A YOUNG PERSON’S GUIDE TO
INVENTING DOWNTOWN:
ARTIST-RUN GALLERIES
IN NEW YORK CITY,
1952–1965
In the 20th century, New York City came to be called the “capital of the art world” by some.

This began in the 1950s, when a group of artists transformed the New York art scene. The center of that art community was a neighborhood called “Downtown.”

How did these artists become an art community? How did they change the art world?

This exhibition and guide explore some answers in chapters:

- LEAVING MIDTOWN
- CITY AS MUSE
- SPACE AND TIME
- POLITICS AS PRACTICE
- DEFINING DOWNTOWN
In the 1950s in New York, commercial galleries were in the “Uptown” neighborhood. They didn’t sell experimental, contemporary art. So, some artists decided to open their own art spaces together, Downtown. These spaces were “co-operative” – the artists shared the expense of running these galleries. They changed how the world saw art making and art.
Yayoi Kusama came to New York from Japan to be an artist. She made large “infinity net” paintings of repeating patterns. Her first solo show was at Brata Gallery on 10th street. It was a great success.

Today she is world-famous.
Some spaces were not only galleries: they were studios and laboratories for experimenting with art. At the Reuben Gallery, some artists had solo exhibitions in which they made art from objects found on the streets, and combined drawing, sculpture, and theater in one space.

Claes Oldenburg is an artist who uses everyday objects to create public art that is usually big in scale. He had a solo exhibition at Reuben Gallery titled “The Street”. For this exhibition, he used items found on the streets to create an art installation that represents a panorama of the city.
The gathering places of artists were important to how they grew. A group of artists rented an entire five-story building for studios at 79 Park Place. The 5th floor was a workshop for testing ideas and to challenge one another. These artists discussed ideas, from jazz and science to architecture and philosophy.

**3RD FLOOR ARTIST: DEAN FLEMING**
Find his work in the exhibition and count the number of triangles in the painting. (hint: it looks like the illustration below)

**4TH FLOOR ARTIST: LEO VALLEDO**
Connect the dots to make his painting, and then find it in the gallery.

- What is the title of this painting?
- What do you think it means?
Forrest Myers was interested in space travel and new scientific technologies. He wanted to use sculpture to change how we see the space in the gallery. Look at the space around the sculpture. What shapes do you see it make?
Some artists created artwork to express opinions about issues they saw in the world. One of the spaces that artists used was at Judson Memorial Church. They called it “Hall of Issues.” Everyone was invited to come and present an idea or a statement about something they believed in.

Exercise:
List three things you care about the most or you want to change in the world:

1.
2.
3.
The Green Gallery opened in Midtown, but showed art from Downtown. This helped bring a new audience of people who had never seen this unusual art before. This was the beginning of the art movements that historians call “Minimalism” and “Pop Art.”

Claes Oldenburg once did an exhibition called “The Store” and filled the gallery with large-scale sculptures of things you can buy at the store, even food like cakes and burgers.
Now it’s time to think about your own city. What would your neighborhood look like as an artistic community?

Where would the artists meet each other, and get their ideas? Would it be different from your city now?
This guide accompanies the exhibition *Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City, 1952-1965* at the Art Gallery of New York University Abu Dhabi, on view from October 2017 to January 2018 in Abu Dhabi, UAE.

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