

Paris exhibitions

The Eighth Biennial

by MICHAEL PEPPIATT

Beneath me, as I turn to look out of the window, the focal point on the opposite side of the street is a brightly lit, gleaming-white interior. Within it, as though in a fish-tank, a man in spattered overalls is intent on some transformational activity as yet unclear to me. He kneels, as though humbled, amid pots of paint, odd piles of wood shavings, bits of rope, tools and rags, while his right hand rests on the first rung of a ladder. Behind him, placed upright against the wall like a plank, is a length of milky-coloured plastic inscribed with four bold black capitals: FURE.

The whole scene is urgently familiar. I have been here before, crossed this interior, stopping to reflect on its disorder and apparent meaninglessness, before moving on, often still wrapped in doubt. I have seen it strewn through immaculate galleries or neatly sealed off in august museums. I have seen it, in compact and forceful fashion, this very afternoon at the Eighth Paris Biennial.

The light goes out. The man, now changed into a suit, is standing outside, carefully locking the glass door. Over his head run another four letters: COIF, followed by a gap of equal length. The distinction is drawn. This is not, to speak with what little strictness is left, an exhibit. It is a man who has been redecorating a hair-dressing saloon.

Yet I am quite certain that it could have been inserted without exciting particular surprise (who would allow himself to-day to look surprised at the convulsions of art?) in the bland spaces of the Musée d'art moderne, both of whose sections have served to house the new Paris Biennial. There is no reason, either, why it should not be there, if the particular *peintre en bâtiment* would agree to being converted into a *peintre artiste*. As an "environment," it confronts the viewer with quite as much reality of a certain kind as many another experience on show; and it does not appear to be more, or less, interpretable in aesthetic terms than a good number of the accepted entries.

This is not a rib-digging comparison. Jokes about signing a fire hydrant or presenting the most banal or intimate gesture as art already belong to another age, and have since flown back in the jokers' faces. To a large extent, the present Biennial does

bring the street into the museum. Conversely, it creates that curious democracy of the mind whereby an interior in the process of being redecorated can exercise a certain fascination, as though its jumble in fact signified something beyond itself. How, in any case, could one joke about a show that represents, whether one agrees with its choice or no, fragments of the collective imagination of a whole generation of artists now between 25 and 35?

The works come from all over Europe and the Americas, with some remarkable contributions from Japan and Korea, and although certain national, or at least hemispheric, flavours persist, they are as nothing in the great general sweep towards forms of expression which owe as little as possible—despite the obvious cost in allusive richness and coherence—to anything that has come before them.

No other generalisations are valid. Thereafter, room after room, you pass through quite separate worlds. Irony, mysticism, nihilism and kitsch are all assembled beneath the same

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roof. You leave a stardust-spangled tent filled with small plastic Tarzans busily masturbating (by Wolfgang Weber, a member, as it were, of the group that calls itself the Düsseldorf Scene) to plunge into another candle-lit darkness in which two real, naked bodies, a man and a woman, slowly enact some fraught rite amid carefully strewn, vaguely charismatic odds and ends.

In all, how moderate and well-behaved this Biennial seems when one thinks back only just over a year to the last Kassel Documenta, with its emphasis on factualism, sickness and self-mutilation. Photo-realism, which was so dominant then, is quite absent here. Extremism and militancy have been replaced by an interest in creating atmospheres, in making public private corners of fantasy. Within a year, if these two anthologies are truly indicative, the homage to literalness has apparently switched to explorations of the unconscious. The camera has given way to a fascination with dreams in which one seems to match glimpses of Robert Wilson's stage visions.