

ART 1

Time running out for spaces

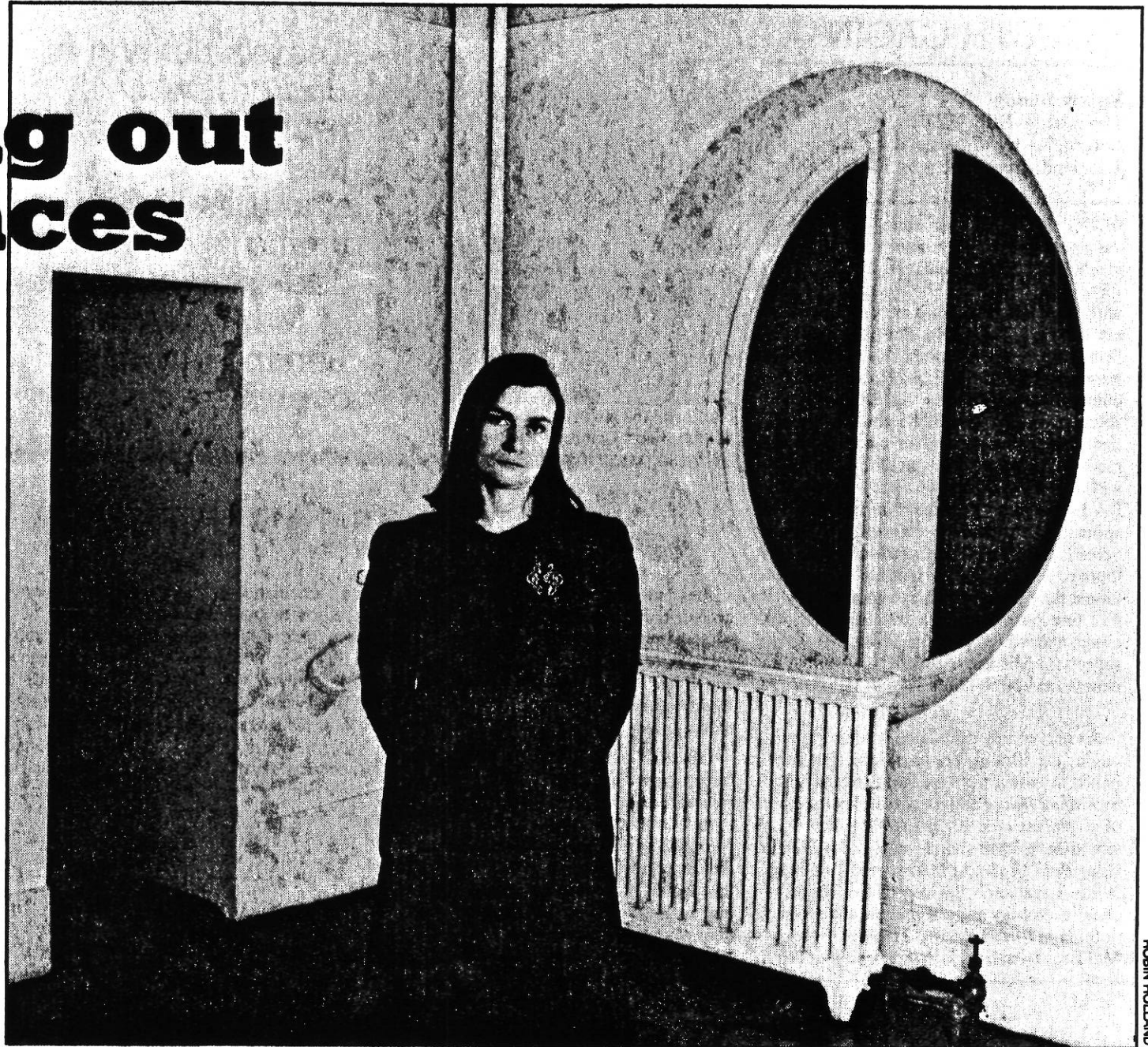
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TURN on the radio and you hear WBAI begging for money. On the tube it's WNET. Open your mail and you hear from the New York Public Library.

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. Reaganites 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.

We have entered the period of the art benefit. The people are expected to pay. The Alternative Museum just closed its benefit



Linda Shearer of Artists Space: pushing the vanguard, shoved by supply-side

exhibit. Even CAPS (Creative Artists Public Service Program), a New York State fellowship program for individual artists, had a benefit show (at the Alan Frumkin and Terry Dintenfuss galleries). The latest benefit exhibit is for one of our prime alternative spaces, Artists Space (105 Hudson Street, through December 24).

Alternative spaces, as we now know them, began in the early '70s. Memories may differ about why they were created, but it's fairly safe to say that they were formed in response to a frustrating situation: too many artists with too few places to show their work. Commercial galleries and the museums were unable or unwilling to handle the huge numbers of artists clamoring for exposure; new and experimental work was having a particularly hard time of it. Non-commercial, alternative spaces such as the Clocktower, P.S. 1, the Alternative Museum, and Artists Space came into being, assisted by federal and state arts funding. Simultaneously, the co-op gallery was reborn as the artist-run gallery (55 Mercer, A.I.R., etc.) but that's another part of the story.

Thus a great deal of pressure was taken off commercial galleries and the major museums. Should the alternatives collapse that pressure would return. Therefore, it is in the interest of commercial galleries and museums to offer financial support to the alternatives. The museums, of course, will quickly respond that they are having troubles of their own; the commercial galleries have no excuse.

The alternatives are now an integral part of the art system. No matter what the original intentions, they do not present a parallel system or a new culture. Without the alterna-

tives, where would new artists get to try out their wares, experiment with public presentation? Where would galleries get their pretested artists?

Perhaps this is why there are constant mutterings about starting alternatives-to-the-alternatives. We already have Fashion Moda in the Bronx, well on its way to becoming another research and development institution. This is exactly what the so-called alternatives are: art world R&D. Without them the art world might easily grind to a halt; its fragile capitalism, ever dependent on new products, might wither, for few commercial galleries seem willing anymore to support untried artists for longer than the one-shot trial.

The benefit at Artists Space, called "35 Artists Return to Artists Space," may represent the first step in getting commercial galleries to take up some of their responsibilities. It is a splendid show. When I spoke to Linda Shearer, Artists Space's executive director, she was optimistic. Artists Space will survive. But it's going to take a lot of fundraising, and, paradoxically, Shearer has less time to visit artists' studios than when she was associate curator at the Guggenheim.

All 35 artists in the show got their start at

Artists Space and all but three of these are now represented by commercial galleries. Pricing is at current market rates, but Artists Space gets 25 percent; artist and dealer split the rest according to their usual percentages. Strictly speaking, there are no bargains. (If you want bargains, you should have combed the Alternative Museum's recent benefit.) But if you were going to buy a Scott Burton table or an R.N. Fisher lamp anyway — or a David Salle drawing, a piece by Jonathan Borofsky, or a Laurie Simmons photograph — buy now and feel less guilty, knowing that some of the money will go to keep Artists Space going.

For the rest of us — we who look and do not buy — the show is a timely reminder of how much good art we owe to Artists Space and places like it. It's inevitable that most of the art that gets shown is going to be tentative or of no interest. That's the price one pays for attempting to encourage new art. The alternative to this is deadly. Who would want to look only at art that has been totally validated?

Shearer intends to keep the basic format she inherited from former director Helene Winer (now with Metro Pictures) and curator Ragland Watkins (now with Concord — alternatives also feed gallery directors to the commercial spaces). This format consists of

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.

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