

- 9 OCT 1975

## RICHARD CORK on a startling confrontation among the artists at the Paris Biennale.



HOMAGE TO  
NARCISSUS:  
Self-portrait of  
a writhing  
transsexual Swiss  
Tarzan, Luciano  
Castelli. The  
most exotic  
obsessions and  
private fantasies  
of individual  
contributors  
from the West  
are openly  
flaunted.

# Our Western decadence is showing...

THE GREAT surprise of the ninth Paris Biennale, which contains work by more than 120 young artists selected from 19 countries throughout the world, is a special pavilion devoted to the People's Republic of China.

Positioned symbolically across the road from the main body of the exhibition on show at the Musée National d'Art Moderne, it consists of 80 paintings by peasant artists from the Huxian District who, according to their own manifesto, are "filled with dynamism and a revolutionary ardour" when they "firmly grasp their paint-brushes in order to take up ideological and cultural positions throughout the country and thus become masters of the new socialist culture."

Such enthusiastic sentiments are calculated to cause a flutter of knowing amusement among the pavilion's Western visitors, most of whom have long since given up expecting their art to be inspired by concerted social aims. Jacques Lassaigne, the Conservateur en chef at the Musée National d'Art Moderne, no doubt echoes the expectations of his European audience when he claims in the catalogue that the Biennale "has always welcomed the most way-out manifestations of young artists," and the contents of his museum certainly respond to this invitation in good measure.

Everywhere you look, the most exotic obsessions and private fantasies of individual contributors are openly flaunted. The Swiss contingent is particularly outrageous, with a transsexual Tarzan called Luciano Castelli writhing across the floor in the briefest of leopard skins, Walter Pfeiffer alternating between virile torso-flexing and a smirking drag act, Urs Lüthi dressing up as a "night-performer" in black leather, and Alex Silber exuding limp-wristed charm as he poses for the camera, his make-up glistening in the studio lights.

### Rejection

None of the other exhibitors can match this corporate display of self-absorbed decadence, which seems to spring from an extreme rejection of Switzerland's healthy, well-balanced and neutral national image. But a comparable strain of narcissism does run through the entire Biennale, encompassing Francesc Torres's performance piece entitled "Imitation of myself speaking Catalan," a naked Alan Sonfist impersonating a tiger in the jungle, and Marina Abramovic inflicting the most appalling pain on herself with knives and schizophrenic drugs.

These three artists come from Spain, America and Yugoslavia respectively, so it can be safely concluded that the mood of intro-



HOMAGE TO THE PEOPLE'S  
REPUBLIC: By a peasant  
painter of China's Huxian  
District.

version is world-wide. And it is equally reasonable to imagine members of the Chinese delegation having their worst suspicions about Western culture confirmed if they venture across the road to see what their fellow participants are up to.

No greater contrast between the two main ideological camps of contemporary society could possibly be found. While European artists pursue the most exaggerated forms of laissez-faire expression, united only by a communal determination to uphold the right of an individual ego to make itself heard, the Huxian district dismisses the personality cult and concentrates on a shared programme.

Whereas the West remains attached to the ideal of a full-time artist, more or less divorced from the everyday reality of the normal public, these Chinese painters make art in their spare time and regard it as an integral part of their working lives. And unlike their Western counterparts, who are embroiled in alienation, violence, despair, cynicism, doubt and perversions, the Huxian peasants rejoice in a uniformly positive brand of optimism.

Their pavilion is alive with an affirmation of the Communist system, and it is communicated so joyfully that a lot of our misgivings about art conducted according to a party-political rule book drop away.

If the adherence to one rigid style is anathema to us, it must be said that the peasants themselves give no sign of suffering from repression. Rather do they revel in the certainty of genuine goals, recording in all its blithe

detail the village round of sewing and harvesting, learning and teaching, labouring and relaxing. Everyone is at once smiling and energetic (what happens to people in China who suffer from melancholy, boredom or nervous depression?) and this human buoyancy is matched by the fertility of every fruit-laden tree within sight.

Decorative, boldly-coloured and defined with a comic-book clarity of line, the idiom employed in all the pictures crosses realism with nursery-rhyme innocence. Each artist's name is cited beneath his or her exhibit, and yet attributions are irrelevant: they all subscribe to an identical set of priorities.

In the Western sections of the Biennale, however, the personality cult is given full rein. Deprived of any common goals apart from an overall thirst for self-assertion, the participants employ painting, sculpture, video, body art, process art, writing, performance, photographs, record-players, assemblage, found objects and diagrams in any orgy of liberated media.

None of it gives any firm indication of a new initiative developing in contemporary art, and most of it amounts to little more than a second or even third-generation elaboration on directions established by more senior artists several years ago. In this respect, the Biennale is an accurate reflection of the fragmented and eclectic state of art half-way through the present decade, and it is valuable to have this situation spelled out so clearly.

### Lyrical

The variety of work submitted by the English artists, ranging from Bob Evans' big figurative paintings and Jeffrey Lowe's equally monumental metal sculpture to David Dye's lyrical film-projection stills and Michael Craig-Martin's enormously popular installation riddles, is therefore symptomatic of the survey as a whole. But there are distinct signs, in the dialectic of John Stezaker's socially-orientated photographic stories, Conrad Atkinson's polemical protest against the problem of world hunger and Darcy Lange's video documentation of working life in Bradford, that a new awareness is growing among artists in this country and elsewhere.

Far more pessimistic and guarded than the Chinese painters, they are nevertheless attempting to tackle the problem of Western art's chronic separation from the larger society which produces it. And if the Huxian peasants' appearance at the 1975 Biennale does nothing else, its dramatisation of this desperate divide between artists and their potential public will have been well worth witnessing.

● The Paris Biennale continues until November 2 and is open every day, 12-6, except Tuesdays.

31 OCT 1975

Paris exhibitions

## The Ninth Biennial

by MICHAEL PEPIATT

Unfortunately, I can find next to nothing to say in favour of the current Paris Biennial (at both the Musées d'Art Moderne until November 2). It ranks with the 1972 Kassel Documenta as the most dispiriting large-scale exhibition I have seen in years. The section devoted to paintings by Chinese peasants apart, its only virtue is perhaps to make the previous, muddled, but not uninteresting Biennial (of 1973) seem like a profusion of riches in comparison.

This year you walk through space after space at the two modern art museums conscious above all that the work of a hundred young (that is under 35) artists from many parts of the world is passing you by without so much as arousing your curiosity, let alone your interest. It is not impossible to suggest why: one participant has scribbled a few lines or made a

little nick in a canvas here, another has left a litter of imponderables there, a third has placed three glasses of water with an explanatory (?) note below, a fourth has made a plaster cast of his penis, a fifth has a row of record-players droning out various sounds, and so on. You might feel yourself lucky to have been spared the more alarming manifestations of body art (Kassel contained some extreme examples of self-mutilation); even so, the childishness, the uninventive messes and the dogmatic pretentiousness make for a most oppressive atmosphere.

Many of the exhibits seem to have been based on a common fallacy: you entirely reject the rules of the game, make some kind of spontaneous gesture, and it's significant because it's your very own. I think this has more to do with kindergarten activities than with art, where spontaneity

is significant only within a context of self-discipline and technical accomplishment.

In defence of this boredom, some people say that it is the inevitable reflection of contemporary confusion. Less grandly and less facetiously, perhaps, one might also suggest that it mirrors a lack of real talent for what might still be called the visual arts.

Opposite the Musées d'Art Moderne, in the Musée Galliera, the Biennial has put on a special show of the paintings of a group of Chinese peasants from the Huxian District (in Shensi province). The artists in question are "members of the popular communes including women, youths and old people, as well as secretaries of Party cells, heads of production groups, officers in the regiments of the

popular militia, accountants... — and they make a singularly refreshing impact. No signs of contemporary confusion in these scenes of harvest, technological advance and ideological discussion, of course; backs are bent and rosy faces raised in common, joyous assent with the aims of the Revolution. "Filled with dynamism and a revolutionary ardour," the catalogue note says, "the peasants of Huxian firmly grasped their paintbrushes in order to take up ideological and cultural positions throughout the country and thus become masters of the new Socialist culture."

Masters they certainly are of the straightforward message as well as of a considerable pictorial charm. These paintings altogether avoid the exaggerated muscularity that renders so much Socialist Realism a little difficult to swallow.