

What Price Artistic Fame?—A Tidy Fortune

By NICHOLAS POWELL

Paris

Every other year Paris puts on its "La Biennale," and by beefing up its 1985 exhibition it has put itself back on the map alongside the Whitney, the Venice Biennale and the Kassel Documenta as a major showcase for contemporary art.

In its new premises in the "Grande Halle," this year's show also benefits from a



healthy ten-million-franc budget from the ministry of culture, the city council and private sources—ten times the funding for the previous Biennale.

Visitors to the Grande Halle—a long, cast-iron pavilion built in 1867—can see works by 120 artists representing 23 countries. Until 1974 the pavilion was used as a cattle market, which explains why it covers some five acres of ground.

Five acres means a lot of art, and the Biennale's organizers have provided guidelines for the less-enlightened among the 250,000 visitors expected through May 21. Most of the works, we learn, belong to conceptual art, art pauvre, figuration narrative, transavantgarde, graffiti painting and figuration libre. Contemporary art is nothing if not self-conscious, and the high prices commanded by some young Biennale artists show that artistic self-awareness goes hand in hand with market sophistication.

The opening of the Biennale to artists of all ages this year—including one, Henri Michaux, who is dead—marks a change from the old policy of exhibiting only those under 35 years old. It includes nine South American painters "as part of the North-South dialogue." Were the French government not so keen on North-South

dialogue, one assumes from some of these sights, they would not be there at all.

Overall, the Biennale marks the swan song of abstraction and a return to the figurative. This trend consecrates artists like the 81-year-old Jean Helion who, despite the friendship and influence of Piet Mondrian, broke with abstraction long ago. Seven fine works by Mr. Helion are on display.

Because of the great size of the Grande Halle, there was no problem in fitting in a number of colossal works. The rough-finished, half-abstract forms of Jorg Immendorff's monumental painted bronze "Brandenburger Tor" (1983) are intended to symbolize the division of Berlin. An enthusiastic German reviewer finds it "brings out the contrasts of hopeless rigidity and political utopia." On the more mundane level of aesthetics, one wonders why Mr. Immendorff chose such a metal as noble and expensive as bronze only to daub it with paint.

Further on lies the long photomontage "Death After Life" by British-based artists Gilbert and George, a dada-ish pile of 35 tables and branches, "Tables, Willow Branches" (1984) by the German Jacques Vieille, and a pink-and-white canvas tent structure by Frenchman Daniel Buren. Walking in and out of a featureless tent is no aesthetic turn on. According to one tour guide, however, in Mr. Buren's work as in Samuel Beckett's "there is nothing to talk about but at least we have this nothing."

Elsewhere other famous names—David Hockney, Evert Lundquist, Antoni Tapies, Julian Schnabel, and the rapidly established graffiti artist Keith Haring—rub artistic shoulders with younger or less prominent painters. There are some revelations and a lot of cross.

Jean le Gac, for example, is a 49-year-old French artist with a sense of wit and technical mastery of his media: pastels and

photography. Four sizable works juxtapose skillfully executed pastels, photographs of the original model and a literary text.

Another Frenchman, Patrice Giorda, combines apparent spontaneity with bold compositional and harmonic skill in six canvases titled "Les Terrasses." Suruchi Chand, from India, who has already exhibited in Germany and the U.S., successfully combines an interpretation of Hindu myths, the color harmonics of Indian miniatures and a style close to "expressionist figurative."

French painter Gerard Garouste, very much a figurative artist, gives the characters in his semi-mythical canvases an almost Titian-like density of flesh. New Yorker Eric Fischl, more of a realist, betrays an anxiety-ridden repulsion for the flesh in his oil nudes, "Birthday Boy" (1983) and "Mother and Daughter" (1984).

"Happenings," having survived the 1960s, are still with us. Californian Kim Jones, begrimed with mud and covered with sticks and garbage, tries to exorcise the horrors of Vietnam with his "Installation Performance." Joseph Beuys, a German airman who sustained head injuries in the Soviet Union during World War II and then turned to art, appears at the Biennale on video, croaking into a microphone to a piano accompaniment, "Tokyo Konzert Coyote III." Mr. Beuys does have fans who apparently understand him.

On the really tricky side, one can marvel at a Brandt refrigerator atop a Haffner safe entitled "Brandt Haffner" by Frenchman Bertrand Lavier. This represents the sort of facile gimmick one thought had died out.

Unequal in quality as it is, the Paris Biennale will have enhanced the market value of many participants. As elsewhere in the art world, fame rather than taste dictates prices.

Mr. Powell writes on the arts from Paris.