

## ARGUS de la PRESSE

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# 'Cultural Mutation' in France—Is It More Than a Phrase?

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PARIS.—Next to "J'aime Swipe," "Cultural mutation" is currently the most bandied phrase in France. André Malraux gave the phrase its start in a campaign speech following the upheavals of May, 1968.

Since then, it has been used by everyone who finds his position, tastes or ideas threatened—from professors gibed by their students to pop singers whose records have ceased to sell. Mutation has a fateful ring, and it is more flattering to one's ego to be pushed off one's pedestal by destiny than by an ambitious newcomer or a simple change of fashion.

Fashion or mutation? Perhaps the best place to look for the answer was the sixth Biennale de Paris: the age limit set for the participants is 35 years. For a month, artists from 52 countries took over the lugubrious premises of the Musée Municipal and the Musée National d'Art Moderne (in fact, they have even temporarily chased the roller-skaters off the terrace between the two museums).

The trend seems clear. The traditional disciplines, painting and sculpture, are no longer practiced except in Finland, Senegal, Panama and Bulgaria. Art has sought refuge in the media: the visitors, this year, are bombarded by sight and sound effects. Painters and draftsmen no longer show their creations but project slides of them on the walls.

## Technology

The other favorable shelter is technology: running the now familiar gamut from plastics to electronics, scores of exhibits can be interpreted as pathetic pleas for scholarships and grants from industry—a wish not likely to be fulfilled very often, since the only thing that makes these works recognizably art is that they don't work.

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in fact stand as a summary of the new aesthetic. Only the architects have not been contaminated by it.

Their projects form an exciting, imaginative oasis in a Biennale flooded by negation. Art is out: (make it invisible (a photograph of a plot of desertland, for instance); make it unpalatable (a heap of refuse) or unprintable (four-letter imagery); make it too big or too unwieldy to allow exhibition—in short, make life impossible for the museums.

The specifically French variant to this universal trend is a nostalgic attempt to transform the walls of the museum into those of the Sorbonne by covering them with graffiti.

One such room where visitors could "participate" (another current shibboleth) by scribbling was closed down by the authorities, apparently apprehensive lest society might tremble before the writing on the wall.

## A Pretty Splash

Another was left open: the inscriptions have been so numerous that they have melted into a large, indecipherable and rather pretty splash of red paint.

Why this aggression against museums? Because they are regarded as the custodians and consecrators of cultural objects, which are bourgeois luxuries and therefore must be destroyed.

This generation of artists seeks to destroy art by not practicing it (but to call this "mutation" is to confuse it with muteness). And they seek to destroy the museums by filling them with nonart.

They may achieve the former, but certainly not the latter, for as curators have been quick to realize and to exploit, nonart needs the museum far more

than art does. A sculpture by Brancusi remains a Brancusi wherever it is placed, whereas a garbage can becomes perceptible as an artistic protest only within the hallowed, conservative precincts.

There is a confusion here between the nature of the system of distribution, the mode of consumption and the nature of the product. To assert that painting is bourgeois on the ground that the bourgeoisie buys it is like repudiating arithmetic because Hitler once said 2 plus 2 equals 4.

There are of course bourgeois works and one of the merits of the current drastic rejection on the part of the young is to leave such works mercilessly exposed by depriving them of the routine adulation that was their pedestal.

## A Fatal Blow

That culture as a mark of status has been dealt a fatal blow by the younger generations is made evident, too, by the reception given to the newly released sequel to that great hit of a decade ago, "L'Histoire d'O" by Pauline Réage, a nom de plume that has still not been decoded.

"The Story of O" became a best-selling novel because its sado-masochistic daydreams were couched in flawless neo-classic French language: the imperfect subjunctive, in those days made even sodomy acceptable.

Today, Racinean purity of language has lost its prestige and poor, enraptured O's new sufferings, stripped to the bare facts, would probably pass unnoticed in a pornographic bookstore.

Culture as illustrated by Pauline Réage seems, within a few years, to have receded into the antediluvian past.

But is this true of all culture?

If culture is what art and literature turn into when they cease to live, has everything produced by writers and artists in the millennia that preceded the barricades of May, 1968, been petrified into culture?

## Giacometti

The most important exhibition of the incipient season, the retrospective (through Jan. 12) given at the Musée de l'Orangerie to the work of Alberto Giacometti, who died in 1965, may well serve as a test.

Few modern artists have been more cultivated. From Chaldean sculpture to Egyptian frescoes, from the Etruscans to the cubists, Giacometti had seen and remembered everything.

But where the man of culture catalogues schools, movements, styles, he recognizes individuals trying to look at the world and to represent what they saw.

Giacometti himself had chosen once and for all to question rather than to answer. It was his fear of deadly perfection that drove him, around 1936, to ask a question that he knew

could never be answered. How do you represent on a limited piece of paper or canvas, or with a handful of clay, a mountain, a tree, a human being?

And now these eyes, done with no other purpose than copying what he saw, seem immediately related to the eyes that peer out of the effigies of Memphis and Giacometti has recaptured a basic constant shared with the remote past as well as with the spectator of his exhibition.

Despite the unbridgeable distance with which he surrounds his figures, Giacometti's minimal creatures say something so essential about man that they seem to rise not before the visitor's eyes but within his conscience.

Perhaps some people will say, "Giacometti, who cares?" relegating him to the same realm of oblivion as Phidias, Michelangelo, Rodin or Oldenburg.

If a few say so, it will be a silly remark. If thousands say so, it will be a new cultural fashion. But as long as a single person subsists who doesn't say so, it won't be a mutation, choice remains possible, and choice is the opposite of mutation, because to choose is to be free while mutation is fatality.

\*This ad for a new cleaning product is seen on badges, car windows and billboards all over the country.