

ARTS & LETTERS

*The Strength
of Fiction*

"The State of the Art: Fiction and Its Audience" by Annie Dillard, in *The Massachusetts Review* (Spring 1982), Memorial Hall, Univ. of Mass., Amherst, Mass. 01003.

Writers often lament the fact that serious literature seldom makes the best-seller lists, and that the marketplace plays such a large role in setting standards for their craft. But Dillard, herself a novelist, finds a "certain grim felicity" in the audience's control over fiction.

Fiction's large public distinguishes it from all the other contemporary arts. Today's painting, for example, is controlled mainly by specialists. "No one would collar a man in the street to review a showing of a contemporary painter's work," Dillard observes. Art's popular audience today is found mainly at museums, not at commercial art galleries. Yet anybody can be a fiction "critic," and as a result the popular audience holds sway over the field. The need to engage readers obliges novelists to retain fiction's traditional features—dramatic plots, character development—though it inhibits experimentation. Dillard sees this in a largely positive light: "When the arts abandon the world as their subject matter, people abandon the arts."

Moreover, says Dillard, tradition even benefits fiction's innovators by giving them conventions to use as a springboard. Critics in the art world, having discarded older forms and ignored the audience, dictate that a "work of art is produced only at some sort of cutting edge of history." That leaves artists without a clear set of standards, Dillard says: If the "painter can do no wrong, he can also do no right."

Fiction is also free of the notion, common in the other arts, that a popular work is by definition bad. Dickens and Tolstoy enjoyed great popularity in their day, and serious writers such as John Updike and Gabriel García-Márquez occasionally make the best-seller lists today.

Dillard adds that the publishing industry's zeal in supplying the market with books of all kinds ensures a niche, however small, for less popular experimentalists. Yet she worries that literary innovators must rely upon a few publishers who print their novels mainly as a hobby.

Overall, she believes, fiction's large audience and freedom from "dictatorial experts" keep it "lively, loose, and at the same time rooted in its own traditions." No rarified art form, fiction thrives on crowds.

*The Death
of Modernism*

"Postmodern: Art and Culture in the 1980s" by Hilton Kramer, in *The New Criterion* (Sept. 1982), Foundation for Cultural Review, 460 Park Ave., New York, N.Y. 10022.

Beaux-Arts architecture, Art Deco, and other "bourgeois" styles long ago discredited by the modern art movement have recently enjoyed enthusiastic revivals at the hands of "postmodern" artists, architects, and others. Kramer, editor of *The New Criterion*, contends that the