

# Why we are not in São Paulo

The recent dramatic withdrawal of the American entry to São Paulo's biennial art exhibit on involved a clash of artists with differing approaches toward effecting change in contemporary life. Here is an analysis of how and why this crucial event occurred.

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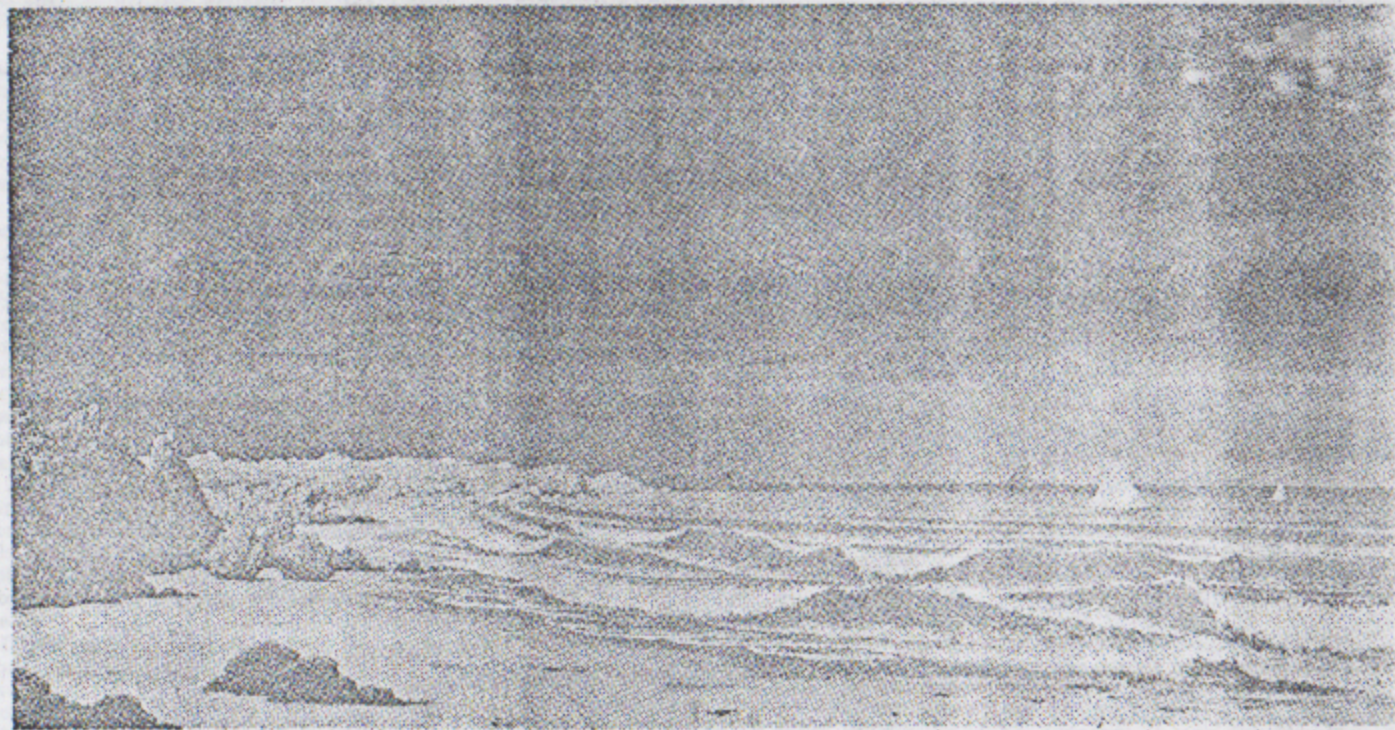
The Center for Advanced Visual Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology comprises a community of artists who recognize that art is always in some dimension a social phenomenon. They have been trying to realize its possibilities on an environmental scale with the aim of discovering ways in which the quality of contemporary life might be improved.

This year the MIT center, because of its stated aims, was invited to design the American entry in Brazil's São Paulo biennial art exhibition. The invitation was accepted. Two months before the São Paulo exhibition was to open, however, the American entry was withdrawn, following withdrawals by a number of other countries slated to participate.

The events leading up to this withdrawal—drawn together from pertinent documents and discussions with the center's director, Gyorgy Kepes—are a striking instance of the commerce between contemporary art and life.

## 'Synergetic'

In March of this year Professor Kepes was invited to organize and design the American contribution to the 10th Bienal de São Paulo, scheduled for September. This promised to be the largest international art



'Approaching Storm'

... is one of the paintings by Martin J. Heade (1819-1903) from the Museum of Fine Arts M. and M. Karolik Collection, included in the first retrospective exhibition of the artist's work ever shown. It marks the 150th anniversary of his birth, and will be on view through Aug. 24. The paintings, drawings, and prints range from the placid salt marshes of New England to South American jungles, and some have been loaned to Boston by other museums and galleries for this occasion. After it closes here, the exhibition will go to the Whitney Museum, New York, and to the University of Maryland, Baltimore (which organized it).

showed a natural affinity in concept with the aesthetic principles animating his design.

The exhibit, as conceived, was to incorporate the work of 23 artists into a "synergetic, interdependent" aesthetic environ-

of [the] original intention to make a community statement," and thus necessitate withdrawal of the whole enterprise simply on aesthetic grounds.

Within days of the date when the American artists' work was to be shipped to

biennial ever presented. The American exhibit was to be jointly sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution and MIT; past American entries had been organized by the United States Information Agency, and had therefore been under government sponsorship.

Professor Kepes began by drawing upon the resources of the MIT center and shortly extended invitations to a number of artists not connected with the center whose work

ment. This design was meant to outline the possibility of going "beyond the limitations of the private studios" to "turn the total environment, both social and physical, into [a] common workshop." A second portion of the exhibit would have been an "information center," presenting through various media a sampling of "the fullest spectrum of current artistic activity" in the United States.

Obstacles arose almost immediately. One artist within the MIT center itself made known his reluctance, ultimately a refusal, to participate on political grounds; two others followed later. In December, what was considered the already repressive military regime governing Brazil had effected a further curtailment of liberties, one that brought about newly severe censure of artists and other intellectuals. A number of American artists felt that to allow the São Paulo biennial to take place as planned, despite the fact that it was not under the Brazilian Government's sponsorship, would be to give the government a chance to polish its image by creating an illusion of cultural freedom. Soon what amounted to a movement was afoot to boycott São Paulo as a gesture of protest.

The idea seems to have gathered momentum in Europe. It was announced early in the summer that the French, Dutch, Swedish, Spanish, and Italian exhibits were to be withdrawn on political grounds. Entries from Argentina and Mexico were added to the list.

It was argued, plausibly, that the withdrawal of the American exhibit would really give teeth to the boycott, since this was probably traditionally the most prestigious entry.

A rumor, said to have originated in Brazil, began circulating to the effect that an artist exhibiting at São Paulo would be risking the destruction of his work — at whose hands no one was certain. A number of expatriate Brazilian artists called for a boycott as the most powerful and effective means of protest. At least one artist still in Brazil affirmed the contrary.

The official statement drafted by Professor Kepes under the pressure of mounting protest recognized the possibility that a withdrawal by too many of the artists might make of the American exhibit "a parody

Brazil, three more of the artists chosen to participate withdrew, taking a total of nine from the original 23, and forcing Professor Kepes to announce that justification could not be found for presenting the exhibit "in misleadingly incomplete form." Thus the American entry was withdrawn completely.

Only after this was done did a letter come to light written by the former elected President of Brazil, Juscelino Kubitschek, once a prisoner of the military regime. The substance of the letter was to stress the importance, urgency even, of participation in the São Paulo event by those foreign nations invited to do so, especially the United States, to counterbalance the repressions attributed to the regime.

## Irony

There is a certain irony to these events in view of Kepes's plan for the exhibition. He had chosen artists who "do not believe in divorcing art from life, nor . . . see [their] activities separated from the major issues that trouble our contemporary society." This belief undoubtedly lies behind the logic of the artists' withdrawals, though there is evidence that a more parochial form of pressure may have been brought to bear on some of the artists from within the New York art world.

Professor Kepes's design had meant to suggest how the quality of life might be elevated by broadening our sense of the aesthetic. The artists' effort to change the contemporary situation took place at a more pragmatic and political level.

The issue of "divorcing art from life" has clearly become more than an aesthetic one. Art has always been, in some dimension, a way of thinking and of making ideas apparent to others. The making of art is a natural movement toward communication — it assumes as its territory a fundamental ground of communication, namely, the visible.

To speak to vision, as art tries to do, is already to address the understanding and to commit at least a latent message. The relation of art to politics has less to do with "content" than with the fact that vision is one means given us of being present to each other; and "the political," in the most fundamental sense, is that which mediates the terms of this compresence.

## ENTERTAINMENT

Thus art is always potentially p Professor Kepes's design for the An entry at São Paulo (and, no doubt, n the individual works within it) tried ploit this most fundamental political sion, not in the service of a politic trine, but in the service of that ver, ness toward others of which vision paradigm. The emphasis on the e mental is all the more appropriate l vision opens first upon a world ar upon the particulars within it.

## Arrest

The argument that the Brazilian might have made propagandistic us intact São Paulo exhibition probably But since distortion is the common c nator in propaganda, the argument t regime will turn a boycott to its p may hold equally true.

It may be that an "affirmation," s the proposed American exhibit att to be, would have been more diffi distort than a pure negation in the f a boycott. Given the prevailing cor of censorship in Brazil, it is doubtf many but those in power will be e to the rhetoric behind the boycott.

But the fact that censorship exte the arts (a number of works were or destroyed in a recent exhibition at and the artists and organizers impi suggests that those in power reali art speaks a "secret" language tha be silenced. It was the Brazilian G ment's claim in the Bahia case th artists arrested were actually gui subversive activity not confined to ti hibition.

History may reveal a difference b the silence achieved by this destructi that of the boycott, but from the p perspective the silences show an uns likeness. The question must remain: one if events are to be heard whis their answers over the clamor of opin the words of one of the spokesmen f boycott, "We are all trying to find th way to change the situation around v

## Entertainment timetable

### Summerthing

MATTAPAN, ALMONT PLAY-  
GROUND—People and Play-  
ers Travelling Theater Com-  
pany, 10 a.m.  
JAMAICA PLAIN, WACHU-  
SETT PLAYGROUND—People  
and Players Travelling The-  
ater Company, 2  
PARKER HILL, WENTWORTH  
PARKING LOT — Jack Lan-  
dron and the Parliaments,  
2  
DORCHESTER, BOWDOIN  
GREEN — Boston Musicians'  
Association band concert, 6  
WEST ROXBURY, FALLON  
FIELD — "Point," rock con-  
cert, 8  
NORTH END, PRADO — Jazz-  
wagon, "Al Noelle," 8  
CHARLESTOWN, RYAN PLAY-  
GROUND — the "Beacon  
St. Union," rock concert, 8

### Music

HATCH MEMORIAL SHELL —  
United States Coast Guard  
Band, 8  
APPLETON CHAPEL MEMO-  
RIAL CHURCH — Mary Vir-  
gin, organist, 12:10  
PRUDENTIAL CENTER — New  
Gazebo Band, 7

### Films

ABBEY—"Roméo and Juliet,"  
2, 4:30, 7:30, 10  
ASTOR — "Castle Keep," 10,  
12, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10  
BEACON HILL — "Popi," 10,  
12, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10  
BRATTLE — "The Silence,"  
7:30, 9:30  
CENTER — "Run Wild, Run  
Free," 11:10, 2:35, 6:05,  
9:30; "The Big Gundown,"  
9:30, 12:55, 4:20, 7:50  
CENTRAL SQUARE I — "Mon-  
terey Pop," 6, 8, 10; "The  
Chief," 7:25, 9:25, 11:25  
CENTRAL SQUARE II — "Yel-  
low Submarine," 6:30, 8:10,  
9:50  
CHARLES CINEMA — "Easy  
Rider," 2, 4, 6, 8, 10  
CHERI I — "3 Into 2 Won't  
Go," 10:30, 12:10, 1:50

3:30, 5:10, 6:50, 8:30,  
10:10  
CHERI 2 — "The Libertine,"  
10:30, 12:15, 2, 3:30, 5,  
6:30, 8:15, 10  
CHERI 3 — "Oliver!" 2, 8:30,  
Fri. and Sat. 5:15  
CINEMA KENMORE SQUARE—  
"Baby Love," 2, 7:30, 9:35  
CIRCLE at Cleveland Circle—  
"True Grit," 4:40, 7:30,  
9:50; Robert Kennedy Re-  
membered," 1:30, 4:10, 7,  
12  
COOLIDGE CORNER — "Chor-  
ley," 1, 9:20; "I Love You  
Alice B. Toklas," 2:40, 7:45  
EXETER — "Alexander," 2:15,  
4, 5:50, 7:40, 9:30; short  
subjects, 2, 3:45, 5:35, 7:25,  
9:15  
GARY — "Krakatoa, East of  
Java," 2:30, 8:30  
HARVARD SQUARE — "Chor-  
ley," 2:15, 5:20, 9:30; "The  
Wicked Dreams of Paula  
Schultz," 3:30, 7:40  
MUSIC HALL — "The Great  
Bank Robbery," 10, 12, 2, 4,  
6, 8, 10  
ORPHEUM—"Eye of the Cat,"  
2:05, 5:50, 9:35; "The House  
of Cards," 12:10, 3:55, 7:40  
ORSON WELLES CINEMA —  
"The Fire Within," 4, 8,  
10; "The Comedienne and  
the Pimp Machorka Muff,"  
6, 12  
PARAMOUNT — "2001: A  
Space Odyssey," 9:40, 12:35,  
2:35, 6:20, 9:20  
PARIS — "The Lion in Winter,"  
2, 8:30; Sun. 8  
PARK SQUARE—"Baby Love,"  
1:30, 3:30, 5:30, 7:30, 9:30  
ROXBURY CINEMA — "Eye of  
the Cat," 7:30  
SAVOY — "Che," 10, 11:35,  
1:20, 3:05, 4:50, 6:35, 8:20,  
10  
SAXON—"Midnight Cowboy,"  
10, 12, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10  
SYMPHONY I — "I am Cur-  
ious (Yellow)," 12, 2:10,  
4:15, 6:20, 8:30, 10:45  
SYMPHONY II — "I am Cur-  
ious (Yellow)," 11, 1:10,  
3:15, 5:20, 7:30, 9:45  
WEST END CINEMA — "I, a  
Woman, Part II," 11:15, 1,  
2:30, 4:35, 5:20, 8:05, 9:50