

Art

Art Without Elevators

By JOHN CANADAY

THE scheme by which ten artists opened their studios to the public on three weekends (last weekend, this weekend, and next weekend) received the kind of advance publicity usually accorded only major museum exhibitions. Last Sunday when I made the trek, which involved climbing a total of 24 flights of stairs and walking from Prince Street to West 23rd Street and very nearly an equal distance in zig-zags, the artists' estimates of the number of visitors they had received on Saturday ran from around 250 to around 400. That is a lot of people doing a lot of climbing, and indicates a lot of interest in art or in artists. The one aspect of the affair that seems to have received no attention in the press or, so far as I could tell, from the visitors, is whether or not the painting and sculpture exhibited was worth seeing.

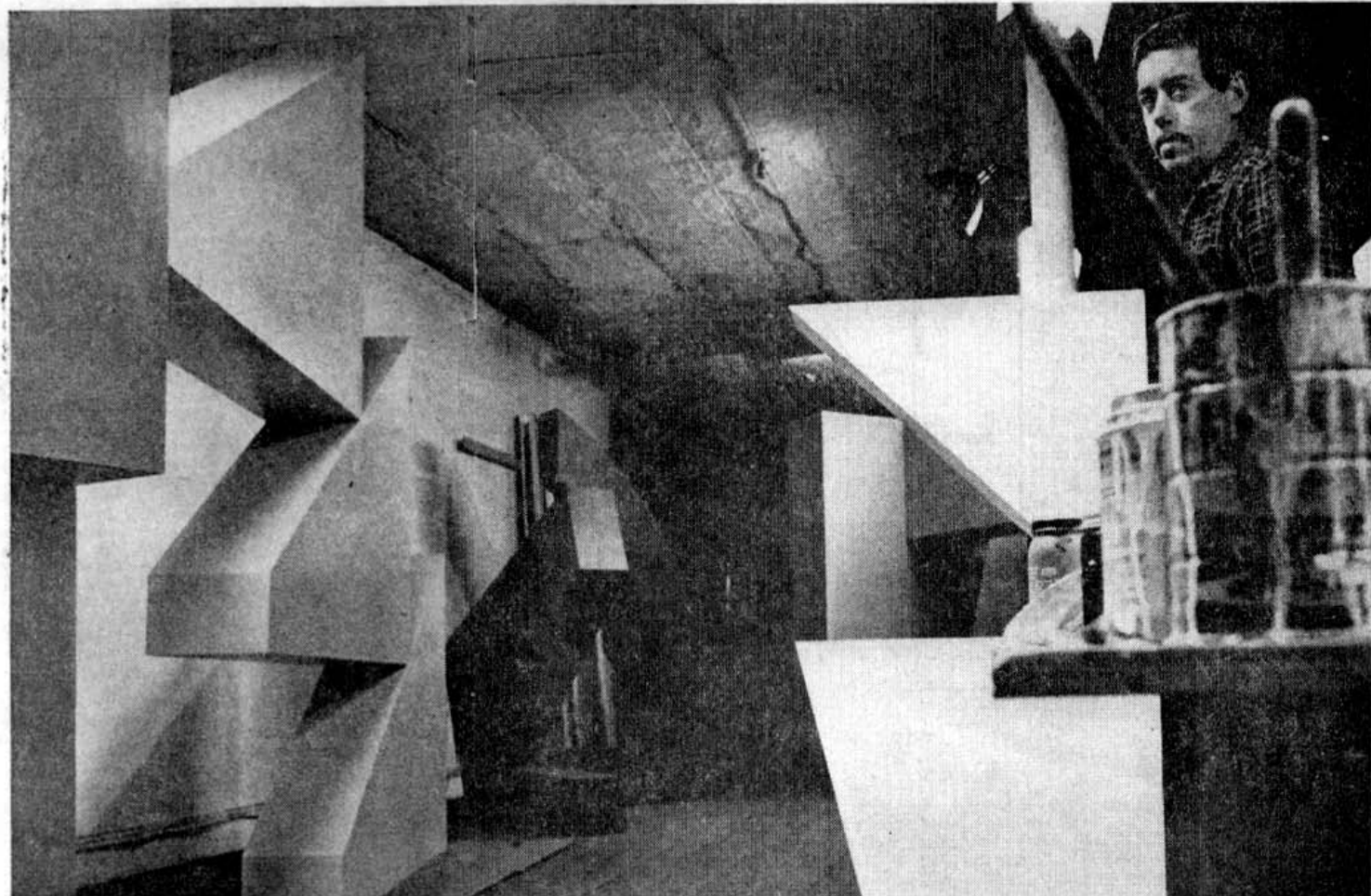
As an innovational program directed against the gallery system, a system that, if eliminated, would presumably leave the artist an autonomous member of society, this venture found a keynote in the statement by an unidentified member that the artists involved wanted to get outside the "success-failure syndrome." I am not certain that I understand exactly how this is supposed to work. Within the present system, the artist can show his work only if a dealer thinks it is a saleable commodity. Even if he finds a dealer, he is thrown back into limbo if he fails to make the grade in dollars, cents, and publicity.

But the first question that arises is, what system or syndrome does the artist expect to substitute for this one? The success-failure syndrome

is one hell of a syndrome to beat, whether you are exhibiting in a gallery or offering in your own studio a product that is a repetition of products offered more conveniently in the galleries with whom you enjoy a relationship of mutual rejection. All ten of these artists, both the strong and weak members of the group, work in manners that would never have become successful if there had not been galleries that can capitalize on strong connections with critics and museums to create an audience (including collectors) for art forms that upon their first appearance were antipathetic to popular taste.

Just barely conceivably, there might be a chance for artists to bring the success-failure syndrome within the studio instead of the gallery. Just barely conceivably, there are enough people with the knowledge and physical stamina to maintain their interest in art when it is not pre-winnowed and conveniently exhibited for them. I doubt it, but the possibility can be granted. It is invalidated, however, when you remember that public interest in current art is stimulated not by the quality of the work an artist produces but through the promotion of vogues conceived by artificial insemination, nurtured in incubators, and then offered through well established commercial channels.

The success-failure syndrome thought of in personal terms by these ten artists thus has a much larger application in the success-failure syndrome of modern art in general. From impressionism to pop, modern art has failed by every standard of public response until the gallery-museum system has created a taste for it and made it a



Roger Jorgensen in his studio, with sculpture: Fighting a syndrome, or just changing the same old syndrome's location?

Alan Winston

success. This is true, no matter how lamentable it may be. And every single work in these ten studios is in reality a product of this mill and is riding current favor or, as in the work of a couple of members, is tagging along in the wake of fading fashions. There is the uncomfortable feeling that the venture is not really the rejection of a system; but rather a business of catching on to the tail of a kite.

Of course it would be irrational to expect the venture to yield ten undis-

covered geniuses or even ten talents of true originality. If it included even one, the newness of his work would make it unintelligible to a public that had not yet been put through the routine of discovery via the usual paths. Some of the work, even so, was of top quality by gallery standards. The sculpture of Roger Jorgensen, Julius Tobias and Charles Ginnever I thought was as distinguished as that of Hans van de Bovenkamp was tacky—to pick the high and low spots as I saw them. The low spots raise

another question, which is whether a second venture can attract a public unless the membership is more selective — by the standards of selection made by the galleries, when you come down to it.

I was re-impressed during this long trek by the persistence of another syndrome, the one, whatever its name, that keeps artists at work. The majority of these ten were busy creating works of such character or dimensions that they were unmarketable, barring the long (and limited) chance of museum purchase

or, in the case of sculptures, commission for large civic projects. I am aware that by every connotation of the words the success-failure syndrome rejects marketableness as a criterion of creation. And yet surely the reason for creating is to reach an audience. If you cook something, you want it to be eaten, and with appetite. If you write something, you want it to be read, and with interest. If you do a painting or sculpture, surely you want it to be not only seen, but seen and desired, not merely gawped

at as a curiosity in your studio. There is something more than paradoxical in the artist's wanting to exhibit work that has been done only for his own satisfaction, in full knowledge that only a few specialists will enjoy it. It must have to do with the old communication-alienation syndrome, which, by my way of looking at it, is virtually synonymous with success-failure. But artists apparently think differently.

The exhibitions are on from noon to seven at night, today and tomorrow, and then

May 3, 4, 5 and 6. There are maps to be had at the studios. The addresses, working from down town up and across: Bernard Aptekar, 100 Prince Street; Steve Montgomery and Charles Ginnever, 143 Greene Street; Julius Tobias, 9 Great Jones Street; Robert Wiegand, 12 West 4th Street; Leon Golub, 528 La Guardia Place; Richard Baringer, 74 Grove Street; Hans van de Bovenkamp, 271 West 10th Street; Roger Jorgensen, 11 West 18th Street; William Creston, 727 Avenue of the Americas.