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Paris: Festival d'Automne and the Biennale 1973

A multitude of exhibitions, of openings, a gallery that celebrates its official consecration; a Festival d'Automne in Paris as well as a Biennale to publicize and promote these manifestations, ... these are the events that have marked the confused opening of the season in Paris. The confusion arises from the fact that everything was shown (painting, happenings, dance, related events ...) for the implicit purpose of gaining official consecration. This was a condition of which all the artists were well aware beforehand.

These works seem only to exist to win prizes, accumulate honours and be manipulated by museums. J. C. Ammann, one of the organizers of the Paris Biennale, defined this precisely in a declaration published by *Le Monde* (14 September): 'It is only within the context of the museum that

these works have a chance of being seen as a signifying system'.

Hence, the reality underlying the opening of the Parisian season and this 'signifying system' consists of an all-out race for money, prestige and power. Seen from this angle, everything becomes comprehensible and the real motives appear. As art is only a pretext for this joyous feast, all commentary concerning the works themselves or their authors becomes useless. This article intends to deal with the centre and the purpose of all these activities: the institutions.

The Paris Biennale was organized this year by an international committee consisting of twelve members backed up by correspondents in many countries. A 'hanging' committee divided the works between two museums (Musée National d'Art Moderne and Musée Municipal de la Ville de Paris). The national sections were suppressed and the exhibition ran until 21 October. In principle, the artists had to be presented by a correspondent to the International Committee whose job it was to make the final decision regarding each one and draw up a list of those invited.

The result of this is:

(a) An abstract system that operates through the maintenance of the established hierarchy; the artist's work is transformed into a dossier forwarded from the correspondent to the committee until the final judgement which is rendered without appeal.

(b) Everything is justified by the bureaucracy; committees systematically decide what works will be chosen and where and how they will be hung. Collective decisions spare everyone the risk of personal involvement and responsibility, which is what they are afraid of anyway. The artists selected are thus subject to a process of negotiation and mutual concessions. Obviously those works that lend themselves most readily to this kind of manipulation are those that are the most mediocre, i.e. the least controversial. It is no wonder the exhibition looked so desolate and old-fashioned.

(c) The hanging of the works, which was done by a collective committee made up of a few well-known personalities, only emphasized the prevailing paucity of talent.

(d) Examples illustrating the obtuse, totalitarian and improper attitude of the organizers: 1. Representatives of the old and academic Parisian Salons were consulted with regard to the selection of the works. 2. Selection is also made retrospectively: in the catalogue one can see a 'Proposition for the first five Biennales': a selection of names chosen from all the artists who participated in these Biennales. 3. In the preface of the same catalogue, the reasons why Charlier refused to participate have been falsified. (This artist did not accept

an invitation to take part because the Commission refused to answer the questions he posed them in response to their initial questionnaire. He never intended this response to be treated as an 'artwork'.)

The Sonnabend show at the Musée Galliera brought together the stars of the gallery, a few young artists who are not known in Paris, and a few local artists. A maximum effort was made to present the show in accordance with official dictates concerning the Festival d'Automne as a whole, thus ensuring it of the selection refused Yvon Lambert last year when he proposed the exhibition 'Actualité d'un Bilan'.

The three stars had one room each. The other artists were bunched together in a fourth room at the back. The exhibition was organized according to the traditional formulae of Parisian Salons. In this respect, however, it is worth remembering that in the last few years even the obsolete 'comité du salon de Mai' has had the good sense to make the presence of artists such as Picasso, Hundertwasser, Pignon, etc. less imposing by distributing their works among those of the other exhibitors.

The Sonnabend Gallery's calculations became all the more petty when it was revealed that those few local artists who were chosen for Galliera were already supported by the establishment: in the last analysis, it is on account of their presence that officialdom accords such importance to this gallery.

The show at Galliera was also endowed with dance, music and theatre performances each evening; these performances, done by different artists, took place in a fifth room in the middle of the museum. But make no mistake: the artists who took part in this - some with unquestionable talent - basically served only to add prestige to the gallery. The exhibition itself remains the important thing because down there, there are objects for sale. Moreover, the rewards were soon in sight: *Le Monde* published a half-page interview with Ileana Sonnabend, and long articles appeared in other newspapers. It is very likely also that in the near future the CNAC will make large purchases. The fact that Sonnabend feels obliged to have more and more recourse to official power shows that the gallery has run out of energy and indicates panic and weakness.

It would be a mistake to think that this situation is unique to Paris. In varying degrees, it is repeated almost everywhere, rendering illusory the idea that exhibitions abroad might be different. The reason for this is that artists, considerably more concerned with their personal well-being than with the work that is to be done, increasingly resemble their gallery directors or museum curators. The only basis of their activity is to haggle, and art plays the role of an oxygen mask to be used in case of emergency. Caderé