

"Women Choose Women" at The New York Cultural Center is a pioneering enterprise with repercussions for the entire art-institutional structure. It is the first example of a large-scale exhibition held in a major art museum and organized entirely by the members of a minority group within the art community. We have often heard in the past few years, since women artists have been forming politically active groups, that hundreds of talented women artists are working without recognition. This is our first opportunity to see what a large body of their work is like, and its quality more than justifies the rhetoric we have heard.

It is significant, too, that our first opportunity to judge for ourselves about women's art came about in a do-it-yourself show. As Lucy Lippard points out in her catalogue introduction, museums are "discriminatory, usually under the guise of being discriminating." Galleries are similar offenders. As a result women have had to band together and organize their own shows to gain more than occasional and token exposure in the art world. "Thirteen Women Artists," a collective effort on Prince Street last spring, made important inroads into the gallery situation and sparked a renewal of interest in the idea of the coop as a democratic outlet for artists who aren't, or who don't wish to be, part of the commercial gallery system. The two largest exhibitions of women's art to date have been 1) the "Gedok American Woman Artist Show" in the Hamburg Kunsthaus last spring, and 2) the "Unmanly Art" exhibition at The Suffolk Museum, Stony Brook, this fall; each included over 50 artists. However the Stony Brook show was in three successive sections, which unavoidably reduced its impact and the opportunity for comparison. There have been a smattering of smaller shows—"Ten Artists* (*Who also happen to be women)" at Lockport and Fredonia, New York, "9 x 9" at Fordham University in Manhattan, various group and solo shows at the A.I.R. Gallery, and a series of one-woman exhibitions at Rutgers University in New Jersey. But until another major New York museum takes up the challenge made by Women in the Arts (WIA) last April to mount large shows of women's art, this one at the Cultural Center will have to function as the model for its kind.

The sheer efficiency with which "Women Choose Women" was organized is a prime example of cooperative effectiveness. Only eight months passed from the time Sylvia Sleight put out initial feelers on behalf of WIA to Mario Amaya last April, when he assumed the directorship of The New York Cultural Center, to the opening in January. Within about a month after he agreed to mount the show, a selection committee was formed, the number of artists to be included was more or less agreed on, and it was determined that the women would have to cover all the expenses for transportation and organization plus the cost of a catalogue if it were larger than a checklist. (This singular arrangement was necessitated by the fact that The New York Cultural Center lacks the funds for a sustained prog-

ram of such large exhibitions.)

The 111 women in the show were selected by a system carefully conceived to be as fair and as representative as possible. The exhibition was selected by Pat Passloff, Ce Roser, and Sylvia Sleight of the WIA with Linda Nochlin, professor of art history at Vassar College, joining the committee for painting, and Elizabeth C. Baker, managing editor of *Art News*, for sculpture. Mario Amaya and Laura Adler represented the Cultural Center with full voting powers.

All WIA members were invited to submit slides of their work for consideration and to nominate five nonmembers each to do the same. Such a wide base had the potential to encompass the entire women's art community, though overlapping and accident undoubtedly reduced this potential considerably. Nevertheless, it was a highly democratic foundation on which to structure an exhibition. Although an Armory-type show in which hundreds or thousands of works might be shown was in the minds of many of the members, the realities of a museum situation forced a reduction to about 100 representative works. Paintings were chosen during the summer and sculpture a few months later. Ce Roser contacted Exxon and the company agreed to fund a catalogue for the show.

"WOMEN CHOOSE WOMEN"

The exhibition was hung by Audrey Flack, a WIA member, and Mario Amaya. While the physical characteristics of the Cultural Center are far from ideal, the installation was excellent on the fourth and fifth floors, and adequate on the third. This was a real feat, especially in the light of the wide range of sizes, styles, media, and dates (only about 70 were executed in the '70s) of the works in the show. This was a function of the democratic process of selection: many of the artists, unaccustomed to being requested to submit slides for possible inclusion in a show, sent their best or most representative work, but not necessarily their most recent; or they sent slides they happened to have on hand. But disparities occur in every large group show, no matter how much effort is expended to avoid them.

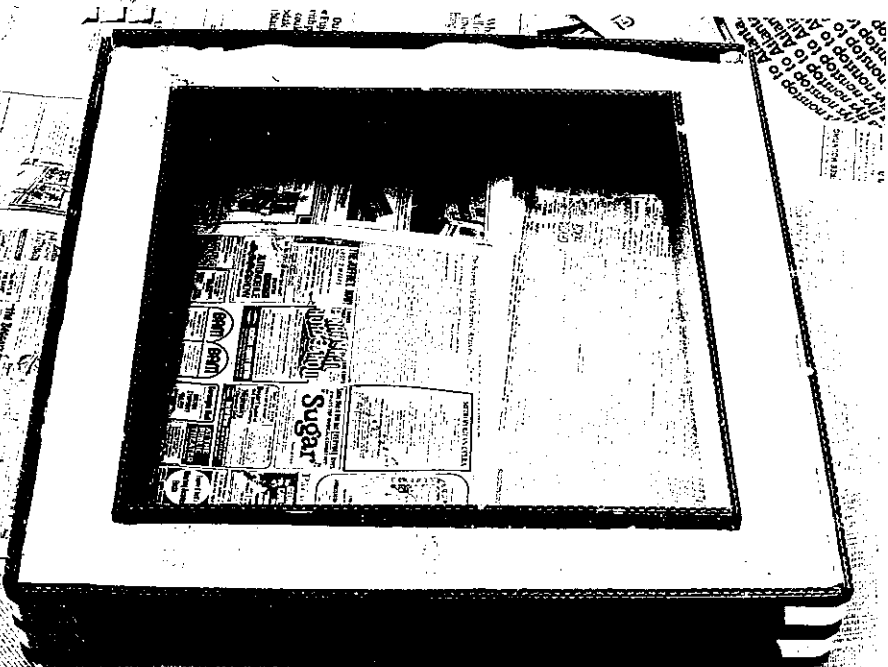
A few other factors that went into the selection process are worth noting to understand the overall composition of the show: there is almost twice as much abstract painting as either realistic painting or sculpture. This may be partly because of a preponderance of abstractionists in WIA, but the concurrent shows of Realist painting in the Cultural Center ("Realism Now" and "The Realist Revival") may also have influenced the selection. With sculpture, the physical difficulty of exhibiting it in these

oddly shaped, poshly embellished rooms severely limited the number and kinds of work that might be included. And finally, no effort was made to make certain that the "big names" in women's art were represented, especially when the artists in question didn't submit slides for consideration, or didn't wish to be included.

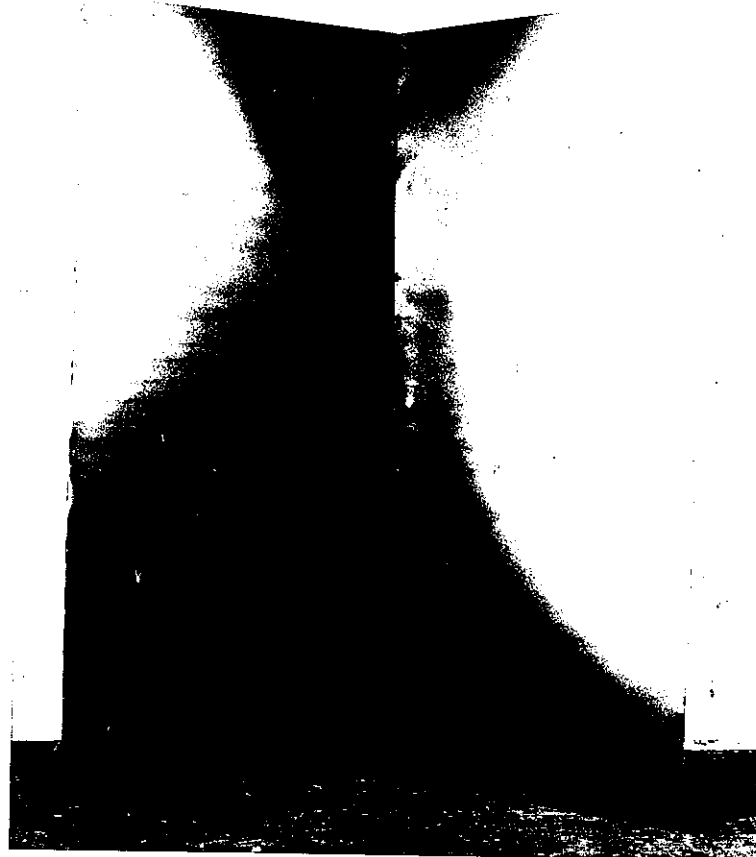
The extent to which the organizers are effective at producing a truly representative exhibition, is the extent to which the critic's problems in discussing it are increased. To make matters worse, the entire question of the existence of a discernible feminine style is raised by this show. Every woman artist I've spoken to hates the whole concept of feminine art, possibly because, as Lucy Lippard suggests, women's conditioning has been to the effect that "women's art has been, and is, by definition, inferior art." No one wants to be confined within limits, and that is what most discussions of the femininity of women's art tend to do. Fully aware of the problem, I am nonetheless forced to address myself to it, since this is the first opportunity we've had for a comprehensive view of the subject.

There are two major and a few minor themes that run through most of the discussion of "women's imagery." One major thesis is that the biological realities of a woman's body — her round organs, bilateral symmetry, and centrally located uterus — condition her work as an artist. Judy Chicago and her California Institute of Arts Feminist Program group feel that these factors tend to produce centrally focused paintings or sculpture and a preponderance of circular, ovoid, or box shapes in overlapping flowerlike concentric structures. I am afraid, however, that despite the logical neatness of this theory, precious little work can be found, in this show at least, that conforms to it. Alice Baber's centrifugally massed, ovoid fingers that overlap like petals of a single giant flower provide the only perfect example of such an image in the entire show. Andrée Golbin's bilaterally symmetrical arches of hard-edged color bands fanning out atop an expanse of marbleized painterly ground, Pat Adams' breastlike form, Nancy Ellison's pear in section, Buffie Johnson's enormous *Pomegranate*, and Dorothy Heller's *Womb of Light* provide a few supporting examples, as does Ruth Richard's circular, sectioned construction in wood. *But only a few.*

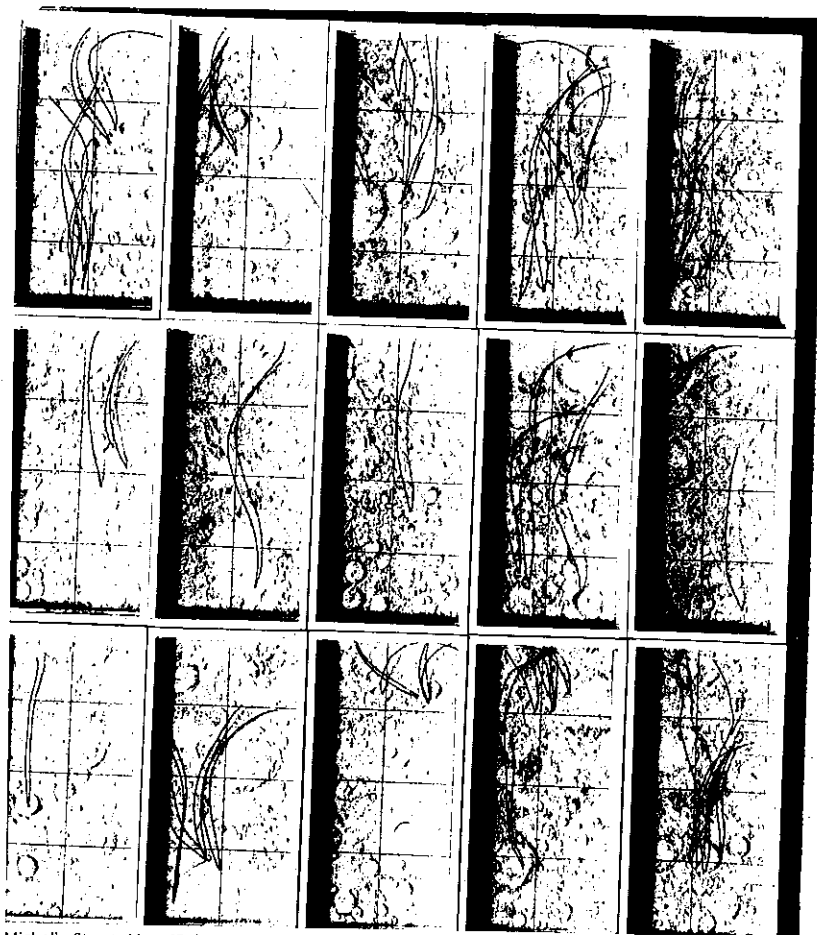
More common are works that are centrally focused, like Helène Aylon's aluminum corner-shaped sculpture, Anne Healy's ceiling-to-floor draped yellow nylon *Door of Death*, Sylvia Carewe's *Night Road* in which four tapering planes converge on a central horizon line, Nina Yankowitz's bilateral crush of pleated cloth, Yvonne Thomas' double curving swaths of color rising up along a central joint, Carmen Herrera's straight-edged swaths, and Betsy Damon's five-part geometrical lozenge painting. Examples of boxy works are even rarer than concentrically circular pieces. Michelle Stuart's glass-fronted boxes containing delicate topographical drawings of the moon's surface, Cecile Abish's cardboard channel of plaster on newspaper, and sculptures by Elise Asher, Maude Boltz, and Susan



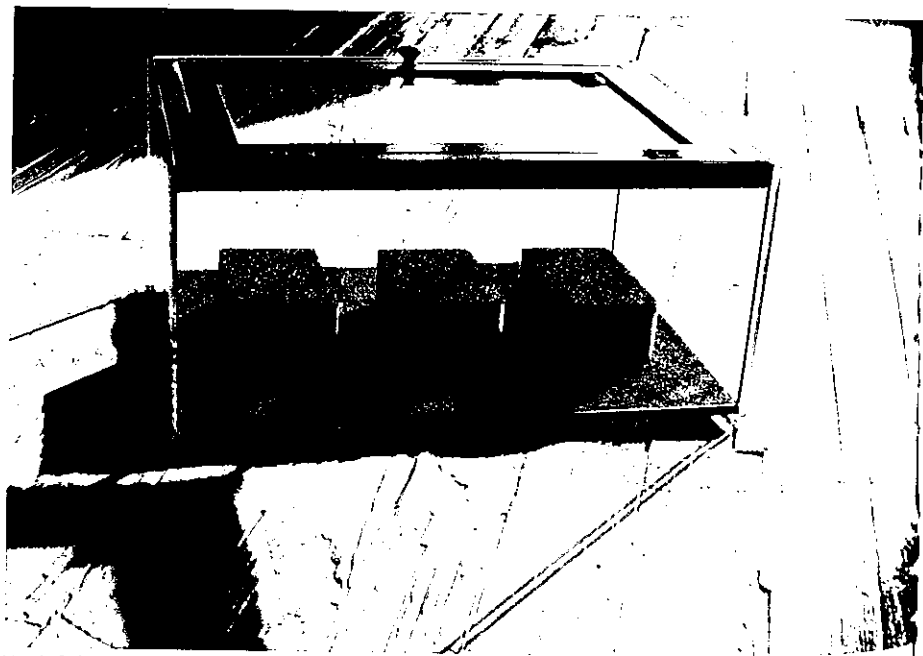
Cecile Abish, *Space Setting*, plaster/dynacore, 4"x60"x60", 1972.



Helène Aylon, *Centerfold*, aluminum, 8'x8', 1972.



Michelle Stuart, *Mare 15*, box construction, 25"x22"x3", 1972.



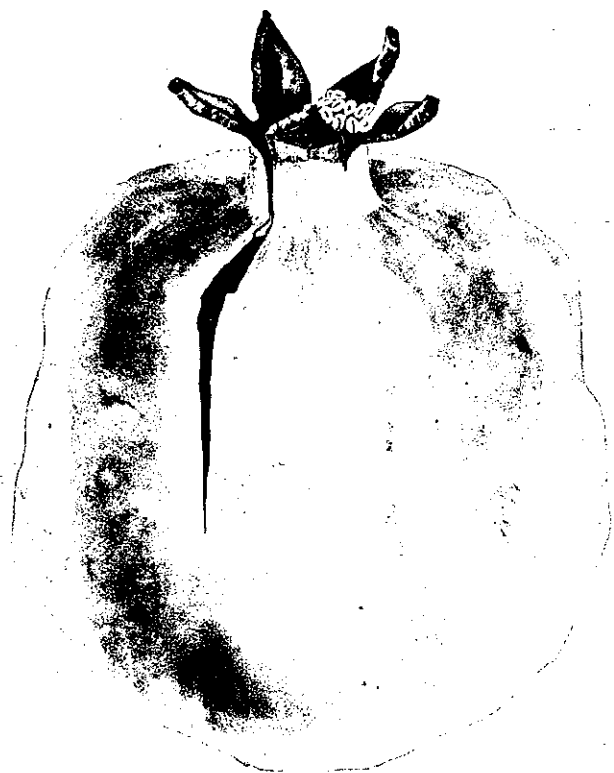
Maude Boltz, *Glass-Echo*, m/m, 13"x18", 1969.



Audrey Flack, *Jolie Madame*, o/c, 72"x96", 1972.



May Stevens, *Hats Go By*, acrylic on canvas, 6'x6', 1971.



Buffie Johnson, *Pomegranate*, o/c, 52"x48", 1972.



Sylvia Sleigh, *Philip Golub Out of Doors*, o/c, 16"x12", 1972.



Alice Neel, *Pregnant Woman*, o/c, 40"x60", 1970.



Nancy Spero, *Codex Artaud XIV*, collage-gouache, 90"x18½", 1972.



Tobi Zausner, *The Strength of Memory* (right half of diptych), o/c, 72"x52", 1972.



Andrée Golbin, *Osomo*, acrylic polymer, 68"x63", 1972.

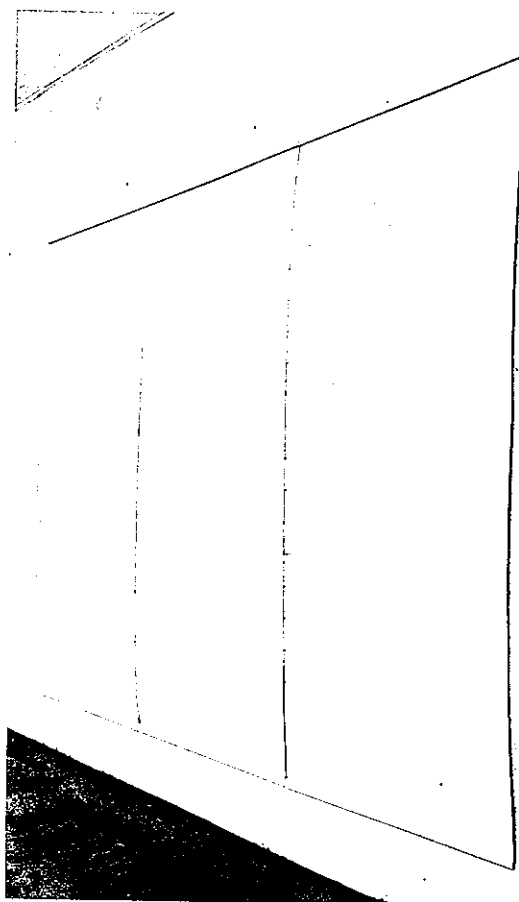
Sayre were the only specifically box-shaped works in the show, though a number of paintings contained square forms, were divided into square sections, or were comprised of multiple square units.

All in all, this is not an impressive percentage of examples with which to prove a theory, and my feeling, despite my own propensity toward the notion of bilateral symmetry in women's art before I saw the show, is that the organo-physical generalization doesn't hold up in a sampling of actual works.

The other major thesis concerning female imagery is that it is frequently derived from women's societal conditioning. This is a vague notion that women's activities—cooking, sewing, coping with daily realities—color their imagery and their technical methods. The show includes a few examples of the influence of conditioning on subject matter: Leatrice Rose's *Sink*; Muriel Castanis' *Chair*; Sari Dienes' *Bottle Garden*; Lois Dodd's window curtained in red; Phyllis Floyd's *Still Life with Paper Bag*; Gloria Graves' miniature *Picnic Box*; Marian Lerner Levine's *Spaghetti*; Rosemary Mayer's satin and cheesecloth four-tiered curtain; and Amy Stromston's *Neo-Colonial Quilt*. Homemaking seemed to have even less influence on the technical methods employed by women. Only Hannah Wilke's snap-fastened fleshy ruffles of latex, Amy Stromston's grid-stitched quilt, Dana Romalo Andrews' sewn thread abstraction, and Paula Tavins' stitched-on canvas bags reflect this notion directly.

A few of the minor themes in the general talk about feminine imagery don't seem to hold up any better than the ones I've just outlined when they are examined on this scale. Lawrence Alloway pointed out in his introduction to the "New York Women Artists" show at the Art Gallery in the State University of New York at Albany that "there is a marked concern with synonymy of form. . . which reveals itself in the use of grids or in the accretion of small forms." I have leaned toward this idea myself lately considering the work of Agnes Martin and Eva Hesse in particular. But, again, the sample here provided few examples to support the theory. Michelle Stuart's *Mare 15*, Loretta Dunkelman's triple panels of faint white grids, Perle Fine's explicit grid in *A King's Game* and Paula Tavins' implicit one for her rectilinear bags, Joan Snyder's naive pictographs of *Houses*, Arlene Slavin's fleeting mosaic of colored squares, Amy Stromston's quilt, Agnes Denes' x-rays of art works, Faith Ringgold's faces and Blythe Bohnen's stacks of brushstroke units were the only works that employed true grids in their composition. Some others were comprised of multiple units arranged in grid formation — Vera Klement's brushily shaded sections of a *Sea Wall*, Tania's solid colored geometrical planes, and Felicity Rannie's *Kaleidoscope*.

Other theories I tested on the show included Lucy Lippard's notion of the prevalence of sky-blue-pink pastel coloration in women's painting for which I could find only a few more than a dozen examples; her "ubiquitous linear 'bag' or parabolic



Loretta Dunkelman, *Ice Wall*, caran d'ache, 100"x126", 1972.

form that turns in on itself" to which I could locate only a few conformees; and her layering or stratified imagery theory was confirmed by only a couple of instances, Joyce Kozloff's *Underground Landscape* being the clearest. Some of Lippard's vaguer feelings about women's art, like the impression that it is loosely handled, textural, and sensuous, were impossible to decide about one way or the other. I came away with the general feeling that about all one can say about women's art to differentiate it from men's art is that women artists seem to have a tendency toward curvilinearity (though not toward any specific shape of curve) and that they seem to like all the parts of their work to show, in some way, the traces of their hands' passage over it. That is to say, there is an absence of empty or nonchalant passages. One or both of these tendencies were visible in almost every work on view.

On the whole what the show did prove was that women make art in a wide variety of distinctly

With *Women in the Arts*, The New York Cultural Center published a Catalogue, *Women Choose Women*, essay by Lucy Lippard, 126 pages, 109 black-and-white illustrations, softbound, \$3.00.

idiosyncratic, underivative ways and that they make art that is as strong, both conceptually and perceptually, as men's art. Their solutions to pictorial and sculptural problems are no easier or weaker than those of their brothers in art. For me the toughest abstractions in the show were painted by Joyce Kozloff, Virginia Cuppiadge, Vera Klement, Judith Reed, Ce Roser, Joan Mitchell, and Joyce Weinstein. The strongest sculpture was by Cecile Abish, Michelle Stuart, Anita Margrill, and Mary Frank.

Although any contention that women have a natural leaning toward the depiction of realistic imagery would be refuted in this show by the fact that less than a third of the works belonged in that category, I believe that the two Realist shows overlapping it on the other floors were partly responsible for the smallish representation. Sylvia Sleight's token portrait of Philip Golub, for instance, could not make the same impression as one of her large paintings would have made. As it was, Alice Neel's frightening study of a nude *Pregnant Woman* and Janet Kogan's *Interiorized Self-Portrait*, which seemed reminiscent of both Rousseau and Magritte, made the strongest cases for the power of womanly figuration to express deep levels of femininity not available to men artists.

Richly evocative image worlds were also created by Vija Celmins' burning house sculpture, Nancy Spero's *Codex Artaud XIV*, Yvonne Jacquette's *A Quick Look at the Weather*, Inverna's *Ms. Alexandra Aquamarine*, Selina Trieff's *Portrait of Sarah*, Jeanne Reynal's *Nanuki*, and Anne Arnold's *Hippo Head*, all of which don't fall into any of the previously discussed categories.

"Women Choose Women" is a good show (one that I'd be proud to be in if I were an artist) comparable to any major museum exhibition of like scale and intention. Since only ten of the women in this show are in the Whitney Biennial, it functions as a sort of Salon des Refusés for that institution's female contingent. Its success not only promises women a large and permanent share of the art world action, but it also opens the way for a new approach to institutional responses to pressure groups within the art community.

It is now obvious that a museum's professional responsibility for the dissemination of pure information about the community it represents can be simply and efficiently met by the adoption of the egalitarian, do-it-yourself methods of "Women Choose Women." This doesn't signify the demise of quality or of the validity of an elitist approach, but it does indicate that the structure of the art world today can only be covered by a *simultaneous* variety of approaches. The art community has grown too large for the exclusivity of traditional thinking. Like the New York City school system, for instance, it may be in the process of being forced to decentralize and disperse its power to smaller, more effective centers. The method developed by WIA for "Women Choose Women" may serve as the example of an alternative, fully democratic, means of changing the basis on which our exposure to art, and an artist's exposure to us, will rest in the future. ■