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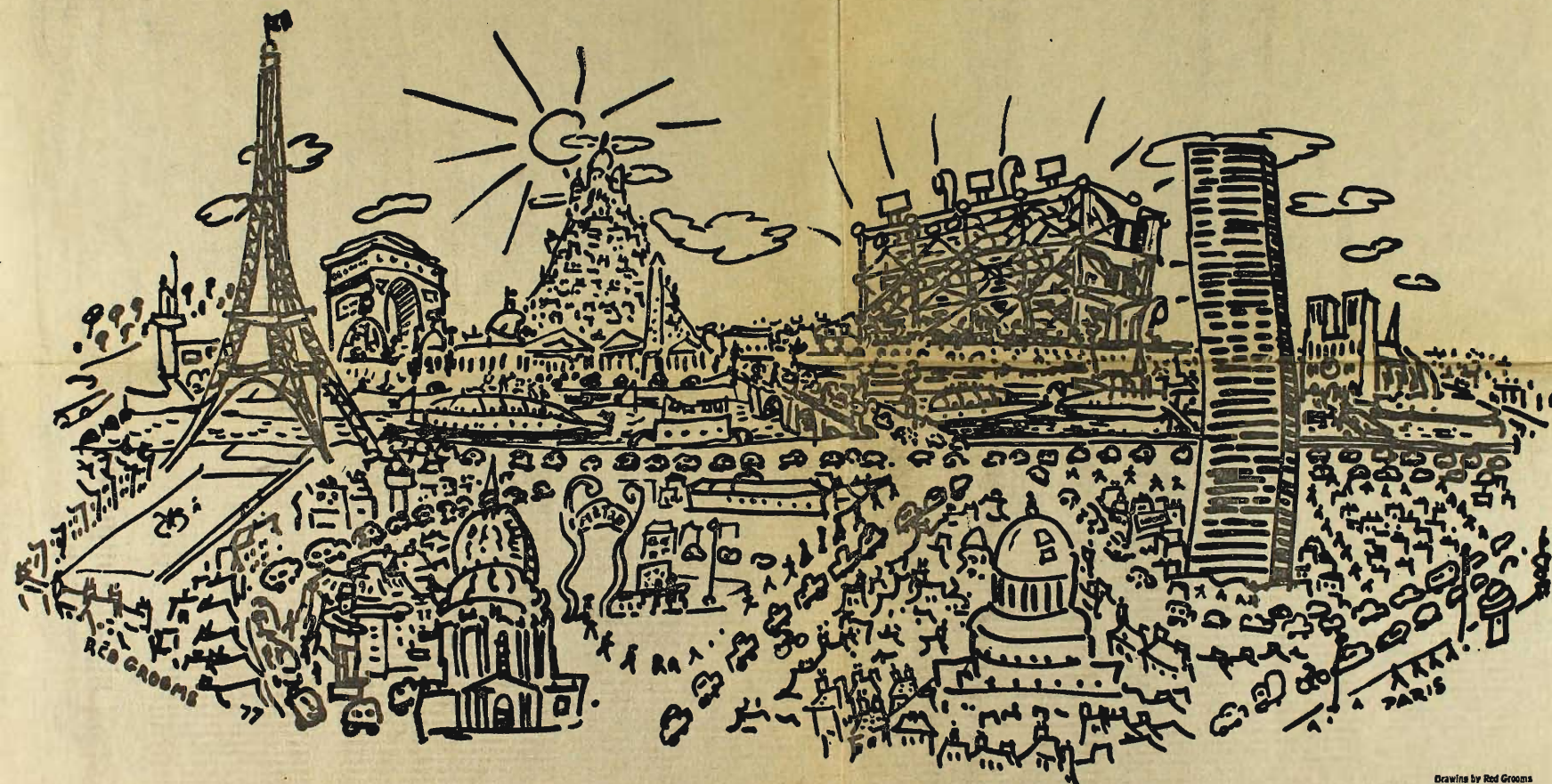
ARTS AND LEISURE

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A New Arts Center in Paris to Open Amid Raging Controversy



Drawings by Red Grooms

The unorthodox design of the new Pompidou Center, upper right, has led one critic to call it "an architectural King Kong," but a more serious issue is raised by its purpose.

By HILTON KRAMER

After several years of sometimes bitter political controversy and acrimonious esthetic debate, in which every aspect of the mammoth enterprise has been mercilessly ridiculed and maligned, the Georges Pompidou National Center of Art and Culture will be officially inaugurated tomorrow evening by President François Mitterrand. Although the

Center will not be devoted to the performing arts, the elaborate opening ceremony will include, among much else, what is described in the program as an "Impromptu" written for the occasion by the playwright Eugene Ionesco. The choice is appropriate, perhaps, for only a specialist in the theater of the absurd could hope to reconcile so much negative opinion with the high-minded platitudes of praise certain to be voiced on this official occasion.

Virtually everything about the new cultural center—its design, its cost, its basic conception, and the effect it may

or may not have on other institutions and on the very future of art in France—has inspired strong expressions of doubt and disapproval among the artists, critics, administrators, politicians and ideologues who concern themselves with cultural developments in Paris. The Center has also inspired, among art dealers, an energetic takeover of the surrounding Beaubourg neighborhood, and this too adds to the general suspicion. The belief is widespread that the whole project is little more than a plot—the Socialists say it is an "elitist" plot—to sell the public

something it does not really need.

"The Pompidou Center," a writer in *Le Nouvel Observateur* correctly noted a few months ago, "has nothing but enemies." And a week before the opening, the controversy was still raging in the pages of *Le Monde*.

It therefore comes as a pleasant shock for a visitor to Paris to discover that this new institution, so conspicuously lacking in friends willing to defend it, is immensely impressive—ambitious in scope, audacious in conception, and already quite brilliant in certain parts of its realization. There may

be much to quarrel with among the ideas that are expected to govern the Center and its activities, but there can be no question, I think, that this dazzling venture gives the French capital something it has never had before—a thoroughly modern arts facility, beautifully equipped to accommodate and encourage whatever creative energies the last decades of the 20th century and the first decades of the next century may bring forth.

The astonishing building that houses the Center—the object, of course, of the most concentrated abuse—is one

of the most breathtaking architectural accomplishments of recent times, and certainly the most radical modernist building ever to be erected in Paris. Even in New York, which is so much richer than Paris in examples of fine modern architecture, the design of the Center would cause a considerable stir. It simply does not look like anything one has ever seen before, and is therefore especially frightening to people who cannot bear the idea of something really new in the art of building.

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