

Report from the Paris Biennale

Georges Bogardi

PARIS — A cross between Expo '67 and the Grand Bazaar of Istanbul, the 9th Paris Biennale is a labyrinth of art.

Three museums filled with paintings, sculpture, video, Camerart, assemblages, performances, accumulations of funky debris sent from three continents. The crowded conditions and chaotic hanging seem designed to constitute an esthetic endurance race rather than to make points. It's a new Babylon where photos of loping transvestites hang opposite a bank of tape recorders that recite statistics on urban poverty, where large, Minimalist structures are interspersed with blaring video transmitters . . . the effect is delirious and infuriating.

That so much of the work on view is derivative and often frankly archaic in intent only adds to the confusion, to the exhaustion which is both physical and moral. There are too many pale echoes of the past: ready-mades, Dadaist provocations, surrealist deformations, old vaudeville *schticks* and even the old abstract expressionist gestures now mostly on photos or video: A recycling of old routines.

Many artists seem to believe that the camera lens possesses rejuvenating powers, that it is capable of exorcising staleness from utterances that only a few years ago seemed safely consigned to the history books. Now the old ideas live again — though pale and sickly — in the brand new works on display. All the artists in the Biennale are under the age of 35.

Just one example, from among many, of deliberate archaism: Barry Flanagan, who used to be one of the most interesting Minimalists of the British colored sculpture movement, is represented here by his recent pen-and-ink sketches, drawn from the live model. Many young artists seem to have decided that after having paid their dues during the innovative 60's, the time has come to take a well-earned vacation in a cosier past.

To counter the onset of severe depression, one begins to recite the Biennale's statistics: 125 participants, 25 of whom are women (is it discriminatory not to list the transvestites separately?); 23 artists from the U.S., nearly as many from France and West Germany, a handful of British, Italian and Dutch, a surprising number of Swiss, three from Poland, two each from Yugoslavia, Hungary and South Korea. And one Canadian participant, the Torontonion Ian Carr Harris.

What is an "art critic" to do in face of such a hodge-podge of wilful anti-historical gestures and a hanging that



Urs Luthi

seems determined to counter one impression by an unequal and vaguely opposite idea? Occupational rehabilitation seems indicated; it would take a psychiatrist to discern the impulse behind the astonishing number of practically identical, fetishistic collections of bits of tattered fur and old family photos.

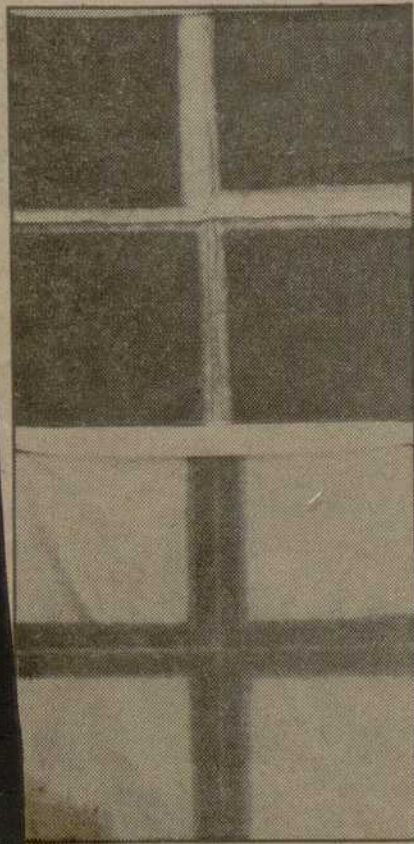
One must not be naive, however: These are not just any old snaps, more than likely they constitute a "structural analysis of sibling interaction." For the spectator, the struggle to remain on an elevated plane is constant and essential. When a painter, whose subject is the texture and irregularities of bare canvas, declares that what he does is "isolate natural phenomena . . . in their temporal and spatial aspects" one must remember that this is art and not the kind of newspeak one would despise if it came from Ron Ziegler.

Before the mind boggles completely, let's get back to facts and figures. This is the second Paris Biennale organized under the new formula which restricts participation to artists under 35. An international commission, composed of 12 members and chairman Georges Boudaille, selects artists with the help of files sent in by some 150 correspondents around the world. Unlike the Venice and Sao Paulo biennales then,

the Paris event is not based on official national entries and is thus free of political pressures from governments. The formula is flexible, the Biennale's bylaws enjoin it merely to "provide information about international artistic activity. In addition to the presentation of works, it is open to any kind of event, to any mode of expression, including film and video as an extension of the visual arts." The Biennale is financed by the French government.

With ground rules as vague as these, the composition of the international commission becomes a critical factor in shaping the exhibition, since no commissioner could be fairly expected to vote for an artist whose work he is not familiar with. That the current commission is composed of ten Europeans, one American and one Japanese, explains why there are no African artists in the show and none from a country as active in contemporary art as Argentina is. Walter Hopps, the sole American member, is based at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington and thus can't have been a very informed advocate of the numerous files sent to Paris by the Canadian correspondents.

Controversial as the show is, there is one point on which all visitors agree: No new school has emerged in this Biennale, though one can isolate, if not



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Barry Flanagan

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