

Exploring New York's Mid-Century Boom of Artist-Run Galleries

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Red Grooms transporting artwork across the street to Reuben Gallery, 1960

John Cohen/Courtesy L. Parker Stephenson Photographs

Where does art belong? For a young artist living in New York in the 1950s, this was no small question. The city wasn't flush with galleries then as it is now, and those that were here — most uptown, many along 57th Street — couldn't afford to deal seriously in contemporary art. Neither audiences nor collectors had developed a taste for much beyond the Modernists and the Abstract Expressionists, and museums weren't yet in the business of promoting the upcoming generation. Rather than bow to context — what's ever the use of waiting to be discovered, or of trying to break in? — some artists took matters into their own hands, opened their own galleries, and carved out new corners of the city where art could thrive on artists' terms.

"Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City, 1952–1965" is a rich and roiling exhibition at NYU's Grey Art Gallery that takes stock of fourteen such venues that opened across Lower Manhattan over the thirteen-year period between the ascendance of Abstract Expressionism and the art world's explosive Pop. Artists were not only working between the dueling albatrosses of abstraction and figuration, but were also mixing media and kinking genres to create installations, environments,

happenings, and performance art. The story of each gallery is told in part via a selection of artworks that were shown by them. Some names will be familiar (Alex Katz, Yayoi Kusama, Louise Bourgeois, Robert Rauschenberg, etc.), others less so, and curator Melissa Rachleff rightly refuses to straighten the messiness of art's history into tidy arcs — or to erode the complex half-lives of artists and artworks into some kind of creepy proof of present destiny. Instead, the show beautifully captures glimmers of the vibrant, topsy-turvy momentum of the times.

Artist-run spaces weren't only founded in the name of new aesthetics; in some cases it was a matter of ethics too, of staking a claim in how best and most correctly to conduct business. No matter how much money was or wasn't being made, art should come first. There were the storefront cooperatives, member-based outfits such as Hansa Gallery (founded by former students of the painter Hans Hoffmann), Brata Gallery (opened by the Krushenick brothers, Nicholas and John), and Tanager Gallery (started by Angelo Ippolito), where artists chipped in money every month to cover rent and expenses and volunteered to cover whatever jobs needed to be done. There were spaces opened at the intersection of art and politics, such as Phyllis Yampolsky's Hall of Issues at Judson Memorial Church, which invited artists and others to freely initiate and participate in exhibitions and public forums on any subject — political, social, cultural — that felt urgent or necessary. Dancers, musicians, and composers found audiences in Yoko Ono and La Monte Young's Chambers Street Loft Series; performance artists were given space and time at Allan Kaprow and Anita Rubin's Reuben Gallery.

Over the course of this exhibition, one might begin to think of space as a gesture of a different kind. Permanence seemed of less interest to these artists than the need to somehow support the disorder that came of experimentation and collaboration. Few of these venues lasted very long, let alone remain. Red Grooms's City Gallery (November 1958–May 1959) and his Delancey Street Museum (October 1959–May 1960) were both carved out of his private studio spaces, giving himself and others opportunities to show work in the way they wanted. It was at the Delancey Street space that Grooms staged his happening *The Burning Building* (1959) over the course of a week. Fueled by both the spirit of collaboration and a caution regarding the art market, the artists who filled the building at 79 Park Place (November 1963–March 1964), including Mark di Suvero, Robert Grosvenor, and Dean Fleming, would together build installations and environments, seeding new notions about public art. Romare Bearden, Hale Woodruff, Emma Amos, and the twelve other artists of the Spiral Group produced a single, potent exhibition in 1965: "Spiral: Works in Black and White," which wrestled with the problem of how to represent the black American experience at a time when the subject of race would invariably segregate the artists from the critical conversations that whirled around their white peers.

These spaces are gone, but what is left, of course, is the art. Walking around "Inventing Downtown," it's easy to lose track of the dense histories on view, of who showed whom and when, and to lose oneself in the genuine pleasure of looking at the works themselves. Discovery still happens, no matter how well an artist may or may not be known; time perhaps only amplifies that delight. A selected few: Wolf Kahn's radiant portrait of pied piper of the New York School Frank O'Hara (1953–54), which translates into paint something of the poet's own effervescent palette; Martha Edelheit's deliriously uncontained abstraction *Frabjous Day* (1959), as racy in its own way as her darkly erotic watercolor *Dream of the Tattooed Lady* (1961); a video of "electromedia" artist Aldo Tambellini's paintings on glass, which he called "Lumagrams" (c. 1962/2009), this but a tiny taste of the hypnotic, cosmic

projections that played behind his performances; the self-possessed cool of the woman wearing nothing but sunglasses in Amos's etching *Without Feather Boa* (1965); the witty transmutation of jeans pocket into symbol in Richard Smith's painting *Lee 2* (1961); the creepy upended anatomic composition of Jean-Jacques Lebel's assemblage *Foursome* (1961); and on and on and on.

Another proud legacy of that era: that artist-run spaces are still very much alive and well and are now an ongoing tradition in this city. Galleries like Soloway, EDDYSROOM, Regina Rex, Kimberly-Klark, Microscope Gallery, and Ortega y Gasset Projects are but a few of the places where art and artists can imagine where it is they might belong.

'Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City, 1952–1965'

Grey Art Gallery, New York University
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212-998-6780, greyartgallery.nyu.edu
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