ARTLIES

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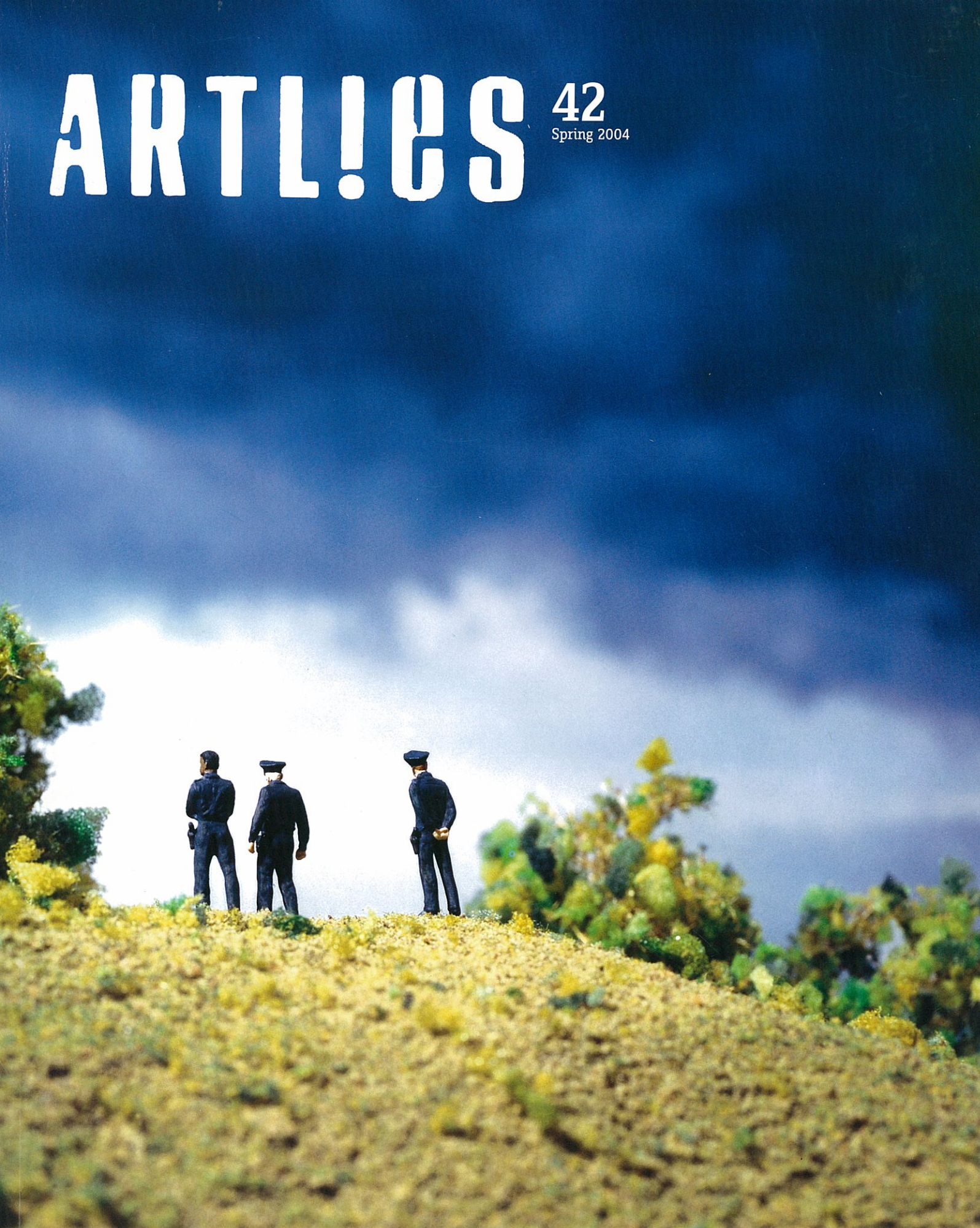


Run Artist-Run

The Changing Nature of Alternative Spaces in Houston

Janaki Lennie

The fire that decommissioned the art barn at the University of Houston twenty-five years ago sparked an explosion of local artist-run spaces, many of which remain to this day. True, the Art League of Houston—formed in 1948 by a group of artists frustrated by their exclusion from The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and by the dearth of local commercial galleries—was the first. But it wasn't until the opening of the Lawndale Art Annex following the fire that the idea of artist-run spaces caught on in Houston.

Today, Houston supports a host of well-established alternative spaces, run by dynamic professionals and volunteers, with governing boards drawn from committed groups of patrons and supporters—quite different from the urgent, raw, spontaneous experiments begun back in 1979. There is a greater sense of professionalism now, a general "smartening up," but also a greater conformity to international trends and less regional flavor. Houston artists follow conscious career trajectories, reinforced biennially by New York curators plucking choice artists for important shows like ripe melons from a country field.

In retrospect, alternative spaces facilitated the inclusion of Houston-based artists in mainstream venues and major collections—both locally and internationally—but along the way the nature and purpose of the alternative space has changed. Despite substantial overlaps in programming, artistic concerns, patronage and audience composition, each space has carved a distinct and vital niche in the artistic landscape of the city.

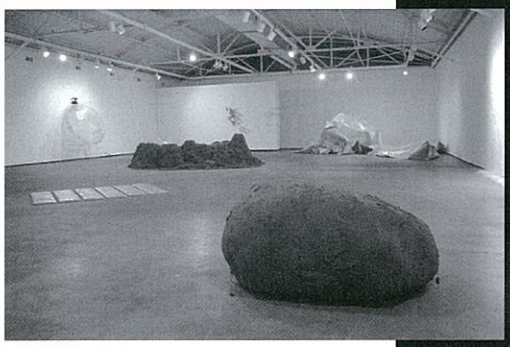
Houston-based artists certainly do not feel as isolated from potential audiences and major art centers as they did before Lawndale. Developments in the early 80s such as the Core Program, DiverseWorks and FotoFest all played a major role in fueling a movement towards self-consciousness and sense of place in the national art scene. But of these spaces, programs and festivals, Lawndale was arguably the movement's catalyst.

I wasn't there, but the nostalgic look in the eyes of anyone who reminisces about the early days of Lawndale tells me I missed one hell of a party. From its inception, there was a ground swell of energy—a sense of freedom and inclusiveness among the students and hundreds of local artists and supporters who gravitated to the cavernous East End warehouse space, with Professor Surls at its epicenter. Many artists are still living off the vapors of those heady times.

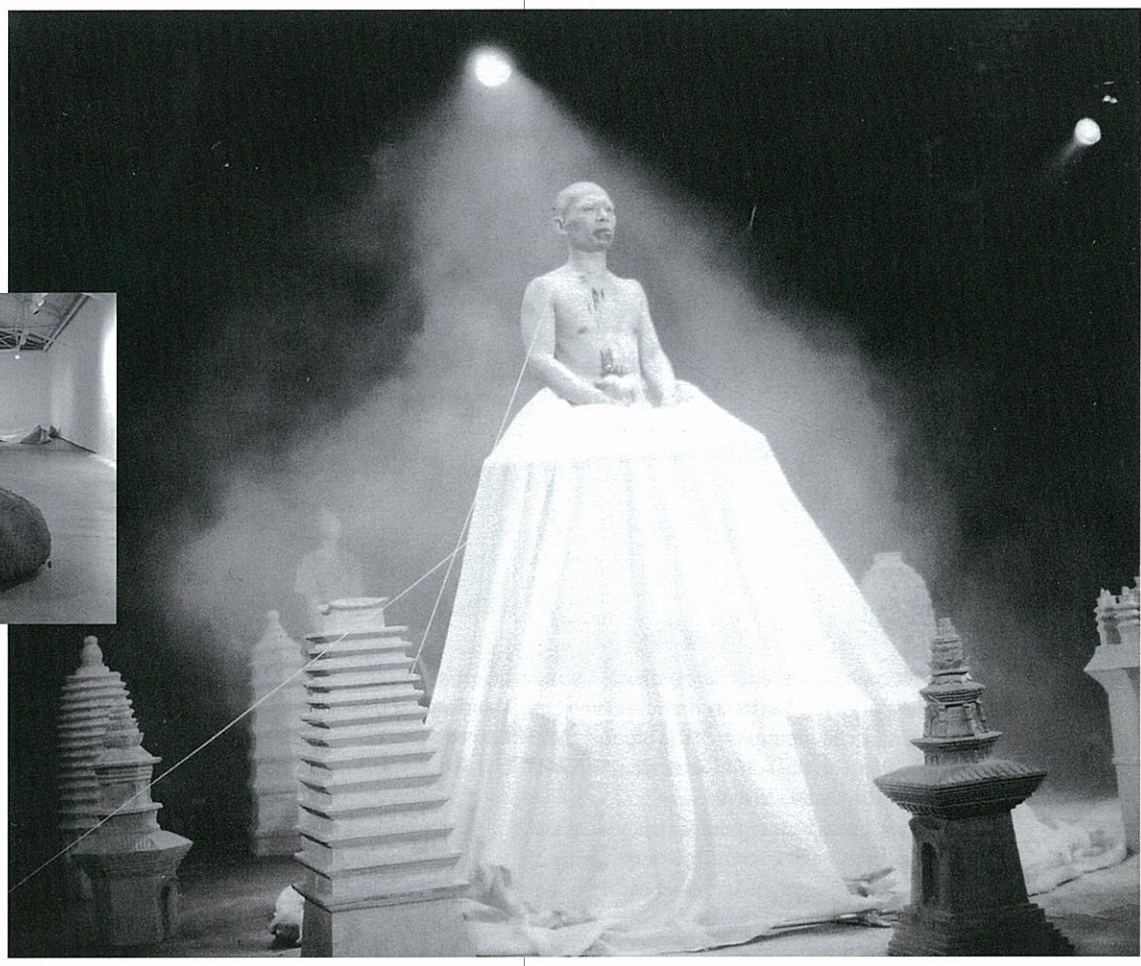
Besides mounting their own exhibitions, Lawndale students helped to build Houston's art scene by staging large-scale music and art performances, assisting with the restoration of the Orange Show, starting the local Art Car movement (spawned from the "Collision" show curated by Ann Harithas in 1984), and moving out to inhabit some of the first downtown warehouse studios.

The structure of the Lawndale organization has changed considerably over its twenty-five-year history. Initially tied to the University of Houston around professor James Surls and subsequent charismatic directors, by the end of the 1980s the University wanted to divest itself of this wild, unruly offspring. The support network that came together to raise money for Lawndale expanded into a governing board with non-profit status in 1989, emerging as the Lawndale Art and Performance Center. Part of the center's reorganization included the formation of a programming board made up of artists. Previously, the director made all curatorial decisions; now artists held the reins while the non-artist board members concentrated on fundraising and administrative decisions.

After acquiring its current premises on Main Street in 1993, Lawndale eventually dropped the word "Performance" from its name since the new venue precluded staging performative events. The major difference, however, between the old Lawndale and its current incarnation seems to be in the level of excitement



Installation view of *Munchie Munchie*
From *Munchie Munchie* at DiverseWorks
May 27-July 4, 2004



Zhang Huan, *Buddhist Relics* (performance), 2003
A site-based installation at DiverseWorks
May 2-June 14, 2003

the original Lawndale's shows generated. This may merely be a reflection of increased audience sophistication, but some suspect the practice of using an artist board to determine programming, which requires consensus and compromise, and means that exhibitions can seem uneven in quality. As a result, the work exhibited may not be fully resolved or may be too obscure for general audiences. Sounds much like the original shows at the old annex! Surls himself admits that some of the work in those shows wasn't good, but like today's Lawndale, he was committed to giving young artists an opportunity.

Critics also view artist-based programming committees as a conflict of interest, lacking the focus and vision of a single curator. Interestingly, Lawndale and the Art League are the two major organizations I surveyed that program in this manner. Both operate on relatively small budgets and are committed to exhibiting local artists. While it is prohibitive for such organizations to hire staff for programming (Art League first employed a director only in 1981), it should still be possible to present exciting shows. Efforts are being made to present shows that generate enthusiastic audiences. For instance, the Art League has lately been pairing the work of artists who submit individual exhibition proposals to encourage a new level of dialogue and assigning an artist board member to facilitate all aspects of the production of each show.

On the other hand, both the Art League and Lawndale remain accessible to emerging artists due to their selection process. Localism means that these institutions might not acquire the national reputation of DiverseWorks—or its income—but they do retain a vital role in the community. Lawndale alone provides exposure for some five hundred artists each year.

From the outset, DiverseWorks was an ambitious venture, aiming to achieve the level of programming and reputation of organizations like New York's P.S.1. Originally housed in an old warehouse on the East Side and then on Travis Street, DiverseWorks was displaced by a fire in 1989 and moved to its present 10,000 square foot location just north of downtown. As a space for new work and a forum for issues with no other outlet in Houston, the founders intended to place Texas artists alongside their peers from across the country and abroad. Founding director Charles Gallagher proposed a structure that allowed a governing board of artists to decide the organization's future so that the space would, in his view, remain an entity free from any individual or singular direction and allow input from every sector of the arts community.

Politically involved from its inception, DiverseWorks aims to provide support through programming opportunities but also delivers equitable artist fees, commissions new work and offers a sampling of grant programs and other advocacy efforts. DiverseWorks is structured with an artist board and a separate governing board composed of community members, one quarter of whom are artists. Artist board members are involved in strategic planning for the future of the organization and are encouraged to submit proposals to curate some of the eight to ten visual art shows a year. However, while in the early years the artist board made all programming decisions; today staff assumes that role. Over time, a perception developed that the committee programming

Allison Wiese, *Hay Burner*, 2003
Main Gallery at Lawndale
Mixed media
Dimensions variable

Laura Lark, *Primp, Indigo* (installation view), 2003
Main Gallery at Lawndale
Pantone marker on Tyvek

model did not produce as strong an exhibition schedule as a single curatorial vision. Certainly a single vision has benefits, not least for the reputation of the organization, but the downside can be the sort of exclusions alternative spaces were established to overcome.

With funding sources running dry for individual artists, arts organizations have become crucial in terms of artist advocacy and for financial support of individual projects. Always innovative, artist-run organizations have had to adapt to changing political and economic pressures. As spaces mature and become more professionally structured they eventually become institutions. Inevitably, their allegiance is to the survival of the organization as much as to the artists they serve. Through an almost faddish progression of catchphrase criteria—multiculturalism, educational outreach, audience development and now "cultural tourism"—directors and boards have had to become quite savvy, balancing community concerns with the original intent of their organizations. Ironically, in some cases this can mean less accessibility for the very artists who formed these organizations.

National recognition for DiverseWorks has been achieved by affiliation and active participation in the National Association of Artists Organizations (NAAO), the National Performance Network and other bodies. In 1985 then-director Michael Peranteau convinced the NAAO governing board that Houston could host their annual conference. This truly brought the spotlight of contemporary art to Houston. Diane Barber, DiverseWorks Visual Arts Director since 1997, is a board member and past president of NAAO.

DiverseWorks has been criticized for seemingly top heavy national programming mounted at the expense of local talent. However, Barber insists her approach includes a balance of interests and issues; this mission plays out over a whole season, rather than through each discreet event. Regardless, national funding follows national programming. DiverseWorks has achieved what it set out to do and is now recognized as one of the premier arts organizations in the country. While it may not provide as many exhibition opportunities for locals as Lawndale, its residencies, programs and workshops equip artists with the tools needed to build and sustain successful careers.

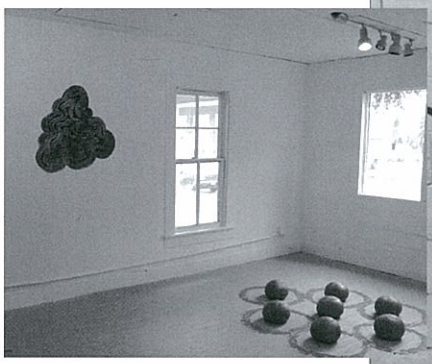
DiverseWorks is now twenty; Lawndale turns twenty-five this year. Both are old enough to have babies of their own. So where is the next generation?

In the 1980s the imperative for every Houston artist was visibility. Alternative spaces offered exhibition opportunities when the major arts institutions of the day weren't interested in local talent. By the 1990s a range of options existed for mounting conventional and neo-conventional shows, including installation and performance. While the organizations born in the 1980s adapted and refined themselves over time, new projects undertaken in the 1990s seem to have been more organized from the outset, fulfilling community needs such as perceived gaps in opportunities for artists while remaining aware of their target audience.

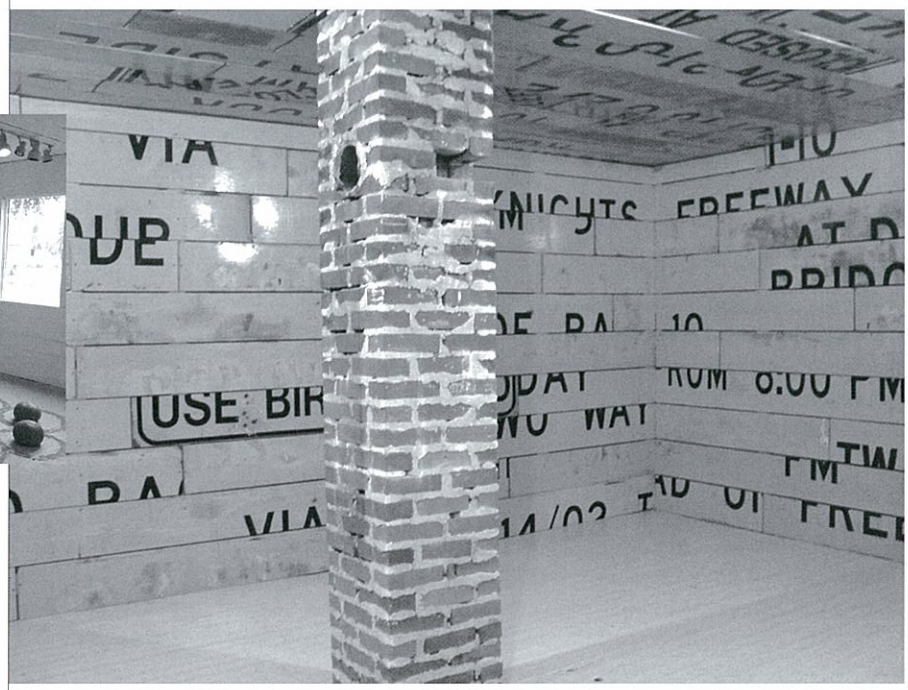
Of these 1990s spaces, Aurora Picture Show grew rather spontaneously. In just six years Aurora has achieved a national reputation as one of a handful of microcinemas committed to showcasing issue-oriented, provocative, experimental films and videos. In 1998, Core fellow Andrea Grover and her friend Patrick Walsh produced a 16mm short that did not fit the film festival format or the museum context, drawing their attention to the need in Houston for a venue for such work. Inspiration also came from local artist-run gallery spaces operating out of private homes such as Jeff Elrod's "Art of the Century" and Mark Allen's "LAX" and "Revolution Summer." When a tiny church in the Heights came on the market, Grover and Walsh purchased it as living space/cinema. Their first screening was presumed to be a one-time event.

As Grover describes it, an atmosphere of an underground club developed. Artists made films with secondhand or borrowed equipment, and volunteer workers and donations from enthusiastic individuals kept the place going. At the suggestion of some keen patrovns, Aurora incorporated and gained 501(c)(3) non-profit status just over a year after its first screening. Grover began receiving a salary in 2001. Institutional funding has increased, and this year Aurora is the recipient of an Andy Warhol Foundation grant, among others. Spontaneous individual contributions have become less common, but a steady core of five to ten volunteers remain involved in the day-to-day operations of the venue.

Aurora Picture Show benefits from an enthusiastic board whose members regularly attend events and provide some fiscal support, as well as a national advisory board that includes heavyweights in the media arts from across the country. In fact only a third of Aurora's board members actually live in Houston. While the advisory board makes recommendations, guest



Wesley Heiss, *Inside Walk*, 2004
Mixed media installation at Project Row Houses, April 17-September 5, 2004



Jesse Lott and Joe Cardella, *The Domino Shack*, 2004
Mixed media installation at Project Row Houses, April 17-September 5, 2004

curators make programming decisions. This encourages variety as well as broad coverage of issues and influences. Grover feels that the project has retained a grassroots, street-level quality despite its rapid growth and national profile. This she attributes in part to the building itself, which fosters a strong sense of community.

Project Row Houses founder Rick Lowe was possessed with a singular vision and purpose when he came across a row of twenty-two abandoned, shotgun-style houses in the Third Ward in 1992. Earlier discussions with fellow artists identified a need in the African-American community for creative development and education, and many artists felt they had skills to offer. Again, it was the availability of this unique property that propelled the project into reality; though, interestingly, Lowe first secured funding for program development. Originally conceived as an arts center, Lowe's vision was to provide a venue to present works that would engage the community in the creative process itself.

Project Row Houses secured the site in 1993 and gained non-profit status and staff in late 1994. With two rounds of installations each year, including local as well as national and international artists, the Row Houses presents challenging, issue-based work in all media. Lowe makes curatorial selections with input from a committee of artists. Rather than a venue for neighborhood talent, Lowe brings edgy contemporary work into this inner-city community—an unusual venture, but Lowe can't be accused of underestimating his audience. While openings reflect a mix of people from all sections of the arts community, on any given day Row Houses is a thoroughfare for locals. Children as well as adults wander through the open doors of the houses, encountering challenging art in a familiar environment. Neatly kept paths and gardens attest to Project Row Houses' investment in the community.

Project Row Houses has also achieved a unique national profile with a steady stream of visitors ranging from local church officials to Whitney Museum of American Art curators. The project has expanded well beyond its original twenty-two houses. An increasing emphasis on community service—such as housing for young single mothers, after-school art education programs and refurbishing and revitalization—is intermingled with preserving the neighborhood from the encroaching gentrifying forces that clamor at its gates. These days it would be difficult to separate the project's art from its social role: the success of one seems inextricable from the other.

Today there are few underground, backyard, no-budget venues we can identify as alternative spaces in the historical sense. Perhaps a combination of rising real estate prices and the variety of existing exhibition spaces hinder the development of new initiatives. Still, it remains vitally important to the health of the art community to have alternatives to the established alternatives pushing up from below. Commerce Street Artist Warehouse (CSAW) is one such space. As far back as 1982, a group of graduates from Lawndale, as well as other area artists, occupied and transformed the empty warehouse at 2315 Commerce Street into studios and a performance area.

Aided by then-Mayor Cathy Whitmire's policy of diversity in downtown development, and low rent, many studios soon sprang up in the warehouse district. The Art Crawl established these spaces as destinations every November and many studios mount shows for Fotofest, when it seems every wall in the city has art on it. But CSAW has attempted, since its earliest days, to be more than a communal studio complex. The space gained non-profit status sometime around 1996, but because of its informal, somewhat transitory nature and tradition of non-leadership it has been challenged to maintain the requirements necessary for non-profit status.

Nevertheless, in addition to a performance area, the warehouse maintains two exhibition spaces. One is reserved for revolving shows of tenants' work; the other, larger space is programmed by proposal. These are reviewed and selected by a committee of tenants who also contribute to the cost of invitations, maintain the gallery and the CSAW website through a portion of their rent. (My own introduction to Houston was through a studio residency at CSAW in 1995-96, which proved to be an invaluable start to my career here.)

Current tenant and activist Teresa O'Connor coordinates the gallery and has recently helped revive a historical connection with UH students, mounting curated graduate sculpture exhibitions for the past three years and an undergraduate painting exhibition in 2004. O'Connor's motivations echo those of James Surls; she stresses the need for young artists to experience the whole process of mounting an exhibition and the satisfaction of seeing the successful completion of their projects.

CSAW provides a venue for other groups as well—recently MicroCinema, Theater Illuminata and Buffalo Bayou Art Park have utilized the space. Collaborative exhibitions with Buffalo Bayou and Project Row Houses are planned for 2004. Though Commerce Street has the same historical longevity as DiverseWorks, its anarchistic, truly artist-run structure means it continues to struggle financially, aided in no small part by the incredible longevity of its 104-year-old landlady. Long may she live!

Two recent start-ups that don't depend on a particular physical venue are Voices Breaking Boundaries and Glass Free Grounds. Both organizations have a strong educational component, using creative processes as tools for change. Overtly political, issue-based, multidisciplinary and multiethnic, Voices Breaking Boundaries (VBB) is a four year old with big ambitions—not in terms of growing into a large organization or financing a slick venue of its own but in its mission to invest in art for social change on the global as well as the local level.

Founder Sehba Sarwar is a published author and former recipient of a Cultural Arts Council of Houston Harris County (CACHH) project grant. With ten years experience teaching in the Houston school system, she is acutely aware of the shortfalls in opportunities for creative expression, especially in communities of color. From this understanding grew the idea for the VBB's programs which now take place not only in schools but in available venues across the city. DiverseWorks provided space for VBB for nearly two years; recently Project Row Houses offered Sarwar a permanent home in one of their shotgun houses.

With rent-free space, VBB has been able to focus its limited resources on programming. This arrangement also affords the organization the mobility to target different audiences. Though primarily literary in emphasis, visual art components are added as artists step forward to be involved. The only curatorial criterion seems to be a congruence of vision. For instance, VBB recently produced a multi-media installation entitled "Translating Intimacy," a fusion of spoken word, visual art, video and music in four languages that explores the possibilities of nonverbal communication. Sarwar also takes to the airwaves each week with an informative community arts program on Pacifica Radio.

Splash, Homestyle, March 2004
Commerce Street Art Warehouse group show

Photographer Mark Nelson's non-profit, Glass Free Grounds, is an amalgam of artistic, environmental, educational and public health concerns wrapped up in a uniquely creative package. Soon after he graduated from the University of Houston in 1998, Nelson landed an American Photography Institute fellowship at New York University, the focus of which was public art. Returning home, Nelson undertook a project to clear all of Houston's parks of broken glass and litter. Working with groups such as schools, community centers, employers and their families, Nelson gathers groups of children and adult supervisors. To date, twenty-five groups involving a thousand volunteers have cleared 1,800 lbs. of glass from Houston's parks. Recently, Nelson added another component to the project—he had 150,000 marbles made out of the glass shards collected by volunteers, giving free marbles to each participant and bringing his process to a satisfying full circle.

While Nelson sees his project as artmaking with a community component, he initially received financial support for his project from the Mayor's Office through the Clean Neighborhoods program. He has since received several CACHH artist grants and funding from Hermann Memorial Hospital. The Citizens Environmental Coalition also honored Nelson as Environmentalist of the Year in 2003. The sources of his funding attest to the opportunities available to creative people able to diversify their problem solving skills. In order to secure ongoing funding and a future for Glass Free Grounds, Nelson gained 501(c)(3) non-profit status in 2001 and has recently received a grant from Houston Endowment, Inc.

Good work is to be found in all of the city's alternative venues. Each provides distinct and complementary opportunities for artists and audiences, and together they contribute to the vitality of the community at large. At their core, the impulse to create alternative spaces is really about people—individuals with the germ of an idea that grows organically into something larger than even they had imagined. We are fortunate that so many of the people who were involved in these histories are still around and accessible—a phone call away at most—still vitally invested and involved in the community they helped create. Houston has generated not just of collection of physical spaces but a welcoming community of committed artists, supporters and arts professionals whose efforts have built on the bare bones of mission statements and brick walls, and developed a rich culture of opportunity.

Janaki Lennie is an artist and writer from Australia who has been living in Houston since 1994.