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About the Biennale

By Annette Michelson

THIS shifting network of aims and decisions, of invitations and judgments, of committees—national, international and supranational—and of intersecting juries, is, then, the first, the long-awaited Paris Biennale. It has, of course, produced an assemblage of some thousand paintings, sculptures and graphic works, but assemblages are common in Paris. The salons, the dozens of immense, official *accrochages* organized each year, pose the perennial technical problem for the critic, and generation after generation of men-of-letters-turned-critics has resigned itself to the social necessity of dealing with them. Unless one wishes to descend to the level of ritual ("Mannin is a bit hard; Portugal has contributed some well-made canvases by Bertholo in green and gray" . . . See "Combat," Sept. 5), to the sort of politely murmured roll-call which does nothing for painter or public, one must reject the task of "covering" the exhibition, of discharging official duties. One is then free to feel that charity will consist in tracing lines of force (which I hope to do in another article) and, above all, in examining the idea of the exhibition, the conception underlying the institution.

The Biennale most certainly is a gesture, and, as a gesture, most comprehensible and interesting. It has been precipitated by the tactical position of the School of Paris, and everything about it, including the unprecedented speed and efficiency with which it has been organized, indicates that it is essentially a defensive riposte in a duel to the death.

Organized under the leadership of Raymond Cogniat, Inspector in Chief of Fine Arts, the Biennale constitutes Paris's answer to Venice and Sao Paulo and, indirectly but more importantly, to the United States. The question of age limit (the artists participating are under 35 years of age) is essentially a secondary issue, though a highly debatable one. The real question is: "Why a Biennale at all?"

Certainly one may see it as another result of the increasingly tight and elaborate network of communication which is both facilitating cultural interchange and destroying all possibility of creative solitude. But to see it simply as such is to accord it a naturalness, an inevitability which it does not have.

The Biennale is a highly self-conscious enterprise, expressing a need for reassurance, for self-assertion and prestige inherent in France's general position today. The Biennale has a specifically Fifth-Republic character, it is one more aspect of the general policy of the *rayonnement de la culture française*.

André Malraux's statements published Monday in the Paris afternoon paper "Le Monde" strikingly confirm this. The interviewer establishes the "fact" that "the capital of our country remains the center of gravity for pictorial enterprise, notwithstanding attempts to transport it elsewhere," and that "these attempts are by now too

obvious for anyone to pretend to be unaware of them. Paris's prestige remains intact."

Now this has understandably been the great, anxious theme-song of ultra-conservative critics of the generation of Raymond Charvet and Claude Roger-Marx. It has been adopted by the organizers of the Biennale. That M. Malraux should join in the chorus is, however, if no longer astonishing, disheartening. Having said that the Biennale testifies to the emancipation of the painter (and by this he is quite rightly insisting on the formal, esthetic freedom visible on canvas) and that this emancipation comes from Paris, M. Malraux states his intention of organizing a major exhibition to demonstrate the historical role of the Paris School in contemporary painting, and the debt that Jackson Pollock, among others, owes to Fautrier, Wols and Masson—all this to be nicely catalogued, documented and dated.

One has now begun to rub one's eyes, feeling one has misread. But no, one has not—no more than one had misread the incredible personal attack on Sartre in which M. Malraux indulged during his recent, official cultural mission in South America.

M. Malraux is prepared to violate reality to the point of re-writing art history as drama. That, of course, may simply be the man of letters' supreme coquetry: wishing to be read by posterity, not like Mathiez, for one's content, but, like Michelet, for one's style.

Pollock's debt to Fautrier and Wols must, then, be invented and used to support and reinforce the very real importance of Masson's influence, thus re-establishing, through mere chronology, France's creative supremacy. One is naturally astonished once again that a man of this sophistication, well versed in dialectical strategy, should lose control to the point of making this particularly elementary kind of blunder—and at the expense of three gifted painters.

M. Malraux's stance, the techniques of assertion, of hypostatization, the fundamentally gestural and rhetorical character of his statements confirm the Biennale's historical significance, if not its mission. For France to have to prove to us that Paris is *still* that center of the art world is sad. For obvious reasons the show's organizers deserve one's severity, generosity, understanding and a special kind of tenderness.

Above all, the Fifth Republic can, when it so chooses, do things handsomely. In that dreary, insubstantial, badly designed and propped-up sepulcher on the Avenue du Président Wilson, the thousand works of art, shipped, insured, well hung, well lighted, have been grouped with taste in a specially conceived décor which is neither obtrusively elaborate nor offensively meager. Subsidies are available, when the "Politique de la Grandeur" is in question. The prizes, grants and scholarships which have been announced testify to the fact that the government is prepared, if necessary, to do things liberally, indeed. That is the single most important fact to be retained. The money is there.

One's duty, then, is to campaign for its efficient use—for a revision of the curriculum at the School of Fine Arts, for example; for the building of studios and workshops and for aid for first one-man shows (similar to that already available for the production of first plays by young writers).