

In Search of Urbanity, Humanity and New Talent at the Paris Biennale

PARIS — The aim of the Paris Biennale is to give young artists a showing. This year, about 200 participants under 35 from 41 countries submitted paintings, sculptures, videotapes, music, photos, films, architecture and sundry unclassifiable items.

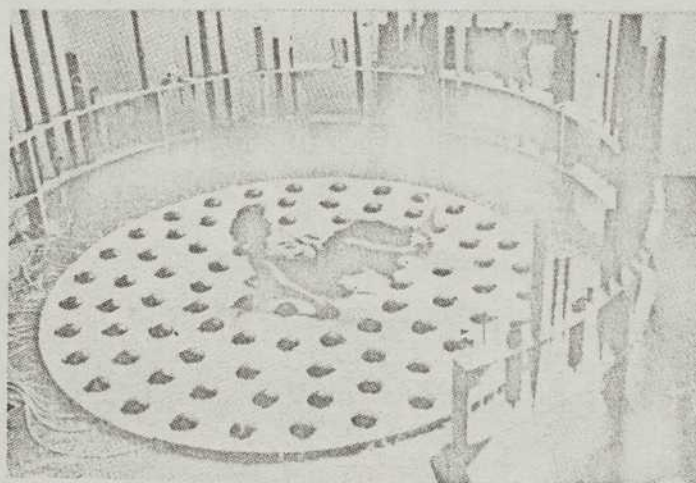
The Biennales of the past were often marked by what might be described as a mood of anemic provocation. The anemia is still there, but the stormy provocations of the past have taken the wind out of the sails of those who now venture to reiterate them. A film by one young Englishman shows him writhing naked in a slop of color on top of a sheet of glass. Alas, as Duchamp himself once remarked: "Even derision, even destruction becomes tedious in the long run."

It is widely known that Yves Klein had nude models sponge themselves blue and then slap their painted bodies onto a canvas before an audience. Matta has indulged himself before the camera,

standing behind glass and rubbing his face in an unappetizing mixture of color and spit. People who ignore history, the dictum goes, are condemned to repeat it.

Yes but, we are told, this is different: This man's body is treated as a sculpture. He does know about Yves Klein, "and he has synthesized these various influences into an art that is powerful and personal." Which raises the issue whether a gesture of negation (like Duchamp's urinal or Klein's various actions) can by the force of repetition be transformed into an affirmative statement. My own conviction is that it cannot. Duchamp himself, an expert in the matter, was of the same opinion.

One group whose members are in their mid-30s had the quaint idea of calling themselves "Normal." They handed out a rather childish manifesto symptomatic of the more banal aspects of the show. Two other artists sat with their mouths plastered shut with



Horst Glasker's noise machine.

red tape to protest that they had been censored by the organizers. Their point was somewhat blunted by the fact that they sat inside the museum's precincts.

Not all contributions by any means are in this vein. There were some serious attempts at sculpture: Franz Rosci's were in marble and restrained, those of the group

Paisaje Imaginario in wood and randomly baroque.

Horst Glasker's construction was an entertaining toy. He carpeted the ground with the rubber hemispheres used to inflate floating mattresses, each connected to a whistle, an organ pipe or some other noisemaking gadget. Visitors were invited to trot around and make their own ruckus.

But the rewards of serious and sustained work were perhaps best illustrated by the photo exhibit of Mroczak (pronounced *Mroshchak*) and Sikora, who chose to illustrate scenes from Alice in Wonderland, using models (or actors) and complex sets to bring that familiar dream world to life with expressionistic humor.

A Norwegian woman, Marianne Heske, has dismantled a log cabin in a distant fjord and reassembled it in the space afforded in the Pompidou Center. It is an endearing manifesto expressing concern, affection and dissatisfaction. But

as a work of art, it lacks esthetic structure, just as a sigh of pleasure or a scream of agony does.

This is a failing of most of the work presented in the Biennale. The "Alice" pictures bring this home. To some, the structure, borrowed from Lewis Carroll, may seem arbitrary but it has, one senses, been assimilated by the artists who chose it. And in its new form, it tells us something relevant about their own world and ours.

The Biennale also includes cinema, performance, video and music (one much-awaited event is a performance of the Portsmouth Sinfonia Orchestra, a sort of post-Hoffnung musical joke).

It has been repeatedly observed that video art tends to be unspeakably boring. A Dutch critic, Winny Kaiser, has soberly maintained that "creative boredom, resulting in an expansion of consciousness," was a new esthetic characteristic.

Don Foresta, a member of the selection committee at the Bien-

nale, responded to this theory quite explosively: "Nonsense!" "It's boring because people don't know how to do it. Sure, there is a hypnotic aspect to the television screen. But I don't think video art should be boring."

A lot of it is still very bad, he says, and the easy excuse is to say that this is intentional. "The Kitchen in New York, for instance, has produced a lot of sloppy, technically inadequate work. 'Fast and dirty' — spontaneity of the medium — are some of the slogans used to justify this. But that was fine 15 years ago. To me," he concludes, "it is more of a potential art than a real art."

One of the most attractive aspects of the Biennale is its most recent addition: the architectural show "In Search of Urbanity," presenting 60 projects that attempt to inject some humanity into urbanism.

Architects from 18 countries sent in proposals or completed

projects, including a plan of a campus, another for a New York skyscraper that would be partly covered with rocky cliffs, gorges, waterfalls and vegetation, and one for the reconstruction of the center of old Moscow.

Completed projects included a development in a Mauritanian city based on local (rather than colonial) materials and styles, and a Horace Walpole water tower in Krefeld, Germany, preserved from destruction by public affection and now transformed into lodgings with a swimming pool where the reservoir once was. These contributions reflect a new attention to human needs that have so often been brutalized in this century.

The Biennale de Paris is at the Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 11 avenue du President Wilson, Paris 16, until Nov. 2, and at the Pompidou Center, Paris 3, the site of the architecture show, until Nov. 10.