

# REPORT: New York

A new exhibition called “Inventing Downtown” looks at the artist-run alternative and performance galleries that nurtured the city’s art scene in the 1950s and ‘60s.

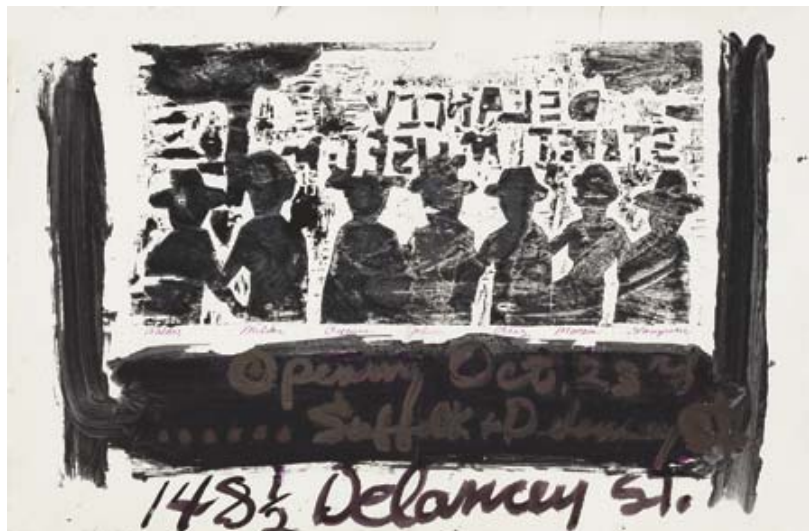
By **art ltd.** - February 23, 2017

In the summer of 1961, Claes Oldenburg rented a storefront at 107 East Second Street in downtown Manhattan. This became both his studio and his gallery and he gave it the simple title “The Store.” Here he made and displayed a whole series of brightly colored sculptures of exactly the sorts of things—like wedding dresses, sneakers, cakes, and pies—that real stores in the neighborhood sold. “The Store” is now seen as a key part of Oldenburg’s contribution to what came to be called Pop Art, and the splendid exhibition “Inventing Downtown” (at the Grey Art Gallery at NYU, January 10 – April 1, 2017) provides fascinating insight into the art world that spawned it.

“Inventing Downtown” focuses on fourteen galleries that artists established for themselves in lower Manhattan between 1952 and 1965, and though art history has been somewhat negligent of this subject up to now, curator Melissa Rachleff has assembled a fascinating collection of artworks and documentation that goes a considerable way to correcting the oversight.

Discussing the title of her show, Rachleff says, “I wanted to demonstrate the way Downtown—mainly the Lower East Side and what we now call the East Village—was solidified as an artist neighborhood.” Whereas the bulk of New York’s gallery business was conducted on or around 57th Street in the 1950s, most contemporary art was almost entirely absent there. So artists who wanted to show their work began to look for possibilities in the neighborhoods where they lived and worked. “I was interested in examples of adventurous projects in which the gallery and the artist forged an unusual partnership,” Rachleff explains, “a partnership that had less to do with selling, and more to do with art and ideas.”

As is almost always the case, taking a closer look at a time and a place makes it obvious that the way things actually happened was considerably more complicated than routine art historical accounts would have us believe. Far from suggesting a smooth straight path from Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art and Minimalism, “Inventing Downtown” reveals that this in-between period was more of a rocky terrain littered with all sorts of ill-defined, only vaguely related, though often surprisingly significant outcrops of artistic activity.



“Announcement for opening at Delancey Street Museum, New York,” 1959  
Bob Thompson, Ink on paper, 22” x 34”  
Photo: courtesy the Estate of Bob Thompson

Rachleff offers a number of routes that you can take through this landscape. You might trace the hitherto undervalued contributions of women and artists of color to the period. You might focus on the co-op galleries like the Tanager, the Hansa, and the Brata that were part of the so-called Tenth Street scene. You might choose the now-almost-forgotten political groups like the Hall of

Issues, The March Group, and The Center. But the most compelling journey on offer here is taken in the company of artists who made rough-hewn installations and performances that, to use the word that Allan Kaprow came up with, were known as *happenings*.

Red Grooms emerges as a key figure in this history. He founded the City Gallery with his friend Jay Milder in 1958 (when he was still only 21) and the grandly titled Delancey Street Museum a year later. Both of these were located in his studio and existed for only a few months, but they were essential places where artists gathered, made art, and exhibited. The City Gallery hosted Claes Oldenburg's first solo show, and the Delancey Street Museum is best known as the November 1959 venue for Grooms' happening *The Burning Building*, a key work in the early history of contemporary performance art. Just reading the chronology of these events gives a sense of the excitement of the times. Opening the same month as the Delancey Street Museum, the Reuben Gallery became an even more significant locale. It was opened by Anita Reuben at the behest of Allan Kaprow, who was looking for a place to stage his performance *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959). If nothing else had ever happened there, the Reuben would have thus entered the annals of performance art's history. In fact, it also staged exhibitions and installations by Oldenburg, Grooms, Lucas Samaras, Rosalyn Drexler, and Jim Dine (to name only the best known) and a whole slew of happenings: by Oldenburg, Dine, Robert Whitman, George Brecht, and Simone Forti, as well as more by Kaprow and Grooms. Meanwhile, Dine was instrumental in the foundation of the Judson Gallery, which hosted more installations and happenings by Dine himself, Oldenburg, Grooms, Whitman, Kaprow, Al Hansen, and Dick Higgins.

Given the central importance of performance to this history, and the fact that even the pictures and objects that the artists made were scrappy in both style and materials, it is a tribute to Melissa Rachleff's scholarship and determination that she has been able to assemble so complete an account. She has brought together two separate exhibition announcements for a 1958-59 "Drawings" show curated by Michaela Weisselberg at the City Gallery for example, and several works that were included in it; she has dug out a page of Kaprow's 'score' for *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (though this is exhibited only in facsimile); she has prized a wonderful woodcut poster for *The Burning Building* out of Claes Oldenburg's private collection; and she has discovered a gorgeous *Self-Portrait in Fur Jacket* (1959) by Marcia Marcus that was first exhibited at the Delancey Street Museum in 1960.

But the most evocative material here is the direct documentation of performances. There is Whitman's own 8mm movie of his most celebrated happening *The American Moon* (all works cited 1960), Stan VanDerBeek's 16mm records of Dine's *The Smiling Workman* and Oldenburg's *Snapshots of the City* (all transferred to video for exhibition) and 'digital slideshows' of John Cohen's photographs of *The Burning Building* and another Grooms happening, *Magic Train Ride*. While documentation cannot transport us back to 1959 or 1960 to experience these things in the flesh, these flickering images still carry a poignant immediacy that make them among the most compelling things in the show.

One of the reasons why this group of performance artists and their immediate collaborators assume a central position in "Inventing Downtown" is because they actually made their work in front of a public, and thus managed to muddy the boundary between studio and gallery. This was a development that Rachleff regards as crucial to the period, and to her exhibition. "I want the visitor to be engaged by what artists *invented*," she explains, "both in terms of the spaces they founded and ran, and in terms of their artwork." She hopes that her show will help us "better appreciate the full flowering of this adventurous generation in a fresh way." In fact, it does far more than that. "Inventing Downtown" is one of those rare exhibitions that will permanently alter the comprehension of a key art historical moment.

—ROBERT AYERS

art ltd.