

jhs



ABBEY OF GETHSEMANI
TRAPPIST, KENTUCKY

Nov 9, 1963

Dear Victor

I shudder at the thought of attempting a long didactic poem on art. Yet who knows, someday it may happen. I generally end up doing what I never expected to do, and I suppose that is a very good thing. However, I am firmly resolved to do anything but this at the moment.

Of course one could approach the subject of art as a way of "knowing" and seeing. You sometimes cannot see a thing at all unless you take pains to make something like it. And yet not like it. Nothing gets to be known without being changed in the process.

As to saying "what is art", well, I don't think there is much chance of making any sense out of the question if one is looking for a pure essence. On the other hand the question is not without meaning. It is a matter of communication, not of discovery: not of defining the thing and getting command over it, but of clarifying one's own concepts and conveying what one means, or does not mean.

After all, one has to be able to say that abstract expression is not art, and I think that clarifies most of what needs to be said about it, both for and against. That is precisely what is "for" it: that it is not art, though it seems to be. I know this statement is scandalous, and I think the ambiguities are bad ones in the long run (it should not pretend to be art, which in fact it does). I do not think that throwing paint on canvas and saying "this is not art" merits twenty thousand dollars. It is too obvious. However, even the obvious has its place.

If I write a long didactic poem on art it will certainly not be about this.

Best wishes to you both, always,
With all blessings,

Tom.

I keep thinking about the Shaker project, and wonder what Carolyn thinks of the article.