

The Paris Biennale: Is There Art Under 35?

By Michael Gibson

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PARIS — "We are subject to a very simple and obvious restriction," said Georges Boudaille, commissioner general of the Paris Biennale of Young Artists (under 35). "We can only show artists that actually exist!"

The Paris Biennale opened this week and runs to Nov. 14 — with hundreds of artists from 45 countries — in the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, (11 Avenue du Président Wilson, Paris 16), the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, (14 Rue Bonaparte, Paris 6), the Institut Français d'Architecture, (6 Rue de Tournon, Paris 6), the Australian Embassy, (Rue Jean Rey, Paris 15) and the Pompidou Center, and the significance of Boudaille's observation was instantly apparent: The current Biennale is predominantly like the ruts left by the wheels of society, the expression of a mass-culture phenomenon in which the younger artists express youth's divorce from the symbolic language of the past and its disavowal of things as they are.

This disavowal, however, is not only an expression of something which is perhaps the most valuable aspect of youth — it is also the sign of a cultural hiatus comparable to the appearance of Pop Art, and for somewhat the same reasons. Pop Art, despite all the art school rationalizations that surround it, owes its success to becoming the cultural banner of a sector of American society that was achieving wealth and leisure in the '50s. This new class did not share, nor desire to share, the cultural values of the older rich who had turned to Europe as a guide and market place.

The debatable assumption that "art should represent reality" led to the conclusion that American

art should represent the reality of America — the supermarket and the fast-food shop, the Brillo box and the beer can. There was of course room for a slightly perverse irony in all this, but Pop's success was really due to its appearance at a moment when a large body of new buyers arose and needed a form of decoration in their minds, homes or museums that proclaimed their new identity and imposed it on society.

Today's phenomenon is in some ways similar. There is a "new class" in Europe which has acceded to leisure if not to wealth. This new class represents yet another "vertical invasion," in the sense that Ortega y Gasset used the expression, and consequently a new arrival of barbarians.

"Barbarians" here is not a moody value judgment but a his-



Oil by Jacek Siudzinski of Poland.

torical reality. The ancient Greeks coined the word as a derisive imitation of unintelligible foreign speech. The barbarian is someone who does not know the language, and the new barbarians today do not simply reject the cultural language of the past. They are mostly unaware of it. Their reference is a chaotic culture of their own, derived from urban life, television, and rock and punk music.

This is not entirely negative. There is a Pop culture vivacity that is not at all incompatible with the wealth of the past, that could very well treat it as an inheritance (rather than as a "heritage"). It is ironic, humorous and bright, but in its present form it is also decorative (or anti-decorative) and glib. Its best expression is in films (for instance, "Diva") and its main weakness in the field of art is a naive, or defiant, trust in spontaneity, as though unmediated free association could ever communicate anything — an assumption that reflects total unawareness of the historically defined nature of all communication.

Obsessed Imagery

Looking at the narrative representational works that dominate the current Biennale, one cannot help feeling that the painters are obsessed by the imagery of film and television, its quick flashes of sequences and its non sequiturs that can occasionally make TV advertising entertaining. One can walk through the show as a whole and take in much of it as if each work were a fragment of a cinematic montage. As such every piece acquires a relevance of sorts, even if it is unintelligible on its own.

There are a few privileged

moments that rise out of this amalgam. The rippled stone of the Argentine sculptor Pablo García Reinoso; the vivid sculptures, covered with pure pigment, of Britain's Anish Kapoor (who was also in Venice this year), or, in a more playful vein, the imaginary fresco fragments of Jérôme Baratelli (Switzerland), the strongly colored constructions of J.B. Audat (France) or the impudent little assemblages of odds and ends of André Léocat (also France). Some artists refer to art forms of the past, but in that case the reference is only formal.

The Biennale on the whole reflects the current trend toward cultural slumming in which the established social class makes an attempt to blend culturally with the emerging class. The people who buy (or in some cases, who make) "bad painting" do not belong to the social stratum that finds expression in it. "Bad painting" is the cultural (or anti-cultural) banner of people who cannot afford to buy it (especially at the manipulated prices at which it is being sold). But it reflects a sort of consensus on matters that have nothing to do with art and which find symbolic expression in art only at art's expense. The issues are rationalized social and economic, not aesthetic, although they are rationalized in the dialect of art criticism.

Transcendence

This is by no means all. The deeper issue remains the so-called avant-garde's flight away from the vexed and unresolved problem of transcendence. This is the central issue of all art and it has been festering in the Western world for the past 200 years. The 19th centu-

ry made various more or less felicitous attempts at a make-believe transcendence which, on the whole, gave art a bad name as a placebo for sentimental women. The problem is that without some credible form of transcendence, art is not able to present and illuminate the drama of human existence.

Mark Rothko, (who refused to be described as a "religious" artist and who subscribed to no religion), was well aware of this issue, which is acutely present in his art: "The presentation of this drama in the familiar world was never possible," he wrote, "unless everyday acts belonged to a ritual accepted as referring to a transcendent realm. . . . Since the archaic artist was living in a more practical society than ours, the urgency for transcendent experience was understood and given an official status."

Our secular society urgently needs to examine the question of transcendence in a secular perspective — but that question is repressed and covered up with much sociological talk. And this, in turn has created a self-confirming system in which works are more or less consciously according to sociological criteria (e.g. this or that artist is validated as a symbolic spokesman of homosexual demands), and the works, in turn, appear to substantiate the latent theory.

Other Forms

The Biennale is also offering an abundance of other forms, installations, experimental musical instruments, cinema, architecture (sober and technical in presentation) and a wide variety of music.

Finally the United States, which is not officially present at the Biennale, will be represented after a fashion thanks to a technical curiosity, the Slowscan system, which translates an image into sound signals and sends it by phone during the Biennale. Those works will appear on a TV screen, be photographed by a Polaroid camera and hung with the rest in the museum.

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