ForeWord Reviews

The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene 1974-1984

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Princeton University Press
978-0-691-12286-1
(Oct 17, 2005)

The post-Pill, pre-AIDS decade of 1974—1984 was uniquely rich in art and performance. Because most locations are gone, many artists displaced, much "product" lost to the public, and even the most arresting work and events slipping from memory, this beautifully produced book is an invaluable record. With the essay analyses of Bernard Gendron (music), Carlo McCormick ("a phantasmagoria of subjectivities") RoseLee Goldberg (performance art), Matthew Yokobosky ("No Wave cinema"), Robert Siegle (literary products), Brian Wallis (art and text after Modernism), and Ian Alteveer's extensive chronology, readers have a rich, resonant recapture of those exuberant, chaotic years.

Key catalysts that triggered the explosion of art included revolt against institutional values and against the saccharine late 1960s, and New York City's 1974 law that allowed artists to live and work in floor-through lofts previously used for manufacturing. Artists flocked to affordable lofts in "downtown"—Manhattan below 14th Street. Given space, physical and conceptual constraints shrank: large-scale, mixed-genre, multimedia work, particularly performance art for often participating audiences, became increasingly frequent.

As the editor writes in his incisive introduction, *Downtown* "attempts to chart the complicated web of relationships that shaped a generation of experimental, outsider, and avant-garde artists […] during the seminal decade 1974—1984." The links did more than create new constellations of artists able to work with each other, developing new art forms for growing audiences, but also extended to promotional concerns such as reportage (e.g., *SoHo Arts Weekly*, *Wedge*, and other publications), exposure in the New Museum, and to new venues—the Kitchen, Artists Space, the Danceteria—and even retail outlets such as Ken Haring's Pop Shop.

Overall, the essayists' almost intimate introductions to the scene, the artists, and the

work upstage their analytical contexts. Booksellers should prepare for a run on the in-your-face early texts of Kathy Acker (enemy of “nicey-nicey-clean-ice-cream-TV society”), Spalding Grey, Eric Bogosian, Catherine Texier, and their cohorts, likewise for recordings of Philip Glass’s early Minimalist music, the Sam Rivers Quartet, the Dolls, Patti Smith, Television (the band created by poets Tom Verlaine and Richard Hell) and other Downtown “product”—all break-out and defiantly different.

With Reagan’s re-election to the presidency in 1984, cutbacks by the then liberal National Endowment for the Humanities and New York State Arts Council, and the toll of AIDS, downtown’s art-transforming decade passed. Given this comprehensive *Downtown Book* with its wealth of illustration, documentation, and probing interviews with activists of the era (and the must-see exhibition now at New York University, later opening in Pittsburgh and Austin), the truly ambitious can now claim, à la James Frey, to have been part of a scene too big, too varied, and too fast-changing for anyone but a dedicated 24/7 attendee to begin to capture.

Peter Skinner