When artists move into a neighborhood, no matter how small, dilapidated, they transform it into a vibrant, safer community. New York is full of successful examples such as Soho, Chelsea, the Bowery, and Williamsburg. Not only does artistic vitality attract commercial interests but art has the potential to cut across barriers and to bridge distinctions. Following the Second World War, the first artists that came to the Bowery were painters, drawn by the inexpensive, large spaces and light. Abstract Expressionists were especially fond of downtown living, as the scale of their paintings thrust in 4000 square foot lofts. In 1957, the painter John Coper returned to New York after five years of teaching in North Carolina and discovered a former YMCA building at 222 Bowery that would become his studio for nearly four decades. As his daughter, Jane Coper, discussed in her 2008 Bowery Artist Tribute interview, the building provided a precious resource for his practice: "Working in the big space on the Bowery gave him the ability to stretch out the canvases and really explore what he wanted to do," she explained, "which was work with color."

Other painters followed, and over the next few years the artists: Mark Rothko, Wyen Chamberlain, Michael Goldberg, and Angelo Ippolito all began working at 222 Bowery. By 1965, there were over one hundred painters living along the Bowery, among them Cy Twombly, Robert Indiana, Al Loving, and Elizabeth Murray. The lure of cheap rent and vast lofts drew a steady stream of artists to the neighborhood, many of whom occupied space illegally. While the lofts themselves remained the primary attraction, with each new artist’s arrival a second draw emerged: the growing artistic community of the Bowery. As Coper himself recalled in a 1968 interview with an historian Irving Sandler, it wasn’t the space that brought the artist to New York, it was the culture. "I missed the companionship of the artists," he explained, "I missed the discussions."

Painters weren’t the only artists who benefited from this community: sculptors, photographers, writers, and musicians also flocked to the Bowery. Some, like sculptor Doris Litt, took advantage of the Lower East Side’s lawlessness, installing an illegal kite in her backyard. Others, like Sandy Gelfo, took inspiration from the neighborhood’s manufacturing district, collecting malformed buttons and plastic scraps from the endless heaps of garbage. Artists built meeting spaces in their lofts, or transformed neighborhood fixtures into creative hubs.

At the north end of the Bowery, Amiri Baraka and Hettie Jones co-edited the literary journal Light from their loft at 27 Cooper Square, pulling their contributors from the Lower East Side community. One block away, The Five Spot hosted live jazz, packing the house with artists for performances by Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, and Billie Holiday. Maxon’s Luncheonette, at Bowery and Grand, became an unofficial meeting place for artists in the neighborhood, with Sid LeWitt, Sylvia Plimack-Mangold. Roy Lichtenstein and others appearing almost daily for tomato soup and cheese sandwiches. For many, The Bowery was a community for alcoholism, homelessness, and poverty. With the rise of graffiti in the 1980s, the Bowery’s walls were bent to another use in Jean-Marciney Raquet, Fab Five Freddy, and Keith Haring all realized the neighborhood.

In recent years, the Bowery has retained a site of creative activity. The physical space that once supported so much painting has, in many cases, evolved into a site of mind that informs artistic practices from poetry to new media art. New galleries and non-profit venues provide locations for dialogue and reflection, and zoning regulations have insured that ample light can still be found on the Bowery, nourishing a new generation of painters. To acknowledge this tradition, the Bowery Artist Tribute was inaugurated by the New Museum in 2007, with the opening of our home on the Bowery. Through an interactive website, a series of in-depth artist interviews, public programs, and publications, the Bowery Artist Tribute continues to grow as we record more oral histories and keep an archive that documents the lives and work of the artists.

The interviews presented in this publication are excerpts from longer discussions, available on our website boweryartisttribute.org.

We are indebted to Hermine and Daniel Holod for funding the research, development, and presentation of this archive, and for providing enduring funds for its future. We are also grateful to a number of individuals who have provided us instrumental in the research and coordination of these efforts over the past few years, especially Eungie Joo, Irving Sandler, Bethany Swain, NYU fellows Matthew Israel, Jouna Stokie, and Matthew Levy; Trung Chamberlain, and Becky Brown. Finally, we owe many thanks to the artists, relatives, and friends who have shared their stories, photographs, and memories of the Bowery.

Lisa Phillips, Toby Devil Lewis Director
Yuri Tomono in his studio at 151 Canal (at Bowery), 1971.
Photo courtesy Doris Licht

Joe and Carole Bascetta's wedding day, 1974.
Exterior of Pelican Footwear, 219 Bowery. Left to right: David Johansen, Cyrinda Foxe, Carole Reidford (Bascetta), Joe Bascetta. Pelican Footwear was a custom shoe store founded by the Bascettas, with all design, fabrication, and sales occurring at their Bowery loft. Pelican's clients included David Bowie and The New York Dolls, who featured their shoes on the cover of their debut LP. Courtesy Joe and Carole Bascetta. Photo: Bob Gruen © Bob Gruen / www.bobgruen.com

Interior of The Tin Palace, a jazz club located at 325 Bowery from 1970–80. Photos courtesy Paul Pines

CBGB, 315 Bowery, 1991. Photo: Clayton Patterson

Artist in Residence sign at 188 Bowery, 2010. The Artist in Residence (AIR) sign was a New York City requirement for legal loft living. The sign indicates that the building is occupied, with evidence on the 3rd floor. Photo: Thomas Rennie

John Opper in his Bowery Studio, 1965. Photo courtesy Jane Opper

Keith Haring, subway drawing, circa 1981. Taken at the Astor Place station, just north of the Bowery. Keith Haring artwork © Keith Haring Foundation
New York filmmaker Roddy Bogawa (b. 1962) makes work known for its investigation of history and culture via lyrical low-fi means and innovative narrative structures. He has made three feature films and numerous shorts. He studied art and played in punk bands before turning to filmmaking, receiving his MFA degree from the University of California, San Diego where he made his first two short films. In 1991, he directed his first feature, the experimental narrative *Some Divine Wind*. A mixture of fictional and documentary material, this expressionistic film focused on the paradox of assimilation while trying to hold on to one’s cultural perspective. The film was selected for the Sundance Film Festival, the Mannheim International Film Festival, the Asian American International Film Festival, the Hawaii International Film Festival, and the Fukuoka Asian Film Festival.

*I Was Born, But…*, a look back at punk music in the late ’70s and early ’80s, and its intersection with race and identity, premiered as the closing night film at the New York Underground Film Festival where it won the Festival Choice Award. His awards and grants include Creative Capital Foundation, the American Center Foundation, the Jerome Foundation Independent Filmmaker grant, and New York State Council on the Arts.

“...and then you have this quality of a kind of emptiness at the end of it. That was intriguing to me, you could sort of walk around, and, I think, experience New York, I grew up in Los Angeles, so I was always in a car. Moving to New York and being able to walk and see these places that I had studied in art school or things like that were very important and I think an influence to a lot of my filmmaking after that. My last feature that I finished was a film that literally started from the sidewalks of the Bowery. It was a film that I started after Joey Ramone died, when all the kids had been leaving stuff in memory of Joey in front of CBGBs. There were things like Valentines, beer cans, sneakers, notes, and things like that. So I woke up one day at six in the morning, and I took a 16-millimeter camera down there, and I started shooting just the objects that the kids were leaving, just to have. I took a couple rolls of film, and I was filming a shot, where I was laying on the ground in front of CBGBs, and there was a note that a girl had written that was just in blue and red crayon. And my face, I was looking through the camera, was about three inches away from the sidewalk, and literally I was smelling decades of vomit and blood, piss, and I wasn’t even really paying attention to the shot so much other than timing it, and I started reading the note: ‘Dear Joey, my life was boring in Columbus, Ohio, and then I discovered the Ramones.’ It was a very amazing Proustian moment for me, because I started sobbing as I was taking the shot, and I turned off the camera and I basically just sat there in silence for awhile... reading this note that this girl had written, and how deeply it affected me emotionally... literally sent me off on this whole feature project. I raised some funding, and I ended up going back to Los Angeles, shooting the punk clubs that I went to as a kid. I shot some in Hawaii where my family was from, and it became this whole journey starting from this one moment. I’ll never forget that, the idea of literally being in such proximity to the Bowery sidewalk completely setting me off on this whole emotional journey.”

Excerpt from the Bowery Artist Tribute interview with Roddy Bogawa January 18, 2008 Video available at boweryartisttribute.org
John Giorno (b. 1936) was drawn to poetry at a young age, studying art and literature at Columbia College. In the early 1960s, he became acquainted with the Pop art movement, an encounter that would compel him to abandon his job as a stockbroker and dedicate his life to poetry. Inspired by the tactics of his friends Andy Warhol (who featured Giorno as the star of his 1963 film Sleep), Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns, Giorno brought the act of appropriation to his work, presenting found texts as poetry. In 1963, Giorno gave his first public reading at a union building on 14th Street, beginning an energized, vibrant practice that has inspired many historians to describe him as the father of performance poetry. Giorno met William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin in 1965; they introduced him to the Cut-Up technique. In exchange, Giorno shared his experiments with tape recording and looping. In 1965, Giorno founded Giorno Poetry Systems, a not-for-profit organization. Utilizing such media as LPs, CDs, videos, and films, Giorno Poetry Systems has shared the works of more than forty poets, including John Ashbery, William S. Burroughs, Denise Levertov, and Bobby Seale. In 1968, Giorno expanded this reach even further with Dial-A-Poem, a service that allowed listeners to call a local telephone number and hear a randomly selected poem. During its three year existence, Dial-A-Poem received over one million calls, offering over 700 selections by fifty-five different poets. In 2008, he collaborated with Rirkrit Tiravanija on the latter artist’s work, JG Reads (2008), a ten-hour film in which Giorno performs works from the five-decade span of his career. Since 1970, Giorno has exhibited an evolving set of drawings and paintings based on his poetry, most recently in the exhibition “Black Paintings and Drawings” at Nicole Klagsbrun, New York (2010).
Mary Heilmann (b. 1940) is one of the preeminent artists of her generation—a pioneering painter whose work injects abstraction with elements from popular culture and counterculture. A “painter’s painter,” her straightforward, seemingly loose and casual approach belies a witty dialogue with art historical preconceptions. Heilmann’s work has been deeply influenced by her personal experiences, including a childhood and adolescence moving from Los Angeles-area beaches to Bay Area beatnik clubs. The impact of this thoroughly West Coast childhood is seen in the vibrant, lusty color palette, sense of boundless possibility, and rhythm evident in the work—as well as many of the paintings’ titles—are connected to Heilmann’s enthusiasm for popular music ranging from Brian Eno and the Sex Pistols, to k.d. lang and beyond. Her free abstractions, combined with an element of autobiography, have made Heilmann’s paintings highly influential to a younger generation of artists. Ultimately, Heilmann’s practice can be seen as an all-encompassing network linking genres, styles, friends, locations, and histories—enabling each individual work to speak eloquently on its own terms as well as in a larger chorus.

Heilmann’s museum retrospective “To Be Someone,” organized by Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA toured the USA from 2007-09. Her work has been seen in solo exhibitions at Secession, Vienna; Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin; and Camden Arts Centre, London, as well as in numerous one-person gallery shows. Excerpt from the Bowery Artist Tribute interview with Mary Heilmann June 4, 2010 Video available at boweryartisttribute.org

“I was just this wrecked, rough house. There was a cigar store on the ground floor, and the whole building was for rent for $500. I got Tina Girouard and Dicky Landry to come in, and the three of us rented it—four floors and a little half floor on the top, the penthouse. And I got the penthouse, Tina and Dicky had the first two floors. We moved in there in 1970.

“What was a big influence was the view that I had out of my window onto Chatham Square. It was this big open square, so I did get a lot of nice lighting there in my studio. That scene, always looking out the window, influenced how my work developed. I started there in 1970, and by the end of the ’70s, I was thinking in terms of having a narrative in the painting, and I think that was influenced by looking out the window and constantly seeing everything going on.

“I always used to think that for prospering—for moving from one level of life to another, making a living and getting more money, that you simply can’t do it strictly legally. You have to break the law to get past that, and get from one class to another. And we were sort of doing that by living in the building, without a certificate of occupancy. It was a culture of lawlessness. We really tried to not pay taxes. We didn’t make any money, so it wasn’t really an issue.

“I never felt unsafe. One time, a guy climbed into my window, off of the roof. He took a ring from my little dressing table, you would never think to go in there because it was so rough! But anyway, it was a diamond ring, and I called the cops. The cops were going to show up. Other than that, nothing had ever happened.

“Living in Chatham Square, on the Bowery, and constantly going up and down the Bowery to get to Max’s Kansas City and to the West Side to Norman [Fisher’s] house where we all hung out, was the beginning of my having a sense that community was an important part of the work. Before, my model for being an artist was this sort of lone-person up in a garret, where you work all alone all day and then you go out to a bar and just get drunk and get in a fight and then sleep all morning and get back into it. That changed in those years.”
Kellie Jones (b. 1959) arrived on the Bowery at the age of three, with her parents Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones) and Hettie Jones. The family settled in an illegal loft building at the north end of the Bowery, a situation that Hettie Jones would later recall in her memoir, "How I Became Hettie Jones: "As far as the city knew, 27 Cooper Square was a vacant, cold-water tenement house. 'Loft living' considered a fine hazard, was illegal. Artists hid their beds and kitchens—even built false walls—while landlords turned their heads out of their hands." From 27 Cooper Square, her parents wrote and published a variety of works, including poetry, plays, music criticism, and children's literature. The building's central location, and the couple's literary journal Yugen, established the building as a nerve center for the Beat writers such as Allen Ginsberg, and the jazz scene, including free jazz player Archie Shepp, we had free jazz rehearsals underneath our apartment. My elementary school, she was my art teacher… along with her first husband, Don Sunami, who was the wood shop teacher. And they lived in our building. I'm sure mom has told you about who these are the people you're going to be writing about. If you think you're not, you're wrong.' I met Lorna Simpson, didn't know who she was, but she knew about me. And then I met Fred Wilson. Fred Wilson was shocked that people didn't even Whitfield Lovell who I knew for oh cool, hey, I like your work…. Or even Whitfield Lovell who I knew for so long, or Fred Wilson. Fred Wilson gave me one of my first exhibitions in the Bronx, at the Longwood Art Center, in 1986. And even the late Elizabeth Murray, That's another part of the story. My elementary school, she was my art teacher…. along with her first husband, Don Sunami, who was the wood shop teacher. And they lived in our building. I'm sure mom has told you about who lived in the building: Elizabeth Murray and her husband Don, when they first moved from Chicago. The saxophone player Archie Shepp, we had free jazz rehearsals underneath our apartment, you know, as part of growing up."

"As a child, you think the world is like your world. You think the whole world is like that. I remember going to college, I mean, I had no idea, I was always around artists. When I went to high school, I went to the school of music and art—more artists! And the important thing about that for me was that it was a very diverse, multicultural place. I never, as a child growing up, thought that artists were only meant to be white. I had no concept of that. It was really a shock when I started taking art history, actually in high school, and I thought, why is it that the artists of color, they're very ancient. They're pre-Colombian, or they're Egyptian. Those are the only people of color you talk about. Once you get into people who are alive, or even from the fifteenth century on, they're gone. I couldn't understand how you could really teach that, and yet we're sitting in the class with people who are artists, like Whitfield Lovell, who was a classmate of mine in high school. So art was just part of my life. When I went to college, I was really shocked that people didn't know artists, that everybody hadn't grown up with artists…. I began to realize, say, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two, that this was a real gift that I had been given, to actually grow up on the Bowery, to grow up the way I did."
Adam Purple (b. 1930) is a social activist, philosopher, and urban gardener/revolutionary. He created the world-famous earthwork The Garden of Eden, which flourished on Manhattan’s Lower East Side from 1975–86. By the early 1970s, much of Manhattan’s Lower East Side had become a desolate, crime-ridden place. In the midst of this, Purple started a garden in the backyard of his tenement building at 184 Forsyth Street. In time, the surrounding tenements were torn down and Purple’s The Garden of Eden grew to 15,000 square feet and included forty-five fruit and nut trees. He carted off tons of refuse and created virgin topsoil with horse manure from Central Park as well as his own “night soil.” To create the garden, he used simple tools and raw muscle power.

Excerpt from interview with Adam Purple and Amy Brent for StoryCorps Oral History Project, November 22, 2006

“I’m Missouri, there’s an old saying—‘You can take a boy out of the country but you can’t get the country out of a boy.’ I grew up about a half a mile outside the city limits of Independence [Missouri]. Although I was born in Independence, I grew up mostly in Missouri. I had already started the garden and I wasn’t going to abandon that because I could see other buildings were going to come down, and so it was circular and it would expand and the circles would bump into buildings and knock the buildings down, metaphorically, which of course they did. I mean the buildings fell down, and the city saw what was happening and decided, well we gotta kill this for sure.

“We had cucumbers, and cherry tomatoes, and asparagus, and black raspberries on the wall on Eldridge Street, and forty-five trees, including eight black walnut trees, half of which were fruiting. In fact, there’s still a black walnut tree that I transplanted into the back of what is now also called 184 Forsyth Street. In their backyard in the northeast corner of their yard, I don’t know if they know it, and if they did they’d probably run in and kill it.

“I had started the garden in ’75 and the landlord left in ‘76, as I remember, but I had already started the garden and I wasn’t going to abandon that because I could see other buildings were going to come down, and so it was circular and it would expand and the circles would bump into buildings and knock the buildings down, metaphorically, which of course they did. I mean the buildings fell down, and the city saw what was happening and decided, well we gotta kill this for sure.

“On the map for the block I was in, all the area where The Garden of Eden existed, it was labeled vacant. It was never officially recognized by the city as existing. They called it vacant. When in fact it was a work of art there, an earthwork. And, incidentally, earthworks and performance art, as I understand my art history, are referred to as antiestablishment for the very simple reason that the owning class cannot buy them and put them in a gallery somewhere and make them unavailable to the general public. There’s a lot of artwork that’s in private hands that the public never sees. And, so when you do something that is free, open, and costs nothing in terms of money, except human labor, you are a threat. That is antiestablishment. And, obviously, I was aware of that.

“I left the garden because, well, that’s the way I view it.”

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“It was a work of art that was also ecologically based, in terms of a human right to make earth and grow food. So, all of our human rights were violated, when the garden was handled the way it was by the city. I think it was the late Martin Luther King, Jr. who said that injustice to anyone, anywhere, is a threat to justice everywhere, to everyone, something to that effect. We don’t live in isolation of everyone else.

“I said at the time, and I still feel that it would have been better to kill me and leave the garden because, well, that’s the way I view it.”
Arleen Schloss (b. 1943) has worked interchangeably in a variety of mediums since the 1970s, including performance art, sound poetry, new music, paintings, film, and video. Presented in spaces as varied as the Kitchen, the Museum of Modern Art, the Ars Electronica Festival in Austria (1970), and her own home, Schloss’s performances possess a spirit described by Linda Burnham as “a contagious sense of wonder.” These presentations, which could involve Schoo’s cyclical recitation of the alphabet, live painting, closed-circuit video, and music, all at once, combine the anti-art whimsy of Fluxus, scientific exploration, Cageian indeterminacy, and a site-specific empathy that made every act unique.

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These workshops demanded a dedicated location for performance, and in 1979, A’s was born. Each Wednesday night, Schloss opened her loft to the public, offering a diverse program of dance, music, and performance, including such artists as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Phoebe Legere, Glenn Branca, Berhard Heidsieck, Eric Bogosian, Alan Vega (Suicide), and Y Pants. On weekends, the space doubled as A Gallery, offering space for visual artists as well. Especially notable were two group shows in 1985: “The Asia Show,” which included works by Nina Kuo, Bing Lee, Ai Weiwei, Tehching Hsieh, and Shirin Neshat; and “The Friends Show,” which involved over one hundred artists, including Willyoung Sharp, Kim Jones, and Schloss’s parents.

In the 1990s, A’s ended its regular schedule and Schloss developed a new platform with different artists. As soon as people heard about A’s they rushed here because the Mudd Club was on the expensive side. The public were artists, basically from the hood, and also from Europe. Everyone was open and loving what was going on because everyone was experimenting. It was a chance to try your ideas. The first band that played here was Grey, Jean-Michel Basquiat’s band. He came in to play in his pajamas. Everything was on the edge and people were just doing whatever they were doing, Maria D, a German all-women band played the same night. The whole point about A’s was loving what you do. And if you’re serious, and you love what you do, then you do it. And I’m open.

Excerpt from the Bowery Artist Tribute interview with Arleen Schloss July 24, 2008 Video available at boweryartisttribute.org

Even though it was the late ’60s, we kind of knew that Soho was going to become fashionable and turn into something, and we wanted to be off to the side. We were all being thrown out of where we were living on East Broadway because the building had been bought. There was no one in this building, and we moved in as a group of artists. One of the people in the group was a dancer who danced with Merce Cunningham. One was the artist Ray Kelly, who founded the Rivington School here in Manhattan. We were all experimental artists, testing and trying different things.

When I first arrived here I was painting with my feet because there was no wall space. That turned into performance art workshops. In 1970 I did a performance called New in an experimental space on Prince Street. I did a large workshop with a number of people to take off their shoes and socks and walk in mounds of hot pink Play-Doh. It was like you were hanging out on the moon.

We were all experimental artists, testing and trying different things. When I first arrived here I was painting with my feet because there was no wall space. That turned into performance art workshops. In 1970 I did a performance called New in an experimental space on Prince Street. I did a large workshop with a number of people to take off their shoes and socks and walk in mounds of hot pink Play-Doh. It was like you were hanging out on the moon.

I was working in the neighborhood with children that didn’t speak English. I was experimenting then too, trying to find creative ways to teach Language. This was in the early ’70s. I became a resource for City as School, which was here in Lower Manhattan. I worked with high school students that couldn’t work in regular classrooms. I would take them out to Tomkins Square Park, we would do Art Around the Park [a live action public art project during Hotel Festival] and they would paint as part of the whole outdoor institution.

As formed because I was giving performance art workshops and working with friends and other people to help develop works using their voice and sound and experimenting with creative ideas. The workshops increasingly became more popular, grew quite large so I opened it as a space for creation of works by different artists. As soon as people heard about it they rushed here because the Mudd Club was on the expensive side. The public were artists, basically from the hood, and also from Europe. Everyone was open and loving what was going on because everyone was experimenting. It was a chance to try your ideas. The first band that played here was Grey, Jean-Michel Basquiat’s band. He came in to play in his pajamas. Everything was on the edge and people were just doing whatever they were doing, Maria D, a German all-women band played the same night. The whole point about A’s was loving what you do. And if you’re serious, and you love what you do, then you do it. And I’m open.

The paintings, drawings, and photographs of Billy Sullivan (b. 1946) are tributes to the beauty of fleeting moments. Each portrait acts as a document of time, freezing such natural acts as eating, reading, or resting. Beginning with a series of unhurried photographs, taken over the course of a conversation, a meal, or simply hanging out, Sullivan is able to condense his impressions of a subject into the finished work, creating what he describes as “a psychological take on their time spent together.” These subjects are drawn primarily from Sullivan’s social circle: his friends and the people he encounters as a part of the downtown New York scene. This personal relationship with each individual lends a calm, intimate quality to his portraits, evoking a caring, romantic tone. Sullivan’s vibrantly colored paintings capture the golden tones of the late afternoon sun sinking over the Bowery, or the red hues of flashing nightclub lights, his palette reflecting both the radiance of his surroundings and the warmth and emotion he carries for each of his subjects.


Excerpt from the Bowery Artist Tribute interview with Billy Sullivan
October 9, 2007
Available at boweryartisttribute.org

“My family moved to Brooklyn, but my parents are from here. My dad said when he was a kid that the Bowery was an exciting place, it was fancy. For his time, it was the biggest boulevard in New York. The Astors lived here.

“I slept in the front of the studio—one day, I must have been waking up, I felt like my studio was on fire. They had painted the outside of my building red as I was sleeping. I woke up and it was bright red.

“I moved to this space, 105 Bowery, in December 1980. I had to go speak to Jack Klein, who dealt in studios in those days, he was great. I went to speak to him, and he told me the price. I was nervous, I said, ‘sure, I’ll pay,’ and he said, ‘aren’t you gonna bargain with me?’ I had no idea that people did things like that. I didn’t have the money to pay for the studio, it was like $400 or something. I didn’t have money. I mean, I went out every night and I partied, and drove a taxi once in a while. But I got it together.

“You came here because it was cheap to live and no one wanted to live on the Bowery. There were these big buildings—this was an old flophouse. And they cleaned it up. There’s still some marble partitions in the bathroom where the men, they used it as a public bathroom, on the floor.

“It was the greatest place to live. Jake Berthot lived in this building at one point. I got my studio from Brice Marden, who was in this building. Alan Uglow lives across the hall and down one flight. These buildings used to be connected so you could walk back and forth, he lives in 103. Eve Sonneman used to live across the street, with Bob Yucikas. Lynda Benglis lives up the Bowery, the building with Mike Goldberg and Lynn Umlauf that used to be a YMCA. John Giorno’s in there, and Burroughs used to live there.

Artists always lived here. When I was at the School of Visual Arts, I worked for Malcolm Morley, who had a studio on the Bowery. Roy Lichtenstein had a studio on the Bowery. And now we have Whole Foods! I would have never believed that this would happen. There are doormen on the Bowery. It’s changing. The sad thing is that young people can’t come here. It’s impossible unless, you know, you already have a lot of money. I came when you didn’t have to have money, and you could have a dream.”
Dash Snow (1981–2009) worked with spray paint, newspaper clippings, photography, and his own body to create work that stretched from the condemned territories of downtown New York to countless exhibitions around the world. His restless, enthusiastic spirit drove Snow to combine and mutate materials, obsessively modifying arrangements and corporeal configurations in his collage, portraiture, and self-published artist books.

Dash Snow began his creative activity as a prolific graffiti writer, notorious both for his intensity and his ability to access remote spots. He rejected the late 1990s tendency towards extreme technical skill and avant-garde character design, instead setting his sights on dominance and daring as his goals. His word, SACE, always executed in legible, sharply defined letters, was marked clearly by his tag at every block. His graffiti adventures provided a Helen-in-camera acquired at the age of sixteen accompanied Snow on these outings, capturing the prescient sites and unseen views of the city that his graffiti adventures provided. His transient passage through subway tunnels, rooftops, and abandoned buildings was solitary, but his prints fixed his view of the city in a format that could be openly shared.

Alongside these desolate panoramas, Snow began to document his other nighttime activities—the bare skins, consumption, and exhaustion that colored his life. Giuliani’s mayoral reign, which extinguished Chelsea’s mega-clubs and neutered Times Square, crowned Manhattan’s youth culture downtown once again—concentrated that particular culture of drugs, sex, and mayhem into a limited patch south of 14th Street. This was Snow’s turf, marked clearly by his tag, every block. The sites that people spent entire nights (or summers) searching for—the flogging dive bars, the basement rock clubs; the 5 a.m. lift-makes-up parties—Snow found every one, and photographed the ensuing fights, drunken kisses, and triumphs. Just as Nan Goldin documented the drug use and transgression of her own community in the same neighborhood two decades earlier, Snow used snapshots to document his extended family, to commemorate intimate situations that normally pass without notice. The tone of his photographs never approached objectification or spectacle, like Goldin he was a part of the community he documented, and the work was a reflection of his relationships with the subjects. The photos portray moments of revelation, tinted with an open spirit of welcome.

Snow’s generosity was best disseminated through his self-produced, photocopied zines. Recording photos, sensational news stories, typewritten fragments, and rescued debris, Snow’s publications collate disparate materials into an intensely personal narrative, illuminating his sense of humor, his morbid fascinations, and his adoration for friends and family. Often running hundreds of pages long, these zines reed in secret activities; handwritten notes mirror excessive New York Post headlines and familial snapshots exhibit the same rap facial expressions as found photos of occult gatherings.

In Snow’s collage works, the impulse towards collecting and contrasting reveals much darker fascinations. Built upon a foundation of aged, milkless-toned paper, these rigorous compositions combine degraded headlines and delicately edited photos to create sharp-edged, deeply frustrated commentaries. Snow would often splice together two sentences, alternating the words in a manner that reinforced the brutality of current events while surrendering to their absurdity. Collages without text edged together images of battlefields, celebrities, and consumer goods—an architecture of suffering and misplaced desire. These works, while occasionally imbued with the amusement and thrill of his photography, exposed a cynical, troubled side of Snow, complicating notions of the artist as party documenter.

Throughout Snow’s installations and publications, his key compositional elements—debauched flesh, prurient clippings, and adoring portraits—jet one another much in the same way that these energies struggle in life. Viewed at this scale, Snow’s consideration of this balance is fraughtly conscious. In one collage, 1930s pornographic photos are combined and drawn upon, forming a cross, aggressive orgy; but in a second work, the same naked bodies splash through a pond, cast with a Waldenesque freedom that is reinforced by the glued-in words, “Have Fun.”


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