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HUGGER-MUGGER IN THE GIARDINI

A Flurry of Excitement and Recrimination Marks the Opening of the Venice Biennale
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by Milton Gendel

Amid the flora of Napoleon's Public Gardens, the fauna of the international art world congregates for the thirty-second Venice Biennale; and from the central pavilion with its Italian host and its various foreign guest and theme shows, to the twenty-seven national pavilions scattered around the grounds on this and the other side of the Giardini canal, the artists wander and linger as mute or else verbal petitioners for the glory of their creations, while the dealers wheel and gooseflock at a rumor that some loner with a tipoff on the prize juries' decisions has been buying up the Kemenys and the Burys, or, already stocked, step out to waylay the industrialist collector.

These are familiar biennial tableaux, but how does the ninth exhibition since the War differ from its predecessors? In an even-paced, subdued quality largely due to the absence of the peaks provided in the past by the great monographic retrospectives such as the 1956 Delacroix, the 1958 Braque and Wols, the 1960 Brancusi and Schwitters, the 1962 Gorky, Giacometti and Redon. This time the space in the main building usually devoted to progenitors of contemporary art has been allotted to "The Art of Today in the Museum." Eighteen rooms in fact are given over to displays of post-1950 works acquired by museums in Italy, Germany, Austria, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, France, Brazil and Yugoslavia, and by the Tate and the Guggenheim. The displays are reminiscent of the national stands at trade fairs, and like the various North African exhibits at the Rome Trade Fair, each separately and equally includes pretty much the same line of goods. It comes as no surprise to learn that museums all over the world buy the works of the same artists, with some local color added, and that the locals in turn are shipped abroad for sale. The simple lesson of this elaborate marshaling of the obvious is exactly what strikes one as too trite to be meaningful—for the international visitor. But it isn't aimed at foreigners; it is meant to show the sanity-in-art and equal-art-representation-for-all advocates, of which Italy is by no means free, that the Rome National Gallery of Modern Art is no more capricious than the other museums and that they all buy precisely the same art, only more of it because they have more funds.

Prof. Argan, inspirer and organizer of the museums' exhibits, has been obliged to make his point at the cost of boring the public, but deserves sympathy for resisting reactionary pressures. However, his elaborate defense of the need for such a show, although including a statement of its pragmatic purpose, is devoted mainly to the symbiotic habits of dealers, collectors and museums. But his exemplary museum is a state institution, his dealer sounds like a provincial merchant and his collector sees only dealers and never an artist, as far as one can make out. The loose thinking, rigidly formulated, of the schema covering the ideal economy of the art world is typified by the statement that it is "abnormal and immoral" for an art work to go back onto the market from a collection instead of finding a permanent berth in a museum. For some of the monstrous accumulations of the old Hearst collections, however, it was obviously normal and moral to be dispersed on the market, and this goes for all ill-conceived and second-rate hoards.

Anyway, despite efforts to placate the apostles of seamliness in art, by showing that the Italian art bureaucrats are doing exactly what the other fellows are up to, the Church took an extraordinary stand against the Biennale as a whole. *The Voice of St. Mark's* the Venetian Catholic weekly, published a communiqué from the Curia of the Patriarchate of Venice forbidding all clerics, priests and religious of the diocese and from outside it to visit the Biennale because: "in the prudent judgment of competent persons the viewing of some of the works exhibited... is entirely unseemly." Which works had given offense Church authorities refused to say, and the wholesale blast remained all the more bewildering as this Biennale to a lay eye appears exceptionally free of the nudities and scabrous themes that might be expected to appear with the revival of poster art (e.g., Baj). Whatever the reason for the ban, it was serious enough; it was said, in talk and in print, to deter President Segni from inaugurating the exhibition. This was the first time since the War that the President of the Republic failed to attend the opening. Church and State are officially separate in Italy, but Roman Catholicism is the state religion. If the President stayed away from Venice because of the Patriarch's disapproval of the Biennale, he extended the prohibition for clerics to cover his own Catholic layman's conscience.

The bazaar aspect of the Biennale was foremost during the previews for the press, artists and officials who had close contact with one another unvitiated by the presence of large numbers of culture-hounds and the curious, many of whom were kept out of the Giardini grounds by the orotund charge of 10,000 lire for a non-invitation ticket. Prize candidacies were discussed *ad nauseum*, and lobbies were hastily organized to pressure the juries one way or another: if Cagli was mentioned as a likely prize-winner someone would be bound to telephone the wife of a juror to urge him to vote for Guidi. Some eighty Italian painters, sculptors and combiners showed either with separate rooms to themselves or in groups, and of these the names most frequently bandied as prize candidates were those of Guidi, Cagli, Baj, Scialoja and Novelli. In the end no national painting prize was awarded. The three best sculptors are Andrea Cascella, with his grandiose elementary engines, hooks and pulleys, mortises and tenons in granite and basalt; Ettore Colla, whose crusty iron compositions of massive, found bars, plates and wheels are totemically majestic; and Arnaldo Pomodoro, this time showing shiny brass cylinders and balls with surfaces broken open to reveal an inner cellular structure, which evidently are mates for the great brass organic boxes he has previously exhibited. Colla declined to compete for an award, and the Italian sculpture prize was given *ex aequo* to Cascella and Pomodoro.

The painters are a very mixed lot. Some continue themselves, like Scialoja with his roomful of splendid black and white scansions of a kiss, or other physical imprint, on giant screens; Acardi and her busy ciphers swarming in all directions; Scordia, the impeccable, structured Action Painter, whitely self-effacing; Tancredi, with snowstorm chromatics; Novelli, a whitewing of pre-Pop. Rotella's poster *décollages*, under Pop influence, now show only a few tears and holes, and logically should eventually become intact posters transferred unblemished to the canvas. And the most continuously discontinuous, the eclectic Cagli, who in making paintings that look like reproductions is a mirror image of the Popsters who try to make reproductions look like paintings. Among the groups, Angeli's veiled emblems, Pozzati's compartmented bulging forms and del Pezzo's gold and silver shelves with objects - all metaphysical in inspiration - stand out. The Popsters seem less than first-hand, though Maselli's unpleasant purple and pink *Garbo* comes almost as much from the painter's old habits as from Pop propinquities; Schifano adroitly keeps abreast of New York developments; and Fioroni reinforces her nebulous aluminum-hued figures by grouping them in series.

So much for the host country. The showiest of the guests are the Americans, for the first time representing the United States rather than private organizations like the Museum of Modern Art. The USIS appointed Alan R. Solomon, ex-director of the New York Jewish Museum, as Commissioner of the American exhibition, and he chose Morris Louis, the Great Hurrah of the Biennale, and Kenneth Noland for the U.S. pavilion, and single works of Dine (a silly blank-faced shoe labeled "Shoe"), Chamberlain, Oldenburg (a limp black plastic typewriter), Rauschenberg

(tasteful mixed mediums), Johns and Stella in the forecourt, while the ex-Consulate on the Grand Canal housed many more works by the same forecourt practitioners. A paucity of big serious exhibitions - the Gonzalez retrospective at the French pavilion is badly cramped and inadequate - gave an extraordinary prominence to the Americans. The two painters at the U.S. pavilion, and the abstract polychromed metal sculpture of Chamberlain, Stella's hard edges and John's double-dyed American icons were generally accepted by Europeans as belonging to familiar traditions. From the combiners - Rauschenberg and the para-Popsters Dine and Oldenburg - an atmosphere of giddiness emanated, as of some cosmically escalated private joke, and peripheral activities around the Biennale took on as much importance as what was happening at the center. The U.S. Government threw a party at the former Consulate, which was attended by several hundred invited guests and what seemed like several thousand uninvited. The mass of celebrants stuck together like a still from a movie mob-scene in a Pop decalomania for hours after the drinks ran out, which was almost at once. But there were the exhibits to peer at and comment on. Indeed the reaction to the Americans, especially the post-abstracters, became the main theme of the Biennale. Neo-Dada and para-Pop will bury you was the idea, for they have insidiously broadened the base of art, made it accessible to all with their blank basilisk fixity, their faint limp pleasantries, and their cardboard sturdiness. America meet Russia and vice versa; Social Realism meet the latter-day Cecil Beaton with their social insignificance. Pre Pop and para-Pop, they said, are sending a syrupy lymph in all directions, like a Coca-Cola machine oozing from the bottom. It lends a damp sheen to Cagli; makes the Soviet pavilion look contemporary; causes the new Cremonini to look old fashioned because he paints his pieces of second-hand furniture as images on the canvas instead of gluing them to it; creates a milieu for the two fleamarket geniuses Baj and Bissiere; the latter conservative, just utilizing rags and stitches; the former Italianly eeking out *l'art brut* with darling materials, and taking flyers in erector-set Buck Rogers groups and tasteful mirror assemblages. At the Consulate, an epiphany of the modish had the Europeans on their ear, what with the corruption of objects, which is an elaboration of the joke of men putting on women's hats, or the provocative juxtapositions of sophisticated window dressers; the creation of *objets de vertu* out of the latest synthetics, the tapping of the esthetics of the curio and the souvenir (as in the line from the eighteenth-century *Wunderkammer* to the Victorian parlor) and of the trophy (*l'objet volé*), like the traffic signs and milk cans brought back to the college dormitory at dawn. The accomplishment of having given an up-to-date separable identity, and therefore an independent reality, to this kind of esthetics was illustrated by some living vignettes embracing critics and artfully combined objects. One critic pushed another under a showerbath exhibited by Dine, and the second critic resisted as if he were about to get a dousing. Oldenburg's limp plastic typewriter had to be moved from the yard in front of the pavilion to the Consulate because it had begun to melt in the sun. A fat, sagging spectator stood in front of it and said, "It doesn't look so soft to me." A dealer reassured a visitor about the damage done to a Rauschenberg in transit. One of the Coca-Cola bottles in it had been broken. He said, "Michelangelo recommended taking a sculpture up on a hill and rolling it down; when it gets to the bottom everything extraneous has been planed away." A woman looking at an Oldenburg composition of a stove with a roast in it, which glinted with the nasty synthetic succulence of a Palissy plate, said: "I wouldn't want to eat anything like that."

Rauschenberg, whose eligibility for the international painting prize was contested because his work was displayed outside of Giardini territory, was saved for world celebrity by the presence of one combine at the American pavilion and the hasty importation of four from the Consulate. He was the star of the occasion and probably unaware that the Cardinal Urbani who put the wholesale ban on his entire field of glory - the Biennale - has the same name as the Dottore who put a retail ban on his *Bed* at the Spoleto Festival six years ago.

Meanwhile the exhibition was haunted by two marginal figures, a man holding an open umbrella overhead painted with self-advertising slogans, and carrying a satchel full of photographs of his work; and a French dealer with a boatload of minor Neo-Dada, Pop and so-called *art informel*, which dogged the public from the Dogana to the Giardini, up-anchoring and following whenever

the crowds moved on. The boat originally carried some Fontanas, on loan from another dealer who quickly reclaimed them when it was found that the wind was enlarging the holes, and it was presumably unacceptable to offer the larger holes at the same price. As a running gag the umbrella man and the boat lady appeared to stand to the Biennale as para-Pop and pre-Pop to traditional art exhibitions.

The more or less merry permissiveness of the rags, junk, plastic and old newsprint men was counterpointed by the solemn commitments and rigid exercises of the artists dedicated to programming. This vein has an introduction in a brilliant sculptor who doesn't belong to it. Kemeny, the Swiss national who emigrated from Hungary, makes pictorial brass and copper sculptures that imply movement as if they were ready and waiting for programming or were programmed sculpture broken open to reveal the circuits. He is one of the strongest personalities at the Biennale. Another, more fantastic, is the Belgian Pol Bury, whose automata of wood and metal have fascinating movements recalling plants germinating and the deliberate gestures of creatures like stick insects, although one looks much like a railroad-station ticket-rack undergoing slow spasms of self-expulsion. The cabinetry workmanship and emphasis on somber richness of material in the wood sculptures relates them to traditional esthetic values. More in line with the feeling of scientific equipment and industrial design productions are the works of the visual puzzlers and the kineticists, prominently represented this time at the exhibition, and indeed one of the most interesting avenues of development. They range from the immaculate abstract anamorphs and eye-dazzlers of the Venezuelan Jesus Raphael Soto to the work of "Group N" of Padua in studies of optic and spatial phenomena executed in plastic, wood and plexiglass, and of "Group T" of Milan in programmed electromechanical constructions. From under the cloak of collective responsibility so congenial to the prophetic visions of Prof. Argan, personalities emerge, the most engaging being that of Davide Boriani, Milanese, whose *Magnetic Surface* is a pair of big conjoined plexiglass disks containing an anthill life of iron filings that busily swarm to get into in-groups which keep shrugging off latecomers and disintegrating Some of the kineticists in their repetitions and earnest pursuit of the obvious give the impression that one day they will reinvent the motion picture.

This would be all to the good as far as the sixth international art film exhibition is concerned. The show ran for several days concurrently with the opening of the Biennale, the showings being held alternately at inconvenient times at Ca' Giustinian and the Cinema Olimpia. It is a pity that the making of art documentaries seems to appeal mainly to soulful dabblers and cliché artists, and the results are generally neither stimulating nor instructive. The typical film has a breathlessly awed or mournfully elocutionary narrator, sometimes the self-conscious voice of the artist himself, describing the subject's thoughts and intentions as he unlocks his studio door, walks in, puts on a smock or takes something off, messes around in an unconvincing way or gazes out at the landscape we are told has determined the soft or hard edge of the bits of ego he is proffering to the public. The direction is as predictable as a piece of peasant embroidery: the camera travels in and travels out, pans up and pans down. All the same, the best of the films are the profiles, and occasionally they convey a real feeling of the creation of art, as in the highly specific yet poetic documentary on the American sculptor Tajiri. Certainly the worst are the sweeping, inaccurate and uncomprehensive surveys like the unspeakable N.B.C. television production, *Greece: The Golden Age*. Somewhere between ethnology and art history, an excellent movie sponsored by Qantas described the rock paintings of the indigenous Australians, whose pictorial traditions go back to the Stone Age. *The Dreaming* by Geoffrey Collings is brilliantly photographed and directed, to express the qualities of myth, reverence, fear and opportunism reflected in the image making and conserving (they are regularly repainted, as the cult icons of occidental civilization were) of the aborigines. The effective musical commentary suggests primeval gruntings and whinnies of pleasure and apprehension. Other points of interest at the Biennale are the full-bodied Expressionist abstractions of Appel at the Dutch pavilion; the English collages of Irwin and the para-Pop constructions of Tilson; the big funereal bronzes of the French sculptor Ipousteguy; and the unerring Japanese, the painter Domoto

and the sculptor Toyufuku. Bompadre is an excellent Italian graphic artist working in white. Savelli is an Italian painter showing beautifully incised works among the graphic artists. The dry points and aquatints of Pentti Kaskipuro (Finland) are wonderful. All of Eastern Europe has come into line with the "advanced" art of previous Biennales, and a metal *Peasant Ceres* at the Hungarian pavilion, a ringer for the González *Montserrat*, was done in 1962.

Beyond the grounds of the Biennale, in Venice proper, are the Dubuffet exhibition (figures familiar, composition now jigsaw) at Palazzo Grassi; a rundown on Manzu's bronze doors for St. Peter's at the Ala Napoleonica; a show of fantastic furniture at the Alfa Gallery by the painter Ugo Sterpini and the architect Fabio de Sanctis. The furniture series constitutes an enjoyable excursion that romps from Dr. Caligari's cabinet to the props for Surrealist movies to Pop-type combines involving the shocking pink doors of a Fiat 500. Handicrafts are always a Venetian theme, glass for instance, and it is surprising that no one ever thought of putting the Venetian glass industry in touch with the contemporary art that is displayed biennially on its watery doorstep. This *connubium* has now been arranged under the sponsorship of Peggy Guggenheim, and the Fucini degli Angeli (Angels' Forge) has produced blue glass figures from Picasso's drawings of mythical personages, and numerous bottles and shapes designed by Lurçat, Arp, Max Ernst, Cocteau, Calder and others.

Top prize-winners in Venice

Robert Rauschenberg, U.S.A., first prize, painting, \$3,200; Zoltan Kemeny, Switzerland, first prize, sculpture, \$3,200; Andrea Cascella, Italy, sculpture, \$3,200; Arnaldo Pomodoro, Italy, sculpture, \$3,200; Roger Hilton, Great Britain, painting, \$1,000; Gastone Novelli, Italy, painting, \$800; Luca Crippa, Italy, print-making, \$160.