

CULTURAL COMMENT

# THIRTEEN CRUCIAL YEARS FOR ART IN DOWNTOWN NEW YORK



By Louis Menand March 28, 2017



VIEW FULL SCREEN



*Norman Lewis, "Untitled" (1965)*

COURTESY SETH TAFFAE FINE ART

It's a commonplace to say that after 1940 the capital of the art world moved from Paris to New York. But commonplaces are usually distortions created by looking in a rearview mirror, and this one is no exception. About seven hundred European artists immigrated to the United States after Paris fell to the Germans, in 1940, and most settled in New York City. Since people assumed that Paris would remain under Nazi control for the long haul, it looked like New York had become the de-facto center of advanced art.

That assumption turned out to be mistaken, of course, and when Paris was liberated, in 1944, most of the exiles returned to France as fast as they could, and the art world reverted to its prewar pattern: young American artists went to Paris. More than three hundred of them studied and worked in Paris after the war, including Richard Serra, Robert Rauschenberg, Joan Mitchell, Larry Rivers, Al Held, Ellsworth Kelly, Sam Francis, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski.

New York did become the center of the art world eventually, but it took another ten or fifteen years. The reason is that an “art world” is not an abstraction. It refers to an actual world, a community of people who foster the production, exhibition, appreciation, and, ideally, sales of contemporary art. It means a network of galleries, dealers, collectors, curators, museum officials and trustees, and critics. A network did emerge in New York City after 1945, just not overnight. In 1955, there were a hundred and twenty-three galleries in the city; in 1965, there were two hundred and forty-six. “Inventing Downtown,” a fascinating exhibition at New York University’s Grey Art Gallery, tells part of the story of how that happened, how New York developed an art world. The show is guest-curated by Melissa Rachleff.

The focus is on artist-run galleries—co-ops—mostly on or around Tenth Street (although other types of galleries are represented) and on the period 1952 to 1965. That year marks the point at which American avant-garde art went mainstream (i.e., moved uptown). Most of these downtown galleries had the lifespan of a snap on Snapchat: City Gallery, on Sixth Avenue, from November, 1958, to May, 1959; Reuben Gallery, on Fourth, from October, 1959, to June, 1960; 112 Chambers Street, from December, 1960, to June, 1961. The last was the address of Yoko Ono’s fourth-floor loft, an important space for musicians, such as La Monte Young, as well as for artists, the best known of which is probably the sculptor/performance artist Robert Morris.

You can read in books about these figures and these spaces, of course. What is revelatory about the Grey Gallery show are the dozens of works on display from that period. Two things jump out. The first is the number of women artists. Although it took years for some of them to be recognized, there were notable women artists among the Abstract Expressionists—the first group of American painters to hit the big time after 1945. But the narrative of postwar American art tends to be populated by male envelope-pushers: Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol. In “Inventing Downtown,” we see the envelope being pushed, in a wide variety of artistic styles, by women: Jane Wilson, Martha Edelheit, Mary Frank (represented by a stunning wood sculpture, “Reclining Figure”), and many others.

The other striking impression—again, something it helps to see to appreciate—is how much formal experimentation and theoretical ferment there was in New York art between 1952 (the year by which the Abstract Expressionists had established themselves) and 1965. You can see these downtown artists attempting solve a problem inherent in the term “Abstract Expressionism” itself. That term is an oxymoron: if something is abstract, it can’t express. So there arose a push-pull between abstract forms and figuration (the same thing was happening in Europe) that yielded a rich variety of original work.

It’s moving, really, to see virtually all the contemporary art modes that would become mainstream by the mid-nineteen-sixties being adumbrated in these tiny gallery spaces ten years earlier: Pop, Minimalism, performance, Conceptual art, poster art, political art, found art. And that art, the art of the mid-sixties, is basically the ground from which contemporary art still grows. At the Grey, you can see how, in fugitive spaces scattered around a city that had yet fully to embrace avant-garde art, dozens of artists, most now largely forgotten, sowed the seeds.



*Louis Menand has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 1991, and has been a staff writer since 2001. [More](#)*