Paris Arts Center

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enough, the most dramatic view), where it stretches for the length of a New York City block along the busy rue du Renard in the 4th arrondissement, the Center fills the eye with a brash, polychrome construction of thick pipes and boxes—painted in bright blue, green, red, yellow and silver aluminum—that rise in a rhythmic vertical splendor to a height of five stories. From this view, at least, the building affords the kind of visual experience, although greatly amplified of course, that we are more used to seeing inside a gallery or a museum than outside on the street of an ancient city. The effect is at once awesome and gay, a monument to contemporary building technology that manages to be playful and even elegant with materials customarily consigned to the hidden recesses of modern structures.

From the front, on a large open plaza along the rue Saint Martin, which has been turned into a pleasant pedestrian mall, the building looks very different but no less surprising. From this view, one confronts a structure of glass walls and polished steel supports, which rise (like the outside stairways at either end) in an open, criss-cross design reaching to the roof. At various intervals there are outside escalators and terraces enclosed in giant glass tubes—a device already familiar from the arrival building of the new Charles de Gaulle Airport outside Paris—and these have the effect of animating the entire facade of the Center with a sense of movement.

They also have the effect of establishing, even if subliminally, a symbolic equation between the dynamics of pedestrian movement within the building and the dynamics of the complex technology that governs the building's operation.

This radical exoskeletal design—the work of two foreign architects, Renzo Piano, an Italian, and Richard Rogers, an Englishman, who collaborated with the firm of Ove Arup and Partners—leaves the vast interior of the building free of all divisions and supports. With all of the so-called "guts" of the building on the outside—both the means of access to every floor and the means of heating it, lighting it, and providing it with other essential services—the interior is thus a space that can be molded and remolded into whatever shapes or forms are deemed suitable for the Center's diverse constituencies.

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This is a concept now very much favored by modern museums the world over, but none has ever before realized it on quite this scale.

It was inevitable, I suppose, that a design of this sort, which embraces the technological present with such unconcealed enthusiasm and steadfastly refuses to invoke old glories, would meet with a certain opposition. But some of the charges against the building are wildly inappropriate, I think. Even the thoughtful and scholarly critic for Le Monde, André Fermigier, who is friendlier than most to the Center, was moved to describe it as "a kind of architectural King Kong." But this, I think, is precisely what it is not. It neither towers above the other buildings in the old Beaubourg quarter nor violates their scale in any way. Large as the building is, its scale is indeed remarkably discreet. Visually the building is bold, but it nonetheless takes a friendly attitude toward its immediate urban environment, and does so without for a moment lapsing into the kind of mincing modernism—all compromise and mediocrity—we are familiar with at Lincoln Center, for example.

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If the building is, then, as I believe, a stunning architectural success, something else must be said about the Center as a cultural organization. It is much more than an art museum, of course, and it is this "more" that raises many legitimate doubts. In addition to housing the National Museum of Modern Art and galleries for temporary shows of new art, the Center consists of an industrial design center, a general public library (Paris's first, by the way), a children's library, a music research institute, a cinémathèque, a variety of "information" facilities ranging from periodical rooms to racks of open storage that allow the public access to pictures not already hanging on the walls, and much more.

Outside, on the plaza facing the Center, alongside a reconstruction of Brancusi's old Paris studio in its own tiny building, there is to be a circus permanently performing. There has even been talk of a zoo. The enemies of the Center deplore this mixture of "high" and "low" forms, and speak contemptuously of a "supermarket" concept of culture, while even the Center's devoted staff has not been able to explain what, if any, more exalted concept of culture governs this unwieldy alliance of so many separate interests.

Now it is true, of course, that the cultural experience of the educated classes in our society nowadays consists of an informal mixture of high art and popular art, and there is a sense in which the Pompidou Center merely ratifies and systematizes what is already a cultural commonplace. But does one really want to have this informal mix of "high" and "low" officially institutionalized? Does one want it transformed into a bureaucratic system? And what effect would such a transformation have on the fate of high art itself? These are serious questions, and the champions of high art have so far been given little reason to believe that the Pompidou Center can be counted on to defend their interests. In a system in which the fine arts, the applied arts, the popular arts, and various forms of entertainment, journalism and kitsch are all regarded as cultural activities of equal value and significance, the fine arts may indeed be the ultimate losers.

On the other hand, quite the most impressive single component of the Center is, for the moment at least, the new National Museum of Modern Art. This gives to Paris its first adequate facility for the permanent exhibition of the painting and sculpture that was created here in the earlier decades of the century. To say that it represents an improvement over the old museum quarters on the Avenue du President Wilson would be an absurd understatement. The old galleries always had the air of a dreary makeshift, and the new ones are handsome, flexible, spacious, well-lighted and inviting. Even the collection, which nobody claims to be quite first-rate, looks a good deal better in the new galleries, and now for the first time we are able to see what it actually consists of.

This is not a collection of outstanding masterpieces on the order of the painting and sculpture collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It is, rather, a history of painting and sculpture since the turn of the century as the French (until recently, at least) have understood it. What this means, alas, is that a great many secondary artists of the School of Paris are well represented, and many first-rate artists —both those who worked elsewhere, and some who even worked in Paris— are not. It is the kind of collection in which the minor Cubists are more strongly represented than either Braque or Picasso, and the German Expressionists not represented at all.

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The director of the fine art division of the Center, K. G. Pontus Hulten, has now significantly enlarged and improved this basic collection from the old museum. With the help of a large budget (18 million francs for acquisitions over a period of three years), an energetic campaign to solicit gifts, and a vigorous international outlook, he has bought a great deal, been given a great deal, and borrowed what he could not permanently acquire.

Thanks to him, the Museum now has its very first Mondrian, for example, and there is at least a token representation of German painting. For the period covering the last 30 years, it is American art that now—under Mr. Hulten's direction—looms largest in the Museum, a shift of emphasis about which the French, of course, have very mixed feelings.

With the permanent collection of the museum, augmented by loans and gifts, Mr. Hulten has done brilliantly, I think. The drawings he has acquired are especially impressive. The temporary exhibitions he has arranged are something else. He is giving Paris its first Marcel Duchamp retrospective—a little late, perhaps—and publishing a four-volume catalogue to go with it. He has organized a small show of Icelandic Conceptual art, a larger one-man show of the German Superrealist Gerhard Richter, and a still larger one of French artists (Arman, Vautier, et al.) who have worked around Nice over the past 20 years.

If none of this sounds very exciting, the fault may not be entirely Mr. Hulten's. The fact is, the contemporary art scene in Paris is extremely dreary just now. Indeed, it is practically dead. When a visitor asks, "Who are the most important artists now working in Paris?", the question leads to embarrassment, silence, and explanations, but very few names, and no enthusiasm.

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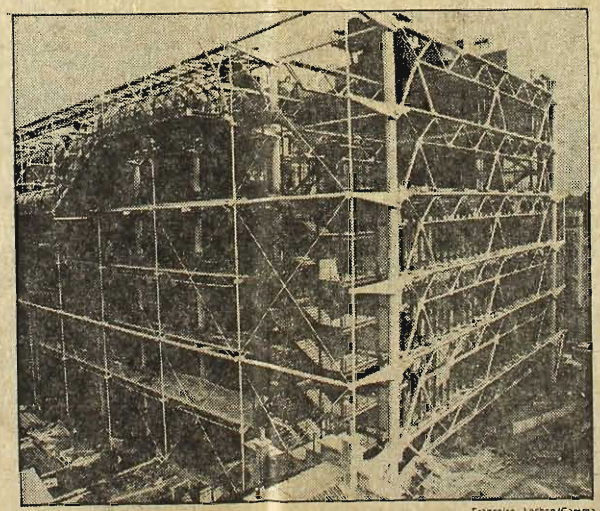
The paucity of significant new art in Paris inevitably affects the way the Pompidou Center can expect to function as a contemporary art establishment. The hope, of course, is that the creation of this new institution will inspire a revitalization of art in Paris, but for the moment it remains only a hope—and a prayer.

Meanwhile, in the absence of any vital new fine art, it is the industrial design section of the Center that is likely to sound the strongest contemporary note. But by "industrial design," the directors of this department do not mean the design of industrial objects. They are far more interested in social ideology than in taste or invention. An immense exhibition of "City Archeology," for example, organized by the Haus-Rucker group of Vienna and New York, takes a Spenglerian view of the sort of mass-produced goods that make modern city life possible, and the show —a cross between a flea-market and an environmental sculpture—is clearly intended to make us feel that we are threatened, rather than aided, by the objects we live with. Another of the design exhibitions, "Women of a Day," shows us how women are represented in the mass media. Both shows are, in effect, profoundly hostile to industrial design. It is a considerable irony, of course, that this anti-design and anti-technology note should be sounded too loud at the inauguration of a building that is itself a celebration of the beauty of technology. But that is only one of the ironies attending this event. The immense cost of maintaining this technological triumph in a period of economic uncertainty is another. Yet despite all the problems and contradictions, there remains something very grand about the whole enterprise, and I think French cultural life is likely to be the better for it even if, as I also believe, the Center does not succeed in re-establishing Paris to a position of leadership in the international art world. Of that, there is no sign whatever. ■

Drawing by Red Grooms

La belle Paris has a new chapeau.



Francoise Lochon/Gamma

Pompidou Center of Art and Culture