

quite trends, then at least a few shared affinities and special interest groups.

It is tempting to perceive the show's women artists as just such a group and New York critic Lucy Lippard, for one, does so in a preface to the catalogue. She writes:

"This is perhaps the most controversial question in the women artists' movement today: Is there an art unique to women? Another way of putting it, which alters the ramifications, is: Is there a feminine art? The two intersect interestingly. On the first question, I, for one, am convinced that there are aspects of art by women which are inaccessible to men, and that these aspects arise from the fact that woman's political, biological and social experience in this society is different from that of a man."

Lippard's argument is not supported by the immensely varied art sent to the Biennale by women. It seems almost as syllogistic as the one that opines that women can't be equal to men because they can't handle the job of a lumberjack. This kind of reasoning, of course, ignores that fact that 99 per cent of males are not cut out to be lumberjacks either and, more to the point, that there can be an enormous range of political, social and even biological differences within any given group of male artists, differences which don't necessarily render their work inaccessible to an informed and compassionate observer.

To this befuddled observer, it seems that the greatest contribution he can make to International Women's Year is to heed painter Agnes Martin's complaint that "the concept of a female sensibility is our greatest burden as women artists" and resolve to never again bring up the wretched question.

The only coherent movement one can isolate at the Biennale is one proposed by the transvestite artists Armleder, Castelli, Pfeiffer, Silber and the best known among them, Urs Luthi. They are not a group, though they all happen to be Swiss; if their work is, collectively, the most impressive in the show, it's not because of any shock value they possess the iconography they offer has already been thoroughly explored by Diane Arbus among others. What makes these artists remarkable is that they have found a way to reintroduce a certain affective content into contemporary art. While their images are superficially (and deliberately) outré, they nevertheless serve as vehicles for a content that is autobiographical introspective, evocative of human experience and psychologically astute. If Castelli's self-portraits show one particular individual wearing a ludicrous costume — desperate, in heat — they at the same time resonate with the kind of universal anguish that makes Francis Bacon's paintings relevant even when they're not interesting. And if the transvestites are dishing up the old expressionisms in new guise — in drag, this time — then so be it. At least they offer possibilities of a richer, more involving communication than that that proposed pedantic Conceptualist chart makers.

A new opening of some kind seems especially urgent when we perceive the bankruptcy of the paintings shown at the Biennale. The second generation of the Support/Surface movement is represented in force but the rigor of the original theory has become, inevitably, diluted: after Louis Cane and Viallat, what is there for a young adherent to do but to slowly regress to Klein-like gesture or Klein-like surface dialectics or, in the case of Dolla, to atmospheric nuances that go all the way back to Rothko? Those who would practice "fundamental painting" — the rarified geometrical approach of Mangold, Martin, etc. — find their options similarly preempted. For as good an artist as Mangold is, has he ever proposed a problem that has taken more than three paintings to solve?

What the new expressionists — the transvestites — are embarking on is a much more tenuous proposition than the problem-solving of current painters or the data gathering that preoccupies the Conceptualists. They also demand more of the spectator who must make



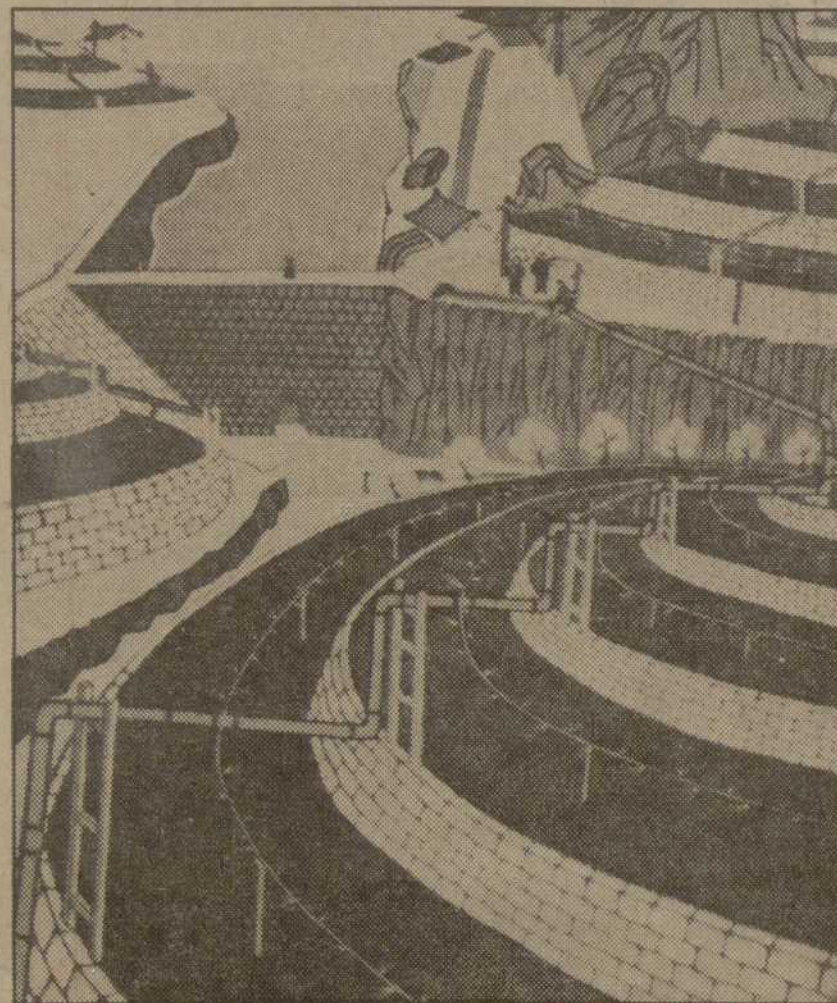
Castelli

an effort to leap the sensibility gap that likely separates him from the obsessive, hermetic worlds offered by these artists. But the effort is worth making, because under the surface glitter and indulgent catharses, there are important issues being raised: questions of identity, construction of a more finely calibrated device to measure the distance between the male-female polarities. And if the superficial persona transmitted by the transvestite artist is not calculated to arouse the average spectator's immediate sympathy, we'll nevertheless have to remember that in an age of "new morality," social security and general complacency, it is only the sexually oppressed who are still in touch with the essential hopelessness of Romantic love; only they who can enunciate existential agony with any measure of conviction.

Such effete and arcane matters as

trends and angsts are of course completely beside the point as far as roughly a quarter of the world's population is concerned: in Mao's happy land all artistic problems are now solved. The sensation of the 9th Biennale is a selection of paintings by the peasant artists from the Huxian district of the People's Republic of China. After returning from the fields, these tireless people create paintings based on a formula of maximum efficiency: a great panorama observed from bird's eye view and in single-point perspective, better to show a maximum number of smiling faces, burgeoning crops, new construction, positive sentiments.

One of the Biennale's commissioners admits privately that the Chinese were invited to draw crowds and increase the gate — a cynical gesture sadly in tune with much of the Western production on display.



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