

PARIS OLYMPIADE OF YOUNG ARTISTS

J. P. HODIN

I.

The IIIrd Biennale of Young Artists was opened on September 28th in the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris. Fifty-five nations took part through their official organisations, innumerable artists, all between 20 and 35 years old. It is the best organised Paris Biennale hitherto, doing honour to Paris and to its aim of giving the young a valid forum for the exchange of their experiences and for judging each other, i.e., young critics, the young artists, young French artists giving prizes to young foreign artists, etc. The first impression is that of two extremes. The one is the art devoted to the task of solving the artistic problems of technology and of our space-age, the use of new materials, of new techniques and the application of kinetic principles. Not all that new—but definitely dominating. The other extreme is that of an insensitive megalomaniac Realism of the 19th century in the service of, i.e., enslaved by political demands. Lenin making notes, over life size, on a walk through a field, or The First Steps, a child trying to walk between its father's legs in high boots (both Soviet Union), or the Industrial landscapes in Rumanian official art. In between there is the upsurge of Neo-Dadaism and Neo-Surrealism (particularly Tetsumi Kudo's, born 1935, revolting combination of kitchen utensils, drainage matter, biological models of human organs neatly packed in white juke-boxes with music built in. Your Portrait in 1962, Your Portrait in 1963) appearing in various forms at Pop-Art, compactly represented by Great Britain, though of American extraction and so bewildering that even Englishmen walked through the section in search of the English contribution without being able to detect it. The best here was David Hockney both in his oils and engravings. He could be a painter if he so wanted but his spirit is feather light so that the next breeze will carry him away into a new 'adventure'. We cannot be convinced by the theoretical claim that Pop-Art is a search for the figurative and a break away from abstraction. It is as gimmicky as much of the Surrealist and Dadaist production was before.

The French, of course, drive the point *ad absurdum*. They do not pretend to create a new 'style' basing it on cheap advertisement tricks, and loud poster colours, as the English do, they simply make fun. (Groupe Lettriste.)

It may be good, however, to know what the serious young artists are concerned with, whether it is expressed in an accomplished way or not. There is the anxiety of modern living, the terror of the atom bomb, the shade of Hiroshima. We see it in individual works but above all in the *Travaux d'Equipe* the collective group works produced by Belgium, Great Britain, Germany, Italy and France. The Italians presented a sequence of welded steel chambers suggesting with its life size bronze of a skinned corpse and of two horrified children, its paintings and objects, either gas chambers, or air-raid shelters in atomic warfare. So did the French in their *Abattoir* (Slaughter House) with its Dubuffet-Francis Bacon stylisations of the corpses of mass humanity. It is the weakest contribution of the French from the artistic point of view. But otherwise they have produced fine group works on the problem of the co-ordination of the arts and architecture: their *Approche d'un Sanctuaire*, their *Baptistère Saint-Jean*, their *Cité de la Cour des Nations de Tous les Arts*. Here the religious and ethical undertones are quite audible in this pandemonium of Existentialist and Technological Nihilism. For after all: if Politics and Eco-

nomics may lead to disaster it is the artist's duty to show up values of more varied quality. He cannot only tremble, make fun or be cynical. What is needed is a spiritual decision. The French represent all three. The *Finis Terrae* mentality (Mutation Zoomorphe à usage océanographique implanté à Ouessant), and the combination of mobile shapes of new materials resembling a radar station in the night exposed to varied lighting and accompanied by the sound of electronic music; of sudden shouts, quarrelling voices, prayers, birdsong, calls of seagulls, the thunder of the tide, frightened, hungry animals and man. An atmosphere of the cave age combined with that of a new metropolis is created. Space-Time-Energy are the new 'Idols'. And there is, too, that purely Technological-Optical Credo as demonstrated in the kinetic *Labyrinthe* symbolising the unstable character of modern life, its ability. The eye is being intentionally worried, the shock technique is applied.

The Belgian *équipe* produced an effect curiously bound up with deep sea research in its kinetic use of light and mobile, superimposed 'abstract' picture strips, perpetually moving and changing with teleguided images, sculptures in reflections, electronic sounds of bubbling water, lions roaring, etc. Both the German and the English contributions in this co-operative section are negligible with the exception of the model submitted by students of the Bath Academy of Art, Corsham (Penelope Ellis, Sculptor, Raymond Burton, architect, Irmgard Flemming, graphics and Jean Campbell, photographer) on the theme of *Life and Death*.

By far the largest number of works exhibited can be classified as Abstract Expressionist. More than half of all the contributions, indeed. The most obvious influence is Tápies and the modern Spanish school all over the world; as in Yugoslavia, Germany, Senegal, Japan, Canada, Brazil, France. There are reminiscences of Dubuffet, of Mathieu, of Klee, and quite sporadically still of Picasso floating like islands in a small archipelago amidst the dead sea of Abstract-Expressionism. There is practically no symbolism but Signs and Images still occur, especially in sculpture.

II.

There are good works in the Biennale, quite promising though not masterly.

The Prize Winners of the Paris Biennale of 1961, the painter Horst Antes (b. 1936) from Germany, the sculptor Yerasimos Sklavos (b. 1927) from France, displayed one man shows within the framework of this year's Biennale. Antes' style is a combination of large strongly coloured areas in the manner of de Staël and the South Pacific school with an infusion of Max Ernst's Surrealist Figuration. Sklavos' elaborate and dynamic neo-Gothic sculptures in porphyry or granite are to be placed in the vicinity of Gaudi's fantastic world of forms.

III.

The programme of the Biennale is vast. It includes permanent preformances of modern music, poetry reading, films on art, experimental work in choreography, electronic poetry, theatre decor and performance. It also gives opportunities to young interpreters and conductors of modern music, including jazz, to show their abilities and there is a free tribune for discussions on all cultural aspects.

The only foreign prizes given in the categories of group work and of graphic art went to The Bath Academy of Art and to David Hockney for his prints.