

THE DOWNTOWN SHOW

THE NEW YORK ART SCENE 1974–1984

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NYU ROCKS WITH *THE DOWNTOWN SHOW*

**Scintillating survey of the New York Art Scene from 1974 to 1984
debuts at the Grey Art Gallery and Fales Library from January 10 to April 1, 2006
before embarking on national tour**

New York City (December 2, 2005)—Downtown New York has been an epicenter of creative ferment for more than 150 years. One decade, from 1974 to 1984, is the subject of a landmark exhibition premiering at two New York University institutions: the **Grey Art Gallery**, NYU's fine arts museum, and **Fales Library**, the repository of its special collections. ***The Downtown Show: The New York Art Scene, 1974–1984*** is the first retrospective to chart the rich cross-section of artists and activities that coexisted and often overlapped during this heady time in Lower Manhattan, and will be on view at both locations from **January 10 to April 1, 2006**. Featuring approximately 375 paintings, sculptures, drawings, videos, and photographs as well as over 70 items from the Downtown Collection of Fales—the world's most extensive archive of books, journals, posters, and ephemera relating to the Downtown scene from 1970 to the present—the show views Downtown as both geography and metaphor, and illuminates how this 10-year period radically altered the face of American art and culture.

Some 25 years later, the exhibition and its accompanying publication, ***The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene, 1974–1984*** (Princeton University Press), untangle the knot of multiple narratives that became intertwined during Downtown's heyday. What distinguishes *The Downtown Show* from earlier exhibitions is its focus on a broad section of Lower Manhattan's artistic community, beginning with the enactment of the "Loft Law," which made it legal for artists to live in SoHo's sprawling industrial spaces, and concluding with the rise of the East Village's narrow, storefront galleries and Ronald Reagan's re-election. Emerging out of the deflated optimism of the Summer of Love, New York's Downtown scene attracted artists, musicians, performers, filmmakers, writers, and others who could afford the then-low rents of SoHo lofts and Lower East Side tenements. In a rapidly evolving Downtown landscape, they ferociously churned out work that was populist and subversive, utopian and raw, antic and angry.

"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," observes **Carlo McCormick**, *The Downtown Show's* guest curator and a well-known critic. **Marvin Taylor**, editor of *The Downtown Book* and director of Fales Library, adds: "Downtown artists adopted an anarchic attitude that violated the gap between high art and mass culture, removed the production and reception of avant-garde art from its isolation within elite circles, and directly addressed social and political concerns. They also irreverently pushed the limits of traditional artistic categories—visual artists were also writers, writers developed performance pieces, performers incorporated videos into their works, and everyone was in a band."

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In keeping with the experimental spirit of Downtown's interdisciplinary practices, McCormick has organized the work of approximately 175 artists, writers, performers, and musicians into eight themes. Installed salon style, this provocative framing invokes the invigorating dissonance of the Downtown scene. The eight sections comprise: 1) **Interventions**—a preface and introduction that posits a connection between the proliferation of not-for-profit exhibition venues and artworks engaging Downtown urban settings and architecture; 2) **Broken Stories**—a fresh look at the innovative narrative techniques developed during the decade not only by writers, but also filmmakers and visual artists; 3) **De-Signs**—an investigation of the artistic use of advertising's shorthand signs and strategies, which in turn set the stage for more theoretical works grounded in postmodern theory; 4) **Salon de Refuse**—a section that brings together works that harnessed the surrounding detritus to create a "trash culture" of their own that challenged traditional hierarchical distinctions; 5) **Body Politics**—a presentation of art concerned with sexuality and identity politics; 6) **Sublime Time**—an exploration focusing on the period's search for the sublime in the wake of minimalism's reductive and formal concept of beauty; 7) **The Portrait Gallery**—a space featuring photographic, sculptural, and painted images of key Downtown denizens, which creates a vibrant "portrait" of this dynamic community; and, in conclusion, 8) **The Mock Shop**—a recreation of the stores—featuring low-cost artists' multiples and other artworks—that critiqued consumer culture in many Downtown shows and other collaboratives.

The Downtown Show intentionally presents a mélange of generations: works by **Vito Acconci**, **Joan Jonas**, **Leon Golub**, **Carolee Schneemann**, and **Lawrence Weiner** will be displayed alongside pieces by **Karen Finley**, **Robert Longo**, **Christian Marclay**, **Cindy Sherman**, and **Laurie Simmons**. Leading off the "Interventions" section, for example, is **Gordon Matta-Clark's** *Days End*, which depicts the artist's slicing of Pier 52 in 1975. This sets the stage for pieces by **David Wojnarowicz** and other artists who likewise took their art to the streets, drawing inspiration from Downtown New York's desolate industrial landscape. **Ida Applebroog's** multi-paneled narratives herald the resurgence of figuration out of the austerity of minimalism in "Broken Stories." Also presented in this section are books by Downtown denizens such as **Spalding Gray** and **Lynne Tillman** (featuring illustrations by **Kiki Smith**) along with manuscripts by **Kathy Acker** and **Eric Bogosian**. In "Sublime Time," documentation of **Tehching Hsieh's** *One Year Performance*, 1980–81, which demonstrates an interest in expanded notions of temporality will be installed alongside abstract paintings by **Ron Gorchov** and **Peter Halley**. "Sublime Time" not only encompasses mesmeric or meditative artworks and compositions, but also conjures the atmosphere of the late-night club scene and even New York City itself, where time—even without the mind-altering drugs then so prevalent—often seemed to either slow down inexorably or speed by in a blinding flash. Fales Library and Special Collections—housed in NYU's Bobst Library down the street from the Grey Art Gallery—will feature the "De-Signs" and "Body Politics" sections. In the former, selections from **Jenny Holzer's** *The Living Series*, 1980–82, enameled signs proclaiming terse statements, will hang along side the stencils **John Fekner** employed in spray-painting proclamations on the city's brick walls and concrete overpasses. "De-Signs" references graffiti and introduces the Punk music scene. Similarly, "Body Politics" includes **Lynda Benglis's** infamous 1974 *Artforum* ad, performance documentation of **Ethyl Eichelberger**, and **Nan Goldin's** color photographs. Also featured will be a selection of musical extracts from SoHo's Loft Jazz era, Techno, and Punk Rock.

Interspersed throughout is a rich array of Fales Library's archival material—artists' journals as well as exhibition announcements, posters, and other ephemera—which together represent not only a significant body of the period's material culture but also vivid reminders of its personal histories. As **Marvin Taylor** makes clear, "In order to restore the vitality of this period, we must attempt to put the human elements, the individual experiences, motives, and aspirations—the agency if you will—back into the cultural memory." In the words of **Carlo McCormick**, "The Downtown scene is all about collision—don't follow the footsteps. Instead, track the skidmarks."

The Downtown Book

The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene, 1974–1984 provides the first comprehensive overview of this important period. Although there is no shortage of commentary on the Downtown scene—including its already mythic subculture of Punk—few accounts rise above hagiography. Published by Princeton University Press, *The Downtown Book* probes the trends that arose in the 1970s and early '80s and solidified New York's reputation as arbiter of the postmodern American avant-garde. Its seven essays are intercut with twelve personal reminiscences from pioneers, practitioners, and provocateurs of the scene. Providing a lively survey of the media, trends, and culture of the Downtown scene, *The Downtown Book* offers an illuminating counterpart to the exhibition and will make a substantial contribution to the greater understanding of late 20th-century culture.

Exhibition Tour

After closing in New York, *The Downtown Show* travels to the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, from May 27 to September 3, 2006, and the Austin Museum of Art, in Austin, Texas, from November 18, 2006, to January 28, 2007.

Sponsorship

The Downtown Show is made possible in part by 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 Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, the New York University Humanities Council, Ronald and Frayda Feldman, the Buhl Foundation, MRB Foundation, Frank and Mary Ann Arisman, Frederieke S. Taylor, NYU's Graduate School of Arts and Science, Larry Warsh, and the Abby Weed Grey Trust. Public programs are supported by the Grey's Inter/National Council. Special thanks to Scharff Weisberg/Audio, Video & Lighting Technology and *Museums Magazine*.

Grey Art Gallery

100 Washington Square East
New York, NY 10003
T: 212/998-6780
Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday: 11 am–6 pm
OPEN LATE Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm
Saturday: 11 am–5 pm
Closed Sunday, Monday, and major holidays
www.nyu.edu/greyart

Fales Library

Elmer Holmes Bobst Library
70 Washington Square South
3rd Floor
T: 212/998-2596
Monday–Thursday: 10 am–6 pm
Friday: 9 am–5 pm
Closed Saturday and Sunday
www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/fales

Related Exhibition

Anarchy to Affluence: Design in New York, 1974–1984

January 10 – April 2, 2006
Parsons The New School of Design, Arnold and Sheila Aronson Galleries, 66 Fifth Avenue

Parsons The New School of Design presents the first exhibition to examine the interiors, furniture, graphics, fashion, and illustration produced in New York between 1974 and 1984, a period in which Downtown New York artists, musicians, playwrights, and designers created some of the most avant-garde work ever produced in America. This time of unprecedented creativity was marked by the birth of Punk, both as a style and a form of music; the rise of fashion designers such as Stephen Sprouse, Betsey Johnson, and the house of Parachute, who revolutionized traditional forms, colors, and materials; and the advent of the High-Tech interior phenomenon, which promoted industrial austerity in interior and graphic design. *Anarchy to Affluence* is curated by Christopher Mount, Director of Exhibitions and Public Programs at Parsons. Information: 212/229-8919.