

Intercultural Gaps on the Côte d'Azur

Maeght Foundation Shows American Art

by Dore Ashton

Prologue

High above the Mediterranean, but still easily accessible to Cannes and Nice, stands the Maeght Foundation, a sort of museum founded by the Parisian art dealer Aimé Maeght, which enjoys a well-deserved reputation amongst travelers. The white, modestly-scaled museum has attracted visitors to its exhibitions of works by Miró, Giacometti, Chagall, Matisse, Léger and other modern masters; to its exquisitely landscaped purlieu where sculptures by Calder and Miró are permanently ensconced, and to its annual summer festivals of avant-garde music, dance and film.

For this place, hallowed by Miró and Giacometti and Calder, and radiant in the light emanating from the Mediterranean, I was asked just a year ago to compose an exhibition of "living" American art. I hesitated for the usual reasons—that the scale of the museum limited the choice; that the United States and its art could not be impaled like an insect as characteristic of a species; that group shows are never satisfactory and please no one; that France was never notably cordial to American claims to esthetic significance—but I finally succumbed to the temptation to see certain paintings and sculptures in that splendid natural light.

What I agreed to do was to organize an exhibition of artists whose work I found significant and who mostly had produced an *oeuvre*. In the interest of seriousness, I decided to try to show at least two works, or more, of each artist, and to treat excellent drawings with equal deference to excellent paintings. I took the position that no one could document "contemporary" art history as history, since history is always retrospective, and that therefore all judgments about living art of the present should be provisory (which is not to say that esthetic pleasure should be).

I also insisted that no exhibition could or should be "representative" of a whole nation's art. Although I hadn't set out to include tendencies—I loathe bookkeeping—when the list was complete, I found that almost every major, discussable tendency was included, and all the generations.

The catalogue is available so I don't have to list the artists here, but the show included important groups of paintings by the prime generation (deKooning, Albers, Rothko, still alive at the time of organizing, Tobey) and a room of outstanding Rauschenberg and Johns drawings, and works by younger artists such as Jake Berthot, Harvey Quaytman, Deborah Remington, William Williams, Christopher Wilmarth, Robert Murray, Alvin Loving, Brice Marden. And Stella, Youngerman, Lichtenstein, Lukin, Samaras, Guston, Diebenkorn, Rosati, Tworkov. A room of Steinberg paintings and Cornell boxes. And Snelson, Bourgeois, Lewitt, Nevelson and so on up to seventy artists.

In addition to orthodox objects that could be shipped and installed, there were works to be realized only *in situ*. Robert Whitman, Carl Andre, Robert Israel and Hans Haacke were my choices. In the preface, I urged viewers to come to the orthodox paintings and sculptures with the same open expectancy they have for these uncatalogued works on site.

After Kent State, and after Jackson, many of us were alarmed.

Some artists wanted to cancel the exhibition. I thought it wiser to go ahead with it but to make a statement. It was agreed that Louise Bourgeois would read it in French and I in English on the opening day of the show. This was the statement:

"As artists we are aware that governments frequently use the arts to cover up their crimes. We emphatically condemn the following programs sponsored by the American government."

War in Southeast Asia. Racism at home and abroad. Unwavering support of fascist governments throughout the world. Suppression of political dissent.

We appeal to all artists to join us in a boycott of all cultural programs sponsored by the American government.

This was signed by forty-two artists.

Log

As we were heading from the airport on the first of July, a couple of weeks early so I could install the show and arrange for the "events", the director of the *Fondation* confirmed what I had learned before from experience: any cultural event, no matter how remote from government auspices, is always claimed by the U.S. government. Right enough—the Ambassador himself was planning to fly down from Paris for the opening. The news in no way changed our plan.

More news: the supplementary exhibition space, which had begun with a grand scheme for an inflatable gallery, turns out to be a long, narrow wooden framework which will presumably be covered with plastic. A barrack. As for the theater, in which Israel and Lukas Foss would open the evening events with a collaborative performance, it is nowhere in sight. This fabulous plastic tent, held up by air, striped and asymmetrical, had not arrived. Not even its platform was ready. Israel disturbed.

July 2. Carl Andre walks softly around the grounds. He has not yet decided. Snelson has arrived to install his enormous piece on the front terrace, and the other on the court. Hans Haacke is there, sighting a site in the woods, well removed from the hurly-burly. And the tourists are there, shocked to find their Chagalls missing, and irate to find, as one woman scornfully pronounced, that Madison Avenue has taken over.

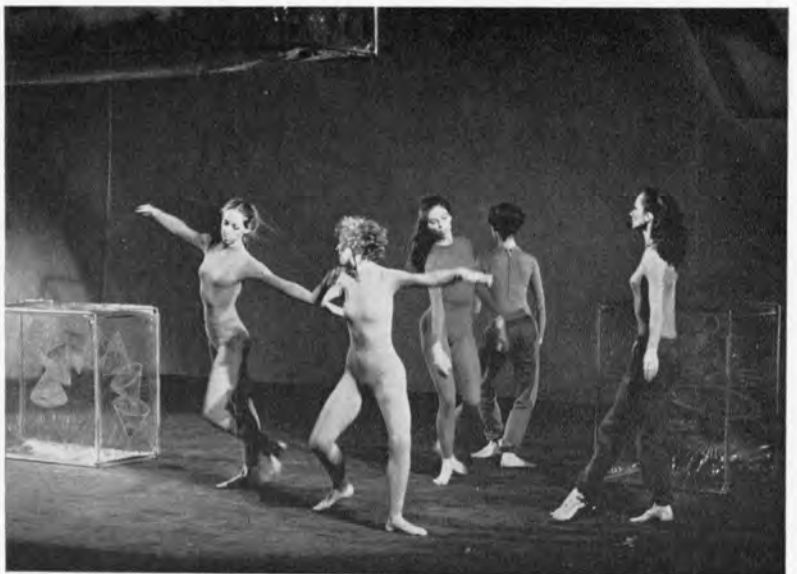
July 5. While still in New York, Lukas Foss and Bob Israel had carefully worked out their plans for opening night. Lukas, who wrote in his catalogue preface that American composers had changed because they worked with others such as poets, performers, and technicians, had planned *M.A.P. (Men At Play)*, a piece based on games theory in which the performers play a territorial game the rules of which are known only to them. Israel was to create a mirrored maze that would compound the mysteries. For this maze, he needed 12 sheets of thick glass and 12 tall mirrors, and several cans of black paint (which losers among the musicians would use to paint out the glass). Now, it is suggested that the glass and mirror is prohibitive in cost, and that Israel might have to "think of something else." Disaster!

July 6. Carl Andre has decided. He takes the white polystyrene



*(Top) Robert Whitman's sail goes up.
 (Above) Kenneth Snelson assembles his piece.
 (Top right) Carl Andre composing
 The Snows of Yesteryear.
 (Center right) When the power failed.
 (Bottom right) Jasper Johns' props and
 Merce Cunningham's troupe.*

*At the Fondation Maeght in St.-Paul-de-Vence,
 July 16-September 30.*



rectangles used to pack works of art and makes a catwalk over the undulating lawn. He calls it *The Snows of Yesteryear*. He is pleased. The parts are easily replaceable. The glimmering white ribbon on the grass is very successful, even if some of the public insists on regarding it as a causeway. Even the towering corten steel Nevelson, and the lowering dark steel hulls of Robert Murray do not annul the white path.

July 7. Hans Haacke having his troubles. He needs a goat. He needs turtles. He needs the landscape gardener. He hasn't specifically told me yet what he plans. Israel and Whitman stalled because the damned tent hasn't yet arrived and the floor isn't even ready. How on earth do they expect Merce Cunningham's troupe to rehearse. And where will Foss's New Music Ensemble rehearse? I decide to let them use one gallery.



Israel's maze for M.A.P. (Men at Play), Maeght Foundation (1970), mixed media.

July 8. Israel still can't get clearance for the mirrors and glass. Sol Lewitt arrives and supervises the installation of his piece. Its white cubic simplicity beautiful on the courtyard. Good "conceptual" artist that he is, he exclaimed with pleasure when it was all assembled. "I've never seen it, you know." It looked perfect there, although Snelson's second piece at the end detracted, I thought. Mike Todd's simple rocking steel piece now placed on the other side, near the Miró maze. Hans is worried about the exploitative aspect of the whole affair. His position on museums makes his position here awkward, and he resolves it by removing himself as much as possible—his environment of imported moss is underway; his grass plot in the rain garden is growing, and the goat is being arranged for.

July 9. Bob Israel will get his mirrors. But will he find the three videotape TV sets he needs for his other event, billed the same night as Whitman's? Whitman came today with his list of needs: tape recorders, a mast, a great sail, chain saws and some five and seven-year-old children. Lukas arrived. *M.A.P.* he says is a game where the musicians must not be caught in silence. Their penalty is to paint the glass black. I am still trying to fit all the works into the museum without stacking them the symmetrical way the Europeans seem to prefer. The barrack is still a skeleton and I am more and more dubious. Harvey Quaytman is helping with quiet efficiency.

July 14. The workmen are rushing about looking for Scotch tape. The plastic tent, which is sweltering inside at midday, is

developing holes. It seems that the glass and mirror may be delivered just before the opening in two days.

July 15. The day before the opening and a great mistral is blowing. Suddenly there is a power failure and the heaving striped beast slowly gives way, foundering in a mass of red and white stripes. Worse still: the barrack is finished. Ungodly space. Impossible to use for exhibiting, and impossible not to use because I am committed to show what has been borrowed. Brice Marden correctly refuses to be shown there. I realize the whole exhibition must be re-hung toward late afternoon. Bill Williams and Pat and I run out for something to eat and see Hieronymous Bosch fires on the distant coast, brilliant beneath a starry sky. The whole Côte d'Azur is burning. (And tomorrow night, there *will* be fiddling.) We stay until 3:00 A.M. re-hanging the show, still heart-

sick about having to use that narrow shed. The Maeght key men are disgruntled. We are now Americans vs. the rest. It can't be helped, there are deep cultural gulfs, even though we intellectuals all read the same books, talk about the same poets and philosophers. Besides, they keep telling me that there is not enough pop art, pop art is their idea of America. Isn't Rosenquist's Joan Crawford enough? And as for the Rothkos—they're too dark, they all seem to think.

July 16. Vernissage day. No invitations are forthcoming to the sizeable group of exhibiting Americans, no drink, no dinner, no lunch. Nothing. Strange. But everyone is bustling about preparing for the Ambassador. Our signal was for 5:30 P.M. We gather at the entry. Mr. Ambassador is within, still, being whisked from gallery to gallery. At 5:30 Louise begins her reading. The French television is there. I then read the text in English and all the signatories' names. Meanwhile, I hear some commotion behind me but refuse to turn. It seems the Ambassador has been all but bodily rushed out the side way, to avoid us. No matter. Later, the tent seems all right. Lukas's men take their places and listen for the taped cues. The slow hypnotic movement from place to place, the strange cadences, and the knowledge that something is going on beyond one's ken is exciting. Bob's maze good, although he feels it is too narrow. The lights weren't working right, and one of the tape recorders on the blink. Yet all in all, stirring. The audience is properly tepid, some hostile. This is the Côte d'Azur after all. They will rally for the jazz no doubt.

July 19. Like everyone else, Merce Cunningham distressed about the lack of planning, and poor facilities. His first performance the best I've ever seen; perfection itself. The next one marred by the sudden appearance of three young dissidents on the stage, effectively chucked off by Merce and his dancers. Still, it was not pleasant and I'm told that Cunningham had never yet had such an experience. These are the artistic young, no doubt, whose social conscience leads them into totalitarian modes of behavior, a dangerous tendency both in Europe and here. The "sets" by Warhol and Johns are suitably inflatable, but irritated me by obtruding so I could not see hands and feet, so essential in Cunningham's vocabulary.

July 21. Lukas's second piece paradigm—lusty, full of humor, with a kind of escaped raucous laughter reminiscent of Stravinsky. He offered eight choices of words, mounted for all to see, from which the musicians could choose to whisper, bark or recite with elocutionary eloquence. A moralistic refrain *silence is safe* suited our mood. His use of visual aids has a comic relevance. Meanwhile, there have been several dubious critics here who find the show "un peu trop classique", and at least twenty disappointed viewers who ask "*Mais où est le Andy Warhol?*" Where is the Andy Warhol? (somewhat like those madcap characters in Raymond Queneau who traipse about Paris asking "*où est le camping?*"). Whitman, Israel and Haacke well under way with their *Evening*. Meret Oppenheim, the beautiful originator of the fur-lined teacup, liked the exhibition and especially Sven Lukin. Lamonte Young arrived, and he too, needs lots of equipment. And who will rehearse where, and when? Confusion still reigning, as I suppose it will until the end. I hear that Aretha Franklin walked off the stage at the nearby Antibes Festival.

July 25. How little appetite there is for esthetic experience. How few seem able to be totally absorbed, taken, rapt by a single work of art. They are still walking on Andre's *Neiges d'Antan*, and touching everything in sight. I am very nervous but resigned.

July 26. The "events". Whitman chose the steeply declining wooded areas below the tent for his happening. We scramble through the wood in total darkness. Trepidation. Thistles. Scratchy branches. We head toward glimmering blue beacons in the darkness and sink to the ground, waiting. There are beautiful fluorescent patches on the trees and black lights. A brief apprehensive wait and the terrifying rumble coming toward us. The chain saws (properly dismantled). An interval of silence. Then Whitman, Israel and Marden slowly hoist a huge sail on a tall tree. The sail is alight with the moon-like illumination of black lights. Then slowly, slowly, a second smaller sail. Then a sudden brilliant light showed slender knotted banderoles swaying in the blackness, like brushstrokes. Then a soundtrack of children's voices, French and English, telling stories and singing songs. Slides of the crowded Riviera beaches projected on the sails, and finally, smoke bombs. Small hitch: one catches fire and the happening is quickly brought to a close, in view of the fact that the whole Côte d'Azur is at that very moment burning away mysteriously. We scramble up the hill again to the tent, while the artists toil up, pushing a great Sisyphus tin drum.

The audience settles in the tent and Bob Israel appears. On the stage, behind three videotape machines he has placed a table, a bottle of wine, a bell, a blackboard, some chalk. He raps three times, in the familiar European signal that the show will go on. This suggests immediately the theatrical character of his event.

Solemnly he begins to read a brief text and the videotape reflects him reading. The text is important. It is from Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* and reads as follows:

"If I have ever had these gifts in any sort of living form they have been smothered out of existence a long time ago under a wilderness of words. Words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality. I have been for many years a teacher of languages. It is an occupation which at length becomes fatal to whatever share of imagination, observation, and insight an ordinary person may be heir to. To a teacher of languages there comes a time when the world is but a place of many words and man appears a mere talking animal not much more wonderful than a parrot."

He slowly pours a glass of wine, drinks it, chalks a number on the board, gets up, does three jumping exercises, slowly draws a chalk line around his table on the stage, rings his bell, raps three times, and begins to read the same text again. The first reading is on the videotape and the second is being screened. He does not alter the solemnly ritual pace. After the fourth glass of wine and reading, the audience resists, starts singing. The tape records the sound and gives it back, and the next time around, they are embarrassed and silent. This *grosse fugue* Bob is performing gains tension as he continues to empty the wine bottle. All the mysteries of language and communication converge in the recapitulations, and his own physical tone. The meaning of Conrad's text, of the re-recording and simultaneous projection, of the man and the machine, the actor and lecturer, the acrobat and pedant, begins to absorb the audience. They become quieter and quieter as once, he lifts his glass to salute them, and they await the finale—the moment when the bottle is empty and the pale actor-teacher carefully stalks off the stage. It is a subtle and extremely well realized work. It seems to epitomize in its commentary on the mere talking animal, all the cultural tensions we have experienced.

Epilogue

I was not surprised when the left-wing press attacked me for my "ambiguous" exhibition, in which I did not carry through the "radical consequences" of my own admission that artists regard with horror the society within which they are told their art must evolve. It did not surprise me that the left, intent on displacing objects with street propaganda (which is fine, too) saw the exhibition as a rear-guard action against their program of *contre-société* or counter-society. When I read the indictment, I understood and even sympathized with the impatience they demonstrated. And I remembered again a passage in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*:

"Politics are like a stone tied to the neck of literature which, in less than six months, will drown it. Politics in the middle of things that concern the imagination are like a pistol-shot in the middle of a concert. The noise is ear-splitting and yet lacks point. . . ."

On the other hand, the conventional press, happy to be *au courant* with the very latest art propaganda, spent most of its space upbraiding the exhibition for its calmly classical look, or else, searching vainly for pop art in quantity. The knowing and sophisticated were distressed for diverse reasons, not the least of which was their conventional view of Americans as grand-scale sensationalists, not a part of the great Western European tradition of modern art. Certainly anything but that. But that, precisely, is where Conrad's melancholy observation holds true. The words that have passed back and forth across the Atlantic have become the great foes of reality. □