

Roman Galleries With a Difference

by Edith Schloss

ROME — Two small galleries, serenely indifferent to the idea of the gallery as a shop for high-class wares, have created quite a stir here. There are degrees of commercialism of course; artists, like other respectable members of society, have the inalienable right to live off their work. How this is now achieved — when artists are no longer necessary seers, explainers, storytellers, but since the 17th century only geniuses — is the puzzle and exasperation of all concerned today.

There is something ludicrous in the spectacle of a work of art — the result of such intangibles as insight and private feeling — when it is traded in public like a lump of material goods. How much is a paint stroke by Turner, a square inch of Twombly, worth now, pray?

Although the works in the two new galleries, A.A.M. and Jartrakor, are for sale, their exposure is the primary function. Both galleries, by pointing up certain directions, ways of thinking, the relationship between various media and philosophies, wish to document the trends of our times and so to stimulate and help us clarify our thoughts.

A.A.M. is run by a group of architects who say they want to present a rounded cultural picture, an interdisciplinary view. But behind the showing of artists and architects together there is also the unstated fact that architectural elements by themselves are too dry to swallow without the fillip of art.

So the series of shows this season, each based on a special theme, consists of "Duets" — that is, one half of the space is given to an architect, the other to an artist. That these are always interesting is not so much because they might be true confrontations or the obvious, banal complementations, but rather because they are chosen with intelligence, each time putting a finger on active and controversial figures right in the swim.

In October, Ettore Sottsass, the architect who invented the nifty little Lettera 22 — the only portable typewriter on which you can safely balance your cup of tea, as an English critic once said — showed his notes and jottings. These were hung alongside the personalia of the conceptual artist Alighiero Boetti: collages, letters and other private documents, part of an inquiry to pin down his personality.

Later there were artifacts from various stages of the career of Alessandro Mendini, the editor of the celebrated *Domus* magazine. Sculpture, drawings and objects and clothes he

designed were paired with the willful whimsicality of Luigi Ontani: his painted wooden masks and dainty drawings, his photographs of himself posing as Dante, Leda and Columbus — themselves photographed in the Guggenheim Museum's "Young Italians" show last April in New York — all monuments to a great, deliberately deadpan narcissism.

This month however, Carlo Cego, with 18 years of his work, has the floor alone. In an intriguing way it is particularly adapted for a gallery of architecture. For Cego serenely deals with an apparent form of geometry as only a painter can. He uses it for his own means with a cool, wry wit, taking it as building material for his own thoughtful expression.

In early work, elements of the vorticists, of Klimt, and other artists' fragments are taken into his own compositions as a sort of homage. In later series Cego brings several small canvases together — a few bright precise marks on each, to make a poetic constellation.

Then in the 1970s, fine pastels and drawings are populated and dissected by pyramids and crystals and look like nothing so much as architectural fantasy projects. The latest paintings on paper, called "lines of light," are quite minimal. Here it seems as if two opaque panes — the white of the paper — had squeezed into a narrow rainbow — one or several multi-colored thin shafts crossing the pages.

This may appear too reduced, everything too neatly refined. But Cego observes given art, shapes, light — weighing them with a knowledgeable mind, taking them apart and then putting them together again to show us something: in his understated way to put them subtly into a fresh context of abstraction.

At Jartrakor, another noncommercial gallery, the relation between art and psychology is the main concern. The group of young people running it are busy examining the hidden drives in art, how a person may develop her or his identity through it, how far the stance of independence can be pushed, how an artist's effort is colored by society, and it in turn colored by art.

As an example the late Dadaist and early conceptualist Manzoni was featured as a particular case of the modern search for authenticity, which he expressed with extremes of naughtiness and bitter wit, with a wild iconoclasm, however always tempering his desperate irony with great elegance of arrangement. Several other conceptualists, who themselves always are dissecting ideas, were analyzed here and deliberately put in revealing situations.

The image as psychological stimulus is what

fascinates the group most of all, and they encourage, as in the show "50 Answers to 4 Images," the experiments of nonprofessionals as well as organizing workshops and publishing a magazine on the subject. Whether one cares to share their inquiries or not, one can respect the dedication of the group, reflected as it is in the consistency of their instructive shows — of sparse objects displayed in neat white rooms.

This month (through Jan. 10) the very young Giovanni Di Stefano is allowed to present his experiments ("experiments," "research," "analysis" and other science terminology are very dear to this group), in which he tries to break through the conventional bind of art. In his quest for purity he deliberately blindfolds himself before he attacks the picture surface with a felt pen, so that the result is a crisscrossing of thick lines tumbling over white, without the baggage of emotional expression, exposing action alone.

Using the laws of chance to alter our preconceptions, to do away with history and personal feelings has been the main drive and aim in John Cage's music for decades.

In art this kind of urge for reform is still a little less common but spreading. But watch out: relying on the aleatory — raw gesture or raw sound — may itself become a style, though it is also a pause, a cleansing, in the process of evolution.

In Western culture it can take place only within a conventional framework: the sound issues from the concert hall, the lines and colors are mounted on the gallery wall, and — ultimate compromise! — the whole effort is coupled with the name, that is the ego, of the artist who proposed it.

Though this young painter risks finding himself in a blind alley, he is part of the spirit of inquiry and genuine curiosity that informs the activities at Jartrakor.

The two galleries may be isolated cases, nor are their precepts entirely new, but they are examples of brave attempts to change something.

They work against the gallery as no more than a shop full of fancy goodies — modern potboilers and conversation pieces. Instead they want it to be a space — like a concert hall, a hall for poetry readings — where things made by rune makers can be read in common, where something can be learned, enjoyed or experienced in such a way as to take us beyond the humdrum current of our daily lives.

A.A.M. Cooperative of Modern Art and Architecture, 12 Via del Vantaggio. Jartrakor, Experimental Space and Center for Studies of Art Problems, 20 Via dei Pianellari.