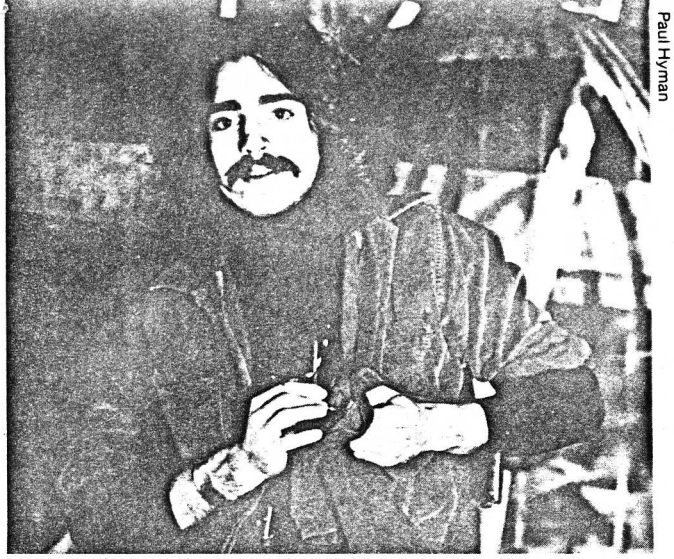

Paul Hyman

Augustus Goertz

Howard Barash

Peter Reginato

Standoff in SoHo

by Julian Weissman

Art writers and journalists have visited SoHo in increasing numbers over the past four years, supplying their readers with gastronomical guides, shopping information and gallery walking-tours. Like well-intentioned nurses, they tell us about SoHo's height and weight but not about its heartbeat and pulse. Artists are the "heartbeat and pulse" of SoHo. They re-pioneered the area during the early 1960s, and it is the artists—not the forty odd galleries or the boutiques or the exotic shops—that account for the community's vitality.

As Stuart Waltzer, director of the downtown Emmerich Gallery, recently pointed out, "There are three places one traditionally places galleries. One is where people who love and collect art live. We have a gallery on 57th Street. The second place is where they bank the money with which they buy art. We have a gallery in Zurich, Switzerland. The third place is where the artists make art. Thus the downtown gallery in SoHo."

The artist is there—but what is his current situation? How do these men and women live and work? How do they see their community and its future from the inside looking out?

Following are profiles of four young artists presently living and working in SoHo. By no means do the artists profiled here cover the gamut of SoHo art or SoHo artists. But they do bring into focus some of the internal realities of this art community's most vital group.

One attitude shared by all four artists is a growing uncertainty with SoHo, a refuge and a community becoming less and less viable for artists.

At 25, Augustus Goertz is the youngest of the four artists profiled. Yet, in many ways, his situation is the most typical. Like the overwhelming majority of the 1,200 to 1,800 artists living and working in SoHo, Goertz is still trying to get his first one-man show. And like most of them, his immediate concerns are two-fold: he must support his art and himself.

His background helped prepare him for what is often a long, difficult effort. Goertz grew up in the West Village of the 1950s, the son of a former painter. "My father did everything from teaching art to driving a cab for seven years to support our family, his painting and himself," he said. In the family tradition, he is currently working four nights a week as a second chef at the new artists' bar-restaurant, The West Broadway Central. Goertz first arrived in SoHo in 1971, after four years of study and painting on the West Coast. "I was really knocked out by the excellent work some of my friends were doing. And the vitality of SoHo!"

A 2,500-square-foot loft on the edge of SoHo is both home and studio for Goertz. As with most artists' lofts, the emphasis here is on the studio. Two-thirds of the unfinished loft is devoted to a work and storage area. Two loft bedrooms with skylights rest on supports above an informally defined kitchen and living room in the remaining third of the loft. Goertz has lived and worked here for two years, and has invariably had to share it with someone else. Faced with a $350-a-month rent (plus utilities), there is little else the unsubsidized, unexhibited Goertz can do. High rents are no longer the exception to the rule— they are simply a part of the reality of living in SoHo today.

Like most of his peers, Goertz avoids the use of labels when it comes to describing his art. "I guess if I am any one thing, I am a synthesizer. Basically, my paintings are investigations of two things. First, the multiple levels of visual perception that can be incorporated on one canvas through the use of projection of overlapping images. And second, the created illusion of two separate paintings working within the same frame."

Most of Goertz's canvases are 2 by 6 or 9 by 5 feet. They range in price from $200 to $800. In 1973, Goertz sold six paintings. In the first half of 1974, he sold two.

Most of his sales have evolved directly out of recommendations made by fellow artists living in SoHo. They have helped him, and he them. It is rapport like this that convinces Goertz that "SoHo is special. It's incredible how different it is from the art scene I knew as a child in the Village. Most of the artists of my father's generation were more independent, more selfish. We have our envies and our jealousies, but we really try to help each other as well."

Julian Weissman is a free-lance writer based in New York and art critic for the Press.

Howard Barash

Susan Hall

Howard Barash

Ken Showell

THE ARTISTS ARE THERE, BUT FOR HOW LONG?

The only reservation Goertz has about living in SoHo is the inconvenience of shopping and doing his laundry. There are a number of bodegas on and near West Broadway, but most residents do their serious grocery shopping at a supermarket on Bleecker Street, just off LaGuardia Place, north of SoHo. Goertz is no exception. A bicycle fanatic, it is not unusual to see him peddling through SoHo on his ten-speed Italian racer, the knapsack on his back filled with groceries or laundry.

Goertz first made the rounds of the downtown galleries in 1973. He is now approaching galleries again. While he longs to have a show, his immediate goals are gaining the respect of his peers and being able to support himself on his art alone.

At 28, metal sculptor Peter Reginato has achieved some of the success toward which others still work. The Tibor de Nagy Gallery has represented Reginato in New York since 1969, and gave him his fourth one-man show last March. A year ago, Reginato won the prestigious Allen Center sculpture competition in Houston, Texas. With it came $30,000 in prize money and the opportunity to create a monumental sculpture.

Although Reginato shows uptown, he lives and works in a 5,000-square-foot loft on Greene Street in the heart of SoHo, his workshop and home for almost eight years. Reginato has the distinction of being at the same time a pioneer and one of the "oldest" residents of SoHo.

Aristocratic in appearance and mild in manner and conversation, Reginato was born in Dallas and grew up in a middle-class family in California, where he attended local public schools and the San Francisco Art Institute.

Reginato usually works with an assistant and more often than not can be found in his immense studio, moving, grinding, tacking or welding huge plates of steel. But he also makes small "table" pieces, sculptures approximately 12 by 6 inches, that sell for around $1,000. His largest sculptures are approximately 11 by 7 by 4 feet and sell for $5,500 and up.

Surprisingly little of the artist's work is to be seen in the huge Greene Street studio; but up on the roof, between potted shrubs and plants and colorful canvas chairs, was a retrospective of his work. About 30 or 40 sculptures from different periods and of various sizes sat quietly against the natural backdrop of the cast-iron facades of the neighboring buildings, water towers and sooty sky.

For the last two years, Reginato has been able to support himself through his art. Yet he has no intention of quitting his part-time teaching post at the Ridgefield Art College in Ridgefield, New Jersey. He enjoys it, and likes the security.

Unlike Goertz, Reginato was not impressed with SoHo on arrival, nor is he enamored of it now. He says that good space and cheap rents were the real reasons behind his move. The handful of artists already living and working here, he insists, had little influence on his move.

The "unique rapport" and "sense of community" so highly valued by Goertz are not apparent to Reginato. "What I see happening," he said, "is SoHo becoming just another neighborhood. Admittedly, there are many artists and galleries here. But the area is developing stores, shops and apartment houses just like anyplace else. It's becoming more like the Village. In fact, the majority of the people who have moved here in the last three years are not artists. People keep telling me that major, well-known artists are moving into SoHo. I've been living here for eight years. I know almost everyone living down here. I know it isn't so."

Yet Reginato still likes living and working downtown and plans to continue doing so. In the last few years, he has made friends with a number of the non-artists who have moved into the area. He enjoys the easy familiarity and relaxed gossip of a number of the artists' bars, the Broome Street Bar and 162 Spring Street in particular. Like most SoHo artists, he visits the galleries periodically—not religiously—usually attending the shows of friends and artists whose work he is particularly interested in. It was clear that if the bars, the galleries and the social scene in general were to disappear tomorrow, Peter Reginato would not be much affected.

Susan Hall, 31, is the only artist profiled here who does not currently live in SoHo, although three of her four years in New York were spent there. Now, after a year of living in a two-room roof apartment on 19th Street and Broad-

way, Hall is ready to move back downtown. Her gallery, Nancy Hoffman, is in SoHo. More importantly, she needs a larger working space with good light, and downtown is the obvious choice.

While Goertz moved to SoHo because of its vitality and Reginato had practical reasons, Hall arrived in SoHo "almost by accident." In 1970, determined to settle in New York, Hall and a friend traded her San Francisco studio for a small, "sight unseen" Grand Street loft.

Hall feels SoHo was a great place to first experience New York. Impressed with SoHo's vitality four years ago, she believes it still exists. "I really love SoHo," she says. "I think it's great. But it's simply becoming too expensive, too fashionable and too chic. When we first took the small Grand Street loft, the rent was $115 a month. Then it became $150 and eventually $250—in less than three years. Another increase was on the way when we finally decided we had had enough. We moved out." Most likely, Hall will be moving into one of the less expensive bordering regions and not the fashionable historic district.

From 1967 to 1973, Hall painted almost entirely in acrylics. Now, for the first time in eight years, she has begun using oils again. But she feels no commitment to materials or technique; her one commitment is to the image. It is the image, she believes, that must determine everything else. A figurative painter, Hall always makes precise drawings before she begins to paint. "This way there is never any guesswork about the kind of image I am going to use."

Hall's best known works are paintings created between 1968 and 1972, devoted exclusively to women. These highly autobiographical works show women in isolation, resting, posing or daydreaming.

In 1972, Hall had a successful one-woman show at the Whitney Museum. Since then, she has become a self-supporting artist. Her small, 2-by-3-feet paintings sell for around $700. Large canvases are 10 by 11 feet and sell for $4,000 to $5,000. But Hall has not given up teaching. Like Peter Reginato, she no longer desperately needs the money, but she enjoys guiding others and appreciates the extra security.

Ken Showell, 34, has temporarily come full circle. The Ken Showell of 1974 is struggling to support his art and himself. So was the Ken Showell who arrived in SoHo in 1965.

Between March 1969 and March 1971, the native Nebraskan was one of the hottest young painters around, a focus of critical attention whose work was in great demand. During this period Showell sold more than 50 of his lyrical abstractionist canvases, earning approximately $40,000 in gross sales. The majority of the paintings were sold by David Whitney at his 19th Street Gallery. It was Whitney who in November 1969 gave Showell his first and only one-man New York show.

Ken Showell is not bitter about the evanescence of his success. "When I first came to New York I was really out to become rich and famous. I got a little taste of fame and learned some humility as well." Now Showell's concern is to keep creating the sort of color-field painting he began exploring in 1971, when he became dissatisfied with his own lyrical abstractionism and in turn lost the support of dealer Whitney and his audience.

Showell believes he is coming into his own once again. Yet he readily admits it has taken longer than he expected. And it has required both a patience and a maturity he previously did not have.

"In 1971 I was naive enough to think that if I sold one thing I could sell anything. The truth is, I'm not the type of person who can develop an idea into a mature thing in a year. I had forgotten that it had taken me almost four years to arrive at one thing I could call my own."

Showell calls his current works "slow painting." It's a good description, from the standpoint of both artist and viewer. Each canvas consists of literally hundreds of coats of watered-down paint. Using only a tablespoon of paint to each gallon of water, Showell paints with what is in essence a watercolor or glazing technique. He usually works on two or three canvases at a time; it is a highly controlled, laborious process; each painting takes from one to two months to complete. His present style is much more subtle than his lyrical abstract work, but the two styles nonetheless have something in common: Showell's continuing preoccupation and exploration of illusion.

At present, Showell works three weekend nights a week as a bartender at the Broome Street Bar in the heart of SoHo. "It's an animal farm. It's busy as hell, and most of the time I'm really unaware of who's there."

SoHo artists and other local residents have even begun avoiding their neighborhood bars on the crowded weekends, as have many of their non-artist and non-neighborhood friends. They simply refuse to subject themselves to the hordes of young hip or hoping-to-be-hip non-artists who taxi downtown and subway in from Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx to "make the scene in SoHo."

The weekend stint as a bartender nets Showell approximately $120 a week, not enough to cover his $250-a-month rent (plus utilities) and other living expenses. Six months ago, he converted his favorite hobby, photography, into a second supporting business. This brings in another $50 a week. Between the bartending and the photography, Showell just barely supports his art and himself.

Ken Showell found SoHo exciting in 1965, and still finds it exciting, although his enthusiasm has mellowed. Gone are the "Park Place monthly Sunday socials"—the community-oriented group shows that brought everyone together and consistently showed art on a high level.

Showell now feels he is living in a place "with the general ambience of a small town, while being in reality a rather sophisticated neighborhood." It is a neighborhood that he still values, even though he expects to be swept out on the rising tide of ever-increasing rents. While he has two years left on his current lease, he is already contemplating the move he believes is inevitable. "I've been looking across the river a lot lately. I know a number of artists moving there now. Williamsburg in Brooklyn. That's most likely where I will be—two years from now."

As Showell points out, some SoHo artists have already gone across the river to Williamsburg and other points in Brooklyn. An even greater number have moved to Tribeca, SoHo's immediate neighbor to the south. Roughly the same size as SoHo, Tribeca is Manhattan's *real* last frontier. Unfortunately, the city has already committed itself to rebuilding most of this area, which today is appealingly full of abandoned and deserted warehouses.

Is the SoHo artist really becoming an "endangered species"? Some say yes. Others say no. This much is certain: while SoHo is still the most vital art community in New York, its prohibitive rents are keeping the vast majority of young artists out, while others are being forced out. ■