

ALTERNATIVE SPACES; A HISTORY IN CHICAGO

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

158N 0933856180 (pBK) 1984

Chicago's Alternatives

By Lynne Warren

One fact about art that many sense but few actively acknowledge these days is that its practice frankly thrives on adversity. More specifically, it is a particular type of adversity that seems to goad an artist on, cause his vision to be crystallized and his talent to mature, for hunger, poverty, disease, and mental illness can realistically only be hobbling. This adversity is a resistance to the artist put up by his audience—and not necessarily an uninterested, uncultured one. Ironically, this resistance often comes from whence it hurts most, from those artists who have found acceptance by major cultural institutions (museums, collectors, publications, galleries) and, most disheartening to the artist on the outside, by those very cultural entities. Yet the desire to be taken seriously—a universal impulse, but one that is of particular importance to the artist, as the very validity of his calling is often questioned by society-at-large—can be seen as the drive that produces much interesting, and some great, art. It is the resistance of established cultural entities, specifically here in Chicago, that is a fundamental factor in the history of alternative spaces: if the doors of the Art Institute had always stood wide open to all artists of this city, it seems almost certain that few, if any, alternative spaces would have ever been founded, and a unique, varied, and stimulating legacy would have been lost.

An "alternative space" is defined here as a not-for-profit or noncommercial organization originated by and for artists (and assuring them a primary role in policy development and programming) that primarily shows Chicago-area artists and has had a fixed location, and operated on a continuous basis. In many ways, the history of alternative spaces in Chicago begins in 1949 with the founding of Exhibition Momentum—a series of large exhibitions organized by students from the School of the Art Institute who were not permitted to enter the prestigious, at that time annual, Chicago and Vicinity shows at the Art Institute. From the aptly named Momentum exhibitions, which continued on and off until 1964, a number of true alternative spaces as well as other artists' groups got their impetus. Yet the tradition of artists who found themselves on the outside and banded together to further their aims, which threatened to be thwarted by an uninterested art establishment, is a long one in Chicago,

originating in the late 19th century. Interestingly enough, equally long is the dialectic that sees the alternative space transforming—very quickly in some cases—into the art establishment. It is this history of rejection by and rebellion against the established art world that has seemed to make Chicago a particularly rich breeding ground for new talent, for alternative spaces are especially good places for young artists to get their start, season themselves, and develop their vision and their ability to express that vision before entering the even more formidable national or international fray. It is interesting and, in the light of history, ironic, that the entity against which virtually all the alternative spaces have worked, The Art Institute of Chicago, was founded in 1866 by a group of artists.

Chicago's early artistic history mirrored the tempestuous mixture of frontier roughness and naive eagerness for all things "modern" of the city itself. Its rapid growth from a provincial outpost to a major American metropolis provided a wide-open stage for a number of talented and progressive performers—in the visual arts, in music, and especially in architecture. This heady, freewheeling atmosphere allowed for

some quite astonishing accomplishments by cultural entrepreneurs looking to their own European experiences as confirmation of art's capacity to uplift and refine: the founding of the Art Institute; the creation in 1893 of the Fine Arts Building,¹ which sought to gather together artists, writers, musicians, craftsmen, and other creative people for the overall advancement of cultural life; and the establishment in 1892 of reasonably priced, comfortable studios by real estate speculator and judge Lambert Tree. These were institutions that contributed greatly to the first period of artistic activity in and growth of the Chicago art world, and the first subsequent period of rebellion by artists against the ossifying of cultural life.

In the early years, art was seen as a means to achieve "social uplift,"² and philanthropists such as Edward E. Ayer, Marshall Field, Charles L. Hutchinson, Martin A. Ryerson, and Lambert Tree worked tirelessly to create Chicago's great cultural institutions. The European ideal, defined in large part at this time by the rhapsodic classicism of John Ruskin, served for these men as the model for a cultural life. Thus, for these people, in the final analysis art was nothing to leave in the hands of the provincial native population of artists. Although the Art Institute served as a center and headquarters for a great number of local artists' groups and allowed many exhibitions of these groups' memberships, as it expanded and saw itself more as an organization to serve the city's general population³ rather than just those already involved in the arts, many artists felt themselves being locked out.

The Art Institute of Chicago had been founded in 1866 by a group of artists as the Chicago Academy of Design. The intent of the Academy was to create a school and gallery to exhibit members' work. However, the visionary aims of the artist-founders were not sufficient to propagate the school and gallery. A board of directors was created in early 1879 and business and civic leaders appointed in hopes of rescuing the Academy, which was experiencing grave financial setbacks. In May 1879, to effect this rescue, these appointees resigned from the board to incorporate a new organization, the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, renamed in 1882 The Art Institute of Chicago; the new institution retained the School as an important aspect of

its activities but was no longer devoted to showcasing its artist-members. This particular, and seemingly almost inevitable, process of development—the taking over of artist-founded organizations by other professionals with the organization's subsequent bureaucratization—continues today, as can be seen by examining spaces such as N.A.M.E. and Randolph Street galleries, discussed below.



The Fine Arts Building, c. 1903. Photo courtesy the Chicago Historical Society.

The artists' organizations of the late 1800s, which initially had worked in close harmony with the Art Institute, including the Chicago League (f. 1880), the Chicago Society of Artists (f. 1888), the Art Students League (f. 1893), the Palette & Chisel Club (f. 1895), reacting by the 1920s to the change in the Art Insti-



Exhibition Momentum Catalogue, Momentum Midcontinental, 1954.



The Art Institute served as headquarters for numerous artists' organizations in the late 1800s. Sculptor Lorado Taft (r.) costumed for an Artists Festival, 1897.

Poster designed by Emil Armin for the 1923 No-Jury Society "Cubist Ball." Chicago at the No-Jury Artists Cubist Ball, 1923, woodcut. Photo courtesy of Mrs. Emil Armin and the Illinois State Museum, Springfield.



tute's exhibition and collecting policies—notably to the greater emphasis placed on the development of a historical permanent collection—began providing the impetus for artists to organize exhibition opportunities and spaces on their own. A critical juncture was reached in 1920, when artists, outraged at the exclusive jurying system imposed on the venerable annual Art Institute exhibitions of Chicago and Vicinity art, which systematically rejected the work of "modern" artists,⁴ formed a *Salon des Refusés*, which in turn spawned the Chicago No-Jury Society.⁵ This precursor to the Exhibition Momentum organization of the late 1940s and 1950s organized large, nonjuried shows that took place in a wide range of venues, from the Garfield Park Museum to the Goldblatt's and Marshall Field's department stores. It was largely the initiative of artists affiliated with the Chicago Society of Artists and of "radical" modern artists (most of them School of the Art Institute [SAIC] graduates) such as Rudolph Welsenborn, who held jury systems generally in disdain, and Carl Hoeckner and Raymond Jonson, painters and teachers. These artists had been inspired by SAIC visiting artists such as George Bellows, Randall Davey, and John Sloan. Welsenborn in particular was a whirlwind of anti-Art Institute activity. In 1921 he formed the group Cor Ardens (Ardent Heart), an "international organization of artists dedicated to modern art,"⁶ and later, in 1926, the Neo-Artimusc Society (an acronym derived from the words art, literature, music, and science) which attempted, through wide-ranging activities, to promulgate the development of a certain type of artistic life. Their philosophy, which held that artists needed not only the support and companionship of their peers, but immersion in a highly cultivated way of life that included exposure to all art forms, can be seen closely mirrored in the more recent activities of such contemporary alternative spaces as ARC, Artemisia, N.A.M.E., and Randolph Street galleries. Although neither Cor Ardens nor Neo-Artimusc opened gallery spaces as such, the latter group showed for two years in Welsenborn's studio—one of the first instances of an artist's studio being opened for alternative exhibitions.

Other support groups of the 1920s that formed in reaction to the Art Institute's prejudice against modern art included the Introspectives, which numbered Welsenborn and Emil Armin among its members; The Ten (Chicago), which showed regularly at the galleries of Marshall Field's; and the Jewish artists' group



A work by "radical" modern artist Rudolph Welsenborn, who was instrumental in such alternative activities as Neo-Artimusc and Cor Ardens, support groups of the 1920s. Chicago, 1926, oil on canvas. Collection of the Illinois State Museum, Springfield; photo by Marlin Ross.

Around the Palette.⁷ The anti-establishment, "bohemian" attitudes of many of these artists derived in large part from the fact that they had lived and worked closely in the 57th Street Art Colony, which sprang up in buildings originally constructed along East 57th Street near Stony Island to house workers at the Columbian Exposition of 1893. Writers Henry Miller and Floyd Dell,⁸ and art critic J. Z. Jacobson resided there; Mildred Clark ran a bookstore; and artists such as Gertrude Abercrombie, Emil Armin, Fred Bleel and his wife, Frances Strain (later to chair the Hyde Park Art Center), Rainey Bennett, Gustaf Dalstrom, Frances Foy, Martyl, Stanislaw Szukofski, and Egon Welner shared living quarters and studio spaces. The Colony, dating from 1895 but most active during the 1920s and 1930s, provided a haven for the type of artistic life Welsenborn attempted to promote in his organizations, and was instrumental in much of the alternative activity of the era.

The one space of the 1920s that seemed to operate at least in an alternative manner was the Independent Artists of Chicago (f. 1928), which sponsored a gallery to show members' work in the innovative setting of an "open walls" policy that saw members responsible for installing their works in a continuous rotating installation.⁹ This organization, however, apparently was

not one of "modern" artists, and cannot be seen in the same light as the organizations that were in opposition to the Art Institute's policies.

As artistic activity increased in the city—now besides the Art Institute, a number of commercial galleries existed, as well as The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago and The Arts Club of Chicago, both of which devoted themselves to showing the best in international modern art as well as local work—so did the number of artists. Alternative activity, interestingly, died down, as many of the "radical" artists of the 1910s and 1920s found regular exhibition opportunities after their alternative activities had the desired effect of opening the cultural institutions to modern art. The Ten (Chicago) had found a home in Marshall Field's galleries; Around the Palette showed in the Jewish People's Institute building,¹⁰ blurring the line between artist-instigated and establishment activities. Most of these artists were again being admitted to the Chicago and Vicinity shows. Only Increase Robinson, who opened her studio in Diana Square to show artists' work as Welsenborn had done in 1922, and the Chicago Artists Union with their Union Gallery existed as "alternative spaces" in any sense of the term. The Great Depression, of course, also affected the lessen-



Residents of the 57th Street Art Colony outside Charles Biesel's East 57th Street studio, 1939. From l. to r.: Emil Armin, Charles Biesel, Gertrude Abercrombie, children unknown, unknown, Frances Strain Biesel (kneeling), Oscar Van Young, J.Z. Jacobson. Photo courtesy Mrs. Emil Armin and the Illinois State Museum, Springfield.

ing of alternative activity—not in the obvious sense of artists being forced to abandon their profession to survive, but rather because of the vigorous activities of the Federal Works Progress Administration (WPA/FAP), which at one point was employing up to 300 Illinois artists.¹¹ From 1935 to 1938, the WPA/FAP was in fact headed by Increase Robinson, and employed many of the familiar names of the early era—Bennett, Dalstrom, Foy. Interestingly, the true alternative space of the 1930s, The Artists Union, was formed to mediate between artists and the WPA, and had in its origins a connection to the John Reed Society, named for the famous American Communist activist and sympathizer of Russian Communism.

The next event of any importance to the history of alternative spaces was the Hyde Park Art Center's opening in 1939. Its seeming aim was to be a place for Chicago artists to gather together, work in its workshops and studios, and exhibit, although it also sponsored an active schedule of children's and adult art classes, as it continues to do today. HPAC's founding

members included artists Fred Biesel and Frances Strain, both veterans of the 57th Street Art Colony, although the chief instigator appears to have been Alderman (later Senator) Paul Douglas. At first, however, HPAC seemed to be a true Chicago art center, entirely sympathetic and responsive to the needs and desires of Chicago's modern artists. The opening exhibition featured Gertrude Abercrombie, Emil Armin, Charles Biesel, and Frances Strain, among other local painters and sculptors. Yet, after this initial activity, the space settled down to a more typical existence in the early 1940s as a community art center. Harold Haydon, then professor at the University of Chicago as well as an artist, became exhibitions director and the program, now lost, seems to have focused on art education and community service rather than one-person or group exhibitions of Chicago artists, with the workshops and art classes growing in importance. World War II almost extinguished HPAC; in fact, it existed for a number of months without a permanent space, having been forced by dwindling interest and increasing rents to abandon

its space at 1466 East 57th Street. Later, in 1942, a new space was secured, but exhibitions were not mounted. It was not until 1956, stimulated in large part by the activities of Exhibition Momentum, that the Hyde Park Art Center began functioning as a true promoter of Chicago's largely neglected local talent. In general, the decade of the 1940s, preoccupied on the art scene by the government-directed activities of WPA/FAP and the Second World War, was a quiet one for alternative spaces.

World War II changed the Chicago art scene forever in that it introduced a new breed of artists. The classrooms of SAIC, which heretofore had always numbered women in the majority, suddenly began filling with more and more men determined to be professional artists; these men, returning from service, entered art school under the G.I. Bill (established in 1944 to aid returning servicemen in their education). Such well-known Chicago figures as Leon Golub and H.C. Westermann, among many, many others, took advantage of the G.I. Bill to pursue their careers in the fine arts. Many of these veterans were among the group that organized Exhibition Momentum, founded in response to the restrictive jurying of the Chicago and Vicinity exhibitions.

At this time, the Chicago and Vicinity jurors were no longer excluding "modern" art as they had done in the 1920s, but were categorically omitting all undergraduate work, to accommodate "establishment" outrage at the increasing number of top prizes carried off by SAIC students (including Miyoko Ito). A number of artists, mostly SAIC students, including such now well-known figures as Leon Golub, Ellen Lanyon, and Nancy Spero (who later was involved in the founding of the seminal New York alternative space A.L.B.), presented a petition to Art Institute Director Daniel Catton Rich protesting this action by the Board of Trustees. The petition was rejected with the explanation that because of the great numbers of artists of "post student status" competing for exhibition opportunities, the annual Chicago and Vicinity shows, founded originally to represent the work of such artists, must ensure these artists "every opportunity to show their work."¹² Shortly after the rejection of the students' petition, meetings were held to organize a large *Salon des Refusés*. Unlike the earlier Chicago No-Jury Society, the Momentum organizers felt the need for a juried exhibition. They brought in well-known New York artists and art world figures, and in 1952 instigated a revolution-



Artists Union gallery members demonstrating in Chicago (c. 1935) for more jobs for unemployed artists. The Union also operated a membership gallery. Photo courtesy Illinois State Museum, Springfield.



Men studying at the School of The Art Institute of Chicago, c. 1949. Photo courtesy The Art Institute of Chicago.

ary system of jurying—allowing each juror his own choices rather than requiring that all choices be unanimous. The first Exhibition Momentum, featuring 91 works of art and juried by Josef Albers, Robert Von Neumann, and Robert Wolff, opened in 1948 in the basement of Roosevelt College on South Michigan Avenue (fittingly, virtually across the street from the Art Institute). In retrospect, the impact caused by bringing in important art world figures as jurors (jurors in subsequent years included Clement Greenberg, 1950; Jackson Pollock and Max Weber, 1951; Sidney Janis, 1952; Adolph Gottlieb and Ad Reinhardt, 1953; Robert Motherwell, Betty Parsons, and James Johnson Sweeney, 1954; Robert Goldwater and Jack Tworkov, 1956; Willem de Kooning, Sam Hunter, and Franz Kline, 1958) seems almost as great as the fact of the exhibitions themselves.¹³ The excitement caused by contact with these jurors, and the progressive nature of the exhibitions themselves¹⁴ gave confidence and credibility to the postwar generation of artists. Out of these artists' activities came the first recognizable "Chicago School," the Monster Roster; the reactivation of the Hyde Park Art Center under Don Baum's directorship; and the alternative spaces of the 1950s.



The excitement caused by the distinguished jurors brought in by Exhibition Momentum was an important aspect of the impact of the exhibitions. Sidney Janis of Janis Gallery, New York, jurying the 1952 Exhibition Momentum. Photo courtesy Ellen Lanyon and Roland Ginzler.



Meeting of artists involved in the Contemporary Art Workshop, c. 1950. Cosmo Campoli smoking pipe; Lynn and John Kearney at table with Campoli. Photo courtesy Contemporary Art Workshop.

Previous to World War II, the motivating factor in artists' banding together had been the desire to fight against the establishment's refusal to accept modern art. This became a lesser issue immediately after the war, when modern life and all it entailed suddenly was the normal, expected way, having been necessarily adopted to ensure survival and victory by the nation in the face of the war. Although not accepted by the average man in the street, modern art was embraced by cultural leaders; major institutions (The Museum of Modern Art and The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York); major collectors (Nelson A. Rockefeller and Dominique de Menil, and in Chicago, Joseph Randal Shapiro and Edwin A. Bergman); and influential intellectuals. Thus in the immediate postwar era, the major goal was to receive exposure and reviews. Democracy was a major motivating factor—artists felt it was a moral imperative that art not be judged unseen.¹⁵ The artists involved in forming alternative spaces in the 1950s, including the Contemporary Art Workshop, 414 Art Workshop Gallery, Superior Street Gallery, and Exhibit A, were very interested in self-development through exhibiting their latest works and receiving feedback from artists and others interested in art, with the ultimate goal of refining and perfecting their expression. Fortified by the success of the Momentum exhibitions, both the Contemporary Art Workshop and, several years later, Superior Street Gallery, were founded by Momentum veterans. The Contemporary Art Workshop, founded in 1950 by John Alquith, Cosmo Campoli, Ray Fink, Leon Golub, and John Kearney, was intended to show members' work and provide workshops and studio space for artists.

The 414 Art Workshop Gallery, like the Hyde Park Art Center and the Contemporary Art Workshop, functioned as a school. Rather than featuring members' work, it showed the work of its faculty. Instigated by John Miller, who had been involved not only in the Exhibition Momentum shows but had taught at the Hyde Park Art Center, and later would show with the Superior Street group, the gallery mounted monthly one- and two-person exhibitions of faculty and invited artists, including H.C. Westermann in his first one-person show. While the Contemporary Art Workshop survived through the dedication of John and Lynn Kearney and the rental of its reasonably priced studios, 414 had a nonartist benefactor in the form of Doc Walters who, along with his wife Shirley, a teacher in the Chicago Public School system, wished to encourage



414 Art Workshop Gallery's former location at 414 North State Street, 1964. Photo by Tom Van Eynde.

local art. They rented the 414 North State Street space and provided the gallery with a financial stability that enabled it to flourish for five years.¹⁶

Superior Street Gallery, supported by collector and patron of the arts Joseph Randal Shapiro, included such Momentum veterans as Roland Ginzler, Richard Hunt, Miyoko Ito, Ellen Lanyon, John Miller, Kerig Pope (later affiliated with the Chicago Imagists), Seymour Rosofsky, and Vicci Sperry. Located on Superior Street, in the gallery district of the time which also boasted Allan Frumkin and Richard Felgen, commercial galleries devoted to showing local as well as New York art (H.C. Westermann had been taken on by Allan Frumkin and had a very successful showing there shortly after his 414 Art Workshop show which, needless to say, did not attract the crowds and attention that a commercial gallery would). Besides showing its members, Superior Street featured such artists as painter Bob Thompson, painter and printmaker Evelyn Statsinger, and photographer Harry Callahan.

Reacting to the local prejudice against abstract art, Robert Natkin, a recent SAIC graduate, with Stanley Sourellis, formed the Wells Street Gallery which,



Wells Street Gallery founder Robert Natkin at the gallery, c. 1957. Photo courtesy Robert Natkin and Judith Dolnick.

after its first year (1957), became a true cooperative, with its members pitching in to cover expenses. Wells Street showed John Chamberlain, a schoolmate of Natkin's, in his first one-person exhibition, as well as a vigorous schedule of other local abstract artists, including Ernest Dieringer, Judith Dolnick, Aaron Siskind, and Ronald Slowinski. Wells Street also showed in 1958 a group exhibition of paintings and drawings from private collections, which featured Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and David Smith, and marked one of the first instances of what would later become a staple activity for alternative spaces: these group or theme shows of nonmember artists were valuable because they engaged a larger community.

Other spaces of the 1950s did not fare so well. Like Wells Street and Superior Street galleries, which suspended operations after experiencing financial difficulties, Exhibit A, an artists' cooperative headed by 24 local artists, including Leopold Segecin, Vicci



Exhibit A members, c. 1957. From l. to r.: Frank Peterson, Robert L. Bailey, Joan Taxay-Wenger, Dolores A. Nelson, Mary Lou Weiss Kelly, Leopold Segecin, Morris Baranzi. Photo by Paul Ponsard.

Sperry, and Angelo Testa, operated for only a short time, showing mostly members' work, and closed its doors in 1959 after its gallery floor caved in during an opening.¹⁷

The early to mid-1960s in general were bleak. Many of the artists involved in the alternative spaces of the 1950s, having met with success, had moved to New York. PAC, an outgrowth of Phalanx, a loose organization of over 150 artists, including veterans of Superior Street, established a gallery devoted to large group exhibitions much in the mold of the Hyde Park Art Center (see below); in fact, their initial exhibition, titled "Black and White" (an homage to Franz Kline, who had been a juror of the 1958 Exhibition Momentum), was held at the center. The group, which included Roger Brown, Martin Hurtig, and Vera Klement, closed after two years, in 1960.

The Second Unitarian Church on Barry Street hosted a gallery for four years (1969-72), instigated by maverick local artist Nottley Maddox, who died prematurely in 1980. This space showed a number of artists and photographers, many SAIC students and faculty, in one- and two-person exhibitions. PAC and the Second Unitarian Church Gallery, located as they were on the North Side away from the traditional gallery districts, did not receive the traffic and attention in the art press that the quality of their exhibitions merited.

Also in the late 1960s, the group Live from Chicago, consisting of artists, designers, and architects, opened a space that featured exhibitions weighted heavily toward technologically derived media, such as photography, film, and electronic works. Although some extraordinary exhibitions were mounted, as well as a lively program of music and film, Live from Chicago (its name an attempt to show there was still "life in Chicago" after the brutal events surrounding the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention), which had opened in the fall of 1968, closed in 1970.

The bright light in the 1960s alternative space landscape was the Hyde Park Art Center. After coming to life in 1956 under the directorship of Don Baum, whose involvement in The Renaissance Society's Student Committee (which sponsored an annual exhibition), as well as experience with the Exhibition Momentum group had well prepared him for such a position, HPAC came into a dominant position in the Chicago art world in the 1960s. Baum organized exhibition after exhibition of extraordinarily lively and innovative group and theme shows of local artists, notable for

their humorous, down-to-earth approach to art as indicated by their titles—"The Hollywood Image" (1963); "Three Kingdoms: Animal, Vegetable, Mineral" (1965-66); "Hairy Who" (1968, 1967, 1968); "Non Plussed Some" (1968); "False Image" (1968, 1969); "Marriage, Chicago Style" (1970)—as well as for the uniqueness and vigor of the art they featured. Out of these exhibitions, and especially the now-legendary Hairy Who shows which introduced Jim Nutt and Karl Wirsum, among others, Chicago Imagism was born.¹⁸ The first widely acknowledged "Chicago School" (the Monster Roster artists, although identified as a stylistic group, had mostly left Chicago, and the overall impact of their style was slight), Imagism was quickly disseminated throughout the art world through representation in the 1973 São Paulo Biennial, which traveled to Washington, DC. As well, Imagist artists were showcased at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

The tireless activity of Don Baum and the Hyde Park Art Center introduced an impressive list of artists of lasting importance to Chicago's art history: those associated with Imagism—Roger Brown, Sarah Canright, Eleanor Dube, James Falconer, Ed Flood, Art Green, Phillip Hanson, Gladys Nilson, Jim Nutt, Ed Paschke, Christina Ramberg, Suellen Rocca, Barbara Rosal, Karl Wirsum, and Ray Yoshida—as well as a host of others, including Gertrude Abercrombie, Jordan Davies, Robert Donley, Theodore Halkin, Whitney Halstead, Harold Haydon, George Kokines, Paul LaMantia, Robert Lostutter, Ben Mahmoud, Tom Palazzolo, Frank Platek, Alice Shaddie, Irene Siegel, Steven Urry, and many, many others.¹⁹ As well, the center was instrumental in shaping the Chicago aesthetic by introducing the work of the now-famous Chicago naives, including Lee Godie, Aldo Brandt Piacenza, and Pauline Simon.

The moral imperative of artists of the 1950s and 1960s was that work should be shown without regard to, as Leon Golub put it, "the status of its creator or the circumstances implicit in its creation" (see note 15). This imperative had almost vanished by the late 1960s, and is conspicuously absent from the thinking and manifestos of the third and best-known generation of alternative spaces—those, including ARC, Artemisia, and N.A.M.E., founded in the early 1970s. These artists, too, felt they were being flogged out of exhibiting, but not because their work was being judged inferior because it was student or fledgling art, but because Chicago's art world, ironically, had settled on an ac-



The Hyde Park Art Center during the 1960s and early 1970s featured group exhibitions of a high-spirited nature, introducing the style that came to typify Chicago art. Imagery: Poster featuring Karl Wreum, Barbara Rosal, Ed Paschke, Suellen Rocca, Ed Flood, and Sarah Conright in their exhibition "Marriage Chicago Style," February-March 1970. Poster photos by Don Buucos. Dennis Adrian Bequest, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.



Poster designed by Jim Nutt for the April 1968 "Hairy Who" exhibition at the Hyde Park Art Center. Dennis Adrian Bequest, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.



ARC Gallery's founding members at the 226 East Ontario space, July 1974. From l. to r.: Jan Miller, Johnnie Johnson, Judy Lerner Brice, Mary Min, Monika Wehrenberg, Laurel M. Ross, Gerda Meyer Bernstein, Frances Schoenwester, Kay Rosen, Priscilla Human, Daka Alekna, Gina Rosenblum, Elva Maltz, Chivie Rosenberg (in corner), Sara Skolnik. Photo by Ruyell Ho, courtesy ARC Gallery.

ceptable style for exhibitable local art: the Imagism promulgated by the Hyde Park Art Center.²⁰ These third-generation alternative space artists seemed not to crave dialogue and development of an engaged art community in quite the same way the Momentum generation did. Because of the changing times, these artists, most of whom had studied at the School of the Art Institute—a constant factor in Chicago's history of alternative spaces—were more nationally and internationally oriented, working more and more in experimental modes—performance, installation, and conceptual art, which dealers found difficult to sell even when produced by such luminaries as Vito Acconci, Walter de Maria, and Dennis Oppenheim, to name a few. As well, many women artists, encouraged by the women's movement, felt it was time to organize to further their aims, artistic as well as feminist. The alternative spaces of the 1970s thus arose out of very different needs—the necessity to promote a new aesthetic

in art, one that seemed natural and right to those educated in the late 1960s and early 1970s when painting had been declared dead (reminiscent, interestingly, of the battles of the first generation of alternative space artists against the summary rejection of "modern art"); and the need by women artists to feel a part of the system which, heretofore, as in many other fields, had discriminated against women, particularly those with families.

The first space of the 1970s, ARC, arose out of meetings encouraged by Ellen Lanyon, instigator of the Momentum exhibitions and Superior Street Gallery, as part of W.E.B. (West Coast-East Coast Bag), a women's network. As women met to discuss various issues, some began to realize the need for an outlet for the increasing number of women artists who had experienced difficulty in entering the Chicago art world. Seventeen women—some veterans of the W.E.B. discussions, and some having been invited to join in the

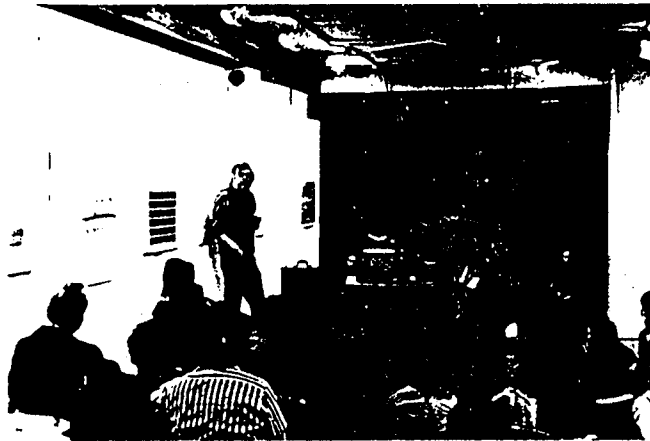
effort—in September 1973 opened ARC in the 226 East Ontario building, a prime location since it stood across the street from the Museum of Contemporary Art. Run as a cooperative, ARC was out to show that "women don't just have to be mothers or dilettantes," as Gerda Meyer Bernstein, one of the more experienced of the group, having shown at the Hyde Park Art Center as well as in New York and Germany, put it.²¹ The goals of enhancing members' status in the art world and, by extension, enhancing the status of all women artists, and of providing a model for younger women artists, were often cited. A few weeks after the opening of ARC, a second women's cooperative, Artemisia, opened in the same building. Named after Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi, Artemisia had goals similar to those of ARC, but included a number of SAIC students and alumnae, whereas the women of ARC were from widely divergent artistic backgrounds. This factor, combined with Artemisia's slightly more headline

feminist philosophy, allowed for a greater cohesion and stronger institutional identity.

While a segment of the city's women artists were organizing themselves, a group of SAIC graduate students, with one exception all men, banded together to form N.A.M.E. Gallery, generally considered Chicago's premier alternative space. These artists mostly were involved in nontraditional types of work—performance, conceptual and installation art, filmmaking, etc. With great enthusiasm and idealism (as well as seemingly complete ignorance not only of Chicago's past alternative spaces but of New York spaces such as A.I.R. and The Kitchen, which had been founded in 1971), these artists wished to provide a space not only for presentation of their own investigations, but for other experimental artists' work.²² Although initially organized as a co-op, from the beginning N.A.M.E. opened its doors to other artists, with exhibitions chosen by majority vote of the members.



Large theme exhibitions became an increasingly important feature in the alternative spaces' programming in the late 1970s. Artists from N.A.M.E. Gallery's "Daley's Tomb" exhibition of 1978, curated by Jerry Saltz. Photo courtesy N.A.M.E. Gallery.



Visiting artists and lecturers were another important aspect of the Hubbard Street alternative programming. John Baldessari lecturing at N.A.M.E. Gallery, May 1975. Photo courtesy N.A.M.E. Gallery.

tory of West Hubbard Gallery, which was founded in 1977 by another group of SAIC students. In many ways, by 1977 N.A.M.E. had become "the establishment." It was certainly so considered by some of the artists who formed West Hubbard. The founders of West Hubbard were not inclined toward accepting the government's generosity — particularly John Hogan and Steve Sherrell, who felt that the gallery should not become dependent on something that could be taken away. Indeed, in 1981, cutbacks by the Reagan Administration caused the alternative spaces considerable financial difficulties. N.A.M.E. reacted by forming a board of directors consisting both of artists and non-artists to broaden its base of support and assist in fund-raising; in 1982, West Hubbard gave up the maintenance of a space. Its history, in fact, is not unlike the histories of the spaces of the 1950s and 1960s: initial vigorous energy generated by the enthusiasm of its founders²⁶; the dropping away of members due to the grind of keeping up the space — which cut greatly into personal artistic output; and the subsequent process of financial difficulties, reorganization, discouragement, and closing of the space as its founders, now more established, could afford to go on without it.²⁷

However, in the 1970s and 1980s, with the security of NEA funding, most alternative spaces have been able to find new energy, easier to discover at the lower level required by this type of maintenance. The departure of founding members does not cause a vacuum — momentum is ensured through the creation of an institutional identity separate from the identity of founding members. This institutional identity is, more and more, indistinguishable from museums and other non-artist-instigated organizations: boards of directors, exhibition committees, gallery directors, and guest curators are a feature of most contemporary alternative spaces.

N.A.M.E.'s creation of a board of directors has already been noted; the Randolph Street Gallery, one of the most recent additions to the alternative space scene, although founded by two artists (Tish Miller and Sarah Schwartz), established a board virtually from the outset. Like West Hubbard, Randolph Street was founded to provide an alternative to the alternatives: its particular focus is on large group exhibitions of installation art and on performance. Yet, in the 1980s, the function of alternative spaces, brought about in large part by their success in opening up the art world, is that of extending the museum-gallery system rather

open to all:

8^{1/2} x 11
show

west hubbard gallery
61 west hubbard street
chicago, illinois 60611

West Hubbard Gallery attempted to provide exhibition space for a wide range of artists through its "open walls" shows. Prospectus for the "8 1/2 x 11" shows, which were held annually between 1979 and 1981.

than existing as an alternative to it. Thus, realistically, a contemporary alternative space — whether founded as an alternative to the alternatives or not — can do little more than provide still another venue for arts activities, often times indistinguishable from the activities in which other institutions, both "alternative" and "establishment," are engaged. Randolph Street, as well as N.A.M.E., can today more realistically be characterized as government-supported *Kunsthalle*.

For an artist-run organization to be truly artist-run, artists must also be administrators, which, as it cuts significantly into their artistic output, is something that most artists are understandably reluctant to do. Yet the hiring of administrators ruptures the artist-run identity. Patrons of the arts, curators, and professional administrators may be entirely sympathetic to the desires and aims of artists — having had their consciousness raised by the alternative system's activities — yet they are not artists and ultimately may not do what artists perhaps would. While providing an expanded art context, contemporary alternative spaces

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Randolph Street Gallery staff, members of the board of directors, and artists from "Opening New Doors" exhibition, October-November 1982. Top row (l. to r.): Hudson, Mary Min, David Heim, Jessica Swift, Cynde Schaepe, Suzie Kunz, Bruce Clearfield, Paul Maurice, Greg Green. Middle row (l. to r.): Greg Knight, Morgan Puett, Nancy Forest Brown, Gary Juska, Dennis Kowalski, L.J. Douglas. Bottom row (l. to r.): Steve Moss, Story Mann, Lynnette Mohill, Frank Garvey, Jennifer Hereth, Marc Giordano, Ted Lowitz, Sarah Schwartz, Robert Pollack, Stephen Laphiacophon, Ron Cohen, Jeffrey Thomas, Michael Hoskins, Lannie Johnson, J. Joseph Little, David Cloud. Photo by Studie GO, courtesy Randolph Street Gallery.

may not necessarily provide a more responsive one. As N.A.M.E., ARC, Artemiala, Randolph Street, and other galleries have begun to undertake museumlike activities — retrospectives, mid-career reviews, one-person shows of older and more established but hitherto little-seen artists, etc., the young, untried, unknown artists face tougher competition, both in terms of the amount of physical space available and in the level of maturity and professionalism required to convince the spaces they are worthy of showing.

This situation, of course, is exactly the kind that consistently has caused artists to band together and found spaces of their own. A few local spaces seem to have found formats that for them and the artists they serve are viable, given the pressures of fiscal realities upon alternative idealism. NAB, founded in 1974 by a group of Southern Illinois University students, organizes large theme and group shows that mix NAB members with outside artists and encourage artists to show one or two works on a regular, almost ongoing basis.²⁸ W.P.A. (L1983) derives its exhibition schedule by soliciting ideas and votes from artists who have previously shown, in a sort of round-robin.²⁹

Some of the most stable alternatives of the 1980s seem to be the media-oriented spaces, such as The Center for New Television, Chicago Filmmakers, and Lill Street Gallery (devoted to ceramics). The cohesion afforded by a single, well-defined goal, such as investigation within a single medium, allows these spaces to develop easily recognizable institutional identities.

Alternative spaces have enlivened and enriched Chicago's art scene. They have been successful in stretching the local attitudes about art and in discouraging complacency; they have enabled many artists to embark on successful careers. The philosophical debate about their purpose and value will certainly continue. Realistically, as this history shows, alternative spaces can hardly be seen as some fledgling, speculative venture. One would be surprised by the questioning of the validity and contributions of, say, museums or commercial galleries — alternative spaces, by their very definition, seem to invite such basic debate. As the cycle of ossification of established cultural institutions and the emergence of an alternative voice to counter this ossification continues, so will the history of alternative spaces in Chicago.

Notes

1. The Fine Arts Building housed the Little Room and the Little Gallery, frequented by such artistic and literary figures as Margaret Anderson, founder of the avant-garde magazines *Poetry* and *The Little Review*; Lorado Taft, sculptor of heroic, monumental sculpture whose studio was on the tenth floor; and William Denelow, best-known for his illustrations of L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz*. See Percy R. Dus, "Where is Athens Now?" *Chicago History* 6, 2 (Summer 1977): 69-72.
2. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, "The Art Institute: The First Forty Years," *Chicago History* 8, 1 (Spring 1979): 5.
3. By 1989 the Art Institute was recording attendances of half a million visitors a year.
4. Chicago Society of Artists, *Role & Impact: The CSA, Chicago, 1879*: Section 1, p. 81. Interestingly, the Art Institute boasted a rather radical, for the time, collection of Impressionism and had hosted the notorious 1913 Armory Show; perhaps the outcry caused by the event had strengthened the already firm conservative instincts of powerful then-director, Charles Hutchinson.
5. Esther Sparks, *A Biographical Dictionary of Painters and Sculptors in Illinois 1808-1945*, Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1972: 677.
6. *Ibid.*: 8.
7. Maureen A. McKenna, *Emil Armin*, Springfield, Illinois State Museum, 1979: 7, 10.
8. Dell's novel *The Binary Bush* is a quaint exposition of pre-1918 life in the Colony.
9. Sparks (note 5): 687.
10. McKenna (note 7): 7.
11. Sparks (note 5): 214-16.
12. *Exhibition Momentum* (exh. cat.), Chicago, 1948: n.p.
13. Paul Campagna, a member of Wells Street Gallery, relates that when gallery members began taking their work to New York, much to their surprise, they found Wells Street's reputation had preceded them, thanks to abstract artists such as Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning who, when in town to jury Momentum exhibitions, had stopped by the gallery.
14. In his column "Art News from Chicago" (*Artnews* 45, 2 (Spring-Summer 1987): 64) A. James Speyer stated that the Momentum exhibitions are "traditionally considered the most avant-garde of Chicago shows."
15. Leon Golub in the 1948 *Exhibition Momentum* catalogue stated this eloquently: "Exhibition Momentum confirms a fundamental aesthetic ideal: that the ultimate criterion in judging an art object is its inherent value rather than the status of its creator or the circumstances implicit in its creation."
16. Interview with John Miller by Paolo Colombo, Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Archive, Aug. 18, 1983.
17. Interview with Leopold Sagedin by Paolo Colombo, Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Archive, Nov. 23, 1983.
18. The term "Imagism" was coined by Franz Schultze in *Fantastic Images: Chicago Art Since 1845* (1972), his book on the "Monster Roster" generation, but came to denote the style typified by the Hairy Who and Falsa Image artists.
19. For a complete listing of the artists shown at HPAC, see Goldene Shaw, ed., *History of the Hyde Park Art Center 1936-1976*, Chicago, 1978.
20. At this point, access to the halls of the Art Institute by young artists was not considered a serious possibility; much of the feeling of being locked out of established cultural institutions had transferred to the Museum of Contemporary Art, founded 1967. The MCA was criticized for showing only Imagist art when it focused on the local scene, which, it was claimed, was all too rare an occurrence.
21. C.G. McDaniel, "Feminist Art Gallery Opened," *Richmond (VA) News Leader*, Sept. 18, 1973.
22. Jane Allen and Derek Guthrie, "N.A.M.E. Gallery: Unique experiment in public patronage," *New Art Examiner* (Chicago) 3, 1 (Oct. 1975): 1, 14.
23. The 414 Art Workshop Gallery had been located just around the corner from N.A.M.E.'s 9 West Hubbard address, on State Street; the lofts along Hubbard had long served as artists' studios and living quarters. In 1957, artists Melvin Johnson and Johann Sellenraad had opened an informal alternative space in their loft at 22 West Hubbard. However, the street's identity as an alternative district did not take shape until N.A.M.E.'s move there.
24. Kay Larson, "Rooms with a point of view," *Artnews* 78, 8 (Oct. 1977): 34.
25. *Ibid.*: 34-5.
26. Interestingly, Jane Allen and Derek Guthrie raised this issue in a 1974 interview with N.A.M.E.'s founding members, stating it was a "rare organization that can outlast its founding members." N.A.M.E.'s members replied that they took as one of their major responsibilities finding replacements when they left the gallery, stating that the "important thing is that we stay open for good." Jane Allen and Derek Guthrie, "What's in a N.A.M.E.?" *New Art Examiner* (Chicago) 1, 7 (Apr. 1974): 3, 10.
27. Franz Schultze noted the closing of Superior Street Gallery in an article in the October 1981 issue of *Artnews* as follows: "...Roland Ginzler and Richard Hunt became affiliated with Holland-Goldowsky; Ellen Lahyon and Dominick De Meo with Fairweather-Hardin; Seymour Rosofsky with Richard Feigen."
28. One problem some alternatives, particularly co-ops, quickly discovered was "member burnout," where some members, after installing one- or two-person exhibitions, and given the responsibilities of running the gallery, often could not get together sufficient work to show annually or even biannually, causing tension among the membership.
29. Other alternatives to the current "alternative space scene" include large group shows organized and sponsored by spaces, such as Randolph Street Gallery's 1981 "Loop Show" (curated by Larry Lundy), which took place in a building slated for renovation in Chicago's Printer's Row District; art parties, such as the 1981 "Black Light-Planet Picasso" party organized by Darina Novitovic; and one-day exhibitions held in artists' lofts, such as the 1982 "1840" show organized by Ian Edwards, George Horner, and Victor Venuti.