

The work for the 15th EV+A/Exhibition of Visual Art, which opened in Limerick last Friday, was selected by Germano Celant, the Italian art critic and curator of contemporary art at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Paddy Woodworth was asked to interview him for the exhibition catalogue.

The art of giving space to the artist

I IMAGINE that, in selecting an exhibition like this, you have to move constantly between choosing according to your personal taste and trying to be representative in some way. How do you deal with these alternatives?

The problem of objectivity and subjectivity is one of the biggest problems, whatever you do in your life. You are subjective because you are going through your own personal experience, your own accumulation of information. But if you're working in a public institution, whether it's a newspaper or a museum, there is the task of being representative.

In selecting painting, film or whatever, you always try to be personal, because that is the thing you trust most. Then you stand back and correct your selection, you see that some part is missing, because your attitude is to select a certain ideology, for example, and you know that it doesn't represent the entirety (of the work). Still, you don't want to give up your own identity.

— And you always try to relate the two, I think.

Yes, I'm not only writing text, I also write shows, which is a physical act, and I use the space as I would a page. In this case I have been given about 20 "pages" as my maximum space. Now, if you respect the work, you don't fill those 20 pages with lots of small reproductions — no, you make 20 selections. That's how it works. It's not just that I select, I am also selected by the situation. If you invite a person to your house, and you respect them, you don't put them in the toilet, you give them a comfortable space. Likewise, the artist's work has to be able to breathe, otherwise the exhibition is an assemblage, what they call the rat box, the works kill each other. If I had had the whole city at my disposal, I would have selected more work.

Is there also a degree to which the works select each other, whereby if you select one or two works at the beginning the others follow by a sort of chain reaction?

I don't think it is automatic. You go through the work and

there is an immediate reaction to a good professional piece. To be a writer, an architect or a painter is a very serious job. The art system is based on this kind of attitude. I'm not so romantic to think there is always a genius somewhere. So a certain immediacy and a serious, professional attitude (influence) the first selections.

By professional work, do you mean technical excellence?

Not only technical, there are different levels, iconographical and so on. An artwork can be technically very good, but have no meaning, no complexity, raise no questions about the system.

You have been very closely associated with a particular artistic tendency, with Arte Povera...

Yes, I have been a champion of this position, but I am increasingly interested in "multilingual" analysis, in theatre, film, architecture. So for me the problem is not whether a work is an oil painting or a sculpture, but whether it communicates something to me. If it does that, I am interested.

So, for example, a figurative or landscape painter would not be excluded from EV+A because you are the adjudicator?

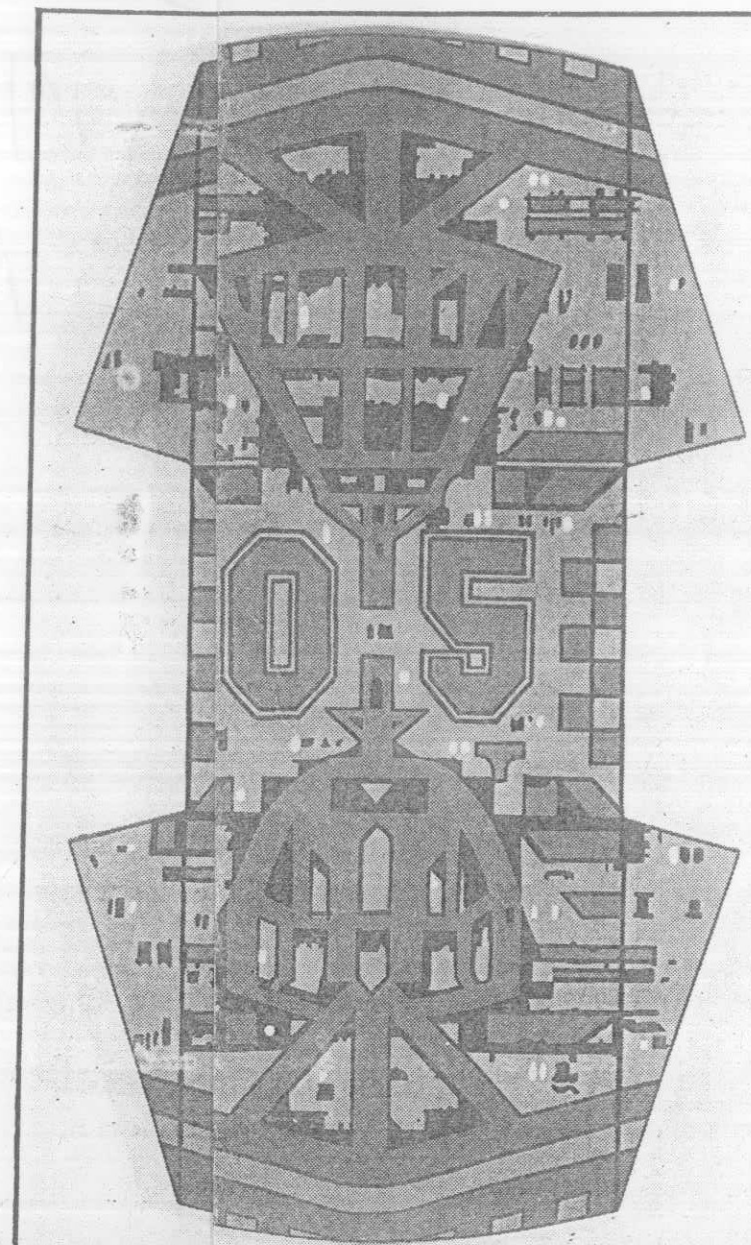
No, I select paintings too, but naturally my selection represents the "cool" attitude which I have. I am not very involved in the mysticism of being an artist, of being wild, of expressing the self. I am more interested in the conceptual and installational aspect of the work, and you will see that the selection reflects this kind of complexity. But I am also interested in painting, painting is one of the most difficult jobs to do today, because, well, after 2,000 years, it is a tough job, not because there are no good painters around today but because the competition with the past is so enormous. On the other hand, the use of installation, for example, is still open to new developments.

And yet the first thing you did in adjudicating this exhibition was to choose a work from the past...

I chose a work from the past because I think that a gesture to the past is a gesture to the present. Especially in a situation



Above left, Germano Celant: "contemporary art is becoming like nouvelle cuisine". Above right, Michael Hegarty's "Captain Kirk meets the Apaches", currently showing at EV+A exhibition.



like Ireland's, where the art system — the relationship to the international art market, international museums, art information and so on — is not developed. The past is part of your roots, the past without the present is dead. That is why I have made this statement. The City Gallery is a beautiful building on the outside, but inside it needs to be restored, so that you can have an incredible tool for culture here.

You're really making two statements, aren't you? You're saying that the work of the past can be seen in the context of the modern work, and you're also making a political gesture, saying that we must put money into restoration and preservation.

Because the future, without a past, doesn't exist. It's very important for artists to support history, just as history supports contemporary arts.

As well as giving a prize to the past, you have also decided that the other prizes should be spread among all the selected entrants, instead of making specific awards. Why?

Because art is not a running competition for a record. I think that's ridiculous. If they are serious workers, they all need the same recognition. Naturally, the first prize goes to history, the others share it.

How aware were you of Irish contemporary artists before coming to make this selection?

I knew a few people, but I was not so familiar with the general situation. These would be people like Nigel Rolfe and Seamus Coleman, people who worked in the performance

and action and conceptual areas?

Yes, people in those areas. I came 10 years ago, but I didn't too many artists. I was interested in the political situation. That's always a problem when you visit a country, you want to see the country first and the second.

So I have much information. I have very little information about contemporary Irish art internally. I came [this time] partly because of my own curiosity because I am fighting Europe all the time, and it's important that something should be out of Ireland for Europe. I usually make a selection in a few minutes sometimes it is necessary to do it for political

reasons, because you give [the exhibition] a certain amount of energy or power. Not because I represent something important, but because I haven't selected such an exhibition for 15 years, it's a very political gesture to come here and do it. There are moments when there is a push to be made for culture.

How did the invitation come about?

Someone sent me a fax and I accepted. Just like that?

I decided on the feeling of the invitation. If people are violent, and say 'you must come', I don't go. Normally now, no-one asks me because I always say 'No'. The EV+A invitation was very gentle, very naive, which was very nice.

Returning to the theme of politics, it seems to me that foreigners visiting Ireland are often attracted to work explicitly related to the conflict in Northern Ireland, work which might not have so much credence within Ireland.

Yes, there is a danger that such work will seduce you through its tension. If the politics speaks through the work, not in a banal way, as in social realism, or through being too didactic, if there is a balance [between the politics and the work] it can be good. You can be political in so many ways. Kandinsky was political, but he used a red triangle. I was a good friend of Pasolini's, and he was very political, but he was a poet. Baroque art is highly political, but it is very subtle in its sensuality and its manipulation of the material. It's this subtle aspect that I'm interested in.

You say that subtlety is important to you, and yet you make your selection very quickly indeed.

Almost in a flash. Because if you look for too long, it becomes annoying, boring [like reading the same information over and over again]. I'm interested in enigmas, metaphors, which allow many meanings to emerge [from the work].

Have you gained any overview of Irish contemporary art from making the selection?

No, I have no serious analysis, I would have to spend much more time, absorb your traditions and history. Then I would know a little...

But you do say that it is increasingly difficult for artwork to have national identity...

Everyone has national roots but, more and more, contemporary art is becoming like nouvelle cuisine, everything looks the same. You have local food because you have a local fish. In art, you have local symbols, metaphors, allegories and so on, and it's important to keep these.

I saw [while making the selection] so many copies of everyone, because artists look at [international art] magazines. Information is a killer, and yet, if you're not informed, you're out. How do you feel about the problem of attracting a broad popular audience to contemporary art exhibitions?

It's difficult to do it [without compromising the work]. Kids are the best, because they have no preconceptions. I think this problem can only be overcome through education — and through symbolic power. If the show is in a big public institution, the public will respect it more.

The above interview is based directly on a conversation with Germano Celant, slightly condensed, though Mr Celant's own strictures on subjectivity/objectivity should perhaps be borne in mind: "When you write, it's your article. You have your position, you don't represent me."

Froz in ti

RAD

Michael Cur

This Week (R Sunday); A (Radio 4, S: Phone Show (Tuesday); Th (RTE Radio 1 Scrap Saturday, 1, Saturday).

"WHAT was the moment, the moment that your mind?"

Little was talk Walker in his D

It was when walked into the gun and put a b head. "And he sa fucking Irish bas 'we're going to ...' The gun was head and I just I and I thought, th

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Others' wanted hanging — if the had been availabl might have been m