

# THE DOWNTOWN BOOK



THE NEW YORK ART SCENE 1974-1984

Outside

Floor plan drawings - Tom Otterness  
Sign of Dejon Sax Player - Tom Otterness  
Graffiti by Subway Entrance -  
(Fred Brathwaite) The Fabulous Five



Wall by Normal:  
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Milan Kunc  
Peter Angerma

In Basement:  
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(In Stairwell)  
Red Gun, Money, Plate Painting  
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Robin Winters

Stairwell to Basement designed by  
Julie Hair - Mary Ann Fowler - Nan Beck  
Bathroom - "Fruit" drawings - Joe Fyt  
Fountain - Becky Howland

bent records: TIMES SQUARE SHOW  
Ehry Anderson

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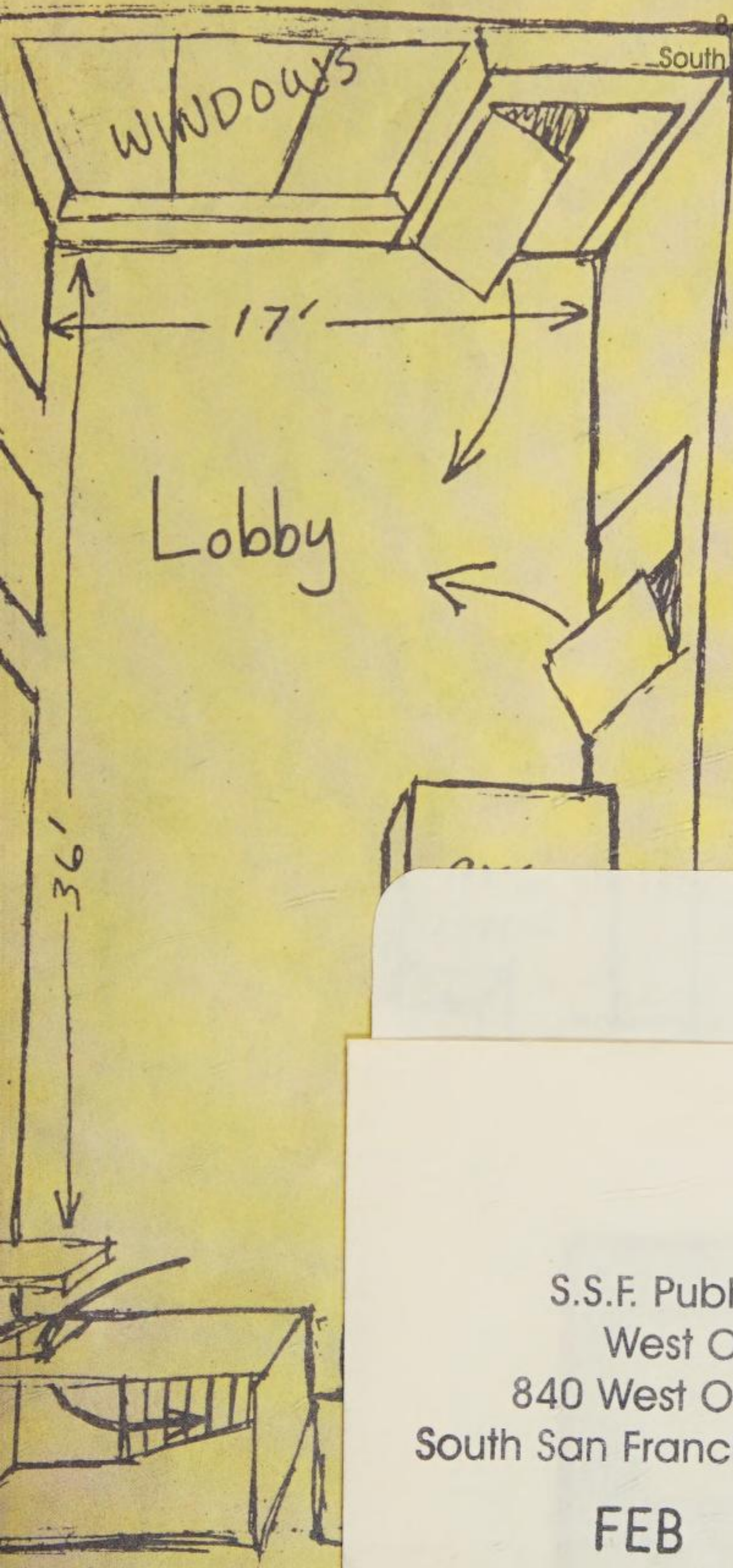
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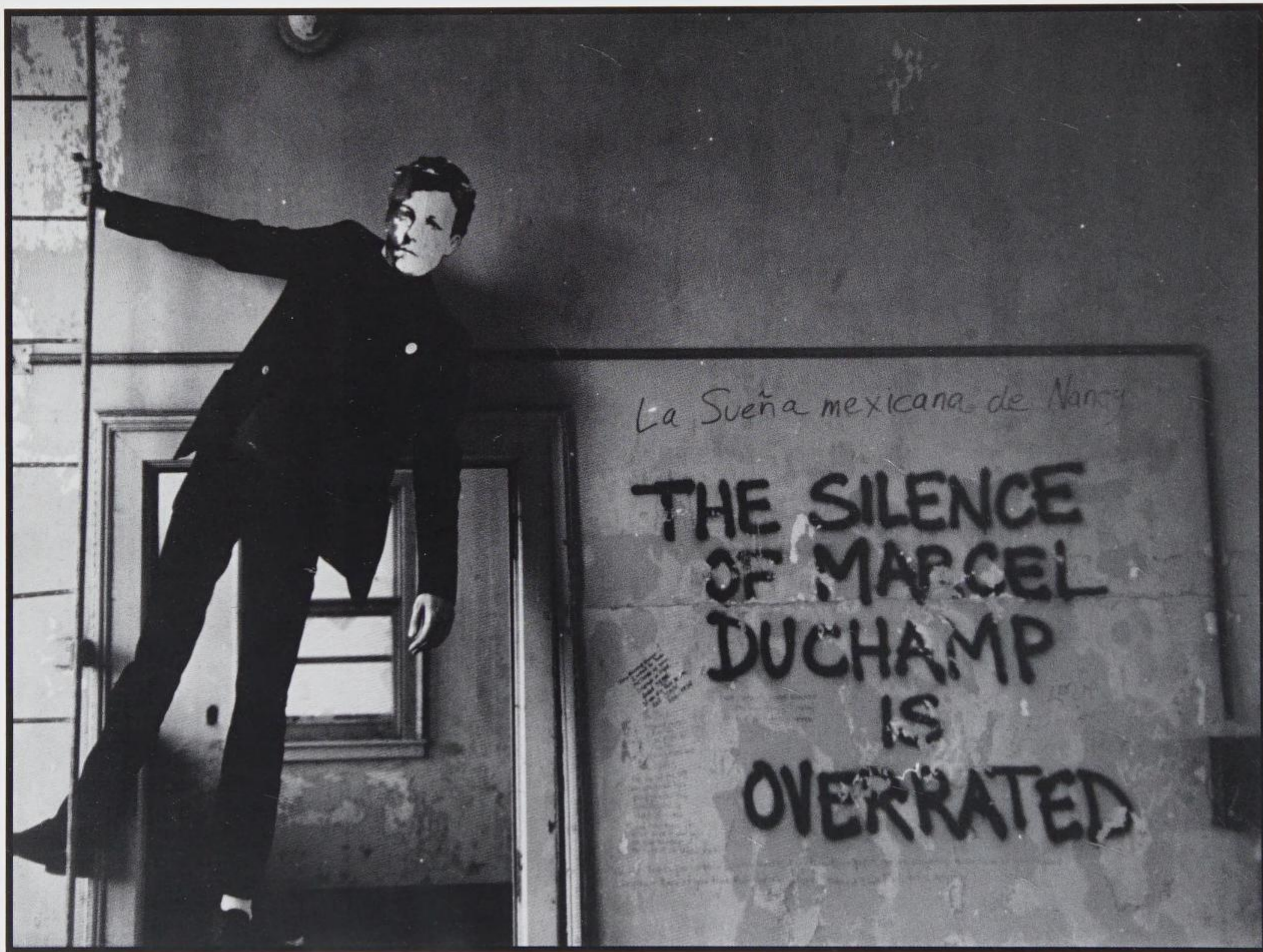
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**THE DOWNTOWN BOOK**



*La Sueña mexicana de Nancy*

**THE SILENCE  
OF MARCEL  
DUCHAMP  
IS  
OVERRATED**

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MAIN

# **THE DOWNTOWN BOOK**

**THE NEW YORK ART SCENE 1974-1984**

EDITED BY **MARVIN J. TAYLOR** FOREWORD BY **LYNN GUMPERT**

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IN SUBWAY CAR, c. 1982–85.  
Photograph by Tseng Kwong Chi.  
Photo © Muna Tseng Dance  
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**BACK COVER:** "DEBUTANTE BALL"  
AT CLUB 57, c. 1982. Left to  
right: Sean Ammo, Katy K, John  
Sex, Drew Straub, Kitty Brophy,  
Kenny Scharf. Photo: April Palmieri

**FRONTISPIECE:** DAVID  
WOJNAROWICZ, UNTITLED  
(THE SILENCE OF MARCEL  
DUCHAMP IS OVERRATED),  
FROM THE SERIES RIMBAUD  
IN NEW YORK, 1977–79.

Gelatin silver print. David  
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**FRONT ENDPAPER:** TOM  
OTTERNESS, FLYER FOR THE  
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OTTERNESS, FLYER FOR THE  
*TIMES SQUARE SHOW*  
(DETAIL SHOWING SECOND  
FLOOR), 1980. Andrea Callard  
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IN A T-SHIRT PROCLAIMING  
"BUGS BUNNY HAS TOO  
MUCH MONEY." Photo: Patty  
Hefley, NYC

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**FOR ALL THE ARTISTS WHO CREATED THE DOWNTOWN SCENE**



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**IT TAKES AWHILE BEFORE  
YOU CAN STEP OVER INERT  
BODIES AND GO AHEAD WITH  
WHAT YOU WERE TRYING TO DO.**

JENNY HOLZER, *THE LIVING SERIES: IT TAKES AWHILE . . .*,  
1980–82. One of a series of seventy-eight plaques, enamel on metal,  
21 x 23 in. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. Copyright © 2004 Jenny  
Holzer / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

**IT WAS ONE OF THOSE “IS IT ART?” MOMENTS.** The small, commercially produced, black-and-white enamel sign was unremarkable except for the text, which stated brusquely, “It takes awhile before you can step over inert bodies and go ahead with what you were trying to do.” On display in Grand Central Station’s waiting room in 1981, the sign’s blunt message invoked both the legions of homeless who seek shelter in the bustling train station as well as the suited men and women who briskly crisscross the station’s immense, vaulted spaces on their way to work in Manhattan’s canyons or heading home to the suburbs.<sup>1</sup> Appropriating the apparatus of industrial signmakers, Jenny Holzer’s artwork, part of her Living Series (1980–82), stopped me in my tracks, confounding my expectations of what art should be and provoking me to consider larger social and political issues.

I had moved to New York in 1978, fresh from graduate art history studies in the Midwest, where I researched how distinct genres, such as painting and sculpture, had begun breaking down over the course of the twentieth century. I had brought with me, as had Eric Bogosian, a well-thumbed copy of Roger Shattuck’s *The Banquet Years*, the remarkable account of the lives and friendships of artists, musicians, and writers in Paris during *la belle époque*.<sup>2</sup> The living, breathing contemporary artists I met while working at the New Museum from 1980 to 1988—like their French avant-garde predecessors Erik Satie, Alfred Jarry, Henri Rousseau, and Guillaume Apollinaire—partied together, hung out at restaurants, frequented bars, attended performances, and, perhaps most important, gleefully and irreverently stretched the boundaries of art making, further eroding what Robert Rauschenberg later famously characterized as the gap between art and life.

I experienced the New York Downtown scene primarily during the daytime.

A resolutely morning person and never keen on nightclubs, I chose to concentrate on the visual arts—painting, sculpture, photography, video, and installation—visiting artists’ studios, alternative spaces, and galleries, usually between the hours of 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. My understanding of this heady and creative time was shaped in part by working in a museum of contemporary art that was unrelentingly self-critical and exceedingly mindful of the context in which it functioned. For instance, although I had missed the early and mid-1970s New York art scene, I participated in a crash course on it when Jacki Apple organized her remarkable exhibition *Alternatives in Retrospect: An Historical Overview, 1969–1975* at the New Museum in 1981. Presenting documentation of and works shown at seven alternative spaces active during those crucial years, *Alternatives in Retrospect*, as Marcia Tucker observed in the catalogue’s preface, was “relevant to the [New Museum’s] own genesis, and to [its] continued function and constant redefinition as an extension of and alternative to other contemporary arts institutions.”<sup>3</sup> The show examined a time when artists took matters into their own hands, creating venues for exhibiting unconventional artworks. As Apple, a former curator at Franklin Furnace, notes in her introduction to the catalogue:

*A majority of the works [shown in these spaces] were process oriented and situationally specific, involving a relationship between materials, concepts, actions, and locations. They were sometimes spontaneous, improvisational, open-ended, and often collaborative. The works existed within a given time and then ceased to exist. As a result much of this work was labeled “ephemeral,” the intent being to create an experience rather than a product, and new terms were devised to describe it, such as “installation” and “performance.” . . . During the period in which this exhibition deals, artists out of necessity created and took control of their own contexts.*<sup>4</sup>

Five of the seven alternative spaces featured in Apple’s exhibition were located below Fourteenth Street, four of them south of Houston, in what had recently become known as SoHo. As RoseLee Goldberg notes in her essay included here, artists were living in cheap lofts next to or down the street from other former factories that might also become alternative art spaces. As she puts it, “workspace and exhibition space were interchangeable.” Changes, however, were brewing. Narrative returned with a vengeance. Some veteran Downtown artists, such as Ida Applebroog, Leon Golub, and Nancy Spero, had never abandoned figuration. Younger newcomers—many of them, as noted in the essays included here, art school graduates flocking to this legendary “promised land”—found inspiration in such work, which eschewed the stark minimalism and stringent conceptualism that had prevailed in the mid- to late 1960s. Matthew Yokobosky observes here that this resur-

gence of interest in narrative triggered a major shift in the history of avant-garde filmmaking. Similarly, artists such as Cindy Sherman and Laurie Simmons presented “stills” of imagined films and novels in their photographs. John Ahearn—whose twin, Charlie Ahearn, filmed the influx of graffiti artists into the Downtown scene in his landmark *Wild Style* (1981)—created colorful plaster casts of Bronx residents who could easily have played roles in his brother’s movie.

Jenny Holzer’s interest in narrative also grew. Following in the footsteps of the conceptual pioneer Lawrence Weiner, whose artwork consists solely of words, Holzer posted her *Truism Series* (1977–79), one-liners printed in offset on colored paper, throughout the streets of Lower Manhattan. Taking her art out of museum, gallery, and alternative spaces, she wanted to both provoke and engage larger audiences. She notes: “There may be a greater chance with the outdoor work that you might startle people so much that you have some hope of changing their thinking a little bit, or even prompting them to take some kind of action. . . . [T]he content of the writing is taken at face value, it is not dismissed as art.”<sup>5</sup> Like Weiner, whose work appeared not only on museum walls but also on posters, T-shirts, books, and other printed materials, Holzer began reproducing her writings on hats and T-shirts, as well as carving them into benches, splaying them on electronic billboards, and, eventually, scrolling them across L.E.D. signs. Abandoning the short, terse locutions of *Truisms*, such as “Money creates taste,” in the *Living Series* she began writing longer narratives, adopting various vantage points and voices, such as “What a shock when they tell you it won’t hurt and you almost turn inside out.”

Other artists, of course, took to the streets in the late 1970s, including, most famously, Jean-Michel Basquiat (whose spray-painted alter-ego tag SAMO appeared throughout SoHo), Keith Haring (whose graffitied “radiant babies” chalk figures danced across the city’s subway platforms and on sidewalks), and Richard Hambleton (whose shadowy, black figures lurked menacingly in poorly lit Downtown alleys and construction sites). Then came the now-mythic *Times Square Show* in June 1980, when Colab (Collaborative Projects, Inc.) filled an empty massage parlor on the corner of Seventh Avenue and Forty-first Street with works by more than a hundred artists.

What is so fascinating about this particular time in the Downtown art scene—that is, the years between 1974 and 1984—is that it not only bore witness to, but also spawned the transition from modernism to postmodernism. One crucial aspect of this transition is manifested in artists’ desire to break out of the framework of the established art world. Another is in the spectator’s heightened role—the notion that engaged audiences should participate in a work’s completion. In an essay I wrote in 1991, I characterized this key shift as follows:

In the past, frames enclosed paintings and served as protective and mounting devices. Formally, they functioned to demarcate the perimeters of art, to delineate and distinguish the painted image from the physical world that surrounded it. With the transition from modernism to postmodernism, not only did painting begin to extend physically beyond its frame, and the strict boundaries between the artistic media continue to disintegrate, but the notion of a frame as a protective barrier began to give way. Viewed as constrictive, the frame, as both symbol and fact, has been deconstructed, as it were, by postmodernist critiques of context. The content of a work of art is no longer viewed as necessarily self-referential and self-contained. . . . References to the outside world now crowd in and jostle with each other, at the same time that an artwork's meaning is posited as residing in the viewer's interpretation of it.<sup>6</sup>

In the mid- to late 1970s, the Downtown art world was located primarily in SoHo. Of course, artists, galleries, and alternative spaces had long been spread throughout Lower Manhattan, the New Museum among them. In the early 1980s, much of the action shifted to the East Village, where art galleries rapidly proliferated in what was called "Alphabet City," slang for the territory delineated by Avenues A, B, C, and D.

Given the great upsurge of activity in the arenas of performance and installation art outside the established art circuits of commercial galleries and museums, it is interesting to note that much of what was shown in East Village galleries during their heyday was painting, and often rather small paintings at that. Part of this was a result of the storefront galleries' narrow, confined floor plans. Limited space did not, however, dampen ambition or inhibit creativity. Gracie Mansion, who in 1981 had staged one of her first "shows" in a rented limousine parked in front of 420 West Broadway, home to the legendary Castelli and Sonnabend galleries, was at the forefront of developing innovative ways to market art and expand art-world audiences. She and the other East Village gallerists soon banded together, deciding to remain open on Sundays, a day when galleries in SoHo and Uptown, along Fifty-seventh Street and Madison Avenue, were closed. I have fond memories of stopping off at Veniero's, the esteemed Lower East Side Italian bakery, for biscotti and cappuccino after a Sunday spent trekking through the long, numbered streets intersecting the Alphabet City avenues in order to keep tabs on a scene that seemed to grow exponentially.

Although many Downtown artists were keen to establish their own exhibition alternatives, a number, when asked to participate in a museum show, seized the opportunity. In 1980, the New Museum—which had been founded by Marcia Tucker in 1977 in order to create an institution more receptive to contemporary artists' works that often challenged traditional museum practices—offered its

galleries carte blanche to three artists' collaboratives: Fashion Moda, an alternative space founded by Stefan Eins in the South Bronx; El Taller Boricua, a Puerto Rican artists' group that had grown out of the Art Workers Coalition in the late 1960s; and Colab.<sup>7</sup>

Eins, who had operated an informal alternative space out of his studio at 3 Mercer Street beginning in 1973, moved to the Bronx in 1978 in order to establish a multicultural base from which he could actively engage a community removed from the rather insular, inbred SoHo art world. With codirectors artist Joe Lewis and William



Scott (then a fifteen-year-old South Bronx resident), Eins facilitated interactions between artists, who commuted from Lower Manhattan, and South Bronx community members, who were exposed to new vistas and ideas. Many of the artists invited by Fashion Moda to show at the New Museum—which was then located at 65 Fifth Avenue, at Fourteenth Street—made every effort to desanctify the pristine white gallery space. Labels were handwritten directly on the wall (in Fashion Moda's "official" four languages of English, Chinese, Spanish, and Russian), framed paintings were hung askew, works were added midway through the show's run, and nail holes were left unspackled. John Fekner ironically posed the question "Are you only interested in art that is to be hung on white walls?" in bright-green spray paint stenciled on the walls in Latin. Graffiti artists Lee Quinones, in a self-portrait, and Futura 2000, in a geometrical abstraction, also spray painted on the walls, within clearly demarcated rectangles simulating conventional stretched canvases. Also making his first museum appearance and working directly on the wall was Keith Haring. In what seemed to take only a minute or two, Haring deftly executed a large mural in Magic Marker, importing into the museum space the guerilla techniques he had developed in order to move quickly from one blacked-out subway platform advertisement to another in the course of creating his trademark images.

By the mid-1980s, the East Village scene had developed its own version of the

PORTRAIT GALLERY AT THE TIMES SQUARE SHOW, 1980. Left to right: Duncan Hannah (five portraits); Gregory Lehman, *Three Stabbing Suspects* (photographs); Jane Dickson (two portraits on black plastic); Mike Robinson, *G.I. and Girl*; Robert Torres, *Spanish Couple* (lifecast heads); Caz Porter and Janet Stein, *Phallocrats* (drawings and posters). Photo: Andrea Callard



SoHo and Uptown “star system.” Alternative spaces and socially conscious collectives, such as Group Material, felt growing pressures to compete against each other as funding became more dependent on government grants (and the attendant justifications necessitated by the peer panel review process). The stakes rose, and by 1984 the East Village had grown increasingly commercial. Artists’ works were selling at five-digit prices, contributing to the “bubble” that would eventually burst. Two years later, Haring opened his Pop Shop on Lafayette Street just south of Houston. Haring’s intent to sell art at reasonable prices not only demonstrated the influence of his friend Andy Warhol, but also recalled Eins’s sale of artists’ multiples at 3 Mercer Street as well as Claes Oldenburg’s *The Store*, an installation of inexpensive artworks at 107 East Second Street in 1961. Colab had also created shops, most notably at the *Times Square Show* and *A More Store*. But Haring’s efforts were the first to result in a full-fledged, successful retail outlet that was made possible by his ever-increasing commercial success. The year 1984, as Marvin Taylor recounts here, also marks Ronald Reagan’s re-election, which, along with the rapidly expanding AIDS epidemic, was to have a devastating impact on the arts community.

As noted earlier, I did not frequent the Downtown club scene. But even I was aware of how Punk musicians drastically turned up the volume and fostered a new aesthetic that openly embraced extremes, as charted here by Bernard Gendron. So much of Downtown art was clearly “in your face,” edgy, and provocative. As Robert Siegle observes in his essay in this volume, Downtown writers such as Kathy Acker and Lynne Tillman radically altered mainstream literature, while a multimedia artist such as Karen Finley performed her own writing. Nonetheless, I am amazed by how many younger artists today are not aware of how their predecessors, living in Downtown New York during the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, so fundamentally changed established attitudes about how to make art. Perhaps it is precisely because of the chaotic and irreverent attitude of much Downtown art that its reception has suffered, especially in terms of public opinion, preservation, and government policy. It is also crucial to remember that multiple artistic scenes coexisted in this dense, compressed urban environment. But as Marvin Taylor so trenchantly discusses in his introduction, Downtown was not just a geographical distinction but also a metaphorical one. What so many Downtown artists of this era did share is that they conceived their work as alternative, if not outright subversive, vis-à-vis traditional curatorial and exhibition practices. Incorrigibly and resolutely defiant, Downtown artists interrogated systems of accreditation, broke down generic disciplines, and directly engaged with political issues. The years between 1974 and 1984 were indisputably fertile ones, and Downtown art, in so many deep-seated ways, irrefutably transformed American culture then and now.

## NOTES

1. I saw this work by Jenny Holzer in a one-day exhibition, *Rémy Presents: Project Grand Central Station*, sponsored by Rémy Martin. Curated by Allan Schwartzman, this show was one of the first to present Downtown work made specifically for a public context. Other featured artists included Dara Birnbaum, Brian Eno, and Maren Hassinger.
2. Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France, 1885 to World War I*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1968; first published in 1958). Shattuck notes in a 1967 preface that his study of Alfred Jarry, the creator of *Ubu Roi*, helped clarify “how the fluid state of bohemia, a cultural underground smacking of failure and fraud, crystallized for a few decades into a self-conscious avant-garde that carried the arts into a period of astonishingly varied renewal and accomplishment.”
3. Marcia Tucker, “Preface,” in *Alternatives in Retrospect: An Historical Overview, 1969–1975*, exhibition catalogue (New York: New Museum, 1981), 3.
4. Jacki Apple, “Introduction,” in *Alternatives in Retrospect*, 5. Another very informative overview of these years in New York is Donna De Salvo, “New York 1969–1974,” in *Century City: Art and Culture in the Metropolis*, exhibition catalogue (London: Tate Publishing), 122–47. Similarly, the volume published by Artists Space to commemorate its twenty-fifth anniversary not only contains a veritable treasure trove of information about this venerable alternative space but also includes numerous interviews with artists who discuss their memories of the period 1973 to 1998. Claudia Gould and Valerie Smith, eds., *5000 Artists Return to Artists Space: 25 Years* (New York: Artists Space, 1998).
5. Quoted in Diane Waldman, “Interview,” in *Jenny Holzer*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 17–18, cited in Vicky Clark, “Jenny Holzer,” in *Beyond the Frame: American Art, 1960–1990*, exhibition catalogue (Tokyo: Committee for Beyond the Frame, 1991), 77. This show of American art spanning three decades was sponsored by Amway Japan and traveled to three Japanese museums: the Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo; the National Museum of Modern Art, Osaka; and the Fukuoka Art Museum, Fukuoka.
6. Lynn Gumpert, “From Work to Frame and Back Again: Looking at Three Decades of American Art,” in *Beyond the Frame*, 44.
7. For more information, see my essay, “Observations on ‘Events,’ ” in *Events: Fashion Moda, Taller Boricua, Artists Invite Artists*, exhibition catalogue (New York: New Museum, 1981), 8–18. As it turned out, after initially agreeing to participate, Colab decided to withdraw. The New Museum then turned to a bimonthly discussion group, “Minority Artists’ Dialog,” asking twelve participants to choose two artists each. See Ed Jones, “Introduction,” in *Events*, 38. Colab then mounted a benefit exhibition at the Brooke Alexander Gallery on Fifty-seventh Street. Colab later stated that it declined to participate in *Events* because the New Museum “stood to gain more than Colab.” Cited in Grace Glueck, “The New Collectives—Reaching for a Wider Audience,” *New York Times*, February 1, 1981.

CHRISTY RUPP, *THE RAT PATROL*, 1978-79. Offset prints, installation view. Courtesy the artist



# PLAYING THE FIELD: THE DOWNTOWN SCENE AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION, AN INTRODUCTION

MARVIN J. TAYLOR

**Snap them out of their art trances.**

—Laurie Anderson, “Time to Go (for Diego)”

**There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.**

—Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*

## **PLACE. BELOW 14TH STREET. MANHATTAN. DOWNTOWN.**

What is it about this place? From Fourteenth Street to the Financial District, from the old West Side piers to Avenue D. Does something emanate from Five Points, carried by rats throughout the city over all these years? Is this something lost in the memories of waves of immigrants—Irish, Italian, Chinese, African American, Jewish, Latino—who came to New York seeking a better life? Is it the close proximity to the center of capitalism and the justice system? Or is it the cheap rent in barely habitable buildings with makeshift heating and plumbing? What ethos adheres to the ironclad buildings, the cobblestone streets, the fire-escaped tenements that stirs up political unrest and artistic creativity?

For New Yorkers, and for just about everyone as a matter of fact, Downtown is synonymous with experimentation. Experimentation with art, sex, drugs, rock and roll. It takes many decades for a geographic space to develop such an ingrained cultural mythos, and Downtown New York’s reputation as an artists’ haven can be traced back to as early as the 1850s, when German refugees from the 1848 Revolution—the original “Bohemians”—poured into the city, many of them taking up lodgings in the poorer parts of the developing metropolis, in what would become known as the Lower East Side.<sup>1</sup>



JOHNNY THUNDERS,  
RICHARD HELL, AND JERRY  
NOLAN ON A DOWNTOWN  
FIRE ESCAPE, 1975.

Richard Hell Papers, Fales Library.  
Photo: Bob Gruen/Star File.  
Courtesy Richard Meyers

Richard Kostelanetz, a longtime Downtown denizen and artist, says that the term *Downtown* was first applied to artists below Fourteenth Street in the late 1950s with specific reference to the work of John Cage, who lived there. The term *Downtown* differentiated Cage's metamusical work from compositions by the more traditional (read: serial) composers "Uptown" at Columbia.<sup>2</sup> This link to John Cage is very important, but it does not fully portend the meaning that *Downtown* would assume during the explosion of art in the 1970s and '80s.

From the early 1960s, artists had been living, and often squatting, in loft buildings south of Houston Street. George Maciunas, a Fluxus artist and proponent of cooperative living, had assisted artists in purchasing several former light-industry buildings and converting large lofts into living and working spaces. These buildings were known as "Fluxhouses."<sup>3</sup> The lofts provided ample room for studio space, though they lacked plumbing, heating, and other amenities. This was especially true for artists living illegally in non-"Fluxhouse" spaces. Police raids and evictions were commonplace. Despite the difficulty of living in SoHo, as it began to be called, a vital artistic community developed.

So many people were living in the once-deserted buildings that a new law, the Emergency Tenant Protection Act, ch. 576 (ETPA), was enacted by the New York State legislature on June 15, 1974. Its purpose was to "prevent exaction of unjust, unreasonable, and oppressive rents and rental agreements, and to forestall profiteering, speculation, and other disruptive practices tending to produce threats to public health, safety, and general welfare,"<sup>4</sup> and thus to regulate the ever-increasing illegal occupancy of commercial lofts in Lower Manhattan and to prevent abuses by landlords. This law opened the path for even more artists to move into SoHo and geographically to establish the Downtown scene.

Nineteen-seventy-four was memorable not only for the so-called “loft law,” however. In the world of politics, 1974 was a watershed for political corruption. On August 8, 1974, Richard Nixon announced his resignation as president of the United States in a televised address. His vice-president, Spiro Agnew, had already resigned the previous year, and Agnew’s replacement, Gerald Ford, was sworn in as president at noon on August 9.<sup>5</sup> Ford, in a further act that outraged many, granted Nixon an unconditional pardon on September 8. Thus, the stage was set for one tawdry political drama after another throughout the 1970s.



By 1974, something had changed in American culture. The hippie euphoria of the 1960s, with its optimism, free love, and paeans to personal fulfillment, had evaporated. Hippie culture had never really found New York to be fertile ground anyway. As Ron Kolm, author, editor, and Downtown impresario, explains: “You couldn’t drop acid and take the A Train.”<sup>6</sup> If acid had been the mind-expanding substance of the West Coast sixties, heroin was the drug of preference in Gotham. New York in the 1970s was a dark and dangerous place. By 1975, the city would be bankrupt and sold down the river by President Gerald Ford, whose view was succinctly captured in a famous *New York Daily News* headline of October 30, 1975: “Ford to City: Drop Dead.”

In March 1974, Television, a new band formed by Richard Hell and Tom Verlaine, convinced Hilly Kristal, the proprietor of CBGB’s, the mostly bluegrass and country music club on the Bowery, to let them play for a few nights. Punk rock was born.

Perhaps nothing fueled the scene as much as Punk. Founded by bands such as Television, the Ramones, Richard Hell and the Voidoids, and Patti Smith, Punk rejected the marketplace of commercialized music and returned rock to its roots. Instead of large, orchestral, overproduced theme-albums performed in massive stadiums, Punk stripped music down to basics, emphasized the words, questioned musical virtuosity, and played small local venues—CBGB’s being one of the best known. This self-made and self-promoted sound led many to link Punk and its fellow traveler, New Wave, to postmodern theory, but too often only in superficial

INVITATION TO GRAFFITI  
ARTIST ZEPHYR’S  
EXHIBITION AT THE FUN  
GALLERY, NEW YORK, 1984.  
Downtown Flyers Collection,  
Fales Library.

*This image shows the New  
York City subway at the time.*



RICHARD HELL  
PERFORMING IN A T-SHIRT  
PROCLAIMING "BUGS  
BUNNY HAS TOO MUCH  
MONEY." Richard Hell Papers,  
Fales Library. Photo: Patty Heffley.  
Courtesy Richard Meyers

experimental, outsider, and avant-garde artists working in Downtown New York during the seminal decade 1974–84. It brings together essays by some of the leading scholars, writers, and other people who were part of the Downtown scene. By viewing Downtown as both geography and metaphor, we can begin to understand how this place, during this period, shaped creative culture in the United States over the past twenty-five years.

**IN THE MID-1970s** a distinctively new attitude toward artistic production surfaced in Downtown New York. It was not a new aesthetic, not a new style, and not a unified movement, but rather an attitude toward the possibilities and production of art. Although for the most part unformulated, this attitude was shared by a wide range of writers, artists, performers, musicians, filmmakers, and video artists who moved to the relatively inexpensive lofts and tenements of SoHo and the Lower East Side. Influenced by the Symbolists, Beats, New York School, Situationists, Dada, Pop Art, Hippies, Marxists, and Anarchists, Downtown New York artists sought to push the limits of traditional categories of art. Artists were also writers, writers developed performance pieces, performers incorporated videos into their work, and everyone was in a band. Downtown works undermined the traditions of art, music, performance, and writing at the most basic structural levels. Rather than overthrow traditional forms and establish a new movement, Downtown work sought to

ways. Rarely have these intricate, contradictory, and vexing interrelationships been seriously investigated. More often they have been the subject of heated debate and, even years later, steaming vitriol.

Although there is no shortage of commentary on the Downtown scene—including the mythic subculture of Punk—little of it rises above hagiography. Indeed, to date, there has been no comprehensive overview of this important period in American art. This book attempts to chart the complicated web of influences that shaped a generation of

undermine from within the traditional structures of artistic media and the culture that had grown up around them.

Writing about Downtown literature, Robert Siegle identifies a central insurgency against the structures of culture in Downtown works:

*It is, then, an insurgency, but not one that expects to break free of some kind of specific corrupt institution. It is an insurgency against the silence of institutions, the muteness of the ideology of form, the unspoken violence of normalization. But it does not expect of itself the pure voice of the Other—it knows its own language is divided against itself, its every move a contradiction that marks the position of the speaking subject at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>*

Siegle describes Downtown writing as quintessentially postmodern in its approach to the “silence of institutions” and to the “position of the speaking subject”; that is, rather than attempting to overthrow institutions or to define a universal speaking position, Downtown writing, Siegle argues, is about understanding how the discourse of institutions constructs who we are, and then using that knowledge to complicate cultural discourse. Although Siegle is speaking only of writers, his observations apply equally to all Downtown artists.



KEITH HARING IN SUBWAY CAR, c. 1982–85. Photograph by Tseng Kwong Chi. Photo © Muna Tseng Dance Projects, Inc., New York. Drawing by Keith Haring © Estate of Keith Haring. All Rights Reserved



*PUCK BALL (THE GANG'S ALL HERE)*, 1983. Left to right, top to bottom: Katy K, Keith Haring, Carmel Johnson, John Sex, Bruno Schmidt, Samantha McEwen, Juan Dubose, Dan Friedman, Kenny Scharf, Tereza Goncalves, Min Thomez, and Tseng Kwong Chi. Photo: Tseng Kwong Chi. Copyright © Muna Tseng Dance Projects, Inc., New York. All Rights Reserved



Suspicious of easy assimilation into the traditional Uptown art scene, Downtown artists mounted a full-scale assault on the structures of society that had led to grinding poverty, homelessness, the Vietnam War, nuclear power, misogyny, racism, homophobia, and a host of other social problems. Downtown artists were profoundly aware of the failure of modernist revolutions, but unwilling to abandon the possibility of a better world. The Vietnam War had taught a whole generation to see links between the military, industry, and politics. The presidencies of Nixon, Ford, and Carter dispelled any vestiges of belief in the “great men” of American government. With these larger systems of power exposed, Downtown artists began to explore the cracks and fissures where human experience, the actual events of everyday life, undermine the oppressive, prescriptive structures of society. Hoping

to kick culture—both in the sense of forcing it to change and, possibly, in the sense of renouncing its stifling, prescriptive structures, which can be so addictive—Downtown work exploded traditional art forms, exposing them as nothing more than cultural constructs. Verbo-visual work, installation art, performance art, appropriation art, graffiti painting, Xerox art, zines, small magazines, self-publishing, outsider galleries, mail art, and a host of other transgressions abounded.

It is important to understand that Downtown artists are not part of a coherent movement; there is no one unified Downtown aesthetic, nor are there easily definable genres. Downtown works do not fall into the usual subject categories. What Downtown artists do share is, as Siegle notes,

*a desire to use art in refabricating a basis for individuality in the face of our sharpened sense of the structural determination of our lives. . . . Far from being defeated by contradictions, these postmoderns take from it the cue for an alternative logic. Far from being rendered hopeless by the seemingly inevitable drift of (inter)national politics, they borrow from disinformation the ironic habitation of familiar forms for cross-purposes. Far from being paralyzed by the anxiety of past masters' influence, they appropriate them for commentary on classic motifs (such as mastery, originality, autonomy, representation) and art-world structures (such as publishing houses, galleries, museums, and criticism). Far from feeling compromised by the investment economics of art, they turn the art market into a microcosm of consumer capitalism.<sup>8</sup>*



RODNEY ALAN GREENBLAT,  
INSTALLATION VIEW OF  
EXHIBITION AT GRACIE  
MANSION GALLERY, 1983.  
Courtesy Gracie Mansion

COLLABORATORS ON  
*SECRET PASTURES* AT THE  
BROOKLYN ACADEMY OF  
MUSIC POSING IN KEITH  
HARING'S STUDIO,  
NOVEMBER 1984. Left to right:  
composer Peter Gordon,  
choreographers Bill T. Jones and  
Arnie Zane, set designer Haring,  
and costume designer Willi Smith.  
Photo: Paula Court



For Downtown artists, lack of generic specialization was a way of breaking down the traditional structures that upheld the art market. Collaborative works, installations, performances, and the use of alternative spaces all resisted the pressure to define oneself as a painter or a sculptor or a musician and even resisted individual ownership of a work entirely. Why not do all these things? And they did.

What developed were various overlapping artistic scenes that coexisted within a larger social and historical context. Each had its own champions and detractors, its own critics and publications—but often these different groups shared an overlapping audience. For all the creativity and differences among the various artists, certain central themes appear again and again. These themes are **AUTHENTICITY**: What did the Downtown scene see as its origins? What do authorship, originality, uniqueness, and “realness” mean? What roles do appropriation, theft, piracy, and plagiarism play? How do contextualization, recontextualization, and Camp inflect Downtown work? How does collaboration affect notions of ownership and the marketplace?

**PERFORMATIVITY**: What constitutes a finished work? What is a performance? How is identity configured in a constantly changing environment? How does representation function in a fragmented world of multiple identities? Why did performance art grow Downtown? How did the scene encourage the development

of postmodern dance and performance art? What role did outsider theater play? What are the performative aspects of traditional artworks? What kind of agency inheres in performance?

**POLITICS:** Downtown work was unabashedly activist and aggressively engaged politically. How did this affect the work's reception? What kind of activism was really possible in Downtown work? What effect did the feminist movement have on Downtown work? What issues did queer activism and AIDS activism forefront? How did political inclinations relate to the theoretical frame in which the artists worked? In what ways does Downtown



work represent a new political movement, and in what ways is it related to other leftist activism in the postwar United States?

**ACCREDITATION:** Downtown work investigates the processes by which cultural power is created, maintained, and distributed. Through what mechanisms do Downtown works examine power structures? What are the roles of “education,” “technical skills,” and “technique” in this process? How did galleries, clubs, outdoor spaces, graffiti, installations, and the like operate in the scene? What kinds of publishing ventures and venues sprang up? What role did postmodern theory play in the formation of a Downtown sensibility?

**ONE FURTHER TENDENCY**, if not theme, runs through Downtown work: subversion. As Siegle notes, Downtown artists appropriated existing cultural models, such as business structures, only to use those models to disrupt the hegemony of business, for example. This key strategic tendency underlies all of the themes in Downtown art. The repeated exploration of and engagement with these themes and tendencies held the Downtown scene together as much as anything did. Accordingly, these themes run through the essays that make up this book. Bernard Gendron, who has written extensively on music and the avant-garde, explores how minimalism, loft jazz, and Punk inhabited the same spaces Downtown. Carlo

DAVID WOJNAROWICZ,  
UNTITLED, FROM THE  
SERIES RIMBAUD IN NEW  
YORK, 1977–79. Gelatin silver  
print. David Wojnarowicz Papers,  
Fales Library

McCormick, who was a seminal figure and a major critic in the scene, writes about the visual arts and the near impossibility of separating Downtown artworks into traditional genres. Rather than fall into totalizing narratives about the scene and the art it produced, McCormick evokes the energy, power, drugs, and nonstop erotic motion that propelled the scene, in an essay that can only be described as a meditation on speed. RoseLee Goldberg, the noted scholar and critic of performance art, looks back at ten years of its ascendancy. The medium of film was a crucial part of the Downtown scene. In October 1996, Matthew Yokobosky, then an assistant curator of film and video at the Whitney Museum of American Art, presented *No Wave Cinema, 1978–87*, which screened some of the most vibrant films by Downtown artists. His insightful essay on Downtown cinema appeared in the Whitney's *New American Film and Video Series*. It still stands as the best brief introduction to Downtown film from the period, and we reprint it here as an overview. Robert Siegle, whose book *Suburban Ambush* opened up the field of Downtown studies, examines the literary scene and how it influenced and reflected the larger cultural canvas.

Sometimes a single book changes the direction of an entire field of study. Such is the case with *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, which was published at the height of the Downtown scene by the preeminent Downtown museum, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and edited by Brian Wallis. Wallis's compilation includes texts by fiction writers, artists, feminist theorists, and French post-structuralists, and opens up a new mode for looking at and thinking about art. It is no overstatement to say that this book has become a bible for postmodern art historians. Wallis's erudite introduction remains the most articulate explanation to date of the link between Downtown work and postmodern theory. Often overlooked in the reader's haste to turn to the essays by Foucault, Baudrillard, Benjamin, Barthes, or Borges, Wallis's introduction is reprinted here to address some central questions about Downtown art and postmodern culture.

**IT MAY COME AS A SURPRISE** to find archival texts, texts from years ago, in a book about new art—art that has not received this kind of critical attention before. In his mammoth *Art of the Postmodern Era*, Irving Sandler emphasizes the importance of documentation and archives for contemporary art:

*Because postminimal works were not objects, they were generally ephemeral. To preserve their memory or to provide them with an afterlife, and to disseminate information about them, artists recorded them in photographs, films, videos, notes, and other documentation. There were debates over the purpose of such information. Was it simply a nonart record of an artistic event or an artwork in its own right, to be marketed as such? Postminimalists whose sympathies were*

countercultural believed that the documentation of a work was not art and thus not salable. They had turned to process art, earth art, installation art, body art, and conceptual art because they did not want to create art commodities. Many also believed, as Lucy Lippard observed, that their refusal to produce salable objects would subvert the art market (although she later acknowledged that this attempt failed). In the end the documentation was accorded the status of art object.<sup>9</sup>

Paradoxically, then, in postminimalist art the need for documentation was more important than ever before. The need for documentation, however, goes beyond just the artworks themselves. To truly understand these works and the climate in which they were created requires an archive documenting the culture that produced the works—the milieu in which the creation of such works was possible.

Over the past ten years, I have directed the Downtown Collection at New York University's Fales Library, the only university collection of archival and print materials that documents the Downtown scene. The collection contains more than 12,000 printed items and 7,500 linear feet of archival materials and is growing. Attempting to comprehensively document the scene, the collection comprises records of events and performance spaces in all media, including paper, film, video, and photography. We also have correspondence, manuscripts, diaries, slides, works of art, sculpture, sound recordings, and many other objects that are the fossil



BILL T. JONES AND ARNIE ZANE REHEARSING *VALLEY COTTAGE* AT THE KITCHEN, 1981. Photo: Paula Court

remains of artistic activity. Included in the collection are the papers of artists such as David Wojnarowicz, Richard Foreman, Richard Hell, Dennis Cooper, Martin Wong, John Watts and Laura Foreman, Ron Kolm, Richard Kostelanetz, Jaime Davidovich, Frank Moore, Bob Holman, and Wendy Perron. Organizational archives include the papers of the Judson Memorial Church, Mabou Mines, Fashion Moda Gallery, *Between C & D* magazine, *Serpent's Tail/High Risk Books*, *REPOHistory*, and the MIX Festival of Experimental Lesbian and Gay Video, to name but a few. The collection has more than 300 Downtown magazines and periodicals, such as *Bomb*, *Wedge*, *Between C & D*, the *East Village Eye*, *SoHo Arts Weekly*, *Avalanche*, *Art-Rite*, and *Redtape*. Within these publications, archives, videos, films, and photographs lie clues to understanding Downtown art and the Downtown scene—the impact this art had and continues to have on the art world and on culture in general. But the effect of Downtown art does not stop there. The same critical methods deployed by Downtown artists can be applied to the structures of libraries, archives, and museums—where they provide a critical means to examine how and why we collect, describe, exhibit, and preserve cultural materials.

Perhaps no scholar has given as much thought to the concept of documentation as Michel Foucault. His major texts, *The Order of Things*, *Discipline and Punish*, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, and *The History of Sexuality*, all examine how power affects us by structuring the world of discourse in which we live. For Foucault, there is no overarching metaphysical world of knowledge, no *a priori*, only what he paradoxically calls a “historical *a priori*.”<sup>10</sup> That is, no experience or knowledge stands outside the time in which it occurs or is created. For Foucault, then, various ways of organizing the world, what he calls “discourses,” create our reality in a given period by overlapping their symbolic structures. Think, for instance, of scientific language, medical language, the language of engineering, and the language of art as overlapping modes of understanding. The complex and often contradictory relationships of these discourses make up what Foucault calls the “archive.” Importantly, however, the archive is not the summation of all things that can be known in a period, nor is it the “library of all libraries, outside time and place.” Rather, it is “the general system of the formation and transformation of statements.”<sup>11</sup> That is, the archive, for Foucault, is a system of power, which in a given period allows things to be articulated, ideas to take shape and be vocalized or performed, objects to take on meaning. He goes further to say that the archive is not the sum of all the possible events, be they linguistic, physical, mental, or other, that occur within an historical *a priori*. It is only ever a subset of these possibilities. For Foucault, time allows us to see what sifts out as important from an historical *a priori*. So it is only after time passes that we can begin to see the shape of a period.

Yet what benefit is time? When better to document a scene than just after or just within it? What criteria can time itself produce? It is worth remembering that most of Foucault's studies were conducted on historical periods, using historical texts from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. His reliance on discourses, primarily represented via language, often printed or written, also lends to his critique a formality that does not account for the actions of individuals within a given historical period. What Foucault misses is the possible agency of individuals living within a historical *a priori*.<sup>12</sup> What is lost with the passage of time and the turn to documents is the experiences of people living and acting in a specific period—such as the Downtown scene between 1974 and 1984. Foucault's explanations of how cultural memory works through the actions of discourses and power leaves little, if any, room for the agency of the individual to effect change in the world. Without falling into some hippie (or Romantic, for that matter) notion of making a better world through individual fulfillment, we must ask how Downtown artists deployed their art to change the world and how they manipulated the power structures of art and culture to do so. If Michel Foucault had pointed out how discourses work to shape systems of culture, then the experiences of Downtown artists during the late 1960s and early '70s had shown them exactly how the military, government, and industry overlapped not only to support, but also actively to promote colonial violence. But Foucault's notion of the archive leaves little room for action and, thus, little room for understanding the effects Downtown artists wanted to produce through their work.

Rather than wait for the actions of time to filter out the documents that will most succinctly represent the Downtown scene, I have engaged within that scene to build an archive that is more complete. My conversations with a wide range of people from different parts of the scene led me to new facets of the period. New acquisitions bring their own perspectives into the mix and alter the positions of others already in the Downtown Collection. By using a documentary strategy, one that has as its goal the widest possible collection of materials related to the Downtown scene, I hope to preserve more of the historical materials, even the detritus, than would otherwise be kept. This is not a connoisseurship model. Taste, rarity, and market value are not the driving, or even necessarily important, forces behind the Collection.<sup>13</sup> Documenting Downtown culture is.

Instead of Foucault's archive, it is to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the "field of cultural production" that we must turn if we are to gain insight into how the Downtown scene functioned and into how we might begin to document that scene. For, as Bourdieu says, Foucault "refuses to relate works [of art] in any way to their social conditions of production, i.e., to positions occupied within the field of cultural production."<sup>14</sup>



1974

I travelled all the way to the other end of my bed to use this notebook ~~she~~ she gave me. It's 6:00 AM Sunday morning in June. It would be nice to fill this book up but I like to write on a typewriter. Glamorous letters to poetry lovers in cold print. This thing is utterly useless to me. (But I love having it) He figure out some systematic way to fill it up even if I have to tear out half the pages. I won't be able to travel for years and by then the pages will have fallen out. I've gotta figure out something pleasurable to do with a pen on paper that I wouldn't want to see in print. Can always read the preceding pages for inspiration. What could be better. Too bad she didn't throw in a few drawings. Maybe I'll write a book. Starting with title for next page.

**IN SUMMER 2003**, Richard Hell invited me to his apartment to look at his papers and, possibly, to acquire them for the Downtown Collection. I was intensely interested in Hell's collection, knowing about his literary, music, and film careers and what he meant to the Downtown scene. Nothing, however, prepared me for the amazing collection of personal papers and avant-garde books Hell had amassed over the years. As I looked through them, I came upon a series of journals and diaries Hell had kept. One in particular caught my attention. Hell had divided a page in the journal into two columns and had listed a group of authors and filmmakers who were influential on his work. Among the list were a number of Symbolist and Décadent writers, including Lautréamont, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Huysmans.<sup>15</sup> There I had it, or so I thought, a smoking gun linking Punk rock to the long tradition of the avant-garde as it had developed in the late nineteenth century—something I had instinctively felt to be the case. With a scholar's zeal, or perhaps tripped by the lure of the object, I had missed an important part of the picture. Certainly Tom Verlaine's nom de guerre was a clue to the link between early Punk and the Symbolists, but, as Hell pointed out to me subsequently, the New

York School poets were just as much an influence on him and other early Punks.<sup>16</sup> What was important about the New York School was that they "did it themselves," as Hell said. Rather than relying on mainstream magazines, editors, publishers, and the marketplace to produce and promote their poetry, New York School authors became editors, publishers, and salesmen. For Hell, Punk arose from the same spirit; he, too, was editing and publishing poetry.

I got one thing right, however: Hell had tapped into a lineage from which Downtown work derives when he listed the Symbolists. In fact, what he had begun to unfold was a genealogy of outsider-art practice that Pierre Bourdieu regarded as an epoch-making moment in cultural history. Rather than view the world strictly in terms of Marxian economic capital or Foucauldian discourses, Bourdieu developed

the concept of “the field of cultural production,” separate but related to the fields of economics, science, and politics. A sociologist by training, Bourdieu saw limitations to Foucault’s dire prognosis for the agency of the individual within culture, especially creative culture. For Bourdieu, economic capital did not apply as easily to the value of artworks as it did in other spheres of human activity. If the whole field of cultural production could be thought of as all those artists, poets, musicians, editors, publishers, critics, performers, and the literally hundreds of others involved in the creation, production, promotion, distribution, and preservation of cultural properties, then there could be subsets of this group who did not all conform to the desire for economic capital, but rather, and mostly because their work was experimental, sought “symbolic capital” from their peers. If the total creative world could be thought of as “large-scale” production, then there could also be “restricted” fields of production. For Bourdieu, the Symbolist poets represented the first field of “restricted” production. Their works, often intensely personal, were produced with little thought of widespread distribution. In fact, often very small print runs numbering only a handful of copies were distributed to friends. This is certainly true of the work of Stéphane Mallarmé, for instance. The value of Symbolist works lay within the reputation of the author in his subfield of cultural production, not within the larger world of the marketplace.

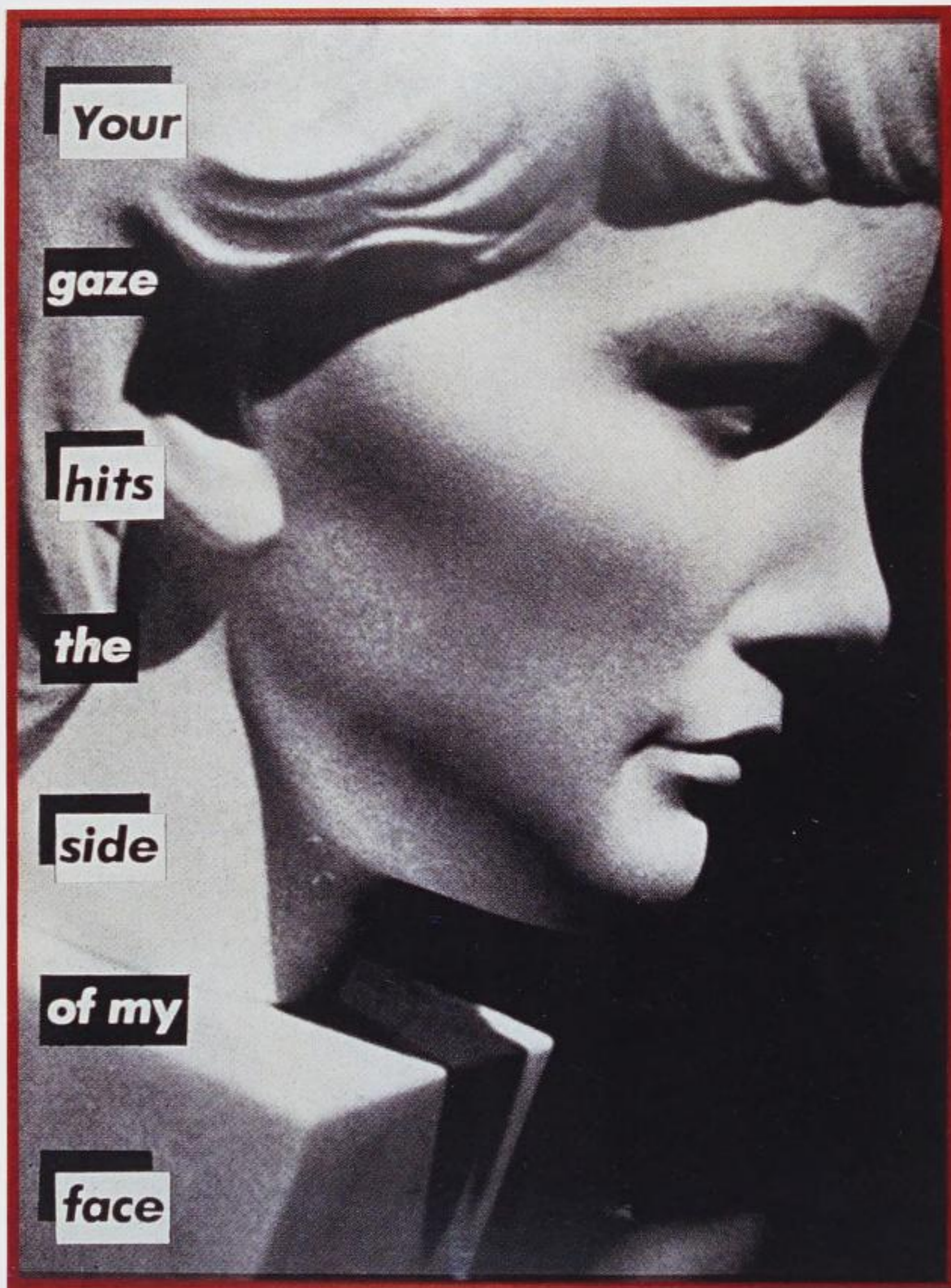
The Downtown scene was exactly the “restricted” field of cultural production of the sort that Bourdieu describes. The value of Downtown works emanated from the symbolic capital Downtown artists received from their peers. Artists worked in multiple media, and collaborated, criticized, supported, and valued each other’s works in a way that was unprecedented. The new modes of art—whether installation, performance, or a host of others—opened new paths for all art to follow. It is essential to remember that in this ten-year period, more artists were graduating from art schools than at any time in American history. The excitement of what was going on Downtown drew them to New York.<sup>17</sup>

All these artists were living and working in an urban geographical space that was not more than twenty-by-twenty square blocks. Rarely has there been such a condensed and diverse group of artists in one place at one time, all sharing many of the same assumptions about how to make new art.

To understand any work of Downtown art, then, we need to perform what Bourdieu calls a “radical recontextualization” that takes into account the intricate workings of the scene.<sup>18</sup> We need to understand the effect all these people had not only on one another, but also on the scene as a whole. Instead of Foucault’s rigid set of possible positions for individuals to occupy in culture, Bourdieu acknowledges that these positions exist, but posits that along with positions there are “position

RICHARD HELL AND PATTI SMITH, *JOURNAL FROM PATTI*, 1974–79. Autograph manuscript, 11 x 8 in. Richard Hell Papers, Fales Library. Courtesy Richard Meyers.

*In 1974, Patti Smith gave Richard Hell this journal, which she had already begun to use. In this passage, Hell wonders what to do with it, because he preferred typing to writing in longhand. At the end of the passage shown he speculates about writing a book. Centered on the next page, he wrote the proposed title: “Please Kill Me.”*



BARBARA KRUGER,  
UNTITLED (YOUR GAZE HITS  
THE SIDE OF MY FACE), 1981.  
Photograph, 55 x 41 in. Courtesy  
Mary Boone Gallery, New York

takings,” that is, individuals can choose—to some extent—how they will act within a specific cultural position they inhabit. If we are by necessity caught within the web of possible cultural “positions”—whether physical, textual, geographic, psychological, political, emotional, sexual, artistic, scientific, temporal, economic, or critical—we also have at our disposal a set of possibilities for responding to these “positions.” If artists are not allowed to be political, they can make political art. If women are not welcome in the Fifty-seventh Street galleries, they can create their own art world in SoHo. If music has drifted off into meaningless love songs, stadium rock, and pseudo-orchestral claptrap, musicians can bring poetry and passion back through an aggressive, even minimalist, return to the roots of rock. If galleries and museums are only exhibiting “great painters,” artists can reject the gallery system, create performative works, and show them in clubs, outdoors, anywhere. Not accepting the normal positions, however, meant that these artists’ works would not be rewarded by the “large-scale” field, which was directly linked to economic gain. Instead, these artists earned symbolic capital within the Downtown scene.

Downtown artists understood, at a fundamental level, Bourdieu’s seminal notion of art: “Literature, art and their respective producers do not exist independently of a complex institutional framework which authorizes, enables, empowers, and legitimizes them.”<sup>19</sup> Downtown artists’ rejections of the effects of the field of “large-scale” production can also be viewed as modernist gestures by a young avant-garde group, who reject their past masters in a simple binary relationship. After all, other artistic movements had already challenged the rigidity of high modernism, but Downtown artists took this a step further, willfully manipulating their “position takings” in a spirit of irony, deliberately aiming to upset the larger systems.

Downtown artists’ attempts to create artistic work outside the structures of culture is the quintessential Downtown problematic. For, on the one hand, it

gestures toward the authentic—that which is natural, unsullied by cultural systems and power—and, on the other hand, seeing how everything is shaped by cultural systems and power, it leads to a profound understanding of performativity. It is as though, in Downtown art, Friedrich Schiller's binary construction of the naive and sentimental approaches to the creation of art become fused. This may, in fact, be the locus of the debate about whether Downtown art is postmodern. For example, if Punk is a simple rejection of mainstream modes of production and dissemination of work, then it is inextricably caught in a modernist binary with those very modes of production. On the other hand, if Punk artists understood how mainstream modes of production and dissemination were deployed and willfully used similar means not only to subvert that same mainstream but also to show the constructed nature of all systems, they were performing their roles in a gesture that signals postmodernism. The postmodern/modernist nature of Downtown work was a central, if overdetermined, debate of the time. Perhaps it is better to view this debate as a problematic calling for attention at every turn as we explore the Downtown scene.

Jean-François Lyotard's views on postmodernism are useful here. For Lyotard, postmodernism is part of modernism, but not in the way we normally think. Modernism to Lyotard is a gesture of nostalgia, of restriction, and of form. Postmodernism is "that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable."<sup>20</sup> For Lyotard, then, postmodernism is an opening up of possibilities; modernism, a codifying of experimentation and a nostalgia for form and taste. This leads him to comment, paradoxically, that "a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant."<sup>21</sup> In this way, Lyotard's postmodern state resembles that of Bourdieu's "possibilities" and "position takings." All are moments of flux in systems of culture that affect the ways those systems function. Postmodern moments occur at times of cultural expansion and genre fluctuation. They are symbolized by widespread innovation, expansion, and creativity before the structures of the larger culture commodify and contain the experiment. The period between 1974 and 1984 was one of unprecedented expansion, rethinking, reimagining, and realignment in twentieth-century art. The field of cultural production that we call the Downtown scene was a hotbed for this particular postmodern moment, and the "position takings" of Downtown artists helped shape the art and art practices that would follow.



MONEY, LOVE, AND DEATH  
ROOM AT THE *TIMES*  
*SQUARE SHOW*, 1980.

Wallpapers by Golen Fitzgibbon and Robin Winters, *Gun, Dollar, Plate*; Christof Kohlhofer, *Billion Dollar Bills*; and Christy Rupp, *Rats*. Artwork, clockwise from top left: Richard Mock, *Hoof-Head Portraits*; Candace Hill-Montgomery, *Idi Amin Plate*; unidentified painting on paper; Scott Miller, *Sky Falls*; Tom Otterness, *Man with Visible Insides*; Marc Brasz, *Man with Foot in Mouth* (drawing); Richard Bosman, *Three Blind Mice*.  
Photo: Andrea Callard

If we are to attempt Bourdieu's "radical recontextualization" of a work of art within its field of cultural production, where do we turn? Following Irving Sandler's lead, we look to the archive, but not to the traditional notion of the archive. Instead, we need an archive that attempts to document a field of cultural production, one based on a much broader notion of what an archive can be. We need not only the correspondence, manuscripts, diaries, photographs, video, film, and sound recordings that constitute most archives, but also artworks, interviews with artists, papers of editors, archives of galleries and performance spaces, flyers and announcements for exhibitions and bands, objects used in installations, and the list goes on and on. What we need is a new understanding of what an archive and a museum can be. We need a new model that combines both functions and goes beyond them to envision a new entity that promotes not only research but also continued creative activity and engagement with all forms of art. Within this book, we interleave the scholars' essays

with memoirs by people who participated in the scene. Eric Bogosian, Richard Hell, Joe Lewis, Lydia Lunch, Ann Magnuson, Gracie Mansion, Michael Musto, Sarah Schulman, Sur Rodney (Sur), Lynne Tillman, ChiChi Valenti, and Martha Wilson complement, counter, contradict, and sometimes corroborate what the scholars have written.

It is true, of course, that not everything can be documented and preserved. Not all experiences are worth preserving, and, in any event, some are so ephemeral that there is no means of capturing them. This is not a reason for not collecting, describing, and preserving more than we have in the past. It is critical to understand the overwhelming importance of the documentation of art, something sorely lacking in most libraries and museums. Beyond that, we must counterbalance scholarship on the arts with firsthand accounts. We must attempt to put the human elements, the individual experiences, motives, and aspirations—the agency, if you will—back into the cultural memory.

**1984.** The Orwellian year. We might have chosen 1984 as the end date for the exhibition this book accompanies because of Orwell alone. In some ways, understanding how Big Brother—read: systems of culture—structures and polices our lives is crucial to the Downtown scene. There are other, more subtle reasons for selecting 1984, though. By 1984 the larger art world had encroached on the scene. That same year Mary Boone displayed and began to sell Basquiat's paintings for up to \$20,000. Another of his paintings, originally purchased for \$4,000, sold at Sotheby's for \$20,900. In June, *Art in America* published an article by Carlo McCormick and Walter Robinson titled "Report from the East Village" that described the growing East Village art scene.<sup>22</sup> Without informing the authors, the editors commissioned a rebuttal titled "The Problem with Puerilism," by Craig Owens, which harshly criticized the scene.<sup>23</sup> The internal postmodernism/modernism problematic had now become art world news. No matter which side you took in the ensuing controversy, the battle for accreditation in

ANN MAGNUSON (AS TELEVANGELIST POLLY ANN) AND TOM RUBNITZ, *MADE FOR TV*, 1984. Television still. Photo: Tseng Kwong Chi. Copyright © Muna Tseng Dance Projects, Inc., New York. All Rights Reserved





MARK KOSTABI,  
BLOOMINGDALE'S  
SHOPPING BAG, 1986. Ron  
Kolm Papers, Fales Library.

*In the 1980s, more and more  
Downtown artists took part in  
Uptown projects. In 1986, one  
of Mark Kostabi's images  
appeared on this department  
store shopping bag.*

“large-scale” production was on. The major art journals, galleries, and auction houses had co-opted the restricted field of Downtown art, creating superstars and an influx of economic capital that would eventually overtake the symbolic capital. Ronald Reagan’s landslide re-election on November 6, 1984, signaled the country’s overwhelming turn to the right. His pandering to the religious right encouraged its growing involvement in government. Reagan’s unquestioning support for the military and his blatant disregard for the arts signaled a shift away from the previous twenty years of arts funding. This disastrous combination gave birth to an atmosphere that soon led to censorship, the Culture Wars, and the eventual decimation of the National Endowment for the Arts. Finally, the groundbreaking work of feminist artists in the 1970s, with their keen sense of how patriarchal culture had contained them, and with their ability to employ personal experience as a vital tool for artmaking, opened the way in the early 1980s for gay men to create openly gay work that addressed the issues of homophobia. Tragically, in 1981, gay men began dying of a heretofore unknown disease that would be named acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) the following year. By 1984, more than 11,055 cases of AIDS were diagnosed in the United States, and 5,620 men were already dead, as the disease spread in unprecedented numbers among gay men in New York and San Francisco. In addition, intravenous drug users

were susceptible to HIV infection. Reagan did not even speak about AIDS in public until 1987, six years after the disease was identified. Within ten years, the Downtown scene would be decimated, many of its most active artists dead from AIDS or drug overdoses, while others, suffering from burnout or grief, moved away from New York.

Many, however, remained. The vibrant Downtown art scene of the later 1980s and early '90s was concerned with a somewhat different set of issues. It burned with a different flame, but one still fueled by the artists, writers, filmmakers, performers, dancers, activists, editors, publishers, and band members who gave birth to the earlier Downtown scene.



**TOP:** JOHN BERND'S GO-GO BOYS PERFORMING IN *FULL MOON SHOW* AT P.S. 122, 1985.

Photo: © Dona Ann McAdams

**BOTTOM:** RONALD REAGAN STANDING BEFORE JOHN FEKNER'S MURAL *BROKEN PROMISES*, 1980. Fashion Moda Archive, Fales Library. Courtesy AP/Wide World Photos





## NOTES

For Michael and Ziggy

1. See Theodore Winthrop's novel *Cecil Dreeme* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1862), which details the lives of artists renting rooms in New York University's neo-gothic University Hall, the first NYU building. Featuring a female-to-male transvestite, the book was so popular that University Hall became known as Cecil Dreeme Hall. University Hall was demolished in 1894 to make way for NYU's neoclassical Main Building, now the Silver Center.
2. Telephone conversation with the author, fall 1995.
3. For a detailed description of the Fluxhouses, see Charles R. Simpson, *SoHo: The Artist in the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 155–66.
4. McKinney's Uncons Laws of New York § 8622, L 1974, ch 576.
5. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s.v. "United States" (accessed July 25, 2004).
6. Interview with the author, December 13, 1993.
7. Robert Siegle, *Suburban Ambush: Downtown Writing and the Fiction of Insurgency* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 4.
8. *Ibid.*, 10.
9. Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s* (New York: Icon Editions, 1996), 24.
10. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 127.
11. *Ibid.*, 130.
12. Foucault's later work, especially *The History of Sexuality*, begins to explore modes of understanding outside language, expanding the notion of discourses somewhat. As we will see, Bourdieu's sociological approach provides a more subtle understanding of individuals' agency within discourses, or what he calls "fields of cultural production."
13. I would be foolhardy to think that my own personal likes and dislikes do not affect my collection decisions at some level. After all, the decision to build the Downtown Collection can be seen as a statement of taste, connoisseurship, and valuation. That said, once the decision to collect the scene is made, then I must collect it as comprehensively as possible, even acquiring those aspects that, to me, are not appealing or particularly interesting. How am I to know what will be useful a hundred years from now? My experience in repositories is that often the most unlikely materials become the most valuable for research in the future.
14. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. and intro. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 33.
15. Richard Hell, "Journal from Patti, 1974–1979," Richard Hell Papers, Fales Library, New York University, Series 1A.
16. In fact, Tom Verlaine's surname was suggested to him by Hell. Hell had originally proposed Gauthier, but they agreed that no one would be able to pronounce it correctly. Richard Hell, communication with the author, November 1, 2004.

17. Thanks to Alexandra Anderson-Spivey and Shelley Rice for pointing out that the exploding population of artists in New York during this period was directly related to the unprecedented number of art-school graduates. The sheer number of new artists helped fuel the Downtown scene. Joint interview with the author, May 27, 2004.
18. Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 9.
19. *Ibid.*, 10.
20. Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?" in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 46.
21. *Ibid.*, 44.
22. Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick, "Report from the East Village: Slouching toward Avenue D," *Art in America* 72 (summer 1984): 134–61.
23. Craig Owens, "Commentary: The Problem with Puerilism," *Art in America* 72 (summer 1984): 162–63.



3 TEENS KILL 4  
▲ PYRAMID  
AVE.A 6+7<sup>ST</sup> THURS. JAN. 21

# THE DOWNTOWN MUSIC SCENE

BERNARD GENDRON

**DOWNTOWN MUSIC EFFECTIVELY BEGAN** in the early 1970s, following the growing migration of artists and musicians into SoHo and the flowering of galleries and performance spaces. A generation earlier, New York musical undergrounds were located in more specific neighborhoods, Greenwich Village or, in the 1960s, the East and West Villages. But once SoHo was thrown into the mix, followed soon by the Bowery, TriBeCa, and the Lower East Side, the notion of a cultural Downtown came to the fore, encapsulating a heterogeneous array of bohemian neighborhoods below Fourteenth Street.<sup>1</sup>

The emergence of a musical Downtown in the early 1970s reflected much more than geographic expansion and a change in nomenclature. The new term signaled a significant transformation in the music scene, resulting in a rich and diverse period of musical production, with an international impact. Three musical fields stood out, each associated with particular Downtown institutions, each increasingly overlapping with the other fields: experimental post-Cagean music, the loft jazz movement, and Punk and New Wave rock.

This irruption was preceded, and perhaps made possible, by the waning of most of the musical genres with which the East and West Villages had previously been identified. The folk revival of the 1960s was altogether a thing of the past. The jazz avant-garde had fled temporarily to Europe or were taking up academic positions away from New York, while the clubs that had nourished them—the Five Spot and Slug’s—were barely limping along. The Velvet Underground ended its short life with hardly a ripple in its home base of the East Village, as attested by the very spare coverage in the *Village Voice* and even the *East Village Other*. Their canonization would come later, in the burgeoning Downtown rock scene of the 1970s.

DAVID WOJNAROWICZ,  
*EARLY BAND POSTER II*,  
1980–81. Spray paint stenciled  
on paper, 17 x 14 in. David  
Wojnarowicz Papers, Fales Library.

*Like many Downtown artists, Wojnarowicz played in a rock band—in his case 3 TEENS KILL 4—No Motive, its name derived from a New York Post headline. This concert poster announces a performance at Pyramid.*

**LOU REED**

IN CONCERT AT STUDIO 54  
 254 W. 54 ST.  
 TUESDAY MARCH 8, 1983  
 \$12. PP DOORS OPEN  
 AT 7:30  
 PERFORMANCE 10:00

FIRST COME—FIRST SERVED

ADVANCE TICKETS AVAILABLE  
 DAYS MONDAY—FRIDAY FROM 1  
 TO 7 P.M. 229 W. 53 ST.  
 NIGHTS FROM 10 TO 3 A.M. 254 W. 54 ST.

INVITATION TO LOU REED'S  
 CONCERT AT STUDIO 54,  
 1983. Downtown Flyers  
 Collection, Fales Library.

*With their anti-mainstream rock  
 and their links to Warhol's  
 factory, Lou Reed and the  
 Velvet Underground were  
 crucial forerunners of the  
 Downtown music scene.*

Their most notable descendents, the “minimalists” Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass, carried this postmodern turn into the 1970s. So it is with them that our story begins.

### **TRANSITION: THE MINIMALISTS**

Musical minimalism both belongs and does not belong to the 1970s–80s Downtown scene, having arisen earlier yet flowering during it, and its performances taking place both in- and outside it. On the one hand, the three minimalists had already produced a significant body of work beforehand, in particular Riley's *In C*, performed in 1964 in San Francisco. On the other hand, although also very active in the 1960s, Reich and Glass, unlike Riley, did not achieve their critical breakthroughs until the early 1970s (Reich's *Drumming* and Glass's *Music in Twelve Parts*) and produced their most celebrated work in the latter part of that decade (Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* and Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*).

Riley left New York in 1970, after five years there, to teach Indian music at Mills College in Oakland, California. Reich and Glass kept New York as home base, yet their connection with the Downtown scene is not altogether unambiguous. Their main works, for the most part, premiered Uptown. Nonetheless, when all is said and done, Reich and Glass ultimately belong to Downtown. It is telling that their early Uptown performances were in art, rather than music, venues (particu-

Only in the art music of John Cage, La Monte Young, and their descendants did a uniquely Village tradition, initiated in the 1950s and '60s, continue to develop and flourish in the 1970s. Cage and Young effected a Downtown rebellion against the onerously academicized serialism of the Uptown Princeton-Columbia axis of composers (e.g., Milton Babbitt). Art composers abandoned the complex formalisms and the extreme compositional control of the latter for indeterminacy and audience engagement (Cage), musician improvisation and stark simplicity (Young), and a serious dialogue with non-Western musics.



PHILIP GLASS WITH HIS ENSEMBLE, 1974. Left to right, Bob Telson, Dickie Landry, Joan La Barbara, Jon Gibson, and Philip Glass. Copyright © Henri Dauman / DaumanPictures.com. All Rights Reserved

larly the Guggenheim and the Whitney), whose audiences came mainly from Downtown. Uptown music audiences, at Lincoln Center and Town Hall, were slow to accept minimalism and its amplified sonorities. Most important, Downtown was Reich's and Glass's haven in a harsh art world, the friendly confines providing home and studio, alliances and support systems, small venues and lofts for rehearsing and honing new work, as well as the site for triumphant returns and retrospectives. Reich presented an early version of *Music for 18 Musicians* at the Kitchen, and Glass rehearsed *Einstein on the Beach* at Robert Wilson's Spring Street studio. Glass in particular, with a permanent ensemble needing frequent gigs, performed regularly in the early 1970s at Downtown haunts such as La Mama, the Village Church, 112 Greene Street, the Loeb Student Center at New York University, his Bleecker Street studio, and Max's Kansas City, where his rocklike amplifications were perfectly at home.

Furthermore, the first unqualified plaudits for Reich and Glass came from critics closely associated with the Downtown music scene (Tom Johnson of the *Village Voice* and John Rockwell of the *New York Times*). Indeed, Downtown critics were in the forefront of propagating the concept of musical minimalism—which did not enter the discursive stream until the early 1970s—as a group designation for Riley, Reich, and Glass (much to their dismay).<sup>2</sup> But they all shared important common interests, at least during their “minimalist” periods. All three constructed

their music out of modular units, repeated at length but with subtle, sometimes barely perceptible, long-run shifts. In the case of Riley, these shifts resulted from each musician's limited freedom to decide how long to repeat one set phrase before moving on to the next. For Reich, they resulted from the same module's being played somewhat out of phase by different instruments or tape loops, and for Glass, from addition and subtraction processes. This was a return to tonal music, which, in contrast to the busy harmonic activity of traditional Western classical music, was governed by just a few chords in static or glacial harmonic motion. The concept of musical minimalism dominated Downtown musical discourse in the 1970s and was also applied to diverse composer-performers such as Charlemagne Palestine, Rhys Chatham, Meredith Monk, and Pauline Oliveros.

### THREE STREAMS

Looking back, we can pinpoint the years 1971–72 as the start of a new musical scene that, unlike minimalism, was altogether indigenous to Downtown and would prevail for more than a decade. The rise of two new performance institutions marks the beginnings of this era: the Mercer Arts Center, a modern multiplex of performance spaces chiseled out of the dilapidated former Broadway Central Hotel at 240 Mercer Street, and, a few blocks away, the Studio Rivbea, a rehearsal space that the owner, the jazz saxophonist Sam Rivers, transformed into a public performance loft in 1972. The Mercer, which originally provided venues for off-Broadway plays, expanded its vision to include other media in 1971–72. In the hotel's former kitchen emerged the Kitchen, a space initially devoted to experimental video arts, but which moved quickly to include experimental art music. The newly decorated Oscar Wilde Room, just across the hall from the Kitchen, was rented for rock shows and was occupied most famously in 1972 by the New York Dolls. Following the Mercer Arts Center building's collapse in August 1973, the Kitchen moved to 59 Wooster Street, at the corner of Broome, joining SoHo's teeming gallery and performance art scene. Meanwhile, the Oscar Wilde Room's demise left a vacuum in underground rock venues that was soon filled by CBGB's, the incubator of New York Punk and New Wave.

The Kitchen, the Oscar Wilde Room, and Studio Rivbea were homes to the three musical streams that came to dominate Downtown in the later 1970s and '80s: experimental postmodern (post-Cagean) music, Punk and New Wave rock, and the loft jazz movement. Though initially quite separate from each other, these three streams, no doubt due in part to their geographical proximity and shared audiences, would eventually converge in dramatic fashion. This meant an unprecedented breakdown of barriers between the "high" and the formerly "low,"

between art and the popular. Or, given jazz's status in the middle sector of the cultural hierarchy, a breakdown in the barriers between highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow. This mix also reflected the continuing racial divisions in the cultural demographics of Downtown: an island of black music in a vast white sea.

### **AT THE KITCHEN (1971–76)**

The video artists Steina and Woody Vasulka founded the Kitchen in April 1971 as a site where artists could experiment with the infant medium. Both rent and equipment were funded in part by a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, at a time when government funding for the arts was expanding rapidly. But visitors' continued interruptions quickly turned the Kitchen into a performance video space. Soon a hotbed of video arts performance in New York, the Kitchen was quick to introduce music performance, under the direction of Rhys Chatham, a student of Morton Subotnik's, who, still in his teens, was initially hired to fill the empty slots on the Monday night schedule. But music insinuated itself increasingly, within a few years replacing video as the centerpiece of Kitchen programming, and remaining so even after dance and performance art were added in the late 1970s.

Both at the Mercer and later in its more resplendent space on the corner of Wooster and Broome, the Kitchen, wide-open except for banks of equipment, allowed for a variety of performance setups, from theater-in-the-round to the interspersing of performers, machines, and audiences. Rather than a site for art-music ensembles playing someone else's compositions, the Kitchen was an ideal venue for composers who wanted to organize their own concerts, control the way the music was staged, or even take part in the performance. Said one executive, the Kitchen "functions like a gallery," where "the composer is as much an artist as a sculptor or painter."<sup>3</sup> Initially, the only sonic difference between the earlier Mercer Arts and later SoHo sites was in the ambience: the raucous and belligerent sounds of proto-Punk bands reverberating across the hallway from the Oscar Wilde Room at the Mercer was replaced by the roar of trucks barreling toward the Holland Tunnel on Broome Street (accompanied by the hissing and knocking of radiators).<sup>4</sup>

A heady array of electronic equipment ensured that, at least in the first few years, computer, synthesizer, and multimedia performances took pride of place, as seen at the Computer Arts Festivals of 1972 and 1974. Electronic music performances at the Kitchen were warm and interactive rather than austere or abstract (as was the case Uptown), laced with "humanistic" components and conceptual playfulness. There were live performances with synthesized tapes, computer approximations of brass quintets, and a computer-generated performance of "Three Blind Mice" in twenty-one voices.<sup>5</sup> David Behrman, who founded the Sonic Arts Union with Robert



**LIFE BEFORE CELL PHONES**, answering machines, iPods, or DVDs. No video rentals or Walkmans. No MTV. In other words, less interference. Blocks of abandoned buildings. Apartments with low rents, the toilet in the hallway and a bathtub in the kitchen. Few distractions, few ambitions, and even fewer bills to pay. Being in a band even if you couldn't play, making art even if you never learned to paint, running a club with no business experience, falling in love over and over and over again.

Having just enough to get by and never wanting more. Living for the moment. Doing nothing, trying everything. Hanging out with your artist friends with no timetable, no pressure, no agendas. Sharing vinyl. Xeroxing fanzines. Wondering why so many people liked heroin when it just made you sick.

Odessa for breakfast, Stromboli Pizza for lunch, and drink tickets for dinner. Rarely having a real job. Getting your hair burned to a crisp by Mr. Steve, the nearly blind Polish hairdresser on First Avenue who gave the best (and highest) bouffant in town. Buying a complete vintage retro wardrobe for less than fifty dollars at any Salvation Army or Goodwill. Thinking those greasy potato knishes at Dave's Luncheonette near the Mudd Club would prevent hangovers. Pretending you weren't a debauchee as long as you got home before sunrise.

Finding the set, costumes, and props for your next show in the trash. Listening to Klaus Nomi sing an aria atop a dirty, urine-soaked snow mound. Watching the Heartbreakers kick the shit out of James Chance when he repeatedly tried to sing "Route 66" during their set at Max's. Making friends with Lance Loud, whose moving-into-the-Chelsea-Hotel episode on the PBS series *An American Family* convinced most of us to move to N.Y.C. A.S.A.P.

Not giving a fuck about the *New York Times* or anything north of Fourteenth Street. Dressing like an Ellis Island immigrant while working as an extra in the movie *Ragtime* (back when Eleventh Street didn't need any help from a design team to transform it into a turn-of-the-century tenement slum). Being genuinely shocked while passing the bums on the Bowery. Being genuinely transformed while watching the Wooster Group perform.

Eagerly anticipating the new issue of the *SoHo Weekly News* (and hoping to be in it). Discovering what those studded, black leather bracelets were really good for. Go-go dancing 'til you were numb. Being in a Shaggs cover band. Living for the Monster Movie Club and manifesting anything our warped imaginations could dream up every night at Club 57.

Being horrified when a boyfriend wanted me to move into his apartment on the preppified Upper West Side, because a girl doesn't give up "a room of one's own" when she finally finds it, not when it's just 150 dollars a month and on Tompkins Square Park in the East Village, *Downtown*, the undisputed center of the universe and the coolest small town in the biggest, baddest city in the entire world, where I had gratefully found a new family of friends who gave me every reason to live . . . and to live there.

Ashley, Alvin Lucier, and Gordon Mumma, would typically make use of unintimidating homemade computer circuitry that, on various occasions, responded with a series of pitches or harmonies to the notes of improvising cello players, to the moves of dancers, or, more abstractly, to the shifting patterns of clouds.<sup>6</sup>

But electronics was by no means the only fare on offer in the early years of the Kitchen. Chatham and Jim Burton, who followed him as director, pursued a generally eclectic agenda, showcasing also a broad variety of post-Cagean composers who explored all types of sounds, employing nontraditional or noncanonical art instruments (or traditional art instruments used in nontraditional ways), engaging in musical humor or philosophical concepts, or seeking to dismantle the wall between performers and audiences. Thus, a concert beginning with improvisations among piano, bass, trombone, and trumpet culminated when the audience joined the fray by blowing on tin whistles. “The idea may sound silly,” reported Tom Johnson, “but it turned out to be one of the most successful attempts at audience participation I have witnessed.”<sup>7</sup> Choruses of highball glasses vibrated against one another; musicians bowed industrially on vertically mounted bicycle wheels or rubbed different materials on piano wires strung head high, producing a squeaking, moaning effect.

The Kitchen’s avant-garde practices were rarely shocking or outrageous, but rather evoked amused surprise, bemused afterthoughts, or at worst mild irritation. Such was the case when the environmental composer Maryanne Amacher passed out a program asking the audience if they could hear her music being played in Boston, or when Richard Hayman created an overnight concert of relaxing music for an audience lying on mattresses, encouraging them to drift off to sleep. But for all its eclecticism and testing of this or that musical boundary, the Kitchen, during its first five years, always remained firmly fixed in the classic musical avant-garde tradition, never breaching the walls separating it from other musical fields, such as jazz and rock. This would change in 1976, when jazz suddenly appeared at the Kitchen, no doubt as much in response to outside pressure—namely, the flowering of the loft jazz movement—as from an inner dialectic.



ANN MAGNUSON, 1984.  
Photo: Paula Court

### LOFT JAZZ (1972–79)

The loft jazz movement was the offspring of a local musicians' revolt against the exclusionary practices of the Newport Jazz Festival when it moved to New York in 1973. As was typical of George Wein's productions, the Newport remained a rather conservative affair, with mostly well-established jazz stars and some popular entertainers (including rock musicians). This left little room for local New York musicians, mostly African American and avant-garde, including those recently returned from self-imposed exile in France. With a grant from the New York Council on the Arts, a number of these discontented musicians organized the New York Musicians' Jazz Festival, to run concurrently with the Newport. Along with the lesser known, this counterfestival also featured established musicians such as Sun Ra, Archie Shepp, Jackie McLean, and the vocalist Joe Lee Wilson. It took place in a variety of sites throughout the city, including Slug's in the East Village, the Harlem Music Center, city parks (where concerts were free), and a few lofts owned by jazz musicians—Sam Rivers's Studio Rivbea at 24 Bond Street and Studio We—which also functioned as meeting places for strategic planning and conspiracy.

The success of this counterfestival—crowds were turned away at many of the venues—led to the formation of the New York City Musicians Organization, which committed itself to a program of recurrent musician-controlled festivals. After an unsatisfactory alliance with the Newport Jazz Festival in 1973—which had provided slots at Alice Tully and Carnegie Halls to complement the alternative sites—these musicians reverted to independent festivals and events. As the New York City Musicians Organization lost its collective impetus, the jazz lofts, rapidly increasing in numbers, became the main, almost exclusive, showcases for musician-controlled performance. Now the opposition between alternative jazz and the Newport Jazz Festival was a clear Downtown-Uptown polarity, between the jazz lofts, located mainly in the gritty environments of the East Village, the Bowery, SoHo, and the Lower East Side, and Newport's lavish settings at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall.

The idea of a jazz loft was nothing new in itself. In the early 1960s, young and even established avant-garde musicians (e.g., Archie Shepp, Cecil Taylor), frozen out of the jazz club scene, occasionally performed in Downtown lofts before meager audiences drawn by small ads in the *Village Voice*.<sup>8</sup> Such episodic and hardly noticed events waxed and waned with the employment prospects of the avant-garde, and then ground practically to a standstill with the exodus of the avant-garde to Europe in the late 1960s. But something new was afoot when Ornette Coleman, joining the migration to SoHo in 1968, inaugurated Artists House at 131 Prince Street, which set the early standard for a jazz musician-owned establishment, functioning as home, performance space, recording studio, music workshop, and meeting

place. Although the Artists House project ended within a few years, after a string of none-too-successful and episodic ventures, it was a harbinger of things to come.

The loft scene of the mid-1970s was altogether different. Operating on a regular basis, Downtown lofts had become the major showcases for jazz performances of all types in New York. The recurrent “loft jazz festivals,” sponsored by an alliance of sites, drew excited coverage in the mainstream New York press, as well as in the national and international jazz press.<sup>9</sup> European critics and fans traveled to New York for such loft-organized events, eager to discover what the hubbub was all about. Everyone was asking: What is loft jazz? Is it a new kind of jazz? But in reality, “loft jazz” signified less a stylistic revolution than an institutional transformation, in which musicians successfully (but, alas, only temporarily) took over the production of live (and sometimes recorded) jazz music and were absorbed into the shimmering, mass-mediated surface of Downtown music.

“Jazz lofts” varied considerably in physiognomy, from seedy storefronts, basements, studios, living rooms, and penthouses to clubs disguised as lofts. Sam Rivers at Studio Rivbea was the unquestionable leader of the loft jazz movement. Funded by New York State Council on the Arts grants throughout the decade, he had the means to generate regular programming—weekend gigs and spring and summer festivals—as well as to provide musicians with a reasonable assured salary, instead of the uncertain door percentages typical of other lofts. Despite the cramped quarters and lack of air conditioning, Rivbea drew a loyal crowd, quite happy to sit on pillows, low mattresses, park benches, or the hard floor, and to mix informally with musicians while sipping coffee, tea, or soda.

The Studio Rivbea was especially supportive of avant-garde musicians, as was Ali’s Alley, 77 Greene Street, which was owned by the percussionist Rashied Ali. Rivers had long been involved with the experimental side of jazz, having worked with Miles Davis and Cecil Taylor, and Ali was a member of John Coltrane’s most emphatically free jazz combo. Major Midwestern experimental jazz organizations were lured to New York by the successes of the loft movement, among them Chicago’s Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) and the lesser-known Black Artists’ Group from Saint Louis, which set up its own loft, The BAG, at 236 East Third Street. Most important, the loft jazz movement provided performance space and international publicity for a number of young or not-yet-recognized avant-garde musicians, notably tenor saxophonist David Murray, alto saxophonist Julius Hemphill, and baritone saxophonist Hamiet Bluiett, the latter two former members of the Black Artists’ Group. Murray displayed a broad stylistic virtuosity, blending the squeaks, squawks, and atonal runs of free jazz with the melodic expressivity of soul music and an innovative command of bop formulas



IGGY POP AND RICHARD HELL AT CBGB'S, 1976.

Photo: Roberta Bayley.  
Courtesy the photographer

ton and Eddie Jefferson; at the Environ, on Broadway and Grand, where the Brubeck family appeared; and at the fancy Jazzmania, on Twenty-third and Broadway. Originally, the loft movement was led, and peopled almost exclusively, by African American musicians (though the audience was predominantly white), but white musician-impresarios soon entered the fray (John Fischer at Environ and Mike Morgenstern at Jazzmania).

Ultimately, jazz lofts proved too unstable to sustain a permanent presence. Among the destabilizing factors were the constant threat of financial collapse, abetted by the decline of public arts funding in the late 1970s, and the predictable internecine warfare. In addition, the loft movement's growing international reputation created substantial new touring opportunities for Rivers, Ali, Wilson, and other owners, enticing them to curtail their Downtown programming or even to shut down or sell their lofts. Nor can one discount the explosion of Punk/New Wave rock at CBGB's—located at 315 Bowery just a few blocks away from Studio Rivbea and Ladies Fort—which no doubt drew audiences and much-needed media attention away from the already vulnerable jazz scene.<sup>10</sup>

So, for all practical purposes, the loft jazz scene was dead by 1980. But some of its activities were taken up by institutions not usually associated with jazz, such as Joseph Papp's Public Theater Cabaret, which featured the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Anthony Braxton, and the Sam Rivers Quartet, among others. With Studio

and blues motifs. Along with Oliver Lake—also of the Black Artists' Group—Murray, Hemphill, and Bluiett formed the World Saxophone Quartet in 1976, which would prove to be one of the more resilient and influential jazz combos of the 1980s. Sam Rivers arranged for the recording of Rivbea's 1976 Spring Festival, selections from which were released on the five-LP compilation *Wildflowers*—the best testimonial to the rich diversity of avant-garde loft jazz.

There was also much conventional jazz music at the lofts: at the Ladies Fort, owned by the vocalist Joe Lee Wilson; at 2 Bond Street near the Rivbea, where one heard Dakota Stan-

Rivbea closed, the Public Theater housed the Sam Rivers counterfestival in the summer of 1979, the final act of defiance. This and other related events provided evidence that the rigid walls between avant-garde jazz and the rest of the Downtown art and music worlds were beginning to break down.

### **PUNK/NEW WAVE (1972–78)**

No doubt the Mercer Arts Center had never envisioned that rock and roll, a not-yet-fully-welcome guest in the Downtown art world, would invade its performance spaces.<sup>11</sup> But economic necessity overcame aesthetics, and the center's management, frustrated with recurrent vacancies at the Oscar Wilde Room, booked a night of rock-and-roll acts headlined by the Magic Tramps, with the New York Dolls opening. The Dolls, strutting in their not-quite-drag attire and ornamentation—black-sequined hot pants, bright-pink pantyhose, satin miniskirts, lipstick, eyeliner, and high platform boots—were an immediate hit, overshadowing the main act. Thus began an uproariously successful four-month Tuesday-night residency at the Oscar Wilde Room (from June to October 1972), which became for a brief time the epicenter for like-minded unrecorded rock bands, such as Teenage Lust and Ruby and the Rednecks. Evidently, these lively sounds did not please the Kitchen's denizens just across the hallway—a short distance masking a yawning cultural chasm.

To the glitter and glam of the Dolls, Punk provided a lively counterpoint—raw, basic, rough-and-ready rock and roll—with minimal technical competence, in stark contrast to the prevailing faux art rock so much in fashion at the time. The term Punk, which had recently been put forth by Lester Bangs and other critics to designate retrospectively (and nostalgically) the garage bands of the 1960s, had not yet evolved into a genre label. It served more as a descriptor, to identify the street-ruffian sides of the Dolls' image, in tandem with the bohemian and decadent sides. The Dolls' reputation was rising Downtown just when, not coincidentally, the now-disbanded Velvet Underground was belatedly being anointed and achieving cult status. But, contrary to all expectations, national stardom eluded the Dolls, despite wild trips to England, two well-received LPs, and a constant barrage of publicity. With the drug excesses, bad management, and uncertain performances, what played well Downtown did not generate the same excitement in mid-America. The Dolls were finished by 1975, with the loss of a record contract and the defection of Johnny Thunders and Jerry Nolan, although some configuration under that name limped along for two more years.

But neither the decline of the Dolls nor the collapse of the Mercer Arts Center's building in August 1973 dampened the emergence of a distinctive Downtown rock

TELEVISION PERFORMING,  
1975. Left to right: Richard Hell,  
Richard Lloyd, Billy Ficca, and Tom  
Verlaine. Photo: Suzan Carson.  
Richard Hell Papers, Fales Library.  
Courtesy Richard Meyers



scene. Even before the hubbub over the New York Dolls, Patti Smith was already making a name for herself, first as an actress in underground theater and collaborator with Sam Shepard, and then in 1971 as performing poet at St. Mark's Church, where she was accompanied on three songs by the guitarist and rock critic Lenny Kaye. Smith later opened for the Dolls and Teenage Lust at the Mercer Art Center, but it was not until late 1973, at a "Rock 'n Rimbaud" performance at Times Square, that she and Kaye, along with other instrumentalists, transformed her chant-sung poetry into a rock-and-roll show, leading to the formation of the Patti Smith Group. Smith effectively merged street-tough poetry with basic rock and roll when segueing, during the same song, from poetic incantations ("Jesus Christ died for somebody's sins, but not mine") to a cover of a classic rock-and-roll recording (e.g., Van Morrison's "Gloria"). The group released the much-acclaimed album *Horses* in 1975, just when the Punk/New Wave scene was taking shape at CBGB's.

Had it not been for the collapse of the Mercer Arts Center's building in August 1973, CBGB's, a dank dive on the seedy Bowery with a predilection for blues, bluegrass, and country, would probably not have left any trace on the city's cultural history.<sup>12</sup> A number of local unrecorded bands, now bereft of a hospitable performance

site—Downtown clubs, including Max’s Kansas City, were primarily interested in national acts—turned to the nearby CBGB’s to showcase their still-developing talents. In spring 1974, the owner, Hilly Kristal, quite unimpressed but also desperate for paying customers, agreed reluctantly to take in the fledgling band Television, led by the poets Tom Verlaine and Richard Hell. Others soon followed—the Ramones and Blondie in the summer of 1974, and the Talking Heads in the summer of 1975. But it was the Patti Smith group, already notorious in local art and rock circles, that really set the CBGB’s scene in motion when they paired up with Television on a two-month residency in spring 1975. Meanwhile, Hell left Television to join Jerry Nolan and Johnny Thunders, formerly of the New York Dolls, in the “take no prisoners” band the Heartbreakers, which he later left to form his own group, Richard Hell and the Voidoids. Thus was constituted the core of the legendary CBGB’s scene, labeled alternatively as “Punk” or “New Wave.”

The “Punk” label was foisted on this scene not long after the appearance, in early 1976, of the highly imaginative and humorous Downtown fanzine *Punk*, whose editors, however, used the term generically to designate any hard-rock sound. The Punk label did not sit well with many musicians, fans, and critics associated with CBGB’s. Thus, not surprisingly, the label “New Wave” soon also took hold, promoted by another Downtown fanzine, *New York Rocker*. That no one label became dominant reflected the heterogeneity of musical styles at CBGB’s. How could one stylistic rubric encompass the Ramones’ “dumbed-down” lyrics and speeded-up garage-band riffs, Patti Smith’s snarling poetry, the Talking Heads’ spastic sounds and faux preppy lyrics, Television’s meandering improvisations, the Voidoids’ anthemic nihilism, and Blondie’s retro girl-group posturings? But the terms Punk and *New Wave* worked well conjointly, bringing out the common aesthetic tension that underlay the idiosyncratically different styles at CBGB’s—Punk standing for gritty, aggressive, unadorned rock and roll, and *New Wave* for artiness, archness, self-consciousness, and ironic detachment. Every band at CBGB’s displayed a bit of both Punk and *New Wave*, though some were more Punk (the Ramones, the Dead Boys) and some more *New Wave* (the Talking Heads, Television).

In the early days of Television, Richard Hell was positioned on the Punk/Pop end of the spectrum—with torn T-shirt, minimal bass chops, and cathartic wildness on stage—while Verlaine, bored with three-minute songs and intent on the challenges of improvisation, stood on the *New Wave*/art end. But distinctions were

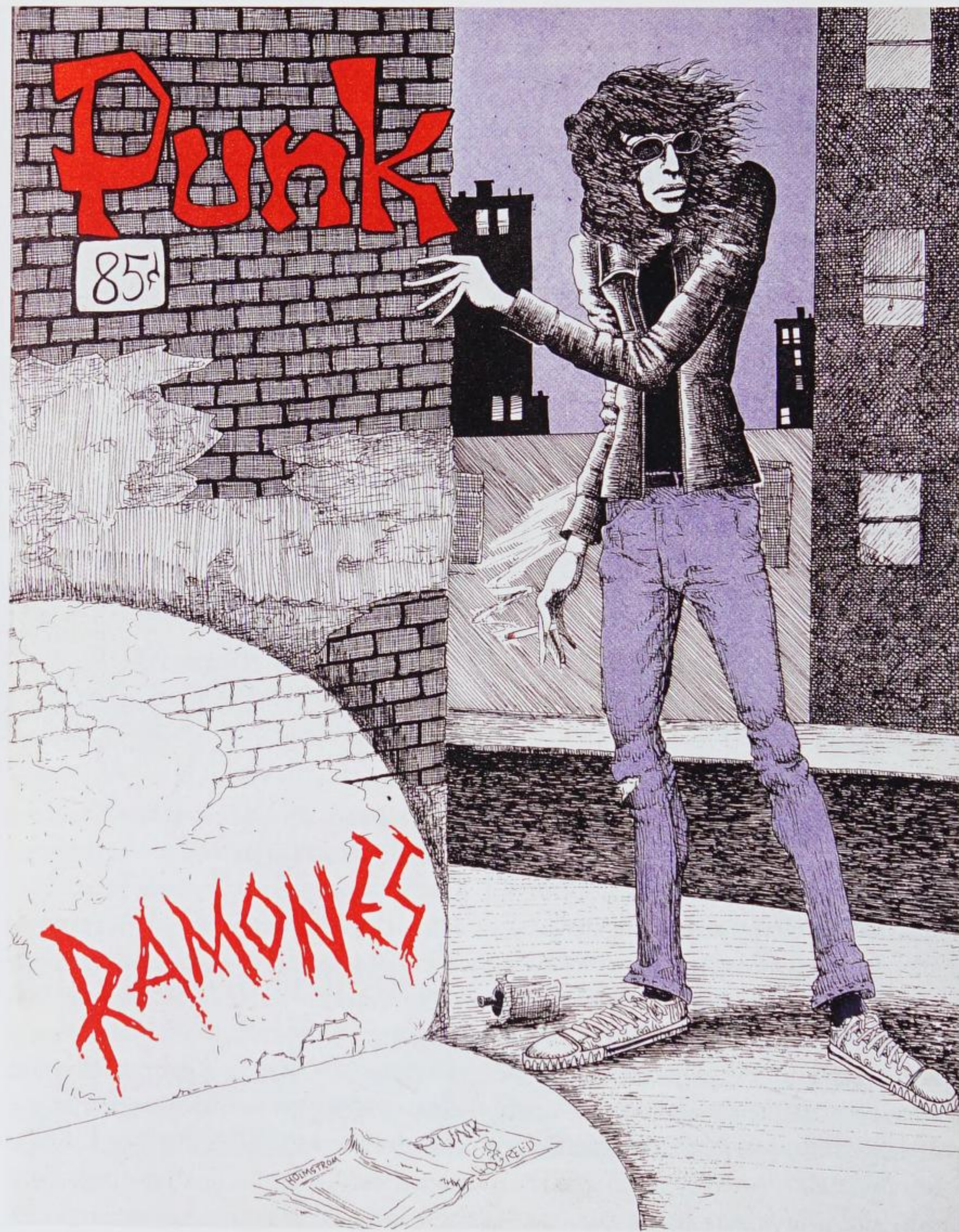


TOM VERLAINE AND  
RICHARD HELL, c. 1981.  
Richard Hell Papers, Fales Library.  
Courtesy Richard Meyers



FRONT COVER OF PUNK  
MAGAZINE, NO. 3, APRIL  
1976.

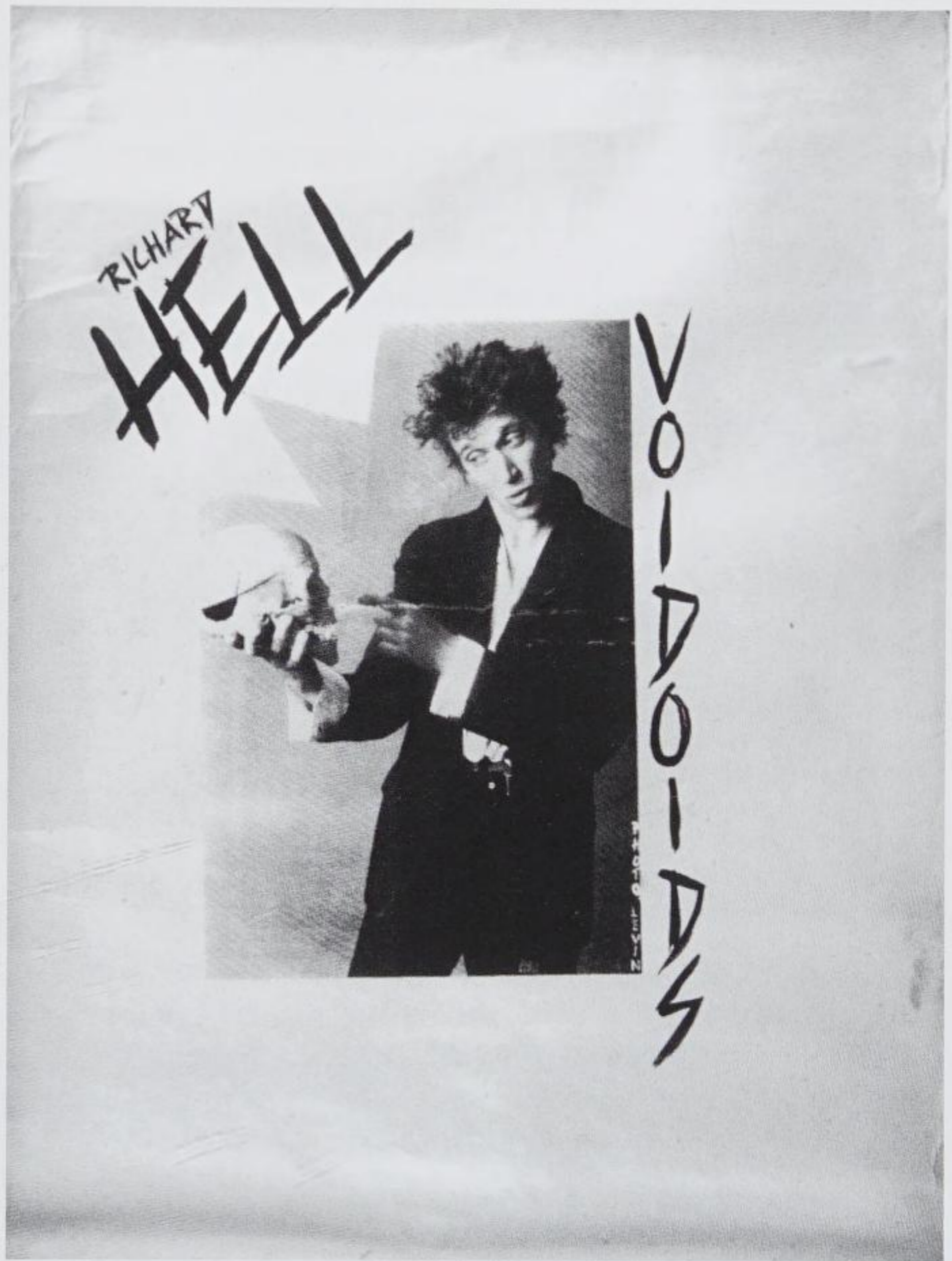
*No other image conjures  
up the look of New York Punk  
as effectively as John  
Holmstrom's drawing of Joey  
Ramone for the cover of his  
magazine Punk.*



never so simple. Hell found himself at the other end of the spectrum with the Heartbreakers, whose “fuck art let’s rock” attitude he found ultimately too brutish and not sufficiently ambitious musically. The Voidoids might appear as the perfect synthesis: the striking, provocative poetic imagery in “Blank Generation” and “Love Comes in Spurts,” backed by Robert Quine’s scrappy, punctuated riffs, which were by no means amateurish. Verlaine, for his part, never fell into the trap of explicit virtuosic athleticism or showy art.

Similarly, no two bands at CBGB’s seemed more aesthetically opposed than the “Punk” Ramones and the “New Wave” Talking Heads. But here again, the issues are more complex. In the midst of the Ramones’ furious assaultive sounds, observers perceived an almost mathematical minimalism, stripping down rock to its bare essentials, with the fat drained away. They were perceived as quite arch, self-conscious in their artistry, and ironic in their appropriation of 1960s garage band sounds. How could they not be, performing before audiences composed largely of artists, aesthetes, and Downtown bohemians? The terms minimalism and irony were often applied to the Talking Heads, whose twitchy, spastic vocals, loopiness, and detached explorations of the clichés of suburban life seemed to place them outside the pale of rock and roll. But this was belied by their driving rhythm section, making them the best dance band at CBGB’s.

By 1977, CBGB’s core bands had left the nest with contracts in hand, in search of national and international audiences. Such success would be forthcoming only for Blondie and the Talking Heads. In effect, CBGB’s deserves credit for creating what would become a permanent underground in the rock and roll field, spreading to other cities and later taking on the designation of “indie rock,” never fully crossing over into the mainstream.



POSTER FOR A PERFORMANCE BY RICHARD HELL AND THE VOIDOIDS. Richard Hell Papers, Fales Library. Courtesy Richard Meyers

### THE WALLS BREAK DOWN (1976–83)

Until the mid-1970s, the three Downtown musical fields of loft jazz, post-Cagean experimental art music, and Punk/New Wave moved separately, quite independent of one another. Punk/New Wave was the least isolated, if only because a significant portion of its audience came from the visual-art world (including film). Indeed, voting with their feet, young visual artists, filmmakers, and so on—steeped in mass culture and having grown up with rock music—identified more with the new rock scene than with avant-garde jazz or experimental music. This was unprecedented for Downtown, where previously jazz (with the Beat poets) and Cage and the Cageans (with Robert Rauschenberg and others) had ruled the roost among non-musician avant-gardes—the one exception being the evanescent alliance between Warhol and the Velvet Underground, which did not spread beyond its narrow circles. But in the wake of Punk/New Wave, young artists were forming, or playing in, rock bands (e.g., Robert Longo, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Jim Jarmusch). Beginning with Amos Poe's pathbreaking *Blank Generation* in the mid-1970s, young filmmakers would thematize the music scene, feature Punk/New Wave musicians as actors, or collaborate musically with them. This massive identification of the visual-art world with the rock scene must surely have affected the practices of experimental art and avant-garde jazz musicians, who were always looking for ways to expand their small audiences.

Nonetheless, it remains true that, at least for the first wave of the Punk/New Wave movement in the mid-1970s, there was little inclination, and little felt need,

to engage in avant-garde practice. Within the three musical fields, it was the Kitchen that first took the initiative to breach the barriers, when it opened its doors in 1976 to avant-garde jazz, perhaps also in response to increasing attention being given to the loft jazz movement. Though today such a move might strike us as obvious, it was still somewhat controversial in experimental music circles at the time, when, in Rhys Chatham's words, "improvisation was a dirty word" and some still considered the advanced tendencies in jazz "to be feverish, opium-inspired gibberish dreamed up by the hope-

RHYS CHATHAM'S BAND PERFORMING DURING AN EXHIBITION OF WORKS BY ROBERT LONGO AT METRO PICTURES GALLERY, MAY 27, 1984. Left to right: Longo, Wharton Tiers, Chatham, and Jules Baptiste. Photo: Paula Court



lessly confused.”<sup>13</sup> But soon the elite of avant-garde jazz, particularly from Chicago’s AACM (the Chicago Art Ensemble, Anthony Braxton, George Lewis, etc.), were appearing at the Kitchen on a regular basis along with the usual musical fare. There was in effect a rapprochement—if not a fusion—between experimental art music focusing on improvisation (e.g., Garrett List, Frederic Rzewski, Karl Berger) and advanced jazz, especially when the latter dispensed with rhythm sections (Braxton’s solo concerts, the World Saxophone Quartet). The saxophonist Braxton, with his incursions into atonal and aleatoric compositions, and the trombonist Lewis, who combined a proficiency in computer-based music with his advanced jazz compositional and instrumental practices, were emblematic of this new fusion. Programming of jazz peaked at the Kitchen during the early 1980s, when Lewis was musical director.

By the late 1970s, the Kitchen also began to move toward rock, though somewhat more gingerly. This followed on the emergence of the No Wave movement in rock music, a second wave of Downtown bands, which was explicitly positioned as an avant-garde movement, with occasional jazz inflections. In effect, rock, jazz, and experimental avant-garde were involved in a lively crossover ménage à trois by the late 1970s, which never led to outright fusion, however. Quite appropriately, what would later be called No Wave was inaugurated, not at a CBGB’s-style seedy bar, but at Artists Space, a not-for-profit “alternative” gallery site in SoHo (at 38 Greene Street), as part of a five-day festival featuring relatively unknown local bands. The roster included Teenage Jesus and the Jerks (led by Lydia Lunch), James Chance and the Contortions, DNA (with Arto Lindsay), Mars, Theoretical Girls (led by Glenn Branca), and the Gynecologists (including Rhys Chatham).

No Wave was adamantly Punk in its postures, surfaces, and looks, despite the fact that a significant number of band members came from the art world—poets, experimental filmmakers, avant-garde dramatists, visual artists, sculptors, and art-music composers. No Wave took on an explicitly avant-garde posture, driving to an extreme the avant-garde features always implicit in Punk music itself—noise and shock, minimalism, and willed amateurism—but never fully exploited in a self-conscious way. No Wave’s avant-gardism hailed back more to the European shock practices of Dada and Futurism—most forcefully resuscitated in the 1970s by the outrageous performance art of Vito Acconci and Paul McCarthy—than to the temperate and playful art-musical practices incubated at the Kitchen.

Lydia Lunch screamed her bratty affrontive lyrics, backed up by Teenage Jesus’ extremely simplified rhythmic and harmonic patterns. James Chance actually assaulted audiences physically in time-outs from his own vocal shriekings and free jazz saxophone squawks. Instrumental amateurishness provided No Wavers with

JIMMY DESANA, *LYDIA LUNCH  
AND TEENAGE JESUS  
AND THE JERKS*, 1978.  
Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 in.  
Courtesy Jimmy DeSana Estate



opportunities for experimentation with sounds (e.g., neophyte Arto Lindsay's guitar scrapes and buzzes) as well as ironic comment on instrumental virtuosity, the latter somewhat in accord with post-Cagean musical values. On the margins of the No Wave movement, John Lurie's Lounge Lizards specialized in "fake" or "spazz jazz." Dressing the part in sleek suits and slicked-back hair, with the "schlepcat" talk to go with it, they jocularly recreated the clichés of 1950s lounge jazz, though not without a modicum of skill.

The Downtown experimental music and jazz fields were quick to reciprocate rock's crossover tendencies by moving closer to rock. Within the art music field, the Kitchen again took the lead, under the promptings of Chatham during his second directorship in the late 1970s. In his brief musical career (he was only in his late twenties), Chatham had gone from pure serialist to Cagean to jazz experimenter, and then to hybrid art composer–rock musician. This latter shift was occasioned by a conversion experience at a Ramones performance—his first-ever attendance at a rock concert—where he found "real connections [with] the minimalism [he] had been involved with."<sup>14</sup> Chatham proceeded to book some already established art-rockers at the Kitchen (Fred Frith, Robert Fripp). But his more adventurous move was to provide a venue and encouragement for art musicians to merge with rock or

FRONT COVER OF EAST  
VILLAGE EYE, NO. 1,  
SEPTEMBER 1979.

*Published by Leonard Abrams,  
the East Village Eye was  
the premier magazine of  
the Downtown Punk and  
performance art scene.  
The Eye's listings provide an  
illuminating glimpse into the  
scene: who was performing  
and who was showing in  
the galleries.*



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18 THREE OF THEM DENNIS COOPER TIM MILLER JEFF McMAHON 10:00	19 T.B.A.	20 57 beat cocktail lounge	21 A FEW NIGHTS OUT WITH NAN GOLDIN MAX BLAGG DAVID MASSENGILL KAREN MALDOF ALFONSE MANOSALVAS GERARD LITTLE NEEDLES JONES 10:00	22 A FEW NIGHTS OUT WITH NAN GOLDIN KAREN MALDOF ALFONSE MANOSALVAS C.P. LOISE DOVELL LIT SHEPHERD GERARD LITTLE NEEDLES JONES	23 INTERNATIONAL RAP NIGHTS III 10:00	24 PRIVATE PARTY
25 FILMS BY JACOB BURCKHARDT "THIS OBJECT" GEORGE KUCHAR "BLIPS" 9:00/11:00	26 GORE GAZETTE PRESENTS JOE CAGE '51 THE WORMEATERS	27 SING-A-LONG WITH ALITCH 10:00	28 JOHN ZORN FESTIVAL WITH SPECIAL GUESTS! 8 P.M.	29	30 10 ON 8 PRESENTS 100 ARTISTS 8-12 P.M.	

seriously to incorporate rock devices into their compositions (e.g., the Love of Life Orchestra, which included Peter Gordon on saxophone, David van Tieghem on percussion, and David Behrman on synthesizer).

Chatham and Glenn Branca, in somewhat parallel career paths, displayed the most dramatic and even-handed synthesis of art and rock music, in what was called "classic music for loud guitars." In their approach to the rock guitar, both Chatham and Branca were mainly preoccupied by the variety of harmonics resulting from unusual tunings. Branca soon went beyond Chatham by massing many guitars in one band, all given nonstandard tunings, thus creating dense multilayers of overtones. The intended result was to produce incredibly loud but grand sonic structures. Chatham and Branca, and the other art-musical composers making an entry into rock, were not content merely to perform in new-music spaces such as the Kitchen and Franklin Furnace, but also displayed their wares in the hip rock clubs receptive to Punk/New Wave, such as Tier 3, Max's Kansas City, the Mudd Club, and Hurrah's.

Among the art musicians turned rockers, only Laurie Anderson was able to cross from the small Downtown bailiwick into international stardom,

with the surprise 1981 British number two hit single "O Superman (For Massenet)," which led to a recording contract with Warner Brothers and an LP, *Big Science*, which achieved the lower reaches of the Billboard charts. Nurtured at the Kitchen, Anderson had established herself as a leader in the burgeoning

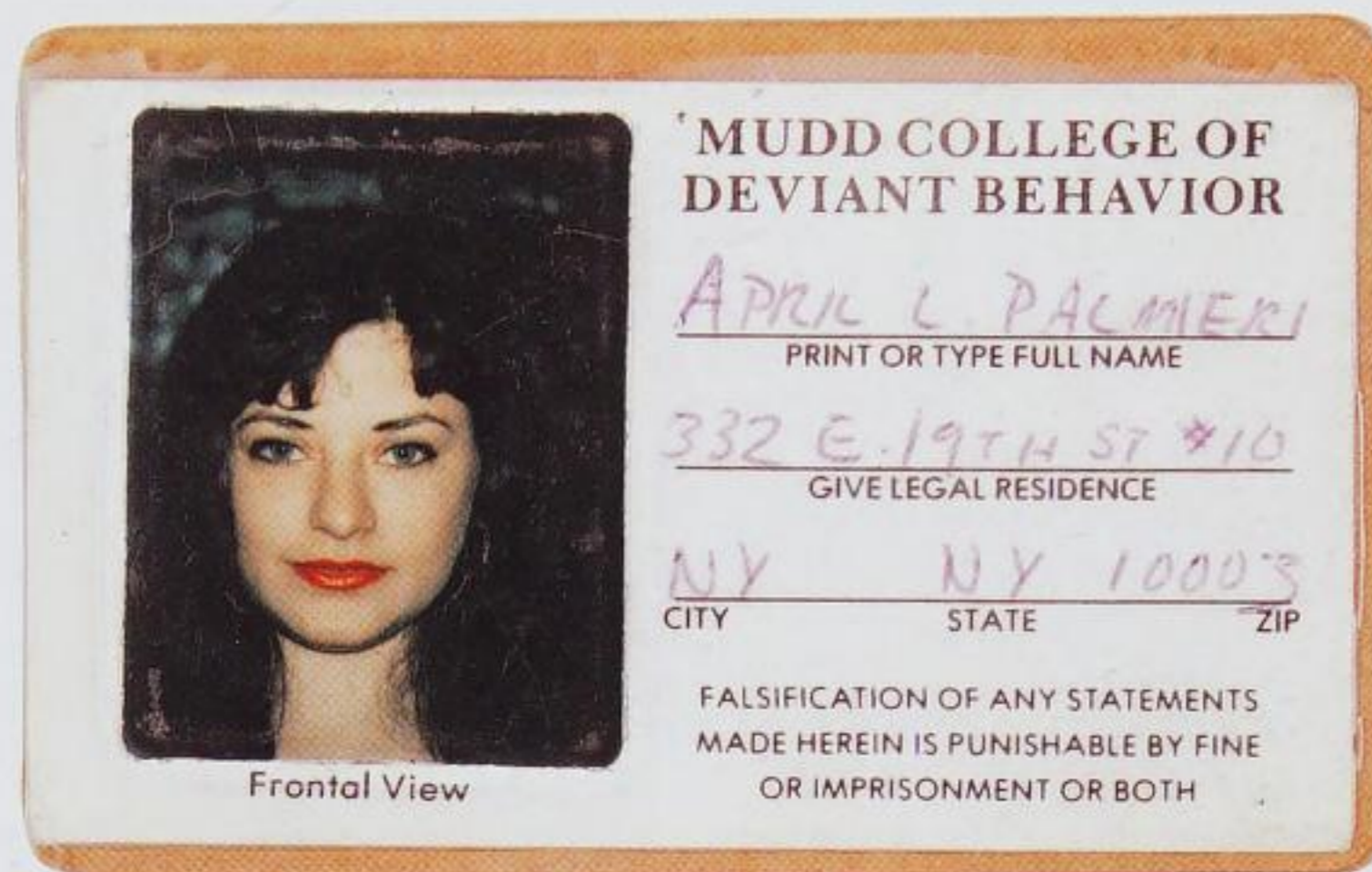
multimedia performance art scene. By the late 1970s, she was increasingly using pop-song components—encased in wry, slightly disturbing themes depersonalized by the use of vocoder and other distancing technologies—into her otherwise rarefied conceptual performances. This culminated in the massive multimedia song cycle *United States*, highly technologized and yet perceived as utterly minimalist, evoking the nightmarish in the everyday banal.

### PEAKING AND WANING

The furious crossover activity peaked in the early 1980s, when jazz joined the fray. Under the influence of Ornette Coleman's Prime Time band, the guitarist James Blood Ulmer and the trombonist Joseph Bowie, both former participants in the loft jazz scene, helped create a fusion style combining jazz and funk, laced with Punk posturing. Bowie and others formed Defunkt, the most self-consciously jazz-funk fusion band, after having backed up James Chance in his new incarnation, James White and the Blacks, a No Wave—funk-disco aggregation awash with irony. The rock component of the Ulmer and Defunkt bands had more to do with alliances and sites than stylistic appropriation; they played in the New Wave clubs (Hurrah's, Tier 3) and shared the stage with rock bands (e.g., Johnny Lydon's Public Image Ltd., Captain Beefheart).

The jazz-funk-Punk phenomenon was just one manifestation of a black infusion into the white New Wave world, another kind of crossover. Rappers and turntablists followed graffiti artists Downtown: Afrika Bambaataa drew New Wavers with his electronic-funk performances at the Mudd Club and Negril Club. At some aesthetic distance from the New Wave, but still of relevance to that scene, was the impact of disc jockey Larry Levan at the underground disco Paradise Garage, on King Street in West SoHo, who was laying the groundwork for the later New York house music sound. At the same time, white New Wavers were increasingly appropriating African American forms. Blondie's three most successful singles adopted the disco, reggae, and rap formats. In the promotional tour for their self-styled Africanesque album, *Remain in Light*, the Talking Heads opened their ranks to major African American musicians, notably Bernie Worrell of Parliament/Funkadelic fame. The Talking Heads' Chris Frantz and Tina Weymouth formed the Tom Tom Club, which explored rap and other dance club styles.

Nothing better embodied the crossover mania than the Kitchen's showbiz



**OPPOSITE, TOP:** GLENN BRANCA'S BAND PERFORMING "THE ASCENSION" AT BONDS DURING A BENEFIT FOR THE KITCHEN, 1981.

Photo: Paula Court

**OPPOSITE, BOTTOM:** CLUB 57 CALENDAR FOR APRIL 1982. April Palmieri Papers, Fales Library.

*This calendar from Club 57 indicates the variety of events, from poetry readings to performance to film screenings, that took place there every month.*

**ABOVE:** APRIL PALMIERI'S MUDD CLUB ID, c. 1981. April Palmieri Papers, Fales Library.

*Conceived as the antithesis of Studio 54, the Mudd Club functioned as rock club, performance venue, and gallery for Downtown cognoscenti, complete with an ironic velvet rope.*



**TOP:** AFRIKA BAMBAATAA  
SPINNING AT THE RITZ,  
1984. Photo: Paula Court

**BOTTOM:** GENNARO PALERMO  
AND ELLEN KINNALLY IN THE  
DJ BOOTH AT AREA, 1984.

Photo: Bob Gruen/Star File.  
Courtesy the photographer.

*Elaborate costumes and theme parties abounded Downtown and influenced Uptown fashion trends. Gennaro Palermo—a master of the glue gun whose creations included Amadeus Western and Geisha Punk—and Ellen Kinnally are pictured in the DJ booth during the Butterfly Ball at Area, 1984.*



1982 Domestic Tour, which featured Chatham and Branca, the rapper and graffiti artist Fab Five Freddy with a group of break dancers, Oliver Lake's reggae funk band, and the performance artist Eric Bogosian. But at this same moment, the scene was beginning to come apart. Loft jazz was already dead, jazz-funk-Punk fizzled without ever really catching on, and jazz's afterlife at the Kitchen came to an end when Lewis left as director in 1982. The Kitchen, increasingly perceived as mainstream, was suffering especially from the dramatic Reagan-era decline in public funding. Though it remains active in its new, more uptown location (512 West Nineteenth Street), the Kitchen has never regained its on-the-edge reputation. The Punk/New Wave movement had also lost much of its impetus. The succeeding waves of bands following on the original CBGB's core group (including No Wave) were increasingly marginalized and suffered early demises. Punk and Post-Punk were now moving to other centers and regions, first to Los Angeles and San Francisco in the early 1980s, then to Washington, D.C.; Athens, Georgia; Austin, Texas; and finally and most dramatically to Seattle. In the midst of the art boom in New York, artists had supplanted musicians as "the rock stars of the eighties," or so said Steve Rubell, the former owner of Studio 54, when he opened the Palladium, his art-infused nightclub.<sup>15</sup>

But this was only a waning, not an end or a vacuum. New Downtown generations, many of whom cut their teeth during the breakthrough 1970s–early '80s period, would create new scenes and new aesthetics: John Zorn, Sonic Youth, Elliott Sharp, DJ Spooky, Jon Spencer, and the Strokes, among others. The Knitting Factory replaced the Kitchen as the main arena for musical experimentation, operating on the borders of rock, funk, jazz, and art music. Indeed, this is the legacy of the rich and exciting Downtown music scene of the 1970s–early '80s. The barriers between musical fields, between the formerly high-, middle-, and lowbrow cultures, have been permanently dismantled, and crossover activity is now an almost banal fact of life.



UT PERFORMING AT A's,  
330 BROOME STREET, 1981.  
Photo: Paula Court.

*A's was Arlene Schloss's loft on Broome Street, which she opened for exhibitions, performances, and concerts on Wednesday evenings. Among the art bands that played there was Jean-Michel Basquiat's Gray. Thurston Moore played some of his earliest performances in New York at A's, before he formed Sonic Youth.*

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Dress up, have fun!

—Danceteria slogan, c. 1982

**WE NEVER CALLED IT DOWNTOWN** at the time—it was simply our universe, population three hundred on any given night. The invisible boundaries of this universe extended from the Mudd Club to the south, Danceteria to the north, the Pyramid Club to the east, and the desolate stretches of the after-hours Wild West. Late risers without bank accounts or datebooks, we defined time and place solely in relation to clubs: The morning after the Dead Rockstars Party. Down the street from Tier 3. The opening night of Berlin.

In an age remembered for artists who left prodigious bodies of work—Keith Haring, the Ramones, Jean-Michel Basquiat—the art we practiced was ephemeral and largely undocumented. It consisted of nothing more than dressing up for a succession of entrances into boîtes and basements more thrilling than any gallery or concert hall of the time. While some labored over Super-8 films or paintings, we made—and relentlessly remade—only ourselves.

This art had little to do with fashion, though it is sometimes mistaken for it now. By its practice, a dreadlocked dandy named Gennaro Palermo could forge a lasting legend out of ever-changing stylistic blends: Amadeus Western. Heavy Metal Haysi Fantayzee. Geisha Punk. A New Jersey shop clerk could become “Rockabilly Roxanne,” traversing the night city in a convertible the exact same vintage as her crinolines, duck-tailed beau at her side. To these observers, Klaus Nomi’s bee-stung, black-painted lips and vinyl robot couture were even more significant than his startling vocal range.

None of these looks just happened, and some required weeks of planning to yield a single evening’s effect. Preparations often began in the bargain stores of Fourteenth Street or the industrial suppliers on Canal, changed course through a hot-glue-gun fiasco or by way of a lucky dumpster find. I once sewed until my machine caught fire and had to be tossed burning from the window. Inspiration was everywhere, from aluminum-foil baked-potato wrappers to Lord Byron’s waistcoat.

Years before stylists reduced them to commodities, these statements were self-made and actually meant something. Inspired by the DIY (do-it-yourself) ethos, new arrivals formed their own tribes of like-minded dressers, who in turn started

magazines, club nights, and bands. Low budgets and happy accidents fashioned The New—such as the now-iconic Punk portrait of Debbie Harry, draped in a zebra-print pillowcase straight out of a Bowery garbage can.

Twenty years ago this insular universe began to disappear beneath the increasingly accessible place called Downtown. The art of extreme style was still being practiced, most notably by East Village drag queens and the neophyte Club Kids, but it was increasingly viewed as show costuming. By the early nineties, hastened along by music video, personal reinvention had become a mere marketing device. Clubs were the size of stadiums, and clubland just a business once again.

The mythic nights and their dandies, born in another New York entirely, have now all but vanished. Their glamour is still invoked sometimes as tourist entertainment, like a nostalgic cancan in modern Montmartre, the faint reminder of a city once both poorer and richer, now forever lost in time.



CHI CHI VALENTI, 1996. Photo: Michael James O'Brien

## NOTES

Many thanks to Cassandra Leopold, my research assistant, for her indispensable help every step of the way. Thanks also to Dan Morgenstern and Esther Smith, and to the welcoming staff at the Institute for Jazz Studies at Rutgers University, Newark.

1. Beforehand, at least in musical fields, the Downtown-Uptown binary was rather mobile and unstable. In jazz, during the 1940s and early '50s, Uptown referred to the Harlem clubs and Downtown to the clubs located on Fifty-second Street and on Broadway stretching a few blocks down.
2. For a thorough narrative of the history of the term *minimalism* as applied to music, see Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 241–53.
3. Richard F. Shepard, "Gray, Grimy Wooster St. Emerging as Little Avenue of Performing Arts," *New York Times*, December 7, 1974.
4. John Rockwell, "A Cage Sampling Heard at the Kitchen," *New York Times*, December 9, 1973.
5. John Rockwell and Tom Johnson frequently and supportively reviewed shows at the Kitchen during the 1970s for the *New York Times* and *Village Voice*.
6. John Rockwell, "Electronic and Computer Music and the Humanist Reaction: Dave Behrman," in *All American Music: Composition in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 133–44.
7. Tom Johnson, "Someone's in the Kitchen—with Music," *New York Times*, October 8, 1972. See also Johnson, "Improvising in the Kitchen," *Village Voice*, February 17, 1972.
8. Leroi Jones (Amiri Imamu Baraka), "New York Loft and Coffee Shop Jazz," in *Black Music* (New York: Morrow, 1967), 92–98.
9. For example, Gary Giddins, "Up from the Saloon: Lofts Celebrate Alternate Jazz," *Village Voice*, June 7, 1976; Robert Palmer, "Jazz in the New York Lofts—New Music in a New Setting," *New York Times*, October 10, 1976; Stanley Crouch, "Rashied Ali and the Lofts: Up from Slavery," *SoHo Weekly News* (Special Newport Jazz Supplement), June 24, 1976; Ron Welburn, "The SoHo Loft Jazz," *Music Journal*, March 1977, 26–28; Chris Flicker and Thierry Trombert, "Qu'est-ce que la loft generation," *Jazz* (France), June 1977, 13–23; Werner Panke, "New York Loft Scene," *Jazz Forum* (Great Britain), February 1978, 56–59.
10. This geographical proximity and competition was ruefully noted in Robert Palmer, "A New Life for the Bowery," *New York Times*, April 15, 1977.
11. For the more thorough account of Punk, New Wave, No Wave, and other New York rock, on which the following sections are based, see Bernard Gendron, "From New Wave to No Wave," in *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 227–315.
12. The club's full name, CBGB-OMFUG, is an acronym for "Country, Bluegrass, Blues, and Other Music for Uplifting Gormandizers."
13. Rhys Chatham, "Five Generations of Composers at the Kitchen," in *The Kitchen Turns Twenty: A Retrospective Anthology*, ed. Lee Morrissey (New York: The Kitchen, 1992), 15–16.
14. Cited in John Rockwell, "Rhys Chatham: Classical Road to Rock," *New York Times*, April 17, 1981.
15. Cited in Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, 311.

DAVID WOJNAROWICZ,  
*HUNGER*, 1981. Spray paint on  
offset, 21<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 33<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. David  
Wojnarowicz Papers, Fales Library



# A CRACK IN TIME

CARLO MCCORMICK

**WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED?** I mean, if we must ask ourselves now, a mere two or three decades since, to explain the unruly ten-year period of manic creativity, outrageous styles, and even more outré lifestyles that were continuously spawned and just as rapidly disintegrated in a compressively short period in New York City between the years 1974 and 1984, how could we possibly expect to make any sense of such an unruly melee? Perhaps it would be best—or at least most convenient and expedient—to leave it in pieces, let the vested interests of academia and the market take their share, and allow the distinctly different cultural models for fine art, popular music, design, theater, literature, film, fashion, performance art, video, and the like divvy up what they find relevant to their requisite narratives, declare their pantheons, and let the rest fall through the cracks. The problematic here however is that it's all about the cracks. Nothing quite fits and, worse yet, everything fits together.

Inherently anti-institutional, perversely aware of the forces of co-option (as a negotiable, hypothetical point of resistance and acquiescence), nonhierarchical, and pathologically unfixed, Downtown was a discourse on the nullification of absolutes that needs the full cacophonous chorus to be heard. It was not a time of guitar solos, arias, perfect objects in sterile cubes, the deification of virtuosity, the formalist separation between mediums and strategies, or the once-unquestioned authority of the singular artist's hand and vision. We may do our best to assemble some cohesive semblance of all the artifacts and attitudes, but the point is that you don't listen to the lyrics without keeping time with the beat, you don't go into a room without seeing who else is there, and you don't go to a show without at least acknowledging that—beyond all other subjectivities—the rules of perception might have a lot to do with what drugs everyone was on, and who left together.

**BEYOND THE WRETCHED HYPOCRISY** of selecting a meritocracy out of a period that was all about inclusivity, and the overriding delusion that must take place to snap a set of highlights from what was—in every significant way imaginable—a total blur, the whole topography of creative practice in the Downtown scene was all about the mix. It was an abandoned space, left bereft of its original function by the “white flight” of first- and second-generation European immigrants moving family and business to the suburbs, and a sanctified space where, due to the larger woes of the city, whatever transgressions a bunch of artist-types might be up to in its neglected nether-zones were granted unprecedented free rein. Latticed with a lexicon of shifting autonomies and temporal nodes of intense interconnectivity, Downtown, between the decades, between the center of media to the north and markets of capital to the south, is not so much something you fix as something you track.

Over a period that begins as we first stumbled back into the figurative out of the austerity of minimalism, eventually finding our way toward the ecstatic in the wake of conceptualism, and ends with the hardly-a-whimper mass grave of AIDS and the embitterment of the Culture Wars, this crack in time is the physical and psychic space occupied by a true cultural anomaly. From its center, which by my suspect math would be 1979, out in concentric circles—seminal, formative, and contextual to the fore and exaggerated, referential, and mannerist to the aft—we have a period of moving forward through an obverse syntax of retrogressive

LUIS FRANGELLA, HUDSON RIVER PIER INSTALLATION, 1983. Courtesy the Estate of Luis Frangella and Hal Bromm Gallery, New York

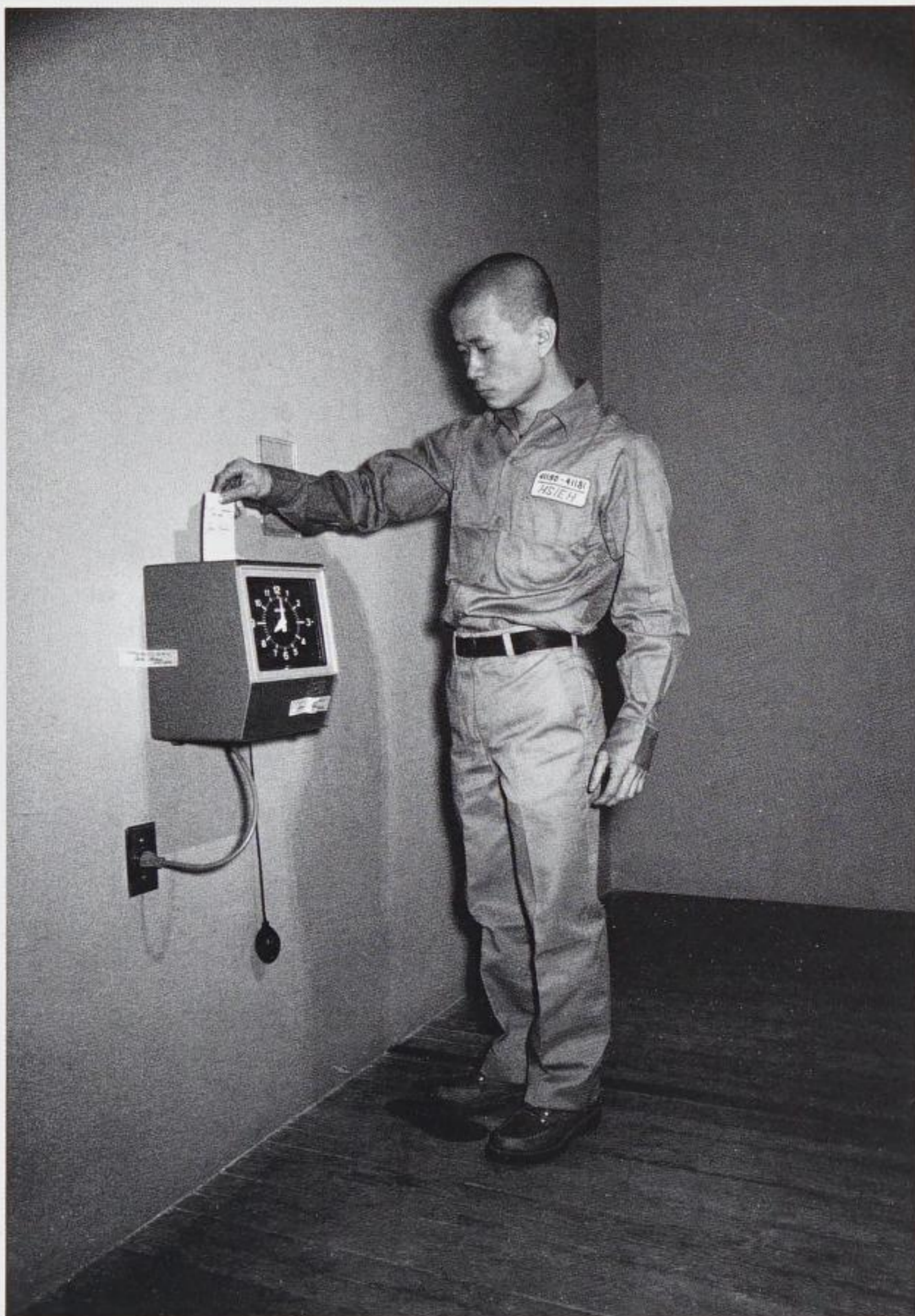


incursions. If you need no other axis to chart the chronology of this arc, consider that at its outset it was deemed a problem of plurality, and by the end it was damned as outright puerility. A swollen swamp of fertile fecundity that hit a melting-pot simmer in the miasma of multiplicity and contradiction, the psychic architecture of this time and place is at once defined by the monumental walls of theory and market that rise on either side of it as by the curious mutant organisms that somehow germinated, evolved, thrived, festered, and fossilized within its compact and intimate lowland habitat.

**A POLYGLOT THAT SIMPLY CANNOT BE PARSED**, the vernacular of Downtown was a disjunctive language of profound ambivalence, broken narratives, subversive signs, ironic inversions, proliferate amusements, criminal interventions, material surrogates, improvised impersonations, and immersive experientiality. It was the argot of the streets, suffused with the strategies of late-modernist art, inflected by the vestigial ethnicities of two centuries of immigration, cross-referenced across the regionalisms of geographic and generational subculture, and built from the detritus of history on the skids as a kind of cut-up of endless quotation marks. If any dialectic was at play, it was not about truth or logic, but rather after them. The quotients of representation were no longer an algebra of meaning constituted in some ratio between content and aesthetics because each and every term of the equation could at best hold relative meaning. Not only were the absolutes gone, so too were even those random, irrational, and radical x factors. It would be disingenuous to say that sincerity, novelty, beauty, romanticism, sublimity, politics, or narrative were any less evident and endemic than before—they were merely no longer essential. Everyone responded to the world of lies in a different way—from lodging the tongue firmly in cheek to speaking in tongues—but the form of address was increasingly too savvy, reflexive, absurd, antagonistic, and cannibalistic to embrace any absolute without also acknowledging its concurrent negation among the growing failure and futility of myths.

The mass of cultural production that took effect in New York City over an extended period, which was nothing if not extremely prolific and polymorphous, is hardly a monolithic construct of measurable dimensions. What we're talking about here is a kind of relentless feedback loop, a mass of simultaneity and interconnectivity that warps any linear narrative into a constantly proliferating web of cumulative reverberations—where time stood still by virtue of some centrifugal force of acute acceleration, where day and night were in perpetual parallax. If you want to mark it, remember that its etymology derives from the need of music writers to distinguish what John Cage was doing in the experimental spaces of a loft





TEHCHING HSIEH, *ONE YEAR PERFORMANCE (TIME PIECE)*, NEW YORK, APRIL 11, 1980, TO APRIL 11, 1981.

Courtesy the artist.

*For his second One Year Performance, Hsieh punched a time clock every hour on the hour, twenty-four hours a day, for one year.*

versus the institutional settings of Uptown, and consider that during the period that we're charting, when people told you that they never went above Fourteenth Street, it was not simply a truth but a matter of pride. A state of mind as much as a place, Downtown was a methodology, an audience, a membership, and a phenomenology of experience. Downtown was outside America; even outside New York City—perhaps its most anthemic proclamation a graffiti message on the wall: "U.S. out of N.Y.C."

Like mongrel mutts marking territory in daily streams of urination, the creative community thrived off its isolation from the larger culture, inhabiting abandoned spaces, protected (if perilously) by the majority's fear of subjecting themselves to its inherent indignities of crime and squalor. It was not one place but a time-based excavation of space, an ever-shifting locus of energy that migrated according to the escalation of real-estate values and the various entry years of its intergenerational participants. If there is a chronology of value here it is topographic. That is, rather than divide Downtown into a succession of movements (postminimalism, Pattern and Decoration, feminism, New Narrative, Imagists, Punk, No Wave, the Pictures group, Neo-Expressionism, the East Village scene, po-mo, etc.), it is better seen as an

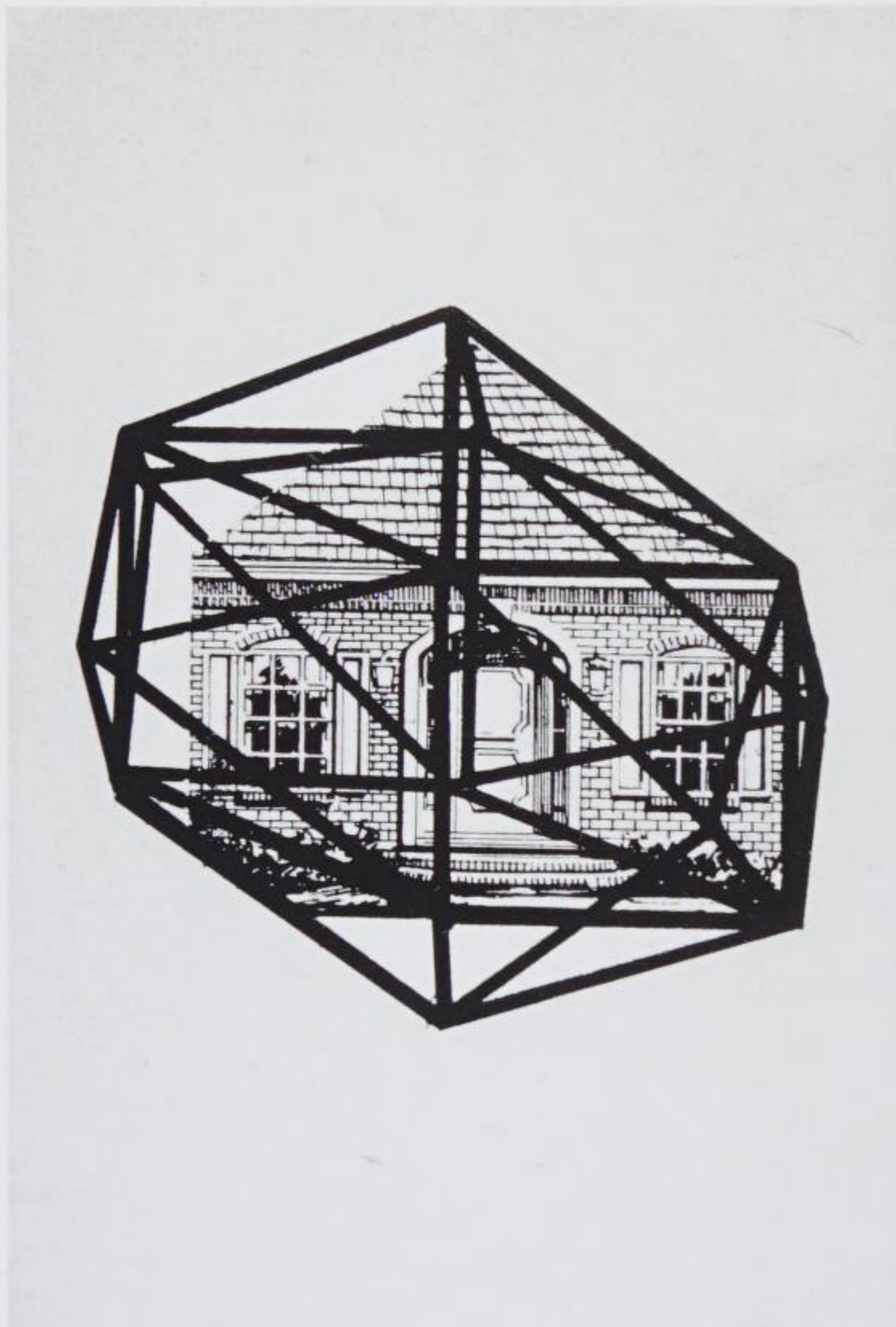
ensemble choreography of motion itself best traced in the rise and fall of an infinite list of alternative spaces, storefront galleries, bars, neighborhoods, street corners, and, most important, nightclubs.

Separated from the historical continuum into a virtual end zone, we can mark this territory as a field of play set between two posts. It begins with the collapse of modernist absolutes, what happened when artists had literally boxed themselves into a corner (and for all their pretensions, the dead end of minimalism looks more and more in retrospect like a glorified guild of coffin makers) and fought to escape such a reductive language through more personal and idiosyncratic expressions under the rubric of postminimalism. It ends in a similar but opposite way, when

the intuitive strategies of the period became suddenly formalized as a critical rubric called postmodernism. Beyond the general lack of fun and the totalitarian dominance of a single overriding theory and look that bookend this post-to-post period, it could well be argued that between 1974 and 1984 in Downtown Manhattan occurred the true postmodern moment: a time when modernism was most certainly dead and, unmoored from its schematics, creativity was based on the flux, uncertainty, and searching. By such terms, it would have to end as it did, when all that manic stumbling and groping created enough of a map, a legibility that allowed a reading, a theory that could become orthodoxy. Postmodernism, we would argue, is not when a particular set of semiotic tools and critical skepticisms were adopted by fine art. That's the moment of stasis, the veritable death of these ideas and their codification into terms that submit the anarchic iconoclasm of its incipient form back into the historical schematics of modernism.

Dictated by objects, we tend to see art from the vantage point of the finish line. In the same way that we date a work according to its moment of completion and place it into the generational time frame of when it caught our attention, we accept the sum of any creative endeavor as an indivisible totality unto itself, never quite accounting for the amorphous gestation period and perverse puddle of "inspirations" at its source unless we are specifically directed by the artist toward the aesthetics of process. With just enough critical distance now to look back, and yet still a faint familiarity to make a gathering more like a reunion than a wake, let's enjoy the time-lapse effect in which the subject does not stand still but only truly reveals itself through the arc of motion. Historians will inevitably sort it all out with their usual glorious gospel of call and response, but having the absurd fortune of being revisionist before the fact, let's not pursue art as if it were simply heading in one direction. When the eruption of graduate arts degree programs churned out an unparalleled glut of artists, who all crammed into the claustrophobically intimate confines of the only city that mattered in that era, the overview we are now afforded is not of a neat and tidy flow—it's about collision. To read the history of Downtown between the decades, or what really happened between 1974 and 1984, is not to follow the footsteps imprinted in history but the skid marks of spontaneous encounters and urgent negotiations.

Downtown, in its phantasmagoria of subjectivities, was like a cargo cult washed up on the shores of a most amazing island of cultural detritus—where the reinvention of self, art, culture, and space was concurrent with the re-imagining of place. Moving into the abandoned, the void inhabited was, of course, one of the richest silences ever. Oddly, there's not much direct representation of this mesmeric space beyond the forces of documentation, but as pieces of a broken



INVITATION TO VITO  
ACCONCI'S EXHIBITION  
*ABSTRACT HOUSE AT THE  
KITCHEN*, 1981. Downtown  
Flyers Collection, Fales Library.

*Acconci's work influenced  
many artists Downtown.  
This invitation to an exhibition  
at the Kitchen reflects his  
venture into architecture.*

world it was always in the art: ripped up or ripped off, always in tatters. Ranging from interventions to guerilla actions, appropriations to squatting, the subway to the street, the disused factory/warehouse to the disenfranchised tenement, the loft and alternative space performances to the storefront galleries and nightclubs, it was both the liberation of place and an accession to all it could possibly offer. It is not at all irrelevant here to remind ourselves that this sort of incursion was rarely given sanction. This was a time before permits and regulations, so it was never so much a question of what was permissible or a measurement of what was irregular. This is an era we can almost taste as a matter of one thing above all others—what was available.

Let us not leave unsaid in this the obvious: at perhaps no other time in its history has art rubbed up so closely to the proclivities and possibilities of criminality. Certainly, a keen awareness of this lineage—from the more distant exemplars of Genet and Artaud to something closer, like Abbie Hoffman shutting down the New York Stock Exchange with a modest shower of one-dollar bills—was in the air. More important, given the sheer weight of cultural apathy—radicalism reduced to streaking, icons reduced to pet rocks, rebellion tamed into corporate rock—the intangible decompression of spirit that took over Sin City, a town that President Ford told to

“Drop Dead,” where Serpico was sheriff, and a famous blackout shopping spree enabled Hip-Hop to gain even greater velocity and volume—and the vertigo of occupying a vacuum left by the loss (or at least relocation) of the American Dream—the only possible response was to fend for yourself in improvisatory, temporal solutions and to take all that was left behind as food or fodder. If you want to draw the arc from Gordon Matta-Clark cutting through an abandoned pier to three artists—David Wojnarowicz, Mike Bidlo, and Luis Frangella (and eventually an untold legion more)—taking over a West Side pier to execute a guerilla aesthetic transmogrification of the urban brut, or along that same stretch of waterfront, trace it from the orgy of anonymous gay sex on the piers and in the trucks parked along them to the fury of Wayne (later Jayne) County and the Electric Chairs, think about the repossessing means of the dispossessed.



And if one modest stretch of the West Side Highway is too local a view, just fill in the line with any other assortment of dots—artists taking to the train yards in the great age of top-to-bottom full-car graffiti masterworks, the ever-shifting surface of walls perpetually covered with band flyers and stenciled street art, a whole lot of street performance and public artwork that was created without city or corporate sanction, or even simply that the clientele of almost every club of meaning (Max's Kansas City, Ocean Club, CBGB's, the Mudd Club, Tier 3, Tin Pan Alley, Hurrah's, Peppermint Lounge, Irving Plaza, Danceteria, Club 57, A7, Pyramid, Red Bar, Negril Club, the Roxy, Paradise Garage, 8 BC, ad infinitum) was

GORDON MATTA-CLARK,  
*DAY'S END (PIER 52)*, 1975.  
Color photograph, 16 x 20 in.  
Courtesy the Estate of Gordon  
Matta-Clark and David Zwirner,  
New York. Copyright © 2004  
Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark /  
Artists Rights Society (ARS),  
New York

BELOW: EAST VILLAGE  
GALLERIST PAT HEARN  
PERFORMS AT DANCETERIA,  
1985. Photo: Paula Court



a potent mix of then-underage participants (even with the legal age just eighteen), drug dealers, and those who collectively, for lack of a better term, we will call artists, all packed into spaces without those niceties of egress now insisted on by the fire department. The commonality is, well, unsupervised behavior that would most certainly land you in jail today.

The terms shifted from artists taking over SoHo in George Maciunas-esque machinations circumventing basic certificate of occupancy housing laws to other low inhabitations along the margins of neglect—be it the Lower East Side or the South Bronx. The modus operandi for meeting these demands remained ever in the flux between sporadic demeaning toil and more fiscally gratifying endeavors in the free trade of taboo beyond the ledgers of an IRS statement. It's hard to say where such a migration might meet up, but I'm quite fond of the picture of Joseph Beuys handcuffed to the gate before that ill-fated one-day art show/takeover of an arson-gutted building on Delancey Street. It was called the Real Estate Show, and featured the nascent group Collaborative Projects (Colab). The cops shut it down, so perhaps winning that battle, yet the city ceded a similarly disabused building to the politicized agenda of ABC No Rio, which in its model of trespass contained the germination of an exhibition that would change New York forever—the Times Square Show.

This was the age of appropriation without quotation marks, trademarks, or licensing fees, where turntablists around the city sought out the breaks





from records of a prior funk, where Justen Ladda's *Thing* loomed in the auditorium of an abandoned Bronx schoolhouse, where Christian Marclay, John Zorn, Elliott Sharp, and others were trying to put together the disabused fragments of our music history in seeming disregard of authorial domain. This was the time when the great train bandits would have felt at ease running a thrifted iconography from Vaughn Bodé and *The Saint* to the lowest common denominator of Warhol's Campbell's, where Richard Prince, Jane Dickson, Richard Kern, Betty Gordon, and Kathy Acker could feed off the same image glut of disembodied forty-deuce carnality with radically original and different results. It was an age where a symptom of our collective willingness to reposition the furniture of contemporary culture might breed a Pictures group as widely divergent as Cindy Sherman, Thomas Lawson, Robert Longo, Walter Robinson, Laurie Simmons, and Sherrie Levine. Punk, so close to self-effacing parody that it took its mantle from the jailhouse argot for the weakest and most willing of male sexual prey, was itself an abstruse conglomeration—as if Patti Smith, Blondie, Television, the Ramones, and the Talking Heads had anything in common musically. What they shared, as a matter of difference, was essentially the resurrection of rock's most primal forms. Everywhere was the authentic fake, the genuine reproduction, and, most pertinently, the regurgitation of our national pabulum as an inorganic sugarcoated foodstuff and phosphorescent content-whiz that might take no more from consensus reality than the most absurd terms we could all collectively laugh at.

**OPPOSITE, BOTTOM:** CROWD OUTSIDE THE *REAL ESTATE SHOW*, WITH JOSEPH BEUYS SECOND FROM RIGHT, 1980. Photo: Barbara Brooks. Downtown Collection, Fales Library

**ABOVE, LEFT:** FAÇADE OF THE *TIMES SQUARE SHOW* WITH SIGNS BY TOM OTTERNESS, 1980. Photo: Lisa Kahane. Copyright © 1980 Lisa Kahane, NYC

**ABOVE, RIGHT:** ANNOUNCEMENT FOR THE *TIMES SQUARE SHOW*, 1980. Ron Kolm Papers, Fales Library.

*In June 1980, more than a hundred artists installed their work in an empty massage parlor near Times Square. Organized by Colab, the Times Square Show included graffiti artists, feminist artists, political artists, Xerox artists, performance artists, and everyone in between.*

LAURIE SIMMONS, *PINK  
BALLERINA (VERA ELLEN)*,  
1982. Cibachrome print,  
40 x 27 in., edition of 5.  
Courtesy the artist

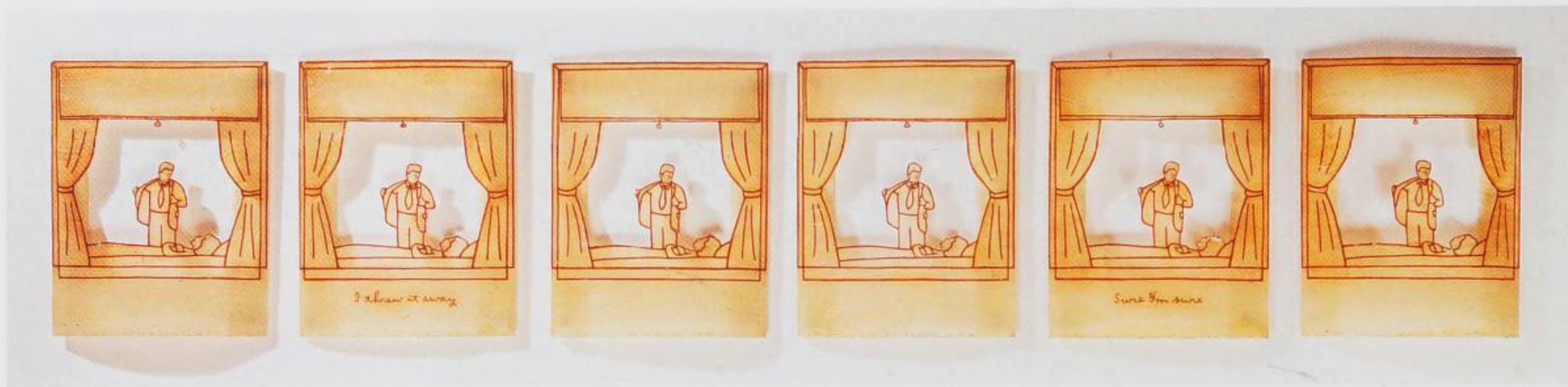




INSTALLATION VIEW OF  
RHONDA ZWILLINGER'S  
EXHIBITION *POST MINIMAL  
GLITZ* AT GRACIE MANSION  
GALLERY, 1985. Courtesy the  
artist and Pavel Zoubok Gallery,  
New York

My most coveted line from a critic at that time is Edit deAk proclaiming, “We’ve been taking your shit for so long, now we’re selling it back to you at highly inflated prices.” My most salient moment of inverted logic is when Rhonda Zwilling offered Clement Greenberg’s authoritative didactic “for every avant-garde, there is always a rear guard,” as if this were just the point—so close was it still then to an earlier group of warriors for dubious taste who misread Michael Fried’s condemnation of the theatrical in art as a mandate to go further. And my final epiphany of the ludicrous is when Kembra Pfahler (later of the band the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black) proclaimed to the congregation of a mock religion called the Church of the Little Green Man (founded by conceptual artist Mike Osterhout along with sundry others including Karen Finley, Gary Ray, and David West) her new movement of “Avilabism”—that is, everyone who was broke must take whatever was at hand as their artistic medium. Yes, that’s the alchemical moment when the scraps that Betsey Johnson collected in impossible pastiche became a dress, when Glenn Branca’s hundred-guitar ear-bleedin’ blasts became one note, when Elizabeth LeCompte’s incompatible story lines and Kathy Acker’s shattered narratives made sense, and where the litany of fabricated identities—from Richard Hell and Tom Verlaine, to Ida Applebroog and Beth B, to SAMO and Crazy Legs—became more real than whatever truth lay behind the imposture.





IDA APPLEBROOG, *SURE I'M SURE*, 1979–80. Ink and rhoplex on vellum, six panels, each 12 x 9½ in. (12 x 75 in. overall). Photo: Jennifer Kotter. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

For all its fictions and uncanny ways of parsing myths without fully letting go of their emotional sway, the cultural centrality of Downtown was itself based upon the mutually defining symbiosis of its social marginality. A destination for so many, it was ultimately an escape. This dichotomy between external disillusion and insider membership is a relationship Downtown struck not only against the mainstream but also consistently upon itself. Clearly post-counterculture, this was the moment of multiplying subcultures, a politics not of engagement but of estrangement. Too often regarded by others as mere apathy, to “party like ya just don’t care” or to refute humanism with the headlong nihilism of Richard Hell’s ragged

MENTHOL WARS  
PERFORMING AT TIER 3,  
1980. Left to right: Richard Prince,  
Joe Hannan, David Linton, Robert  
Longo, and Jeffrey Glenn.  
Photo: Paula Court



“please kill me” T-shirt, was a social mandate of (re)action through ironic dissociation. As Hip-Hop (or, by our terms, graffiti) was an artistic sublimation and deferral of gang territorialism, and Punk was a retrieval of rock’s primordial urgency and vitriolic rebellion from the MOR banality and masturbatory virtuosity of 1970s corporate rock, the creative strategies of Downtown artists were driven by self-reflexive positions on the purpose of what art should be or do. Within the set of contradictions that manifested themselves in this mid-decade span, irreconcilable differences constitute the impossible terms of agreement. Fueled by a pervading ethos of do-it-yourself (DIY), most every congregation that mattered was invented on its own conditions and fabricated on its own turf; each was relatively self-contained and replete with watering holes, restaurants, publications, galleries, neighborhoods, and entertainments of its own.

We must look to the oppositional parameters of Downtown culture to map its intangible geometry of difference. At the last-gasp end of the analog era, you can pretty much define the sensibilities of artists from that time by their record collections of LPs and twelve- and seven-inch singles; and by the plethora of sounds manufactured in the death throes before digital, you can thus almost characterize New York’s compression of time and space in the vinyl terms of revolutions per minute. Perhaps we can’t count them all, but we can at least still see the grooves. If we follow the postminimalist impulse from the start, we see the opening of a locatable quasi architecture of new vistas. A highly mannerist rendering befitting its dislocation at a point when not only had the well of modernism run dry, but the chronological forces of fin de siècle perversity and end-of-the-millennium dread set in, each view looks on the other in peripheral overlap, and every room leads to all others. It’s funny how what, in specifics, seems to be nothing more than a series of discrete simplicities must, by virtue of their communal coexistence and convergence, be registered en masse as baroque complexity.



CHRISTIAN MARCLAY,  
*RECYCLED RECORDS*, 1981.  
Collaged phonograph record,  
diameter 12 in. Courtesy Paula  
Cooper Gallery, New York

CRASH, DICK TRACY,  
c. 1982. Acrylic and enamel on  
canvas. Photo: Lisa Kahane.  
Copyright © 1982 Lisa Kahane,  
NYC. Fashion Moda Archive,  
Fales Library



Like any lost landscape, you can take it in as a terminal tableau of signs. But like the Ozian scarecrow who offers directions by pointing at polar opposites, it's MapQuest in a blender, an assimilation of Pop Art's label fetish (or, for that matter, the flailing of Joseph Kosuth at the end of his linguistic tether) into an avuncular rambling that never really takes you anywhere. If you begin in 1974, where does the dildo Lynda Benglis sports in her Artforum ad point? Is it merely back to the homo-macho of Robert Morris's similarly scandalous costuming (a seminal citation in what would soon become a world of cross-referencing collisions), as it has often been read? But the damn thing seems to direct us forward, a phallogentric imposture along the lines of the girly-man art being made by Robert Kushner, Kim MacConnel, and others, toward those signs of power posted down the road by the likes of Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Mike Glier, and PADD. Perhaps it's rather a surrogate for the proverbial middle finger, for indeed it rendered the feminist movement into a cacophony of divergent feminisms (a litmus test that split the fine hair of a woman's sexuality into what is subjugated/complicit with, or empowering/explicit against, the male gaze), as well as tore apart the uneasy allegiance of Artforum into those who would defend the lofty academic citadel of

theory in the bitter cold of October and those who would remain to navigate that incrementally more acutely slippery slope of populism.

Although the de:signs may never have been very useful at telling you where you were going, they sure as hell told you where you were. This was the coded language of youth culture and resistance in the public realm: anarchic gestures, re-imagined identities, and poetic provocations wheat-pasted, spray-painted, stenciled, and scrawled without warrant. Covering the invisible (who paid attention to T-shirts, walls, streetlamps, or trains unless they actually bore these scars of urban blight?), textual and visual content made manifest what was otherwise not apparent. Nasty pictures for bands bearing rude names like Suicide, the Dead Boys, the Voidoids, the Contortions, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, 3 TEENS KILL 4, or Murphy's Law, flyers ciphered with the ransom-note rage of people you did not want to fuck with—anonymity was the undercover of fame itself. From Christof Kohlhofer's Mickey Mouse swastika, to Arturo Vega's bat-bearing eagle Ramones logo, to Richard Hambleton's lurking shadows and crime-scene body outlines, to Keith Haring's enigmatic and emblematic Radiant Child, to John Fekner's literal descriptions and Anton Van Dalen's pictographic parables of our social woes, art made you think—or at least blink—at unlikely times and places.

When it worked best, it tricked you through the gift of mimesis, pretending to be what it was not—a proclamation of self or the proposition of an idea—at a time when we still only knew how to read signs as information and understand their status in the landscape as sponsored advertising. This was the great gift of DIY as it hit the market of cultural production—art didn't have to look like art; it could take the form of any populist commodity: a magazine or a poster, a tourist souvenir or a novelty item. The best group shows and the most inspired creativity often came in the lowliest of forms, be it a zine, a self-produced compilation, a vending machine, or a gift shop. The sign of the times was one you would imagine coming from the Blank Generation—an affordable (or outright free) surrogate for the meaningless detritus of consumer culture run amok. Just as alternative spaces proffered one exit strategy from the art market, and Food transformed the restaurant into a living work of art, the rise of the mock shop—from Printed Matter to See Hear, from the souvenir shop at the Times Square Show to Colab's annual *A More Store*,



LYNDA BENGLIS,  
ADVERTISEMENT FOR  
*ARTFORUM* MAGAZINE,  
NOVEMBER 1974.

Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.  
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## GRACIE MANSION

In the **MID-1970s** I was working at a law collective while attending art school and living in a commune in New Jersey. I met Al Hansen, who was teaching at Rutgers, Newark. On trips to New York, he introduced me to many artists, including Sur

Rodney (Sur), who had curated a show at Hansen's brother's gallery in SoHo. I graduated in **1980**, moved to the East Village and reconnected with Sur Rodney (Sur), doing preproduction for the *Sur Rodney (Sur) Show*. I worked at a print gallery in SoHo, where I started selling friends' artwork out of the print drawers. Sur, who also worked there, and I curated a show in a two-foot access space behind the display window, hanging artwork from coat hangers. In **1981** Buster Cleveland and I set up one-night shows of his collages in Jim Stark's loft. We conceived the *Limousine Show*, renting a limousine and parking it on the corner of Spring and West Broadway in the hopes of encountering Leo Castelli on his daily route. Unfortunately, he was just passing by as we pulled up. I sold collages from the backseat while Sur offered cherries from a silver tray on the sidewalk. I participated in a number of theme shows at Club 57. The work would be brought to the basement of a church at 57 St. Marks Place, where it would hang for one night. Work was retrieved after midnight. I was also part of Keith Haring's *Drawing Show* at the Mudd Club. Life then seemed to be a time of no limitations; everything was not only possible, it was probable. Around this time, I started using the name Gracie Mansion. In my fifth-floor walk-up, with a bathtub in the kitchen and a tiny room for the loo, I had hung a selection of photographs that Timothy Greathouse had given me. In **1982** I offered to present them in the loo. He loved the idea, and I set about designing letterhead for the new Gracie Mansion Gallery, Loo Division. The press release had the show running one night and was "by appointment" for the rest of the month. Its less-is-more positioning offered one-at-a-time viewing in an intimate setting. When Howard Smith and Melik Kaylan interviewed me for a *Village Voice* article, they asked about my next show. I couldn't admit it was a one-time event. By the third show, the landlord put a stop to it. Paul McGregor offered me a former hair salon above his bar on St. Marks Place, where I worked as a cocktail waitress. I renamed the gallery Gracie Mansion Gallery, Lieu Division, and organized three shows: *Beyond the American Standard*, *The Famous Show*, and a solo show of Carmen Cicero's paintings. I also curated a number of shows in other locations. It was around this time that Sur Rodney (Sur) returned from Europe. I found a space on Tenth Street facing Tompkins Square Park. Sur agreed to help, and Jim Stark agreed to buy enough artwork to pay the rent (\$500 a month) for a year. We opened with *East Village Art: Food for Thought*, a fundraiser for the new gallery, now simply the Gracie Mansion Gallery. I still worked in SoHo three days a week, and Sur would come to the gallery after he got off work at St. Marks Graphics at 5 p.m. Every month we painted the gallery a new color. Each show was a transformation. The East Village was teeming with artists. All of the earliest gallery owners were artists. We attended each other's openings and sent curators and collectors to each other's shows. Carlo McCormick and Walter Robinson covered it all in Leonard Abrams's *East Village Eye*. We traveled en masse to art fairs and out-of-town exhibitions. Limbo Lounge and 8BC were our private clubs. We started a "Girls Night Out" where the female artists, curators, and gallerists would party together. In **1983** the gallery expanded to the storefront next door, giving us control of the backyard and a third exhibition space. In **1984** we moved to a larger space on Avenue A, while Greathouse took over the West Gallery of our premises on Tenth Street. In the East Gallery, we opened the Gracie Mansion Museum Store, which was run by Elayne Kling and sold mostly functional objects by neighborhood artists. I thought it would help support the gallery, but it was a money-loser from day one. In **1985** Nicolas Moufarrege died of AIDS, a disease that would take the community by storm. When the Fun Gallery closed that same year, someone spray-painted "The Fun is Gone" on the outside of their building. That said it all. By **1989**, Sur had left the gallery, and I finally gave in and was one of the last galleries to move from the East Village to SoHo. I had grown up in the apex of the period between the birth-control pill and AIDS.

Upon Timothy Greathouse's death, Cornelius Conboy told me something that moves me to this day: "I thought of . . . how anything was possible and how clear the future lay in front of us. We knew nothing of the impending plague and thought that those halcyon days (and nights) would be the defining moments of our lives. How wonderfully naive we were."

**1972** My earliest visits to the Lower East Side had me staying with friends in a tenement building on East Eleventh Street off Second Avenue where I would meet Bill Stelling, Adrian Milton, Cindy Doll (who claimed to be Candy Darling's real sister), and Jackie Curtis, and be introduced to the theatrical theater troupe the Hot Peaches and the legendary Minette. (Jack Smith, Sheyla Baykal, Peter Hujar, and Warhol's Factory circle all had familial associations with this group.) **1976** After graduating from the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts School of Art and Design, I returned to New York. The first person instrumental in introducing me to other art worlds was poet Michael Cooper. He had me meet poet Gerard Malanga and talked a lot about Ray Johnson, Dick Higgins, and Fluxus. I recall renting open-reel video equipment from the Young Filmmakers co-op. I have a memory of being invited to participate in a show at 112 Greene Street, where I exhibited a photostat blowup of my performing as Candy Darling in front of my three-panel painting of Candy Darling. **1978** I shared a flat at 101 St. Marks Place with photographer Gervaise Soeurouge, and would meet Jean-Michel Basquiat and building neighbor and poet Ted Berrigan, who would introduce me as a young poet to Rene Richard. **1979** I'd found a basement gallery on Wooster Street in SoHo interested in showing my projects. One project focused on my interest in photography and led to my organizing the exhibition *File 13*. At this time, I met Jimmy DeSana and included him. Al Hansen, who was visiting the gallery at that time, introduced me to a woman he was with who would one day be known as Gracie Mansion. We became good friends, collaborators, and eventually business partners. She was also instrumental in having Timothy Greathouse and me live together (in 1980–82). Walter Stedding's roommate, Henry Benvenuti, introduced me to George Staples, a young African American gallerist on Wooster Street at Prince, who wanted to establish his gallery as part of the avant-garde and thought that I had connections that could help. I produced, in his Nonson Gallery, the first of a series of television talk shows advertised as the *Sur Rodney (Sur) Show*. I interviewed Downtown personalities who would later be identified as the Brides and the Bachelors of Manhattan's Lower East Side. I hired a crew from the Experimental Television Co-op to tape the shows on broadcast tape. The tapes played on Manhattan Cable Television, at the Mudd Club, and at Charlotte Moorman's New York Avant Garde Festival. **1980** While working as a receptionist at an animal hospital at Ninth Street and University Place, I curated exhibitions for the reception area and announced them in mailings. During our inaugural exhibition of collages by Buster Cleveland, Basquiat smeared

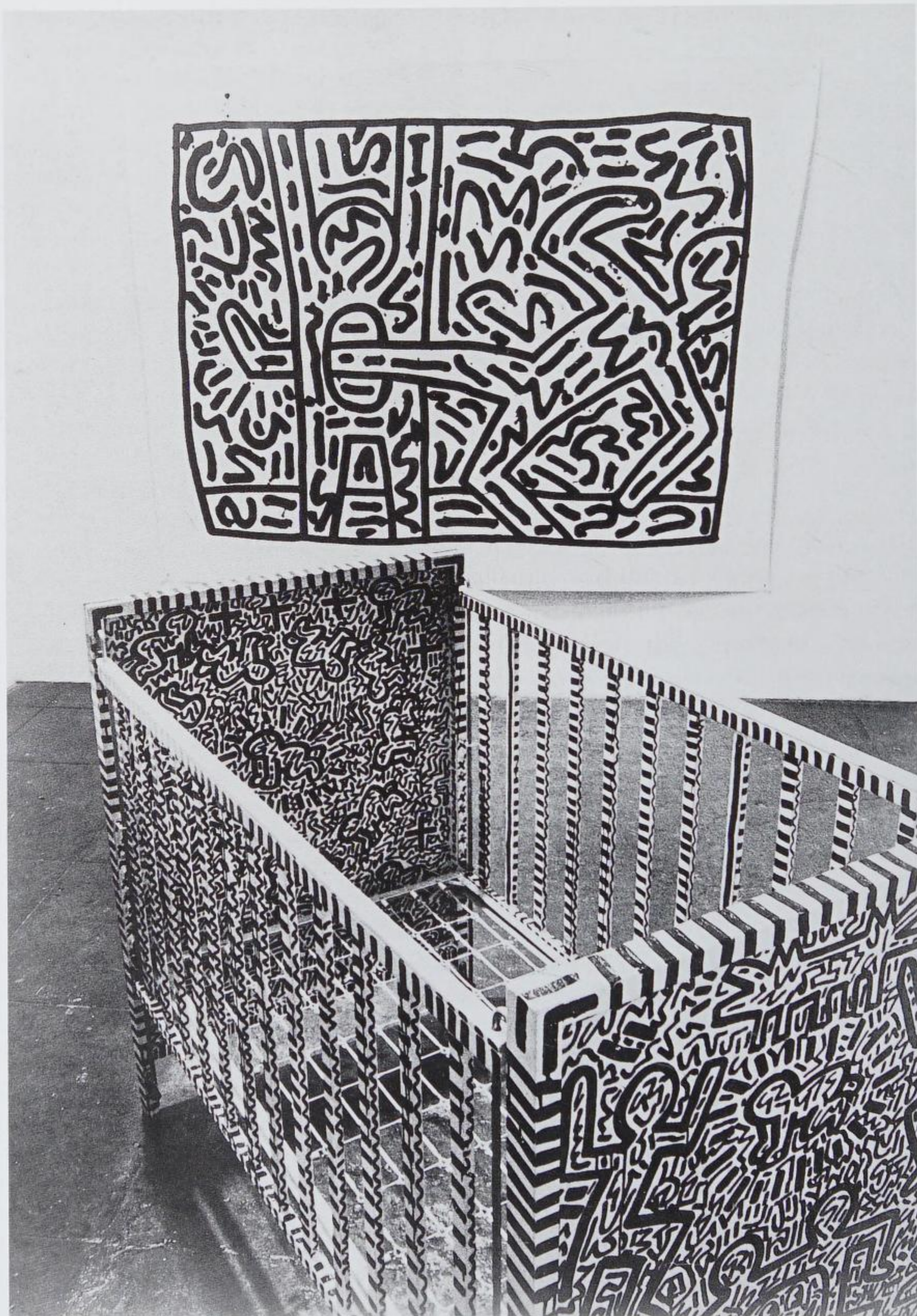
red paint on the gray walls at the opening. Club 57, up the block from my apartment, became an active social center, as did the Mudd Club and Arlene Schloss's loft on Broome Street for "Wednesdays at A's" events. It was during this period that I got to know better Tina L'Hotsky and Steve Mass, and started collaborating on a video project with comedienne Tessie Chua. My downstairs neighbor Anders Grafstrom introduced me to David McDermott and Klaus Nomi. I also formed friendships with photographer Bern Boyle as well as the remarkable brothers Adolfo and Oliver Sanchez. I was producing Super-8 films and continuing video projects, as well as performing with the Blackheart Collective, a group of gay black poets and musicians that included Isaac Jackson, Assoto Saint, and Salih Michael Fisher, among others. But none of this prepared me for what would culminate beginning in **1981**: meeting Swiss artist Andreas Senger and artist/writer Nicolas Moufarrege and eventually escaping New York City for London and France, before returning to see Gracie Mansion open a gallery in a former hair salon on St. Marks Place, and, soon afterward, moving my residence to 368 East Eighth Street, east of Avenue C.



SUR RODNEY (SUR) AND GRACIE MANSION.

Photo: Mark Stern

INSTALLATION VIEW OF  
KEITH HARING'S EXHIBITION  
AT HAL BROMM GALLERY,  
NEW YORK, DECEMBER  
1981. Included are his *Crib* (1981,  
marker and enamel on wood)  
and an untitled ink drawing. Courtesy  
Hal Bromm Gallery, New York.  
Photograph by Tseng Kwong Chi.  
Copyright © Muna Tseng Dance  
Projects, Inc., New York. Artwork by  
Keith Haring © Estate of Keith  
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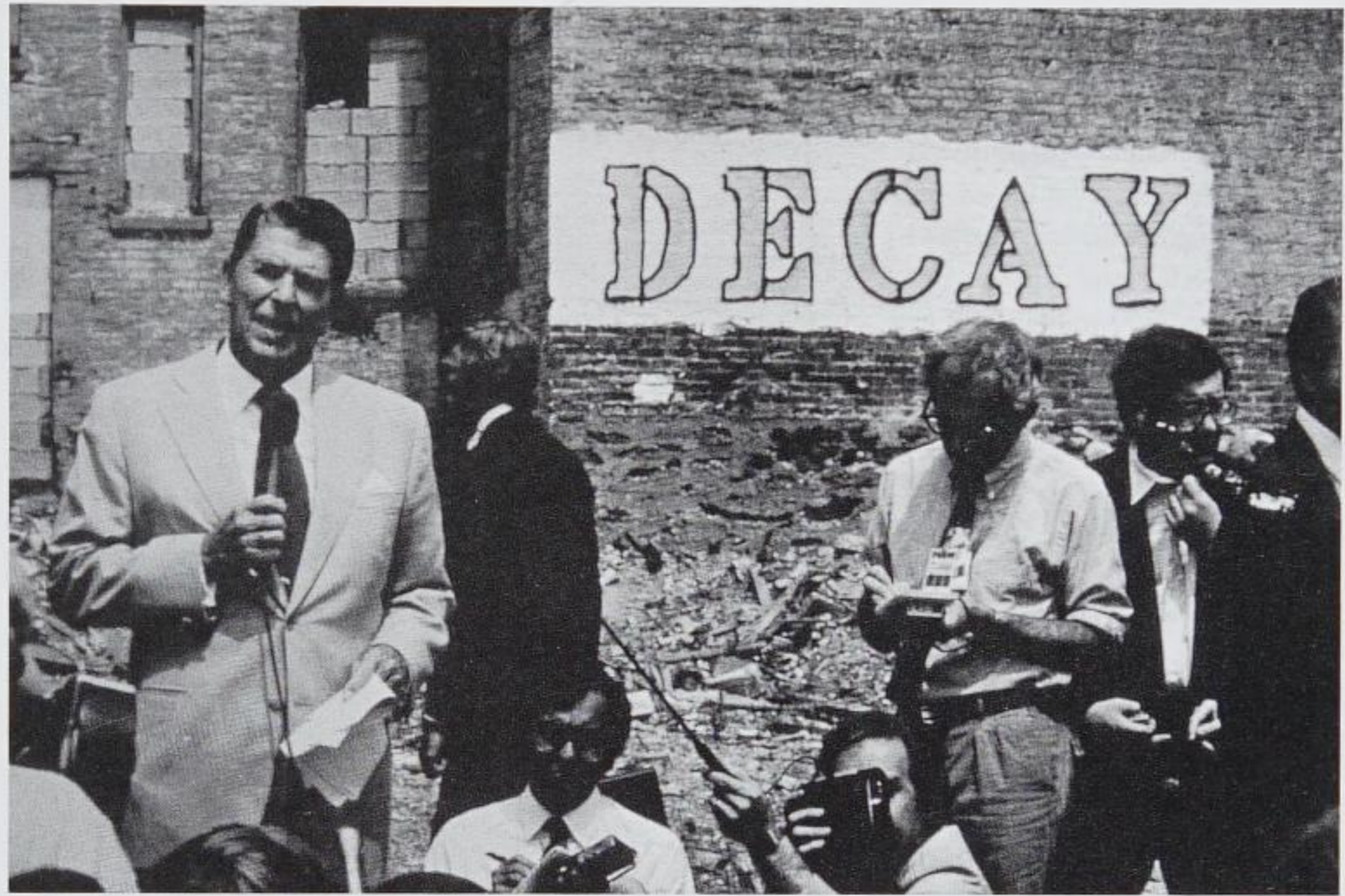


and from Vendart to Haring's Pop Shop—signaled a new subversive interface between the private realm of the studio and the fluid commerce of the mass market.

At the heart of all these endeavors was the crucial issue of authenticity. Believing ourselves to be inhabiting a full-blown society of the spectacle (how premature this assessment seems now, in light of the present day), what was at stake was less a question of reality than the conundrum of how creativity could fabricate something of the “self” out of, or against, the metonymy of

mediation and co-option. Not surprisingly, the way artists responded to this rupture along the borders of identity was at once diametrically opposed and pathologically convergent. In uneasy responses to the legacy of modernism, artists sought to assume the void of experience—be it through transcendence or transgression—to simulate the spiritual in a godless age. On the one hand, you had the invocation of a kind of sublime time, growing more ornate and entertaining out of the reductive austerity of minimalist beauty, wrought across media from time-based endurance and life-as-art performance through the mesmeric effects of repetitive and subtly modulated music to a kind of optically charged painting. On the other hand was a more locally dominant trash culture, not so much a new salon des refusés as a saloon of refuse, where the detritus of American culture and the vulgarity of bad taste assaulted the hierarchical presumptions of high art. And between these two, the sound of only one hand clapping, a meditation on the emptiness where sincerity and artifice dance cheek to tongue-in-cheek.

If Downtown was searching the borders of sublimity, however (certainly not the center—for one would never enter a conversation with God, only about god), the process of the all-subsuming was intrinsically connected to the sublimation of time itself. This was the discrete language of the pharmacopoeia, the deferral of the moment in anticipatory speculation, the ascension of secondary over primary experience as the only critical distance that could deliver gratification. That's not to say these artists used any more drugs than the rest, it's just that their work extended into a kind of amped-up narcotic psychedelia that conjured the main ecstatic and



RONALD REAGAN STANDING BEFORE JOHN FEKNER'S MURAL *DECAY*, 1980. Fashion Moda Archive, Fales Library. Courtesy AP/Wide World Photos



ENTRANCE TO THE  
SOUVENIR SHOP AT THE  
*TIMES SQUARE SHOW*,  
1980. Artwork, left to right: John  
Ahearn and Robert Torres, portrait  
heads; Andrea Callard, *Second-  
Hand Clock*; L. Abrahms, doll; Ehry  
Anderson, wall sculpture; and Scott  
Miller, *Crocodile on Couch* (oil on  
canvas). Photo: Andrea Callard



hallucinatory components of the potent aesthetic cocktail coming from either end of this period—LSD to the aft and coke to the fore—with heroin right smack in the middle. Rather, it might be fairer to note here that many were relatively quite straight, others totally mad, but all found an audience and home in such quarters as the Downtown lifestyle provided. Oddly, when one thinks of some of the performers and artists who might fall under such a rubric—Laurie Anderson, Glenn Branca, Rhys Chatham, Papo Colo, DNA, Philip Glass, Tehching Hsieh, Kim Jones, Shigeko Kubota, Nam June Paik, Linda Montano, Adam Purple, Steve Reich, La Monte Young, Sonic Youth, Swans, or Ross Bleckner, Futura 2000, Jack Goldstein, Peter Halley, Philip Taaffe, Peter Schuyff, and Martin Wong—the rapture was constituted directly out of the mundane. The phantasmagoria was merely an effect, the accumulation to the point of excess, the dementia in the duration, the trance state of occupying a reality now based on endless repetition. Never so much an exploration of the fantastic as an exposition of the fetish, the process determined the results.

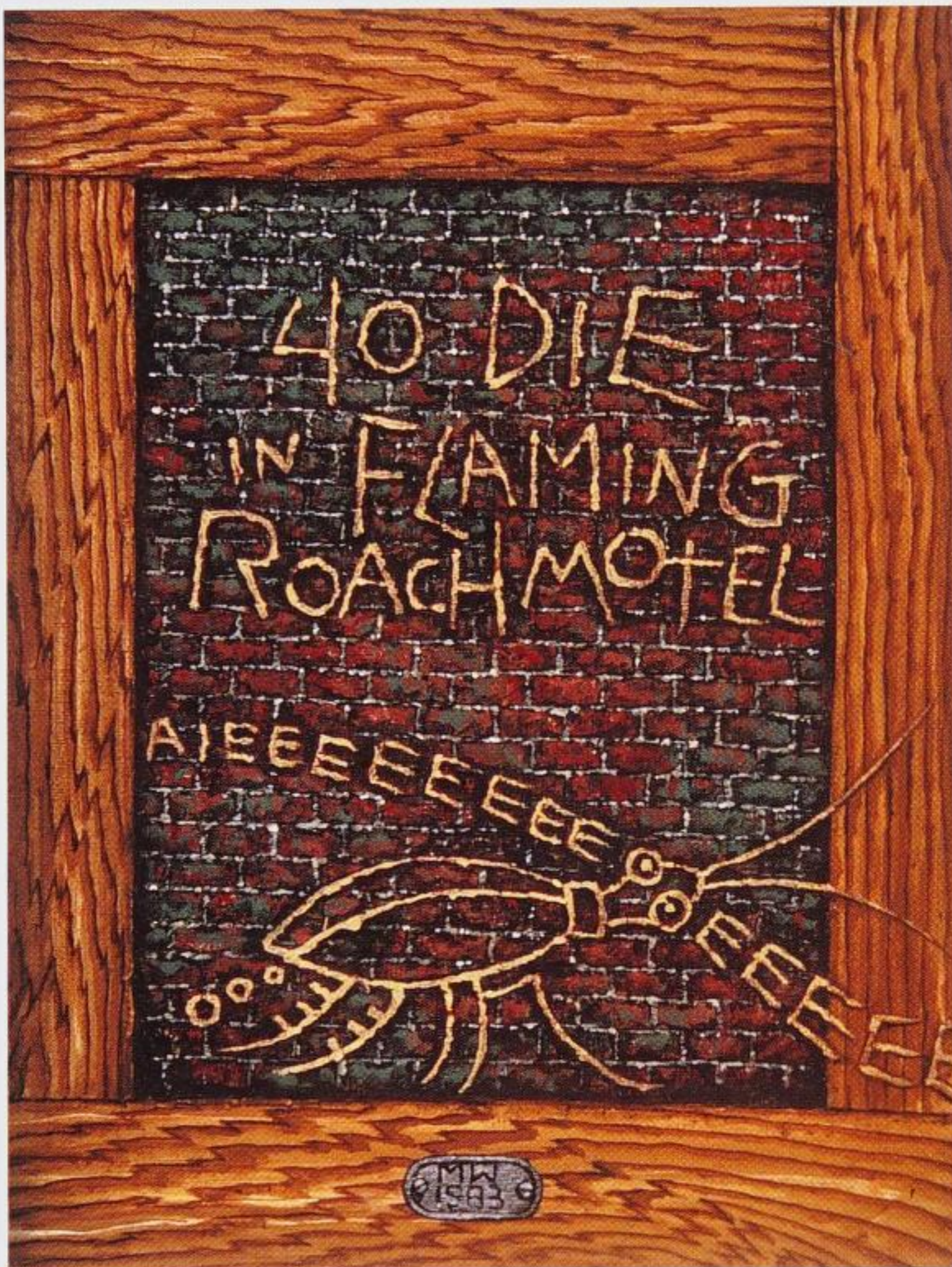
While some artists were hewing the divine objects and elemental experiences out of the chaos of experience, others were embracing the chaos for its baroque or brutal surfeit as a stage for the distortions of excess in popular culture. Revisiting representation as if it were an estranged lover, each tryst was a choreographed duet of the artists and their obsessions. The regressive tendencies of this era, each fundamentally a response to the mire that had all but swallowed up the



TWO INSTALLATION VIEWS  
OF COLAB, A MORE STORE  
AT WHITE COLUMNS, NEW  
YORK, DECEMBER 1981.

Photo: Lisa Kahane. Copyright ©  
1981 Lisa Kahane, NYC





MARTIN WONG, *40 DIE IN FLAMING ROACH MOTEL*, 1983. Oil on canvas, 24 x 18 in. Collection of Hal Bromm, New York. Courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong and PPOW Gallery, New York

momentum of progress, staggered forward in backward retreat. Memory was mined as the mother lode of fantasy, innocence and romance were costumes that transformed you body and soul (and yes, when belief systems crash and reality gets truly ugly is when make-believe is the only truth still tenable), and all that was discarded and reviled was treasured for its forlorn, gaudy glamour. Sincerity was no longer an essential quality, it was a necessity of compulsion that expressed itself through the homemade touch of craft. From the very start, Pattern and Decoration, by virtue of being decorative, figurative, and—most *déclassé* of all—painting, had three strikes against it. The visual arts continued over the next decade to seek out the nadir of ruling aesthetic criteria as a treasure trove of inspiration and expression. With the imprint of the Whitney's *New Image Painting* show, and the radical position of the New Museum's "Bad" Painting exhibition, both of 1978, the resurrection of painting would continue to explore simple, crude, naive, or regressive pictorialism as something inherently more personal.

If "bad" from the start was an affected ironic inversion, by the time it ends its path in Neo-Expressionism, we have the true measure of postmodern

practice: the abjuration of the new through the compromised surrogate of the neo. By the time we get to Julian Schnabel, it no longer really matters anymore that bad has lost its hip vernacular of African American cool; it's been nuked like a Hungry Man TV dinner until it's steaming hot—bad taste has run its course, becoming as pompous and pretentious as the highbrow it once opposed. It makes little difference, in the end: if paintings so ugly could be regarded as beautiful, the important part was that Schnabel was great at acting great. What you have along the way, however, from the first rudimentary suggestions that the virtuosity of Photorealism is ultimately about as trite and soulless as the Eagles, is a succession of shrines to the dubious and inappropriate (from John Torreano to Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt to Arch Connelly to Rhonda Zwillinger) that are deeply reverential toward the greater ambivalence of artifice. While male artists such as Kushner, MacConnel, Lanigan-Schmidt, Alan Shields, and Izhar Patkin turned to femme materials and methodologies, the New York Dolls, the seminal group of the nascent music scene, found that

singing about trash while dressing up in tawdry women's clothes might not exactly take America by storm but was immensely successful at attracting the girls.

That was the mockery of it all—a deep affection for the “real thing” no matter how plastic or ridiculous its beauty. Taken together, the pop-cultural damage registered—by Kenny Scharf's Day-Glo Hanna-Barbera; Walter Robinson's macho pulp; the Lounge Lizards' faux jazz; Kiely Jenkins's drooling dogs; the manic retrospectacles of Ann Magnuson, Carmelita Tropicana, and McDermott and McGough; the mutant beauty paintings of Jedd Garet, George Condo, and David Bowes; the saccharine pop of Rodney Alan Greenblat and They Might Be Giants; the passion-fugues of Keiko Bonk and John Kelly; an ingenuous personification with animals from Christy Rupp to Rebecca Howland to Ellen Berkenblit; the sentimentality of Daze or the sincerity of a Mike Bidlo replicate; and the thrifting of glamour from Betsey Johnson and Stephen Sprouse to the craze of cocktail-party dresses and the reigning fashion emporium so

ANN MAGNUSON AND  
KENNY SCHARF IN  
MAGNUSON'S "CHRISTMAS  
SPECIAL" AT THE KITCHEN,  
DECEMBER 1981.

Photo: Paula Court



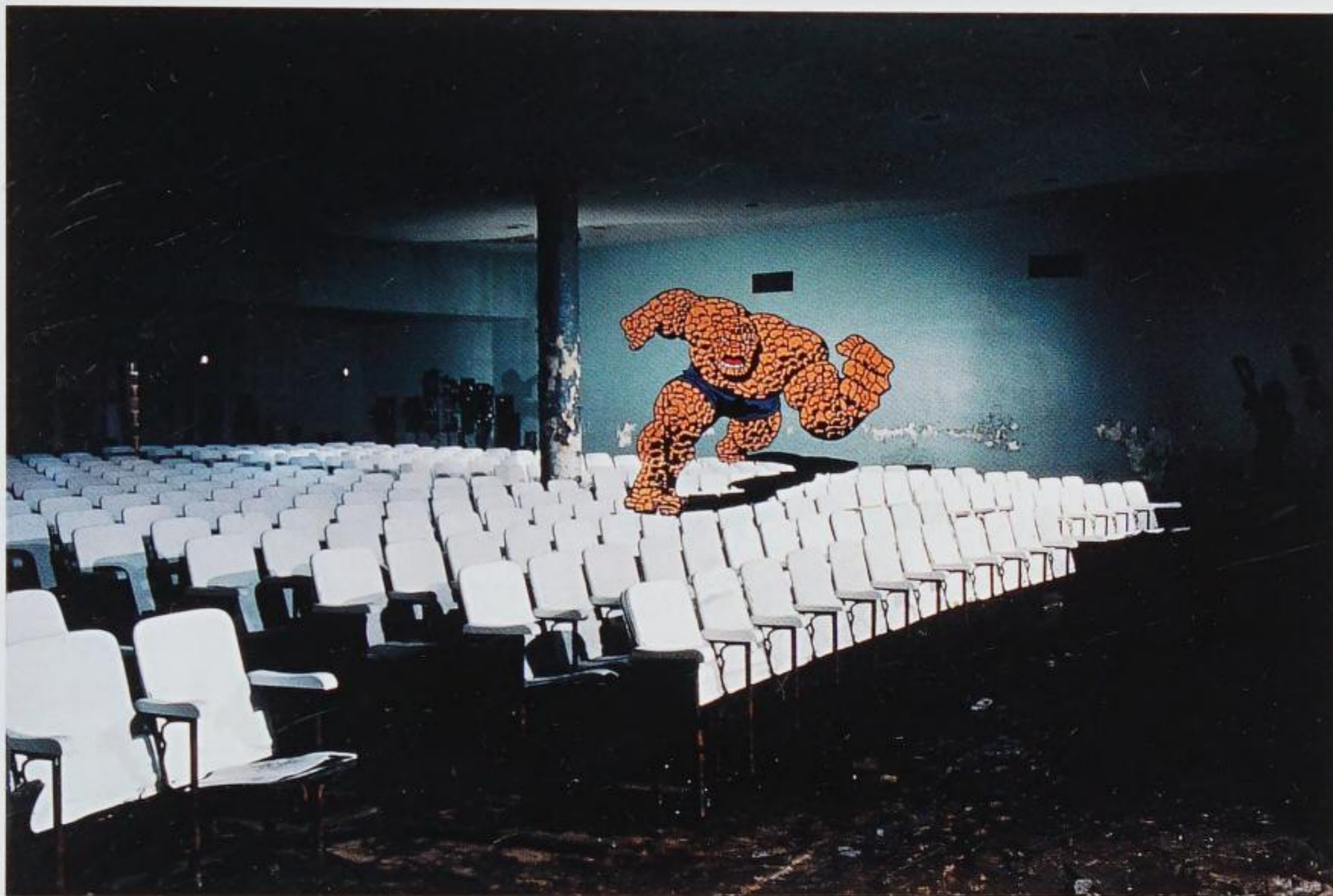


aply named Trash and Vaudeville—brought the pseudo into the self to such a degree that no deception was not without an honorary truth. To call it kitsch would be to miss the point entirely. Kitsch was the beginning of our Industrial Age, what Germans called the mass production of religious icons on an assembly line that was outside God's direct workings through the artisan's hand. A century later, as the age of industry was entering its own inevitable obsolescence, these artists took to tacky artifacts of misguided faith and beauty as a secondhand language by which to express their own uneasy discourse with the ineffable.

With the rules of self-definition and cultural hierarchies both very much up for grabs, one of the most provocative and empowering territories of Downtown social personae was the reconstitution of sexuality. Between the communality of the great psychedelic orgy and the mortal dread of viral transmission, the concupiscence of youth proliferated a polymorphous perversity that explored the politics of desire, the social ideals of attraction, and the aesthetics of fetish in a carnal celebration of ideogrammatic Sexpressionism. If we begin with Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* of 1976, in which she literally unfurled a feminist Torah of diary/diatribe rage and ritualized Eros from her vagina, or the *Starification Object Series (S.O.S.)* of Hannah Wilke, in which she folded wads of chewed gum into vulvic wounds, the ensuing decade brought us a litany of texts and an odditorium of explicit forms that challenged and changed the puritanical canon of normative sexuality.

The photographer Charles Gatewood documented the most fertile confluence of Uptown and Downtown subcultures in the deviant hotbed of the Hellfire Club, as photographers such as David Armstrong, Richard Kern, and Robert Mapplethorpe gave tangible iconography to the prurient boundaries of the forbidden. Performance opened up a Pandora's box of forbidden fantasies in the works of Penny Arcade, Joey Arias, Ethyl Eichelberger, Karen Finley, Debbie Harry, Bill T. Jones, Lydia Lunch, Klaus

Nomi, Kembra Pfahler, John Sex, Annie Sprinkle, and Diane Torr, and the visceral shape of our carnal appetites was reformed from the copulating classic friezes of Tom Otterness to the transgender dolls of Greer Lankton. Post-Stonewall and post-feminist at once, this was a time when PONY (Prostitutes of New York) could become a political force, and a new wave of gay culture in the East Village (lodged in my memory as the sadly forgotten group Fags against Facial Hair) could proclaim a new kind of individualized, Punk-inspired anticlone identity from which would germinate the radicalized roots of late 1980s Queer Culture. Before



**OPPOSITE:** BETSEY JOHNSON, ASSEMBLAGE WITH LYCRA OUTFIT FROM *ARTIFACTS AT THE END OF A DECADE*, EDITED BY CAROL HUEBNER AND STEVEN WATSON, 1981. Downtown Collection, Fales Library.

*In the late 1970s, Carol Huebner and Steven Watson invited a group of Downtown artists to each create a "page" for a book that would function like a time capsule for the period. The result was this portfolio of artist editions. Among works included are this outfit by Betsy Johnson, alongside contributions by Robert Wilson, Jimmy DeSana, Lucinda Childs, and many others.*

**ABOVE:** JUSTEN LADDA, *THE THING*, 1981. Installation view, Bronx, New York. TM and copyright © Marvel Comics Group 1981. Photo: Martha Cooper



**LEFT:** TIM ROLLINS + K.O.S., *FRANKENSTEIN*, 1981–84. Acrylic on book pages mounted on linen, 9 x 12 ft. Courtesy the artist and Studio K.O.S.



HANNAH WILKE, *S.O.S. STARIFICATION OBJECT SERIES*, 1974–82.

Ten black-and-white photographs with fifteen gum sculptures, overall 41<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 58<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 2<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.

Photo: Zindman/Fremont. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Copyright © 2004 Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt

she scandalized and sensationalized popular culture, it's worth remembering that Madonna was just one of many Downtown artists mining the exaggerated iconography of sexuality, and that in that context she hardly stood out.

In its innumerable shards and impossible symmetries, Downtown between 1974 and 1984 represents something more than merely a break with the continuum of history. It was a seizure in time, the subjugation of everything we still held near and dear to an auto-da-fé of hysterical heresies, the shantytown of makeshift necessities built from the rubble of a no-future world that was quite literally physically collapsing around us. If you're looking for the cracks, there's no need to measure this moment against any other. Rather we might gaze upon this time as a shattered looking glass, where all distortions, repetitions, and corruptions of content and reason arose from a total rupture in the form and function of creativity. To turn

it all into a narrative, you first of all need to understand that, above all else, this was at once the birth and death, agony and ecstasy of our collective failure to suspend belief in any such fictions. This was the time of the broken story, when film, painting, sculpture, theater, literature, fashion, music, and performance art ultimately crashed together in a mass demolition derby of discarded meanings and cultural dead ends. Something entirely new was conjured then, but it was built of rubbish, a house of cards that inscribed its own fatal architecture of imminent collapse.

Be it the monologues of Eric Bogosian, Constance De Jong, Spalding Gray, Paul McMahon, and Michael Smith, the New Narrative videos of Michel Auder, Juan Downey, Kit Fitzgerald, and Tony Oursler, the No Wave film enlistment of the scene as subject and character with Jim Jarmusch, Charlie Ahearn, Scott and Beth B, Eric Mitchell, James Nares, and Amos Poe, the reconstitution of comic art forms as a confessional and social medium by Ida Applebroog, Sue Coe, Joe Coleman, Gary Panter, and Art Spiegelman, an intimate literature on the language of perception exercised by the likes of Kathy Acker, Max Blagg, Tim Rollins's K.O.S., Patti Smith, and Lynne Tillman, an ongoing modulation of received images that spewed across the exploding visual landscape from Leon Golub and Nancy Spero, to Robert Longo and Cindy Sherman, to Judy Rifka and Stephen Lack, to Kiki Smith and David Wojnarowicz, or even the return of performance art and theater itself, to a kind of phenomenological experience with Richard Foreman, John Jesurun, Joe Lewis, the Squat Theater, and Robert Wilson—deconstruction often took shape in the homespun vernaculars of Mickey and Judy's "let's put on a show in the barn" pseudo amateurisms, and the still-evolving media of video and performance art were staged as a new theatrics of the situational self. These were the stories of the times; a misfit lit. of extended time and spliced-together composites, personal expressions in borrowed voices and modes of communication that so deeply mistrusted the compromised nature of language and pictures that representation was merely a trope, and purloined genres became perfect vehicles for our reckless drunken drive into the abyss of insignification.



ETHYL EICHELBERGER AS  
QUEEN LIZ, PERFORMING  
AT P.S. 122, 1984.

Photo: © Dona Ann McAdams



**TOP:** *MR. DEAD AND MRS. FREE*, PERFORMANCE BY SQUAT THEATER, 1981.

Photo: Paula Court

**BOTTOM:** ALAN VEGA OF SUICIDE AT ROCK LOUNGE ON CANAL STREET, 1980.

Photo: Paula Court



**BASTARD CHILDREN OF CHARLES MANSON**, Angela Davis, Chris Burden, Huey P. Newton, Iggy Pop, the Velvet Underground, Kent State, and Attica, the mutant fringe core of the late 1970s and early '80s was spawned watching the Summer of Love disintegrate into a psychedelic orgy of social dysfunction whereby the political gains of the '60s were gutted by the spiritual bankruptcy of the following decade, creating an antagonistic vortex of rebellious tantrums riddled with hysterical cries and impassioned rants that created a cacophonous vertigo, the repercussions of which, like a filthy specter who refuses a final exorcism, still reverberate through the once savage, now sanitized New York City night air. Shit . . . the way it USED to be.

Insanity. Anger. Isolation. Poverty. Soul murder. The connective tissue where the cultural division of art, film, music, and literature was cauterized, creating a vast insane asylum, part Theater of Cruelty, part Grand Guignol. All Dada, all the time.

As a foul-mouthed, hyper-sexualized, violent teenage runaway with a chip on my shoulder the size of Boulder Dam, late one night I stumbled into Max's Kansas City. Over an ovary-rattling, trance-inducing din, Alan Vega of Suicide was berating the masochists in the audience while repeatedly battering his right cheekbone with a microphone. Stark. Surreal. Horrific. My first exposure to the blood-soaked bones of New York's underbelly.

Suicide massacred all musical convention, inspiring the sonic desecration of the No Wave music that followed. A "musical" Armageddon, brought on by maladjusted mongrels like Vega, who as Art Brutes demolished the safety net between spectacle and spectator. Art and Artist. Giving birth to a radical fringe whose assaultive battle cries, thinly disguised in song, spoken word, film, the visual arts, and an ungodly commingling of all the above, they created a seething necropolis, polluted by and overpopulated with art school dropouts, rural refugees, Midwestern bible burners, Southern white-trash rejects, and just about every other "outsider" who had been too fricking intense to ever really fit in anywhere else.

The decade of glory holes and garbage strikes gave rise to a fistful of hard-core, hell-bent Art Terrorists, whose extremist mantra mimicked that of their anarchist forebears, who bellowed that whoever creates also demands destruction, and demands it right now! Kill your idols, your parents, politicians, convention, kill yourself if you can't fucking take it, but let your voice be heard—and LOUD. Scream bloody murder. Use any and every available implement. Treat it as an assault weapon. Your voice. A guitar. A Super-8 camera. Canvas. Paper. Paint. Concrete. The street. The side of a train. The criminal brilliance of Emilio Cubeiro, Karen Finley, Eric Bogosian, Beth and Scott B, Ramelzee, Richard Kern, David Wojnarowicz, Barbara Kruger, and Jenny Holzer—all shared a common pathos, exposing the dirty little secrets of a battered American psyche, which, using art as shock therapy, was now battling back at the damage caused by incest, trauma, poverty, prejudice, injustice, and war. A beautiful, terrifying racket whose reverberations still remain inspiring.

## LYDIA LUNCH



LYDIA LUNCH.

Photo: Marc Viaplana

KLAUS NOMI PERFORMING  
AT IRVING PLAZA, c. 1978.  
Photo: Harvey Wang. Copyright  
© 2004 Harvey Wang, New York



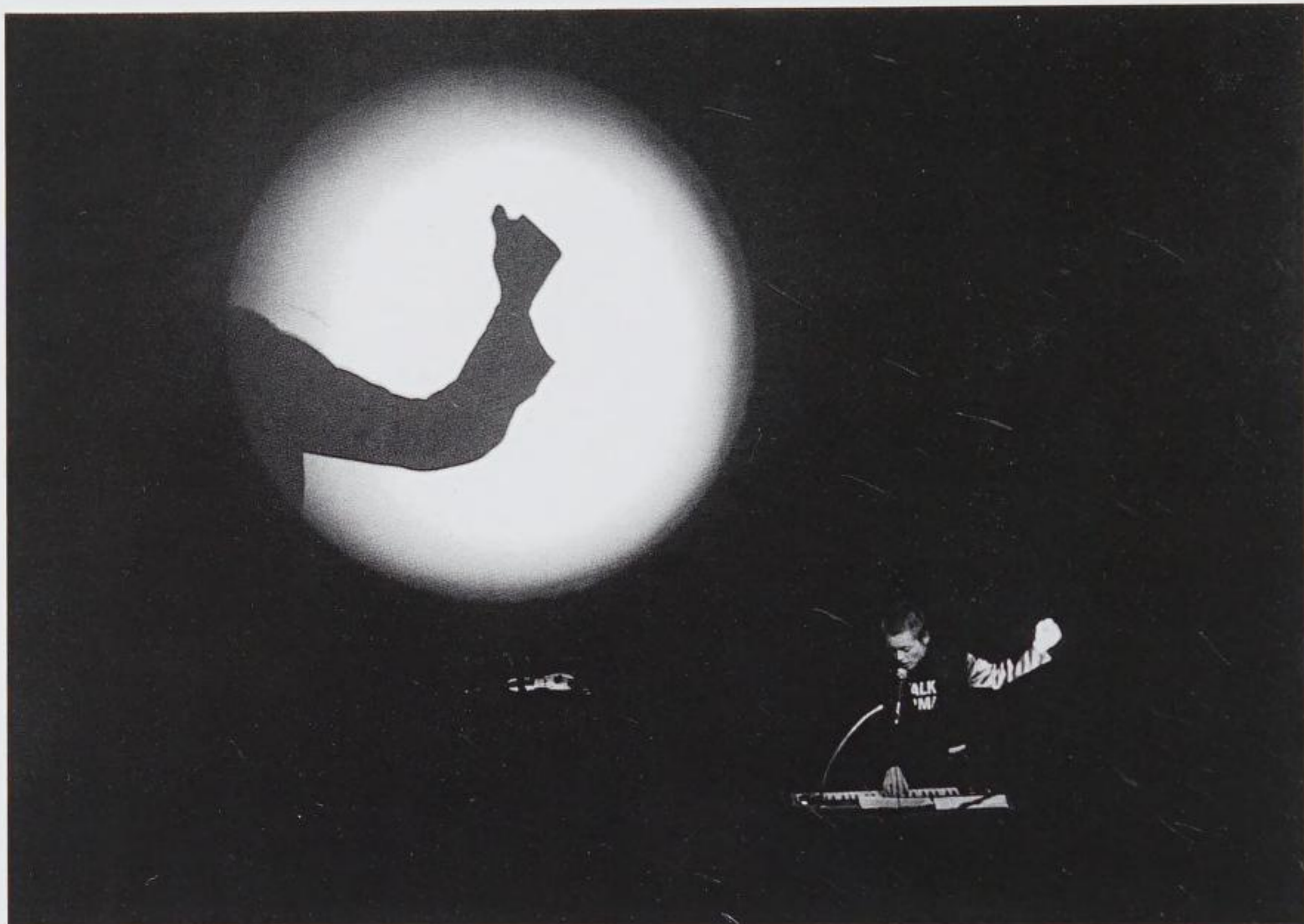
# ART AFTER HOURS: DOWNTOWN PERFORMANCE

ROSELEE GOLDBERG

**WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT** that straddling two decades would provide a plausible way to grasp one of Downtown New York's most vital periods of creativity? Yet it is that era, bracketed at either end by polar opposites—hard times and overabundance, intellectual pursuits and mainstream ones, a literate generation of artists and an essentially visual one, and a semisecluded community of filmmakers, artists, choreographers, and composers, living and working in abandoned real estate in downtown Manhattan, and the upwardly mobile traders, bankers, doctors, and lawyers who would displace them—which frames the huge aesthetic explosions that occurred in New York at that time. This period, beginning in fact some years prior to the starting point for this exhibition, in the late 1960s and early '70s, and running through the mid-1980s, can be considered the Big Bang whence the ideas, the visuals, and the values of contemporary art of the following decades would emerge.

Whether object or film installation, public intervention or video portrait, the conceptual source, the range of materials, and the visual language of today's art had their origins in those years. It was a time when the entire art-making process was reconfigured by artists eager to infuse their work with investigative energy and to change the function of art to reflect experience, for the maker as well as the viewer. During this period artists focused on live actions, not on things, on an art of ideas, not of product, and the general ethos was as much a response to the events of only a few years earlier at Kent State, Chicago, Columbia, and Memphis as it was to a sense of serious, even rational purpose. Art was an intellectual endeavor with philosophical and moral consequences. Although not accessible to every audience, content, context, and communication mattered.

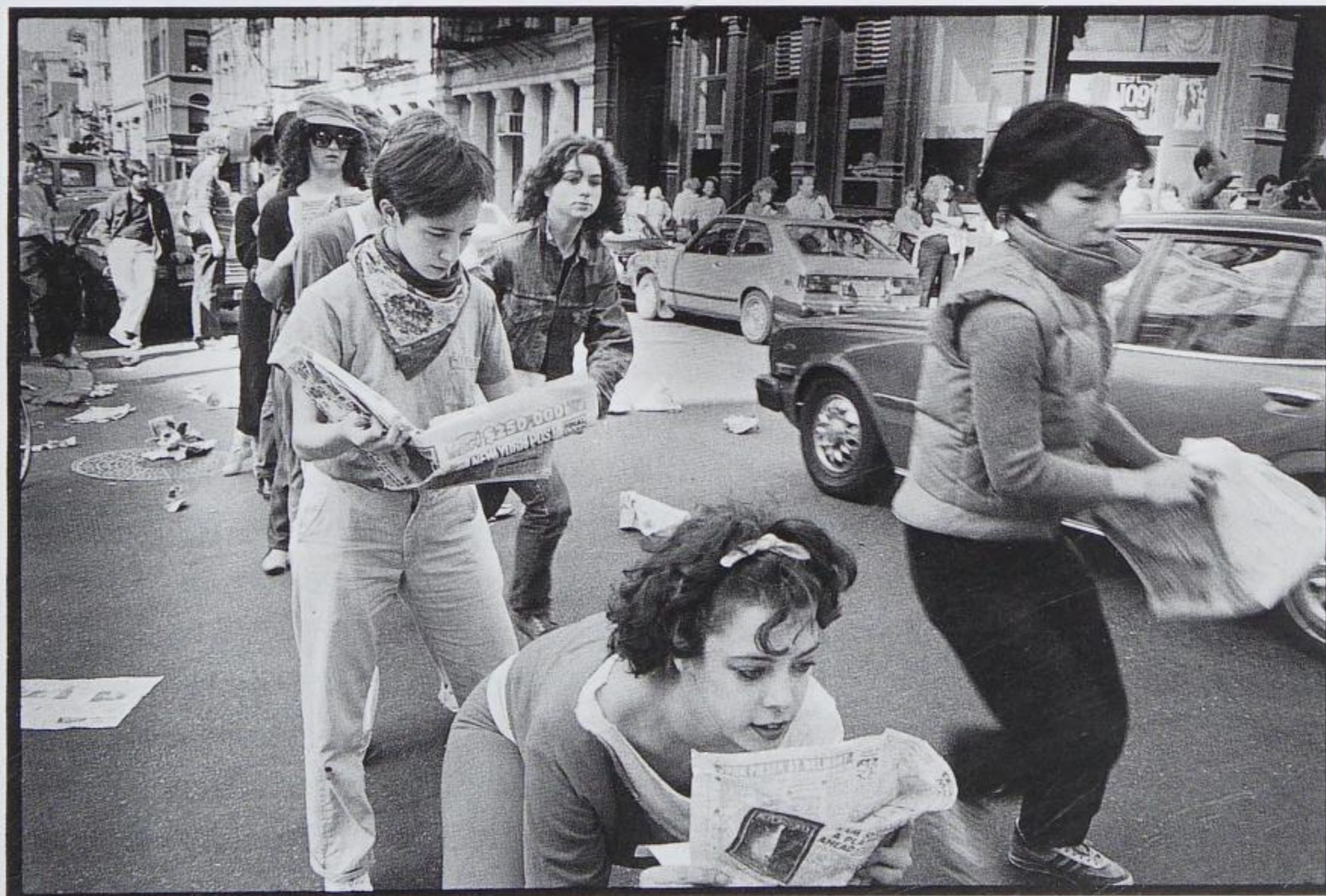
LAURIE ANDERSON,  
"O SUPERMAN (FOR  
MASSENET)" SEGMENT,  
*UNITED STATES, PART II*,  
PRODUCED BY THE KITCHEN  
AT THE ORPHEUM THEATER,  
1980. Photo: Paula Court



**IN THOSE DAYS**, artists worked in the gap between disciplines, the space between buildings, the intervals between people, and the friction of so many different approaches that sparked the constant experimentation that audiences came to anticipate. Conceptual art, and performance art, which was its corollary, had essentially cleared the art marketplace of goods for sale, and artists stayed away from traditional galleries and museums on principle. They performed on rooftops, in vacant parking lots, or in warehouses turned studio-cum-rudimentary-habitat. They hoisted pianos onto opposing riverbanks and installed soundworks over water (Laurie Anderson); made giant collages from suburban houses cut into quarters (Gordon Matta-Clark); took fellow artists and friends via public transportation to a nearby beach for one-of-a-kind actions (Joan Jonas). They wound Super-8 cameras around their bodies as they turned and turned in circles and filmed a partner doing the same (Dan Graham); gathered in semiprivate meetings with other women and pulled from her vagina a scrolled manifesto on the politics of gender (Carolee Schneemann). They lay beneath a specially built wooden ramp in a gallery, masturbating for several hours each day to alter the psychological matrix of a space (Vito Acconci); spent a week in a small Downtown walk-up gallery with a coyote symbolizing colonial decimation (Joseph Beuys).

Every formal device of earlier art-making, in all disciplines, was unraveled or thrown out, and direct interaction, visual or behavioral, in real space or imagined, was articulated in unexpected ways. A new terminology—Land Art, Body Art, Sound Art—was invented to describe, and also to categorize, the endless variables, which critics reviewed in radically different prose from the art writing that had come before. Creating dances about gravity, with performers supported by mountaineering harnesses walking down the face of a building (Trisha Brown), making sculpture about the sensation of sculpture, hanging by fingers and toes in a convex curve between two supporting walls (Dennis Oppenheim), or composing music about the sounds of music, using many sets of clapping hands to accumulate dense polyrhythms (Steve Reich), they raised the rhetoric of art practice. Yet they did so in the most practical ways; before art theory of the early 1980s provided fixed systems for analysis, activities such as these provided empirical proof that art can change perception and signal shifting political and economic realities.

The demarcation between Uptown and Downtown was another reality. Below Fourteenth Street was a distinct parcel of urban geography. Few who lived there ventured Uptown, except to visit a doctor's office or the Museum of Modern Art, and those living Uptown remained there. In 1974, a two-thousand-square-foot loft in the heart of SoHo cost just two hundred dollars a month. Streets were empty and



YOSHIKO CHUMA AND THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS AT THE CORNER OF PRINCE AND GREENE STREETS IN SOHO, 1983. Photo: Paula Court



RICHARD FOREMAN,  
*PANDERING TO THE  
 MASSES*, PERFORMANCE  
 AT FOREMAN'S LOFT,  
 52 WOOSTER STREET,  
 NEW YORK, 1975.

Photo: Max Waldman. Richard  
 Foreman Papers, Fales Library

bitions, initially private affairs, might take place in any number of these personal spaces, and their generous architectural volumes gave the simplest gesture, the least pretentious construction, a grandeur all their own. Cheap rent generated a particular aesthetic in the art of the 1970s, and the extraordinary spaces that it made available to a large and immensely talented community provided the model for exhibition spaces for years to come, including the new museums with their cavernous halls that would be built at the turn of the millennium.

The galleries that opened at 420 West Broadway, and along Greene and Wooster Streets, had the same proportions and construction as artists' lofts, so that workspace and exhibition space were interchangeable. Attending a rehearsal with Laura Dean dancers spinning in a loft on lower Broadway, or a Simone Forti and Charlemagne Palestine performance at Sonnabend Gallery, had essentially the same feel; close proximity to the work in both venues forced viewers to watch and listen carefully, to weigh the propositions set before them as attentively as they might try to memorize directions through a maze. Such concentrated mental tracking of instructions to notice a myriad of clues, both physical and conceptual, was part of the play of many a Downtown performance in those days: Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater was set in a long and narrow space that stretched away from the audience like the rings of a telescope. Seventy-five feet deep, with the first twenty feet situated at floor level, the next thirty feet running at a steep

dimly lit at night, trucks and truckers hogged sidewalks by day, and rummaging through bins outside electrical stores along Canal Street constituted a shopping expedition for artists living in loft buildings with their fourteen-foot ceilings, large lozenge-shaped windows, and long, wide floorboards. Here they searched for industrial clip-on lamps for their raw lofts, or for interesting items that might become part of an installation or concert. For those artists living and working in the cast-iron buildings, usually one or two per floor, in buildings recently vacated by small businesses and factories, the infinite possibilities of so much space were themselves inspirational. Equally inspirational were the friends living next door, who might contribute a dance or sound piece, or a video, to a work being made. Performances and exhibi-

rake, and finally leveling off at a height of six feet, with sliding walls on either side, Foreman's specially constructed stage emphasized the pictorial aspect as much as the rhetorical energy driving his intensely intellectual theater. In *Pandering to the Masses: A Misrepresentation* (1975) or *Book of Splendors: Part 2 (Book of Levers)* *Action at a Distance* (1977) actors and objects appeared in a series of rapidly formed and briefly held tableaux, composed with an eye to the visual picture frame as much as an ear for phrasing that would trigger convoluted thought processes in the brain. Early drafts of Robert Wilson and Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) also showed that this brave new work had as



much to do with the vast, dreamy spaces of Lower Manhattan as with Wilson's ferocious imagination. A trained architect, Wilson envisaged drama on the scale of city blocks, and performers traversed them in slow motion, as though giving actual form to time. When he and Glass rehearsed at Westbeth (a huge building on the corner of West and Bethune Streets on the West Side, converted from Bell Telephone Laboratories to artists' studios), it was as though the entire ethos of an era were contained in one very large room. In a bold collaborative gesture, Wilson brought together the talents and intelligence of the neighborhood. Glass, fellow traveler with Wilson in conceiving and developing *Einstein* into an extraordinary visual opera without narrative, sat at his electric piano, while slides of drawings of proposed backdrops were projected onto a wall behind him. The choreographers Lucinda Childs, Gary Reigenborn, Grethe Holby, and Dana Reitz, the musician Connie Beckley, and many other performers highly regarded in their own right added their idiosyncratic design to Wilson's whole. *Einstein*, when it opened at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, was called a total artwork for the way it combined an entire gamut of disciplines. Yet it was also a tally of the totality of inventions and influences of Downtown performers, including Meredith Monk, Robert Ashley, the Wooster Group, and Mabou Mines, those having nothing to do with the opera itself, but whose essential and pivotal work could be said to have provided touchstones for it.

RICHARD FOREMAN, *TOTAL RECALL*, PERFORMANCE AT FOREMAN'S LOFT, 52 WOOSTER STREET, NEW YORK, 1971. Photo: Babette Mangolte. Richard Foreman Papers, Fales Library. Copyright © 1971 Babette Mangolte. All Rights of Reproduction Reserved



THE PHILIP GLASS  
ENSEMBLE AT THE  
PEPPERMINT LOUNGE,  
DECEMBER, 1980.

Clockwise from left: Jack Kripl,  
Michael Reisman, Jon Gibson,  
Richard Peck, Iris Hiskey,  
Philip Glass, and Kurt Munkacsi.  
Photo: Paula Court



The moment of *Einstein* coincided with the arrival of a new generation in town; the students of the conceptualists. They poured in from art schools where some of the best had been teaching: Cal Arts, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Rhode Island School of Design, the University of Buffalo. They came to witness firsthand the artist-run “alternative spaces” that served as exhibition and performance outlets for the area’s enormous artistic production: 112 Greene Street, Franklin Furnace, 3 Mercer Street, Anthology Film Archives, Global Village, Artists Space, and the Kitchen. The latter was situated at the crossroads between Broome and Wooster, a convenient midpoint between studio and afternoon hamburger at the Broome Street Bar, or CBGB’s and the Mudd Club, where any number of Punk and Post-Punk bands, often made up of the same group of artists who might be showing at the Kitchen or working in its backrooms, were playing. Later, they might make their way further downtown to the Ocean Club, to hear a band of recent art school graduates, the Talking Heads, and later still, to Puffy’s Tavern, on Hudson, for early morning cocktails as the sun came up. They were the media generation who had grown up on rock and roll, B movies, twenty-four-hour television, and fast food, and who focused at art school on the mechanics, both perceptual and emotional, of the media as ubiquitous cultural and experiential filter. The work of John Baldessari, Joseph Kosuth, Marina Abramovic, Michael Snow,

Joan Jonas, Chris Burden, Rebecca Horn, Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, Dara Birnbaum, Joseph Beuys, or Laurie Anderson was second nature to them, and Andy Warhol reigned supreme in this firmament for his utter disregard of the boundaries between commerce and fine arts and his incomparable success in combining them. The media generation's sophistication was palpable, as was their ambition, and their experience of Downtown life, much edgier than that of their elders, made no distinction between the intellectual high of conceptual art and the gut-wrenching low of Punk, the ingenious experimentation of artists' video or the ironic absurdity of late-night TV; *The Gong Show*; *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*; or *Saturday Night Live*, on the one hand, and videotapes (and live performances) by Michael Smith, Julia Heyward, Mitchell Kriegman, Bill Viola, Kit Fitzgerald, and Jill Kroesen, on the other, were the flip sides of a mirror that reflected the United States as a vast media landscape stretching from coast to coast. With one foot in high art and its historical legitimacy, and the other in the mire of popular culture and celebrity acclaim, they dreamed up an entirely new look for the art of the 1980s that would fit together the nuanced sensibilities of the one and the not-so-nuanced pronouncements of the other.

Performance provided the vehicle for this two-way shuttle between art world and everyday, between art space and all-night club. By the late 1970s, it was clear that performance was the key factor in the connectedness of the Downtown community (imagine how different the way of life would have been if artists had sat alone making only objects in their vast loft work-living spaces), and for a radical inventory of influences—from Happenings to Fluxus, Judson Memorial Church, Grand Union, and the actions of conceptual art—which would be of enormous import to contemporary art, locally and internationally. Participating artists had long considered performance integral to their practice. But only in the 1970s did major art institutions finally accept it as a medium of expression in its own right, with the Whitney Museum's *Four Evenings, Four Days*, and the Museum of Modern Art's *Line Up*, both in 1976, featuring the best of Downtown, including Pat Oleszko, Adrian Piper, Ralston Farina, Robert Wilson, Laura Dean, Robin Winters, Terry Allen, Stuart Sherman, Laurie Anderson, Julia Heyward, and Michael Smith. Universities and art schools, also around this time, gradually introduced the history



YO! CIAOI! ECCO! PREGO!  
 COUNTESSA ANNA MAGNANISON  
 INVITATI YUA ALLA  
 2ND ANNUALE  
**FESTIVALE DI  
 SAN DeNIRO**

WEDNESDAY, AGOSTO 17, 1983

A VIA DANCETERIA —

LA STRADA PICCOLINA NEXDORA\*\*\*

AN ESCLUSIVO E ROMANTICO FEAST FOR  
 FAMOSA PERSONE DE GROOVI E GLITTERATI NOTTURNE  
 !LOTSA RONZONI AND PLENTI OF PAPPARAZZI!

AN ENTERTAINMENZI L'AVVENTURA

"LA DOLCE VITA PER TUTTI"

\* IL CONCERTO D'ACCORDIONE

\* PRESIDENTE OF THE LIRA COUNCIL.

VINCENT GALLO ADDRESSES THE NEIGHBORHOOD

\* PUPPITO TEATRO PRESENTE "SCICILIAN LIMES" BY

LUIGI PIRANDELLO

\* ARTISTA STEPHANO CASTRANOVO

\* MUSICA THE DEAN MARTINS

\* DINING E DANCING TO THE SPECIALE NEAPOLITAN MIX

BY D.J. V.V.G.

\* MOLTO MORE

FLYER FOR ANN  
 MAGNUSON'S "FESTIVALE  
 DI SAN DE NIRO" AT  
 DANCETERIA, 1983. Downtown  
 Flyers Collection, Fales Library.

*Spooing the Festival of San  
 Gennaro, which takes place in  
 the streets of New York's Little  
 Italy each fall, Ann Magnuson  
 organized this tribute to Robert  
 De Niro, pictured here in his  
 role as a Catholic priest in  
 True Confessions (1981).*

# JOE LEWIS

1. Unlike most of my comrades in art, I was not hypnotized by the

Bohemian charm of the East Village; I was born in the ghetto, and those streets were my reality and not the ingredients of an exotic, creative elixir.

2. The East Village scene was much like Woodstock: if you remember it, you probably weren't there. To paraphrase Ginsberg, I also watched the cash, flash, and dash destroy some of the best minds of my generation.

3. Lots of revolutionary talk in the days leading up to the occupation of the commercial property used for the *Real Estate Show*. We were going to show the establishment! Man the ramparts! Power to the Artists! We would hold our own—until the police came to shut the exhibition down, that is. Then everyone abandoned the art and the rhetoric, even me.

4. "The Squat" and "Black Art"

Two fantastic little stories (all names are changed to protect the innocent, and the guilty):

## THE SQUAT

There's a knock at the door during a party at a graffiti artist's squat.

"Who is it?"

"Bro, I've got a couple of Italians [*sic*] collectors that want to see your stuff."

"Word."

He unchains the door. A well-dressed, diminutive couple enters and immediately starts running around the space, moving the two clamp-on lights to see into every nook and cranny, taking notes and caucusing for a moment.

He says, "Bella." She says, "Bella, bella!"

They want everything that has a mark on it. The shard of mirror over the sink, the plywood cover for the bathtub in the kitchen, fast food bags, the toilet seat, for Christ's sake! How about your pants?

Clutching a small aluminum suitcase, one Italian says, "We take all for \$20,000? Okay?"

Twenty grand! Got our attention.

"27,500," says the artist.

The Italians pause a moment and speak amongst themselves. "Okay, 27,500."

"Oh shit," we all say in unison. Party!

## BLACK ART

The East Village scene was like that, but also like this: I got a call . . .

"Hello, is this Joe Lewis?"

"Who is this?"

"Amanda from the East Village Gallery. I'm calling for the director. He saw your work in a group show at Fashion Moda and would like to speak with you about the possibility of a show."

"Great! When can we meet?"

"He is available next Thursday, say 3:30?"

"That's fine. Next Thursday it is, 3:30."

Wow, I think. A gallery director interested in my work! The following Tuesday I happen to be in the area and decide to drop in. Maybe I could squeeze in a little ahead of schedule. I go up to the receptionist and ask for the director. "Hi, my name is Joe Lewis. I have an appointment with the director to show my work on Thursday and thought . . ."

She cuts me off in midsentence and says, "That must be a mistake. We don't show Black Art."



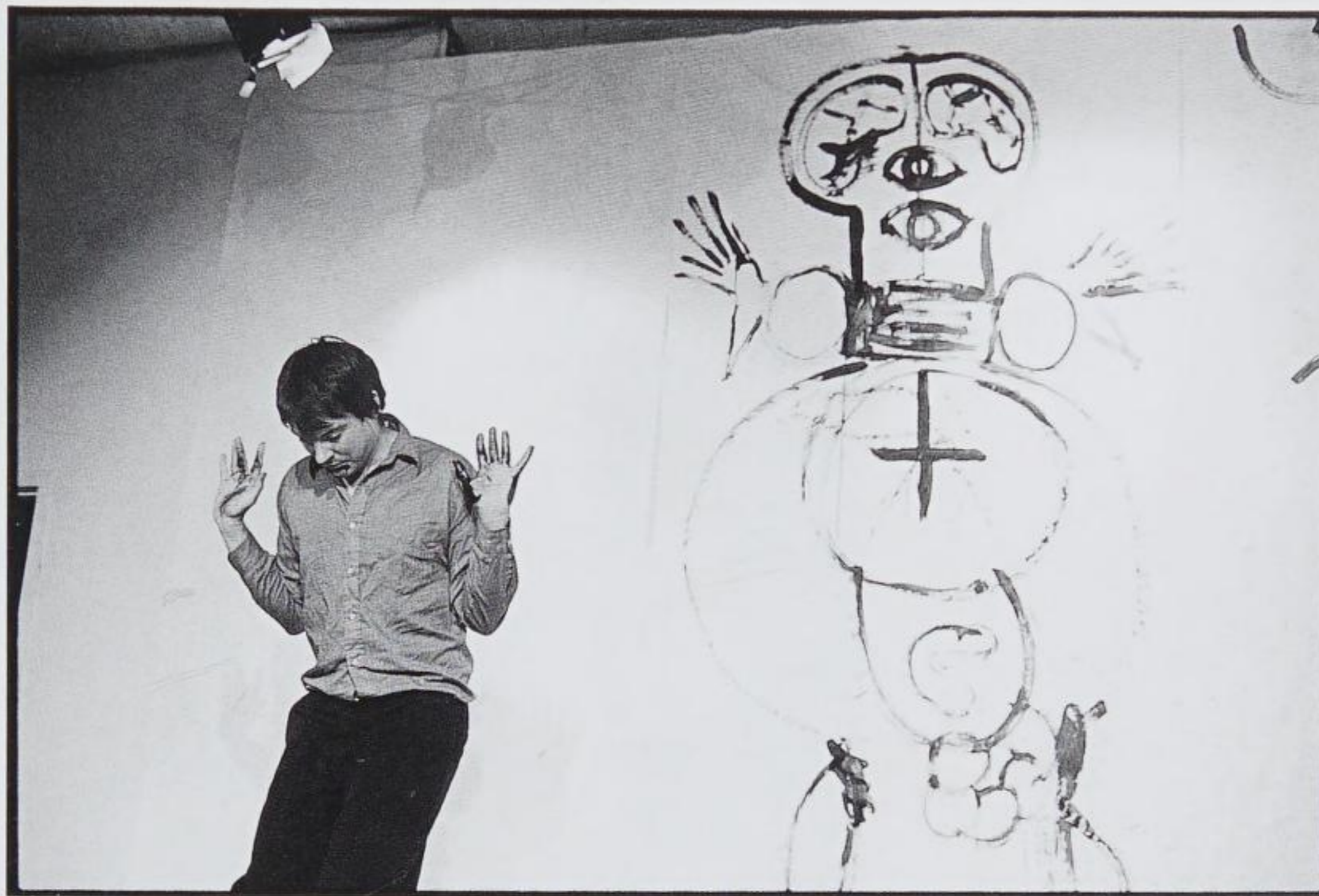
JOE LEWIS AT FASHION MODA IN THE SOUTH BRONX.

Photo: Lisa Kahane. Copyright © 1982 Lisa Kahane, NYC

of performance art and related courses on performance studies into their curricula.

In 1978, the Kitchen added performance to its logo “center for video, music, and dance.” It made a point of presenting the latest performances in tandem with the visual artworks of the young postconceptualists. A small gallery dedicated to the recently arrived media generation was instituted, complementing the large second-floor space, with its narrow columns and black-out curtains. Also included was a unique stepped video viewing room, carpeted so that visitors could sit or lie on it and watch video in a relaxed, lounging mode as they would at home. Between 1978 and 1980, the gallery exhibited Robert Longo, Jack Goldstein, Matt Mullican, Cindy Sherman, David Salle, Thomas Lawson, Troy Brauntuch, and Sherrie Levine (the first solo shows of each of these artists), among others. These artists examined the edge between fine arts and the media effects contained in their work by literally situating their visual art material side-by-side with performances and video screenings, in the gallery, performance, and viewing spaces.

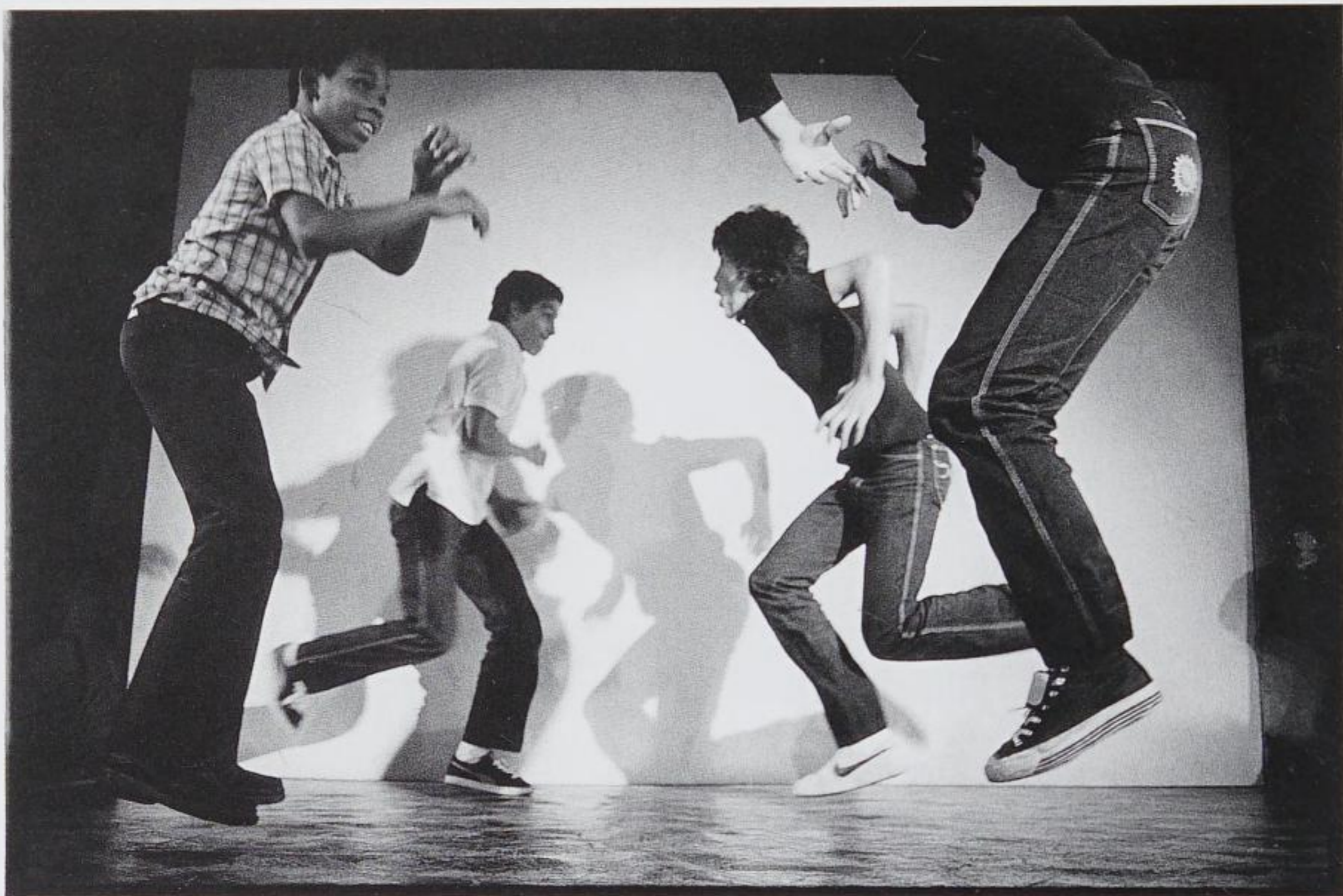
Making direct connections, both conceptual and aesthetic, among all media was built into the Kitchen’s programming. Longo’s early wall reliefs of wrestling boys, in the gallery, and his performance *Boys’ Slow Dance* (1979), with music by Peter Gordon, underlined the link between Longo’s sculpted figures, his drawings of *Men in the Cities*, and the statuesque, dramatically lit, live performers. Goldstein’s *Diver* (1978), a film-loop of a sparkling, almost life-size male figure somersaulting continuously on a brilliant red background, hovered between performance and painting. Cindy Sherman’s *Film Stills*, shown as a group for the first time, illuminated performance as the early source for her staged photographs. Curatorially speaking, this was the first time that a dedicated plan to make evident these links among performance, objects, and video screening was instituted at the Kitchen, or anywhere else for that matter. Such “combination” exhibitions, which reviewed the



MATT MULLICAN, *UNDER HYPNOSIS*, PERFORMANCE AT THE KITCHEN, 1982.

Photo: Paula Court

FAB FIVE FREDDY  
BRAITHWAITE (TOP AND  
BOTTOM) AND ROCK  
STEADY CREW  
PERFORMING AT THE  
KITCHEN, 1981.  
Photos: © Paula Court



output of artists in several disciplines at once, were curated with the same attention to organizing material into coherent groupings as one might find in an exhibition of painting or sculpture in a museum—and with the same purpose of drawing viewers into a broader understanding of individual works, as well as for the revelations that such comparisons provide. The exhibition, performance series, and video installation *Imports* showcased some aspects of a moment in time of 1970s London, with performances by the Kipper Kids and Bruce and Rosie McLean, and the musicians Ann Bean and Judy Nylon, as well as a video installation by Brian Eno. *The New West* focused on West Coast artists (unusual in those days), including performances by Eleanor Antin and Bob and Bob, with music, video, and gallery offerings as well.

For artists of this new generation, the Kitchen's multidisciplinary approach reinforced the media-oriented explorations of their artwork, adding a sense of motion and mediation, even when the artwork was still. It revealed as well how cleverly this group examined the mechanics of spectacle: its repetition of bold images, its obliteration of the backgrounds that transformed such images into solid iconic legends, its use of veils of brilliant light and technicolor to seduce viewers. For this astute group, including the performer Eric Bogosian—who applied similar isolating and framing devices to his acting and developed his own monologue form in the process—and their peers beyond the Kitchen, including intuitive and articulate image makers such as Gretchen Bender, Sarah Charlesworth, Nancy Dwyer, Barbara Ess, Laurie Simmons, Louise Lawler, Beth B, Jenny Holzer, and Barbara Kruger, the space maintained an ongoing critical conversation—about medium and content, about pictures that speak and words that don't (but that function as visual signs instead), and about how their artworks, which explicitly critiqued the media, were nevertheless quickly co-opted by advertisers on Madison Avenue. The Kitchen was a unique platform for such debate and an active reminder that art can and should set serious arguments in motion. Its team of curators—in dance, music, performance, video, and visual arts, most of whom were artists themselves—were in continuous discussion in their determination to provide up-to-the-minute reporting on cultural shifts as they occurred.

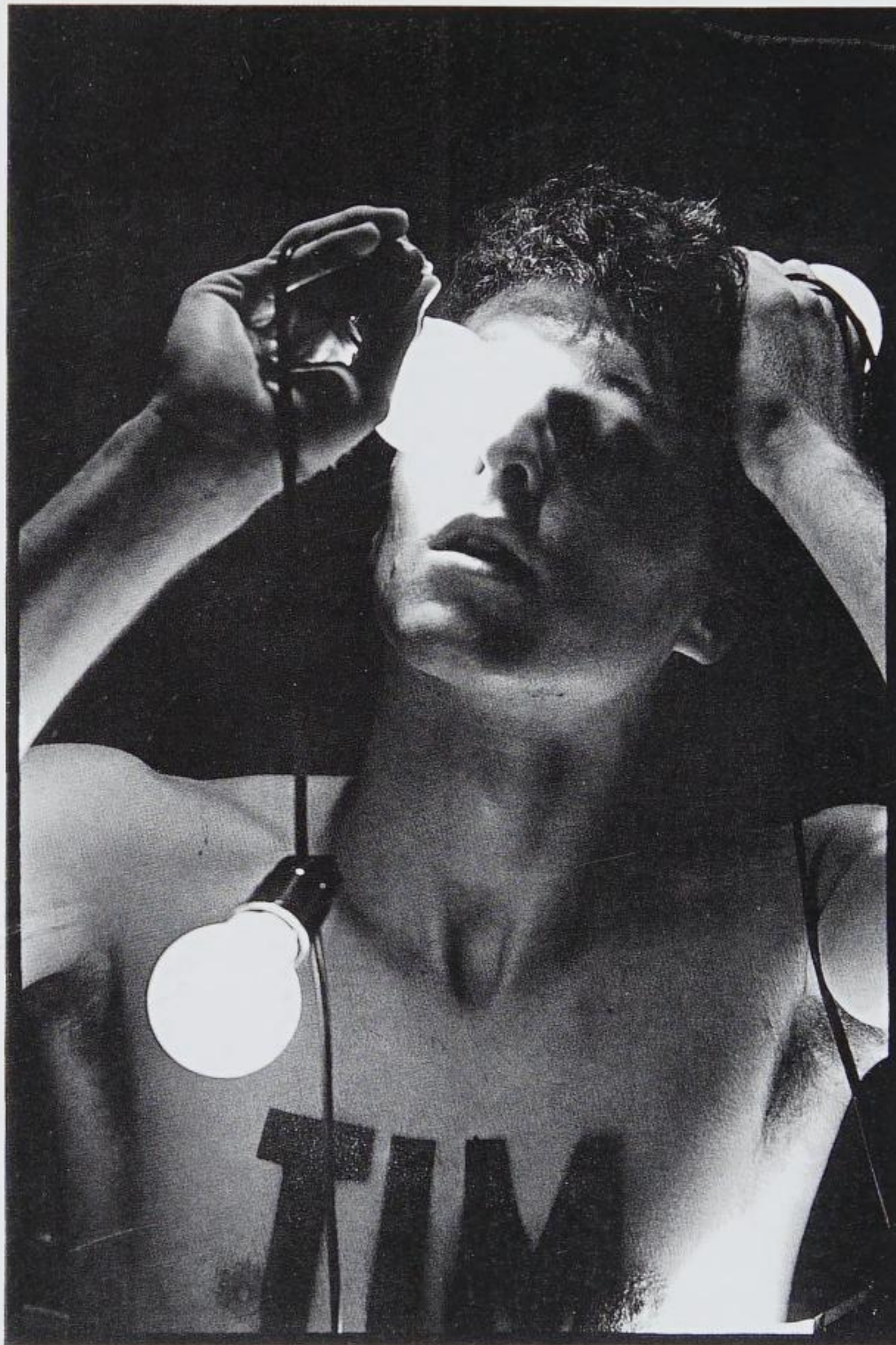
The Kitchen's dedication to all media all the time helped launch waves of new material that shaped the 1980s across disciplines. The choreographers Bill T. Jones, Arnie Zane, Molissa Fenley, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Jane Comfort, Karole Armitage, and Charles Moulton, to name a few, were seen as extending the “high-low” dialogue, as was the music program with its new jazz, serial, rock, and art music by performers as varied as Rhys Chatham, Ned Sublette, Glenn Branca, Blue Gene Tyranny, Sonic Youth, the Contortions, Garrett List, and John Lurie. Films by Amos Poe, Eric Mitchell, or the painter and performer James Nares swung between

narrative styles that referred to French Nouvelle Vague and American TV fare. Any one of the above-named artists was just as likely to be in the audience as to be showing her work at the Kitchen, whether at a benefit at Bonds on Times Square where Afrika Bambaataa manned the turntables, or at the Kitchen when Rock Steady Crew gave its first institutional performance of breakdancing in 1981.

That same year, Laurie Anderson's single "O Superman" topped the British pop charts, breaking the "high-low" barrier in the most public way. By the time she presented *United States* (1983), an eight-hour opus of storytelling, music, and projections of hand-drawn pictures, blown-up photographs, and film fragments onto an opera-sized backdrop at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), other artists were also finding ways to present their work in a much wider context than Downtown. Those able to adjust their material to the dimensions of BAM's opera stage and auditorium graduated from a lengthy, relatively contained incubation in the Downtown scene to the spotlight of an international festival, just as the art world, fueled by the burgeoning economy and troops of upwardly mobile young collectors, exploded into a glamorous and desirable social milieu. BAM's Harvey Lichtenstein provided the visionary energy that propelled to new heights Meredith Monk, Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Bill T. Jones, Molissa Fenley, Ping Chong, David Rousseau, Kathy Acker, Mark Morris, Tim Miller, Richard Foreman, Bob Telson, Lee Breuer, Constance De Jong, and many others. The Next Wave Festival, presented at BAM each fall, was, throughout the 1980s, a procession of majestic productions that represented the culmination of a nearly two-decade maturation process. The miracle was that these artists retained the radical markings of their Downtown origins, even as they filled the seats of a theater complex in Brooklyn.

Ever watchful for the precise location of the latest edge, younger artists in the Next Wave's wake were eager to break new ground, again. Forced by more than a 1,000 percent rent increase to leave the SoHo area, they migrated east, toward Avenues First and Second and A and B, to small storefront bars and clubs—Club 57, Pyramid, WOW Café, 8BC, Chandelier, Limbo Lounge, Darinka—and a new presenting organization, Performance Space 122, in an old public school. Even as groups such as Colab (including Kiki Smith, Jenny Holzer, Walter Robinson, and Stefan Eins) went north to create their vibrant and thoroughly idiosyncratic Times Square Show on Forty-second Street, in 1980, and small galleries opened along the neglected avenues of the Lower East Side, many young artists and performers, among them Ann Magnuson, John Sex, Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, Carmelita Tropicana, Karen Finley, Tom Murrin, Klaus Nomi, Jo Andres, Lydia Lunch, Joey Arias, John Kelly, Penny Arcade, David Wojnarowicz, Lucy Sexton, Laurie Carlos, Holly Hughes, and Huck Sneider, staked out their own performance stages in long,

narrow, and sometimes below-ground, low-ceilinged settings. The thrill of co-opting these late-night, off-the-street venues, which were explicitly not art venues, generated an exuberant performance scene with its own animated cabaret style that parodied popular culture, television, and Borscht-belt comedy, with all the effrontery that knowing New Yorkers could muster. Stealing from a broad swath of flamboyant precedents, from Warhol's Factory to the Velvet Underground, the Beat Poets, Jack Smith, or John Waters, as well as the high-profile partygoers Warhol, Bianca Jagger, or Calvin Klein at Studio 54 or Hurrah's, this burst of new performance displayed the frenetic energy of the Punk conquistadors that they had become: the East Village, a somewhat depressed enclave of low-income apartment houses inhabited mostly by European immigrants for decades, was suddenly a bastion for a new, fun-loving Downtown, albeit somewhat east of center. Various called Trash Performance, New Wave Vaudeville, Pop Performance, East Village Cabaret, New Burlesque, or Performance Fringe, this lively scene grew at an extraordinary pace. A circuit of performance clubs wended its way from one street to the next, within a five- or six-block radius, past the Russian Baths, Polish bread shops, and centers for homeless people. Two, three, and sometimes four acts per night (one club, 8BC, totaled more than six hundred performances in 1983) were typical, and DJs played music or film clips such as *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*, anything with Vic Damone, TV classics such as *Born Wreckless* or *The Terror of Tinytown*, and in-house productions by Ela Troyano such as *Ulua*, starring Jack Smith, between sets. Sometimes performers were given only five minutes to make their mark, by emcees such as David McDermott or Joey Arias, before being yanked off the stage, Gong-Show style, to the accompaniment of yells and whistles from the floor. Wearing rock-glamour-lamé and Rocky-Horror makeup, prosthetic boobs or butts, high heels or high hair, performers and audience were interchangeable in the dimly lit, smoke-filled surroundings. A pervasive atmosphere of high Camp and



TIM MILLER, *POSTWAR*, PERFORMANCE AT THE KITCHEN, 1982. Photo: Paula Court.

*This photograph records Miller performing the first half of Postwar at the Kitchen as a work-in-progress. The following year he premiered the entire piece at Dance Theater Workshop, the choreographers' collective and performance space in Chelsea.*



**FRANKLIN FURNACE** opened in my storefront living loft on Franklin Street in TriBeCa on April 3, 1976, as a bookstore and archive intended to fill a void in the art world: the lack of venues for artists' books. The rent was five hundred dollars a month—a large amount at the time—and my two roommates, who paid their share of the monthly costs, also helped renovate the space. I conceived the idea for Franklin Furnace in the wake of the 1970 *Information* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, when a few years later the museum rejected my offer to provide artists' books—made with photocopiers, stencils, potato prints, and the like—to sell in its bookstore. This kind of art, MoMA's bookstore manager told me, clearly would not be profitable. During its first year, Franklin Furnace was financed from my own personal savings, but the organization soon attracted the attention of and funding from the New York State Council on the Arts and the Visual Arts program at the National Endowment for the Arts, directed by Brian O'Doherty.

Initially titled "Artists' Readings," Franklin Furnace's events immediately morphed into performances, as many artists—such as Martine Aballea, Vito Acconci, Ann Messner, and Michael Smith—were not only making books but also performing and creating installations. Soon Franklin Furnace became a leading venue for artists who viewed publications, performances, street works, and installations—often using film, audio, and video—as a continuum of time-based media to choose from when creating a "piece," as we called these works of conceptual and intermedia art. The "public" for this work, as Laurie Anderson has noted, was "the same 300 people" who went to everything, mainly to see what other artists were up to.

In its first seasons, Franklin Furnace paired well-known and emerging artists for each weekly performance or monthly installation in order to draw audiences. The two, however, sometimes didn't get along. In following years, we held art events on Tuesday and Thursday evenings to enable the artist-staff (composed of Jacki Apple, Franklin Furnace's curator in the early days, Barbara Quinn, its first director of development, and me) to attend performances at the Kitchen, the Clocktower, Just above Midtown, and the Fine Arts Building (where Artists Space and Printed Matter were located) other nights. One of Franklin Furnace's more memorable early performances took place on February 15, 1977. William Wegman and his much-loved dog Man Ray drew a packed house, with the audience spilling out onto the sidewalk, where they watched through the storefront window. Wegman read a passage from Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* but Man Ray—distracted by the crowd—missed his cue twice. Exasperated, Wegman switched over to an impromptu and absurd discourse on donuts as a nutritious, filling snack food. Recorded on video, this performance can be viewed on the Franklin Furnace Archive Web site ([www.franklinfurnace.org](http://www.franklinfurnace.org)).

Before Franklin Furnace, my own art was a solo and largely autobiographical enterprise—as in *De-Formation*, my first performance for New York audiences, which I



DISBAND PERFORMING IN  
*SOUND SHOW* AT P.S.1,  
OCTOBER 21, 1979.

Left to right: Ilona Granet, Ingrid  
Sischy, Donna Henes, Martha  
Wilson, and Diane Torr. Courtesy of  
Martha Wilson

gave in 1975 at the Whitney Museum's Downtown Branch during the *Autogeography* exhibition organized by students in the Whitney Fellowship Program (including the future Exit Art cofounder Jeanette Ingberman). Finally, tired of this self-referential approach, I founded Disband, an all-girl, nonhierarchical, conceptual-art band. Membership was somewhat fluid at first, but included among others Barbara Kruger (who did not stay long, but who contributed a number of songs we continued to perform), Ilona Granet, Donna Henes, Ingrid Sischy, and Diane Torr. From 1978 to 1982, Disband members took various guises, including the members of Ronald Reagan's cabinet; for example, I performed as Lov Story and Alexander M. Plague Jr. We did not play instruments, but we did employ objects in performance—such as Colonel Sanders fried chicken buckets formed into nuclear cooling towers. Disband helped me see the world from other points of view—a crucial step for me on the road to political satire, which became my signature art form.

In those early days at Franklin Furnace, we had no idea we were creating art history, and we sometimes failed to document events. In the case of performances, artists often chose not to document their work on videotape not only because we couldn't afford it, but also because we believed that the presence of the camera would "change the work." Now I am grateful for any scrap of documentation we have from that time.

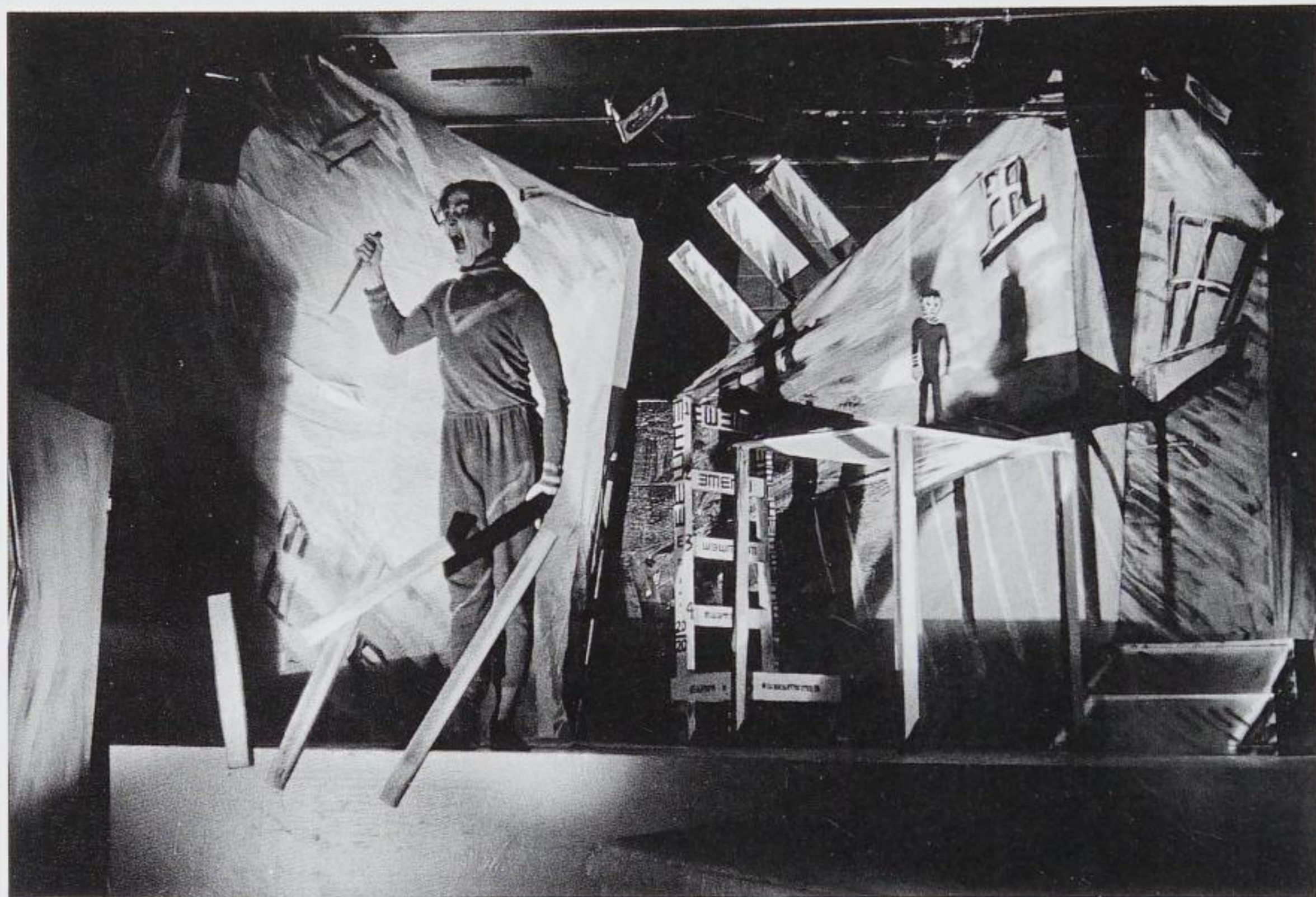
TOP: JOHN KELLY, *DIARY OF A SOMNAMBULIST*, PERFORMANCE AT LIMBO LOUNGE, 1985.

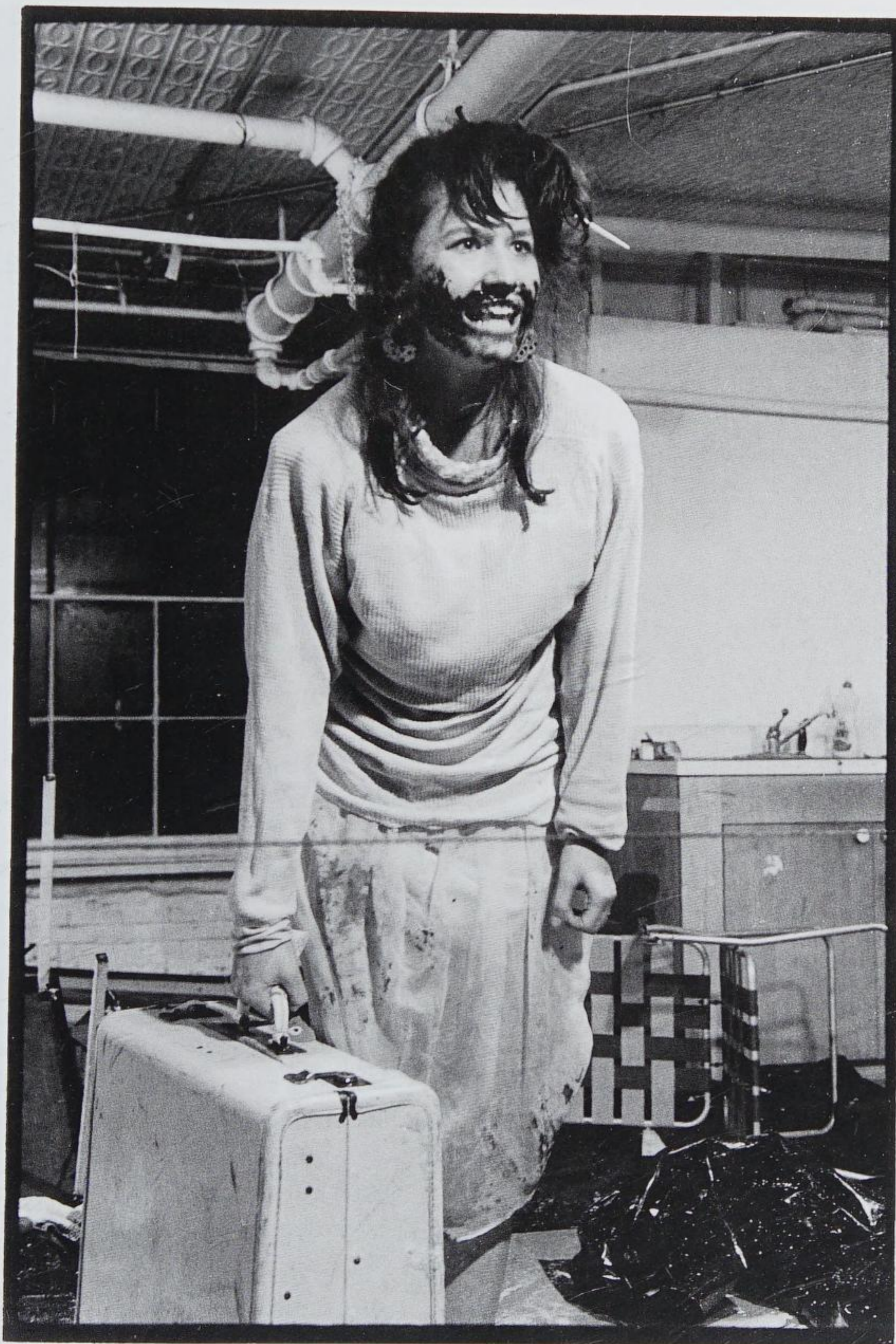
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Photo: © Dona Ann McAdams

BOTTOM: PUBLICITY STILL FOR *CARNIVAL KNOWLEDGE, SECOND COMING*, PERFORMANCE AT FRANKLIN FURNACE, 1984.

Photo: © Dona Ann McAdams.

*Carnival Knowledge*, a feminist performance collective, invited Annie Sprinkle, a porn star and performance artist, and the members of her porn-star support group, Club 90, to participate in their January 1984 event at Franklin Furnace. Photographer Dona Ann McAdams, who shot this publicity still in a Broadway loft, suggested that the participants pose topless with signs identifying them as either "feminist" or "porn star"—but many traded signs in a show of solidarity. This publicity still was widely reproduced, in publications ranging from *Hustler* magazine to the *Village Voice*. The performance itself involved tea and cookies, and sought to remind the audience that sex workers are mothers, daughters, wives, and women—just like their feminist counterparts.





KAREN FINLEY, *I LIKE THE DWARF ON THE TABLE WHEN I GIVE HIM HEAD*, PERFORMANCE AT FRANKLIN FURNACE, NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 1983. Photo: Danuta Otfinowski.

*For her first New York performance, Finley set her narrative in Franklin Furnace's kitchenette and used props such as bottles of wine, a tape recorder, a pink party dress, a can of tuna, and a box of Ivory soap. She ended with chocolate frosting on her face, taking a bubble bath in the suitcase pictured here.*

MAX BLAGG AS "THE NARRATOR" AND ETHYL EICHELBERGER AS "DORA" IN *EGGS ON HORSEBACK* AT PYRAMID, MAY 24, 1983.

Photo: Nan Goldin. Courtesy Max Blagg.

*Max Blagg sent Eichelberger his manuscript Eggs on Horseback in the hope that they would perform it together, but he received no response.*

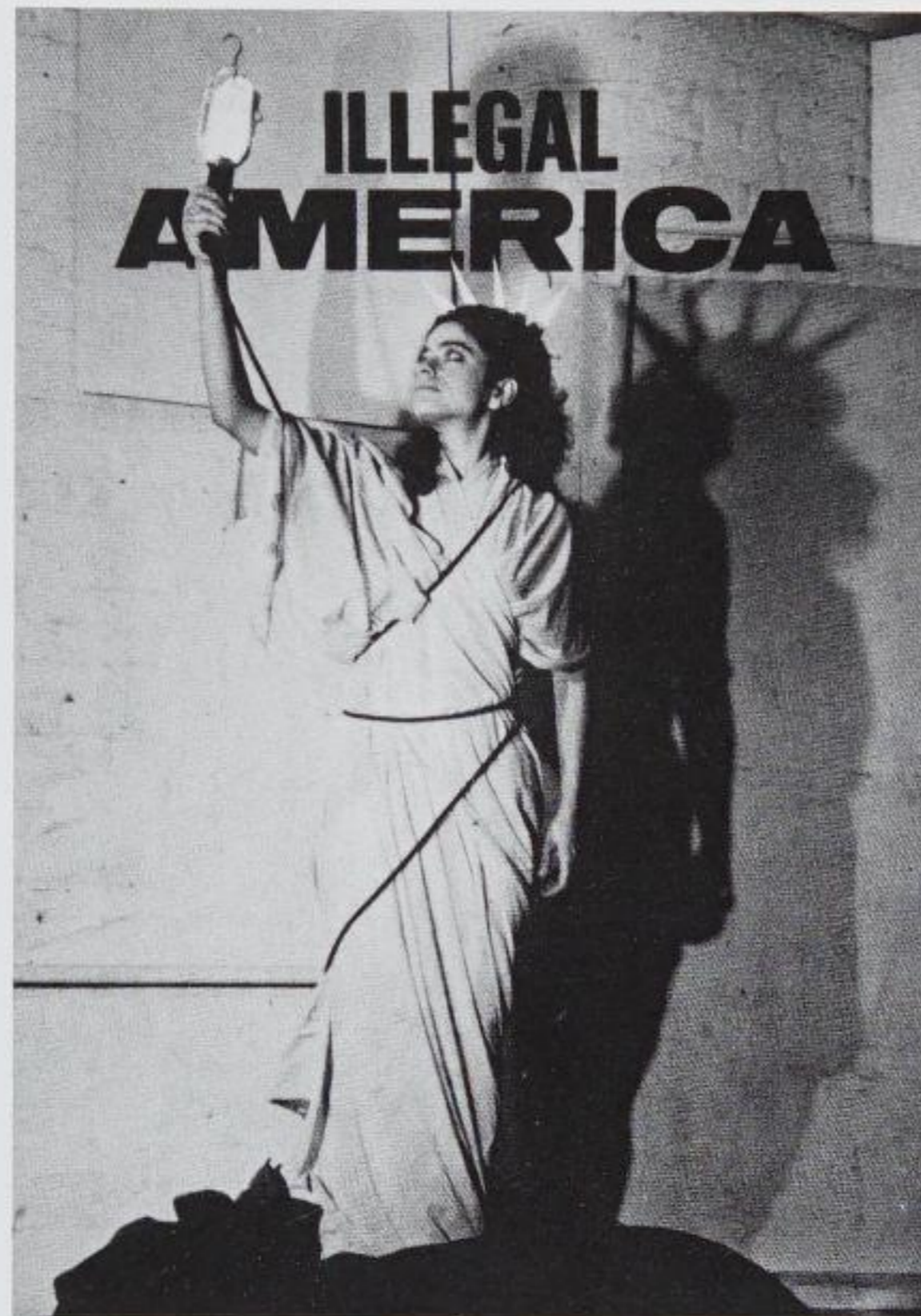
*On the night of the performance, Eichelberger arrived at Pyramid in full "Solo in the Spotlight" Barbie regalia, to Blagg's delight, and joined him onstage for the reading.*

low expectations, supported by flowing alcohol and plenty of recreational drugs, combined to produce a steaming hothouse of creativity.

New performance ideas erupted nightly in this lively environment, with larger-than-life performers such as Ethyl Eichelberger—creating the wondrous world of *Dora* at Pyramid, often including surprise guests such as the poet Max Blagg and the photographer Nan Goldin (who would present an early version of her slide show *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* at the same venue in 1982), and John Kelly introducing one of his many personae, Dagmar Onassis, an opera diva. Former filmmaker John Jesurun invented the "living serial" *Chang in a Void Moon* (1982), which ran for forty weeks with a regular cast of characters (Steve Buscemi, John Kelly, David Cale, Sanghi Wagner, Michael Tighe, and Jeff Buckley), and a year later Kestutis Nakis presented *Titus Andronicus* (1983), a weekly "Elizabethan" extravaganza starring Ann Magnuson. Such robust entertainment kept the late-night crowd entertained into the early hours, while P.S. 122 began the evening at the more regular curtain time of 8 p.m. Many of the same artists played the makeshift stages of the clubs as well as the performance space of the former school, with the latter encouraging lengthier, more developed works than the fast-paced throwaways of the cabaret setting. The monologue, ignited by Bogosian and Spalding Gray in the

late 1970s, as well as by Karen Finley in the mid-1980s, with its emphasis on autobiography, individual identity, and social commentary, would take root as the "house style" at P.S. 122. It would provide an important outlet for an increasing atmosphere of agitation and concern as AIDS began taking hold in the Downtown community and the country at large. It would also serve the voices of newly activist minorities—African American and Latino—who, tired of waiting for the dreams of the civil rights movement to materialize, would bring a powerful multicultural movement to the performance stage.





**FAR LEFT:** "CONTESSA ISABELLA" (RUTH GRAY) AND "THERESA" (HELENA WHITE) IN JOHN JESURUN'S *CHANG IN A VOID MOON*, EPISODE 21, "THE BARBARITIES OF INSULIN," PERFORMANCE AT PYRAMID, FEBRUARY 7, 1983. Photo: Kirk Winslow. Courtesy John Jesurun and Paula Court

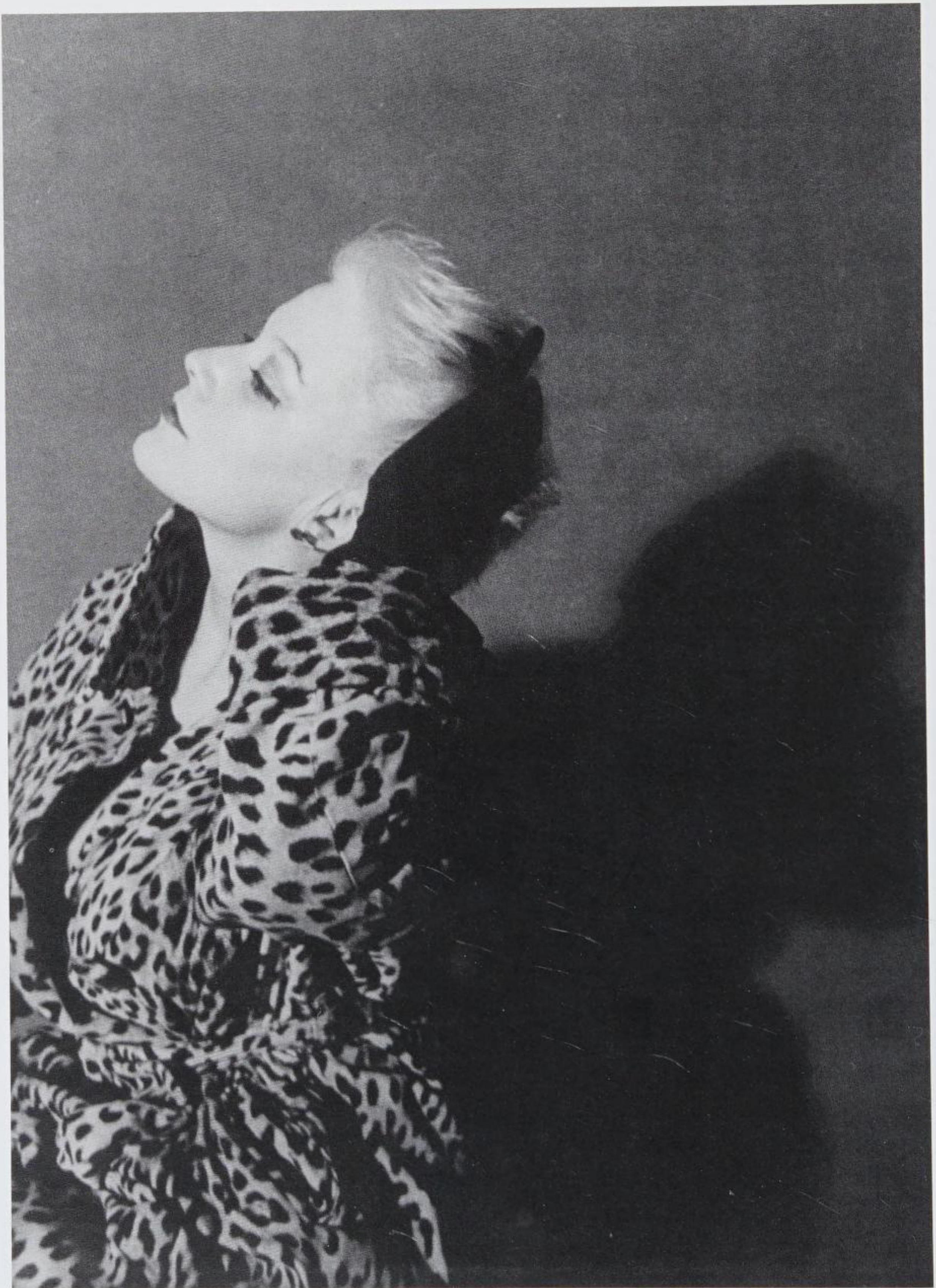
**LEFT:** FLYER FOR *ILLEGAL AMERICA*, GROUP EXHIBITION CURATED BY JEANETTE INGBERMAN AT FRANKLIN FURNACE, 1982. Downtown Flyers Collection, Fales Library.

*The first major exhibition organized by Jeanette Ingberman, one of the founders of Exit Art, Illegal America consisted entirely of works of art involving illegal actions.*

The year 1984 would come and go, and the picture of a society described by George Orwell in 1984—ruled by Big Brother peeping into every nook and cranny of ordinary life through computerized surveillance, tracking systems, and politicians talking in “newspeak”—would take two more decades to materialize. Rather, the lives lived then seem closer to Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, in a country succumbing happily to rule by television and the media presidency of Ronald Reagan, who regularly commanded the airwaves with a close-up of his beaming, heavily made-up face. The second term of Reagan’s presidency would reinforce the shrill voice of the religious right and the power of conservative senators such as Strom Thurmond and Jesse Helms, at the same time as a thriving economy shifted into high gear for three more years. By 1984, Downtown, that forbidding geographic quarter of artistic ferment, had had its day as the source of a radical cultural revolution. Its “look” had been branded and exported Uptown, where it was incorporated into fashion spreads and billboard advertising, and reimported into the new designer store windows in former galleries on West Broadway. The line demarcating Uptown from Downtown, and everything those oppositions implied, had gradually been erased by so much crossing.

JIMMY DESANA, *PATTI  
ASTOR*, c. 1977. Gelatin silver  
print, 20 x 16 in. Courtesy  
Jimmy DeSana Estate.

*In addition to his art  
photography, DeSana shot  
a series of Downtown  
portraits for SoHo Arts  
Weekly. Pictured here is  
the No Wave film star and  
owner of the Fun Gallery,  
Patti Astor.*



# NOT A PART OF ANY WAVE: NO WAVE CINEMA

MATTHEW YOKOBOSKY

**NO WAVE CINEMA** emerged in the late 1970s out of New York City's East Village, in the aftermath of the Punk movement's angst and alienation. Against settings of New York's buildings and bleak interiors, performances were photographed in the harsh black-and-whites and acid colors of the newly introduced Super-8mm sound film.<sup>1</sup> The soundtracks combined sharp dialogue, often reminiscent of Bette Davis's carefully clipped phrases, and No Wave music—a strident form of music that synthesized scraping guitars, jazz-like improvisation, and accelerated vocals. Thematically, No Wave films were equally cutting edge, incorporating aspects of the performance scenes and social issues prominent in the East Village's underground terrain: the idea of role-playing and the themes of law enforcement/investigation and pro-sexuality feminism. By embracing these nontraditional film aesthetics and subjects, often with frank and graphic portrayals, No Wave Cinema became a vanguard movement which altered the course of film history.

No Wave film and, later, video productions incorporated aspects of the documentary, B-movies, and earlier avant-garde film aesthetics. The documentary approach was used to make records of people in theatrical/club performances and to create establishing shots, typically of New York City itself—Forty-second Street, the Mudd Club, the East Village. The use of existing or minimally constructed settings and costumes was a common trait of the low-budget B-movie, one also employed by No Wave filmmakers. For example, in John Lurie's film about space travel, *Men in Orbit* (1978), silver spray-painted television sets and bucket seats represent Mission Control. The inventiveness of the No Wave movement extended also to the photography and editing of the film itself, in ways that recall two earlier avant-garde movements: *Cinéma Descripant*, developed in France in the 1950s,



whose characteristics included rephotography from magazines and television and sound-image discoordination; and Baudelairian Cinema, an American movement of the early 1960s, which cultivated casual filmmaking through improvised acting and lack of editing, resulting in extended film sequences that often exceeded their expected duration.<sup>2</sup>

Though the production aesthetics gave No Wave Cinema its distinct visual appearance and sound, it was the movement's turn toward narrative that redirected the history of avant-garde filmmaking. By the mid-1970s, avant-garde film- and videomaking were focused on the primarily nonfigurative movements of conceptual art, minimalism, and Structural Film, as centered around the activities of Anthology Film Archives—an organization which charted the evolution of film primarily in terms of abstraction and the crafts of cinematography and editing, as distinct from commercial filmmaking.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, the No Wave filmmakers, who

"FASHION" THEME PARTY AT  
AREA, NOVEMBER 1984.

Photo: Paula Court



were children of the 1950s and the first generation of artists to grow up with television, viewed film as the perfect medium to tell the stories that were not told in mainstream cinema—stories perhaps too personal, too real, too honest for the general public. These filmmakers separated themselves from their contemporaries by medium (Super-8mm sound film) and subject, but also through new means of exhibition. Instead of screening their films in theaters, these works were primarily shown between band performances or as part of film programs in nightclubs, lofts, or in alternative spaces—usually a place rented by artists solely for the purpose of exhibiting their work outside the traditional gallery or theater systems.<sup>4</sup> Because they could exhibit their films in an uncensored, supportive environment, these filmmakers were free to produce works that did not follow the usual censorship of language, sexuality, and violence normally enforced by exhibitors.

The participants in the No Wave Cinema movement themselves were mostly Americans and transplanted Europeans who arrived in New York with backgrounds in music, art history, film, and performance. In the later 1970s, the East Village, with its low-rent apartments and thriving Downtown club scene (Club 57, the Mudd Club, Max's Kansas City), provided the perfect environment for these newly arrived, emerging artists. At that moment, the most vital form of art making in the East Village was No Wave music, a highly theatrical, performance-based approach to music, characterized by rough and often dissonant sounds.<sup>5</sup> Musicians experimented with the way instruments could be played, while making sounds which expanded the range of sounds traditionally associated with instruments. It was within this experimental musical environment and club culture that the collaborative structure of the East Village filmmaking scene developed.

The initial collaborative projects were simple—musicians provided soundtracks for sculptures and photographs, filmmakers created works to be projected during concerts. The projects then expanded to the creation of films involving people from all disciplines of art making. Big City Bohemia qua production studio. Artists began to experiment with new media. Musicians directed (Gordon Stevenson, John Lurie). Directors created music: Vivienne Dick played in the band Beirut Slump; James Nares and Jim Jarmusch played in the Del-Byzanteens; Beth B and

CLUB 57  
57 St. Marks Place

presents

Sunday, March 30

Marlene Dietrich

in  
Fritz Lang's  
RANCHO NOTORIOUS  
6:00 + 10:00

plus—

Joan Crawford

in  
Nicholas Ray's  
JOHNNY GUITAR  
8:00 + 12:00

both films in Technicolor

Film Admission: \$3.50 | \$2.50 for 57 Members

FLYER FOR RANCHO NOTORIOUS (1952) AND JOHNNY GUITAR (1954), MOVIE SCREENING AT CLUB 57, 1980. April Palmieri Papers, Fales Library.

Before the advent of video rental, revival houses and the occasional late-night TV broadcast were among the few places to see old movies. To fill the gap, Club 57 developed several screening series featuring films with either particular artistic merit or noted Camp value.

Used as a medium for personal expression by artists since the 1940's the 8 millimeter format is finally getting the recognition it deserves. Here are eight films produced over the past two years that demonstrate Super 8 as super cinema.

**THE OFFENDERS** by Beth B and Scott B (1979 90 min.) The daughter of a wealthy Medical Examiner is kidnapped by a revolutionary group and ends up as the leader of a female gang.

**THE TRAP DOOR** by Beth B and Scott B (1979 70 min.) The little man is victim and the world is an alien in an inexplicable nightmare.

**MENAGE** by Betsy Sussler (1981 75 min.) The story of a loving couple who committed three of the most grisley murders in English history.

**GHOST SISTERS** by Adam Brooks (1981 58 min.) Two women meet by chance and switch lives. A tale of confused love and doomed identity

**OUT OF HAND** by Ericka Beckman (1980 30 min.) This film is an example of just how limitless the Super 8 medium can be. Produced on a \$800 budget, it offers beautifully complex animation and superior art direction.

**BLACK BOX** by Beth B and Scott B (1978 25 min.) An innocent youth is taken to a torture chamber. With Lydia Lunch and Bob Mason.

**G-MAN** by Beth B and Scott B (1978 40 min.) An exploration of social schizophrenia in which terrorists consult their mothers before planting bombs. With Bill Rice and Marcia Resnick.

**LETTERS TO DAD** by Beth B and Scott B (1979 15 min.) A litany of letters written to Jim Jones read by a cast of artists and musicians. With Arto Lindsay and Pat Place.

## SUPER 8 SERIES

144 Bleecker Street • NYC • 674-2560

Agee  
ROOM

FLYER FOR THE SUPER-8 SERIES AT AGE E ROOM, c. 1981. Downtown Flyers Collection, Fales Library.

*Many Downtown artists used affordable and readily available Super-8mm film to shoot their movies. The Agee Room was one of a handful of Downtown venues featuring these new films.*

Scott B composed the soundtrack music for their own films. Musicians acted (Lydia Lunch, Lurie, Stevenson), sculptors, painters, actors, and writers directed (Tom Otterness, James Nares, Eric Mitchell, Manuel De Landa). And except for a few who had studied filmmaking (Kathryn Bigelow, Jim Jarmusch), it was a new venture for almost everyone. They taught each other how to use the equipment or simply learned by trial and error. It was through this learning process that film, with its capability to record performance, multiple locations, text, and music all within one medium, emerged as a dominant medium of the East Village art scene in the 1970s and '80s.

**ONE OF THE FIRST SHOWCASES** for the emerging No Wave Cinema was an alternative space aptly named New Cinema. The New Cinema began in 1978, when a group of artists and arts professionals formed Colab (Collaborative Projects, Inc.) as a means to exhibit art in an uncurated, though thematic, form.<sup>6</sup> New Cinema, one of Colab's first projects, was organized by three of its members: Becky Johnston, Eric Mitchell, and James Nares. Housed in a former Polish social club on St. Marks Place (East Eighth Street), New Cinema featured some of the first works pro-

duced by the No Wave Cinema movement: Mitchell's own *Kidnapped* (1978), John Lurie's *Men in Orbit* (1978), and Vivienne Dick's *She Had Her Gun All Ready* (1978). But in addition to its specialized programming, New Cinema was also unique in its presentation of works, for the films were transferred to videotape before being projected. Because Super-8mm sound film was marketed as a positive film, like 35mm slide film, duplicate film prints were required for repeated screenings. This normally entailed making a direct positive (which often resulted in a soft image) or an internegative and a print (which was expensive). On the other hand, transferring the film to videotape preserved the original from scratches and wear, the cost



was nominal, and since Super-8mm film and video have the same proportions (the horizontal borders of the frames were both 1:33 times larger than the vertical sides of the image), no borders of the image were trimmed. The screenings at the New Cinema were a success, not only for their form and content, but equally for their bold repudiation of the accepted distinction between film and video—the latter medium long viewed by film advocates as inferior.

Also in 1978, Colab sponsored a cable television series titled *All Color News*, which featured videotapes produced by its members. Cable television companies in New York offered channels designated as public access—channels that could be leased for specific time slots by the public in order to televise self-made television productions. *All Color News* included social issue documentaries by artists such as Charlie Ahearn, Beth B and Scott B, and Tom Otterness, covering such diverse

NO WAVE FILMMAKERS  
BETH B AND SCOTT B, 1982.  
Photo: Paula Court

subjects as subway overcrowding and the sanitary conditions of restaurants in Chinatown.<sup>7</sup> The Bs' *NYPD Arson and Explosions Squad vs. FALN* contribution to *All Color News* juxtaposes an interview about terrorism with Inspector Robert J. Howe, commanding officer of the Arson and Explosion Squad of the NYPD, with a collective statement by the Puerto Rican nationalist movement, which had set off bombs in New York in retaliation for the CIA's involvement in Puerto Rican affairs. The combination of the documentary interview in conjunction with narrative footage would become a trademark of the Bs' oeuvre, as would the continued interest in the themes of law enforcement and investigation. In their film *G-Man* (1978), G-man Max Karl, as portrayed by painter Bill Rice, leads a double life, that of an FBI-style agent and of a sexual submissive with an affinity for transvestitism and worshiping a dominatrix. The antithesis of his work ethic, his submissive behavior is perhaps what balances his work life—unless one serves, one cannot understand domination. This fictional footage was then combined with documentary footage. In an early scene, footage of an airplane explosion was rephotographed from a television image and followed by images of undetonated homemade bombs—bombs that could be produced with materials available in any home: bottles, wire, clocks, etc. This scene is accompanied by a squealing guitar and synthesizer soundtrack that accentuates the insidious nature of the devices. The prolonged static meditation on bombs allows viewers to question how the bombs are made and conclude that they too could perhaps build such things. Sound-image discoordination, a frequent device in works of *Cinéma Descrépant*, often heightens filmic language and thus its results.

*G-Man*, one of the primary works of No Wave Cinema, encapsulates many of the primary characteristics of the movement—acid color, No Wave music, and documentary footage—while simultaneously negotiating the three, parallel No Wave themes of role-playing, law enforcement, and pro-sexuality feminism. And like the Bs' later film *The Offenders*, it was screened between band performances at Max's Kansas City.

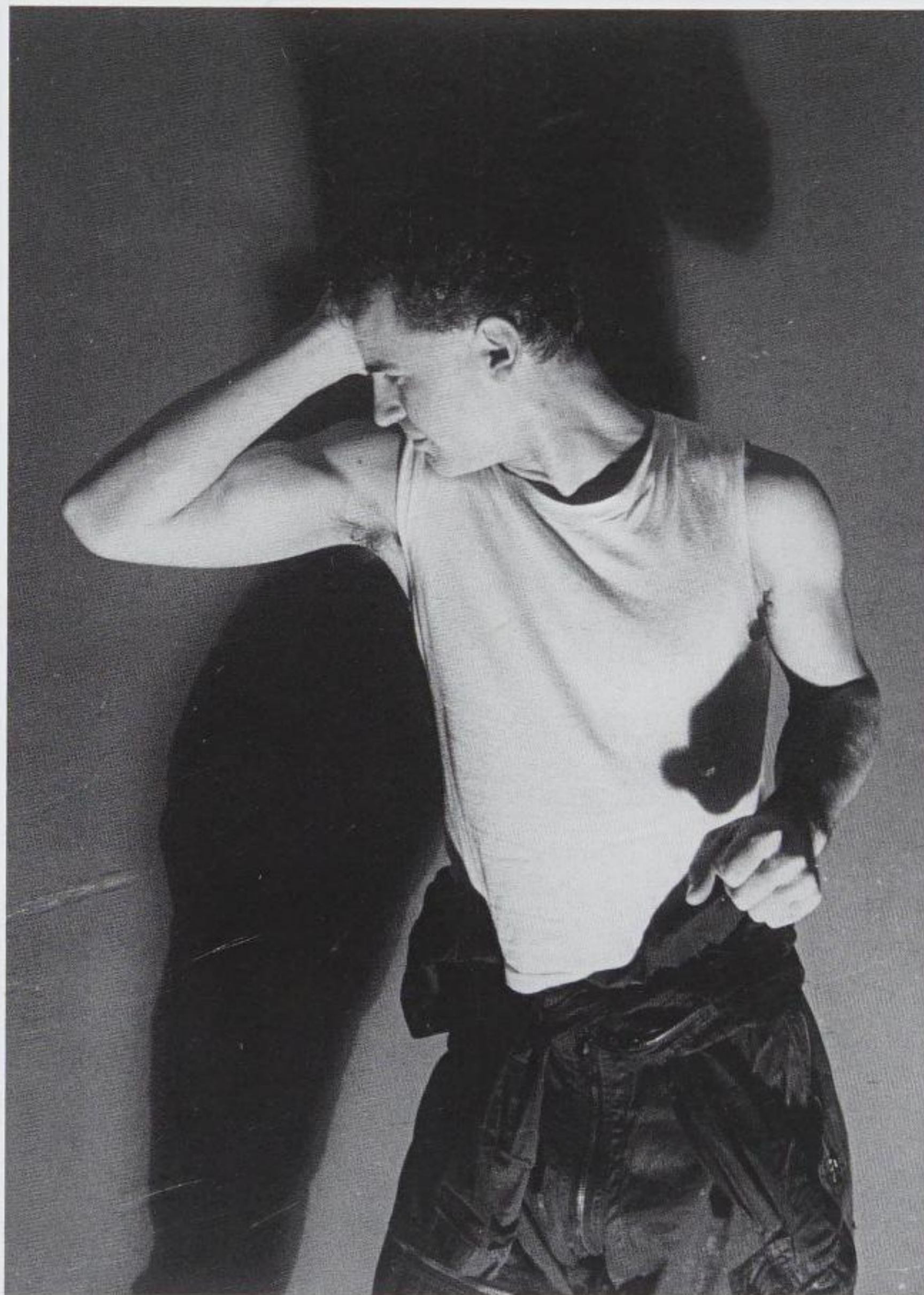
Many of the early film/tapes<sup>8</sup> balanced all aspects of the No Wave aesthetic. Some, however, emphasized just one theme, choosing subjects concerned either with documentary, law enforcement/investigation, role-playing, or pro-sexuality feminism. As these themes developed between the years 1978 and 1987, the filmmakers' voices became more articulate, while retaining the audio and visual textures of the movement.

The documentaries produced during this time provide us with a record of brief moments in the lives of the East Village habitués. In Nan Goldin's 35mm color slide and audio performances, Michael McClard's Super-8mm sound films, and Paul Tschinkel's videotapes, the original spirit and vitality of the East Village is

preserved. Goldin's relationships both with her lovers and friends (*The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, 1980–present) as accompanied by a score of period and contemporary music (including the Del-Byzanteens' remake of Holland-Dozier's "My World Is Empty") become a testament to the vitality of living and life's equally devastating tragedies. The words of each song guided the categorization of the slides and propelled the narrative by interrelating slides as they were projected during a given song.

The actors and actresses who were the subjects of No Wave documentary and narrative films were frequently friends or acquaintances of the filmmakers—musicians, artists, or performers whose personalities or physical appearances conveyed qualities one often associates with great actors and actresses: charisma, dynamism, character, attractiveness, invention. Patti Astor, Karen Finley, Rosemary Hochschild, Lydia Lunch, John Lurie, Ann Magnuson, Eric Mitchell, Cookie Mueller, David McDermott, Bill Rice, Ron Vawter, and Jack Smith were the predominant "stars" during these years. The performers' strengths as personalities, along with the natural talents and creativity they brought to performing, produced a genuineness that increased the realism of the film/tape collaborations, producing a form of neo-realism or role-playing. Bill Rice's mature and defined appearance in *G-Man*, for example, mirrored that of an FBI-type investigator, adding realism to Rice's feature role.

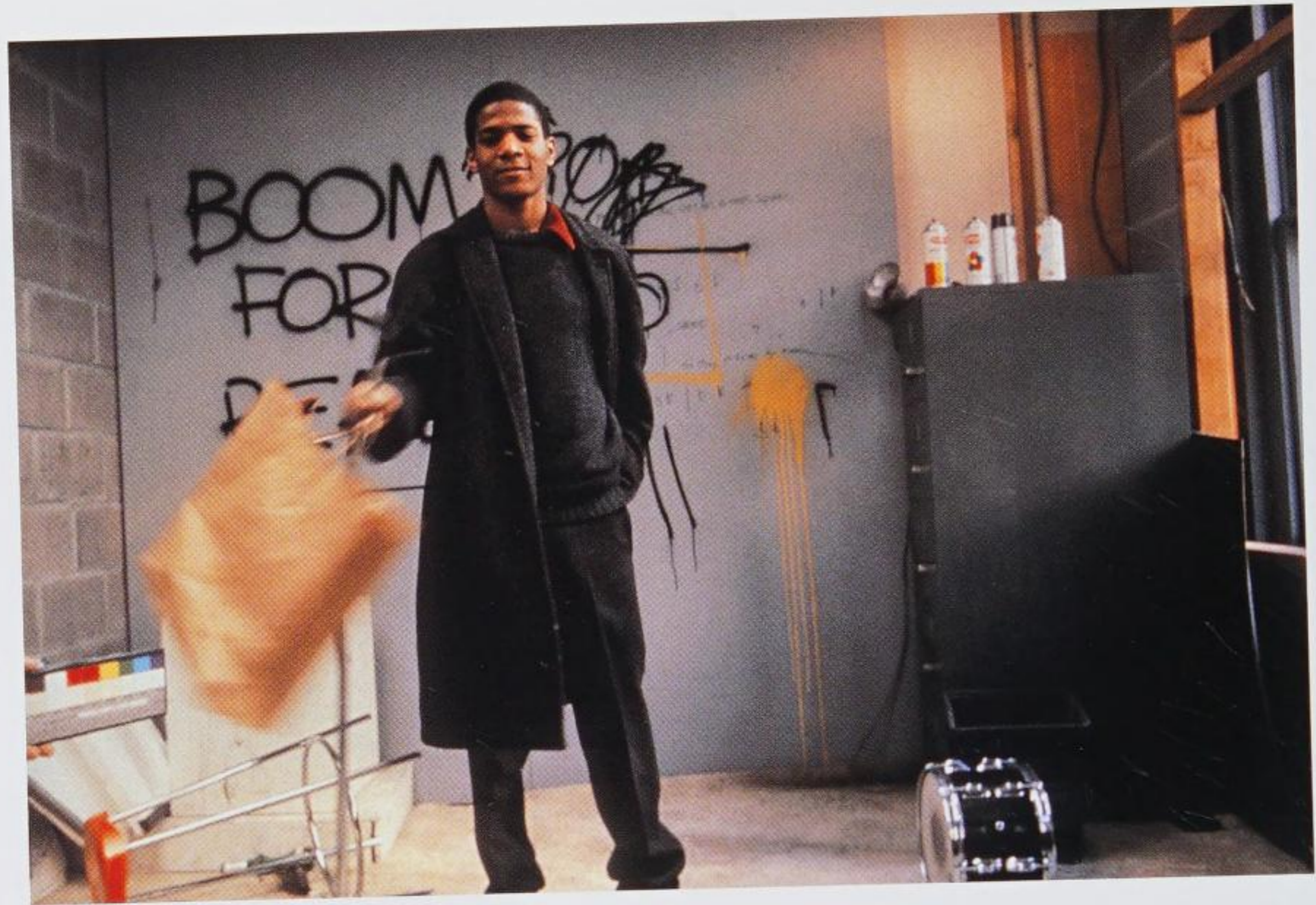
Employing stars of the East Village, the filmmakers often developed films that harmonized with or evolved from the performers' personalities and interests. In Tom Rubnitz and Ann Magnuson's *Made for TV* (1985), Magnuson, who portrayed many characters at performance events she organized at Club 57, transforms herself into dozens of characters, as if a modern Lon Chaney. Edited to resemble channel surfing on cable television, every channel features Magnuson in a different program, ranging from a horror movie ("Bill, is that you?") to a music video parody



JIMMY DESANA, *ERIC MITCHELL*, 1977. Gelatin silver print, 20 x 16 in. Courtesy Jimmy DeSana Estate.

*Eric Mitchell is an actor, director, producer, and screenwriter. His best-known film is the No Wave classic Underground U.S.A. (1980).*

JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT  
STARRING IN THE FILM *NEW  
YORK BEAT (DOWNTOWN  
81)*, 1981. Artwork Copyright ©  
1981, Estate of Jean-Michel  
Basquiat, used by permission, all  
rights reserved. Photos: Edo  
Bertoglio, copyright © New York  
Beat Films L.L.C., 2000. Courtesy  
Zeitgeist Films Ltd.





featuring Lina Hâgandâzovich—a conflation of Post-Punk singers Lene Lovich and Nina Hagen. In Eric Mitchell's *Underground U.S.A.* (1980), Patti Astor, who starred in countless No Wave films, portrays Vicky, an aging actress whose career has ended, but who still perceives herself as a young star; as such, she befriends a young hustler whom she misleadingly perceives as a romantic involvement. With cinematography by Tom DiCillo and sound by Jim Jarmusch, *Underground U.S.A.* is reminiscent of *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) and *Heat* (Paul Morrissey, director; Andy Warhol, producer; 1972)—both of which focused on the blur between acting in life and acting on the screen. In homage to these earlier films, *Underground U.S.A.* acknowledges both the momentary success one can achieve as an actress through physical appearance and personality in movies and the adjustments an actress must make to be a part of the real world. Set against the backdrop of the Mudd Club and the East Village Gallery scene (Astor was the proprietor of the Fun Gallery, the first gallery to exhibit Basquiat, Haring, and Scharf), the film depicts a sentiment perhaps too near the reality of the momentary success many performers experienced as a result of the No Wave movement itself.



**A LARGE NUMBER OF WOMEN** became centrally and successfully involved in No Wave Cinema. Through their embrace of pro-sexuality feminism, they positioned sexuality as a positive characteristic of women, as opposed to the doctrinaire stance of earlier feminists. In Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls* (1986), filmed in the saturated colors of Times Square, working women (prostitutes) are painted as women who have chosen sex work as a viable career option. These were not the working women of yesterday's Hollywood, who had hearts of gold but were typically killed, abused, or in the employ of a pimp. Similarly, in Richard Kern's *Fingered* (1986), filmed in Super-8mm and transferred to and edited on videotape, Lydia Lunch, former lead singer of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, is featured as a telephone sex operator. Lunch, who co-wrote the script with Kern, based the dialogue on her own sexual fantasies ("I can only put mommy on after you've given me your credit card number and expiration date. You know it takes money to talk to mommy"). Kern and Lunch use explicit language and graphic representation as a means to illustrate a woman's sexual command while she openly engages in unexpected sexual roles.

Due to the dominant position of women, men in these films often become subordinate characters. The man as an impotent victim of the city, its laws, government, and businesses conversely became a central character during the last years of No Wave Cinema. In *King Blank* (1983), written by Michael Oblowitz and Rosemary Hochschild with Barbara Kruger, Ron Vawter of the Wooster Group portrays Blank. He ekes out an existence at the Howard Johnson motel near Kennedy Airport from the money his wife, Rose (Hochschild), earns as a go-go dancer. While she's at work, he spends his time pursuing other women and acting out fantasies with blow-up dolls while watching Super-8mm porn films. By the film's black-and-white end, Rose chooses revenge and shoots Blank dead. Although this violence appears justified, routine and unexpected violence is common in the city, though uncommon as a theme for an avant-garde film at the time. Nick Zedd's *Police State* (1987) takes violence to an extreme, as Zedd is arrested in the afternoon by a policeman (Willoughby Sharpe) without having committed a crime. At the police station, he is abused by the officers in a maddening game of twisted language and lies, an analogy to the bureaucratic torment government can inflict on the individual.

**THE EVENTUAL DECLINE** of the No Wave movement was rooted in the economics of East Village properties and Super-8mm filmmaking. The \$300 rents rose as the East Village became an important arts center during the mid-1980s, and the \$6.50 rolls of Super-8mm sound film simply became scarce as film companies began to reduce the product's availability and processing. As East Villagers began to

move out of the city, the community grew apart. Signs of its collapse started to show as early as 1982, when many of the No Wave bands broke up, though their members continued to pursue musical careers. This splintering echoed the transition that took place in No Wave filmmaking during the early 1980s: films at the beginning of the movement united many themes and modes of production design, but the later films followed narrower thematic paths.

No Wave Cinema's blend of documentary realism (the result of location shooting) and fictional narrative enabled filmmakers to readdress traditional genres of cinema during the movement's ten-year history: the period film, the detective drama, the woman's film, and the documentary. This approach also enhanced the significance of sexuality and violence. No Wave Cinema's successful harmony of performances, music, and scripts, along with its aesthetic, treatment of genres, and merging of film and video into one interrelated form, resulted in a distinct and ground-breaking movement in the history of film and video. It was, moreover, a movement nourished by the unrestricted culture of the East Village during those years. It was this environment that both inspired the works and allowed the filmmakers to develop new voices within the cinematic arts. Their investigations and articulations now stand as precursors of today's highly publicized "independent" film movement.

## NOTES

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In this first exhibition [*No Wave Cinema, 1978–87*] to fully explore the No Wave Cinema movement, I am indebted to the filmmakers and videomakers who answered many questions and shared their well-preserved knowledge of the period. I would also like to thank those individuals and organizations who provided invaluable and detailed information: Alan Moore, Patti Astor, Kirsten Bates, Jim C., Michael Carter, Diego Cortez, Johanna Heer, Rosemary Hochschild, Majka Lamprecht, London Filmmakers Coop, Lydia Lunch, Glenn O'Brien, Rafik, Rene Ricard, Bill Rice, Jack Sargeant, Louise Smith, Betsy Sussler, Toni Treadway, Jack Waters, and Christopher Wool.

1. Super-8mm sound film was introduced in 1973. Its magnetic sound-strip allowed audio to be recorded either simultaneously during filming or following the film's development, from an audiotape or record, for example.
2. For an in-depth discussion of *Cinéma Descrépant*, see Thomas Y. Levin, "Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord," in Elisabeth Sussman, ed., *On the Passage of a*

*Few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International, 1957–1972*, exhibition catalogue (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1989), 72–123. For Baudelairian Cinema, see Carel Rowe, *The Baudelairian Cinema* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1982).

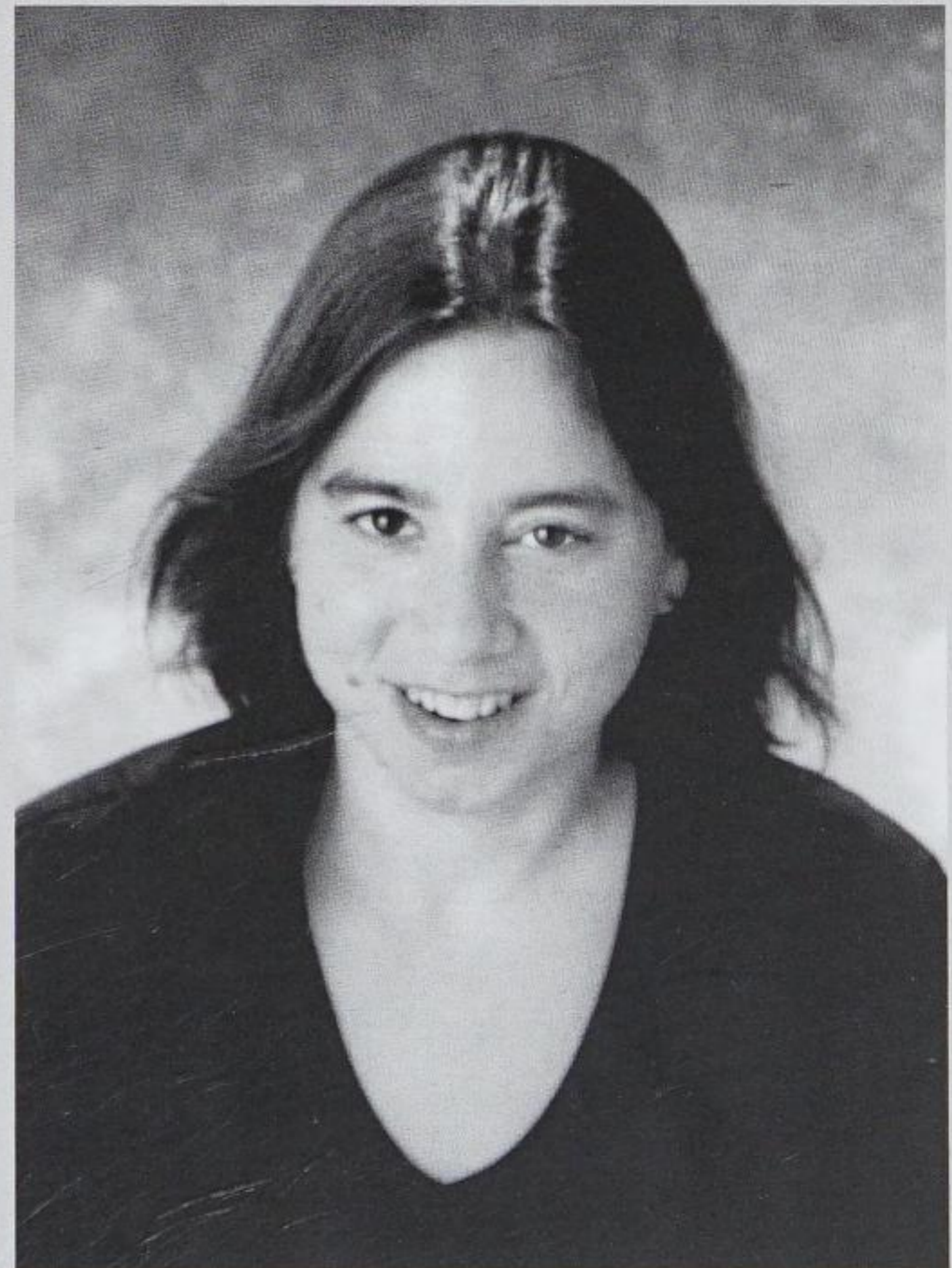
3. For Anthology Film Archives and the establishment of its repertory film library, the Essential Cinema, see P. Adams Sitney, ed., *The Essential Cinema: Essays on the Films in the Collection of Anthology Film Archives*, vol. 1 (New York: Anthology Film Archives and New York University Press, 1975).
4. An important alternative space was the OP Screening Room. It began as the U-P collaborative film group in 1967. Between 1979 and 1984, it operated as the OP Screening Room, under the direction of Rafik (Rafic Azzouny). During that five-year period, screenings were held by members of Colab (Beth B and Scott B, Vivienne Dick), as well as Nan Goldin, Amos Poe, and Nick Zedd. Rafik charged fifteen dollars to use the space, and the filmmaker kept that evening's receipts and paid for the advertising. Screenings were held on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. Conversation with Rafik, New York, July 7, 1995.
5. The principal bands of the No Wave music movement included the Contortions (Adele Bertei, James Chance, Don Christensen, Jody Harris, Pat Place, and George Scott III), DNA (Robin Crutchfield, Ikue Ile, and Arto Lindsay), Mars (Nancy Arlen, China Burg, Sumner Crane, and Mark Cunningham), and Teenage Jesus and the Jerks (Bradley Field, Lydia Lunch, Gordon Stevenson). These bands were all featured on the album *No New York*, produced by the influential British producer Brian Eno. Of equal importance was John Lurie and the Lounge Lizards.
6. Colab became most noted for its group exhibitions held in alternative spaces. Among the exhibitions were the *Real Estate Show*, shown in an abandoned Lower East Side building, and the *Times Square Show*, housed in a four-story former bus depot and massage parlor at the corner of Seventh Avenue and Forty-first Street. The *Times Square Show* featured a film, video, and slide exhibition organized by Beth B and Scott B, which included works by Charlie Ahearn, the Bs, Nan Goldin, Jim Jarmusch, James Nares, Michael Oblowitz, and Gordon Stevenson, and is the subject of Matthew Geller's videotape of the same title (1980; self-distributed). For information on Colab, see *Landslides and A More Store*, exhibition brochure (Philadelphia: Moore College of Art, 1985).
7. It should be noted that while Colab produced *All Color News* for cable broadcast, most artists did not have access to cable television during the late 1970s. Many people would visit bars or clubs to watch the programs.
8. The term *film/tape* has been coined by Beth B to denote the interrelationship between film and videotape production.

**I WAS BORN IN 1958** on Tenth Street and University Place. I attended Hunter High School, a public school for smart girls. I fell in love and began a passionate, loving relationship with a female classmate. We wandered Christopher Street together, going to the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop, with dapper Blue Lunden behind the counter. They had a shelf of mimeographed articles like “The Woman Identified Woman” and a shelf of porn novels like *Cycle Suck*. There I bought my first lesbian book, *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*. I was working as assistant to lighting designer Dennis Parichy at Circle Rep on Sheridan Square, right next door to the Dutchess lesbian bar: blacked-out windows, Israeli mafia, male bouncer. My friend Jenny Glasgow took me to a play by her minister, Al Carmines, called *The Faggot* at the Truck and Warehouse on East Fourth Street. It starred David Summers as the New Boy in Town. I was working on a play at Circle starring Brad Douriff and directed by Lanford Wilson. David walked in looking for an audition, but the Circle guys looked down on the Judson fags. Later David founded the People with AIDS coalition.

Jenny also took me to a gay pride rally in Washington Square Park. My lover was afraid of disappointing her Holocaust-survivor parents and stayed home in Queens. At the rally, Bette Midler sang “You’ve Got to Have Friends,” then Sylvia Rivera spoke for Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. I remember her saying “I’ve been raped” in a deep, gravelly voice. Rose Jordon got on stage and said that street queens were imitating a fake idea of femininity that had oppressed women for years. Everyone got upset and then Vito Russo tried to make peace.

In 1979 I dropped out of school, went to Africa for six months, and then returned to live on East Seventh Street between Avenues C and D (Coke and Dope). The East Village was filled with three generations of lesbians. There were a lot of dykes who had been kicked out of where they were from, had no money, and were important to no one but each other. We had a club called Medusa’s Revenge at 10 Bleecker Street, run by Ana Mario Simo; a butch/femme bar on Delancey called Chaps and Rusty’s; Bonnie and Clyde’s on Fourth Street (upstairs was a white restaurant and downstairs was a Black and Latino bar); La Femme on West Fourth Street, with male bouncers who walked back and forth across the dance floor; Paula’s on Greenwich, with the pool table; Ariel’s on West Sixteenth, which served free food on Sunday afternoons; plus Mother Courage, a feminist restaurant in the West Village. There was the St. Mark’s Women’s Health Collective, a free clinic for lesbians who could not get decent health care anywhere else. There was *Womanews*, the much-read and much-debated newspaper that I started working for in 1979.

There are many divisions in Downtown life, but the one that was about to slap me in the face was that between the people who grew up here or had nowhere else to go and the people who came to the Village from the rest of America to “make it.” We had different values, profiles, modes of behavior. In 1979, they were just stepping off the bus and we were all about to meet. Sometimes we looked alike, but we were never the same again.



SARAH SCHULMAN, 2000. Photo: Michael Wakefield



NAN GOLDIN, *COOKIE AT  
TIN PAN ALLEY, NYC, 1983.*

Cibachrome print, 30 x 40 in.  
Courtesy the artist and Matthew  
Marks Gallery, New York

# WRITING DOWNTOWN

ROBERT SIEGLE

**IN THE MID-1980s**, I had a hunch that most academics were dead wrong about “where the action is” in American literature. They thought “only theorists” were doing “it.” I was writing my book *Suburban Ambush: Downtown Writing and the Fiction of Insurgency* at this time, and no one I talked to Downtown had any doubt that something was happening to the static world of late modernist writing.<sup>1</sup> As I write from this distance, the work that academics were promoting looks dated and conservative, while the fiction from the shelves of the old St. Marks and Spring Street bookshops still stuns readers. Sadly, much of this fiction is now impossible to buy and can be found only in the loft of a former publisher or on the shelves of those lucky enough to have scooped up the writing when it was fresh from the alternative presses and magazines. I am still struck by the mind-opening quality of this work when it comes into the hands of someone encountering it for the first time. “Oh,” they say, “this isn’t what I expected.”

At New York University’s Fales Library these works are available for study along with troves of drafts and notebooks, notices of readings and openings, and other ephemera of a scene that would otherwise be fading memories and disputed recollections. Why do we need such an archive? Why a retrospective of this period of such intensity? Call it a by-product of capitalism and commodification, if you like, but the sheer *speed* of culture now means that there is no longer a lag between emergent work and our ability to judge its character. Many readers today were shaped by the same forces of the 1970s that shaped these writers; they share a zone of understanding where deep assumptions about life and art intersect with rapidly morphing textures of daily life. These shared experiences gave rise to writing (and to art, for that matter) that broke with late modernism at more than a superficial

level. This generation came of age in the remarkably misrepresented 1960s. It paid heavy dues for shifting gender roles, shifting political sensibilities, shifting life paths, shifting everything at once. Dazed in the process, stunned by the casualties from war and drugs and sexuality and relentless mechanisms of normalization, readers and writers manifested an awareness that is shaped differently, tuned differently, engaged differently than that of their late-modernist counterparts.

What was it about this period, its pace and trajectory, that left no social or cultural form unquestioned, unaltered, no interiority intact, no exteriority quite as exterior as it had seemed? Why was the casualty rate so high, taking many writers before their work ever began or at a point where it was left unfinished and unpublished? Was it the attempt to live like a double agent in the heart of culture that ate at artists whose awareness was honed by the intensities of the period? Was it the proximity to so much creativity that led others to shift tactics of response and give up writing for other modes of expression? The survivors are still writing and are, no doubt, still amazed at how much effort it took to unlearn the old codes and forge a different space for their work. Looking back today provides a chance to remap, with hindsight, what happened, how it happened, and why.

**THE YEARS BETWEEN 1974 AND 1984** were filled with examples of how large cultural systems really work. Sometimes the exposure was deliberate and crafty, like artworks that highlight cultural contradictions so clearly that we have no choice but to see. Other times, it was as if the ideas of Downtown artists had invaded history itself to stage scenes of rabid exposure: Nixon's Watergate speech in front of Lincoln and the flag, Jerry Ford hitting his head repeatedly on a helicopter in a CBS compilation straight out of *Saturday Night Live*, Carter attacked by a swimming rabbit, Reagan giving a major policy speech in front of buildings with John Fekner stencils screaming "Broken Promises" at the camera. Faced with these incongruous images and unintentional critiques of culture, you could not help but learn new ways of thinking and acting. Downtown artists used these ideas knowingly, creating a breakthrough in society, politics, art, and theory.

Perhaps no single aspect of American culture was more influential on Downtown artists than the seemingly least likely: suburbia. Middle-class society, or suburban culture, is shorthand for a historical construct intensively distributed through Ozzie and Harriet, Turfbuilder and charcoal grills, Rotary Club and church suppers, runaway consumption and individual retirement accounts. Its dark side was divorce and hidden poverty; mortgage slavery; the abuse of sex, drugs, and alcohol; chauvinism and complacency; credit card debt; and panicked investment in trickle-down promises. This dark side was kept as invisible as possible until it was



too obvious, too widespread, too visible anyway; then we covered it in self-help literature and news-media scare stories. Downtown writers learned to use mass culture as a mode of critique. For it was from suburbia that many Downtown artists fled into Manhattan, looking for something that was more real than what Kathy Acker calls the “nicey-nicey-clean-ice-cream-TV society.”<sup>2</sup>

These new urban nomads were overloaded with the “sexual revolution,” women’s liberation, and gay and lesbian rights. Confronting diversity in sexual orientation, or discovering it within, brought down the heterosexual monoliths of 1950s culture, thereby allowing us to see the sheer constructedness of even so deceptively “basic” a category as sexuality. Let us not forget the other two members

KIKI SMITH AND DAVID  
WOJNAROWICZ,  
*PSYCHIATRIC CLINIC:  
COURT OF BERLIN  
GENERAL SESSIONS*, 1983.  
Lithograph and screenprint,  
17 x 22 in. David Wojnarowicz  
Papers, Fales Library



FLYER FOR *SWEET BLONDES OF YOUTH*, STARRING JOHN SEX AND ALEXIS DEL LAGO, DANCETERIA, 1982. April Palmieri Papers, Fales Library.

*John Sex with his two-foot-high platinum-blond hair and frequently unclad body was one of a group of gay performance artists who appeared at venues such as Danceteria and Club 57. The performance advertised here is a parody of Tennessee Williams's drama Sweet Bird of Youth, in which the main character, a handsome gigolo, is castrated at the end of the play.*



of the trinity—drugs and rock and roll. Drug-altered states eroded the mythic homogenized self of postwar normality. For all of their promised liberating effect, one didn't have to be William Burroughs staring at his foot for three days to realize the destructive power of drugs—the burnouts were all around. Drugs provided easy access to the sheer authorability of consciousness. If consciousness itself was “authored,” then where did that leave writing? What about the narrative control of the modern author? Rock, meanwhile, had come a long way from Elvis's release of desire within/as a commodity to the Velvet Underground's engagement with the music industry and the capitalist construction of America and Americans behind it. Theirs was a dark view, an angry exhaustion with being “nice” in all the expected ways, and they anticipated the disaffection and musical revolt of Punk before it emerged.

As for history, the news was not seen as “the way it was today,” but as a spectacle, a disciplinary apparatus and mode of spreading disinformation through public stories that had little to do with the violence of actual life. The Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam war were contested sites of media manipulation and individual pain. Vietnam taught a generation that governments lie in order to prac-

tice violence and that corporations profit from a war economy. Vietnam honed our analytics while it trained our tactics; it was the visceral textbook excluded from our formal curriculum. Understanding how the media operated altered people's relation to institutions of public life and taught lessons in both analysis and practical politics. Idealism lost its naiveté and risked cynicism on its way to creating scrupulous inventories of the fictions by which world domination was maintained by the flow of postmodern capital.

Finally, Watergate ended any residual myths about great men. Politicians sat in front of flags and presidential busts when they talked at us, but behind the scenes they were foul-mouthed about their subordinates, treacherous in their exploitation of others, and ruthless in turning the mechanisms of public agency to private and sordid ends. As Michel Foucault was first being translated into English, American political realities illustrated his darkest fears. The lesson for the left was to expect nothing from Washington, to push hard for something, and to attempt to keep visible the machinery of postmodern power wielded by the politico-economic elite. The lesson for the right was to demolish the independence of news media, intimidate and marginalize dissent, and take deeper into secrecy its pre-election deals, its politics of drug money and arms-dealing, its alliances with authoritarian regimes, and its mechanisms for channeling wealth into the pockets of the top 1 percent.

In the aftermath of Vietnam, assassinations, and Watergate, a number of artistic stimulants also radicalized the relation between writers and what T. S. Eliot called tradition. Downtown writers appropriated what could be used, abandoned or subverted the machines seeking to use Downtown work, and attempted the difficult task of simultaneously creating lines of words in the complex climate of postmodernity and keeping those lines from being recaptured by the omnivorous culture machine.

Among the primary cultural precedents for Downtown artists was Dada. Even if writers knew it only secondhand, they drew energy from Dada's universal irreverence toward "art" and society, its rule against rules, and its enthusiasm for performances that triggered visceral, even violent, forms of audience reaction, exposing the narrowness of conventional responses. They also drew strength of purpose from Surrealism's blend of art and bravado, its attempt to release the unconscious, and its dexterous blend of cultural demystification with leftist activism. Downtown writers were perhaps never so far outside as the Dadaists, for they had seen in Warhol's career an inspiration to appropriate the cultural marketplace for alternative ends. And they were far too "Downtown" to ignore all the cultural detritus that was layered into the unconscious. Far from viewing the unconscious as a surreal haven of authenticity, as the late modernists continued to

do, Downtown writers had a more general instinct to inventory that detritus. By the time their excavations had continued for a full decade, it was no longer possible to pretend that even so deep an “inside” as the unconscious was not stuffed with the loose leaves of an “outside.”

Particular modernist writers such as Gertrude Stein and Jane Bowles, to name just two examples, served as models for modernism’s own “internal” dissent: their work tilted the balance between the residual and the emergent far enough toward the latter to create a belief in new possibilities and to expose the grip of classic forms of thought on modern forms of expression. In fact, an entire weave of alternative traditions became visible to Downtown writers, who tapped various configurations among the possible mix discovered through conversation and recommendation, readings, and the artfully crafted inventories of St. Marks Bookshop, Spring Street Books, Embargo Books, Printed Matter, and other booksellers throughout the city. Among the exemplars was Oulipo, a mostly French group of experimental writers and mathematicians whose sometimes extreme literary algorithms—for instance, in his novel *The Void*, Georges Perec eliminated the letter “e” throughout—foregrounded the fact that literary form was itself generative, that language could be understood as a kind of algorithm shaping one’s perceptions, taxonomies, syntactic plotting, and subtler assumptions.<sup>3</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum from Oulipo’s brilliantly self-aware performances was the circle of writers we call the Beats, who were all but throbbing with the mad hormonal drive of postwar adolescence. One quality that kept the Beats on the mental horizon of Downtown writers was their problematic mixture of elements: women writing the body (Diane di Prima and Hettie Jones, among many others), issues of class and ethnicity (Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso), and the importance of race (Bob Kaufman, Amiri Baraka, and Ted Joans). Politics was everywhere, as was the primacy of oral performance over the written page.

Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* may serve as a reference point here because it has not yet dated, not yet come to feel “historical” to young readers, the way they must bridge to connect to Byron or Milton or Shakespeare. The book remains a series of routines and stunts that exposes the nature and machinery of our addiction to commodities, our dissolution in a flow of capital, our structuring of a society in which savants operate the mechanisms of normalization. Burroughs breaks one’s addiction to individuality, to power, to consumption, to our enslavement to lack, which forever hurtles us along the striations of surrogate pleasures. He sweeps us up in a mode of reading that imposes at least a visceral awareness of how the world feels as it works upon us, making each reader an “invisible [wo]man” in the society of the spectacle.

**WHAT I WAS DOING IN 1974–1984** was conceiving and playing in bands.

In fact, that period pretty well encompasses my career as an active musician, and to my mind music was also at the center of what was going on in art then, in Downtown New York and elsewhere. It was the bands that were the exciting, innovative, inspiring things. The Velvet Underground learned from Andy Warhol, but I think the Neo-Expressionists of the 1980s learned from Patti Smith and Television and the Voidoids and the Ramones (and the Talking Heads and the Heartbreakers and the Dead Boys and Blondie). As did Richard Kern and Nan Goldin and Jim Jarmusch and David Wojnarowicz, etc. (not to mention the Clash and the Sex Pistols).

I came to music from poetry, from writing and publishing poems—“publishing” not only in the sense of being published but also as a small-scale publisher—and when I started playing music I had no technical music skills whatsoever. I was also interested in treating everything about my band(s) and me—the clothes we wore, our haircuts, our interviews, our posters, even our names—as important vehicles of information, as conveying messages. Our approach could be thought of as a kind of advertising concept, except that we wanted to subvert (and maybe inspire) by doing this rather than comfort and flatter. Most important, we wanted to do it ourselves rather than have it imposed on us as packaging by corporations whose only motivation was profit.

I got some of these ideas from the poetry scene (as well as from the Velvet Underground and the New York Dolls). When I came to New York as an aspiring teenage poet in the late 1960s, it was the peak of one of the most exciting developments in the history of American poetry: the “Second Generation New York School” of young street poets—who were also very sophisticated—centered around the St. Mark’s Church Poetry Project. These were wild, brainy, drug-fueled kids who took back the means of production from the universities and the big commercial publishers and made the typewriter-typed, mimeoed, staple-bound pamphlet into far greater art in every respect—in choice of graphics and quality of design, as well as the poetry itself—than what was being offered through the conventional channels. The poets just bypassed the boring, self-satisfied standard publishers and *did it themselves*. When the corporations eventually came around, the books they produced were done on the poets’ terms.

They called our music “Punk.” There are certain stylistic traits that are associated with that appellation: loud, crude, raw, angry. With all the movement’s rejection of the values of the giant media purveyors that thrive by cynically exploiting people’s vanity and sentimentality, maybe the thing that separates Punk from previous anti-establishment youth movements is that Punks were a little cynical themselves from the very beginning, or at least wary of underestimating even their own self-serving impulses. What they valued most was honesty, but they recognized the complexity of that. The Punk scream was one of frustration as much as it was of anger. This is why the real, pure thing tends to burn out and shut down: It doesn’t survive in captivity, which is also why you won’t find it in these five hundred words. You’ve got to do it yourself, you stupid monkey.

## RICHARD HELL

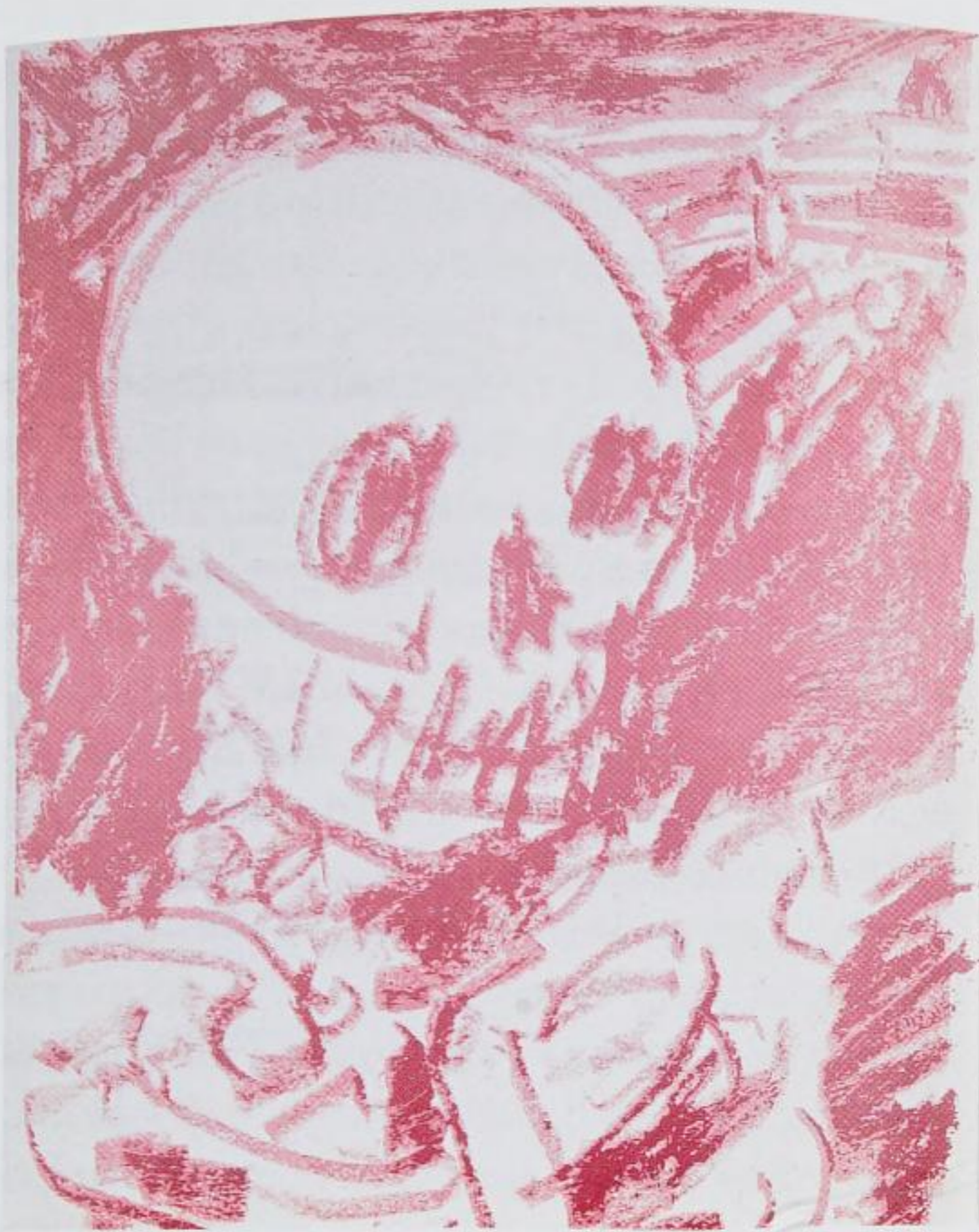


RICHARD HELL, 2003. Photo: Echo Danon

In contrast, most Beat writing shows a deep and paradoxical mixture of modern and postmodern practices and assumptions. Jack Kerouac's *Some of the Dharma* is almost paradigmatic in the way that his superbly robust ego struggles to espouse and embody egolessness. Ultimately, the power of striking out *On the Road* remains strongly affecting for Downtown writers, but equally strong is the clarity of forces that bent Kerouac's line of flight into recapture. The longevity of Burroughs and Ginsberg meant that their work could inflect itself through the changes of style and nuance as the century moved toward its final decade. Whatever was limiting in their residual elements coexisted with a vigor and immediacy through which both immersed themselves in art and life, however different their manner and tone. For Downtown writers, then, the Beats were both inspiring and cautionary.

A more contemporary influence came in the form of poststructuralist thought, whose explosion in America in the 1970s paralleled the intensity of Downtown writing at the time. Both were manifestations of a profound slide (as Roland Barthes would have it) or break (as paradigm theorists would prefer) in how we experienced daily life, and both illustrated the extent to which profoundly different assumptions and metaphors were needed if we were to find our way out of what increasingly felt like a dead end. The theory invasion was mainly French, and it was led largely by English departments, where a new generation of critics had experienced the bewildering effects of close reading. A faculty suddenly more diverse in terms of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation couldn't help but mount challenges to the canon and our ways of reading, changing the nature of literary politics. Why did America finally begin listening? The leaders were shot in the 1960s, the braggarts embarrassed in Vietnam, the liars exposed in Watergate, the great men deflated by the mediocrity of 1970s politicians—we were ready for lessons on how to think about economics, power, and the cultural and political seduction of our investment of desire.

From Jacques Lacan we learned that the kind of subjectivity we thought was transcendental truth was in fact infantile neurosis. From Jacques Derrida we learned that the kind of textuality we thought was sacramental or scriptural was agonistic self-deception, and that the tradition of conceptuality we called Truth was a structure of repression and mythology. From Foucault we learned that we were looking in the wrong direction when we hunted for power, that what ran through our bodies told us more about power than the series of failed sovereigns we watched in sound bites. From Jean-François Lyotard we learned that the grand theories, the master narratives of modern intellectual life, were already dead, even if we had barely (begun to) read them. And the list goes on to include Hélène



**Hello, I'm Erica Jong.  
All of you liked my novel  
*Fear of Flying* because in it you met  
real people. People who loved and  
suffered and lived. My novel contained  
real people that's why you liked it.  
My new novel *How to Die Successfully*  
contains those same characters. And  
it contains 2 new characters. You and  
me. All of us are real. Goodbye.**

Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord, Roland Barthes, and Jean Baudrillard.

Skimming indexes, footnotes, and textual references of the time suggests the pervasiveness of poststructuralist thought, the amount of energy it produced, and how frequently it provided vocabulary and concepts for understanding how culture works, how art works, and what is possible through art. I wouldn't argue that every writer mastered the intricacies of Derrida, but it is remarkable the extent to which the historical distrust of theorizing and explanation among many writers gave way to using such thinking to amplify and expedite what they were trying to do. "At this point in my life . . . , politics . . . take place inside my body," wrote Kathy Acker, describing the political inscription of individuality.<sup>4</sup> We "exist, like a shadow, in the interstices of argument," wrote Lynne Tillman, alluding to our passage through all the determining strands of cultural codes.<sup>5</sup> Even among writers who were not particularly interested in theory or criticism, the ideas that pervaded the Downtown climate during the 1970s reinforced the difference in their way of understanding what they were about and the distinctive, postmodern reality in which they found themselves.

PAGES FROM KATHY ACKER, *HELLO, I'M ERICA JONG*, WITH AN ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL MCCLARD, 1982.

*Long before second-wave feminism took hold in the American academy, Kathy Acker was punching holes in first-wave feminism's construction of women. Hello, I'm Erica Jong is Acker's morbidly funny take on the dark side of the "zipless fuck"—when women's liberation, taken to the extreme, becomes sexual compulsion and madness.*



FRONT COVER OF THE FIRST ISSUE OF *BOMB* MAGAZINE, DESIGNED BY SARAH CHARLESWORTH, 1981.

*Bomb magazine was founded by Betsy Sussler and a group of artists to provide an outlet for writing about each other's works in defiance of the Uptown critics. The central magazine of the SoHo scene, Bomb attracted contributors such as Lynne Tillman, Gary Indiana, Kathy Acker, and Glenn O'Brien.*

**LITERATURE HAS CHANGED.** The world of publishing has changed. In our era, editors gather the best they can find and see if it will fly with the marketing department: profit margins must be higher than cultural capital. Literary bookstores are nearly all submerged before the prow of Barnes and Noble and the other superstores, veritable Wal-Marts of bookselling. Publishing now consists of commercial blockbusters, leaving only a handful of zines and Internet sites where more experimental writers can compete for an audience—without remuneration.

In New York in the 1970s and '80s, independent presses and magazines bustled titles and issues in and out of print as fast and for as long as the energy of key individuals lasted. In cafés and reading venues, writers, musicians, and artists gathered for mutual inspiration and cross-fertilization. The literary milieu consisted of small circles of half a dozen or so writers at a time, varying in consistency, longevity, and intensity, overlapping with other circles of writers, each centering on a magazine, a press, or a neighborhood, with larger combinations of circles centering on reading venues or the like. These circles of writers mixed freely with musicians and visual artists, filmmakers and per-

formance artists, actors and journalists, curators and critics.

Magazines such as Betsy Sussler's *Bomb* and the Robert Witz and Joe Lewis production *Appearances* provided a forum for Downtown artists working in a variety of media. Sussler explained her magazine's genesis in these terms:

I knew people who had been doing underground films, and through that scene you meet a lot of writers, you meet a lot of painters who volunteer to do the sets—I'd met a lot of painters anyway because I'd gone to school with them—and so, I thought, I'll start a cultural magazine about conversation. I didn't like the way everything was separate—the painters and sculptors were in *Artforum* and then the theater people had their theater magazine—and it didn't seem like much fun.<sup>6</sup>

These magazines highlighted the importance of conversation, the intellectual collaboration that was particularly visible in *Bomb*'s mix of key players from the "normally" separate communities of film, journalism, television, photography, painting, graphic design, theater, writing, and so on. One sees this sense of collaboration not only between individuals—Constance De Jong writing a libretto with Philip Glass, or Kiki Smith creating artwork for a Lynne Tillman book—but also, more radically, within individual artists who refused to confine themselves to a single medium: David Wojnarowicz was visual artist, writer, and musician; Richard Prince was both writer and (re)photographer; Barbara Kruger was both writer and visual artist. Encouraged by the open nature of clubs and bars, artists' and performance spaces, and sustained by the diversity represented in magazines like *Bomb* and *Appearances*, Downtown writers accelerated their flight past outdated and conventional modes by regaining a sense of intermedia cultural adventure.

*Wedge*, a joint creation of Brian Wallis and Phil Mariani, was inspired by their sense that critical discussion was lagging behind what was emerging in artistic practice: "Nobody was looking at the broader political implications of this work," Wallis said. "It was important to get those kinds of literary and theoretical ideas out to a wider audience."<sup>7</sup> *Wedge* mixed critical explorations with interviews, artists' writings, fiction, and pages given over to artists, and the result was a more explicitly theoretical counterpart to the remarkable interviews featured in *Bomb*.

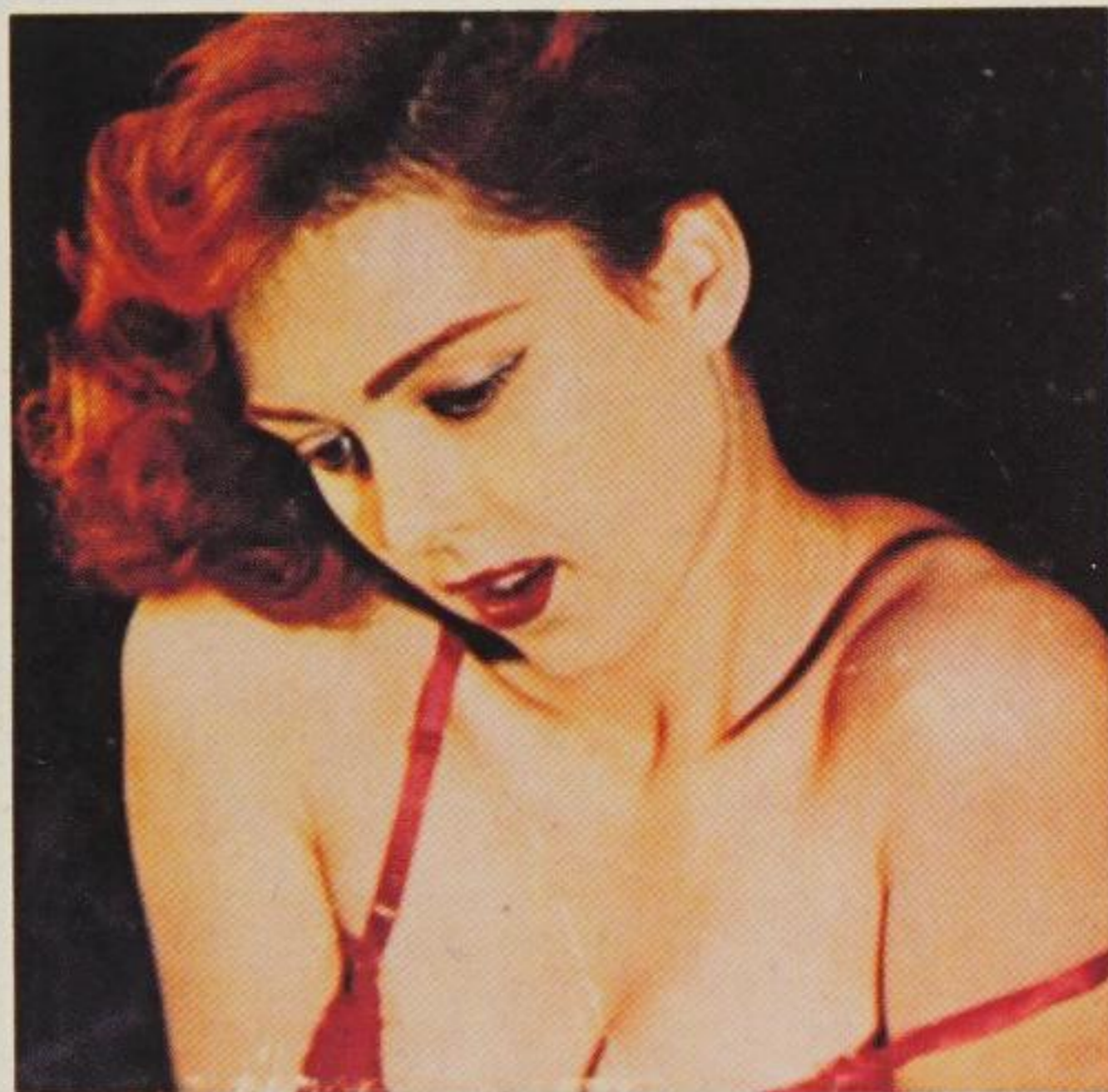
A vital task of cultural connection also took place in the pages of tabloid arts-oriented periodicals—from disposable giveaways such as *Downtown* and compendiums such as *SoHo Arts Weekly*, to important titles such as *Paper*, Leonard Abrams's *East Village Eye*, and Jeff Wright's *Cover*—whose calendar sections became a kind of bulletin board for these overlapping communities of artists, just as their reviews were among the best explanations of the new ideas manifesting in the art world. In these pages one could expect to find stories and poems, reviews and overviews, everything timed to correspond with the periodical's publication schedule. Supplemented by the more established *Village Voice*, these periodicals continued to intertwine the ongoing cultural and political lives of the Downtown scene.

More purely literary magazines were also vital in circulating work among Downtown artists: Edmund Cardoni's *Blatant Artifice*, produced in Buffalo, which included his own commentary on new writing; Michael Carter's *Redtape*; and Allan Bealy's *Benzene*, which mixed the work of Downtown artists with that of fellow travelers elsewhere. Surveying the diversity of such periodicals and the intensity of interconnection among the participants makes it clear that "Downtown" was more an ongoing collaboration than a critic's retrospective imposition.



\$4.95

## JUST ANOTHER ASSHOLE



FRONT COVER OF  
*JUST ANOTHER ASSHOLE*,  
NO. 6, 1983.

*The list of contributors to Barbara Ess and Glenn Branca's Just Another Asshole reads like a Who's Who of Downtown artists and writers at the turn of the 1980s. While number five appeared as a phonograph album of forty-five different artists' tracks, number six was a literary anthology.*

The range of approaches in literary magazines is well represented by the *National Poetry Magazine of the Lower East Side* (the creation of Stephen Paul Miller and Jim Feast), the *Portable Lower East Side* (Kurt Hollander), and *Between C & D* (Joel Rose, Catherine Texier, and, later, Patrick McGrath). The pages of the *National Poetry Magazine* are diverse, to say the least, in form, medium, and intent, each issue serving to exhibit minds in motion at the moment of publication; very little time elapsed between the preparation of a writer's contribution and its ultimate distribution in an issue. The *Portable Lower East Side* was a beautifully printed, highly pocketable magazine whose format changed with the theme of each issue and whose aim was to "connect this work to the larger socio-political struggle" of the era, whether that meant the politics of race or ethnicity, or those of gentrification. For *Between C & D*, Rose and Texier used their desktop PC and dot-matrix printer to produce a quarterly that honored the longer traditions of Downtown writing but also published more recent writing from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. The magazine included art by Art Spiegelman, Kiki Smith, Barbara Kruger, and David Wojnarowicz; some issues also featured topical prizes such as postcards, posters, and flexi-disk records. Smart, inclusive, and playful, but also clear about rejecting "middle-class family dramas or cute college tales," *Between C & D* constitutes an index to the phenomenon called Downtown writing, and it commanded a great deal of attention from the several hundred readers who conceived and carried out

the primary productions that populated the Downtown scene.

Other periodicals were important as well—the frequently guest-edited *New Observations*, with its juxtaposition of verbal and visual work; *Public Illumination*, a tiny compilation of pseudonymous offerings; *Tellus*, in an audiotape format—and they played an indispensable role in showing writers what their peers were doing to push writing into new territory.

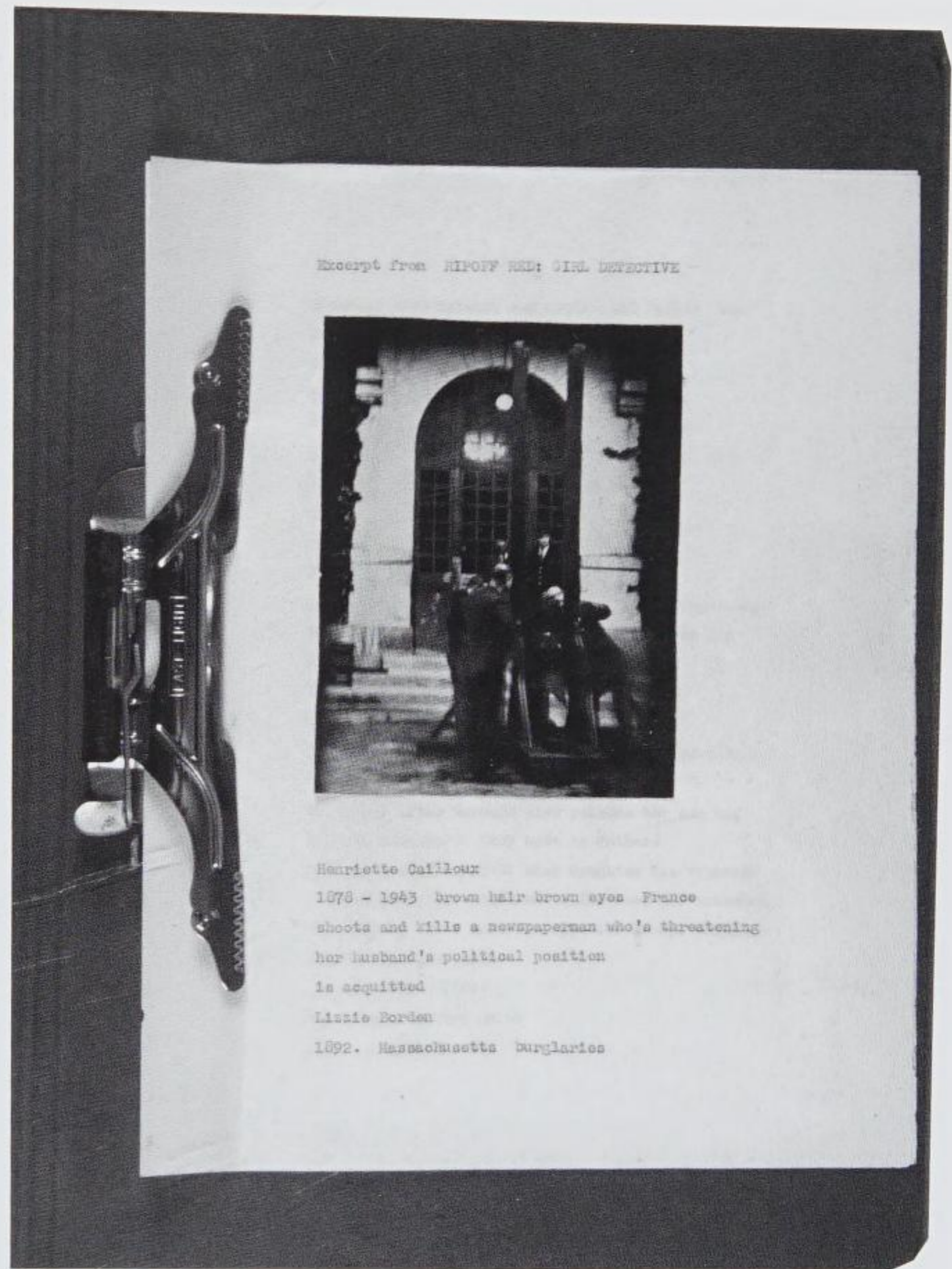
Anne Turyn's *Top Stories* straddled the line between magazine and press: her series published stories longer than the shorts handled by zines but shorter than the novels published by small presses such as TVRT, which printed Acker's early work, or Reese Williams's Tanam Press. Like many other small presses functioning in these

years, *Top Stories* helped to circulate work during the crucial months after a narrative was first written, and also functioned as a stepping stone to publishing contracts that could pay real money. Also important in terms of dissemination were the anthologies that came out from Tanam Press and other publishers, gathering together the wildly heterogeneous energies and forms of Downtown writing.

**WHAT, FINALLY, DID THIS WRITING LOOK LIKE?**

One must start with the work of Kathy Acker, whose works were among the most radical and disorienting departures in writing at the time. To summarize how her fiction works, I would suggest a 3-D outline of her tactics: denaturalizing narrative, desublimating repressed violence, and demystifying power. Acker's work shows that what the privileged sector and its literary and media voices call "The Nature of Reality" is actually the practice of cultural politics. She denaturalized that so-called Nature, reattaching its ideas, values, and daily practices to a history of power and economics. What's natural about work? she asked. What's natural about sexual love? What's natural about the way humans relate to each other, or the way humans relate their stories? What's natural about consciousness as we know it? Acker's texts challenge the reader to keep up with this process, and in so doing she denaturalizes narrative and the culture that sustains its form.

When Acker rewrote *The Scarlet Letter* from Hester's perspective or *Wuthering Heights* from Cathy's, she desublimated—pulled to the surface of consciousness—what conventionally "right" and "appropriate" behavior typically masks: namely, the violence of exhibiting one gender as the object and property of another.<sup>8</sup> "Having any sex in the world is having to have sex with capitalism," Acker wrote, because she knew that commodification, economic monopoly, and possession are capitalist organizations of social production that become internalized as the very



KATHY ACKER, *RIP OFF RED, GIRL DETECTIVE*, 1974. Typescript. Fales Manuscripts, Fales Library.

*When Kathy Acker first moved to New York, she earned money babysitting for David and Eleanor Antin—she had studied with David at the University of California, San Diego. Acker gave them this manuscript, a fragment of an early fiction piece.*

form for producing and containing desire.<sup>9</sup> Her Hester and her Catherine say what Hawthorne and Brontë could not or would not have them say: that reducing male and female gendering to sadism and masochism is a lousy means of social control, and that the great economic squeeze by which people are panicked into conventional work roles and forms is a bitter lashing of the body to a leaking raft on the sea of money. Another fundamental trait of Acker's work was its recognition that if we knew what we were doing, we might not choose to play the game established by the core assumptions of the culture. Trying to imagine something completely different, she set out on many verbal spins and spirals and prowled the forbidden zones of personal and social experience and the controversies of history. In her work, demystifying meant not only critiquing the philosophical or conceptual core of the culture, but trying to reprogram us at the most basic level.

Lynne Tillman's fiction is quite different from Acker's, more a reworking of traditional narrative from within than cutting it to pieces. Her writing deals with characters who either fail to understand enough about themselves to function at all, or else work their way out of the contradiction between the being inscribed by culture and a more authentic form of being. Her experiments confront the reader with texts that are open to conventional misreadings. Her first novel, *Haunted Houses*, mixes the stories of three young women trying to contend with the embodiment of power in their daily lives.<sup>10</sup> Tillman makes us all but lose the thread of the characters' individual identities and focus instead on the mesh of micropower relations that make up the living texture of their culture. *Motion Sickness* follows the geographical wanderings of a woman constrained by the state culture she carries with her in the manifold miniprocessors of experience internalized from that culture.<sup>11</sup> If you read the novel as a modernist portrait of an individual, you find decent late modernist fiction, but you miss the point: that the sickness of motion, even of motion-in-place, is the result of culture's viral reprogramming, even at a neuro-motor-sensory level. In a more recent novel, *Cast in Doubt*, the modernist narrator, Horace, is a mystery writer who expects life to follow his narrative and whose relationships are hopelessly complicated by analogies to his plot form.<sup>12</sup> Horace is just the latest in a series of misrecognitions inspired by Tillman—some by characters, some by us readers who allow ourselves to indulge in the sins of our cultural implants.

Among the other writers one would need to include in any catalogue of Downtown writing is Constance De Jong, who shared the bill with Kathy Acker when writers first read at the Kitchen performance space. Her remarkable capacity to memorize long stretches of narrative from her books *Modern Love* and *The Lucy Amarillo Stories* made for mesmerizing performances in which such usual narrative

**A VAST MIGRATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE**, fresh out of college, arrived in New York City in the late 1970s. Perhaps there has never been a time when so many people with the same goals came to one place, except during wartime. We came to New York City with boxes of tattered required reading under our arms: *Against Interpretation* and *The Banquet Years*, Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharpe's *Avalanche*, and Michael Kirby's *The Drama Review*. We were following the true avant-garde: clusters of artists, musicians, choreographers, dramatists, and writers who had burrowed into the crevices of the city after World War II and become notorious. History had been made south of Fourteenth Street, and ambition follows ambition. Our college professors had regaled us with tales of the Cedar Tavern, or Café Cino, or a place called SoHo. Like hypnotized rats we swarmed into the dilapidated and affordable neighborhoods, desperate to make a mark. We were young rats, restless, eager to create, eager to gnaw on something, with young, hormonally enriched bodies. Sex was on everyone's mind, all the time. And drugs were a given. The art myth-machinery had changed, and the new artists emulated rock gods, making much-anticipated theme albums every two years. We didn't think in terms of content or lack of content; everything was an "event." Some of those dialing the combination on the big safe, dialing-dialing-dialing, exploring idiosyncrasies, exploring voices, trying new approaches, eventually made their mark. Now new legends were forming. By any measure it was a golden era. Was this due to the greatness of the participants? Or simply the right combination of elements? Art history, economics, and politics had an effect, but so did degraded real estate, prodding the academy, and the stimulus of drugs. Other catalysts were ambition—a function of youth, before age and disaffection had set in—and plain old horniness, which kept everyone jumping until the viruses showed up. All must be factored into the mix to explain why there was a flourishing of the arts during the 1980s. When so many are crushed into a box twelve blocks wide and thirty blocks long, things happen. Everyone watches everyone else. Everyone listens to everyone else. And so it starts: spontaneous combustion. Like a string of firecrackers getting lit, inspiration triggers ambition, which incites socialization and sex, which fires off jealousy, which fires off competition and more inspiration. It was like a fire that creates more fire, until no one's sure how it got started in the first place.

## ERIC BOGOSIAN

ERIC BOGOSIAN AS  
RICKY PAUL, c. 1982.  
Photo: Paula Court



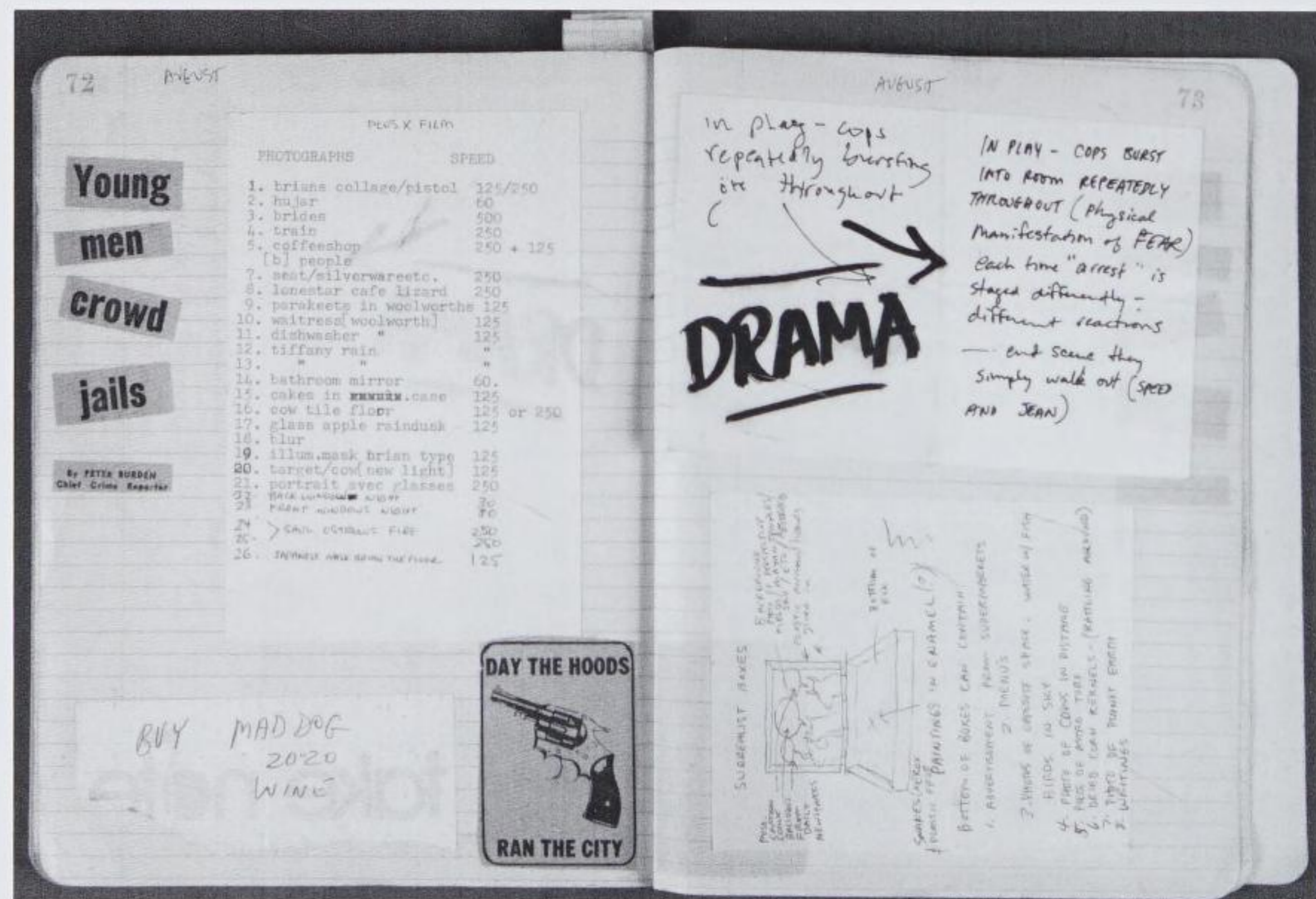
strategies as a consistent “I” and a continuous plot gave way to metanarratives in which story-making itself was as much the point as her observations about life in the postmodern age.<sup>13</sup> Her writing was as unconventional as her publishing process: *Modern Love* was originally issued as a series of pamphlets, which De Jong mailed out to key figures in the arts.

The writers whose work filled the pages of Tanam Press—one thinks especially of the publisher Reese Williams, the visual artist Richard Prince, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha—brought to its books and anthologies an acute sense of the difficulties of living and constructing a self in the age of the image. In Tanam anthologies and in their own works, other writers—Tina L’Hotsky, Sylvia Reed, Peter Nadin, Jenny Holzer, and Cookie Mueller among them—demonstrated the power of shorter interventions.

Books from performers such as Spalding Gray, Eric Bogosian, and Karen Finley suggested three types of staged pieces taking print form. In Gray’s raconteurish, self-reflexive pieces—such as *Sex and Death to the Age Fourteen* and *Swimming to Cambodia*—the narrator discovers himself, in a way emblematic of us all, in a film he didn’t remember making, searching through narrative strands in which every story is a “cover” for the untellable stories, every story another effort to keep ahead of despair.<sup>14</sup> Eric Bogosian, in his raw, sometimes abrasive pieces *Lost in the Funhouse* and

PAGES FROM DAVID  
WOJNAROWICZ'S JOURNAL,  
VOLUME DATED JUNE 6–  
AUGUST 28, 1979. David  
Wojnarowicz Papers, Fales Library.

*Wojnarowicz began keeping journals during his teenage years and continued well into adult life. They include poetry, prose, dream memories, and countless ideas for paintings, films, installations, and other artworks. Shown here is a typical page, from August 1979.*



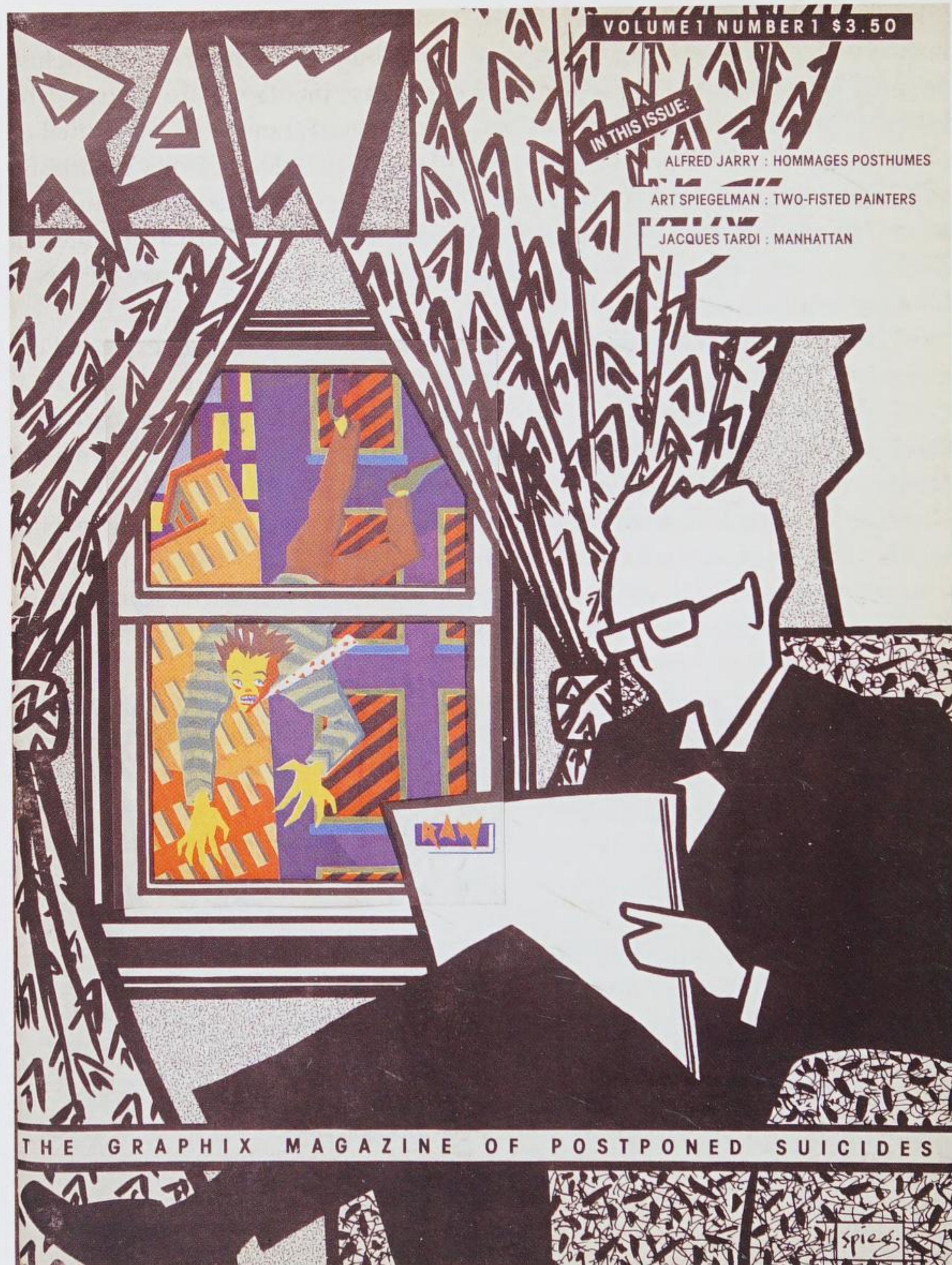
*Drinking in America*, spun persona after persona out on a plain stage, often casting the audience as the listener—to a condemned man, a bum lying on the street, a recluse twisting in sensuous leather. “In our age of mass media we are saturated by imagery,” Bogosian said, “and this familiar imagery, if framed, set off, edited or piled up, can reveal deeper currents flowing within us.”<sup>15</sup> Karen Finley’s work still shocks and dismays suburbanized readers with its nexus of sex, power, and violence. Her pieces emerged from a life of challenging both external and internal censorship in the culture, often making Kathy Acker’s most graphic passages seem like a jumping-off point.

Dennis Cooper and David Wojnarowicz, each in his own way, exploded the naiveté of the mainstream with their explorations of being queer in America. Cooper’s notebook annotations of gay crime stories build up to stunning narratives detailing the violent deformations of self and libido that occur when the syntax of pleasure becomes overlaid with the grammar of normalization. In writing such as *Waterfront Journals* and *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz blended his own gay seeking with a consciousness honed in art-world events and AIDS activism.<sup>16</sup> Some of the voices in *Waterfront Journals* are fractured with pathologies, while others are nuanced with the danger of a delicate flirtation detonating the latent homophobia within the desired one.

The trio most involved with the magazine *Between C & D*—Joel Rose, Catherine Texier, and Patrick McGrath—embody the literary energy of the Downtown scene. Rose’s *Kill the Poor*, laden with drugs, crime, passion, and ethnic tensions in the immigrant district we call the Lower East Side, captures the experience of those who found themselves trying to make a space within the highly contested ground laid bare by East Village realities.<sup>17</sup> It took its strength from Rose’s attempt, as he lived and wrote in the neighborhood his grandmother had left in her time, to draw energy from the life of the streets he rediscovered. A similarly visceral energy runs through Catherine Texier’s first New York novel, *Love Me Tender*, in which sex works like the drugs on the streets, inducing one semiartificial high after another.<sup>18</sup> Pregnancy, disease, and mortality tax the characters’ will to continue performing invented roles on a stage crumbling on the edge of history. A third literary refraction of these times is McGrath’s ironic turn to the gothic, a genre that is always on the edge of extinction but capable of being revived once again to haunt the nightmares of another transitional age. Recoiling from the Reaganomics that consumed the bodies of a global market economy’s zombified workers, McGrath wrote tales that imagined grotesque versions of our consumption of each other, described the harrowed imagination hanging to coherence by a thread, and pointed to the repressed beneath the narratives’ surfaces.

FRONT COVER OF RAW  
MAGAZINE, NO. 1, WITH  
ILLUSTRATION BY ART  
SPIEGELMAN, 1980.

*Art Spiegelman and Françoise  
Mouly's Raw magazine  
published a wide range of  
outsider comix artists  
who were radically reworking  
the traditional forms of  
comic-book art.*



Gary Indiana had made his name through a decade of plays, stories, and art and film reviews by the time his story collection *Scar Tissue and Other Stories* emerged in 1987.<sup>19</sup> A mix of irony and ennui, of comic barbs and sudden death, his stories feature characters who fight against loneliness, anxiety, and a culture that fills up their interiority with zeros. Relationships never quite align and, as one character says, “might as well be fantasies” in their brevity and in the isolation produced by all the layers of mediated desire.

Bruce Benderson’s explorations of Downtown’s marginal worlds—*The United Nations of Times Square*, *Pretending to Say No*, and *User*—demonstrate the systemic nature of the behaviors he chronicles by juxtaposing voices, worlds, and the forms through which individuals evolve.<sup>20</sup> The artist Roberta Allen specialized in short fictions, often a page or less, that make snapshots of that pivotal moment when readers, if not the characters, can see the size of the mote in another’s eye. Michael Kaspar’s “verbo-visual” books attacked the idiocies of public policy and the global hardships perpetrated by our self-imposed naiveté and complacent consumption patterns. Mike Topp became known for his witty skewing of conventions both narrative and cultural. The urban screwball comedies of Mark Leyner and Peter Cherches treated every odd turn in the American psyche with verbal slapstick, formal subversions, and one-liners glistening with satiric wit. In the hands of Darius James in his book *Negrophobia*, humor became the grotesquerie of racism.<sup>21</sup>

In pulling together such a galaxy of disparate figures into something to which we could give a name, individuals such as Ron Kolm played a catalytic role. A longtime manager at Spring Street Books and St. Marks Bookshop, an editor and facilitator for magazines and presses as well as a writer of fiction and poetry, for years Kolm carried boxes of little magazines around to bookstores, passed around copies of new work, and connected people by introducing them to each other and corralling them to readings and openings. In a mid-1980s interview, he summed up the Downtown writing scene: “During this time we had various policies on the national scene that were brutalisms, and there was brutalism in what we were doing to other countries. Downtown was a reaction to all this. It was a neighborhood that was a microcosm of responses and reactions to the tyranny of the Empire. I think that’s the reason why this work is germane. I also think that’s why the work has vitality.”<sup>22</sup>

Anyone harboring doubts about the diversity and intensity of Downtown writing need only consider the bewildering tangle of writers, styles, venues, periodicals, and wranglings on the poetry side of the ledger. Downtown poetry was especially effective in capturing the daily forms in which the great issues of post-modernity take place, whether in fractured love lives, police riots, or the daily



PAGES FROM LYNNE  
TILLMAN AND KIKI SMITH,  
*MADAME REALISM*, 1984.

*Tillman and Smith's  
collaboration on Madame  
Realism resulted in one of the  
most startling and eloquent  
books of the Downtown scene.  
Inflected by experimental  
writing, critical theory, and  
feminism, the text jars readers  
into new modes of  
understanding the media's  
influence on our lives.*

hustling by government policies and agencies. Formally, Downtown poetry was an oral art and one that thrived in live venues, from traditional reading series to slams to public readings on the Brooklyn Bridge. These writers remind us that poetry is performance—not just a public reading of words on a page, but lines that act out the direct contact between bodies and forces with innumerable manifestations.

The St. Mark's Poetry Project, officially underway by the mid-1960s, tapped long traditions of connection between the Lower East Side and tributaries of dissent, both artistic and political. With immediate connections to the Beats, the Black Mountain school, the New York school, and the San Francisco Renaissance, the St. Mark's group provided a site in which all kinds of new work could affect creative audiences looking to explore the issues of idea and form that they struggled with in their own work. It was the quintessential model of the kind of Downtown institution one finds earlier at Warhol's Factory and later at a place like the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. In the sheer power and immediacy of this poetry we find the same narrative punch packed by the fiction of the time.

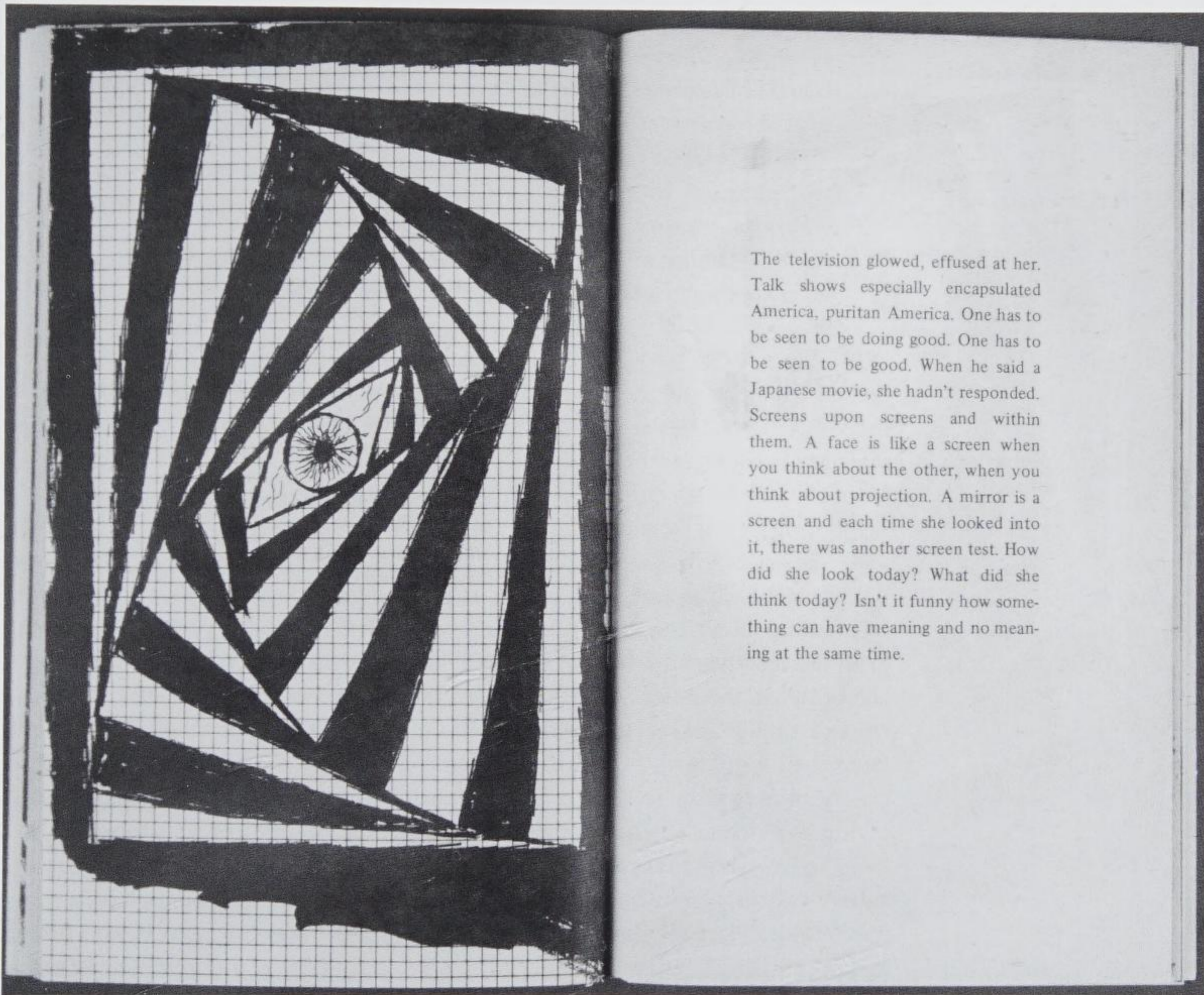
Resisting mainstream poetry's inaccessibility, these poets "light a match," as Alan Kaufman says in the introduction to his anthology *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry*:

*These poets have given form to incoherence, made a song of ugliness, and shown that unbearable pain is something we can survive. In their best work, the poetry achieves a gentleness and compassion despite that pain.*

*From the clubs of Manhattan's East Village to the cafes of San Francisco to the rock stages of Venice West, a new cultural front is riding the upsurge of populist verse in our time, a passionately lyrical energy that's spreading fast around the globe. In every town and city people from every walk of life, young and old alike, are standing up at open mikes to bare their hearts in protest against their dehumanization.<sup>23</sup>*

Indeed, writing poetry and reading it collectively at venues like the Project and the Kitchen and the Nuyorican became survival strategies for nascent nomads escaping from the insidious despotism of postmodern capital.

*Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe*, a remarkable 1994 anthology edited by Miguel Algarín and Bob Holman, provides a generous sampling of the many voices one might have heard in the two decades of the café's operation.<sup>24</sup> Whatever its specific subject matter, this type of poetry harbored the sentiment Mike Tyler expressed when he wrote: "The most beautiful word in the American language is / Resist."<sup>25</sup> Much of it concurred with Peter Spiro's refusal of corporate-defined "work"—"I am an unambitious worthless problem / like the air and the wind"—and lambasted the abuses Peter Skiff knew could occur "when language / has a landlord."<sup>26</sup>



The television glowed, effused at her. Talk shows especially encapsulated America, puritan America. One has to be seen to be doing good. One has to be seen to be good. When he said a Japanese movie, she hadn't responded. Screens upon screens and within them. A face is like a screen when you think about the other, when you think about projection. A mirror is a screen and each time she looked into it, there was another screen test. How did she look today? What did she think today? Isn't it funny how something can have meaning and no meaning at the same time.

Holman gave voice to the increasingly widespread realization that “paranoia used to be a psychosis, now it’s a national pastime.”<sup>27</sup> “There’s nothing left anymore except for the time being,” he wrote. “You live your whole life for the time being / While meanwhile—there is no meanwhile.”<sup>28</sup> These poets nodded in agreement when Miguel Piñero called himself

a street fighting man  
a problem in this land  
I am the Philosopher of the Criminal Mind  
a dweller of prison time  
a cancer of rockefeller's ghettocide  
this concrete tomb is my home  
to belong to survive you gotta be strong  
you can't be shy less without request  
someone will scatter your ashes thru  
the Lower East Side<sup>29</sup>

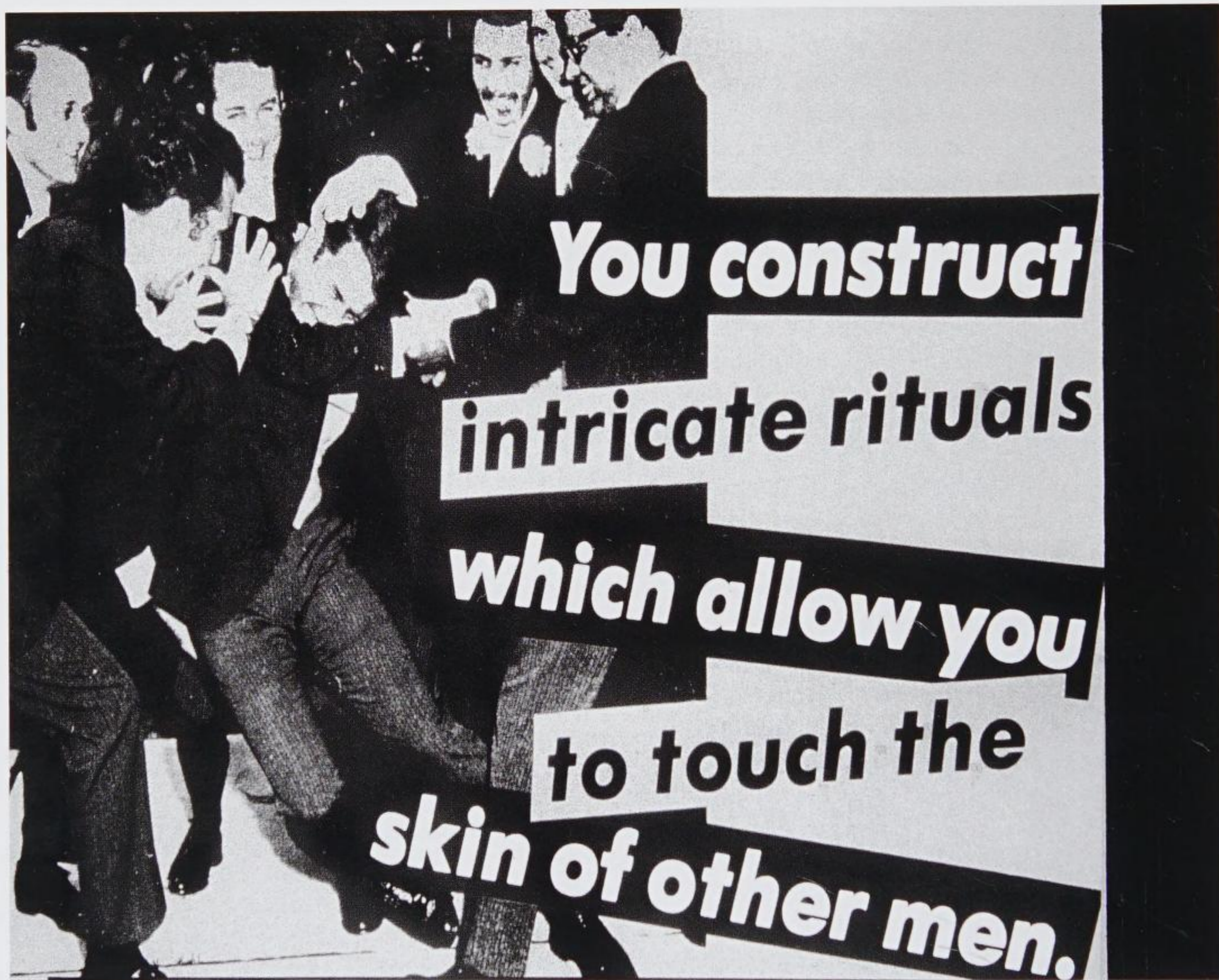
The mix of literal and metaphoric in these lines may have varied from individual to individual, but all of these poets were criminalized by the prevailing codes of normalization, all knew the effects of corporatized public policy, and all evinced a strong desire to spread more than their ashes through the overlapping poetic neighborhoods of Downtown.

This poetry was a grim inventory of politically aware anger and the symptomatic signs of displacement, misdirection, and misrecognition. But matters were by no means hopeless, as seen in the repeated references to life persisting amid the grimness: as Algarín wrote, “there is still a chance for a revival, / the rebirth that takes place in the mind.”<sup>30</sup> This more oral, performance-oriented poetry was like a revivalist religious service calling its audience forward to be saved, in this case, from the living death of zombie consumerism. These quick, sharp shots of oral poetry showed us what we had internalized, both as a culture and as individuals, giving us a chance at what Holman called a “gumbo anarchistic sensibility.”<sup>31</sup>

To have thought in these terms might have helped us avoid the implicit censorship of college curricula and research agendas, the confines of the appropriate and the canonical. Lynne Tillman's character Madame Realism sums up what this fiction and poetry offers: “It's only a story really should read, it's a way to think.”<sup>32</sup> Downtown works are different from mainstream writing. They are always conscious that the process of telling a “story,” of narrating—or for that matter punctuating—anything, is not a neutral act. Reading these texts, experiencing the differences, shows us an equally different “way to think.” One that could have helped us avoid the all-too-predictable beginning we've seen to the new millennium.

## NOTES

1. Robert Siegle, *Suburban Ambush: Downtown Writing and the Fiction of Insurgency* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).
2. Kathy Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 94.
3. Oulipo is an acronym for *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, or Workshop of Potential Literature. In addition to Perec, members have included Raymond Queneau, François Le Lionnais, Claude Berge, Italo Calvino, and Marcel Duchamp. See Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie, eds., *Oulipo Compendium* (London: Atlas Press, 1998).
4. Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School*, 97.
5. Lynne Tillman, *Madame Realism* (New York: Print Center, 1984), n.p.
6. Unpublished interview with the author, June 25, 1987.
7. Unpublished interview with the author, June 22, 1987.
8. Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School*, 65–100.
9. *Ibid.*, 135.
10. Lynne Tillman, *Haunted Houses* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1987).
11. Lynne Tillman, *Motion Sickness* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1991).
12. Lynne Tillman, *Cast in Doubt* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1992).
13. Constance De Jong, *Modern Love* (New York: Standard Editions, 1977); *The Lucy Amarillo Stories* (New York: Standard Editions, 1978).
14. Spalding Gray, *Swimming to Cambodia* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1985), 127.
15. Eric Bogosian, *Drinking in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 14.
16. David Wojnarowicz, *The Waterfront Journals: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Grove Press, 1996); *Close to the Knives* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).
17. Joel Rose, *Kill the Poor* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988).
18. Catherine Texier, *Love Me Tender* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987).
19. Gary Indiana, *Scar Tissue and Other Stories* (New York: Calamus Books/GPNY, 1987).
20. Bruce Benderson, *The United Nations of Times Square* (New York: Red Dust, 1987); *Pretending to Say No* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990); *User* (New York: Dutton, 1994).
21. Darius James, *Negrophobia: An Urban Parable: A Novel* (Secaucus, N.J.: Carol, 1992).
22. Unpublished interview with the author, June 22, 1987.
23. Alan Kaufman, *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1999), xxvii.
24. Miguel Algarín and Bob Holman, eds., *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1994).
25. *Ibid.*, 168.
26. *Ibid.*, 142, 138.
27. *Ibid.*, 223.
28. *Ibid.*, 222.
29. Miguel Piñero, *La Bodega Sold Dreams* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1980).
30. Algarín and Holman, *Aloud*, 302.
31. *Ibid.*, 228.
32. Lynne Tillman, *Madame Realism*.



BARBARA KRUGER,  
UNTITLED (YOU CONSTRUCT  
INTRICATE RITUALS WHICH  
ALLOW YOU TO TOUCH THE  
SKIN OF OTHER MEN), 1982.  
Photograph. Courtesy Mary Boone  
Gallery, New York

# WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

BRIAN WALLIS

**IN 1984** Brian Wallis edited *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, an anthology of critical and theoretical writings that helped revolutionize the field of art criticism. Incubated in the Downtown scene of the late 1970s and early 1980s, where he published the seminal journal *Wedge*—which combined contemporary art and literature with theory—Wallis's approach to the future of art criticism placed French critical theory, especially that termed postmodern, at the center of art writing. *Art after Modernism* serves as a compendium of some of the most important essays by a wide range of critics and theorists whose ideas have continued to shape our thinking ever since the book was published. Wallis's introductory essay makes a strong case for the importance of this criticism for the art world, and it remains one of the most concise statements of the role played by postmodern theory in how we think about art today.

1984 is a curious year. For many Downtown artists, it signifies the end of a decisive period of experimentation. Wallis's essay, then, can be viewed as a symptom of the Downtown problematic: on the one hand the essay introduces a wide audience to postmodern critical ideas that had been enacted, if not always fully understood, by Downtown artists since the 1970s. On the other hand, the book's quick rise to canonical status marks the reification of a certain kind of postmodernism out of the period's stew of experimentation—in which ideas about representation were contested, and it was considered impossible to keep art “pure” and separate from the “real” world. Nevertheless, coming at the end of this time of tremendous growth and vitality, Wallis's essay provides an epiphanic perspective on the scene and its postmodern underpinnings, as well as a pathway for the larger world to understand the significance of what happened Downtown. And, of course, *Art after Modernism* structures how we will view Downtown work—through the lens of postmodern theory. The mere fact that we can now appreciate this last point shows our debt to Wallis's achievement. Through both his introductory essay and his selection of texts for *Art after Modernism*, Wallis proposed a new vocabulary for art writing: a vocabulary essential to mapping the multivalent complexities of the Downtown scene.

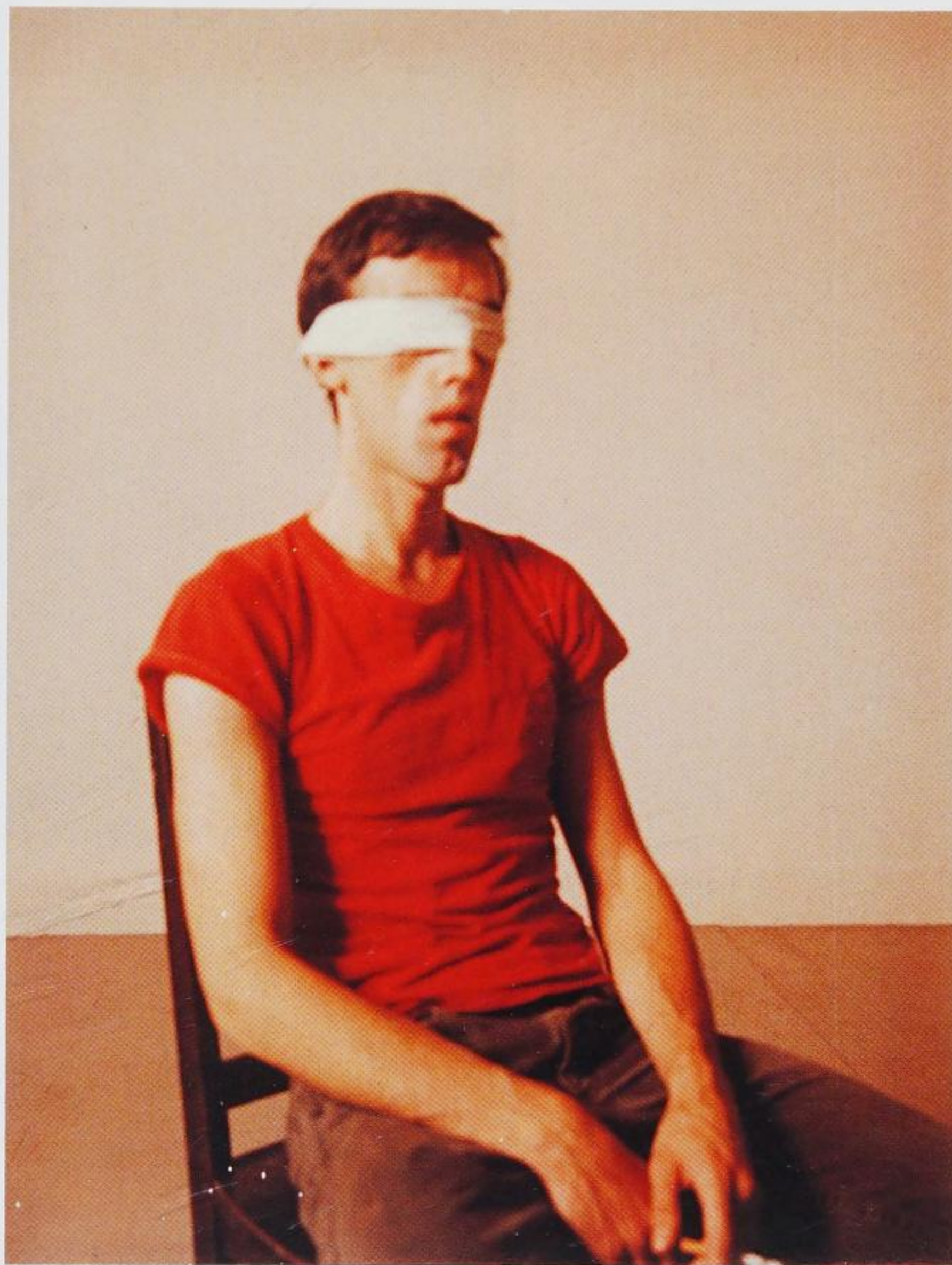
**BEYOND THE MORE OBVIOUSLY SYMBOLIC OVERTONES** of 1984, the year may be remembered in the art world as that in which a debate, resulting from the loss of public funding for American art critics, revealed deep fissures and contradictions in contemporary art criticism as a whole. Many traditional critics—writers for the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *New York* magazine, for example—publicly confessed to doubts about the intellectual worth of criticism owing to its supplemental position, subservient to the primary creative activity of the artist. At the same time, neoconservative critics seized the opportunity to insist, once again, that contemporary criticism is too political and that most art critics are “opposed to just about every polity of the United States except the one that put money in their own pockets.”<sup>1</sup> In this paradoxical climate—where some see art criticism as having too much power while others find it impotent—it is hardly surprising that many observers, especially in the growing audience for art, should find this a period of particular crisis in art criticism.

The picture we get—of a conflicted, two-sided debate—is not altogether accurate, however. For if we examine closely the apparent contradiction, we find that both arguments stem from the same, fundamentally modernist, premise: that criticism could and should be value-free. In other words, the single argument is that art criticism fulfills its purpose best when it keeps its place, when it confines itself to the elucidation and evaluation of high art. In this way, art and art criticism form a mutually supportive closed circuit, cloistered from the exigencies of social reality. By denying criticism an interest or leverage in social, economic, or political structures (particularly those in which art circulates), these arguments act as a kind of moral smokescreen, self-righteously rejecting alternate forms of criticism, but also masking the real political service their own criticism provides both through noninterference and through the promotions of prevailing values. Any purported failure of criticism then is only its failure to conform to these standards and expectations of modernist art criticism.

This supposedly apolitical stance of traditional or modernist art criticism, then, is in fact political in what it represses. On the other hand, in much recent writing, the political and social function of all kinds of criticism is acknowledged, and critics have actively explored the use of criticism as a positive means for social critique and change. It is this avowed social responsibility for art and criticism that lies at the heart of the essays in this volume [*Art after Modernism*]. This interventionist criticism, as it is often called, represents a sharp break with the primarily formalist and idealist pretensions of modernist criticism.

**ANY UNDERSTANDING OF CONTEMPORARY ART** and criticism is necessarily bound up with a consideration of modernism, for modernism is the cultural standard which even today governs our conception of what art is. Modernism was the great dream of industrial capitalism, an idealistic ideology which placed its faith in progress and sought to create a new order. A self-consciously experimental movement covering well over a century, modernism encompasses a plenitude of positions. In the present context, however, modernism is taken to refer not to the terms of this historical program in its diversity, nor is it seen in terms of its original historical context, but rather as the aestheticized modernism which has been left at our doorstep: modernism as an institution. Today modernism is exhausted; its once provocative or outrageous products lie entombed in the cultural institutions they once threatened and offended. Picasso, Joyce, Lawrence, Brecht, Pollock, and Sartre are our contemporary classics. The rapid assimilation of these once-transgressive modernists, the reduction of their works to academic studies, has at the same time made newer art forms and activities, which do not conform to mainstream modernist canons, seem marginal or unimportant. Now, not only is the avant-garde no longer radical, though its forms continue to be reproduced and simulated for an overextended art market, but in a final irony, modernism has become the official culture, the aesthetic haven of neoconservatives.

Today our understanding of modernist art is shaped by the systematic critical theory which was applied to its history by Clement Greenberg and his followers. In a series of eloquent and highly persuasive essays published from the 1930s to the 1960s, Greenberg argued that the terms of modernist art practice were objectively verifiable, that they conformed to certain immutable laws. In this sense he saw modernism as the fulfillment of the promise of the Enlightenment in which rational



DAVID WOJNAROWICZ,  
UNDATED SELF-PORTRAIT.  
Polaroid. David Wojnarowicz  
Papers, Fales Library



MIKE BIDLO, *JACK THE DRIPPER AT PEG'S PLACE*,  
1982. Installation views, P.S. 1.  
Photos: Lisa Kahane. Copyright ©  
1982 Lisa Kahane, NYC

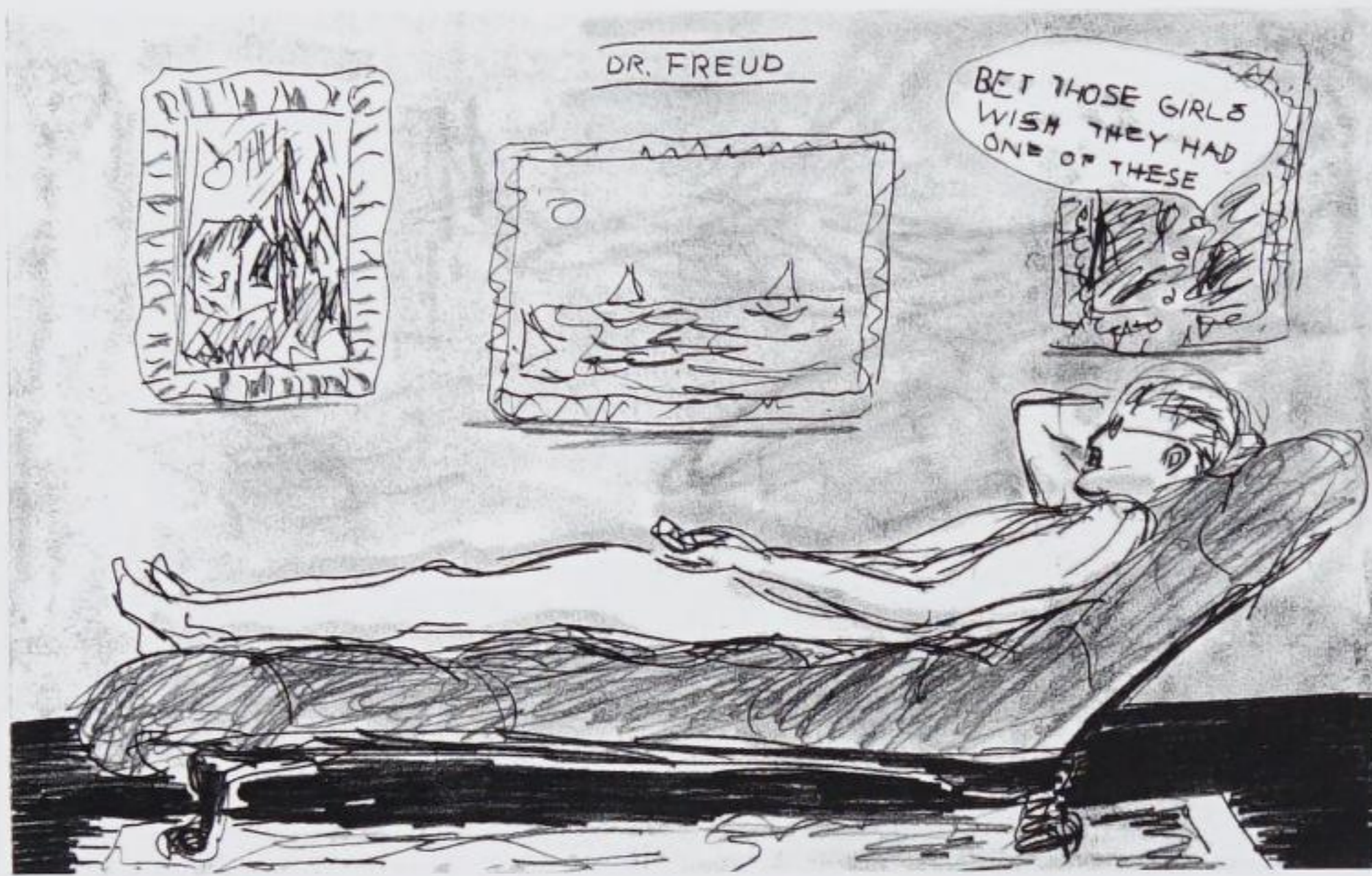


determinations governed the parceling of all disciplines, all fields of knowledge, into discrete areas of competence—this applied to science, philosophy, history, as well as art. In all fields the mark of achievement, the attainment of high quality, was determined by self-criticism, self-definition, and elimination of elements from other disciplines. As Greenberg wrote, “The essence of modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself—not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.”<sup>2</sup>

In painting, for example, the inherent qualities of the medium—identified by Greenberg as color, flatness, edge, scale—formed the basis for determinations of quality. Characteristics considered extrinsic, particularly literary or theatrical qualities such as narrative, realism, description, subject matter, or drama, were regarded as detrimental and constituted impurities. Logically, Greenberg favored an art of expression and form, one exemplified by abstract painting, such as that of the abstract expressionists, or later that of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland.

In this way, modernism was constantly bound to its own formally reductive system. Transgression or critique could take place only within the terms of artistic creation already established. Stylistic change in this medium-specific system was based primarily on technical innovation, and progress was identified with advancements in technique which increased the degree of pure, aesthetic pleasure. Factors determining the nature and causes of cultural production were limited, in criticism, to specifically artistic ones. Modernism marginalized the issue of artistic motivations or interests outside the art system, denying that artworks were themselves bound by a web of connections to specific historical and social contexts. Indeed, in the aesthetic economy of modernism, the amount of pure pleasure provided by a work of art was often gauged by how effectively that work separated itself from the “real” world to provide an imaginary space of ideal reflection. One principal attitude, which the essays in this book [*Art after Modernism*] contest, is this tendency of modernism to posit artworks as the products of an autonomous, disengaged form of labor and consumption, freed from normal social commerce by virtue of their status as objects designed exclusively for visual pleasure.

The central purpose of art and art criticism since the early 1960s has been the dismantling of the monolithic myth of modernism and the dissolution of its oppressive progression of great ideas and great masters. As the leading cultural products of late modernism—abstract expressionism, the *nouveau roman*, existentialism, avant-garde film, New Criticism—were gradually set aside, they were replaced by art forms and critical models which specifically countered the ideals of modernism. Pop art, for instance, deliberately accepted as its subject matter the low-culture, tabloid images rejected disdainfully by modernism; similarly, minimalism



exaggerated hyperbolically the formalist codes of late modernism, creating spare but “theatrical” works. Subsequent artistic production, throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, defiantly deviated from the clearly defined aesthetic categories of modernism. There were significant crossovers between art and music, film and performance, sculpture and architecture, painting and popular culture. This gradual shift or mutation in the rigidly structured forms of modernist art has led not to another style, but to a fully transformed conception of art founded on alternate critical premises.

Indigenous transformations in American art and criticism in the 1970s were fueled by the introduction of new translations of European critical theory, particularly the works of the Frankfurt School, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Continental feminist theory, and British film theory. This extensive body of critical and theoretical work, responding to the breakdown of modernist discourse in literary theory, psychoanalysis, and the social sciences, shifted attention

away from the masterworks toward the operations of modernism itself, and from the established divisions of traditional culture toward an interdisciplinary examination of the dynamics of representation. Specifically, this work studied the function of cultural myths in representation, the construction of representation in social systems, and the perpetuation and function of these systems through representation. In film studies, for example, the critique of the Hollywood film system by the British film journal *Screen* (exemplified by Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”), followed precisely these lines.



A MENUDO LOS PADRES USAN MUCHA FUERZA  
 ALGUNAS CICATRICES JAMÁS SE SANAN  
 AMENAZAR A ALGUIEN SEXUALMENTE ES UN ACTO HORRIBLE  
 CRÍSE A LOS NIÑOS Y NIÑAS DE LA MISMA FORMA  
 DEBERÍA VIAJAR LIVIANAMENTE  
 EL ABURRIMIENTO HACE QUE UNO HAGA COSAS LOCAS  
 EL ABUSO DEL PODER NO DEBE DE SER SORPRESA ALCUNA  
 EL AMOR ROMÁNTICO SE INVENTA PARA MANIPULAR A LAS MUJERES  
 EL ANIMALISMO ES PERFECTAMENTE SALUDABLE  
 EL COMER DEMASIADO ES CRIMINAL  
 EL CRIMEN CONTRA LA PROPIEDAD ES RELATIVAMENTE POCO IMPORTANTE  
 EL DINERO CREA GUSTO  
 EL DOLOR PUEDE SER UNA COSA POSITIVA  
 EL EXPRESAR CORAJE ES NECESARIO  
 EL GOBIERNO ES UNA CARGA PARA LA GENTE  
 EL HAMBRE ES LA FORMA DE LA NATURALEZA  
 EL HOMICIDIO TIENE SU LADO SEXUAL  
 EL HUMOR ES UN ESCAPE  
 EL IGNORAR LOS ENEMIGOS ES LA MEJOR FORMA DE PELEAR  
 EL INTERCAMBIO DE UNA VIDA POR OTRA ES SUFICIENTEMENTE JUSTO  
 EL MATAR ES INEVITABLE PERO NO ES ALGO DE QUE ESTAR ORGULLOSO  
 EL MOLESTAR A LAS PERSONAS SEXUALMENTE PUEDE DAR A CONSECUENCIAS MUY FEAS  
 EL MORIRSE DEBERÍA SER TAN FÁCIL COMO CAERSE DE UN PALO  
 EL UNIRSE CÓNYUGES FORTUITAMENTE ES BUENO PARA LO FALSO DE LOS MITOS SEXUALES  
 EL USAR LA FUERZA PARA PARAR LA FUERZA ES ABSURDO  
 EN ALGUNAS INSTANTES ES MEJOR MORIR QUE CONTINUAR  
 EN EL AFÁN NO HAY NADA QUE REDIMIR  
 EN TIEMPOS LA INACTIVIDAD ES PREFERIBLE AL FUNCIONAMIENTO SIN CUIDADO  
 ES BUENO DAR DINERO EXTRA A LA CARIDAD  
 ES HERCÓICO EL TRATAR DE PARAR EL TIEMPO  
 ES IMPERANTE TENER UNA VIDA DE FANTASÍA ACTIVA  
 ES IMPOSIBLE RECONCILIAR EL CORAZÓN Y EL CEREBRO  
 ES MEJOR SER INGENUO QUE SER VIVIDO  
 ES MEHO ACCIDENTE EL QUE SUS PADRES SEAN SUS PADRES  
 ESCUCHE CUANDO SU CUERPO HABLA  
 HAY QUE TENER UNA GRAN PASIÓN  
 HAY UNA DIVISIÓN MUY DELICADA ENTRE LA INFORMACIÓN Y LA PROP  
 LA DECADENCIA PUEDE SER SU PROPIO FINAL  
 LA DESCRIPCIÓN ES MÁS VALIOSA QUE LA METÁFORA  
 LA ENFERMEDAD ES UN ESTADO DE MENTE  
 LA FALTA DE CARISMA PUEDE SER FATAL  
 LA LIBERTAD ES UN LUJO NO UNA NECESIDAD  
 LA MAYORÍA DE LA GENTE NO SON APTOS PARA MANDARSE A SI M  
 LA MODERACIÓN MATA AL ESPÍRITU  
 LA NUEVA DISTRIBUCIÓN DE LA RIQUEZA ES IMPERATIVO  
 LA PRESENTACIÓN ES TAN IMPORTANTE COMO EL CONTENIDO  
 LA PROPIEDAD PRIVADA CREA EL CRIMEN  
 LA RABIA Y EL ODIO SIRVEN COMO FUERZAS MOTIVADORAS  
 LA RELIGIÓN CAUSA TANTOS PROBLEMAS COMO RESUELVE  
 LA SALVACIÓN NO PUEDE SER COMPRADA NI VENDIDA  
 LA TORTURA ES BARBARO  
 LA VIOLENCIA ES PERMISIBLE Y OCASIONALMENTE DESEADA  
 LAS DIFERENCIAS SEXUALES ESTÁN AQUÍ PARA QUEDARSE  
 LAS PALABRAS TIENDEN A SER INADECUADAS  
 LAS PERSONAS ESTÚPIDAS NO DEBEN PROCREAR  
 LAS PERSONAS NO SE COMPORTAN SI NO TIENEN NADA QUE PERDER  
 LAS PERSONAS QUE SE VUELVEN LOCAS SON MUY SENSITIVAS  
 LAS PERSONAS SON ABANDONADAS A MENOS QUE SEAN EXTREMISTAS  
 EL SENSIBILISMO HA PERDIDO SU AUTORIDAD  
 LOS NIÑOS CON LA ESPERANZA DEL FUTURO  
 LOS NIÑOS SON LOS MÁS CRUELES DE TODOS  
 LOS PRINCIPIOS SON PARA LOS SERES PEQUEÑOS  
 MALAS INTENCIONES PUEDEN PROVOCAR BUENOS RESULTADOS  
 MAS QUE NADA U LISTED DEBE DE MANTENERSE EN SUS PROPIOS ASUNTO  
 MIENTRAS MÁS SEPA MEJOR ESTARÁ  
 NADA TRASTORNA EL BALANCE DE LO BUENO Y MALO  
 NO PONGA MUCHO CONFIANZA EN EXPERTOS  
 NUESTROS CASTIGOS AGUALDAN GENTE BIEN MALA  
 SI UNO NO PUEDE DEJAR SU SEÑA DESISTA  
 SENSIBILIDAD ABSOLUTA PUEDE SER UNA FORMA DE LIBERTAD  
 SUS ACTOS SON RUTINARIOS SI NADIE SE FIA  
 SUS MENOS VIEJOS SON LOS PIORES  
 TODAS LAS COSAS ESTÁN DELICADAMENTE INTERCONNECTADAS  
 TODO LO INTERESANTE ES NUEVO  
 UN ELITE ES INEVITABLE  
 UN FUERTE SENTIDO DE RESPONSABILIDAD ENCARRILA A UNO  
 UN HOMBRE NO PUEDE SABER LO QUE ES SER MASO  
 UNO CAVA SU PROPIA TUMBA  
 UNO ES EL PASADO PRESENTE Y FUTURO  
 UNO ES INOCENTE EN SUS SUÑOS

OPPOSITE, TOP: JANE DICKSON,  
*DR. FREUD*, 1980. Monoprint,  
 18 x 25 in. Courtesy the artist and  
 Marlborough Gallery

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: JANE  
 DICKSON, *THE KISS*, 1980.  
 Monoprint, 19 x 25 in. Courtesy the  
 artist and Marlborough Gallery.

*Dickson's two monoprints  
 reproduced here are part of a  
 suite of images she produced  
 in response to the Times  
 Square Show in the summer  
 of 1980. They were published  
 in Hey Honey Wanna Lift?  
 (Appearances Press, 1981),  
 one of a series of four artists'  
 books organized by Joe Lewis.*

LEFT: JENNY HOLZER,  
 INSTALLATION IN THE  
 WINDOW OF FASHION  
 MODA, NEW YORK, 1979.  
 Fashion Moda Papers, Fales  
 Library. Copyright © 2004 Jenny  
 Holzer / Artists Rights Society  
 (ARS), New York

CINDY SHERMAN, *UNTITLED FILM STILL #27*, 1978. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures Gallery, New York



By focusing on the wider issue of representation (of which art forms a part), artists and critics sought, first, to undercut the authority of certain dominant representations (especially as they emanated from the media through photography), and, second, to begin to construct representations which would be less confining and oppressive (in part by providing a space for the viewer, in part through signifying its own position and affiliations). This critique of representation forms the centerpiece of an alliance of theoretical and critical positions which have examined and influenced the art of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In addition to underlying

the restructuring of much recent art, issues of representation in society provide the focus for the critical approaches in this book [Art after Modernism]. Therefore, a somewhat greater analysis of the function of representation is warranted at this point.

### RETHINKING REPRESENTATION

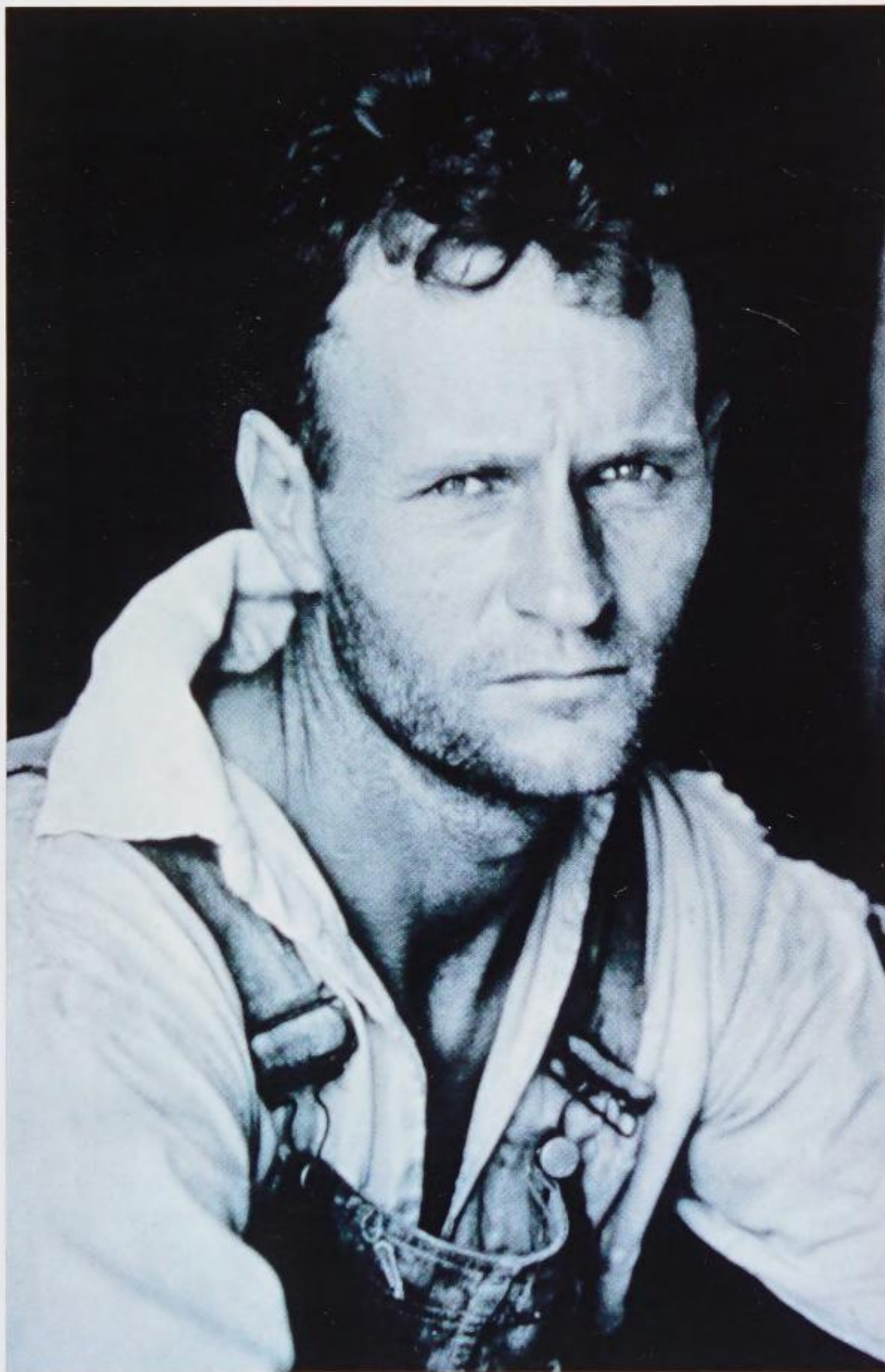
This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. This passage quotes a “certain Chinese encyclopedia” in which it is written that “animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.” In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that.

—Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*



In his introduction to *The Order of Things* in 1966, Michel Foucault identified Borges' story of the Chinese encyclopedia as an allegory which pointedly suggests the limits of representation. The irony of Borges' allegory centers on this demonstration that such classifications, such representations—the “landmarks of our thought”—are themselves fictional and contradictory constructions. The name, the genre, the category, the image, are all ways of circumscribing branches of knowledge by initially isolating certain elements of similitude and making these the criteria for differentiation. Foucault's laughter underscores his recognition that the cultural codes we live by, the orders of discourse we follow, all manners of representation—are not natural and secure, but are arbitrary and historically determined; they are, therefore, subject to critique and revision. Moreover, being critically formulated, such systems and discourses are governed by the biases of any critical process and, in assuming the authority to enact distinctions, initiate their own limitations and exclusions based on particular interests.

LAURIE SIMMONS, *ARMS UP—MARIA TALLCHIEF (BALLERINAS IN A LINE)*, 1982. Cibachrome print, 27 x 40 in., edition of 5. Courtesy the artist



SHERRIE LEVINE, *AFTER WALKER EVANS #3*, 1981.

Black and white photograph,  
8 x 10 in. Courtesy Paula Cooper  
Gallery, New York

There are of course many forms of representation; art forms a single, highly visible example. In the wildest sense, representations are those artificial (though seemingly immutable) constructions through which we apprehend the world: conceptual representations such as images, languages, definitions; which include and construct more social representations such as race and gender. Although such constructions often depend on a material form in the real world, representations constantly are posed as natural “facts” and their misleading plenitude obscures our apprehension of reality. Our access to reality is mediated by a gauze of representation. What is fragile about this oppressive contract is that the representational model we employ (and which cannot be avoided) is based on a critical selectivity—defining, naming, ordering, classifying, cataloguing, categorizing—that is just as arbitrary as that in Borges’ encyclopedia. Two implications immediately arise: first, that the founding act of representation involves an assumption of authority in the process of segregation, accumulation, selection, and confinement; and second, that critical theory might provide a key to understanding and countering certain negative effects of representation. For criticism addresses the fact that while the rational surface of representation—the name or image—is always calm and whole, it covers the act of representing which necessarily

involves a violent decontextualization.<sup>3</sup> In Roland Barthes’ words, “Representations are formations, but they are also deformations.”

Considered in social terms, representation stands for the interests of power. Consciously or unconsciously, all institutionalized forms of representation certify corresponding institutions of power. As Louis Althusser demonstrated, this power may be encoded subliminally in the iconography of communication, as well as in the anonymous evaluations which construct the “ideological state apparatuses” of the family, religion, law, culture, and nationality. Typical cultural representations, such as newspaper photographs, films, advertisements, popular fiction, and art, carry such ideologically charged messages. Advertisements, for example, depict



particular mythologies or stereotypical ideals of “the good life.” And while no one would deny that advertisements purposefully embody the ideological projections of the particular class whose interests they perpetuate, the point is that all cultural representations function this way, including representations of gender, class, and race. Such designations are inevitably hierarchical in the manner by which they privilege one element over another, in the ways they direct and dominate. Therefore, it is not that representations possess an inherent ideological content, but that they carry out an ideological function in determining the production of meaning.

If we acknowledge this system of inclusion and exclusion, and reject the implication (which Borges’ story lampoons) that any system of representation can be successfully unifying and totalizing, then it follows that there may exist within any system not only margins which may serve as sites for resistance, but also whole fields or communities of interest which might be inhabited and invigorated. The recognition that the critique of representation necessarily takes as its object those types of cultural constructions (images, ideologies, symbols) with which art traditionally deals, suggests that art and art making might be one effective site for such critical intervention. From this point of view, the issue is less how art criticism can best serve art than how art can serve as a fruitful realm for critical and theoretical activity. This gives to art criticism a responsibility and a political potential it is often denied (what the artist Victor Burgin refers to as “the politics of representation,” as

**LEFT:** RICHARD PRINCE, UNTITLED (COUPLE), 1977–79. Ektacolor print, 20 x 24 in. © Richard Prince. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York

**RIGHT:** RICHARD PRINCE, UNTITLED (COWBOY), 1980–84. Ektacolor print, 24 x 16½ in. © Richard Prince. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York



opposed to the “representation of politics”). Further, it shows the way to a more general critical practice which, surrounding and playing off art, might place in broader circulation an important body of issues and ideas.

Rather than simply ridiculing the ideal of determinate meaning, then, Foucault’s laughter underscores the potential of cultural criticism to challenge the fixed notions of representation. This new criticism would reexamine representation as a discourse, analyzing the way it produces and enforces knowledge (the institutions and operations which ensure its circulation), making clear how such knowledge is legitimated, and initiating a less exclusive and more generative means for interpreting the products of our culture. There is no possibility of operating outside the confinements of representation; rather—as is suggested in much of the criticism in this volume [*Art after Modernism*]<sup>1</sup>—the strategy is to work against such systems from within, to create new possibilities.

**THIS BOOK** [*Art after Modernism*], then, comprises a kind of argument. In contrast to the narrowly stylistic and ostensibly apolitical theories of modernist criticism, the essays in this book [*Art after Modernism*] insist on a variety of rigorous, interdisciplinary approaches, using economic, psychoanalytic, literary, and sociological theories to establish specific connections between art and social operations. This argument accepts as a historical determinant the waning validity of modernism as a radical endeavor and proposes in its wake a more heterogeneous set of options and strategies to operate as a “working definition” of what art can be and how it can function critically. (How art criticism functions in this expanded field of art activity forms the subtext of this argument.) The main lines of this polemic emerge through clusters of essays which specifically address one another or each contribute to the dialogue on a particular issue.

Three very different essays in the first section of the book [*Art after Modernism*] raise three fundamental formal issues which signal the break with modernist aesthetics: the so-called “death of the author” (Borges); the importance of originality and innovation in the construction of the “aura,” desirability, and value of the modernist art work (Krauss); and the displacement of the production of meaning from the artist to the reception or “completion” of the work by the viewer (Acker). Discounting these former linchpins of aesthetic production has in a certain sense liberated contemporary artists from modernist constraints. Yet, at the same time, there persist vestiges of modernist practice and ideology, in many respects anachronistic, which complicate the critical issues. The terms of this struggle between the still-dominant modernism and its critical opposition are charted in the various short histories of painting (Hughes), film (Hoberman), photography

(Solomon-Godeau), and criticism (Kelly), contained in the chapter entitled “Dismantling Modernism.”<sup>4</sup>

Current, somewhat frantic, attempts by the art market to salvage the commercial products of the collapsed modernist project are epitomized by the present, peculiarly vaunted status of painting as a preferred medium. Benjamin Buchloh sees in this revival of figurative expressionistic painting an echo of the reactionary revival of traditional craftsmanship and subject matter in European painting of the 1920s. Donald Kuspit and Thomas Lawson, on the other hand, both argue for the continued validity of painting as a radical endeavor, though their arguments proceed along different paths. Kuspit contends that New German Painting retains a radical capacity to serve as a public exorcism of personal or national trauma. Lawson, accepting the central, privileged position of painting in the art system, argues for it as the most visible and expedient site for critical intervention.

As a cultural term, postmodernism has been used to describe everything from a broad cultural shift (coinciding with postindustrialism) to new directions in rock music. Since in a broad sense postmodernist critical practices underlie all the essays in this book [*Art after Modernism*], the section “Theorizing Postmodernism” focuses rather narrowly on the original definitions of that term in relation to recent art. To a great extent these definitions depend on a literary source, particularly Roland Barthes’ theory of the text and, more broadly, poststructuralism. Hal Foster’s essay provides an excellent introduction to the ways in which several art critics used these theories to interpret the shifting attitudes of artists in the late 1970s. Douglas Crimp and Craig Owens, in particular, argue that works of art function like texts in that they facilitate the active response of the viewer. As with allegorical fragments, the viewer must fill in, add to, build upon suggestive elements in the text supplying extraneous historical, personal, and social references, rather than, as in modernism, transporting himself to the special world and time of the artist’s original production.

This tendency to read all cultural products as “texts” has led to considerations of the structure and function of representation outside of high art. Elements of popular culture—anathema to modernist critics such as Greenberg—are regarded as equally fruitful objects of critical investigation as painting and sculpture. Thus Fredric Jameson’s investigations of the subgenres of science fiction and detective stories as bearers of contemporary ideologies, or Jonathan Crary’s recognition in *General Hospital* of a digitized interchangeability of characters, do more than describe the mechanisms of the media, they attempt to deconstruct and expose their contradictory codes.

Jean Baudrillard has suggested that these media-derived representations are more real to us today than reality. Or, at least, that certain forms of imagery and



SUE COE, *REAGAN SPEAKS FOR HIMSELF*, 1984. Mixed media and collage on white etching paper, 30<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 23 in. Copyright © 1984 Sue Coe. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York

narrative strategies in the media, having no basis in fact, have warped our definition of and access to material reality. Today no action, no feeling, no thought we own has not been preformed by a thousand movies, commercials, television sitcoms, or magazine articles. Our society, supersaturated with information and images, not only has no need for individuality, it no longer owns such a concept.

As the technical means for producing or distributing mass-media representations becomes increasingly remote from the individual, the need for a critical understanding of the network and institutions which produce such images becomes even more important. In this respect Walter Benjamin's essay provides a still-timely model for how the artist might function politically through changing the forms of artistic production, particularly by effective use of preexisting mass media forms of photojournalism, promotion, and distribution. As Benjamin establishes a direct, functional relationship between the context and distribution of photographic images and the interests of capital, Martha Rosler extends this project in her own essay examining the contemporary art world institutions which govern the production,

critical assessment, and circulation of photographs as art. Lucy Lippard adopts a more overtly militant activist response to specific social and political situations, especially in relation to overtly unequal distributions of social and political power.

A rigorous questioning of such hierarchical conditions is central to current feminist theory and to its contribution to the analysis of the social function of representations. Today feminist critiques of representation and power address a number of issues which have not been examined elsewhere with equal force or clarity: the repositioning of the subject in relation to power (Acker, Foucault,

Mulvey); the ability to reread and question inherited knowledge (Mulvey, Penley); the understanding that power is knowledge and knowledge power (Linker, Foucault); and ultimately the rejection of logic and representation themselves as demonstrably patriarchal concepts (Acker, Linker).

Inasmuch as any anthology is retrospective in character, this book [*Art after Modernism*] is in a productive way backward-looking, providing a summing-up of several, by now established directions in recent criticism. This approach, however, inevitably harbors its own exclusions and foreshortens consideration of issues which only now appear on the horizon. The exclusions are of great concern not only for what has been left out, but also for what has not been written (a serious study of black culture in relation to the institutionalized art world, for instance)—or what will never be written given present institutional practices. With these limitations in mind, we can make further demands on future criticism: to explore the specific economic motivations and impingements on the institutions of the art world—museums, galleries, publications, critics themselves; to examine the methods by which specific racial, social, and ethnic groups are marginalized, their interests and images stereotyped or suppressed; to address particular audiences for art and criticism and establish new means of distribution to meet such audiences; to consider how certain issues elude representation or are assimilated into conventional modes of representation (images of work, poverty, history, nature, for example); and, finally, given the invisible imperialism of global information networks, to retain access to the apparatus of image production, but also to insist on access to criticism of the system itself.

## NOTES

This essay was originally published as “What’s Wrong with This Picture? An Introduction,” in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited by Brian Wallis with a foreword by Marcia Tucker (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, in association with David R. Godine, Boston, 1984), xi–xiii. It is reprinted here by gracious permission of the New Museum of Contemporary Art.

In most cases, author names (often in parentheses) and essay titles refer to contributions to *Art after Modernism*.

1. Hilton Kramer, “Criticism Endowed: Reflections on a Debacle,” *New Criterion* 2, no. 3 (November 1983): 4.
2. Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” *Arts Yearbook*, no. 4 (1961): 48.
3. Edward Said, “In the Shadow of the West,” *Wedge*, nos. 7–8 (winter–spring 1985): 4.
4. “Dismantling Modernism” echoes the title of Allan Sekula’s seminal essay, “Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation),” *Massachusetts Review* 19, no. 4 (winter 1978): 859–83.

**FROM THE MARGINS**, I'm supposed to speak as a native informant. I was there then; when. It's a fact, I was. It was my experience. Friends could document me, sitting at a table, in a corner, standing onstage, giving a reading when the room was so dark I couldn't see the words on the page. If they remembered me there. But most of my friends or acquaintances won't, and I won't remember most of what they did.

I remember boring and exciting nights and dull and hallucinatory events. I remember a group reading in the early 1990s at Simon Watson's gallery, emceed by Patrick McGrath in a tux jacket, in which Richard Hell, Max Blagg, Gary Indiana, and I recited from the Marquis de Sade's *100 Days of Sodom* to protest censorship.

"I remember" is a heart-stopper (now an homage to poet and painter Joe Brainard's book *I Remember*). "I remember" is as powerful as "I love," a trigger, and just a subject and verb. Both capture emotions left out of histories.

Sometimes, as on the strangely intoxicating de Sade night, I took photographs—because no one else did; photographing was a special act to me; it was a group of special people; I knew the moment would die; or I wanted to be able to record scenes as, or because, I would forget them, for when they no longer mattered, like now, with a present that doesn't require them.

Being in the present entails having a past that is never completely dead and also never again alive. When I interviewed Meret Oppenheim in Paris—she was my first interview—I asked her about "her time," the 1920s and '30s, when Dada and Surrealism thrived. She looked at me as if I were crazy and replied, and I paraphrase: It is the same as it is now. I have friends, I do my work.

Does it matter that Meret Oppenheim left Max Ernst because she felt he'd hold her back? That her reputation was stuck to an early work, *The Fur Teacup and Saucer*, like the fur to the cup, and that this plagued her? What is the value of another's experience, what is significant about so-called movements, seeming coalitions, temporary alliances, parallel activities, whose importance asserts itself only after they're over. What is history for, what is remembering for?

I remember the rigor and vitality with which Meret Oppenheim talked about her work; maybe it affected my writing in some way. I have no capacity to gauge or grasp this.

If we study the past we might not repeat it, we're told, so history's important—though we do repeat it, because the compulsion to repeat is not just an individual matter and mostly not voluntary. We return and return to familiar places, ideas, and beliefs, with enthusiasm, naiveté, and in paroxysms. Look at the twenty-first century's return to religion. The murderer returns to the scene of the crime, fascinated, horrified by the act, full of guilt and pleasure and fear.

Let's say I return to the scene of my "crimes"—my times that presumably are not yours. Do my acts add to "knowledge" and "history"—history is always multiple. But ineluctably, history has its immediate and less immediate uses for life's current occupants, who do and undo it in their image. What is it that my experience offers you, reader?

Inside this margin, more than my explaining my inclusion in, or exclusion from a scene, whatever that is, since its theorizations and renditions are necessarily false and true, because it's never possible to render judgments that won't be in some way inaccurate and incomplete, I was asked to remember.

I remember Craig Owens. I met Craig Owens through Barbara Kruger in the early 1980s, maybe on West Broadway in SoHo. I'm not sure. Craig Owens was a brilliant, serious, productive, quixotic thinker, he was a major theorist of postmodernism in art, he was a senior editor at *Art in America*, he was an art critic. Craig Owens was formidable, severe in his analyses. Craig Owens was insecure. Craig Owens was curious and intellectually fun. Craig Owens loved Almodóvar's *Law of Desire*, especially its opening scene. Craig Owens explained, at the end of an opera, that it was normal when opera fans, especially in the balcony, loudly booed a diva. Craig Owens screwed up his face when he explained things. Craig Owens went to the giant AIDS March in Washington, D.C., in 1988,

where he disliked protesters pointing fingers and yelling “shame” at the White House. Craig Owens was joyful eating a ripe nectarine I’d bought for him. Craig Owens was six foot seven. Craig Owens watched Mets games on TV.

Craig Owens told me, after he read my novella *Weird Fucks*, that it didn’t matter if it had happened to me. We were having lunch, for the first time together, in P. J. O’Rourke’s. Craig Owens thought art depended on the artist’s ability to use material and turn it into something that might matter—but not necessarily about its maker’s identity and experience. Craig Owens may not have been aware that I experienced my own private death of an author, while eating a rare hamburger. Craig Owens phoned me, in 1986, and asked me to write for *Art in America*, to contribute to a symposium on Renoir. I said, I’m not an art historian. Craig Owens said, We’re asking you as a fiction writer.

Craig Owens once said in an interview that he and his colleagues were “writing not necessarily about these critical and oppositional practices but alongside them.” Craig Owens was frustrated that his essays on the allegorical impulse were often reprinted, when he’d moved on from them, and that

reminded me, even then, of Meret Oppenheim glued to her *Fur Teacup and Saucer*. Craig Owens cooked a Southwestern-style Thanksgiving dinner, with blue tortilla chips. Craig Owens adopted a soaking wet cat, discovered and thought dead lying in a garbage can outside his building, and named her Miss Kitty, after the heroine in *Gunsmoke*. Craig Owens told me in a taxi, after we’d been to an opera, that he wasn’t afraid to die. Craig Owens’s last essay in *Art in America* suggested that people “speak to” rather than for or about others.

In the eight months before he died, when he lived in his parents’ house outside Chicago, Craig Owens was excited about his reading and ideas on paranoia and homosexuality, theorizing about Fassbinder, Pasolini, and Derek Jarman. Craig Owens died of AIDS on July 4, 1990. He was thirty-nine. *Beyond Recognition* is the only collection of his work that exists (read it, dear reader). It appeared posthumously, because Craig Owens was never satisfied with his own work. And, I don’t remember much more than I remember.



LYNNE TILLMAN, 1986. Photo: Nan Goldin

# AFTERWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**WITH ENOUGH TIME**, even the most radical art, music, literature, film, and performance take on the patina of history. Certainly, some twenty to thirty years later, we can begin to unravel the knot of multiple narratives that became intertwined during the tumultuous Downtown New York art scene between 1974 and 1984. Clearly, this impetus is not ours alone—it is in the air. In 2002, Julie Ault's *Alternative Art, New York, 1965–1985*, an overview of the alternative Downtown scene, was published. The following year in March and April, *Artforum* produced a specially packaged two-issue study of the 1980s in celebration of the journal's fortieth anniversary that, not surprisingly, focused on the more commercially successful artists. Richard Flood is preparing an exhibition that presents a much more selective view of that decade for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. And in December 2004, Dan Cameron's show, *East Village U.S.A.*, opened at the New Museum's temporary space in Chelsea.

This volume, *The Downtown Book*, was conceived to accompany an exhibition, *The Downtown Show*, at Fales Library and the Grey Art Gallery at New York University. The Grey and Fales were destined, and we were determined, to collaborate, given our mutual interests and collections. We also shared the conviction that, with an exhibition and publication, NYU could make a substantial contribution to the Greenwich Village community as well as inform students about the extraordinarily rich cultural scene that has taken place in Lower Manhattan for well over 150 years. The Fales Downtown Collection, the largest repository of materials—including books, photographs, videos, journals, posters, and ephemera—relating to the New York Downtown scene, provided the nucleus for this collaborative venture.

In fall 2001, Martha Wilson introduced us to Leanne Mella and Mark Segal,

who proposed an exhibition focusing on the New York scene from 1974 to 1981. As we proceeded, we realized that our visions of that time differed, and we decided to part ways. We thank Leanne and Mark for sharing their thoughts and ideas about this dynamic time; certainly, our discussions helped us define our goals for such an endeavor. With the receipt of a New York State Council on the Arts exhibition planning grant, we were able to convene an informal advisory committee of notable Downtown denizens and scholars. The group met three times during the 2003–4 academic year. The lively discussions and debates that took place were enormously helpful as we tried to resolve a number of the challenges we would face in trying to write about and present art that was conceived as ephemeral and alternative, and often outright subversive. The committee members—Bruce Altshuler, Eric Bogosian, Linda Goode Bryant, Richard Hell, Liza Kirwin, Ron Kolm, Joe Lewis, Carlo McCormick, Alan Moore, Yasmin Ramirez, Robin Schanzenbach, Lynne Tillman, Brian Wallis, and Martha Wilson—were vociferous and passionate. A number of them were asked to contribute to this volume, and Carlo McCormick courageously (and perhaps foolhardily) agreed to act as the exhibition's guest curator. Also adding expert advice were Alexandra Anderson-Spivey, Ann Butler, Dennis Cooper, Karen Finley, John Hanhardt, Shelley Rice, Ira Silverberg, and Chris Straayer. We are enormously grateful to all of them.

Then there are, of course, the numerous contradictions and pitfalls that we both predicted and have attempted to address as we produce an institutional exhibition and publication about a scene that, at its very core, set out to undermine institutions. For instance, *The Downtown Book* comprises essays addressing genres even though the artists themselves were adamantly breaking down those very genres. Moreover, the show takes place in a university art museum and library— institutions at the very heart of academia, a double whammy of sorts. Some things, however, cannot help but remain stubbornly unruly and messy. The period we are addressing is neither the complete decade of the '70s nor the '80s. The show is not only about the East Village, nor is it solely about the alternative spaces. Finally, we did not want to mythologize or idealize these raucous, and also clearly troubled, times. Whether we have succeeded or not is up to you to determine.

Certainly, an endeavor of such magnitude and ambitions could not have been realized without the help of many people. Key among them, especially in terms of the book, have been Lucy Oakley and Ian Alteveer. Lucy's keen editorial sense, extensive knowledge of art history and critical theory, and substantial art-publishing experience were absolutely invaluable. Ian's subtle eye, comprehensive understanding of contemporary art, and practical gallery experience enabled him to gather an impressive array of images and manage them with aplomb and, luckily for us, good



humor. Among the many others who helped with editing and production, we wholeheartedly thank Madeleine B. Adams, Deborah Drier, Michael Gillespie, Nancy Grubb, Kate Norment, and Leif Sorensen, as well as Hanne Winarsky, Carmel Lyons, Daniel Ranbom, and Sara Lerner at Princeton University Press. We also gratefully acknowledge our sidebar authors, who experienced the Downtown scene firsthand and, more important, helped shape it. Their voices, along with those of their fellow essayists, helped us put the pieces of the puzzle together. Similarly, our heartfelt appreciation to Patricia Fabricant, whose daring book design similarly plays a crucial role in conveying the visual dynamics of a scene where so many different disciplines became interwoven. We thank, as well, the New Museum of Contemporary Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art for permission to reprint the essays by Brian Wallis and Matthew Yokobosky, respectively.

At the Grey Art Gallery, Ian was the third graduate assistant from NYU's Institute of Fine Arts to help us organize the show. Bragan Thomas conducted initial research and Gregory Galligan oversaw the advisory committee meetings and added to our ever-expanding research files. Ian not only assisted Carlo McCormick but also compiled this volume's chronology. Interns Juliana Balestin, Andrea Giambrone, Rie Homura and Maria Nicanor diligently pitched in. Also, once again, the project could not have been completed without the remarkable and steadfast teamwork by Frank Poueymirou, Michèle Wong, Gwen Stolyarov, David Colosi, Shauna Young, Philip Hall, and Alyssa Plummer. At Fales Library, Ann Butler and Mike Kelly assumed even greater responsibilities while Marvin edited this book.

Funding, of course, is also essential. We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, Philip Aarons and Shelley Fox Aarons, M.D., The Buhl Foundation, and the Abby Weed Grey Trust. Finally, neither the Fales Downtown Collection nor the Grey Art Gallery could exist without institutional backing. We would like to thank our colleagues at New York University for their enthusiasm, with special recognition to Dean Catherine Stimpson, Dean Carol Mandel, and Michael Stoller, along with New York University's Humanities Council. Finally, our heartfelt gratitude and thanks to the Downtown artists who lived the scene from 1974 to 1984 for willingly sharing their memories, writings, and art, and for keeping alive the vision and contributions of those who didn't survive.

**LYNN GUMPERT**

Director, Grey Art Gallery  
New York University

**MARVIN J. TAYLOR**

Director, Fales Library  
New York University

We also extend special thanks to the following for their help:

Jonas Mekas at Anthology Film Archives	John Jesurun	Murison at PPOW Gallery
Les Barany	Lisa Kahane	Adam Reich
Max Blagg	Alissa Wagner at Paul Kasmin Gallery	Tim Rollins
Ron Warren at Mary Boone Gallery	Justen Ladda	Jane Kallir, Sarah Freeman, and Meta Duevell at Galerie St. Etienne
Hal Bromm	Marcus Leatherdale	Hiroko Onoda and Keith Lang at Tony Shafrazi Gallery
Andrea Callard	Susan Hoeltzel at the Lehman College Art Gallery	Russell Sharon
John Cheim, Paul Moreno, and Chris Burnside at Cheim & Read	Gracie Mansion	Laurie Simmons
Martha Cooper	Jeffrey Peabody, Sabrina Buell, and Victoria Cuthbert at Matthew Marks Gallery	Starsfilesonline.com
Steve Henry, Anthony Allen, and Maki Nanamori at Paula Cooper Gallery	Carol Platt at Marvel Enterprises, Inc.	Mark Stern
Paula Court	Dona Ann McAdams	Mark J. Sussman
Jane Dickson	Allan McCollum	Allan Tannenbaum
Stefan Eins	Catherine McGann	Jenn Joy at TDR: <i>The Drama Review</i>
Ron Feldman, Marco Nocella, Sarah Paulson, and Laura Muggeo at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts	Patrick McMullan, Perrie Wardell, and Nick Papananias at Patrick McMullan Co.	Diane Torr
Martha Wilson and Harley Spiller at Franklin Furnace Archive, Inc.	Peter Schuette, Tom Heman, and Allison Card at Metro Pictures	Muna Tseng and Rachel Foullon at Muna Tseng Dance Projects, Inc.
Rosalie Benitez and Adam Ottavischiesi at Barbara Gladstone Gallery	Joseph Nechvatal	Marc Viaplana
John Marchant at the Nan Goldin Studio	Dan Trout at the Tom Otterness Studio	Harvey Wang
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Bob Gruen	Penny Pilkington, Wendy Olsoff, Photios Giovanis, and Jason	Jimmy Wright
Tehching Hsieh		Stephanie Azam at Zeitgeist Films, Inc.
		Pavel Zoubok and Julie Brunner Cross at Pavel Zoubok Gallery
		Angela Choon, Wendy White, and Melissa Piechucki at David Zwirner

# CHRONOLOGY

## ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES

### AUGUST 3, 1973

A section of the 1869 Broadway Central Hotel's facade, at 879 Broadway, collapses, killing four people. The former hotel houses the Mercer Arts Center on its first two floors, with five theaters and cabarets, the performance space the Kitchen (inaugurated on July 5, 1971, in the hotel's old kitchen), and several artists' studios. The loss of the Mercer Arts Center leaves a significant hole in performance venues downtown.

### OCTOBER 11, 1973

Michael Goldstein publishes the first issue of the *SoHo Weekly News*. It is free and only twelve pages, with the headline "SoHo Wins Landmark," referring to the recent decision to create the SoHo Cast Iron Historical District, running from West Broadway to Crosby Street, and from Houston to Canal Streets.

### DECEMBER 31, 1973

Abraham Beame is sworn in as New York's 104th mayor. The next day, he tells a group gathered on the steps of City Hall: "I hope to be a matchmaker in the years of my administration, wedding our people to their city, encouraging them to identify with this great metropolis that is their home." New York faces a mounting budget crisis, and Beame is forced to lay off 65,000 people from the municipal payroll the following year.

## EVENTS

### MARCH 9, 1974

Gordon Matta-Clark opens the *Anarchi-cture Show* at 112 Greene Street. He conceives this group show as a document of ideas sparked in weekly meetings over the course of a year. All works in the show are to be 16-by-20-inch photographs and exhibited anonymously. The participants all stick to the rules except for Laurie Anderson and Richard Nonas, who both submit drawings.



RICHARD HELL AND TOM VERLAINE, *THERESA STERN*, 1973. Gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 in. Richard Hell Papers, Fales Library. Courtesy Richard Meyers.

*In the early 1970s, Hell and Verlaine's poetry included works by a fictional young woman named Theresa Stern. To produce this iconic, gender-bending image of "Theresa," both men posed for a composite portrait wearing the same wig.*

## POLITICS AND HISTORY

### FEBRUARY 4, 1974

Patty Hearst, daughter of newspaper magnate Randolph A. Hearst, is kidnapped from her apartment in Berkeley, California, by members of the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA). Despite extortion from her father of some two million dollars worth of food for the poor and a violent Los Angeles shootout that kills six members of the SLA, Hearst remains a captive and cohort of the radical group until she is nabbed by the FBI in San Francisco on September 18, 1975. She is later convicted of various crimes undertaken with the SLA. Hearst is later granted an official pardon by Bill Clinton on January 20, 2001, his last day in office.

### APRIL 1, 1974

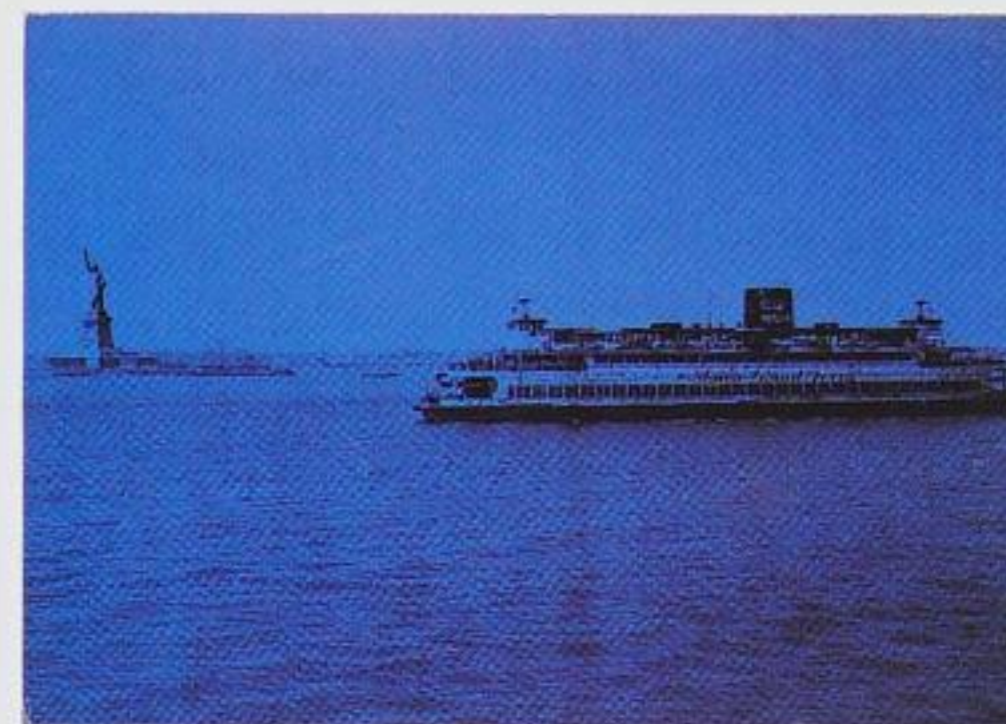
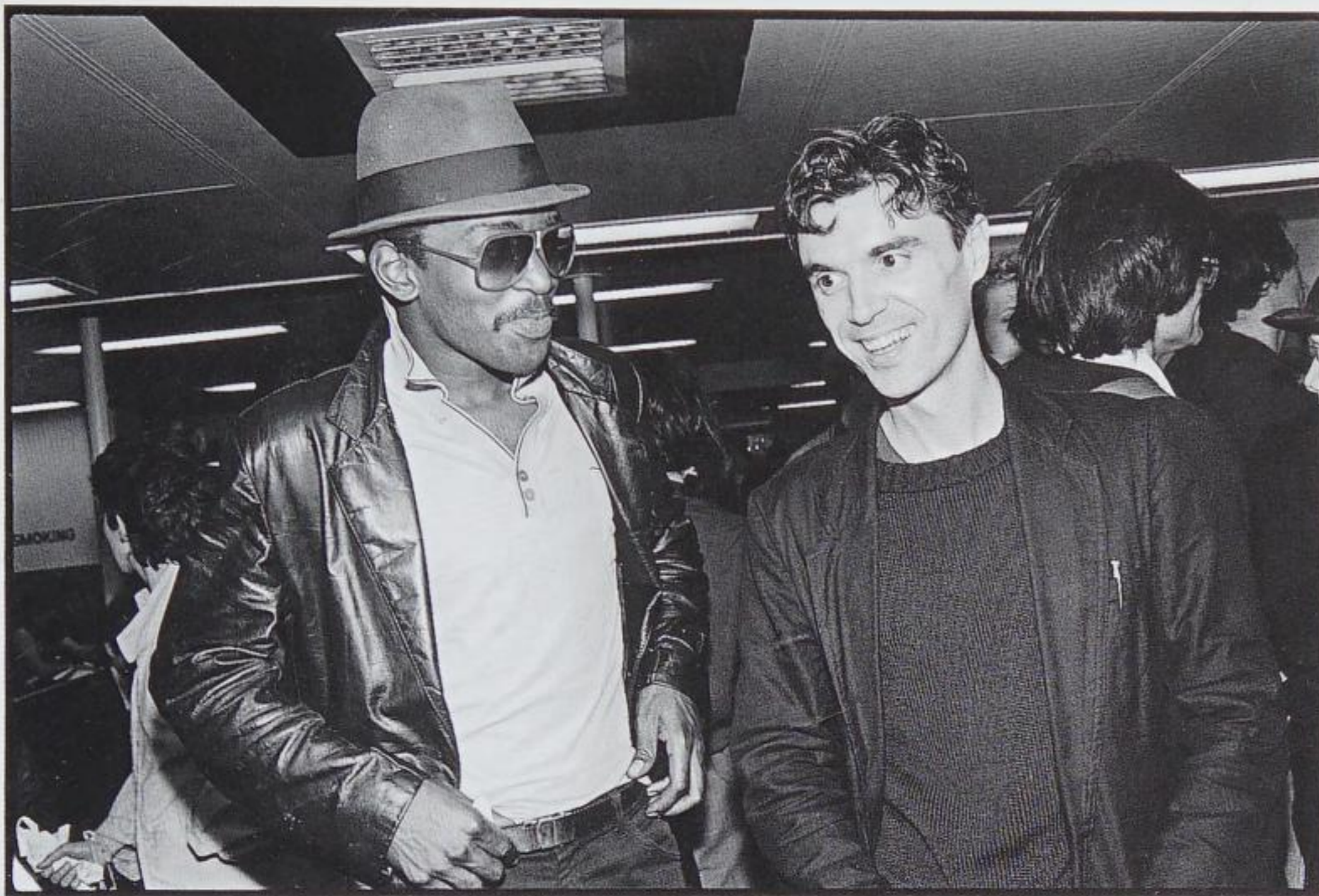
Jane Fonda, joined by her husband, the politician Tom Hayden, arrives in Hanoi, North Vietnam, for the second time since 1972.

### MAY 20, 1974

New York Magazine's cover article boasts that SoHo is "The Most Exciting Place to Live in the City," and features a pull-out guide to the galleries and lofts in the area.

### JUNE 15, 1974

In order to regulate the ever-increasing illegal occupancy of commercial lofts in Lower Manhattan and stem landlord abuses, the Emergency Tenant Protection Act, ch. 576 (ETPA), is passed in New York State, to "prevent exaction of



**LEFT:** FAB FIVE FREDDY AND DAVID BYRNE ON THE STATEN ISLAND FERRY, KITCHEN BENEFIT, 1983. Photo: Paula Court

**RIGHT:** ANNOUNCEMENT FOR THE EXHIBITION *KITCHEN TOURING THE U.S.A. I*, 1983. Downtown Flyers Collection, Fales Library. *The Kitchen was the site for many important exhibitions and performances—but in this case, it took the show on the road. This invitation announces a “traveling” exhibition on board the Staten Island Ferry, a benefit for the organization.*

## 1974

Joe Overstreet founds Kenkeleba House at 185 Bowery, with Corinne Jennings as director. In December 1979, the gallery moves to 214 East Second Street. Providing artists' studios and an exhibition and performance space as well as an extensive library of books and slides, Kenkeleba House is dedicated to “the development of experimental work and the encouragement of an interdisciplinary approach to the arts” with a special emphasis on African American artists and others excluded from the cultural and political mainstream.

The Kitchen, recovering from the collapse of the Mercer Arts Center, incorporates itself as the not-for-profit Haleakala, Inc., and moves to 59 Wooster Street in SoHo, rapidly becoming a center of the Downtown art world and a hotbed of artistic activity.

### MARCH 21, 1974

Warhol Superstar Candy Darling dies of leukemia at Columbus Hospital on East Nineteenth Street (now Beth Israel Medical Center):

### MARCH 31, 1974

Television (Richard Lloyd, Tom Verlaine, Richard Hell on bass, and Billy Ficca on drums) performs for the first time at Hilly Kristal's CBGB-OMFUG (Country, Bluegrass, Blues, and Other Music for Uplifting Gourmandizers). Performances by Blondie and the Ramones soon follow. Patti Smith and Lenny Kaye (the Patti Smith Group) join Television for a joint two-month residency in spring 1975, followed shortly by the Talking Heads, sealing CBGB's reputation as the focal point of the Punk/New Wave music scene.

### MAY 1974

Joseph Beuys arrives at New York's Kennedy Airport entirely wrapped in felt. He is picked up by an ambulance and transported to the René Block Gallery, 409 West Broadway, for his exhibition *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me*. Beuys lives with a coyote behind a chain link fence in the gallery for three days, performing daily rituals of introducing the animal to some of Beuys's signature objects: felt, a walking stick, newspapers, and so on.

unjust, unreasonable and oppressive rents and rental agreements and to forestall profiteering speculation and other disruptive practices tending to produce threats to public health, safety, and general welfare.”

### AUGUST 8, 1974

In the aftermath of the burglary at the Watergate Apartments in June 1972, Richard Nixon announces his resignation in a televised address. His vice-president, Spiro Agnew, had already resigned the previous year, and Agnew's replacement, Gerald Ford, is sworn in at noon on August 9. He grants Nixon a controversial unconditional pardon on September 8, stating, “My conscience tells me clearly and certainly that I cannot prolong the bad dreams that continue to reopen a chapter that is closed.”

### NOVEMBER 13, 1974

Karen Silkwood, union organizer and whistle blower, disappears on her way to meet with a union leader and a New York Times reporter.

## ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES **EVENTS**

### SEPTEMBER 1974

Andy Warhol moves the Factory from 33 Union Square West to 860 Broadway at Seventeenth Street, even closer to Max's Kansas City.

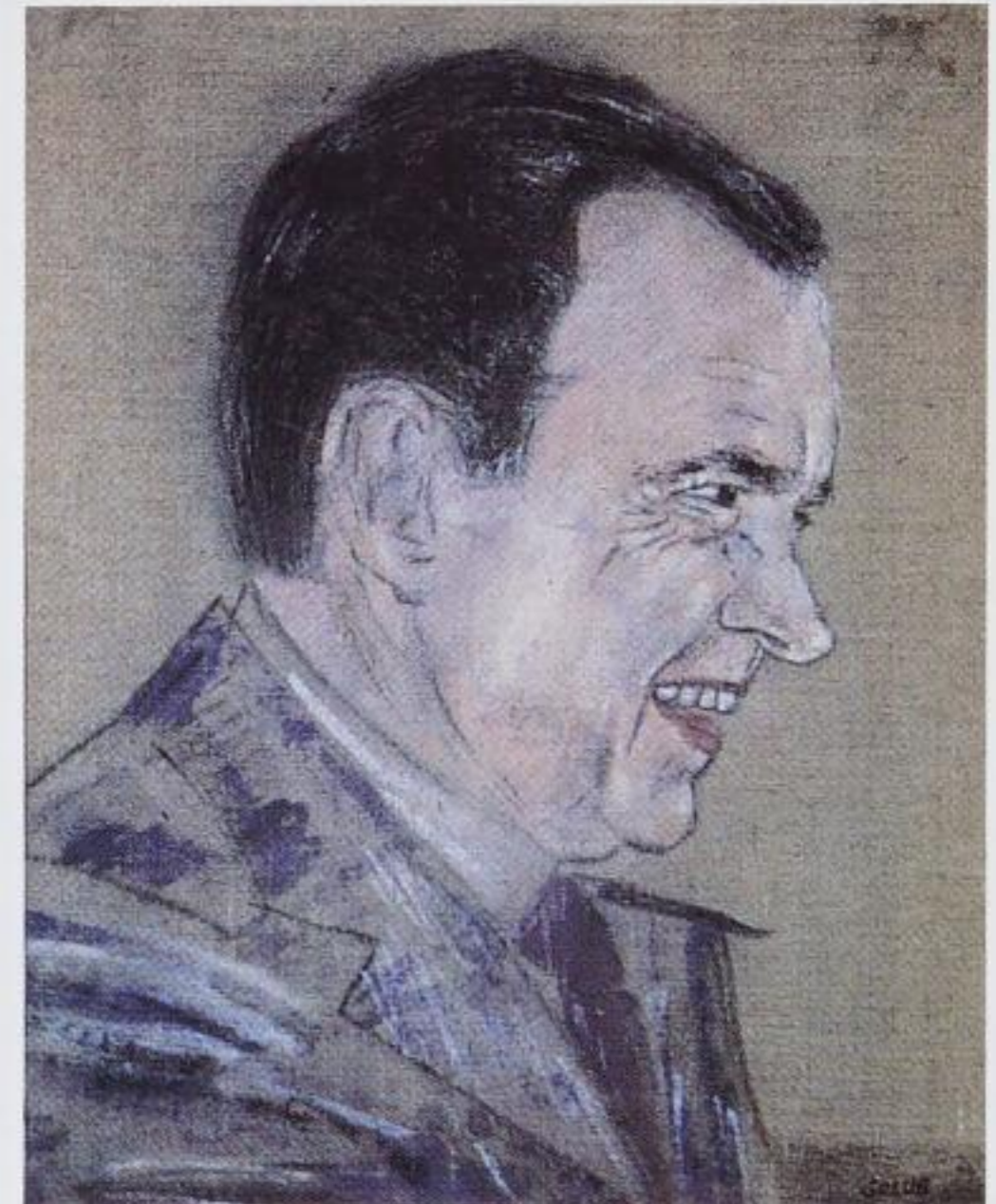
### DECEMBER 1974

With an exhibition of ten Japanese artists, Geno Rodriguez, Janice Rooney, and Robert Browning open the Center for International Arts on East Fourth Street as "a non-profit organization dedicated to a pluralistic approach to the arts and cultural activities of New York City." In 1979 the CIA is renamed the

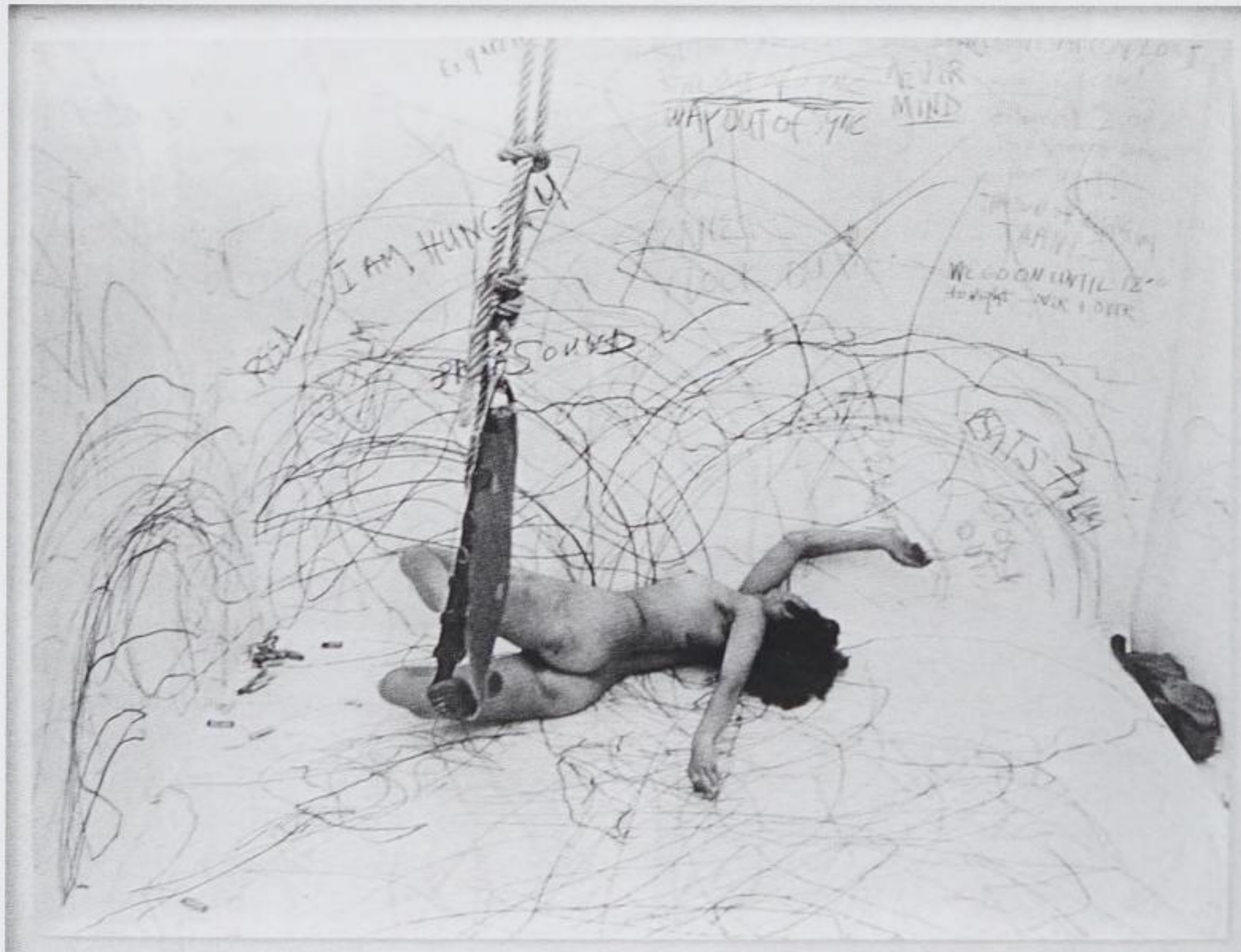
### NOVEMBER 1974

Following Robert Morris's macho poster for his Castelli Sonnabend Gallery exhibition—which shows the artist shirtless and adorned in S/M-style leather straps, a helmet, and dark aviator glasses—Lynda Benglis publishes an ad in *Artforum* in conjunction with her show at Paula Cooper Gallery. The ad shows the artist naked except for cat's-eye sunglasses, holding a large double-headed dildo that extends from her crotch. Editors Lawrence Alloway, Max Kozloff, Rosalind Krauss, Joseph Masheck, and Annette Michelson pub-

## POLITICS AND HISTORY



LEON GOLUB, *RICHARD NIXON*, FROM THE SERIES *PORTRAITS OF POWER*, 1976. Acrylic on canvas, 20½ x 16½ in. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Art copyright © Estate of Leon Golub/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN, *UP TO AND INCLUDING HER LIMITS*, PERFORMANCE AT THE STUDIOGALERIE, BERLIN, 1976. Photo: Henrik Gaard. Courtesy the artist and PPOW Gallery, New York.

*In Up To and Including Her Limits*, Schneemann swung naked from a rope harness, drawing on the walls and floor of the gallery in a feminist reworking of Pollock-type action painting. She staged it at numerous Downtown venues throughout the mid-1970s, including Artists Space, the Kitchen, and Anthology Film Archives—where it opened their new space on Wooster Street in 1974.

### APRIL 30, 1975

North Vietnamese troops capture Saigon without a struggle. Any remaining American troops or personnel—the few left after U.S. Congress's August 1973 proscription against any further American involvement on the peninsula—had been airlifted out earlier that month. When North and South Vietnam are united the following year, Saigon is renamed Ho Chi Minh City.

### JULY 30, 1975

Under mysterious circumstances, former Teamsters president James Hoffa disappears from a restaurant in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Although both later denied having met Hoffa, Anthony Giacalone, a Detroit mobster, and Anthony Provenzano, a former New Jersey Mafioso and Teamsters official, are said to have had an appoint-

Alternative Museum upon its move to 17 White Street, where it presents solo and group exhibitions that often address social or political themes. The Alternative Museum goes completely digital in 2000, closing its Broadway exhibition space and launching its Web site.

#### DECEMBER 12–13, 1974

Jonas Mekas inaugurates Anthology Film Archives' new space in a building owned by Fluxus artist George Maciunas at 80 Wooster Street with two evenings of Carolee Schneemann's film and performance cycle *Up To and Including Her Limits*. Mekas had opened Anthology Film Archives at Joseph Papp's Public Theater on Lafayette Street on November 30, 1970.

#### DECEMBER 15, 1974

Barbara Dilley and Larry Fagin found Danspace Project "to provide an appropriate venue for independent experimental choreographers," and present their first show. Danspace performances take place in the 1799 landmark St. Mark's Church in the East Village, and Dilley and Fagin support the early work of dancers such as Bill T. Jones.

#### 1975

Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero move the Nuyorican Poets, which began meeting in Algarín's living room the previous year, to the Sunshine Café, an old Irish bar on East Sixth Street.

#### 1976

Paradise Garage opens at 84 King Street. Larry Levan designs the custom sound system and becomes the house DJ.

#### JANUARY 1, 1976

John Holmstrom and Legs McNeil, denizens of the CBGB's scene, publish the first issue of *Punk* magazine from a storefront at Thirtieth Street and Tenth Avenue. Lou Reed appears on the first cover, followed by Patti Smith and then Joey Ramone. Their first editorial reads:

lish a letter to the editor (John Coplans) the following month calling the ad "vulgar," "disgusting," and "the last straw."

#### JANUARY 20, 1975

The Whitney Biennial opens, curated by Marcia Tucker. She includes the work of the Downtown artist Ross Bleckner, and, for the first time, video art, by Bill Viola.

#### JUNE 1975

Shooting begins at CBGB's and Max's Kansas City on Amos Poe and Ivan Kral's (a performer in the Patti Smith Group) movie *Blank Generation/Dancin' Barefoot*. After wrapping on New Year's Eve and being edited in February 1976, the fifty-five minute film—a vital document of the burgeoning Punk scene—premiers soon afterward at CBGB's as the "opening act" for Richard Hell's band the Heartbreakers.

The Talking Heads, founded by David Byrne and friends from the Rhode Island School of Design Chris Frantz and Tina Weymouth, make their live debut at CBGB's.

#### JULY 1975

CBGB's Festival of Unrecorded Rock Bands, showcasing forty bands in two weeks, is covered by the *New York Times* and the *Village Voice*.

#### DECEMBER 1975

Colette, the Tunisian-born performance artist, transforms a room of the Clocktower into a lush cocoon with thousands of yards of parachute silk for her performance *Real Dream*, sleeping naked in her installation.

#### 1976

Gordon Matta-Clark is invited to participate in an exhibition at New York's Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies that includes work by some of his former architecture professors

ment with him. Hoffa is declared "presumed dead" in 1982.

#### AUGUST 1, 1975

Officially recognizing post-World War II political boundaries in Europe as well as certain overarching human rights and freedoms, thirty-five nations sign the Helsinki Accords. Aiming to reduce Cold War tensions between the Eastern and Western blocs, all European countries (except Albania) sign, along with the United States and Canada.

#### SEPTEMBER 1975

President Gerald Ford is twice the target of assassination attempts by women this month. Secret Service agents intervene before shots could be fired by the first would-be assassin, and the second takes a shot that misses the president by several feet.



FRONT COVER OF *PUNK* MAGAZINE, NO. 2, 1976.

*John Holmstrom's Punk magazine helped codify the term Punk in the Downtown music scene. His now-legendary issues included interviews, photos, and comix. This one features Patti Smith.*

## ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES

"Death to Disco Shit. Long live the Rock! Kill yourself. Jump off a fuckin' cliff. Drive nails into your head. . . . OD. Anything. Just don't listen to discoshit." Among the top forty singles for 1976 are Johnnie Taylor's "Disco Lady" (released March 6) and Diana Ross's "Love Hangover" (released April 24).

### APRIL 1976

Martha Wilson establishes Franklin Furnace Archive, Inc., at 112 Franklin Street, "to present, preserve, interpret, proselytize and advocate on behalf of avant-garde art, especially forms that may be vulnerable due to institutional neglect, their ephemeral nature, or politically unpopular content."

### JUNE 1976

With a \$150,000 start-up grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, P.S. 1, a former public school that had been derelict since 1963, is opened as a not-for-profit exhibition space under the guidance of Alanna Heiss's Institute for Art and Urban Resources.

### NOVEMBER 1976

The legendary Bykert Gallery closes.

### 1977

James Nares, James Chance, Tina L'Hot-sky, John Lurie, Eric Mitchell, David McDermott, and Patti Astor all live on East Third Street. Edit deAk will later refer to this period as "that Third Street moment."

### JANUARY 1977

Martha Beck opens the Drawing Center on Mercer Street "to provide opportunities for emerging and under-recognized artists; to demonstrate the significance and diversity of drawings throughout history; and to stimulate public dialogue on the issues of art and culture."

## EVENTS

from Cornell. He arrives at the installation site drunk at 3 a.m. and shoots out all the windows in the building.

### FEBRUARY 1976

At a performance festival at the Whitney Museum, Adrian Piper performs *Some Reflected Surfaces*, dressed in black clothes, whiteface, and a false moustache, dancing to Aretha Franklin's "Respect." Laurie Anderson performs *For Instants*, a narrative of her frustrations in producing a film.

### MARCH 1976

Brian O'Doherty (aka Patrick Ireland) publishes "Inside the White Cube" in *Artforum*.

### NOVEMBER 21, 1976

Philip Glass and Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach* opens at the Metropolitan Opera with two sold-out performances. The five-hour work has no real plot, but deals loosely with Wilson's thoughts on Einstein's theory of relativity set to a minimalist score by Glass.

### SEPTEMBER 1977

Douglas Crimp's landmark exhibition *Pictures* opens at Artists Space, and includes the artists Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith. Crimp's catalogue text, later reprinted in *October* magazine, becomes a foundational essay for postmodern criticism in the 1980s. The press release states, "The fundamental relationship between the artists under consideration for the show is their use of recognizable, non-abstract images, without, however, resurrecting representation as it is traditionally understood. (The return to figurative painting is at the farthest remove from this new work.)"

## POLITICS AND HISTORY

### OCTOBER 30, 1975

The *New York Daily News* runs the headline "Ford to City: Drop Dead," highlighting the president's reluctance to extend federal loans to the city, which is deep in bankruptcy. Ford's spokesman, Ron Nessen, refers to New York as a drug-abusing child: "You don't give her a hundred dollars a day to support her habit," he says.

### JULY 2, 1976

Two days before the country's bicentennial, in the decision *Gregg v. Georgia*, 428 U.S. 153 (1976), the Supreme Court votes to reinstate the death penalty, effectively outlawed since 1972. Under the new ruling, it falls to the states' discretion to apply the penalty. Five days later, Congress passes Public Law 94-344, a "joint resolution to codify and emphasize existing rules and customs pertaining to the display and use of the flag of the United States of America," including, in its fourth section, "That no disrespect should be shown to the flag of the United States of America."

### NOVEMBER 2, 1976

Jimmy Carter defeats Gerald Ford to become the thirty-ninth president of the United States. At his inauguration in January, Carter strives to project a more casual image of the presidency, appearing hatless and walking down the length of Pennsylvania Avenue with his wife, Rosalynn.

### JULY 13, 1977

In a blackout triggered by a lightning strike, New York City and the greater metropolitan area loses power at 9:35 p.m. The blackout continues for twenty-five hours, subjecting the city to widespread looting, with damages estimated at a minimum of \$135 million. The crimes are largely blamed on far-reach-



TISH AND SNOOKY BELLOMO OF THE SIC F\*CKS UPSTAIRS AT THE MUDD CLUB, 77 WHITE STREET, NEW YORK, 1980, PRIOR TO THEIR PERFORMANCE AT THE "CATHOLIC GIRLS' PARTY."

Photo: Copyright © 2002 Allan Tannenbaum. Courtesy the photographer and Chi Chi Valenti. Known for their bold fashion statements, sisters Tish and Snooky Bellomo were frequent performers who also owned the Punk boutique Manic Panic on St. Mark's Place. Peter Occhiogrosso, SoHo Weekly News music editor, and Sari Becker, Mudd Club publicist, are in the background.

#### APRIL 26, 1977

Steve Rubell and Ian Schrager open Studio 54 at 254 West Fifty-fourth Street.

#### JUNE 1977

Sisters Tish and Snooky Bellomo, singers in the original Blondie lineup, open the Punk store Manic Panic at 33 St. Mark's Place. The Bellomos sign a lease for the space at \$250-per-month rent.

#### NOVEMBER 11, 1977

The New Museum opens its first on-site exhibition at 65 Fifth Avenue.

#### DECEMBER 1977

The B-52's play Max's Kansas City.

#### JANUARY 14, 1978

Marcia Tucker's exhibition "Bad" Painting opens at the New Museum, including Judy Linhares, Charles Garabedian, Joan Brown, and William Wegman. Tucker writes in the catalogue, "The freedom with which these artists mix classical and popular art-historical sources, kitsch and traditional images, archetypal and personal fantasies, constitutes a rejection of the concept of progress per se."

#### MAY 1978

A five-day festival of new music at Artists Space in SoHo brings together Lydia Lunch's Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, James Chance and the Contortions, DNA, Mars, Glenn Branca's Theoretical Girls, Tone Deaf, and Rhys Chatham's Gynecologists. Although the bands have no previous solidarity with each other, they are all soon grouped under the moniker "No Wave" by New York Rocker magazine.

#### SUMMER 1978

Creative Time, founded in 1973, sponsors the exhibition Art at the Beach. Environmental sculptures by artists such as Alice Aycock are sited on Battery Park City's landfill.

#### NOVEMBER 1978

Ann Magnuson's New Wave Vaudeville performance runs at Irving Plaza, a former Polish meeting hall on Irving Place. Produced by Tom Scully and Susan Hannaford, Magnuson's later partners in Club 57, New Wave Vaudeville showcases the Downtown talents David McDermott and Joey Arias, and includes as its finale Klaus Nomi's triumphant New York premiere. Nomi sings "Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix" from Saint-Saëns's opera Samson et Dalila wearing a silver space suit.

ing economic decline that "created exceedingly high levels of unemployment and high prices for food and other necessary goods." Welfare allotments for families of four in New York have not been adjusted since their 1974 levels, even though the consumer price index has risen 86 percent since 1967.

#### AUGUST 9, 1977

After more than a year of terrorizing young residents of Brooklyn and Queens, David Berkowitz, the ".44 Caliber Killer," is arrested outside his home by New York City police. Also known as the "Son of Sam," Berkowitz claims that he was directed to shoot young people by demons hosted by his landlord, Sam Carr, and Carr's black Labrador retriever, whose barking allegedly drove him crazy. Before being taken into custody, Berkowitz often revisited the sites of his shootings and reveled in the press coverage he received.

#### JANUARY 1, 1978

Ed Koch is sworn in as mayor of New York. The city is in the grip of a financial crisis, and Koch announces: "These have been hard times. We have been drawn across the knife-edge of poverty. We have been shaken by troubles that would have destroyed any other city. But we are not any other city. We are the city of New York and New York in adversity towers above any other city in the world."

#### MARCH 6, 1978

Virulently racist serial killer Joseph Paul Franklin shoots the magazine publisher Larry Flynt and his attorney outside a courthouse in Gwinnett County, Georgia, allegedly for publishing photos of interracial couples in Hustler. Up on obscenity charges, Flynt had been vigorously defending the right to publish his magazine at the time. The wound leaves him paralyzed, and Flynt later says, "I even took a bullet for the First Amendment."



**1978**

Colab (Collaborative Projects, Inc.) opens the New Cinema on St. Marks Place. In addition to producing "All Color News" segments for New York public access cable, New Cinema provides an invaluable screening venue for experimental filmmakers.

**SUMMER 1978**

Madonna arrives in New York from Michigan with thirty-five dollars in her pocket.

**AUGUST 10, 1978**

A strike shuts down publication of all three New York daily newspapers. The *New York Daily News* finally runs again on October 5, while the *New York Times* and *New York Post* will not recommence printing until November 6.

**AUGUST 27, 1978**

Gordon Matta-Clark dies of cancer at the age of thirty-five. A leading SoHo artist, he is best known for a series in which he carves up buildings with a chain saw, documenting the work in films and photographs.

**OCTOBER 12, 1978**

Sid Vicious stabs his girlfriend Nancy Spungen to death in their room at the Hotel Chelsea, where they have been living since August, after the Sex Pistols break up during their American tour. Four months later, on February 2, 1979, out on \$50,000 bail, Vicious overdoses before he can stand trial.

**OCTOBER 31, 1978**

The Mudd Club opens on Halloween with a party for the staff of *Punk* magazine at 77 White Street, a building owned by the artist Ross Bleckner. Steven Mass, whose money derives from his family's medical services business, with Diego Cortez and Anya



NAN GOLDIN, *COOKIE AND MILLIE IN THE GIRLS' ROOM AT THE MUDD CLUB*, 1979. Cibachrome print, 30 x 40 in. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

**DECEMBER 1978**

Glenn O'Brien, music critic for *Interview* magazine, begins hosting *TV Party* on New York public access cable, with Chris Stein, the guitarist from Blondie.

**1979**

Filmmakers Beth B and Scott B shoot their movie *The Offenders* with a cast that includes Lydia Lunch, John Lurie, Christof Kohlhofer, Edit deAk, and Diego Cortez.

**JANUARY 1979**

The 1979 Whitney Biennial opens with work by Susan Rothenberg and Bruce Conner. It also includes film for the first time, with pieces such as *77* by Robert Breer, a seven-minute color 16mm.

**APRIL 1979**

Brian Eno produces the definitive No Wave compilation album *No New York*, which features only four East Village

**MAY 1978**

The Resorts Casino Hotel, the first legal gambling casino in the United States outside Nevada, opens on the boardwalk in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

**NOVEMBER 18, 1978**

Jim Jones, leader of the self-styled utopian community of Jonestown, orders his followers to drink cyanide-laced Kool-Aid; 913 people die en masse, and those refusing to drink are shot. Jones had quickly moved his followers from San Francisco to Guyana following an August 1977 magazine article detailing abuse within the organization. After one of Jones's trusted confidantes escaped and warned of mass murder-suicide drills, U.S. Representative Leo Ryan arrives in Jonestown on November 17 with a delegation of reporters. Attempting to leave the next day, the group is ambushed and Ryan is killed with four

Phillips, conceive of the space as an antidote to the disco scene provided by Studio 54, now in its heyday.

#### NOVEMBER 1978

Stefan Eins founds the gallery Fashion Moda at Third Avenue and 147th Street in the South Bronx.

#### DECEMBER 11, 1978

The *Village Voice* runs an article exposing Jean-Michel Basquiat (along with his friend Albert Diaz) as the elusive graffiti artist SAMO. By now Basquiat has been spray-painting subway cars and writing SAMO's aphorisms for several years, including guerilla statements at the School of Visual Arts (where he is not enrolled), such as "Stop running around with the radical chic playing art with daddy's dollars." The *SoHo News* had run a series of SAMO's statements asking readers to identify him, but the *Voice* won out when a reporter offered Basquiat and Diaz a hundred dollars for the feature.

#### 1979

Rafik (Rafic Azzouny), a founding member of the U-P collaborative film group of the late 1960s, opens the OP Screening Room in his loft at 819 Broadway. Before closing it in 1984, Rafik shows films by Colab members such as Beth and Scott B, and slide shows by Jack Smith (*What's Underground about Marshmallows*, 1981) and Nan Goldin.

#### FEBRUARY 1979

The experimental exhibition space 112 Workshop, founded in 1970 by the artists Gordon Matta-Clark and Jeffrey Lew, moves from 112 Greene Street to 325 Spring Street, and is renamed White Columns.

#### MAY 1979

Club 57 opens its doors in the basement of the Holy Cross Polish National Church at 57 St. Marks Place. Ann Magnuson, teaming up with Tom Scully and Susan Hannaford, begins to



FAÇADE OF FASHION MODA IN THE BRONX WITH MURALS BY CRASH (DETAIL FROM A BROCHURE), 1980. Fashion Moda Archive, Fales Library. Photo: Lisa Kahane. Copyright © 1980 Lisa Kahane, NYC

bands: Lydia Lunch's *Teenage Jesus and the Jerks*, the *Contortions*, *DNA*, and *Mars*. SoHo's "Downtown sound" bands are pushed to the exterior of the No Wave scene. Despite this impression, *Rolling Stone* sees *No New York* as marginal music in and of itself: "A great deal of punk rock is basically art rock in a primitive guise," writes Tom Carson. "Despite its intellectual top-heaviness, the music on *No New York* is all surface: militantly antimelodic, inaccessible and antihumanist."

#### MAY 19, 1979

The expatriate Russian artist duo Komar and Melamid conduct the "auction performance" *We Buy and Sell Souls* from a desk at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts gallery at 30 Mercer Street. They take telephone bids from Moscow for deeds to the souls of various New Yorkers, including prostitutes, drug pushers, and Andy Warhol.

#### JUNE 1979

The Kitchen, at 484 Broome Street, hosts the weeklong *New Music, New York* festival. Presenting more than fifty composers of "post Cageian" new music, performances on opening night include those by Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Laurie Anderson, Meredith Monk, and Rhys Chatham.

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## FASHION 時髦 MODA MODA

SIGN FOR FASHION MODA, c. 1978. Oil on wood, 40 x 24 in. Fashion Moda Archive, Fales Library. Painted by Martin Wong and others, this sign hung on Fashion Moda's storefront gallery in the Bronx.

*Fashion Moda began as a small gallery on Mercer Street run by Stefan Eins. In 1978, Eins, with the help of Joe Lewis and others, moved the gallery to Third Avenue near 147th Street in the Bronx, where it became a center for collaboration among artists.*

others. Since 1978, the U.S. government has kept classified five thousand pages of documents relating to the massacre.

#### NOVEMBER 27, 1978

City Supervisor Harvey Milk, one of the first openly gay elected officials in the United States, and Mayor George Moscone are gunned down in San Francisco's City Hall by the disgruntled ex-supervisor Dan White. White's attorneys plead that his judgment was impaired by eating Twinkies, leading to a lesser verdict of voluntary manslaughter on May 21, 1979. Upon announcement of the ruling, spontaneous riots and protests break out in the city.

#### JANUARY 16, 1979

Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi flees Iran under pressure from massive demonstrations, strikes, and civil unrest, largely instigated by the Shi'ite leader Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini returns to Tehran after a fifteen-year exile on February 11, 1979, and leads the country for the next ten years. Under his rule, domestic opposition is

organize Monster Movie Nights for Stanley Stryhaski, custodian of the church's basement space.

### FALL 1979

Charlie Moulton finds space in a former public school at 150 First Avenue in the East Village and inaugurates a series of performances and dance, retaining the school's name, P.S. 122.

### NOVEMBER 12, 1979

New York magazine publishes "Studio 54's List of Party Favors," Ian Schrager's secret and meticulous list of every giveaway to his celebrity guests. Among other things, it itemizes poppers for Bianca Jagger, drugs for other celebrities, and eight hundred dollars in one-



WENDY WILD, APRIL PALMIERI, JOHN SEX, AND KATY K AT SEX'S BIRTHDAY PARTY AT THE TUNNEL, APRIL 11, 1987. Photo: Copyright © Patrick McMullan

### JUNE 15, 1979

The 1970s: New American Painting opens at the New Museum. Including Jennifer Bartlett, Alex Katz, Elizabeth Murray, Ed Ruscha, Susan Rothenberg, and Joe Zucker, among many others, the curators state that the 1970s produced a feeling that "there is no mainstream or major style (that is, no style which is inherently more important than any other). Recent painting, rather, is highly individualistic, if not idiosyncratic."

### NOVEMBER 29, 1979

Eric Bogosian inaugurates his Ricky Paul Show at White Columns, in which he plays an obnoxious comedian who hurls insults at the audience.

### DECEMBER 21, 1979

At Frank Zappa's thirty-ninth birthday party at the Mudd Club, Nan Goldin premieres her slide show *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. "I don't think many people noticed it—it was a big party," she later says. Goldin had arrived in New York

suppressed, the shah's pro-Western policies are scrapped, Western music and alcohol are banned, and women are required to wear the veil in public.

### MAY 1979

Margaret Thatcher becomes prime minister of Britain after the Conservative Party's electoral victory. Thatcher begins an ambitious program of deregulation, selling state-owned industries and public services, including aerospace, television and radio, gas and electricity, water, the state airline, and British Steel. She also instigates a series of laws aimed at curbing the power of trade unions.

### JUNE 1, 1979

In reaction to the mounting gasoline crisis, the U.S. government under President Jimmy Carter begins decontrol of



FLYER FOR LADIES' AUXILIARY MEETING AT THE "HOME OF THE PRESIDENT," 1980. April Palmieri Papers, Fales Library. *The Club 57 Ladies' Auxiliary parodied suburban women's groups. This particular meeting included advice on how to shop at thrift stores, a pot luck, a visit from a Mary Kay cosmetics representative, and discussions of upcoming events such as "Lady Wrestling" night at the club.*

dollar bills to fill a garbage pail for Andy Warhol's birthday (August 1978). Upon reading this, Warhol is said to have remarked, "You mean they told me there was a thousand dollars in there and it was only eight hundred? Oh, I knew I should've counted it." The article prompts a bust at the club by fifty IRS agents in December, and on January 18, 1980, Schragar and Rubell are sentenced to prison for tax evasion.

#### MAY 1980

David Wojnarowicz and Julie Hair throw bloody bones down the stairwell at 420 West Broadway (home of Leo Castelli, Mary Boone, and Sonnabend Galleries) to protest President Reagan's policies in Central America.



FAÇADE OF ABC NO RIO GALLERY, EARLY 1980s. Photo: Lisa Kahane. Copyright © Lisa Kahane, NYC

#### OCTOBER 1980

Group Material Gallery opens at 224 East Thirteenth Street.

#### NOVEMBER 1980

Helene Winer, formerly of Artists Space, and Janelle Reiring open Metro Pictures with a group show exhibiting a number of artists from Douglas Crimp's *Pictures* exhibition (1977). A commercial gallery, Metro Pictures represents artists who "appropriate and re-use images from pre-existing sources, and often work in more than one medium of presentation that renders traditional art categories obsolete."

from Boston the previous autumn, one week before the Mudd Club opened.

#### DECEMBER 30, 1979

A group of artists, many involved with the group Collaborative Projects (Colab), take over an abandoned factory at 123 Delancey Street on the Lower East Side and install the *Real Estate Show*. The exhibition opens to the public on New Year's Day, 1980. The artists, whose works largely comment on the policies of the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development, return January 2 to find the building padlocked. A standoff with the city ensues, but further negotiations result in the gift of another space, now the not-for-profit ABC No Rio, at 172 Delancey Street.

#### JUNE 1980

Under the auspices of Colab, more than a hundred artists take over an empty massage parlor near Times Square for the *Times Square Show*; represented are graffiti artists, feminist artists, political artists, Xerox artists, performance artists, and everything in between.

#### JULY 12, 1980

*Deconstruction/Reconstruction: The Transformation of Photographic Information into Metaphor*, organized by Shelley Rice, opens at the New Museum. In the catalogue, Rice states that "the works in this exhibition imply both a more complex and more ambiguous relationship between image and reality, between information and its perception."

#### 1981

Postproduction on Glenn O'Brien's film *New York Beat* is halted owing to financial difficulties. Shot during 1980–81, the film captures a day in the life of a young artist, played by Jean-Michel Basquiat. The film also features cameos by everyone from Debbie Harry, Lee Quinones, and Fab Five Freddie Brathwaite to John Lurie, Cookie Mueller, and Basquiat's bandmate in Gray, Vincent Gallo. Bands

domestic oil prices. Previous legislation fixing oil prices had been put in place by Richard Nixon in 1971.

#### NOVEMBER 4, 1979

Militants marching under the banner "Students Following the Line of the Imam" seize the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, taking sixty-six U.S. citizens hostage and demanding extradition of the shah from the United States. On November 12, President Carter orders an end to imports from Iran. The hostage crisis would last more than a year. In April 1980, a military rescue ordered by Carter fails.

#### DECEMBER 24, 1979

The Soviets invade Afghanistan in order to depose its provisional leader, Hafizullah Amin, who had previously received aid from the U.S.S.R. as leader of the People's Party. The Soviet Union continues to occupy the country until 1989.

#### MARCH 21, 1980

President Carter announces that the United States will boycott the Moscow Summer Olympics to protest the invasion of Afghanistan. About sixty other nations join the United States in its boycott.

#### SEPTEMBER 23, 1980

Iraq invades Iran, beginning a ten-year war.

#### NOVEMBER 4, 1980

Ronald Reagan wins the presidential election with 489 electoral votes to Jimmy Carter's 49. American voters are swayed in part by Reagan's characterization of Carter as weak in the face of the Iran hostage crisis.

#### DECEMBER 8, 1980

Returning home from a recording session, John Lennon is shot by a deranged fan in front of the Dakota apartment building on New York's Central Park West. He dies soon afterward.



ANN MAGNUSON DJING FOR "ELVIS NIGHT" AT CLUB 57, c. 1980. Photo: Harvey Wang

### DECEMBER 1980

The Pyramid Club opens at 101 Avenue A.

### JUNE 1981

Patti Astor and Bill Stelling open Fun Gallery with a show of Astor's then-husband Steven Kramer's drawings, which sell out at fifty dollars apiece.

### SEPTEMBER 1981

Annina Nosei moves Jean-Michel Basquiat into the basement of her gallery on Prince Street so that he has space to work. Rene Ricard snidely remarks that this leads to an "art-feeding frenzy of invasive collectors," who now have easy access to the up-and-coming artist.

### MARCH 1982

Gracie Mansion and Sur Rodney (Sur) open Gracie Mansion Gallery at 432 East Ninth Street. Mansion previously

such as Arto Lindsay's DNA, the Plastics, and Kid Creole and the Coconuts also make appearances.

### 1981

Barbara Ess and Glenn Branca publish *Just Another Asshole #5*, an LP compilation with seventy-seven tracks of forty-five-second sound pieces, each by a different Downtown artist. Performers include Martha Wilson, Jenny Holzer, Dan Graham, Kiki Smith, Thurston Moore, and Barbara Kruger.

### FEBRUARY 22, 1981

The Lower Manhattan Drawing Show, a group exhibition curated by Keith Haring, opens at the Mudd Club.

### APRIL 1981

Mary Boone and Leo Castelli collaborate to show Julian Schnabel's works simultaneously in their 420 West Broadway galleries.

### MAY 9, 1981

Jacki Apple's exhibition *Alternatives in Retrospect: An Overview, 1969–75* opens at the New Museum. The exhibition chronicles the many cooperative and artist-run spaces in New York's Downtown, and provides important documentation of work just beginning to be defined ("performance," "installation") and often, of necessity, ephemeral.

### JUNE 1981

Josh Baer, the director of White Columns, has Kim Gordon and Thurston Moore organize a festival of Downtown music called *Noisefest* for the space at 325 Spring Street. Along with their band, Sonic Youth (which plays on June 18), *Noisefest* also features Y Pants, Rhys Chatham, Information, and twenty-five other acts.

### JANUARY 1981

At his inaugural luncheon, Ronald Reagan announces that the Iran hostage crisis has come to an end and that the hostages have been released. Allegations are made, but never substantiated, that Reagan's campaign brokered a secret deal with the Iranians to hold the hostages until after the presidential election.

### FEBRUARY 2, 1981

Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority joins with four hundred other Christian organizations to found the Coalition for Better Television (CBTV), announcing planned boycotts of any "offensive" programs and their corporate sponsors. Four months later, Proctor and Gamble withdraws sponsorship of at least fifty television programs before CBTV can begin an announced boycott of the company's products. Eight years later, CBTV's director, Rev. Donald Wildmon, brings Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* to the attention of Congress and the media, igniting controversy over the artist's funding by the National Endowment for the Arts.

### MARCH 30, 1981

John W. Hinckley Jr. fires six shots from a .22 caliber revolver at President Reagan as he leaves the Hilton Hotel in Washington, D.C. Reagan's lung is punctured, and his press secretary, James Brady, is severely wounded. Rushed to George Washington University Hospital for emergency surgery, Reagan jokes with doctors: "I hope you're all Republicans."

### MAY 13, 1981

Pope John Paul II is nearly killed by a gunshot fired by Mehmet Ali Agca, a Turkish citizen. The Soviet Union is widely suspected to be behind the conspiracy—John Paul II is a tireless



TOP: FLYER FOR "LADY WRESTLING" AT CLUB 57, 1980. April Palmieri Papers, Fales Library. "Lady Wrestling" nights were among the most popular events at Club 57.

BOTTOM: "LADY WRESTLING" NIGHT AT CLUB 57, c. 1980. Photo: Harvey Wang

held exhibitions in a limousine parked at Spring and West Broadway, as well as in the bathroom of her East Village apartment, a venue she called "Loo Division." Soon Gracie Mansion moves to St. Marks Place and exhibits the Famous Show, featuring almost one hundred artists.

### MAY 1982

Dean Savard and Alan Barrows open Civilian Warfare at 526 East Eleventh Street, and Peter Nagy and Alan Belcher open Gallery Nature Morte at 204 East

### OCTOBER 1981

Laurie Anderson's single "O Superman" hits the U.K. Top Ten.

Diego Cortez opens New York/New Wave at P.S. 1. This exhibition of Downtown art includes work by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Greer Lankton, Kenny Scharf, David Armstrong, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Keith Haring.

### 1982

At P.S. 1, Mike Bidlo meticulously recreates Peggy Guggenheim's town-house living room for the performance Jack the Dripper at Peg's Place. He restages the episode in which Jackson Pollock urinates in Guggenheim's fireplace during one of her parties. Bidlo's appropriations will later include posing as Andy Warhol for a simulacrum of the Factory, also at P.S. 1, and restaging Yves Klein's Anthropometries with blue paint and nude models at the Palladium.

David Wojnarowicz has his first solo exhibition at Milliken Gallery, along with group shows at Civilian Warfare and Gracie Mansion Gallery.

### FEBRUARY 10, 1982

Illegal America opens at Franklin Furnace. Curated by Jeanette Ingberman and Papo Colo, the exhibition includes work by artists and artist collectives whose work conflicts with the law. Among them are Vito Acconci, the Art Workers Coalition, Chris Burden, Gordon Matta-Clark, David Hammons, Tehching Hsieh, Charlotte Moorman, Carolee Schneemann, and the Real Estate Show. The catalogue comes in a cardboard box with a real one-dollar bill pasted on it, and the exhibition inaugurates Ingberman and Colo's new organization, Exit Art.

## FASHION 時髦 MODA МОДА

PAIN AND PLEASURE  
as it relates to...  
LOVE AND SEX



ART BY...

Richard Admirale · Alvaro · Sahara Belbeaux · Paolo Buggiani · Stephen Chichow · Thom Corn · Susan Crowe · Irene Dogmatic · Guillermo Dominguez · Bradley Eros / Aline Lili Mare · Catherine Hazard · Richard Hofmann · Isaac Jackson · Engelbert Kievernagel · Lisa Kahane · Joe Lewis · Leslie Lowe · Robert Mapplethorpe · Nelson Ocaundi · Kembra Phaler · Rick Prol · Seeno Evil · Stefan Poloff · Bernhard Scheibner · Carolee Schneemann · Anita Steckel · Alicia Thurston · David West.

#### Performance:

Eric & Co.  
Bradley Eros / Aline Lili Mare  
Uri Yonagatzki  
Imani Mahdi  
Kembra Phaler  
Gary Shriek  
Dave Street

#### COMMENTARY:

Bobby Astyk  
Stefan Eins  
Sahara Belbeaux  
The Eulenspiegel Society  
Samantha Fox  
Leslie Lowe  
Rudolf  
Dave Street  
others...

OPENING: March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1984

CLOSING: April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1984

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left to third Ave.

Goodbye, my love.

FLYER FOR PAIN AND PLEASURE, GROUP EXHIBITION AT FASHION MODA, 1984. Fashion Moda Archive, Fales Library. Photocopying provided a cheap and effective way of disseminating information about exhibitions. Here, hand-applied red paint highlights the theme of this exhibition at the South Bronx gallery.

advocate for Polish Solidarity—but Russian involvement in the assassination attempt is never proven.

### JUNE 5, 1981

In its Morbidity and Mortality Weekly, the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta publishes a report focusing on five cases of pneumonia among previously healthy gay men in Los Angeles. Less than a month later, this is followed by the New York Times's first article on AIDS, which opens: "Doctors in New York and California have diagnosed among homosexual men 41 cases of a rare and often rapidly fatal form of cancer." By the end of 1981, 121 people will have died of the disease.

## ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES



JOHN READ GIVES ANN MAGNUSON, PLAYING EDIE SEDGWICK, A FAKE INJECTION IN THE "ANDY AND EDIE SHOW" (ANDY WAS PLAYED BY JOEY ARIAS) AT DANCETERIA, c. 1982.

Photo: Tseng Kwong Chi. Copyright © Muna Tseng Dance Projects, Inc., New York. All Rights Reserved

Tenth Street. Nature Morte soon shows Gretchen Bender and Joseph Nechvatal, while Civilian Warfare exhibits Richard Hambleton, Luis Frangella, Judy Glantzman, David Wojnarowicz, and Greer Lankton.

### AUGUST 5, 1982

Performance artist Klaus Nomi dies of AIDS.

### SEPTEMBER 18, 1982

*Performance A-Z*, the first show at the not-for-profit gallery Storefront for Art and Architecture, opens at 97 Kenmare Street. Curated by Arlene Schloss and R. L. Seltman, it includes work by Ilona Granet, Richard Hambleton, Tehching Hsieh, Carolee Schneemann, and many others.

### OCTOBER 1982

Adam Purple has friends and colleagues petition the New York City Planning Commission to preserve his psychedelic *Garden of Eden*, a hand-built, self-sustaining, organic garden. Purple had moved to the Lower East Side a decade earlier, and, after the demolition of two derelict tenement buildings, began sift-

## EVENTS

### MARCH 1982

Jenny Holzer takes over the L.E.D. billboard in Times Square and projects truisms such as "Money Creates Taste" in her series *Messages to the Public*.

### JUNE 1982

Documenta VII, curated by Rudi Fuchs, opens in Kassel, Germany. Fuchs includes many Downtown artists from both the SoHo and East Village scenes: Vito Acconci, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Jack Goldstein, Keith Haring, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Matt Mullican, Lee Quinones, Judy Rifka, Martha Rosler, David Salle, Cindy Sherman, and Andy Warhol.

### NOVEMBER 1982

Jean-Michel Basquiat leaves Annina Nosei Gallery for a solo exhibition at Patti Astor and Bill Stelling's Fun Gallery in the East Village—having just shown with Nosei in March 1982.

### FEBRUARY 3, 1983

Laurie Anderson's *United States*, an eight-hour performance cycle split over two evenings, premieres at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Incorporating her own recorded voice, both synthesized and "played" on a violin strung with audiotape and bowed with a magnetic pickup, Anderson intends the performance as a fusion of art and music, concept and narrative, with feminism as part of the message. *United States* also heralds the increasing marketability of the "Downtown sound" to a wider art audience.

### AUGUST 1983

Barbara Ess publishes *Just Another Asshole #6*, a compendium of sixty artists' writings by figures such as Kathy Acker, Jenny Holzer, Kiki Smith, Lynne Tillman, and Cookie Mueller.

## POLITICS AND HISTORY

### JULY 7, 1981

Sandra Day O'Connor is nominated for the U.S. Supreme Court, the first woman so honored.

### JULY 29, 1981

Charles, Prince of Wales, weds Lady Diana Spencer at St. Paul's Cathedral in London. The wedding is televised for an unprecedented global viewership numbering in the hundreds of millions.

### APRIL 2, 1982

Claiming sovereignty and hoping to distract attention from economic troubles at home, Argentina invades the Falkland Islands, then under British occupation and administration. Margaret Thatcher quickly declares war, and, to Argentina's dismay, the United States allows the use of its base and stockpiles on Ascension Island in the South Atlantic. Argentina surrenders on June 14 after losing nearly 750 troops—256 British soldiers die. Thatcher converts the subsequent rise in patriotism into another landslide electoral victory, while Argentina's defeat results in the ousting of the military government the following year.

### SEPTEMBER 30, 1982

New York City passes the Loft Law, the Multiple Dwelling Law Article 7-C, to respond again to the "emergency . . . created by the increasing number of conversions of commercial and manufacturing loft buildings to residential use without compliance with applicable building codes and laws," and to regulate buildings in areas that were "zoned for commercial or residential use and are now inhabited by artists."

### NOVEMBER 13, 1982

Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial is dedicated in Washington, D.C., after a march by thousands of Vietnam veterans and



THE B-52's, c. 1982. Photo: Harvey Wang

ing through the rubble and making topsoil from the bricks, wood, and manure carted from Central Park's bridle paths. The Garden is featured in *National Geographic* in September 1984, but is destroyed by the city on January 8, 1986, to make way for development.

#### DECEMBER 31, 1982

Max's Kansas City closes for good.

#### MAY 1983

Club 57 closes its doors.

#### SEPTEMBER 1, 1983

The New Museum of Contemporary Art moves in as the first tenant in the restored Astor Building at 583 Broadway, leaving its former space at 65 Fifth Avenue. The inaugural exhibition, *Language, Drama, Source, and Vision*, organized by Lynn Gumpert, Ned Rifkin, and Marcia Tucker, opens October 8. Citing system, metaphor, the theater, mass media, and abstraction as disparate but important modes for artists' work, the curators seek to highlight the museum's thirty-three exhibitions since its founding in 1977.



FLYER FOR A WOMEN'S DANCE PARTY AT CLUB 57, 1982. April Palmieri Papers, Fales Library.

*Club 57 was a leading underground club in New York during the late 1970s and early '80s. This flyer, which advertises a "women only" night, is one of hundreds produced by the club to promote its ever-changing menu of events.*

soon becomes one of the capital's most visited attractions. Composed of two black granite walls engraved with more than fifty-eight thousand names, Lin's project is chosen despite protests that it is not appropriately monumental. Lin was a senior at Yale when her proposal was chosen over 1,421 other submissions the previous year.

#### DECEMBER 8, 1982

The U.S. House of Representatives passes amendments, authored by Massachusetts representative Ed Boland, to prohibit the use of defense funds to "train, arm, or support persons not members of the regular army for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua." In what is popularly known as one of Reagan's "secret wars," the administration funds an army of guerillas, known as "Contras," and illegally mines Central American harbors (sinking one Soviet ship), attempting to overthrow the Marxist Sandinista government. Despite the Boland amendments, throughout 1984 and '85 the Reagan administration—led by Lieutenant Oliver North, Rear Admiral John Poindexter, and the National Security Council—continues its secret campaigns, funding the Contras through illegal missile sales to Iran (supposedly in exchange for the release of hostages held in Lebanon by Shi'ite terrorists), money laundering, and private donations. The so-called Iran-Contra Affair is finally revealed to the public in early November 1986.

#### MARCH 8, 1983

In a speech to the National Association of Evangelicals, President Reagan calls the Soviet Union an "evil empire." Couching the Cold War in theological terms, he continues, "While America's military strength is important, let me add here that I've always maintained that the struggle now going on for the world will never be decided by bombs or rockets, by armies or military might.



## ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES

### OCTOBER 1983

Kent Klamen, Elizabeth Koury, and Meyer Vaisman open International with Monument at 111 East Seventh Street.

### NOVEMBER 1983

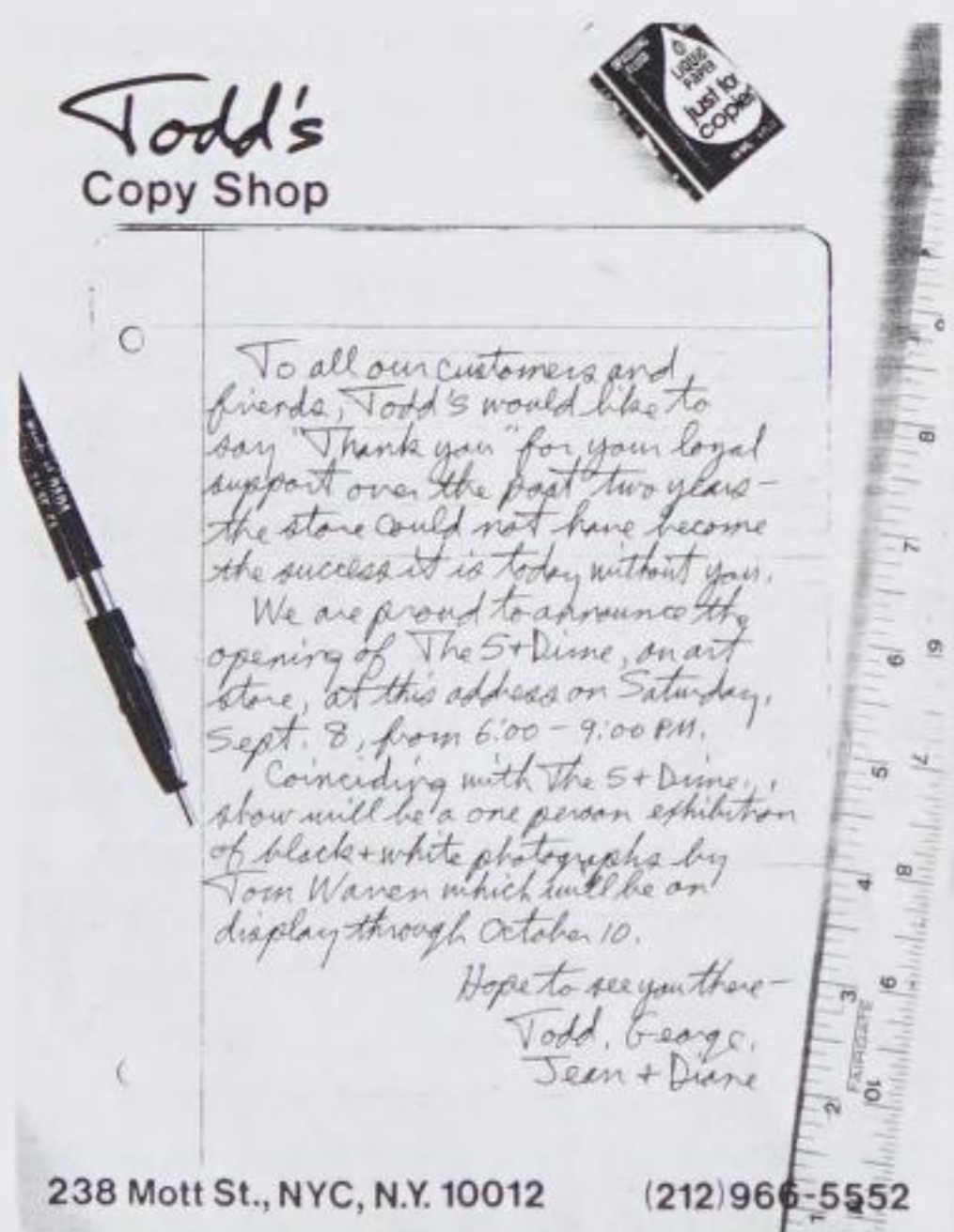
Pat Hearn opens her gallery at the corner of Sixth Street and Avenue B.

### NOVEMBER 3, 1983

Penny Pilkington and Wendy Olsoff open PPOW with an inaugural exhibition.

### 1984

Timothy Greathouse, a photographer who exhibited in Gracie Mansion's Loo Division gallery in 1982, opens his own gallery, Oggi Domani, at 318 East Eleventh Street. He shows photographers Jimmy DeSana, Peter Hujar, Zoe Leonard, and Marcus Leatherdale.



FLYER FOR TODD'S COPY SHOP, 238 MOTT STREET, 1984. Ron Kolm Papers, Fales Library. Todd's Copy Shop was one of several where artists went to copy flyers and create Xerox art. This flyer announces the opening of Five and Dime, a gallery within the shop.

## EVENTS

### DECEMBER 10, 1983

*The End of the World: Contemporary Visions of the Apocalypse*, curated by Lynn Gumpert in anticipation of the Orwellian year 1984, opens at the New Museum of Contemporary Art.

### 1984

John Kelly performs in drag as opera diva Dagmar Onassis in *The Dagmar Onassis Story*, part of his ongoing imaginings of the life of Maria Callas and Aristotle Onassis's secret love-child. Kelly is also known for his impersonations of Joni Mitchell, Antonin Artaud, and the Mona Lisa.

### JANUARY 1984

Carnival Knowledge, a feminist performance group, takes part in Franklin Furnace's *Second Coming* performance series, inviting the porn star Annie Sprinkle and her industry friends to collaborate. On a stage-set replica of Sprinkle's living room, tea and cookies are served, and the players remove their porn-star costumes and replace them with street clothing, blurring the line between the "public" persona of sex worker and the private life of homemaker.

### FEBRUARY 4, 1984

*Art and Ideology*, curated by Benjamin Buchloh, Donald Kuspit, Lucy Lippard, Nilda Peraza, and Lowery Sims, opens at the New Museum of Contemporary Art. "Artists who remain stubbornly uninformed about the social and emotional effects of their images and their connections to other images outside the art context are most easily manipulated by the prevailing systems of distribution, interpretation, and marketing," writes Lippard in the catalogue.

## POLITICS AND HISTORY

The real crisis we face today is a spiritual one; at root, it is a test of moral will and faith." Relations with the U.S.S.R. are already strained by what the Soviets call "bellicose, lunatic anticommunism." They are worsened again in September 1983 when a Korean airplane en route to Seoul is shot down as it strays over Soviet territory on Sakhalin Island. All 269 people aboard are killed, including 61 Americans.

### OCTOBER 23, 1983

Suicide bombers drive a truck with explosives into the U.S. marine compound in Beirut, killing 241 marines. President Reagan had sent 800 marines to Beirut the previous year as part of an international force to protect the fragile Lebanese government and Palestinian refugees there from Israeli invasion (Israel withdraws from Lebanon in September 1983). Accepting blame for the tragedy, Reagan states that the commanders in Lebanon "suffered enough." He withdraws troops from Lebanon in February 1984.

### OCTOBER 24, 1983

One day after the bombing of the U.S. marine compound in Beirut, Reagan orders the invasion of Grenada. A week earlier, Grenada's prime minister, Maurice Bishop, had been executed in a coup, and Reagan justifies the invasion as necessary to prevent the island from becoming a Soviet outpost. Critics charge that the Reagan administration staged the invasion in order to distract from the Lebanese bombing.

### JANUARY 29, 1984

Reagan announces his intention to run for a second term as president.

### JULY 28, 1984

The Summer Olympics open in Los Angeles. Many Communist nations,

**NEW GALLERIES OF THE LOWER EAST SIDE**

ORGANIZED BY HELENE WINER

INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS: BELGIUM

**DIDIER VERMEIREN**

SELECTED BY JAN DEBBAUT

A BENEFIT EXHIBITION FOR

ARTISTS CALL AGAINST U.S. INTERVENTION IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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JANUARY 21 - FEBRUARY 19

**ARTISTS SPACE**

105 HUDSON STREET, NEW YORK

FLYER FOR *NEW GALLERIES OF THE LOWER EAST SIDE*, EXHIBITION CURATED BY HELENE WINER AT ARTISTS SPACE, 1984. Downtown Flyers Collection, Fales Library. *Dating from 1984, Winer's exhibition signals a switch in which the alternative artist spaces of SoHo began to look to the burgeoning East Village gallery scene, which would explode in the mid-1980s.*

**MARCH 1984**

Colin de Land opens his first gallery at 29 Clinton Street, calling it Vox Populi. He then moves to 511 East Sixth Street in October. After relocating to SoHo, he renames it American Fine Arts in summer 1986.

Clarissa Dalrymple, Nicole Klagsbrun, and John Abbott open Cable Gallery in TriBeCa. They will eventually show James Nares, Ashley Bickerton, Haim Steinbach, and Christopher Wool.

**SPRING 1984**

The Lady Bunny, Wendy Wild, and other friends from Pyramid Club on Avenue A close the bar and wander drunkenly into Tompkins Square Park, performing impromptu in the park's bandshell. They conceive the idea for a daylong festival, and make plans to reconvene in summer 1985 for the first Wigstock with performers from Pyramid: Wild, John Sex, John Kelly, Ethel Eichelberger, and the Fleshtones, among many others.

**MARCH 1984**

Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo cocurate the dual East Village exhibitions *Still Life with Transaction* at International with *Monument and Civilization and the Landscape of Discontent* at Nature Morte.

**MAY 1984**

Basquiat shows with Mary Boone, who sells his works for up to \$20,000. One of his paintings (originally sold for \$4,000) brings \$20,900 at Christie's this month.

**JUNE 1984**

*Art in America* publishes Carlo McCormick and Walter Robinson's "Slouching toward Avenue D," a colorful and detailed survey of the diverse East Village art scene. Without informing the authors, the magazine follows directly with Craig Owens's harsh rebuttal, "The Problem with Puerilism," which critiques the scene as a mere simulacrum of *la vie bohème* and a hothouse for the production of "artificial, mass-produced generic signifiers for 'Difference.'"

**SEPTEMBER 1984**

*Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern* opens at the Museum of Modern Art, proving an immediate blockbuster. The show prompts criticism that the African artworks used to illustrate European modernists' dependence on so-called primitive artifacts are removed from their original contexts and presented without regard for their creators' intentions.

**DECEMBER 8, 1984**

The New Museum of Contemporary Art opens *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, including works by Dara Birnbaum, Victor Burgin, Hans Haacke, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, and Jeff Wall. The artists in the exhibition explore "sexuality as a cultural construction, opposing a perspective based on a natural or biological 'truth.'"

including the Soviet Union, East Germany, and Cuba, citing the U.S.-led boycott of the 1980 Moscow Games and fiercely anticommunist sentiment, stay away.

**AUGUST 22, 1984**

Gregory Lee Johnson is arrested for burning a U.S. flag at the Republican National Convention in Dallas. He is fined and sentenced to jail under a Texas law that prohibits "desecration of a venerated object." Five years later, in *Texas v. Johnson*, the Supreme Court rules in a 5-4 decision that desecration of the flag is a protected form of speech, nullifying laws in forty-eight states as well as a resolution passed in Congress five months before.

**NOVEMBER 6, 1984**

Ronald Reagan defeats Walter Mondale to secure a second term as president. Reagan wins almost 60 percent of the popular vote and every state except Minnesota, where Mondale prevails by only 3,300 votes (Mondale also takes Washington, D.C.).

**DECEMBER 22, 1984**

Bernard Goetz, the "Subway Vigilante," shoots four men in a Manhattan subway car, paralyzing one of them. Though Goetz alleges that the men tried to rob him (he has been mugged twice before), he is criticized for singling out four African Americans. Goetz is acquitted of assault three years later, although he is convicted of possessing an unlicensed weapon, and he serves only 250 days in jail.

**DECEMBER 31, 1984**

The Centers for Disease Control reports that 7,699 Americans are dead or dying of AIDS; by the time President Reagan finally utters the word "AIDS" in public, on May 31, 1987, more than 20,000 of the 36,058 Americans diagnosed with the disease are already dead.

**THE ORWELLIAN YEAR OF DISASTER** we'd been waiting for never came, not Downtown anyway. The only Big Brother watching over us in 1984 was the proverbial doorman with the guest list, separating the enchanted from the wannabes in order to fill all those cavernous clubs with just the right thousands of people.

See, in a world before the Internet, people actually had to go out of the house to connect with other people, which made for a teeming nightlife scene populated with networkers and freaks (not mutually exclusive groups, by the way). The most popular boîte was Danceteria, a four-floor bohemian hangout for rockers, poseurs, and European drop-ins, where co-owner Rudolf and his Jayne Mansfield-like girlfriend, Dianne Brill, held court over the circuslike procession of zanies. Farther downtown, Pyramid provided a ramshackle watering hole for drag queens with a dream, who never imagined the mainstream press would christen their stage shows "performance art" and deem them influential beyond the comp cocktail crowd.

And you didn't just stick to the condoned spaces for clubbing. Every Wednesday, promoter Vito Bruno would take over a midtown pizza restaurant and throw "Pizza A-Go-Go," where the Downtown celebs posed and performed amid ovens and silver trays. Casting his bait even farther, Bruno tossed outlaw parties—events illegally held in outré places, like a sanitation dump, where all the fabulosities showed up in full regalia, holding their noses but still giving attitude. Invites to these things were strictly by word of mouth, and insiders made sure to show up the second they started; outlaw parties lasted only until the cops found out, which made them manically sped-up and poignantly doomed.

Prancing about that dump was the most concentrated forty-five minutes of my life. In fact, I was all set to go on a makeshift stage and sing "Happy Birthday" with my band to then-*Details* editor Annie Flanders, but we were all shooed the hell home and instead had to sing to Annie in some godforsaken side street. Thank God a photographer followed us and we made the press! (In '84, it didn't make sense to be a Downtown zany unless you could get at least one photo op out of it. The "celebutante" crowd learned from both Warhol's superstars and '80s networkers that self-expression is even more rewarding if it results in a mention.)



In between bouts of pathologically seeking attention, I doled it out, using my *Village Voice* column to chronicle the parade of artists, designers, and professional partiers prancing around me, desperate to be noticed. Some of them (Marc Jacobs, Stephen Sprouse) became huge, others (James St. James) became infamous, and yet others fell into the volcano they'd been dancing at the edge of. But what a party! Other folks' "I Love the '80s" experiences involve cozy nights with the *Cosby Show*, but mine were all about free drink tickets, fending off famous drug addicts, and trying to get that nasty sanitation-dump smell out of my hoop dress.

MICHAEL MUSTO WITH HIS PARENTS AT THEIR HOME IN BENSONHURST, 1992.

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The following bibliography, filmography, and discography are not intended to be comprehensive, but rather are offered as suggestions for further reading, viewing, and listening. In compiling the lists, we gave preference to influential theoretical writings and general overviews of various aspects of the scene. Monographs and catalogues of solo exhibitions are not included. On the other hand, Downtown zines and periodicals are extensively listed. These publications, almost none of which have been indexed, provide a wealth of indispensable information about the scene. The No Wave filmography and Downtown music discography present selected lists of major works from the vast corpora of Downtown film and music. The editor thanks Matthew Yokobosky and Bernard Gendron, respectively, for compiling the filmography and discography.

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**ERIC BOGOSIAN** came to New York to work at the Kitchen in 1976, where he created and ran the dance series *Dancing in the Kitchen*. Since then he has authored five full-length plays and created six full-length solos for himself. For these, he has received three OBIE awards and a Drama Desk Award. In 2004 he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to continue his work in the theater. Bogosian is also well known as a film and television actor, working with some of the leading directors of our time: Robert Altman, Paul Schrader, Woody Allen, and Atom Egoyan. He has starred in films as diverse as *Bright Shining Lie* and *Under Siege II*. In 2003 he starred in *Wonderland* with Val Kilmer.

**BERNARD GENDRON** is professor of philosophy at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. He is the author of *Technology and the Human* (St. Martin's, 1976) and *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), as well as a number of articles including "Theodor Adorno Meets the Cadillacs" (1986) and "Pop Aesthetics: The Very Idea" (2001). He has recently taught courses on Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, contemporary aesthetics, and Miles Davis. His current projects include why jazz lost to rock and roll, popular aesthetics and the end of art, and a history of New York's Downtown sounds from World War II to the present.

**ROSELEE GOLDBERG**'s book *Performance Art from Futurism to the Present*, first published in 1979, pioneered the study of performance art. A graduate of the Courtauld Institute of Art, she was director of the Royal College of Art Gallery in London and curator at the Kitchen in New York. Author of *Performance: Live Art since 1960* and *Laurie Anderson*, she is a frequent contributor to *Artforum* and other magazines. In 2001 Goldberg originated and produced *Logic of the Birds*, by Shirin Neshat and Sussan Deyhim, which premiered at the Lincoln Center Summer Festival in 2002 and toured to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and to Artangel in London. Goldberg lectures extensively and has taught at New York University since 1987. She is founding director of PERFORMA, a nonprofit organization founded to support and develop new visual art performance.

**LYNN GUMPERT** has been director of the Grey Art Gallery, New York University's fine arts museum, since 1997. Previously, she worked as an independent curator, consultant, and writer, organizing shows such as *Beauty and the Beast: A Selection of Young American Artists*, for the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, and *Beyond the Frame: American Art, 1960–1990*, which traveled to three museums in Japan. As senior curator and curator for the New Museum of Contemporary Art from 1980 to 1988, she organized more than fifteen major exhibitions. She authored the first monograph on the French artist Christian Boltanski (Flammarion, 1992), and has contributed essays to numerous exhibition catalogues as well as magazines such as *Art in America*, *Art News*, and *Parkett*.

**RICHARD HELL** was a founder of three New York groups: *Television* (1974), the *Heartbreakers* (1975), and the *Voidoids* (1976). His first album was *Blank Generation* (1977), by Richard Hell and the Voidoids.

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**ANN MAGNUSON** is an actress, singer, writer, and performer whose chameleon-like persona has found expression in everything from TV sitcoms (*Anything but Love*, *Fraiser*, *The Drew Carey Show*) to Hollywood films (*Clear and Present Danger*, *Panic Room*, *Making Mr. Right*) to cult classics (*The Hunger*, *Cabin Boy*, *Glitter*) to the Off-Broadway stage, as well as in art galleries, museums, rock clubs, and cabarets worldwide (including Lincoln Center, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and Joseph Papp's Public Theater, among many others). Born and raised in West Virginia, Magnuson arrived in 1978 in the East Village, where she cofounded and managed Club 57. The former singer and lyricist for the psycho-psychedelic cult band Bongwater, Magnuson now resides in Los Angeles, where she continues to work as an actress and perform her one-woman shows. She has written for various magazines (*Condé Nast Traveler*, *Departures*, *Vogue*, *Allure*) and pens a monthly column, "L.A. Woman," for *Paper* magazine.

**GRACIE MANSION** opened her first gallery in 1982 in the bathroom of her apartment and subsequently founded commercial galleries in the East Village, SoHo, and Chelsea. She currently works as an art consultant to collectors and corporations, specializing in the acquisition of modern and contemporary art.

**CARLO MCCORMICK** is a popular-culture critic and curator living in New York City. He is the author of numerous books, monographs, and catalogues on contemporary art and artists, and has lectured and taught extensively at universities and colleges around the United States. His writing has appeared in *Aperture*, *Art in America*, *Art News*, *Artforum*, *Camera Austria*, *High Times*, *Spin*, *Tokion*, *Vice*, and countless other magazines. He is senior editor of *Paper* magazine.

**MICHAEL MUSTO** writes the *Village Voice's* popular, long-running "La Dolce Musto" column covering gossip, clubland, and entertainment. He is the author of two books—*Downtown* (a nonfiction guide to Gotham nightlife) and *Manhattan on the Rocks* (a roman-à-clef spanning the social scene). A 2002 United Press International profile called him "one of the wittiest stylists in the English language." Musto has written for publications as diverse as the *New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, *Interview*, and *TV Guide*. He was a correspondent on E!'s *The Gossip Show* and cohosted Metro TV's magazine program, *New York Central*. He is highly visible on E!, VH1, and many other television channels.

**SARAH SCHULMAN** is the author of eight novels—*The Child* (forthcoming); *Shimmer*; *Rat Bohemia*; *Empathy*; *People in Trouble*; *After Delores*; *Girls, Visions, and Everything*; the *Sophie Horowitz Story*—as well as three nonfiction books: *The Twist: Familial Homophobia and Its Consequences* (forthcoming), *Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America*, and *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life during the Reagan/Bush Years*. Her plays include *Carson McCullers* (Playwrights Horizons), *The Burning Deck* (La Jolla Playhouse), and *Enemies, A Love Story*, which she is currently adapting for the stage from a work by Isaac Bashevis Singer. She has received numerous awards including a Guggenheim Fellowship as well as Fulbright, Revson, and Stonewall Awards, the latter "for improving the lives of lesbians and gays in the United States."

**ROBERT SIEGLE** is professor of English at Virginia Tech, where he teaches courses in contemporary culture and theory. In addition to his book on Downtown writing (*Suburban Ambush*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), he has also written on narrative theory (*The Politics of Reflexivity*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986) and postmodern South Asian fiction (*Mirror to Mirror*, published online by the Center for Digital Discourse and Culture, [www2.cddc.vt.edu/mtm](http://www2.cddc.vt.edu/mtm)). His essays have appeared in *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Contemporary Literature*, *Social Text*, *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, *The American Book Review*, and other journals.

Enigmatically recognized as a poet, eccentric, curator, exhibition designer, artistic collaborator, and archivist, **SUR RODNEY (SUR)** was codirector of the Gracie Mansion Gallery during the 1980s. During the 1990s he served as program director for Kenkeleba House, an African American art center in Lower Manhattan, and he later assisted in archiving and placing the center's collection at New School University. His work with artists' estates in the wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic led him to serve on the board of Visual AIDS and to help establish the Frank Moore Archive Project, which assists artists with HIV/AIDS and their estates, and

provides a resource for curators, exhibitions, and publication projects. (Sur) lives in New York City, London, and Cape Breton Island with his partner and collaborator, Fluxus artist Geoffrey Hendricks, whom he married during the re-creation of an Al Hansen memorial Happening at Judson Memorial Church in 1995.

**MARVIN J. TAYLOR** is director of the Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, where he has amassed an unparalleled Downtown Collection comprising some 12,000 volumes, more than 300 periodical titles, and 7,500 linear feet of archival and manuscript material about the New York scene from 1970 to the present.

**LYNNE TILLMAN** is the author of four novels, most recently *No Lease on Life*, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in Fiction. She has also written three books of nonfiction, including her essay collection *The Broad Picture*, and three collections of short stories. Her latest book is *This Is Not It*, stories written in response to twenty-two contemporary artists' work. She is the fiction editor of *Fence* magazine, a contributing editor of *Bomb*, and associate professor/writer in residence at the University at Albany.

**CHI CHI VALENTI** has participated in Gotham's alternative nightlife for a quarter century, most famously as a producer of the clubs Jackie 60 and MOTHER. She is the wordsmith for the Jackie Factory, the creative collective behind the midnight spoken word series and zine *Verbal Abuse*, hundreds of spectacles and events, a radio show, and a theatrical wing. Valenti began her career at the Mudd Club in 1979, where she met her husband and partner, Johnny Dynell. In the 1980s, her nightlife reportage for *Details*, *ID*, and the *Village Voice* introduced homegrown club cultures to a worldwide audience. Since 1999, her popular Web site *Mothernyc.com* has continued to spotlight the New York demimonde.

**BRIAN WALLIS** is chief curator and director of exhibitions at the International Center of Photography in New York. Previously, he curated exhibitions at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, including *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business* and *Damaged Goods: Desire and the Economy of the Object*, among others. He has also served as senior editor of *Art in America*; as coeditor of *Wedge* (1982–87), a theoretically and politically oriented art journal; and as editor of several cultural anthologies, including *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation* and *Blasted Allegories: Writings by Contemporary Artists* (both New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984 and 1987). His essays have appeared in *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Aperture*, the *Village Voice*, and numerous other publications.

Performance artist **MARTHA WILSON** is founding director of Franklin Furnace Archive, Inc., a museum in Lower Manhattan which, since its inception in 1976, has presented and preserved temporal art: artists' books and other multiples produced internationally after 1960, temporary installations, and performance art. Franklin Furnace now exists entirely as a virtual museum on the Web. Trained in English literature, Ms. Wilson was teaching at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design when she became fascinated by the intersection of text and image. As an artist, she has performed in the guises of Alexander Haig, Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush, and Tipper Gore. Ms. Wilson lectures widely on the book as an art form, on performance art, and on "live art" on the Web.

**MATTHEW YOKOBOSKY** is a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh (B.A., 1986) in film studies. In 1987, he joined the staff of the Whitney Museum of American Art, where over the following twelve years he served in several positions, including associate curator of film and video (*No Wave Cinema*, 1978–87, 1996) and exhibition designer (1995 Biennial and *The American Century*, 1999). Between 1987 and 1991, he also designed costumes and sets for the theater director Ping Chong; in 1989, he won a Bessie award for *Brightness*. Since 2002, he has been chief designer at the Brooklyn Museum.

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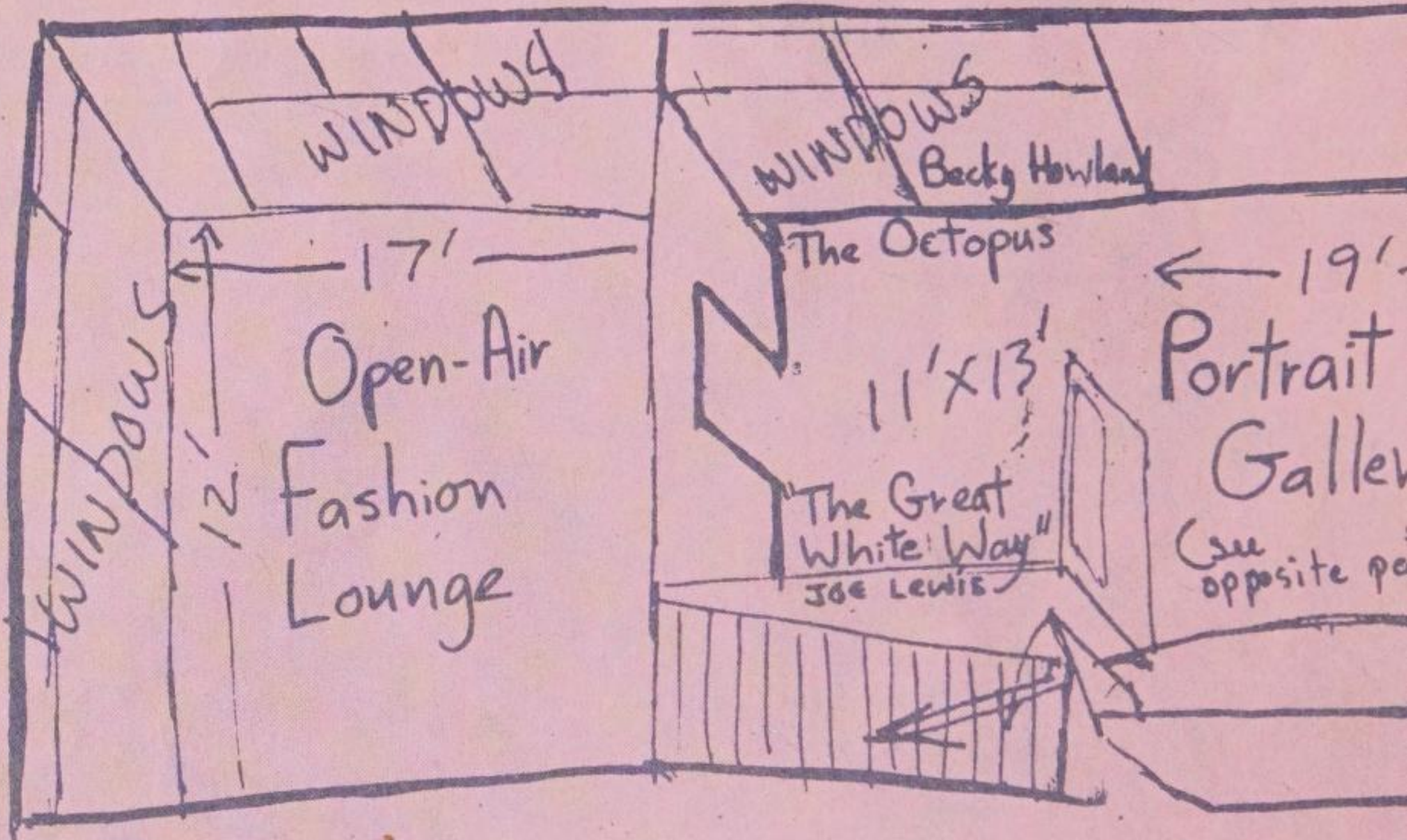
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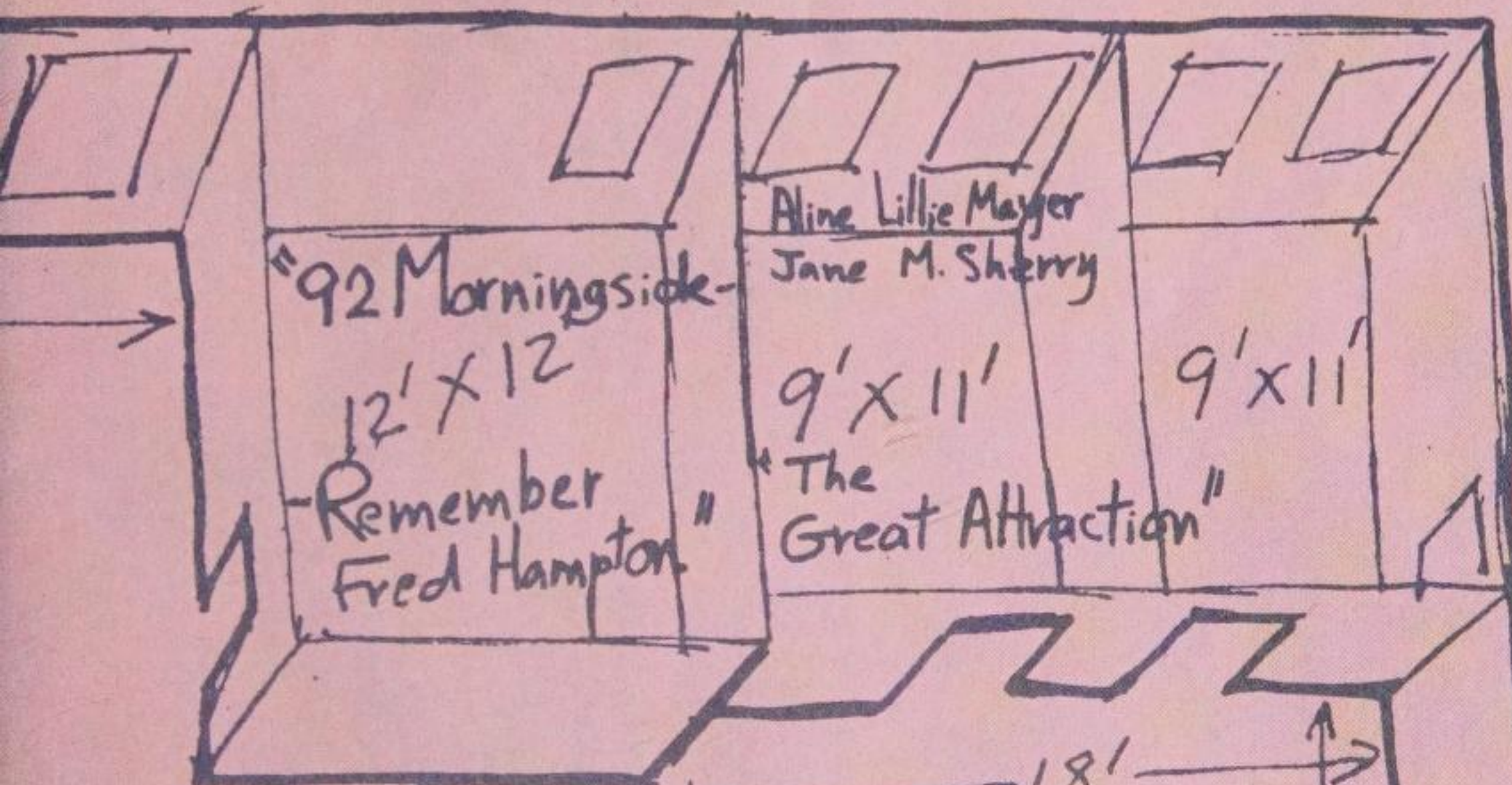
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"Willie's Passage"

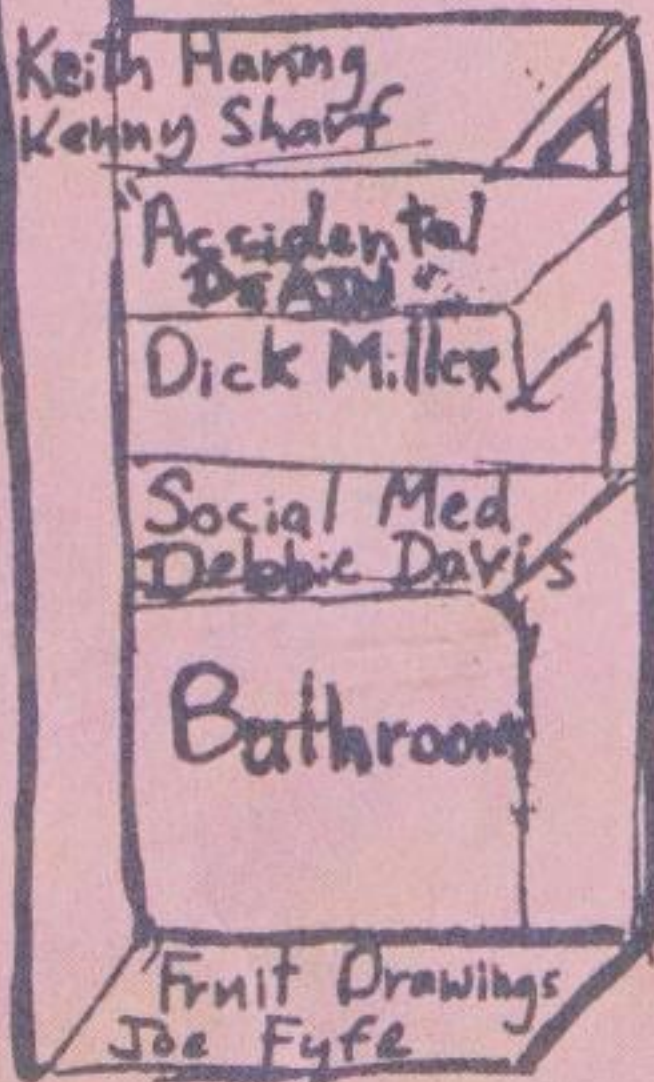
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06

# THE DOWNTOWN BOOK

THE NEW YORK ART SCENE 1974-1984

EDITED BY MARVIN J. TAYLOR • FOREWORD BY LYNN GUMPERT, ESSAYS BY BERNARD GENDRON, ROSELEE GOLDBERG, CARLO MCCORMICK, ROBERT SIEGLE, MARVIN J. TAYLOR, BRIAN WALLIS, AND MATTHEW YOKOBOSKY.

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