

Paris: Biennale des Jeunes

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The 11th Biennale de Paris, the so-called Biennale des Jeunes, is now on public view (until November 3), the major portion of it occupying the upper floors of the old Musée d'Art Moderne, just up-river from the Trocadero Gardens, with a small ramp to be found on the mezzanine deck of the Centre Pompidou. Held under the joint auspices of the Ministers of Culture and Foreign Affairs, and the Mayor of Paris, it is an event international by invitation and of some considerable cumulative prestige; for the French are inclined to take such things as seriously as they take themselves, and this is a generous, imaginative and, certainly to the artists themselves, a most valuable act of practical patronage.

It was due to take place last year and so, in fairness to disappointed youth, the qualifying age has for the moment been raised by a year to 30. Naturally the French themselves, *par droit de seigneur*, take the lion's share of space and attention, with something like a third of those artists showing in the Plastic Arts category alone; but over 40 countries have chosen to send young artists to represent them, a great many of them admittedly only a single spy or two, but the cultural powers, as we might like to see ourselves, respectable battalions. West Germany and Italy, for example, have 11 artists apiece, and if the Irish three are added to ours, the British Isles 13 in that same category.

There is, on the other hand, comparatively little to be seen from Communist countries, rather less from Latin America, and hardly anything at all from Africa and the Arab world; and surprisingly the U.S. has contributed only to the section given to Video Art. China does take part but, as seems to be her habit, somewhat hors concours, with quite separate a display of recent popular art that, in the context of Western modernist engagement, can only seem utterly, ludicrously bizarre.

The Biennale falls into four sections, with some minor overlapping: the Plastic Arts, Video, Performance and Experimental Cinema; of which, apart from a single performance by the Irishman, Nigel Rolfe (catalogued with it in any case), I had the opportunity only to study the first. Whatever generalisations I make apply, therefore, only to the Biennale as a festival of the Plastic Arts, as they are presently understood. But it is overwhelmingly the largest section, holding more than enough to see, ponder and assimilate.

As is always the case with these huge international committee shows, what we confront is an extraordinary, visually raucous, one feels at times hopeless jamboree and jumble-sale of Art, with each contribution fighting for its aesthetic life against what chance or the diplomatic coups of the hanging have made its neighbours. No matter how conscientiously the organisers might strive for unity, such is the nature of the exercise, so vast in scope, so varied and unpredictable the contributions (for so much must be taken on trust, so much accepted unseen or, at best, inadequately photographed), that all coherence is dangerously insubstantial.

But this is not so much a deficiency as a simple unqualified characteristic disappointing in itself only if contrary expectations are entertained. The variety might make for hard work, but also for surprise and stimulation, and the opportunity to take a broad, arbitrary view across international activity, especially so when it is naturally less well-established and official, is one to value. If, in sheer self-defence, a particular country chooses to submit a delegation which will achieve a substantial presence amidst the hubbub, fair enough. Here I must declare my own interest, for at the invitation of the British Council, the sponsoring body, I had a say in selecting the artists to represent the UK—and I certainly subscribed to

the view, which the event has confirmed, that it would be wise to choose artists whose work was robust and self-sufficient enough to look after itself in circumstances where ideal display could not be guaranteed.

In consequence conceptual work, photographic work and subtle and complex installations, which the British Council has frequently sent abroad in recent years, was passed over this time in favour of autonomous, discreet objects: paintings, sculptures and reliefs. The eight artists we chose represent no one but themselves, no particular school, no single aspect of modernist or avant-garde preoccupation: all are conspicuous, in a show that contains a great deal of triviality, for their seriousness and their technical accomplishment. Of the painters, Paul Hempton's quiet tonal pictures of ambiguous objects, rods and stones, lying in close, walled-in spaces, are as beautiful as anything in the entire Biennale: Edwin Easychorik's huge monochrome panels impressively outface the decorative patterns of Mlle Isabelle Champion-Metadier that share their cubicle; Michael Crowther commands the entrance to the exhibition, by virtue of a wall built at the eleventh hour, with his huge images, simplified figures in a Matisse space; and Stephenie Bergmann's frail hangings sit alone on the staircase, deceptively self-effacing.

As luck would have it, our four sculptures, after much confusion and general post, found themselves sharing one of the simplest, cleanest spaces of all, with only a stray Austrian carver, whose work at least was not unsympathetic, for company. Thus, quite unforeseen. Brian Thompson, Keith Reeves, Lloyd Gibson and Dave King, who form or would wish to form no group, make the most impressive collective display of the Biennale.

It is one thing to come to a decision many months beforehand, quite another to confront

the fruits of one's deliberations in the event; but, though it may sound uncritically chauvinistic to say as much, I must say I was relieved and gratified to see our artists show up so well. The Irish presence is less assertive—from Northern Ireland gentle abstractions from Felim Egan and a single low rectangular sculpture, immensely heavy from John Aiken; and quite separately from Ireland three artists, of whom, though I found Patrick Connor's stoneware figurines most intriguing, the performance man, Nigel Rolfe is the most notable.

His performance takes place at intervals at the Pompidou where he has erected a platform some 10 feet off the ground, the floor of which is transparent, and upon which he disposes himself stark naked. The ritual I saw him enact had him place small piles of pigment around himself, first white, then blue, in which he would roll, at first dry and then wet, to the fascination of an audience which was assiduous in recording every detail of what it saw. The distant view of this tableau a raft above a sea of heads, on which Rolfe lay motionless, his body glistening like a Canova marble in a pink light, was removed and unexpectedly impressive.

For the rest, I came away less concerned with the meretricious, the gimmicks and side-shows with their squawks and flashes and self-conscious earnestness, which are unimportant, than grateful for the good number of excellent authentic, well-made works of art that are unquestionably to be found amongst them: the sewn mannikins of Gitte Daehlin from Norway, for example, or the loose and open abstractions of Dominique Gauthier, which were shown somewhat more extensively in Venice this summer. There is, too, the engaging photographic tableaux which are enacted by the Poles Mroszczak and Sikora and their friends, splendidly grotesque visions of Alice's Wonderland.

