Time running out for spaces

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TURN on the radio and you hear WBAI begging for money. On the tube it's WNET. Open your mail and you hear from the New York Public Library.

Inflation is eating holes in everyone's pockets. Or is it recession? Few seem to know. And just when we expect the government to step in to help, the government steps out. The private sector is supposed to take over. Reagamites pin their hopes on donations from rich people and corporations that get tax breaks when they give to charity and nonprofit institutions. But now the most they can be taxed is 50 percent, so those donations mean much less than when 70 percent was the top rate.

Even the art world is feeling the pinch. I don't mean the commercial art world; that's booming. Where is the money coming from? One probably shouldn't ask. Some of it is mad money, money better spent on hard goods now — art that might keep or increase its cash value — than socked away to dwindle. It is the noncommercial art world that is hurting, the world of alternative spaces. Fundraisers abound.

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Linda Shearer of Artists Space: pushing the vanguard, shoved by supply-side
In the world of alternative spaces, fundraisers abound. We have entered the period of the art benefit — Reagan cuts, and the people are expected to pay showing four or five artists each time, with guest curators and also in-house group shows. Coming up are four installation artists and then new Fluxus artists, curated by Peter Frank and Ken Friedman. Do I detect a more “experimental” bias? Perhaps. Shearer explained that Artists Space was for artists who might end up inside the commercial system, but also for those who had no interest in it.

Though I, like many others, have been known to pick and carp at the alternative spaces — I always want them to do more than they are doing and, of course, come into line with my personal taste — even I have to admit that the art world would be a dull and dreary place without them.

Currently they are in jeopardy. Just Above Midtown/Downtown, a welcome and innovative addition to the pioneer alternatives, is trying every kind of group show and benefit performance possible. Alanna Heiss, director of the Institute for Urban Resources (the Clocktower and P.S. 1), seems to be holding on, but P.S. 1 has enormous maintenance costs — try heating an old schoolhouse and keeping the roof from leaking! — and group shows are now up for twice as long, which means half the art is being shown. Geno Rodriguez just may be able to keep the Alternative Museum afloat. He certainly has the energy. Smaller, less established spaces already seem doomed.

So until Reagan has a change of heart — quite unlikely — or time allows the government funding to creep back to former levels (even that would not be enough), the alternatives need all the help they can get. There are no alternatives — or there’ll be no alternatives.