

Rise and Fall of Alternatives Spaces

Cristelle TERRONI

Throughout the 1970s, New York's alternative spaces appeared through the spontaneous initiatives of avant-garde artists whose wish was to emancipate art from the institutional and commercial pressures of the art world. The use of decaying urban spaces was thus one of the main characteristics of these spaces. Most of them have disappeared, others have been assimilated by the commercial or institutional art systems.

New York's first alternative spaces appeared by the end of the 1960s in SoHo,¹ one of Manhattan's southern districts. At the beginning of the decade, when the artists started to settle illegally in the abandoned lofts of some of the local manufactures, it was hard to predict that the South Houston District could and would become the center of New York's artistic avant-garde. As the first artists were settling in, the manufactures, as well as the wholesale and retail businesses had already abandoned most of the buildings of this industrial neighborhood. The future of SoHo was also threatened by important plans of urban restructuring. The most ambitious of them was headed by the urban planner Robert Moses, whose project – *The Lower Manhattan Expressway* – was to insert an East-West ten lane expressway across the south of the island, connecting New Jersey to Brooklyn *via* the Holland Tunnel and the East River Bridge. The projected expressway would therefore cut through Chinatown, Little Italy, SoHo, the Lower East Side and South Village. The project was approved by the city in 1960 and from then on faced a relentless and very organized resistance, in which SoHo's artists formed a pungent group.² At the time, even if SoHo's artists and residents were very vocal against the construction of the expressway, their presence in the district as inhabitants remained illegal. It would remain so until 1971 because of strict urban zoning laws; as an old industrial neighborhood SoHo was indeed classified as an M1 zone in which any kind of permanent residence was unlawful. In spite of all these rules and restrictions, it was in SoHo that a movement of urban and economic revival of the south of Manhattan started. By the mid 1960s, the

¹ SoHo is an acronym for *South of Houston Street*; in his book on the birth of SoHo as an artists' neighborhood, Richard Kostelanetz indicates that the acronym started to be used in 1969 only: Kostelanetz, Richard. *SoHo: the rise and fall of an artists' colony*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

² SoHo's artists gathered in an organization as soon as 1960: *Artists Against the Expressway* (AAE).

political involvement of the artists was strong enough to save the district from demolition and their presence in the neighborhood also marked the beginnings of an intense artistic life, in which alternative spaces played a key role. Among the first alternative spaces to open in October 1970 was *112 Greene Street/ Workshop*, a space which carried the very neutral name of its address; its exhibition and work space was located in the ground and basement levels of a building owned by the artist. Jeffrey Lew's studio was located above on another floor. *112 Greene Street/ Workshop* kept its original name until the late 1970s when it relocated and was renamed *White Columns*.³

Among the fifty or so alternative spaces which appeared in New York from 1968 to 1985 – a list was edited by Julie Ault in 2002⁴ – not all were located in SoHo, nor were they all former artists' studios. Yet all of them were born out of the spontaneous initiatives of local artists and each possessed its own distinguishable identity, delineated by its structure (artists' cooperative, private studio, non profit group), as well as the variety of their artistic activities (installations, performances, video art...). The spaces I will focus on in this essay can be identified as the first generation of alternative spaces, which appeared in New York from 1969 to 1975:⁵ *Apple, Gain Ground, 98 Greene Street, 3 Mercer Street Store, 112 Greene Street, The Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Artists Space, Creative Time, The Kitchen*. These spaces all appeared in an agitated social and political climate which made them specific from a strictly historical point of view; most of them also opened without any exterior funds and their structure thus remained rather informal during the first years of their existence. The administrators were the artists themselves. A second generation of alternative spaces was born after 1976: *The Alternative Museum, Franklin Furnace, Printed Matter, The Drawing Center, The New Museum, Fashion Moda*.

Yet, distinguishing between the first and second generations of alternative spaces leaves the question of identity unanswered; on what grounds and characteristics (artistic and/or administrative) was an artistic space defined as “alternative” in the 1970s? What was the artistic nature of the alternative these spaces offered? These are questions I would like to address while studying the alternative spaces within the urban, economic and artistic contexts which prevailed to their multiplication throughout the decade.

³ The space changed names in 1979 when it moved out of its first location, see the history of what is now a non-profit art gallery at: www.whitecolumns.org/

⁴ Julie Ault, *Alternative art New York, 1965-1985* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

⁵ The first generation of alternative spaces was identified by an exhibition organized by Marcia Tucker in 1981 at the New Museum: *Alternatives In Retrospect, an historical overview, 1969-1975*, The New Museum, 1981. The division of alternative spaces between a first and second generation is further discussed in the PhD thesis of Pauline Chevalier, Pauline Chevalier, *Les Pratiques artistiques des Espaces Alternatifs à New-York, 1969-1980*, Université François-Rabelais, Tours, 2010.

Clarifying the Identity of Alternative Spaces

The expression “alternative space” has been used since the early 1970s. It was coined by Brian O’ Doherty, a conceptual artist also known under the name of Patrick Ireland. In the early 1970s, O’ Doherty was at the head of the *Visual Arts Program* at the *National Endowment for the Arts*.⁶ It was within the confines of this federal agency that in 1972 he created a specific type of grants that would go to “workshops/alternative spaces”. The expression was also commonly used in the art press at the time, as in the title of an article published by the magazine *Art in America* in 1973, “Alternative Spaces – SoHo style.”⁷ By the end of the decade, the British art critic Lawrence Alloway added a general definition to his portrait of one of New York’s alternative spaces (*10 Downtown*): “ ‘alternative spaces’ is a general term referring to the various ways in which artists show their work outside commercial galleries and formally constituted museums. It includes the use of studios as exhibition space, the temporary use of buildings for work done on site, and cooperatives of artists, whether for the purpose of putting on one exhibition or for running a gallery on a long-term basis.”⁸ This very broad and inclusive description defines alternative spaces negatively, as being neither commercial galleries nor museums, and leaves out the artistic production of such spaces. The purpose of this essay is therefore to observe the spatial, economic and urban traits shared by these art spaces, in order to understand their alternative nature.

Alternative Spaces and the Spatial Context of the Art Work

The most blatant characteristic of this first generation of alternative spaces was the rough, sometimes industrial, quality of the buildings in which artists worked and exhibited. The dilapidated nature of SoHo’s old manufactures, as well as that of decayed municipal buildings that the city of New York agreed to lend to artists, was immediately spotted out by the press as an important feature of alternative spaces; “Apotheosis of the crummy space” titled an article published in *Art Forum* magazine in 1976, on the occasion of P.S.1’s first exhibition (*Rooms* 1976). That year, *Project Studios 1* was New York’s latest and largest alternative space, which strangely operated from a former public school located in Queens.⁹

The first exhibition organized at P.S.1 was called *Rooms* and took place in the dilapidated

⁶ The N.E.A was created in 1965 by President Lyndon Baines Johnson. This federal agency represented the cultural component of the President’s Great Society program. The goal of the agency was not to serve directly the community but to strengthen the cultural market, as well as to promote American culture abroad. See Binkiewicz, Donna M. *Federalizing the muse United States arts policy and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-1980*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

⁷ Stephanie Edens, « Alternative Spaces- SoHo style », *Art in America*, Novembre-décembre 1973.

⁸ Lawrence Alloway, *10 Downtown, 10 years*, NY, 1978, p. 4

⁹ P.S.1 is the acronym for Public School 1; P.S.1 still exists at the same location, but is now part of MoMA.

classrooms of the old school, without the building to be renovated or thoroughly cleaned before the first show was organized:¹⁰ the seventy-five artists who presented work in this immense artistic venue – which had long been abandoned by the City of Long Island – were in fact delighted to work in dusty classrooms, among blackboards and broken windows. In her article, Nancy Foot described the place as a “wreck” in which prevailed “ a disaster area ambiance.”¹¹ The space was as rough and crummy at *112 Greene Street/ Workshop*, one of SoHo’s most prominent alternative spaces; contrary to what was happening in any other contemporary art gallery, none of the walls was painted white. According to Stephanie Edens, in an article published in *Art In America* in November 1973, the artists exhibiting there were faced with the challenge of taming the space: “Split by two pairs of cast iron pillars and punctuated by pipes, *112* is a difficult space to use. But in sharp distinction to the way commercial gallery maintains the virginal sanctity of its walls, Lew¹² encourages artists to drape from the ceiling, to hammer in the floor, even burrow underground.” In other words, the artists had to integrate the architectural features of *112 Greene Street* into their work.

The raw and crummy nature of alternative spaces was therefore a matrix and constant source of inspiration for artists. It was also the direct consequence of the economic situation surrounding their birth in the first place. Looking for cheap and vacant spaces, the artists set up their studios in any building they would find, thus defeating the original purpose of the industrial spaces they occupied. The most obvious example is again SoHo and its old abandoned manufactures. But alternative spaces were also found outside of this neighborhood. *The Kitchen*, for example, opened in July 1971 as a space dedicated to video art. This alternative space opened in the kitchens of the Broadway Central Hotel. In the early 1970s this former hotel kitchen was the only vacant space of the *Mercer Art Center*, a group of art galleries located in a former hotel in Greenwich Village. The random appropriation of vacant spaces, coupled with the near-absence of financial investment to restore them therefore explains the roughness of these alternative surroundings. In 1971, Alanna Heiss created *The Institute for Art and Urban Resources*, a non-profit organization whose aim was to systematically look for such vacant urban spaces and resuscitate them by the most avant-garde exhibitions or by artists’ studios. Alanna Heiss had been inspired by the experience of St Katherine’s Dock in London.¹³ By the late 1960s she was also married to the sculptor Jene

¹⁰ According to Nancy Foot in her article, the complete renovation of the building would have cost \$1,5 million, whereas the building was simply set up to sanitary norms for \$150.000, with the help private and public funds.

¹¹ Nancy Foot, *op. cit*

¹² Jeffrey Lew was the founder *112 Greene Street / Workshop*, he possessed the building in which the space was open and had his studio on an upper floor of the building.

¹³ St Katherine’s Dock was very large building recently been acquired by the city of London, who had accepted to lend part of the building to artists in need of a studio; the experience lasted for two years, from 1968 to 1970.

Highstein and therefore very aware of the need to make more studios available for artists in New York City. *The Institute* set its headquarters in various municipal buildings in the heart of Manhattan but also in other boroughs. Before settling in a public school in Queens in 1976 (P.S.1), the *Institute* was located at *10 Bleeker Street*, a former SoHo workshop, at *The Clocktower*, on the very last floor of the *New York Life Insurance Building* near Canal Street, but also in an abandoned factory on Coney Island, on the banks of the Cropsy Canal (*Coney Island Factory*).

The fact that New York's alternative spaces did not look like any of the pristine art galleries located on 57th street in Manhattan is the result of several factors. First, the economic constraint prevented artists as well as administrators/curators like Alanna Heiss to undertake any renovation in the facilities they occupied: before the first exhibition was organized at P.S.1 in 1976, renovation works were estimated to \$1.5 million by the city authorities.¹⁴ Once the decision was taken to maintain the building in its initial state of disrepair, the unpolished quality of the space – its *crumminess* as it was coined in the art press at the time – was seen as a perfect setting for the art works created by the artists. Indeed, through sculptural works and installations, avant-garde artists not only worked within but on the space itself: its floor, its walls, its ceilings and overall architectural features.

In 1966 already, Allan Kaprow had remarked on the use of new spaces of exhibition in the case of installations and happenings: “Gallery exhibited environments [later called installations] almost invariably tend to be untouchable, static display pieces in conformity with the gallery tradition. [...] the only fruitful direction to take is toward those areas of the everyday which are less abstract, less boxlike, such as the out of doors, a street crossing, a machine factory or the seaside. The forms and themes already present in these [spaces] can indicate the idea of the art work and generate not only its outcome but a give-and-take between the artist and the physical world.”¹⁵ Many installations created in *112 Greene Street/ Workshop* offer examples of this very tight link established between the work of art and its spatial context. Gordon Matta-Clark's installations – or “pieces” as they were called in the early 1970s – offer obvious illustrations of this link, his work always cutting directly into the space. Such was the case with *Cherry Tree* (1970), for which Gordon Matta Clark dug a hole into the basement floor, planted a cherry tree in it, and then used an infra-red light as subsidiary for natural light.¹⁶ For *Winter garden; mushroom and waistbottle recycling cellar* (1971), another of Matta-Clark's pieces, the artist used the old sidewalk elevator

¹⁴ Nancy Foot, Op. Cit.

¹⁵ Kaprow, Allan. *Assemblage, environments & happenings*. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1966. p. 182-183

¹⁶ A good view of the installation can be seen on the website of the gallery White Columns:
http://www.whitecolumns.org/archive/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/11

shaft of the building, filled it with empty bottles collected throughout the city and grew mushrooms in it. In direct echo with these examples, Martin Beck¹⁷ explains that there is a progressive shift from contingent urban reality to outright avant-garde aesthetic. He indeed explains that since the mid-1970s “maintaining the material rawness of the loft-space was no longer perceived as oppositional; instead it was considered an aesthetic choice tied to a specific artistic movement that had gained prominence in the gallery system.” In the case of installations and performances executed at *112 Greene Street/ Workshop*, or even for *Rooms*, which has been mentioned before, the formal difference between artistic container and artistic contents was no longer a pertinent one and the space was entirely absorbed into the work of the artist.

The rough architecture of alternative spaces was also endowed with political meaning; indeed, refusing to adopt the white pristine frame of commercial galleries amounted to refusing the codes and rules of New York’s commercial and institutional art world. And beyond the pristine frame lay the aesthetics of high modernism, a link which was formally exposed by Brian O’ Doherty in the mid-1970s:¹⁸ “The development of the pristine, placeless white cube is one of modernism’s triumphs – a commercial, aesthetic, and technological development». In the early 1970s, the modernist definition of the art work, described as an autonomous object placed within a neutral spatial context, the White Cube, still dominated New York’s contemporary art world and museums’ artistic discourse. Rejecting the White Cube as an adequate art container was therefore a gesture of opposition, which carried political as well as aesthetic meanings. In the third essay of *Inside the White Cube*¹⁹, Brian O’ Doherty speaks of “context as content” and explain how alternative art practices aim at exposing the spatial and institutional context of the art work, instead of an autonomous object. As a challenge offered to the formalism of late modernism, alternative art practices therefore appeared as a challenge to the art practices so far established within the white galleries of modern art museums.

Alternative Spaces as Places of Avant-Garde Art

The alternative movement of the 1970s took place in a period of social and political dissent which concerned and touched the whole country from the early 1960s to the late 1970s. For about fifteen-years American interior politics were dominated by the question of the Civil Rights, in favor of racial and sexual minorities, as well as by the growing discontent about the Vietnam War. On April 1967, about two hundred thousand people gathered in the streets of New York to demand the

¹⁷ Martin Beck, « Alternative: spaces », in Julie Ault, 2002

¹⁸ Brian O’Doherty published three essays in *Artforum* in 1976, they were then published together under the title: *Inside the white cube, the Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Larkspur, Ca., Lapis Press, 1976

¹⁹ Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the white cube*, Larkspur, Ca., Lapis Press, 1976

end of the war. As a major center of artistic and cultural life in America, the city of New York was a vocal hotbed of political dissent. The city had indeed been home to a variety of counter-cultural groups and movements localized in the south of Manhattan since the 1950s (in Greenwich Village, in the East Village, in Alphabet City, as well as around Tompkins Square Park and Saint Mark's street). A few years before the apparition of the first alternative spaces, New York's artistic avant-garde joined this movement of political dissent through the criticism of the formalist principles of late modernism. Through the various artistic movements developed during the 1960s, Pop Art, Minimalism, and Happening among others, many artists started to question the dominant aesthetic principles established since the 1950s and structuring New York's art world. With the emergence of new art forms, the modernist idea of an autonomous and self-sufficient work of art, an object which was understood as being disconnected from the spatial and political realities of its surroundings, was no longer possible.

As if to illustrate this new contextual approach to art, New York's museums suddenly became the prime targets of a movement of opposition led by politically engaged artists and critics. The battle between local artists and New York's museums started in 1969 when groups such as the Art Workers Coalition organized protests and direct actions against the MoMA, the Guggenheim and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Minimalist, post-minimalist and conceptual artists like Robert Morris, Carl Andre and Hans Haacke, art critics like Willoughby Sharp and Lucy Lippard, denounced and rejected art museums as anti-democratic institutions. They asked for more openness and democracy within these institutions, from the selection process to their social and political responsibilities²⁰. What was then the role played by alternative spaces within these tense artistic and political contexts? Because of their original definition as alternatives and because of their will to stand apart from the two models structuring the art world – the museum and the commercial gallery - these new art spaces embodied the very strong criticisms that were leveled at the institutional and mercantile art systems. Their criticism took on new forms however and operated from outside of traditional art practices. In more practical terms, it is through the diffusion of art practices whose forms and content escaped the common strategies of merchandising and display that alternative spaces leveled their criticisms at New York's art world. In the introduction of a book dedicated to *112 Greene Street/Workshop*²¹, the artists Tina Girouard explained what the real artistic goal was: "It is important to note that although there were many reasons for protest in 1970, the real focus was on the work itself. [...] There was also a keen interest in revitalizing the dead, abandoned spaces around the city and in using the cast-off materials of light industry in the neighborhood. The results

²⁰ See the most important reference on the subject: Julia Bryan Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2009).

²¹ *112 Workshop, 112 Greene Street: History, Artists & Artworks* (New York: New York University Press, 1981)

were often undefinable and unsaleable.” In the case of *112*, as in many other alternative spaces of the same generation, the aim was not to merge with the movement of political dissent which agitated New York’s art world, but to be critical nonetheless through the production of avant-garde art forms.

This creative freedom implied that artists working and exhibiting in alternative spaces would ignore all of the artistic and practical constraints imposed by museums or art galleries, which often implied creating art works within the boundaries of a definite and commonly accepted style. As Tina Girouard remarked in the above quotation, the art works created in alternative spaces defied commercial and exhibition strategies. In the early 1970s critics did not know how to define these works either. Here is how the *New York Times*’ critic Peter Schjeldahl described one of the *112*’s first sculpture/ installation exhibitions: “ most [artists in the show] are united by an obvious relish for raw, *natural* (manufactured goods and junk being part of the urban pastoral) things and material which they employ with a forceful minimum of ostensible craft and design. Their break from the recent tradition of formalism, with its insistence on the rationalized art object seems complete.”²² The merchandising of such works was impossible because they were created on site and because their life span was often very short.

The alternative was thus to create works of art which could not be described as objects anymore, a trend which was very quickly analyzed and documented by the New-York critic Lucy Lippard in an anthology published in 1973, *The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966-1972*.²³ The ephemeral nature of many art works created in this period made it difficult, if not impossible, to document them. Many sank into oblivion. In the monograph dedicated to *112*, the editor apologized for the lack of information on Gordon Matta-Clark’s work from 1971 to 1973: “Gordon Matta Clark’s work was changing daily and much of what he did then was never documented.”²⁴ When and if someone took the trouble to record what was done, it was always intentionally and through photographs or the video recording of performances, in which sculptures and installations would for example appear. Transience was synonymous with alternative.

Alternative spaces also abandoned the traditional standards of art display as they set by museums and galleries. The wording changed: they did not organize *exhibitions*, but *shows* or *workshops*, in which viewers were invited to participate in various ways, rather than engage in the sheer contemplation of seemingly autonomous and self-sufficient art objects. The artistic outcome

²² Peter Schjeldahl, “Sculpture Found in Rag Factory”, *New York Times*, November 1st, 1970, p. 125

²³ Lucy R Lippard, *Six years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*, New York, Praeger, 1973.

²⁴ *112 Workshop, 112 Greene Street* (1981), p. 5

of such shows was subject to chance, chance as to the final form of the show, but also as to their effect on the viewers. This can again be illustrated with what was happening at *112 Greene Street*. In 1971, Jeffrey Lew invented the concept of “*Group Indiscriminate*” and got rid all at once of any formal process of selection: for these shows exhibition space would be given on a first come first served basis. The alternative was also that of new art forms. Although conceptual art and installations had started to be integrated to the formal circuit of art exhibitions,²⁵ other medium were still widely ignored by museums and galleries. This was the case for performances and video art, two art forms made increasingly popular by *The Kitchen* (1971). In one of the articles of the *New York Times*, dated July 4th 1973,²⁶ the journalist remarks on the still utmost avant-garde quality of the activities of *The Kitchen*: “‘video art is an art unto itself, with its own reality, visual language, and its own conception of time and space’, says Woody Vasulka, one of the increasing tribe [sic] of ‘video artists’ who maintain that their medium is as much an art form as painting, sculpture and film.”

The Financial Precariousness of Alternative Spaces

The 1960s were a period of important economic growth for New York’s art market, and especially for contemporary art.²⁷ The first auction house to be entirely dedicated to the sale of contemporary art, *Auction 393*, opened on West Broadway in 1976. In SoHo, the growth of the contemporary part of the art market resulted in an increasing number of art galleries settling in the district: there were eighty-four such galleries in 1975, barely four years after residence was made legal in the neighborhood.²⁸ 1976 was also the year Leo Castelli chose to relocate in SoHo. And yet, the growth of New York’s contemporary art market happened in the midst of an important economic crisis. As services were becoming an increasingly important part of the economy, the industrial activities in neighborhoods like SoHo declined, leaving the district in decay. By the mid-1970s when SoHo was progressively revitalized by the presence of artists and art dealers, the neighborhood became a striking example of a district in which contemporary art was exhibited in very different ways: in expensive commercial galleries in which the annual budget could amount to more two million dollars,²⁹ as well as in alternative spaces whose financial instability was such that they could hardly survive from one year to the other.

²⁵ See the exhibitions organized at the MoMA and the Whitney Museum in 1969 and 1970 respectively: *Spaces*, curated by Jennifer Licht (installations), and *Information*, curated by Kynaston McShine (conceptual art).

²⁶ Davis L. Shirey, « Video Art turns to Abstract Imagery », *The New York Times*, July 4th, 1973, p. 6.

²⁷ See Crane, Diana. *The transformation of the avant-garde?: the New York art world, 1940-1985*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

²⁸ Charles R. Simpson, *SoHo: the artist in the city*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981 (chapter 2)

²⁹ That’s the figure indicated in a *New York Times* article dated 1975 (Richard Blodgett « Making the Buyer Beg and other tricks of the art trade », *New York Times*, 26 October 1975) that Simpsons, *Ibid* refers to.

In other words, the concept of alternative also encompassed the question of economic survival. Depending on their internal structure, each type of alternative space operated on the same financial basis; most of the artists' studios which had been turned into exhibition spaces did not, at least in the beginning, benefit any outer financial support and remained autonomous financially. Such was the case for the studios of Billy Apple (*Apple*, in Chelsea), Robert Newman (*Gain Ground* in the Upper West Side), and Jeffrey Lew (*112 Greene street/ Workshop* in SoHo). When *112 Greene Street/ Workshop* opened in October 1970, the space received the financial support of Alan Saret's uncle, himself an artist and very close friend of Jeffrey Lew's³⁰ who helped him open the studio space for public exhibitions. In some of the spaces, the artists would help maintain the structure afloat by paying a monthly or annual fee, or sharing the benefits if an artwork was sold. But even if these financial rules sometimes existed, very little money circulated. Whenever they were registered as nonprofit organizations, alternative spaces often benefited from public or private moneys to launch their activities. In order to get the subsidies, artists had to renew applications annually or for each specific artistic project. For the *Institute for Art and Urban Resources*, municipal and federal fundings helped Alanna Heiss start the activities in the various spaces she had spotted in Manhattan. In 1976, for example, when some minor renovation works were undertaken at P.S.1 (to make the building safe before it opened to the public), Alanna Heiss obtained a loan from Chemical Bank – a loan which was very quickly bought back by the Ford Foundation. In the case of *Artists Space*, the initial project was entirely funded in 1973 by the *New York State Council for the Arts* (N.Y.S.C.A.), a state agency which had been financing many artistic projects throughout the whole State of New York since 1960. Another of these early alternative spaces, *98 Greene Street* (1969-1973), was entirely supported by the financial and administrative aid of the Solomon couple, Holly and Horace Solomon, who personally rented the SoHo loft to maintain it at the disposal of local artists.

In spite of these various means of financial support, alternative spaces constantly found themselves on the brink of bankruptcy. Because of their nonprofit business, their economic survival was tied to the various sources of private or public subsidies that could help them pursue their artistic activities, while respecting their autonomy. This state of financial instability was therefore inherent and almost unavoidable, which also explains the fact that many spaces were forced to close shortly after they had opened. This was the case for *Apple* (1969-1973), *Gain Ground* (April 1969-spring 1970), as well as many of spaces occupied by the *Institute for Art and Urban Resources*, with the exception of the Clocktower which is still operational.³¹ However the spaces at *10 Bleeker*

³⁰ His name was Kurt Wasserman, he was Alan Saret's uncle.

³¹ Alanna Heiss now works from the Clocktower and launched Art On Air, an international art radio: <http://artonair.org/>

street, *The Idea Warehouse*, *77th Precinct House* and the *Coney Island Factory* all ceased their activities before 1975. The existence of an increasing number of public grants and subsidies allocated to artists and alternative spaces helped other spaces pursue their activities well into the 1970s and beyond, some of them until today (*Artists Space*, *112 Greene Street* – called *White Columns* since 1979 – and *P.S.1* whose affiliation to MoMA dates back to 2008).

As for *112 Greene Street*, the space almost close one year after its opening but was saved by the unexpected financial support of both the *National Endowment for the Arts* and the *New York State Council for the Arts*. Throughout the 1970s, the N.E.A. and N.Y.S.C.A. were the main sources of subsidies for New York's alternative spaces. Under Nixon's presidency the N.E.A. budget grew from \$11 million in 1969 to \$114 in 1977. It is also during the early 1970s, in 1972 to be accurate, that a new category of federal grant was created specifically for the funding of alternative spaces. For the great majority of spaces, if not all of them, the input of public money was the only way to pursue their activities throughout the decade. However, this outer input had a strong bearing on the way these spaces functioned: they suddenly had to get somewhat organized in order to be eligible, to set up artistic programs and agendas and choose a board of directors and a selection committee. Progressively, most of the spaces had to abandon their *ad hoc* way of functioning, which had so far been essential to their nature. In 1973, Jeffrey Lew and Alan Saret, the artists who were somewhat in charge of *112 Greene Street/ Workshop* had to set up a selection committee. The first *review board* of 197 was composed of artists and critics that year: Henry Geldzhaler, Marcia Tucker, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol.

From Alternative Spaces to Institutions, an Unavoidable Progression?

In other words – and to summarize Brian Wallis's thesis in his article on the economy of alternative spaces³² – the arrival of public funds represented a real threat to the essentially spontaneous character of such art venues whose alternative identity was tied to yet undefined avant-garde practices and financial instability. In 1981, in the introduction to the exhibition organized at the New Museum on early alternative spaces,³³ Holly Solomon explained that at *98 Greene Street*: “The space was given to them [the artists] and they could do with it what they wanted...I didn't want any name on it. That's why it was called 98 Greene Street – a location, a place...[...] it was quite spontaneous on purpose – no particular schedule – an atmosphere of immediacy. Galleries and museums must plan ahead. At 98 Greene the artists created what happened [...] the quality and spirit of the place was in this spontaneity.”

³² Brian Wallis, « Public Funding and alternative spaces », in Ault (2002)

³³ *Alternatives in Retrospect, an historical overview, 1965-1975*, Cat. Exp, The New Museum, New York, 1981

Alternative spaces are places whose identities were and are still essentially fragile, as well as subject to changes through time. Their progressive integration to the art world, as non-profit exhibition spaces or art galleries, seems unavoidable. One of the most striking examples may be that of P.S.1, which now belongs to the MoMA. Because they could only be defined as “alternative spaces”, the identity of these spaces of avant-garde has remained fuzzy from the start as well, the expression being very unspecific. The question of their identity can thus best be addressed by in-depth case studies, each space possessing its own singularity, as well as by the study of the artistic, political and social contexts surrounding their births. Because of these uncertainties and evolutions as to their definition, the question of their identity has been addressed since the 1970s and remains the focus of contemporary research on the subject. It was, for example, one of the main issues raised by the ambitious exhibition organized in September 2010 at *Exit Art*, a contemporary alternative space located in New York City.³⁴ Through the comparison of more than a hundred and thirty alternative spaces born in New York since the late 1960s, the exhibition raised this question once again and divided into three main panels of discussion: identity (“What is Alternative ?/ What is the Future of the Alternative ?”), political involvement (“Activism and the Rise of Alternative Art Spaces”), and the role of the new media (“New Media Alternatives, Past and Future”). This very recent exhibition thus confirms the idea of the constantly evolving and dynamic identity of alternative spaces, an identity which is grounded on artistic, but also political and social, involvement.

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³⁴ *Alternative Histories, a history of New York City alternative art spaces since the 1960s*, Exit Art, 24 September – 24 November 2010. See the very rich archives on this exhibition at: <http://www.exitart.org/>