

## “Times Square Show Revisited”

THE BERTHA AND KARL LEUBSDORF  
ART GALLERY AT HUNTER COLLEGE

Were we to have the beer-stained napkin upon which was scrawled the brainstorming list of the participants in, say, the *Salon des Refusés* or the first Impressionist exhibition (perhaps we do, but I've forgotten my Rewald), imagine how precious such scraps would be. It may yet seem a stretch to equate the Times Square Show of the spring and summer of 1980 with these epochal undertakings—though posterity, such as it is a little more than thirty years on, appears to be taking a bullish view. But it seems to me that the ephemera generated by this sprawling Pictures-era conclave, from handbills to broadsides to stray snapshots and videos, are infused with the same talismanic quality.

To scrutinize the working floor plan by John Ahearn and Tom Otterness—with its list of some 150 (more or less) inclusions—is to set memory aflame, for scattered across the yellowing paper are names such as David Hammons, Keith Haring, Mike Bidlo, Kenny Scharf (then called “Jet”), Mimi Gross, James Nares, Walter Robinson, Fred Brathwaite (aka Fab 5 Freddy), Judy Rifka, Wolfgang Staehle, Alan W. Moore (who once interned as my assistant at *Artforum*), Rigoberto Torres, Mike Glier, and, obviously, dozens more. This reprise of the TSS at Hunter College also included video documentation of often-raw performance—footage of the installation, the fashion show, and a concert



View of “Times Square Show,” 1980, West 41st Street, New York. Left wall: Jean-Michel Basquiat, untitled, 1980. Photo: Ted Stamm.

by Johnny Dynell and the Dynells—but real-time art interests me less than painting or sculpture, which, alas, are thinly represented. Particular standouts are a lost Jean-Michel Basquiat painting for the “Fashion Lounge,” captured in a photograph, and Kiki Smith’s large ex-voto-like painting *Severed Limbs*, 1979–80, an early masterpiece. Ahearn is the real sleeper. Underregarded cast portraits of his black and Hispanic neighbors in the Bronx suggest that he was our Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (Messerschmidt being the great eighteenth-century sculptor of hyper-realist “character heads”).

Despite the best efforts of Collaborative Projects (Colab), the organizing artist collective, the actual number of participants in the original show remains uncertain, mounted as it was in an abandoned firetrap of a building in the middle of the roiling tenderloin that was Times Square circa 1980. This shifting enumeration is inescapable, given the near-anarchy of artist-run exhibitions—and recalls the wavering participant count in the Ninth Street Show of 1951. Just as that exhibition signaled the emergence of the Abstract Expressionists, the TSS publicized the vitality of a galvanic body of artists then being brought, if not into the mainstream, at least into the historical record, a generation forged in the clubs, on rock music, on “alternative lifestyles,” on a solidarity of disenfranchisement. Filmmakers and performers were welcome, as were feminists of all stamps, gender renegades, and LGBT artists militating on the verge of the AIDS decimation that struck the AZT Generation. The TSS mirrored the values of the underground’s social activists—Colab, the Loisaia’s ABC No Rio, Fashion Moda up in the Hub of the South Bronx, and, subsequently, Tim Rollins’s Kids of Survival.

While the TSS may have grown out of a reaction to New York painting in the 1970s, as the nutshell caricature of that decade would have it, the exhibition surely spoke to the burgeoning interest of the club scene of those years, the joy of being “sceniuses” together as the East Village phenomenon crystallized. It was, as Shawna Cooper and Karli Wurzelbacher, the exhibition’s curators, explain, a moment of still-affordable rents in a pregentrified Alphabet City, of an art both joyous and embittered, an art deeply resistant to the polite “white cube” sensibility of uptown or SoHo. To be sure, as the mode reified, fraternal unanimity quickly fractured.

In the handbill call for submissions, one reads with bemused rue that the “artists should be sensitive to the Times Sq. audience—the residents and general populace in this area.” This admonition is daintily ludicrous in the face of the area’s then paracriminal character, redolent of balcony sex in squalid movie houses and noisy with the quotidian proffering of loose joints in the streets, filled with the ambience of a way, way downscale neighborhood that some may remember with a certain nostalgia. As the exhibition catalogue comprises brief accounts of the event by several of its principals, I take the liberty of adding my own journal notation of June 25, 1980:

The unrepentant raunch of the Times Square Art Show—post-punk “Boonies,” plus porn, plus disco freak goes inner-city social Soul realist. Astonishing froth and media-hype, wonderful in a way one would never dream, even from the extolling newsprint of the “Voice” and “Soho News.” Installed at 41st and Seventh Avenue, in an old souvlaki joint-cum-massage parlor that out-grosses any alternative space yet conceived. Four floors of extravagant bad taste, which is of course, already codified and imitated—in short, its own good taste. Black artists . . . graffitiists galore, neo-Feminists inquiring after bondage porn. Pleated fans depicting penetration, moving sex tales coupled with explicit anecdotes of all kinds; in short, the resolute antithesis of any high art notion associated with Formalism—with the proviso that this, too, this outrageous post-and-anti-Formalism, has its own recognized modes. An irony—Clyfford Still’s death notice in today’s Times. What would he have said? And who still cares?

—Robert Pincus-Witten