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Art in Paris: Should One Burn Down the Louvre?

By Michael Gibson

PARIS, Oct. 1 (IHT).—"What is time? What is space? And self? And other? And how do all these interrelate?"

Each great civilization builds up an increasingly elaborate answer to these and similar questions—an answer that finds its fullest expression in the arts and its (ideally) most succinct form in the assertions or negations of philosophy. Then as the answers grow and lock into one another ever more rigidly and tightly, an immobility sets in that cannot be endured—the foundations begin to rot and a new base must be found on which to raise new answers.

It seems apparent that we are now in the midst of such a period of corruption and renewal. Corruption, because the entire spiritual structure of the past is falling apart just as fast as people are able to think of new questions to throw at it. Renewal, because despite the defensive irony of those who cling to dying forms (and nearly everyone does cling, at least to some extent and in some secret corner of his soul), something will unfailingly arise to fill the void. It will come perhaps sooner than we expect and from some quarter of the horizon that no one is watching at the moment. Meanwhile, our new world has lost the security of the old and, expelled from that gentle womb, it feels the chill air of time and the solitude of space.

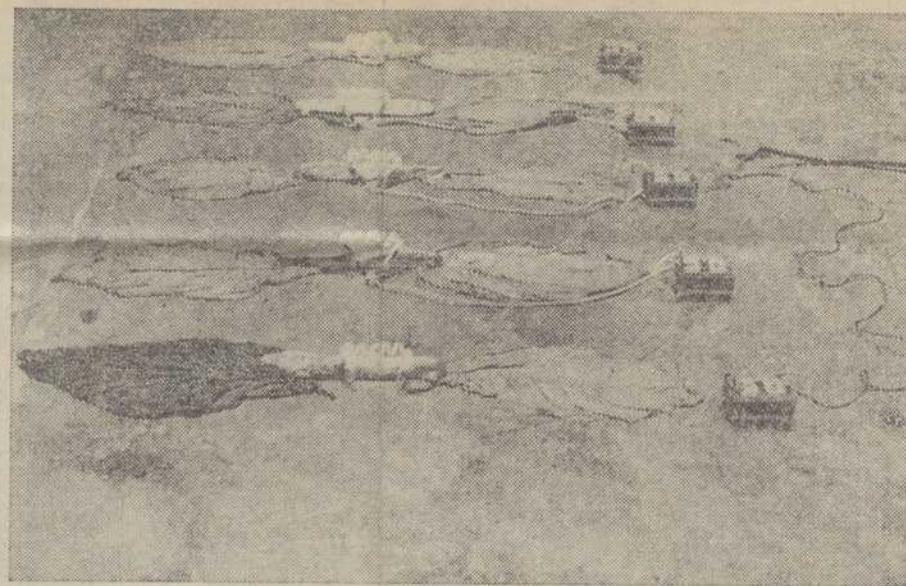
In an this is an age of liability. The picture is taken from its frame, the statue from its niche and the idea from its pedestal. "What is so sacred about art? Why is culture such a big deal?" The questions are quickly followed by the questioner's own answers: "There is nothing sacred about art. Culture is a fraud."

All this may remind one of the surrealists' question: "Should one burn down the Louvre?" But the surrealists still used paint and canvas and somehow still stood inside the club (at least in our present perspective), whereas the questioner of today, no more a painter or a sculptor, appears to be standing outside and holding a match to his Molotov cocktail.

The Wheel

The match, nonetheless, is verbal. But there are words, once spoken, that do not leave our work the same. Somehow they turn the wheel and we find we have moved on and shall never be again where we once were.

The Biennale de Paris that just opened at the Parc Floral de Vincennes opposite the Château (with no participant over 35) is a remarkably apt illustration of this situation. It is a bizarre conglomerate of esoteric fun-house, jam session, theater in the street, hall of mirrors, labyrinth and biggest-bulletin-board-in-the-world. Participants from 48



Tobacco leaves and neon "nons," a typical creation by Pierpaolo Calzolari, whose work is included in the Paris Biennale.

countries have sent entries that cannot really be grouped into watertight categories. There is a section devoted to Conceptualism, but all the entries are so tightly packed together that the cumulative effect is rather similar to that you might get from reading through the Düsseldorf phone book.

There is Arte Povera and other similar tendencies, and a number of entries loosely grouped under the heading of Hyperrealism. Finally, whatever does not fit into this classification has been brought together under the heading of "Option 4."

Here in the shadow of geometric sculptures and next to a chromatic maze, in a corner covered with hay and the bones of large quadrupeds, there is a fellow who periodically and unconvincingly goes through the motions of animal sacrifice, raising his red-stained fingers to the skies and uttering hideous screams.

Near the entrance a man in a devil suit sits on a chair, turns somersaults on the concrete floor, pulls wads of paper and bits of string out of his costume and throws them at the audience. The overall effect is curiously new for an art show, mainly because of the dominant fairground informality. This might turn out to be a positive change if it can in time succeed in growing more meaningful and complex.

Much of the strangeness also comes quite simply from the juxtaposition of works by a variety of artists, works that were conceived to be viewed separately in the intimacy of an art gallery. The gallery setting allows a microscopic increment of meaning or emotion (or the absence thereof) to be blown up so as to fill the room. Thus viewed, it can—like the flea seen through a magnifying glass—strike one as impressive or oppressively fearful. But in the vast hangar of the Biennale, the works tend to cancel each other out—the meaning or emotion is reduced to its

original scale, and what remains is the overall impression.

Perhaps the most positive aspect of the whole thing is the way in which the theology of art is deflated. Here even the aura of religious mystery surrounding the avant-garde is dispelled to a great extent.

What remains is the pattern of a certain number of reflex arcs that stubbornly persist even when the higher functions are terminated.

Narcissism is pervasive: a blunt, sullen, passive kind of narcissism bordering on nihilism. The nihilism is partly the consequence of the intensity of the narcissism that can be read in the deadness of the eyes in much of the self-indulgent photo work and in some of the paintings, but also in a certain infantile assurance that whatever one may choose to do will be (or at least should be) of general interest.

Narcissism is certainly nothing new to art and perhaps it is not even much more of an endemic disease now than it was, say, at the end of the 19th century or among the dadaists or the surrealists. But it is more blatantly provocative today, and this seems to be because the higher philosophical functions are momentarily silent, and consequently, the stubborn—and dubious—assertions of self-love can now be heard quite clearly. In other times this voice is rather subdued thanks to a coherent theory of individuality and reality. But in the unreal void created by the absence of a general philosophy (and which cannot be replaced by the excessively intellectual systems that proliferate today) the anguished narcissistic cry: "I am!" rings loudly in our ears and carries with it its own uncertain echo: "Am I?"

There is also some ironic comment on this narcissism: Walking past a sequence of frames with the single word MOI printed in the middle of them you come

to what looks like the last frame and it turns out to be a mirror. (Nearly all the works, incidentally, are badly or not at all identified). Elsewhere, in a small cubicle, neon signs ironically spell out: "VIVRE ET MOURIR DEVANT UN MIROIR" (to live and to die in front of a mirror).

Insecurity

Aggressiveness (especially of a sexual nature) as a manifestation of fear, bloated self-importance as a reaction against one's spiritual insecurity are two other notable moods encountered.

The expression of life in its fullness can be seen as an interlocking of pulses, of mobile rhythms, and art, in a sense, as a concentration or distillation of this rhythmic complex. Here, on the whole, there is no rhythm but an obsessional mechanical iteration, an apathetic stillness or a purposeless spasmodic twitching (the reflex are again). The rhythm is gone because there is no real purpose and no view of totality to make it possible. Self and naked impulse are points that must be set in relation to others in space if their displacement is to become perceptible and to hold any meaning. It is this relationship which is lacking at the moment.

The collapse of art today is a normal consequence of the function of destruction it has assumed. And this function itself is positive and necessary. It is a duty that many artists of our century have accepted with great seriousness of purpose.

That they have been followed and aped by a certain number of frauds or mere nihilists with neurotic motivations tends to make their own venture look doubtful. But what is significant in their work is not the negative emotional charge it contains but the fact that it raises a number of questions to which it is up to us to find the answers, if we want the coming civilization to be fit for humans.