IT is safe to say that no one visits Gallery 58 for the atmosphere. The so-called alternative art space founded by Orlando Reyes in Jersey City is not the pristine white box typical of, say, a gallery in Chelsea in Manhattan. It is an ad hoc display space in an old glass factory, where Mr. Reyes works on his abstract paintings in a back studio and has lived on and off with a number of artist friends. The open-plan kitchen doubles as a performance space.

Mr. Reyes has run such a gallery for four years now, and he is not alone. As artists seeking affordable space to live and work spread out from New York City into the surrounding region, more alternative art spaces like Gallery 58 are springing up. Some are in old warehouses in gritty urban areas, while others find their way to suburbia. They are demographically assorted, racially diverse and committed to supporting new, burgeoning artist populations.
gallery and back-room project space.

On a recent visit, Mr. Reyes was installing a stage in the area off the kitchen for a jazz performance, which was to feature a rented Hammond organ. Their story is typical of alternative artist-run spaces.

As Will Wilkins, director of Real Art Ways in Hartford, one of the nation's oldest such galleries, puts it: "Museums and galleries are more about objects. Alternative spaces are about people."

The phenomenon goes back to the social movements of the 1970's, when young experimental artists, often including women and minorities, sought alternatives to the mainstream museum and gallery system, where they felt excluded. They created their own institutions with a mandate to support emerging and underrepresented artists. Staunchly independent, they often exhibited artwork with strong social and political content.

Today there are so many kinds of alternative art spaces that it is difficult to define the genre. But they are usually noncollecting, project-driven institutions inhabiting the fringes of the art world. Unlike commercial galleries, they generally do not show works just to sell. Some may sell art, but their primary mission is to support artists, who are particularly vulnerable to the pressures of a booming real estate market.

Denise Markonish, the director of Artspace, an alternative space in New Haven, says such places are a kind of laboratory where artists can experiment.

"They are a place where young and emerging artists often get their first break straight after art school," she said, "or before they are taken on by a commercial gallery. They are an important testing ground, you might say, a place for unrestrained experimentation."

A work by Jane Philbrick, an artist in Redding, Conn., that was commissioned for a project exhibition at Artspace last year has since been included in an exhibition in Sweden, Ms. Markonish said, and Ms. Philbrick was offered new commissions on the strength of that work.

Artspace was founded in 1987 by a group of New Haven-based artists. It petered out in the early 1990's, but re-emerged in 1998. It now employs three full-time and two part-time staff members and has an annual budget of close to $450,000, most of it from foundation and government grants and donations. Each year it shows works from 40 to 60 mostly young and emerging artists, in a light-filled ground-floor space in the historic area of downtown New Haven. It also does public art projects and touring shows and runs an annual open studios program.

Whereas Artspace now has the means to support artists in a variety of ways, most alternative spaces in the region have a more limited role. The B. J. Spoke Gallery in Huntington, N.Y., founded in 1976 in an old brick-front building that was once a dairy, is run and managed by artists as a cooperative; members pay annual dues that help support the gallery. It shows members' work and holds annual open-call juried exhibitions that bring the work of artists from around the country to Long Island.

Beverly Figelman, a longtime member, said the basic goal of the gallery was to provide a space for artists to show their work in the hope that it sells or that the artist gets the attention of a commercial gallery or wins a place in a museum exhibition.

"Art-world people pay attention to our annual juried shows," she said, "especially when we have an important juror." This year, Adrian Sudhalter, a curatorial assistant at the Museum of Modern Art, judged the competition, selecting 10 winners from 380 entries.

However they are constituted, most if not all alternative spaces have a strong relationship with the community, providing sites for activities ranging from performances and concerts to charity benefits.

Mr. Wilkins sees them as a kind of "alternative social space," providing a friendly, welcoming environment in which to ask questions. This role is especially important in the suburbs, he says, where there are fewer outlets for creative people.

"People see each other here mostly at church or at the mall," he said. "We want to create an environment where those interested in art can interact in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere.

"I think that our organizations in some ways perform a function similar to that of an old-fashioned social club."

Harald Plochberger agrees. He runs BAU, Beacon Artist Union, a member-supported alternative space in a storefront in Beacon, N.Y., a river town that has attracted an influx of artists from New York City since the opening of Dia:Beacon in 2003. Mr. Plochberger and a group of local artists looking for a place to show their work founded BAU the next year.

Mr. Plochberger, who emigrated from his native Austria to the Hudson Valley in 1999, said that the gallery has become a real melting pot of ideas and people from different backgrounds.
"More than just a place for artists to display work, it has fostered a sense of community for all kinds of people interested in art," he said. "There is a real pioneer spirit up here, with everyone coming together to collaborate on many levels. That is the beauty of a place like Beacon."

Others have had to work harder to build relationships with the local community. Such is the case with Tedd and Katie Stratis at The Studio: An Alternative Space for Contemporary Art, housed in a small white clapboard building in front of their home in Armonk, N.Y.

"The gallery was initially born out of a sense of isolation," said Mr. Stratis, a painter. "We moved to the area and wanted to remain connected to new art and also bring some of that to the community."

The couple run a vibrant contemporary art program on a budget of around $14,000 a year, most of which comes from donations.

That figure doesn't include in-kind support, like sponsorship for catalogs or wine for the openings, Mrs. Stratis said, and occasionally the gallery earns extra income through the sale of artwork. It also relies heavily on volunteers and has several advisory boards and committees that offer advice on fund-raising, exhibitions and other matters. Mrs. Stratis, working part time, is the only paid employee.

Most alternative spaces are in a similar financial situation, partly because they find it hard to attract donors with deep pockets and partly because those who run them lack business training and fund-raising and administrative skills.

With this in mind, in 1999 the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts in New York City began a nationwide project to provide these spaces with substantial grants along with professional consulting services to help them maximize those funds.

"It was like manna from heaven," said Victor L. Davson, director of Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art in Newark. His organization, in an expansive ground-floor space, was one of three in the New York area selected to participate in the first two rounds of the project; the other two were Real Art Ways in Hartford and Artspace in New Haven.

Throughout the program, Mr. Davson said, Aljira worked with a team of consultants on management issues, staff and advisory-board development, and devised strategies for increasing revenue. Aljira was also given funds to upgrade its administrative space and received a grant of $100,000 to help bolster cash reserves.

"We found there had evolved a mismatch between the high level of services we were giving artists and the community and the administrative systems and structure of the organization," Mr. Davson said. "This program helped bring the two into better sync."

A third phase of the Warhol Foundation project begins this fall, when another dozen alternative spaces nationwide will be selected for support.

Mr. Reyes of Gallery 58 would love to see his space as part of the project, but figures it is not quite ready yet.

"We have only just gone to regular opening hours, and up until now I've had people living in the gallery," he said. "It is not a good look."

Sites And Shows

These are some of the alternative art spaces in the New York City suburbs, with scheduled shows. Plans are subject to change.

NEW YORK


CONNECTICUT

Artspace, 50 Orange Street, New Haven; (203) 772-2709 or go to www.artspacenh.org. Benefit auction preview exhibition, through April 29.
Real Art Ways, 56 Arbor Street, Hartford; (860) 232-1006 or at www.realartways.org.

NEW JERSEY

Gallery 58, 58 Coles Street, Jersey City; (917) 349-1693 or www.fifty8.com. "XX: Female Artists Take Over for a Month and Show Us How It Gets Done." Opens April 14.

Aljira: a Center for Contemporary Art, 591 Broad Street, Newark; (973) 622-1600 or www.aljira.org.

[Photograph] Above, Cathrin Hoskinson installing her work at The Studio: An Alternative Space for Contemporary Art, in Armonk, N.Y. Right: the artist/managers of the Beacon Artist Union in Beacon, N.Y., are, from left, Gary Jacketti, Elizabeth Winchester, Harald Plochberger, Vivian Altman, Christopher Staples and Tony Moore. Top right: Real Art Ways in Hartford. (Photo by Janet Durrans for The New York Times); (Photo by M. J. Fielder for The New York Times); (Photo by Tony Cenicola/The New York Times); Orlando Reyes in Gallery 58, an alternative art space that he runs in an old glass factory in Jersey City. He uses a back studio to work on his abstract paintings. (Photo by Joyce Dopkeen/The New York Times)