HER OWN SPACE
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ALTERNATIVE SPACES: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

At one time, women may have controlled the creation of images in places that represented the seat of spiritual and social power in their cultures. The very small size of the handprints that sometimes accompany the paintings of the animals in the Paleolithic caves suggests the possibility that some or all of these earliest known painters may have been women (Fig. 1). And in Neolithic communities like Catal Höyük in Anatolia, women were the cultural innovators; they were the cultivators, the weavers and the potters. In their house-like sanctuaries, dedicated to the worship of the Mother Goddess as protector of the animals and of the new agricultural and domestic arts, women, as priestesses of the religion, may well have been responsible for the ritual adornment of the shrines.

With patriarchy and kingship in the early historical periods came masculine usurpation of female power, and with the ceremonial public spaces of Sumer and Egypt came both the physical eclipse of the domestic sphere and the transfer of its ancient association with divinity and cosmological power to the public realm. The preeminence of the public over the private space was institutionalized under Greek democracy—the Athenian agora and the Acropolis, and the Roman forum that followed, were the spheres where the “important” activities occurred, a fact confirmed and intensified by the public art made for those spaces, which served and glorified the rulers, or in the case of Greece, the ruling segment (male) of the population.

Although distinctions between public and domestic art existed in the Middle Ages, there was as yet no qualitative or hierarchical distinction between the “artist” and the “craftsperson”—between high art and low art. It was not until the cult of artistic personality and “genius” emerged in the Renaissance that the visual arts were given intellectual and social status, separated hierarchically from the crafts, and made almost an exclusively male domain. And on the wings of this ascension, the artist’s studio and the art academy became the official spaces of art activity.

Zoffany’s painting of the English Royal Academy (1772) has fixed in our minds the denial of official art spaces to women artists (Fig. 2). Although members of the Academy, Angelica Kauffmann and Mary Moser are depicted as present only through portraits on the wall, a symbolic exclusion which corresponded to reality, since women in the English Academy, as in the French, were denied admission to life drawing classes, and were not given full membership rights such as teaching or holding office. An exception to this practice was the Académie de Saint-Luc, which admitted women on a more equal basis and in larger numbers, and it is not surprising to note that this alternative academy had its origins in medieval craft guilds. Even though the Académie de Saint-Luc, whose members were largely craftspersons, was not regarded as a serious rival of the Académie Royale, it nevertheless afforded, for some women artists, an opportunity for recognition, as well as an avenue to the other, more prestigious academy.1

In the eighteenth century, there emerged for women other forms of alternative space that both echoed the ancient past and presaged modern feminism. The private salons, over which women of both fashion and talent presided, influenced not only the tastes and manners but also the politics of the period, and signalled, in a certain specialized sense, the reemergence of the domestic power base for women in society at large. Another newly important “alternative” arena was the woman artist’s atelier, where women artists taught women students. Both the self-consciousness and positive celebration of a female artistic tradition is commemorated in two paintings by women artists now in the Metropolitan
Museum of Art, Marie Victoire Lemoine's *Interior of the Atelier of a Woman Painter*, and Adélaïde Labille-Guider's *The Artist and Two Female Pupils* (Fig. 3).

In the nineteenth century, alternative spaces were to foster the emergence of the *avant garde*—spaces such as Courbet's *Pavillon du Réalisme*, the *Salon des Refusés*, and the Impressionist exhibitions, the first of which was held in the studio of the photographer Nadar. In the twentieth century, the experience of the nineteenth-century *avant garde* has prepared us to accept the idea that what is artistically most innovative can often be found (and can indeed flourish) on the peripheries of the established art world, in unofficial, irregular and modest spaces. A somewhat more permanent successor to such alternative spaces was Alfred Stieglitz's "291 Gallery", which opened in New York during the first decade of the twentieth century. Devoted to *avant garde* modern art and to the then still controversial medium of photography, "291" was aptly described by Marsden Hartley as "the largest small room in the world".

In the nineteenth century, artists increasingly turned to personal and contemporary experience as sources for their art, and this is a phenomenon which may have helped to prepare us in the late twentieth century to look freshly at—and to rename as "art"—activities that had previously been seen as too closely associated with "life" to deserve that other, more exalted name. Photography, certainly, belongs in this category. But we are concerned here principally with women's traditional arts, among them the arts of quilting, weaving and ceramics, which remind us of how important the domestic realm—the alternative space of the home—has been for women throughout history. For while men have dominated the public spaces, for many women the home has been virtually the only arena in which their creative impulses have been allowed expression and have been kept alive.
Fig. 3. Adélaïde Labille-Guérin, *The Artist with Two Female Pupils*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1785.

Fig. 4. Signature Quilt (with a silk-screened image of the working hand of each of the artists and quilters in the Quilt Project), cotton and silk, 1981. Designed and cut by Charlotte Robinson, with assistance from Ruth Corning and Daphne Shuttleworth; silk-screened by Wenda F. von Weise; pieced by Bonnie Persinger, Betty Guy, Gena Simpson, and Honey Nashman; quilted by Bob Douglas; embroidered by Alice Clagett, Barbara Rigdon, and ten other members of the Research Staff.

But while the concept of the alternative space has become an important one for all artists in the twentieth century, its implications for male and female artists are not always the same. The *avant garde* artists who first came to public attention from the "alternative" peripheries of the art world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—most of them men, but numbering among them several women—were eventually to become, in the eyes of the historians at least, the new art establishment. Following the patriarchal model of generational conflict, they vanquished their conservative elders, and then replaced them, thereby joining and giving a life-supporting transfusion to the very system that they had originally set out to challenge.
Women's alternative spaces, on the other hand, seem destined to remain alternative, as long as women reject the values—as indeed to some degree they must—upon which the mainstream, with its cyclical avant garde, is based. Women's traditional arts, in particular, are unable by definition to partake of this fine arts cycle, for they literally draw their inner strength from ongoing traditions, and from modes of operation that are essentially cooperative rather than competitive. The problems and paradoxes that this raises today for women artists—many of whom are trained in the fine arts tradition and may therefore be drawn to and may identify with each of these contradictory modes—are poignantly spelled out in some of the major feminist art projects of our period. It is the very gap between "high art" and the "crafts" that becomes, inadvertently and perhaps uncomfortably, the subject of such collaborative projects as The Dinner Party and The Artist and the Quilt, both of which have nevertheless been able to show that there are alternatives to masculine competitive cycles, as well as new modes of working together—with our predecessors as well as with our contemporaries (Figs. 1 and 4).2

Are women better off maintaining alternative spaces and separate values, or pressing to join the "mainstream"? The question comes up again and again. A recent instance is that of the new National Museum of Women's Art, which may soon become a physical reality in Washington, D.C. Here the work of women artists, past and present, will be collected, and the question for many people is whether such a museum will become a stronghold or a ghetto. For contemporary women artists as well, the issue of separatism versus integration is also an urgent one. No longer naive, they know how to attain individual recognition in the art world. But they also know that in abandoning the collective strength afforded by feminist alternative spaces—and the psychic strength offered by a group identity—they risk losing, diluting, or contaminating those very alternative values once held to be so important. The answer ultimately depends upon whether the goal is to enter the mainstream on its own terms—which means, in essence, preserving it by changing it, according to the model of the avant garde, though it also means accepting some of its values—or to challenge more fundamentally the conceptual base of "high art" by setting out to destroy its artificial supremacy. Such a challenge can only be sustained from the now very real power base of genuinely alternative values and alternative spaces.

If such a strategy denies to women—and especially to women's traditional arts—the sometimes fleeting rewards of the mainstream, we may be comforted at least by the thought that this fundamental women's heritage is not subject to the vulnerability of the fine arts tradition. Paradoxically in this context, she who does not seek fame through art may indeed live forever—a total reversal of the Renaissance idea that through art, fame was assured. For it may only be by renouncing the idea of art as power that it will be possible to sustain power—the enduring power of art that affects lives, not exhibition seasons. The reward for those who choose this path will also be to live on, not in the yellowing and forgotten pages of history, but in the more enduring archetypes that constitute the collective memory of the human race.

Footnotes
2. On the Quilt Project, see Dorothy Seiberling, "A New Kind of Quilt", The New York Times Magazine, October 3, 1982, pp. 42–50. The correspondence that was generated by this article reflects the uneasiness that can accompany these new esthetic marriages between the fine arts and the crafts. See "Letters to the Editor", The New York Times Magazine, November 14, 1982, p. 158.

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