

The Death of Downtown New York

ONCE UPON A time, the art world—at least as it existed in downtown New York in the 1950s—was incommensurable in myriad ways. I mean, when is the last time you went to a big group show and came across more than half-a-dozen Asian and Asian American artists: Yayoi Kusama, Leo Valledor, Yoko Ono, Nanae Momiyama, Robert Kobayashi, Walasse Ting, and Tadaaki Kuwayama? How many Asian American artists were included in *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*, which was at the Museum of Modern Art in New York? What happened between the mid-1960s and the present, a little more than a half century? Did Asians stop painting and go into computer programming because that's where the action was? Hollywood erases Asians faster than you can say "anime," and so does the art world, it seems. What forces caused them to become invisible in the mid-1960s, when the art world briefly and begrudgingly acknowledged a handful of Black artists, but seemed to think that America's population was either Black or white?

These are just some of the questions spurred by the exhibition *Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City, 1952-1965* at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, which was curated by Melissa Rachleff, who has done an amazing and thorough job. Rachleff deserves our thanks for amassing a wide and wild range of material, from artwork to documentary pho-

tographs to gallery ephemera. She has managed to allot discrete areas to a variety of artist-run galleries and groups in what is a difficult space to organize. Rachleff seems to have left no stone unturned. Driven by curiosity, this is curatorial practice at its best. For anyone who has come across the name Jean Follett, you can see two wall pieces by her in this exhibition, one of which is in a little-known collection in Athens, Greece. Follett, who studied with Hans Hoffman, began applying layers of paint to found objects placed in a shallow box, to which she added more objects. They are shadow boxes but they are not. They don't look like anything else. They are hybrid works, but that term does not touch upon the strangeness of Follett's art.

Follett was included in three shows at the Museum of Modern Art between 1959 and 1963, including *The Art of Assemblage* (October 4–November 12, 1961), organized by William C. Seitz. That catalog was the first place I saw her work, along with a number of other artists', including Bruce Conner, Jess, and Robert Mallary, alongside Lee Bontecou, Joseph Cornell, Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns, Marisol, and Robert Rauschenberg. That kind of openness to different aesthetic positions does not happen anymore.

I don't know what happened to Follett, but I have long been curious about her work, and was more than happy to see it.

Forty years ago, Thomas B. Hess mentioned her in passing in a review of the painter David Budd that appeared in *New York Magazine* (March 7, 1977). Here is the kicker line from that review:

Some lost their way. Where are Jean Follett and Felix Pasilis? A few died before their time (Gabe Kohn, Sam Goodman, Gandy Brodie). Most have persevered. They however, in lives of not quite quiet desperation. They teach a bit, exhibit now and then, while slowly piecing together the historical puzzle that was scattered, so brusquely about fifteen years ago, when it seemed, as if on a Monday, they were respected members of a cultural milieu and then, the next Friday, practically the whole art Establishment crossed the street to avoid having to say hello.

Hess writes that this sweeping change took place around 1962. All the artists he mentions have work in the NYU exhibition. I would venture that most are hardly known and the probability is high that none of them have something currently on display in a New York museum.

If 1962 is the dividing line between one art world and what we seem to have inherited—the moneyed domain of expensive, well-produced, shiny fabrication, not to mention the big, industrial, and tastefully rusted—*Inventing Downtown* will bring you back to the period before the “art Establishment crossed the street” into the welcoming arms of the investor class. It is before the art world became arty, and gatekeepers and art-style influencers became more prominent. Between 1952 and ’65, the years covered by the exhibition, every kind of scene seemed to be percolating in a rather small geographic area of Manhattan. The epicenter was East Tenth Street, where a bunch of artist-run galleries opened and Willem de Kooning had a studio. Rachleff smartly organizes the show around artist-run galleries, alternative spaces, and groups. Some were short-lived. *Spiral*, a collective of African American artists who met in Romare Bearden’s loft on Canal Street, was active from the summer of 1963 until 1965 and had one exhibition. They were trying to negotiate their relationship to race, civil rights, and aesthetics. It could not have been easy. Rachleff also includes the Green Gallery, whose “program,” according to the free brochure accompanying the exhibition, “resulted in the narrowing of aesthetic possibilities and the marginalization of many artists.” If she left any gallery or alternative scene out, I am unaware of it.

In addition to Follett, there were many artists whose work I hadn’t seen before. There were also many surprises from familiar artists, including a garish, Bonnard-inspired *Portrait of Frank O’Hara* (1953–54) by Wolf Kahn. It looks as if the poet is wearing a pink and orange Halloween mask. A few feet away, on the same wall, is a lovely *Portrait of Jane Freilicher* (1957)—a close friend of O’Hara’s—

by Jane Wilson. We know the portraits of O’Hara done by Larry Rivers, Fairfield Porter, and Alice Neel, but this one was new to me. There are also early works by Jim Dine, Dan Flavin, and Alan Kaprow before they became famous for making signature works. Flavin’s piece *Apollinaire wounded (to Ward Jackson)* (1959), is made from a crushed can surrounded by oil paint and pencil on Masonite, mounted on plaster on pine in a shallow box. The title is carefully incised into the paint in the upper left corner, while the red hole at the top of the crushed can refers to the poet’s head wound, which he got in World War I.

There are abstract paintings by the Black artists Norman Lewis, Hale Woodruff, and Ed Clark, which tell us that the legacy of the 1960s is one of exclusion. That this exclusion began during the Civil Rights Movement does not speak well of the art world. There other thing that struck me is the wide assortment of work. There is no hierarchy between figurative and abstract paintings, nor are there distinctions about materials or processes.

The thickly painted *Heaven and Earth* (1960) by Alfred Jensen is diagonally opposite the thinly painted *Ada Ada* (1959) by Alex Katz. The former is filled with arcane symbols, while the latter depicts the artist’s wife twice, wearing a plain blue dress and matching blue shoes. While Hess never says what led up to the sea change in 1962, one cause seems to have been the advent of hierarchical thinking and the other is the growing importance of the collector class. You also have Donald Judd separating painting from the rectangle in his essay “Specific Objects” (1965) as well as reframing the avant-garde phrase of “make it new” to “you cannot do it again.”

While Judd’s theories might have influenced the thinking and actions of a lot of people, that does not mean he is right: it means that he has a forceful viewpoint powerfully expressed in unequivocal terms. But you can also find the paintings of John Wesley at the Judd Foundation in Marfa, Texas, and so maybe he was not as much of an ideologue as some people want to believe and take comfort in because looking is easier when you know what to look at.

Then there is Clement Greenberg's snobbish term "Tenth Street Touch," which dismissed a lot of artists, including many who did not use a loaded brush or paint the figure. There is the much-ballyhooed claim that art had to be objective, abstract, pure, and even universal—all of which are questionable standards. I think collectors also had something to do with what happened. Whatever the collectors Robert and Ethel Scull did for the art world, they were self-serving narcissists, as Andy Warhol's portrait *Ethel Scull 36 Times* (1963) demonstrates. And, of course, there's commerce, from rising rents to the escalating prices of what looks good on a big, immaculate wall—the "post-easel" picture. These forces together helped produce the perfect storm. In some sense, the art world turned from a place of community to a place of authority.

By bringing us back to the decade before the "art establishment" decided what were the true, quantifiable markers of progress, *Inventing Downtown* reminds us that what we have now was not always the way it was. There are so many things to see and discover—from photographs of interactive paintings by Yoko Ono to George Sugarman's *Four Forms in Walnut* from 1959 (yes, you can carve wood and not be old-fashioned), to a strange and interesting *Self-Portrait in Fur Jacket* (1959) by Marcia Marcus (what happened to her?), to a group of gritty drawings by Emilio Cruz, Red Grooms, and Bob Thompson. Check out the work of Boris Lurie, who was in a concentration camp (1941–45), and then read about him and Sam Goodman and the NO! art movement in *The Outlaw Bible of American Art* (2015), edited by Alan Kaufman. This exhibition brings back a lot of what has been forgotten, overlooked, and thrown under the bus—no doubt with joy. It might not all be good, but to quote another statement that Judd made in "Specific Objects": A work needs only to be interesting. By that standard, everything you see in this exhibition needed to be included.