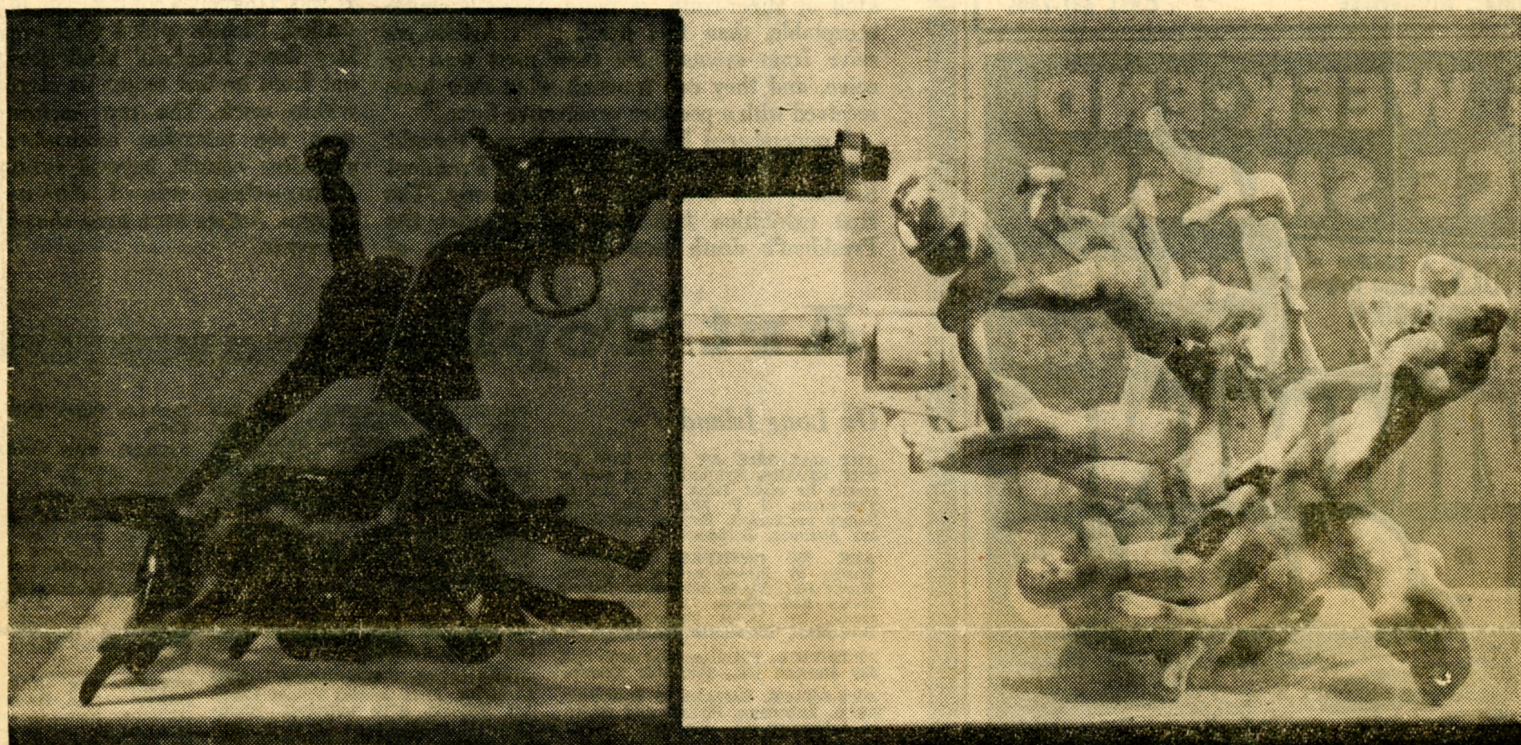


ON THE ARTS

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“Artists whose work is violent aren't what's wrong with society.”



"Equation," an epoxy and plastic sculpture by Luise Kaish at the New School for Social Research's exhibition "Protest and Hope."

THE VIOLENT STRAIN IN MODERN ART

IN "PROTEST AND HOPE," a recent exhibition at the New School for Social Research, there was displayed, under the title "God Really Loves America Best," a black wooden box within which was an electrically animated monster with huge claws grasping out for whatever it could reach. It was the work of a California artist, Edward Kienholz.

In this year's Carnegie Institute international exhibition at Pittsburgh, the stuffed, oversized entrails of a disemboweled woman, along with the severed lower and upper halves of her body, all fabricated of plastic by a British artist called Roland Piche, were scattered over the floor of a 12-foot-square section of the galleries. The work's title was "Woman

is the exhibition "Destruction Art," which includes such items as burned and slashed canvases, sculptures representing severed limbs and a filthy battered sofa with its insides falling out of it and barely held together with a thick coat of transparent paint. They are the work of an artist called Ralph Ortiz.

These are only a few among hundreds that could be cited, although the total is still less, I'm certain—and happy—than their prominent display in major exhibitions indicates. But they still underscore the increasing emphasis on violence in art as in all other phases of contemporary life. They also confirm my belief and relief that Shelley was wrong when he wrote of poets (or any artists) as "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." I'd hate for the men who made those pieces to run my life. The fact is that they don't.

Good art—paintings and sculpture, that is—may move us deeply, but it doesn't move us

them. The few who do don't know what remedies will help. And those who think they know want to administer them to the thermometer, instead of to the patient. Artists whose work is violent aren't what's wrong with our society. And censoring them, or refusing them an audience for their art, won't help.

Artists have, of course, always depicted violence. Their subjects have included the barbarism of war, the martyrdom of saints, man's inhumanity to man, and, always, the Crucifixion. Often their concern wasn't really with violence even in these. They were painting a prescribed iconography, or using the common currency of familiar stories, or simply painting a picture.

The fact is that the vein of violence which runs so strong in today's art is different from what it used to be, just as the violence in our lives is different. It's visceral and unfocused.