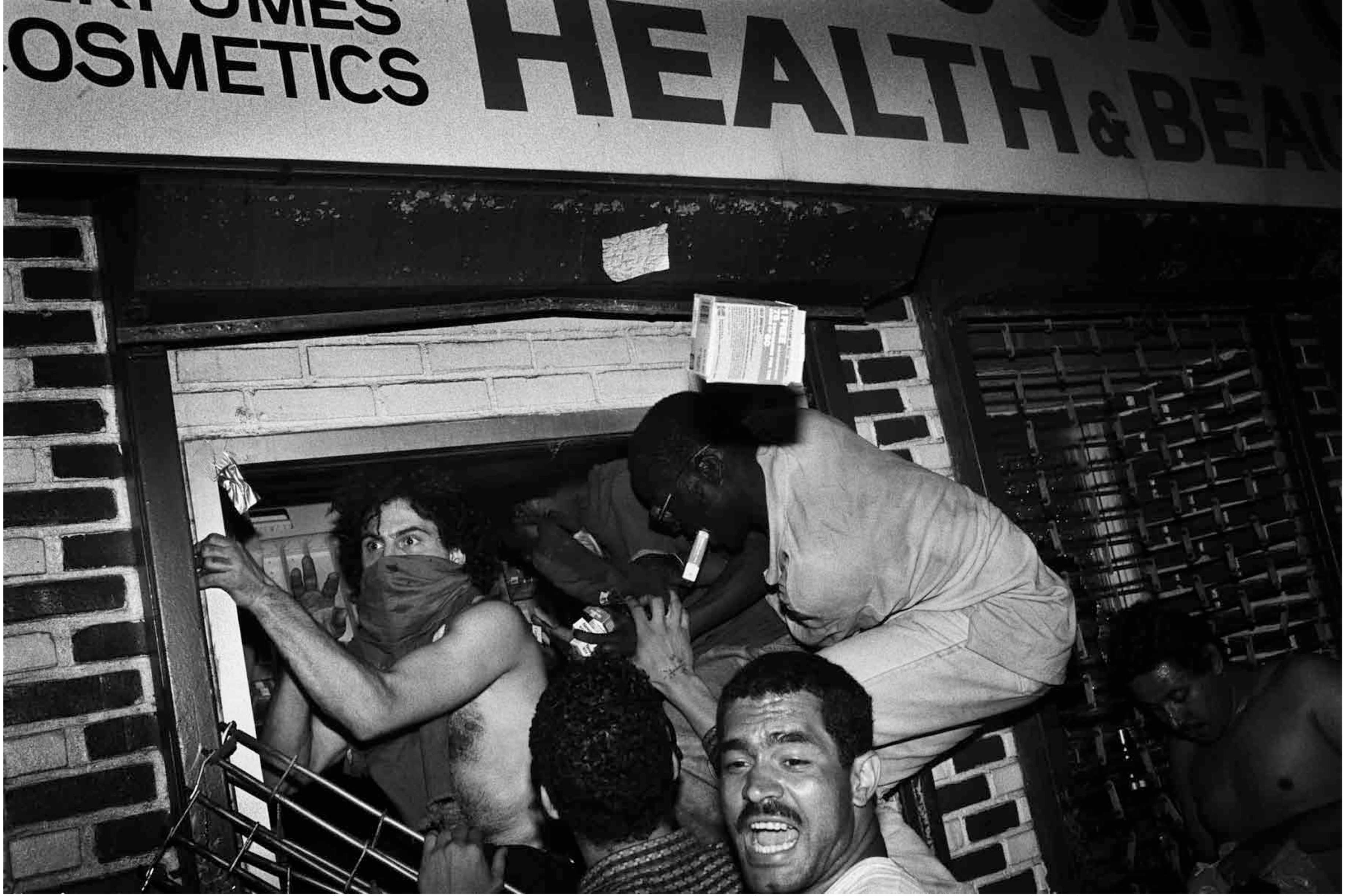
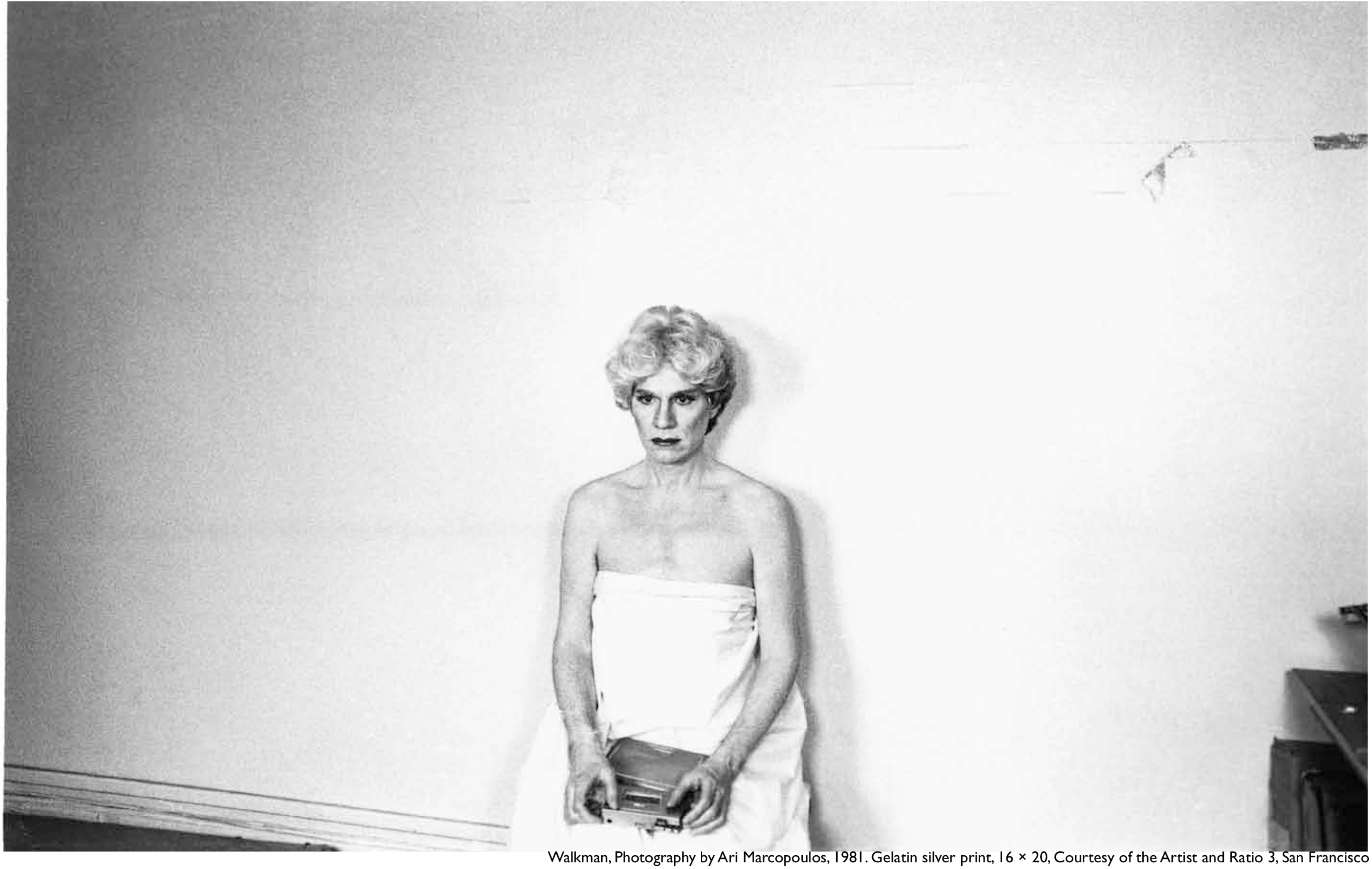


From Tompkins Square Park by Q. Sakamaki, published by powerHouse Books. Near the Tompkins Square Park, a shop recognized as symbol of gentrification is looted. New York, May 27, 1991.



Walkman, Photography by Ari Marcopoulos, 1981. Gelatin silver print, 16 × 20, Courtesy of the Artist and Ratio 3, San Francisco

57th Street Might as well have been the Moon

Carlo McCormick is a writer, curator, maven and integral character in New York's cultural landscape. His list of accolades are as follows: numerous articles and catalogue essays, the author of the recent *Trespass: A History of Uncommissoned Urban Art* (Taschen), curated the landmark exhibition "The Downtown Show: The New York Art Scene from 1974 to 1984" at NYU's Grey Art Gallery and Fales Library and with Thomas Solomon organized "The New York Mets and Our National Pastime," at the Queens Museum and "The New York Yankees and the American Dream," at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Other exploits include being an iconic presence known to multitudes of nocturnal denizens thanks to his stints as doorman at Max Fish and Lit and being a longtime senior editor at *Paper* Magazine.

We got together at the Pink Pony on a much-changed Ludlow Street to discuss the vagaries of downtown vs. uptown, the vicissitudes of the art world and its fringes, diverging cross currents, and tangents both tangential and profound. He brings his encyclopedic knowledge to bear on Downtown's (in its broadest, most global sense) habitués and their relevance, importance, and rituals, along with refreshingly forthright opinions on major and minor figures and their intellectual and artistic pursuits. We covered as much terrain from the 1960s up to the present as possible, ranging from the very-well known and storied to the disregarded and notorious, from Rammellzee to Peter Hujar, Vito Acconci to REVS, Rivington School to Jimmy De Sana, with surprise guest appearances by Ozzy Osborne, Grace Jones, and GG Allin.

JW: Using the Downtown show and that era as a starting point, one thing you've said is that at that time there was an openness to failure, there was room for that, a chance to try whatever and not worry about success the way it's usually construed.

Carlo McCormick: That's vital, it has to do with a notion of audience. When you're making your art for other artists your audience is your community, everyone in the same boat pushing each other in different ways, and failure is part of the equation. The problem is when there's another audience. Now, that audience does bring in good things, like money, but imagine you're a bunch of performance artists and you're all just goofing off and the only people who come to see you are other performance artists, and all of a sudden there are other people there that you don't know, maybe they paid five or ten bucks to get in, I think that fundamentally changes it.

JW: I got here in 1990, and it really felt like there wasn't much of an audience and there also seemed to be a big vacuum.

CM: It's funny you mention that, talking to people who arrived in New York around that time, the late 1980s or early 1990s, everyone comes to New York with expectations and you're told you just missed it anyway. For those people, they arrived here following a series of ridiculous follies, AIDS wiping out a big chunk of the old heads, a lot of the gay community, a lot of drug users, a lot of the beautiful freaks. The rents had gone up so it phased out certain marginal people, the Tompkins's Square riots, the cannibal of Tompkins's Square, it all alienated a lot of people so they moved away or didn't go out of the house anymore. They were made to feel less a part of the community and the community got really ugly. Just a whole confluence of variables and it did really seem like, "Where is everyone?" In 1991 there was a big contraction, literally hundreds of galleries closed in a few months. A lot fewer openings, a lot less social interaction. We were lucky with Max Fish, and I was lucky to reinvent myself in the 1990s to some degree, my vampiric attachment to youthful energies, and skateboarding was really great, skating saved your soul and the souls of many, even people like me who can barely ride a bicycle let alone ride a skateboard, it saved my soul. Because it reinvented the city and youth culture and brought all these different energies.

JW: Around that time there were vague imitations of all this stuff going on previously, you heard about it but it did appear kind of dead, while paradoxically being really exhilarating. When I first came it's not like I wanted to meet Andy Warhol but when I was sixteen this friend of mine had told me that Public Image Ltd. hung out in New York, might have been one of the reasons, it's just that I arrived ten years too late. There was most definitely a sense of loss, but the manic energy was very much in evidence, really palpable, standing on 2nd Avenue and 6th Street in 1990. Though I was kind of ignorant of what had been going on before, and in a way that was good because it made it a *tabula rasa*.

CM: That was the rupture that everyone experienced around 1991, or the two or three years before that. New York had lost its whole multi-generational freakiness. Before that you would immediately connect with old heads. Before if you were a young kid, well, especially with Allen Ginsburg, he would be nice to you. If you were a young kid, older people would give you the time of day and schooled you in this really unofficial way. I think that's back more, now. Lately it seems it got rebuilt and New York is multi-generational again.

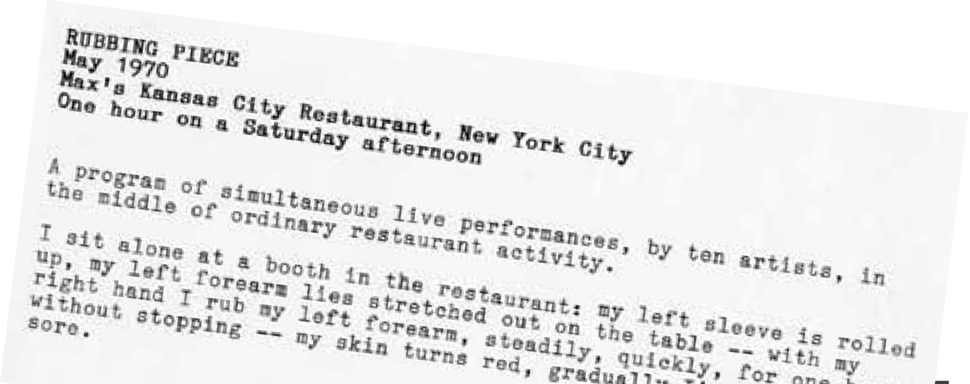
JW: You would see these artists and musicians and poets like Francesco Clemente or John Lurie, or Taylor Mead, but in general there was a real gap between young and old. Maybe I was incurious, or possibly I wanted to find out in a roundabout way and didn't have the social skills or chutzpah to be like, "Hey, what happened?" Directly or indirectly because of AIDS and drugs, there was a hole, and the ones that were still around were hiding out.

CM: I always thought New York was multi-generational, like San Francisco, but in San Francisco people stop leaving their houses at a certain age and that age unfortunately sometimes is thirty-two, so the energy isn't put out there. I think New York benefits from the fact that people don't have nice apartments, so we're always out. You could have come to my place to interview me and it would have been like, "Here's a milk crate to sit on."

JW: The compactness of New York makes that possible, to have those serendipitous run-ins. It's a hoary cliché but it's true for that time, about going above 14th, you just didn't go. Above 23rd was like Manitoba or something. So people were in close proximity and there weren't a thousand bars. There was Odeon if you got invited with older hip people who had some money; there was Max Fish, the diner where Quentin Crisp was every day, and the Blue and Gold. There were a lot less hangout spots and that really concentrated the liveliness.

CM: There's been an influx of bars, an influx of people, some of them we can call "creatives" but they're really of the creative industries. They're people who are trying to adapt art to fit in with commerce instead of people who are trying to push art. They can sustain all these places, and so basically we live on a college campus because there are so many kids down here going to school. And everybody feels really dwarfed, like it's over, because there are a lot of entitled people who don't care or are really not curious in a smug way. Those types always existed but it's just that they didn't live down here. Now they do.

> "...Well Bruce [Conner] is a really interesting example because the really good ones are those who become multi-generational figures, cross generational. I think New York at that time was still really conscious of the Beats, and Bruce goes back to the Beats and the whole Funk thing, and he becomes emblematic by 1968... then he becomes one of the great figures on the San Francisco punk scene. Thank goodness he had amphetamines and raging alcoholism to keep him going..."



RUBBING PIECE
May 1970
Max's Kansas City Restaurant, New York City
One hour on a Saturday afternoon

A program of simultaneous live performances, by ten artists, in the middle of ordinary restaurant activity.

I sit alone at a booth in the restaurant: my left sleeve is rolled up, my left forearm lies stretched out on the table -- with my right hand I rub my left forearm, steadily, quickly, for one hour without stopping -- my skin turns red, gradually I've developed a sore.

Vito Acconci, Rubbing Piece, 1970. Photograph by Kathy Dillon. Courtesy of Acconci Studios.

Vito Acconci, Rubbing Piece, 1970. Photograph by Kathy Dillon. Courtesy of Acconci Studios.

Vito Acconci, Rubbing Piece, 1970. Photograph by Kathy Dillon. Courtesy of Acconci Studios.

It's funny I was at this party recently, and it was all people who work for advertising agencies or do branding, whatever that means, it was really weird, and I came to Max Fish afterwards, I really needed a drink after that. I ran into Matt Sweeney, and we were just bullshitting, and he had a friend with him. The guy walked away at one point, with his hand to his head, and Matt was like, "Oh man, he's so bummed" because what I was describing, he was that. These people are just like us, they're into the same bands, they dress the same, they chew the same food, they're so much like us, but they're different. They're trying to push that information in a different direction, to monetize it. They're not the enemy, but there's a huge difference.

I always thought art schools were a good place to fail, that was an important part of the process. But now you see it as a place where people hone their ideas and skills up against a certain market standard and expectations and that's not as daring.

There are some that are trying to discover themselves and their voice, and there are others who might be part of their practice but ultimately they're looking for a gallery and are much more calculating. It's just my tendencies, my proclivities, to be more interested in the ones who have that different agenda, the ones who don't have it all figured out.

JW: As far as that feeling of Downtown as a really separate place, both geographically and psychically, there were reasons to go Uptown, the zoo or MOMA maybe, but generally you never went up there. 57th Street might as well have been on the moon. It gets repetitive and possibly boring trying to explain sometimes, to people who weren't here then, that prior to, let's say the late 90s, there were all these "beautiful freaks" Downtown, as you called them. As a related aside, I saw Grace Jones perform at Town Hall a couple of years ago.

CM: She was always a freak, and always very Downtown.

JW: It was amazing, an incredible atmosphere that was both poignant and joyous, really emotionally affecting, because there were all these oddballs and characters who I think have been in exile for the last fifteen years. And it was like, oh yeah – those are the kind of people who used to rule downtown. When I first got here there was shall we say an indigenous population, and you went about your life and they went about theirs, and you didn't mess with them and hopefully they didn't mess with you, but it was also full of real outcasts from small towns in Texas or Montana, and the community was that kind of person. And they weren't exactly dominant but it did seem like their playground. And in the last ten years that got supplanted by normal people.

CM: Maybe there's just more normal people. I'm not sure there's that many less freaks but the stakes are really different now. Basically now you have to be a wealthy kid to come to New York and be a so-called "freak," or really suffer the worst indignities of bohemia and be really marginal.

JW: In the latest *SFAQ* there's an oral history piece that has interviews with Bruce Conner and Jay DeFeo, amongst others. Now if the accepted narrative of New York in the sixties is the wane of the abstract expressionists and the rise of pop, the whole Factory scene, and the East Village hippie action with the Fillmore East, who are some corollaries outside of all that akin to Conner and DeFeo?

CM: Well Bruce is a really interesting example because the really good ones are those who become multi-generational figures, cross generational. I think New York at that time was still really conscious of the Beats, and Bruce goes back to the Beats and the whole Funk thing, and he becomes emblematic by 1968, when he's doing covers for *Oracle*, and then he becomes one of the great figures on the San Francisco punk scene. Thank goodness he had amphetamines and raging alcoholism to keep him going. That's the thing – you have to still be thirsty – that keeps you going out. All the Warhol people were still around, and Andy was certainly still around. People have forgotten now that he's been resurrected, just how low he had sunk and how despised and reviled he was then. It was the younger generation, people like Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, and of course Jean-Michel Basquiat, when they got big they couldn't believe they were getting to hang out with him. So they did a lot to resurrect him and make him a star again. A lot of the interesting Soho people, the conceptualists, were and are still around. You still have Jonas Mekas around, Vito Acconci, these people were around then. Vito's one of the reasons I came here. He's very high on my pantheon. My memory is a little suspect but I'm pretty sure when I first met Vito I almost genuflected and prostrated myself, and he was dismissive in a kind of sad way, saying "Well if I'm so famous and important, how come I'm sleeping on friends' couches and buying a jar of peanut butter every week?"

JW: It's strange to think that now every person in art school knows who Vito Acconci is, and I suppose that's a good thing, but I wonder if it breeds over-familiarity. The attitude towards these "stars" then was much more diffident and less intrusive. Now it's like the relationship between athlete and fan. When I first got here, generally there wasn't that star worship, even with someone like Vito, it was manifested in a more peer-to-peer relationship. You didn't treat them like they were celebrities, you saw them on the street and you might admire their work, but you didn't see them as a star.

CM: It all goes back to what we were talking about before, about audience. There was always a star system and it was so out of kilter because we all sort of thought we were famous. Like say Richard Prince or Cindy Sherman, when they crossed over to really really famous to your mom's heard of them, we were like, oh no, they've been famous for ten years already. It was a weird measurement of exactly what recognition is. So there was a star system, but it was Warholian, a little comedic. I think peer review is important and I think some generations and some personalities got more hurt by being separated from their peers. You can look at why Lou Reed or Laurie Anderson are such miserably bad artists today. Why haven't they done anything of significance for decades? A devastating loss for people who actually had some promise at one point. And part of it, both of them, even before they hooked up together, kind of started believing the sycophants around them, that their shit didn't stink, and they got pretentious and clueless.

JW: Back to Bruce Conner, he was known to be pretty irascible…

CM: I got thrown out of a few places because of that motherfucker…

JW: But there's a sense that he stayed connected, like, a totally different personality, where Tony Conrad seems so vital and not to have believed the hype. He's interested, a true fan.

CM: Yeah and not acting too cool. I first got to know him when he was up in Buffalo all the time and you'd go there and he's really into these church sales. So we'd go to these flea markets and one day a month they'd do a dollar sale where you could stuff a shopping bag full for a dollar. And I remember going to one, with these nice old ladies behind a long cafeteria table covered with socks that they were trying to match up, and he just took his arm and swept them all up into a bag. All these mismatched socks. But that's the way he dressed, this tall guy with the worst kind of flooded pants, bell-bottoms that hardly clear his knees. The point being, he never acted that cool.

JW: There was an interview a while back in *The New York Times* with a certain someone who has a gallery and does a lot of parties and he was quoted as saying "Well basically I'm the cool guy to go to downtown" and he might have been joking, though probably not, and it made me think, you know if you're saying you're the cool guy than you're definitely not the cool guy. And a related aspect is that being cool or whatever you want to call it, the older artists or musicians that I first met when I came to New York were really paragons of cool but they never acted "cool," If you know what I mean. And the way they treated other human beings reflected that, most of them were respectful and nice to everybody, be they the trash man or whoever. Then along the way it became cool to be an asshole.

CM: That came in with the 90s, I think, this bad attitude, like people thinking they were being punk rock by being dicks. And you're like, nah man, you missed it, I was there, we didn't behave this way to our fans or other musicians. Music types do that the most. Like, "That album is so last week." More obscure than thou. "Oh man, you don't know this one? I don't know why, they only printed twelve copies in 1965."

You have to really work hard at keeping it normal. And have time for people. One of the ways to deflect the weirdness around you is by keeping a constant discipline of accessibility. A lot of people – Iggy is that way. Ozzy is that way. I've seen Ozzy pretty much lay someone off his crew because some kid scaled thirty fences and got through security and then gets blown off. And if Ozzy gets wind of it, he's like no, it really is about the fans. That's tangential, but practicing accessibility is really vital to keeping your credibility, ultimately.

JW: Something about the things that happened off the beaten path, let's say from the 1960s to the 1990s, was that there was some mystery. You would know that some guy made a movie, but you didn't know much else about them, and if you met them you might not talk about the movie, but everything else besides what they were known for. Plus, I feel like back then it wasn't kosher to be a weird fan, to fan-out, as they say.

Let's use 1975 as a historical marker. The city is bankrupt, and there wasn't much of an art market, in the way we think of it now.

CM: It was a very bad time to arrive, but of course the bad times are the good times. Obvious things, the city's bankruptcy, the blackout, the looting of the Bronx. If you look at it from a really boring art fag angle, minimalism had really, really fucked us up. In the same way that what happened when post-modernism was really big, it made everything else irrelevant. See, pluralism is difficult to navigate, it's not resolved, and it doesn't give you the next thing. Now, in the mid-70s when we begin our descent into post-modernism, that's a slippery slope of uncertainty. If you weren't making that box, with minimalism, it's like physics – if you aren't on that particle accelerator or whatever and you're working on questions that don't have answers – they're irrelevant. So out of that time, which is what the "Downtown Show" tracked, is the emergence of incipient post-modernist strategies. The broken narrative, how do you get around these structures that are broken but you still want to attach yourself to them, how do you still think about being new after the idea becomes obsolete? These really bad times are often where if you can get off the consensus radar you can find interesting stuff happening.

JW: There was a real puritanical bend to a lot of that, minimalism, and it reached a sort of dead end about the object having to be about itself and it couldn't be about anything else.

CM: That's what I mean, the orthodoxy.

JW: There were others around outside that doctrine, on the fringe, like Joe Brainard for example.

CM: But he was on the poet scene, not the art scene. It was thought of as collage-y ephemera.

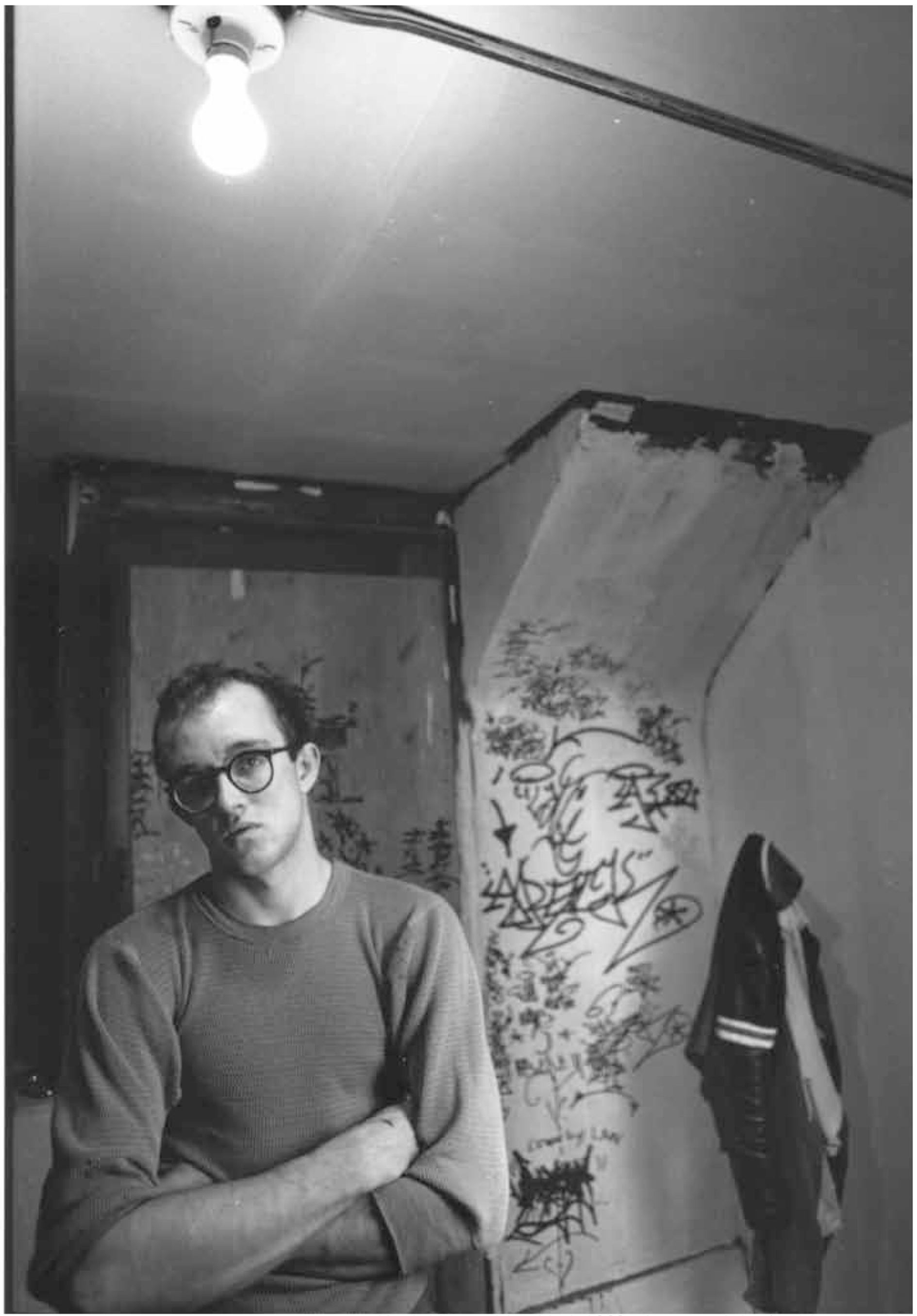
JW: Or somebody like Jack Smith.

CM: Well, this has been a cruel fate of revisionism. I've got friends whose taste I honestly respect who like Jack Smith's work so I can't entirely argue against it, but I think it's the most boring shit possible. And he was a monster that no one wanted to talk to; we all hated him, personally, to our core. He was a shithead in every which way, a mean mean queen who was really exploitative, bossy, and made people cry. These kinds of posthumous deifications happen because somebody like that did die, and that's really suspect. It's a way to access it to make money off it now, and it's really not right.

JW: OK, what about Jimmy De Sana? His stuff was so strange and uncanny, and truly subversive within the art world and the general culture.

CM: It's amazing he didn't get more famous after his death. Pat Hearn did a really nice show. He was a really important figure on the scene, a great character. Really beautiful and disturbing work. There are always artists who are "artist's artists" and he was that for sure. What he was doing was way more important within the discourse of where that culture was going than it was to people outside of it. And Peter Hujar, another artist's artist, was so bitter and had to die before he could get famous, because, if he was introduced to someone and told they were an art dealer and interested in showing his work, he might punch them, for no reason besides the fact that he had so much anger about all that shit.

JW: I find that hard to imagine happening now. With the really nicely done COLAB show Max Schumann just put together ("A Show About COLAB (And Related Activities")) at Printed Matter bringing them to light for many who didn't know what they did, what about them?



Keith Haring, New York, 1982, photograph by Ari Marcopoulos.
Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the Artist and Ratio 3, San Francisco

Those were people faced with not wanting to make a shiny box.

CM: Well most of them didn't have the actual skills to do that, and that's the great thing, it was true D.I.Y. They had a certain drawing style, a style of hanging their work, the COLAB thing, it's just what everyone was doing. I know a lot about COLAB but do not ask me who did which drawing, because it all looked exactly the same. It's a really weird thing because you could not tell the difference between a Jenny Holzer and a Walter Robinson and a Bobby G. What's striking about COLAB is how few of them died. There are a few who did, but there are an amazing number of survivors. My generation, a little younger, lost way more.

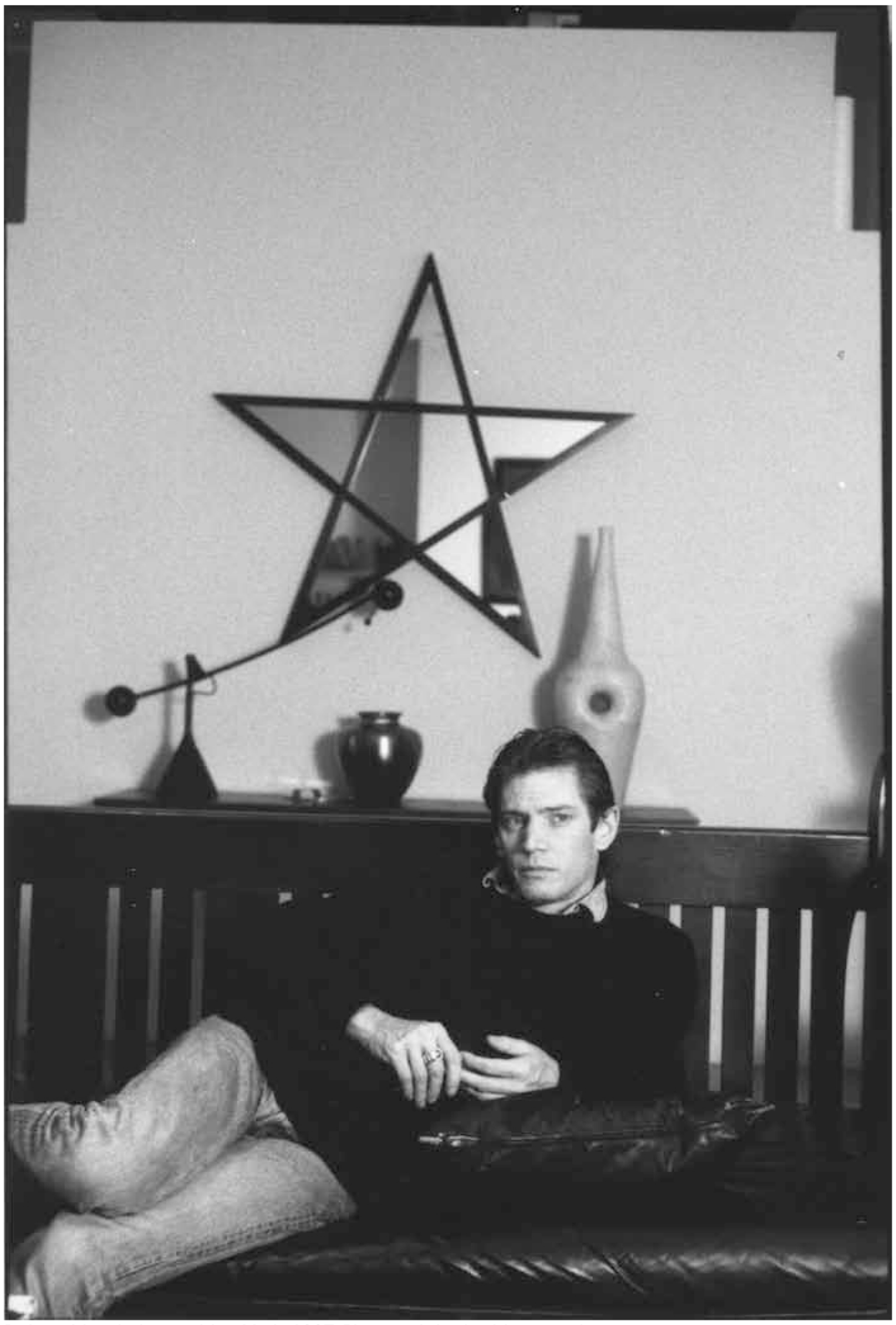
JW: They were partying less, I guess.

CM: Well politics is its own form of intoxication. It was a good scam, with COLAB. What it was, a lot of those artists didn't really share much in common. They shared the zeitgeist, their drawings looked alike, but they really didn't really get along. COLAB meetings were notorious brawls and they all hated each other and it wasn't really that collaborative at all. But it was a time when there was federal funding, so it was power in numbers. By all applying for those grants together they could look like a real arts organization. They could mimic that power structure, and that's what it was all about. They started that new cinema thing with the little place on St. Marks. By the way, film is one of the things that gets forgotten about, really something that doesn't get talked about as much as it should.

JW: Yeah when I came here I knew way more about film than art, because of Richard Kern and Scott and Beth B. I'd read about them in *Forced Exposure* or somewhere, and even seen some of the films. That actually seemed more vibrant.

CW: In the 60s and 70s and then through the cinema of transgression, filmmakers were the purists. There was no money in it. The painters, the sculptors, even if they weren't selling them they were still making objects. A lot of careers came out of that, like Nan Goldin's slide shows came out of that. And for those film people their painter friends who weren't as cool as them got rich and famous, but they didn't.

JW: It seems quaint now, though I remember being very much under the sway of this, as was par for the course, how important it was to be anti-something, that was so much of the original impetus. Of course then there was a much more hegemonic mainstream, and I think that's easy to forget. But good or bad, that monolithic established culture gave you something to be "against." Now it doesn't seem like anything is against anything.



Robert Mapplethorpe, New York, 1987. Photgraph by Ari Marcopoulos.
Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the Artist and Ratio 3, San Francisco

CM: I think that was true of a number of different times. Don't underestimate the power of discontent or also the way in which one's identity is defined in oppositional ways to culture, and that can be a different culture right there.

JW: Do you think that's a difference though, that twenty or thirty years ago things were more oppositional?

CM: It's funny the art world, in some ways it's always first, and some ways always last. It's always a little late. The first place you could register the effects of post-modernism was in the art world, but it was one of the last places to jump on it and codify it. So I do think there is a possibility now for a real radicalization of ideas in our culture. I think street art is emblematic of that.

JW: But hasn't that become just another orthodoxy? My friend likes to joke, "The graffiti artists have really outstayed their welcome."

CM: There are certain people who become household names, and certain people do museum shows and say these are the important ones and ignore everybody else, and yes, that kills it. That kills anything. And it kills it within the scene with jealousy. And it's gotten bigger, and feels safer. That all said, that people are out there creating art that is free, for the public, is the most radical thing. And the art world still doesn't get it. Galleries, when they ask me what's going on and I mention street artists, they look at me like, Carlo, you're such a weird pedophile. But the kids who work in the gallery, the interns opening the mail or whatever, they're like "Yeah!" so psyched that someone is drawing attention to this kind of work. It's still marginal and outré for a lot of people.

I always use history to justify the present, and sometimes to pay for the present. Now and then someone wants me to weigh in on Jean-Michel Basquiat or Keith Haring and you know, that's how I can make a living, so in some ways I continue to live off my squandered youth but at least I'm investing in it by wasting my time on it in the present.

JW: Back to the early 1990s, on the street, two people I wanted to bring up are REVS and COST. It was like, who are they? What is this? And they were so busy, up everywhere, on every "Walk/Don't Walk" sign from 105th street down to Houston Street, "COST FUCKED MADONNA" and all that. It was nonsensical and secret but also plainspoken, populist, and witty.

CM: It was a muscular body of work. REVS is still very elusive, someone will broker a meeting and it will be like "Carlo, I'll meet you, but you have to come uptown and hang out on the corner of 145th Street for an hour before I'll come and say hi." I will say, I appreciate it much more now than I did then. More specifically why I didn't like it was it was lacking something aesthetically.

JW: I think that's what attracted me, it was stark, plain, not adorned.

CM: I'd been so into the nuances of what graffiti could do, so to me, what they were doing was kind of transplanting what was happening in California, which didn't appeal to me much. The idea of getting up that high. I always thought of it as a street level or subway level kind of thing and in LA it was the freeway overpass. I really thought it was ugly work and didn't say anything. But to look at REVS' diaristic work in the tunnels, and the sculpture, and the absolute steadfast unwillingness to be co-opted by the art world, that's part of the reason I have much more respect for him now than I did then. He and COST did totally alter the visual landscape, and you always have to give someone props for getting up to that degree.

That's the issue, the history of co-optation, how to do something that is underground and doesn't get fed into the mainstream, that isn't the minor leagues for the art world, every generation has to comes to terms with that.

You mentioned Rammellzee. I'm a supporter of his work, I'm friends with his widow, and when Jeffrey Deitch was putting together "Art in the Streets" at MOCA I said you know this is the perfect time because Ramel is finally dead and you can work with his work. Because he was impossible. If you wanted to interview him, he would have asked you for a hundred dollars, said you were a horrible white person, stood you up five times, and then stuck you with a big bill at the restaurant. He was his own worst enemy. I actually like his work, so I won't compare him to Jack Smith in that way, but there are certain people who have to die or at least get clean or sober before you can deal with them.

JW: And Alfredo Martinez? He's not nearly near as impossible, his drawings and guns are incredible, but he also seems to manage by chance or on purpose to sabotage his own best interests.

CM: He can't help himself, but his intentions are much nicer. You know, he's sorry when he pulls a gun on you, he's sorry he was so broke he forged that piece; generally it's not his intention. Some of these other people we're talking about are a lot darker in their hearts.

JW: Richard Hambelton? That's art for free, and Dan Witz?

CM: Both of them, Dan was doing stuff in the 1970s, where he was doing birds on the street, really beautifully crafted, and now he's fucking with signs, with figures jumping through the "one-way" bar, and Richard it's just amazing that he's alive. But you know the first big catalogue that I wrote, that I got paid for, when I wasn't getting paid for anything, was about Richard. And we all were drug addicts, we had that in common.

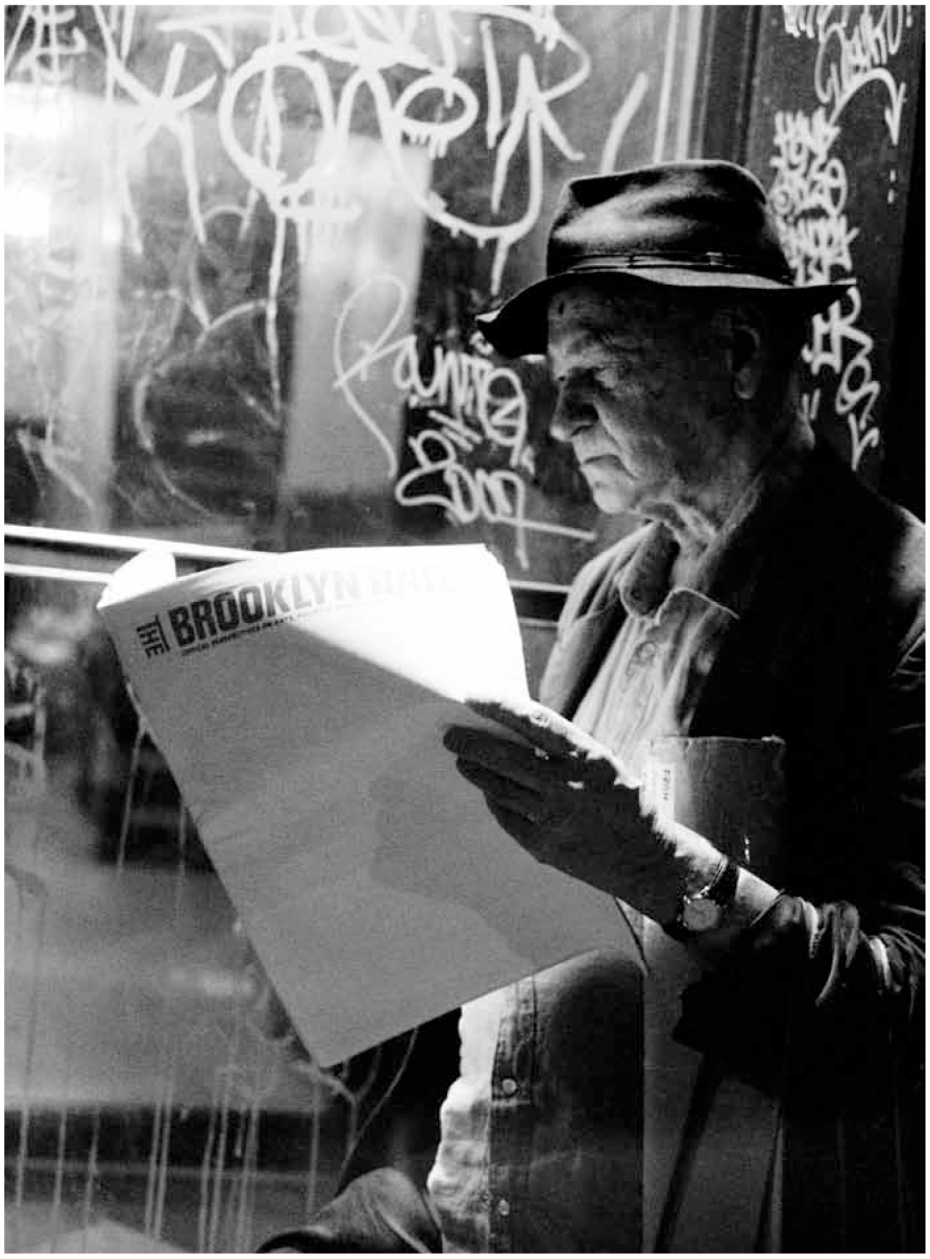
JW: On that subject, I was talking to someone the other night about how prevalent coke is now, and how back then it was more Hollywood, more expensive, something you only did every once in a while, and the drug of choice for most in the period we are talking about was heroin, which as hokey as it sounds, is somehow more soulful.

CM: Coke breeds delusional larger-than-life hysterias and heroin doesn't do that, it's more about self-questioning and self-doubt. Junkies are much better to be around.

JW: This is venturing into further eddies, which I think is the notion here. Rivington School – they are really unknown, and maybe that's fine – but they're evocative of that time and somehow in their lack of current visibility and partially wasted and disastrous non-inclusion in so-called history, they seem somehow emblematic of many things, the forgotten ones, the ones that failed, but sometimes gloriously.

CM: There were a lot of bozos involved. Unfortunately a lot of it was people, like with music, there were those who were overly influenced by Johnny Thunders and thought they had to be junkies and didn't really work that hard on their music, a lot of what happened with Rivington School was like that, people becoming stupid drug addicts or horrible alcoholics and really immature and infantile. It was a boy's club, a weird macho thing, soldering, welding. A lot of it was really off-putting to me, but there were some interesting artists. They did the Gas Station and 2nd and B, where Richard Hambelton was living for a while.
That belongs a bit to what I was saying about what became of the neighborhood, the East Village, with the riots and the guy cutting up his girlfriend and serving her to the homeless people, the really funky dregs of what happened, it was a nadir. But it's all part of a continuum, like when people moved to Haight-Asbury thinking they were going to get the summer of love but instead it was the winter of Haight, and then another kind of thinking came out of that, The Residents, the Dead Kennedys.
JW: That meanness got taken away in New York, it was defanged a lot.

CM: Things always get lost in the translation. Look at San Francisco, and the music that came out of there, from love to hate, but sometimes in really good ways. It's like Ozzy just wanted Black Sabbath to be the Beatles but they got it all wrong, and sometimes those mistranslations are really great, and other times, like bands in Norway took Slayer way too seriously and all of a sudden they're burning churches down, which is fine by me, but killing foreigners and fags isn't. Sometimes the bad translation is brilliant, and other times it gets it so fundamentally wrong it's an egregious insult to what it was about in the first place. And speaking of the Gas Station, the location of his ultimate concert, GG Allin was a really bad translation of what Iggy was trying to do. I was at one of those shows working the door, so I wasn't "at" it but it's more relevant to my history that everyone else there who gave me money to get in. For many decades I was not the guy in the room when the cool shit was happening, I was the schmuck at the door freezing my balls off. Anyway Monday nights at the Cat Club, the promoter was Steve Blush, and it was everyone from Henry Rollins to the Butthole Surfers and we got in trouble a lot of times, like once we booked a Richard Kern and Lydia Lunch night, and that just crossed certain lines of behavioral dignity and freaked out the club owners. But Steve (Blush) got fired for the GG Allin show, and it was really insane. The two things that stick out in the mayhem, obviously he got cut off by the second song, but he was swinging the microphone around and hit this girl and she wanted more so he picked up the microphone stand and started beating her in the face and she lost her teeth, and it was her moment with her rock star. This girl is such a mess, she's so confused. The other great thing is he stuck the mic up his ass that night, and we had the meanest, prissiest, hated-all-bands-anyway sound man, who could only really have fun when he was tweaking the lights, and he had to deal with this mic covered in shit. And this is the scene that really saved the night for me.


Jonas Menkas. Photograph by Benn Northover. Courtesy of Anthology Film Archives.

CBGB's, 1991, Photograph by Q. Sakamaki, published by powerHouse Books

Vito Acconci, Palladium Underground, 1986. Courtesy Acconci Studio.