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Art/Kay Larson

SEVERAL WEEKS AGO I NOTED THE PROLIFERATION of benefits among alternative spaces being squeezed to desperation by funding cuts. Now venerable Artists Space has caught the fever. The national endowments and the New York State Arts Council, finding their own funds on the wane, are beginning to encourage their charges to go it alone. Artists Space, which gets about 60 percent of its budget from those sources, is already operating on a \$30,000 deficit. Nor is its plight unique. "This year will be the critical one for all the alternative spaces," says director Linda Shearer.

If so, we may be faced with the near-extinction of a tradition most people barely know exists. The origin of the "spaces" is traceable in the adjective "alternative," which dates from the end of a decade (the 1960s) in which every public institution, from the elementary schools to the war machine, had its free-thinking corollary. The alternative spaces were set up by artists or young artist manqués at the beginning of the seventies to provide a system separate from but parallel to galleries and museums. They spring straight out of a Jeffersonian, quintessentially American eagerness for positive revolt.

Artists Space, begun in 1973 by art historian Irving Sandler and administrator Trudi Grace, is almost the oldest surviving New York space. Though artists, atypically, weren't co-founders, they chose most of the shows for the first years. Young artists now receive direct benefits from small grants: the Emergency Materials Fund, which supplies up to \$150 to prepare work for exhibition at any non-commercial institution; the Independent Exhibitions Program, which awards up to \$400 to groups of artists who find their own location and organize their own exhibitions elsewhere; the Unaffiliated Artists' File, which holds slides by 1,500 artists and is open to anyone, from gallery owners to

curators to collectors. Artists Space estimates that in eight years nearly 4,500 artists received these services.

The spaces are, if anything, too humble about their successes. They have directly contributed to the rampant pluralist exuberance of the eighties by encouraging young talent at crucial points before it can be assimilated by commerce, and they have supplied the gallery system with much of its fodder, contributing to the boom in art without benefiting from it. Linda Shearer's current exhibition confronts that issue directly by bringing back 35 successful gallery-affiliated artists who were introduced via Artists Space: Cynthia Carlson, Charles Clough, Troy Brauntuch, Scott Burton, John Torreano, Don Gummer, Lois Lane, Ree Morton, Gary Burnley, Robert Longo, among them.

Though it may have been puzzling once, the work the artists are showing now ranges toward the familiar, the important—and the saleable. Shearer has included one of Torreano's intense jewel-embedded crosses, a striking black mask-painting by Lane, a marvelous pair of drawings by Ree Morton—all work that might never have existed, or might have mandered about with the desperate self-annihilating anxiety of the 1950s, were it not for the zeal of a threatened institution. (105 Hudson Street; through December 24.)