

Recycled Space for Artists

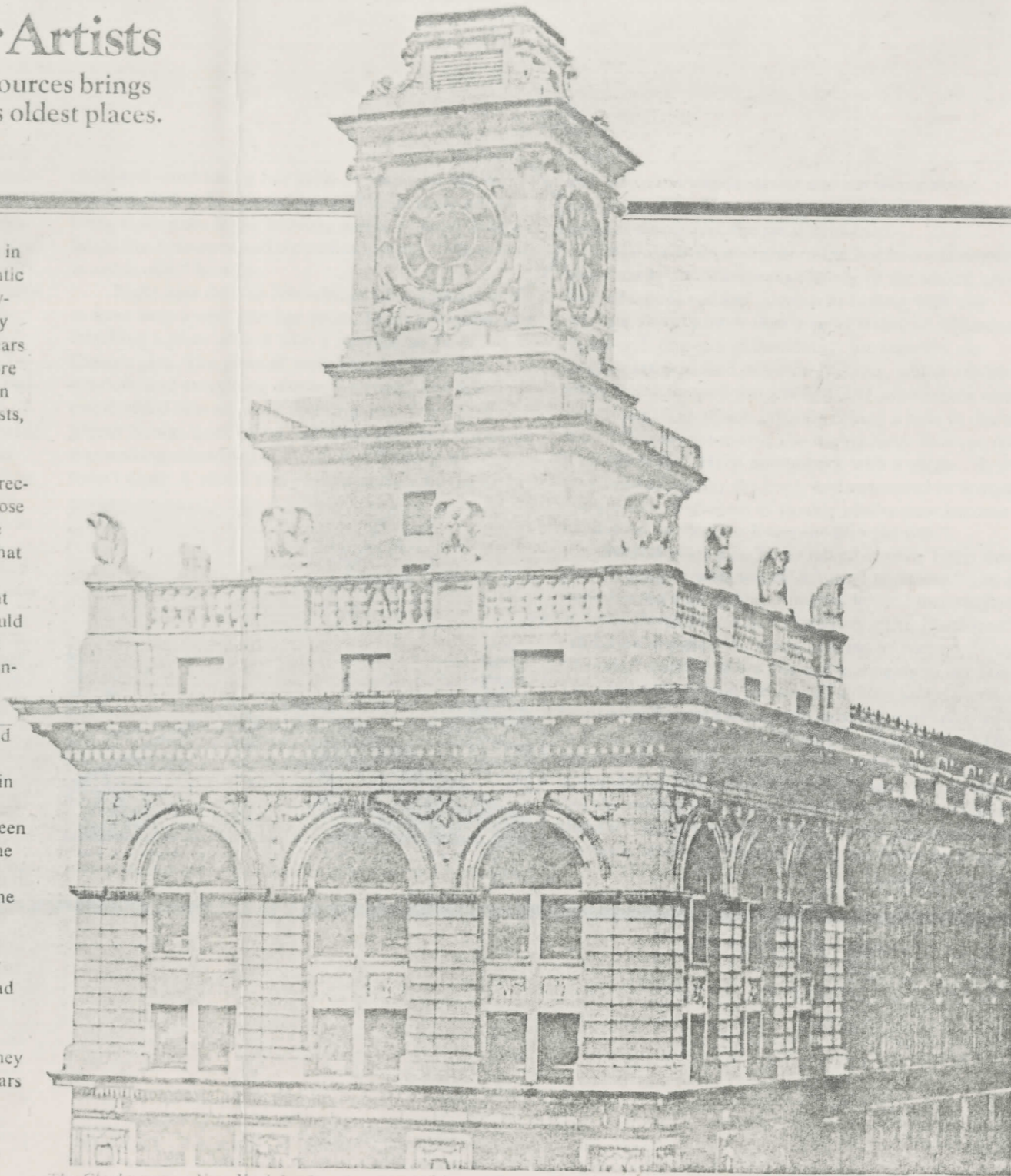
The Institute for Art and Urban Resources brings the newest art to some of New York's oldest places.

by Alex Ward

The portrait of the starving artist working alone in his cramped, unheated garret may be as romantic as ever, but in reality artists, starving or not, are nowadays lucky to find a garret that's available, especially in large metropolitan areas like New York. A few years ago there was SoHo, with its spacious lofts, and before that, Greenwich Village. But trendiness has overtaken both areas, and artists, unable to meet the soaring costs, have been squeezed out. That's where Alanna Heiss comes in.

Heiss is the founder, president, and executive director of the Institute for Art and Urban Resources, whose principal purpose it is to find unused municipal space and then convince the New York City bureaucracy that artists should be allowed to use it. Heiss is young, energetic, determined, and diplomatic, so the fact that the institute she heads has been highly successful should come as no surprise. At present, it has exhibition and studio space for artists in three locations in lower Manhattan, including the Clocktower, a city landmark on Leonard Street. But its showcase is P.S. 1, a huge, red-brick Romanesque Revival schoolhouse in Long Island City, Queens, just across the East River. Built in the 1890s and shut down by the city in 1963, P.S. 1's main function for years was to keep neighborhood vandals amused. Since the summer of 1976, however, it has been a thriving arts complex whose exhibitions have become a regular stop for the city's art crowd, and which provides studio space, at minimal monthly fees, for some 35 artists.

The roots of the Institute for Art and Urban Resources go back to the early '70s when Heiss, recently returned to the United States after several years abroad and eager to organize art shows, discovered just how difficult a task that was. "I talked to curators at large museums, and began to find out how little flexibility they have," she recalls. "Exhibitions have to be planned years in advance; and because museum space is limited, it's almost impossible for lesser-known artists to get their work in. I wanted to do shows in a simple, immediate, spontaneous way."



The Clocktower, a New York landmark converted into gallery and studio space by the Institute for Art and Urban Resources

Photo: Thomas Struth

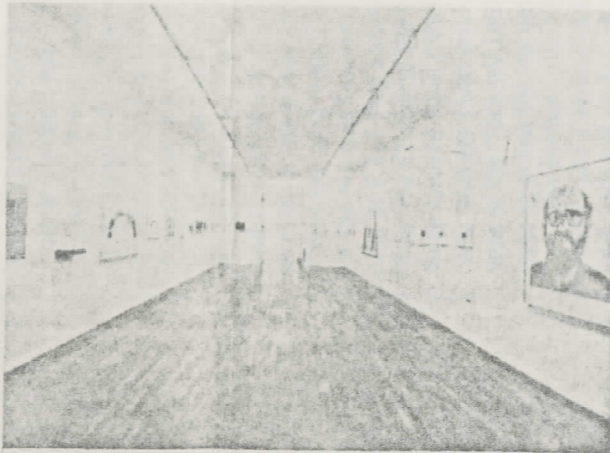
The solution, she felt, lay all around her, in spaces not usually thought appropriate for exhibiting art. Heiss had known of a group of artists in London who were making their studios in municipal space that had fallen into disuse; she felt the same thing could happen in New York. So the Clocktower, once used as a storage facility by the city, has come alive again, as has P.S. (which now stands for Project Studios) 1, whose classrooms, hallways, and even closets are brimming with art works. A typically varied recent exhibition there included photographs of punk rockers by Chris Yuin, poetry by Stephen Paul Miller, working drawings by a number of artists under the collective title of "A Great Big Drawing Show," a satirical architectural show by Stanley Tigerman, and several large-scale installations, including Ron Gorchov's "Entrance, 1971-79," a 14- by 20-foot rainbow-colored structure that stood in splendid isolation in P.S. 1's huge, white, sun-drenched second-floor auditorium, which is normally used as a performance space.

While Gorchov was having a two-man camera crew videotape "Entrance" one recent afternoon, Martin Johnson, a young artist who moved to New York from North Carolina last fall, was busy down the hall, putting amid the colorful clutter he has created in his workspace, which was once a classroom. Johnson calls his work "ritual residue redo," which, roughly translated, means he takes old things and reincorporates them into his own artistic viewpoint. Pieces of wire, glass, metal, fabrics, acrylic paint, and cheesecloth have been buoyantly assembled into conceptual pieces of all shapes and sizes.

Johnson rents his space for \$70 a month, which he

considers more than a fair price in exchange for the exposure P.S. 1 has given him. Although some artists using workspace in the building prefer privacy, Johnson keeps his door open and welcomes visitors. "My exhibit is my studio," he says.

Right next door to Johnson, in what appears once to have been a small storage room, Louis Forigione was attacking a piece of wall with a squeeze bottle of Elmer's glue. The piece of wall, like the floor, the window, and everything else in the room, had been transformed into art work by Forigione. The chunk of plaster he was working on had fallen out, and Forigione was making something new out of it. Exactly what, wasn't clear. A visitor was greeted warmly by the artist



Once a corridor in Public School No. 1, this space is now used to display such exhibitions as "The Altered Photograph."

Photo: Gianfranco Gori goni © 1979

and invited to wander about and not worry about stepping on the floor paintings. It will only give them another dimension, the artist explained.

Alanna Heiss is drawn to the inspired whimsy of avant-garde art. She speaks warmly of the artists, and they of her; for all her acumen in dealing with city officials, she has more than a small streak of whimsicality herself. She enjoys describing, for instance, an English artist named Amanda Fielding, whose exhibit when P.S. 1 opened was a film of her experiences with self-trepanation, which involves boring a hole in one's skull. "Besides the movie, there were large blowups from it on the walls," Heiss remembers, with a giggle. "It was very unusual, to say the least, and succeeded in bringing out a whole contingent of punks, who've now become regulars at our shows. Everyone else got sick."

Several years ago, Heiss talked Bonwit Teller into participating in what she calls "street museums." For a week Bonwit's 27 display windows housed the creations of Lynn Hershman, a San Francisco artist. Hershman's exhibition depicted the aging of a model named "Bonnie," starting in her 20s and ending up in her 50s. The idea was to show the uses of clothes and cosmetics to disguise Bonnie's advancing geriatric state. According to Heiss, Bonwit's took it all very much in stride. "The entire staff worked with us on this, especially the people in the display and advertising department," Heiss says. "As the exhibit took shape, they really became excited about it." Since Lynn Hershman's work appeared in its windows, of course, Bonwit Teller has fallen on rough

(continued on page 14)

The Cultural Post

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p. 3

times, but "street museums" are something Heiss plans to try again, in other stores.

The Institute for Art and Urban Resources also is fostering "20th-Century Ruins," for which Heiss has acquired the use next year of some rundown buildings in midtown Manhattan. The buildings will be turned over to artists who will, according to Heiss, "create" environments out of them by making serious architectural alterations. It still hasn't been decided exactly what form this will take," she says, "but one thing I've been thinking of is to turn them into a sort of 'museum of the night' by having the artists create tableaux in the buildings that will be lit at night and visible from the street. People won't even go inside; they'll be able to see everything from the outside."

Still another idea is for "container art," in which artists would create pieces especially for the large (eight-by-eight-by-eight-feet) containers used in shipping art. Ultimately, Heiss would like to have ten artists participating in the project, which she likes to call the "ultimate traveling show." But much depends on the institute being able to acquire the containers, which cost as much as \$10,000 new. So far, one container has been donated, by the Lyndhurst Container Corporation.

Heiss has been remarkably resilient and resourceful in her efforts for the Institute for Art and Urban Resources. "Alanna is able to talk to more different kinds of people than anyone I've ever known—politicians, artists, anyone," says Ron Gorchov. "And they all really trust and respect her." The track record is certainly impressive. Beyond what the City of New York has contributed—P.S. 1, with its 100,000 square feet of space, is being leased for 20 years at \$1,000 a year—her organization has been able to enlist corporate and institutional aid, and has recruited an active board of directors that includes the artists Robert Rauschenberg and Christo; writer Brendan Gill; J. Sinclair Armstrong, executive vice president of the United States Trust Company; and John Comfort, assistant vice president of the Morgan Guaranty Trust Company. The renovation of P.S. 1 was accomplished with a \$150,000 loan from the Chemical Bank in New York, and grants have been secured from CBS, the Helena Rubinstein Foundation, Morgan Guaranty, and the Ford Foundation, as well as the National Endowment for the Arts, which last year awarded the institute a \$150,000 challenge grant.

The institute also has staged some imaginative fund-raisers, like a roller-skating party last spring in Brooklyn, and a big fall bash at the glittery Manhattan disco Xenon. "When it comes to fund-raisers, we can't compete with museums like the Met or the Modern, so we've got to do something unusual," says Heiss. Sometime in the near future, she hopes to put on a giant bowling tournament called "Bowling for the Arts." After bowling, she says, the next big fund-raiser will be an archery contest.

If the Institute for Art and Urban Resources began as a radical alternative to establishment museums, its successes so far might appear to threaten its status. Any organization that has a board of directors that includes bankers and business executives, and has received a goodly share of government and corporate money can hardly be termed "radical." Heiss worries that the institute might become over-organized, and thus lose the spontaneity and flexibility she feels is necessary to foster avant-garde art. "The problem with many radical institutions is that they eventually get balled up with stupid mistakes because they don't have a structure," Heiss says. "We want to be radical but well run. And we are. We have to be careful, though. Once a board of directors becomes more interested in the maintenance of an institution than in the institution itself, then it's dead. That hasn't happened to us. I think we're unique."