

The New York Times

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ART/ARCHITECTURE; When the Mainstream Takes Over Outsiders' Turf

By LINDA YABLONSKY JULY 22, 2001

AMONG the many group shows of contemporary art offered by Manhattan galleries this summer was one that trumpeted its own historical significance. It had to. " 'Pictures' at an Exhibition" at Artists Space, the nonprofit gallery at 38 Greene Street, recreated part of a 1977 show whose focus on appropriated imagery is said to have signaled the birth of postmodernism.

This mini-retrospective, which closed on July 14, marked a defining moment not just for Artists Space but also for the loose network of nonprofit galleries that make up what is known as the alternate space movement. For viewers with long memories, the show may also have seemed the last gasp of a dying breed.

Alternative spaces are certainly not what they used to be, but neither is the art world. The spaces were formed in the 1970's by and for a group of young SoHo artists whose work in photography, film, video, performance and installation art aggressively defied the market established by traditional, white-box galleries. Relieved of any pressure to make sales, the alternatives provided new artists with the visibility they sought, while their exhibitions' anything-goes aesthetics and multidisciplinary curatorial practices constantly sharpened art's cutting edge.

Things began to change in the 1980's, when young artists bypassed the nonprofit circuit to join equally funky, for-profit galleries in the East Village. Today, outnumbered and outclassed by commercial enterprises that quickly embrace artists who now live and work in places like the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, the

Manhattan alternatives rarely leap ahead of the curve. Staying ahead is hardly the issue. In the ever-expanding market of the moment, they struggle just to find a niche.

In the face of the steady decline of federal and corporate support for art and soaring rents in Manhattan, Franklin Furnace and the Alternative Museum gave up their homes in TriBeCa in the late 1990's and now exist solely on the Internet. The Sculpture Center is relocating from the Upper East Side to Long Island City, Queens, near the nonprofit P. S. 1 Center for Contemporary Art (and what will be the Museum of Modern Art's temporary home during its reconstruction). Last month, the 10-year-old Thread Waxing Space closed its doors permanently when its lease ran out and a proposed merger with Creative Time, which commissions artworks for public spaces, fell through. The remaining old-style alternative spaces have had to retrench in ways that many critics say have turned these formerly anarchic operations into institutionalized reflections of the very system their movement once opposed.

"The whole notion of the alternative space is outdated," said Julie Ault, an artist and curator who is putting together a book on the subject. "Spaces with alternative origins have retooled to the point where we don't think of them as alternative anymore."

In recent interviews, the directors of Artists Space, Exit Art, Art in General, the Drawing Center, White Columns and others all acknowledged that it had become increasingly difficult for art audiences to distinguish their exhibitions from those of commercial galleries. All the same, they believe that their organizations are far from an endangered species and can still serve their original purpose even as they mature. "The alternative is always bound to show what isn't shown by others," said Catherine de Zegher, director of the Drawing Center. "You just have to figure out what that is."

In his seven years as director of White Columns, New York's oldest alternative space, now at 320 West 13th Street, Paul Ha has figured it out pretty well. "Alternative spaces do the kinds of shows commercial galleries can't and the kinds of shows museums should be doing but aren't," he said. Only very imaginative programming has kept attracting new audiences and new financial support to White

Columns, he added. Nonetheless, Mr. Ha recently resigned to become deputy director of the Yale University Art Gallery. "I feel like what we do here sort of disappears immediately, as opposed to shows at Yale," he explained. "They have more permanence."

However ephemeral their exhibitions, nonprofit galleries still make a critical contribution to the art market. Because they can show far more artists in a single year than their commercial counterparts, the alternatives offer a wider range of emerging talents a better chance to be seen in New York. In addition, most spaces maintain slide registries for thousands of unaffiliated artists that art professionals continue to consult. Alanna Heiss, the founding director of P. S. 1, is one of them. "White Columns, Artists Space and Exit Art are examples of efficient and important places that are involved in early and experimental presentations," she said. "It would be foolhardy to ignore that activity." And Jeanne Greenberg, of Lawrence Rubin-Greenberg Van Doren Fine Art at 730 Fifth Avenue, noted, "Two of our exhibitions for next season are with artists who first showed at White Columns."

Though he never accepted commissions on a sale, Mr. Ha fostered new relationships between artists and dealers. "I don't blame commercial galleries for not looking through 10,000 packets of slides or making 900 studio visits every year," he said. "That's my job -- to give artists whom I think are ready to be seen an opportunity to do whatever they want. Then the galleries can say, 'O.K., you do the homework and we'll get the artists after you show them.' "

But commercial dealers also mount shows of emerging, even fledgling, artists (sometimes organized by artist-curators) and often display adventurous work in a variety of mediums, sometimes at monumental scale. Even Sotheby's has been playing host to exhibitions of young artists' work for nonprofit organizations like the New York Foundation for the Arts. Occasionally, commercial galleries also sponsor free musical performances, readings, film screenings and discussions, the sort of programs that nonprofits have always included with exhibitions. Small wonder that many people in the art world are wondering what's left for the alternative galleries to do and whether there is any reason to keep on doing it.

Rachel Feinstein is 30 and will have her first solo show of sculpture at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in Chelsea in the fall. "White Columns has really been pivotal for so many people like me, but I hardly ever go there anymore," she said. "Which may be a sign of something."

On the other hand, Jeanette Ingberman, who founded Exit Art, at 548 Broadway, with her partner, Papo Colo, 18 years ago, sees only signs of new life. "People are always picking on alternative spaces," she said. "But alternative to what? The status quo? The artists we show don't think they're out of the mainstream, and I don't see Exit Art as alternative to the galleries or museums. At this point, we're all part of what's going on. But I do think alternative spaces need to redefine who they are."

Ms. Ingberman and Mr. Colo no longer mount shows by mid-career artists, as was long their practice, in order to present a broader perspective on popular culture. "We know the commercial galleries don't catch it all," said Ms. Ingberman, offering as evidence Exit Art's genetics-related "Paradise Now" exhibition last fall and its current "LP Show," which displays nearly 3,000 record album covers. "Judging by the response we've been getting," she said, "we're more relevant than ever." But, she added, a large portion of the audience for such shows has not come from the art world -- and that, she says, is the audience she's always wanted.

She's not the only one. Holly Block, the executive director of Art in General, at 79 Walker Street, since 1988, is also hoping to extend her institution's reach. "We've done a lot of work with public programming -- readings, lectures, all kinds of discussions that occur beyond our exhibitions," she said, "and six years ago, we started a residency program that has a public component." Art in General, whose space is donated by its landlord, will celebrate its 20th anniversary next year with 10 commissioned artworks along nearby Canal Street.

Though many nonprofit galleries sponsor artist residencies, Art in General's invites viewers into the studio to observe work in progress, and attendance has been up. "It's a new twist for us," Ms. Block said. "After the N.E.A. funding crisis, we realized no one understood how artists work. So we're offering the public an

opportunity to become more familiar with the process of making art. And we're challenging artists to get involved with the public in ways they normally wouldn't."

Ms. Block has also developed an international program. "It's for artists who never have the opportunity to come to New York and be exhibited here," she said. "And next year we'll start sending New York artists elsewhere, specifically Eastern Europe. We're also developing a library and expanding our education room. We're always trying to respond to the immediate community."

Community is one element many say has been lacking. Alternative spaces compete not only with dealers for artists but also with one another to raise money for annual budgets that range from \$300,000 to nearly \$1 million -- costs they meet by cobbling together many small grants from philanthropic foundations and individual donors, who include collectors, established artists and, yes, commercial dealers. Then there is the nonprofits' isolation in SoHo; many dealers have moved to Chelsea and beyond. Add to that the unaffiliated artists' own isolation in their studios, and the idea of "community" suffers even more.

To counter the trend, Barbara Hunt, the director of Artists Space, has held afternoon teas to acquaint emerging artists with established ones as well as with curators, writers and arts administrators. "I want artists to feel we're an ally," she said. "When commercial galleries are approached by artists, they know they're only being approached for a show. When artists come here, an exhibition opportunity is not the only thing we have to offer. We would become very demoralized if it was."

At the museumlike Drawing Center, at 35 Wooster Street, Ms. de Zegher expressed similar sentiments. "Because there's less exchange in the galleries between the audience and the artist, between artist colleagues and poets and performance people, everything has become so separated, so scattered, that for a viewer it's hard to understand what is going on," she said. "We're trying to set up programs where there's more and more dialogue." To that end, she has established a scholarly new publications program to promote that dialogue and support the center's mix of historical and contemporary shows. Artists Space and Art in General have already done the same.

Lia Gangitano, Thread Waxing Space's first (and only) in-house curator from 1998 until its closing, emphasized publications throughout her tenure. "I think an alternative space should encourage a written discourse about the work beyond its reviews," she said, "because there's nothing to sell at the end of an exhibition. Putting the word out in more depth gives a project a longer life." She now hopes to start a new nonprofit gallery, possibly in Williamsburg. "Alternative spaces not only modified the way museums and commercial galleries did their work," she said, "they had a huge impact on shaping what galleries showed. They have less of an immediate impact now, but it won't be long before they make a new difference."

Linda Yablonsky is the author of "The Story of Junk"

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