

The Paris Biennale — Stained Glass and Goldfish

By John Canaday

PARIS
THE Third Paris Biennale, which opened Sept. 28 and will close Nov. 31, under the distinguished patronage of André Malraux, Minister of Cultural Affairs, is limited to artists between 20 and 35 years of age, on the sound principle that youth must be served, seen and heard. Among the works from 60 nations represented in the endless galleries of Paris Museum of Modern Art, there are paintings, sculptures, and objects of an ambiguous nature by artists young enough to be forgiven their shortcomings and others by artists who are certainly old enough to know better.

The trouble with so large and so spotty an exhibition is that the question soon becomes not what is good but what is new, or seems new. The American representation, for instance — a group of West Coast sculptures selected by Herschel B. Chipp, professor of Art History at the University of California, Berkeley — is a respectable display even though it is not widely representative of current trends in the U.S. It is worth thorough inspection, but there is not much chance that it will be given more than a glance since the manners are familiar.

THIS IS a sad state of affairs and an argument against exhibitions of this kind — big, exhausting, and selected by ambiguous and shifting standards from one section to the next. What could be worse than the Polish showing, a weary and commonplace group described by Ignacy Witz, the commissioner general of the section, as "putting into relief certain new and important tendencies" while as a matter of fact anyone with any acquaintance with contemporary Polish art can recognize that much effort must have gone into finding such trite and stale examples in

a country where contemporary artists are so inventive.

With so much that is bad contaminating the little that is good, the weary eye soon stops trying to distinguish a sheep from a goat and asks only to be startled by a monster. The startlers in the Paris Biennale are the "Tra-vaux d'équipe," or team-works, designed by painters, sculptors, architects and others working as a unit. One enters them somewhat as one enters the side-shows on the midway of a fair, and they have the primary advantage of offering something compact in an otherwise sprawling display.

ONE OF THE more elaborate team works, Exhibit Number 219, in the French section called "Laboratory of the Arts," may serve as an example. A synthesis of just about everything, its list of team members includes a "co-ordinator responsible for the team," a "space philosopher," a "space organizer," an "action and time organizer," a technical counsellor, a plastic artist (sculptor to you), a painter and creator of "color ambience," a composer, a singer (soprano), a poet, a cinematographer, two dramatic readers of the kind once called elocutionists, a sound man, a theatrical technician, an experimental musicologist and a projectionist. Various commercial firms also teamed up with contributions of such things as aluminum, light bulbs, motors, sound equipment and so on, and another nine came through with scientific photographs. The man who deserves most credit, however, is whoever did the wiring.

What you get out of all this is a sort of abstract opera or a beatnik game, depending on how seriously you want to take it. It is "son et lumière" gone St. Germain-des-Près. Large forms resembling sails or radar antennae move round and round; an abstract glass sculpture swings at erratic intervals along a semi-circular track; lights go on and off and change color; experimental poetry is decisively delivered from numerous speakers with a really extraordinary ef-

fect suggesting that the readers are flying around above your head. Mixed in are electronic music and what must be the sound track of exotic bird calls from a movie of some years ago called "Burma Road." All this time the soprano is working hard. The idea is to "extract" both the actors and the spectators from their "habitual dimensions."

THIS SPECTATOR was not quite extracted. Somehow he remained firmly seated in the Museum of Modern Art divided between lively interest (he likes electronic music and exotic bird calls) and an inability to believe that a collection of professional clichés becomes original by being stirred up and served as an amateur hash.

Rather more satisfactory and much less complicated is a Belgian team job organized by the painter Octave Landuyt. Landuyt's painting often resembles stained glass. In this case he has painted in brilliant colors on transparent plastic illuminated from behind, sometimes superimposing one painted sheet over another, and in one case painting on a pair of transparent cylinders, one within the other, that rotate in opposite directions. In an architectural arrangement accompanied by electronic music filled with agreeable bubbling sounds, this display is optically and aurally diverting.

AN ITALIAN TEAM offers a truly elegant sheet-metal architectural miniature composed of intersecting corridors resembling the interiors of submarines sliced up and reassembled. Painting and sculpture of great ornamental character is displayed here as in a museum. If there are sound effects, the hi-fi was out for repairs during my visit.

The worst of these sideshow displays is also French, and let us say of it only that one of its units is an ordinary tank of goldfish labeled "living mobile." Any group of Bennington freshmen could improve on this one on stunt night.



One of Marie Koehler's drawings from an exhibition at the Galerie Ars Classica, 1454 Sherbrooke Street west, which has been extended until October 25.

Several projects for team jobs are presented only in the form of technical drawings or architectural models, since they would have been too large for construction and exhibition. A promising one is a study for an approach to a sanctuary by students of the Ateliers d'Art Sacré. Another is "an area appropriate for meditation," by the students of Bath Academy of Art, Corham.

ALL THESE inventions are contemporary extensions of the old Beaux Arts "collaborative problem" in which a painter, a sculptor and an architect combined their efforts in the production of a single harmonious structure. The integration of sounds and controlled light and

literature as well as the abstract art-for-the-art's-sake approach transforms them. If team-art is a new art form it must range, like any other, from the prostitution of novelty to thoughtful exploration. All you can hope for is that the bad, which so often has a theatrical advantage over the good, won't capture the audience.

The trouble with the Paris Biennale in all its parts is that this tends to happen. It takes a real Pollyanna to be grateful for all the bad in order that the little good may get shown mixed up with it, and it takes a real Candide to believe that this is the best of all possible exhibitions of art by young people between 20 and 35.

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