

## Post-Conceptual Art In Paris

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you ever try to explain an armadillo to a Frenchman?)

SOME generalizations about the art of the under-35 set as revealed at the Biennale can, I think, be made. One of them is that there is more emphasis on social themes and anti-war protest among the Europeans than there is among us, but then there always has been; we haven't had a war on our soil in over 100 years, but Europe hasn't forgotten the Forties. Another generalization is that there is more collective effort — more collaborative groups making art — in Europe than in the United States.

Not all the ideas in the show are new, but good new versions of old ideas keep cropping up. If Robert Helm's boxes owe much to Cornell, they are authentic treasure chests nonetheless. If Marc Devade's paintings are indebted to Rothko, well, Rothko was a good painter and so is Devade. Solid-color paintings, like those Rauschenberg made years ago, are much in evidence. One can find less precedent for things like the room and bed made, apparently, out of old shredded raincoats, by an artist who has annexed the name of Colette now that the novelist who used it has gone. The new Colette's room is luridly lighted, and she invites ladies to lie in her bed, but there was no lady there when I saw the show.

I loved Claudio Parmiggiani's trio of tables, each bearing a bottle, a glass of wine, and a Chinese vase with exactly the same design on it; these three set-ups grew progressively larger from left to right and were dated from 1973 to

1977. I was delighted with the exquisitely evocative color-field paintings of Leslie Reid; the thoughtful juxtapositions of poetry and collaged common objects by Alexis Smith, the breathtaking lightheaded drawings of Thomas Herbig, the brilliant abstract expressionism of Andraz Salamun, and Dieter Hacker's roomful of amateur snapshots, all of them — and there must have been thousands — scattered at random on the floor. Immigrant labor from depressed countries is becoming a major problem in Europe, and the sensitive recording of the lives of newly-arrived Turks in Paris by the French Group of Four is perhaps the most impressive of the social documents.

Somehow I usually get to museums when the performance pieces are over, but this time I caught one of them, author unannounced. It was a slow, beautifully choreographed wedding ritual, with bride and groom both in white, toasting each in champagne from a tray which was actually — or looked like — a huge wheel of flat bread.

These are some of things that are easy to describe. The indescribable I shall not attempt. There was plenty of that, much of it good, some of that irritating kind which suggests that the artist wanted to have an idea but didn't know how. In general, however, the Biennale refutes Gerald Forty's pessimism. At the risk of being set down as a blubbing sentimentalist, I insist that the two big international shows I have recently seen in Europe — Documenta in Kassel and the Biennale in Paris — offer no reason to think that invention and technique and creative juice are currently in abeyance.

## Art

### A New Spirit? —Or Gloomy Exhaustion?

By Alfred Frankenstein

Paris

POST-CONCEPTUAL art is the latest thing. That, at least, is what they tell you in the publicity and advertising for the tenth Biennale de Paris, which opened a few days ago. Unfortunately nothing in the show is labeled "This is a work of post-conceptual art," so you have to figure it out for yourself, and that's not easy to do.

The phrase was apparently twisted out of the catalogue introduction by Georges Boudaille, the director-general of the show, who observes that this time there is much less conceptual art than there was ten years ago, when such was riding high. (Was it really that far back?) At all events, conceptual pieces are few this year, which may or may not tell us anything worth knowing.

The Biennale is limited to artists under 35 years of age. The show was selected — mostly through examining slides and photographs — by an international commission of 14 people representing France, Germany, the United States, Yugoslavia, Switzerland, Japan, Norway, Holland, Italy, and Great Britain. Most of the work therefore comes from these countries and those closely allied to them culturally (Denmark, Sweden, Canada, Australia, and South Korea). The tough dictator countries are not represented at all, and if there is anything interesting going on in the Arab world, black Africa, Iran, India, and a few other little places, the International Commission for this international event doesn't know about it or doesn't care.

One fantastic peculiarity of the show is that its Latin-American representation was not selected by the international commission but by a single special commissioner in Montevideo, and is hung separately, and has a separate catalogue. The reason for this, we are told, is that rules of the Biennale permit the admission of certain national and ethnic groups *en bloc*, as was the case last time when a selection of work by peasants from the Chinese province of Hsien was brought in as a unit. So the cultivated art of Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Venezuela, and Mexico is equated with the peasant art of Hsien. A more shocking example of European provincialism would be hard to find. One wonders what they'll do the next time there is a Biennale in Sao Paulo.

THE parameters of the show are suggested by two catalogue statements.

Jared Bark of the United States says "There is clearly a new spirit in the air. Some of us are making work that is rich, verbal, literary, colorful, humorous, ironic, specific, topical, political, social, fast-paced, entertaining, complex, personal, autobiographical, perceptual, contradictory, emotional, dramatic, and ambitious. Most of these qualities were rigorously purged from the art of the Sixties."

Gerald Forty of England thinks otherwise:

"I see the arts of the present day as lying in a period of withdrawal, of uncertainty and lack of direction: a period in which the potential exceeds the achievement." And he goes on to paint a gloomy picture of exhaustion and confusion in all the



BILL VIOLA VIDEO PIECE: 'ON SUNDAY, SEPT. 26, 1976 ...

intellectual activities of the present day; a picture, furthermore, of breakdown between art and the public and modern art and its past, concluding that shows like the current Biennale are worth while only to preserve what little is worth saving.

Both Bark and Forty exaggerate, of course. The dull Sixties of Bark were actually the heyday of Pop art and of people like Ed Kienholz, Morris Louis, and the Hairy Who. To be sure, the current exhibition does not contain any piles of broken rock or heaps of dirt, no photographs of mile-long trenches in the desert, no tangled hang of plastic strips or mounds of rusty metal scattered here and there. If this is what Forty misses, perhaps we really are in a period of withdrawal, but the positive values of this show far outweigh its negative ones.

WHETHER positive or negative in value, the new word these days is "time." Everybody used to talk about space, but space is out nowadays. "Time" is the new word because video is everywhere; at least a third of the Biennale is made up of video presentations, and much attention is also being paid to the performance-piece.

Time is not only video's major dimension but also its major drawback so far as exhibitions are concerned. It would take 15 or 20 hours to see all the video in the present show, and if you don't make a business of it you will see very little, since the hours

of presentation are capricious. Paul Kos was clever enough to make his video piece, "Tokyo Rose," very short, and this ironic, sinister speech delivered by the gorgeous Mrs. Kos is the first thing you see on entering the building containing the show. The building is called the Palais de Tokyo, and don't tell me that's an accident.

Now, Paul Kos is from our town and a version of "Tokyo Rose" belongs to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Catherine Millet, one of the French members of the selection committee, observes in the catalogue that one tends to favor artists and works one has seen in reality rather than in slides, and something similar applies to works and artists one has known when encountering them in the unfamiliar context of a show like the Biennale. Still, Kos' piece makes its point with special eloquence because it reduces the time factor to a minimum.

Another artist of the Biennale whose work I knew and to which I responded with special warmth is Bob Wade, the Texas assemblagist. Here he is showing his "Texas Mobile Home Museum," a trailer containing a stuffed bucking broncho, a set of fake longhorn antlers 12 feet across, a two-headed calf, and some taxidermized armadillos. One of Wade's assistants told me that the local viewers accept the 12-foot spread of cattle horns without question as real but are incredulous about the armadillos. (Did

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