# THE DOWNTOWN BOOK

## THE NEW YORK ART SCENE 1974–1984

EDITED BY MARVIN J. TAYLOR FOREWORD BY LYNN GUMPERT

THE GREY ART GALLERY AND THE FALES LIBRARY AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

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**FRONT COVER:** 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
**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 Wojnarowicz Papers, Fales Library
**FRONT ENDPAPER:** TOM OTTERNESS, FLYER FOR THE *TIMES SQUARE SHOW* (DETAIL SHOWING LOBBY LEVEL), 1980. Andrea Callard Papers, Fales Library
**BACK ENDPAPER:** TOM OTTERNESS, FLYER FOR THE *TIMES SQUARE SHOW* (DETAIL SHOWING SECOND FLOOR), 1980. Andrea Callard Papers, Fales Library
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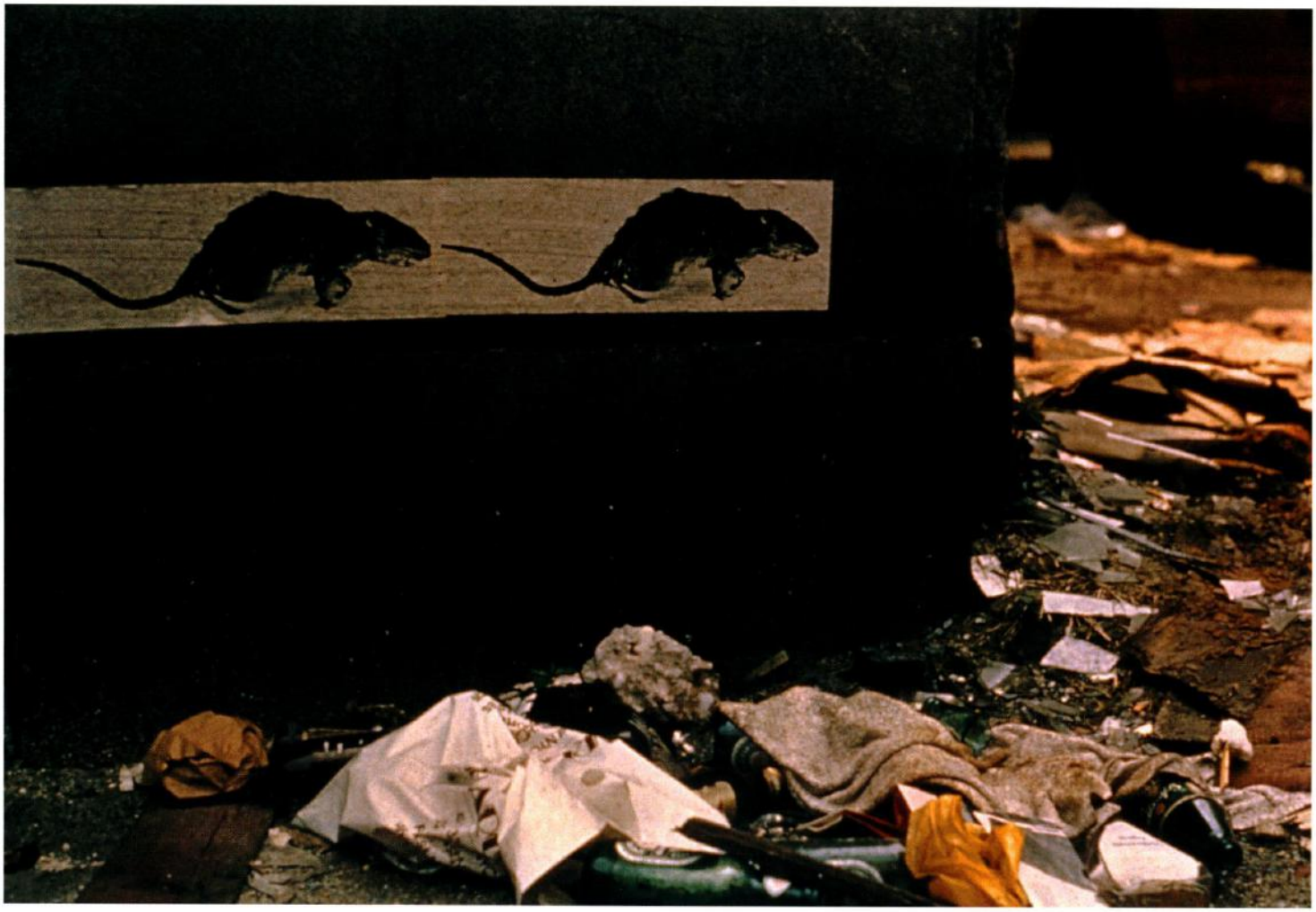
CHRISTY RUPP, *THE RAT PATROL*, 1978–79. Offset prints, installation view. Courtesy the artist



# 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.[1]

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.[2] 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."[3] 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,"[4] 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.[5] 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.


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.*

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."[6] 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


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

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 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

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.*[7]

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. 

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.*[8]

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.

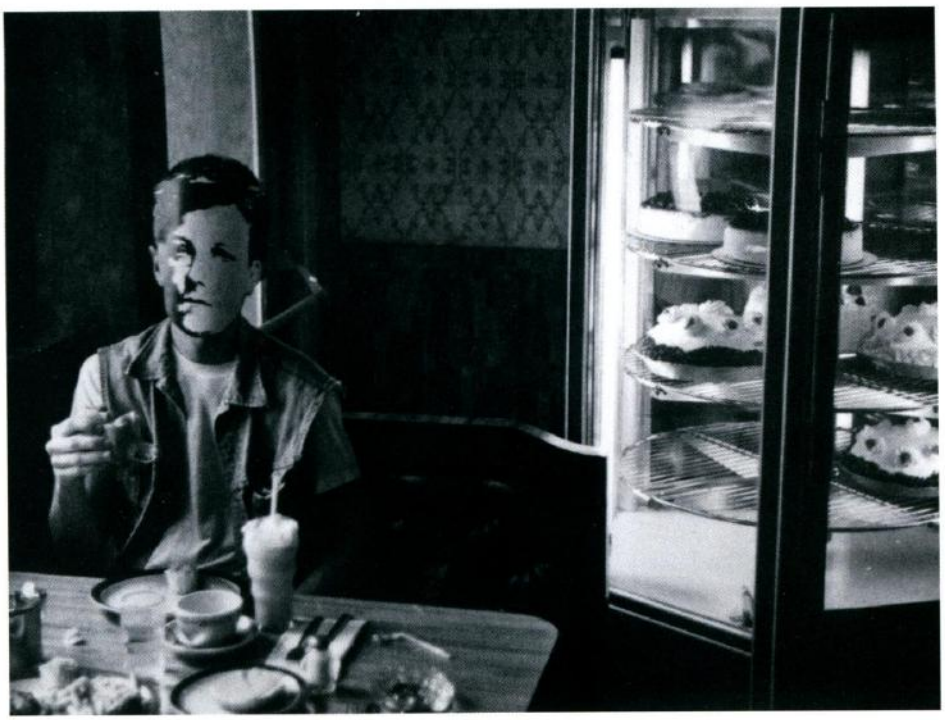
What developed were various overlapping artistic scenes that coexisted within a larger social and historical context. Each had its own champions and detractors, its own critics and publications—but often these different groups shared an overlapping audience. For all the creativity and differences among 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, recontexualization, 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?



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

**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

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 poststructuralists, 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.[9]

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

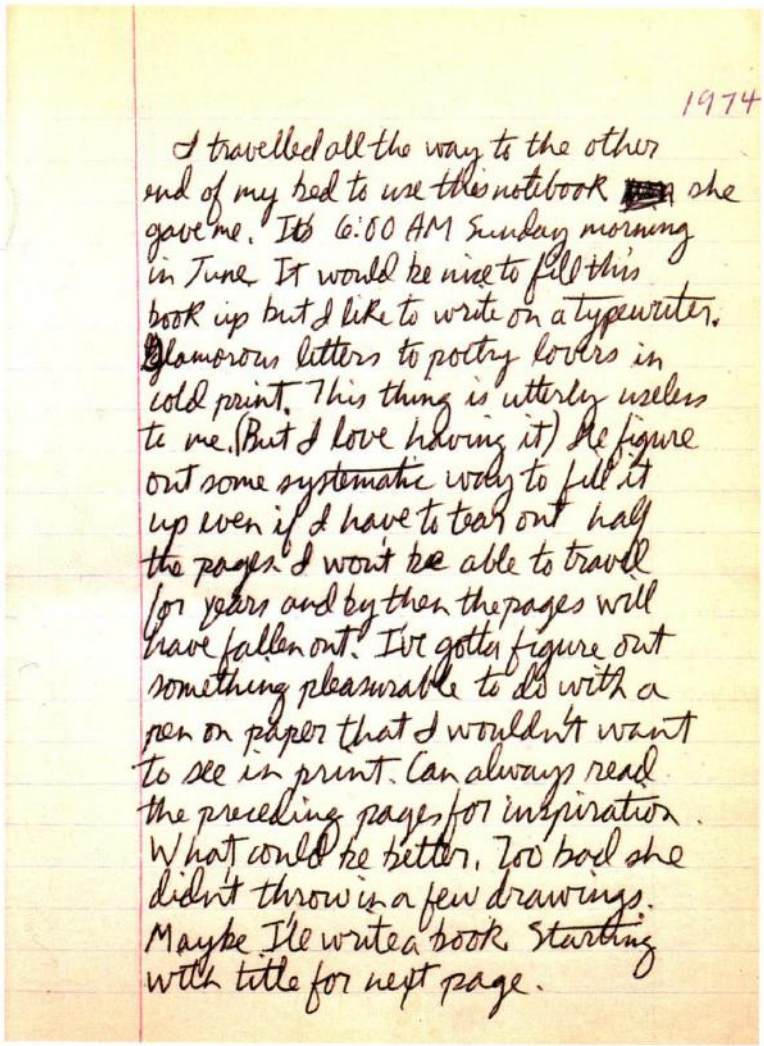
remains of artistic activity. Included in the collection are the papers of artists such as David Wojnarowicz, Richard Foreman, Richard Hell, Dennis Cooper, Martin Wong, John Watts and Laura Foreman, Ron Kolm, Richard Kostelanetz, Jaime Davidovich, Frank Moore, Bob Holman, and Wendy Perron. Organizational 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*."[10] 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."[11] 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.[12] 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.[13] 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."[14]



1974

I travelled all the way to the other end of my bed to use this notebook [redacted] 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) Me 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.[15] 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.[16] 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.

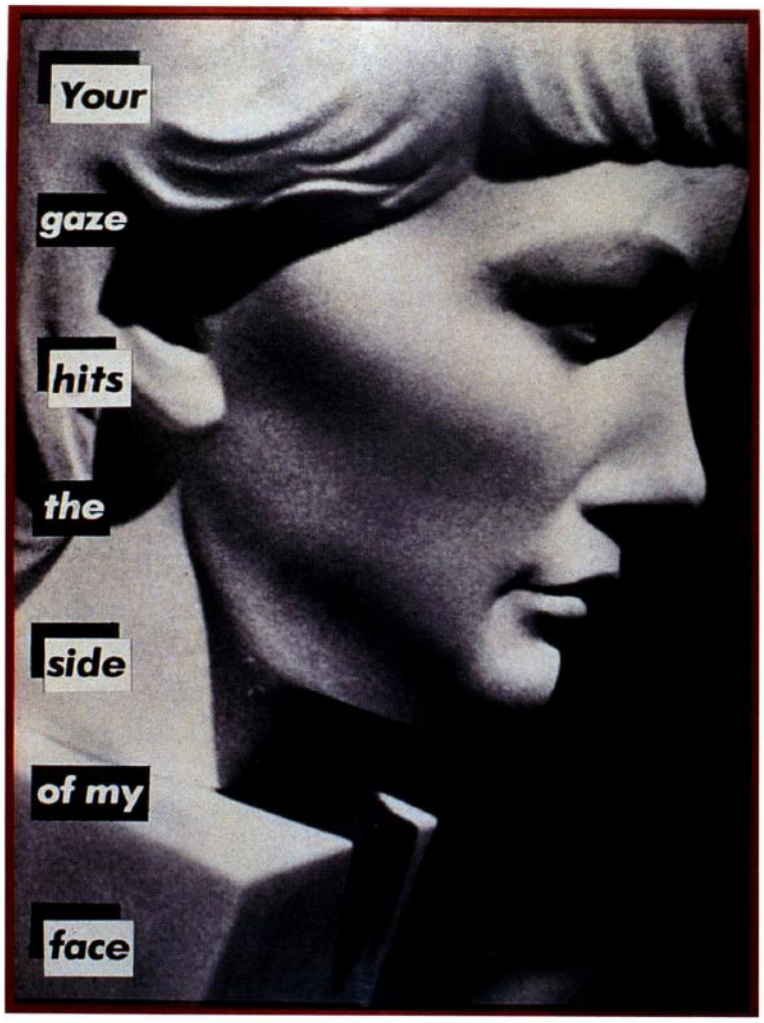
The Downtown scene was exactly the "restricted" field of cultural production of the sort that Bourdieu describes. The value of Downtown works emanated from the symbolic capital Downtown artists received from their peers. Artists worked in multiple media, and collaborated, criticized, supported, and valued 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.[17]

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.[18] 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."[19] 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 unpresentable 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 unpresentable."[20] 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."[21] 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.[22] Without informing the authors, the editors commissioned a rebuttal titled "The Problem with Puerilism," by Craig Owens, which harshly criticized the scene.[23] 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.