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Melissa Rachleff

The artist as gallerist

interview by **Leda Cempellin***

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We are discussing the exhibition you recently curated, *Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City, 1952-1965*. How does this project relate to your research interests? My research has long revolved around institutions founded by artists. In 2009 I was teaching a course at NYU that looked at the history of New York galleries from the vantage point of innovative exhibitions, and I realized I had a huge gap in my scholarship when it came to the 1950s and early 1960s. My research for the course uncovered the cooperative (or co-op) artist galleries, most located on East 10th Street, and all founded in the 1950s. I also discovered the shorter-lived galleries such as the Reuben Gallery, where Allan Kaprow inaugurated *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* in 1959, and the Judson Art Gallery, where Claes Oldenburg presented an environment called *The Street* and Jim Dine also presented an environment, *The House* in 1960. I also learned about political, agit-prop installations done by Boris Lurie, Sam Goodman and Stanley Fisher at the March Gallery on East Tenth Street, and Phyllis Yampolsky's Hall of Issues at the Judson Church, a forum about social concerns that involved artists and non-artists alike. The late 1950s and early 1960s was also an era when many West Coast (California) artists came to New York, and a group of them began a quasi-gallery at 79 Park Place, starting in 1962. And other West Coast artists collaborated with Yoko Ono at her loft at 112 Chambers Street in 1961. Finally, that semester the Museum of Modern Art posted an online exhibition from their then recent acquisition of the Richard Hu Bellamy papers. Bellamy worked for an artist co-op called the Hansa, and in 1960 opened the commercial Green Gallery. I believed the Green Gallery was linked to all the artist activity that took place downtown. So there was a lot of different artist groups, some overlapping and others distinct. I felt there was enough information for an exhibition because this era of New York had not been examined from the vantage point of artist galleries; the later period—1966-1970s—had been examined, but not the 1950s and early 1960s. I was very lucky that NYU's Grey Art Gallery agreed, and with their support, I was able to do the research for the exhibition and book.

Where did you find all the information? Well, as you saw in the exhibition—we have more than 100 lenders! And this gives you an idea of what it was like to research the project. I began by trying to find records of the galleries I discovered. The list changed over time to the 14 galleries that make up *Inventing Downtown*. Sometimes the records were in public archives, like the Museum of Modern Art, or the Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C. Other times, I would go directly to the artists who were involved with the galleries to see what they might have saved; for instance Lois Dodd, one of the founders of the Tanager Gallery, had very important material. I also met Milly Glimcher of Pace Gallery, who was completing an exhibition and book about artist performances (or "Happenings") in 2012; she shared primary research, and she put me in contact with a number of artists. Milly also introduced me to Julie Martin. In the early 1990s Julie, along with her husband, engineer Billy Klüver (1927-2004) interviewed artists and others about art of the postwar era until 1965. They spoke to more than 200 people, and in the summer of 2011 I listened to more than 60 of interviews. Their conversations with artists indelibly influenced how I saw the era. Other research

included reading the art periodicals and art reviews in newspapers of the time—this was sometimes the only way to reconstruct the exhibition history of a gallery. So for every gallery included in the project, there was a variety of research strategies—from public and private archives, to visits with artists or their families, to secondary sources. Because there was not a single repository, it took a long time. **I saw lots of visitors. What makes an exhibition of this scholarly caliber so successful?** People are seeing a period they thought they knew in a different way. (For those who were in downtown New York, they are seeing a part of their past reconstructed.) The 1950s and early 1960s are not known for cultural diversity. Even in New York City, one of the most diverse places in the entire United States, this era in art is still defined by the achievement of male American abstract artists like Willem De Kooning at the beginning of the 1950s, and then Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, and then in the early 1960s, Andy Warhol—and of course this is such a reductive way to look at an era. It leaves out figurative work, it leaves out women, it leaves out non-Caucasian artists. The reason people are responding to this exhibition is that they are seeing—some for the first time—what art making looked like when women and non-white artists are included. This is what I meant by *Inventing Downtown*—that artists invented a culture through galleries that were inclusive, and in their inclusiveness, were very different from uptown galleries. I believe visitors find this very exciting because it deviates from the common view. You see, I am adopting a different framework. Rather than use traditional, art historical categories—which can be useful—I use the galleries that artists founded and ran as the frame. And this opens up other possibilities, a new way to see art and history.

Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City, 1952-1965 is an exhibition curated by Melissa Rachleff at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University. The book has been published by Prestel. Our gratitude to Ariana Tiziani. Like all previous interviews, edited for brevity and clarity.



"Inventing Downtown" Grey Art Gallery, NYU, 2017, with (in foreground) Mary Frank, *Reclining Figure*, c. 1960 and (in background, left to right) Sidney Geist, *Studded Figure*, 1957; Philip Pearlstein, *Roman Ruin*, 1961; Perle Fine, *Heroic Awakening*, 1957; and Angelo Ippolito, *Storm*, 1956, photograph by Nicholas Papananias, courtesy Grey Art Gallery, NYU