
Exhibitions

The Biennale of non-art in Venice

by Fausto Tapergi

Translated from the Italian weekly Nuova Solidarietà of Jan. 7, 1989. The "Biennale" held every two years, as its name indicates, is one of the most pace-setting modern art exhibitions in the world.

The headline is not intended as ironic or deprecatory, but simply indicative of what the Biennale of Art in Venice this year does not contain, and instead does contain. In fact there is a lot, and in a certain sense almost everything, except precisely that art which according to the purpose stated in the label is supposed to be its specific content.

There are black or colored lines of every thickness, isolated, or in multiple juxtapositions and intersections and mixtures, and splashed colors and dotted lines and wavy lines. There are stones and metals in blocks which are either protuberant, ovoid, spheroid, squashed, elongated, slotted, sometimes smooth and sometimes rough. There are hints at representation in drawing, painting, stone, metal, wood (even in laboriously woven straw), but these are immediately disarticulated, twisted, and resubmerged into deformity or lack of form, or in geometricized alterations. There are various materials, sand, brick, tile, lumber, garbage, manure, on planes or overlapping or piled up. There are even machines or elements of them, devices, tents, boats, receptacles, also dustbins, in whole or in part, and strange wooden or metal bodies, turned upward in the manner of streetlamps or masts. There are collections of utensils, even nuts and bolts, and commonly used household or office objects, and forged or stamped or cut-out figures, set up in broad compositions on the ground or on the wall, more or less the way children set up their little toys. Everything is in the most diverse array of volumes and extensions, some perceptible only from very close up, and others imposing and almost aggressive in their grandeur.

With a benevolent and justifiable interpretation one could consider this Biennale as the exposition of the back room of

painters and sculptors' shops, that is, some efforts that turned out badly or remained at the level of a rough draft or study, and of experiments in modes and techniques which would later be picked over and reworked into actual works of art. Unfortunately they themselves have been presented instead, and with a bounty of means and space as if they were works of art. And moreover accompanied, since by themselves they would have very little to say or at the most would make some decorative statement, by elaborate explanations and expositions and dissertations, in which treasures of erudition and dialectical ingenuity are shown off, which recall rather too closely the pompous twaddle of the doctors and pharmacists in Molière's *The Imaginary Invalid*.

Some examples

Some examples and samples, drawn from here and there, demonstrate sufficiently the enormous discrepancy between the smallness of meaning of the "works" and the abundance of meanings and values attributed to them by the commentators of the official catalogue. The work shown in **Figure 1** is presented with the title "Bather," and of it and its maker is said: "Viani is surely one of the greatest craftsmen of the renewal of Italian sculpture in the postwar era. . . . The presence of the 1970 work 'Bather' in this Biennale . . . has the meaning of an homage owed, but above all of a recognition that a visual grammar so rigorously pursued by the artist returns to be at the center of the creative attention of new artists." Where the "Bather" and the "visual grammar" are in this sculpture is all yet to be discovered, that is, totally unexpressed. In fact the work could have hundreds of titles and different explanations, and all equally lacking in any relevance to its form.

The work in **Figure 2** entitled "Montefeltro's Sun Chariot," which is part of a series called "Cosmic Dynamic," is expounded as follows: "The sculpture of the artist from the Marches, which is always in relation to the environment where it is placed, must be read in its two antithetical possibilities of symbolic abstraction which generates its heroic and archaic content, of iconography and of concrete technological challenge which instead provokes its ultra-modern burst of energy." And a little further on: "The various members of the entire spatial composition—or I should say cosmic, sticking to the title—not only have an autonomous life. They pass into traction or tension as they meet up with the other parts. Then the dynamic of the whole takes off, gets under way, as if it were a great complex motor which, however, stands there immobile, with its gigantic force, where the artist has put it."

How, in the composition of vertical shafts seen in **Figure 3**, the "Empire of Turbulence" is expressed, and with what significance it is presented, is truly impossible to understand. Unless it is the turbulence that grabs us when we read that its maker "seizes in the destruction, in the suppression of heavy schemes and inveterate habits the only means to bring new

FIGURE 1

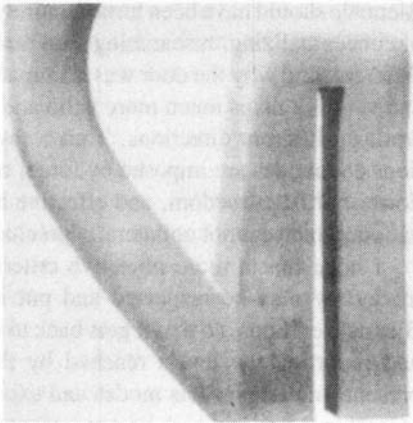


FIGURE 2

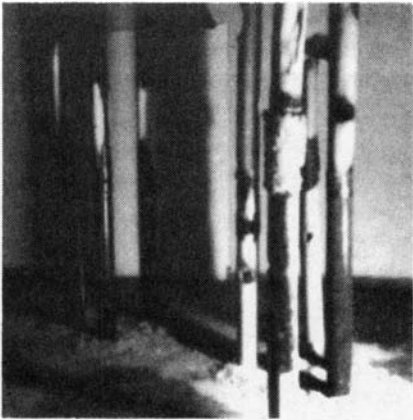
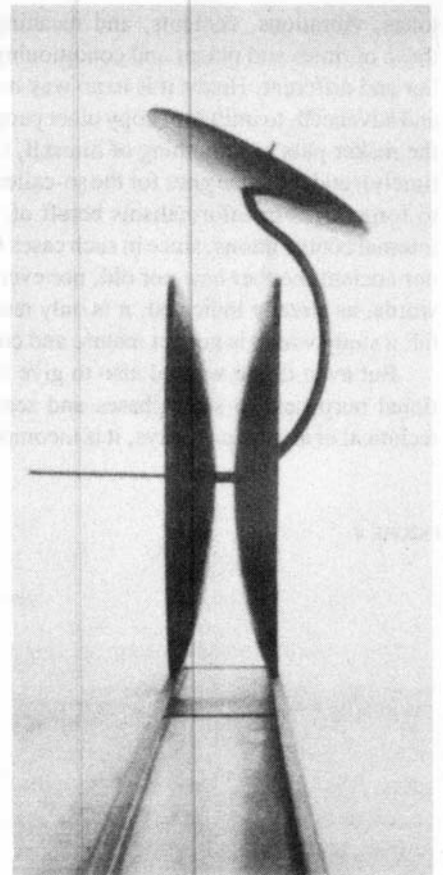


FIGURE 3



structures into being.” The two tones of black, one opaque and the other anthracite, in which the painting in **Figure 4** is divided, mean, according to the maker, “Nightfall.” The tangle of striped and curving brushstrokes and a few geometrical hints seen in **Figure 5** are supposed to mean, believe it or not, “The Canal of the Giudecca.”

Artistic freedom

The exhibition organizers and catalogue writers of the Biennale maintain as the unifying thread of their choices and evaluations that of free artistic expression, in the overcoming of every preconstituted and limiting criterion of a form or school. As in fact it should be. Art is expression, and in order to express, it must be free. In fact we are all or ought to be all free to express and thereby to make art, which we do from our childhood onward for our entire life, by speaking, writing, gesticulating, and making sketches and drawings.

But let us also remember that to express means to externalize, make evident, make clear, that which within ourselves would remain obscure and indeterminate; and that expression, therefore, is all the more and better expression, i.e., art, when it most and best knows how to make evident and clear the inner world of he who expresses, and of those in whom, dedicated to other tasks and with other talents, it would remain unexpressed and confused.

It is also important to attentively and correctly evaluate every expression, according to its richness, depth, intensity, refinement of thought and feeling, i.e., the artistic level, which each work of art really encompasses and shares with the person viewing or hearing it. And it is precisely this more careful and objective evaluation and choice which turns out to be missing from the organizers and catalogue editors of this Biennale (as of many earlier editions).

Modernity and innovation

To counter this judgment, it is asserted that the exhibition was deliberately restricted to the most decisively modern works, and especially those most committed to research and implementation of the most advanced and innovative expressive modes.

But we must also clearly understand each other on the meaning of these words, in order to avoid the misunderstandings which are distorting all the arts and the judgments on the respective works, be they figurative, architectural, literary, or musical. That is, an art is modern, advanced, and innovative in the manner and to the extent in which it truly expresses the inner world of the artist: a world of thoughts, feelings, expressions, and environmental and cultural conditionings, which are formed in the living present, and which shapes necessarily one’s work out of oneself, with accents,

tones, vibrations, contents, and meanings, that cannot be those of times and places and conditionings which were earlier and different. Hence it is in no way modern, innovative, and advanced, to imitate or copy other people's works (unless the maker puts in something of himself, therefore making it timely); and the same goes for the so-called art that is reduced to formalisms or informalisms bereft of, or poor in deeper internal contributions, since in such cases it is neither modern nor ancient, neither new nor old, nor even is it art—in other words, as already indicated, it is only tentative, experimental, a study which is not yet mature and complete.

But even if one wanted also to give space, for informational purposes, to such phases and searches for different technical or artistic pathways, it is incomprehensible why the

Biennale should have been turned entirely over to such modes of conceptualizing, researching, and realizing the new or the different; and why the door was slammed in the face of many and valid (perhaps much more valid and worthy) artists who work in different directions. Thus a few determined directions and modes are imposed by force, contrary to the assertions of artistic freedom, and effective modernity and innovation, which cannot unilaterally preclude anything.

I hope that a more objective criterion of freedom and modernity may be respected and put into effect in future Biennale editions, so that it gets back to its task of exhibiting and reporting the levels reached by the figurative arts at present, in their various modes and expressed directions, or at least in the ones which best represent them.

FIGURE 4

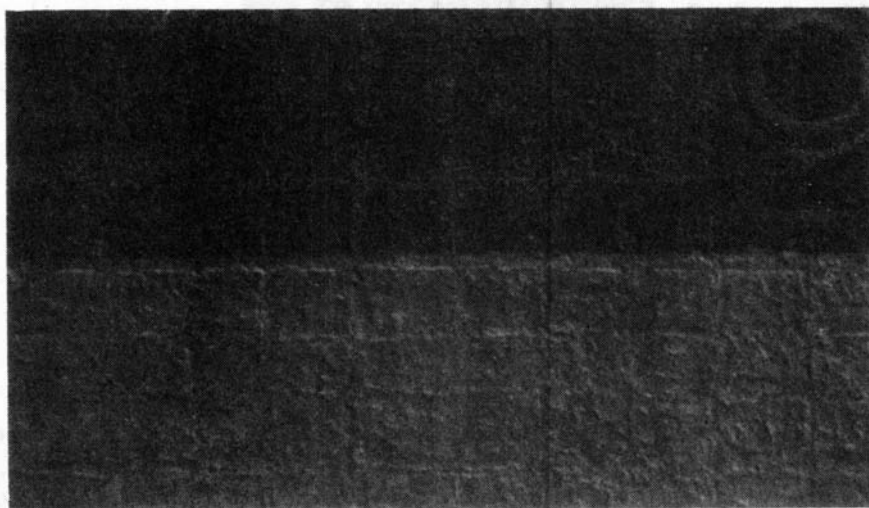


FIGURE 5

