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# DOWN AND OUT

ART

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<sup>5100</sup>  
**T**OO often, strangers and friends alike seek assurances that "there's nothing new worth going to see in the art galleries"; and I am dumb for a reply.

It is tragically true that contemporary art offers very, very little that in any way reflects the inherent greatness of man's stature and the human race, the glories of creation, and the divine wonder of life. But to avoid "wasting time" at exhibitions—at least at official and important ones—is to avoid joining debate. This can only increase the isolation and lack of direction of artists. Far, far better, to go, and complain.

So there are certain shows which I call "essential evidence"; which however much I hate, I think you, dear reader, ought to go and see. Such a one, if a little distant this time, is the eighth Biennale de Paris, housed in the two sections of the Musée d'Art Moderne by the Seine; it runs until October 21.

At the first of these Biennales—for artists under 35 only—Anthony Caro in 1959 was our star; later Hockney, Jones, Caulfield and Riley gained acclaim. This year the structure has been reorganised, and a 12-man international committee, which included Gerald Forty of the British Council, has selected 98 visual artists or groups, of whom five—Stephen Buckley, John Cob, John Davies, Tam McPhail and Carl Plackman—are British.

In addition, there is a photographic documentation section, to which 11 of our artists—the Cameron/Miller team, Chaimovitz, Dye, Hilliard, Head, Richardson, and the "GASP" group—were invited to contribute; a film section which includes from Britain, le Grice, Lowe, Masi, Raban, du Cane, and McCall; a musical composition section which includes no British names (no support or no composers?); theatre (no British group); pop (none likewise); and jazz (the Keith Tippett trio our sole contribution).

Besides the 12-man jury, a team of knowledgeable correspondents from all countries, including our own Edouard Lucie-Smith and David Thompson, assisted in bringing together the selection. So the dismal result cannot be taken as haphazard, quirkily personal, or the result of some in-group intrigue. Here are the 98 most talented avant-garde artists under 35 in the world; you cannot ignore or reject them without acknowledging that this is the state of the world. If these artists are the keepers, or even merely the prophets, of the human psyche A.D. 1973-2000, God help us; if this is tomorrow, better cancel it.

But let me at least try to mention the best first (and I'm confining myself to visual art on view all the time). Our John Davies comes off perhaps best of all (though the French don't go for him so much): a whole room devoted to his four wax figures, two within a ring, another acting as ringmaster, another sitting out lost in self-absorption; astonishingly powerful in its presence and mystery, a proof that the degree of attention given to a work is directly reflected to the viewers. If this artist's view is tragic and pessimistic, at least it's art.

Stephen Buckley's paintings show more research and attempt to communicate than most other exhibits; John Cob has put more work into his wooden constructions than

most exhibitors; Carl Plackman's is a serious attempt to use objects for their shape without function. And Tam McPhail makes witty use of a rhetorical flight of stairs to a blank door in the museum, in his environmental piece—spoilt by a too introspective "artist's situation" message in place of creation.

Otherwise about the only really positive, life-enhancing exhibit is a slide documentation of the activities of the Brigadas Ramona Parra from Chile, who celebrated Allende's coming to power by painting public walls with vigorous, strong murals. And the group from Düsseldorf at least bring public humour to their work.

But the general impression is of a civilisation ripe for takeover. An unswept, uncared-for building (in Paris!) A drugging lack of discrimination or mental direction. Pathetic assertions of a separate individual existence in place of work.

Pervading the whole show is a weary sense that the Western mind is sick to death, living in a yet disguised spiritual poverty that not all the colour television, washing machines and cars in the world will of themselves alleviate. One can understand young artists revolting at the evidence of man's inhumanity to man; it just happens to be their duty to transcend this and show us the rest of the universe and its glories.