children. My parents sank back in my memories, probably because the daily existence was so vivid that I had to forget them in order to live. Sometimes I lost myself in daydreams, but the rhythm of the day was such that I was drawn into its structure and dreamt no more.
At the same time I had new experiences associating and dealing with all kinds of people I met on the streets: German and Italian soldiers, fascist soldiers, people behind wire, peasants coming into the city. I was at an age when nobody paid any attention to me. I could move between all kinds of people without being noticed. While spending hours standing in line to get potatoes and other food for the orphanage I heard all kinds of conversations about the war, about the Russians, the Partisans, the Americans and the English. I got acquainted with different stands of different groups about the war, because this was on everyone’s mind. I developed a kind of instinct on first sight about people. I was like an animal instinctively avoiding certain people while trusting others completely. It seemed to me that I knew more about human nature then, than I do now.

At that time we had been starving and to fill our stomachs was our primary concern. I didn’t care about tomorrow. Today I had to eat. If I found a piece of bread on the street or some rotten fruit it was a big experience. So the adoption of a new and scary life became natural. I could not think of anything different, for example peaceful times.

The orphanage I lived in was managed by a German woman who, after having left Germany when Hitler came into power, had settled down in Zagreb. She was a Marxist and she led the home in the spirit of Marxist ideals.
In 1942 the orphanage was dissolved by the local fascist authority. Twelve children were put into collecting camp and most of them were sent to concentration camps. I had just been baptized in the Catholic religion and so by chance I was sent to rich peasants as a farmhand. This second adjustment was more difficult for me. Taking care of cows and pigs, chopping wood and carrying water into the house, being used like a slave from early morning till evening made me aware of the good life I had had before. I only thought about how to escape. After a few months I left and turned back to the city. I held the naive belief that since there were so many houses, with so many rooms and so many beds that there had to be at least one bed for me. I came back to Zagreb, but I didn't find my friends. Some had moved and the ones I found I could not stay with. After some time the police picked me up and sent me into another orphanage run by nuns. That was about 1943.

I learned a lot of prayers, I learned about God and Devil, about discipline and punishment, and as always we were hungry. I simply could not take this kind of life and after six months I ran away.

I came to a village looking for work. A woodsman took me to watch his pigs and cows. That was the first time that I had plenty to eat, like white bread and milk every morning. But at night I could not sleep without having a certain nightmare: Somebody held me and I could not move. I was afraid to tell anyone about it. Maybe I
was so mixed up thinking about God, Devil, and people and I always had to hide my real story and had to lie, so that I would not be delivered. The people I lived with were kind and simple. They had two sons of whom one was a Partisan and the other a Ustasa-Fascist. They came to visit their parents at different times and the people suffered a lot from it.

I knew that the front was coming nearer. I knew that the Germans were losing the war and the Russians were advancing. Everyone said that the war would bring freedom and communism. Our place had been constantly changing hands from one kind of army to another. I was questioned by soldiers about what kind of soldiers had been there on previous days and nights. I had a terrifying experience with an airplane shooting at me. Existence at this place became more and more insecure. Also the people I stayed with were quite old and there was no real relationship between them and myself. I did not sleep in the house but in the stable. I felt I had to leave and when it got warm in the spring I told them that I wanted to go to relatives of mine. When I left the woman took a pair of woolen socks away from me which she had knitted for me and I could not figure out why.

I arrived at the railway station of the same city I had had to run away from before. I slept among the soldiers in the fields and I obtained permission from railway authorities to travel in the direction of Zagreb. After a
few days I got on the train and got halfway through to
Novska when fascist patrols, who examined traveling
permits arrested me as a Jew and put me in a collecting
camp. I was interrogated and beaten up and I kept
denying to be Jewish. Finally the officer in charge
asked me whether I knew Catholic prayers. Of course, I
knew a dozen of them which I had learned from the nuns and
I prayed everything I knew and convinced them of my
Catholic religion, and they let me go. I went back to the
railway station and caught a train full of soldiers who
had great sympathy for me and made jokes about me. I was
dirty and probably looked terrible. I came close to Zagreb
and tried to visit the peasant I had run away from the
first time. He did not want to take me. I went back to
the railway station and sat on the tracks. It was market
day and the peasants from the surrounding villages came to
the town. One of these peasants asked me what I was doing
there. I said: "Nothing," and he asked me whether I
wanted to watch his cows and so I went back home with
him. I stayed there until the end of the war, and a little
longer. Life became new for me. These people had no
children. They treated me like their own child and wanted
to adopt me. I learned how to work the land, ride horses,
I learned about the mentality of the village people, I led
a good life and had positive experiences and influences.
Of course I did not tell anybody my true story, I told
only what I thought was appropriate. I knew that I would go
away one day after the end of the war and I lived a kind of double life.

All through these war years I hardly got to go to grammar school. Anything I learned at that time was for survival. I knew all the dogs and about a thousand people in the village. I started to understand their mentality, their customs and beliefs. Their relations between each other and towards strangers and also towards me was frank and straight without pretention and diplomacy, without promises or speculations. Everything they did in their lives was pure necessity. They did not distinguish between different political regimes ruling them or armies passing through. They knew that each different government through the centuries had sent its own tax collectors. So they were basically suspicious towards any government as well as towards law and lawyers and also towards the townspeople, who would call them "stupid peasants" because of their illiteracy, although they were depending on them for their food and everything the land produced. The peasants were aware of that but they took the injustice and exploitation as a natural part of their existence. For them the war was a play of gentlemen, and they only knew that they had to suffer from it. Superstition played a great part in their lives and was more important to them than anything else. It influenced their dealing with problems and their decision-making process. They had inherited pre-Christian customs of paganism which helped
them to survive and keep their individuality. They believed that there was a soul in any animal or tree or any part of nature. There was a deep feeling of belonging and living in complete harmony with land and nature. They had special prayers for good luck, good crops for the animals, for money, for the sick and the dead people.

The peasant I stayed with used to tell me, that at his grandmother's time the priests went about on Sunday mornings from door to door with a stick in their hand chasing people to church. The church was a forced-on institution, to which peasants had to pay taxes and give presents. So many things that happened around them like war or religion or governments stayed outside of their real concern about their land, their animals and crafts, their superstitions and supernatural interpretation of life. I heard them say that war was going on because of all the evil people in the world and that a much more terrible war was still to come, that one day man will have to search for man. These fears still exist in our time in our more complicated thinking. But they were able to see and interpret things in a simple and basic way. Their hardheadedness and superstition helped them to survive. During the war peasants were singing and dancing, and there was a feeling of selfconsciousness and indestructiveness. Their spirit of generosity and open-heartedness was larger than all the war miseries. Burning airplanes
were falling down and stables burned to the ground. We
kids played with ammunition and hand grenades. Animals
were part of the families and were handled with love and
care and special prayers.

I see it now as the most honest relation I ever
experienced. I believe that this was my basic schooling.
The only book we had in the house was about the meaning
of dreams.

The end of the war came nearer. The retreating
Germans were burning columns of trucks. The peasants hid
their horses in the woods. One day a galloping rider with
a red star flag came proclaiming: "Freedom is here. The
war is ended. Death to Fascism and liberty to the people!"

The long awaited freedom had finally arrived. I
decided to leave the village and go back to town to find
out about my parents and about the orphanage. The fear
for existence was over. Although I was afraid of what I
would find out, I was full of optimism, believing in the
future and in the goodness of man. After a long
preparation and a heartbreaking departure I was again on
my own. Coming to Zagreb I found out that the woman who
had run the orphanage had died in a concentration camp.
I decided to go to Beograd, where my parents had lived
before. Since I had no money I went to work for a
blacksmith who was very mean. I had to take care of a
white horse who was old and laid in his own piss and shit
every night and I had to make him white again every morning. Another duty was to drive coal and wood into town. If there was nothing to deliver I had to help the blacksmith with a sledge hammer and if I missed I was hit. I was not allowed to eat at the table. I ate in a corner. He told me to eat fast: "Who eats slowly, works slowly." I was lucky that my horse was smart enough to bring me home when I fell asleep during the trips to town.

After a few months I had enough money to buy a train ticket and I left for Beograd. When I arrived I walked through the streets and hung around market places until the government picked me up and put me into a government home and school. They promised that they would search for my parents. This school was for children who were all in situations similar to mine. The idea of the school was to build up a new generation of men in the spirit of Marx and Lenin to become the elite of the future.

The school was organized in a military way. We were wakened by the sound of a trumpet. We went outside for report and the rising of the flag. Sparta was put as an example for us: "In a healthy body will be a healthy spirit." Sports and ideological education were the basics in this school. The discipline was such that one was not allowed to leave the school barracks alone. We marched singing to school, to work, to the cinema. Everything was organized to the last detail. We exercised self criticism.
Each room had its responsible leader. After being there for a time I discovered contradictions and discriminations, which I pointed out during the meetings. That was how my troubles began. We lived, for example, from American packages but we were constantly exposed to anti-American and anti-English propaganda. I saw favoritism and unfair punishment which contradicted the teaching of self-sacrifice and fairness. I was supposed to learn the trade of a mason. The only thing I did was to carry bricks to the sixth floor of a building.

The whole school went for summer vacation to a mountain village. There I found a new friend who was an excellent chess player. He could beat anybody in our school. The school committee which consisted of the student leaders, found out, that this boy's father had died on the opposite side during the war, fighting the Partisans. The boy was declared a reactionary and they forbid me any association with him. Since I knew that the real reason for that was his ability to play chess, I could not agree with this exclusion and we continued our friendship. I was stripped of my honours and communist party membership. I spent the rest of the vacation in house arrest.

My life in that school became gradually worse and I planned to escape. I tried to leave Yugoslavia illegally. I wanted to go to the Free Territory of Trieste, which was under American and English
administration. On the first of April, 1948, I left
Beograd. After seven days of traveling I was arrested
by the Yugoslavian Army for trying to cross the border.
I was interrogated and transported to a prison as a
political prisoner. I stayed in prison for three months
with Stalinist intellectuals, disobedient peasants,
priests and all kinds of people. I became conscious of
different realities, of differences between the ideals
and reality. At the same time I realized that man alone
has to depend on himself. At about the same time I
found out that my parents had died in a concentration
camp. Through all these experiences I lost confidence in
building my future in Yugoslavia, and I decided that I
had to acquire the skill and ability to become independent.
I hoped that one day I would be able to leave Yugoslavia.
Later on I realized that there was no way of escaping,
no way of forgetting. The past is present and future.

After prison I wanted to go to a graphics school.
I could not enter because of my bad recommendation. The
only chance for me was to learn a trade and I chose to
become a mechanic. At the same time I began intensively
to participate in sports, where I won lots of friends
and popularity. Sports became a compensation for the
experiences I had before. It was a refuge to a new
understanding and love. It was a new social position.
I felt I had some value as a person.
At the same time I also met some people from the art school and we discussed Greek classicism which was used as a teaching basis. We also compared the ideological and political line of social realism with the art of Picasso and Braque. There was a conflict between the personality of the artist and the function of art in a socialistic society, between freedom of expression and the art policy of the regime. I became consciously aware of art as a part of human life and human expression.

II. **STANDS I TAKE**

Many years passed by before I became involved in art. I started studying art in 1962 at the Academy for Fine Arts in Stuttgart. At the beginning as well as now I felt a strong relationship to figurative sculpture and to organic forms. Through these forms I renewed my ties to nature and earth. I studied archaic Greek figures. I became influenced by Mailol and Laurens, not only through their formal way of treating the figure but rather through their personalities, their honesty and simplicity of approach. Of course, I was conscious of the formalistic, abstract tendencies which dominated the art world at that time. I associated directly with Hoflehner, who worked in steel, making aggressive, expressive, abstract figures. He was dealing more consciously with the formal values of masses and motions in sculpture. He incorporated both tradition with abstract formalistic conception. He was a very inspiring person through his
straight-forwardness and total involvement in his own work and with students. He encouraged us to get involved in different philosophies and to stay open to fundamentally different ideas and attitudes in art.

In 1960 there was a tendency in art to eliminate the artist from his own work. Anything subjective and personal, anything which was part of the artist himself was supposed to disappear from his work. Art was to become a reflection of intellect and of speculations, executed clean and clever like machine-mad. There was a visible polarization between a subjective approach and the tendency of the time, the style makers, galleries and art politicians. I decided to continue with my figurative work at a time when art critics declared the figure dead. It seemed to me that it was being declared that people should not feel anything any more, that they should only use their minds and understanding, as if feeling and understanding could be separated, which I doubted very much.

In the short time of ten years art has been jumping from one extreme philosophical stand to the other, and all together it looks like a big competition. Art for me is not just a product, and doing it is not just getting into competition. It is total self realization as a human being. It is my relationship to the universe and to my fellow man consciously and unconsciously. Doing art for me is asking an existential question and I do not
think that an art product in itself is a final thing, it is like a search for human identity, and a human place in the universe. It is a question about ourselves.

Today some artists say that they need only to invent a design (to make a blueprint) and somebody else should do the labor of producing it. This trend shows that artists have lost their respect for their own work and their fellowman who now has to labour for him to materialize that work. I would compare such an artist with a profit-making machine which uses a human being to fulfill certain objectives. I value a work of art, which is done with love and determination, not fast and easy, trying to impress someone through shallow cleverness.

At the same time it is self-denial of an artist to accept and to worship an esthetical, industrial, ready-made object because of its formal quality. Through looking for salvation in materials and technology man deprives himself of his own senses and reasoning. He submits himself to the technological area and its advocates.

Critics are engaged in battles and proclamations about what art is and what art should be. They classify, eliminate and categorize man’s creation, condemning or praising it, and at the same time they contradict themselves through slogans that art is free and everyone is welcome, and everything could be art. I cannot rely on everybody else’s opinion than rather on my own senses, feelings and on my own understanding of life and express
that in art. I believe that society can only survive if the individual person survives and the individual will survive if the fragmentation which the world is experiencing can be given form. Foremost in this field is the artist who is true to his tradition and who does not join the fragmenters. My own biography is proof of a conscious attempt to rob one individual of his identity. To a certain extent I am a living example of the new nothingness. I escaped this nothingness by noting the solidity and timeliness of the peasant the earth and nature. The peasant endured by going beyond the abstract forms of the various governments and ideologies. Art, then, is like the peasant for modern man.

The argument between classicism and non-representational is no longer valid. To return to what is enduring real, the artist does not have to make a copy of the Mona Lisa. Each age rediscoveres within its own media and ethics what is enduring and real and thus reveals to all, not a social realism but a hope that mankind can find hope and dreams and, in a religious sense, redemption.

III. MY WORK

My works may not fulfill this artistic mission but they try through materials and tools of the late 20th. century to make the attempt. Through sculpture of massive metallic forms brought about
by casting and by the welding rod on the "new" metal, aluminum, I have sought to demonstrate the flow of metal related to big size as if to show that large numbers do not necessarily have to end in mass man. Technology can be reshaped by artists not technicians. Much of contemporary art is directed toward social satire and social protest which lends itself to a certain degree of propagandizing.

I made the big sculptures in part as an expression of, and exaggeration of, the dislocation of ourselves. I want to express emotion through the parts of the figure, rather than a whole figure. A whole figure would give too much, would show, like Lehmburc's figures, too much pathos, too much sentiment. I use just a hand, or just a foot, exaggerated, huge, as big as a man, because people do not listen very well, and do not take the ideas in. Exaggeration is necessary because the symbolism offered is not nearly what is actually the case in the real world. It is much worse.

This sort of surrealistic approach to art offers the chance to deal with the existential questions of human survival as well as personal survival. We confront these big parts of bodies as another human being, they are the same size as we are, not small like a sketch or an idea, or a decoration. They cannot be dismissed or ignored. Put the big fist next to the Empire State Building and the size of the building will not kill the
sculpture. Also the organic form is used as a basic reference because it has its own sensuousity. It is a part of life. It represents life. People are attracted because of its sensuous qualities, they want to touch it for its vitality, while constructed things do not seem to have as much attraction because of their abstractness to human life.

I decided to locate art in the private recesses of imprisoned man by utilizing the camera and fusing it to graphics and creating a hybrid in order to depict the art found within prison cells.

Through the use of a college technique combining photographic elements like drawings and calligraphy I sought to personalize a somewhat mechanical process and at the same time transcend some of the drawbacks of a straight photo journalistic approach.

I worked with prison art, with the drawings and words of prisoners on the walls of their cells for two reasons. First, because I have been there; I have been a prisoner in real jails with real walls and can understand the thoughts and feelings of these men shut away from the rest of the world. I have also been a prisoner of culture and circumstances, free to walk about in the world, but a prisoner all the same. This is of course true of almost all of us, only most of us do not know it. The second reason is linked to this because of the basic humanness of all people. I respond to
human beings at the most basic level, as humans and therefore valuable. These prisoners show their humanity in their graffiti and they show us, who think we are free, how we are linked to these men shut away. It may be that we can learn also how we are prisoners without knowing it, and then move to loose the bonds of culture and circumstances, move to responding as human beings, one to another.

While seemingly separated there is a relation between my sculpture and my work in graphics. Both concern themselves with subjects which are figuratively and literally larger than life. The techniques of modern technology along with new materials can begin to allow one man to cope with larger mass features rather than with dealing with abstracted analytical aspects. In some ways I have tried to say that man can deal with the large complex world facing him with the respect due to that complexity by mastering the technique placed before him just as many children have left to learn to deal with a complex chaotic order given to them unwittingly after the last World War.

A man takes his own freedom through his own decisions. He broadens his freedom through decision-making. A mechanic replaces parts in an engine, an artist deals with human decisions. As a mechanic I am part of the machine, as an artist I have freedoms and risks that can be expressed as well as generated through
my art. Teaching and participating in sports, making art, these things deal with people and are unending, not finished like a machine.

I value the struggle in art perhaps because I have struggled in so many places. I value the beautiful and the human, because that is what we are basically. I do not know how my art will change, but it will grow with me and change as I do, based in my history and directed by the stands I take.