

# THE ARTIST AS CURATOR

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## AN ANTHOLOGY

Edited by  
Elena Filipovic



THE ARTIST AS CURATOR  
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## Collaborative Projects Inc. (Colab), *Times Square Show*, 1980

*It's not like people got together before the month of June and they made this Times Square Show and then they open the door and everyone came in and went, "Wow! Look at that!" No. It was not anything like that. It was more like something that was constantly changing.*

—Charlie Ahearn<sup>1</sup>



Exterior of *Times Square Show*, New York, 1980

On June 1, 1980, what the *Village Voice* called “the first radical art show of the ’80s” opened in a former massage parlor at 201 West Fortieth Street and Seventh Avenue in New York.<sup>2</sup> It was organized by the artist members of Collaborative Projects Inc., also known as Colab, and was inaugurated with a party that went late into the summer night. For the entirety of the month of June, *Times Square Show* (frequently abbreviated TSS) was open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, echoing the all-hours rhythm of nearby Forty-Second Street.<sup>3</sup> Though it was economically downtrodden, New York was on the verge of massive cultural change and, with it, the art world too was on the brink of a new era. Within this cityscape Times Square was an especially liminal site, the social context of which became material for Colab’s event-based exhibition where spontaneous interventions created a stream of unanticipated alterations—much like the unpredictable reality of the streets outside.

*Times Square Show* was comprised of artworks by 100 to 150 artists and included an extensive lineup of “Exotic Events,” performances, and screenings.<sup>4</sup>

1. <http://www.timessquashowrevisited.com/accounts/charlie-ahearn.html>.

2. Richard Goldstein, “Three Chord Art Anyone Can Play,” *Village Voice*, June 16, 1980.

3. In some of the posters and fliers, *Times Square Show* was promoted as being open “everyday in June” or from June 1 to 30. However, William Zimmer’s review of the show in the *SoHo News* listed the final date as July 4, 1980 (“Underground in the Underground World,” June 18, 1980). It thus seems likely that the show was extended through July 4.

4. Posters and fliers for *Times Square Show* include lists of “Exotic Events.”





Becky Howland, *Oil Rig Fountain* (1980), as installed in the men's room at *Times Square Show*, New York, 1980; also visible at the upper right are Mitch Corber, *Atomic Graffiti*, and Joe Fyfe, *Fruit* (both 1980)

More than a constellation of artworks or events, however, it was the artists' protocol that was remarkable for the way it activated the exhibition as social space. The artists of Colab made, conceived, organized, and displayed the "show" themselves, taking all aspects of production into their own hands and following the "open-wall" or "open-invitation" policy of their previous exhibitions staged in downtown lofts and studios.<sup>5</sup> This strategy had built them a reputation for inclusivity, prompting other artists to show up unannounced with their artworks, or to create pieces *in situ* even after the exhibition had opened.<sup>6</sup> The organizing artists did not adhere to conventions of modern art display (white walls, even lighting), and they welcomed a sweeping range of media as well as non-art objects. At times, viewers might have

5. In January 1979, Colab members, including Diego Cortez, Coleen Fitzgibbon, Jenny Holzer, and Robin Winters, began to sponsor a series of open-invitation, thematic group shows in their apartments, lofts, and studios. The shows sponsored in 1979 included *Batman Show*; *Income and Wealth Show*; *Doctors and Dentists Show*; *The Dog Show*; *The Manifesto Show*; *Just Another Asshole Show*; and *Exhibit A*.

6. In a conversation with the author (November 2015), Callant reaffirmed that information about the exhibition spread by word of mouth. There is no record of a submission deadline or a request for proposals.



been hard pressed to distinguish between one artwork and the next. There were artworks in every nook and cranny of the four-story building—on ceilings and in toilet stalls, closets, staircases, and dimly lit halls—the result looking “aggressively unkempt” according to Jeffrey Deitch in his review of the show, or “tarted up,” as the critic Lucy Lippard described it in her pseudonymously penned review.<sup>7</sup>

As a group, Colab relied on the hard work and enthusiasm of its participants, whose spirited approach echoed throughout *Times Square Show*. Atypical among post-1960s artist collectives, the artists incorporated themselves as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, but did not rent a permanent exhibition space, hire salaried administrators, or otherwise formalize along institutional lines.<sup>8</sup> Instead, to meet the requirements of funding bodies and solicit nationwide public grants, which is to say, to use the means and legal status of incorporation (and the “Inc.” in their name flaunted it) to radical ends, members took on temporary administrative responsibilities. By keeping bureaucracy and financial overhead to a minimum, they maintained artistic autonomy and maximized flexibility. The funds Colab raised were distributed via democratic forum at group meetings, where members could vote their dollar share toward projects of their choice. As well as shouldering many of the administrative responsibilities, the women of Colab were active feminists who spearheaded numerous projects and challenged patriarchal hierarchies. It is significant that women made up 50 percent of the membership, a high level for a heterogeneous group at the time. With a constituency of thirty to fifty members at any given moment, Colab artists maintained their unique mandate for more than seven years.

Ideologically, Colab endeavored to create affordable art, reach audiences beyond the art world, and challenge systemic relationships between culture, money, and information. In speaking about *Times Square Show*, Colab member John Ahearn told the *East Village Eye*, “There has always been a misdirected consciousness that art belongs to a certain class or intelligence. This show proves there are no classes in art, no differentiation.”<sup>9</sup> These ideas are reflected in Colab’s affiliation with Fashion Moda, an arts organization founded in 1978 in the South Bronx that collaborated on *Times Square Show*.<sup>10</sup> Fashion Moda raised critical questions about the function of art, especially in terms of race and class: Who makes art? Who decides what art is? Who decides which art gets shown?<sup>11</sup>

Six months prior to the exhibition, a handful of Colab members participated in the Committee for the Real Estate Show, which organized a rebelliously themed exhibition about landlord speculation in low-income neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side (LES). *Real Estate Show* opened on January 1, 1980, in an illegal LES squat. When the artists returned the following morning, they found themselves locked out of the building. They later returned to the site to protest outside, and were joined by art dealer Ronald Feldman and the German artist Joseph Beuys. This high-profile lockout, captured by photographers from the *New York Times*, led to negotiations with city agencies, and the artists were eventually granted use of another empty building at 156 Rivington Street, where they founded the collectively run center for art and activism ABC No Rio. In many ways, *Real Estate Show* was a threshold exhibition, bringing together social critique, political activism, and art to highlight pervasive housing issues in New York.

In Times Square, the relationship between private capital and public space evolved at a different pace. Successive generations of elected representatives had tried and failed to eradicate crime there through commercial development, and in

7. Jeffrey Deitch, “Report from Times Square,” *Art in America* 68 (September 1980): 58–63; and Anne Ominous [Lucy Lippard], “Sex and Death and Shock and Schlock: A Long Review of the Times Square Show,” *Artforum* 19, no. 2 (October 1980): 52.

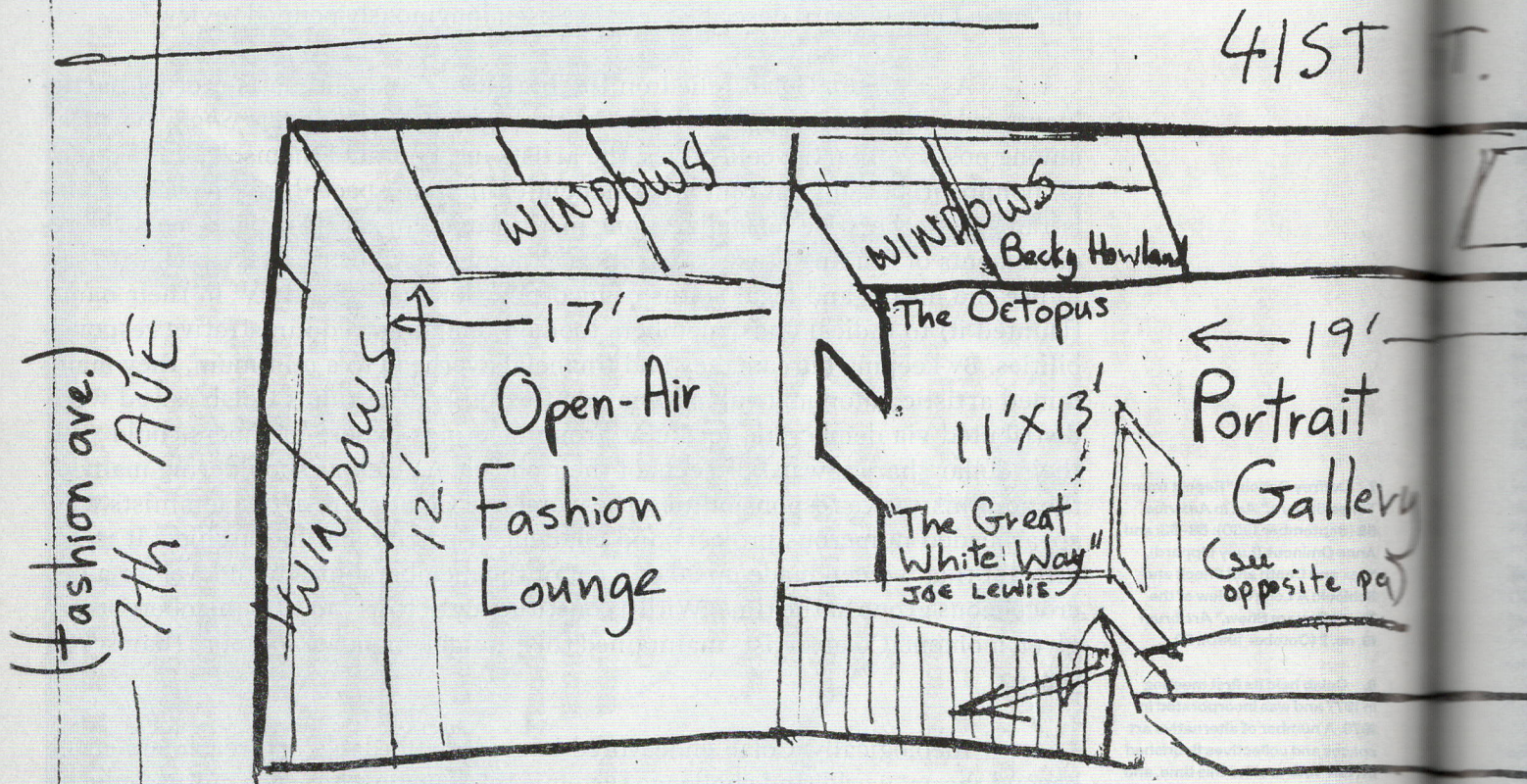
8. Colab held its first meeting in 1977 and was incorporated in 1979. A number of alternative art spaces and collectives flourished in New York around this time, and in the previous decade, including: 112 Workshop / 112 Greene Street / White Columns, A.I.R. Gallery, Artists Space, Clocktower Gallery, Creative Time, the Drawing Center, Electronic Arts Intermix, Fashion Moda, Franklin Furnace, Institute for Art and Urban Resources (later P.S.1 / MoMA PS1), Just Above Midtown, Kenkeleba House, the Kitchen, Printed Matter, and Public Art Fund.

9. Quoted in John Reed, “Crossroads of the (Art) World,” *Paris Review*, October 10, 2012, <http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2012/10/10/crossroads-of-the-art-world/>.

10. Fashion Moda was founded by Stefan Eins, who was soon thereafter joined by the artist Joe Lewis and William Scott as codirectors. Presenting influential exhibitions including *GAS (Graffiti Art Success for America)*, curated by John “Crash” Matos, in October 1980, Fashion Moda was critical in bringing graffiti artists into contact with Colab members and other downtown artists. Shortly after, graffiti was featured in P.S.1’s *New York / New Wave* exhibition in 1981.

11. The photographer Lisa Kahane enumerated these questions during a conversation with the author about Fashion Moda in March 2016.





Fashion Lounge  
designed by: Mary Lemley

Sophie VDT  
Paula Grief

Karen Luner

Esther Balint

Jean-Michel Basquiat

Vicki Pederson

SOUTH w/ black painting - Olivier Mosset

Listing for "Money, Length"  
and Portrait gallery  
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TIMES SQUARE SHOW  
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"92 Morningside"

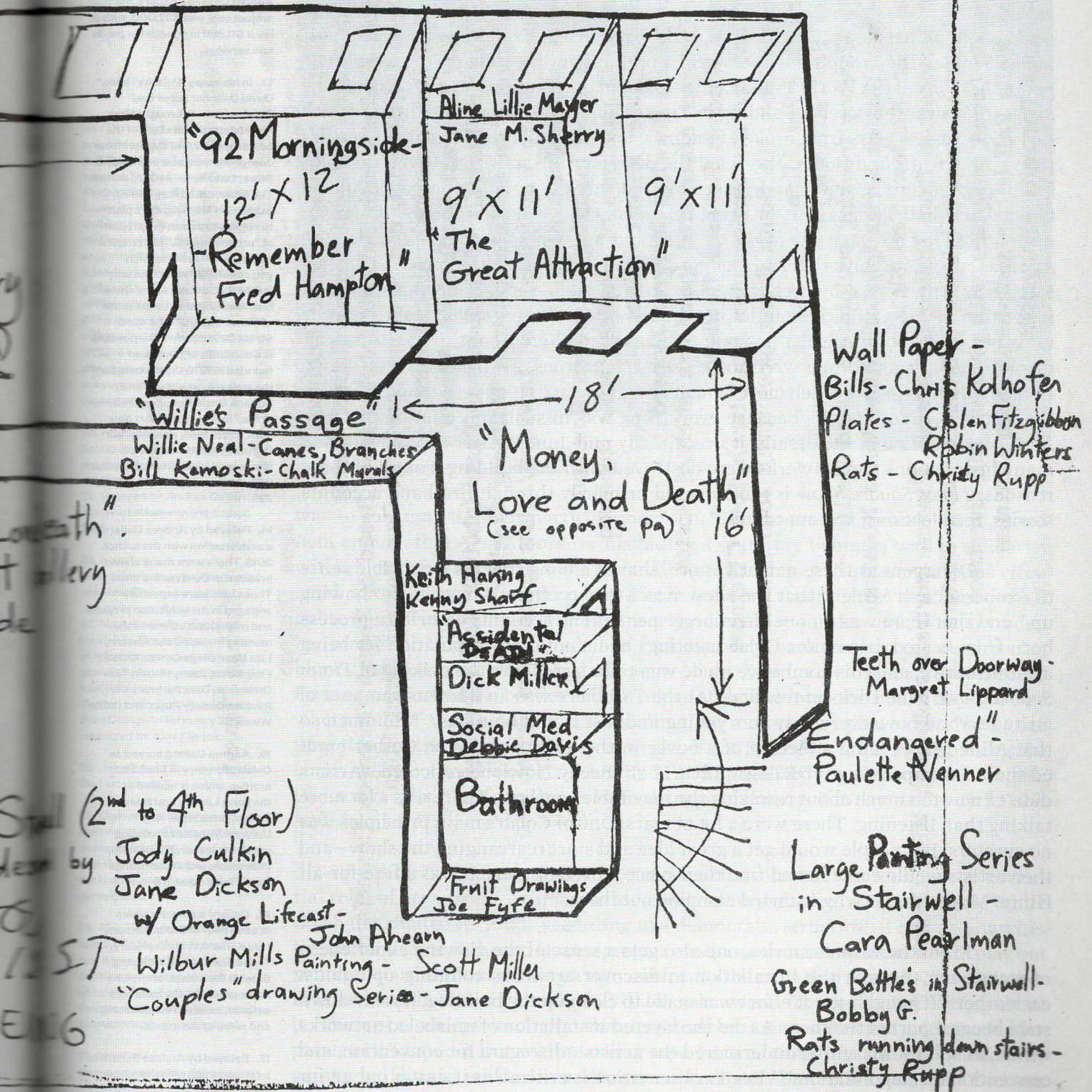
Candace Hill Montgomery - Bill Stephans

w/ Portrait Painting - Kathleen Gilia

Large Pig - Angela Fremont

Lifecasts - John Ahearn

Broken Glass - David Hammons



(2nd to 4th Floor)

Jody Calkin  
Jane Dickson

w/ Orange Lifecast - John Ahearn

Wilbur Mills Painting - Scott Miller

"Couples" drawing Series - Jane Dickson



1980, such projects were just beginning to take hold, as evidenced by the increasing number of buildings slated for demolition. *Times Square Show*'s dilapidated massage parlor (likely a brothel) was one such site. To arrange their use of the building, John Ahearn, Tom Otterness, and Coleen Fitzgibbon negotiated with the landlord, who donated it for two months in exchange for a \$500 deposit that was never returned.<sup>12</sup> This agreement is an early example of artists being engaged in processes of "urban renewal," even as they acted out against gentrification.<sup>13</sup>

By all accounts, Colab's vote to do a project in Times Square was unanimous. Some of the group's members held a preliminary meeting on the purple carpet in the lobby of the World Trade Center to begin preparations.<sup>14</sup> In May, when the artists took over the derelict building in Times Square, the floors were littered with dirty mattresses, glass from broken windows, and other debris. They made repairs, painted the walls and floors, and fixed the deteriorating staircase. Given the number of participants, visitors, and passersby, and that the building had unregulated twenty-four-hour access, it is unlikely that a conclusive account of the project or even a final list of every one of the (invited and uninvited) participants exists. In Andrea Callard's archive there are budget drafts and sparsely jotted meeting notes.<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, the artists' own photographs provide vital—though incomplete—documentation of the exhibition, and a handful of other photographers captured portions of it.<sup>16</sup> As John Ahearn has pointed out, "the photographs are just one moment in a month, and things were not so static."<sup>17</sup> Otterness's evocative, hand-drawn floor-by-floor maps are much more valuable for those of us looking back on the show than they were for visitors because everything was in such flux that by the time John Ahearn filled in the details, it was already mid-June.<sup>18</sup> After the show closed, many installations and artworks were destroyed with the building. For all of these reasons, *Times Square Show* is remembered primarily through firsthand accounts, stories, recollections, and anecdotes.<sup>19</sup>

Divergent as these narratives are, shared among them is a palpable sense of exuberance. It is clear that the show was a group effort, a matter of "showing up," and that there was no one "in charge" per se. The accounts describe a process born from heated discussion. Colab meetings had a notorious reputation for being argumentative, and this combative mode was transferred into the making of *Times Square Show*. Jane Dickson recalled, "At the TSS there was an immense amount of attitude, you know, everybody was yelling and just full of opinions."<sup>20</sup> So much so that Aline Mayer hung a picture of a boxer in the lobby and Mitch Corber created there a text painting: *VORTEXVELOCITY*.<sup>21</sup> Becky Howland reflected, "Artists didn't know too much about resolving the inevitable conflicts. There was a lot more talking than listening. There were a lot of tears. One of Colab's main principles was no curators. But people would get a great idea and start rearranging the show—and then artists would come in and find their piece moved or gone. It was a free-for-all. Hmm. Maybe that is why I started camping out there."<sup>22</sup>

From the various stories, one also gets a sense of the viewing experience—of wandering through the installation to discover artworks colliding up against each other.<sup>23</sup> Though a great effort was made to clean up the building, its run-down state became part of the show. As did the layered installation of unlabeled artworks, which, as John Reed wrote, underscored the artists' "disregard for convention, and conventional categorization."<sup>24</sup> Reed's observation is critical, as it draws out an important distinction: while the exhibition may have seemed haphazard, the mode of installation was an explicit decision by the artists, who were interested in undoing art-world hierarchies of power and display.

12. For *Times Square Show*, Colab used funding they received from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the Bears Foundation. O-P cinema, Fashion Moda, and ABC No Rio contributed funds as well. According to a budget draft in Andrea Callard's papers, the total project cost was \$32,000, with at least \$11,850 in donated in goods and services.

13. In his essay "Polarity Rules," David Deitcher notes that Colab members brought Mark Finkelstein, the landlord of the building, a letter of support from Joseph Morningstar of the 42nd Street Development Corporation. The letter, dated May 1, 1980, explicated Morningstar's plan to engage artists in the project of "urban renewal." Morningstar wrote, "Any support which you could offer would not only insure the success of the show, but also aid in the revitalization of Times Square." The 42nd Street Development Corporation is a nonprofit organization founded in 1976 to advocate for the redevelopment of Times Square. David Deitcher, "Polarity Rules," in *Alternative Art New York, 1965–1985*, ed. Julie Ault (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press in collaboration with the Drawing Center, 2002), 220.

14. Relayed by Andrea Callard in a conversation with the author, 2016. There were many artists involved in Colab at the time. Those who were especially engaged in the exhibition projects and might have attended the meeting include John Ahearn, Liza Béar, Diego Cortez, Coleen Fitzgibbon, Jenny Holzer, Tom Otterness, Cara Perlman, Ulli Rinkus, Christy Rupp, and Robin Winters.

15. Andrea Callard served as Colab secretary in 1980. Her archive, which is housed at the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University, includes meeting notes, budget drafts, posters, floor maps, and event listings from *Times Square Show*.

16. Callard shot color slides of each floor of the exhibition. Lisa Kahane, Francine Keery, Terise Slotkin, and Wolfgang Staehle took black-and-white photographs of the building's exterior, selected installations, and some of the events.

17. Relayed by Andrea Callard in a conversation with the author, 2016.

18. <http://www.timesquareshowrevisited.com/accounts/john-ahearn.html>.



If there was selective logic at work at *Times Square Show*, it was murky at best and it is unclear on what grounds artists might have been welcomed or barred from the event. We do know that some were turned away; others argued to be included. In some cases, artists claim to have been in the exhibition, but there is no

19. The author wishes to acknowledge Shawna Cooper and Karli Wurzelbacher, who curated *Times Square Show Revisited* at the Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery at Hunter College, New York (September 14–December 8, 2012). The exhibition featured artist interviews and recollections gathered by the curators as part of their research. *Times Square Show Revisited*'s extensive website includes transcriptions of these recollections, recorded during studio visits, phone conversations, and email exchanges.

20. <http://www.timesquareshowrevisited.com/accounts/jane-dickson.html>.

21. Relayed by Andrea Callard in a conversation with the author, 2016.

22. <http://www.timesquareshowrevisited.com/accounts/becky-howland.html>.

23. Nayland Blake described his visit to *Times Square Show* as a formative experience, especially for the way it upset traditional standards of exhibition display, during an artist talk at Bard College in February 2016 organized by Alex Kitnick.

24. John Reed, "Crossroads of the (Art) World."

25. Conversely, in a phone conversation with the author on March 23, 2016, Lisa Kahane said she was not in the exhibition but is often mentioned as having participated.

26. Alan Moore's sculpture was called *The No*. Moore recalls that it was a "reflection on the decision processes at work in an 'open show.'" <http://www.timesquareshowrevisited.com/accounts/alan-w-moore.html>.

27. <http://www.timesquareshowrevisited.com/accounts/jane-dickson.html>.

28. <http://www.timesquareshowrevisited.com/accounts/charlie-ahearn.html>.



Colab meeting at Peter Fend's Broadway loft, 1983

way to substantiate their participation.<sup>25</sup> The tension around inclusion was prominent enough that Alan Moore recalls hiding a sculpture behind a wall in solidarity with all of the artists who were rejected from the show.<sup>26</sup> Numerous stories circulated: a young David Hammons heard from Joe Lewis that there was a "free-for-all" going on in Times Square. Hammons arrived one day in May and, after introducing himself to Jody Culkin and Jane Dickson, went back out into the neighboring blocks and returned with a bag of empty Night Train wine bottles he'd collected. Hammons crushed the bottles and sprinkled the glass down the side of the staircase where Culkin and Dickson were installing, an intervention that might have gone unnoticed in the bombastic array of works, if not for the fact that anyone using the stairs had to contend with it. "When Jody and I protested the glass carpet he'd laid," Dickson recalls, "David gave us a little shrugging smile as if to say: deal with it, kids. And then left."<sup>27</sup>

With "no curators" as a motto, the artists themselves took up the curatorial roles of organizers, exhibition designers, administrators, and promoters. While Colab distributed its funds according to a democratic structure, it had an anarchistic mechanism at its heart. Once a project was in motion, many ideas would play out simultaneously. About making a sign out front, Charlie Ahearn recalls, "I remember I walked out there and I just did it. I didn't ask anyone. That's the weird thing about it. There was no one in charge that I remember. I remember just taking a ladder, paint, and I taped it out with masking tape." At the time, he said, you could spray paint a building at midday in midtown and "no one would blink an eye."<sup>28</sup> Dickson created, in collaboration with Charlie Ahearn, a poster that featured a reference to the gambling game three-card monte, which was ubiquitous on streets near Times Square. Ahearn then turned the third floor into a temporary silkscreen workshop.





David Hammons smashing bottles for his installation at *Times Square Show*, New York, 1980

Additionally, artists made fliers of photomontaged images culled from magazines with hand-scribbled notes, which they plastered on buildings and in clubs downtown. Someone printed up VIP invitation cards and sent them to New York art critics. Colab frequently employed alternative strategies to disseminate information. They produced numerous ephemeral materials, including posters, fliers, multiples, and magazines. As an integral part of their social practice, these were more than project collateral; they were a core element of Colab's creative output and activities.<sup>29</sup>

29. Curated by Max Schumann at Printed Matter in 2011, *A Show About Colab (and Related Activities)* brought together an extensive collection of Colab ephemera, documents, publications, and artworks, as did the subsequent publication, *A Book About Colab (and Related Activities)* (Printed Matter, 2015). Francesco Spampinato discusses the importance of Colab's ephemeral materials in "Colab Again: The Real Estate Show and the Times Square Show Revisited," *Stedelijk Studies*, no. 2 (July 2015): <http://www.stedelijkstudies.com/journal/colab-again/>.

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In light of this, the advertisements created for *Times Square Show* were central to the exhibition. Created by Colab artists, they expanded the borders of the event to include even the airways and sightlines of New York. And they foretold Times Square's imminent future as an advertising mecca and symbolic locus of capitalist entertainment. In many ways, the advertisements for *Times Square Show* mobilized Colab's two primary interests, which David Little describes as media and space.<sup>30</sup> Dickson, who worked as a programmer for the Spectacolor—an enormous block of computer-programmed lights that hung over Times Square—created an animation directed at the crowds of commuters and tourists. Her thirty-second piece ran once an hour, every hour, for the entire month of June. In it, two hands swept away playing cards to reveal the words “Times Square Show.”<sup>31</sup>

30. David Little, “Colab Takes a Piece, History Takes It Back: Collectivity and New York Alternative Spaces” *Art Journal* 66, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 60–74.

31. Jane Dickson worked as a programmer for the Spectacolor unit. She recalls that her boss had grown tired of trying to teach computer programmers how to be creative, so instead the company hired artists and taught them how to use the software. Dickson's boss allowed her to produce and run the ad for *Times Square Show*. After the show, Dickson asked if she could do an artists' series, which she would go on to curate until 1982. Control of the series was then passed over to Public Art Fund, who continued to run it until 1990. Dickson organized Jenny Holzer's first work in LED lights, and commissioned projects by Keith Haring, David Hammons, Matthew Geller, and Nancy Spero, among others.

32. In his essay “Colab Takes a Piece, History Takes It Back,” David Little writes that Colab was inspired by pioneers of guerrilla video from 1960s and 1970s activist collectives such as Union, Video Freez, Top Value Television (TVTV), Raindance, and the Paper Tiger Collective. As with many of these groups, Colab members participated in one another's film and video work, taking on various production roles and sharing equipment costs. Colab member and filmmaker Michael McClard was especially involved in these media-based projects, the extensive output of which included numerous cable TV programs.

33. All three PSAs can be viewed at <https://archive.org/details/xfrstn>.

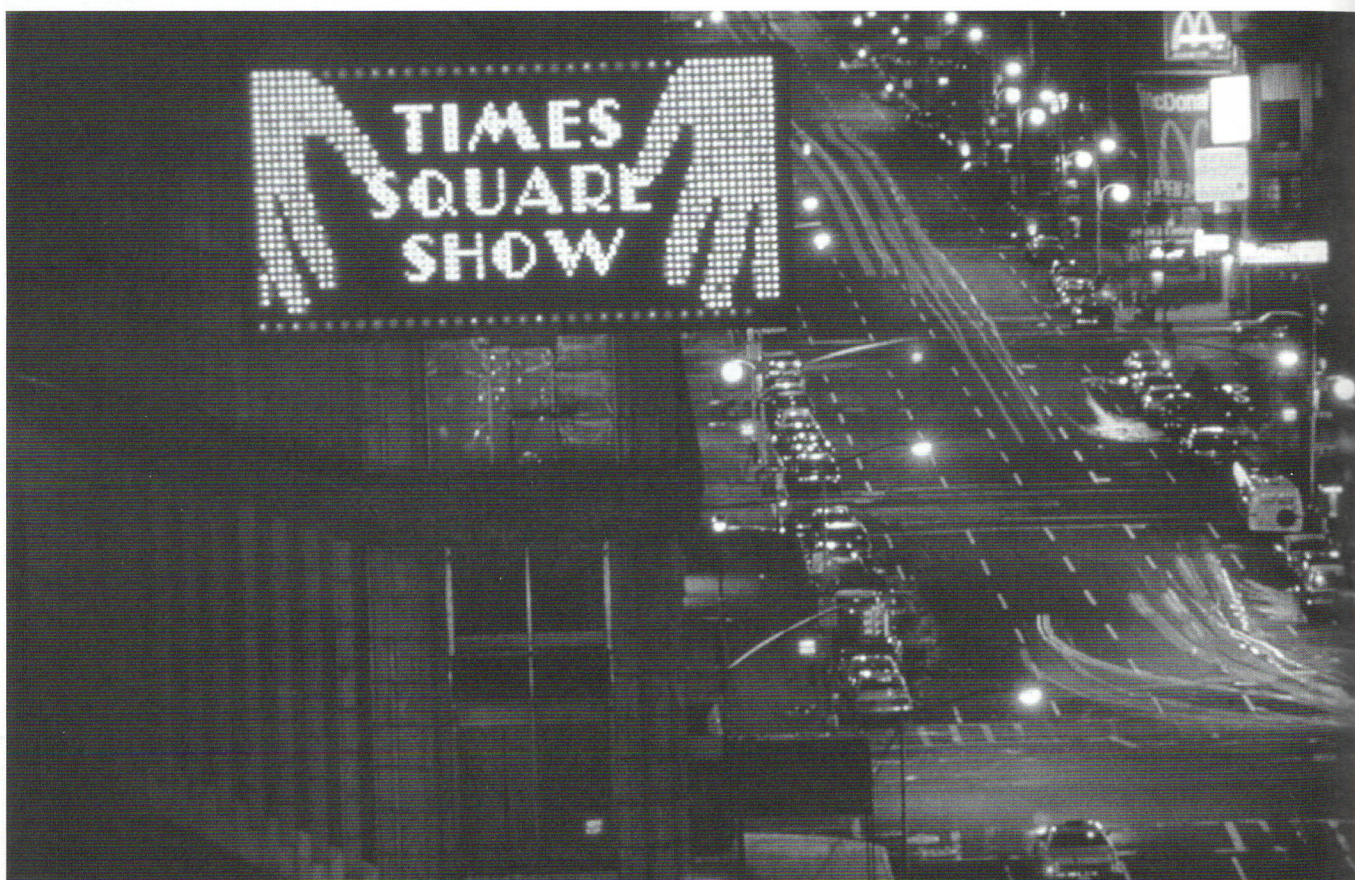


Gregory Lehman among drying posters designed by Jane Dickson and Charlie Ahearn in the temporary silkscreen workshop on the third floor of *Times Square Show*, New York, 1980

From its inception, Colab was interested in video as a democratic medium; they embraced it as a non-salable art form.<sup>32</sup> Significantly, a handful of Colab members created three public service announcements (PSAs) to promote *Times Square Show*, which aired on New York cable television throughout the month of June.<sup>33</sup> Colab members collaboratively acted, shot, directed, and provided audio for the PSAs, which were filmed on a soundstage, while walking through Times Square, and in a park, respectively; each PSA promoted the show as one would the circus or a Broadway musical. These do-it-yourself videos were integral to the scope and concept of the exhibition, and in creating them, Colab explored sociopolitical relationships between time-based media and space. They harnessed video as a medium, and TV as a mode of distribution, to reach an “everyday audience.”

Continuing in the mode of their previous exhibitions, the artists formed ad hoc committees to oversee the thematic design of each space in the four-story building. In small groups, they managed the construction and installation of the Souvenir Shop and lobby, which came endowed with a stage replete with mirrored panels. They oversaw the Fashion Room, the Portrait Room, the TV Lounge/Leopard Room, and the Money, Love, and Death Room, that last covered in Coleen Fitzgibbon and Robin Winters's black and white *Gun, Dollar, Plate* wallpaper. Artists from the Harlem Workshop and White Columns managed spaces on the fourth





Jane Dickson's Spectacolor billboard announcement overlooking Times Square, New York, 1980



# BIGGEST MACHINE ON EARTH



opening

June 1

1980

thru

June 30

ART POLITICS  
PERFORMANCE  
+  
FILM

7<sup>th</sup> Ave  
+  
41<sup>st</sup>

# TIMES SQUARE SHOW



floor. Installations found their way into the damp, dark, rat-infested basement and into the stairways, where brightly colored Christmas lights illuminated faux Roman columns. Christy Rupp's yearlong project *Rat Patrol*, created in response to New York's garbage emergency, went indoors for the first time; her offset prints depicting rats climbed up the stairs from the lobby and along the baseboards. Peter Fend installed the first iteration of *NEWS ROOM*, which included news reports from agencies that kept head offices within two miles of Times Square, including the *New York Times*, Time-Life, NBC, CBS, and the BBC. Fred Brathwaite (aka Fab 5 Freddy) and Lee Quiñones made graffiti on an exterior wall and hung canvases upstairs. Brathwaite's fortuitous meeting with Charlie Ahearn at the show later led to the seminal film *Wild Style* (1983).

With their emphasis on interactivity, the artists' experiments further dissipated the usual distinctions between exhibition, artwork, and audience. In addition to the number of hand-painted plaster works they hung in the Portrait Room, John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres organized life casting sessions on the sidewalks of Times Square. Bobby G, Matthew Geller, and Julie Harrison videotaped unscheduled interviews with spectators, inside and outside of the space. Mary Lemley, Paula Greif, Karen Luner, Eszter Balint, Vicki Pederson, and Sophie Vieille designed the Fashion Lounge, which they filled with painted clothes that visitors took away over the course of the show. They also dislodged the tall windows on the second floor, creating a balcony effect, so that the auditory chaos of Seventh Avenue, aka Fashion Avenue, filled the room. They invited Jean-Michel Basquiat to make his first painting on board, which they hung behind the catwalk as a backdrop for a fashion show



John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres doing a life cast on the sidewalk in front of *Times Square Show*, New York, 1980

titled *Wraps and Raps*.<sup>34</sup> One of the twenty models roller-skated down the runway; another paraded down in white foam held together with silver tape. Upon visiting her womblike installation, Eva DeCarlo would find strangers trying on wigs and panties that she'd woven into her "nest" made of cloth, tinsel, and satin.<sup>35</sup> Walter Robinson remembers once walking in on someone masturbating in there.<sup>36</sup> Of her installation DeCarlo has said, "I wasn't as interested in recording the interaction as I was in providing the environment for it. . . . It was also an ongoing live performance;

34. Kim Levin, "The Times Square Show," *Arts Magazine* 55, no. 2 (September 1980): 87–99.

35. <http://www.timessquashowrevisited.com/accounts/eva-decarlo.html>.

36. <http://www.timessquashowrevisited.com/accounts/walter-robinson.html>.



anyone could happen upon people in there and join or watch, which was a great tribute to the location."<sup>37</sup>

In the preceding decades cultural shifts had taken place, generating new artistic strategies with an emphasis on participation, indeterminacy, and chance, in which the presence of a spectator activated or completed a work of art. This emphasis on participation and reception within the field of performance art (from the 1960s onward) began to shape aspects of public art and institutional critique, the latter of which attempted to, as Miwon Kwon has noted, "expose the cultural confinement within which artists function."<sup>38</sup> In a manner of thinking, *Times Square Show* epitomizes strategies, on an exhibitionary scale, that were "aggressively anti-visual," "immaterial," and "bracketed by temporal boundaries," anticipating artistic practices that would come to be known under the rubric of relational aesthetics or socially engaged art.<sup>39</sup> At *Times Square Show*, social interactions and their ensuing conversations were critical to the overall experience, perhaps even defined it, and were activated by an extensive list of events. Jim Jarmusch screened early films, as did



The Souvenir Shop at *Times Square Show*, New York, 1980

Michael Auder, Scott B and Beth B, and Betsy Sussler. Dara Birnbaum showed her video *Wonder Woman* (1978), and Nan Goldin presented one of her first slide shows. Jack Smith held a typically long and uneventful performance, which cast the entire evening within a performative frame. At one point, he accidentally lit his turban on fire while lighting incense. Smith didn't realize his headgear was burning, but one of the other two performers, a hooker he had picked up in Times Square, did, and patted it out.<sup>40</sup>

Becky Howland recalls waking up one morning to the sound of a commotion. Colab artists were painting over the words "Free Sex" that Basquiat had spray painted above the entry door. Fitzgibbon reasonably points out: "Who would want to be working there minding the store when people came in for the free sex?"<sup>41</sup> Modeled after the tourist stores and seedier sex shops selling tchotchkes nearby, the Souvenir Shop on the exhibition's ground floor, which Fitzgibbon is referring

37. <http://www.timessquareshowrevisited.com/accounts/eva-decarlo.html>.

38. Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 89.

39. To invoke a few of Kwon's terms. *Ibid.*, 91.

40. <http://www.timessquareshowrevisited.com/accounts/justen-ladda.html>.

41. <http://www.timessquareshowrevisited.com/accounts/becky-howland.html>.



to, continued blurring the boundary between art and life. The shop featured artist multiples, some costing about five dollars, some as cheap as twenty-five cents; these included winged penis figurines, pill capsules bearing messages, and fans with a prayer on one side and a picture of people having sex on the other. Kiki Smith chopped up two-by-fours, painting them to resemble cigarette packs for sale. Colab artists saw multiples as a way to make art affordable and accessible to working-class people, and a way to earn some income as well.<sup>42</sup> Playing off of Times Square as a site of consumption, the Souvenir Shop critically highlighted relationships between art, commodity, and tourism—modes of cultural transaction—that would become more entrenched and pronounced throughout the decade.

The early 1980s in New York was a time marked by bankruptcies, violence, and class struggle. Blackouts and fires plagued the outer boroughs during the post-Vietnam years, prompting many artists to reflect on their role within the political system at large. In this cityscape, Times Square was a region unto itself: a cacophony of stimulants, light, and sound. The sidewalks were busy with the foot traffic of tourists, businesspeople, con men, pimps, prostitutes, pickpockets, clubbers, and roaming gangs of kids, who partook in underground illegal transactions of all kinds. The streets were lined with porn shops, tourist traps, fake-antique stores, film labs, kung fu cinemas, fast food joints, and strip clubs. There were queer outposts and artist outposts, including Maggie Smith's basement bar on Forty-Ninth Street, Tin Pan Alley.<sup>43</sup> Adjacent to Broadway's many theaters and the bus depot at the Port Authority was a red light district filled with peep shows, hustlers, drug dealers, and their customers. Describing the exhibition with words like "sleazy," "gritty," and "smutty," reviews of *Times Square Show* tended to revel in its proximity to New York's "criminal underbelly" and the spectacle of Times Square.<sup>44</sup> The artists may have felt liberated in this illicit space where the rules of regular society (not to mention the rules of bona fide art spaces) were temporarily lifted. In some ways, one can understand the former massage parlor as a zone of permissibility as much as a zone of experimentation.

As evidenced by their previous projects, including *Real Estate Show*, Colab artists were actively engaged in the issue of space and affordable housing in New York. In Times Square they literally inhabited the exhibition locale, sleeping and living there for weeks alongside homeless people who were taking temporary shelter from the street. The openness of the exhibition site meant that meetings, conversations, and frictions between the artists and the wide variety of visitors played out in unregulated and unexpected ways. Otterness said, "TSS as public art is really that question about reaching an audience that doesn't walk into a museum. I think one of the big successes of the show was that people would walk in because they just didn't know what it was—and they weren't looking for art."<sup>45</sup> Post-1980, homelessness would escalate across New York. In her groundbreaking 1989 exhibition *If You Lived Here . . .* at Dia Art Foundation in New York, Martha Rosler organized a rigorous conversation about homelessness and housing in relation to economics, culture, and art. Rosler's appropriation of the promotional condo slogan framed a series of events intended to subvert the institution from within.<sup>46</sup> In some ways, Rosler's proposition built off of Colab's looser experiment in which the artists actually did "live there."

Located as it is above Fourteenth Street, Times Square was outside the "downtown scene" and the network of galleries and artists' projects that thrived there at the close of the 1970s. By that point, alternative spaces and sites had already played a significant role in shaping the cultural paradigm in New York for more

42. Colab member Stefan Eins sold multiples out of his previous street-level space at 3 Mercer Street. Colab went on to organize *A More Store*, an annual series of stores of artists' multiples that appeared at Broome Street (1980), White Columns (1981), Barbara Gladstone Gallery (1982–83), and Jack Tilton Gallery (1983–84). Additionally, Eins organized a store at Documenta 7 (1982). Colab also worked with Printed Matter to create Art Direct, a mail-order catalog for their multiples.

43. Artists in *Times Square Show* who worked at Tin Pan Alley include Nan Goldin, Cara Perlman, Ulli Rinkus, and Kiki Smith. Rinkus organized events there and would go on to open the Lower East Side bar Max Fish. Colab members were generally involved in the music and nightclub scene centered around CBGBs, Club 57, Max's Kansas City, and Mudd Club.

44. Reviews of *Times Square Show* not previously mentioned include Susana Sedgwick, "Times Square Show," *East Village Eye* (Summer 1980): 21; and Guy Trebay, "Art in the Privates Sector," *Village Voice*, June 9, 1980, 57.

45. <http://www.timesquareshowrevisited.com/accounts/tom-otterness.html>.

46. See Nina Möntmann's essay on *If You Lived Here . . .* in the present volume.

47. Colab projects help but inscribe th a history of particip and scenes, including loft scene, Yoko Ono Chambers Street, J Theater, Andy Warh Factory (which occu locations in Manhatt 1962 to 1984), Claes The Store (1961), Go Matta-Clark's interv abandoned buildings West Side Highway in and FOOD, the restaur Clark cofounded with Carol Goodden and T SoHo in 1971.

48. David Deitcher, "F Rules," 217.

49. Simon Sheikh, "M of Distinction, Vectors Possibility," in "The Ar is a Global Phenomen special issue of *Open*, 2009): 75.

50. John Reed, "Cross the (Art) World."



than two decades. Artists' projects thrived in disused warehouses, abandoned lots, churches, storefronts, and nightclubs throughout the city.<sup>47</sup> Various forms of underground culture had developed beyond the normalizing sphere of the museum world, which had yet to adapt or modify its own conservative standards, and art activism had begun to directly address the institutions' discriminatory policies, in particular the racism and sexism embedded within them. By the time 1980 came around, artists were galvanized by the activity and polemics of independent organizational strategies. As David Deitcher writes in his essay "Polarity Rules," "They were also united in their disaffection with the parochial concerns and elitist rituals of the commercial gallery and museum scene and in their impatience with alternative spaces that paid lip service to diversity but remained unresponsive to young, punk-inspired artists like themselves."<sup>48</sup> It was in this moment, before the museums began to change their policies, that *Times Square Show* took place.

*Times Square Show* was the first major exhibition for many artists, including several not yet mentioned in this essay—Jenny Holzer, Keith Haring, Olivier Mosset, Kenny Scharf, and Wolfgang Staehle—as well as artists who already had some significant exhibitions under their belts, for instance Mimi Gross and Alex Katz. While this helps to account for its legendary status, more than any one artistic practice, *Times Square Show* is most notable for the way in which the artists' methods and ideological values shaped the exhibition's form. *Times Square Show* leveled attention priorities from the outset, indicating a shift away from static structures in which singular combinations of artworks are displayed, and toward event-based installations, especially where large-scale collaborations are concerned. It complicated—and began to dissolve—notions of authorship, and did so at the beginning of an era in which artistic interventions in the social sphere attained equal, if not more, cultural significance than art objects. To borrow Simon Sheikh's description of biennials, *Times Square Show* was "not only a container of artworks" but a social space, "a place where meanings, narratives, histories, conversations and encounters are actively produced and set in motion."<sup>49</sup> Biennials and other large-scale exhibitions, which burgeoned in the late 1980s, may have gleaned some of these attributes precisely from exhibitions like *Times Square Show*, whose prescient signaling of the importance of social engagement announced a shift to the larger art world.

If the *Village Voice* immediately understood it as "first radical art show of the '80s," the comment suggests that the exhibition's radical form and its inauguration of a brave new era in art were already recognizable at the time. Speaking of the show in hindsight, John Reed recently asked, "At what date on the calendar, at what precise location, did counterculture become pop culture? And who do we mark down in the history books as the hero, or the villain, who masterminded the switch? There is an answer: 'The Times Square Show.'"<sup>50</sup> As it happens, in 1980 the culture of appropriation within the visual arts began to mix with DJ and graffiti culture. Colab artists were particularly open to such hybridity between high and low art, something that *Times Square Show* epitomized. Appropriated images that addressed issues such as money and sexism were heavily featured in the non-juried, thematic exhibitions organized by Colab. Punk and pop aesthetics influenced these artists more than questions of framing and representation, although other artists and scholars were taking up those latter points of inquiry in parallel conversations about appropriation. Douglas Crimp's salient observations about quotation and meaning construction as tenets of postmodern art practice are a concurrent example of the increasing use of appropriation across the visual arts, though employed according to different artistic strategies. Crimp curated the group exhibition *Pictures at Artists Space* in 1977—the same year that Colab's first meeting took place—and published

47. Colab projects could not help but inscribe themselves in a history of participatory events and scenes, including the Fluxus loft scene, Yoko Ono's loft at 112 Chambers Street, Judson Dance Theater, Andy Warhol's The Factory (which occupied different locations in Manhattan from 1962 to 1984), Claes Oldenburg's *The Store* (1961), Gordon Matta-Clark's interventions in abandoned buildings along the West Side Highway in the 1970s, and FOOD, the restaurant Matta-Clark cofounded with the artists Carol Goodden and Tina Girouard in SoHo in 1971.

48. David Deitcher, "Polarity Rules," 217.

49. Simon Sheikh, "Marks of Distinction, Vectors of Possibility," in "The Art Biennial as a Global Phenomenon," a special issue of *Open*, no. 16 (2009): 75.

50. John Reed, "Crossroads of the (Art) World."





Outside Times Square Show, New York, 1980







his follow-up essay in the art journal *October* two years later, shortly before the planning for *Times Square Show* was under way. While *Pictures*, and its “Pictures Generation” artists, have maintained prominence in art history ever since, the opposite could be said of *Times Square Show*, where the artists traded conceptual frameworks for a sloppier, handmade attitude toward appropriation.



Sidewalk view of *Times Square Show*, New York, 1980

Many artists in *Times Square Show* expressed their social anxieties by creating topical images of objects like guns and dolls, but the political position of their artworks was perhaps diluted amid the mix of references and visual noise. In a discussion about representation and reception in her review of the show, Lucy Lippard raised the issue of “code sharing” and how shifts in context may change the meaning of an image: “TTSS’ [sic] images of hard and soft porn may have seemed quite daring and ‘real life’ to an art audience. To the street audience they were probably downright opaque.”<sup>51</sup> Still other images that might have read as social critique according to the cultural codes of the downtown art world took on new meanings alongside the sex shops and brothels in Times Square. Lippard also noted what she recognized as instances of racialized coding in the show, such as the dancing puppet of James Brown hanging in the lobby, invoking minstrel stereotypes. Lippard’s observations articulate one of the primary concerns of site-specific art, which Kwon has referred to as “the epistemological challenge to relocate meaning from within the art object to the contingencies of its context.”<sup>52</sup> The collision of subjectivities, languages, and signs at *Times Square Show* produced critical questions about context and meaning that continue to occupy artists and curators today. Lippard noted:

*What makes TTSS noteworthy, no matter what one thinks of the art in it, is the levels it offers. TTSS is an organizational feat—an object lesson in object-organizing by artists. It is a weird kind of cultural colonization that worked because colonizers and colonized had something in common; an exhibition of “unsalable” works accompanied by a gifte shoppe that managed to sell just such works—cheap; a constantly changing panorama of esthetic neuroses; a performance and film festival; a throwback to the early ’60s happenings-and-store-front syndrome; a sunny apotheosis of shady sexism; a cry of rage*

51. Anne Ominous [Lucy Lippard], “Sex and Death and Shock and Schlock,” 54–55.

52. Miwon Kwon, “One Place after Another,” 86.



*against current artworldliness and a ghastly glance into the future of art. It's also a lot of knives and guns and money and dirt and cocks and cunts and blood and gore housed in four wrecked floors (plus basement) donated to the organizers by the landlord.*<sup>53</sup>

The artists in *Times Square Show* gravitated toward the seductive and taboo industries around sex. Half of the exhibitors were women, and many works in the show posited disparaging assumptions regarding the sex industry. Lippard describes how on opening night, Diane Torr and Ruth Peyser presented a series of five-minute interactions with a life-size, inflatable porno doll. These feminist performers waged an attack on the doll's orifices, using sex toys and strap-on dildos while yelling things like, "She likes it!" Some male bystanders were deeply offended by the artists' aggressions, while others noted that some pimps came in, watched for a while, and later walked off giggling.<sup>54</sup>

Julie Ault of Group Material, an important artist collective active at the time, and a historian of alternative art spaces in New York, has described Colab projects as "often messy, pluralistic and democratic."<sup>55</sup> This was especially true at *Times Square Show* and noted in the show's enthusiastic exhibition reviews, which frequently mentioned the popular use of "downtown" aesthetics: New Wave's retro style, irony, and appropriation. Invoking the Lower East Side's punk schlock attitudes, Richard Goldstein called *Times Square Show* "three chord art that anyone can play."<sup>56</sup> Reviews noted the lack of distinction between artworks and other objects. One anecdote mentioned sawdust on the floor as evidence of the artists' punk-inflected, laissez-faire attitude. In fact, the artists used sawdust to sop up spilled beer before sweeping it away.<sup>57</sup> At the show, a visitor might have easily confused it for random debris or part of an installation. This potential slippage in meaning is indicative of the perspectival shifts that were activated by the show's environment.

*Times Square Show* embodied the chaos and social dynamism of Times Square, serving dual duty as site and theme. By abolishing distinctions between inside and outside, shop and exhibition, artwork and trinket, original and copy, artist and audience, corporate (incorporation) and radical, famous and unknown, elite and downtrodden, this "object lesson in object-organizing by artists" (to recall Lippard's characterization of it) reminds us that the place, policy, protocol, and even opening hours of an exhibition contribute to its overall "form." And in the case of *Times Square Show*, this form shaped not only the "first radical art show of the '80s," but perhaps also the one that best encapsulates the questions about context, site, and sociality that artists and curators would grapple with in the decades to follow.

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The following *Times Square Show* artist list has been compiled from the floor maps and the Exotic Events listings, but cannot be considered definitive, since for example some artists whose artworks were photographed in the exhibition are not listed on the floor maps, and many artists added work to the show after it opened. Spellings have been corrected whenever possible:

L. Abrahms; Charlie Ahearn; John Ahearn; Jules Allen; Amsterdam Theater; Ehry Anderson; Anonymous; Eszter Balint; Doug Ball; Jean-Michel Basquiat / SAMO; Nan Becker; Michael Bidlo; Marc Blane; Jeff Blechman; Richard Bosman; Marc Brasz; Fred Brathwaite / Fab 5 Freddy; Bread and Roses, Leni Brown; Edward Brzezinski; Andrea Callard; Jim Casebere; Georgeen Comerford; Mitch

53. Ibid., 51.

54. <http://www.timessquashowrevisited.com/accounts/coleen-fitzgibbon.html>.

55. Julie Ault, ed., *Alternative Art New York*, 49.

56. Richard Goldstein, "Three Chord Art Anyone Can Play."

57. Relayed by Andrea Callard in a conversation with the author, November 2015.



Corber; Diego Cortez; Jody Culkin; Debbie Davis; Annie Deon; Jimmy DeSana; Eva DeCarlo; Jane Dickson; Leah Douglas; Wally Edwards; Babs Egan; Stefan Eins; Bill Evertson; Peter Fend; Arnold Fern; Coleen Fitzgibbon; Mary Ann Fowler; Angela Fremont; Funk City Graffiti (Bill and Mark); Joe Fyfe; Bobby G; Robert Gaines; Matthew Geller; Kathleen Gilia; Mike Glier; Paula Greif; Mimi Gross; Alan Guttman; Julie Hair; David Hammons; Duncan Hannah; Keith Haring; Julie Harrison; Willy Heeks; Candace Hill Montgomery; Jenny Holzer; Becky Howland; Peter Jameson; Alex Katz; Christof Kohlhofer; Bill Komoski; Kim Komoski; Justen Ladda; Gregory Lehman; Mary Lemley; Joe Lewis; Margret Lippard; Karen Luner; *Jai Mal*; *Aline Mayer*; *Rosemary Mayer*; *Meryle*; *Dick Miller*; *Scott Miller*; *Richard Mock*; *Howie Montaug*; *John Morton*; *Alan Moore*; *Olivier Mosset*; *James Nares*; *Willie Neel*; *Paulette Nenner*; *Ann Newmarch*; *Normal* (Jan Knap, Milan Kunic, and Peter Angarmang); *Michael Norton*; *Jackie Ochs*; *Tom Otterness*; *Lan Payne*; *Vicki Pederson*; *Cara Perlman*; *Anne Petrone*; *Scott Pfaffman*; *Susan Pitt*; *Caz Porter*; *Lee Quiñones*; *Judy Rifka*; *Ulli Rimkus*; *Mike Robinson*; *Mike Roddy*; *Anne-Marie Rousseau*; *Christy Rupp*; *Kenny Scharf*; *Sandy Seymour*; *Jane Sherry*; *Teri Slotkin*; *Ann Smith*; *Kiki Smith*; *Harry Spitz*; *Wolfgang Staehle*; *Janet Stein*; *Bill Stephens*; *Mindy Stevenson*; *Jamie Summers*; *Kathleen Thomas*; *Rigoberto Torres*; *Robert Torres*; *Sophie VDT / Vieille*; *Tom Warner*; *David Wells*; *Reese Williams*; *Robin Winters*; and *Janet Ziff*.

Artists known to have participated in the "Exotic Events" include Kenneth Ager; Charlie Ahearn with Michael Smith; Michael Auder with Ondine and Viva; Scott B and Beth B; Dara Birnbaum; Jane Brettschneider; Steve Brown; Tim Burns; the Dynells; Bill Garner; Jean Genet; Nan Goldin; Ilona Granet; Rick Greenwald; Gary Indiana; Nathan Ingram; Jim Jarmusch; Becky Johnson; Mark Kehoe; Christof Kohlhofer; Linton Kwesi Johnson; George Landau; Bing Lee; Willie Lenski; Aline Mayer; Larry Meltzer; Ellie Nager; James Nares; Michael Oblowitz; Mark Pauline; Ruth Peyser; Caz Porter; RAYBEATS; Walter Robinson; Kenny Scharf; Terrance Sellers; Stuart Sherman; Jane Sherry and Cara Perlman; Barry Shills; Jack Smith with Sinbad Glick and the Brasiere Girls of Bagdad; Michael Smith; Bill Stephens; Gordon Stevenson with Mirielle Cervenka; Mindy Stevenson; Suicide; Betsy Sussler; Third World Newsreel; Diane Torr; Erika Van Damn; video X; and Peter von Ziegesar.

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