

# ART

With alternative spaces, the National Endowment for the Arts and the state arts councils are financing basic research the way other government agencies finance energy or medicine . . .

## WEIGHING AN ALTERNATIVE

John Perreault

Ten Artists/Artists Space  
Neuberger Museum, Purchase, N.Y.  
(through Oct. 15)

Sixth Anniversary Exhibition  
Artists Space  
105 Hudson St.  
(through Nov. 10)

Unlike artist-run, cooperative galleries, the best of which are organized around a principle — realism, feminism, large-scale sculpture or what have you — alternative spaces have no commitment except to what used to be called the avant-garde: work too far out, too controversial, too experimental, or too "unsalable" for the commercial galleries.

And yet these spaces are not *really* alternatives to the gallery system after all. They provide in-town "out-of-town" try-outs. They feed the gallery system with new artists. A smart dealer doesn't have to gamble on backing a new artist, doesn't have to provide the initial financial and emotional support, doesn't have to fret over possible critical response. It isn't heroic, or even much fun, but by keeping an eye on the alternative spaces a dealer can scoop up pretested products.

Most of these alternative spaces were launched, and are now usually funded, by government arts agencies. So the art industry — like so many other essential industries — has come to be subsidized by

the state. The National Endowment for the Arts and the state arts councils are financing basic research the way other government agencies finance energy or medicine, areas where there is much more money to be made.

Artists Space, here in New York, is one of the best of the alternative spaces. Opened on Wooster Street in Soho six years ago and now located at the corner of Hudson and Franklin Streets in Tribeca, Artists Space is committed to showing the work of artists without gallery representation. (Like other alternative spaces, it is also a home for types of work not tailored to the galleries: video, performance and such.) It is run by the non-profit, mostly state- and federally-supported Committee for the Visual Arts; takes no commissions for sales; pays the artists a little something for exhibiting; and prides itself on "presenting the most challenging new art developments to the public."

On a recent Sunday afternoon, three busloads of art types were deposited on the State University of New York's Purchase campus for the opening of "10 Artists: Artists Space," an exhibition of Artists Space graduates, at the Philip Johnson-designed Neuberger Museum. At the opening, I asked "historian of contemporary art" Irving Sandler — co-founder (with Trudie Grace) of Artists Space, member of its board, and initiator of this show — how the 10 artists were chosen from the hundreds showcased over the years by the alternative space. He told me

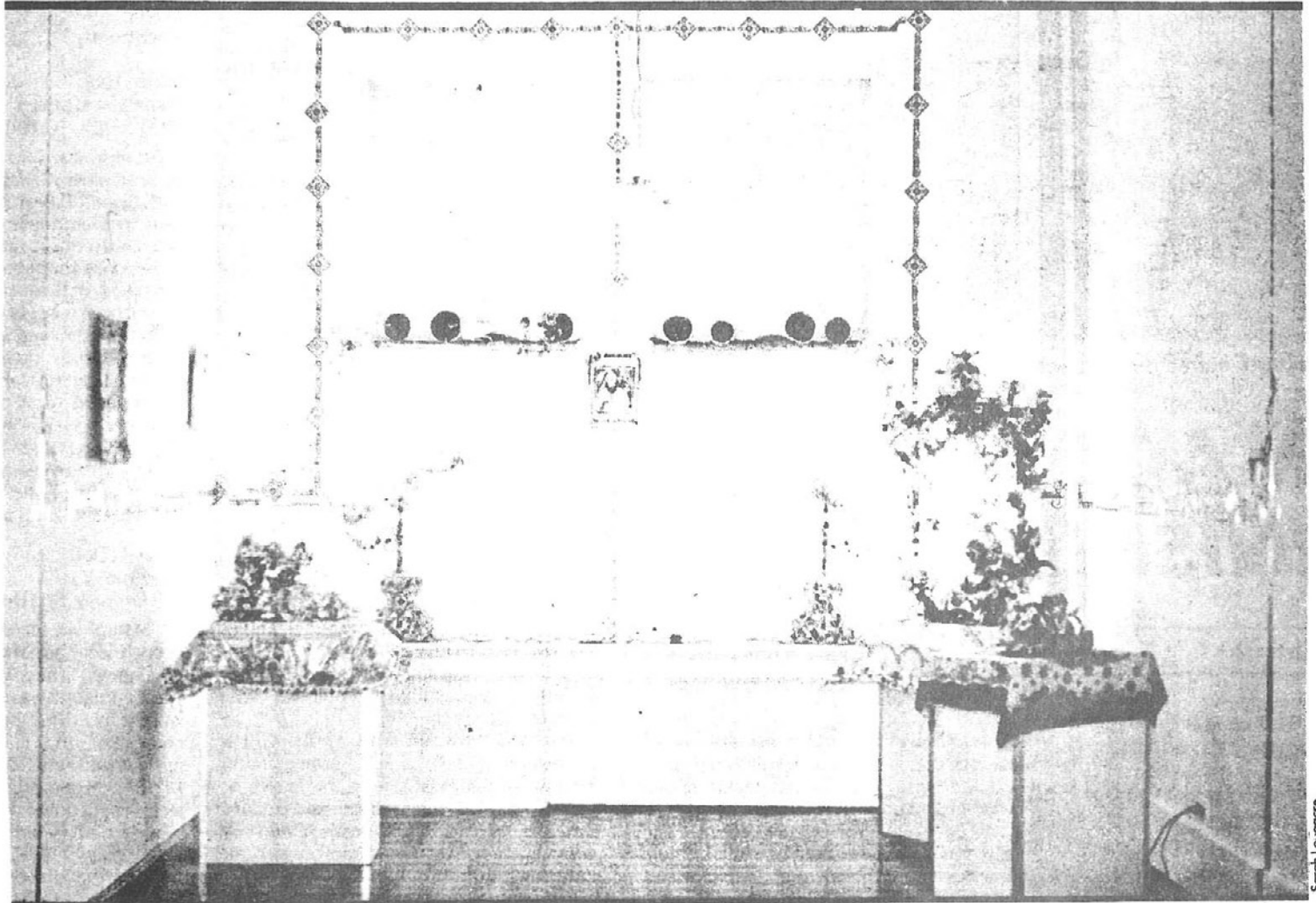
that he and Helene Winer, director of Artists Space, sat down and drew up independent lists of 10 artists each. Nine names turned up on both lists; simple as that. (That nine of the ten artists in the show are now represented by commercial galleries didn't jar me until later.)

I wanted to see the show because I like the work of these artists, but also because I wanted to see with my own eyes the horrors of this reportedly alienating, almost science fiction-like campus. The place was worse than I expected. A vertiginous arcade makes de Chirico seem humane; and a vast plaza induces agoraphobia in even the most insecure. The museum itself is a monster, with as much (or more) floor space as the Whitney. Another triumph of modern architecture: Brick walls need false walls so the paintings can be hung; small paintings from the permanent collection look like miniatures in the huge second-floor space; and one gallery is so large that helicopters could do an aeroballet inside it.

Amazingly enough, the Artists Space works manage to conquer the cavernous space; as soon as you walk into the lobby you are hit on the head with one. Jon Borofsky, using paint and charcoal, has inscribed a giant, diamond-eyed fish on the ceiling. Some complained of its lack of visibility, but aside from the lighting fixtures that get in the way it's hard to miss.

Off the lobby is Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt's *Grace and Original Sin: Saints and Sinners (Two Seconds Before the End*

Oct. 4, '74 (cont)



Sarah Lo Spore

Lanigan-Schmidt's installation at Artists Space: alumnus of the alternative route

of the World), with its tinfoil rats on a tinfoil altar, complete with lollipops. Children's room linoleum covers the floor, and a folding metal gate is decorated with plastic flowers and plastic grapes. All this adds up to a weirdly successful and emotional mock-religious environment.

Barbara Schwartz's painted rag-pulp wall sculptures enliven another room, followed by a roomful of John Torreano's "jewel"-encrusted impasto paintings; a Torreano red ball (also "jeweled") is a knockout. Next come paintings by Lois Lane, tiny models of floating cities by Charles Simonds and a telephone-booth piece by Laurie Anderson. While all three artists have received favorable critical response, I confess that the charm or significance of their works escapes me.

Sheer delight awaited me in the next room, though, where Judy Pfaff has filled the aforementioned "helicopter" space with an art work that looks like an explo-

sion in a Canal Street plastic shop. Colors and refracting plastic march across the floor and up the walls. Although she incorporates older pieces or parts of pieces — as she has done before — into this one, it still took her three weeks to complete (on site) this complex, rambunctious amalgam of stick figures, stick-up art and fragments of hot color.

The final room is partitioned: in one space, fine and quirky works, such as *Devil Chaser* and *Regional Piece*, by the late Ree Morton; in the other, a giant mock-up of Scott Burton's *Table for 16*. Without the wall label, *Table for 16* could have passed for a minimalistic sculpture of considerable power — but it's a real table, perhaps for a board room, which makes it even better.

Burton and the other nine Artists Space alumni are also the subject of an anniversary show at Artists Space itself. Outstanding works there include Burton's

model for a room-sized, serpentine banquet, Lanigan-Schmidt's installation and Borofsky's zany, kinetic piece.

Without alternatives like Artists Space the art situation would be a lot less exciting. (What are the alternatives?) Except for the racist title of one exhibition last season — an appalling error — Artists Space, as these two exhibitions prove, has been a worthwhile endeavor.

There are always more artists than spaces to show art. We have yet to run out of promising artists, though sometimes I fear that Artists Space may now be scraping the bottom of the avant-garde barrel. Often in the name of risk and experiment, which I am all for — these are the soul of art — we have to put up with work that is outre or idiotic, trusting that time will weed out the junk.

But never fear. The art schools are grinding out contenders and pretenders as if there's no tomorrow. And the talented occasionally survive. ●