



Vito Acconci: Blind-folded Catching Piece

Dusseldorf, Cologne and Paris: Europe's artists on show

Last week I went to three big international exhibitions of recent art: Prospect in Dusseldorf, the Kunstmarkt in Cologne and the Biennale des Jeunes in Paris. They were each so different in organization and atmosphere that one became intensely conscious of exhibitions as "things in themselves". What are they for? Which really tell us about art, about what artists are doing, and which use art as a means to tell us about something else?

Some people believe the critic should not write about the exhibition, its organization, its venue, but only about the work of artists included. But these two things are in a subtle relationship and each affects the other. The Kunstmarkt in Cologne is a conspicuously depressing exhibition and it should be visited by anyone who wants to see one side of the contradiction in which artists in our society work. In Cologne it is really the dealers who are on exhibition. Each has a certain-sized booth and he, she or their representative sits surrounded by an assortment of art objects. Here art, which in other circumstances might be an instrument to change perception, becomes merchandise.

The Paris Biennale brings together the work of hundreds of young artists (they have to be between 20 and 35) from 48 countries. This in itself is an impressive fact. However uneven artistically they may be (and they always are) Biennales have the great redeeming feature that they bring in artists from countries remote from the main forces of publicity and galleries. But somehow this remains just a fact. In the enormous pavilion in the Parc Floral at Vincennes (a difficult journey from the centre of Paris) there is a rather dispirited atmo-

sphere. It is as if the occasion has failed to lead to any mutual benefit among the artists or to reach out to the public. There is a remarkable number of semi-environmental works, which have the air of melancholy shrines. Some individual work is striking. But this overall atmosphere is what you take away.

The Dusseldorf Prospect is quite a different sort of occasion. The artists are from several countries, but the circle of organization is much smaller. It is mainly arranged among the newer avant-garde galleries. Prospect was first set up in 1968 as a challenge to the Cologne Kunstmarkt (only 20 minutes away by train) and this it certainly is. It is meant to stress the process in art rather than the finished, marketable product. Prospect 1971 is clearer and more skilfully conceived than any comparable exhibition in this country. They have taken a subject that is "in the air" — the use of the medium of film, video-tape and still photography by artists. And they have presented it on its own terms. Projectors, slide equipment, TVs keep a continuous show going in several rooms of the Kunsthalle all day. There is a splendid concentration of material.

Can you say anything in general about these very individual films? In comparison with commercial films in general, yes. A great many of the artists are passionately interested in the camera, in the film, as an intermediary between the spectator and reality. The capacity of the camera to zoom (as in Michael Snow's *Wavelength*), to pan (as in Walter de Maria's *Hard Core*), the play of light on the celluloid surface, film's capacity to be immensely slowed down, or speeded up, the cyclic loop film—

the effects these simple devices can exert on our normal sense of time are explored, sometimes beautifully.

Film and video has been widely used to relay a form of art which consists in the bodily actions and movements of the artist himself. He becomes a focus of struggle or concentration of energy rather in the manner of an escapologist or a yogin. Several American artists have projected a stark expression of stress and anxiety through their bodies. For instance, at Prospect there was Vito Acconci's film *Blind for the Catching*. Blindfolded, he tried to catch rubber balls thrown at him, and fumblingly to anticipate when the next one was coming.

Yet in spite of its thoroughness something was missing for me at Prospect. The method of selection is to invite galleries to submit their own artists. If an artist has no gallery he has no chance of being included. This would be indefensible for any exhibition, but particularly one concerned with film and video. Why make a distinction between "artists who make films" and "filmmakers"? It is too much in line with the tendency to treat video-tapes as precious objects and market them like limited edition prints. In a curious way the inexorable whirring projectors took over the scene. As a visitor one felt like a ghost; in fact the traditional passive relation of audience to film was not much questioned by this exhibition. This was a pity; many of the artists were around the Kunsthalle and could have been given the opportunity of working something out, perhaps with the public, there and then. Prospect was a triumph of compilation rather than creation.

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