

ARGUS de la PRESSE

Tél. : 742-49-46 - 742-98-91
21, Bd Montmartre - PARIS 2^e

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Frankfurter Allgemeine

5. Biennale von Paris

2. Okt. 1967

Die 5. Biennale von Paris ist vom
französischen Kulturminister André
Malraux im Museum für moderne Kunst
am 1. Oktober 1967 eröffnet.

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Things Seen

By Edward Lucie-Smith

Trying to guess which way the cat will jump is the occupational neurosis of the critic of contemporary art. Yet there is a kind of painful pleasure in it, too. Fulfilled expectations are always something of a disappointment. Unfulfilled ones are better. I'm prompted to these reflections by two exhibitions—one large and one small; one in Paris and one in London.

The large exhibition is the Biennale des Jeunes Artistes, which has just opened at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris. The small is a show of "posters"—quotation marks to be explained in a moment—in the library at the ICA.

The Biennale is one of those large mixed shows where everyone is supposed to be doing their best for the national honour—and a whole United Nations confronts the spectator. Or, to change the metaphor, it might be compared to a food-fair, where the attendants keep offering you a taste of the various regional and national specialities. One passes from haggis to houmous, while the digestion groans.

Some of these specialities are very much what one expects. The Russians still cling to socialist realism. The Yugoslavs are showing their primitives. The small nations often seem to lag in the rear of the larger. The smaller South American republics provide an anthology of all the "modernist" styles which were in favour in Paris five years ago. The Americans, too, run true to form by opting for "minimal art", or else

for the kind of minimal pop art which is very little different from the purer variety.

But it is impossible to dismiss minimal art as just another American eccentricity: an example of the doctrinaire extremist of the American avant garde, and of the way in which this avant garde remains deliberately out of step with what is happening in Europe. Minimal art, in fact, rears its head elsewhere, and especially among the British and the Italians. It is not too much to say that whatever is truly new in the exhibition is related, in one way or another, to the philosophy of the minimum.

Terrifyingly logical

It is interesting to trace the steps by which this has been arrived at. The simple slabs of plastic shown by the American John MacCracken, for example, are certainly the direct successors of the plastic sculptures in more complex shapes which we have become used to in the last couple of years. Young British sculptors have been simplifying their forms for some time—the American has taken another, terrifyingly logical step along the path. At the same time, pop imagery has continued to evolve: the direction it has taken is the direction away from choice. That is, the originally pop artists tended to choose, deliberately, things which seemed to them significant in the urban environment. These were then held up for our inspection. The next step (very visible in Andy Warhol's work) was to deprive what was chosen of much of its meaning by

What will happen next?

multiplying the image; a hundred Campbell's soup-cans in place of one, the generic replacing the specific. Finally, the idea that the artist was abandoning all volition, and must not choose the image, but must allow himself to be chosen. The image is selected by deliberately random methods, and no meaning must be attached to the choice.

The retreat from meaning seems to be a kind of protest against art itself, or at least against the kind of art which gets shown in international exhibitions. The Biennale is despised by a good proportion of its contributors, or so it appears from what they show.

What is the reason for the discontent which they so clearly seem to feel? Isn't it, somehow, the idea that the public, permanent, monumental work of art is depressingly otiose? The other show I mentioned would seem to confirm this. These posters, from an Italian publisher, are not advertisements for anything. Nor are they artist's prints. They take the graphic skills of the advertising man, the concern with the idea of print in the advertising sense (which includes images as well as words), and set these to work for their own sake. The result is elegant and blessedly unpretentious. The posters, which are nicely produced on good paper, cost very little money. One wouldn't feel at all guilty if, after having such a thing on the wall for a couple of months, one decided that one was

tired of it, and wanted to throw it away.

It has always seemed to me that the dislike of significance and the dislike of physical permanence are closely linked phenomena in the arts. And it looks as if a good deal of the art produced during the next few years will be governed by these twin antipathies. What this means, in effect, is that we have reached a new stage in the development of modernism—that if the middle 'Forties marked a kind of watershed in the development of the visual arts, the middle-to-late 'Sixties will mark another. The change is much more radical than, for example, the evolution from Abstract Expressionism into pop art—and the reason why it is more radical is the fact that it involves a reassessment of the role of the artist, and not merely a change in the product.

Still searching

Abstract Expressionism carried self-concern, the exploration of the individual psyche which had preoccupied artists from the beginning of modernism, just about as far as it would go. Pop represented a search for a new relationship to reality; while minimal art is largely the expression of the feeling that the search has not succeeded. The artist is therefore left searching for a new basis for his activity. The visual arts are, I believe, the first to reach this extreme point, though modern music is obviously not far behind. Literature has not as yet reached the point of crisis.