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French Artists Boycott Museum Opening

By ALAN RIDING

PARIS, June 9— A group of important artists and critics have decided to boycott the inauguration of the new Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Nice later this month to protest anti-Semitic remarks made by the city's Mayor, Jacques Medecin.

The Nice-born artist Arman Fernandez, better known simply as Arman, has also canceled a major retrospective of his work that was organized as a tribute to him to accompany the museum's inaugural show of European and American art of the 1960's.

The museum's curator, Gilbert Perlein, said the exhibition would open on schedule on June 21 but would include only three Arman sculptures that are owned by the city of Nice. "It's a pity that a new cultural institution should be penalized in this way," he said.

The French Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, in announcing that he would not attend the inauguration in Nice, said about 15 paintings owned by the French Government would not be loaned to the museum at the request of their artists.

A Reaction to the Right Wing

The boycott movement was organized by Arman, who is 61 years old, after a series of incidents that began in late March when Mr. Medecin allowed the extreme right-wing National Front to hold a congress in Nice and publicly endorsed "99.9 percent" of its positions.

The mayor then received the National Front's leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, who has frequently made anti-Semitic and anti-Arab statements, as well as Franz Schonhuber, a former SS officer who was also attending the National Front Congress as head of the West German ultra-nationalistic Republican party.

When three Jewish municipal councilors in Nice resigned from Mr. Medecin's political group in protest, the Mayor replied that he had close ties to Jews and added: "I don't know any Jew who will refuse a gift offered to him, even if he doesn't like the gift."

The Mayor later apologized, but he was forced to resign from the conservative Rally for the Republic party amid a wave of fierce public criticism.

He was also quoted in the French press as blaming Jews for his troubles. "It is the Jews who have created a fuss in a scandalous manner," he reportedly said. "I have received hundreds of letters of support from all over France that say, 'These are ungrateful people after all you have done for them.'"

Although this incident preceded the nationwide protests provoked by the desecration of 34 Jewish tombs at a cemetery in Carpentras, north of Marseilles, on May 10, it is now being cited as additional evidence that anti-Semitism is on the rise in France today.

'Against My Idea of Democracy'

Recalling that 16 years ago he had strongly protested Mr. Medecin's decision to match Nice with Cape Town as sister cities, Arman said he had been "disgusted" by the Mayor's decision to receive Mr. Le Pen and Mr. Schonhuber and by his reaction to his Jewish critics.

"I couldn't see myself opening the museum arm in arm with Medecin," the artist said. "It would be against my idea of democracy. He has a right to express his views, but I have a right to dissent."

Arman said he had refused to accept a compromise under which he would boycott the museum's opening but his retrospective of 65 artworks would go ahead as planned. "I was sorry for Perlein because he had spent almost two years preparing for it," Arman said, referring to the curator. "But I felt I had to be consistent."

He added that he did not condemn local artists who decided to exhibit their work in the new \$40 million museum. "I am not the master of anyone's morals," he explained. "It's a luxury for me to give up a major retrospective, but I can't condemn artists who need the exposure."

Quietly Spreading Awareness

Nonetheless, since announcing the cancellation of his show in early April, Arman has quietly insured that the art community here and abroad became aware of his decision. Almost immediately, an association of French art critics gave him their support and said they would join the boycott.

A monthly art magazine, Art Press, had planned a major article on the new Nice museum for its June issue. Instead, it canceled the article and in its place ran a statement endorsing Arman's decision and noting that "art should never be associated with intolerance and racism."

The New York Times

Last month, 12 other internationally known artists also announced their refusal to exhibit in the new museum. They joined Arman in denouncing Mr. Medecin and "the anti-Semitic and racist gangrene that is trying to gain acceptance here and elsewhere."

Those who signed that statement included the American artists Roy Lichtenstein, Frank Stella and Julian Schnabel; Pierre Soulages, Daniel Buren, and Jean-Rene Bazaine of France; Jean Tinguely of Switzerland, and Zao Wou Ki from China.

Mr. Perlein said the cancellation of the Arman retrospective came too late for a substitute to be found, forcing him to reorganize the display of the inaugural exhibition. "Ours is essentially a contemporary museum, with a postwar collection focused on the period between 1960 and today," he explained.

The curator said the first exhibition would focus on European New Realists and American Pop Art in the 1960's, with shows later this year and in early 1991 covering the 1970's and 80's. "Eventually, two floors will be given over to our permanent collection and one floor to temporary exhibitions," he said.

Alarmed by the impact of the boycott on the new museum, however, Mr. Perlein refused to become involved in the dispute stirred up by Mr. Medecin, who is also head of the museum's executive committee. "I'm too busy hanging paintings to become involved in polemics," he added.

Photo: Arman Fernandez, who organized a boycott of the inauguration of a new art museum in Nice, France. (Alain Bizos for The New York Times)