THE ARTIST AS CURATOR

AN ANTHOLOGY

Edited by Elena Filipovic
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It’s not like people got together before the month of June and they made this Times Square Show and then they open the door and everyone came in and went, “Wow! Look at that!” No. It was not anything like that. It was more like something that was constantly changing.

—Charlie Ahearn

On June 1, 1980, what the Village Voice called “the first radical art show of the ’80s” opened in a former massage parlor at 201 West Fortieth Street and Seventh Avenue in New York. It was organized by the artist members of Collaborative Projects Inc., also known as Colab, and was inaugurated with a party that went late into the summer night. For the entirety of the month of June, Times Square Show (frequently abbreviated TSS) was open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, echoing the all-hours rhythm of nearby Forty-Second Street. Though it was economically downtrodden, New York was on the verge of massive cultural change and, with it, the art world too was on the brink of a new era. Within this cityscape Times Square was an especially liminal site, the social context of which became material for Colab’s event-based exhibition where spontaneous interventions created a stream of unanticipated alterations—much like the unpredictable reality of the streets outside.

Times Square Show was comprised of artworks by 100 to 150 artists and included an extensive lineup of “Exotic Events,” performances, and screenings.

3. In some of the posters and fliers, Times Square Show was promoted as being open “everyday in June” or from June 1 to 30. However, William Zimmer’s review of the show in the SoHo News listed the final date as July 4, 1980 (“Underground in the Underground World,” June 18, 1980). It thus seems likely that the show was extended through July 4.
4. Posters and fliers for Times Square Show include lists of “Exotic Events.”
More than a constellation of artworks or events, however, it was the artist’s prototype that was remarkable for the way it activated the exhibition as social space. The sweeping range of media as well as non-art objects. At times, viewers might have or “open-invitation” policy of their previous exhibitions staged in downtown lofts. Becky Howland, (1980), as installed in the men’s room at Moda in March 2016. The photographer Lisa Kahane enumerated these six significant that women made up 50 percent of the membership, a high level for a heterogeneous group at the time. With a constituency of thirty to fifty members at any given moment, Colab artists maintained their unique mandate for more than seven years.

Ideologically, Colab endeavored to create affordable art, reach audiences beyond the art world, and challenge systemic relationships between culture, money, and information. In speaking about Times Square Show, Colab member John Ahearn told the East Village Eye, “There has always been a misdirected consciousness that art belongs to a certain class or intelligence. This show proves there are no classes in art, no differentiation. These ideas are reflected in Colab’s affiliation with Fashion Moda, an arts organization founded in 1978 in the South Bronx that collaborated on Times Square Show.” Fashion Moda raised critical questions about the function of art, especially in terms of race and class: Who makes art? Who decides what art is? Who decides which art gets shown? Six months prior to the exhibition, a handful of Colab members participated in the Committee for the Real Estate Show, which organized a rebelliously themed exhibition about landlord speculation in low-income neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side (LES). Real Estate Show opened on January 1, 1980, in an illegal LES squat. When the artists returned the following morning, they found themselves locked out of the building. They later returned to the site to protest outside, and were joined by art dealer Ronald Feldman and the German artist Joseph Beuys. This high-profile lockout, captured by photographers from the New York Times, led to negotiations with city agencies, and the artists were eventually granted use of another empty building at 156 Rivington Street, where they founded the collectively run center for art and activism ABC No Rio. In many ways, Real Estate Show was a threshold exhibition, bringing together social critique, political activism, and art to highlight pervasive housing issues in New York.
Tom Otterness with handwriting by John Ahearn, second-floor plan of Times Square Show, New York, 1980
1980, such projects were just beginning to take hold, as evidenced by the increasing number of buildings slated for demolition. *Times Square Show*’s dilapidated massage parlor (likely a brothel) was one such site. To arrange their use of the building, John Ahearn, Tom Otterness, and Coleen Fitzgibbon negotiated with the landlord, who donated it for two months in exchange for a $500 deposit that was never returned.13 This agreement is an early example of artists being engaged in processes of “urban renewal,” even as they acted out against gentrification.

By all accounts, Colab’s vote to do a project in Times Square was unanimous. Some of the group’s members held a preliminary meeting on the purple car to discuss the idea. 

18. John Ahearn filled in the details, it was already mid-June. Ahearn, Tom Otterness, and Coleen Fitzgibbon negotiated with the landlord, who donated it for two months in exchange for a $500 deposit that was never returned.13

19. By all accounts, Colab’s vote to do a project in Times Square was unanimous. Some of the group’s members held a preliminary meeting on the purple car to discuss the idea.

20. According to a budget draft in Andrea Callard’s papers, the total project cost was $32,000, with at least $15,000 in donated goods and services.

21. In his essay “Polarity Rules,” John Reed has pointed out, “the photographs are just one moment in a month, and things were not so static.”


23. From the various stories, one also gets a sense of the viewing experience—of wandering through the installation to discover artworks colliding up against each other. Though a great effort was made to clean up the building, its run-down state bedeviled any attempt to layer and install the artworks, which, as John Reed wrote, underscored the artists’ “disregard for convention, and conventional categorization.”14 Reed’s observation is critical, as it draws out an important distinction: while the exhibition may have seemed haphazard, the mode of installation was an explicit decision by the artists, who were interested in undoing art-world hierarchies of power and display.

24. The tension around inclusion was prominent enough that Alan Moons recalls hiding a sculpture behind a wall in solidarity with all of the artists who were rejected from the show. Numerous stories circulate: a young David Hammons heard from Joe Lewis that there was a “free-for-all” going on in *Times Square*. Hammons arrived one day in May and, after introducing himself to Jody Culkin and Jane Dickson, went back out into the neighboring blocks and returned with a bag of empty Night Train wine bottles he collected. Hammons crushed the bottles and sprinkled the glass down the side of the stairwell where Culkin and Dickson were installing. An intervention that might have gone unnoticed in the bombastic array of works, if not for the fact that anyone using the stairs had to contend with it. “When Jody and I protested the glass carpet he’d laid,” Dickson recalls, “David gave us a little shrugging smile as if to say: deal with it, kids. And then left.”

With “no curators” as a motto, the artists themselves took up the curatorial roles of organizers, exhibition designers, administrators, and promoters. While Colab distributed its funds according to a democratic structure, it had an anarchistic mechanism at its heart. Once a project was in motion, many ideas would play out simultaneously. About making a sign out front, Charlie Ahearn recalls, “I remember I walked out there and I just did it. I didn’t ask anyone. That’s the weird thing about it. That’s the weird thing about it.”

25. Colab’s meeting at Peter Fend’s Broadway loft, 1983.


27. Colab meeting at Peter Fend’s Broadway loft, 1983.

28. Colab meeting at Peter Fend’s Broadway loft, 1983.
Additionally, artists made fliers of photomontaged images culled from magazines with hand-scribbled notes, which they plastered on buildings and in clubs downtown. Someone printed up VIP invitation cards and sent them to New York art critics. As an integral part of their social practice, these were more than project collateral; they were a core element of Colab’s creative output and activities.

From its inception, Colab was interested in video as a democratic medium; they embraced it as a non-salable art form. Significantly, a handful of Colab members created three public service announcements (PSAs) to promote Times Square Show, which aired on New York cable television throughout the month of June. Colab members collaboratively acted, shot, directed, and provided audio for the PSAs, which were filmed on a soundstage, while walking through Times Square, and in a park, respectively; each PSA promoted the show as one would the circus or a Broadway musical. These do-it-yourself videos were integral to the scope and concept of the exhibition, and in creating them, Colab explored sociopolitical relationships between time-based media and space.

In light of this, the advertisements created for Times Square Show were central to the exhibition. Created by Colab artists, they expanded the borders of the event to include even the airways and sightlines of New York. And they foreground Times Square’s imminent future as an advertising mecca and symbolic locus of capitalist entertainment. In many ways, the advertisements for Times Square Show mobilized Colab’s two primary interests, which David Little describes as media and space.”

Continuing in the mode of their previous exhibitions, the artists formed ad hoc committees to oversee the thematic design of each space in the four-story building. In small groups, they managed the construction and installation of the Souvenir Shop and lobby, which came endowed with a stage replete with mirrored panels. They oversaw the Fashion Room, the Portrait Room, the TV Lounge/Leopard Room, and the Money, Love, and Death Room, that last covered in Coleen Fitzgibbon and Robin Winters’s black and white Gun, Dollar, Plate wallpaper. Artists from the Harlem Workshop and White Columns managed spaces on the fourth...
York Times's garbage emergency, went indoors for the first time; her offset prints depicting Avenue, filled the room. They invited Jean-Michel Basquiat to make his first painting on board, which they hung behind the catwalk as a backdrop for a fashion show.

Robinson remembers once walking in on someone masturbating in there.

Fashion Lounge, which they filled with painted clothes that visitors took away over Brathwaite's fortuitous meeting with Charlie Ahearn at the show later led to the seminal film Wild Style (1983). With their emphasis on interactivity, the artists' experiments further dissipated the usual distinctions between exhibition, artwork, and audience. In addition to the number of hand-painted plaster works they hung in the Portrait Room, John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres organized life casting sessions on the sidewalks of Times Square. Bobby G, Matthew Geller, and Julie Harrison videotaped unscheduled interviews with spectators, inside and outside of the space. Mary Lemley, Paula Greif, Karen Luner, Eszter Balint, Vicki Pederson, and Sophie Vieille designed the panties that she'd woven into her "nest" made of cloth, tinsel, and satin.

Installations found their way into the damp, dark, rat-infested basement and rats climbed up the stairs from the lobby and along the baseboards. Peter Fend installed the first iteration of NEWS' ROOM, which included news reports from agencies that kept head offices within two miles of Times Square, including the New York Times, Time-Life, NBC, CBS, and the BBC. Fred Brathwaite (aka Fab 5 Freddy) and Lee Quiñones made graffiti on an exterior wall and hung canvases upstairs. Brathwaite's fortuitous meeting with Charlie Ahearn at the show later led to the seminal film Wild Style (1983).

Michael Auder, Scott B and Beth B, and Betsy Sussler. Dara Birnbaum showed her video Wonder Woman (1978), and Nan Goldin presented one of her first slide shows. Jack Smith held a typically long and uneventful performance, which cast the entire evening within a performative frame. At one point, he accidentally lit his turban on fire while lighting incense. Smith didn't realize his headgear was burning, but one of the other two performers, a hooker he had picked up in Times Square, did, and patted it out.

Becky Howland recalls waking up one morning to the sound of a commotion. Colab artists were painting over the words "Free Sex" that Basquiat had spray painted above the entry door. Fitzgibbon reasonably points out: "Who would want to be working there minding the store when people came in for the free sex?"

Modeled after the tourist stores and seedier sex shops selling tchotchkes nearby, the Souvenir Shop on the exhibition's ground floor, which Fitzgibbon is referring anyone could happen upon people in there and join or watch, which was a great tribute to the location."

In the preceding decades cultural shifts had taken place, generating new artistic strategies with an emphasis on participation, indeterminacy, and chance, in which the presence of a spectator activated or completed a work of art. This emphasis on participation and reception within the field of performance art (from the 1960s onward) began to shape aspects of public art and institutional critique, the latter of which attempted to, as Miwon Kwon has noted, "expose the cultural confinement within which artists function." In a manner of thinking, Times Square Show epitomizes strategies, on an exhibitionary scale, that were "aggressively anti-visual," "immaterial," and "bracketed by temporal boundaries," anticipating artistic practices that would come to be known under the rubric of relational aesthetics or socially engaged art.

At Times Square Show, social interactions and their ensuing conversations were critical to the overall experience, perhaps even defined it, and were activated by an extensive list of events. Jim Jarmusch screened early films, as did
to, continued blurring the boundary between art and life. The shop featured artist multiples, some costing about five dollars, some as cheap as twenty-five cents; these included winged penis figurines, pill capsules bearing messages, and fans with a prayer on one side and a picture of people having sex on the other. Kiki Smith living there for weeks alongside homeless people who were taking temporary shelter from the street. The openness of the exhibition site meant that meetings, conversations, and frictions between the artists and the wide variety of visitors played a significant role in shaping the cultural paradigm in New York for more than two decades. Artists’ projects thrived in disused warehouses, abandoned lots, churches, storefronts, and nightclubs throughout the city. Various forms of underground culture had developed beyond the normalizing sphere of the museum world, which had yet to adapt or modify its own conservative standards, and art activism had begun to directly address the institutions’ discriminatory policies, in particular the racism and sexism embedded within them. By the time 1980 came around, artists were galvanized by the activity and politics of independent organizational strategies. As David Deitcher writes in his essay “Polarity Rules,” “They were also united in their disaffection with the parochial concerns and elitist rituals of the commercial gallery and museum scene and in their impatience with alternative spaces that paid lip service to diversity but remained unresponsive to young, punk-inspired artists like themselves.” It was in this milieu that the museums began to change their policies, that Times Square Show took place.

Times Square Show was the first major exhibition for many artists, including several not yet mentioned in this essay—Jenny Holzer, Keith Haring, Olivier Mosset, Kenny Scharf, and Wolfgang Staehle—as well as artists who already had some significant exhibitions under their belts, for instance Mimi Gross and Alex Katz. While this helps to account for its legendary status, more than any one artistic practice, Times Square Show is most notable for the way in which the artists’ methods and ideological values shaped the exhibition’s form. Times Square Show leveled attention priorities from the outset, indicating a shift away from static structures in which singular combinations of artworks are displayed, and toward event-based installations, especially where large-scale collaborations are concerned. It implicated—and began to dissolve—notions of authorship, and did so at the beginning of an era in which artistic interventions in the social sphere attained equal, if not more, cultural significance than they had in the 1960s. To borrow Susan Sontag’s terms, the Times Square Show was “not only a container of artworks” but a social space, “a place where meanings, narratives, histories, conversations and encounters are actively produced and set in motion.” Biennials and other large-scale exhibitions, which burgeoned in the late 1980s, may have gleaned some of these attributes precisely from exhibitions like Times Square Show, whose prescient signaling of the importance of social engagement announced a shift to the larger art world.

If the Village Voice immediately understood it as “first radical art show of the ’80s,” the comment suggests that the exhibition’s radical form and its inauguration of a brave new era in art were already recognizable at the time. Speaking of the show in his book Recombinant, John Reed recently asked, “At what date on the calendar, at what precise location did counterculture become pop culture? And who do we mark down in the history books as the hero, or the villain, who masterminded the switch? There is an answer: ‘The Times Square Show.’” As it happens, in 1980 the culture of appropriation within the visual arts began to mix with DJ and graffiti culture. Colab artists were particularly open to such hybridity between high and low art, something that Times Square Show epitomized. Appropriated images that addressed issues such as money and sexism were heavily featured in the non-juried, thematic exhibitions organized by Colab. Punk and pop aesthetics influenced these artists more than questions of framing and representation, although other artists and scholars were taking up those latter points of inquiry in parallel conversations about appropriation. Douglas Crimp’s salient observations about quotation and meaning construction as tenets of postmodern art practice are a concurrent example of the increasing use of appropriation across the visual arts, though employed according to different artistic strategies. Crimp curated the group exhibition Pictures at Artists Space in 1977—the same year that Colab’s first meeting took place—and published


43. Artists in Times Square Show who worked at Tin Pan Alley included Nan Goldin, Cara Parks, Carol Rork, and Kiki Smith. Rork urged participants there and would go on to open the Lower East Side bar Max Fish. Colab members were generally involved in the music scene, a nightlife scene centered around CBGB, St. Vitus, and Mudd Club.


45. For further reading, see Susan Sontag’s essay “Pictures at an Exhibition,” Times Square Show; and Susan Sontag’s, “Times Square Show,” Village Voice, June 9, 1980, 51.


47. Colab projects could not help but inscribe themselves in a history of participatory events and scenes, including the Fluxus scene, Yoko Ono’s solo at 19 Chambers Street, Judson Dance Theatre, Andy Warhol’s The Factory (which occupied different locations in Manhattan from 1952 to 1964), Chris Oberndorf’s The Store (1985), David Hockney’s party, etc. Matta-Clark’s interventions in abandoned buildings along the West Side Highway in the 1970s, and FOOD, the restaurant Matta-Clark cofounded with the artists Carol Goodwin and Tom Gowanlock in SoHo in 1971.


49. John Reed, “Crossroads of the Art World.”
AN EXHIBIT

MARCUS BROODTHAERS, installation view of the
Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures,
Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1972

Outside Times Square Show, New York, 1980
his follow-up essay in the art journal October two years later, shortly before the
planning for Times Square Show was under way. While Pictures, and its “Pictures
Generation” artists, have maintained prominence in art history ever since, the
opposite could be said of Times Square Show, where the artists traded conceptual
frameworks for a sloppier, handmade attitude toward appropriation.

Many artists in Times Square Show expressed their social anxieties by cre-
ating topical images of objects like guns and dolls, but the political position of their
artworks was perhaps diluted amid the mix of references and visual noise. In a dis-
cussion about representation and reception in her review of the show, Lucy Lippard
raised the issue of “code sharing” and how shifts in context may change the meaning
of an image: “TTSS’ [sic] images of hard and soft porn may have seemed quite daring
and ‘real life’ to an audience. To the street audience they were probably down-
right opaque.” Still other images that might have read as social critique according
to the cultural codes of the downtown art world took on new meanings alongsid e
the sex shops and brothels in Times Square. Lippard also noted what she recognized
as instances of racialized coding in the show, such as the dancing puppet of James
Brown hanging in the lobby, invoking minstrel stereotypes. Lippard’s observations
articulate one of the primary concerns of site-specific art, which Kwon has referred
to as “the epistemological challenge to relocate meaning from within the art object
to the contingencies of its context.” The collision of subjectivities, languages, and
signs at Times Square Show produced critical questions about context and meaning
that continue to occupy artists and curators today. Lippard noted:

What makes TTSS noteworthy, no matter what one thinks of the art in it, is the
levels it offers. TTSS is an organizational feat—an object lesson in object-or-
ganizing by artists. It is a weird kind of cultural colonization that worked
because colonizers and colonized had something in common; an exhibition
of “unsalable” works accompanied by a gift shoppe that managed to sell just
such works—cheap; a constantly changing panorama of esthetic neuroses;
a performance and film festival; a throwback to the early ‘60s happenings-
and-store-front syndrome; a sunny apotheosis of shady sexism; a cry of rage
against current artworldliness and a ghastly glance into the future of art. It’s
also a lot of knives and guns and money and dirt and cocks and cunts and
blood and gore housed in four wrecked floors (plus basement) donated to the
organizers by the landlord.

The artists in Times Square Show gravitated toward the seductive and ta-
boo industries around sex. Half of the exhibitors were women, and many works in
the show posited disparaging assumptions regarding the sex industry. Lippard
describes how on opening night, Diane Torr and Ruth Peyster presented a series of
five-minute interactions with a life-size, inflatable porno doll. These feminist per-
formers waged an attack on the doll’s orifices, using sex toys and strap-on dildos
while yelling things like, “She likes it!” Some male bystanders were deeply offended
by the artists’ aggressions, while others noted that some pimps came in, watched for
a while, and later walked off giggling.

Julie Ault of Group Material, an important artist collective active at the
time, and a historian of alternative art spaces in New York, has described Colab
projects as “often messy, pluralistic and democratic.” This was especially true at
Times Square Show and noted in the show’s enthusiastic exhibition reviews, which
frequently mentioned the popular use of “downtown” aesthetics: New Wave’s retro
style, irony, and appropriation. Invoking the Lower East Side’s punk schlock atti-
tudes, Richard Goldstein called Times Square Show “three chord art that anyone can
play.” Reviews noted the lack of distinction between artworks and other objects.
One anecdote mentioned sawdust on the floor as evidence of the artists’ punk-
inflected, laissez-faire attitude. In fact, the artists used sawdust to sop up spilled
beer before sweeping it away. At the show, a visitor might have easily confused it
for random debris or part of an installation. This potential slippage in meaning is
indicative of the perspectival shifts that were activated by the show’s environment.

Times Square Show embodied the chaos and social dynamism of Times
Square, serving dual duty as site and theme. By abolishing distinctions between
inside and outside, shop and exhibition, artwork and trinket, original and copy, artist
and audience, corporate (incorporation) and radical (fame), and the dapper and
downtrodden, this “object lesson in object-organizing by artists” (to recall Lippard’s
characterization of it) reminds us that the place, policy, protocol, and even opening
hours of an exhibition contribute to its overall “form.” And in the case of Times
Square Show, this form shaped not only the first radical art show of the ‘80s,” but
perhaps also the one that best encapsulates the questions about site, site, and
sociality that artists and curators would grapple with in the decades to follow.

The following Times Square Show artist list has been compiled from the
floor maps and the Exotic Events listings, but cannot be considered definitive, since
for example some artists whose artworks were photographed in the exhibition are
not listed on the floor maps, and many artists added work to the show after it opened.
Spellings have been corrected whenever possible:

L. Abrahms; Charlie Ahearn; John Ahearn; Jules Allen; Amsterdam
Theater; Ehry Anderson; Anonymous; Eszter Balint; Doug Ball; Jean-Michel
Bosman; Marc Brathwaite / Fab 5 Freddy; Bread and Roses, Leni Brown;
Edward Brzezinski; Andrea Callard; Jim Casebere; Georgeen Comerford;
Mitch Spellings have been corrected whenever possible:

Ibid., 51.
55. Richard Goldstein, “Three
Chord Art Anyone Can Play.”
57. Relayed by Andrew Collett in a conversation with the author,
November 2015.
Artists known to have participated in the “Exotic Events” include Kenneth Ager; Charlie Ahearn with Michael Smith; Michael Auer with Ondine and Viva; Scott B and Beth B; Dara Birnbaum; Jane Brettschneider; Steve Brown; Tim Burns; the Dynells; Bill Garner; Jean Genet; Nan Goldin; Ilona Granet; Rick Greenwald; Gary Indiana; Nathan Ingram; Jim Jarmusch; Becky Johnson; Mark Kehoe; Christof Kohlhofe; Linton Kwesi Johnson; George Landau; Bing Lee; Willie Lenski; Aline Mayer; Larry Meltzer; Ellie Nager; James Nares; Michael Oblowitz; Mark Pauline; Ruth Peyser; Caz Porter; RAYBEATS; Walter Robinson; Kenny Scharf; Terrance Sellers; Stuart Sherman; Jane Sherry and Cara Perlman; Barry Shills; Jack Smith with Sinbad Glick and the Brasserie Girls of Bagdad; Michael Smith; Bill Stephens; Gordon Stevenson with Mirielle Cervenka; Mindy Stevenson; Suicide; Betsy Sussler; Third World Newsreel; Diane Torr; Erika Van Damn; video X; and Peter von Ziegesar.

* The author thanks Andrea Callard and John Ahearn. Thanks, too, to Ann Butler for her conversations, and Dean Daderko, Sara Marcus, Benny Morris, Max Schumann, and David Senior.

COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS INC. (COLAB)