



ArtSeen

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112 Greene Street—Spaces Interior and Exterior

by Bill Beckley

Did you know that SoHo's streets are named after Revolutionary War generals? Mercer, Wooster, Thompson, Sullivan, MacDougal, Lafayette, Crosby, and, oh yes, Greene. General Nathanael Greene and Brigadier General Hugh Mercer led their troops in the Battle of Trenton after crossing the Delaware at McKonkey's Ferry with General Washington, the morning of December 26, 1776. It was a decisive battle in the Revolutionary War.

Almost two centuries later in October of 1970, an artist named Jeffrey Lew opened the ground floor and basement of 112 Greene Street. Actually there was no official opening. The doors were simply unlocked and stayed that way.

It was a messy aesthetic. Broken glass and industrial waste littered the floors. The basement was frightening. Except for the occasional merchant of cocaine and hashish, there was no dealer present to officiate over the sale of art. In fact, there was not even the notion of a sale.

The curatorial process was open-ended. Jeffrey had friends, and he asked his friends, and these friends had friends. His friends were Gordon Matta-Clark, Alan Saret, Suzanne Harris, Robert Rauschenberg, Dennis Oppenheim, and Yvonne Rainer.

With the same spirit that colonialists reacted to the pronouncements of King George III, artists reacted to the strict dictums of minimalism, the dominant movement of the 1960s. (One really couldn't react to Andy's Popism. Like his handshake, his art was way too accommodating.)



Bill Beckley, "Rooster Bed Lying," 1971. Live rooster, pillow, sheet, wire caging.

At 112, one could hardly tell the art from the space or visa versa. A brief inventory of work could include: a thin metal tray setting on the floor where Gordon grew algae, and his poetic dancing-in-the-rain dumpster piece piled with open umbrellas. 112 extended to the outdoors; Vito Acconci blindfolded himself and huddled in the basement, swinging a stick whenever he heard footsteps on the stairs. Vito was an art mugger, when there were still street muggers in SoHo (ah, nostalgia!). Any gallery visitor was a possible muggee. Rafael Ferrer's installation—a bucket, a rope, a sheltering cloth, evoked a homeless abode, or perhaps it actually *was* an abode; Barry Le Va's nine cleavers planted in the wall at equal intervals alluded to a minimalist aesthetic but evoked dead chickens and serial killings; Louise Bourgeois's multi-phallic homage, "The Destruction of the Father" nudged us away from our patriarchal past; Suzanne Harris's megalithic dance contraption, "The Wheels," composed of revolving eight-foot wooden gears, provided dance sites for the nimble. Suzanne also danced with Yvonne Rainer's Grand Union dance group, named after the grocery store on LaGuardia just above Houston. Like the art at 112, you could hardly differentiate dance from common human activities like walking, sitting, and sleeping; George Trakas's beautiful sculptures, constructed from glass and wood, bludgeoned through a hole from first floor to basement, creating a unified upstairs downstairs; I might mention here my rooster purchased from a Puerto Rican shop on Broome Street that sold live roosters and chickens so we could eat fresh. The rooster, a possible wake-up call, inhabited a coop constructed over an elongated bed bolted between two of the iron pillars running down the center of the space. The thin bed was open to activities such as sleep and sex. And the rooster, rescued from a butcher's cleaver only to find himself in a space with nine more, nevertheless seemed content, until he died from an unexpected overdose caused by the toxic fumes of a pile of sisal put there by Brenda Miller.

112 existed through a confluence of events: Jeffrey and Rachael Lew acquired (somehow) an eight story building, with no financial need to rent out the ground floor and basement; the Vietnam War was on with its consequent draft; Nixon's presidency, 1969 – 1974 ran concurrently with the meaningful years of 112—a time when the woman's rights movement, and the movement for racial equality were considered "anti establishment." The gallery establishment was thought by some artists to be surreptitiously responsible for social injustice.

The early '70s, sandwiched between the very Janis Joplin decade of the '60s and the Apollonian decade of the '80s, were transitional, though of course we didn't know it. The '80s came complete with President Ronald Reagan, the advent of AIDS, and an actual art market, complete with oil paintings that smelled like art. Coincidentally, the '70s were the last years in human history where you didn't have to worry much about disease as a consequence of sex.

But sex and railing against the establishment were not the only curricula. The main agenda was art. I am sure this sounds naive, but an idea so ill-defined and esoteric as "art," could be meaningful, generative, and cohesive. The derelict space of 112 Greene Street was a perfect shelter.

As early as 1917, by hanging an implement of the outdoors, a snow shovel—inside a gallery, Marcel

Duchamp made the point that context creates meaning. So he may be largely responsible for the clean white art-defining spaces of SoHo and Chelsea, where, because of the isolating context, anything can be art.

At 112 there was a crackup of context and art, so much so that, to the casual observer, art and context were indistinguishable. Of course we knew which was which. And it was easy for women and men to work together unselfconsciously and unselfishly, because it was not “gender,” that was primary. It was art. Since the art was revolutionary, it made us—like Washington’s troops—comrades in arms, sloshing across the Delaware that winter night.

Nostalgia, I admit. But as I write, on LaGuardia Place—north of Houston east side of the street across from the fenced in gardens of N.Y.U.—stands a new shelter. It is the sidewalk home of Dolphin. He’s Peruvian, and he has lived there for about three years. His abode comes complete with bicycle, bucket, ropes and sheltering cloth, slapped together on the sidewalk between the old Grand Union and the gardens. His face looks like it was carved from mahogany. His Rasta hair, sometimes covered with a huge patterned sock, falls to the sidewalk in one long clump. Take my word for it. Don’t actually go there and visit. Like memories of 112, we wouldn’t want to disturb. Let him live though photos and texts. I have no idea how he manages to keep living there, but he and his shelter are as close as you get to 112 Greene Street Gallery, in the autumn of 1970, and he’s there now in the spring of this 21st century, just outside the window.

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