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## Nonprofit Gallery in TriBeCa Finds Itself at Storm's Center

By **MICHAEL KIMMELMAN** NOV. 10, 1989

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While two young men quietly spackled and whitewashed the walls at Artists Space for an exhibition about AIDS that is to open on Thursday, Susan Wyatt, the director of the nonprofit gallery in TriBeCa, frantically fielded phone calls yesterday and tried to cope with an onslaught of attention.

The decision by the National Endowment for the Arts to rescind a \$10,000 grant for the AIDS exhibition because of remarks in an accompanying catalogue about John Cardinal O'Connor of New York, Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina and Representative William E. Dannemeyer of California has thrust Artists Space into the middle of a storm over Government support of the arts.

The storm started several months ago when the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, fearing adverse Congressional reaction, canceled an exhibition that included homoerotic photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe and that was partly paid for by the National Endowment. About the same time, members of Congress began objecting to Federal financing of an exhibition organized by a North Carolina arts group that included a photograph by Andres Serrano of a plastic crucifix submerged in urine. Many Artists Started There

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influential of the so-called alternative galleries in the United States, and it has been known for the diversity and open-mindedness of its activities.

Many prominent artists, including Jonathan Borofsky, Barbara Kruger, Scott Burton, Jeff Koons and Peter Halley, received their first public showings at Artists Space. Several of the gallery's group shows have become minor landmarks in the history of contemporary art.

A 1974 series at Artists Space called *Persona*, for example, helped introduce a generation of performance artists, including Laurie Anderson, to the public. A 1977 show entitled "Pictures" was one of the first exhibitions to identify and describe the interest by young artists in mass-media culture. Artists Space has also been an innovator in presenting works by audio artists and by other artists involved with experimental media.

Writing in the catalogue for an exhibition celebrating the 15th anniversary of the gallery in 1984, Linda L. Cathcart, who was director of the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, singled out the breadth of Artists Space's interests for praise. "As it stands, virtually any artist from New York or any part of the country not only feels comfortable with Artists Space but aspires to exhibit there," she wrote. *How the Gallery Began*

Trudie Grace and Irving Sandler started Artists Space in 1973 when New York City had few galleries devoted to contemporary art and even fewer alternative exhibition spaces. It was intended to be a place where young artists who had no affiliations with commercial galleries could exhibit their works and could also turn for financial help. The gallery relied on artists for advice in organizing exhibitions. As much as possible, it tried to remain independent of the trends and fashions in contemporary art.

The gallery has grown and now gives \$42,000 a year to individual artists and groups. The grants range from \$50 to \$500. Among the services started by the gallery is the Artists File, a computerized slide registry of current works by almost 3,000 artists from New York State.

Artists Space also runs a film and video program and presents many exhibitions each year, including one, paid for by a 10-year, \$150,000 grant from the Mark Rothko Foundation, devoted to artists who have been working for at least 20 years

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Among the recent shows at Artists Space have been "Min Joong Art: A New Cultural Movement From Korea," which was presented last fall to coincide with the Summer Olympics in Seoul, South Korea, and which featured the work of dissident South Korean artists; and "Metaphysical Visions/Middle Europe," an exhibition in June by eight artists from Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Both shows were paid for in part by the National Endowment for the Arts. Last fall, Artists Space featured a video exhibition entitled "The AIDS Crisis Is Not Over." It did not receive a Federal grant for this show.

Ms. Wyatt, who began working at Artists Space as a college intern in its first year, recalled the gallery's original setting in a loft on Wooster Street. "We had two director's chairs and a file cabinet that fell over every time you opened the drawer," she said.

Ms. Wyatt now oversees an organization with a \$725,000 annual budget. Roughly 40 percent of that comes from public grants by the National Endowment, the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the Institute of Museum Services. The gallery has a small membership program that brings in some \$20,000 each year. It raises about \$85,000 a year from a benefit party. Artists like Robert Longo and Cindy Sherman have donated works to be sold by the gallery. Less than \$30,000 each year comes from corporate sponsorship. The remainder of the budget is supported by foundations and private individuals. A Touch of Controversy

Artists Space occupies two floors in a former warehouse at 223 West Broadway, near Franklin Street. A staff of 11 includes 4 full-time employees. Almost half of the staff members are practicing artists.

Artists Space has not been entirely free from controversy. In 1979 a show of abstract works by Donald Newman entitled "The Nigger Drawings" prompted a demonstration by a group that considered the event racist and questioned government support of the show. Kitty Carlisle Hart, who heads the New York State Council on the Arts, issued a statement at the time that said the council deplored "the insensitivity expressed toward a large segment of our public inherent in the use of the title." But she said the council stood by its policy of "encouraging and assisting rather than in any ways limiting the freedom of expression that is essential to the

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Ms. Wyatt said yesterday that over the years Artists Space has maintained an excellent relationship with government groups that support art, including the National Endowment. She said she told the endowment in advance about the contents of the new AIDS exhibition because "I was concerned that the N.E.A. not be blind-sided and that Artists Space not be blind-sided." Many Offers of Support

Ms. Wyatt said she had received "countless offers of financial, legal and moral support." She added, "The phones haven't stopped ringing and I haven't gotten sleep in days."

Sitting in a tiny, cramped office whose walls are covered with, among other things, posters of Senator Helms and copies of the Serrano photograph and of a self-portrait by Mr. Mapplethorpe, Ms. Wyatt said that as a member of the National Association of Artists Organizations, she has been speaking out against censorship and about Government support of the arts.

But she said: "I never anticipated all this would happen. Artists Space is a cultural organization, not an activist organization. I have nothing against activism, but that is not our goal.

"It's important to point out that I don't consider the N.E.A. an adversary. I've always considered it a part of the art world, at least until now."

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