

SEX and Sensibility

Nan Goldin's past will never fade: she has processed her life and friends into a sequence of colour slides. **Sacha Craddock** reports on this telling record of contemporary America

IT IS a privilege to see Nan Goldin's life and friends recorded and put together in such a straightforward and decent fashion.

The *Ballad Of Sexual Dependency*, a slide show with music, began its life on the New York club circuit. What makes it so successful and downright moving is that she can take such wonderful photographs without ever sacrificing her subject for form.

The show of over 700 pictures, divided into sensible categories, moves fast without allowing one to dwell on the "art" in any particular piece.

It goes click, click, through pregnancy, affection, parties and sadness. Click as friends pose or are caught unaware. Nan's friends are used to her taking photographs, the camera is a useful and unselfish extension of herself.

She really loves her friends and many people become familiar to us as she enters their misery and fun over and over again.

These are not particularly beautiful people, just people she knows, that's that. The point Nan makes is that this is her diary of her life, her record. The point for us is that this even-handed show adds up to a record far more general and important than an outsider's lofty observation could ever achieve.

Nan and her friends are not

at all well off — they live in some chaos and all seem to drink. Hardly one slide goes by without a half-empty bottle around the place. The title of the "Ballad" suggests a concentration on sex. But what's new, sex and the imbalance of power that sex and relationships inevitably brings is always there.

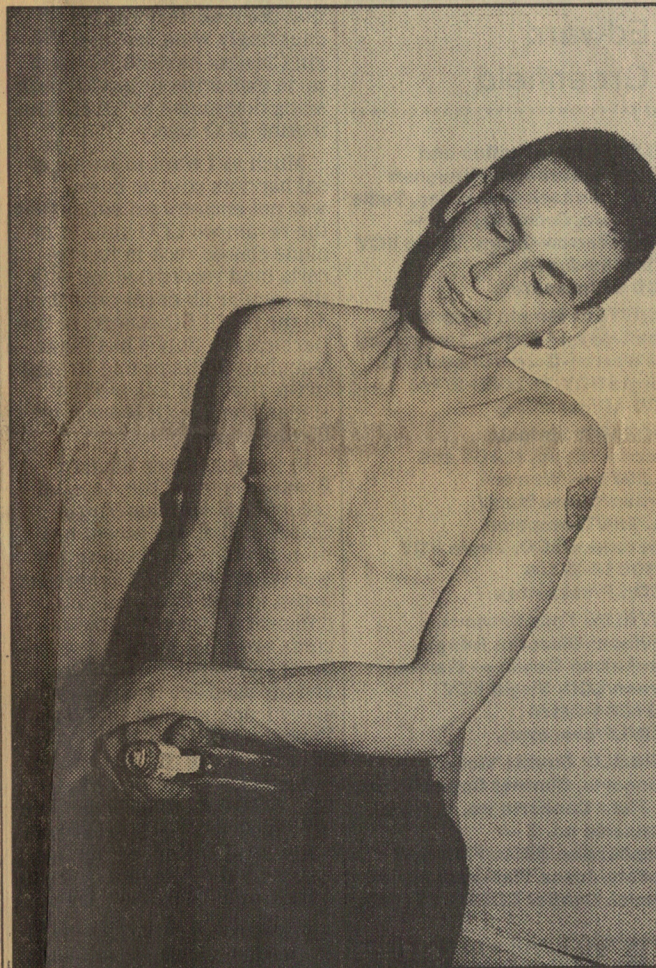
Any stills — reproduced photographs not on slide, will allow you to concentrate on this, but when shown in a mass of slides the changeability and insecurity builds up a picture of reality more important than detail of sexual activity will ever give.

Good fun, squalor, relentless searching for experience evolves into a pattern of long-lasting truth and loyalty. So many moments captured would make anyone jealous: "If only I had got hold of my life in such a way, if only I hadn't let it pass into a blur."

Nan Goldin needed to do this. Just as the swaying drunk attempts to write a list of order to impose on the next day, Nan's need to get a grip on her life encouraged her to be so relentless over the last 15 years.

The first section of "Ballad" is a series of portraits, people on their own. It is rare to see people, especially men, captured in such a kind way. Nan's boyfriend is there a lot, he beat her up, but that's not the only point.

The men show off or laugh, but she has managed to get



Mark Dirt, New York City 1981

them as proper people with as much insecurity in their sex as the next man. Rather than a charter or agitational piece this work must be considered as a whole, the violence, power, marriages, melt into a totality of existence that any nit-picking criticism would be quite unequal too.

Men with men, women with women, and so on in a change-

able set of patterns: no group are shown with any preference.

The "Veritee" photograph has been on the increase, with the photographer attempting to show what's real. But often this has degenerated into an voyeuristic imperialism. To go in from outside and photograph someone looking to the camera or to "capture" a truth perceived from outside can seldom

work as well as dealing with something you know.

It is interesting that Nan Goldin takes very few pictures of older people, with the exception of her parents: there is no one included because they might be different in some way.

The music is used as narrative, simply, the lyrics and sense sometimes of Desert Island Discs lead you into a section.

"Down town", where all the lights are bright, starts the partying. Groups of friends go out to drink and dance, the mass of them pose laughing for the camera. Nan's birthday party has just got to that stage of unequal levels of consciousness.

"Its A Man's World," starts the section of men on their own. If the music encourages sentimentality, so what? Any record of the past invokes sentiment. Pop music is evocative as well as powerful in its ability to place something in time and context.

Everyone tries to hold on to what they have been through, but they tend to want to keep only the good bits — the scraps pinned to a board, photograph album and display on the mantelpiece.

Nan Goldin recorded it all, and apart from her skill as a photographer, it is that which makes this art, and therefore more powerful than any regular framed selection for public presentation.

The format of the ballad, with its life, truth, death, and bits in between, will go on forever. It is as good a record of the last decade that America could ever hope to produce.

Organised into a story that is universal, the show ends in a death, that of a friend from drugs. There is also a photo-

graph of two skeletons copulating, painted on to a door.

That is the end, and times have changed: Nan has changed. Her community in New York has disbanded. Her use of drugs got too much for her. She even stopped taking photographs, so that hold on reality eluded her.

Aids, too, filtered through the frenetic maze; friends died.

Instead of preaching and setting down what has been her life and friends, Nan stopped the "Ballad" and has been working on another piece which is also being shown at the ICA.

Different in feeling, it is based on time in hospital becoming "sober" from drugs. This new piece suffers from its lack of structure; sombre and upsetting, it charts Nan's attempt to find herself again after darkness.

Self-portrait after self-portrait is accompanied by classical music. Some of the friends remain, many have gone through the same thing.

As art, it is not perfect, but by continually re-sifting the slides she will get there.

It must be a great problem for Nan Goldin that she is so skilled at what she does: it is unusual for art to provide such a practical use.

The wish to produce art usually goes too far ahead of its point. Personal stuff can bring out the worst and autobiography can often be an excuse for dross. It is the other way around here: vision with real purpose.

● *The 50-minute show is at the ICA until tomorrow.*

● *A book version of Nan Goldin's The Ballad Of Sexual Dependency is published by Secker and Warburg at £12.95.*