

air pollutants. Dozens more remain to be dealt with. The other option is to reformulate the rules, either by persuading Congress to allow the EPA to weigh costs and feasibility or by doing so covertly. Congress has not gone along, and the courts, naturally enough, have rejected the EPA's covert efforts to do so.

Other commentators wag their fingers at

Congress for passing laws that are impossible to enforce, but Dwyer considers himself too much of a realist to believe that that will do much good. He suggests that regulators work behind the scenes to win informal concessions with congressional oversight committees, and that the courts stop holding regulators to the letter of the cynical laws that Congress passes.

ARTS & LETTERS

Our Fin de Siècle And Theirs

"The Decline of the City of Mahagonny" by Robert Hughes, in *The New Republic* (June 25, 1990), 1220 19th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Art critics of the future will inevitably refer to the era we live in as the *fin de siècle*. Just as inevitably, they will compare our *fin de siècle* to the one that went before, and Hughes, of *Time* magazine, declares that we ought to be embarrassed by what they will see. For who among the current crop of Manhattan artistic "giants," he asks, can reasonably be compared to Cézanne, Monet, Seurat, Degas, Matisse, van Gogh, Gauguin, Munch, Rodin?

New York seized the title of art capital of the world from Paris after World War II, and for the first quarter of a century all was well. The city nurtured such great talents as Jackson Pollock, Willem De Kooning, Mark Rothko, and Robert Motherwell. Then, in Hughes's view, everything went sour.

The fault, he concedes, is not entirely New York's. The last *fin de siècle* was a positive era; "the presiding metaphors were of conquest and development: of oceans, air, mineral strata, jungles, and foreign peoples." Political radicalism had not yet been betrayed by Lenin and Stalin. "Radicality" today, Hughes avers, is nothing more than "flippant, reamed-out cynicism." Moreover, the artists of that earlier era were thoroughly schooled in such basic skills as drawing; they also felt free to "consult and to use the past of [their] own culture, freely and without prophylactic irony."

But at bottom, Hughes believes, the fun-

damental difference is that art carried much more weight in the earlier era, "the weight of tradition, dreams, and social commemoration." Our era is dominated by the mass media, and art has sought to compete by lightening its load of meaning, by abandoning its "elitist" traditions. But it has sunk rather than sailed.

Hughes believes that art's decline was further exacerbated by the explosion of wealth in New York City during the 1980s, a development which greatly inflated the price of paintings and created a celebrity culture. "The great city has gone on with frantic energy not as an art center but as a market center, an immense bourse on which every kind of art is traded for ever-escalating prices. But amid the growing swarm of new galleries, the premature canonizations and record bids, and the conversion of much of its museum system into a promotional machine, the city's cultural vitality—its ability to inspire significant new art and foster it sanely—has been greatly reduced."

In fact, he says, few artists of any kind—and no great ones—live in Manhattan any longer. Few can afford to. Still, no other city is stepping forward to claim the title of art capital of the world. Hughes doubts that any will: The title has been rendered obsolete by New York's self-destruction. The artists who will eventually revitalize the art world, he predicts, will inhabit the world, not just one city.