INVENTING DOWNTOWN

ART GALLERY

OCTOBER 4, 2017–JANUARY 13, 2018

New York University Abu Dhabi Art Gallery, Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi, UAE

Organized by the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, and curated by Melissa Rachleff
In January of this year, Inventing Downtown opened at the Grey Art Gallery (the fine art museum of New York University in New York City), and the critics responded with some surprise: although the exhibition was about a place and period already well-studied by art historians, it complicated, if not upended, what we thought we knew about how New York became an art world center. It did so by shifting the focus away from individual artists and movements, and focusing instead on the venues and communities they created. Guest curator Melissa Rachleff’s focus on artistic community enabled her to chart innovation, creative breakthroughs, and to re-evaluate the art historical impact of many different artists in this context of community. As Arielle Bureick observed in the Financial Times, “This effervescence played out in basements and backyards away from the established uptown galleries where Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art duked it out over price and prestige.”

By re-framing the emergence of the “Downtown” scene in terms of its actual scenes, Rachleff also re-integrates those whom art market prejudice and art history had since dis-integrated.

While Inventing Downtown was being reviewed in New York, the NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery was opening But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988–2008. This show surveyed a different under-studied “scene,” a group of avant-garde artists, poets, and playwrights that coalesced in Dubai and Sharjah, forming and re-forming from the 1980s through at least 2008. They generated ateliers and pop-up exhibitions, as well as two artist-run local institutions, the Emirates Fine Arts Society (1980–present), and The Flying House (ca. 2007–2012). Ultimately, a “scene” that enabled one another as a community before their rise to fame remains little-studied.

A core mission of the NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery is to engage and to re-evaluate the art historical impact of many different artists in this context of community. As Arielle Bureick observed in the Financial Times, “This effervescence played out in basements and backyards away from the established uptown galleries where Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art duked it out over price and prestige.”

By re-framing the emergence of the “Downtown” scene in terms of its actual scenes, Rachleff also re-integrates those whom art market prejudice and art history had since dis-integrated.

While Inventing Downtown was being reviewed in New York, the NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery was opening But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988–2008. This show surveyed a different under-studied “scene,” a group of avant-garde artists, poets, and playwrights that coalesced in Dubai and Sharjah, forming and re-forming from the 1980s through at least 2008. They generated ateliers and pop-up exhibitions, as well as two artist-run local institutions, the Emirates Fine Arts Society (1980–present), and The Flying House (ca. 2007–2012). Ultimately, a “scene” that enabled one another as a community before their rise to fame remains little-studied. 

A core mission of the NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery is to engage topics of local concern and international significance. For this reason, we present Inventing Downtown. In the case of both But We Cannot See Them and Inventing Downtown, stories of artists’ communities and innovation will be crucial to the UAES’s current conversations about art worlds and cultural districts. When we talk about “inventing downtown” we are talking about artists inventing a cultural center, and institutions responding in ways that nourished and shaped 20th-century art history. What is an art “scene”? What circumstances give rise to historically important innovation? What value does an institution offer to an artist, and vice versa? All of these are important questions as we consider the varied cultural institutions now populating the UAE, from Sharjah’s museums to Dubai’s gallery district, to Abu Dhabi’s Saadiyat Island cultural district and beyond.

His is a living body of knowledge, not a static list of facts. We know that art history does not get written only once: as our perspective changes, our understanding of the archive and artwork changes, and exhibition-making informs each perspectival shift. Through the lens of artistic community, we can see how the artists of Inventing Downtown and of But We Cannot See Them actively shaped the narrative and context of their work, to be the writers and the makers of their own history. Working in radically different contexts, both shared an impulse to be in dialogue with audiences, with one another, and ultimately, with history. Why start an artist-run space? Why curate and write art criticism? One wonders why the Downtown artists thought they could or should be exhibiting, if the gatekeepers of the existing New York institutions did not find their work worthy. Why, in the far different context of Gulf countries in recent decades, did a kind of self-made artist movement also take shape? What is at stake?

Exhibitions and community response, whether to Hassan Sharif’s atelier in 1990s Dubai or an artist-run gallery in 1950s New York, breathes life into artistic dialogue. This impulse to create spaces for art to develop is not unique to New York, nor to Paris of the turn of the 20th century, nor to the UAE at the turn of the 21st century—it manifested throughout the Gulf, and in other urban centers around the world, from Beirut to Bombay to Mexico City. It is no doubt happening in yet another way, somewhere else, at this very moment.

Maya Allison, Galleries Director and Chief Curator
New York University Abu Dhabi
Between the apex of Abstract Expressionism and the rise of Pop Art and Minimalism, the New York art scene was transformed by artist-run galleries. *Inventing Downtown* presents works from fourteen of these crucibles of experimentation, highlighting artists’ efforts to create new exhibition venues for innovative works of art—ranging from abstract and figurative painting, assemblage, sculpture, and works on paper to groundbreaking installations and performances.

*Inventing Downtown* proposes viewing these fourteen galleries via five thematic groupings. *Leaving Midtown* focuses on three Tenth Street galleries which adopted a cooperative business structure where expenses were shared among elected members: TANAGER GALLERY, HANSA GALLERY, and BRATA GALLERY. *City as Muse* features four ventures that did not adopt the co-op model: CITY GALLERY, REUBEN GALLERY, DELANCEY STREET MUSEUM, and JUDSON GALLERY. They are best known for creating dynamic installations and pioneering performances. *Space and Time* investigates two significant artist-run projects, 112 CHAMBERS STREET and 79 PARK PLACE, which occupied different conceptual terrains, embraced a wide range of media, and shared an interest in exploring temporality and geo-spatial dimensions. *Politics as Practice* includes four groups: MARCH GROUP, JUDSON CHURCH’S HALL OF ISSUES, THE CENTER, and SPIRAL GROUP, which examined the viability of politics as a subject for art and channeled a new sense of social urgency in addressing Cold War politics, the civil rights movement, and the legacy of World War II, among other concerns. Finally, *Defining Downtown* looks at the GREEN GALLERY, which played a decisive role in bringing downtown uptown and fostering the rise of Pop and Minimalism. Its program, however, resulted in the narrowing of aesthetic possibilities and the marginalization of many artists.

*Inventing Downtown* proposes viewing these fourteen galleries via five thematic groupings. *Leaving Midtown* focuses on three Tenth Street galleries which adopted a cooperative business structure where expenses were shared among elected members: TANAGER GALLERY, HANSA GALLERY, and BRATA GALLERY. *City as Muse* features four ventures that did not adopt the co-op model: CITY GALLERY, REUBEN GALLERY, DELANCEY STREET MUSEUM, and JUDSON GALLERY. They are best known for creating dynamic installations and pioneering performances. *Space and Time* investigates two
LEAVING MIDTOWN examines three pioneering cooperative galleries on or near East Tenth Street between Third and Fourth Avenues. Located in storefronts, these co-ops split expenses and administrative duties among elected members. Tanager Gallery, known for its strong curatorial program, presented both better-established and emerging artists. Some of Hansa Gallery’s artists tested new aesthetic paradigms—incorporating found objects into their artworks—while others continued to pursue figuration. Brata Gallery artists moved away from the emotive gestures of Abstract Expressionism toward hard-edge geometrical compositions.

TANAGER GALLERY
51 East Fourth Street (May 1952–March 1953)
90 East Tenth Street (April 1953–June 1962)

Among the first of the many artist-run galleries, Tanager maintained a busy schedule of group and solo exhibitions, providing a model for later co-ops. Originally founded in a barber shop on East Fourth Street, the gallery moved in spring 1953 to a less expensive and larger—though still small—storefront at 90 East Tenth Street. Artist Angelo Ippolito, a co-founder, transformed both spaces into clean, white-walled galleries, designed the inventory and oversaw installations with artist members who paid monthly dues of $5. The Tanager also received financial support from the future simbologist Sally Havelot Drummond in exchange for artworks. This additional funding made it possible to hire a gallery assistant, a position notably held by the future art historian and critic Irving Sandler, who worked there for several years while a graduate student at Columbia University.

Tanager artists resisted those who viewed as critics’ outworn designation of downtown art as a unified “New York School.” In response, artist-curator-organized shows that offered the nuanced mix of representational and abstract art that came to characterize the Tenth Street scene. One ambitious landmark exhibition of October 1961, The Private Myth, organized by Sidney Geist and Philip Pearlstein, examined the use of symbols in sculpture and assemblage by twenty-eight artists.

HANSA GALLERY
70 East Twelfth Street (November 1952–November 1954; 210 Central Park South [December 1954–June 1959])

With its initial address on East Twelfth Street, Hansa’s initial address on Forty-second Street, the gallery moved uptown to 210 Central Park South and raised dues to $35 a month. The new location, near commercial galleries on Fifty-seventh Street and the Studebaker Gallery around the corner on Fifty-eighth Street, was a strategic move to attract patrons gathered, attracted by both the adventurous art and Bellamy Nicholas, a co-founder, transformed his barber shop into the gallery, a co-founder, transformed his barber shop into the gallery’s spirit. Members Jean Follett, Allan Kaprow, and Jane Wilson continued their ambitions, which prompted them to open their own space, City Gallery, and emerging artists. Some of Hansa Gallery’s artists tested new aesthetic paradigms—incorporating found objects into their artworks—while others continued to pursue figuration. Brata Gallery artists moved away from the emotive gestures of Abstract Expressionism toward hard-edge geometrical compositions.

JUDD GALLERY
89 East Tenth Street (October 1957–April 1962)

Co-founded by the brothers John and Nicholas Krushenick, the Brata was a strategic move to attract a mix of representational and abstract art that came to characterize city’s ambitious exhibition of October 1961, The Private Myth, organized by Sidney Geist and Philip Pearlstein, examined the use of symbols in sculpture and assemblage by twenty-eight artists.

Hans van Dijk with painting from her Infinity Net series, c. 1959. Photograph: Kenneth von Stiehl. Courtesy the photographer

Brata Gallery artists moved away from the emotive gestures of Abstract Expressionism toward hard-edge geometrical compositions.

installations. Inspired by Post-Impressionist painter Pierre Bonnard, Wolf Kahn and Jane Wilson continued to paint figuratively, creating compelling portraits as well as scenes from their everyday lives. Membership dues at Hansa’s initial address on East Twelfth Street were $21 a month, later reduced to $15. In 1954, the gallery moved uptown to 210 Central Park South and raised dues to $35 a month. The new location, near commercial galleries on Fifty-seventh Street and the Studebaker Gallery around the corner on Fifty-eighth Street, was a strategic move to attract collectors. In 1955 Richard Bellamy, who was close to Hansa members Barbara and Miles Forst, was hired as the gallery’s director, later he shared the position with Ivan Karp, then to the Village Voice. The open Hansa ultimately operated less as a thriving business and more as a clubhouse where artists, critics, dealers, art historians, and patrons gathered, attracted by both the adventurous art and Bellamy and Karp’s convivial personalities.

BRA EA 9 East Tenth Street (October 1957–April 1962)

Co-founded by the brothers John and Nicholas Krushenick, the Brata Gallery took its name from the word “brother” in their father’s native Russian-Ukrainian dialect. Having worked at the Museum of Modern Art as a frame, Nicholas believed there was a need for this service downtown, running a business there helped cover some of the gallery’s expenses. The Krushenick brothers invited Nicholas’s long-time friend, painter Al Held, to join. Other members included Ronald Bladen, Sal Romano, George Sugarman, and Ed Clark—who was one of the very few African American artists to join a Tenth Street co-op. The Brata also welcomed a number of Japanese artists, including husband and wife Robert Kobayashi and Nanae Momiyama. The notion that abstraction’s cross-cultural history could be reconciled differently, via a type of synthesis, drew the American and Japanese members together and pointed toward new ways of thinking about abstraction. Not every Brata artist pursued this formalist approach, but between 1957 and 1960, geometric works lent the gallery a remarkably coherent aesthetic. This tendency culminated in critical acclaim for Yayoi Kusama’s 1959 solo exhibition at Brata, which drew widespread admiration for her controlled use of paint, repetition of form, and monumental scale, juxtaposing her illusions.

CITY AS MUSE focuses on four galleries whose artists took urban life as their point of departure: City Gallery, Reuben Gallery, Delancy Street Museum, and Judson Gallery. All rejected the co-op model; their spaces were either donated or operated as gallery, studio, and living space. Each gallery presented groundbreaking shows, many of which consisted of installations (in today’s terms) or performances, then promoted as “Happenings.”

CITY GALLERY
735 Sixth Avenue (November 1958–May 1959)

In fall 1958, when Charles “Red” Grooms returned to New York from a summer in Provincetown, he moved into a loft at 735 Sixth Avenue, at the corner of Twenty-fourth Street. That same fall, Grooms and artist Jay Milder helped found the Tenth Street co-op Phoenix Gallery—though they were often stifled by its administrative demands and many meetings, which prompted them to open their own space, City Gallery, in the front of Grooms’s left. Michelle “Micky” Weisberg, now Maria Now, a young artist from London who was studying part-time at the Art Students League, soon joined the gallery and managed the space.

Grooms and Milder, along with artist Lester Johnson, were inspired by Manhattan’s city life. A decade older than his collaborators, Johnson insisted on the continuing validity of figuration; Grooms bridged the stylistic gap between Johnson’s sensual figures and the rough expressionism of younger representational painters such as Milder and Bob Thompson. Their desire to work with great speed, fewer restrictions, and more improvisation was aided by the group’s lack of bylaws, which constituted a marked departure from the formality of the Tenth Street galleries.

City Gallery’s ambitious Drawings exhibition featured more than forty-five artists, ranging from the celebrated Franz Kline and George Giust to the emerging artists at the gallery’s heart. The show was conceived by Weisberg, who—with help from Grooms and Milder—gathered nearly 170 drawings, which generated tremendous excitement and attention in the press. The gallery closed in May 1959 when Grooms left the city for the summer, and the building was torn down soon thereafter.

REUBEN GALLERY
61 Fourth Avenue (October 1959–June 1960)
44 East Third Street (November 1960–April 1961)

The Reuben Gallery was founded by Allan Kaprow and Anita Rubin in the summer of 1959, after the Hansa Gallery closed; its name came from the biblical spelling of Anais’s last name. Pushing the boundaries of painting and sculpture, the Reuben also introduced performance art as a serious form. Inspired by the simultaneity of a three-ring circus, Kaprow created his revolutionary Happenings in 6 Parts for the gallery’s inaugural show, using translucent plastic sheeting to divide the space into three separate rooms; over the course of an hour, six actions unfolded in each room. This watershed performance, or “Happening,” set the bar for the gallery’s experimental approach.

Other artists given solo exhibitions at the Reuben include Robert Whitman, formerly with the Hansa, whose suspended sculpture and use of the fisher produced a total environment. Lucas Samaras’s paintings and exquisite postcards drew critical acclaim. Also generating attention were Claus Oldenburg and Jim Dine, who both reprised themes they had first explored in their Judson Gallery shows, and Red Grooms, who exhibited paintings and drawings as well as mounting his performance The Magic Train Ride in January 1960. Renee Rubin and Martha Edelheit fabricated powerful assemblages that paralleled the
held two more performances, both happenings produced by women artists—Marcia Marcus and Joan Hoeben—in 1966.

**JUDSON GALLERY** 239 Thompson Street (February 1959–January 1962) Bob Scott—a community-minded minister at Judson Memorial Church, on the south side of Washington Square Park—reached out to artists in the Village in 1959. Among those who responded was Cooper Union student Marcus Ratliff, then living at Judson House on Thompson Street, who brought in his high school friend from Cincinnati, Jim Dine, a recent arrival in New York, and a new friend, Tom Wesselmann, another Cooper Union student from Ohio; in collaboration with Scott, they transformed the basement into an approximately 1,000-square-foot exhibition venue. There they mounted a series of shows, including Phyllis Tampsolky’s first solo show. Impressed by a small exhibition of Claes Oldenburg’s drawings, Ratliff and Wesselmann offered him a solo exhibition. In January 1960, Judson’s most radical projects made their debut: Oldenburg’s The Street and Dine’s The House. Created in the gallery itself, both installations demolished the boundaries separating drawing, painting, sculpture, and theater. Before their exhibitions were dismantled, Oldenburg and Dine organized Ray Gun Spex (February 29–March 2, 1960), in which Oldenburg performed Snapshots From the City inside The Street. The audience also moved about the church’s other spaces, viewing Dine’s The Smiling Workman, Projections by Al Hansen, Coco Cela Shirley Cunneth by Allan Kaprow, Ediface Cobertan’s Contributions by Dick Higgins, and Dust for a Small Smell by Robert Whitman.

**DELANCEY STREET MUSEUM** 148 Delancey Street (October 1959–May 1960) In 1959, Red Grooms moved from Chelsea to an abandoned boxing gym on the third floor of 148 Delancey Street, at the corner of Suffolk Street, on the Lower East Side. As he had done at City Gallery, Grooms conceived the space as both private studio and public gallery. He dubbed it the Delancey Street Museum and mounted on the door a life-size sculpture of Abraham Lincoln made of found wood. The gym on the third floor of 148 Delancey Street, on the Lower East Side. As he had done at City Gallery, Grooms mounted a site for the redefinition of painting and sculpture—no longer discrete disciplines defined by their materials, but rather in relation to emotions.

**SPACE AND TIME** highlights how installation, performance, and related concepts were investigated differently by two separate groups: the musicians, composers, dancers, and artists involved with the boundary-expanding Chambers Street Loft Series organized by Yoko Ono and LaMonte Young, and, two years later, group exhibitions of painting and sculpture at 79 Park Place. Artworks at 112 Chambers Street reflected the impact of poetry, dance, and especially music. Park Place artists viewed time and space through a space-age lens, focusing in particular on theories about the fourth dimension and pushing abstraction in radical new directions.

**112 CHAMBERS STREET** (December 1960–June 1967) Yoko Ono leased a fourth-floor loft at 112 Chambers Street in December 1960, to be used as both studio and performance venue. There she established the Chambers Street loft Series, inviting LaMonte Young to co-curate. During the series, Ono installed her Instruction Paintings throughout the space and asked visitors to participate by throwing color onto, throwing food at, lighting on fire, or causing shadows to appear on them.

Among the many artists, poets, musicians, and dancers who presented projects at 112 Chambers Street were Simone Forti and Robert Morris. With her May 1961 Five Dance Constructions & Some Other Things, Forti helped redefine choreography, shifting dance toward corporeal challenges to be resolved differently by performers according to their physical abilities and the parameters of her rules. Like Ono’s Instruction Paintings, Forti’s rules lack the capacity to predict results.

Morris’s June 1961 Passageway, another breakthrough work, was composed of two arcing plywood walls that gradually narrowed, beginning at the door to the loft and extending approximately fifty feet back. A plywood ceiling followed the structure’s curve, effectively sealing the work off from its surroundings. Morris painted Passageway gray and added a soundtrack of a ticking metronome; electric bullies provided just enough light to allow viewers to navigate the space. Possessing neither the functionality of architecture nor the autonomy of sculpture, Passageway is impossible to perceive all at once. Although short-lived, 112 Chambers Street was remarkable as both venue for and material of radical works of art—inviting a shift away from objects and toward Conceptual Art.
POLITICS AS PRACTICE explores the art and exhibition programs of four downtown organizations: March Group, Judson Church’s Hall of Issues, The Center, and Spiral Group. Coincident with the election of John F. Kennedy as president in 1960, these galleries explored the viability of politics as a subject matter for art and debated new strategies. In the wake of World War II and under the shadow of the Cold War, each fostered a sense of social urgency during the civil rights era and the nascent counterculture, articulating a new awareness of the artists’ responsibility to their communities.

MARCH GROUP 90 East Tenth Street (1960–62)

Until fall 1960, the March Gallery—located in a squat basement with exposed pipes, tin ceiling, and whitewashed brick walls—was a typical Tenth Street co-op of the late 1950s; its diverse members practiced a range of styles. This would change with the advent of Boris Lurie, one of the co-op’s founding members, who took charge of the gallery. Dismayed by the increasing careerism of the Tenth Street gallery scene, he wanted to do something different. Lurie had arrived in New York with his father in 1936, after surviving four years’ imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps. He found like-minded colleagues in Sam Goodman, who shared his disdain for the art world, and the poet Stanley Fisher.

During World War II, Fisher had served as a medic in the 1944 Normandy campaign, arriving soon after D-Day to treat the wounded. Under Lurie and Goodman’s tutelage, Fisher identified an artistic outlet where he could express the horrors of combat. The three Jewish artists invited others, such as French artist Jean-Jacques Lebel, to participate where he could express the horrors of combat. The three Jewish artists invited others, such as French artist Jean-Jacques Lebel, to participate in group shows. Embracing unpopular and anti-aesthetic stances, and marketing newspapers and magazines for their provocative imagery, they employed art as a tool for making polemical statements—rejecting the consensus that made it possible to mount group exhibitions. That grew out of the social activism associated with the New Left, with its own community-based multimedia spaces and inclusive aesthetics. Born in Syracuse, New York, to Italian parents, Tambellini spent his formative years in Tuscan, Italy, and returned to Syracuse after World War II. Arriving in New York City in 1959, he settled on the Lower East Side. Working in his building’s backyard, using objects from the debris surrounding demolished buildings, Tambellini cast them into concave forms with Hydrocal plaster. While his molds were hardening, he added nails, shards, piping, and beer cans—resulting in sculptures that were part testament to the neighborhood, part fossilized relics.

Tambellini fired in a recently cleared lot next to his backyard space, where he fashioned an outdoor sculpture park for his works. In 1962–63 he dubbed his efforts The Center, a new type of artist-run organization and non-commercial forum with a commitment to art’s relevance in the fight against racism and poverty in the Lower East Side. Tambellini’s wife Elza was his administrative partner. Other participants included the artist Ben Morea and the black poets affiliated with Umbra, a literary collective and magazine. Wanting to engage non-art-world audiences, the Tambellinis partnered with St. Mark’s Church-in-the-Bowery, then under the leadership of former Look magazine editor Reverend J. C. Michael Allen, who helped garner further support from the social service agency Lower East Side Neighborhood Association (LESA). The Center’s first programs at St. Mark’s Church-in-the-Bowery in June 1963 included a small exhibition of paintings and a two-week “LENA Festival”—featuring outdoor jazz concerts, poetry readings, and film screenings.

SPIRAL GROUP 147 Christopher Street (1963–65)

The Spiral Group comprised some fifteen African American artists who convened to discuss issues and shared concerns. Formed just prior to the August 1963 March on Washington For Jobs and Freedom—the largest protest against racial discrimination in the history of the United States—the group began meeting in Romare Bearden’s loft on Canal Street that summer. Members included Bearden’s cousin, Charles Alston, Hale Woodruff, Norman Lewis, Emma Amos, and others. Before the end of the year, they had secured a space on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village. Spiral represented the only effort by visual artists to self-consciously align with the civil rights movement before 1965.

Taking their name from the Archimedean spiral—a symbol that is imbued with the latent power of untapped energy and found in the art of many peoples—the group was caught up in debates over the modernist belief in the autonomy and universality of art, which discouraged the overt insertion of race into aesthetics. Before the Black Arts movement in 1963, artworks referencing race were likely to be condemned as sociological, not aesthetic. Spiral’s artists were passionate about confronting the tumultuous events of their time but struggled with the question of how to incorporate politics into modernism. Many feared the pitfalls of self-segregating in the art world if they too closely or narrowly identified themselves and their works—a debate that continues today. Such concerns contributed to the group’s slow, even fitful, working process; it took them two years to reach the consensus that made it possible to mount Spiral: Works in Black and White in 1965, their only exhibition.

HALL OF ISSUES AT JUDSON MEMORIAL CHURCH

55 Washington Square South (December 1961–January 1963)

Artist Phyllis Tampolsky initiated the Hall of Issues at Judson Memorial Church in 1961. This open-call exhibition and public program series allowed all who were interested—even non-artists—to instigate discussions and participate in the project. The Hall of Issues presented topical statements and visual artworks from "anyone who has any statement to make about any social, political or esthetic concern." Displays changed every Sunday and required a modest entry fee of twenty-five cents.

Lining the walls of Judson’s Long Hall, materials were informally taped or pinned to temporary Celotex insulation panels. Weekly dialogues were offered on Wednesday evenings, bringing together artists, community activists, and experts in a variety of fields. Though it was not conceived as an art exhibition, the initiative counted luminaries such as Claes Oldenburg, Dean Fleming, Tampolsky herself, and her husband, Peter Forakis, among its contributors. The Wednesday forums resembled the consciousness-raising sessions that grew out of the social activism associated with the New Left, with which Judson Church was aligned. Tampolsky banned the direct broadcast of any party platform, however, reflecting the Hall of Issues’s apolitical position. Such non-partisan polemics were attacked by the nihilist contributions of artists Sam Goodman, Stanley Fisher, and Jean-Jacques Lebel. In summer 1962, Tampolsky curated Best of the Hall of Issues, a selection of art, films, and music, as well as a repeat presentation of the well-received play Totentanz, featured black-draped figures moving to a steady percussive beat.

THE CENTER

147 Christopher Street (1962–65)

In the Hall of Issues, Aldo Tambellini found an important precedent for his own community-based multimedia spaces and inclusive aesthetics. Born in Syracuse, New York, to Italian parents, Tambellini spent his formative years in Tuscan, Italy, and returned to Syracuse after World War II. Arriving in New York City in 1959, he settled on the Lower East Side. Working in his building’s backyard, using objects from the debris surrounding demolished buildings, Tambellini cast them into concave forms with Hydrocal plaster. While his molds were hardening, he added nails, shards, piping, and beer cans—resulting in sculptures that were part testament to the neighborhood, part fossilized relics.

Tambellini fired in a recently cleared lot next to his backyard space, where he fashioned an outdoor sculpture park for his works. In 1962–63 he dubbed his efforts The Center, a new type of artist-run organization and non-commercial forum with a commitment to art’s relevance in the fight against racism and poverty in the Lower East Side. Tambellini’s wife Elza was his administrative partner. Other participants included the artist Ben Morea and the black poets affiliated with Umbra, a literary collective and magazine. Wanting to engage non-art-world audiences, the Tambellinis partnered with St. Mark’s Church-in-the-Bowery, then under the leadership of former Look magazine editor Reverend J. C. Michael Allen, who helped garner further support from the social service agency Lower East Side Neighborhood Association (LESA). The Center’s first programs at St. Mark’s Church-in-the-Bowery in June 1963 included a small exhibition of paintings and a two-week “LENA Festival”—featuring outdoor jazz concerts, poetry readings, and film screenings.

Norman Lewis, Untitled, 1965, oil on canvas, 62 × 37 in (157.5 × 94 cm). Courtesy Seth Tuffier Fine Art, New York
DEFINING DOWNTOWN considers the five-year history of the Green Gallery. Directed by Richard Bellamy—who had previously worked at the Hansa Gallery—and secretly financed by collector Robert Scull, it does not fit the strict definition of an artist-run space. However, Green Gallery exhibitions promoted the kind of risk-taking art featured in the more adventurous noncommercial enterprises. Bellamy, a true downtown denizen, spotted and shored, early on, work that would become known as Pop and Minimalism and, with Scull’s backing, helped establish their marketability.

GREEN GALLERY 15 West Fifty-seventh Street (October 1960–June 1965)
After inaugurating the Green Gallery in October 1960 with an exhibition of Mark di Suvero’s commanding, large-scale sculptures, Richard Bellamy fostered a spirit of collaboration among the downtown artists who showed there: located in the heart of the commercial gallery district on Fifty-seventh Street, Green Gallery introduced midtown audiences to performance, environments, a new realist tendency, and sculptures that emphasized materiality, often to great critical acclaim. Bringing downtown uptown and embracing artistic pluralism, Bellamy was less concerned with defining art, and selling it, than his fellow gallerists.

During its first two years, the Green Gallery showcased abstraction’s reanimation by painters such as Tadaaki Kuwayama and Joan Jacobs. Also mounted in the gallery’s early years were solo shows by Pat Passlof and group exhibitions featuring figurative works by James Rosenquist, George Segal, Tom Wesselmann, and Claes Oldenburg—who together helped establish Pop Art as an unprecedented new trend, testifying to Bellamy’s attentiveness to the era’s most novel and momentous artistic developments. Oldenburg’s 1962 exhibition helped stabilize the gallery’s shaky finances, enabling seminal shows of works by Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, and Robert Morris between 1963 and 1965. Together these artists shepherded in Minimalism as a new art form, using the Green Gallery’s space to reconceive sculpture itself. At the same time, two shows of difficult-to-classify objects, boxes, and panels by Lucas Samaras—including the 1964 reconstruction of his New Jersey bedroom in the gallery—counter views of the period as completely dominated by Pop and Minimalism, epitomizing the Green Gallery’s ethos of openness and its avoidance of stylistic orthodoxy. When Scull pulled out of the venture in spring 1964, the Green Gallery survived for one more season, but without financial backing, it closed in spring 1965. Ironically, while its program initially demonstrated great diversity, the commercial success of some of its artists ultimately ended up excluding and marginalizing many others.

BY BRIAN BENTLEY AND ALISON MUELLER
Brian Bentley (BB): How did this project come about?
Melissa Rachieff (MR): In spring 2009, I taught a graduate class in NYU’s MA Program in Visual Arts Administration, titled “The Deinstitutionalization of the Art Gallery,” which looked at how artists produced exhibitions that had no market value. The Museum of Modern Art had just posted an online exhibition about Richard Bellamy and the Hansa and Green galleries. I began to go through Bellamy’s voluminous papers and discovered that the 1950s and early ’60s were a far more vibrant era than I had realized. I had also learned about the Tenth Street galleries and recognized that they were just the tip of the iceberg. Anita Rubin, who had helped start the Rousell Gallery, graciously sketched it all out for me. Then Milly Glimcher at the Pace Gallery contacted me about her exhibition and book on Happenings. That sparked a wonderful collaboration; Milly generously shared an amazing archive of photographs taken by Robert McElroy. She also put me in touch with Julie Martin who, with her husband, Billy Klüver, had recorded in the 1990s artist interviews looking back at this time. These absolutely changed the way I understood the era.

Alison Mueller (AM): Why focus on the period between 1952 and 1965?
MR: In 1952, both the Tanager and Hansa galleries opened. These were perhaps the most prestigious of all the artists’ co-ops. We end in 1965 because that’s when art culture in New York starts to split. By 1965, there is a bifurcation of attitudes between downtown and uptown. Also, that year coincides with the solidification of a new American art market, epitomized by Pop Art. If you showed some Pop artists, it became possible to survive as a business. In addition, to deal with a New York scene post-1965, you have to address the anti-war movement, the women’s movement, gay liberation, and the formation of nonprofits. That is another project with a very different set of concerns.

BB: Could you clarify what exactly the cooperative gallery model was?
MR: Co-op galleries were businesses where members split the expenses of the operation. They had bylaws and were incorporated. Every co-op member paid fees. Members also determined officers—who was president, who was treasurer, and so on—and worked on a volunteer basis to keep the gallery open; some galleries levied fees to pay an assistant. The Hansa Gallery’s bylaws were well formulated; you can see a copy of them in the show. The co-op gallery’s drawback was that in deciding how to manage the space and determine the fee structure, the meetings could become quite contentious.

BB: Why was Tenth Street the epicenter?
MR: A lot of artists lived on East Tenth Street—from Fourth Avenue to First Avenue—including William de Kooning, Esteban Vicente, Milton Resnick, and Perle Fine. It was fine who told the Tanager artists about the available retail space at 90 Tenth Street. Most of the buildings on Tenth Street between Fourth and Third Avenues were of the
three-story tenement type, with parlor floors designed as storefronts. During this postwar period, many of the businesses that had been there closed and rents were very cheap. The spaces were not unlike those of the Lower East Side galleries now, which occupy similar storefronts. They’re not that big, but they’re big enough for shows.

MR

AM

BB: Jean Follett’s work is featured in Lowering Downtown. Who are some of the other women artists you think warrant more attention or critical reevaluation?

MR: Jean Follett is very important; many artists cited her as an influence. I am not yet finished with my research on her—she is my next project. Luis Dodd just had a retrospective at the Portland Art Museum in Maine; a lovely painting by her from the late 1950s is in the show. Sally Hazelet Drummond is another woman artist I came to admire; she created exquisite abstract pointillist canvases. June Wilson’s work is absolutely moving; she had a facility for capturing light. Mary Frank’s powerful carved-wood sculptures mine the body so sensually; they are amazing. Mimi Gross’s work was another delight—her keen sense of color and love of New York City scenes captured my heart. Marcia Marcus’s self-portraits are ironic before irony was really in style. Of course Phyllis Yampolsky’s free-spirited Hall of Issues, which made it unique in this exhibition. Can you speak to its importance and why it’s included?

MR: Strictly speaking, the Green Gallery shouldn’t be included because it’s not an artist-run space. Richard Bellamy isn’t an artist although he acted like one. He was hired by the Hansa Gallery in 1955, when they moved uptown. The members knew him from summers spent in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Bellamy shared the Hansa job with Jean Karp, who eventually went to work with Leo Castelli.

At the Castelli Gallery, Karp met Robert Scull, who wanted to buy as many works as possible by Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. But Castelli and Karp were trying to build a legacy for these artists by placing their works in various collections. Resenting his lack of access, Scull approached Karp about opening a gallery; Karp recommended Richard Bellamy. The Green Gallery debuted with a show of sculpture by Mark di Suvero, and Scull bought one or two works. Bellamy also showed works by a number of women artists during the first two years, including Yayoi Kusama, Sally Hazelet Drummond, Joan Jacobs, and Pat Passlof.

Bellamy had followed what was happening at the Reuben Gallery. And he asked George Segal to join the Green stable. He also invited Claes Oldenburg to come uptown and, over the summer of 1962, Oldenburg made his signatures soft sculptures in the gallery itself. Bellamy remained extremely open to artists such as Richard Smith, Tadaaki Kuwayama, Robert Morris, Dan Flavin, and Donald Judd (whom he knew as a critic, initially). At the end of the 1963-64 season, Scull pulled out. The gallery couldn’t sustain itself without a backer, and it closed at the end of the following season.

an enormous urban renewal project. New buildings—such as the white- and red-brick complexes that were publicly subsidized, and others that were speculative—were going up. And whole city blocks were coming down. All those kids playing in the rubble reminded him of the war, and that’s when he began thinking about creating outdoor art venues and how to engage the local residents. In 1962–63, he founded The Center, a public-art organization that initiated outdoor exhibitions and festivals as a means of engaging local residents with contemporary art.

**Q:** To conclude, could you summarize some of the most significant developments during this period as presented in the exhibition?

**MR:** In the 1950s and early 1960s, artists are reinventing both abstraction and figuration. At the same time, assemblage moves toward the environmental and performative, away from focusing on the object itself and toward incorporating the body and spatial dimensions. Artist-run galleries were crucial to both these developments. They provided places where artists could test out new ideas and strategies—even if their relative lack of sales left many artists in desperate financial circumstances. Life on the downtown scene, while chaotic and uncertain, was at least cheap.

And to some extent, artists’ involvement with galleries provided a first step, as it were, to getting commercial representation. Many would have preferred to show outright. Indeed, artists weren’t too much rebelling against Fifty-seventh Street but rather using artist-run galleries as a way to get their works seen. The co-op model eventually evolved into more radical, short-lived experimental spaces. Despite being transitional, all these artist-run galleries made a real aesthetic impact. My hope is that Inventing Downtown demonstrates that these galleries did nothing less than redefine modern art. By focusing on these forerunners of alternative spaces, the show provides an opportunity to shed more light on artists, both established and those who deserve to be better known, who made this period in American art one of the most dynamic, exciting, and uncertain, was at least cheap.

To some extent, artists’ involvement with galleries provided a first step, as it were, to getting commercial representation. Many would have preferred to show outright. Indeed, artists weren’t too much rebelling against Fifty-seventh Street but rather using artist-run galleries as a way to get their works seen. The co-op model eventually evolved into more radical, short-lived experimental spaces. Despite being transitional, all these artist-run galleries made a real aesthetic impact. My hope is that Inventing Downtown demonstrates that these galleries did nothing less than redefine modern art. By focusing on these forerunners of alternative spaces, the show provides an opportunity to shed more light on artists, both established and those who deserve to be better known, who made this period in American art such a groundbreaking and exciting one.

Transcribed by Grey Art Gallery interns Hazal Kamisli, Charlotte Kohlberg, and Mary-Brett O’Bryan

---

**LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR OF THE GREY ART GALLERY AT NEW YORK UNIVERSITY IN NEW YORK**

The staff of the Grey Art Gallery is extremely proud to organize and present Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City, 1952–1965. Curated by Melissa Rachleff and six years in the making, this landmark show reveals how artists conceived and created their own exhibition opportunities in mid-20th-century Manhattan. At first those cooperative ventures loosely resembled commercial art galleries—of which there were simply too few in New York during this era—but, over time, they evolved into experimental and innovative sites that encouraged and shot new approaches to making itself. Indeed, Inventing Downtown can be seen as a paradigmatic model for the type of shows university art museums should mount. Not only do Inventing Downtown and the tome-sized publication that accompanies it further new scholarship of an extremely vital period of American art, this project brings to light many works—including those by women and artists of color—which have previously been overlooked.

University art galleries—and the Grey in particular—should be regarded simply as teaching museums. They are so much more, and they are becoming, at this point in our cultural history, essential to ensuring visual literacy. As new NYU faculty member Amy Whitaker argues in her book Art Thinking, artists’ creativity, when showcased in exhibitions, can encourage all students—including those studying sciences, business, economics, healthcare, and so on—to think outside the box, push boundaries, and even provoke in order to mine new possibilities in their respective fields. Moreover, never before have we witnessed so many new developments in visual media. With the advent of the digital age, students are creating their own online publications, websites, video, and photo albums, presented in an ever-expanding realm of social media sites.

The Grey Art Gallery, NYU’s fine arts museum, serves as a museum laboratory, incorporating experimentation as an essential element of our programming. Ann Philbin, my colleague at UCLA’s Hammer Museum, concurs, observing that, like the university itself, college galleries function as laboratories “for the research and discovery of the art and ideas that define and redefine our culture today.” But not everyone has witnessed so many new developments in visual media. With the advent of the digital age, students are creating their own online publications, websites, video, and photo albums, presented in an ever-expanding realm of social media sites.

The Grey Art Gallery, NYU’s fine arts museum, serves as a museum laboratory, incorporating experimentation as an essential element of our programming. Ann Philbin, my colleague at UCLA’s Hammer Museum, concurs, observing that, like the university itself, college galleries function as laboratories “for the research and discovery of the art and ideas that define and redefine our culture today.” But not everyone has witnessed so many new developments in visual media. With the advent of the digital age, students are creating their own online publications, websites, video, and photo albums, presented in an ever-expanding realm of social media sites.

**Lynn Gumpert, Director**

Grey Art Gallery, New York University