

Introduction by Kay Larson

The Artists File at Artists Space is a fascinating place. It contains the slides of roughly 2,000 New York State artists who are neither represented by commercial galleries nor familiar through solo exhibitions. In other words, it provides direct access to the thinking of artists who have not yet had their public say. To use the file, you inhabit the Artists Space basement for the two days necessary to project 4,000 slides (two per artist) in rapid sequence. Each pair of slides is keyed to a file folder. The carousel trays are not labeled, either by age, race, sex, personal history, or significant friendships; they are not even alphabetical. The process is as egalitarian as one can possibly imagine. The only conceivable hitch in its perfect equanimity comes from the artists whose work doesn't photograph well, or who are unable to muster the strength to supply the file with proper documentation.

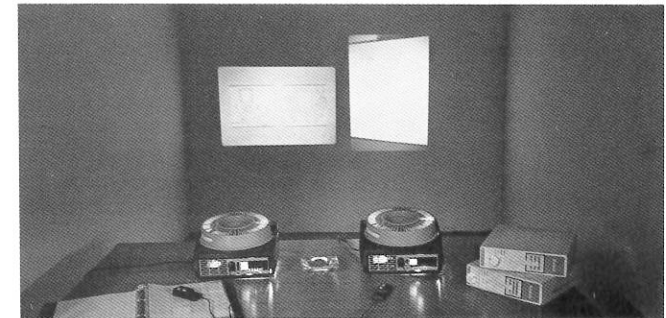
The Artists File is thus like a vast warehouse whose contents must be cross-indexed in the imagination of the user: a kind of art-library of workable notions, akin to one of the great libraries in a Borges story, encapsulating all ideas down to the most banal. Exposure to banality is merely part of the experience; any innovation repeated often enough is by definition a cliché. Artists in development are dismantling many years of received information on their way (one assumes) to insights of their own. The presence of clichés is not surprising, but the values of a cliché needs to be upheld: it offers proof of the power of certain ideas to reach all strata of the community of artists.

All artists (except those whose development has been arrested by success) are always thinking about and measuring themselves against their peers and predecessors. The cumulative weight of their allegiances can tell us which heroes survive in the climate of the moment, and which no longer have much to say. Observers of the latest trends in the galleries will be interested to learn that graffiti and the more garish variants of expressionism have not yet taken over the Artists File carousels. It would certainly be easy to put together a large "bad painting" show, full of flashy maneuvers and zapped up figures in free flight. But, it would be equally possible to find enough realists of different persuasions to satisfy the most eclectic disposition. Just as quickly, one could put together an information-deconstruction show, and apocalypse-science fiction show, or a rather good show of funky assemblage. Within the file is evidence of a shift from the private confessional modes of the 1970's to the outgoing expressive indicators of the 1980's. Minimalism is out like a light. Conceptualism is alive only as a poetic or analytic-poetic vehicle for piecing together words and images; it is no longer used to document semi-public actions.

Two sources of influence are nearly inescapable. Philip Guston's comic tragedies from the last ten years of his life have assumed an uncanny prescience, an ability to project the right escape route from formalism into figuration, and therefore have touched even artists who might not count them as direct inspira-

tion. Those whom Guston hasn't reached are likely to be indebted, at least partly, to Willem de Kooning and to gestural Abstract Expressionism, which seems to present the only other acceptable entry into a kind of naturalist abstraction (or abstracted naturalism) that could also count Arthur Dove and Charles Burchfield as prototypes. The successful rehabilitation of the early American modernists is reflected in the struggle of the slide file's artists to find a meaningful language for the once banned lyric beauty of nature.

In spite of the number of embryonic theme shows in the files, this exhibition is not meant to be thematic. An alert curator could perhaps have plucked out the next trend, but other shows can bear that responsibility. I preferred to look for the singular—for artists who knew what they wanted to do, even if what they wanted to do would not get them into the Whitney Biennial.



These nine artists and three photographers have a dozen different points of view. They are all strong individuals with an idiosyncratic connection to "movements" and an empathy for craft. Tad Wiley and Thor Rinden came of age during minimalism (Rinden was a student at Hunter College during the reign of Tony Smith) and have remained committed to its fundamentals while working out for themselves a personal relationship to their materials. Jacques Roch, age 50, was born and trained in France, and developed his cartoon-like line as a reaction against the dreamier aspects of French post-Surrealist abstraction. Jessica Stockholder constructs installations, but they are shaggy-dog-stories built out of industrial materials, aggressively non-organic and non-pictorial. Even Peter White, whose intensely-scaled paintings of forests could fit in any "new image" show of the last ten years, is English, with roots as much in Constable as in contemporary figuration.

The Artists Space slide file is known as an avenue to the larger world; the people who have completed the transition make an impressive list. The file is as egalitarian in terms of style as it is in terms of sex or race; anyone who sits through one of the marathon viewing sessions is prevented from too-rigid proscriptions about the nature of art in the 1980's. In that spirit of diversity, this exhibition has been put together.