

Artist-run Galleries— A Contemporary Institutional Change in the Visual Arts*

*BATIA SHARON
Department of Sociology
University of California
Santa Cruz*

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the contemporary phenomenon of artists who, because of institutional changes in the social organization of the visual arts, become their own gatekeepers by running their own galleries, managing their own exposure and re-establishing direct contact with their audiences and communities. The author contends that the ways in which artists have pursued and organized their own galleries shed light on both the functioning of the established social organization of art and the circumstances that bring about its change. The paper explores the organization, operations and viability of visual artist-managed galleries in the San Francisco and Santa Cruz areas of California as an alternative to the established organization of the art market.

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Pacific Sociological Association Meetings in Sacramento, California (April, 1977). This study was made possible by a grant from the Research Committee of the University of California, Santa Cruz. My warmest thanks to Judith Balfe and Gerald Platt for their substantive and editorial assistance and to Jenny Debouzek for her assistance throughout this research.

INTRODUCTION

One of the processes of institutional change in the visual arts has been the increasing independence of the artist, both from individual patrons and from a clearly defined clientele (Pevsner, 1970). At the same time the artist has become dependent on an increasingly amorphous, anonymous clientele with different artistic tastes and demands. Since the 19th Century, changes of demographic and economic characteristics of art consumers has been followed by a growing number and diversity of new means of art exposure and consumption most of which are managed by a non-artist dealer or auctioneer (White and White, 1965). While the importance of the middle person, the art dealer, who owns or manages the means of exhibiting art, promotes and sells it to various audiences, has increased, direct contact between artist and audience has steadily diminished as a result. Moreover, while artists are freed from constraints of a well-defined patronage system on their artistic autonomy (see Henning, 1970), they have been introduced to new constraints, stemming from their needs to find their own gatekeepers, thereby exposing themselves to great uncertainties.

The contemporary phenomenon of artists who become their own gatekeepers by running their own galleries, managing their own exposure and re-establishing direct contact with their audiences and communities is one of the most significant changes in the contemporary social organization of art, and one which relates directly to the altered social situation of the artist since the middle of the Nineteenth Century. The ways in which artists have pursued and organized their own galleries shed light on both the functioning of the established social organization of art and the circumstances that bring about changes within it.

This paper explores the organization, operations and viability of visual artist-managed galleries in the San Francisco area and Santa Cruz, California as an alternative to the established organization of the art market.

ARTIST-MANAGED MEANS OF EXPOSURE

Since the *Salon des Refusés* (1863) and the *Salon des Indépendents* of the Impressionist group, artists concerned about the inaccessibility of existing means of exposure have periodically organized their own alternatives, be they schools, periodical self-organized shows, or permanent galleries.¹ In the period following World War II, a great number of artist-run galleries opened across the United States (Chamberlain, 1974; *Art Letter*, Jan., 1976). Many of these galleries are referred to as "alternative spaces," a concept which has gained wide usage. It signifies new types of exhibition spaces that are non-commercial, either in orientation or in fact, and run by artists. This term refers particularly to galleries which show art that is new, non-traditional, and in some cases not for sale.

Currently in San Francisco and the Bay Area, there seem to be six major modes of artist-managed exposure:

- 1) Individual artists who own and manage galleries where their own work, at times that of others, is shown.
- 2) "Open studios" where, on designated weekends, artists' studios are open to the public. The weekend events are collectively organized and publicized by the artists involved.
- 3) Rented spaces, a method whereby individual artists rent exhibition space at places other than galleries, such as libraries, banks or the lobbies of different buildings appropriated for such purposes.
- 4) Cooperative galleries, co-owned or co-rented and collectively run by artists who exhibit and sell their own work there.
- 5) "Alternative"² galleries which are collectively or individually run and exhibit art which, due to its spatial requirements, cannot be shown in regular galleries; for example, installation works.
- 6) Community-oriented centers: multipurpose organizations where the exposure of various kinds of art to the

community forms an integral part of their functions. Their art-related activities are run voluntarily by artists from the community.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

The main foci of this study are the organization and operations of artist-managed means of exposure, their effectiveness and the extent to which they emerge as a viable alternative to the existing system of dealer-managed exposure. It seeks to explain both the circumstances under which artist-managed exposure and marketing originate and those which maintain them. The main hypothesis of this paper is that alternative galleries emerge and are organized in response to particular constraints of the present gallery/museum system. These are expected to be both structural and relational in nature. The structural are those that pertain to the limited accessibility of existent means of exposure such as galleries, museums and other exhibition spaces. The relational constraints pertain to artist-gallery dealers' relationships and the artist-audience contacts.

The data were obtained by a combination of open interviews and written questionnaires conducted with visual artists who individually own or manage their exposure means, and with representatives and members of collective galleries in San Francisco, Berkeley, Oakland and Santa Cruz. The sample does not include artists whose only means of exposure is non-gallery rented spaces, since this exposure is usually not a significant one for the artist's career. Community centers are not included as well, primarily because they do not function as a gallery in the usual sense of the word.

Out of the remaining four types of artist-managed galleries the sample includes five galleries owned by individual artists, two open studios, nine cooperative galleries, six "alternative" galleries (one of which is cooperative) and an additional eighteen members of collective galleries.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

A. Basic Organizational Forms and Major Purposes

The individually-run gallery is essentially similar to a regular commercial gallery except for the fact that the artist who owns and manages the gallery shows his or her own work there. On occasion the work of other artists, mostly friends or others whose work they like, is shown as well. When this occurs the artist acts in a capacity of a gallery dealer, charging commission (though much lower than ordinarily charged in a commercial gallery), handling the publicity, and organizing openings. Due to high costs, the gallery does not carry insurance and publicity is on a small scale. The gallery is often at the artist's home. Those who can afford the costs, rent space in an area closer to other galleries where gallery visitors are more frequent.

The collectively-run gallery consists of a group of artists who together manage the gallery and make decisions pertaining to its operation. The collective forms vary; the *open studios* are managed by individual artists, each taking care of his or her own show and visitors, but the weekend event³ is planned and promoted by all the artists involved, principally to share costs, since they are all located in one area (south of Market area in San Francisco) and are frequently visited by the same public. In the *cooperative gallery* costs and responsibilities are shared more or less equally by all members and exhibits contain mostly members' work. *Incorporated galleries* (all of the 'alternative' galleries) are run by a small group of artists who constitute the board of directors and show primarily work by other artists who are not members of the gallery. These latter galleries have a non-profit status and are thus eligible for grants, which they use for setting up the shows, running the organization, and small stipends for the showing artists. Two of the cooperative galleries have also been incorporated, but in their case their boards of directors consist of prominent people in the community who have supported the artists. The board oversees the operations of the organization, is often consulted in matters of policy and

provides the necessary (by law) supervision over expenditures and other budgetary issues. The actual decision making and organizational operations are handled by the artists themselves. Other cooperative galleries which are in the process of incorporating into non-profit organizations plan on having similar arrangements.

All individually run outlets and most of the collectives were organized by the artists themselves using their own financial resources, but a few collectives were sponsored or helped by community organizations or other individuals. The San Francisco Art Commission is active in helping local artists to organize and run art-related activities. The San Francisco Art Dealers' Association has sponsored the creation of 80 Langton Gallery in San Francisco. In Santa Cruz, individual patrons helped to initiate construction of the Art Center, a cooperative. Patton (1977) reported similar state and federal financial backing of alternative spaces in New York.

While individually run galleries are organized mainly around exposure, the collectively run galleries are organized around *exposure* and/or *production* which is focused on working together on the premises and includes collective ownership of tools and equipment. Where exposure is the prominent function of the outlet, the collective aspect of artistic production often manifests itself in exchange of information, evaluation, critique and support, usually on an informal, non-systematic basis,⁴ while the works themselves are produced elsewhere. Almost all galleries have a new show (small group, solo, membership show) once a month.

Where the materials and equipment are expensive, diversified, multiple, and require large space, as in photography and printmaking, the tendency is to obtain a collective ownership. Non-members usually pay a rental fee for the use of the facilities. The number of members becomes then quite crucial.

In any such arrangements the equipment becomes available to a larger number of people and more opportunities to learn new techniques are created. For

photography and printmaking outlets, especially those which are doing experimental work, the cooperative or collective outlet is a pioneering attempt to increase the visibility of these forms of art to the public.⁵ Most of these tend to emphasize the workshop—the production process—over the gallery. In some, the decision to organize shows occurs *after* the production setup is established.

The novelties these galleries introduce are the replacement of the dealer by the artist, who is now in a position of both creator and seller of works of art, and the emergence of the non-commercial gallery. Not only do these artists control the processes of exposure and marketing of their own art, but they have also created opportunities for artists to work together under a possibly more structured and certainly more supportive environment. In this sense, they constitute an expansion of the existing gallery/museum system and provide artists career opportunities not available elsewhere.

B. Experiential and Ideological Grounds for Creating Artist-Run Galleries

The major reasons stated for creating independent outlets seem to vary according to the medium and to individual experiences with the established art world.

The inaccessibility for the established commercial galleries, especially to new forms of art, induced artists, painters, sculptors, photographers, and printmakers to create their own. Similarly, many of the "alternative" galleries were established specifically to expose new forms of art (conceptual, installation or nonstatic art) which could not be exhibited in regular galleries (see also Patton's, 1977 and Steinback's, 1977 account of similar spaces elsewhere). Among them are the Museum of Conceptual Art (MOCA), La Mamelle, and 80 Langton, all in San Francisco. The latter was sponsored by the San Francisco Art Dealer's Association which recognized the necessity to expose these forms of art. These are places where *avant garde* work is being shown.

However, in other collectively and individually run galleries the difficulties encountered by the artists who tried to get their work shown in the established commercial galleries seem to have had little to do with *avant-gardism*. Their art is more traditional in which striking innovations are harder to achieve. This fact itself may explain the difficulties such artists have when trying to show their work. These difficulties were cited as their major reason for establishing their own gallery. Explaining why their work has not been accepted by commercial galleries, these artists stressed that it is in fact of "higher quality," and hence unsaleable, than the art shown in commercial galleries. The latter was stereotyped as "less sophisticated," "saleable," and "less daring."

Other artists expressed reluctance to be caught up in the "commercial game" and many have never actually tried to show their work in commercial galleries for this (claimed) reason.

None of the five art critics and five prominent gallery dealers in San Francisco interviewed seemed to have been particularly impressed with the quality of the work shown in artist-run galleries, though some emphasized that they have seen some good work there. Even the art shown in the "alternative" galleries (which they all admitted is difficult to show in the limited space of regular galleries), was not perceived by them as being consistently good. For the most part, the art shown by individual artists, in cooperative galleries or in the "open studios" has been perceived to be immature, unprofessional and mediocre at best.

This contradiction in perceptions and attitudes can be partially explained by the different interests each of these parties represents. It is, however, crucial to the viability of artist-managed galleries, both in terms of the artists' commitments to do their own thing regardless of what influential people in the art market think and in terms of the market artist-managed galleries can generate. It is not unlikely that the art shown in these galleries represents future, not yet acceptable, trends in art;⁶ but it is also quite possible that the explanations artists have for being rejected

by the established gallery/museum system are self-deluding. On the other hand, rejection by commercial galleries has not stopped them from continuing to produce their work and believing in its quality, and many continue to seek commercial galleries. The creation of self-managed outlets is seen by them as an expedient form of exposure.

What are the advantages of getting away from the dependence on gallery dealers?

Disenchantment with the arrangements offered by commercial galleries was a major reason given by artists for creating alternative means of exposure. The commercial galleries exist, as one artist put it, "to rob, exploit, cheat and manipulate artists for their own economic interests." The most frequent complaints referred to the high percentage of commission taken by the art dealer (30%-60%) and to the pressures put on artists to change their style to one more saleable. Other complaints were: "I got tired of carrying my work from one dealer to another and confronting their lack of understanding of my work;" "They can't relate to my kind of work, they didn't even try;" "Their snobbish attitude was enough for me to get out of the game even though some of them did like my work." Artists often complained bitterly of a lack of commitment on the part of the dealers in promoting the work of new artists.

The commercial orientation of the traditional gallery, catering to particular tastes, was a source of great anxiety among the artists. They "knew" of artists who "prostituted their work," and were reluctant to do the same. When asked about their career aspirations, some, while denying that they were ever interested in a traditional career (fame, etc.), said that they might change their minds "if the opportunity knocks on my door." Most indicated their interest in a traditional artistic career (national acclaim, monetary rewards, socializing with art world people, having their works reviewed in important art magazines, receiving invitations to shows, and so on) while expressing a need to do so on their own terms without the pressures involved in achieving such status through the commercial gallery.

Some saw the commercial art gallery as an enemy, to be avoided if possible, yet reported that having their own

gallery, having to face exorbitant costs of display and insurance and financial risks, made them realize the reasons for high commissions. No artists expressed remorse about adhering to their artistic principles. If the means of maintaining artistic integrity are to look for other forms of exposure and marketing of their art, even though it requires more time and energy, these artists are willing to do it. In this sense, they still "sell themselves." Their "profit" seems to be a great reduction in anxiety involved in submitting their work to evaluation by powerful and consequential (yet perceived as non-supportive) people and an increased sense of control over their lives as artists. Such sense of freedom sustains their commitment to and belief in their work.

The quest for artists' control over the exposure of their work is further legitimized, particularly by representatives of the collective galleries, by the claim that "only artists are capable of judging artistic work and have real empathy with the process;" that artists should not be evaluated at all except by the public at large because "the evaluation process involves economic considerations and has no validity;" "artists should be completely independent and allowed to show whatever they think is their best work."

Whether these comments reflect a sense of ambivalence or an ideology, a reaction to an unreceptive art world or a real belief in the artist's authority in matters of artistic evaluation, needs to be studied further. The pursuit of artistic autonomy is parallel to any other quest made by professionals for authority and collegial control over their work. But unlike other professionals, artists do not have organizational affiliations which secure such autonomy. Any collective action on their part, therefore, is instrumental in creating the necessary conditions for exercising control over their lives as artists. Intensive interaction, exchange of ideas, constant deliberation regarding the mission and function of a collective gallery, a workshop or any group of independent artists (all of which has been taking place), are catalysts for formation of such attitudes or even a coherent ideology.

The "alternative" galleries reject the idea of art as a commodity and the art produced or shown in their space is for the most part unsaleable (performances and installation pieces). Their purpose is to promote these arts, seen by them as means of communication rather than a status symbol, and to create contacts with other artists who work in similar media. La Mamelle, AIR and 80 Langton created information and exchange centers for artists. This may represent a state of "goal succession" on the part of the artists; either a shift from emphasis on fame and financial success to an emphasis on a viable artistic community, or a shift towards a new definition of art and its functions.

The need on the part of each artist to legitimize the route chosen is quite understandable, especially in light of the absence of formalized routes to artistic success. Yet, only when the final goal seems to differ from that of a traditional artistic career, are the rudiments of revolutionary⁷ institutional forms set forth. If goal succession is a result of "failure" to achieve the traditional goal, then one can expect that successful artists will eventually reassume traditional career paths. If on the other hand, the goal succession is based on genuine ideology, it is less likely that successful artists will return to traditional patterns once they gain recognition through their own galleries.

While it may be too early to judge—most of these galleries are quite young—the findings suggest that the creation of artist-managed galleries originated not so much due to the claimed (by artists and others) objection to art as a commodity, nor to conflicting interests between artists and gallery dealers,⁸ as to artists' failure in promoting their career through the commercial galleries. Most artists are still interested in becoming known and in making money from their art. Present monetary rewards come in forms of grants (especially where art is unsaleable) and the sales of the works shown. Though prices in these galleries are lower than in commercial galleries, they do succeed in promoting an artistic career, and offer new ways to achieve exposure and recognition in the face of limited resources. This may present elements of a new ideology emphasizing the liberation of the artist from the middle person, the trans-

formation of art from a commodity to a non-commodity, and the revitalization of the value of artistic integrity.

To further investigate that possibility, it is necessary to examine the membership and operation of the artist-managed galleries.

C. Membership

The ways in which the collective outlets recruit new members vary according to their declared purposes. Where this is to provide willing yet unknown artists with an exposure opportunity, the tendency is to have an "open door" policy with the position that the artists should be the judges of their own work. Where the collective's purpose is to promote *talented*⁹ young artists who could not get any exposure elsewhere (because their work was "provocative or non-marketable"), the tendency is to screen newcomers according to the perceived quality of their work. In "alternative" galleries, the responsibility of choosing the artists for the shows lies with the boards of directors. These galleries expressed a great concern for the quality of the works shown, mainly because of their interest in promoting "new" art. Practices of screening vary among them. Both Patton (1977) and Steinback (1977) indicated that some alternative galleries in New York and Washington, D.C. occasionally invite guest curators to organize their shows, and established artists to participate in the shows, in order to increase the places' visibility. In this study only one place (Camerawork) uses curators for some of its shows. Practices such as soliciting the membership of established artists to promote the visibility and status of the gallery are not common either. Some suggested that this was so because "artists are too competitive and ultimately drive the best among them away," which if true may result in shows of mediocre quality and a diminished attractiveness to established artists or noted curators. Established artists were perceived, in some galleries, to be uninterested since "they already made it, so they don't need us." It is quite possible, however, that since alternative galleries in the San Francisco area have not yet achieved the prestige their

counterparts in New York enjoy, they lack the resources or the visibility to attract established artists or to pay curators to organize their shows. Some of the co-op galleries tend to have special screening committees or special membership sessions to evaluate applicants' work. Invariably, once admitted the artists are free to choose which of their works to exhibit.

In all the cooperative galleries, in addition to the perceived quality of new applicants' work, the extent to which they seem to personally fit into a collective situation is a very important criterion for admission. Since the members have participatory obligations—gallery-sitting duties, committee work, membership meetings, etc.—it is crucial that newcomers are willing to carry them out. A commitment to the idea or the practices of a cooperative endeavor is required. Apparent authoritarian tendencies are met with suspicion, especially in places where decisions are made on consensual basis (see Section D on decision making).

While many of those who have shown in the "alternative" spaces have had prior exposure, mostly in other alternative spaces, most members of the cooperative galleries have shown little work prior to exposure in the current gallery. This is also true for most of the individuals who own their own galleries.

Solicitation of new members is conducted mostly on an informal basis—acquaintance with other artists' work, concern for unexposed artists who seem to be personally suited to join a collective operation, etc. Some collectives use advertising to invite artists to join them.

Recruiting unexposed artists and the non-systematic way by which the solicitation is done present some risks if the collective group is interested in gaining recognition. Many of the artists are inexperienced and/or non-discriminating in their selections. Many recognize the problem, yet insist that the work shown at their respective galleries is of a high quality. Only one representative of a commercially oriented cooperative gallery (Union Co-op) specifically addressed the issue of internal competition among members as another factor that may deter high quality, emphasizing that good

artists are resented and eventually leave.¹⁰ Other galleries, mostly the non-commercial ones, deny any competition among members or any competitive spirit in discussing new applicants. Obviously, competition is neither formally generated nor is it seen as acceptable in such places. In none of the places studied do artists engage in systematic critique of each other's work. Such practice is so crucial to quality control that its absence may very well imply a covert competitive mood.

The provision of exposure opportunities to unknown artists by far supersedes ideologically based quests for self-control. Likewise, the artists face great difficulties selling their art (rather than not being interested in selling their art).¹¹ If membership was primarily based on ideological considerations we would have found in these galleries many more known artists who have rejected the established commercial gallery system for another form of exposure which offers a different context of artistic career. On the other hand, the sincerity of the artists studied is not to be lightly discarded. Many voiced their satisfaction with being able to control their own artistic life and assume an expanded artistic role. Seeking membership in alternative galleries, being willing to work collectively with other artists may very well indicate their acceptance of, if not total commitment to,¹² the ideas upon which such galleries are based.

D. Decision-Making and Organization of Work

The ways by which these galleries perform their activities differ according to size, age and basic structure. Decision-making structures oscillate between *representational* or *oligarchical management*, where a few elected or nominated people run the organization, and *democratic* or *consensual management* by the whole membership with rotating assignments. In the first, annual all-membership meetings take place to select committees, chairpersons and other "officials" who make decisions, regulate new membership and control the evolution of events. The role of the membership, though it has the right to call general

meetings, make comments and participate, appears to be one of "lower participants" in the sense of having less power or less involvement individually (e.g., the Co-op Gallery at Union Street, San Francisco, where the members have no decision-making authority whatever). As a result they are also less inclined to be actively involved in the gallery's events.

Different levels of participatory commitment are common in the older galleries (maybe a case of "routinization of charisma"), the larger galleries/workshops (a case of oligarchical tendencies) and in outlets where the members hold outside, especially non-art-related, jobs. Some galleries, such as the Santa Cruz Art Center, expect artists to commit themselves to work on the premises or to produce at least a number of new works each month, thus requiring a high level of involvement.

Those which emphasize a democratic consensual management tend to have weekly or monthly membership meetings (in some cases, occasional weekend retreats) when all aspects of the gallery/workshop operations are discussed and decisions are made either by a majority vote or consensus. Personal comptability and (at times) limited membership size are seen as important to the effectiveness of such methods. In spite of the drawbacks of consensual management—lengthy discussions, persuasions, cajoling, implicit power games and high commitment levels—the artists involved reject overt non-egalitarian tendencies. Some collective galleries use simple majority rule and attempt to get consensual agreements.

In the "alternative" galleries the boards of directors make all the decisions involving operations and carry out all functions save the organization of shows, which is the responsibility of the showing artists.

The smaller galleries tend to have informal structures of decision-making and management: "We talk everything over whenever we see each other and come to an agreement." Where only one or a few own/rent the place and/or the equipment, other users pay rent and participate in the scheduling of events and work hours, but have no other say.

All large outlets set committees to take care of the necessary operations, the most common being gallery or hanging committees, publicity and advertising committees, and, in places where this function is not carried out by the whole membership, admission committees which screen new members. Very often the galleries have a secretary to do the office work and assign gallery duties, and a treasurer or budget committee which is responsible for the financial aspects of the outlet. Membership on such committees tends to rotate on a yearly basis. In some older galleries, the membership in the committees has stayed unchanged, partly because of specialization and partly because these people tend to be more active in the outlet.

In the smaller places, tasks are assigned on an *ad hoc* basis given the time and energy available. In some, the whole membership carries out the tasks as they come up, without apparent division of labor.

Here, too, the reality of their situation seems to inhibit the realization of the gallery's proclaimed purposes. The amount of time and energy required to manage the gallery results in low productivity levels. Many decisions are often a compromise among different opinions and result in low efficiency. Though mutual support and collaboration are high, very little time is taken for discussions, critiques and exchange in respect to the artists' own art works. Whether this is due to competitive feelings, insecurities, or sheer lack of time, it may result in uncritically organized shows of low quality, slow artistic growth and maturation, and in a failure to reach significant artistic development. Inability or unwillingness to control the quality of the work exposed (as was discussed in the section on membership), the danger or receding commitments, as well as the difficulties generated by highly participatory management, seem to be major potential obstacles in the realization of their goals.

E. Contacts with Audiences

Lack of direct contact with the public was expressed extensively as one of the disadvantages of the commercial gallery. Artists expressed the notion that "the audience is

the final judge," thereby rejecting the need for a middle person, critic or gallery dealer: "The audience needs to respect artists' ability to judge art rather than relying on critics." Others seek immediate feedback from their audiences or want to meet the people who buy their works.

Many see their own galleries as a means of educating the public. Photography and printmaking galleries are eager to explain their methods and the ways by which each of the media involved ought to be observed, perceived and understood. These galleries organize special classes, open house events and public lectures for this particular purpose, yet resent unscheduled interaction with the audience. The latter is encouraged mostly with the person who is on gallery-sitting duty. The artist's name and phone number are given to those who express a wish to speak to him or her or to buy his or her work (especially in non-profit galleries). On the other hand, many artists express resentment regarding the time, effort and emotional energy needed to create and sustain contact with gallery visitors, and are impatient with people who do not seem to understand their art. Often they try to avoid their gallery-sitting duties because of such occurrences. A sympathetic audience, however, is always welcome and artists talk at great length with such people.

These apparent contradictions and ambiguities limit the efforts of these galleries to materialize their ideas relating to their audiences. Irritability with "non-understanding" visitors cannot serve their desire to educate the public. The individually-run galleries and the "open studios" limit the hours in which the gallery/studio is open in order to allow the artists more time to do their own work. This, however, may discourage people from visiting these galleries if hours are not the regular ones.¹³ One should add that the art market in San Francisco and the Bay Area is small and collectors accustomed to buying through the established galleries, a fact which puts the artist-managed galleries at great disadvantage.

Though the established art world constitutes an important audience, the artists' attitudes toward it seem at times dysfunctional to their proclaimed interest in reaching audiences. The galleries in Santa Cruz have less direct

contact or experience with the established art world than those in San Francisco, and express less interest in such relations. Their "art world" contacts are confined for the most part to other artist-managed galleries. Individual artists, on the other hand, do try to gain access to established commercial galleries with limited success. Some display a *naïveté* concerning promotion and publicity possibilities or the implementation of public relations functions. The small amount of media coverage for their shows and the lack of interest by established galleries are due mainly to small scale, low key advertisement. An emphasis on the workshop rather than the gallery may also be a factor.

The San Francisco galleries are more sophisticated, active and knowledgeable in such matters. They are much more aware of and inevitably effected by the surrounding established art world. Though their shows are advertised, only a few actively solicit visits by gallery dealers. Others, especially the "alternative" galleries, do not think commercial gallery dealers are really interested in their art. However, they all have national and international contacts through the art media, exchange of work samples, shows and correspondence, and have generated great interest in San Francisco including substantial, though not systematic, media coverage.

Though the compromises, pressures and competition which are usually associated with the established art world have been rejected by many of the artists, the need to be recognized by that world, to pave the way to commercial success and acceptance of their art, is acknowledged by all of them. Such an attitude seems to be self-defeating. A possible resolution based on interviews with dealers and art critics in San Francisco lies in upgrading the quality of the art being shown in these galleries (see also Patton, 1977). The *avant garde* nature of the art does not in itself keep dealers and art critics from visiting these galleries or reviewing their shows, although art galleries in San Francisco do tend to be more conservative than galleries in New York.

F. Perception and Actualities of Success

How successful do the galleries think they are? The most frequent answer was "it exists" or "it operates." In the face of enormous and constant financial difficulties survival comes to mean a great deal. There is a general sense of satisfaction with the way things are working out, mainly with the existence of exposure opportunities and the working together, rather than any clear vision of success. The plentiful exposure does not, however, seem to generate more opportunities for exposure elsewhere. Very few artists are invited to show their works in commercial galleries as a result of their shows in their own galleries. Connections with commercial galleries continue to result primarily from their own efforts as individuals to solicit exposure. Invariably, contact with the public, the fact that people do come to see their shows, constitutes another important source of satisfaction, in spite of low sales volume.

The collective outlets see themselves as sources of moral (and to some extent instrumental) support for their members. Such endeavors bring them closer to other artists and serve as a fertile ground for information exchange, reinforcement and new ideas for the future. These and a sense of freedom and control over one's artistic life are cited as the main advantages of having their own gallery.

Commercial success is almost invariably nonexistent. Though prices are low, the market is small and conservative, hence these galleries sell very little. A non-profit status is seen as the solution, since it makes them eligible for state and federal grants, tax exemptions and contributions, which may generate more money than they might make from their sales. Few have actually received grants, but any consistent financial success will have to come from exposure in commercial galleries, for which opportunities are limited. Little exposure elsewhere, infrequent media coverage and only few visits from critics and gallery dealers do not provide sufficient recognition for these galleries. Reviews of their shows are not totally negative, but most are unenthusiastic. When asked about it, some respondents voice disappointment, while others brush it off as "not important." Yet the

ambivalent feelings toward the commercial art world remain. For those who joined these galleries to obtain exposure, professing disinterest in the established art world, this does not constitute a problem. For those who want to have exposure and commercial success without encountering the difficulties posed by the commercial gallery the lack of support from the art world does present a problem.

Lack of experience, knowledge, and, at times, reluctance to be salespeople contribute to the lack of commercial success and other financial difficulties. Many voice their disenchantment with the business side of the gallery and express the hope of having a paid business manager.

Though their survival is uncertain due to meager funds, future plans include no major changes in the direction these galleries have taken. Requests for grants, getting new people, tightening up the organization, and greater publicity dominated their plans for the future. The fears of losing their best artists to established commercial galleries, dwindling enthusiasm for collective participation, the difficulty of producing new works when members are busy making a living at other occupations loom large. New members can bring new art works, high motivation to participate, commitment and help with the workload. Yet membership is often limited for space reasons. Where only a few members carry the workload, survival of the outlet will depend directly upon the length of the membership of these few.

Though contact with audiences has been met with ambivalence, no changes are planned in this direction nor are there plans to establish systematic artistic critique, though both were among the reasons given for the establishment of artist-run galleries. Inexperience with the business side of running a gallery results in inefficiency. Nevertheless, no sense of failure is expressed. Exposure, not necessarily the quality of the work, remains the primary source of satisfaction and ultimate purpose. It is possible that if the financial difficulties are resolved and the galleries operate on a more routine basis, these artists will refocus efforts on reaching their other goals. The satisfaction these galleries derive

from their activities and independence are crucial to their survival. It is this that keeps their motivation and commitment high enough to continue working toward their goals despite their difficulties.

CONCLUSIONS—THE VIABILITY OF INDEPENDENT MEANS OF EXPOSURE AS AN ALTERNATIVE

Artist-run galleries were created to achieve wider exposure for artists who found commercial galleries inaccessible to them, either because of the quality of their work, the media and style in which they work, or because of their bad experiences with these galleries. The latter are perceived as limiting the artist's contact with his or her audiences, stifling creativity and innovativeness, being non-supportive of the artist and motivated by profit at the expense of the artist's own income. A greater and more direct access to the public, opportunities to show and produce a greater variety of artistic media and artistic novelties, greater contact and exchange among artists, and larger share in the profits from the sale of their work are other purposes for which these galleries were created.

Greater exposure opportunities, access to the public and a mutually supportive environment for artists to interact with each other have been achieved. All still suffer from financial difficulties, their volume of sales is small, and they provide fewer opportunities for further exposure elsewhere. Aside from exchange of information, sharing experiences and commitment, viable exchange of an artistic nature has not been achieved. It appears, then, that these galleries do not fully provide the advantages, recognition and material success, to be gained from the commercial gallery. How viable, then, is the artist-run gallery as an alternative to the commercial gallery?

Low media coverage, apathy from the established commercial art world, poor salesmanship, lack of funds and low interest by the artists in playing the commercial game, all work against such viability. The future may bring greater interest in the work being shown at the artist-run galleries (such interest has already been detected in New York, see

Patton, 1977, and Steinback, 1977). The artist's willingness to contribute the necessary efforts to achieve wider exposure and commercial success are very important for the attainment of recognition by the art world. Their survival depends heavily on the quality of the work they show. Many do not view their gallery as a replacement to the commercial gallery but rather as an additional form of exposure that coexists with the commercial gallery. Such exposure, however, may not provide opportunities for a traditional artistic career because they are, as one representative from an old established co-op gallery put it, "doomed to fail because it cannot generate enough sales and is disregarded by those who control the art world."

The younger places however,¹⁴ and especially those with workshops on which the membership thrives, see the collective gallery as a viable means toward new directions in art and artistic production. This is so because it "serves professional needs which the commercial gallery does not." Such needs include the need to be around other artists and audiences, to organize legal rights for artists, group health and life insurance policies, to establish a critical mass of political activism in order to forward the special interests unique to artists. Only a sizeable collective setup which is both visible and active can work to fulfill such needs. This may be the rudiment of the institutionalization of artists as a professional interest group assuming professional autonomy and control.

Thus, the artists in the collective outlets are not only entrepreneurs of a new form of exposure and the relocation of the authority to evaluate art but also entrepreneurs of a new collective mode of production which allows artists the sole control over their lives as artists, their careers, commitments, involvement and participation in shaping the present and future of the artistic profession.

If one is to use Seeman's (1959) classification of indicators of alienation, one would probably see the artist's plight more in terms of powerlessness vis a vis the established art world and isolation from other artists and audiences than normlessness or meaninglessness. They

blame the art world for their plight and attack the legitimacy of non-artists to evaluate art works (not the judgments themselves). Though the artists seem more open to new ideas and to support each other's work, it is not clear yet whether this will lead to new trends of artistic taste or even fashions, given the ambiguity of standards of evaluation in art which exists among artists as well. Such openness will be retained as long as artists are not forced to consider the saleability of the works they evaluate, as long as they receive grants, and in case their art begins to sell well.

Unresolved ambivalence toward audiences and competitive feelings among the artists still exist, yet these seemed to be of a lesser importance to the artists than the ability to pursue their work without the constraints of the commercial art world. Reluctant to change their style or medium, they found the resolution in creating their own system of galleries, whereby more sympathetic arrangements allow and reinforce self-actualization. An increased sense of control over their artistic lives, a high sense of involvement and contact with artists and audience are the major results of these arrangements. In time, acquiring more experience and expertise, they may succeed financially, but time may also work against them as disappointments, dwindling resources and other pressures weaken their enthusiasm. Also, artistic recognition may channel them back to the commercial galleries, turning their "independent" experience into a useful (as well as youthful) stage in their career, but one which is not the ultimate goal. Except for those galleries which express great commitment to a collective form as a style of life, all signs indicate that this means of exposure is simply a stage in artists' careers. As an institutional pattern it is liable to stay, operating jointly with the existing commercial system.

NOTES

¹In the United States, the school Robert Henri established in New York in 1909 and the independent show he organized in 1910 (Rose, 1967), the Art Students' League of New York (Ashton, 1972) and the students' and faculty gallery at the San Francisco Art Institute (Plagens, 1974;

Mulford, n.d.) provide examples of artists' concerns and actions to achieve exposure space for their work. Another example is the Women's Building in Los Angeles (Chicago, 1973).

²The members of these galleries prefer the usage of the word "new" rather than "alternative" but this is the concept by which they are referred to in San Francisco and the literature.

³In the last two years "open studios" took place twice a year, two consecutive weekends each. Next year only one two-weekend event is planned.

⁴Although such processes are more intensive in the collective galleries than in those run individually, it is in the latter that individuals indicated that they meet other artists and talk to them about such matters quite frequently.

⁵There are very few individually managed galleries in photography and non-traditional printmaking.

⁶To the question whether these galleries represent new trends in art, the answer given by critics and dealers was negative.

⁷In Mertonian terms.

⁸The gallery dealers I interviewed have provided me with a somewhat different picture of their relationships with their artists. Mainly, they perceived the artists as approaching commercial galleries from an adversary position even prior to having any actual experience with gallery dealers.

⁹Informants emphasized the words "talented" or "good," indicating that the perception of talent depended on their own taste.

¹⁰This particular gallery keeps track of how much each member sells and allows more exhibition space for those at the top of the ladder. Could this be interpreted as the creation of a "pecking order," a practice which by itself promotes competition, or is it a realistic approach to their need to survive?

¹¹Most of the outlets studied do not formally aim at selling art, but, as was indicated before, the works shown are for sale.

¹²As was suggested before, most of these galleries are too young to warrant any definite conclusions in regards to their members' adherence to alternative forms of art exposure and marketing even after they gained reputation in the established art world.

¹³Worse than that, some of the art critics and dealers commented that in some cases the gallery was closed when it was supposed to be open, according to the ads.

¹⁴Three of those studied have closed since this research began.

REFERENCES

Art Letter

1976 "Special report on alternative exhibiting spaces and co-operative galleries" ART LETTER (January).

Ashton, Dore

1972 *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning*. New York: The Viking Press.

Burn, Ian

1975 "The art market: affluence and degradation." *Artforum*, Vol. 12 (April), pp. 34-37.

Chamberlain, Betty

1972 "Who are you." *American Artists*. Vol. 36, No. 360 (July), p. 204.

1974 "How to set up a cooperative gallery." *American Artist*. Vol. 38, No. 378 (January), pp. 28-31.

Chicago, Judy

1972 *Through the Flower*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc.

Crane, Diana

1976 "Reward systems in art, science, and religion." *American Behavioral Scientist*. Vol. 19, No. 6 (July-August), pp. 719-734.

Floating Seminar #2

1975 *A Survey of Alternative Art Spaces in San Francisco*, edited by Paul Kagawa. San Francisco: The Floating Seminar.

Goodman, Calvin J.

1974 "Are you a professional artist?" *American Artist*. Vol. 38, No. 378 (January), pp. 19-21.

Henning, Edward B.

1970 "Patronage and style in the arts: A suggestion concerning their relations." in Albrecht, Milton, James Barnett and Mason Griff (eds.), *The Sociology of Art and Literature*. New York: Praeger Publishers, pp. 353-362.

Laurenson, Diana T. and Alan Swingewood

1972 *The Sociology of Literature*. New York: Schocken Books.

Mulford, Harry

n.d. "Artists and literary men, a history of the San Francisco Art Institute," an unpublished manuscript (and other historical material compiled by Mr. Mulford, presently at the library of the San Francisco Art Institute).

Patton, Phil

1977 "Other voices, other rooms: The rise of the alternative space." *Art in America*. (July-August), pp. 80-89.

Plagens, Peter

1974 *Sunshine Muse—Contemporary Art on the West Coast*. New York: Praeger Publishers.

Pevsner, Nikolaus

1970 "French and Dutch artists in the Seventeenth Century." in Albrecht, Milton, et al. (eds.); *The Sociology of Art and Literature*. New York: Praeger Publishers, pp. 363-369.

Rose, Barbara

1967 *American Art Since 1900—A Critical History*. New York: Praeger Publishers.

Rosenberg, Bernard and Norris Fliegel

1967 *The Vanguard Artist—Portrait and Self-Portrait*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books.

Seeman, Melvin

1959 "On the meaning of alienation." *American Sociological Review*. Vol. 24, pp. 783-791.

Steinback, Alice

1977 A Clean, Well Lighted Space. *The Cultural Post*. National Endowment for the Arts, issue 12 (July-August), pp. 6-7.

Vazquez, Adolfo Sanchez

1972 *Art and Society: Essays in Marxist Aesthetics*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Weiner, Richard

1974 "The artist and his gallery: Legal agreements that work." *American Artist*. Vol. 38, No. 378 (January), pp. 22-27.

Whit, Harrison C., and Cynthia A. White

1965 *Canvases and Careers—Institutional Change in the French Painting World*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Wilson, Robert N.

n.d. "High culture and popular culture in a business society." in Ivan Berg (ed.), *Business in America*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., pp. 390-406.