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The Rivington School

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New York's plucky art world outsiders

by NANCY GRIMES

The East Village has become a symbol for the vagaries of success in New York. When the tiny storefront galleries that sprouted up east of 2nd Avenue between 14th Street and Houston tasted their 15 minutes of fame in the mid-80s, they wanted more. Once the media had designated it a hot zone, money and marketing took over, and the limousines rolled in. The "slickening" of the East Village greased the way to Soho, where galleries like Pat Hearn, Gracie Mansion, M-13, and P.P.O.W. are now indistinguishable from the area's other high-rent establishments. The art press raced after the defecting hordes, just one step behind the high-powered collectors. When the dust had settled, the only sign of artistic life left in the area was the Rivington School—a down-sized, but still vital art community that continues to offer an alternative to the glossy professionalism of Soho.

Throughout the East Village gallery boom, the Rivington School staunchly resisted the commercialization that eclipsed its own activities. Even now it clings tenaciously to the ideals others used as springboards into the establishment. Committed to open exhibition policies and the welfare of the larger community, contemptuous of conventional career strategies, and dedicated to *art brut* and Budweiser, the School reigns in the aftermath of the East Village feeding frenzy. Neither a bona fide organization like, for instance, American Abstract Artists, or a school in any strict sense, Rivington is a sort of social club; its members—some of whom are: Jeff Perren, Ray Kelly, Fred Bertucci, Ed Herman, Toyo Tsuchiya, Ken Hirasutka, Linus Corraggio, R.L. Seltman, Kevin Wendall, Tovey Halleck—are in general a motley bunch of self-proclaimed outsiders who share a disdain for the usual hallmarks of the professional artist—things like M.F.A.s, slides, pretentious monologues about

their work, and in some instances, the work itself.

Because the Rivington School is a club that practically anyone can join, it attracts misfits hanging on the fringe of the art establishment. Art-school drop-outs, unmarketable eccentrics, graffiti artists, the unambitious, the dejected and the discouraged, and assorted expatriates (who often land in New York without friends or English), have over the last ten years made their way to Rivington, where, relatively unaffected by art world politics, they have made work and mingled. "The established art world is such a closed, tight group," says

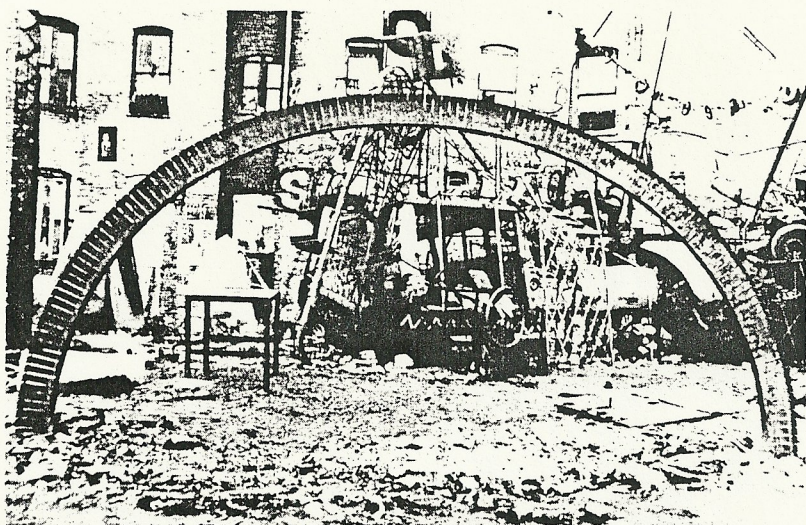
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painter Jeff Perren. "It's hard to crack into. They won't let outsiders in, so we have no alternative but to be outsiders. To hell with their cliques! We don't need them!" He pauses a moment and adds, "If Leo Castelli or somebody wants to show us, of course, we'll show. But he hasn't approached us yet."

While many Rivington Schoolers live in the East Village (often in squats), the group's headquarters lies just below Houston on the Lower East Side.

Originally, they congregated at a sliver of a space on Rivington Street that served as a bar, then a gallery; now, a dank, cluttered storefront around the corner on Forsythe Street doubles as a toolshop and clubhouse. During warm weather, artists and local residents loiter in front of the shop, lounging on blasted kitchen chairs and abandoned car seats, drinking beer and commenting on passing traffic. The School has also staked a claim to the vacant, city-owned lot next door, a junkyard that members call the Sculpture Garden. It's surrounded by a tall, tangled scrap-iron fence, a jungle gym of urban flotsam welded together by Rivington artists and locals. At the rear corner of the fence, a small forge forms the nucleus of a lively blacksmithing operation. (Blacksmithing, along with welding, is one of the skills the School teaches to members as well as to people in the community.) The Sculpture Garden provides an arena for Rivington School functions, usually musical performances and barbecues. Last summer, over 500 people turned out for their annual July fourth pig roast.

Unlike the East Village, which began outside but desperately wanted in, the Rivington School likes to see itself as a revolutionary group locked in a struggle with established values. They are quick to accuse the art world of money-worshipping materialism and scorn the finicky craftsmanship and glossy, seductive finish that they believe make an artwork commercial. Instead, they prize the rough, the ugly, and the forsaken, motivated in part, perhaps, by a dissatisfaction with the stultifying banality of their suburban roots. Like most artists, Rivington Schoolers tend to come from the middle class, which cherishes the myth of the renegade artist. Rivington gives full rein to the fantasy, which takes on a male adolescent tinge, with the artist as a misunderstood loner or solitary cowboy. Not surprisingly, the main players at Rivington are men. Women generally appear in minor



TOVEY HALECK,
"24 Foot I Beam
Arch," steel, 1986.
Photo by Toyo
Tsuchiya.

supporting roles—as girlfriends, wives, and cheerleaders.

If, in a discipline for which no rule is sacrosanct, the School's iconoclasm seems naive and nostalgic, Rivington nevertheless presents an alternative to the New York art world's infatuation with glamor. The Rivington artists have devised ways to live, produce art, and exhibit with very little money and virtually no media attention. To a certain extent, they are free of the financial pressures that they feel compromise the creative process. Whatever its shortcomings, the School does provide a support group for artists who are unwilling or unable to deal with New York's brutal competitiveness and pervasive snobbery. It is one of the only groups in the city to do so.

The Rivington School is the masterwork of Ray Kelly, a one-time farmer and studio artist who came to New York from Amarillo, Texas, about 30 years ago and eventually settled on the Lower East Side. With his cowboy hat, cowboy boots, and graffiti-covered pickup, Kelly cuts an almost hallucinatory figure in the predominantly Hispanic neighborhood around Forsythe Street. Not much of a talker, Kelly speaks haltingly in short sentences and abrupt phrases and, for someone involved in the arts, is astonishingly self-effacing. He minimizes his role as the creator of the School; determinedly populist, he maintains that "anyone can be an artist," that almost every object is a sculpture, that the making of an artwork (which the Rivington School likes to think of as a performance), is more important than the resulting product, and that artistic collaboration is superior to individual effort.

Originally a painter, Kelly came to New York to work as Mark Rothko's studio assistant, an apprenticeship that, he says, "got me away from painting,

because he was obsessed with it. He was a very isolated kind of artist—isolated from the world. The Struggle—it wasn't for me. I don't like the studio scene—sitting in the studio. Sculpture was more physical, less sitting around. I started sculpture to get away from the studio thing." During the '70s, Kelly exhibited his welded sculptures at a couple of Soho galleries, but "at the time," he says, "I was getting more and more interested in doing outdoor sculptures. I was making these sculptures with water and pipes bent into different shapes and I put them on the street. I became less and less involved with galleries. What I was doing, I couldn't do inside of a gallery."

Kelly's revolt was no doubt influenced by the ideas kicking around New York in the '70s, when artists were assiduously crossing lines between traditional disciplines and stretching the

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definition of visual art to see how far it would go without snapping. He recalls that "for awhile I stopped making the sculpture. I went back to Texas and farmed. I was interested in irrigation and water—different kinds of materials. Stuff you wouldn't really think of as sculpture. Sort of like earth art. I made sculpture with water—spray systems. They were functional kinds of art."

When Kelly moved back to New York around 1980, he no longer bothered to promote himself as a conventional sculptor, preferring instead to organize communal activities on the Lower East Side. The new genre of performance art—theatrical presentations by visual artists—had gathered momentum in the '70s, and Kelly's wife, Arleen Schloss, was deeply interested in the idea of collaborative, multi-media performance. From 1979 to 1981, Schloss ran an experimental space, A's, in the building she owns with Kelly. Initially opened as a place to hang visual art, particularly color xeroxes, A's quickly became a forum for musical and experimental performance. In 1982, as an outgrowth of their activities at A's, Schloss and Kelly organized "Performances from A to Z," a series of 26 performances at the Storefront for Art and Architecture in SoHo. Energized, Schloss says, by "the whole idea of collaboration and simultaneity between visual art, performance and music," Kelly joined R.L. Seltman to open the club NoSeNo the following year. There, Kelly, Seltman and Schloss organized the '99 Nites of Continuous Performance," which gradually evolved into the Rivington School.

Located at 42 Rivington Street, NoSeNo (Spanish slang for "I don't know") had been a Hispanic social club before Kelly took over the lease. Although conceived as a venue for performance art, the club atmosphere lingered and NoSeNo soon became a hangout, a place where artists and neighborhood people could drink and listen to the various performers (James Brown and Phoebe Legere) and bands (The Bluejays and Los Lobos) that played there.

Painter Fred Bertucci (a Rivington anomaly, he has an M.F.A. and was a Fulbright/Hays Fellow) stumbled on NoSeNo during the "99 Nites." He describes his first experience there as "magic." It was more performance than it was art, although we had this big group painting on the wall that everyone was invited to paint on. There were isolated art exhibits in NoSeNo, but nothing really formal." He remembers the performances as "off-the-wall statements about life and society—kind of bizarre stuff. A lot of statements about sexuality, an incredible amount of music. Everything was tolerated, from the very worst to the very best. The best were mostly musicians; the worst was Mr. Death. He's an old hippie type who used to sing the most obnoxious hippie social realist songs."

Unlike Kelly, who opposes the art establishment on ideological grounds, Bertucci became disillusioned with the

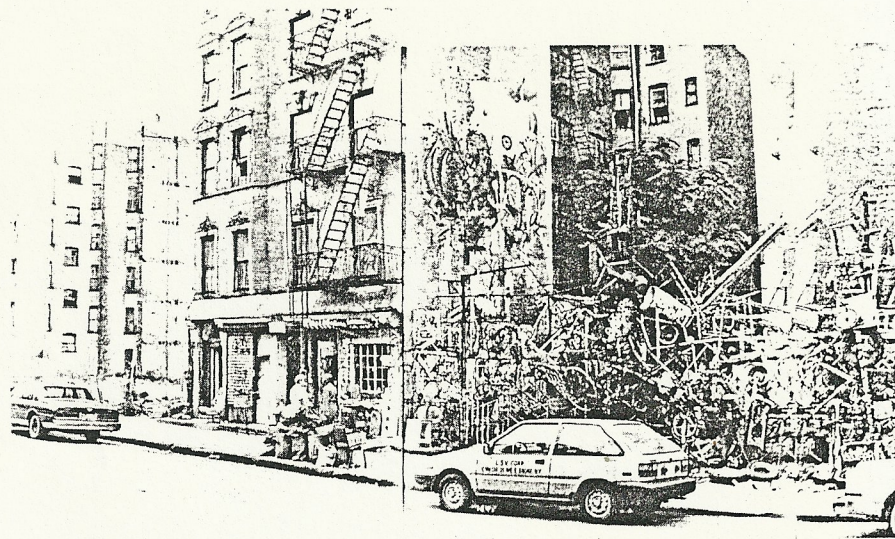
existing gallery system after years of hustling his work with little result. After NoSeNo was shut down in 1985 for serving liquor without a license, he decided to open his own gallery next door. Freddy the Dreamer was an open-forum gallery that hosted one- and three-person shows interspersed with group exhibitions in which, Bertucci recalls, "everyone was invited to show whatever they wanted. Everything got hung pretty much. If there was room we hung it, and usually there was room." Bertucci's wife, painter Tepi Rosen, says, "He had such an open policy that the first time I went down there, I had a painting from another show with me. A friend of Fred's said, 'Oh, this girl has a painting, why don't you hang it?'" Bertucci did, and Rosen says she "flipped out to think that someone would just hang your painting on the spot."

At about the same time Bertucci opened Freddy the Dreamer, they set up two other exhibition spaces on Rivington Street: Nada and a now bar-less NoSeNo. "The original Rivington School was the three little galleries," says sculptor Ed Herman, who exhibits regularly with the group but now socializes only occasionally. "NoSeNo was the main one. Freddy the Dreamer and Nada were satellites, but I think they were important because they established the Rivington School as an area. It wasn't anything one person controlled. If you couldn't show at NoSeNo, you could show at Freddy the Dreamer."

Tall, soft-spoken, with a neat graying beard, Herman looks like a social worker, his appearance a radical challenge to the stereotype of the young, punked-out East Village artist. He had been a research psychologist before pursuing an art career in earnest, and, at the age of 44, began the hustling that most artists undertake in their late twenties. Early in 1986, during his first big push to exhibit, Herman was introduced to NoSeNo. That March he had his first solo show there. Although, at the time, he saw the Rivington School as "a piece of the East Village," he maintains that "yet it was home in a way." Older and better educated than most Rivington artists, Herman admits that "I was different from a lot of them and to some extent I felt out of place, but at the same time I felt less out of place there than anywhere else. It was a good entryway, because it was very accepting."

The Mars Bar is a hole-in-the-wall saloon of a type usually found along the Bowery. In fact, it was opened to accommodate the overflow of winos, bums, and dead-enders that spills into the bottom of the East Village. Located

The first sculpture garden on Rivington St., New York City. Photo by Toyo Tsuchiya.



at First Street and 2nd Avenue, the Mars Bar also happens to be the drinking establishment closest to the Rivington School's shop on Forsythe—so now it is also an art gallery. When the galleries on Rivington lost their leases in 1987, Ray Kelly walked across Houston and persuaded the bar's owner to donate his walls for exhibitions of local art. Today, photographer Toyo Tsuchiya, Ray Kelly's partner, organizes monthly group shows there, run along the same lines as NoSeNo and Freddy the Dreamer, with artwork solicited by word of mouth. Sometimes Tsuchiya sets a theme. For last spring's "Found Art Objects" show, Jeff Perren says, "I found an old hay fork in the garbage and

Bar offers the sort of intense, derelict atmosphere the Rivington School enjoys. Patronized by what bartender Sara Dunne calls "an odd combination of the working class and the very weird," the bar is a node where life and art sloppily intersect.

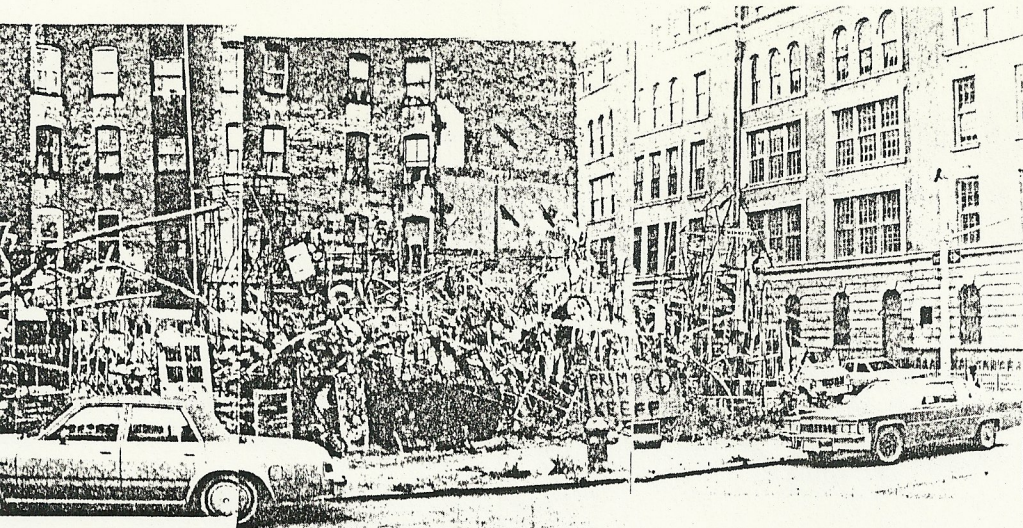
If Ray Kelly is the nominal leader of Rivington, a kind of figurehead monarch, Tsuchiya is his prime minister. At NoSeNo, he imposed a casual order on the laissez-faire exhibitions, a talent that makes him the perfect director for the Mars Bar. Tsuchiya, who studied painting and photography in his native Japan, came to New York in 1980 and settled on the Lower East Side because rents were cheap. When he discovered NoSeNo in the early '80s, his chief pleasure was watching the goings on—each night he would photograph the performance, then pin up his documentation the next day. When Tsuchiya began organizing exhibitions at NoSeNo, he named the fluctuating group of artists who show there the Rivington School, at the suggestion of sculptor Linus Corraggio. Often he would use his own money to pay for the flyers and announcements that advertised the shows. Tsuchiya's entire artistic career is based on the School, whose continuing existence depends, to a great extent, on his curatorial efforts here and abroad. He has curated Rivington School shows in Japan, Australia, and Austria. Last spring he and Amr Shaker, a dedicated collector of the School's work, co-curated an uncharacteristically well-ordered, saleable exhibition at AFR Fine Arts in Washington, D.C.

"Toyo drank Coca-Cola and took photos," says Tsuchiya's fellow countryman Ken Hirasutka. "I, on the other hand, am a drinker." One of the original members of Rivington, Hirasutka met Ray Kelly in 1982 shortly after arriving in New York. At that time he was taking classes at the Art Students' League,

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threw paint all over it. Somebody bought it for ten dollars and now it's hanging in a French restaurant on Second Avenue."

The Mars Bar is not the most propitious spot for hanging art. Decorated with a few peeling, formica-topped tables, a pinball machine, and a jukebox, the cramped, dirty space is packed with haphazardly-hung paintings and assemblages. A few yellow spotlights weakly illuminate works that range from a pair of old, crumpled boots to an elegant, deftly-brushed abstraction. Many artists would not exhibit here, but the Mars



polishing up the ideas he had developed while studying sculpture in Japan. Hirasutka, a street artist in the most literal sense, chisels maze-like diagrams into public sidewalks. During the first encounter, he asked Kelly if he could sculpt the pavement in front of his building. Kelly later arranged for him to carve the slate sidewalk near the Storefront for Art and Architecture on Prince Street.

One of the most fiercely individualistic of the group, Hirasutka prefers to talk about his sculpture rather than the School, which he calls his "part-time job." His full-time job is the *One Continuous Line*—his name for the convoluted linear designs, in which a single stroke meanders but never crosses itself. He regards each new carving as a continuation of the one before. Hirasutka has a number of lines about *The Line*, which he delivers with a mixture of high seriousness and irony. He defines his work as "conceptual, minimal graffiti," maintaining that he wants "to carve the surface of the earth, which is only one huge rock," because, "if each country has my sculpture, the world will become more peaceful." In fact, the idea of public art is fundamental to his work, which, humble and retiring, stands in marked contrast to the violent visual assault delivered by most American street art.

One of Hirasutka's peaceful carvings formed the heart of the monumental snarl of welded metal that sprawled across two lots on the corner of Rivington and Forsythe. This was the legendary first Sculpture Garden, bulldozed by the city in 1987 but still central to the Rivington School's mythology. "Linus and I built the original piece," Kelly recalls. "The other artists fell in love with it and everyone came and helped work on it. Anyone could come and build their own sculpture or help us. It eventually became one huge piece. There were cars inside. The whole piece

was made from metal salvaged from the streets. Sort of a way of cleaning up the city." Under the welding torches of Kelly, Corraggio, and others, the Garden grew into a tense, titanic knot of car parts, bed springs, bathtubs, boilers, pipes, and anything else that would adhere. Intricate, dangerous-looking and continually in flux, the Sculpture Garden was perhaps the only public sculpture ever to successfully compete with the visual dynamism of the city.

As a whole, the School likes fast, assaultive art that slaps an audience across the face.

itself. During its Golden Age, this anti-Eden reached a height of 30 feet and had to be chainsawed to a manageable size.

Second-generation Rivington Schoolers Jeff Perren and Kevin Wendall (aka FA-Q, pronounced "fuck you") met at the experimental and now defunct Cooper School of Art in Cleveland. Wendall came to New York in 1979, Perren followed in 1987, and they gravitated to Rivington because it provided a congenial social milieu. Perren identified with the people there, maintaining that, "we're all somehow similar. I think it has to do with attitude. We all like to drink beer and have barbecues." He adds that, "There's also a romance to it. You know, like an outlaw group—the bad boys of the art world"

Although the group's hard drinking and delight in breaking and painting on things (often each other's work) has

earned them a reputation for hellraising, Wendell, a painter who makes his art in the street as well as in the studio, says that "We're not into violence or hurting people." As outsiders to the art establishment, Rivington Schoolers empathize with other cultural social outsiders. When, in the summer of 1988, city officials announced they would close the East Village's Tompkins Square Park at midnight in order to disband the growing number of vagrants and homeless people who gathered there at night, Wendall printed up and distributed a flyer calling for a demonstration in the park. "Later, he recalls, "a bunch of other people and the Yuppies got involved and made flyers, too." This was in late July. During a second demonstration in August, a riot ensued when police tried to break up the huge crowd of locals that choked the streets around the park. Despite the group's midnight forays on behalf of the oppressed, its politics are obscure. Wendall calls Rivington "the closest thing to anarchy I've experienced in this city," and Corraggio too brings up the term, defining it as "a spirit of spontaneity." But Ed Herman maintains that the Rivington brand of anarchy "is not philosophical, it's just a word. I never felt that the School was really political, other than that it was more outside the art world and at some level identifies with the neighborhood it's in. It's the outsider political position."

The Rivington School's aesthetics are as ill-defined and casual as its politics. The group exhibition at AFR Fine Arts looked like a sampler of East Village styles, heavily flavored by *art brut* and outsider art. Inspired by neo-expressionism and graffiti art, the painters share a taste for crude-drawing, clogged surfaces—and raw, aggressive color. Bertucci saturates his still lifes, portraits, and cityscapes with explosive psychedelic color; Perren interprets Abstract Expressionism with a brutal directness and disregard for formal niceties; Rosen paints in a neo-primitive, quasi-abstract style that vaguely resembles children's painting; while Wendall, who once taught art to disturbed children, kneads paint into distorted, goofy heads, at once violent and funny. Several of the sculptors embrace a junk aesthetic. Corraggio welds together found objects, like toys, tools, and kitchen utensils, into furniture. Ed Herman fashions epoxy-stiffened trash-bags, burlap, and discarded clothing into life-sized beggars that disturbingly equate social decline with material decay, wasted lives with garbage.

As a whole, the School likes fast, assaultive art that slaps an audience across the face. Several artists support



FA-Q. Photo courtesy of Emerging Collector.

Kelly's belief in art as a process rather than a finished product. When Tovy Halleck, Richard Serra's studio assistant and one of the youngest in the group, hammers out sculpture at the forge, the anvil becomes a stage where, sparks and sweat flying, he pounds iron ingots into works that look like a cross between andirons and over-sized phalluses.

Although Kelly thinks of Rivington as another School of Paris, and Perren refers to it as a full-fledged movement, Wendall's girlfriend, Manon (the

drummer/singer in Blood Sister, an all-girl-punk band, describes the group as "a bunch of grown-up kids playing together." And, at least to those outside this outsider group, Rivington appears as a social phenomenon, a support group built on a foundation of compatible personalities rather than a common ideology. Bertucci says that "I think it's fair to call the politics 'interaction among friends.' There is no real ethical tie between those people. If you really look deeply, you'll find that there's a whole lot of inconsistencies with the lifestyles and ethics that people say they adhere to." "Except," Rosen adds, "that they all drink."

SoHo might forgive amateurism, but never a stylistic lapse. Rivington looks less like the next hot movement than it does an anachronism.

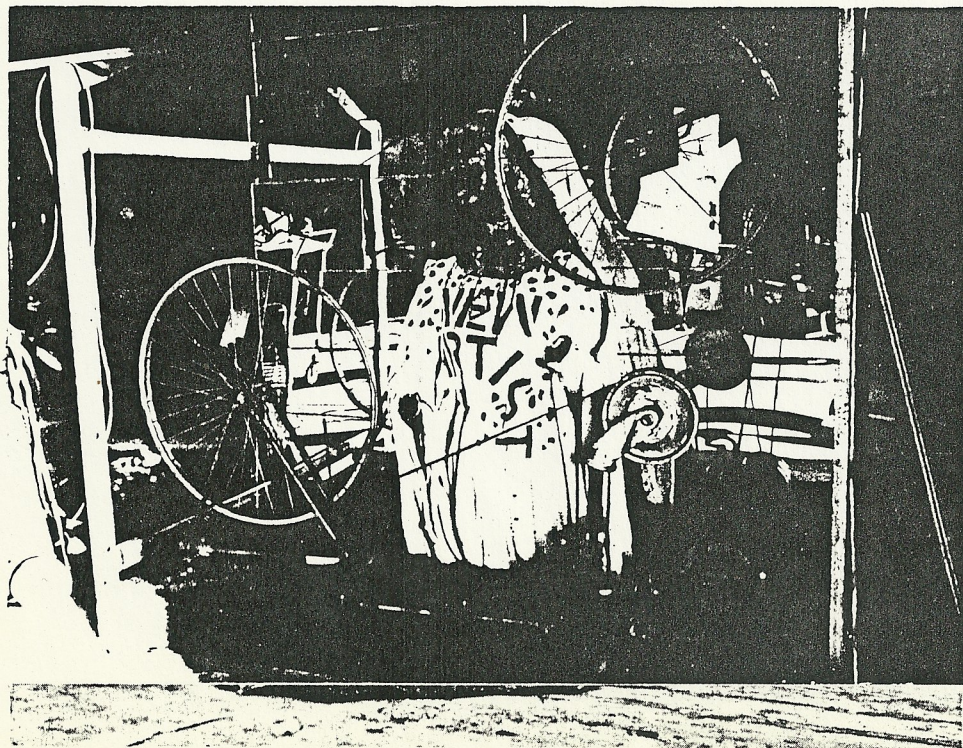
Bertucci also feels that since the galleries closed in 1987, Rivington has "become sort of insulated. It's not really growing now." Many of the artists from abroad have returned to their own countries; other artists have moved on to commercial galleries, or had children,

and no longer have time to hang out. "Since it moved around the corner to the shop on Forsythe," Bertucci says, "the scene is a little bit different. I think the forge is more important. Now, it's more a bunch of sculptors sharing a shop."

Kelly, on the other hand, insists that Rivington "is bigger now" (he considers anyone involved with the School over the past ten years a member) and says that now "we have more alternatives." Certainly Rivington is growing in the sense that more people know about it, more galleries are picking up on individual artists, and more collectors, particularly Europeans, are buying their work. Several Rivington sculptors, including Corraggio, exhibit at Prisunic Gallery, an offbeat space in the meat district. Last summer both Herman and Wendall had shows at the Stockwell Gallery, one of the few left in the East Village. The Emerging Collector, an unusually democratic, high-volume gallery run by an enterprising Frenchwoman, Christine Louisy-Daniel, handles many of the artists. The School routinely exhibits at Bullet Space, a dimly lit, low-ceilinged squat near Avenue C. And, of course, Tsuchiya continues his curatorial efforts at the Mars Bar.

Despite support from a few dealers and collectors, Rivington seems destined to remain a marginal movement. Recent history has proven that artists who don't aggressively promote their work, don't make it. And, while Rivington artists are not against commercial success per se, they refuse to engage in the social rituals and professional lobbying that open the doors of the high profile galleries. Besides, Rivington's expressionistic, anti-intellectual aesthetic is currently unfashionable. SoHo might forgive amateurism, but never a stylistic lapse. Rivington looks less like the next hot movement than it does an anachronism, a reminder of a time when artists willing to live on the periphery could make their own rules.

But fashion is fickle, and a year from now, if the right handful of collectors, critics, and dealers become infatuated with urban outlaw art, the Rivington School could find itself dragged into the mainstream. "It could happen," says Ray Kelly. "A lot of the artists in the group could become famous. But it would happen because we were different—because we were an alternative." Success or failure—Rivington is prepared to deal with both. "Even if my career changed, says Jeff Perren, "I'd still hang out with these guys."



the Gas Station, Linus Corraggios's sculpture 1988.

Nancy Grimes is a painter and critic who contributes regularly to Artnews and teaches at Parsons School of Design.