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The Art of Parties: Downtown New York Cultural Scenes, 1978–1983

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Visual Studies

by

Kristen Galvin

Dissertation Committee:
Associate Professor Lucas Hilderbrand, Chair
Professor Catherine Liu
Chancellor's Professor Cécile Whiting

2015

DEDICATION

Rosco, it's all for you.

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Graduate Student Research and Travel Award (2), University of California, Irvine

PUBLICATIONS

- 2013 Galvin, Kristen. "TV Party: Downtown New York Scenes Live on Your TV Screen." *Sonic Visions: Popular Music on and after Television*, special issue of *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. 25.3 (2013): 326–348. Print.
- Galvin, Kristen. "It's TV Party Time, Not Prime Time!" *On My Video Phone: Popular Music on Screens*. IASPM-US Website. 17 July 2013. Web.
- 2012 Kim, Jihoon F., and Kristen Galvin. "An Interview with Simon Penny: Techno-Utopianism, Embodied Interaction and the Aesthetics of Behavior." *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*. 17.2 (2012): 136–145. Print.

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- 2014 “The Nova Convention: A New Wave Conference Like None Other,” session: “*Switch on Playback*”: *Influence*, The Burroughs Century Academic Symposium, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN
- 2013 “*Jem*: Girlhood, MTV, and Technological Transformation in the 1980s,” session: *Visualizing Adolescent Girlhood*, Society for Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference, Chicago, IL
- “The Queer Spaces of Never-Never Land: *Peter Pan* Goes Downtown” session: *Queer Playscapes*, 2013 Association for Theater in Higher Education Conference, Orlando, FL (Session Chair)
- 2012 “Club 57: The Art of All Tomorrow’s Parties,” session: *Queer Night Worlds*, Marry The Night: A Symposium on Queer Nightlife, 2012 Association for Theater in Higher Education Conference, Washington, DC
- “*TV Party*, or the Children of the Revolution will be Televised,” session: *Genealogies of Reality and Public Access Television*, Society for Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference, Boston, MA
- 2011 “The Queer Violations of Leigh Bowery,” session: *Potentialities of Performance*, College Art Association’s Annual Conference, New York, NY

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- 2013 “States of Excess and Undress: Fashion, Performance, and Taboo in Nightlife,” *THE FUN Conference on Nightlife as Social Practice*, Museum of Arts and Design, NY (Moderator)
- “The Ladies Auxiliary of the Lower East Side,” Queer Lab and Sexuality Studies at UC Riverside present Critical Resources: a Visual Culture Workshop at HRLA, Human Resources, Los Angeles, CA
- “The Art of Parties: *TV Party*,” Annual Society of Fellows Meeting, Humanities in Circulation: 25th Anniversary Celebration of the UC Humanities Initiative, University of California, Los Angeles, CA
- “Hyper-Social Retromania: Club 57’s Art of the Everynight,” University of California Humanities Network Fellowship Presentation, sponsored by the UC Irvine Humanities Collective, CA

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Art of Parties: Downtown New York Cultural Scenes, 1978–1983

By

Kristen Galvin

Doctor of Philosophy in Visual Studies

University of California, Irvine, 2015

Associate Professor Lucas Hilderbrand, Chair

At the decadal turn of 1980s, Downtown New York was paradoxically characterized by crisis alongside unprecedented social and cultural freedom. These circumstances yielded a cultural explosion of unbridled creativity and experimentation across the arts commonly known as the “Downtown scene.” My dissertation adopts the interdisciplinary perspective of visual cultural studies to examine the creative economy that shaped this prolific time and place.

This project maps Downtown’s cultural explosion through an examination of what I call the “art-party”—interdisciplinary and socially engaged practices that structured the city’s thriving creative economy. In contrast to existing scholarship on Downtown, which tends to focus on one artist or medium, my dissertation adopts the art-party as a framework to interpret Downtown’s vibrant sites of collective experimentation that mixed art forms and embraced non-normative lifestyles. Challenging the broad turn toward social conservatism and neoliberalism identified with the election of Ronald Reagan, art-parties forged alternative and queer spaces of possibility, performance, and play that enabled the sharing of progressive politics and the rewriting of cultural systems of meaning. A telling reminder, the art-party is crucial to the cultural vitality and viability of New York City, which has become increasingly jeopardized as a

creative site for local and independent producers, and moreover, alternative and queer cultures that critically constitute vanguards.

Theoretically, I frame the art-party as an agent of creative placemaking and queer worldmaking. Creative placemaking refers to strategies whereby different sectors form alliances to shape public space around culture and the arts. Queer worldmaking refers to a public kind of performance, from theatre to community media, which imagines or even concretizes better modes of living and being for queer identified and/or queer-friendly people. Building from archival research and interviews, my project investigates three case studies: 1) the art and performance-oriented nightclub, Club 57 (1978–83); 2) the live public access cable television program, Glenn O’Brien’s TV Party (1978–82); and 3) the experimental symposium celebrating William S. Burroughs, the Nova Convention (1978). Each art-party variously engages in queer worldmaking and creative placemaking to illustrate Downtown’s flourishing creative economy, and to articulate Downtown as place, style and attitude.

Introduction

Then Ronald Reagan was elected on a hard-line, anti-Communist campaign. The election provoked an outbreak of doomsday fever across the country. For those that felt like the world situation was getting increasingly hopeless, throwing a party seemed the appropriate response. It was so appropriate, in fact, that it turned into a four-year-long binge that a lot of people attended: punk rockers, hip hoppers, new wavers, performance artists, fashion designers and drag queens.

—Steven Hager (1986)¹

I'm not talking about creating '60s-style utopias; all those notions are dead and gone and weren't so great to begin with. I'm talking about carving out a place in the larger culture where a condition of abnormality can be sustained, where imagining the unknown and the unknowable—impossible to buy or sell—is the primary enterprise. Crazy! says anyone with an ounce of business sense. Right. Exactly. Crazy.

—Holland Cotter (2009)²

The Downtown Body

In 2008, the artist Ward Shelley created an illustration as a tear-out poster to accompany an oral history of Downtown New York entitled, *The Downtown Body*³ (fig. 0.1). The illustration was commissioned for *BOMB* magazine, an artist-run periodical that debuted at the height of the Downtown scene in 1981.⁴ Shelley visually charts Downtown New York's cultural history, inventively depicted as a biological form that develops over the course of the 20th Century. *The Downtown Body* takes the shape of arteries, veins, bulging organs, tumor-like growths, and small cells that slough off the “Body” proper. From store fronts to social factors to artists, the individual parts and pathways of this organic system are tagged with numerous labels such as “Speakeasies,” “John Cage Composition Class,” and “Cheap Apartments.” What appears to be *The Downtown Body*'s heart is the “East Village Explosion,” set in the portion of the

¹ Steven Hager, *Art after Midnight: The East Village Scene* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 1.

² Holland Cotter, “The Boom is Over. Long Live Art!,” *The New York Times*, February 12, 2009, accessed May 12, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/arts/design/15cott.html?pagewanted=all>.

³ Ward Shelley, “Downtown Body,” *BOMB*, no. 105 (Fall, 2008): 1-20.

⁴ For a history of *BOMB*, a Downtown publication, see Nell McClister, “*BOMB*, Celebrating 25 Years,” *BOMB*, no. 96 (Summer, 2006): 22-23.

timeline demarcated, “Downtown Scene,” from approximately 1975–1987 (fig. 0.2). The heart and the more vigorously drawn organs gradually wither away as they extend out of the “Downtown Scene” and approach the end of the century. The “Downtown Scene” also temporally brackets the “AIDS Epidemic,” which borders upon Downtown’s final interval of “New Professionalism” heading into the 1990s. The main organs and arteries diminish and eventually flat line into a few words that spill off the infographic to name *The Downtown Body*’s possible future destinations: “Berlin,” “Art Fairs,” and “Brooklyn.”

Shelley’s timeline is obsessive and dizzying in its painstaking detail of Downtown’s vibrant, dramatic, and at times traumatic, social and cultural history. While exhaustingly inclusive, Shelley asks for forgiveness on his website for inevitably excluding a particular Downtown story or work, admitting, “There is not a Downtown Story; there are 100,000 unique stories.”⁵ Shelley’s drawing is accompanied by oral histories of the time in the special issue, with anecdotes from Downtown’s artistic elite (Laurie Anderson, John Giorno, Arto Lindsay, et al.) As a starting point to capturing the totality of “Downtown,” the illustration importantly conveys a century of Downtown’s joint sociocultural history as an intricate organism and network. The complex system charts the cross-pollination and influence of cultural factors over time, and the artist’s excessive labeling is an attempt at the impossible task of covering Downtown’s vast array of cultural contributions.

Importantly, the illustration depicts *The Downtown Body* as connective: the different body parts are relational and intertwine in order to sustain the health of the whole system. *The Downtown Body* indicates that any movement or scene, whether social or artistic, is never one person alone, and flows out of previous activity and into new future forms.

⁵ Ward Shelley, “Ward Shelley’s introduction and disclaimer to the Downtown Body project: Postmortem,” Ward Shelley, accessed February 6, 2011, <http://www.wardshelley.com/>.

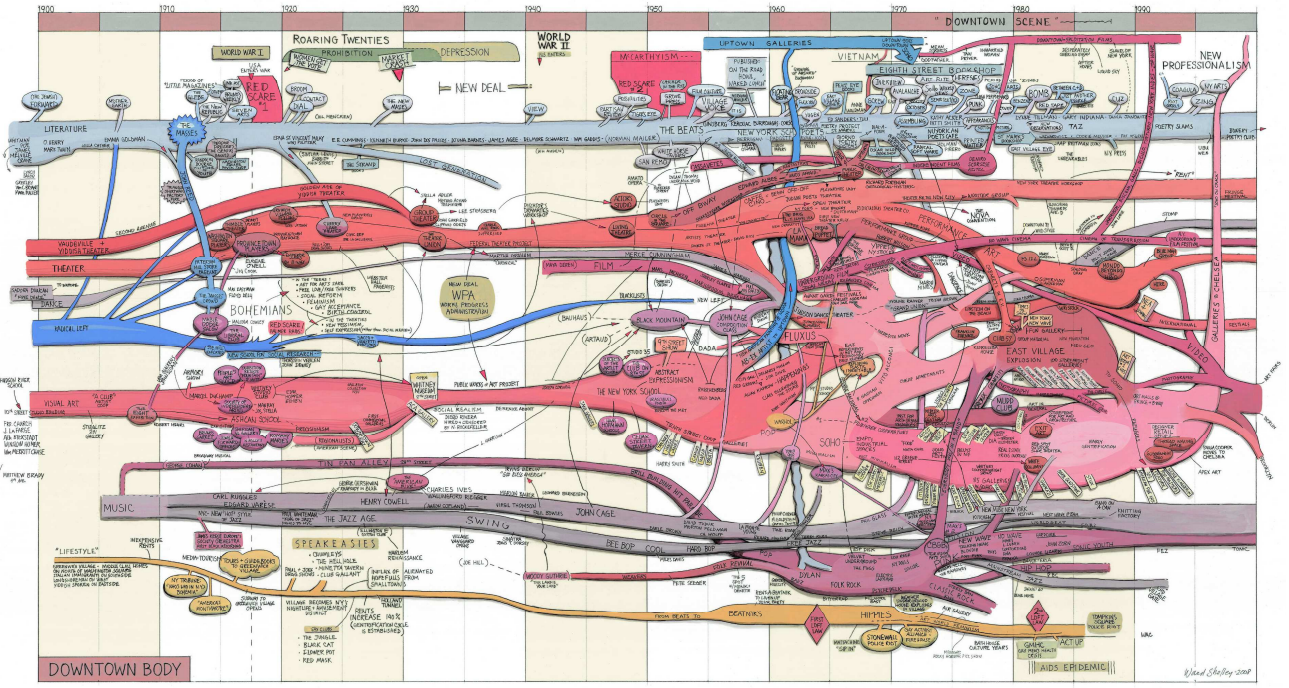


Fig. 0.1. Ward Shelley, *The Downtown Body*, 2008. Drawing on paper, version for the print edition, *BOMB*, No. 105 (Fall, 2008), 36" x 21.5". Permission of the artist.

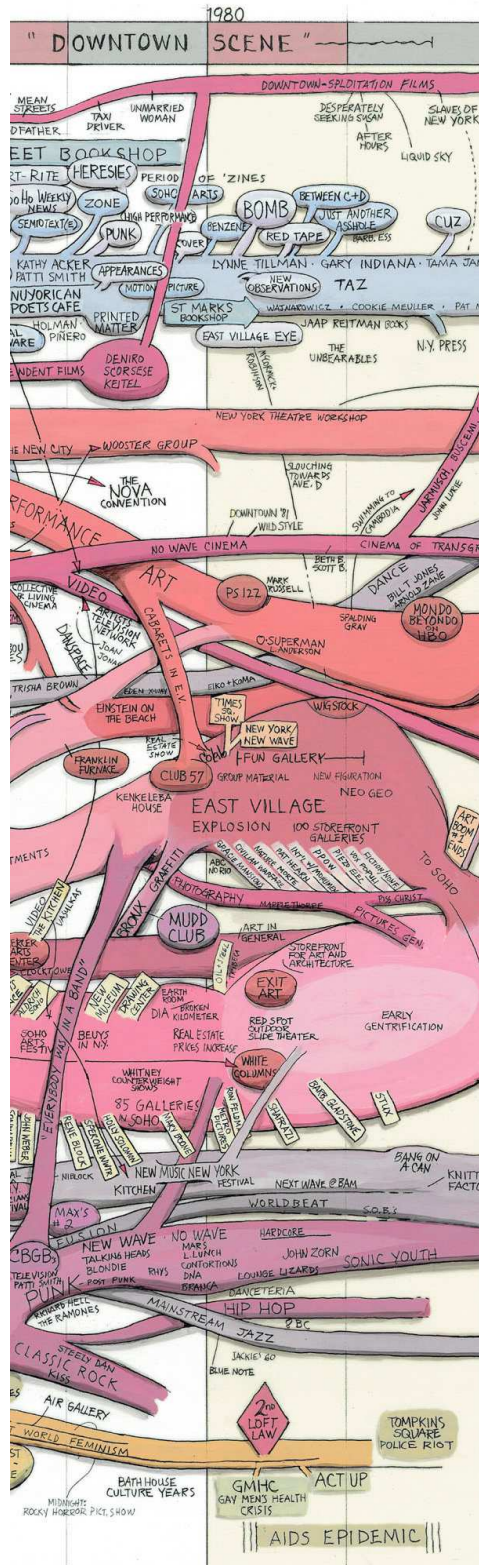


Fig. 0.2. Detail, Ward Shelley, *The Downtown Body*, 2008. Drawing on paper, version for the print edition, *BOMB*, No. 105 (Fall, 2008). Permission of the artist.

This flow of cultural energy is a dynamic that is embedded in the urban environment and within communities of like-minded people—who simultaneously shape and are shaped by Downtown. In the vein of Henri Lefebvre’s relational theories of social space, Downtown is not a neutral “background” for the extensive activity captured in Shelley’s drawing. As Lefebvre simply states, “social (space) is a social (product).”⁶ *The Downtown Body* sketches Lefebvre’s continuous and mutually constitutive process: space is both produced by people, as part of the material world, but it is also the world that in turn shapes urban living, creative production, mindsets, and so forth. Evident in the very title of the work, *The Downtown Body* is both person and place, and represents an urban body collective charted over time.

The Downtown Body explicitly depicts how art and life—as elaborate system—are intimately connected and inextricable, and situated in the urban environment of Downtown New York. However, the detailed info-graphic also captures how Downtown can no longer sustain its cultural pulse. In Shelley’s “disclaimer” of the project, he declares, “dare I say it? Downtown is dead.”⁷ *The Downtown Body*, along with its creative economy, is in a losing battle to maintain its distinctive balance of producing high culture alongside subcultural/underground/countercultural movements, which together, define the poles of the cutting-edge and propel culture forward. On Shelley’s timeline, *The Downtown Body* enters the 21st Century as a relic, as opposed to a thriving and self-sustaining network. Furthermore, what Shelley identifies as the “Downtown

⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, OX, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1991), 26.

⁷ Ward Shelley, “Ward Shelley’s introduction and disclaimer to the Downtown Body project: Postmortem,” Ward Shelley, accessed February 6, 2011, <http://www.wardshelley.com/>.

Scene” is arguably, to this day, the last cohesive and influential American cultural avant-garde movement, which again, was significantly rooted in subculture and counterculture.⁸

The Downtown Body raises critical issues and questions that lie at the very *heart* of this dissertation. What made the “Downtown scene” during this short time period so productive, exciting, and innovative? How was Downtown’s rich creativity, a sociocultural phenomenon across the arts, articulated through its complex relations to lifestyle, sexuality, attitude, geography, and even its own prior cultural history? And as a scholarly pursuit, how can we begin to understand and interpret a time marked by such fervent and diverse cultural activity? To attend to such questions my dissertation, *The Art of Parties*, historically and theoretically examines the brief time period that I believe to be the apogee of the “Downtown Scene.” This occurs between the transitional decadal years of 1978–1983, and revolves around social and cultural activity occurring predominantly in the East Village and Lower East Side.

Therefore, this dissertation identifies and analyzes the form of what I call the “art-party” in order to map Downtown New York’s exemplary cultural scenes and to establish a framework for grasping its dynamic creativity through patterns of production and consumption. To this end, and as a telling reminder, *The Art of Parties* pointedly addresses a contemporary predicament of urbanism. This dissertation argues that the untold story of the Downtown art-party, in the time of post-punk and the new wave, is crucial to the cultural vitality and viability of New York City,

⁸ Scholars across fields of the Humanities, such as Hal Foster, Richard Schechner and Sylvère Lotringer, have all commented upon the (hopefully temporary) dissolution of the American avant-garde, with only Lotringer specifically mentioning the space of Downtown New York as its last gasp. See Schechner, “The Conservative Avant-Garde,” *New Literary History: a Journal of Theory and Interpretation*, no. 41.4 (2010): 895-913; Bret Schneider and Omar Hussain “Is the Funeral For the Wrong Corpse? An Interview With Hal Foster,” *The Platypus Review*, no. 221, April 2010, accessed June 8, 2013, <http://platypus1917.org/2010/04/08/an-interview-with-hal-foster/>; Marcus D. Niski, “Interview with Sylvère Lotringer on the Nova Convention,” *RealityStudio*, September 14, 2012, accessed February 4, 2013, <http://realitystudio.org/interviews/interview-with-sylvere-lotringer-on-the-nova-convention/>; and Joan Waltemath, “A Life in Theory: Sylvère Lotringer with Joan Waltemath,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 2, 2006, accessed June 7 2013, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2006/09/art/a-life-in-theory>.

which has become increasingly jeopardized as a creative site for local and independent cultural producers. Furthermore, the subsequent loss of those risk-taking alternative and queer urban cultures, which have critically and historically constituted postwar cultural vanguards in the U.S., has also led to the inability to produce “new” cultural forms across high and low registers.

Carlo McCormick, an art critic and proponent of the East Village art scene, has recently recognized the critical quandary of assessing and historicizing the Downtown scene. In retrospect, he quips in regards to the difficulties of comprehending Downtown as phenomenon:

What the hell happened? I mean, if we must ask ourselves now, a mere two or three decades since, to explain the unruly ten-year period of manic creativity, outrageous styles, and even more outré lifestyles that were continuously spawned and just as rapidly disintegrated in a compressively short period in New York City.... how could we possibly expect to make any sense of such an unruly melee? Perhaps it would be best...to leave it in pieces, let the vested interests of academia and the market take their share, and allow the distinctly different cultural models for fine art, popular music, design, theater, literature, film, fashion, performance art, video, and the like divvy up what they find relevant to their requisite narratives, declare their pantheons, and let the rest fall through the cracks. The problematic here however is that it’s all about the cracks. Nothing quite fits, and worse yet, everything fits together.⁹

Although indirectly, McCormick acknowledges a need for an interdisciplinary model to better grasp “Downtown” as a means to locate the “cracks.” Or in other words, the vital cultural activity that has fallen through the gaps of hard-drawn disciplinary and market-determined lines, eluding “distinctly different cultural models.” Similar to Shelley’s illustration, McCormick’s query into the “cultural anomaly” of Downtown further drives at the larger question of what exactly fueled Downtown’s fierce creative economy.¹⁰

⁹ Carlo McCormick’s essay appears in *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene 1974-1984*. The catalogue/exhibition covers a ten-year period that is slightly longer than my project’s tighter and more targeted time frame, which emphasizes a decadal and ideological transition in the U.S. See McCormick, “A Crack in Time,” in *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene, 1974-1984*, ed. Marvin J. Taylor (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006): 67.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

To “make sense” of Downtown’s “unruly melee,” I take up McCormick’s challenge and examine one such “crack”—the art-party. My concept of the art-party is an attempt to map some of Downtown New York’s exemplary cultural scenes as microcosms of the operations of Downtown in total, as a larger cultural economy. Therefore, I survey three different Downtown art-parties to demonstrate how each scene functions as a nexus of cultural activity that promotes creativity, intersection, experimentation, collectivity, and exchange. In my consideration of the art-party, definitive of Downtown’s cultural peak, I also investigate each scene’s producers, consumers, and associated belief systems and meanings. Together, the three art-party sites under examination represent the diversity of Downtown New York’s cultural scenes; the art-party’s varied spatial configurations; and the multiplicity of artistic, political, professional, and personal agendas that characterize this time and place.

The Art-Party

Recognizing the vital connection between art and life, my framework of the art-party accentuates notions of social and creative play, and nightlife’s impact upon Downtown’s prolific cultural economy. The interdisciplinary schematic of the art-party recognizes Downtown cultures as highly mixed, in both production and consumption, and creative urban lifestyles as a functional balance of *live/work/play*. Broadly conceived, nightlife refers to social and cultural activities of leisure and entertainment, after dark. Nightlife enhances general levels of satisfaction of urban living, from restaurants, to performance festivals, to warehouse parties, to nightclubs. It also acts as an attractive draw for a city, whether in terms of residential living or tourism. The pros and cons of nightlife exceed negative assumptions of hedonism or crime, or positive evaluations of community building alone. A central concern of this project, nightlife

activity can be conducive to creativity, cultural innovation, and the cultural sustainability of large cities.¹¹

To be clear, this dissertation is not a study of nightclub spaces alone, but a wider examination of different art-party formations that are social practices of art largely constituted by nightlife activity.¹² Agreeing with Shannon Jackson, who acknowledges the imprecision of the term “social practice,”¹³ the art genre names a complicated spectrum of practices and intentions. And likewise, the corresponding “social turn” across art production and criticism has stirred debate on the ethics and aesthetics of social practices in the field of contemporary art.¹⁴ Social practices of art are mostly associated with experimental performance, event, and time-based work; and are otherwise known as “socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogue art, littoral art, participatory art, interventionist art, research-based, collaborative art,”¹⁵ amongst other buzz terms such as “relational aesthetics.”¹⁶ In connection to the mechanisms of the art-party, Jackson notes:

Social practice celebrates a degree of cross-disciplinary in art-making, paralleling the kind of cross-media collaboration across image, sound, movement, space, and text that we find in performance. It also gestures to the realm of the socio-political, recalling the activist and community-building ethic of socially engaged performance research.¹⁷

¹¹ See Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, *The Warhol Economy: How Fashion, Art, and Music Drive New York City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 11-13, 185.

¹² The first institutional recognition of nightlife as a social practice of art began in 2011 with the Museum of Arts and Design’s FUN Fellowship. See the subsequent publication, Jake Yuzna, ed., *The Fun: The Social Practice of Nightlife in NYC* (New York: Museum of Arts and Design and powerHouse Books, 2013).

¹³ Shannon Jackson. *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011): 13.

¹⁴ See Claire Bishop, *Participation* (London: Whitechapel, 2006); *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books, 2012), “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,” *Artforum International*, 44.6 (2006): 178-83, and “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 1.110 (2004): 51-79; Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002); and Grant H. Kester *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), and “Another Turn” (Letter to Editor), *Artforum International*, v.44 no.9, 2006: 22-24

¹⁵ Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,” 179.

¹⁶ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 2002.

¹⁷ Jackson, *Social Works*, 12-13.

“Cross-disciplinary” and traversing visual arts and performance histories, social practices are also positioned within avant-garde trajectories as much as activist pursuits, and are often contradictory in terms of artistic intention and/or critical interpretation. Aside from the critical polarization of aesthetic strategies versus political agendas, social practices also have a tense and complex relationship to art institutions and critical discourses, which, contradictorily, both support and constrain social practices.¹⁸ Consequently, designations of which artistic practices should and should not be considered social practices can be quite thorny, despite the fact that the label encompasses such a wide range of work and intent.

Predating theories of social practices of art, and given the nightlife context and time frame of Downtown New York, the art-party aligns with what Jake Yuzna describes as “the social practice of nightlife”:

Nightlife is an artistic practice that takes place in alternative social contexts. Nightlife produces works that foster fundamentally countercultural and critical, non-normative activities: free expression and the formation of alternative societal structures rooted...in communal ritual rather than static culture or the pursuit of profit...These works create the social contexts that foster new possibilities for societal norms, not just as a message, but also as a functioning alternative to heteronormativity and capitalism. Their advancement of alternative possibilities for gender and sexuality exists not only in theory, but also in real life, and therefore is shown to be possible, achievable and actionable.¹⁹

Although nightlife arts certainly include solo cabaret-style performance, nightlife hinges upon collectivity and worldmaking, and the alternative/non-normative social and cultural possibilities that it engenders.²⁰ Such nightlife spaces and events incongruously celebrate individuality and difference, but within a collective body and communally shared experience. Social practices of nightlife can incubate creativity and alternative possibilities, which can involve a potential for

¹⁸ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 2012; Jackson, *Social Works*, 2011; and Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 2004.

¹⁹ Jake Yuzna, ed., *The Fun: The Social Practice of Nightlife in NYC* (New York: Museum of Arts and Design and powerHouse Books, 2013), 16-17.

²⁰ While Yuzna does not use the term “queer worldmaking,” he is more or less describing queer worldmaking practices, as discussed later on in this chapter as one of the main critical frameworks of the art-party.

social change as a challenge to the oppressive structures of normativity and neoliberalism. And importantly, these factors coalesce in the same-shared space and can have life-altering impacts, regardless of duration.

Foremost, as a term associated with social practices of nightlife, the art-party conjoins art production and consumption with the concept of a party. At the most basic level of understanding, a party is a social gathering that carries the common connotations of conviviality, fun, conversation, entertainment, celebration, pleasure, and debauchery. Here, *party* and *social* overlap as synonyms, and for the purposes of this project, the art-party specifically emphasizes the social processes of cultural production and consumption. A party can also classify a social group and type of activity. It also names a particularly politicized group (e.g. political party) as well as the democratic ideals of involvement and participation. A secondary meaning of party is in its adjectival form describing something divided into different parts, as an amalgamation or diverse entity. This important aspect of the art-party relates to urbanity itself: “diversity is taken to be not only an urban fact but a principal urban value...social mix is not simply a cultural but a functional feature of urbanism as a way of life.”²¹ Downtown has been similarly described as, “a total blur, the whole topography of creative practice in the Downtown scene was all about the mix.”²²

The art-party encompasses all of the meanings above to detail the wild surge of creative activity that ensued at the turn of the decade Downtown. Furthermore, creativity has been theorized to lead to life satisfaction and happiness: it is fundamentally healthy for society and can shape urban space. Creative practices can give rise to a more “convivial society” in which

²¹ Fran Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory: Social Relations and Urban Forms* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 89. Tonkiss cites Jane Jacobs’s seminal work in her discussion of diversity, and how a diverse population correlates to a city’s mixed-uses. See Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961).

²² McCormick, “A Crack in Time,” 68.

direct interpersonal communication exceeds the social control of institutions, and individual are empowered to actually shape the world in which they live.²³ Along these lines, the art-party is a conduit for sharing in progressive politics, taste cultures, and the desire to generate alternative and queer worlds that rewrite existent sociocultural systems of meaning and living.

Highly generative in its capacities for “making” and “doing,” this dissertation construes the Downtown art-party as an agent of both creative *placemaking* and queer *worldmaking*. Creative placemaking refers to strategies whereby different sectors (e.g. public, private, artist/citizen) form alliances to shape public space around culture and the arts.²⁴ Indebted to the scholarship of José Muñoz, queer worldmaking refers to a public kind of performance type, ranging from theatre to everyday ritual to community television, that imagines better modes of living and being in the world, or even proposes new worlds or spaces for queer identified and/or queer-friendly people.²⁵ Therefore, I analyze the varied configurations of the art-party across 1) the new wave art and performance-oriented nightclub, Club 57 (1978–1983); 2) the public access cable television program, *Glenn O’Brien’s TV Party* (1978–1982); and 3) the hybrid symposium celebrating William S. Burroughs, *The Nova Convention* (1978). Each art-party variously engages in queer worldmaking and creative placemaking to structure Downtown’s flourishing

²³ See David Gauntlett, *Making is Connecting* (Polity Press, 2010). In his book Gauntlett invokes the theories of Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

²⁴ Although discussed in more detail further along in this chapter, I use Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa’s definition of creative placemaking as outlined in Markusen and Gadwa, National Endowment for the Arts, Design Mayors’ Institute on City, et al., “Creative Placemaking,” National Endowment for the Arts, Markusen Economic Research Services and Metris Arts Consulting, 2010, accessed May 4, 2012, <http://arts.gov/file/1919>.

²⁵ This dissertation adopts José E. Muñoz’s framework of queer worldmaking. His concept begins with disidentifactory performance as means to imagine and create queer worlds through minority and intersectional performance practices. Disidentification is defined as a practice of (mis) appropriating cultural codes: “The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications.” See *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31. Muñoz further develops his concept of queer worldmaking as a means to access utopian spaces of queer futurity in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

creative economy, and further, to articulate Downtown as place, style and attitude.

For clarification, this dissertation utilizes the term “queer” in association with the concept of queer worldmaking and how it creatively occurred via the art-party in Downtown New York. The period of time under examination exists before the wide reappropriation and reclamation of “queer” within gay activism and academia in the 1980s and 1990s. Given my project’s concentration on the art-party at a specific time and place, I follow a definition of queer offered in Jack Halberstam’s study of queer urban subcultures at the end of the 20th century.²⁶ Halberstam emphasizes queerness as a way of life, which often involves some kind of risk in living at odds with normative structures, instead of defining queerness solely by personal sexual practice. Thus, queerness “has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space.”²⁷ More generally, she describes queer as “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time.”²⁸ Here, queer space takes shape through “the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics.”²⁹ This aspect resonates with my project’s focus on the art-party’s combination of creative placemaking and queer worldmaking tactics.

While my three case studies developed and supported artistic expressions rooted in non-normative gender and sexuality, this is often a sliding scale in terms of producing work that is legibly political, or with direct political intent. To my knowledge, the three art-parties were sexually experimental, pansexual, and/or accepting of all sexual orientations. Yet, the work

²⁶ Judith (Jack) Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1-2, 10.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

produced as a result or as part of them, did not necessarily have to fit a singular community political agenda of sexual liberation: some works were explicitly advancing a precedent of queer politics, while others were rather apolitical and superficial. If anything, the Downtown art-party was a fluid and intersectional “anything goes” arena. However, along the lines of Halberstam’s definition of queer, each scene decidedly produced, and reproduced, cultures that were non-heteronormative, non-homonormative (outside of the dominant gay disco or West Village scene), and generally speaking, at variance with institutionally accepted cultures of the time (e.g. as dictated by museums, galleries, network television, Broadway).

Historically, cities are critical sites for challenging norms and institutions, and for remaking space: “people make space for themselves through everyday practice and imaginative spatial tactics. It looks to places and practices in the city that resist conventional order of space and conduct.”³⁰ Invoking Michel de Certeau’s spatial tactics, such critiques of urban power relations often lie in the realm of everyday activity, and involve aspects of play in order to reclaim city space by imagining new ways of living and being, in order to survive.³¹ By inventively exceeding spatial/power constraints through creative placemaking and queer worldmaking, the art-party too qualifies as a spatial tactic. Needless to say, city space is never a given. Nowadays, to creatively live/work/play in a satisfying manner in urban space takes great ingenuity, and often unrecognized, is a hard fought battle.

A dual spatial tactic, the art-party’s strategies of creative placemaking and queer worldmaking illuminate the problematics of New York City’s current economy, which has progressively stifled those autonomous sites that propagate creativity, cross-pollination and

³⁰ Fran Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory: Social Relations and Urban Forms*, 6-7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 139; invoking Michel De Certeau and Steven Rendall, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

experimentation, and the ability to satisfactorily live/work/play. Varying in duration and spatial configuration, art-parties are veritable “safe havens” for artistic/social risk and cultural exchange, which are qualities vital to the emergence of any cultural vanguard. Challenging the broad turn toward social conservatism and neoliberalism in the U.S., often identified with the election of Ronald Reagan, this dissertation argues that Downtown cultural scenes formed alternative and queer spaces of possibility, performance, and play through the art-party. While a project of historical recovery and revision, *The Art of Parties* is also a call to action. I contend that the art-party is in fact crucial to the cultural livelihood of New York City, which is no longer an accessible and permissive site for local and independent cultural producers. And moreover, it is no longer a fertile ground for alternative and queer cultures that have so critically constituted postwar American avant-gardes from the Beat Generation to the Downtown scene.

Downtown New York at the Decadal Turn

The heyday of Downtown New York is a paradoxical tale of turmoil yielding unprecedented creativity alongside great social and cultural freedom. This contradiction is concisely summed up in the title of a recent documentary on the emergence and intersection of different music cultures, naming 1977 in New York City *The Coolest Year in Hell* (Corra, 2007).³² In the late 1970s Downtown New York was culturally thriving under conditions of urban bankruptcy, with projects running on low-to-no production budgets. Economic and social conditions in Lower Manhattan were bleak due to a combination of factors, including debt, stagflation, massive disinvestment in public infrastructure, and a burgeoning drug economy. An

³² Another similar music-centric documentary on New York in the 1970s lends a more romantic and mythic tone in its title, *Once upon a time in New York: The birth of Hip Hop, Disco and Punk*. See Benjamin Whalley, Richard O’Brien, and Corporation British Broadcasting, *Once Upon a Time in New York the Birth of Hip Hop, Disco and Punk*, (London: BBC, 2007), DVD.

oft-quoted *Daily News* headline ran to define the harsh national sentiment about the troubled city: “FORD TO CITY DROP DEAD.”³³ As boldly indicated, President Ford famously refused to bailout New York City, which ultimately cost him the state’s vote in his loss to Jimmy Carter in the following election year. Adding to the malaise, the Downtown newspaper, the *Village Voice*, prematurely called for the end of the 1970s. In the first issue of 1978, the staff already wanted out of the decade and entitled their collaborative feature, “BIG ZIT ON THE FACE OF TIME: A Plea for the Mandatory Retirement of the 1970s,” not anticipating the devastation that the 1980s would soon unleash upon the Downtown community.³⁴

Supplying one of the framing quotes to this Introduction, Steven Hager remarks, “The election [Reagan] provoked an outbreak of doomsday fever across the country. For those that felt like the world situation was getting increasingly hopeless, throwing a party seemed the appropriate response.” Reagan’s election was partly a result of an effective panic caused by conservatives, which ironically, intensified Downtown’s party impulses. Defying adverse environmental and social conditions, the arts, nightlife and youth-oriented subcultures “appropriately” boomed, although the beginning of Downtown’s cultural upswing predates Reagan’s election. Accordingly, partying, and especially club culture, became pivotal to Downtown at the end of the 1970s:

Central to the identity of the [Downtown] scene was club culture. Downtown became associated with the multitudinous forms of cultural experimentation, most of which were played out in the important and confined spaces of nightclubs, where subcultural styles were imitated and eventually commercialized. The club was a space where art, music, and performance coalesced much like in the 1960s, but it was also the central site of production, dissemination, and consumption of subcultural practices. The clubs functioned both as a meeting spaces for subcultures, such as punks, and as a showcase of exotic and erotic styles, most of which were eventually glamorized, commodified, and

³³ “FORD TO CITY DROP DEAD,” *Daily News*, October 30, 1975, 1 (headline).

³⁴ Jack Newfield, Lewis Grossberger, and Gil Eisner, “BIG ZIT ON THE FACE OF TIME: A Plea for the Mandatory Retirement of the 1970s,” *Village Voice*, January 2, 1978, 11-12.

then popularized in the world outside of the club. Social and sexual (hetero/homo and androgynous) themes were celebrated and stylized through particular blends of music, fashion, and art.³⁵

A hotbed for the cross-pollination of music, visual arts, and performance practices, Downtown was not only a site for artistic experimentation, but also a polysexual rec room for pleasure and fun, spurred on by active nightlife scenes. Yet, having the time and space Downtown to support the form of the art-party was directly related to Downtown's material disadvantages, and cheap rents.

Keeping rents low, daily visual reminders of New York City's financial ruin were found in the great Second Avenue ditch, the failed and abandoned construction project of the Second Avenue Subway, as well as the abundance of burned-out and abandoned buildings strewn across the Lower East Side. By the late 1970s, nearly 700 buildings and lots had been closed, approximately 60% of the neighborhood's total buildings, due to owner abandonment and tax default.³⁶ With waves of immigration, a lucrative drug trade increasing crime, and white flight decreasing the population, those moving to New York City became quickly priced out of the then gentrifying neighborhoods of SoHo and Greenwich Village.³⁷ As a result, the Lower East Side of Manhattan quickly became the only remaining low rent district south of Central Park.³⁸

³⁵ Christopher Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate, and Resistance in New York City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 217.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 56, 184.

³⁷ Urban historians, geographers, political scientists, and sociologists have addressed the contentious history and debates of gentrification, real estate, and community associated with Downtown New York. Lower Manhattan has a lengthy history of urban neighborhood change, social activism, and cultural production, which certainly pre- and post-dates the years of my project. See Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 2000; Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1961; Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1994); Clayton Patterson, Joe Flood, and Alan Moore, *Resistance: A Radical Political and Social History of the Lower East Side* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007); Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996); and Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.

³⁸ Anne Bowler and Blaine McBurney, "Gentrification and the Avant-Garde in New York's East Village: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," *Theory Culture Society* No. 8 (1991): 52.

By the mid-1970s, many creative types could afford the low cost of living in the East Village and Lower East Side. Because of low-to-no-rents, one could afford the luxury to pursue multiple creative and/or leisurely interests, free from the temporal and societal constraints of a nine-to-five day job. Integrating with the existing Eastern European and Puerto Rican communities residing in the Lower East Side, the Downtown scene was loosely composed of young suburban refugees, artists, squatters, and a spectrum of social and sexual misfits. Downtown is reminiscent of Andy Warhol's own description of the Factory: "we were all odds-and-ends misfits, somehow misfitting together."³⁹ Cities have historically been locales for misfits and diverse populations, with the distinct capacity for amalgamating difference in its social spaces. Downtown follows suit with its low barriers of entry increasing the party mix through diversity, and thereby, a more democratic model of creativity.

These fundamental characteristics of urbanity have come under threat due to the increasing "suburbanization" of New York City, along with the normativization of queer cultures. Downtown's standing as a creative refuge for lower to middle class suburban exiles and misfits has, in recent history, been reversed. Further, in the 1980s, Downtown was at odds with the concept of "American Exceptionalism" championed by the Reagan administration. Reagan's usage originates from his "Shining City Upon A Hill" speech of 1974, where freedom and hope provide the bedrock of America's greatness as an ideal nation. This urban image was repeatedly invoked in speeches throughout his political career, from his 1980 victory speech to his 1989 farewell. Downtown's nonconformity, diversity and excess formed an exception to this

³⁹ Douglas Crimp adopts Warhol's quote of "misfitting together" as the title of his book chapter on *The Chelsea Girls*. The quote is derived from Warhol's own description of the Factory space, a site where "misfits misfitted together," as opposed to simply being a group of like-minded individuals. See Douglas Crimp, "Our Kind of Movie": *The Films of Andy Warhol* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2012), 96-110; and Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *Popism: The Warhol '60's* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2006), 219.

imagined, unsullied, and “God-blessed” city—the very image of American Exceptionalism—and countered the social conservatism and controversial urban policies of the Reagan era.⁴⁰

While space was “opened” in terms of urban living and personal time, Downtown also encouraged hybridity by allowing different art forms, genres, histories, and identities to freely intersect. Similar to the absurdist and delightful failures of the 1970’s *Gong Show* (NBC, original run 1976–78), having virtuoso talent or a singular artistic commitment was thoroughly unappealing Downtown. Interestingly, failure can locate effective points of rupture within a dominant system, when success is ruled by neoliberal ideology (hence, here is failure’s very point of success). Jack Halberstam argues that queer failure is “a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities.”⁴¹ While delighting in failure is a liberating proposition, nightlife scenes typically have a short life span, doomed to fail or quickly fall out of fashion.

In contrast to Shelley’s timeline indicating the dawn of “New Professionalism” in the 1990s, the Downtown scene marked a time and place for the non-professional or amateur, under a do-it-yourself rubric. Although it did not last for long, this disregard of social norms and professional standards, or what Sylvère Lotringer referred to as a refusal to become a “CV on wheels,” created a culture of experimentation that was not driven by a predetermined notion of achievement or excellence.⁴² As performance artist and Club 57 manager Ann Magnuson further

⁴⁰ See Ronald Reagan, “Farewell Address to the Nation,” January 11, 1989, accessed April 2, 2015, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1989/011189i.htm>; and Harold Wolman, “The Reagan urban policy and its impacts,” *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (March 1986): 311-335.

⁴¹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 88.

⁴² Sylvère Lotringer, interview with author, April 2015.

explains on Downtown's collective goals, "We cross-pollinated: Artists played in bands, musicians made films, performers made art, and everyone turned themselves into fashion icons. The main objective was to remain perpetually creative and avoid getting a real job."⁴³ Concomitantly, music genres such as hip-hop, punk, disco, no wave and new wave commingled with conceptual, performance, and street art in Downtown's cultural spaces.

Timed with the new wave music movement in the U.S. and U.K., Downtown New York held and self-promoted the perception that it was forging a new and radical culture. This is most evident in the mission statement of the local newspaper, the *East Village Eye* (1979-1987), which documents the sudden rise and even faster fall of the Downtown scene. In her scholarship on the East Village art scene's press coverage, Liza Kirwin describes the *East Village Eye* as the "insider" paper; and "the active voice of the underground" that "registered a sense of the moment, which was about inclusion and participation."⁴⁴ The *East Village Eye*, best representing this new and forward-looking culture from within the scene itself, ran a "Press Release" in its second issue declaring:

East Village Eye is a new newspaper for new culture. Enjoying a mutually parasitic relationship with the East Village and surrounding areas, the Eye serves and guides its readership and community, and promotes the new mutations of Positivist Futurism ... As it becomes clear the future of Western culture is in the hands of artists, the influx of creators from all parts of the world to this vicinity takes on new significance. As the conflict moves to our field, we engage, steadfastly embracing the future—not to forget our legacy but to fulfill it. We work in a variety of media with a variety of tools for these ends. As tools grow and develop and then are abandoned to collectors or scrap heaps, we exhaust all avenues and proceed to a higher plane.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ann Magnuson quoted in Melanie Franklin Cohn, "CLUB 57 WHERE ARE YOU?: Harvey Wang's Photographs of the Legendary East Village Club 1979-1983," Curator's Statement: Melanie Franklin Cohn, May 27 2005, accessed January 11, 2012, <http://classic.harveywang.com/club57curator.htm>

⁴⁴ Liza Kirwin, "EV in the Press," *East Village Issue: Artforum International*, vol. 38 no. 2 (October 1999): 162.

⁴⁵ "Press Release," *East Village Eye*, Jun 15, 1979, vol. 1 no. 2, 2.

Constantly repeating the words new and future, and even developing the term “Positivist Futurism” to describe its local brand of avant-garde (in reference to Russian and Italian movements of futurism’s past), the *East Village Eye* plans to fulfill its destiny by representing this vital, cutting-edge culture in print. Further, the slippage to the pronoun of “we” firmly plants the paper as part and parcel of the Downtown scene and its emerging vanguard.

While exuding “newness,” Downtown New York was also a vibrant multi-generational, countercultural space. It was greatly influenced or inhabited by living members of the historical queer avant-garde such as William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Smith, John Vaccaro, Taylor Mead, and Andy Warhol. While Warhol was tied to the “Uptown” culture of Studio 54 attached to his magazine, *Interview*, the legacy of Silver Factory-like production continued well into the 1980s Downtown. It is also widely known that Warhol employed, befriended, collaborated, and mentored young artists as Downtown scenes began to produce their own art stars such as Keith Haring and Jean Michel-Basquiat. Like Warhol, Burroughs was also a great collaborator and mentor, and his cut-up method was specifically an anti-authorship and recombinatory tactic. Burroughs’s cut-up connects to Warhol’s own anti-authorship stance of appropriation and his own collaborative art practices. For these characteristics, it is not surprising then that both Warhol and Burroughs are commonly labeled as quintessentially “postmodern,” despite their differences in artistic sensibilities and as queer historical figures. While this dissertation is more attentive to the cultish figure of Burroughs, who was more embedded in Downtown New York during this exact time period in comparison to Warhol, the prior Silver Factory version of Warhol, in the time of his own art-partying, was certainly an inspiration and draw as a guiding saint for Downtown’s queer and creative types. In addition, younger art-party

participants were highly self-conscious of cultural history and appropriated past forms from previous incarnations of the avant-garde to retro popular culture.

To note my usage of *Downtown*, the term does not just refer to geography and a time and place arguably past its cultural prime. While literally naming an area of Manhattan real estate, Downtown also refers to an attitude and lifestyle, and characterizes fashion styles and art genres from film to painting. The various meanings of Downtown were actively and socially constructed, and produced and consumed by the participants of its various scenes. In particular, the area known as the East Village became synonymous with Downtown and underground culture during the years of my study, as opposed to other neighborhoods technically located below 14th Street such as SoHo, the West Village, Chinatown, or even Wall Street. The East Village refers to the area, in New York City blocks, from Houston to Fourteenth Street, and from Avenue D to Fourth Avenue.⁴⁶ Downtown, often an imprecise umbrella term mixing geographical location and cultural aesthetics, became popularly associated in the press (and in various discourses since) with an identity and style that was anti-mainstream, heterogeneous, poor, youthful, and dangerous; in contrast to the idea of Uptown as corporate, homogenized, predominantly white, conventional, and upper-class.⁴⁷ Because of the customary use of the term Downtown in reference to this particular time and place, coupled with its descriptive flexibility to cover both social and cultural phenomenon, my study adopts Downtown as a descriptor instead of the more precise geographic term of the East Village/Lower East Side.

⁴⁶ Terms such as Alphabet City and Loisaida (Spanglish for the Lower East Side) label subdivisions within the East Village. See Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, preface xvii-xiii. In 1984, the first museum show to exhibit the East Village art scene, titled *The East Village Scene*, shares approximately the same geographical boundaries as Mele, running from Houston to Fourteenth Street, and Avenue D to 3rd Avenue. See Janet, Kardon et. al., *The East Village Scene: October 12- December 2, 1984, Institute of Contemporary Art. University of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1984), 7.

⁴⁷ Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 217.

A Visual Cultural Study of Downtown New York

The Art of Parties builds upon a body of scholarship on Downtown cultural history and is indebted to many works across different disciplines. However, in contrast to existing histories of this period, which often concentrate on one artist, medium, or subculture, I examine the operations of the Downtown art-party more holistically, and from the interdisciplinary perspective of visual cultural studies. I adopt this multi-methodological approach to better illuminate how these socially engaged cultural practices structure Downtown's complex creative economy.

Martin Lister and Liz Wells provide a useful framework for the burgeoning practice of visual cultural studies. It specifically emphasizes the "cultural studies" approach to the visual, and is therefore primarily interested in an object/practice's social life and history.⁴⁸ From production, to consumption, to the circulation of meaning of everyday practices, to the material objects of high culture, cultural studies recognizes a form's relationship to social groups and social processes as dictated by larger institutions. Furthermore, "objects" of both visual and cultural studies tend to be contemporary, with cultural studies more inclined to analyze formative historical contexts. Accordingly, society, and in this instance Downtown, is not a "background against which to view a cultural practice of a text; rather the production of texts is seen as in itself a social practice."⁴⁹ In my project, various types of texts are produced, consumed, and circulated, along with their attendant possible meanings, through the Downtown art-party.

⁴⁸ See Martin Lister and Liz Wells, "Seeing Beyond Belief: Cultural Studies as an Approach to Analysing the Visual," in Theo Van Leeuwen and Carey Jewitt, *Handbook of Visual Analysis* (London: SAGE, 2001), 61-91. As another recent example of visual cultural study, crossing disciplines and adopting the framework proposed by Lister and Wells, see Janice Miller, *Fashion and Music* (Oxford: Berg, 2011).

⁴⁹ Lister and Liz Wells, "Seeing Beyond Belief," 62.

Because the art-party is rather unfixed and not easily contained within the confines of a singular discipline or theoretical framework, my project is best suited to the multi-methodological perspective of visual cultural studies. My practice of visual cultural studies also aligns with Irit Rogoff, a pioneer in the field, who has recently described the work of visual culture: “It’s not just the objects of study, but also the worlds and the atmospheres and the discursive practices that surround them that really concern us.”⁵⁰ Because the art-party is an agent of creative placemaking and queer worldmaking, and can take on different spatial configurations, my study requires a visual culture model. The approach of visual cultural studies has also helped me to locate the generative intersections between the fields of performance, art history, television and media, gender and sexuality, popular music, and urban studies, vital to the theorization of my project. My historical and critical inquiry into the art-party is dictated by its own intersections and relationality, in terms of community formations and its intermedial and performative modes of cultural production. As a result, this dissertation emphasizes what art-parties *do* during the time and place of Downtown New York, and *how* they function, to better understand *why* this form needs to be better supported and encouraged today.

Despite the popularity of interdisciplinarity as a multi-purpose label, practically every publication, exhibition, and film documentary on Downtown New York makes categorical distinctions by media type, artist, or respective art or music movement, in order to organize or ground individual projects. Because of the proliferation of diverse cultural forms and subcultural affiliations, Downtown historians can easily pick and choose, favoring some artists, subcultures, or art movements, while obscuring others. Punk has obscured new wave or no wave, or even post-punk, as punk tends to encapsulate all that is *not* disco Downtown, and has garnered the

⁵⁰ Interview with Irit Rogoff in Faculti media, “FACULTI-Visual Cultures as... Seriousness by Gavin Butt and Irit Rogoff,” February 17, 2014, accessed 12 Dec, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYXgqgWHzug>.

most critical and historical attention in popular music studies.⁵¹ Furthermore, art historical scholarship, exhibitions with accompanying catalogues, and art documentary films tend to underscore narratives of the solo artist, focusing on the life and work of Laurie Anderson, Jean-Michel Basquiat, or Keith Haring as symbolic of Downtown, as opposed to art collectives and the collaborative modes of production that were so prevalent at the time.⁵²

In particular, popular music scholarship on the Downtown scene has shifted critical attention to the productive hybridity of Downtown music scenes as opposed to existing methods of music genre studies. Tim Lawrence describes a methodological turn in Downtown music history as a move from chronicling a singular music genre to focusing on the location of Downtown as a permissive space that encouraged multiple genres to intersect.⁵³ Thus, he structures a kind of cultural paradigm for Downtown music scenes: “the potential for interaction—the forging of social and sonic alliances.”⁵⁴ Similarly, Simon Reynolds cites 1981 as the zenith of what he calls *mutant disco*: “a glorious period of cultural miscegenation in which ideas from punk and funk, the [D]owntown art scene and the far-uptown hip-hop scene, collided

⁵¹ While New York punk claimed to be ant-hippie and anti-rock (especially anti-commercialized singer-songwriter and arena rock) disco was enemy number one according to its earliest discourses, which often occurred as racialized dismissals. See John Holmstrom’s first issue of *Punk* magazine, “Death to Disco Shit,” *Punk*, January 1, 1976, editorial page, and Stephen Duncombe and Maxwell Tremblay, *White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race* (London: Verso, 2011). Theo Cateforis claims that there is a dearth of writing on new wave music in popular music studies, and his book is the first scholarly account of New Wave music. See Theo Cateforis, *Are We Not New Wave?: Modern Pop at the Turn of the 1980s* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011). For a history of disco Downtown, see Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁵² Although there are histories of Downtown art collectives and community spaces such as Colab (Collaborative Projects) and ABC No Rio, they are far outweighed by projects that concentrate on the solo Downtown artist, with titles and exhibitions much too numerous to mention on the three artists merely listed as example. Furthermore, the work of Keith Haring has only recently been framed within his Downtown experience at Club 57 and SVA. See Keith Haring, Raphaela Platow, and Lucy Flint-Gohlke, *Keith Haring, 1978-1982* (Nürnberg, Germany: Verlag für moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2012).

⁵³ Tim Lawrence, “Who’s Not Who in the Downtown Crowd (Or: Don’t Forget About Me),” *Yeti Magazine* 6 (2008): 90–93.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

and cross-fertilized;”⁵⁵ while Bernard Gendron too corroborates that a “furious cross-over activity peaked in the early 1980s.”⁵⁶ Gendron also employs the phrase “institutionalized borderline aesthetics” to describe the destabilization between high culture/avant-garde art and low culture/popular music within nighttime activities of Downtown clubs.⁵⁷ Concurring with these scholars, and extending their work to the form of the art-party, it was the act of partying in Downtown’s vibrant nightworlds that allowed the vanguard to combine subcultural, popular, and retro styles into new modes of cultural expression. As demonstrated by my case studies, performance art, visual art, alternative art space, nightlife, public access television, academia, and the influx of what would be called “French theory,”⁵⁸ all flourish and intersect through the form of the Downtown art-party, in addition to the melding of music genres.

My study also builds upon existing histories that directly address Downtown New York, including the most significant edited collection to date, Marvin J. Taylor’s volume and exhibition catalogue, *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene, 1974-1984* (2006).⁵⁹ As a prominent source, Taylor’s *The Downtown Book* includes essays by scholars and critics, intertwined with interviews of active participants in Downtown scenes (Ann Magnuson, Richard Hell, Martha Wilson, Eric Bogosian, et al.) While *The Downtown Show*, a ground breaking retrospective

⁵⁵ Simon Reynolds, *Rip It up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006): 261.

⁵⁶ Bernard Gendron, “The Downtown Music Scene,” in *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene, 1974–1984*, ed. Marvin J. Taylor (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), 61.

⁵⁷ Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 310.

⁵⁸ François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

⁵⁹ In general, popular, art, and literary histories addressing Downtown New York culture include Michael Musto, *Downtown* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986); Steven Hager, *Art After Midnight: The East Village Scene* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986); Robert Siegle, *Suburban Ambush: Downtown Writing and the Fiction of Insurgency* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Brandon Stosuy, *Up Is up, but So Is Down: New York's Downtown Literary Scene, 1974-1992* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Lynne Cooke, Douglas Crimp, and Kristin Poor, *Mixed Use, Manhattan: Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to the Present*, (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2010); and Julie Ault *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Collective* (New York; Minneapolis: Drawing Center; University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

exhibition at New York University's Grey Art Gallery and Fales Library was thematically curated to stress interdisciplinarity, the scholarship in the accompanying catalogue, *The Downtown Book*, separates along disciplinary lines by associated media.⁶⁰ In addition to Taylor's volume, popular histories such as Steven Hager's *Art After Midnight: The East Village Scene* (1986) provides the most extensive history of the Mudd Club and Club 57; while gossip and nightlife columnist, Michael Musto, delivers an insider's voice to the social milieu of Downtown New York in *Downtown* (1986). Peter Frank and Michael McKenzie's *New, Used & Improved: Art for the 80's* (1987), also published around the time of Musto's and Hager's books, presents a history of the New York art scene from 1978–1987.⁶¹ Frank and McKenzie place the mass mediatization, appropriation practices, and performativity of the new “postmodern” New York art world front and center, and omit the rather prominent 1980s painting movement of Neo-Expressionism, which the authors view as too traditional and “distinctly modernist.”⁶²

As a general model for my project, Sally Banes's *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (1993) examines the connections between avant-garde performance, popular culture, and alternative community identity within the heterotopic space of Greenwich Village.⁶³ Banes considers Greenwich Village as a multiplexed space that

⁶⁰ As a greatest hits collection, RoseLee Goldberg writes on performance, Bernard Gendron on music, Brian Wallis and Carlo McCormick on visual arts, Robert Siegle on literature, and Matthew Yokobosky on No Wave film.

⁶¹ While Frank and McKenzie refer to the scene as “New York,” many of the artists and sites highlighted are “Downtown” according to Hager and Taylor. Frank and McKenzie write about alternative arts spaces, East Village commercial galleries, nightclubs and performance spaces, including Club 57. I would also strongly argue that “New York” here really means “Downtown.” See Peter Frank and Michael McKenzie, *New, Used & Improved: Art for the 80's* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987).

⁶² Frank and McKenzie's definition of “modern” is troublesome as many of the artists in the catalogue work in highly personalized expressive modes. Following one of Richard Dyer's arguments as well as the history of queer media appropriation, appropriation practices can be highly expressive, personalized, and political. See Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁶³ Michel Foucault's concept of a heterotopia is also a real space, or “counter-site,” that both reflects and rejects social customs, and often represents contradiction, crisis, otherness, deviance, and rebellion. Heterotopias are not beholden to the laws of time because they are sites where generations cross and defy temporal constraints. See Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics*, vol.16, no. 1 (1986): 22-27.

simultaneously reflects and resists societal structures, which results in “a mythic space of dissent” where “it was possible to found an *alternative* community.”⁶⁴ To some extent, my dissertation relocates and updates Banes’s study of avant-garde and countercultural integration within a concrete utopia, just several blocks east and fifteen-to-twenty years later. However, my project significantly differs from Banes in that I specifically concentrate on 1) three convergent sites of the art-party, as opposed to the intersections between individual scenes through their shared features; 2) new forms of artistic and social practice directly informed by cultural consumption, and specific to Downtown New York as place; and 3) issues of multi-generationality.

Lastly, Elizabeth Currid-Halkett’s studies of New York’s cultural economy, particularly *The Warhol Economy: How Fashion, Art and Music Drive New York City* (2007), inform my thinking on how the art-party negotiates relations between the art world, cultural industries, economic development, and urban policy.⁶⁵ Currid-Halkett examines how culture has been implemented for projects of urban revitalization to demonstrate that cultural development is vital to economic growth in global cities. While New York is still claimed to reside at the forefront of cultural advancement, she too states that it has reached a “critical juncture.”⁶⁶ Although Currid-Halkett is not a visual cultural historian, and her focus is not on detailing Downtown cultural scenes, she does acknowledge this period in the East Village in the late 1970s and early 1980s as

⁶⁴ Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 14, 38.

⁶⁵ Other works by Elizabeth Currid-Halkett include, “Bohemia as Subculture; ‘Bohemia’ as Industry: Art, Culture and Economic Development,” *Journal of Planning Literature*, vol. 23 no. 4 (2009): 368-382; “How Art and Culture Happen in New York: Implications for Urban Economic Development,” *Journal of the American Planning Association*, vol. 73 no. 4 (2007): 454-467; “New York as a Global Creative Hub: A Competitive Analysis of Four Theories on World Cities,” *Economic Development Quarterly*, vol. 20 no. 4 (2006): 330-350.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, *The Warhol Economy*, 11-12

an epitome of the operations of the “Warhol Economy.”⁶⁷

In reference to Warhol, whose name provides the adjective for New York’s creative economy here (and an obvious progenitor of the art-party), Currid-Halkett remarks on the productivity of the Factory’s joint social and cultural scene:

Warhol also saw the significance of the social spaces in which these industries and creative people interacted—his Factory merged cultural production with a social scene. And he demonstrated that this scene was instrumental in generating real economic value for those who participated in it, both through the merging of ideas while at a Factory event and the way in which the Factory cultivated economic value through its social cachet. And thus, the social economic dynamics exhibited within the artistic and cultural world are very much the Warhol economy.⁶⁸

In the historical case of Warhol’s “social economic dynamics,” Currid-Halkett certifies the importance of nightlife to cultural production and its accompanying economic value. Conversely, she also acknowledges that shifts in urban policy that negatively impact nightlife and social scenes can obstruct cultural production and creativity. New York’s “Warhol Economy,” stemming from Warhol’s iconic Factory art-party, has been significantly challenged in the past few decades: “Policymaking must cultivate the density, low barriers to entry, open nightlife and social environment that have been pivotal forces in maintaining New York City’s creative edge... We do not normally think about policy incentives for art, culture, and nightlife, and yet without these industries New York would not be New York.”⁶⁹ As my project is intent on understanding and describing Downtown as a sociocultural phenomenon, I follow Currid-Halkett’s line of thought on culture’s contingency upon place: “*place matters* because the social networks are grounded in particular places where culture is produced and consumed.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 16.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 79.

The Art of Parties is a scholarly act of historical recovery and revision, but it is also one of cultural preservation. Aside from the secondary sources discussed in this section, my dissertation has also engaged in archival research, including press from the time and personal archives, and interviews with individuals that participated in select Downtown scenes. Through this project, I seek to open an area of much needed dialogue in assessing art-party scenes as sites that simultaneously produce, support, and exhibit alternative and queer cultural forms across personal and community expression. To reiterate, certain art-party formations can potentially have cultural, social, and political significance. Art-parties are crucial to the cultural politics of representation, as well as the cultural sustainability of large American cities.

The Art-Party's Queer Worldmaking and Creative Placemaking

As previously stated, the art-party is especially conducive to queer worldmaking and creative placemaking, which are terms that provide critical frameworks to better comprehend the mechanisms and potentialities of the art-party. Creative placemaking and queer worldmaking are sociocultural processes that are time-and-place-bound. Accordingly, a study of Downtown New York's cultural peak offers an ideal period in which to study the various manifestations of the art-party through this joint rubric.⁷¹ The hyperactivity of constantly doing and making was indispensable to, and defining of, Downtown's cultural economy. And likewise, the act of *making* is equally mandatory for both creative *placemaking* and queer *worldmaking*. Because I identify the art-party as an "object" predisposed to visual cultural studies analysis, my study also provides the opportunity to address debates that span disciplines, by putting creative

⁷¹ While it may be productive to invent a new term for the joint theoretical framework of the art-party, one that merges creative placemaking with queer worldmaking, I choose to use the two terms in combination, in order to not lose the specificity of theoretical, historical, and practical (real world) applications for each.

placemaking and queer worldmaking into conversation. Aside from the “social turn” and critical status of social practices of art previously addressed within the field of contemporary art, the art-party also rests within the spatial and affective turns in the humanities. The creative placemaking and queer worldmaking potentials of the art-party illuminate contentious issues surrounding queer futurity and homoliberalism, and the functionality and viability of urban creative economies in the time of post-AIDS gentrification and privatization.

The scholarship of José Muñoz’s has been formative to my project, along with theories of queer worldmaking. Muñoz lived Downtown and was a Professor of Performance Studies at New York University, where his own scholarly work was informed by play, or his participation in nightlife. While his concept of queer worldmaking is already influential and widespread throughout the humanities,⁷² Muñoz’s work on performance, art, queer theory, nightlife, and his general approach to visual cultural analysis, have too guided my research.⁷³ However, the term “queer worldmaking” first originates in Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s essay, “Sex in Public” (1998),⁷⁴ and subsequently appears in Muñoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). In their essay, Berlant and Warner claim that queer counterpublics of sex-based cultures, such as the nightclub or sex shop, are important political and affective spaces for queer worldmaking. These spaces and collective experiences, often ephemeral and devalued as a mode of queer lifestyles, are significantly, “a common language of

⁷² Muñoz’s writing on queer worldmaking has influenced many scholars across various disciplines. For one example, see the recent anthology, Angela. A Jones, ed., *Critical Inquiry into Queer Utopias* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁷³ See Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José E. Muñoz *Pop Out: Queer Warhol* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Celeste F. Delgado, and José E. Muñoz, *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); José E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); and José E. Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, vol. 8 no. 2 (1996): 5-16.

⁷⁴ See Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* vol. 24 no. 2 (1998): 547-566.

self-cultivation, shared knowledge, and the exchange of inwardness.”⁷⁵ As a range of everyday cultural practices that become located in powerful sites for transformation, belonging, and sharing, “Queer culture has found it necessary to develop this knowledge in mobile sites of drag, youth culture, music, dance, parades, flaunting, and cruising.”⁷⁶ While the art-party is certainly at home with this list, Berlant and Warner also specifically frame queer worldmaking within transitory urban space.

Berlant and Warner claim that queer counterpublics of sex cultures within urban space are politically important sources of worldmaking:

No group is more dependent on this kind of pattern in urban space than queers. If we could not concentrate a publicly accessible culture somewhere, we would always be outnumbered and overwhelmed. And because what brings us together is sexual culture, there are very few places in the world that have assembled much of a queer population with-out a base in sex commerce...Urban space is always a host space. The right to the city extends to those who use the city. It is not limited to property owners.⁷⁷

“The right to the city” extends to both queer worldmaking and creative placemaking through nightlife and its creative potential, which must be actively cultivated. And furthermore, as David Harvey poignantly remarks on the undervalued status of *making* urban space:

The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.⁷⁸

When considering queer politics in conjunction with urban living and nightlife, large cities are often centers of tolerance and activism (despite also being sites of hate crimes, workplace

⁷⁵ Ibid, 561.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 563.

⁷⁸ To note, the phrase “right to the city” is first advanced by Henri Lefebvre in *Le Droit À La Ville* (Paris: Anthropos, 1968). See Harvey, “The Right to the City,” *New Left Review*, (September-October 2008): 23. For additional scholarship exploring this topic see Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse, and Margit Mayer, *Cities for People, Not for Profit: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City* (London: Routledge, 2012).

discrimination, etc.) New York City is a prominent site of LGBTQ activist and social history that substantiates the political importance of nightlife. The most famous case, of course, is the Stonewall Riots of 1969, whereby the collective political resistance of a West Village gay bar both charged and forever changed the gay liberation movement.

Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) provides the main theoretical framework for queer worldmaking that is most applicable to the Downtown art-party. In his preceding work that lays the real groundwork for his concept, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), queer worldmaking is achieved through disidentificatory performance by minoritarian artists that inherently involves a utopian dimension: "Disidentificatory performances and readings require an active kernel of utopian possibility. Although utopianism has become the bad object of much contemporary political thinking, we nonetheless need to hold on to and even risk utopianism if we are to engage in the labor of making a queer world."⁷⁹ Expanding this notion in *Cruising Utopia*, but no longer as a queer of color critique, Muñoz asserts aspects of hope and utopian space to specifically intervene in the temporal and spatial debates concerning the "antisocial turn" in queer theory.⁸⁰ It is Muñoz's critical idealism in *Cruising Utopia* that so profoundly resonates with the form of the art-party. Furthermore, he examines almost exclusively urban spaces of performance, which prominently include attention to historic Downtown sites and players with chapters devoted to Jack Smith and Fred Herko.

For Muñoz, queerness is a horizon or suspended ideality within a yet-to-be-determined

⁷⁹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 25.

⁸⁰ In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz challenges Lee Edelman's nihilistic signature work on reproductive futurity and the status of the child in heteronormative culture. See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). In general, the two most cited and prominent scholarly works exemplifying the antisocial or anti-relational turn are Edelman's *No Future* along with Leo Bersani *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995).

space that is a collective and relational site for political imagination and transformation. Utopia signifies queerness and potentiality, and likewise, queer worldmaking manifests through performances of utopia or collective futurity. Muñoz eloquently states, “Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.”⁸¹ My investigation of the art-party applies Muñoz’s hope to explore how Downtown, during a time of crisis, staged different versions of queer utopias and collective performance to incessantly fill-in the “blanks,” or to create what was “missing” as “the Blank Generation”—in the words of Richard Hell’s famous Downtown anthem. In this sense, queerness also propels culture forward as a vanguard axis.

Equally important to my study of Downtown art-parties, which are “concrete” (not hypothetical) utopian spaces that communicate a lived reality of Downtown as place, Muñoz highlights the act of *doing*: “Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”⁸² In his formative work, *Disidentifications*, Muñoz claims that queer performance “is about transformation, about the powerful and charged transformation of the world, about the world that is born through performance.”⁸³ And, that “*the doing* that matters most and the performance that seems most crucial are nothing short than the actual making of worlds.”⁸⁴ Such activity, which opens space and creates senses of place and new worlds, also allows for new ways of living and being in city space, which in turn, defines the Downtown cultural moment in question. As this dissertation

⁸¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, xiv.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 200.

argues, it was the social practice of the art-party that emphasized the “Do” in *Downtown’s* creative economy. Through *doing*, its participants made a world that they could inherit, inhabit, create, and feel at home in.

Because my assessment of the art-party is a productive and necessary act of historical recovery, I also follow Muñoz’s scholarly acknowledgment of queer nightlife spaces as politically important. Inspired by Muñoz’s queer worldmaking, my project too investigates the possibilities that remembering the past just might bring, in order to relearn how to carve out space for creating, being, showing, and doing in contemporary times. As a historical study, *The Art of Parties* extends Muñoz’s project, which maintains, “At the center of *Cruising Utopia* there is the idea of hope, which is both a critical affect and a methodology...My approach to hope as a critical methodology can be best described as a backward glance that enacts a future vision.”⁸⁵ This is achieved on a project-level in re-presencing the time and place of Downtown to address a current quandary of urbanism. But, the notion also evidences within the case studies themselves, which appropriate, reinterpret, and reinvent past cultural forms in their “new wave” of queer worldmaking and creative placemaking practices.

Recently the focus of Creative Time’s 2013 summit, “Art Place & Dislocation in the 21st Century,” and a white paper supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, creative placemaking has emerged as a new cultural concern.⁸⁶ In retrospect, and in unconventional usage, I apply creative placemaking to describe the art-party enterprises of Downtown as a

⁸⁵ See José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 4.

⁸⁶ The “Welcome” of Creative Time’s 2013 Summit states in the conference program, “That is what we are doing at the 2013 Summit, as we examine the expanding role of artists in the growth and development of cities worldwide.” See Anne Pasternak, “Welcome,” *Creative Time Summit 2013*, October 25 & 26, 2013, New York University Skirball Center, New York, 2013, 6, accessed 4 December 2013, <http://creativetime.org/pdf/CTsummit2013-program.pdf>.

historical model.⁸⁷ Broadly taking into account cultural industries, not limited to the concerns of the visual arts or art world alone, creative placemaking refers to how:

...partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired.⁸⁸

Creative placemaking is equally critical to the economic development, livability, and culture of a city. While all the above applies to Downtown as a functional model, Downtown also reveals how creative placemaking sustains avant-garde cycles of innovation, and maintains the forward progression of culture. To add, the art-party also specifically emphasizes non-normative modes of happiness, in terms of satisfactory living and livability. However, it is also important to state that not all instances and impacts of creative placemaking are necessarily for public good.

Creativity and art shape a city in complex and often controversial ways, from innocuous community-based public murals, to the racial, ethnic, and class inequalities of gentrification and displacement.⁸⁹

To place the formation of queer utopias in relation to creativity and creative placemaking, utopia commonly refers to an imagined place or state of perfection, while creativity employs imagination or independent thought to make some kind of product (painting, poetry, fashion, etc.) However, queer utopias differ from normative understandings of happiness, or capitalist and

⁸⁷ While the term applies to my other case studies, Club 57 provides a more strong and clear example of the functions of creative placemaking. In addition, most case studies of creative placemaking are contemporary, and not historical.

⁸⁸ Markusen and Gadwa, "Creative Placemaking," 3.

⁸⁹ For further studies on creativity or the "creative class's" impact on urban economic development, see Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How it's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Ann Markusen and David King, *The Artistic Dividend: The Arts' Hidden Contributions To Regional Development* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, Project on Regional and Industrial Economics, 2003); and Ann Markusen, Gregory Schrock, and Amrtina Cameron, *The Artistic Dividend Revisited* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota: Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, 2004).

suburban constructions of “the good life,” as they do “not hinge upon happiness but rather are simply autonomous spaces in which to breathe.”⁹⁰ In defining the space of queer utopia, Angela Jones cites Berlant’s reading of queer struggle as an “aspiration” to attain space in which to breathe: “I think the struggle for a bearable life is the struggle for queers to have space to breathe...with breathe comes imagination. With breathe comes possibility.”⁹¹ Inspiration, which fuels creativity, is also derived from the same Latin root as aspiration, spirare, meaning to breathe, as pointed to by Berlant. Creativity can be both a pathway to, and product of, queer utopias because creativity can pry open space and generate possibilities. Worldmaking and creativity are intricately tied and realized through the boundless youthful energy and imagination of Downtown’s cultural scenes. Generally, these creative practices occurred within a positive affective framework of pleasure and fun (as opposed to restrictive normative definitions of happiness) to reveal how creativity, in combination with nightlife, can breathe *life* into a city’s cultural economy.

Remembering that at the time, the areas of the East Village and the Lower East Side were mainly a draw for disaffected suburban middle-class white youth, and young artistic types. Suburban transplants were drawn to the Downtown’s playscape of low rents, cultural diversity, and social and cultural permissiveness, which in turn supported a chain of subcultural youth movements. In a scathing critique of the East Village art scene, Craig Owens delivers an economically and socially driven analysis to reveal the problematic collision of youth culture and the avant-garde.⁹² With great disdain, he ridicules the East Village art scene by calling it the “enfant-garde,” a simulacral bohemia. Taking issue with East Village youth culture, he professes

⁹⁰ For a survey of the field of queer utopian scholarship, see Angela Jones, *A Critical Inquiry Into Queer Utopias*, 2-3.

⁹¹ Berlant in *Ibid.*

⁹² Craig Owens, “The Problem with Puerilism” *Art In America*, vol. 72, no. 6 (Summer 1983): 162-163.

age as its own subcultural category as youth culture has “co-opted” the avant-garde as fodder for the art market. And in the process, young artists have been innocently duped into catalyzing gentrification.⁹³ Generally speaking, both art and queer communities have been targeted as perpetrators of gentrification. However, this is a highly reductive and unfair accusation. Following such logic, these communities continually and conveniently serve as scapegoats for the larger and more powerful financial, real estate, and government institutions.

Gentrification, taking root in the East Village at the onset of the 1980s, has become accountable for the destruction of the Downtown scene alongside the trauma and devastation of the early AIDS epidemic, which claimed the lives of numerous Downtown artists and inhabitants and impacted countless others. In an ongoing cycle of loss, displacement, and replacement, alongside the rise of conservative values and consumerism since the early 1980s, gentrification and AIDS caused “a diminished consciousness about how political and artistic change get made.”⁹⁴ Reinforcing my argument on the significance of the art-party’s capacity to mix-it-up, cultivate creativity, and to make “new waves,” Sarah Schulman argues that gentrification minimizes diversity and the human capacity to enact change. Homogenization occurs not only in the physical character of the neighborhood itself, across all markers of identification (race, class, etc.), but also in terms of cultural difference and a kind of collective spirituality. Because “Reimagining the world becomes far more difficult,” there is a decline in creative and political

⁹³ Roberta Smith in “The East Village Art Wars,” *Village Voice*, July 17, 1984, 79, reprimands Owens for reductively denouncing the scene, but also chastises East Village art champions Carlo McCormick and Walter Robinson for their blind support and praise. Smith concludes that there are simply good and bad artists within the scene. Published shortly after Owens’s piece, and solidifying the bias against the East Village scene within a group of scholars affiliated with *October*, the gentrification debate is further outlined in Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” *October* 31 (Winter 1984): 91-111.

⁹⁴ Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 14.

imagination that results in “the gentrification of the mind.”⁹⁵

Particularly residing in the younger generation of artists today, this mentality is complicit with institutional structures. Artists, including those that identify as queer, are less inclined to make cultural and political waves and ultimately conform to dominant structures out of blatant careerism.⁹⁶ Schulman also charges professionalization, in the form of elitist MFA programs, with preventing artistic innovation. Moreover, the very meaning of “Downtown” has changed from signifying something inventive, artistic and dangerous, to naming a system for the production of safe art that is a luxury of extreme privilege.⁹⁷ Schulman claims that young queer artists cannot make, or are much too afraid of the risk of making, any reactionary or radical statements indicative of a cultural vanguard. Connecting art to countercultural tendencies, which is the distinct terrain of the art-party, Schulman claims, “Most importantly, real artists—people who invent instead of replicate—need counterculture as a playing field.”⁹⁸ Agreeing with Schulman, cultural innovation and productivity is dependent on countercultural and subcultural space as a fertile breeding ground, which defines the generative milieu of the art-party.

Schulman’s project underscores how urban creativity, gay political mobilization, senses of identity, and even happiness, have all been hijacked by gentrification.⁹⁹ There is a condition of gentrified action, which is a kind of in-action and complacency that results in aesthetic and political *in-activism*. Further supporting my art-party thesis, Schulman claims, “In order for radical queer culture to thrive, there must be diverse, dynamic cities in which we can

⁹⁵ Ibid., 82.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Case in point, Schulman writes on the shifting meaning of Downtown, “The ‘Downtown’ that I was raised in as a young artist included real innovators, real drag queens, real street dykes, real refugees, real Nuyoricans, really inappropriate risk-taking, sexually free nihilistic utopians. Today, ‘Downtown’ means having an MFA from Brown.” Ibid., 101.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 83.

⁹⁹ Ibid., “The Gentrification of Creation,” “The Gentrification of Gay Politics,” and “Conclusion,” 81-133, 154-179.

hide/flaunt/learn/influence—in which there is room for variation and discovery.”¹⁰⁰ Crucially, the art-party makes spatial and psychic “room for variation and discovery” in its dynamics of diversity and its impulses to make and share. The art-party enables a range of creative/social exchanges as an extension of exercising one’s right to city space, through tactics of queer worldmaking and creative placemaking.

Related to the work of Schulman, who cites the trauma of AIDS as causing a “gentrification of the mind” as a consequence of normalization,¹⁰¹ Sara Warner too addresses a conservative and assimilationist politic of homoliberalism, and the revolutionary potential of “acts of gaiety” to undermine its structures.¹⁰² Building upon Lisa Duggan’s definition of “the new homonormativity,”¹⁰³ Warner’s homoliberalism is a legitimizing framework for certain “normative leaning homosexuals” through “individual economic interests, privatized sexual politics, and a constricted notion of national public life.”¹⁰⁴ Homoliberalism is highly depoliticized, and a far cry from equality: it serves to maintain current imbalances of both political and economic power, while simultaneously reinforcing consumer culture and preserving the institutions of marriage, family, and the American dream.¹⁰⁵ Resonating with the art-party, Warner’s “acts of gaiety” use tactics of celebration, silliness, and pleasure to combat homoliberalism, and to “make worlds, albeit illusory and fleeting ones.”¹⁰⁶ While her case studies are not Downtown art-parties, but specifically focus on jovial acts of lesbian performance

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 82.

¹⁰¹ Schulman does not specifically use the terms normalization or homoliberalism, but her politics are very similar and expressed as queer life “streamlining into a highly gendered, privatized family/structure en masse.” *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁰² Sara Warner, *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).

¹⁰³ Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., xi, xviii, 2.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 189.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 9.

as resistance (so often overlooked in queer performance studies), Warner takes on the subject of positive affect and pleasure in both art and activism to write a queer history “documenting and affirming the role of pleasure, humor, fun, and frivolity in shaping the ways sexual minorities come to understand ourselves and the roles in which we have been cast.”¹⁰⁷ Taking Downtown’s politics of fun seriously, my investigation of the art-party aligns with Warner’s “acts of gaiety” and their demonstrated queer worldmaking tactics.

The Art of Parties follows the affective and spatial turns in the humanities, and explores the “frivolous and fun” art-party as a catalyst for creative placemaking and queer worldmaking endeavors. And similarly, instead of focusing on trauma or difficulty in queer history, I too lie on the “positive side” of the affective spectrum, along with Muñoz and Warner, examining the cultural, social, and even political value of the art-party’s fun. While not a calculated response to either the affective or spatial turn, this dissertation places them in dialogue, and is impacted by their discourses and the shifts that they have caused in academia.

Three Case Studies of the Downtown Art-Party

The Art of Parties examines three specific art-party formations during the years 1978-1983: Club 57, *Glenn O’Brien’s TV Party*, and the Nova Convention. In total, the years bracket the brief life spans of the three case studies, and lie within a highly transitional period in Manhattan and U.S. history. While the arts peaked in New York City at the onset of the 1980s, this decadal turn also marks the rapid development of the private sector and the reign of neoliberal policies. Invoking the work of David Harvey, Manhattan in the 1970s is an early

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., xiii.

prototype for neoliberalization.¹⁰⁸ Its operations evidence the self-preservation strategies of economic elites, which revived upper-class capital accumulation. From this point forward, the U.S. and New York City governments have been primarily concerned with supporting financial institutions and sustaining a free market at the expense of public welfare. This certainly impacts and extends to the historical struggle of Downtown New York, as indicated by Shelley's depiction of *The Downtown Body*, over the past few decades.

Predating what is now widely recognized as privatization and gentrification's massive stranglehold on New York City, Downtown's creative party scenes were also post-Warhol's Silver Factory, and pre-Rudolph Giuliani "clean-up," beginning with his appointment as U.S. Prosecuting Attorney in New York City in 1983. While at times in conversation with the general mission of the alternative art space movement, spaces that proliferated since the early 1970s in SoHo, my case studies are sites technically located outside of this movement (e.g. A.I.R. Gallery, Artists Space, The Kitchen). They also precede the explosion of artist-run or unconventional East Village galleries in the early 1980s (e.g. Fun Gallery, Gracie Mansion, Civilian Warfare); and are usually not discussed alongside guerilla-style temporary art exhibitions of the time (e.g. *Times Square Show*, *Real Estate Show*, by Colab, 1980). Opening its doors in 1981, The Fun Gallery was the first East Village commercial gallery and was only in operation for approximately four years. Additionally, by 1985, two large mega-nightclubs had opened their doors Downtown: Area and Palladium. Notably, the Palladium was a club run by the legendary owners of Studio 54, Steve Rubell and Ian Schrager. These large venues caused a commercial shift in nightlife by catering to more mainstream and moneyed tastes, as opposed to the East Village's smaller, underground, and DIY nightlife scenes. Loosely sketched above, the years 1978–1983

¹⁰⁸ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

encapsulate the height of the Downtown scene. This was a moment just prior to the rapid increase of commercialization and gentrification in the East Village and Lower East Side, as well as the onslaught of the early AIDS epidemic.

My chosen case studies all demonstrate the art-party's capacity for collectivity, collaboration, experimentation, mixing, social networking, and cultural exposure, that in turn provide critical promotional platforms for Downtown's underground/ non-mainstream/ youth/ queer/ alternative cultures. To clarify, each term in the previous chain defines sets of cultural activities that prioritize the exploration of potentialities not confined by, but in critical relation to, dominant systems of production and legitimization, such as mainstream or heteronormative culture. Art-parties were sites that mixed the marginalized with the mainstream, and retooled popular culture and mass media with an awareness of past avant-garde art practices to produce new forms of cultural expression. Downtown scenes were marked by experimentation and queer worldmaking ambitions alongside the more banal aspirations for profit or stardom by "crossing over" into accepted cultural institutions. Following urban and cultural sociologist Christopher Mele's definition, each case study of the art-party is also a "representation of place," structured by "historically particular sets of images, rhetoric, and symbols that circulate and signify a particular neighborhood identity."¹⁰⁹ Each site is a historical construction of a "representation of place" that articulates the time and place of Downtown New York, which also includes attitude and culture as markers of identity.

The first case study begins with the most literal example of the Downtown art-party, Club 57, an art and performance-oriented nightclub. From 1978–1983, Club 57 housed performances, film and video screenings, art exhibitions, concerts, and inventive theme parties. Club 57's rapid

¹⁰⁹ Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 5.

rate of do-it-yourself productions illustrates the importance of physical and psychic space to queer and alternative cultures. By constantly doing and making, city space was transformed through Club 57's queer customizations, or what this chapter calls "makeshifting." Even though Club 57 was a raucous new wave kids clubhouse, the participants created a sense of place, or home. Curiously located in a church basement, Club 57 initially catered to students attending the School of Visual Arts (e.g. Kenny Scharf, Keith Haring) and was first managed by the performance artist, Ann Magnuson. Club 57's frenetic pace of campy events reflects a voracious appetite to do, and to queerly customize and re-do, providing a crucial bridge between art school and a more professional and sustainable art career. Club 57's energy, ingenuity, and queer combinations of camp, retro, and punk aesthetics and tactics formatively define Downtown, and demonstrate the operations of its creative economy.

The next chapter on *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party* examines how this art-party took to the airwaves and mixed with a perfect partner for nighttime fun: the unruly and experimental media space of public access cable television. Broadcasting about one hundred episodes, *TV Party* was one of the earliest live public access programs in Manhattan—the first U.S. city wired for cable. *TV Party* not only exemplifies the promises and stigmas of democratized electronic media, but it also provides historical *access* to a kind of *public* constituting Downtown cultural scenes. Airing around midnight, artists and impresarios collectively and independently produced *TV Party* from Downtown's art, music, and nightlife circles. And moreover, the public access studio became a veritable extension of Downtown hot spots, such as the Mudd Club. A chaotic televisual happening as art-party, the show was interactive as home viewers "crashed" *TV Party* through live calls. *TV Party* revels in the theatricality and unpredictability of live television to retool and queer traditional network formats, and to promote Downtown's emerging local cultures through

the then “new medium” of public access cable television. As a form of documentation, the program offers a truly rare glimpse into the real-time, and also mediated time, of the Downtown art-party as both process and product.

The third and final case study analyzes the Nova Convention, a commemorative art-party that celebrated William S. Burroughs as a countercultural, queer, and creative figure; and consecrated him as a cultish Downtown idol in 1978. Reflecting a consciousness and deep pride in Downtown’s own cultural and queer history, this multigenerational art-party situates the Beat and the cut-up technique in the time of punk, hip-hop, and new wave. The collaborative event represented avant-garde luminaries from Downtown’s past and present, and like Club 57 and *TV Party*, it was thoroughly multimodal. Occurring at a constellation of venues, the three-day event was comprised of performance art, poetry, concerts, film screenings, panels, and an art exhibition (with appearances by Allen Ginsberg, Philip Glass, Patti Smith, Laurie Anderson, et al.) Initiated by Sylvère Lotringer, founder of *Semiotext(e)*, the symposium also popularized “French theory” by mixing the journal’s experimental academic agenda with Downtown’s vanguard. Recognizing Burroughs’s artistic achievement and influence for the first time in the U.S., the Nova Convention generated a collective fascination with Burroughs as tied to Downtown as place, and as indicative of Downtown’s countercultural politics and interests. Important to Downtown’s cultural economy, the Nova Convention depicts Downtown’s cultural geography as true palimpsest, which creates a fertile ground for new artists and works in distinct dialogue with New York City’s queer and countercultural history.

All three case studies are representative of independent cultural productions and queer politics, yet all were a result of inventive partnerships with institutions and the neighborhood community. *TV Party* used equipment, facilities, and television channels made possible through

government grants and new policies, corresponding to the rise of cable television. Club 57's space was located in the basement of the Polish National Church, and was technically a church youth group. The Nova Convention was a collaborative effort in which the academe mixed with the historical avant-garde and up-and-coming artists from the Downtown scene to forge new spaces of artistic and intellectual exchange. Nova events were held at an experimental theatre space, New York University, as well as a concert hall, also owned by the Polish community. Through such alliances, the Downtown art-party made space for artistic and personal transformations by providing a permissive and supportive environment for creative experimentation aligned with the "new wave," and for exhibiting local queer and/or non-mainstream cultures. With varying degrees of overlap between scenes, each site depicts a different kind of art-party, along with its associated agendas, intentions, and potential meanings. The case studies attempt to articulate how the art-party was produced and consumed in the context of Downtown, and furthermore, how its varied format promoted the wider circulation of the multiple meanings and associations of "Downtown" itself.

Why Return to Downtown Now?

This dissertation advances the art-party as crucial to the cultural health of New York City. Arguably, the city is now at risk as a viable site for local, experimental and independently produced cultures, and particularly, those that are non-normative and push sociocultural boundaries as queer and/or alternative. Far from the first person to express this sentiment, New York City is at a creative and cultural crossroads. Its troubled status impacts cultural progression by impeding new movements and subcultures, and stagnating what can even begin to be produced. These sites of artistic risk, failure, and rejection—qualities characteristic of any avant-

garde movement—are being squeezed out of cultural production at large. In relation to the art-party, the above lists just some of the factors under threat within a cultural economy that stifles those autonomous urban spaces, and spirits, that foster creativity, cross-pollination and experimentation.

As a result, this predicament leads to what Richard Schechner calls a “conservative avant-garde,” one that has lost its capacity to exceed limits and challenge expectations because it is pre-packaged and pre-legitimized. He also refers to this circumstance as a “niche-garde,” because groups, artists, and works advertise, occupy, and operate as clearly marked and well-known brands.”¹¹⁰ Therefore, the avant-garde is no longer radical or reactionary, or to use Schechner’s past descriptive terms of “current” or “forward-looking,” but instead, it is perpetually static or “conservative,” and is already “known before it is experienced.”¹¹¹ So, there begets the obvious question of how anything “new” can be created under this current avant-garde paradigm. As a solution to such stasis, Schechner remarks, “If there were more ‘bad’ or ‘unacceptable’ performances, that would signal the appearance of a real avant-garde, an actual ‘in advance of.’”¹¹² While perhaps high quality in its slick, well funded, branded, institutionalized, and easily digestible/normative form, the avant-garde has ceased to be innovative or revisionist, along with “bad/unacceptable.” Similar to Schulman’s argument of “gentrification of the mind and creativity,” when vanguards are driven to safety, they do not push societal boundaries, or buttons, and do not venture into any new territories in either content or form. Schechner’s desire to return to the “bad” or “unacceptable” is also reminiscent of Holland

¹¹⁰ Richard Schechner, “The Conservative Avant-Garde,” *New Literary History: a Journal of Theory and Interpretation* vol. 41 no. 4 (2010): 895.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 897. For Schechner’s previous taxonomy and theorization of the five avant-gardes (historical, current, tradition-seeking, forward-looking, and intercultural) see Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 5-20.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 899.

Cotter's sentiment framing this Introduction, where he states there is a need for "a condition of abnormality...where imagining the unknown and the unknowable— impossible to buy or sell—is the primary enterprise."¹¹³ As money leads to "caution and conservatism...Conservative art can encourage conservative criticism," with Cotter also admonishing the state of criticism for its failure to actually criticize, and to only pander to the arts industrial complex.¹¹⁴ While Schechner, Cotter, and Schulman represent an older generation of vanguard supporters (ranging in age and born in the 1930s–1950s), they all chastise younger generations of cultural producers for their lack of imagination and risk, which results in the loss of both a critical and cutting edge.

To add, other voices have chimed in to address the problems of creativity and innovation in cultural production, or the act of just plain making and doing in New York City. Despite op-eds by David Byrne on how New York is a former creative site (and he may move);¹¹⁵ Robert Storr's 2013 College Art Association convocation speech on the difficulty of cracking into the art world now as opposed to thirty-forty years ago;¹¹⁶ or as previously mentioned, Creative Time's 2013 summit on "Art Place & Dislocation in the 21st Century;" to my knowledge, there has been no city response. Unlike the creative economy of Downtown over three decades ago, no longer can any creative type participate as cultural producer and consumer, in the sense of "if there's a will there's a way." And, if one can afford the luxury to be creative in New York City,

¹¹³ Holland Cotter, "The Boom is Over. Long Live the Art!," http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/arts/design/15cott.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

¹¹⁴ Holland Cotter, "Lost in the Gallery-Industrial Complex," *The New York Times* January 17, 2014, accessed February 11, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/19/arts/design/holland-cotter-looks-at-money-in-art.html?_r=0.

¹¹⁵ David Byrne's article was affiliated with the 2013 Creative Time Summit, "Art, Place & Dislocation in the 21st Century City," and also published in *The Guardian*. See David Byrne, "David Byrne, Will Work For Inspiration," *Creative Time Reports*, October 7, 2013, accessed October 14, 2013, <http://creativetimereports.org/2013/10/07/david-byrne-will-work-for-inspiration/>.

¹¹⁶ Robert Storr, "Convocation Address: The Art World We've Made, the Communities We Belong to, the Language We Use, and the Work We Have Yet to Do," *College Art Association*, September 17, 2013, accessed November 3, 2013, <http://www.collegeart.org/features/robertstorrconvocationaddress>.

no matter the specific art/cultural industry, achieving a satisfying balance of live/work/play has an unparalleled high barrier of entry.¹¹⁷ This siphoning effect on creativity, alongside local cultural production consumption, impacts cultural diversity—a characteristic so crucial to urban life itself.

However, *The Art of Parties* is not a forum for stating that creativity and creative worlds are entirely extinct in New York, or even other cities, with absolutely no hope. And furthermore, while admittedly a fan of the work and artists discussed in the next chapters, the purpose of this dissertation is not to romanticize Downtown's past cultural moment. Instead of nostalgia, *The Art of Parties* sheds light on the extreme uphill battle that local cultures and cultural producers now face in comparison to past conditions—which were in fact difficult and far from perfect—in hopes that urban centers will find better ways to support creativity and local alternative and/or queer cultures. This is also to say that money, which can free up time, and access to space, are not quick fixes (although these factors certainly help). These aspects are also highly privileged and rooted in systems of power, with inequalities across class, race, and gender. Like a good night out on the town, or urbanity itself, creativity and the vanguard need a well-balanced, democratic, and eclectic mix of producers, players, and participants.

Ultimately, *The Art of Parties* tackles an ongoing cultural issue in New York City, which extends more broadly to American visual culture. This dilemma applies to other major urban centers in the U.S., and arguably abroad, but such a wide scope would be impossible to assess in the space of this dissertation. On a personal and professional level, attaining a feasible

¹¹⁷ As a personal aside, my friends that currently live in Bushwick and Red Hook in Brooklyn, priced out of Williamsburg, have full time jobs and pay about \$2000 a month for a one-bedroom apartment. Brooklyn is hardly a cheap option. My few friends in my immediate peer group that are still making art at this point, and have somewhat active careers, are supported by a spouse, partner, or parents (and for the most part are straight, white and male). From my personal experience, the field is far from level, and Brooklyn is creeping towards the cost of living in Manhattan with a much more inconvenient commute.

live/work/play model has impacted my own creativity, career path, interests, and more generally, my own capacity to satisfactorily reside for a time in New York City—albeit twenty years after the time period under consideration. My project truly strives to understand what is at stake, and lost, when a major city no longer cultivates its local experimental cultures as precious resource. And critically, I examine a queer and alternative history of collective cultural production and consumption. These reactionary and radical cultures vitally push social norms and cultural boundaries. They also maintain a trajectory of cultural progression of “the new” in hopes of moving towards better tomorrows, or in the words of Lou Reed and The Velvet Underground, discovering what “all tomorrow’s parties” just might bring.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Lou Reed’s song, “All Tomorrow’s Parties” (1967), was inspired and based upon the parties and personalities at Warhol’s Silver Factory.

Chapter 1

Club 57: “Party Gone Out of Bounds”

All the bohemia of the past had one thing in common: they existed at moments in history when a group of losers said, ‘Fuck you’, and turned dystopia into their own kind of utopia.

—Ann Magnuson (2012)¹¹⁹

The NY club scene had evolved into a big playhouse. It was a time full of music and creativity, and if the talent pool was not the biggest, at least there was boundless energy. There was always something going on...

—Alan Platt (undated)¹²⁰

Introduction

Known as “The World’s Greatest Party Band,” the B-52s act as a musical counterpart to the subject of this chapter, the new wave art cabaret, Club 57.¹²¹ Originally from Athens, Georgia, the campy band crash-landed in Downtown New York “like a CARE package from Mars” in late 1977.¹²² Prominently incorporating retro-pop styles and quotations, the queer boy-girl band was named after the 1950s bouffant hairdo that its members often flaunted on stage.¹²³ The high-energy dance-rock of the B-52s eclectically combined doo-wop, space-age sounds, beach party riffs, and garage rock, with the visual culture of John Waters’s trash cinema. The B-52s were immediately welcomed Downtown at a time when dancing was fabled to be “uncool” amongst punk crowds in supposed opposition to the dominance of mainstream disco: “for their

¹¹⁹ Richard Metzger, “East Village Preservation Society,” *Dazed & Confused*, March, 2012, accessed May 8, 2012, <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/12458/1/east-village-preservation-society-club-57>.

¹²⁰ *The Nomi Song*, “About Klaus Nomi,” accessed February 6, 2012, <http://thenomisong.com/about.htm>

¹²¹ This title is reflected on the band’s web site *The B-52s*, “About,” accessed March 3, 2012, <http://theb52s.com/about/>; and in Mats Sexton’s book on the band, *The B-52’s Universe: The Essential Guide to the World’s Greatest Party Band* (Minneapolis, MN: Plan-B Books, 2002). The band is commonly referred to as “The World’s Greatest Party Band,” and is often designated as “queer,” or camp, due to the known sexual identities of the band. The B-52’s also have deep ties to the 1980s AIDS crisis. Band member Ricky Wilson died of AIDS related complications in 1985, and furthermore, “Party Out of Bounds” also names the B-52’s AIDS fundraising event in Georgia, starting in 1995. See, Scott Dagostino, “Bohemian Rhapsody: How some artsy queer kids in Georgia became the World’s Greatest Party Band,” *Fab: The Gay Scene Magazine*, no. 341, March 5, 2008, accessed May 3, 2013, <http://archive.fabmagazine.com/features/341/b52.html>.

¹²² Alan Platt, “Hairdos By Laverne” *SoHo Weekly News*, August 9, 1979, 17.

¹²³ The original B-52s were the brother-sister team of Cindy Wilson and Ricky Wilson, in combination with Fred Schneider, Kate Pierson, and Keith Strickland.

theatrical approach easily fit with the avant-garde and performance art that was then the rage of the [D]owntown art scene.”¹²⁴ Popular music scholar Simon Reynolds even names Club 57 as the spiritual home of the B-52s and as epitomizing “mutant disco.”¹²⁵ Club 57 shared the B-52s’ new wave sensibilities, which combined retro, camp and punk aesthetics and tactics into an exuberant passion for having fun.¹²⁶ In the Downtown moment of “mutant disco,” mingling in the permissive environment of Club 57 allowed the vanguard to freely mix pop cultural forms and retro styles, and to creatively produce new works through queer appropriation and reinterpretation.

Longtime *Village Voice* music critic Robert Christgau reminisces, “The B-52s were New York’s last great club band partly because they were too all-embracing for its club scene.”¹²⁷ This notion of the all-embrace, which practices an appreciation of all things “out-of-bounds,” not only applies to the band’s amalgamation of musical genres and retro-pop culture, but also to a kind of openness and inventiveness more broadly associated with the new wave.¹²⁸ In 1979, the commonalities between new wave music and the Downtown art scene were described as: “openness—a wide embrace that hangs together art and life-in-the-world. Another is the will to reinvent disciplines... The New Wave has been blessed with people who constantly remind us of

¹²⁴ Platt, “Hairdos By Laverne,” 17; and Cateforis *Are We Not New Wave?*, 122.

¹²⁵ The cultural exchanges of mutant disco only thrived for a few short years Downtown as bracketed by the transitional years that are the focus of my dissertation. Further Reynolds cites 1981 as the height of mutant disco. See Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, 261, 278.

¹²⁶ For an analysis of how the B-52s appropriate and remix from America’s cultural dustbin, and utilize camp, kitsch and trash, see Cateforis “Camp! Kitsch! Trash! New Wave and the Politics of Irony,” *Are We Not New Wave?*, 95-122.

¹²⁷ Robert Christgau, “Living Legends: The B-52s,” in *Grown Up All Wrong: 75 Great Rock and Pop Artists from Vaudeville to Techno* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 305.

¹²⁸ While Theo Cateforis examines irony within the B-52s’s new wave/camp aesthetic, my chapter reads new wave as rooted in the more loving, performative, and appropriative aspects of camp. See Cateforis, “Camp! Kitsch! Trash! New Wave and the Politics of Irony,” *Are We Not New Wave?*, 95-122.

the vital connection between art and life.”¹²⁹ Openness, ingenuity, eclecticism, and the collapse of art into (night)life were fundamental to the new wave practices and productions of Club 57.

Club 57 built upon the stripped-down, cynical, amateur, and DIY characteristics of punk, to fill it with a new wave mix of camp parody, play, possibility, and most of all, fun. In fact, it was the artiness, silliness, and fun-factors, often used as descriptors for both Club 57 and the B-52s, that sever the category of new wave from its immediate predecessor, punk—not simply the popular conception that new wave was punk’s more sanitized and radio-friendly cousin. Music critic Alan Platt reinforces this difference in his review of the B-52s, “Even their visuals are perfectly aimed to puncture the seriousness that punk rock has gotten itself into, and they do it without any nostalgia. The only thing they are looking back to is a good time.”¹³⁰ Symbolizing “pure affirmation,”¹³¹ the B-52s and the new wave diverged from punk’s “No Future” stereotype, as the B-52s transformed into “the ultimate pop art rock band.”¹³²

The new wave tendency to queerly mix and appropriate a wide range of retro-pop and trash elements became a distinct Downtown art-party impulse, and nowhere was it more prominent than at Club 57. Playfully blending different styles, histories, identities, art forms, and exhibition types on high speed, Club 57 demonstrates Downtown’s fusion of retro, camp, and punk to articulate the art of the “everynight” as a Downtown mode of cultural production.¹³³ Producing events at an alarming rate, Club 57 held art exhibitions, fashion shows, theatrical performances, theme parties, film and video screenings, and concerts, amongst other types of

¹²⁹ William Zimmer, “Art Goes To Rock World on Fire,” *SoHo Weekly News*, September 27, 1979, 33.

¹³⁰ Platt, “Hairdos By Laverne,” 17

¹³¹ Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, 262.

¹³² Stephen Holden, “The B-52s’ American Graffiti,” *Village Voice*, August 13, 1979, 60.

¹³³ The “art of the everynight” is a play on words based on Michel de Certeau’s writings on everyday social activity and urban life in the *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). The term has also been previously and similarly used in the title of Celeste F. Delgado and José E. Muñoz, *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

hybrid activities. On a minimal budget, the Club 57 community demonstrated maximal energy, aesthetics, and productivity. Club 57 was DIY and raw, while also playful and excessively full of camp's overinvestment and performativity. Club 57's forms of play have been described as, "playful in both the childlike and theatrical senses of the word 'play.' Artifice was celebrated and gender was treated as performative rather than innate;"¹³⁴ and as, "a playpen of fanciful make-believe...encouraging dress-up, act-out, and singing-along."¹³⁵ To this end, Club 57's collapse of art into (night)life has too been explained as: "Private obsessions with stars, styles, sexual variations, and fads of bygone decades became the theme of the club, both on and off stage."¹³⁶ This combination of retro, camp, and punk had political purpose as it informed Club 57's queer worldmaking and creative placemaking practices. A routine engagement in Club 57's activities was a way to partake in a Downtown community of fellow "players," both "on and off stage."

Although Downtown New York has been historicized as a licentious pansexual romper room for fun,¹³⁷ this characteristic especially applies to the creative spirit of Club 57. Haring remarks that Club 57's collective sense of sexuality transcended sexual orientation and identification: "There was a very open sexual situation because, at that point, everyone was pretty much bisexual anyway, so it didn't really matter if you were gay or not."¹³⁸ Scharf further reinforces Haring's sentiment on fluid sexuality, but in connection to actual ownership over space: "At Club 57 there were drugs and promiscuity—it was one big orgy family. Sometimes I'd look around and say, 'Oh, my God! I've had sex with everybody in this room!'... We'd also

¹³⁴ Ibid., 265.

¹³⁵ Frank and McKenzie, *New Used and Improved*, 65-66.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 66.

¹³⁷ Marvin J. Taylor, "Playing The Field: The Downtown Scene and Cultural Production, An Introduction," in *The Downtown Book*, 17.

¹³⁸ Gruen, *Keith Haring*, 48.

go to the Mudd Club, but Club 57 was really our turf.”¹³⁹ A tight-knit “orgy family,” Club 57 queered the suburban family unit as well as domestic entertainment space (living room, rec room, patio, etc.) Along this trajectory, Magnuson comments on social bonding through a shared community defiance of sociocultural norms and institutionalized aesthetics:

Psychologists say that there are two reactions to authority: compliance or defiance. And everyone in that scene were the defiant ones on some level... So it was exciting to find other people who felt the same way... Of course a lot people liked to drink and do drugs too, but there were less sexual constraints, there were far less economic constraints, there were less psychological constraints, and there were far far far less aesthetic constraints as to what was art, what was not art, what was beauty, what was ugly, what was funny or not funny.¹⁴⁰

Club 57’s sense of sexual and personal freedom was intimately tied to creative freedom, and importantly, it was situated within a collective, independently produced, community-oriented space.

Club 57’s open and youthful community spirit was highly supportive of queer sexualities and queer forms of visual cultural expression. Downtown scenester Edit deAk commented on this sense of inclusivity within the new wave, “The New York New Wave scene is, so far, the only tolerant scene I know of—more even than any other bohemian scene—just completely tolerant of any kind of ‘perversion,’ class, sex, color. It’s integrated in an unbelievable fashion.”¹⁴¹ Similarly, Club 57 has also been described as “a varied but specific crowd that only happens in this neighborhood; highly gay but certainly not exclusively; a really healthy mix of rock and roll art types with lots of girls and gay boys running things. It is a very special place, always comfortable but fun!”¹⁴² Club 57’s rotating art-party enabled mixing and mingling across

¹³⁹ Ibid., 46.

¹⁴⁰ Ann Magnuson, interview with author, January 2014.

¹⁴¹ Edit deAk, “Liberals Can’t Integrate,” *Alive*, “Beach Issue,” July/August 1982, vol. 1, no. 1, 20.

¹⁴² David Smith, “Where the Boys Are,” *Topman*, March 23, 1981, 18.

various identity types, as well as subcultural, popular, and retro styles, and in turn reprocessed them into new forms of cultural expression.

In constantly doing and making, participants created a place of their own—Club 57—through a process of what this chapter calls, “make-shifting.” A transformative concept of creative placemaking and queer worldmaking, make-shifting names an inventive alliance to occupy space for cultural production and consumption, while also opening-up space for different kinds of artistic and social expressions which communicate alternative and queer ways of being in the world. Club 57 incubated experimental works and exhibition cultures outside more traditional support structures (theatre, gallery, museum), as well as alternative art spaces coexisting Downtown. Club 57 was a queer nightworld that provided an alternative to the alternative arts space as Downtown’s premier new wave art cabaret.

Given Club 57’s underground and queer cultures, the multi-use art space was surprisingly located in the basement of the Holy Cross Polish National Church at 57 St. Mark’s Place—“a place where the Pope will never visit.”¹⁴³ Graffiti covered and small, Club 57 member Kenny Scharf describes the modest space:

It’s just a basement, you walk down, there’s no windows. There was a bathroom on the entrance, you know a girls and a boys, and a little hallway-basement-bar on one side, jukebox in the corner and a little raised platform in the back, which was the stage. Ceilings were really low, you know, and smoking was allowed then...There was no ventilation. It was all very, you know, cheap. I mean, nothing cost anything back then.¹⁴⁴

On record, Club 57 was a church youth group with a paid membership system that technically allowed the club to run without a liquor license. However, Club 57 would not evade a series of court orders for noise violations by the Environmental Protection Agency; attempts of censorship

¹⁴³ Tom Viola “Collective Lunacy,” *SoHo Weekly News*, October 27, 1981, 55.

¹⁴⁴ Kenny Scharf in Yasmine Van Pee, “Boredom is Always Counterrevolutionary: Art in Downtown New York Nightclubs, 1978-1985” (MA thesis Bard College, Center for Curatorial Studies, 2004), 89.

by neighbors; temporary shutdowns due to late payments of fines; and occasional panic caused by check-in visits from the Church's head priest.¹⁴⁵ Highly unusual for queer and experimental arts narratives, which tend to exist outside of and at odds with, church, state, and family institutions, this clever "church youth group" pulled off numerous subversive events that celebrated freedom of expression, aided by the tolerance of the Church's liaison, Stanley Strychacki.

As a consequence of Club 57's unusual partnership with the Holy Cross Polish National Church, indicative of creative placemaking, Club 57 enabled its participants to explore queer modes of being, cultural critique, fantasy, and fandom, through a variety of activities and productions.¹⁴⁶ Dan Friedman, an art director and designer who frequented Club 57 remarks, "It was an organic transformation of people into a living theatre. They were expanding their boundaries, altering and pushing them by creating fantasy environments."¹⁴⁷ The participants whom built Club 57 occupied a church basement, which had been previously used for polka and bingo nights within the Polish community, with the reputation for being a hangout for old, drunk, and belligerent Polish men.¹⁴⁸ The young and energetic habitués collectively turned the space into a fantastical playscape, and made physical room for the exploration of performance types, personas, and cultural exchange, which lead to both personal and creative transformations.

¹⁴⁵ Tony Heiberg, "5 Years of Fab 57," in the column, "On the Town," *East Village Eye*, October 1982, 21.

¹⁴⁶ While the Judson Memorial Church famously supported a Downtown avant-garde a generation earlier in the West Village, and qualifies as a progressive alliance, it was not a nightclub space, but provided space for arts events. See Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963*, 250-254.

¹⁴⁷ Hager, *Art After Midnight*, 82.

¹⁴⁸ There is a self-published book by Stanley Strychacki in which he details his patience for his artsy kids, and his love of Club 57. Due to issues of inaccuracy and subjectivity in his text, as communicated by some of the Club 57 participants that I interviewed, I have opted not to site his memoir as historical reference beyond this paragraph. For Strychacki's heart-felt view of Club 57 and its key players, see Strychacki, *Life As Art: The Club 57 Story* ([S.I.] iUniverse Inc., 2012).

Considered along the lines of Raymond Williams’s “structures of feeling,” this second chapter analyzes the queer, imaginative, and highly productive environment of Club 57.¹⁴⁹ It demonstrates how Club 57’s new wave fusion of camp, retro, and punk tactics and aesthetics became emblematic of Downtown’s creative economy and notions of “Downtown” itself. An experimental cultural laboratory on a low-to-no budget, Club 57 was a creative leisure/work space that provided a vital bridge between art school and a more “professional” arts career—a space that is practically non-existent in large American cities today. Club 57 was predominantly artist-run, and most notably by the actress and performance artist, Ann Magnuson, then a recent liberal arts school graduate and “suburban refugee” from West Virginia. The story of Club 57 also significantly contributes to the underserved narrative of how young adult women, such as Magnuson, were involved in creative management and entrepreneurial positions Downtown.¹⁵⁰ In addition, Club 57’s history has been overshadowed by historical narratives more strictly attached to punk or disco, with scholarship and/or documentary films concentrating on Downtown clubs such as CBGBs, the Mudd Club, or Paradise Garage.¹⁵¹

This chapter opens with the evolution of Club 57 as a new wave, art and performance oriented nightclub. Here, the historical development of the art-party is considered in conjunction with place, as an active medium, and as indicative of makeshifting space. While Club 57’s

¹⁴⁹ Raymond Williams’s “structures of feeling” refers to the lifestyle, attitudes, values, and shared experience of a particular generation as tied to a specific time and place. According to Williams, a structure of feeling can be found in cultural forms and everyday (or even nighttime) activities. See Raymond Williams, “Structures of Feeling,” in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128-136. Although Williams uses the term across his writings, for a working definition, also see Michael Payne, ed., *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory* (Oxford, OX, UK: Blackwell Reference, 1996), 670.

¹⁵⁰ While Ann Magnuson is discussed within the framework of Club 57 in this chapter, there are many other noteworthy female cultural pioneers, such as Patti Astor, co-owner of the FUN Gallery; Gracie Mansion, owner of Gracie Mansion Gallery; and Tish and Snookie Bellomo, owners of Manic Panic. Amongst others, these are just some of the women who carved out Downtown’s cultural landscape, and left indelible marks.

¹⁵¹ This will soon change with the release of Tim Lawrence’s new book in 2016, *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-83*, in which Club 57 is included. Lawrence’s book mirrors the time frame of my dissertation, and his scholarship will be reflected upon and incorporated once the volume becomes available.

makeshifting lies outside of the alternative art space movement, it is located within the rich historical trajectories of bohemia, counterculture, and vaudeville on the Lower East Side. To emphasize Club 57 as a place for doing, the main activities of the club are outlined to include screenings, queer performance types, temporary and inclusive art exhibitions, and theme parties. This examination includes smaller community/collective formations within Club 57, with an emphasis on the Ladies Auxiliary of the Lower East Side, to emphasize Downtown's emerging queer culture as an expressive arena for women's voices. My historical reconstruction of Club 57's cultural activity, through select examples, facilitates an understanding of Club 57's aesthetics, along with its cultural legacy and impact. To exemplify Club 57's new wave praxis of the "everynight," I analyze the graphic design of Ann Magnuson's monthly Club 57 calendar. In conclusion, Club 57's vibrant and highly permissible "anything goes" and "let's put on a show" outlook directly informed art, performance, and nightlife throughout the 1980s, in the forms of Fun Art and East Village Pop Performance.

The Art-Party's Nighttime Alternative to the Alternative Art Space

Amongst other nightlife options Downtown, Club 57 developed a signature aesthetic across an assortment of creative activity and a committed social following. In conceiving the art-party as a kind of medium, people and culture can be potentially transformed through place: Club 57 mediated both social experience and cultural production. Anthony Haden-Guest, reporter of New York's social life and socialites, advances a party as a medium and art form:

The notion that parties can be works of art, that partygoers are players, and that the long night itself can be considered as a raw art material would be no news at a Jacobean masque or in sixteenth-century Venice. It is certainly as old as organized nightlife itself. Steve Rubell and Ian Schrager made a conceptual advance when they applied the idea to clubland, actually putting partygoers onstage in Studio 54. It was a further development

when performance art was incorporated into theme parties at Mudd and Club 57.¹⁵² Along the lines of Haden-Guest, it is performance, in the context of partying as art that differentiates and potentializes Club 57 as a creative site. Corroborating this view, and connecting it to ideas of place, urban and cultural sociologist Christopher Mele claims: “Since subcultures were located on the Lower East Side and interacted in varying degrees with neighborhood residents, their practices, their rituals, symbols, and rhetoric were often shaped and transformed by the active medium of place.”¹⁵³

This section addresses how Club 57 formed through its energetic participants and their new wave aesthetics, and was further framed by the cultural history and environmental context of Downtown. In part, place is something constructed by people, through a history of activity as well as memory. Club 57 was a place for participants to just *be* and *do* and *make* nearly every night of the week. Existing alongside, yet outside of the alternative art space movement, Club 57 embraced a DIY impulse to incessantly modify space, which I further detail as a process of “makeshifting.” The following section provides the social and historical context to how Club 57 spatially and aesthetically formed, and ultimately demonstrates the art-party as an active and site-specific medium.

As liveness is central to *TV Party*'s dissemination of local nightlife cultures on public access television, live performance and different kinds of *nightlife* experience more generally shaped the social and cultural milieu of Downtown. Scharf remarks (although unknowingly) on the vibrant form of the art-party: “I love having art that you can dance in. It becomes alive.

¹⁵² Anthony Haden-Guest, *The Last Party: Studio 54, Disco, and the Culture of the Night* (New York: William Morrow, 1997), 251.

¹⁵³ Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 27.

Visual art itself is alive, but when you have music and people, it's a great performance."¹⁵⁴ In fact, the inaugural issue of *Alive*, "the New Performance Magazine," targeted the phenomenon of Downtown nightlife, which mixed visual and performance arts across nightclub and alternative art spaces. A short-lived Downtown-publication, *Alive* delivers its mission statement in the following play on words: "New dance, music, theatre, performance, film and video is at a fever pitch, and the news needs to get out. It's what being ALIVE in New York is all about."¹⁵⁵ To experience this major cultural trend across the arts, one could frequent CBGB, the Mudd Club, Danceteria, and Club 57, venues credited as the most influential Downtown.¹⁵⁶ *Alive* specifically promotes the intersection of nightlife and the arts as producing the most new and exciting culture in New York—full of life and energy.

In the first issue of *Alive*, Merle Ginsberg, a *SoHo Weekly News* columnist who chronicled what to do Downtown, credits Club 57 with the development of "club art," and describes the vibe at Club 57:

I trace the roots of club art to the basement of a church on St. Marks Place, the now-infamous Little Club 57. There, a bunch of "kids" (recent college grads, mostly) who wanted to be actors and performers, and who hung out at CBGB's, started their own social club and began "throwing" events. They considered what they did as "entertainment," not "art" and certainly not that boring and pretentious stuff known as performance "art."¹⁵⁷

While club art is proposed as entertainment, and not "boring and pretentious performance art," the East Village became synonymous with underground culture, and the term "Downtown." Danceteria nightclub impresario, Rudolph Pieper, comments on the divisions between Uptown

¹⁵⁴ This comment was in reference to Scharf's "Cosmic Cavern Space" in Brooklyn. I would certainly classify it as an art-party, and a derivation of Scharf's installation at the nightclub, Area, and more generally the Downtown art-party. See Emily Colucci, "You Can't Plan Fun: An Interview With Kenny Scharf," *Art 21*, June 27, 2012, accessed 8 July 2013, <http://blog.art21.org/2012/06/27/you-cant-plan-fun-an-interview-with-kenny-scharf/#.Utn8xOWttGE>.

¹⁵⁵ "Mission Statement, Beach Issue," *Alive*, July/August 1982, vol. 1, no. 1, 2.

¹⁵⁶ Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 218.

¹⁵⁷ "Night(life) Imitates Art," by Merle Ginsberg, *Alive*, "Beach Issue," vol. 1, no. 1, July/August 1982, 7.

and Downtown, and reinforces the perception that Club 57 was foundational to Downtown's cultural explosion and meaning: "‘uptown was basically ignoring what was going on in the rest of the world.’ Uptown means in this instance, of course, much of the clientele of Studio. ‘There were not that many ideas uptown. Uptown was oblivious to the entire art trend that was happening in SoHo and the East Village, that was fun, and interesting, and that originated at Club 57 on St. Marks Place.’"¹⁵⁸ While Uptown was interiorized by the glamour and manufactured hype of Studio 54, Club 57 once again is named as an innovator of Downtown trends, implied here as underground and subcultural. Solidifying the East Village and Lower East Side's alignment with the underground, Mele designates underground club culture and its aesthetics as socio-geographically specific:

Club spaces with their flair for the exotic and shocking were representative of a larger cultural transformation that transpired in tandem with the physical and social decline of the East Village, and Loisada in particular. Underground developed as an urban aesthetic that characterized a wide variety of cultural forms in addition to music, including fiction, poetry, fashion, and visual arts. In the 1980s the underground aesthetics that reflected the underbelly of the city emerged as a nationally and internationally recognized cultural genre.¹⁵⁹

Underground aesthetics, across a variety of cultural forms, became coupled to the East Village through its "aboveground" popularization, as evidenced by the scene's exposé in *People Magazine* in 1984.¹⁶⁰ Yet historically, before 1965, the nominal designation of the East Village was not in the popular nor real estate lexicon.

The "East Village" was a term first used by hippies whom flocked to the neighborhood by the thousands in the summers of 1966 and 1967.¹⁶¹ The new neighborhood name was

¹⁵⁸ Anthony Haden-Guest, *The Last Party*, 108.

¹⁵⁹ Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 219.

¹⁶⁰ Michael Small, "Art After Midnight," *People Magazine*, August 20, 1984, 98-107.

¹⁶¹ Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 173. For a history of hippie counterculture in the East Village, see his entire chapter, "A Brief Psychedelic Detour," 153-180.

reinforced and spread by the local countercultural rag, *The East Village Other* (1965-1972). Not necessarily coined by New York City's greed-infested real estate market, the East Village first denoted a highly visible and public hippie counterculture. The East Village nominally designated the East Coast's hippie center, as opposed to the Eastern European or Puerto Rican communities also residing there.¹⁶² These notions of bohemia, counterculture, and the underground, whether hippie-communal or in its later incarnation as the new wave art-party, all construct perceptions of Downtown New York that are particularly embedded in East Village cultural history. The East Village is still considered a "distinctively American bohemia" that "remains as a cultural ideal for youth—popular, broadly accessible, multiracial, and multiclass."¹⁶³ Because the Lower Eastside has a historical lineage more situated in theatre (vaudeville, "Jewish Rialto") and literature (Beats) as opposed to visual arts, Downtown has been argued to be a bohemia, as opposed to the more academic and art historical accounts of the avant-garde.¹⁶⁴

Blurring histories and theories, constructions of both bohemia and the avant-garde aid in delineating Club 57 and its cultural contributions. Elizabeth Wilson describes bohemia not as a counter-site, but as relational to dominant culture since 1960: popular culture has not erased bohemia but has transformed it. From hippies to punks to new romantics to queer culture, mass culture was bohemianized as much as bohemia was commercialized.¹⁶⁵ Bohemia is also "a stage, a multiple performance," and a means to an end, "a destination and a journey to that

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁶³ Alan Moore and Jim Cornwell, "Local History: The Art of Battle for Bohemia in New York" in *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective*, Julie Ault, ed. (New York; Minneapolis: Drawing Center; University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 324. In addition, Liza Kirwin also mentions constructions of the East Village as "a different bohemia" and the "neo frontier" by the popular press in the 1980s. See Kirwin, "EV in the Press," 1999; and "It's All True: Imagining New York's East Village Art Scene of the 1980s" (PhD dissertation, University of Maryland at College Park, 1999).

¹⁶⁴ Alan Moore and Jim Cornwell, "Local History: The Art of Battle for Bohemia in New York," 323-324.

¹⁶⁵ Elizabeth Wilson, *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 231.

destination.”¹⁶⁶ Wilson defines bohemia as an attempt by Western artists and intellectuals to form alternative worlds within society, which connects to queer worldmaking. This carving out of space, motivated by creativity in conjunction with political beliefs, conveys the dual agenda of Club 57’s queer worldmaking and creative placemaking.

After the flower power wilted, New York City’s mounting problems became concretized in the East Village in the 1970s. Because of the low-to-no-rents, one could afford the luxury to pursue multiple creative and/or leisurely interests, free from the normative social and temporal constraints of a 9-to-5 day job. Club 57 member and manager, Kai Eric, romantically reflects on Club 57’s emergence and vigorous creativity as a product of the economic, social, and mythological facets of New York City:

New York in the late 70’s and early eighties was economically depressed and crime ridden. Times Square was full of Junkies, Prostitutes and sex shops. However rents were very affordable. Although the east side was littered with abandoned buildings and ruins, one could take over a storefront and overnight it would become a gallery or a rehearsal space. It seems in retrospect that people had more free time and could survive working just one or two days a week. Perhaps because the city had served as a backdrop for so many poignant films (i.e. “Midnight Cowboy” and “Taxi Driver”), there existed a romantic allure and dark poetic notion of NYC at the time. In the same way that certain artists are curious about heroin and drag queens are attracted to tinsel, the city became a magnet for art students, runaways and lost personalities. The circumstances all came together in a rare mix where the creative and their inspirations could live side by side in dark dramatic splendor.¹⁶⁷

Eric addresses the benefits of free time and free space, as well as the appeal of New York’s grittier aspects, including its popularization via “New Hollywood” film, to artists and social misfits (or artist as social misfit). The collective goal seemed to be maintaining a state of creative

¹⁶⁶ Wilson, *Bohemians*, 9.

¹⁶⁷ Kai Eric, “A Q&A with Kai Eric, Co-Curator and member of the Club 57 house band,” *CLUB 57 WHERE ARE YOU? Harvey Wang’s Photographs of the Legendary East Village Club 1979-1983* (show dates July 9-31, 2005), accessed May 8, 2011, <http://classic.harveywang.com/club57kai.htm>.

and social freedom, as opposed to monetary or career gain, which lasted for only a brief time Downtown.

Eric's quote also points towards the ongoing popular perception that economic downturn is good for creativity, which enabled not only Club 57 to thrive, but all of Downtown New York. Roy Trakin writes in 1979 for *SoHo Weekly News*: "The incredible plethora of nighttime activity these days in New York is eerily reminiscent of another time when speakeasys and honkytonks flourished. It is no secret that economic hardship encourages the growth of leisure-time activities. The '80s are gonna be tough, kids...' Let's just dance!"¹⁶⁸ While this generalization was realized in print at the time, and predates Steven Hager's sentiment that people made their own "fun" out of a bad situation Downtown, this correlation is repeatedly cited in recent scholarship on nightlife and creativity in New York City.¹⁶⁹ Economic recession is understood to be historically advantageous to nightlife, and moreover, the same argument has been extended to the contemporary art world with longtime *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter cheering on the market bust of 2008.¹⁷⁰ Scharf and Magnuson directly address the struggling artist in 2011: "...you don't need money [to] make art. In fact it's better without it!"¹⁷¹ While money is good for the art market, there is a dominant perception that big money damages creativity and art, and the forward propulsion of culture. When the affluent are in complete control of the art market, with the art market legitimizing cultural value as capital value, then money is considered detrimental to culture, and certainly no fun for the other 99% of the population.

¹⁶⁸ Roy Trakin, "Clubbing In The '80s: I Love The Nightlife" *SoHo Weekly News*, December 20, 1979.

¹⁶⁹ Supporting this generalization, see Phil Jackson, "The Pursuit of Pleasure," in *Club Kids: From Speakeasies to Boombox and Beyond*, Raven Smith, ed. (London: Black Dog, 2008), 11; and Currid-Halkett, *The Warhol Economy*, 12; and Hager, *Art After Midnight*, 1.

¹⁷⁰ Revealing the positive aspects of 2008's financial, Holland Cotter delivers a brief history of art booms and busts since 1960, asserting, "as has been true before, a financial scouring can only be good for American art," my case in point. See Cotter, "The Boom is Over. Long Live Art!,"

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/arts/design/15cott.html?pagewanted=all>

¹⁷¹ Ann Magnuson and Kenny Scharf, *East Village West*, (Royal/T Gallery, Culver City, CA: 2011), 1.

Returning again to Eric's quote, New York's legendary underground is connected to Warhol's Silver Factory and Superstars in the popular conscious, which further magnetized Downtown. Extending beyond the limits of Downtown, historian Andreas Killen describes the 1970's phenomenon of "Warholism:" Warhol's powerful influence on American culture through "nostalgia, camp, and irony, [and] the claustrophobic minutiae of life inside of the media echo chamber."¹⁷² Richard Metzger, who arrived in New York after Club 57 closed but when its alumni still ruled 1980s nightlife, too understands Warhol's Factory as a mobilizing force for the early club art scene:

By the early 80s, the myth of Warhol and the sexy, druggy, doomed denizens who were his Factory's superstars had spread pretty much everywhere, even to the remotest redneck corners of America (like my West Virginia hometown). For a certain type of kid, what they imagined Andy Warhol's social life to be provided the impetus to move to New York City and reinvent themselves like the people in the photograph, who were associated with Club 57, a nightclub in the basement of a church where all the young art-school types hung out. They seemed like the second generation, drawn in by that Warhol myth but doing their own things.¹⁷³

While Warhol may have been the impetus and inspiration for a "certain type of kid," implied here as artist/queer/social misfit, and the Silver Factory certainly was an antecedent for partying as art, Club 57 participants are credited for inventively "doing their own thing," and expanding upon a Warholian Factory framework. In other words, the East Village's biggest art-star exports, Haring, Scharf and Basquiat, settled or stayed in New York due to Warhol's legacy, but, they also independently paved their own way: "This trio of young artists had come to New York City because Andy Warhol lived here, and they are not going to wait for the serious fun to begin.

¹⁷² Andreas Killen, "Warholism," in *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol, and the Birth of Post-Sixties America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), 138, 137-162.

¹⁷³ Metzger, "East Village Preservation Society," <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/12458/1/east-village-preservation-society-club-57>.

They started it themselves.”¹⁷⁴ Although there are many differences between the Silver Factory and Club 57, Eric further comments, “Personally, I always thought of it [Club 57] as a low rent answer to Andy Warhol’s Factory. What the Factory was to the sixties 57 was to the eighties.”¹⁷⁵ This “low-rent” quality speaks to the socioeconomic context of the East Village and Lower East Side, but it also describes the way in which Club 57’s DIY ethos was sparked by imagination, play and the independent spirit to “do their own thing.” This trash/camp aesthetic is more aligned with the work of Jack Smith—with his exuberant pop-cultural quotation of B-Hollywood excess and his artistic philosophy of ecstatic chaos—as opposed to the slick figurehead of Warhol. Club 57 was not simply “playing Factory,” unless they were specifically celebrating it as a theme party night.¹⁷⁶ Prominently, Club 57 also lacked a central Warholian figure to satellite around. Instead, Club 57 collectively reinvented the art-party, a generation later, within a recession-plagued urban space.

However, prior to the Silver Factory, the art-party can be traced back further to the beginnings of modern art in Europe, from the Parisian cabarets of Monmartre to Zurich’s Dadaist hangout, the Cabaret Voltaire. Moreover, the Downtown press understood this longer lineage of the art-party. Straying from the atmosphere of the stuffy and “dry” art institution, journalist Gerald Marzorati claims that it is “the mixed-bag of art-cum entertainment activity” that this new wave of art cabaret inherits from the Cabaret Voltaire. But, it is the fun-factor and disregard for high/low categorical distinctions that separates the new wave art cabaret from the oppressive

¹⁷⁴ Richard D. Marshall, “The Fun’s Inside: The Paintings of Kenny Scharf,” in *Kenny Scharf* (New York: Rizzoli, 2009), 33.

¹⁷⁵ Eric, “A Q&A with Kai Eric,” <http://classic.harveywang.com/club57kai.htm>.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.* Kai Eric also mentions Factory and Warhol inspired events: “Many events directly tipped their hat to Warhol. For example, ‘Velvet Mania’ was a tribute to the Velvet Underground where Ann brought the house down when she performed as Nico. (Velvet Mania was an answer to the Broadway show Beatle Mania. The poster designed by John Sex contained their modified slogan, ‘Not the Velvets but an incredible simulation’).”

constraints of modern art principles.¹⁷⁷ Marzorati's article, and point, is illustrated by a photograph of Scharf spinning a hula-hoop around his neck at Club 57. For Marzorati, the art cabaret of the past has been resurrected Downtown:

Now after an almost 50-year dark age the art cabaret has, you might say, made a comeback. Why the idea of "artistic entertainment" should choose the late '70s to rear its drunken, madcapped head in the U.S. can be attributed to number of factors, not the least of which is boheme geography. For about the past 10 years, the majority of today's avant movers and shakers (painters and poets, performers and players) have huddled below Houston Street, supporting each other's work, and buying each other's rounds. It is no coincidence that all the current art cabarets have hung their shingles downtown.¹⁷⁸

Marzorati specifically indicates that these new art cabarets are located Downtown, coexisting in the very space where artists can actually live, and moreover socialize in its "boheme geography." Here, Downtown provides a satisfying model for creative types by allowing a fluid interchange between *art as work as play*.

Underground aesthetics and the art cabaret have been argued as inherent to the social and economic conditions of the Lower Eastside, and the progression of its cultural history. Further, it is the mix of people Downtown that created Club 57. Stephen Saban, a prominent nightlife voice in the Downtown press, raises the question of the role of a club's crowd: "A party is one thing. A club is another. When you go to a club you're supposed to party. So why not just go to a party?"

¹⁷⁹ In answering his own inquiry, he comes to the conclusion that it "is the people who go there—and that is what ultimately makes anywhere work. It doesn't matter what the decor is like, how big it is, how many bars, or how many floors, speakers, toilets or lightbulbs. It's who

¹⁷⁷ Bernard Gendron also describes the collapse between high and low cultures in the space of the nightclub, but does not devote significant attention to Club 57, in *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, 2002.

¹⁷⁸ Gerald Marzorati, "Art is a Cabaret," *SoHo Weekly News*, December 20, 1979, 29.

¹⁷⁹ Stephen Saban, "WHO GOES THERE?" *The SoHo News*, May 28, 1980, 23.

goes there.”¹⁸⁰ According to Saban, it is not a club’s degree of cash nor flash, it is club crowd that *makes* the space, and structures the economy of nightlife.

Such socio-geographic understandings of nightlife are characteristic of relational theories of social space. Henri Lefebvre influentially develops a triadic theory of space in *The Production of Space* (1991 English translation), which includes spatial practice (production and reproduction), representations of space (conceptualized/perceived space), and representational spaces (lived experience). As a continuous process, Lefebvre describes space as both produced by people, as part of the material world, and as the material world that in turn shapes human existence. Space is not considered a neutral environment as a backdrop for human activity, but is perpetually sculpted by that very activity. As Lefebvre simply states, “social (space) is a social (product).”¹⁸¹ Lefebvre’s concept is relational, by way of the people whom inhabit the spaces that they create, through participation, intention, action; and those very spaces, or institutions, that in turn shape one’s lived reality. Similar to Lefebvre, Bourdieu also considers social space as a relational multi-dimensional field of forces, across all varieties of capital, not just economic.¹⁸² The cultural production of Club 57 is a spatialized and relational practice, embedded in the venue and its crowd, whom produce, and are produced by, Club 57, within the larger framework of Downtown’s cultural history.¹⁸³

Predating Club 57, the alternative art space began to pop-up in the early 1970s Downtown. Sometimes artist-run, such spaces exhibited and promoted art forms that were traditionally unwelcome in museums and unmarketable in galleries. Yet, nightclubs have

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 26.

¹⁸² Pierre Bourdieu, “The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups,” *Theory and Society* vol. 14, no. 6 (1985): 723-44.

¹⁸³ While not a specific subject of discussion in this chapter, Club 57 places different theories of relationality into conversation, cutting across social, queer, and contemporary art theories.

generally been excluded from art historical scholarship on such spaces. While the primary art market was rather stagnant throughout the 1970s, alternative art spaces flourished and even began to showcase experimental art events at night, similar to the programming of Downtown's art cabarets. In the late 1970s, new bands played at alternative art spaces in SoHo, such as Artists Space (established 1973) and The Kitchen (established 1971) showcasing no wave, new wave, and hip hop pioneers. Merle Ginsberg comments on the free-flowing movement between the two spatial types, or the drifting of artists into nightclubs, and vice versa: "alternative spaces (those two words formerly uttered with something akin to reverence) are getting less 'space' and more clubby.... It has come to pass that the most interesting of the nightlifers and crossovers (mixed breeds?) and club people are now 'Artists' (its all in the terminology) and play 'art gigs.'"¹⁸⁴ A hybrid nightlife artist—or just "Artist"—which Ginsberg identifies as a new trend was the result of the mutually beneficial relationship between art and nightlife, highly specific to Downtown.

The early wave of art clubs, as epitomized by Club 57, present a viable alternative to the art world, not just in terms of museums and galleries, but also to the alternative art space itself.¹⁸⁵ Julie Ault's history of alternative art spaces in New York (1965-1985) includes a chronological list and description of alternative art spaces and organizations.¹⁸⁶ During the specific time and space of Manhattan, this "alternative" art world flourished (as part of the art world of course) due to the confluence of a variety of factors. Ault credits the abundance of artists, diversity in population, context of social movements, affordable rent and commercial space, increased public funding for the arts, and New York's existing reputation as a cultural center, as the forces driving

¹⁸⁴ Ginsberg, "Night(life) Imitates Art," 8.

¹⁸⁵ The acknowledgement of the nightclub as viable alternative art space is recognized in Jasmine Van Pee, "Boredom is Always Counterrevolutionary," 78.

¹⁸⁶ Julie Ault, "A Chronology of Selected Alternative Structures, Spaces, Artists' Groups, and Organizations in New York City, 1965-85," in *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective* (New York; Minneapolis: Drawing Center; University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 17-79.

the alternative art space's success. Significantly, nightclubs are totally excluded from Ault's list, as well as in the recent publication, *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces, 1960-2010*, which provides an even longer chronology.¹⁸⁷ While considered an alternative or outsider to the alternative art space movement, nightclubs and the alternative art space certainly co-existed Downtown. They were in dialogue as artists performed and exhibited in clubs, and club performers were active in art spaces, which Ginsberg cleverly articulates as a "brief hot fling" between New York's "grant land" and "clubland."¹⁸⁸

Yet, by the late 1970s alternative art spaces were already becoming institutionalized: conforming to the rules and regulations of government support, endorsing a new group of certified avant-garde artists (The Kitchen), or better yet, providing "trial run" exhibitions for new artists (Artists Space). In 1977 Phil Patton exposed this dilemma in *Art and America*. He claimed that such government-subsidized spaces were hardly independent, having already been absorbed into the art market to serve dominant art world interests.¹⁸⁹ Due to the formalization of public funding procedures, and the failure to challenge institutions or change systems of distribution and exhibition (and arguably at times representation), the alternative art space movement became immediately vulnerable to criticisms of institutionalization and art market pandering. This is also the moment when gallery and museum space received wide criticism in *Artforum*, through Brian O'Doherty's well-known series of "White Cube" essays.¹⁹⁰ O'Doherty identifies the artists' inescapable path of negotiating established systems and ideologies of the art exhibition, which

¹⁸⁷ Lauren Rosati and Mary A. Staniszewski, *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces, 1960 to 2010* (MA: MIT Press and Exit Art 2012).

¹⁸⁸ Ginsberg, "Night (life) Imitates Art," 7.

¹⁸⁹ See Phil Patton, "Other Voices Other Rooms: The Rise of the Alternative Art Space," *Art in America* 21, No. 4, (July-August 1977): 80-89.

¹⁹⁰ Although the essays first appeared in *Artforum* as in series in 1976, see Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica: Lapis Press, 1986), which also includes a thoughtful *Afterword*.

are falsely assumed as neutral. His assessment begets the question, “What is an alternative art space exactly, beyond just another white cube?”

In addition, by the late 1970s criticisms of the alternative art space’s many disappointments actually came from artists themselves. Colab, a nonprofit arts organization and artists collective, mobilized because of a shared disenchantment with the state of the alternative art space.¹⁹¹ These spaces and organizations were quickly transformed into the very “establishments” they supposedly opposed, despite good intentions of being pro-artist, artist-run, and showcasing market-unfriendly art forms (e.g. video, performance, conceptual art).¹⁹² Furthermore, signature spaces such as The Kitchen tended to be anti-everything to do with pop culture, and was more consistent with minimal, conceptual, and performance art trends of the 1970s.¹⁹³ In contrast, Club 57 relished in “low” culture and was decidedly unpretentious, retro-trashy and pop. This sensibility also ran counter to the urban refinement and conspicuous designer consumption of elite gay male culture, located only a few blocks away in the West Village. As a queer culture, Club 57 opposed a highly commodified gay culture that came along with the explosion of disco in New York, as well as the institutionally accepted avant-garde in the art world. Therefore, Club 57 proposed an alternative nighttime solution to both the alternative art space, and the general commercialization of gay culture.

¹⁹¹ For a history of Colab’s organization and activities, see David E. Little, “Colab Takes a Piece, History Takes It Back: Collectivity and New York Alternative Spaces.” *Art Journal* vol. 66, no. 1 (2007): 60-74. As noted in the *TV Party*, Diego Cortez, one of the founders of CoLab was very involved in Downtown music/art scenes, especially at the Mudd Club, and even participated in *TV Party*.

¹⁹² Brian Wallis, “Public Funding and Alternative Spaces,” in *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective*, Julie Ault, ed. (New York; Minneapolis: Drawing Center; University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 161-183.

¹⁹³ When asked about being shutout of the Kitchen, referred to as a “bastion of boredom” in the *East Village Eye*, Ann Magnuson replies “First of all, I don’t think they like anything that has to do with pop culture that doesn’t make a statement against it. I think in the attitude in which I present it, its pretty evident where my feelings lie.” See Toni Heiberg, “Ann Magnuson” *East Village Eye*, August 1983, 9.

Further, the idea of protecting one's ability to makeshift space, to achieve a sense of neighborhood ownership, was tied to espousing a particular brand of queer sexuality. Club 57 members bluntly responded to homoliberalism by crafting creative responses to homonormativity. In reaction to West Village Gay Pride (summer 1980), Haring and John Sex created flyers from images from an outdated "sex manual," *Sex and Guide to Married Life*, described as, "hysterical information and misinformation about sex.... there were these totally cockeyed definitions of what constituted homosexual sex."¹⁹⁴ During Gay Pride, the two artists collaborated and plastered the book's absurd definitions of homosexual sex throughout the West Village. While this graffiti-like public artwork could be interpreted in a variety of ways, it was a pointed jab directed at what the two artists together defined as being "West Village gay." Protecting his home turf of the East Village, Haring also started to tag the city line between West and East Village that summer with a spray-paint stencil warning, "CLONES GO HOME!" Haring would write on the sidewalks that separated East from West, clearly demarcating his territory. He comments on his attempt to ward-off West Village gays, and his perception of that particular gay community:

We didn't want the preppy types of the West Village invading our territory—the East Village. We felt the East Village was a different type of community which we didn't want cleaned up in the way of the West Village. Even though the West Village had a large gay population, they weren't quite our type of gays—so I made CLONES GO HOME! A definition of the border between East and West Village. It went on for blocks and blocks.¹⁹⁵

Haring's tag challenged the then dominant culture of the macho gay clone, and the highly visible and normalizing brand of gay masculinity that became localized in the West Village, which was also connected to whiteness and upper class status ("preppy types"). In addition, Haring's

¹⁹⁴ Gruen, *Haring*, 56.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

message could also have been directed towards the Saint, a new gay mega disco that opened in the East Village in 1980, with queues circling for blocks. While Club 57 was an open environment of creativity, and generally aligned within the inclusive framework of the new wave, there were issues of exclusion and enforcing boundaries based on a gay identity that conformed to dominant homosexual culture. Differentiating between an emerging queer and mainstream gay culture, prominent Club 57 members, some of who were gay male artists, drew territorial lines in terms of class and the commodification of gay life in the 1970s.

David Walter McDermott also explicitly wrote about this sentiment in the Downtown press. Titled “Gay Shame,” before gay shame became a subfield of queer studies,¹⁹⁶ in the *East Village Eye’s* special *Sex Issue*, McDermott penned a short tirade on the commodification and assimilation of gay life. While his article points the finger at gay West Village inhabitants, McDermott gives himself the title, “Noted Member of the Queer Elite.”¹⁹⁷ He writes that gay culture still remains, “as repulsive to America as an advertising campaign glorifying the collapse of American Business and the emergence of a welfare state.” Furthermore, he believes that gay leaders (of the liberation movement) are manipulating queer youth so that they can more easily assimilate into mainstream politics, without actually serving this new gay community. Similar to Haring’s anti-clone stance, McDermott’s rant impresses upon a rift between queer life in the East versus West Village, centered on class and age distinction, as well as issues of individuality. Moreover, being gay is aligned with capitalism and conformity, while queer, in combination with punk, allows for difference and individuality:

No one cares anymore if you are Gay or not, we care about who you are. You Gay Culture Fags have made a culture that can only be your culture... Well, Mr. And Mr. Gay culture Fags, you better redecorate and redo your hair, and make some clothes, because

¹⁹⁶ David Halperin and Valerie Traub, *Gay Shame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

¹⁹⁷ David Walter McDermott, “GAY SHAME,” *East Village Eye*, Summer 1980, 5.

you're out man, real out, and we from the Lower East Side think you look dreadful. So stay away with your DISCO and Gay bars and Mustaches instead of hair on your heads... Why do not you Gay boys and girls be individual Americans with your own friends and neighbors and family instead of associating with that miserable band of slobs that all look alike... Nobody cares if you are Queer or not anymore. SO be yourself, go Punk and leave those tired Queens to their own devices. Down Gay. UP PUNK!

Excluded, yet not wanting to assimilate, McDermott finds potentiality in punk, because you can make your own culture, as opposed to merely consuming the one made for you. For McDermott, DIY creativity is a means to express and “be yourself” as opposed to being just another gay clone.

To return back to the alternative art space in relation to neighborhood identity, while performance art flourished by the late 1970s, it too followed suit and relocated “West” from SoHo to the East Village. Performance art prominently took up residence in bars and nightclubs as new forms of art-entertainment, such as cabaret style shows, burlesque, and drag.¹⁹⁸ In part, the neighborhood migration of performance art was due to the Reagan Administration’s devastating cuts to arts funding (grants that had been previously and generously distributed to alternative art spaces and artists groups), and rent hikes due to the gentrification of SoHo.¹⁹⁹ In December 1981, John Perrault penned a call to action on the desperate state of the alternative art space: “So until Reagan has a change of heart— quite unlikely—or time allows the government funding to creep back to former levels (even that would not be enough) the alternatives need all the help they can get. There are no alternatives—or there’ll be no alternatives.”²⁰⁰ Importantly, to substantiate his position and reinforce Patton’s argument, Perrault insists, “alternative art spaces

¹⁹⁸ Club 57 is not mentioned here, and the group is phrased as “Pyramid Club, 8BC, and many others,” or clubs that are in fact indebted to Club 57’s cultural production. See Jay Sanders and J. Hoberman, *Rituals of Rented Island: Object Theater, Loft Performance, and the New Psychodrama: Manhattan, 1970-1980* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2013), 23, 39.

¹⁹⁹ Sanders and Hoberman, *Rituals of Rented Island*, 27.

²⁰⁰ John Perrault “Time running out for spaces,” *The SoHo News*, December 1981, 60.

are now an integral part of the art system. No matter what the original intentions, they do not present a parallel system or new culture...the so-called alternatives are: art world R&D.”²⁰¹ By 1981, the alternative art space itself was officially in crisis, as its own support system was quickly dissipating underfoot.

While Club 57 can also be accused of accidentally providing art world “R&D,” as it was formative to the careers of bankable 1980s art stars such as Haring and Scharf, it was always artist-run, with events collectively produced and enjoyed at night. The space was not merely a feeder system for art galleries alone, providing test-runs for new artists in order to determine their market-readiness. Club 57, run on a shoestring budget, exhibited many different nonsalable forms of art with decisively non-commercial agendas (underground film, video art, performance, experimental fashion, experience-oriented theme parties). Furthermore, the space very rarely held art exhibitions in the form of a solo-show, which is the bread and butter of the art world, and the stamp of career legitimization. That said, if Club 57 did act as a system of R&D that “Downtown Department” has been pretty much terminated or exists in indefinite hiatus. New York City’s cultural industry/art industrial complex, and speaking more generally to the U.S., is increasingly running sans R&D as young artistic talent is not supported by urban policy. Artists, especially when considered across varied media, do not seem to be in conversation, nor working in tandem long enough to incubate sustainable bodies of work within a shared urban environment. Such conditions prevent the formation of new cultural movements, whether subcultural or avant-garde. Again, (sub)cultural movements cannot develop without the factors of collectivity and sociability.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.* This quote also predates and reflects Thomas Crow’s well-known statement on modernism and mass culture: that artists are the R&D of consumer culture. See Crow’s “Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts,” in *Modern Art in the Common Cultures* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 35.

However, Club 57's art of the everynight did not share in the alternative art space's restrictions or regulations. The nightclub was an "unofficial" alternative art space located in a church basement, and did not run on the government's approval via grants and awards. Ideally, an alternative art space should nurture art forms that can't or won't be shown in an existing network of galleries, museums, and performance arts spaces. Supposedly, the benefits of an artist-run space are 1) the implementation of programming based upon on-the-ground-knowledge of what is currently being produced, and 2) management sensitivity to supporting artist-specific needs. Artist-run spaces, administered by "kindred spirits," hypothetically produce au courant work that is daring, difficult, and/or market-unfriendly (whether in content or form or both). The environment and community of Club 57 initiated and incubated such work, which would not have been readily accepted or funded under the existent cultural support structures.

Makeshifting Space

Through creative placemaking and queer worldmaking, Club 57 was able to "make-do" on little means, out of the ability to "makeshift" urban space. This occurred on a nightly basis whereby different events were hosted in high rotation, and more generally, through the unexpected refurbishment of a church basement into an experimental queer arts clubhouse. Here, I use the term makeshift to convey resilience, survival, and inventiveness, as opposed to outright resistance, while also emphasizing action and transformation. Magnuson comments on Club 57's creative philosophy of finding community and collectively making and doing, as opposed to financially gaining: "...nobody was doing it to make any money, to become stars. It was simply doing it for the pleasure of doing it and being in the company of other people doing it, you know,

creating.”²⁰² As a temporary solution, makeshifting also alludes to the short lifespan of nightlife, underground, and art scenes. Makeshifting incorporates DIY methods and perspectives, as well as availabilism, or the use of whatever is found easily on-hand for materials. Most importantly, makeshifting is a camp strategy that was effortlessly combined with punk and retro tendencies. While makeshifting is aligned with the spirit, ethics and aesthetics of DIY cultures, with connotations of independence, freedom, amateurism, democracy, and anti-corporatism; makeshifting is also about “home” improvement (or church improvement) and repair to one’s everyday existence through action.

However, Club 57 was not completely alone in their makeshifting endeavors Downtown, as this strategy was also shared by Colab. The arts organization famously occupied an abandoned building space on the Lower East Side to house its *Real Estate Show* (1979). The controversy that ensued over this “art-squat” instigated the formation of ABC No Rio, the free-space neighborhood gallery on Rivington Street. Finding New York’s cultural space in the late 1970s exclusive to newcomers, Colab sought to open-up space for cultural expression and opportunity: “When the baby boomer generation, schooled on the highly publicized art of the previous decade, flooded the art world, they found that things weren’t so open...To deal with this situation, Colab banded together as a union of artists to raise grant funds, organize exhibitions, and share equipment.”²⁰³ While Colab paralleled the movement and funding structures of the alternative art space more closely than Club 57, the collective also operated within Downtown nightlife scenes. Makeshifting constitutes the literal making of new cultural spaces out of existent urban space: whether it be Colab’s guerilla art tactics, or Club 57’s reinvention of the

²⁰²Van Pee, “Boredom is Always Counterrevolutionary,” 113.

²⁰³ Alan Moore, Marc H. Miller, and Keith Christensen, *ABC No Rio Dinero: The Story of a Lower East Side Art Gallery*, (New York: Published by ABC No Rio with Collaborative Projects, 1985), 1-2.

church youth group. In these cases, urban space shifts into a mixed-use arts space, as a site for creating art, curating exhibitions, holding performances, and socializing.

Makeshifting also indicates the transformative capacity of Club 57, perceived as “magical” in multiple accounts by Club 57 participants who use the term “magic” to describe the club. Magic correlates to Club 57’s “power” to makeshift.²⁰⁴ Scott Whitman, who produced and directed theatrical shows at Club 57, romantically compares Club 57, and the larger space of Downtown, to the famous fictional metropolis of *The Wizard of Oz*: “It really was the Emerald City—like magic... So much creativity with so little money. The whole Lower East Side was like that then.”²⁰⁵ Within the walls of Club 57, “a city in ruin” transforms into a magical playscape through the construction of a libertarian clubhouse. The participants cleverly used the spaces to produce the culture they wanted to both make and see, because 1) that culture did not exist for them and they decided to make it for themselves; and 2) that opportunity to do so was not available elsewhere, so they independently created that opportunity.

The result, fondly remembered as “magic,” was a windfall of activity, manifesting in performance, theme-parties, or tangible products such as fashion or paintings. Works were not only produced at Club 57, they were consumed there. It was a space for simultaneously producing, exhibiting, distributing, and viewing various works. A studio, creative think tank, and site of socializing and social networking, Club 57 emphasizes cultural production and consumption as a shared social and collective process. Furthermore, Club 57 clearly connects culture to its affiliated term, cultivation, as found in Raymond Williams’s exploration of the

²⁰⁴ Min Thometz (Club 57 and Pulsallama member), interview with author, October 2013; Dany Johnson (Club 57 DJ and Pulsallama member), interview with author, July 2013; and “Club 57 mix by Dany Johnson,” *Soundcloud*, accessed June 10, 2013, <https://soundcloud.com/dany-johnson/club-57-mix>.

²⁰⁵ While not mentioned here in connection to Club 57, the *Wizard of Oz* is an apt comparison as it symbolizes queer culture and narratives. Also see Mary Kaye Schilling “Girls, Girls, Girls!,” <http://nymag.com/arts/theater/features/marc-shaiman-scott-wittman-2011-4/>.

term, “culture.”²⁰⁶ In short, Club 57 was a space for the cultivation of culture, geared towards incubating new artists and previously unsupported forms of cultural expression. If open to conceiving cultivation as a kind of “magic,” Club 57’s charm was its capacity for growth and transformation. The participants of Club 57 possessed the uncanny ability to repeatedly transform what little means they had, beginning with a bare-bones church basement, into a world of creative splendor. Scharf and Magnuson together wrote on the DIY-ingenuity of Club 57, “Flat broke we had to build our own theme park. And we did—out of discarded refrigerator boxes and pure imagination.”²⁰⁷ By common definition, a children’s clubhouse is a place where imagination and play transform ordinary everyday surroundings into a new world. A clubhouse, in the sense of a children’s clubhouse, “is a place where kids have the opportunity to use their creative imaginations and play in a world of their making. Kids will make a clubhouse out of almost anything--blankets over chairs or an old garden shed.”²⁰⁸ For artistically inclined “kids,” economic limitations challenge creative limits. When one has little to begin with, no matter the medium (e.g. self, oil paint and canvas), limitations can force out-of-the-box thinking that leads to new solutions and new ways of thinking and working—or a new wave.

Aesthetically, makeshifting relates to Club 57’s new wave sensibility that fused punk, retro and camp (as affiliated with queer cultures, identities, and politics). Scharf remarks on the creative freedom afforded by Club 57 as mixing punk with playfulness: “art merged with punk rock and lost its preciousness... Suddenly, art wasn’t this thing on a pedestal but something you

²⁰⁶ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 1985), 87-93.

²⁰⁷ Ann Magnuson and Kenny Scharf, *East Village West*, 4. In the DIY spirit of Club 57, the catalogue appropriated an underground zine aesthetic. It was simply photocopied on A4 paper, bound by one simple staple, sold in black and white or color. The catalogue also displayed the text “Vol. 1. No. 1,” in the upper-left-hand corner. In general, the design of the catalogue is low-fi, eclectic collage, with Courier font, mimicking the design of the Club’s ephemera of the time, which had a zine, or offbeat collage, aesthetic.

²⁰⁸ Doityourself staff, *Doityourself*, accessed May 16, 2013, <http://www.doityourself.com/stry/building-a-clubhouse#b>.

can play with and dance with and smash. When you don't take yourself too seriously, it allows for a lot of magic and fun stuff to happen."²⁰⁹ While Scharf does not use the term camp, the lack of seriousness, play, pleasure, and transformation are all aspects of camp. Camp also allows for an interactive appreciation and creation of art that is approachable, as Scharf mentions, not up "on a pedestal."

In terms of Club 57's makeshifting, there is making do out of a bad situation, but likewise, the camp tactic of making fun and something "good" out of bad taste. Camp is a performative and creative act of queer connoisseurship—Club 57 exercises its exquisite taste for America's cultural trash and recent past through a voracious appetite and energy to imaginatively remake and redo. Yet, Richard Dyer indicates that while camp is fun and reaffirming of queer identities, it also "keeps us going."²¹⁰ Stemming from both queer culture and social struggle, Jack Babuscio describes camp as "those elements in a person, situation, or activity that express, or are created by, a gay sensibility," with a gay sensibility defined as:

...a creative energy reflecting consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression; in short, a perception of the world which is colored, shaped, directed, and defined by the fact of one's gayness.²¹¹

While camp is a way of debunking high culture and social norms, and is visibly different from the mainstream, it is also a strategy for reasserting an oppressed identity along with its alternative forms of pleasure through revalorizing demeaned taste cultures. This liberating reappropriation of cultural texts from "low" to a personal value of "high," is one of the distinct pleasures of

²⁰⁹ Wolff, Rachel, "Where the Radiant Baby Was Born: In a basement on St. Marks Place, Keith Haring became Keith Haring," *New York Magazine*, March 25, 2012, accessed June 20, 2012, <http://nymag.com/arts/art/features/keith-haring-2012-4/>.

²¹⁰ Richard Dyer, "It's Being So Camp As Keeps Us Going," in *The Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2002), 49-61.

²¹¹ Jack Babuscio, "Cinema of camp (aka camp and the gay sensibility)," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, Fabio Cleto, ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 118.

camp, according to Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp."²¹² Makeshifting also implies the formation of an adequate but temporary substitute—creating something that recognizably stands in for the original idea or concept, but is obviously different and perceptibly “new.”

Club 57's camp tactics can also be read through Simon Reynolds's notion of “retromania,” whereby the contemporary impulse to recycle the recent past is so endemic that we have reached a critical mass, and may be in danger of cultural paralysis.²¹³ According to the principle of retromania, late capitalist society has drained the cumulative history of pop music without producing anything new to replenish and rebalance the cultural economy. However, Club 57's “retromania” created new forms with a significant margin of difference from the source material or original meaning. In the case of Club 57, there would never be any confusion between the source and Club 57's inspired copy, as the work exuded a Downtown aesthetic and moment, and was thereby marked by the time in which it was made.²¹⁴ While nostalgia is traditionally symptomatic of space, or missing home, Club 57 enacts retromania to makeshift space and to refurbish “the home” into a nightclub space that suits a collective desire for alternative and queer lifestyles.²¹⁵

Retro also links to camp through Club 57's resurrection of cultural objects from the recent past. For Andrew Ross, camp is a recognizable cultural economy since the 1960s: “Camp

²¹² See essay point 54, “Camp asserts that good taste is not simply good taste; that there exists, indeed, a good taste of bad taste. (Genet talks about this in *Our Lady of the Flowers*.) The discovery of the good taste of bad taste can be very liberating. The man who insists on high and serious pleasures is depriving himself of pleasure; he continually restricts what he can enjoy; in the constant exercise of his good taste he will eventually price himself out of the market, so to speak. Here Camp taste supervenes upon good taste as a daring and witty hedonism.” Sontag, “Notes on Camp”, in *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 1964), 291.

²¹³ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania*, 2011.

²¹⁴ This is significantly different from the state of contemporary music, which is simply derivative of past times and in fact sounds like past eras (to the point of confusion), instead of reflecting a current moment. See Reynolds, *Retromania*, 2011; and Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014).

²¹⁵ See Reynold's discussion of nostalgia, *Retromania*, xxv.

is a rediscovery of history's waste...Camp, in this respect is more than just a remembrance of things past, it is the recreation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor."²¹⁶ This camp strategy of recycling cultural excess and surplus from the waste bin of American pop culture produced the narrative content, personas, costumes, sets, and promotional print culture of Club 57. Camp also represents the cultural struggle to creatively express and moreover live, which deeply resonates with the political projects of both queer worldmaking and creative placemaking. Ross locates the politics of camp in survival: "camp contains an explicit commentary on feats of survival in a world dominated by the taste and interests of those whom it serves."²¹⁷ Club 57's "retromania," as a camp tactic, created a queer nightworld that provided free (or extremely cheap) space for different forms of expression.

Connecting Reynold's retromania to a kind of camp recycling found in José Muñoz's queer worldmaking, Club 57 participants used, "a critical deployment of the past for the purpose of engaging the present and imagining the future," and further, they dared to, "dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds."²¹⁸ Such a "critical deployment of the past" was conducted on a nightly basis at Club 57. Through a reactivation of pop culture, especially from the 1950s and 1960s, participants reworked themes from the Cold War, to suburban domesticity, to Warhol's Factory. Rejecting the doom and gloom of the "here and now," given Downtown's social and economic conditions, but hell-bent on living in the moment and indulging in the pleasures of the present, Club 57 imaginatively imbues punk with a camp sensibility and the possibilities of what the "new wave" could in fact precipitate.

²¹⁶ Andrew Ross, "Uses of Camp," *Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Fall 1988): 14.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 136-137.

However, it is also important to note that a popular nostalgia for the 1950s was already active in both mainstream and underground cultures by the mid 1970s, although to different effects. Typical mainstream examples of this phenomenon were the success of the film and associated pop soundtrack *American Graffiti* (Lucas, 1973), and the television show *Happy Days* (1974-1984), which yearned for more conservative and normative boom times. As underground forms of nostalgia, Malcolm McLaren's pre-Sex punk boutique was the "Teddy boy" fashion shop named Let it Rock; and there is of course the iconic CBGBs 1950s rock n' roll slacker-greasers, the Ramones. Along with these punk quotations of the 1950s, Club 57 delighted in appropriating suburban and teen rock cultures as kitsch to critique the norms of the society in which they were raised, and to refashion it into a world of their own.²¹⁹

In addition, Club 57's performative environments were literally constructed out of trash, dependent upon dumpster finds, Salvation Army and Goodwill. Interestingly, at the time, Downtown vintage stores had names like Retro, Reminiscence, and Trash and Vaudeville. Maintaining a budget conscious thrift-store chic, Magnuson would often return and recycle the vintage props that she bought for theme parties the very next day.²²⁰ Finding the new wave in the old, John Sex discusses Club 57's DIY thriftiness and correlates new wave to scavenging: "Club 57 was the pop place, where you took from everything... We were stealing from radio, TV, everything. The New Wave scene was involved in digging up old trash, unique old garbage that people had thrown away and redoing it."²²¹ Joey Arias also names trash as fueling the Downtown scene, "If we could make the scene we did out of trash and without money, imagine what we can

²¹⁹ Bryan Waterman, *Marquee Moon* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 60.

²²⁰ Ann Magnuson, interview with author, January 2014.

²²¹ Uzi Parnes, "Pop Performance in East Village Clubs," *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 29, no. 1, "East Village Performance" (Spring, 1985): 8.

do now. If the world doesn't explode, we will."²²² Club 57's imagination and energy produced creative environments that were materially constructed out of garbage and vintage props, and conceptually grounded in retro-pop, and further spun by Downtown strategies, practices and aesthetics. Similar to the functions of popular memory, retro too defines a play with the past in Club 57's repurposing of pop concepts and material culture. Magnuson remarks on the retro practices and expressions of Club 57's participants, "Most of the people here are trying to make sense of what they grew up with in the '60s and '70s. We take all of those elements and put them back together in different configurations and try to make people laugh. And we make them think."²²³ Here, cultural understanding, or making sense, was accomplished by making something new out of the past.

Makeshifting's appropriations also relate to camp in the sense that camp's exaggerated and subversive quotations are a social process, and can be personally and politically transformative.²²⁴ In Esther Newton's 1972 ethnographic study, *Mother Camp*, the camp figure is concerned with "a philosophy of transformations and incongruity," utilized to "achieve a higher synthesis."²²⁵ The tension between selected textual juxtapositions is crucial to camp: "the camp inheres not in the person or thing itself but in the tension between that person or thing and the context of association."²²⁶ Camp as a social product and process is also reiterated in Babuscio's version of camp, rooted in a gay sensibility: "Camp is a relationship between

²²² Frank and McKenzie, *New, Used & Improved*, 85.

²²³ Magnuson in Small, "Art After Midnight," 101.

²²⁴ See essay point 10, "Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman." To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater." *Ibid.*, 280.

²²⁵ Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979): 102.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, xx.

activities, individuals, situations and gayness.”²²⁷ Camp is socially and cultural relational, and therefore well suited to an art-party forum. Club 57 sets the stage for the humorous collisions and tensions of camp, keeping in mind that camp connects to politics of survival and queer worldmaking. A form of protection as well as a product of imagination, Michael Bronski importantly reminds us that, “Ultimately, camp changes the real hostile world into a new one which is controllable and safe.”²²⁸ Exploring the interstices between DIY low-budget substitute and original text, Club 57 became a queer refuge for nightly explorations of pleasure, humor, self-expression, and fun.

Club 57 manifested through the energy and inventiveness of its community, as well as the cultural history and then-current conditions of Downtown. Club 57 was created for and by its participants in an effort to make space for new forms of cultural expression, which at first, could not be exhibited and produced elsewhere. Through the various characteristics of makeshifting, including its camp tactics, Club 57’s art-party capitalized on the creative talents of its community to potentialize the art-party as an active, collective, medium. Historically, “Art on the Lower East Side has most frequently been a bridge during the last half century between one displaced group and its future position in the culture, and between the next displacers and the last.”²²⁹ In this respect, the visionary transformations of Club 57 have come to represent the growing pains of Downtown itself, when underground and queer cultures teetered on the edge of art institutions and the mainstream.

²²⁷ Babuscio, “Cinema of camp (aka camp and the gay sensibility),” 118-119.

²²⁸ Michael Bronski, *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984): 42-43.

²²⁹ JB Holston, “Not From Nowhere: A Brief Historical Survey” in *ABC No Rio Dinero: The Story of a Lower East Side Art Gallery*, Alan Moore, Marc H. Miller, eds. (New York City, New York: ABC No Rio: Collaborative Projects, 1985), 30.

The New Wave Vaudeville Show and the Formation of Club 57

However, Club 57's brand of new wave art cabaret was evident prior to its St. Marks Place address. Club 57 first formed out of a short performance series at Irving Plaza, located near Union Square in 1978. Suitably titled *The New Wave Vaudeville Show*, the performance extravaganza's goal was to reinvigorate and celebrate the history of vaudeville in the East Village and Lower East Side. Irving Plaza, also run by the Polish Church, would eventually become a Club 57 satellite space for larger concerts and events. In the *SoHo Weekly News*, Pam Black quips that *The New Wave Vaudeville Show* could otherwise qualify as a Halloween party amongst friends in handmade costumes.²³⁰ Magnuson, the director and stage manager of the show, recounts the event as "a like-minded menagerie of punk rockers, wayward art students, and assorted local eccentrics, singing and dancing between strip acts and *Planet of the Apes* movie trailers."²³¹ This eclectic mix, as well as the Vaudevillian-style performances, would soon define Club 57.

The show's actual talent was noted as more *Gong Show* than vaudeville, which included a singing dog, amongst "smoke bombs, pink hair and electric music."²³² David McDermott emceed the show exclaiming the Warholian sentiment that "Anyone can be a star," alluding to the open policy of casting the show, the talent's amateurism, and McDermott's own queer identity.²³³ At points, McDermott was dressed as the boy-king, Tutankhamun, in reference to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's contemporaneous blockbuster exhibition, and the homoeroticism of sword-and-sandal epics. Similar to his performances style and politics on *TV Party*,

²³⁰ Pam Black, "Say Yes-Yes to the No-No New-New Wave," *SoHo Weekly News*, November 16, 1978, 82.

²³¹ Ann Magnuson, "The East Village 1979-1989 A Chronology: Ann Magnuson on Club 57," *East Village Issue, Artforum International*, vol. 38 no. 2 (October 1999): 121.

²³² Black, "Say Yes-Yes to the No-No New-New Wave," 82.

²³³ *Ibid.*

McDermott sang and danced to melodies from the 1920s, such as “Let’s Misbehave” and “Pretty Girl,” changing song lyrics, ad libbing, and stripping.²³⁴ However, *The New Wave Vaudeville Show* is best known for the debut of new wave pop opera sensation, and soon to be Club 57 regular, Klaus Nomi. For his act, Nomi sang a soprano aria from Saint-Saens’ *Samson and Delilah* dressed in an early version of his spacey-Neo-Dada style: a translucent space-age cape with angular and severe makeup. Robotically moving backstage after his performance, McDermott reassured the audience that Nomi was not lip-synching as many were stunned by his exquisite voice.²³⁵ Nomi would quickly hone his space-opera-man act with another Downtown cabaret legend and Club 57 member Joey Arias. By 1979, the two were popularizing *New Wave Vaudeville* by performing as musical guests with David Bowie on *Saturday Night Live*.²³⁶

After the show’s success, Stanley Strychacki allowed Magnuson and friends Tom Scully and Susan Hannaford, who also helped to produce the show, to completely take over the Church’s basement and to organize concerts at Irving Plaza. Magnuson was offered the position of manager of the fledgling club, which she held for two years alongside the title of President of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Lower East Side. Setting the precedent for Club 57’s version of new wave in the press, Black contextualizes new wave within amateurism, or not having “to be a pro to have a gig.” New wave also meant, “self-parodying: the tattered costumes, sleazy atmosphere and pure unprofessionalism of it all remind you that its just a stance, a hype a pose...New Wave Vaudeville is a joke that everyone participates in.”²³⁷ From the very inception of Club 57, new

²³⁴ *Ibid* and Steven Hager, “Art After Midnight” in *Adventures in the Counterculture from Hip Hop to High Times* (Berkeley, CA: High Times Books, 2002), 167.

²³⁵ See footage of the *The New Wave Vaudeville Show* in the Klaus Nomi documentary, *The Nomi Song*, as well as commentary on the show and performances by Ann Magnuson, Kristian Hoffman, and Page Wood. Andrew Horn, Thomas Mertens, and Ilona Ziok, *The Nomi Song* (New York, NY: Palm, 2005), DVD.

²³⁶ The episode aired as part of *Saturday Night Live* season five, on December 15, 1979.

²³⁷ Black, “Say Yes-Yes to the No-No New-New Wave,” 82.

wave is tied to a DIY amateurism and collective camp humor, which soon became ingrained at Club 57 proper.

Club 57 was also first named the “East Village Students Club,” catering to a clique of mostly male, white, suburban gay and bisexual students from the School of Visual Arts (SVA). The students prominently included Frank Holliday, Kenny Scharf, Keith Haring and John McGlaughlin, soon to be known as John Sex. Scharf reminisces on how the queer art school gang came upon the space:

Keith Haring, John Sex (then known simply as John McLaughlin), Drew Straub [a friend and roommate of Keith Haring] and I were basically wandering the streets in the middle of the day, students at the School of Visual Arts. After having a 50¢ drink at the Holiday Cocktail Lounge, we went next door to Club 57 and saw a great jukebox, so we stayed. When the music began, Ann appeared from behind the bar—yes, a bar serving alcohol at a youth club under a church—and we all started wildly go-go dancing. Thus our immediate bond began!²³⁸

Emphasizing the “East Village” half of the title, Magnuson recalls, “It was truly a neighborhood hangout so anyone in the East Village who cared to could drift in and out. Some stayed longer than others.”²³⁹ Haring also referred to it as “*the* neighborhood hang out, It was totally unique and a bunch of us kind of ran it... We hung out there almost every night.”²⁴⁰ Through Haring, artist Tseng Kwon Chi would eventually become part of Club 57 as a central figure and house photographer. Samantha McEwen, also a student at SVA at the time, remarks on Club 57’s group dynamic: “Individually everyone in our group had fantastic identities... Everyone was strong, yet we could all be what we wanted to be. We all looked after each other. There was an incredible sense of security although almost none of us had any money... Club 57 was run on a shoestring.

²³⁸ Metzger, “East Village Preservation Society,” <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/12458/1/east-village-preservation-society-club-57>.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ John Gruen, *Keith Haring: The Authorized Biography* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991), 45.

It was run on sheer energy.”²⁴¹ While Club 57 was an alternative to the alternative art space, it also provided an alternative art school experience that complemented, and for some replaced an art school education.²⁴²

While neighborhood patrons and artists may have drifted in and out of Club 57, New York art scenes are rarely viewed through an art school lens, as compared to their 1970s California art school counterparts. Club 57 proves an exception here, as a New York art school history in affiliation with SVA. Club 57 was a vibrant leisure/work space that provided a vital bridge between the didactics of art school and a professional arts career. The experimental space and community support provided by Club 57 was a vital addendum to an undergraduate education at SVA, free from grades, formalized critique, and internal bureaucratic hierarchies. In fact, it was a transitional space that launched the careers of several Downtown artists. Scharf reflects on Club 57 as his first break, “...then I had my first art show at Club 57. Things all started happening from Club 57. That’s how I got involved in ‘The Times Square Show’, PS1’s ‘New York/New Wave’ and the Fun Gallery.”²⁴³ In spring 2012, the Brooklyn Museum recognized the impact of Club 57 in an exhibition of Keith Haring’s early work, from 1978–82, a time frame echoing the approximate lifespan of Club 57. *New York Magazine* ran an article covering the show entitled, “Where the radiant baby was born: In a basement on St. Marks, Keith Haring became Keith Haring.”²⁴⁴ For the first time, Club 57 is credited as influential to Haring’s work, and as the site of his own transformation and becoming.

²⁴¹ Gruen, *Keith Haring*, 46-47.

²⁴² Keith Haring dropped out of SVA in 1979/80 to focus more time on his various Downtown art activities.

²⁴³ An Interview with Kenny Scharf by Tony Shafrazi and Bruno Schmidt, “Kenny Scharf 1983” (New York: Tony Shafrazi Gallery, 1983), in Richard Marshall, Kenny Scharf, Carlo McCormick, and Ann Magnuson, *Kenny Scharf* (New York: Rizzoli, 2009).

²⁴⁴ Rachel Wolff, “Where the Radiant Baby Was Born,” <http://nymag.com/arts/art/features/keith-haring-2012-4>.

The participants of Club 57 made the tiny church basement a *place* of their own, or a creative home in which to produce and consume alternative and queer cultures, and to enjoy the pleasures of urban social mixing. The club was a mixed-use urban space, where participants freely experimented, created and congregated within a permissive environment. In this way, Club 57 connects notions of queer worldmaking to creative placemaking to construct Downtown New York as place, attitude and countercultural movement. Club 57's feverish production, openness, and ownership bred an atmosphere that was queer, fun and artistically generative. Explored in this next section, Club 57's futurity and forward propulsion is evidenced by its relentless cultural output.

Club Activities

Characteristic of all three of my dissertation's case studies, each art-party site is composed of multiple art forms, as well as various and numerous artistic contributors. To get a better grasp on the complexity of taste cultures, activities, and intents that produce Club 57, this section is divided into five sub-sections. Club 57 represents an overwhelming amount of cultural production and consumption, and a system of categorization serves to clearly reconstruct Club 57's main activities and spin-off organizations. As Club 57 lacks a comprehensive history and has not been the subject of any extensive academic scholarship to date, it is necessary to sketch the scope of the nightclub's activity for the legibility of my larger project. The sub-sections are divided into: *Club Membership and Managers*; *Film and TV Screenings: The Monster Movie Club (MMC)*; *The Temporary and Inclusive Art Exhibition*; *Queer Theatrical Performance*; and *Theme Parties: The Ladies Auxiliary of the Lower Eastside (LALES)*. While Club 57 also held music concerts, musical performance it is not included as a category here as Club 57 organized

concerts were often hosted at Irving Plaza.²⁴⁵ However, Club 57's house-band, Pulsallama, was a central project of the LALES, and is discussed here as relevant to theme parties and the LALES.

Club 57 was heterogeneous, hosting a variety of events and art types, and this typology illuminates the driving mechanisms and interests of the nightclub. Categories were formed according to repetition of type (e.g. screening, theme party), which marks a tendency or inclination for that particular event form and associated taste cultures. However, categories are certainly not discrete, and blend into one another. For example, screenings and exhibitions were often interactive and costumed, similar to theme party nights, which could also screen a film. I have also given special attention in this section to the activities of the LALES. This organization presents an unusual combination of retro, punk and camp practices in conjunction with feminism, and a Downtown sisterhood and solidarity that have yet to be accounted for in Downtown cultural histories.

Club Managers and Membership

Over the course of Club 57's run, there were three different periods loosely grouped by manager. Because the manager was responsible for programming and running the Club, whomever "curated" Club 57's activities was somewhat responsible for the creative output of the Club. Magnuson managed the club from May 1979 to early 1981, and it is with her reign that the Club came into being and gained a reputation Downtown and within the Downtown press. In September 1980, Magnuson resigned and another performer, Andy Reese, took over. However, Magnuson still planned events and performed at Club 57 and in other Downtown nightclubs (e.g.

²⁴⁵ Club 57 organized concerts at its sister space, Irving Plaza. Also owned by the Polish National Church, the venue was located in the East Village at Union Square, and concerts were held there in order to avoid noise complaints and violations at Club 57 proper.

Mudd Club, Danceteria). During Reese's managership, which was soon superseded by bassist Kai Eric in 1981, the club shifted to more cabaret and theatrical performance, due in part to the creative energies of the musical theatre power duo, Marc Shaiman and Scott Whitman. However, Club 57's shift to "quieter" theatrical-style performance was also in response to mounting tensions with the block association.²⁴⁶ By the end of 1981, with more shake-downs, including the closure of Club 57 at Irving Plaza, Ira Abromovitz became manager, and there was a turn to messy and amateur sketch comedy. In 1982, Club 57 temporarily shut down, due to accruing fines for noise violations and general mismanagement. After a benefit attempting to resurrect Club 57 at Danceteria in September 1982, the club briefly opens up again under Abromovitz only to be quickly closed.²⁴⁷ By July of 1983, the *East Village Eye* announces that Club 57 "has closed down for good. This bit of bad news, although published two months after the fact is yet another *Eye* exclusive!"²⁴⁸ Sarcastic in regards to delivering the "old" breaking news, the short piece grieves over the club's demise, but reports on the creative exploits of Club 57's alumni around Downtown that week. While Club 57 was officially closed, the piece addresses its ongoing spirit through the activity of its noted participants.

Membership was functional and formed a greater sense of community at Club 57. A sense of kinship and family can be achieved in tightly knit marginal/subcultural urban communities, and Scharf characterizes Club 57's membership as "a core group, more like a family in a way."²⁴⁹ Likewise, Haring comments on he and Scharf's reasons for relocating to New York: "Kenny had come to New York for similar reasons as mine—to look for peers and

²⁴⁶ Tom Viola, "Collective Lunacy," 55.

²⁴⁷ Heiberg, "5 Years of Fab 57," 21.

²⁴⁸ "ETC. ETC." *East Village Eye*, July 1983, 16.

²⁴⁹ Metzger, "East Village Preservation Society," <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/12458/1/east-village-preservation-society-club-57>.

find something different.”²⁵⁰ While finding a community based on difference and notions of family repeat in accounts of Club 57, “fictional urban kinship” extends to the realities of subcultural community formation in cities, and can be found in other examples, such as the drag houses of ballroom culture. Urban sociologist Fran Tonkiss describes the concrete qualities of fictional urban kinship:

These affective ties—formed around shared politics, sexual identities, common experience, force of circumstance, accidents of locality or the coincidence of origins—can be objects of intense attachment. They rely on the imaginative, emotional and political work of maintaining the fiction, on people honoring for itself a bond they have in fact invented. There can be a great deal riding on the ‘fictional’ ties of urban community, even if there may be relatively little underpinning them.²⁵¹

While Club 57’s membership formed affective ties that tightly bound its community, Magnuson also describes membership as practical: “We technically had to have it as a private ‘members only’ club to serve alcohol. The property manager repeatedly reminded me that if ‘anyone’ (meaning a cop) asked what was going on, that this was a church ‘youth club’.”²⁵² However, membership was not a mark of exclusivity at Club 57, either financial or social, as typical of suburban membership-based clubs (e.g yacht club, golf club), but a necessity to maintain the space. And, membership was cheap. In 1980, a Club 57 membership was three dollars for renewal and ten dollars for first time members. As a Club 57 member, one received the benefits of reduced admission for events, advance notice for events, the newsletter, priority on club space use, and additional discounts for Club 57 concerts at Irving Plaza.²⁵³ In March 1980 there were

²⁵⁰ Gruen, *Keith Haring*, 36.

²⁵¹ Fran Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory*, 24.

²⁵² Magnuson in Metzger, “East Village Preservation Society,”

<http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/12458/1/east-village-preservation-society-club-57>.

²⁵³ “Club Operations,” Binder 1, personal collection and archive of Ann Magnuson.

130 members, and 151 by that May.²⁵⁴ Of the members listed, a great majority showed an East Village zip code, followed by zip codes from other areas of Manhattan and Queens. Club 57 catered to people residing in the East Village, and was very much a local club, per historical records of club membership.

While Club 57 embraced an ad-hoc and spontaneous spirit, events were planned in advance as evidenced by club calendars and newsletters. In running events, Magnuson developed a set of instructions and outline for approximate pay that she would give to those running the club, such as the Bartender (paid \$20-30 depending on bar take) and DJ (\$15-20), as well as To-Do lists for opening and closing the club. The instructions also list the cost of private parties (\$50 minimum, \$75 including clean-up), where to buy ice and liquor in the East Village (with a Church discount for ice), and appropriate music levels for their neighbors (music levels down by midnight on weekdays, and by 1am Fridays and Saturdays; music turns off by 1:00-2:00 am weekdays, 2:00-2:30 pm on weekends). This list clearly indicates that despite all the fun, Club 57 was a lot of work, and people needed to cooperate to keep it smoothly functioning as a bar and arts event space. Moreover, the Club 57 staff was actively encouraged to respect their East Village community. They were highly aware of their neighbors and potential neighborhood problems, with instructions noting, “no congregating outside on neighbors steps, not beyond confine of church gates (maintain low profile);” to turn on the air-conditioner to cut club noise; and to watch out for “drunken old Polish Men” in the neighborhood.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁴ “March 1980” and “May 1980” Newsletters, Binder 1, personal collection and archive of Ann Magnuson.

²⁵⁵ “Club Operations,” Binder 1, personal collection and archive of Ann Magnuson.

Film and TV Screenings: The Monster Movie Club

Club 57 featured film and television screenings, sometimes in conjunction with a theme party night, or as an independent screening series. Susan Hannaford (Chairman of the Board) and Tom Scully (President), who were also SVA alumni, started a movie club within Club 57 called the Monster Movie Club (MMC). This was Club 57's first regularly recurring event, happening every Tuesday night as of May of 1979. Screenings would often take on the performative nature of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, a cult midnight movie phenomenon due west in Greenwich Village, with interactive heckling and dress-up.²⁵⁶ Listed in a MMC monthly schedule, the club showed movies such as *Destroy All Monsters* (Ishiro Honda, 1968); *Planet of the Vampires* (Mario Bava, 1965); and *The Corpse Grinders* (Ted V. Mikels, 1971).²⁵⁷ John Sex commented that the early MMC screenings influenced Club 57's vibe: "The movies were so bad that people sat around making fun of them...That's how it started—with a bunch of witty people tearing apart a really bad movie and acting out the roles."²⁵⁸ Films were not only screened at the club, but they were actively embodied and role-played, establishing a precedent for subsequent theme parties and theatrical parodies.

The MMC had its own membership (independent from Club 57 membership although there was significant cross-over), a newsletter ("nooseletter"), field trips ("fiendtrips"), and an annual Halloween bash. Providing special entertainment during the day, MMC fieldtrips were democratically decided by vote. In a newsletter the Great Adventure fieldtrip was promoted: "Embark on the most horrible journey to the bleak state of mass murder...New Jersey. The

²⁵⁶ For a survey of cult, camp and trash cinema and their participatory audience cultures in New York at the time, see J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

²⁵⁷ "November MMC Calendar and Newsletter," The April Palmieri Papers; MSS 115; Box 1; Folder 1; Club 57, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

²⁵⁸ Hager, "Art After Midnight," *Adventures in the Counterculture*, 189.

MMC's private vehicles will take us to the Great Adventure Corporate Nightmare of the Wild Safari Park and the most modern Scary rides. Trip and rides are free to Monsters."²⁵⁹ Dues and money made from MMC events at Club 57 went directly back to members in the form of a fieldtrip. In addition, the MMC would celebrate its own anniversaries, or celebrate itself. For its first anniversary in May of 1980, the MMC asked all of its members, lovingly called "monsters" (predating Lady Gaga's fan club of the same name), to bring slides and photographs of MMC events to "Crypt 57" to "recall our gruesome memories of our Halloween Ball and summer field trip."²⁶⁰ Club 57 was not just a celebration of retro-pop cultures, but also a celebration of its members and the new memories they formed together.

In a listing suitably entitled, "Projecting Downtown," Amy Taubin wrote a small blurb in the *SoHo Weekly News* under the heading "Club 57 and Monster Movie Club." She describes the screenings and the space: "Closest thing to a home movie set-up in town. The audience/film interactions are often better than the films themselves. Drinks at the bar. Horror films, cult classics, as well as the latest super-8 new wave. Beth and Scott B, recently returned from an acclaimed European tour, will be showing new films."²⁶¹ Aside from screening no wave films as well as its predecessor French New Wave, Club 57 also held theme nights, often centering on cultish film divas such as Lana Turner, Joan Crawford, Mamie van Doren and Doris Day.²⁶² While screenings were of course about watching films, it was moreover a community/audience/club bonding exercise through the collective indulgence in Downtown's taste for underground, exploitation, and B-movie horror films.

²⁵⁹ "August MMC Newsletter," The April Palmieri Papers; MSS 115; Box 1; Folder 1 Club 57, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

²⁶⁰ May MMC Newsletter," The April Palmieri Papers; MSS 115; Box 1; Folder 1 Club 57, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

²⁶¹ Amy Taubin, "Projecting Downtown," *SoHo Weekly News*, December 20, 1979, 36.

²⁶² Assorted flyers promoting screenings with the cultish film divas as listed, The April Palmieri Papers; MSS 115; Box 1; Folder 1 Club 57, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

Bill Landis, exploitation film expert and creator of the zine, *Sleazoid Express*, curated underground, porn, and grindhouse film screenings at Club 57. Early issues of his *Sleazoid Express* were sold at Club 57 and promoted Landis's own screenings there.²⁶³ Under *Sleazoid Express*, Landis hosted screenings such as the "The Sex, Sin and Sadism Film Festival," screening films such as *Caged Heat* (Jonathan Demme, 1974) with B-goddess Barbara Steele.²⁶⁴ Landis has been credited with popularizing underground film at Club 57, screening films by John Waters, Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, Amos Poe, James Nares, Nick Zedd.²⁶⁵ At times, Landis would team up with Lisa Baumgardner, of the early feminist zine, *Bikini Girl Magazine*, to host screenings such as *Chelsea Girls* (Andy Warhol, 1966) with special guest speaker and Warhol Superstar, Ondine. Club 57 also sold issues of Michael Weldon's *Psychotronic*, which promoted the "Z movie": "the ones with the lowest possible budgets."²⁶⁶ Weldon's visually appealing zine was full of movie imagery, and listed the trash, horror and cult television offerings of the week, as found on early morning (or very late night) television, and in the exploitation cinema of 42nd Street. Labeled the "sick TV Guide" by the *Village Voice*, it was available for 35 cents at Club 57, or by subscription to Weldon's East Village apartment on East 9th Street.²⁶⁷

Club 57 also held retro-television screenings, usually in the form of theme nights such as "Cartoon Marathon" and "Television Nostomania." Organized by Magnuson and film historian Jerry Beck, Television Nostomania I and II, a title that certainly speaks to Reynolds's concept of "retromania," was a curated screening of 1960s television shows. Magnuson promotes the event:

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ "September Calendar," The April Palmieri Papers; MSS 115; Box 1; Folder 1 Club 57, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

²⁶⁵ Hager, "Art After Midnight," *Adventures in the Counterculture*, 194.

²⁶⁶ Howard Smith and Lin Harris, "Scenes," *East Village Eye*, February 18-24, 1981 (no page), courtesy of Ann Magnuson Archive.

²⁶⁷ Guy Trebay, *Village Voice*, July 23, 1980 (no page), courtesy of personal collection and archive of Ann Magnuson.

“Take a trip down memory lane when Club 57 invites you over to our house to watch TV!”

Again, Club 57 reenacts the home, but with the “nostalgic” distance of time, and the loving indulgence of camp. In a press release for the second incarnation of Television Nostomania, Magnuson writes:

For the generation weaned on T.V., Channel 57 presents Television Nostomania II...An all new program of vintage 60’s television shows will “air.” Prime time begins at 7:00pm lasting well after midnight. In addition to network classics, a menu of TV snacks including Swanson dinners, popcorn and Kellogg’s cereals.²⁶⁸

The screening included a mix of shows such as *The Donna Reed Show*, *The Monkees*, *Rawhide*, *Gidget*, *Lost in Space*, *Car 54*, *My Favorite Martian*, and *Dark Shadows*. For \$2.50 (or \$3 for non-members) East Villagers could gather together to watch their favorite childhood shows and indulge in kiddie snacks at their second home, tuned to television “channel 57.” Collectively, these screen cultures reinforced the camp, cult, trash, and retro tastes of its clubgoers, and helped to construct Club 57’s interconnected visual, cultural, and social identities.

The Temporary and Inclusive Art Exhibition

The most active curator of Club 57’s large-scale temporary art shows was none other than Keith Haring. He comments on the dual purpose of Club 57: “But for me, Club 57 not only meant dancing and drinking and sex and fun and craziness, but the beginning of a whole career as the organizer and curator of some really interesting art shows.”²⁶⁹ Haring’s exhibits were often erotically themed, and super inclusive. His invitationals would show upwards of sixty artists, crammed into the small club for one evening only. Scharf reflects on the nature of Club 57’s visual art exhibitions, “None of these art shows made any money, it was just very well attended,

²⁶⁸ Ann Magnuson, “Press Release,” Binder 1, personal collection and archive of Ann Magnuson.

²⁶⁹ Gruen, *Keith Haring*, 45.

and it was very happening in this underground scene that was only really getting press in the little East Village rags.”²⁷⁰ However, Haring was not alone in his invitational curatorial efforts, as the temporary show at alternative sites became a mark of the Downtown art exhibition. Haring connects his shows to this larger Downtown trend: “I was organizing all kinds of group shows at Club 57. You see, this was the period in New York where people were trying to do things outside the gallery system—doing things more in the community.”²⁷¹ As previously mentioned, this guerilla art exhibition style was concurrently implemented by CoLab, with shows such as *Exhibit A* (1978), *Manifesto Show* (1979), *Real Estate Show* (1980), *Times Square Show* (1980),²⁷² and Diego Cortez’s *New York/New Wave* (1981). Framing visual art within the new wave, *New York/New Wave* exhibited a monumental 1600 pieces with works by Robert Mapplethorpe, Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Futura 2000, and Fab 5 Freddy.²⁷³

While the large and temporary invitational show could be simply viewed as de rigueur Downtown, it was also a political act of inclusion, participation, and cultural visibility. Cortez comments that after the art market died in the 1970s, and his realization of the “big lie” of the alternative art space, he became an entrepreneur to make his own opportunities: “I guess the evolution from about ’75 through ’80 for me went from being an artist who really couldn’t get many chances because of the market situation and the art gallery scene into having to produce a market, you know, becoming a kind of entrepreneur.”²⁷⁴ Commenting on the social enterprise of

²⁷⁰ Van Pee, “Boredom is always counterrevolutionary,” 74.

²⁷¹ Gruen, *Keith Haring*, 62.

²⁷² Similar to the Nova Convention, discussed in the following chapter, the *Times Square Show* was recently “revisited” in a re-exhibition of about half of the original works. See the exhibition’s website, *Times Square Show Revisited*, accessed February 3, 2014, <http://www.timessquareshowrevisited.com/index.html>.

²⁷³ *New York/New Wave* and the *Times Square Show* are commonly regarded as providing professional breaks to East Village artists, and as the star-making vehicles for Haring and Basquiat.

²⁷⁴ “‘The Night Time is the Right Time,’ Diego Cortez and Edit deAk talk,” in *ABC No Rio*, 36.

the large group show, including those by Cortez, Rene Ricard wrote on what he calls the “communal exhibition”:

The communal exhibitions of the last year and a half or so, from the Times Square Show, the Mudd Club shows, the Monumental Show, to the New York/New Wave Show at P.S. 1, have made us accustomed to looking at art in a group, so much so that an exhibit of an individual’s work seems almost antisocial. Colab, Fashion Moda, etc., have created a definite populist ambience, and like all such organizations, from the dawn of modern, have dug a base to launch new work. These are vast communal enterprises as amazing that they got off the ground as the space shuttle and even more, fly-by-night, that they landed on solid ground.²⁷⁵

These “fly-by-night” and “fly by the seat of your pants” exhibitions were collectively artist-run in non-art spaces because young artists were, at the time, excluded from the art world, although that status would quickly change for the chosen few. Taking matters into their own hands and inventively using space, these communal shows, for just a brief moment in time, disrupted the contemporary art marketplace and the pristine sacredness of the “white cube.” This new brand of art, and its exhibition in the wildly inclusive group show, is reflected in Jeffrey Deitch’s review of the *Time Square Show*. An art speculator himself, Deitch assesses the exhibition as “raw, raucous, [and] trashy,” qualities that reflect Downtown’s appropriation of Times Square’s sex industry, which transformed an old massage parlor into a guerilla art exhibition space.²⁷⁶ Corroborating Ricard’s view of the giant group show as highly sociable, Deitch also called the *Time Square Show* “a month long party,” and an “art funhouse,” aligned with my larger argument of the prevalence of the Downtown art-party.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁵ This is also the very same essay that proved groundbreaking for the individual career of Basquiat. See Rene Ricard, “Radiant Child,” ARTFORUM, December 1981, accessed December 2, 2013, <https://artforum.com/inprintarchive/id=35643>.

²⁷⁶ Jeffrey Deitch, “Report From Times Square,” *Art in America*, September 1980, 58-63.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

For one night only, as opposed to one-month, Haring's temporary and inclusive exhibitions actually were evening long art-parties. In contrast to Colab's endeavors, Club 57, along with Haring's shows, were not supported by external grants, but by accessing a Church basement and harnessing the energy and efforts of Club 57 participants. Haring's curatorial strategy revolved around the opening party: "I figured the best exhibit to have would be the one where the opening was the whole show."²⁷⁸ One evening only and by open invitation, usually by public flyer, the curation and installation process of the exhibition became the work of art itself. The acts of preparing and viewing Haring's art exhibitions turned into a social art practice and ephemeral performance. Here, exhibition mixes with pleasure in the form of an ensemble performance, and manic 24-hour art "challenge." Moreover, this art-party exhibition was not about selling art, or greasing donor's palms; and certainly did not celebrate the artist as singular entity. Haring's exhibitions were about doing, showing, and viewing. They embraced the excitement and pleasure of putting-up and tearing-down a show in one opening night. DIY and democratic, Haring's exhibitions celebrated his own views that everyone can make art and that everyone deserves to have an audience for his/her work. This opposes the elitism of the solo-show, which still drives the art market and professional art careerism today.

Aside from the party qualities of the inclusive temporary show, it was also perceived as a punk act. Scharf remarks on the temporary art show in connection to a punk attitude:

Everynight was something different and that was the nature of the art of the time...art was not precious, it was punk rock. And the art that was happening was kind of punk art... We put a show up one night and it would be a big event. It wasn't meant to be precious, that's what I mean. So by staging these one-night shows it was very of the moment.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ Frank and McKenzie, *New, Used & Improved: Art for the 80's*, 66.

²⁷⁹ Scharf in Van Pee, "Boredom is Counterrevolutionary," 92.

The punk quality of do-it-yourself-in-one-night, and the blatant disregard for the preciousness of art undermine core values of the art market economy. Steve Mass of the Mudd Club also noticed this art as punk attitude. Mass began to attend Club 57 when he felt the Mudd Club's energy waning and eventually hired Haring to curate shows there.²⁸⁰ Now paid for his "punk" curatorial work, Haring's shows included a variety of art types, including "Beyond Words," a graffiti show co-curated with graffiti artists Fab 5 Freddy and Futura. While Haring geared shows to his own interests, whether graffiti, widely-participational, or sexually themed, he also provided an exhibition format to artists in nightclubs, even if they happened to be his personal friends, whom would not have received such an exhibition platform otherwise.

Aside from a variety of themes including Xerox-art and day-glo shows at Club 57, where participants would decorate paper-covered walls with fluorescent paint, Haring curated shows in the Church basement that contained non-normative and pornographic sexual content. In Haring's humorous instructional flyer for "The First Annual Club 57 Group Erotic and Pornographic Art Exhibition" (1981), he appropriates a photograph from the cover of a sex manual. In the photograph, two women and a man are having an orgy with a dog, under the title, "Dog-instruction." Correspondingly, artists were instructed when to drop off and pick-up their work. Haring further jokes with clever sexual innuendo in his instructions, "There is no censorship whatsoever, except maybe size."²⁸¹

Certainly living up to its name, the show eventually filled with sexually themed works by sixty-six artists. Seemingly at odds with the general outlook on sexuality held by the Polish National Church, Magnuson recalls the show:

²⁸⁰ Gruen, *Keith Haring*, 62.

²⁸¹ Flyer for "The First Annual Club 57 Group Erotic and Pornographic Art Exhibition," The Frank Moore Papers; MSS 135; Series 2A Box 6; Folder 190, Fales Library and Special Collections.

Keith Haring curated the Erotic Art Show. There was a photo of a giant phallus at the entrance, and when I saw the church father coming towards us I had to head him off. It's amazing we got away with what we did. In fact, a special neighbourhood meeting was called to complain about us. The neighbours asked Father John why he 'allowed evil people in the church' and he said, 'That's where evil people should be, in a church.' God bless him!²⁸²

While "getting away with it" certainly added to Club 57's fun factor, David Smith quipped in *Topman* magazine, "Does a multi-sexual "New Wave Erotic and Pornographic Art Exhibition" sound like fun to you? Well, Club 57 had their first annual one...and it was a gas!"²⁸³ Catering to the gay audience of *Topman*, the sex and nightlife magazine reprints a comic panel entry by Richard Taddei which illustrates gay sex acts: a blindfolded blow job, anilingus, face fisting, and a few panels devoted to ejaculation. While the cartoon was considered erotic, Smith finds much of the show humorous, which aligns with the over-the-top humor of Club 57. For example, there was a triptych of a high school yearbook style photograph of a teenage boy with the words, "I can suck my own dick," under each picture.²⁸⁴ The poster for the show, apparently plastered all over Downtown, was created by John Sex and depicted him straddling an airplane. Magnuson constructed a fake shrine to Hugh Hefner, commemorating his fictional death with photos, *Playboys*, and burning incense and candles. In terms of performance, John Kelly sang Maria Callas songs in drag, wearing a long wrap of plastic packing bubbles for percussive popping. Punk, new wave, and sexually inclusive, Haring's erotic and pornographic show was fun and adventurous, and provided the impetus for yet another art opening as Club 57 art-party.

²⁸² Magnuson in Metzger, "East Village Preservation Society," ["http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/12458/1/east-village-preservation-society-club-57"](http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/12458/1/east-village-preservation-society-club-57)

²⁸³ David Smith "Where the Boys Are" *Topman*, March 23, 1981, 19.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 18.

Queer Theatrical Performance

A long-time couple, Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman have worked together across stage, television, and film, as a collaborative musical team that began at Club 57. Creating their first queer parodies there, Shaiman and Wittman are now best known for the Tony-award winning music and witty lyrics for *Hairspray* (as well as Shankman's 2007 film version); and for the academy award nominated musical soundtrack for *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut* (Parker, 1999). Shaiman quipped on *Hairspray's* relation to Club 57, "When *Hairspray* finally happened everyone who was still alive from that period came to see it and was like, 'Oh my God, that's just like a Club 57 show with a budget.'"²⁸⁵ In 1980, Shaiman discovered the promising nightclub community by word-of-mouth: "Our friend Marge Gross told us about a club on St. Marks Place... She said, 'I've found Oz. It's kind of theatrical, with funny people who laugh at the same things we do.'"²⁸⁶ Sharing Club 57's hybrid sensibilities, Wittman describes his productions as lying outside of popular Broadway shows of the time (such as *Cats* or *Les Misérables*) and rock venues, but as an ideal fit for Club 57: "We were too rock 'n' roll for theatre and too theatre-y for rock 'n' roll so this was a perfect little niche for us. So we started writing things just for our own enjoyment and the enjoyment of our friends. The place only seated at the most 75 people."²⁸⁷

Furthermore, Shaiman discusses the open format of Club 57 and its manic energy as highly generative for their work: "It was just a crazy place. Every night there was something else. We just booked a night and you could do whatever you wanted. So we would just do things

²⁸⁵ Jaspar Reese, "Theartsdesk Q&A: Songwriters Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman," *The Arts Desk*, June 15, 2013, accessed February 3, 2014, <http://www.theartsdesk.com/theatre/theartsdesk-qa-songwriters-marc-shaiman-and-scott-wittman>.

²⁸⁶ Schilling, "Girls, Girls, Girls!," <http://nymag.com/arts/theater/features/marc-shaiman-scott-wittman-2011-4/>.

²⁸⁷ Reese, "Theartsdesk Q&A: Songwriters Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman," <http://www.theartsdesk.com/theatre/theartsdesk-qa-songwriters-marc-shaiman-and-scott-wittman>

for fun there. We started writing and writing.”²⁸⁸ For their productions, Shaiman and Whitman formed the Who Theatre. The thirty-person company actually developed out of loft parties that were thrown by Whittman and Shaiman: “all our friends would come over and party. We’d do improvs, sing and carry on.”²⁸⁹ The party scene met at a building on the upper Westside, but when the complex went co-op as a result of gentrification, the two moved their performative loft party Downtown to Club 57.

Shaiman and Whittman’s first Club 57 production was a dinner theater-like rendition of the play and film versions of *Boeing-Boeing* (1962; Rich, 1965). The production’s humor mostly capitalized on the American film, where the sexual farce of maintaining heterosexual romantic relationships with multiple stewardesses starred Jerry Lewis and Tony Curtis. Whitman’s camp attitude towards the play motivated his revival, remarking, “This is horrible. Let’s revive it!”²⁹⁰ For their next show, Shaiman and Whitman wrote an original musical, *Livin’ Dolls*, inspired by a book about Barbie’s 25th anniversary.²⁹¹ Part Barbie tribute and part *Beach Blanket Bingo* (William Asher, 1965), *Livin’ Dolls*, wrote one reviewer, “Reminded me of an annual spring college show gone haywire. Or, as one cast member put it, ‘It’s like Mickey and Judy on acid.’”²⁹² Shaiman and Wittman’s production was perceived to perfectly complement the club: “*Living Dolls* and Club 57 have an infectious energy and sprit that are inseparable. I’m not sure I would want to see this production in any other space.”²⁹³

Differing from the usual cabaret fare of individual or small group performance, Shaiman and Whittman's “cast of thousands” theatrical productions were unconventional for nightclub

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

²⁹² Viola, “Collective Lunacy,” 55.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

performance, but telling of Downtown's community dynamics, humor, and fun. Shaiman and Whittman's 1981 campy remake of the *Sound of Music* (1959), first titled *Keep Your Von Trapp Shut*, opened first at Club 57 and later played at other nightclubs as *The Sound of Muzak*. In the musical, Warhol Superstar Holly Woodlawn played a hybridized Maria, substituting the iconic Anglo Maria with a promiscuous and sassy Puerto Rican Maria from *West Side Story* (1957). Here, Woodlawn's drag queen persona subsumes Maria, as the lyrics to "My Favorite Things" were subversively changed to lines such as, "Cocaine that stays on my nose and false lashes."²⁹⁴ Club 57 mainstays John Sex and Wendy Wild performed a raunchy burlesque rendition of "16 Going on 17," while Michael Musto, the Downtown scene's principal gossip columnist, played a disco nun named "Sister Sledge." The large cast reflects the localized social network colloquially referred to as the "Downtown 500," a creative community that supported and collaborated with one another by exhibiting, performing, and playing together at night. This "Downtown 500" casting approach to Shaiman and Whittman's musicals dissolves the boundary between performers and audience, as there were nearly as many people performing on stage as in the audience. Furthermore, Downtown's nightclub glitterati, its familiar faces about town, were part of the cast (Woodlawn, Musto, Wild, Sex). The "Downtown 500" theatrical community approach literally doubled as a nightclub party-on-stage.

After Club 57 folded, Shaiman and Wittman, directed shows throughout the 1980s, at Danceteria, Palladium, and Limelight. Wittman was given the nickname "Mr. DeMille," for his giant casts: the cast of *Pagan Place*, where Peyton Place met the Bible for twenty glorious minutes at the Palladium, had 200 members. Shaiman describes his creative philosophy of theatrical ensemble, centered on the extras: "My first thought whenever we do a show is, *Who*

²⁹⁴ Schilling, "Girls, Girls, Girls!," <http://nymag.com/arts/theater/features/marc-shaiman-scott-wittman-2011-4/>

would the group be? Cowboys? Trojan women? Baltimore teenagers?”²⁹⁵ Shaiman and Wittman’s productions, first workshopped and produced at Club 57, emphasize the continuity of Downtown as creative community both on and off stage. Through such large-scale productions, the Downtown scene fluidly moved between social, ritual, and theatrical performance arenas, collapsing the space between audience and performer, as well as cultural product and environment.

Theme Parties: The Ladies Auxiliary of the Lower East Side (LALES)

Downtown was known not only for its exciting nightlife that mixed with the arts, but specifically for the form of the theme party. Tony Heiberg of the *East Village Eye* credits Club 57 for starting the theme party trend in the East Village, as opposed to the Mudd Club.²⁹⁶ In several cultural histories, Mudd Club proprietor Steve Mass is noted for poaching Club 57 members, such as Haring to curate art exhibitions and Magnuson to throw theme parties. Mass called Club 57 his favorite hangout, and while the clubs are popularly historicized as different, the Mudd as “punk” and Club 57 as “fun and silly,” there obviously was a great degree of crossover. As detailed in the following chapter, the Downtown theme party also spread to public access television via *TV Party*.

A magnetic figure, Magnuson was a mistress of ceremonies, overseeing an alarming number of events per week. Magnuson describes Club 57 as an “exorcism of Americana,” but also as a giant “Yes!”²⁹⁷ When she organized theme parties, her goal was to create different environments for club goers to perform and to play freely in, which she later called

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Heiberg, “5 Years of Fab 57,” 21.

²⁹⁷ Heiberg, “Ann Magnuson,” 9; Magnuson, interview with author, January 2014.

“enviroteques” as opposed to “discothèques.”²⁹⁸ Magnuson comments, “at Club 57 I wanted to be everywhere. I would create a set, a soundtrack, and a framework for people to come in and be their own characters. They’d costume themselves and we’d make a play.”²⁹⁹ Theme parties were immersive environments, similar to a happening, but more of an improvisational comedic performance. Imitating television, Magnuson’s philosophy for running the club was to create a space that was tuned to a different channel every night, as long as that channel cost little to no money.³⁰⁰ This idea of rapidly flipping through television channels visually manifests in Club 57’s logo (fig. 1.1). Designed by Scharf, the logo is a television set with an atomic symbol for a channel knob, with the added elements of stage lights, the club’s name, and the word, “fun.” The theme party mixed entertainment with art, and took on a form that was welcoming, expressive, accessible, intimate, and unpretentious, in comparison to the pluralistic terrain of 1970s contemporary art which tended to be visually stark, large, and serious (performance art, process art, land art, minimalism, feminist art, etc.)³⁰¹

²⁹⁸ Jan Cherubin, “City Stuff: Party Line,” (undated and no publication title), in The April Palmieri Papers; MSS 115; Box 1; Folder 6, Misc. articles, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

²⁹⁹ Heiberg, “Ann Magnuson,” 8-9.

³⁰⁰ A few years later, Ann Magnuson revisits this very Club 57 theme of switching channels, and adopting multiple TV personas, in her signature video made in collaboration with video artist Tom Rubnitz, *Made for TV*. The video premiered as part of the PBS series “Alive From Off Center” in 1984. See Tom Rubnitz, Ann Maguson, and Matt Danowski, *Made for TV* (Chicago, Ill: Video Data Bank, 1984), DVD.

³⁰¹ While there were artists such as John Baldessari and William Wegman that significantly used humor, generally speaking, the major trends of the 1970s were not inclined towards humor or forms of entertainment.

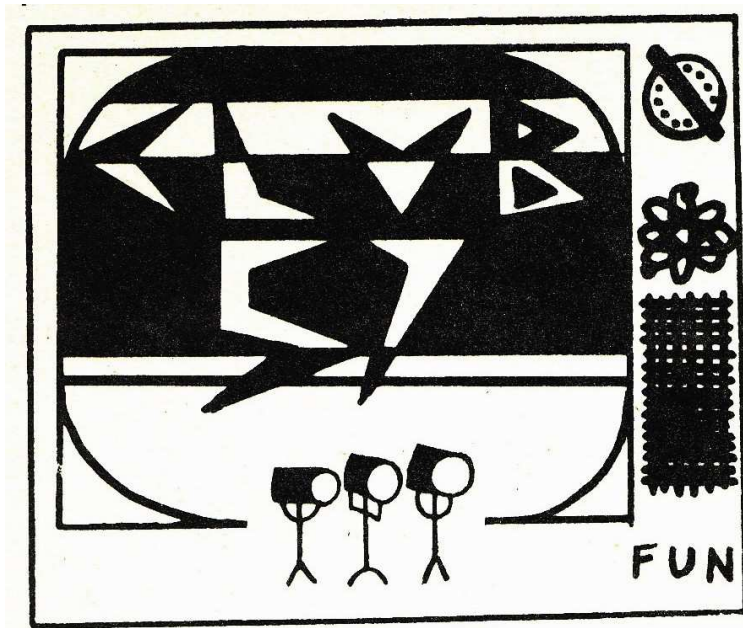


Fig. 1.1. Kenny Scharf, Club 57 Logo, circa 1980. Drawing. Permission of the artist.

While Club 57 provided an alternative to the alternative art space and church youth group, its many themes provided alternatives to the pop culture of suburban America, and the social conservatism of the Reagan era. At times politically reactionary, theme parties constantly reimagined, twisted, and reenacted American culture, as opposed to a mere 1970s nostalgia for the golden age of the 1950s. Merle Ginsberg comments on the nature of Club 57's theme parties, "[they] weren't as sometimes accused, simple nostalgia; they were theatre, comments on popular culture—original, ridiculous, innocent, and very stylishly stylized."³⁰² Parties had themes such as "*The Lawrence Welk Show*," a parody of the television show's corny white-bread mediocrity; "A Salute to NASA," with a simulated space flight and Tang; and "The Model World of Glue," with toy model building, glue sniffing, and some small fires. As another salute to the American living room, Lance Loud, who made his youthful gay lifestyle public on PBS's *An American Family* in the 1970s, hosted a punk game show called "Name that Noise." Min Thometz, of the LALES

³⁰² Ginsberg, "Night (life) Imitates Art," 8.

and Pulsallama held an early theme party called “Voo Doo Night,” where raw chickens were hung from the ceiling and bones were thrown around the club—hardly hygienic but memorable décor. Inspired by the neighborhood’s Eastern European communities and fascinated by communism, Magnuson threw a “Radio Free Europe” party, with borscht and a free beet and potato give-away at the door. Maps and travel brochures of Eastern Block countries lined the walls, while she performed as the Ukrainian chanteuse, Anoushka, alongside a “reverse” Polish strip act (where clothes were put on).³⁰³ On another occasion, Club 57 was transformed into the 5700 Club. A spoof on Jim and Tammy Baker’s famous religious talk show, the *700 Club*, the event was a surreal parody of the rise of the new Christian right and tele-evangelism.³⁰⁴

Ann Magnuson founded the Ladies Auxiliary of the Lower East Side (LALES) in August of 1979, soon after she started to manage the club. Magnuson describes the club within a club:

dedicated to the glorification of womanhood in all of its manifestations, real or imagined. Begotten of the Junior League, it was an amalgam of Eisenhower era housewives and one-breasted amazon warrior-esses, a coven of ‘girls-next-door’ appropriating the icons of femininity and worshipping them in their own graven images. Cloistered behind closed doors they feasted upon ‘potluck’ dinners, libelous pillow talk and gossip.³⁰⁵

This girl power organization produced ladies wrestling nights, ladies only dance nights, a debutante ball, and perhaps most famously, started the all-girl percussion band, Pulsallama. Club 57’s strongest collective force, other members included Dany Johnson, Club 57’s house DJ and LALES Vice President; performance artists and singer Wendy Wild; drummer Jean Caffeine; photographer Ande Whyland; Tish and Snookie Bellomo of Manic Panic; Lisa Baumgardner of

³⁰³ Heiberg, “5 Years of Fab 57,” 21.

³⁰⁴ The Moral Majority and the Christian Voice were both established in 1979.

³⁰⁵ Ann Magnuson, “I dreamed I Was an Androgynous Rock Star in my Maidenform Bra,” *ZG 8, Heroes Issue*, Winter 1982: (no page); reprinted in Magnuson and Scharf, *East Village West*, 13-14.

Bikini Girl; and enduring Pulsallama members, April Palmieri, Stace Elkin, and Min Thometz.³⁰⁶

Initially the LALES and Pulsallama had about seventeen members, which eventually dwindled to a core group of seven in the band.³⁰⁷

While the club threw theme parties for Club 57 at large, they also held private sleepovers and potluck-style parties for LALES members only, in and out of the space of the nightclub. The first LALES event was a *mostly* girls-only sleep over party at Club 57, featuring a pillow fight, hash brownies, a round of mystery date, and Scharf and John Sex as go-go boys (the party marks John Sex's first Club 57 burlesque performance). A repeated event was Stace Elkin's "The Amazon School of Modeling," the Club's foray into fashion. Aside from a catwalk mixing absurd and legitimate fashions by aspiring designers, the evening's performance art included one of the Ladies aiding John Sex with a shaving cream enema, and Dany Johnson gluing hair onto her chest. One meeting ritual of the LALES was the maintenance of a "secret boy file." The gossip databank focused on the opposite sex, to helpfully record and protect women against various STDs, but also to ventilate scathing art reviews, and even harsher sex reviews.

Other LALES side-projects included the publication of a safety pamphlet and a vintage fashion spread in the Downtown press. In a special style supplement for the *SoHo Weekly News*, with photography by Tseng Kwon Chi, the LALES modeled vintage fashion looks, with a text by Magnuson.³⁰⁸ She writes, "From the collection of Thrift Couture, So Then, Its Now, So Out, Its In. Not Retro, just Better...Reactionary." Playing with new and old, and out and in, lines are

³⁰⁶ Substantiating this chapter and my project in general, interviews were held with LALES and Pulsallama members Ann Magnuson, April Palmieri, Dany Johnson, Ande Whyland, and Min Thometz. I also accessed the archives of April Palmieri (Fales NYU) and Ann Magnuson (personal).

³⁰⁷ "Pulsallama Press Kit," The April Palmieri Papers; MSS 115; Box 1; Folder 10, Pulsallama, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

³⁰⁸ Ann Magnuson, "Long on Elegance," *SoHo Weekly News*, in The April Palmieri Papers; MSS 115; Box 3, Oversized, Folder 1, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

blurred in the name of “the endless night” and “for your time, 9pm to 5am.” Using thrift-store-chic as the feature’s selling point, Magnuson writes: “None over \$12.50! Providing new meaning to the word “bargain”... Exclusively modeled by the arbiters of tradition: the Ladies Auxiliary of the Lower East Side.” Mocking the grandeur of wealth, the second-hand looks have titles such as “Opera Boeuf,” and “The Poseidon Adventure.” The dress and the models’ poses satirize excessive wealth, and furthermore, the reference to *The Poseidon Adventure* (Ronald Neame, 1972) parodies a disaster party movie in which a tsunami sinks a luxury liner, drowning the rich in their formal evening wear on New Year’s Eve.

In another piece for the *SoHo Weekly News*, the LALES published “Safety Tips” for women. The twenty-six tips are illustrated by the girl power fashionista, Emma Peel, in a skin-tight training outfit from *The Avengers* (1961-1969), in a martial arts ready stance position. Here, the LALES define themselves as “a secret society of groovy girls situated east of Broadway and South of 14th Street,” with a mission to “provide unique social entertainment for the community and are dedicated to having fun.”³⁰⁹ The tips run from humorous, such as “Dress poor,” to more concrete tips for protecting oneself, such as which brand of mace to purchase. Mixing humor alongside serious women’s issues, other bullet-points include: “Pay a bum to walk you home. Choose Carefully!... Have an air of confidence about you—walk ‘butch’... ‘Carry Condoms in your wallet and make him use it.’”³¹⁰ While the list ended with the final cheeky point, “Don’t trust any man,” the list in total is sharp-witted, yet also deadly serious in terms of protecting oneself, especially when going out in the East Village, which was still a dangerous neighborhood.

³⁰⁹ Ann Magnuson, “Safety Tips From the Ladies Auxiliary of the Lower East Side,” *SoHo Weekly News*, June 17-23, 1981, 49.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Eventually, LALES parties dwindled as emphasis shifted to the all-girl percussion band, Pulsallama. First created as a pagan band for the LALES's "Rites of Spring Fertility Bacchanal" party, the project started with seventeen girls screaming and beating on pots and pans or whatever they could get their hands on. Since everyone Downtown seemed to be in a band, and knowing how to play an instrument was not a qualifier to form one, the LALES began to play shows as Pulsallama due to the success of their debut show. Typical of LALES's humor and eclectic mixing, Pulsallama is a portmanteau combining a Pulsamatic blender, the percussion of choice of the domestic housewife, and the llama, the unofficial mascot of the band. Pulsallama was an anti-band, and a response to the male domination of rock, and the virtuoso guitar heroes of arena rock. Magnuson also comments that it was specifically a parody of Malcolm McLaren's post-Sex Pistols business endeavor, Bow Wow Wow, and the popularization of "Burundi Beats" or "tribal rhythms" in new wave music, which appropriated the polyrhythmic layering of African drumming in the early eighties.³¹¹

The first Pulsallama produced parties were performance art as mock ritual, such as the "Rites of Spring Fertility Bacchanal" and "the Rites of Autumn Harvest." An invite for the autumn harvest read, "Come celebrate the death of summer with frenzy with barbarous sacrificial rituals. Reap the goodness of maize by indulging in our bountiful Autumnal corn and wheat Banquet. Dress code: Heathen."³¹² Dee Pop of the band the Bush Tetras summarized Pulsallama's early performances as "13 girls fighting over a cowbell."³¹³ Songs were sometimes like a cheer, or a chorus, mostly in English but at times fractured Spanish and French. In

³¹¹ See Tony Heiberg, "Ann Magnuson," 9.

³¹² "Press release dated September 12, 1981," which doubles as an invitation stating, "The Ladies' Auxiliary of the Lower East Side invite the public to attend their 'Rites of Autumn Harvest Feast.'" The April Palmieri Papers; MSS 115; Box 1 Folder 10 Pulsallama, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries..

³¹³ "LALES Press Release, September 12, 1981," The April Palmieri Papers; MSS 115; Box 1; Folder 10, Pulsallama, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

performances, homemade percussion instruments littered the stage. The music press would soon describe the band as hilarious noise that must be seen to be really heard, stressing performance and its experiential aspects. Adding to the visual performative aspects of popular music, at times, they all dressed as distressed Amazons or Greek goddesses. But on most occasions, Pulsallama members would each parody a certain image of femininity or pop culture: a prom queen, a female Kiss clone, Barbarella, or a witch. Pulsallama's sharp humor is described in *Sounds*: "Pulsallama satirize and pulverize. They satirize girl talk, the American way of life, and the rock 'n' roll myth ...and then pulverize the glossy girl image."³¹⁴

Parts punk, retro, and camp, but all-girl, Pulsallama were best known for their 1982 debut single, "The Devil Lives in My Husband's Body," which received airplay on college radio and in Downtown clubs. Produced by Y records, the song is a satire of suburban marital bliss gone awry. The song tells the story of a housewife seeking psychiatric and occult help for her troubled husband, who she believes is possessed by a demonic dog, but actually has Tourettes syndrome. By 1983 the music press calls Pulsallama a welcome response to the wholesome popularity of all-girl bands such as the GoGos, Toto Coleo and Bananarama. As Pulsallama reduced to seven members, the band began to struggle with their own professionalization and image. As Club 57 fizzled out, Pulsallama transformed from a spontaneous and fun performance art band, playing only at theme parties, to recording original songs, learning to play instruments, and opening up for the Clash, only to break-up shortly thereafter.

The recent exhibition, *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s*, provides a useful framework for understanding the activities of the LALES, and more generally, Club 57's varied productions. The exhibition highlights how the art of the 1980s rests upon politicized

³¹⁴ Rose Rouse, "Pulsallama Venue," *Sounds*, October 30, 1982 (no page), in The April Palmieri Papers; MSS 115; Box 1; Folder 10, Pulsallama, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

feminist precedents, but within the new production context of mass media influence. Artists practicing in the 1980s were the first generation of producers to be impacted by the visual culture of television. As political and social movements pressed on after the 1960s, the pursuit of personal happiness became a highly disputed terrain within the wider context of popular media. Curator Helen Molesworth claims in regards to this particular creative generation: “They came of age in a culture shot through with visual regimes designed to promote desire across a variety of spectra: desire for objects, for lifestyles, for fame, for conformity, for anti-conformity. These two powerful social forces—movements for social justice and the rise of television—converged and matured in the art of the 1980s.”³¹⁵ The dual agenda and framework of *This Will Have Been* also applies to the varied activities of Club 57, operating in the wake of second wave feminism, but deeply entwined in a commitment to local community and retro-pop cultural commentary.

Ann Magnuson’s Club 57 Calendar

To reiterate, Club 57 was crucial to the formation of the Downtown scene. Moreover, its aesthetic and practices defined conceptions of “Downtown” as a new movement, sensibility, and attitude. By 1982, fashion editor Craig Unger cites Club 57 as a pivotal site of visual and cultural production, which helped to construct a new counterculture Downtown.³¹⁶ In a spread in *New York Magazine*, Downtown is named “the 80s attitude,” which describes a variant of camp, dependent upon ambiguity, ironic eclecticism, and an obsession with the past. Retro images from the 1950s-60s (e.g. housewives, sock-hop couples dancing, and a man bowling) frame the article’s margins, accenting centrally placed photographs of Downtown artists, such as Dan

³¹⁵ Helen Molesworth, Johanna Burton, and Claire Grace, *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s* (Chicago, IL: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2012), 17.

³¹⁶ Craig Unger, “Attitude,” *New York Magazine*, July, 26, 1982, 30.

Friedman, Fab 5 Freddy, and Laurie Anderson, or even Patricia Fields's boutique. On one page, photographs of both Andy Warhol and William S. Burroughs illustrate the text as gay father figures of the new 80s attitude.³¹⁷ While Unger describes 80s attitude as indebted to gay culture as a variant of camp, it also pushes beyond camp. He differentiates this new Downtown strain of camp by asserting: "Eighties attitude, on the other hand, mixes objects and values self-consciously, making connections that are designed to comment on the past, present and future."³¹⁸ Similar to the temporality of Muñoz's creation of concrete utopias via queer worldmaking practices, 80s attitude and its aesthetics bridges now and then, while hinting towards and desiring a better future.

Credited as initiating 80s attitude, Club 57 seems a far cry from the assumed negativity of punk. Simon Reynolds argues that postpunk (1978-1984) did not stick to the "No Future" agenda of the Sex Pistols, and instead, expanded punk's nascent project by exploring and appropriating other musical genres such as disco, reggae, synthpop, and funk.³¹⁹ Carlo McCormick confirms this hybrid mixture of punk and retro, of optimism and pessimism, through an assessment of Scharf's work: "his bold-ass optimism was an irreparably perverse nostalgia that belonged as much to Punk's no-future blank generation as it did to any of the more cloying baby-boomer narcissisms it so deftly mimicked."³²⁰ Previously unrecognized in scholarship on the intersections of queer and punk in the 1970s, Club 57 built upon punk to include camp and retro.³²¹ On the convergence of camp, retro and punk Downtown, McCormick broadens punk

³¹⁷ Ibid, 27.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Simon Reynolds, *Rip It up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 153-57.

³²⁰ Carlo McCormick, "Customizing Kenny," in *Kenny Scharf*, Richard Marshall et al.(New York: Rizzoli, 2009), 10.

³²¹ Performance studies scholar Tavia Nyong'o has written on the intersection of punk and queer in the 1970s, but the mixture of camp and punk goes unmentioned in the scope of his work. In my third chapter case study on the Nova Convention, Nyong'o also does not mention how punk and queer collide through the figure of William S.

aesthetics: “so urban youth mediated their own look through the thrift-store and dumpster diving repossession of discarded former glories. Punk was not all arch-minimalisms in black leather: It was just as well an eye-popping passé of party dresses, lounge-patter patterns, and gravity defying beehives.”³²² McCormick’s descriptions of punk’s variations are located in the work of Scharf and Downtown, and resonate with Unger’s “new 80s attitude,” and more generally, the aesthetic and practices of Club 57.

To analyze the motivational force behind Club 57’s constant range of activity, it is productive to read its reinventions through Richard Hell’s “Blank Generation”—a Downtown punk anthem that did not express nihilism alone, but possibility. While the song can be interpreted as a commentary on the existing cultural bankruptcy in mainstream America, or the marginalization of youth cultures as meaningless or vapid, it was foremost a call to action for filling in the blank with an indefinite number of possibilities. In performances, and in the recording, Hell sings the lyrics of the chorus first by announcing the word “blank” and then by leaving a space, filled in by a percussive beat. The lyrics of the chorus run: “I belong to the Blank Generation/ And I can take it or leave it each time/ Well I belong to the _____ Generation/ And I can take it or leave it each time./ Take it!”³²³ The blank exists for the audience or listener to occupy, replacing it with any possible word or phrase. Hell remarks on his song’s meaning, “[people] misread what I meant by ‘Blank Generation.’ To me, ‘blank’ was a line where you can fill in anything. It’s positive. It’s the idea that you have the option of making

Burroughs. See Nyong'o, “Punk’d Theory,” *Social Text*, no. 23 (2005): 19-34; and Nyong'o “Do You Want Queer Theory (or Do You Want the Truth)? Intersections of Punk and Queer in the 1970s.” *Radical History Review*, no. 100 (2008): 103-119.

³²² Carlo McCormick, “Customizing Kenny,” 17.

³²³ Waterman, *Marquee Moon*, 89.

yourself anything you want, filling in the blank.”³²⁴ Moreover, Hell’s own image creation, naming himself Richard Hell and stylizing himself as a Downtown punk rock star, is also a product of possibility, positivity, and imagination: “So naturally if you invent yourself, you love yourself. The idea of inventing yourself is creating the most ideal image that you could imagine. So that’s totally positive.”³²⁵ This call to fill in the blank was also enacted through the way Hell was visually stylized on the original album sleeve.³²⁶ In the photograph on the album cover, Hell appears shirtless in black jeans, opening a black jacket to reveal the words written across his chest, “YOU MAKE ME _____.” Sexually provocative, and full of possibility, Hell invites the viewer to “take it away” and fill-in the blank.

Club 57’s programming pushes the “Blank Generation’s” filling in the blank to Mad Libs extremes. Combining retro, camp, and punk, Club 57’s new wave impulse to imagine, do and make is readily apparent in the graphic design of Magnuson’s monthly club calendar. Magnuson describes the process of scheduling and filling in the calendar’s blanks:

As the club got more and more popular, people wanted to do things... when I had a blank day, I would go up to people and if I knew somebody who was an aspiring fashion designer I said, “why don’t you do a fashion show here?”... These were East Village designers who had no outlet for any of their work, or hadn’t even created a lot of work but for themselves and their friends... Or people would come to me and say we have this idea, we want to do a Grand Ole Opry night...and we would all be involved in it...³²⁷

The idea that you did not have to be a professional to do a fashion, theatre or art show was at the heart of Club 57’s experimental nature, and derives from a punk and DIY impulse of amateurism. Club 57 was foremost an open creative platform supported by a creative community, and its monthly calendar visually depicted its democratic impulse. In a retro

³²⁴ Richard Hell, *I Dreamed I Was a Very Clean Tramp: An Autobiography*, (New York, NY: Ecco 2013), 207.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ See the album cover for *Blank Generation*, Richard Hell & the Voidoids, Sire Records, 1977, photograph by Roberta Bailey.

³²⁷ Ann Magnuson, interview with author, January 2014.

approach to the calendar, Magnuson was obsessed with visual culture of the 1950s and 1960s. She collected magazines from that time, clipping out and pasting graphic imagery into her calendar collages. In the vein of camp, she describes her own general artistic strategy as having one foot in sarcasm and the other in sincerity.³²⁸ Highly detailed and time-consuming, Magnuson's calendars visually demonstrate the kind of hyperactive and explosive creative energy of the space, and a fusion of retro, camp and punk.

Although the calendars became more and more elaborate as the months passed, an example of a fairly typical calendar is from February 1980, shown in its original and copied form, which was also promoted in the *East Village Eye* (fig. 1.2, fig. 1.3, and fig. 1.4).³²⁹

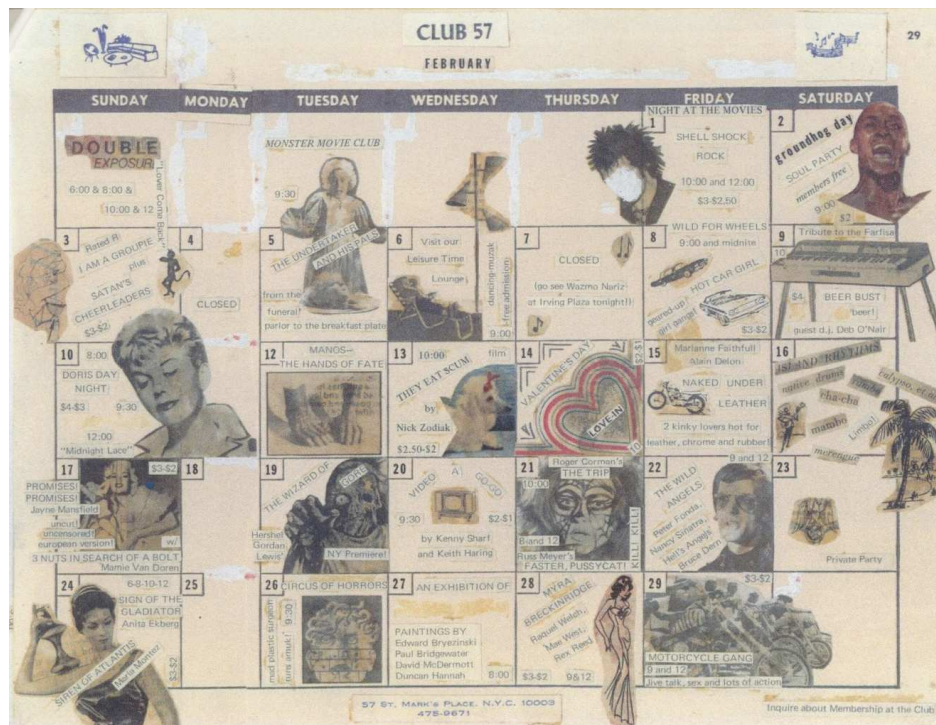


Fig. 1.2. Ann Magnuson, *Club 57 Calendar*, February 1980. Collage on paper, 8.5" x 11". Permission of the artist.

³²⁸ Tony Heiberg, "Ann Magnuson," 9.

³²⁹ The original version appears in Magnuson and Scharf, *East Village West*, 15; the copy is found in the *East Village Eye*, February 1980, 29.

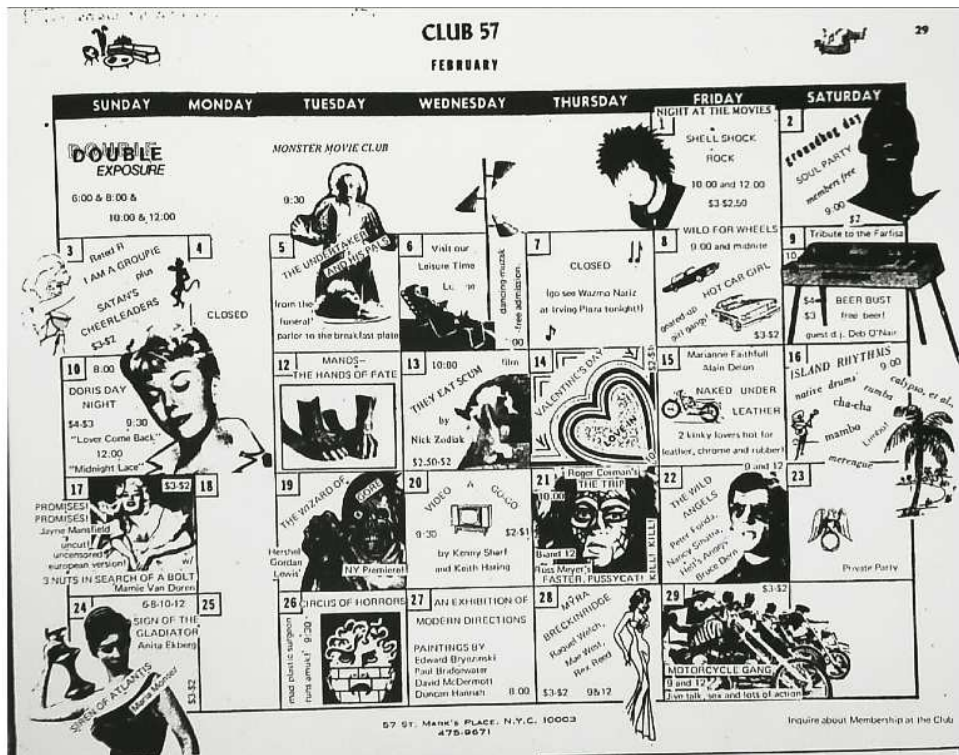


Fig. 1.3. Ann Magnuson, *Club 57 Calendar*, February 1980. Reproduction (flyer). Permission of the artist.



Fig. 1.4. Ann Magnuson, *Club 57 Calendar*, February 1980. Reproduction in the *East Village Eye*, February 1980: 29. Permission of the artist.

Typically, flyers of the calendar were copied and printed on brightly colored paper and distributed to members via mail, and pasted throughout the East Village. Using an 8" x 10" template from an office supply store, Magnuson designed the calendars from her apartment, filling in each small, approximately one-inch square with images corresponding to scheduled events. Magnuson comments on locating her vintage imagery:

There were these fantastic places in Downtown New York at the time: used bookstores and bizarre curio emporiums that were just full of a lot of junk. And everything was a nickel or ten for a dollar, if that much. Things were very cheap. And I would haul things from the thrift stores, and these used bookstores back to my apartment because I liked the visuals. And then I would spend hours creating these collages. It would be a marathon.³³⁰

A few days before completion, Magnuson would give the text to LALES member Lisa Baumgardner, who would professionally type set the captions at her day-job in a tiny font, to fit the small squares. While DIY and eclectic, the calendar's text was legible, and the textual component had the feel of "professional" magazine copy.

February's calendar design, as representative of all of Magnuson's calendars, breaks the strict organization of the modernist grid. The lines of the office template barely contain Club 57's boisterous and diverse parade of events. February boasts inventive theme parties such as "Groundhog Day Soul Party," a "Tribute to the Farfisa Beer Bust," and a "Valentine's Day love-in;" and a "Video A Go-Go" featuring work by Scharf and Haring. For film screenings, there is of course the MMC's weekly Tuesday night fright, screening films like *The Undertaker and His Pals* (Swicegood, 1966). There is also a biker film theme, with *The Wild Angel* (Corman, 1966) and *Naked Under Leather* (Cardiff, 1968) screening in February. Template lines are whited-out by Magnuson to maximize image play and nonconformity of the grid space. Images break

³³⁰ Ann Magnuson, interview with author, January 2014.

boundaries as they burst forth from rigid squares to share the total space and interact within the broken-down grid. The calendar looks like a raucous party as the design elements—a poodle, Doris Day, Peter Fonda, and “the Undertaker”—mix and mingle within the visual representation of Club 57.

Club 57’s boundless energy is further heightened by the calendar’s maximal and all-over-the-place design qualities. The overwhelming number of design elements (text and image) causes the viewer’s eye to actively and randomly dart all over the calendar. Undermining the clarity and purpose of the corporate calendar template, there is no ordered progression to the calendar. It lacks a strict graphic design hierarchy, and a singular focal point as a work of art. Magnuson’s calendar defies the usual left to right and top to bottom linearity of reading a calendar’s chronological grid, and more broadly, disrupts the corporate organization of time, or in other words, a 9-to-5-work schedule. Furthermore, the scattered and frenetic design strategy underscores the speed and spontaneity in which events were produced, as well as the eclecticism of event types. In what Magnuson jokingly describes as “DIY-OCD,”³³¹ the process of the calendar construction represents the Club’s compulsive behavior to do, and to queerly customize and re-do.

As a form of communication that promotes club activities, the calendars also embrace a zine aesthetic, which is typical of alternative and underground cultures. Zines are “noncommercial, nonprofessional, small-circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish. And distribute by themselves.”³³² While Club 57 actually sold zines and newsletters, the zine aesthetic also surfaces in much of the ephemera produced to promote its own activities,

³³¹ Ann Magnuson, interview with author, January 2014.

³³² Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London: Verso, 1997), 6.

from newsletters to posters to flyers. Resonating with Club 57's print cultures, Stephen Duncombe, a scholar of zines, further defines zines as: "Little publications filled with rantings of high weirdness and exploding with chaotic design...In zines, everyday oddballs were speaking plainly about themselves and our society with an honest sincerity, a revealing intimacy, and a healthy "fuck you" to sanctioned authority- for no money and no recognition, writing for an audience of like-minded misfits.³³³ Like zines, which both address and speak for a particular alternative culture or community, the Club 57 calendars were addressing their own membership, as well as potential local clientele.

Duncombe credits the most important and deciding aspect of zines as amateurism, and points to that fact that amateur is a derivative of the Latin, *amator*, meaning lover.³³⁴ As astutely pointed out by Duncombe, zines both articulate and exist in a space somewhere between angst and love, and this paradox applies generally to camp, which extends to Club 57's activities and outlook. Connecting zines to the utopian longings of Muñoz, Duncombe invokes the poet Eduardo Galeano to describe how utopia is "good for walking." Like the basic concept of a new wave (a new cultural movement rooted in difference), utopia is a path for mobility and moving forward, for conceptualizing new possibilities. Without conceptions of difference, and constructions of new, even if impossible, horizons, society would not and could not progress. Spatializing the zine within utopia, Duncombe envisions zines as "a place to walk to...a space within which to imagine and experiment with new and idealistic ways of thinking, communicating and being."³³⁵ Club 57 was also "a place to walk to," in the literal sense of being

³³³ Ibid., 1-2.

³³⁴ Ibid., 14.

³³⁵ Ibid., 195-196.

a local neighborhood spot, but it was also a place for reimagining the world. And furthermore, it was a place to collectively create and experience that world, even if for just one night.

Conclusion: Fun Art and East Village Pop Performance

The work accomplished at Club 57 impacted the developments of two immediate visual cultural movements Downtown: East Village Pop Performance and Fun Art. Outgrowths of Club 57, both conceivably extend the longer and broader legacy of Pop Art, but with a distinct Downtown “80s attitude.” Club 57 is often credited with spawning subsequent Downtown scenes that merged art and nightlife throughout the decade: “the playfully trash-and vaudeville ambience spread to other neighborhood nightspot as soon as they opened.”³³⁶ Club 57 ignited a variety of performance types and visual arts practices that were eventually known as East Village Pop Performance and Fun Art; titles that certainly describe Club 57. Fun Art became most prominently associated with the work of Scharf and Haring; and East Village Pop Performance with the practices of John Sex, Magnuson, and Arias.

In a special 1985 issue of the *Theatre Drama Review* on East Village Pop Performance, the new genre is defined as developing in East Village nightclubs, where performers engage in a highly self-conscious form of parody to critique popular culture. The performance type is argued to be indebted to 1960s Pop Art; the mass media upbringing of that particular generation of performers; and Happenings. Furthermore, as a Downtown-revival, both Happenings and Pop Art, which includes Warhol’s Silver Factory years, are embedded in Downtown cultural history. Like Happenings, East Village Pop Performance was low-to-no budget; occurred within alternative (non-institutional) spaces; held singular or limited runs; and was mostly performed

³³⁶ See C. Carr, *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), xvi.

for small audiences, often composed of artistic peers. East Village Pop Performance is grounded in Downtown as place, but also as a palpable identity and attitude rooted in geography. The East Village is socially and geographically noted as “in transition—and in partial ruin,” and demographically as an “intellectual, financially marginal, youthful population, many of whose members are gay and/or psychologically outside the mainstream.”³³⁷ Also referred to as Dada Cabaret and even New Wave Vaudeville, East Village Pop Performance is readily associated with the performance genres of queer parody, drag, burlesque, and performance art.

To illustrate this point further, the issue superimposes John Sex’s image over a map of the neighborhood, crowning him as East Village Pop Performance’s “poster boy.”³³⁸ One of the breakout acts of Club 57, his performance persona embraces retro, camp, and schlock-pop, as a collage of go-go boy, the tacky machismo of Tom Jones, and the glam of Ziggy Stardust. He is pictured with his signature, excessively high and erect bleached-blond pompadour, his Downtown star image famously held together by “a combination of Dippity-do, Aqua Net, egg whites, beer, and semen.”³³⁹ John Sex’s performance persona is epitomized in his lyrical spin on Frank Sinatra’s “That’s Life,” modifying the lyrics to express his own queer sexuality and lifestyle: “I’ve been a hustler, a hooker, a honcho, a hero, a dike, and a queen.”³⁴⁰ John Sex symbolizes East Village Pop Performance as a distinct product and development of the neighborhood, or as I would argue, Club 57.

Like East Village Pop Performance, Fun Art also came directly out of the East Village. And, its best-known proponents, Haring and Scharf, were straight out of Club 57. Fun Art

³³⁷Michael Kirby, “East Village Performance: An Introduction,” *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 29, no. 1, *East Village Performance* (Spring, 1985): 4.

³³⁸ Parnes, “Pop Performance in East Village Clubs,” 5.

³³⁹ Richard Metzger, “Remembering John Sex” *Dangerous Minds*, January 5, 2011, accessed February 2, 2012, http://dangerousminds.net/comments/remembering_john_sex.

³⁴⁰ Small, “Art After Midnight,” 101.

designates a particular genre of 1980s art which includes artists Ronnie Cutrone, Rodney Alan Greenblat, Dan Freidman, and Rhonda Zwillinger. Aside from the idea that “art can be fun,” the work is both “popular and populist and has animated the art scene with bright colors, zany humor, and almost childlike imagination.”³⁴¹ Often sharing a 1960s cartoon-based aesthetic, Fun Art adopts imagery from the TV generation’s media-laden childhood. Fun Art was not medium specific, and included works on canvas, customization or assemblage (using everyday objects such as a furniture, television, boom box, etc.), installation, and street art/public art. While Fun Art customization is a zany embellishment of everyday objects, it is also experiential as the technique modifies the everyday experience of using common objects. In connection to retro, camp and punk’s DIY strategies: “The customizing practices of the Club 57 crew were part and parcel of this new démodé opulence.”³⁴² Fun art also diverged from recent trends in the field of contemporary art, namely minimalism and conceptual art, and opened space for new modes of expression as a “maximal” aesthetic.

Instead of pretentious and elitist, Fun Art aimed to be popular and accessible, bringing art to a broader and more diverse audience. From Haring’s “Pop Shop” to Scharf’s “Scharf Shack,” purchasing art Downtown became more democratic. At these art stores, anybody could buy a Haring or Scharf, at marked-down prices in edition, and often in popular and wearable forms such as a t-shirt or button. While still generating income for the artist, the cheaper retail store, as opposed to the elitism of a highly priced gallery, made art forms affordable, approachable, as well as more practical. The storefronts embrace Fun Art’s “everyday” public forum, as art could be found in the subway or nightclub, when traveling on the back of a t-shirt. Emphasizing the fun-factor, the first gallery to open in the East Village in the 1980s catalyzing the East Village

³⁴¹ Frank and McKenzie, *New, Used & Improved*, 110.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 99.

Art scene was named the Fun Gallery by Kenny Scharf. Co-owned by underground film queen, Patti Astor, the Fun Gallery provided early exposure for artists such as Scharf, Fab 5 Freddy, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Lee Quinones, Crash, and Futura. Importantly, the Fun Gallery was the first commercial platform for emerging graffiti artists. It recognized the vibrant visual culture of hip hop, and brought artists and viewers from the South Bronx and Brooklyn to the East Village.

Club 57's spin-off movements of Fun Art and East Village Pop Performance branded the visual cultures of the East Village scene in the 1980s. They were located in the performance programming of Downtown nightclubs, and in East Village gallery exhibitions and art shops that mixed pop cultural iconography with graffiti. Both Fun Art and East Village Pop Performance were highly personalized, expressive, idiosyncratic, hands-on, and high energy. These practices stood in opposition to the cold, hands-off, and cerebral appropriation practices of the Pictures Generation critically championed at the time, and the prior movements of minimalism and conceptual art.

Socially engaged art practices often include “non-triumphant” art³⁴³ or the queer art of failure,³⁴⁴ which was central to Club 57's fun and pop aesthetics, and its capacity to act as a creative engine. Quality control was of little concern to Club 57 as cultural production and exhibitions were more about the energy and the will to create, whether entertainment, art, or both. Club 57's varied rotation of activity was due to openness and the commitment to give anyone a platform that actively wanted one. Magnuson commented on the free-form creative diversions of Club 57, “It helped us not to think of it as art—but I always knew it was!”³⁴⁵ This

³⁴³ Shannon Jackson, *Social Works*, 17.

³⁴⁴ See Muñoz, “After Jack: Queer Failure, Queer Virtuosity,” *Cruising Utopia*, 169-185; and Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2011.

³⁴⁵ Original comment in Ginsberg, “Night (life) Imitates Art,” 9. Additional comment, Ann Magnuson, interview with the author, May 2015.

populist anti-art was deemed to be the reason why so many Club 57 artists were so engaging, and eventually fell into career success: “They were never boring. And boring art, let’s admit it, went out with the mid-70s.”³⁴⁶ Never boring, Club 57’s range of activity portrays how the makeshift nightclub pushed the limits of what an art-party could potentially be. Club 57, representative of the creative economy of Downtown, was an open space, or a marketplace, for the circulation of ideas, creativity, and non-mainstream texts.

In 1983, the *East Village Eye* reported that the Polish National Church cut a deal with a mental health clinic and Club 57 was seized without warning. To date, the building houses the St. Mark’s Place Institute for Mental Health. The *East Village Eye* reported on the club’s closing in July 1983: “As the club never had a written lease, this sort of disaster was inevitable...However, as the space is now going to be used to treat the mentally disturbed, a part of the old Club 57 atmosphere is certain to continue.”³⁴⁷ After Club 57 shut its doors, East Village Pop Performance clubs such as the Pyramid, Limbo Lounge, and Darinka inherited Club 57’s performers and continued its legacy of retro-pop, camp, and trash. But, by 1985, large nightclubs such as Palladium and Area opened Downtown, as the live music scene diminished.³⁴⁸ Reynolds laments, “Mutant disco, and the arty, eclectic clubs that nurtured the style were squeezed out.”³⁴⁹ The “all-embrace” and integrationist principles practiced at Club 57 quickly

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Heiberg, “5 Years of Fab 57,” 16.

³⁴⁸ Area opened in 1983, and Palladium in 1985. The 13,000 sq. ft. Area was known for its high-budget six-week long installations as theme parties, changing the face of the club for novelty’s sake and constant reinvention. Ex-Studio 54 owners Ian Schrager and Steve Rubell, capitalizing upon Downtown’s gentrification and the new flow of Wall Street money, opened the megadisco, Palladium. The three Downtown artists with skyrocketing careers in the 1980s, namely Basquiat, Haring and Scharf, decorated aspects of the Palladium with commissioned art.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 278.

faded as Manhattan nightclubs first increased in size, and then became more and more niche-oriented into the 1990s.³⁵⁰

Through exercising cultural imagination and performing alternative modes of being, Club 57 was an effervescent nightworld for creating and accessing a queer and alternative arts community. Club 57 participants cut their creative teeth by artistically experimenting without fear of failure or financial loss, while affectively experiencing “fun” and acceptance within a small like-minded community. Where creative placemaking meets queer worldmaking, Club 57’s camp and punk strategies combined with retro historical play to produce various art forms, and moreover, to always collectively experience them. Most importantly, Club 57 embraced the impetus to simply make, do, and view something, anything, every night of the week.

³⁵⁰ Tim Lawrence discusses this shift in New York nightlife, from integration in the 1970s and early 1980s, to fragmentation by the mid 1980s. See “Big Business, Real Estate Determinism, and Dance Culture in New York, 1980-88,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, vol. 23 no. 3 (2011): 299-300.

Chapter 2

It's TV Party time, not prime time!

*Well now you see what you wanna be
Just have your party on TV*

—Blondie, “Rapture” (1981)

TV PARTY is a medium for establishing a PARTY NETWORK. THE PARTY is the highest expression of social activity—the co-operative production of FUN. THE PARTY is the first step in organizing society for mutual interests. TV PARTY believes that SOCIAL affinity groups will provide the foundation for any effective political action. SOCIAL DREAD is what keeps citizens out of existing political organizations.

—Glenn O’Brien, “TV Party Manifesto” (1980)³⁵¹

Introduction

In 2011, the Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, New York honored Manhattan public access cable television with its first retrospective, aptly titled, “TV Party: A Panorama of Public Access Television in New York City.” Borrowed from the public access program, *Glenn O’Brien’s TV Party*, the phrase “TV Party” suddenly became the catchall for four decades of public access television in New York City. Intermittently broadcasting approximately 100 episodes between the years 1978–1982, *TV Party* was one of the first live public access programs in the city.³⁵² Manhattan Cable TV self-described its government-mandated public access service

³⁵¹ O’Brien’s “TV Party Manifesto,” was first published in the *East Village Eye* in 1980. A version of this manifesto (identical text but different layout) also debuted *Bomb* magazine as part of its 1981 inaugural issue. During the run of the show, the manifesto was printed twice in publications geared specifically to Downtown audiences. Both publications promoted Downtown arts and cultural life, with offices located Downtown. See Glenn O’Brien, “T.V. Party Manifesto,” *East Village Eye* Summer 1980: 18, 28; and “Glenn O’Brien’s TV Party,” *BOMB* 1.1 (1981), 22-23.

³⁵² The exact number of *TV Party* episodes produced is unknown, and has only been approximated. To get a better sense of the total number of shows potentially preserved, Glenn O’Brien recently commented, “I think we have 62 shows in whole or in part, many with technical problems. Probably 20 comfortably watchable in their entirety. Several shows were lost.” Glenn O’Brien, interview with the author via email, April 2015. In a recent interview, O’Brien stated that over 100 episodes had been produced over the show’s run. See Glenn O’Brien, “The TV Party Story” and “The Film,” *TV Party*, BRINKfilm, accessed June 10, 2012, <http://www.tvparty.org/>; and “Art Interviews with James Franco and Rob Pruitt, GLENN O’BRIEN Part 1,” posted September 10, 2012, <http://www.jamesfrancotv.com/videos/223873>; and Part 2, posted October 22, 2012, <http://www.jamesfrancotv.com/videos/238931>, both videos accessed November 5, 2012.

as “channel time reserved for free use by the public on a first-come, first-served, non-discriminatory basis.”³⁵³ The title of “TV Party” invokes meanings of fun, sociality, debauchery, mingling, participation, collectivity, and political organization that were fundamental to the platform of public access cable television, as well as the Downtown art-party. To this end, a wide spectrum of media producers developed content through public access, described as: “A free-range creative habitat, it attracted radicals, reactionaries, artists, smut peddlers, teenage puppeteers, quack doctors, book clubs, church choirs, backyard wrestlers, and naked talk-show hosts. New York’s public access shows harnessed mysteries of human nature never before seen on television.”³⁵⁴ There is a prevalent perception that public access television was a wild party in which everyone was invited, and anyone who actually wanted to be on TV could attend, or create a show of their very own.

While this was Manhattan public access’s first institutional retrospective, *Glenn O’Brien’s TV Party (TV Party)* had already cracked the walls of The Museum of Modern Art in New York with an inclusion in “Looking at Music, Side 2” (2009). This particular exhibition centered upon the productive relationship between art and music in the early 1970s–1980s in New York City (or more appropriately, Downtown). Similarly, a rhetoric of wonder and frontierism also exists in MoMA’s description of *TV Party*: “Equal parts party, talk show, video art, concert, and political action, the *TV Party* series took live television to a place it had never

³⁵³ Manhattan Cable TV, *Manhattan Cable TV Community Programming Handbook*, 1982, Jaime Davidovich Collection; MSS 155; series 2E, box 12; folder 553; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

³⁵⁴ See Leah Churner and Nicolas Rapold, “Series: TV Party: A Panorama of Public Access Television in New York City,” *Museum of the Moving Image*, February 11-20, 2011, accessed 11 October 2012, <http://www.movingimage.us/films/2011/02/11/detail/tv-party-a-panorama-of-public-access-television-in-new-york-city/>. Aside from the web page for the screening series, similar “circus” language is also used in other promotional material for the show, including the official press release.

been before.”³⁵⁵ Manhattan public access, which includes *TV Party*’s distinct mix, was understood as a *new* kind of television, as public access was indeed a new medium at the time. Yet, curiously, *TV Party* also appropriated and reinvented older forms in its media critique, which aligned with the concurrent practices of post-punk in music, and the Pictures Generation in visual arts.³⁵⁶ Similar to the photo-centric tactics of the Pictures Generation, the format of public access television allowed the consumer/artist to become an image producer/user, and to “talk back to the media.”³⁵⁷

By broadcasting diverse amateur content as a precursor to reality TV, public access offered a non-normative expressive forum in contrast to network television in the late 1970s. Given the non-normative and highly sexual content on public access, Michael Warner’s concept of a counterpublic has been applied in recent scholarship to *TV Party* to read it as a queer and/or punk counterpublic.³⁵⁸ In short, a counterpublic is a public that is formed against mainstream or dominant discourse while conscious of its own marginalized position.³⁵⁹ Through counterpublic formations, Warner expresses the possibilities and agency of queer culture through such worldmaking processes. While *TV Party* queers network formats and televisual liveness by

³⁵⁵ “Looking at Music: Side 2,” *The Museum of Modern Art*, accessed December 4, 2012, <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2009/lookingatmusic2/obrien.html>.

³⁵⁶ Gavin Butt, “Welcome to the TV party,” in *Take It or Leave It: Institution, Image, Ideology*, Johanna Burton and Anne Ellegood, eds. (Los Angeles; New York: Delmonico Books/Prestel, 2014), 216-221.

³⁵⁷ The Pictures Generation, a movement named after Douglas Crimp’s renowned “Pictures” show at Artists Space in 1977, became a title in the art press for artists, such as Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, who recontextualized identifiable media images in an experimental and conceptual way, questioning the roles of framing, spectatorship, authorship, desire, and consumerism. Dara Birnbaum, associated with the Pictures Generation and producing works utilizing cable television piracy, has repeatedly stated that her work attempts to “talk back to the media.” See Nicolás Guagnini and Dara Birnbaum, “Cable TV’s Failed Utopian Vision: An Interview with Dara Birnbaum,” *Cabinet No. 9* (Winter 2002/03): accessed February 12, 2015, <http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/9/birnbaum.php>.

³⁵⁸ For a discussion of *TV Party* and public access through Michael Warner’s concept of counterpublics, and as a queer worldmaking alternative to the normativity of network television, see Kara Elizabeth Carmack, “Anton Perich Presents and TV Party Queering Television Via Manhattan Public Access Channels, 1973-1982” (MA thesis, University of Texas, Austin, 2010).

³⁵⁹ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York; Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books; Distributed by MIT Press, 2002), 90.

appropriating and twisting their tropes and structures to produce something tenably different on public access television, it only *at times* directly critiqued gender and sexuality, and/or destabilized the hetero/homo binary. *TV Party*'s open format rendered its articulation of queer politics inconsistent at best, as they shift in clarity and strength of intent per episode, or better yet, individual performance.³⁶⁰ Furthermore, the show was rather congruous with the unruly codes of public access television, and was even derivative of aspects of other public access programs (in structure, low-fi DIY aesthetics, use of a studio, live call-ins, etc.) While legible as a queer counterpublic, it seems more accurate to read *TV Party* more actively as an agent of creative placemaking and queer worldmaking, given that it is documentation of a live performance, which in turn transmits Downtown New York as time and place.

Therefore, this chapter's central claim focuses on how *TV Party* grants viewers rare access to a real-time and live art-party, demonstrating Downtown's cultural economy as both process and product (whether now or then). On a weekly basis, *TV Party* innovatively fused live public access television with Downtown's vibrant nightlife and wider cultural milieu to promote local art forms and their attendant politics, while simultaneously creating *new wave-airwaves* of their very own. Glen O'Brien comments on the community of *TV Party* and its production of "the new" within the framework of Downtown, "I think what was interesting was that we were making music art and film for one another, not some speculative big audience. That's what punk (new wave) was really about. Don't like the art world? Why not start a new one?"³⁶¹ *TV Party*'s creative placemaking and queer worldmaking not only exemplifies the stigmas and promises of

³⁶⁰ Walter McDermott's "Homosexual Minute" is an excellent example of a *TV Party* performance overtly expressing queer politics. The eccentric artist and new wave vaudeville-style performer sings and tap dances to a 1920s song-book style tune urging American family members to "come out." This undated performance by McDermott is highlighted in Vinik, et al., *TV Party The Documentary*, 2005.

³⁶¹ Glenn O'Brien, interview with author via email, April 2015.

the experimental format of public access television, but it provides historical *access* to a kind of *public* constituting the Downtown art-party, and its production and representation of emerging cultures. A site where partying doubles as community television, which now exists as a veritable archive of Downtown culture, *TV Party*'s creative placemaking and queer worldmaking endeavors represent the vibrant multiplicity of Downtown New York and Manhattan's unique broadcast history. I therefore examine *TV Party* to demonstrate how New York's new wave collided with new media technology to produce and reproduce Downtown cultures.

As a text, *TV Party* both reinforces and disrupts the politics of public access television as a participatory form, while pushing the boundaries of the social, spatial, and media dimensions of the Downtown art-party. Bursting with energy, the eclecticism and experimentation of Downtown New York spilled over to public access television and into the proverbial living room as cable subscribers joined the party by watching or even calling-in to directly participate in the show. Acknowledging the widening circulation of Downtown nightlife, the "*TV Party* Manifesto" states: "There is a party in every home where the TV PARTY is TURNED ON."³⁶² As a mediatized countercultural space, *TV Party* riffs off of Timothy Leary's famous slogan, influenced and inflected by Marshall McLuhan: "turning on" the TV and "tuning in" to a public access channel resulted in an evening out and about Downtown—for a more global *East Village*.

Echoed by the Museum of the Moving Image's retrospective, *TV Party* became the preeminent party show, a subgenre that fittingly resurfaced on Manhattan public access television in the late 1970s. A form pioneered by Hugh Hefner in the 1950s, the party show designates a small handful of programs, on both network and public access television, which combine variety-style entertainment with the chatty interview of telejournalism. *TV Party* also

³⁶² O'Brien, "T.V. Party Manifesto," 18.

explicitly embraced the double meaning of the term *party*, as a fun social gathering and/or politically motivated group. Declared “socialist realist TV” before the advent of reality TV, host and creator Glenn O’Brien’s introductory slogan to *TV Party* openly reflected this playful sentiment: “its the show that’s a cocktail party but which could also be a political party.”³⁶³ Although at times zany and seemingly apolitical, *TV Party* participants were highly conscious of their own political situation as the *Party* often included political commentary and satire. O’Brien quips on the role of affect in *TV Party*’s politics: “We were serious, but we weren’t solemn.”³⁶⁴

In *TV Party*’s desire to provoke as well as entertain, the show is consistent with the popular perception of public access programming as “vanity video”—implying that public access’s exhibitionism exceeded its own communitarianism in the late 1970s.³⁶⁵ O’Brien has also reflected on the general outlook of *TV Party*: “Basically we were trying to entertain ourselves, and entertain our friends, and be a star in this little world. But that didn’t mean that we were disqualified from going farther.”³⁶⁶ The label of “vanity video” also resonates with Rosalind Krauss’s criticism and generalization of early video art as an act of narcissism,³⁶⁷ and popular accusations of the 1970s as the “Me Decade” and a “Culture of Narcissism.”³⁶⁸ Yet, collective,

³⁶³ Ibid. (Also commonly stated on various *TV Party* episodes.)

³⁶⁴ Interview with Glenn O’Brien, Gavin Butt, Ben Walters, and Morgan Quaintance, *This is Not a Dream* (Performance Matters, 2013), DVD.

³⁶⁵ “Vanity video” is the title of an article dedicated to the programming on Manhattan public access television; see Terry Clifford, “Vanity Video,” *New York Magazine*, August 6, 1979, 34-39.

³⁶⁶ Interview with Glenn O’Brien, *This is Not a Dream*, 2013.

³⁶⁷ Considered a foundational work of video art criticism, Rosalind Krauss’s essay represents a deliberate maneuver to canonize and pre-institutionalize a first-wave of video artists through a sweeping generalization regarding how all forms of video art operate. She claims, “In that image of self-regard is configured a narcissism so endemic to the works of video that I find myself wanting to generalize it as the ‘condition’ of the entire genre.” For Krauss, video art constitutes a highly contained performance-for-the-monitor that denies the presence of an external world, including the existence of a viewer or audience: “Self-encapsulation—the body or psyche as its own surround—is every-where to be found in the corpus of video art.” See Rosalind Krauss, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” *October*, vol. 1. (Spring, 1976): 50-64.

³⁶⁸ Tom Wolfe, “The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” *New York Magazine*, August 23, 1976, 26-40; and Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1978).

experimental, performance-based, and ephemeral art forms were predominant Downtown, and nurtured by the structuring principle of the art-party. And, like Club 57, *TV Party* was ill suited to art as well as broadcast markets, and developed outside of established, institutional support structures.³⁶⁹

Emphasizing the *life* in nightlife, the *live* and spontaneous televisual format of *TV Party* was essential to its alternative production process, reception, and circulation. Live transmission was literally the “life of” *TV Party*—what made it more compelling to watch, and/or possible for viewers to interact with. *TV Party* was, to use Philip Auslander’s concept, a *live mediatized performance* of both the sociability and cultural politics of Downtown as place. *TV Party* was an *interactive live mediatized party*, displaying the antics, cultures, and main players of Downtown, and the live reactions and opinions of home viewers. Historically, live mediatized performance reflects sociocultural activity as coinciding with technological shifts, and in the case of *TV Party*, the text assumes multimodal configurations and spaces (e.g. in-studio audience, home viewers, and collapses between performer/audiences). Thus, *TV Party* enhances and spins New York’s nightlife through the new technology of live public access television.

This chapter opens with an overview of *TV Party*’s Downtown content and aesthetics, followed by a brief history of alternative television, which emphasizes how public access became a localized “social experiment” in Manhattan and eventually moved Downtown. After, I examine the “party” in *TV Party* to account for the program’s social evolution in relation to Downtown nightlife, the sociality of the television studio, as well as *TV Party*’s appropriation and

³⁶⁹ O’Brien has remarked on this alternative history, similar to other voices of the time, such as Diego Cortez. He states: “When we were arriving young on the scene, galleries were not receptive to what the painters of my generation were making, record companies were not receptive to the music that bands from my generation were making. I was not going to get picked up by the network or whatever.” Interview with Glenn O’Brien, *This is Not a Dream*, 2013.

reinvention of the party show genre. Next, I examine *TV Party*'s manipulation of televisual liveness to promote "partying" as a democratic media concept, with specific attention to the live call-in segments. Liveness was crucial to how the Downtown art-party was disseminated as a new cultural experience and a way of life. In conclusion, I examine the show's politics of fun and how *TV Party* claims to put the "social" back into "socialism" with a short analysis of the "*TV Party* Manifesto."

Public access imparted *TV Party* participants with access to a television studio, equipment, and a channel to live broadcast the content of their choosing and performative doing. This format also granted viewers access to *TV Party*'s outlook on who and what was happening Downtown. And vice versa, *TV Party* studio participants gained access to immediate viewer feedback via live interaction, for better or for worse on their spirits and sense of humanity. As documentation of Downtown cultures viewed in the present moment, *TV Party* provides historical access in which to view the commingling of these different types of access initially provided by the show's live and interactive format.³⁷⁰ *TV Party*, as archive, writes its own distinct cultural history of this prolific yet transitional time by documenting the polyvalence of Downtown New York, and the immediate creation and reception of a live televised art-party.³⁷¹

³⁷⁰ For further discussion of the modalities of media access in relation to production, distribution, and historiography, see Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

³⁷¹ As a prefatory note, *TV Party* was recently the subject of a 2005 documentary film entitled, *TV Party* (Danny Vinik, 2005), with seven full episodes and assorted extras subsequently released on DVD (2005-2008). Although the following summation does not incorporate DVD extras and footage from the documentary (which are often undated) available for viewing, a timeline for the seven full-length episodes forms a bell curve: one episode from December 1978; three from 1979; two from 1981; and one from 1982. The eight DVDs construct the basis for any textual analysis as the only available full episodes and footage (documentary film and DVD extras) of *TV Party* in public circulation.

The *TV Party* Mix: Program Overview

Airing in the apropos party time slot of around midnight, *TV Party* melded performance, music, journalism, television, visual arts, and nightlife through a chaotic variety show format that prominently featured its television audience through live viewer call-ins. The temporary, ad-hoc community that produced episodes for the series appropriated television history and tropes, while showcasing new artists and styles from Downtown's emerging visual arts and music movements. Shows could be informational and variety-style, or be a theme party, reflecting a popular trend in Downtown nightclubs. Raised on the pop cultural diet of television and rock 'n' roll, *TV Party* performers were well aware of how to self-image via media as many *TV Party*-goers went on to become 1980s pop cultural, art, and fashion icons (e.g. Debbie Harry, Maripol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Fab 5 Freddy.) Episodes of *TV Party*, varying in form and content, communicated the cultures of Downtown, while at the same time, *TV Partygoers* pioneered an innovative televisual format indebted to experimental film aesthetics as much as Downtown attitudes and politics.

As part of the first wave of live interactive programming, *TV Party* was a funky, impromptu, and often bewildering televisual Happening. It served as both an entertainment and informational program, supporting New York's underground cultures, and for some that eventually popped aboveground and into the mainstream. It provided entertainment as an amateurish variety show, but also content as an informational show, a dominant category constituting 76% of all early public access television.³⁷² According to an early study of Manhattan public access, informational programming mostly fell into sub-categories of ethnic, community, health, public relations, consumer, and political shows. About one-third of

³⁷² In a study by Alan Wurtzel during the first two years of public access in Manhattan, informational programming accounted for 76% of the total programming, as the largest programming type, while entertainment programming only composed 14%, as the second largest category. See Wurtzel, "Public-Access Cable TV: Programming," *Journal of Communication*, vol. 25, no. 3 (Summer 1975): 17.

informational public access programming was labeled as community-oriented, conveying, “information about a specific geographic neighborhood, block associations, community events and activities.”³⁷³ While this is consistent with the general mission of public cable access television, such programming also reflects the diversity of urban life, and the many neighborhoods and communities within New York City that the form can potentially serve. A large percentage of all public access programming specifically addressed local audiences/communities. *TV Party*, although mostly community-oriented according to this early taxonomy of informational programming, also aired informational elements touching-upon all other categories through their various segments.

O’Brien considered *TV Party* as a hip update to the contrived and “stiff” longtime network talk show *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* (1962–1992), which was pre-recorded during the day.³⁷⁴ *TV Party* appropriated the cast structure of *The Tonight Show* with O’Brien playing the central “Carson” figure while Chris Stein, the lead guitarist and songwriter for the new wave sensation Blondie, became the show’s co-host or the “Ed McMahon” sidekick. Called “Doc Steding” in episodes of *TV Party*, avant-garde electronic musician Walter Steding (also Andy Warhol’s studio assistant) became the “Doc Severinsen” or leader of the *TV Party* Orchestra, often bestowing viewers with his maundering drug-induced quasi-political rants. Steding’s DIY instruments, notably his synthesizer-belt and electronic violin, anchored the dissonant sound of the *TV Party* Orchestra. Fittingly freewheeling, the show’s live “theme song” differed from show to show. The house band rotated its numbers and members, but most often included Stein on guitar and Lenny Ferrari on drums, who was also a member of Steding’s band, Walter Steding and the Dragon People. Although public access allowed for many types of

³⁷³ Ibid., 17-18.

³⁷⁴ Glenn O’Brien, “The *TV Party* Story,” accessed August 4, 2011, <http://www.tvparty.org/>.

transgressions, the television studio prohibited drums. The band therefore softened its percussion with a signature DIY drum kit made of *New Yorker* magazines, cymbals, and Quaker Oats containers. The three core members of *TV Party*, O'Brien, Steding, and Stein, were extremely active in Downtown music and nightlife scenes and they collectively used their connections to lure guests onto the show, and even to link-up to Los Angeles local cable to widen the *TV Party* audience.

Exemplary of the public access ethos, *TV Party* had an inclusive and rotating policy for its participants. Regulars, special guests, production crew, in-studio audience members, as well as the disembodied voices of its viewers, collectively produced the ad-hoc content of the show. Transmitting the cultural landscape of Downtown, *TV Party* was highly eclectic, and represented multiple music genres and artistic mediums. A wide spectrum of musical guests appeared on the show to reflect its diverse and cutting-edge tastes, such as Mick Jones, Nile Rodgers, Klaus Nomi, James Chance, David Byrne, George Clinton, DNA, Grandmaster Melle Mel, Tuxedomoon, J. Walter Negro and the Loose Jointz, David Van Tieghem, John Lurie, and Iggy Pop. *TV Party* also interviewed and/or showcased visual and performance artists on the show, such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Marcus Leatherdale, Chris Burden, Ronnie Cutrone, Peter Fend, John Feckner, Queensites Graffiti, and an early regular performer, David Walter McDermott. *TV Party's* family tree of repeat performers and crew spanned music, fashion, and various arts. It included guitarist Robert Fripp of King Crimson; keyboardist Richard Sohl of the Patti Smith Group; Fred Schneider of the B-52s; photographer Kate Simon; fashion model Lisa Rosen; Downtown fashionista Maripol, the pop stylist famous for creating Madonna's breakthrough look; and in the later years, Charles Rocket, notorious for his dismissal from the cast of *Saturday*

Night Live for saying “fuck” on live network television, and less recognized for his heavy metal accordion.

TV Party could take on many visual and audio forms, mixing media and disciplines. It was much like its predecessor, the Happening, both a performance genre and a celebratory event in the vernacular.³⁷⁵ *TV Party*, as a series and by individual episode, displays a full spectrum of performance types and possibilities. As a televised-event-as-Happening, episodes could be more structured and recognizable as a variety show (“Premiere,” “The Sublimely Intolerable Show,” “Everything for Sale”) or unstructured and unruly (“The Heavy Metal Show,” “Halloween”) or residing somewhere in-between (“Time and Make-Up,” “Crusades”).³⁷⁶ The full episodes can be divided into two categories: those that are theme party oriented (“Halloween,” “Heavy Metal,” and “Crusades”), versus those that do not include a group-costume element (“Premiere,” “Sublimely Intolerable,” “Time and Make-Up,” and “Everything for Sale”). However, these categories are again, rather imprecise as the “Time & Makeup” show supposedly had a theme of slowing down time to analyze the relationship between time and money, outlined in the beginning third of the show (but no group costume). Yet, the conceptual theme was not adhered to throughout the hour as performers quickly forgot to slow it down. The episode was more segmented and akin to a variety show including a fashion make-over (by fashion photographer

³⁷⁵ Resonating with the tactics of *TV Party*, Michael Kirby describes the impact of happenings in 1972 as follows: “Under the direct influence of Happenings, among other things, every aspect of theatre in this country has changed: scripts have lost their importance and performances are created collectively; the physical relationship of audience and performance has been altered in many different ways and has been made an inherent part of the piece; audience participation has been investigated; “found” spaces rather than theatres have been used for performance and several different places employed sequentially for the same performance; there has been an increased emphasis on movement and on visual imagery (not to mention a commercialized use of nudity); and so forth.” See Michael Kirby, “On Acting and Not Acting,” in *Acting (Re)considered: Theories and Practices. Worlds of Performance*, Phillip B. Zarrilli, ed. (London: Routledge, 1995), 49.

³⁷⁶ While shows had distinct conceptual themes, formal titles were assigned for the Brink DVD series (see filmography). For example, they were not formally represented in the show’s on-screen graphics at the beginning or ending of the show. But, themes were addressed within the context of the show, e.g. “Crusades,” “Halloween.”

Steven Meisel and Sohl); magic tricks by Luigi Ciccolini (Lenny Ferrari's performing as his own "Italian cousin"); and assorted live music performances by experimental musician David Van Teigham, Tim Wright (of DNA, but masquerading with his girlfriend accordionist as the French duo, "Fifi and Claude"), and, the electronic musings of the *TV Party* Orchestra. Although it is difficult to establish a formula for an "average" *TV Party* episode, there were reoccurring elements and performance types. Shows often contained live music performance, interviews, roundtable discussions, rambling monologues, and call-ins from viewers. Loosely, the show's first third usually contained a framing monologue, delivered by O'Brien and/or Steding; the middle third contained assorted performances; and the last third answered live viewer calls.

"The Sublimely Intolerable Show," with an original airdate of January 8, 1979, demonstrates the variety of cultural life depicted on *TV Party*, and how it promoted Downtown as its televisual mouthpiece.³⁷⁷ This particular episode displays the creative placemaking potentials of *TV Party* as an inventive alliance between Downtown cultural scenes and public access cable television. Displaying a full-range of Downtown characters and arts, this episode more closely follows a standard variety-style show format, moving seamlessly from act to act. The show's guest acts and interviews include reggae scene photographer Kate Simon; filmmaker and author on reggae, David Silver; new wave opera singer Klaus Nomi; rock-comedy musician Compton Maddox; no wave film director Eric Mitchell; Andy Shernoff of the punk band, the Dictators; and Tish and Snooki Bellamo of Manic Panic, the East Village's first punk boutique.³⁷⁸ After the acts and interviews, Chris Stein, Debbie Harry, and Richard Sohl emerge

³⁷⁷ Glenn O'Brien, Compton Maddox, Debbie Harry, Klaus Nomi, Andy Shernoff, Kate Simon, Dave Silver, and Brinkfilm, *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party The Sublimely Intolerable Show*, January 8, 1979 (Brinkfilm, 2008) DVD.

³⁷⁸ Manic Panic was opened by sisters Tish and Snooki Bellamo on St. Marks Place in 1977. The sisters also had their own performance-art oriented band, the Sic F*cks, and played at various clubs Downtown. In the 1990s their

from the in-studio audience to chat and take calls from home viewers. Fully representing the musical scenes and interests of Downtown New York, this show alone represents the genres of new wave, no wave, punk, reggae, and rock. Early on in the show's run on non-commercial public access television, O'Brien plugs the Bellamo sister's iconic store on St. Marks Place, and Eric Mitchell's new film, *Kidnapped* (1978), with a film clip embedded with even more Downtown socialites (Anya Philips, Patti Astor, and Duncan Smith). *Kidnapped*, a film depicting the abduction of the owner of the Mudd Club, Steve Maas, debuted at the opening of the "New Cinema," a no wave film theatre funded by Collaborative Projects (Colab).³⁷⁹

This episode is packed with information about Downtown cultural life, from its scenesters to its more unique talent. It also demonstrates how different ideas, people, and elements could easily bounce and play off one another within *TV Party*'s art-party structure. As a historical resource, it provides an early and rare recording of a Klaus Nomi performance, and reflections on various cultural scenes (e.g. Simon and Silver on reggae music, Mitchell on no wave film). For those watching live, the show provides entertainment and information, but also advertises where to buy punk clothes and watch new wave films (both spaces conveniently located on St. Marks Place in the East Village). This episode also importantly shows how different scenes and cultural producers came into contact within the space of *TV Party*, as representative of Downtown's larger cultural economy.

Aside from exhibiting and promoting the various cultural activities, personas, and businesses constituting Downtown cultural scenes, *TV Party* also transmitted the party antics of

punk-inspired cosmetic line (hair color, nailpolish, etc.) was very popular within alternative music scenes, such as grunge and industrial.

³⁷⁹ While the history of Colab is not a focal point of this project, it was run by a group of artists whose member list, similar to *TV Party*, reads as a who's who of Downtown New York. One of its most active members/curators, Diego Cortez, was a camera man on the "Heavy Metal" episode of *TV Party*; a regular and founder of the Mudd Club; and the "gateway" dealer for Basquiat's art organizing the "Time Square Show" (1980) and "New York/New Wave" (1981).

Downtown clubs by broadcasting the popular appeal of theme parties, which were at times politically and culturally reactionary. Theme party shows started about one year into *TV Party's* programming, and mirrored the popularity of the theme party in clubs such as Club 57 and the Mudd Club. *TV Party* created shows with nightly themes such as pajama, primitive, heavy metal, Middle Eastern, Halloween, and cowboy. Although its historical record only publicly exists through photography, cowboy night, also referred to as All-American night, was organized directly in response to viewer calls that accused *TV Party* of being thoroughly un-American. Moreover, it was a parody of America's favorite cowboy, Ronald Reagan, and the popular appeal of country music in the 1970s, as symbolized by the film *Urban Cowboy* (James Bridges, 1980).

Another example of a reactionary theme party is "The Crusades" episode, in which the *TV Party* gang dressed as Crusaders through time in homemade monk and knight costumes (or outfits loosely resembling such figures). A response to the current political climate, *TV Party's* "Crusade" challenged Ronald Reagan's foreign policy, centering on the reclamation of the contentious Holy Land, and lampooned the social conservatism of the Reagan Era by organizing a group sexual encounter. The show's liner notes corroborate the first political read: "Reagan was the new President. Iran had just released its American hostages, and Israel and the PLO had rejected Egypt's peace plan. It was a grim moment and TV Party decided to do something about it."³⁸⁰

This episode also presents a sexual commentary through O'Brien's organization of the "first mass television orgone link-up," or televisual mutual masturbation, joining the theoretical

³⁸⁰ Liner notes to the DVD, Glenn O'Brien, Chris Stein, Walter Steding, Amos Poe, Lenny Ferrari, Freddy Fab, Patrick Geoffrois, Mickey Clean, Johnny Dynell, and Brinkfilm, *Glenn OBrien's TV Party the Crusades Show*, February 17, 1981 (Brinkfilm, 2005), DVD.

forces of Wilhelm Reich's orgone energy with Marshall McLuhan's global village.³⁸¹ O'Brien reflects on the episode's sexual mission of pleasure as the true American way:

This is our crusade. This is the means which we're going to use to get into each and every home and cleanse the five senses of those garbage impediments which have sealed off the truth of the American way. Who can resist an empire made of dreams and pleasure and orgone for everyone?³⁸²

Masturbation's subversiveness, through its historical and cultural connections to deviance and sin, comes into relief, as the episode exists in an unnamed time in centuries past. And, as masturbation is non-reproductive, this group sexual act shuns traditional Christian family values—the regressive and repressive morality of 1980s social conservatism.

Recalling Bernard Gendron's characterization of "borderline aesthetics" and Simon Reynold's "mutant disco," *TV Party* showcased how Downtown's nightlife and music scenes were also in constant conversation with visual arts, and how music genres intersected.³⁸³ In the case of new wave blending with hip hop, the sociocultural connections of *TV Party* lead to a number one hit single for Blondie, with the rap song and music video for "Rapture" (1981). Blondie's talent for crossing genres and creating hit "new wave" songs is also evident in their appropriation of disco in "Heart of Glass" (1978), and reggae in "The Tide is High" (1981). As previously noted, hip hop artist Fab 5 Freddy (Fred Braithwaite), later the charismatic host of MTV's first hip hop show, *Yo! MTV Raps* (1988-2004), and Debbie Harry and Chris Stein of Blondie, were all regulars on *TV Party*. Their friendship and mutual support began on *TV Party* and started conversations between hip-hop and new wave, leading to the first hip-hop/rap music video on MTV and the national popularization of rap.

³⁸¹ Glenn O'Brien, et al., *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party the Crusades Show*, DVD.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, 310; and Reynolds, *Rip It up and Start Again*, 261.

Diego Cortez, appearing on *TV Party*, also commented on Downtown's productive relationship to hip hop:

In 1978-79, a small group of downtowners (Edit deAk, Rene Ricard, Keith Haring, Fab 5, myself, etc.) used to go to regular meetings of the United Graffiti Artists in Harlem. Later we would also go to Disco Fever in the South Bronx, which was the genesis of rap and hip hop. Fab 5 Freddy was pivotal in making these connections between the art world and the emerging radical youth scenes of graffiti and rap. Fred curated the first graffiti show at the Mudd Club before becoming MTV's first rap show VJ. That is when rap and hip hop started to get big.³⁸⁴

The forum of *TV Party* was a vital connection between the "uptown" world of hip hop and Downtown's music and art scenes. In a recent interview, Fab 5 Freddy discussed his Downtown networking through O'Brien and *TV Party*: "That's also how I met Blondie and the rest of the punk new wave people. I got to meet and kick it with all these people coming to his TV show. After taping the show we would all go and hang out at the Mudd Club and other hot [D]owntown clubs at the time like Danceteria and the Peppermint Lounge."³⁸⁵ This connection led Fab 5 Freddy to showing his art in Patti Astor's Fun Gallery in the East Village, and starring in the iconic hip hop film, *Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1983), in which he and Astor both played versions of themselves. *TV Party* was a vehicle for this kind of cultural exchange. Such contact not only impacted the landscape of Downtown, but also American visual culture on a national scale during the dawn of MTV.

Aside from Fab 5 Freddy, another member from the graffiti community who participated in *TV Party* was Jean-Michel Basquiat, who went by the tag of "SAMO," short for "same old shit," along with a few others in his loose graffiti collective. Unsurprisingly, Basquiat had a natural affinity and special fondness for the studio's character generator, a device for projecting

³⁸⁴ Diego Cortez, "Downtown Body," *BOMB*, no. 105, Fall, 2008, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40428020>.

³⁸⁵ Troy L. Smith, "Fab 5 Freddy," *ThaFoundation*, 2010 JAH Holdings, Winter 2005, accessed November 3, 2012, <http://www.thafoundation.com/Fab.htm>.

text onscreen. Spontaneously live-typing across the screen from the control room, he bombed televisions across Manhattan with his high-tech impermanent graffiti. He even burned the screen with SAMO, his famous tag, and interviewed on the show as the artist peppering SAMO all over SoHo, taking sole credit.³⁸⁶ Moreover, both Basquiat and Fab 5 Freddy respectively play hip-hop roles, as a DJ and a graffiti artist, in Blondie’s music video for “Rapture”—with lyrics alluding to the show and its participants—further reflecting how *TV Party* connections merged New York’s new wave and hip-hop scenes.³⁸⁷

As public access allowed media consumers to become TV producers, performance and production roles were also nonhierarchical on the show and never clearly defined. *TV Party* was a free-flowing format where Downtown personalities could perform numbers and/or interview (performing off or onstage personas on-air), but did not necessarily have to do so. The camera crew often appeared on camera, responded to viewer calls, or would even spontaneously break into song at the request of a viewer. For example, after performing a “Holy Land Funk Rap” on “The Crusades” episode, Fab 5 Freddy performed an encore rap at a viewer’s request (actually a known friend) at the closing of the show, seated from behind the camera. Artists also experimented in other creative roles or performances types that they were not known for or readily associated. Fred Schneider of the B-52’s read his poetry from junior college on one

³⁸⁶ In “The Crusades” episode of 1981, Basquiat was extremely active with his text, constantly riffing off the show’s antics through his type and tagging the screen with “SAMO.” Basquiat also later appeared on the show to interview as the artist behind the tag of SAMO (undated).

³⁸⁷ The music video for “Rapture” is by no means the only visual cultural evidence of *TV Party*’s sociocultural network outside of *TV Party* episodes. Although not discussed within the parameters of this chapter, the films *Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1981) and especially *Downtown 81* (Edo Bertoglio, 2000; as a re-release of the film *New York Beat Movie*, written and co-produced by Glenn O’Brien, and produced by Maripol in 1980-81) are indebted to *TV Party* connections. The show was on a six-month hiatus while many of its regular participants worked on, and appeared in, *Downtown 81*. *TV Party*’s fusion of new wave and hip-hop has been more recently historicized in Ed Piskor’s vibrant web comic series, “Hip Hop Family Tree: Fab 5 Freddy meets Blondie (with Basquiat and The Clash),” *Boing Boing*, accessed November 1, 2012, <http://boingboing.net/>.

episode, and told deadpan jokes on another.³⁸⁸ Keyboardist Richard Sohl and guitarist Robert Fripp usually did not play their respective instruments on the show, but worked the phone lines instead.

As participants were not restricted to network expectations of entertainment and music industry related performance, *TV Party* displayed a wider range of performance that more fully depicted the ins and outs of Downtown cultural scenes, from behind the scenes to the cutting-edge performances that created scenes. The show's open format provided a window for extra-textual knowledge for fans (of music, art, fashion, etc.) and the curious drop-in viewer. For music enthusiasts, *TV Party's* format radically differed from the sterilized and highly controlled lip-synched music performance of primetime American music shows in the 1970s, as found in performances from the popular and long-running *American Bandstand* (1952–1989); to the surviving pop music-oriented variety shows, such as *The Sonny & Cher* programs (1971–1977). However, *TV Party* also stands apart from the edgier, youth-oriented late-night network programs with standardized routines for live (or pre-recorded live) music performance and/or interviews, e.g. *Saturday Night Live* (1975–present), *Midnight Special* (1972–1981), *Tomorrow Show/ Tomorrow Coast to Coast* (1973–1982); and even fellow public access programs that concentrated on recording live gigs at venues and airing pre-recorded tape, such as *Nightclubbing* (1975–1980) and *Paul Tschinkel's Innertube* (1979–1984). Providing an experimental sonic environment, live performances by the *TV Party* Orchestra also became a kind of adhesive for individual episodes, and eventually integral to the series.

TV Party was deliberately spontaneous and lo-fi in its visual aesthetics, strongly

³⁸⁸ Glenn O'Brien, Fred Schneider, Walter Steding, Andy Shernoff, Gregory Fleeman, Robert Delford Brown, Amos Poe, Freddy Fab, and Brinkfilm, *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party: Premier Episode*, December 18, 1978 (Brinkfilm, 2005), DVD.

influenced by 1960s underground and no wave film. Describing Andy Warhol as his mentor, O'Brien commented that as long as *TV Party* looked and sounded as good as Warhol's *Nude Restaurant* (1967), he was happy, which conveniently set the technical bar pretty low.³⁸⁹ O'Brien further reminisced about his relationship to Warhol, "He was my boss and best teacher. I naturally gravitated to his philosophy of realism. I liked working against the format and conventions of what audiences were expected to like. He made me love 'dead air.' He was one of the only people whose opinion of my work mattered to me."³⁹⁰ Moreover, Andy Warhol's relationship with television went well beyond artistic fascination and celebrity endorsements, as he himself worked in video on the experimental format of cable. Warhol produced three shows: *Andy Warhol's Fashion* (1979–1980) on Manhattan Cable TV in the late 1970s; followed by *Andy Warhol's TV* (1983–1984) on the Madison Square Garden Network; and lastly *Andy Warhol's Fifteen Minutes* (1985–1987) on MTV.³⁹¹ Outwardly rejecting broadcast standards and embracing the nonchalance and mishaps of Warhol's underground films, but as a no-budget no wave tendency, *TV Party* was imbued with the chic casual cool of Warhol.

TV Party has been called a punk or no wave show,³⁹² but it is mostly connected to these genres in its spur-of-the-moment DIY approach, and its non-scripted form. O'Brien remarked that one of the most memorable and fondest aspects of *TV Party* was "the feeling of things just happening spontaneously."³⁹³ Additionally, the no wave film director Amos Poe, of *Unmade Beds* (1976) and *Blank Generation* (1976) notoriety, is credited with directing a majority of *TV*

³⁸⁹ O'Brien, "The *TV Party* Story," <http://www.tvparty.org/>.

³⁹⁰ Glenn O'Brien, interview with the author via email, April 2015.

³⁹¹ For a more detailed account of Warhol's relationship to cable television, see Lynn Spigel, "Warhol TV: from media scandals to everyday boredom," in *TV by Design: Modern Art and the Rise of Network Television* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and Graig Uhlin, "TV, Time, and the Films of Andy Warhol," *Cinema Journal*, vol. 49 no. 3 (2010): 1-23.

³⁹² Marc Masters and Weasel Walter, *No Wave* (London: Black Dog, 2007), 164.

³⁹³ Glenn O'Brien, interview with the author via email, April 2015.

Party episodes. Using a two-to-three-video camera set-up on wheeled tripods, the show was visually erratic. As director, Poe would instruct camera operators to not follow action or to focus on an ear or interesting footwear through an earpiece. He further manipulated camera feeds from the back control room by applying video effects and transitions. The studio floor was also full of old and cheap microphones, so sound often dropped out: technical difficulty was fortuitously aligned with the “dead air” and slips of Warhol’s film aesthetics. But at other times, the show was visually hyperactive, a psychedelic jam session with rapid cuts and excessively applied effects, unbeknownst to the performers. Poe reminisces that he manipulated the camera controls as if playing and punching a keyboard, cutting on beat to the rhythm and improvising along with the live music.³⁹⁴ Curiously, this fast-paced, rhythmic style of editing on public access predates one of the central conventions of MTV aesthetics, its rapid cutting, which was repeatedly attacked by critics for its lowbrow commercialism.³⁹⁵

As new cultural spaces were forged Downtown, so too did public access facilitate the production of a new, hybrid media form of the art-party. With that, *TV Party* negotiated notions of labor versus leisure, mainstream pop culture versus the avant-garde, commercialism versus anti-consumerism, TV versus “reality,” and art versus the “everynight.” *TV Party* was a localized, underground cross-pollination of visual art, fashion, performance, and music, which promoted Downtown arts and interests in an experimental broadcast format highly unique to the urban space and media politics of Manhattan.

³⁹⁴ Danny Vinik, et al., *TV Party the Documentary*, DVD.

³⁹⁵ For a discussion of MTV aesthetics, and the formation of the “MTV aesthetic trope,” see Marco Calavita, “‘MTV Aesthetics’ at the Movies: Interrogating a Film Criticism Fallacy,” *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 59, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 15-31.

A New York City History of Alternative Media

The outrageous and legendary George Clinton of P-Funk delivered the most lyrically fitting description of *TV Party* as a special guest on the show: when O'Brien asked Clinton why he chose to appear on a "moronic show like this" as opposed to "big network shows," Clinton smiled and quipped, "this is my idea of TV, guerrilla TV. You know...anarchy *Howdy Doody*. I like that."³⁹⁶ In Clinton's clever reference to the children's variety show *Howdy Doody* (1947-1960), *TV Party* reimagines the shared cultural memory of postwar era television as a chaotic kid's (night)clubhouse, complete with a public access version of the peanut gallery. Furthermore, Clinton explicitly links *TV Party* to the history of alternative television and independent video production in the United States with his remark, "guerilla TV," which invokes *TV Party's* perpetual love-hate relationship with the normativity of mainstream media, and moreover, the slippery history of democratized media in New York. Following Clinton, this section explores New York City's unique video and broadcast history, which provided a fertile ground for the development of a show like *TV Party*. Alternative and guerilla television, video art, cable expansion, and public access were part of Manhattan's vibrant yet controversial media landscape, and together, they laid the groundwork for *TV Party's* new media exploration.

Historically, even though the pioneers of guerilla television wanted to create social change through video and cable technologies as a challenge to dominant broadcast information structures, they could never entirely shake network television's influence. Deidre Boyle describes the baby boomer generation's fascination with television as Oedipal in her history of

³⁹⁶ This dialogue is transcribed from the group-style interview with George Clinton on an unnamed episode of *TV Party*, originally airing February 13, 1980. The segment can be accessed as a standalone extra under the title, "George Clinton," Glenn O'Brien, Chris Stein, Walter Steding, Debbie Harry, Amos Poe, Lenny Ferrari, Tim Wright, Steven Meisel, David Van Tieghem, Luigi Ciccolini, Ronnie Cutrone, Robert Fripp, Freddy Fab, Richard Sohl, and Brinkfilm, *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party the Time & Makeup Show*, August 19, 1979 (Brinkfilm, 2005), DVD.

guerilla television.³⁹⁷ Yet, the childhood televisual experience of this generation was particularly tied to the concept of community, echoing the popular theories of collectivity and the greater good (Marshall McLuhan, Gene Youngblood, Buckminster Fuller, etc.) that inspired early video practitioners. Furthermore, the very act of watching television was a way of belonging to a gang as found in such popular programs as *Howdy Doody* (as astutely referenced by Clinton) and *The Mickey Mouse Club* (1955-1959). As reruns and spin-offs dominated 1970s network programming, *The Mickey Mouse Club* was so popular the second time around as a rerun in the 1974–75 season that there was a reboot of the famous show in 1977.³⁹⁸ Television’s historicity and the alternative and utopian imaginings of guerilla television align, as Boyle outlines the following logic: “It made sense that a generation linked together by their television memories and nurtured by the communal spirit of television clubs should form their own video gangs to make their own television, once the tools were available.”³⁹⁹ Although the guerilla television movement was short-lived and deteriorated by the late 1970s, *TV Party* arrived on its heels to twist and continue its participatory legacy by challenging systems of cultural representation as “anarchy *Howdy Doody*” on public access television.⁴⁰⁰

Collectively forming what is known as alternative television (or independent video production) public access television, guerilla television, community video, and video art emerged synergistically in New York at the pivotal decadal shift from the 1960s to 1970s. Utilizing William Boddy’s definition, alternative television classifies video works produced outside of

³⁹⁷ Deirdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.

³⁹⁸ Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 110.

³⁹⁹ Boyle, *Subject to Change*, 3.

⁴⁰⁰ By the late 1970s, guerilla video’s most acclaimed collective, *TVTV*, had fundamentally shifted in ideology. It had already moved on to non-documentary formats (fiction, comedy), and ran programs on networks, such as NBC. This narrative of “selling-out” is well-known, and epitomized in the subsequent career trajectory of *TVTV* founder Michael Shamberg, who then goes on to a successful career as a Hollywood executive producer. See David Joselit, *Feedback: Television against Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 99-103.

American commercial broadcasting institutions, but constructed in critical relation to them.⁴⁰¹

Although this first wave of video practices was certainly energized by the immense social momentum of civil rights, anti-war, free speech, and student movements, this communications revolution is often historically attributed to the introduction of the Sony Portapak by 1968.

Eventually, video production divided in two: video artists versus alternative and grassroots documentary producers. The latter category split again between groups more focused on grassroots community video in service of specific community interests (e.g. Global Village), and guerilla television producers who wished to gain the largest audience possible through television (e.g. TVTV). Following the emergence of Raindance Corporation (a combined effort between Michaels Shenberg, Frank Gillette, Ira Schneider, and Paul Ryan) other prominent video collectives surfaced in New York City, such as the People's Video Theatre and the Videofreex. These early New York video collectives often screened their works in private lofts, galleries, storefront theatres, and/or video vans, prior to the availability of public access television as a platform for disseminating independent video.

In the inaugural issue of *Radical Software*, a video journal published by Raindance Corporation from 1970–1974, Paul Ryan expresses a hope and investment in cable to represent local community cultures and their interests. Allied with guerilla television, he sets the tone and paves the way for the future voices of public access television:

The basic business of cable is the cultivation of local culture. This does not mean stenciling national network type programming on a local setting. Any culture is already programmed... This is to say, the life style of the people is structured by the local environment... The role of a cable system is to increase the community's awareness of their existing cultural system, thereby giving them more control of its development: to cultivate the local culture.⁴⁰²

⁴⁰¹ William Boddy. "Alternative television in the United States." Screen 31 (1990): 91-101.

⁴⁰² Paul Ryan, "Cable TV: The Raw and the Overcooked," *Radical Software* vol. 1, no. 1 (1970): 12.

For guerilla video producers, the “cultivation of local culture” could only come about through an alternative to the American broadcasting system: cable. As only alternative infrastructures could yield alternative feedback systems of information, guerilla television first gained a share of airspace through public access channels, to coexist outside of network television.⁴⁰³

Known as the “Blue Skies” period, popular rhetoric surrounding interactivity, participation, and community in the early 1970s supplemented and reinforced guerilla television’s utopian vision of cable technology.⁴⁰⁴ This is most emphatically represented in the writing of Ralph Lee Smith who famously coined the term “the wired nation” in the press, referring to the boundless “communications revolution” of cable television.⁴⁰⁵ For Smith, cable’s potential to positively alter and impact daily life was due to its capacity for another form of feedback, embedded in interactive technology. Smith valorizes cable for its numerous promises of electronic home-based services, such as teleconferencing, banking, education, health care, and shopping; and more effective political systems, with the ability to hold interactive town hall meetings. A harbinger of the Internet and World Wide Web, Smith’s cable-driven society was an “electronic communications highway” that could reconfigure American social, political, and economic structures, for the better.

While New York City housed the socially conscious cultures of guerilla television and community video in the early 1970s, it was also a center for corporate media. New York was not

⁴⁰³ TVTVs first project, *The World’s Largest TV Studio* (1972) on the Democratic Convention, was a precursor to their seminal work, *Four More Years* (1972). *Four More Years* first aired on cable television, and then broke with the “original” tenants of guerilla television but with airtime on VHF and PBS broadcast stations. *The World’s Largest TV Studio* was a combined effort between collectives (Raindance, Ant Farm, and Videofreex, amongst other video enthusiasts) and was supported by monies from four cable systems, including the two early Manhattan cable companies, Sterling (Manhattan Cable TV) and TelePrompTer. The cable companies owned an hour-long tape, and retained the right to air the program or not. See Boyle, *Subject to Change*, 37-38; 72.

⁴⁰⁴ For a thorough historiography of this period, see Patrick Parsons, “The Wired Nation (1966-1972)” in *Blue Skies: A History of Cable Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 232-297.

⁴⁰⁵ Aphorisms are from Smith’s article and book, *The Wired Nation* (1970, 1972), as found in *Ibid.*, 232, 245.

only home to the vanguard of these video collectives (Raindance Corporation, Global Village, People's Video Theatre, Videofreex) but also to the Big Three Networks (NBC, CBS, ABC). Increasing tensions among the mix of interests, the New York State Council for the Arts began generous funding of video in 1970, creating rivalries between video collectives. Furthermore, well-endowed private foundations were also headquartered in New York, such as the Ford Foundation and the Markle Foundation, donating funds to video collectives and throwing their weight around in public media policy decisions.⁴⁰⁶ Ralph Englemen succinctly wrote on this localized nexus of institutional and alternative forces: "New York City, media capital of the nation and home to the Alternate Media Center, video collectives, and the Ford Foundation, was a natural locale for a major experiment in public access."⁴⁰⁷

Manhattan was a perfect storm for the development of cable public access television. Different groups, representing various media philosophies, political affiliations, and financial stakes, took great interest and investment in the future of cable television in Manhattan. Further, Fred Friendly, the television advisor to Ford Foundation, became the chairman of the 1968 task force on Community Antenna Television (CATV) and telecommunications. CATV would soon be known as cable television—the transmission of electronic signals to a receiver via coaxial cable, as opposed to broadcast television's use of frequency on the electromagnetic spectrum. Significantly, cable was also a necessary technology in Manhattan due to the height of its buildings. The urban landscape of skyscrapers actually obstructed television antenna reception, making cable a solution to an unexpected technological difficulty of urban living.

Although CATV was first used to improve television reception in rural regions, its

⁴⁰⁶ Deidre Boyle, "From Portapak to Camcorder: A Brief History of Guerilla TV," *Journal of Film and Video* vol. 44, no. 1/2 (Spring-Summer 1992): 69; and Ralph Engelman, *The Origins of Public Access Cable Television, 1966-1972* (Columbia, SC: Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, 1990), 37.

⁴⁰⁷ Engelman, *The Origins of Public Access Cable Television, 1966-1972*, 32.

financial potential was quickly realized and swiftly moved into larger urban markets. After much hot debate and public hearings, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) passed sweeping legislation for the expansion of cable in 1972, freeing the cable market from its 1966 freeze.⁴⁰⁸ The FCC required new cable systems in the top one hundred television markets in the United States to provide three channels for government, education, and community public access, and one for lease (known as the “Third Report and Order on Docket 18397”).⁴⁰⁹ Any cable systems already in existence had until 1977 to fulfill this mandate.⁴¹⁰ Collectively, public access, education, and government channels became commonly known as PEG (the acronym standing for Public, Education, Government), and were entities conceived as entirely separate from the Public Broadcasting service (PBS) and network commercial television. Writing on the early history of public access, Engelman reflects upon its utopian and democratic impulse and its split from broadcast television:

Community TV represented an attempt to break with mainstream forms of both commercial and public television by permitting broad participation in the most pervasive mass medium of contemporary American culture. ‘Access’ became a rallying cry for the new conception of television as a tool of empowerment, as means of fostering a more responsive government and a more democratic culture.⁴¹¹

This new and revolutionary concept of democratic television, or “access,” was reiterated in promotional brochures produced by the cable company TelePrompTer, championing, “TV by the people, for the people,” for, “any groups or individuals of any belief, purpose, or persuasion, to

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 23

⁴⁰⁹ Thomas Streeter, *Selling the Air: A Critique of the Policy of Commercial Broadcasting in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 176.

⁴¹⁰ Gilbert Gillespie, *Public Access Cable Television in the United States and Canada: With an Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Praeger, 1975), 5-6.

⁴¹¹ Note, community TV and public access are interchangeable terms here. See Engelman, *The Origins of Public Access Cable Television, 1966-1972*, 2.

demonstrate their talents... We'll put you on TV.”⁴¹²

As cable would increasingly fall victim to rapid corporatization and shifts in allegiances throughout the following decade, public access became a bargaining chip for cable companies during franchise bidding wars in Manhattan.⁴¹³ Video organizations and collectives such as the Alternative Media Center desired free broadcast space and the availability of equipment and studios, while cable companies needed public access, and the support of such video organizations and collectives, as philanthropic covers to their capitalist interests. In short, public access became pivotal to clearing cable franchise agreements in Manhattan. It was so decisive that cable companies became legally contracted to make airtime, and potentially equipment and facilities, available to anyone to produce any kind of noncommercial programming that they desired.

Unsurprisingly, New York became the first “wired” city in the United States and the largest, urban testing ground for “electronic democracy.” In July of 1970, Manhattan granted twenty-year franchises to two cable companies, Sterling (Manhattan Cable TV) and TelePrompTer. However, these two companies had actually started to wire Manhattan as early as 1965.⁴¹⁴ The two cable companies geographically divided Manhattan: TelePrompTer served above 86th Street while Manhattan Cable TV served below. Yet, there was no cable service below 14th Street, the common boundary designating Downtown until 1976, two-years prior to the debut of *TV Party*. Here, cable availability and public access underscore socioeconomic distinctions and ideological divisions between “Uptown” and “Downtown” living. Only one year

⁴¹² Quotes are from a 1971 promotional brochure produced by TelePrompTer, and written by Henry D. Pearson. He promises free use of equipment and television studios. See Gillespie, *Public Access Cable Television in the United States and Canada*, 6.

⁴¹³ Edward V. Dolan, *TV or CATV?: A Struggle for Power* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Associated Faculty Press, 1984), 129.

⁴¹⁴ Engleman, *The Origins of Public Access Cable Television*, 32.

after solidifying cable franchise agreements, 80,000 Manhattan subscribers could view public access Channels C and D.⁴¹⁵ While the City of New York demanded eight public access channels from cable operators, the government required only two. Channels C and D, utilized for any kind of noncommercial programming, went on-air July 1, 1971 while channels A, B, C, D, I, J, K, and L were set aside for later use.⁴¹⁶

However, as a social experiment, there was no way to neither predetermine nor control how New Yorkers would actually use this forum. Alan Wurtzel, in his 1971–1973 Manhattan public access study, which attempted to address the use value of its actual programming, observes:

Most of the programming presented content which was, for a variety of reasons, unavailable to the television audience via traditional broadcast stations... Many programs were produced by local community groups and covered events and issues of interest to residents of a particular neighborhood... Most entertainment shows relied heavily on local talent, and many presented entertainment for specific ethnic and other audiences.⁴¹⁷

Consistent with such description, *TV Party* too is an untraditional television program reflecting local neighborhood concerns and utilizing local talent. Therefore, by conventions of public cable access, *TV Party* seems to be standard fare. In addition, cable companies were obliged to make equipment and airtime available for anyone to produce whatever noncommercial content they wanted, only liable to obscenity, indecency and slander laws.⁴¹⁸ Cable companies could not (and dared not) ban controversial programs because censorship would violate both franchise agreements and free speech. The permissiveness of public access as an expressive forum

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁴¹⁶ Cifford, "Vanity Video," 36, 33.

⁴¹⁷ Alan Wurtzel, "Public-access Cable TV: Programming," *Journal of Communication*, vol. 25, no. 3 (1975): 19.

⁴¹⁸ Laura R. Linder, *Public Access Television: America's Electronic Soapbox* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1999), 17-25.

afforded a break from the constraints of network television, both in terms of decency and production values.

Importantly, as shows were not subject to ratings approval, and basically impervious to censorship, public access channels were the only early cable channels to air mature and/or controversial content.⁴¹⁹ In one of the earliest assessments of Manhattan public access, David Othmer likens its to the sensation of 1970s Times Square: “Watching public access programming is much like spending an evening in Times Square. It is exhilarating, frustrating, shocking and boring—above all it is simply amazing.”⁴²⁰ Exemplifying Othmer’s Times Square assessment, *TV Party* would sometimes air after *John’s Cabaret*—a call-in piano bar style request show, full of lively Broadway sing-along tunes. At other times, *TV Party* would follow *The Robin Byrd Show* (1977–present) gaining a lead-in audience from the famous porn star’s strip/talk show, which was more red light district than great white way.

TV Party aired on public access Channels C and D in its first few years of cablecast only to later move in its last year to leased access, the notorious Channel J, the first channel of its kind in the United States. Available in 1976 and differing from public access, leased access was fee-based (fifty dollars per hour as opposed to free), broadcasted in color, and allowed local advertising. Leased access intended to offset television production costs through local advertising, and ultimately, it would turn access production into an entrepreneurial moneymaker. In a time before the widespread consumer use of VHS and Rudolph Giuliani’s sanitization of New York, Channel J was a conduit for soft-core erotica and the sex industry. Its programs openly advertised escort services, sex hotlines, swing clubs, and porn theatres. Channel J’s

⁴¹⁹ Wurtzel, “Public-access Cable TV: Programming,” 21.

⁴²⁰ This observation is from David Othmer’s early survey of the first two years of public access television (1971–1973). See David Othmer and N. Y. Fund for the City of New York, “The Wired Island: The First Two Years of Public Access to Cable Television in Manhattan,” (New York: Fund for the City of New York, 1973), 4.

programming was controversial and incited long-term censorship debates over free speech versus legal definitions of obscenity and artistic merit on access channels. Aside from *The Robin Byrd Show*, the more prominent programs of Channel J included Al Goldstein's *Midnight Blue* (1975-2002), a talk show hosted by Goldstein, the founder of *Screw* magazine, who declared his program "the 60 Minutes of Sex"; and George Urban's *The Ugly George Hour of Truth, Sex and Violence* (1976-1982), a "man on the street" style show in which Urban, an ex-porn star, lures young women into dark hallways to convince them to strip on camera.⁴²¹ While illuminating the conflicting perceptions over the value of access programming and the First Amendment, Channel J actually made little to no revenue for its programs.

While *TV Party* was hardly a profit-driven enterprise, *TV Party* did explicitly advertise for small businesses and record labels, and for local nightclubs such as the Mudd Club, Peppermint Lounge, Danceteria, and the Pyramid Club. According to the liner notes of the only available full episode of *TV Party* that reflects the shift to color and Channel J, suitably titled, "The Everything for Sale Show," the switch abetted the downfall of the show: "'Everything here is for sale,' O'Brien announces. 'Desperation is in the air.'"⁴²² However, unlike other leased access shows, this episode did not air the local stand-alone commercials of leased access. O'Brien urged viewers "to get your pen and pencils ready" and "to take down information" as he read advertisements aloud and displayed cassette tapes, records, and books, as company names and addresses were live-typed across the screen.⁴²³ *TV Party* did promote artists and businesses, but it was done in a low-fi DIY style, or as a kind of casual and spontaneous product-placement, and moreover, it was in support of *TV Party*'s own circle of Downtown artists and friends.

⁴²¹ Tony Schwartz, "The TV Pornography Boom," *The New York Times*, September 13, 1981, A44.

⁴²² Liner notes from Glenn O'Brien, Lothar Manteuffel, Charles Rocket, Dogs Eel, and Brink, *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party: The Everything for Sale Show*, June 13, 1982 (Brinkfilm, 2005), DVD.

⁴²³ Ibid., episode content.

TV Party concretizes both the promises and pitfalls of public access television as democratized media, and exhibits its pluralistic spirit of off beat programming and potentiality of interactive participation. Alternative media is deeply embedded in the cultural history of New York City, and with the advent of public access, *TV Party's* brand of night-worldmaking could emerge. Moreover, *TV Party* unequivocally connects the terrain of public access, as a permissive creative space, to its sister arena, Downtown New York.

The Hyper-Social History of the Party Show

While *TV Party* generally depicts representations of place, it also becomes its own “party destination” by simply turning a dial, or joining the party by calling-in. At the time, Downtown was known for its trendy nightlife, hybridized identity, abundance of drugs, and new brand of countercultural attitude. *TV Party* not only represents the cultural products and vibrant creative types constituting this locale, but also the process of how the Downtown art-party became an intersectional, generative site for cultural production. Classified within the “party show” genre aired on both network and public access television, *TV Party* detailed a social network of Downtown’s creative types and impresarios, to further reveal television’s potential as a creative, collective process. Here, *TV Party's* social history is considered, through its inspiration by other party shows, Downtown nightlife, and the highly social environment of public access television production.

TV Party was the concoction of its host and creator, Glenn O’Brien, whose New York genealogy includes training at the mythic art-party, Warhol’s Factory.⁴²⁴ O’Brien was the

⁴²⁴ Glenn O’Brien’s recently wrote a fond homage to the good old Factory days in his blogpost, “I Remember the Factory (After Joe Brainard),” *Glenn O’Brien*, February 28, 2012, accessed June 24, 2012, <http://glennobrien.com/?p=449>.

managing editor for Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine from 1970-1973, and became a fixture at the Factory in Union Square, which was the next incarnation after the Silver Factory era, or its underground heyday from 1964-1968 on East 47th Street.⁴²⁵ O'Brien even participated in the famous crotch shots for Warhol's *Sticky Fingers* Rolling Stone's album cover, and claims that his photograph made the unattributed inside-cover. After journalistic stints at *Rolling Stone*, *Playboy*, and *High Times* (in which O'Brien interviewed Warhol for the August 24, 1977 issue), O'Brien instigated *TV Party* in 1978 in his early thirties at the same time he started his music column, "Glenn O'Brien's BEAT." Back under Warhol's wing at *Interview*, this new "BEAT" column allowed O'Brien to freely explore various music and nightlife scenes, keeping his finger on the pulse of Downtown. Warhol actually visited the set of *TV Party*, but in typical Warhol fashion, "he got stage fright and wouldn't come on [camera]."⁴²⁶

While the Mudd Club has been noted for its "star making" power for artists,⁴²⁷ a group of public access personalities, including O'Brien in his signature leather jacket and dark Ray-Bans, graced the cover of *New York Magazine* in 1979 with the headline "The Weird World of Cable TV Or How to Be a Superstar for \$15."⁴²⁸ The cover is a candid shot of a boisterous group of fourteen public access producers in varied dress (revealing lingerie, studded leather, wizard hat and wand, sultan costume, jacket and tie, etc.) and squished into the graphic frame of a television set. The image displays the stereotypes of public access programming as wacky, eclectic, unruly,

⁴²⁵ For an account of the Silver Factory and the shift to its 1970s incarnation, see Steven Watson, *Factory Made: Warhol and the Sixties* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003).

⁴²⁶ O'Brien in "The Party Will Be Televised: A Conversation with Glenn O'Brien, Amos Poe, and Chris Stein," *New Museum's Digital Archive*, March 8, 2008, accessed March 8, 2012, http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Occurrence/Show/occurrence_id/1015.

⁴²⁷ Bernard Gendron claims, "The Mudd Club was a 'star-making machinery' for artists like Basquiat, to complement the celebrity-making machinery of the traditional gallery." See Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, 310.

⁴²⁸ See the magazine cover with the headline, "The Weird World of Cable TV Or How to Be a Superstar for \$15," *New York Magazine*, August 6, 1979.

exhibitionist, controversial, and even mundane. It also indicates how fifteen dollars could potentially buy you your Warholian fifteen minutes of fame, or thirty minutes of public access airtime.

However, O'Brien's public access break was not through his professional connection to Warhol, but as a guest-star on Coca Crystal's public access show, *If I Can't Dance You Can Keep Your Revolution* (1977–1995). Bitten by the public access bug and smitten with the minor public notoriety he received the next day, O'Brien produced his own program and loosely appropriated Crystal's party show format—a talk show with live call-ins, centering on Yippie politics and smoking pot, which always wrapped in a dance party. O'Brien and Crystal previously knew each other through *High Times* publishing connections. Crystal had also worked for the local underground newspaper, the *East Village Other*. According to the public access television cover story in *New York Magazine*, Crystal's show was the most popular show on public access, and she notes her own fame, "I'm a star. It's a riot... It's terrific. I get recognized every time I go to the organic supermarket."⁴²⁹ Self-titled an "anti-authoritarian show," Crystal's program contained interviews with politicians such as Tuli Kupferberg and Abbie Hoffman, and lively segments such as *Sinsemella Street*, "America's only weekly video marijuana report," where callers could phone-in to vote for their favorite variety of pot.⁴³⁰ Cable production was even equated to pot prices, as Crystal jokes, "An hour of cable costs less than an ounce of good grass." Even though a live show could cost as little as fifteen dollars per half hour, Crystal, financially strapped, often took collections to cover production costs.⁴³¹

⁴²⁹ Clifford, *Vanity Video*, 34, 38.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

Like Crystal's show, *TV Party* was also primarily shot at the non-profit ETC Studios/Metro Access (Experimental Television Center) at 110 East 23rd Street, with a live feed to Manhattan Cable TV (MCTV) conveniently located next door. Jim Chadlek, a former ABC executive, started ETC Studios in 1974 with a mission to provide physical studio space and equipment for live public access programming. Praised as a public access pioneer with the patience of a saint, Chadlek also devised the live interactive call-in format. He produced the first interactive call-in show, which was his own live chess show where viewers called in to make successive moves.⁴³² A central hub for public access programming and production, by 1982 ETC Studios was credited with producing 90% of all Manhattan public cable access programming.⁴³³ ETC Studios was low budget, with public recollections of poor toilet facilities, leaks, and even fires in the control room, not to mention, it was illegal, as a permit was never acquired to run cables across the buildings to plug into MCTV.⁴³⁴ Chadlek also made arrangements with cable access producers to trade studio time in exchange for volunteer time at the studio. His volunteer program has been noted for fostering a greater sense of community between public access producers, linking programs across areas of interest.

However, this community also extended to various characters hanging around the building that could potentially positively or negatively impact production. Public access producer, Lisa Yapp, reflects upon the broader social climate of ETC Studios in an interview:

It was a community. It was a crazy place. Not that everybody liked each other. But they all came together for television and for public access. The studio was on 23rd and Park, on the 2nd floor. Everybody just seemed to be dropping by. And there were other weird

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ Jim Chadlek and Michael McClard, "Writing on the Wall," *BOMB*, vol. 24, no. 3, March 1982, 16.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

people in the building, you know, dominatrixes working late at night. A lot of people, even if they weren't doing a show, would drop by just to see what was going on.⁴³⁵

ETC Studios exuded a drop-in party vibe, similar to the “drop-in” nature of *TV Party*'s viewers and callers. Warhol once described the Silver Factory's drop-in mentality as similar to the “fun” of a children's television show, but also conceded to its downside. Warhol and Pat Hackett write about the Factory's fun in *Popism*, which was actually first published in the Downtown moment of 1980:

‘Where could be more fun than this, with everybody you know coming by all the time, and you're getting work done yet?’ It was a constant open house, like the format of a children's TV program—you just hung around and characters you knew dropped in. Of course, an ‘open house’ has its risks...⁴³⁶

The open policy of each space nostalgically links different generations of New York's avant-garde to children's television programming of the 1950s, as found in the neighborly attitudes of *Howdy Doody*'s Doodyville or *Captain Kangaroo*'s Treasure House. Moreover, ETC Studios was actually only a few blocks from the legendary underground venue Max's Kansas City, once the atelier space for Warhol's Silver Factory, which by 1978 ran punk inflected programming similar to CBGB; and Danceteria on 30 West 21st Street. While most Downtown clubs were below 14th Street, Danceteria, a large multi-tiered nightclub with an innovative video lounge, specifically catered to the Downtown after-hours crowd.

Although several *TV Party* shows were shot at clubs such as Danceteria and Hurrah, and aired as pre-recorded live performances, the venue of choice for pre-game *TV Party-ing* was the

⁴³⁵ Yapp in Leah Churner, “Un-TV: Public access cable television in Manhattan: an oral history,” *Museum of the Moving Image*, February 10, 2011, accessed April 20, 2011, <http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/un-tv-20110210>.

⁴³⁶ After the passage quoted, Warhol discusses the risk as an “unnamed” woman coming into the studio and shooting a bullet through a stack of Marilyn Monroe portraits. This incident is haunted by Andy's future assassination attempt by a “drop-in visitor,” Valerie Solanas. See Warhol and Hackett. *Popism: The Warhol '60s*, 95.

Mudd Club, located in Tribeca. While the *TV Party* gang frequented all of the Downtown hot spots, “The Mudd Club was more like back stage or what Toots Shor’s bar was for Jackie Gleason.”⁴³⁷ Furthermore, Roy Trakin’s description of The Mudd Club in the *SoHo Weekly News* in 1979 shares many of the same qualities as TV Party:

The Mudd Club is not just about dancing, but about play-acting, posing, make-believe and fantasy. A lot of people turn up their noses, but the Mudd Club has succeeded in bringing back an element of excitement to New York nightlife by encouraging audience participation.⁴³⁸

The participatory qualities of nightlife as well as the forgotten eclectic silliness of the Mudd Club, as opposed to its more popular notoriety for heroin chic and nihilistically detached cool, is conveyed through *TV Party*.⁴³⁹ This quirkiness was acknowledged in the popular press of the time in a 1979 article in *People* with the wisecracking title, “Why Are Lines Shorter for Gas Than the Mudd Club in New York? Because Every Night Is Odd There.”⁴⁴⁰ The piece names the Mudd Club as the next big thing, dethroning the seemingly infallible Studio 54 at only six months old. The crowd at the Mudd Club is described as “a depraved version of the audience of *Let’s Make a Deal*,” likening it to a costumed in-studio audience, and further to the “deviant wackiness” typical of public access discourse. Warhol also accentuates the Mudd Club’s reputation for an alluringly illicit and queer sexuality in the article stating: “The action inside varies from irreverent to raunch. Andy Warhol is happy to have found a place, he says, ‘where people will go to bed with anyone—man, woman or child.’” Although Warhol was more

⁴³⁷ Glenn O’Brien, interview with author via email, April 2015.

⁴³⁸ Roy Trakin, “CLUBBING IN THE ‘80s,” *SoHo Weekly News*, December 20, 1979.

⁴³⁹ Accounts like this, Mudd Club as cool, and Club 57 as more silly, are common in assessments of the Downtown scenes, and seem to stem from Steven Hager, *Art After Midnight*, 1986. It is found in a variety of scholarship including Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, 2002; and Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art* (New York: Viking, 1998), 50.

⁴⁴⁰ See the article, “Why Are Lines Shorter for Gas Than the Mudd Club in New York? Because Every Night Is Odd There,” *People*, vol. 12, no. 3, July 16, 1979, accessed January 6, 2013, <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20074119,00.html>.

affiliated with the “Uptown” Studio 54 crowd to promote *Interview* at this point (no longer Max’s Kansas City), he liked to visit the Mudd for its unusual theme parties. Warhol was a welcome presence at the venue as his employees, Steding, O’Brien, and artist/studio assistant Ronnie Cutrone, were all Mudd Club regulars (and *TV Party* people).⁴⁴¹ For the home viewer or studio audience member, *TV Party* was just another option on the Downtown party circuit. And better yet, one could vicariously “cross the metal chain” to hang out with Mudd Clubbers, a space, which like *TV Party*, capitalized upon and socially indulged in the mask of the antisocial.⁴⁴²

While *TV Party* is the unruly club kid of Johnny Carson and Coca Crystal, with Warhol as “cool uncle,” the show’s concept was actually more inspired by Hugh Hefner’s short-lived network programs, *Playboy’s Penthouse* (1959-1960) and *Playboy After Dark* (1969-1970). To reproduce “cool” as a tastemaker in the late 1970s, O’Brien modeled his program after Hefner’s party shows, which successfully conveyed “the fantasy of being at a super-hip, super exclusive jet set party.”⁴⁴³ In Hefner’s programs, celebrities mingled and mixed performance with cocktails, in a cosmopolitan bachelor-pad setting. Outlined in the *Birth of Cool* by Lewis McAdams, cool was highly racialized and widely appropriated across American cultural production in the 1950s, and was historically rooted in New York City’s avant-garde.⁴⁴⁴ Although Hefner’s cosmopolitan cool was a commodifiable masculine lifestyle that was more about balancing a hard work and play ethic, and adult jazz over juvenile rock ‘n’ roll, *Playboy’s Penthouse* was one of the first nationally televised desegregated shows in the United States. It

⁴⁴¹ See Victor Bockris, *Warhol the Biography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2003), 420-421. Bockris also appeared on episodes of *TV Party*, see Vinik, et al., *The TV Party Documentary*, 2005.

⁴⁴² In response to the Uptown velvet rope of Studio 54, the Mudd Club famously had a Downtown metal chain. However, Andy Warhol, along with Glenn O’Brien and Debbie Harry (and many others) went to parties at both.

⁴⁴³ O’Brien, “The *TV Party* Story,” <http://www.tvparty.org/>.

⁴⁴⁴ Lewis MacAdams, *Birth of the Cool: Beat, Bebop, and the American Avant-garde* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

included iconic musical guest stars such as Ella Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole, Dizzy Gillespie, Sarah Vaughn, and Harry Belafonte. Mostly airing in cities, the show was nationally syndicated but was not picked-up in Southern markets. *Playboy's Penthouse* proved more controversial for its championing of racial integration than in its espousal of sexual liberation.⁴⁴⁵ Hefner's progressive and hip party format also appealed to O'Brien because of the collapse between performer and audience. This is first evident in the scattered party/performance atmosphere, as performances emerged from the audience or from within the party, or as audience members sat behind and around performers "on stage," becoming part of the performance.

TV Party added a Downtown spin to the party show genre that had already existed on public access and within the longer history of network television, as exemplified by Hefner's party shows. The program also distinctly capitalized on the atmosphere of the Downtown nightclub, inspired by its productive social and creative milieu, all the while turning ETC Studios into a club-like space. Through this brief consideration of the hyper-social history of *TV Party*, and an examination of its party impulses, we can see how the show drew from varied party contexts to merge the sociality of public access television with that of Downtown New York.

Liveness, or the *life* of TV Party

TV Party's unusual sense of vicariousness is due to its qualities of liveness that are inextricable from the show's party concept, production process, and reception. *TV Party* was shot, edited and cablecasted live in front of a live in-studio audience; with live musical performances and interviews; a live onscreen text-generator with graphics that would respond to the unfolding antics or letter, "*TV Party* live" or "live from N.Y.C."; and, most vividly, the text

⁴⁴⁵ Ethan Thompson, "The Parodic Sensibility and the Sophisticated Gaze: Masculinity and Taste in Playboy's Penthouse," *Television & New Media*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2008): 291.

relied on live viewer call-ins. *TV Party* records the haphazard process of creating live television, and harkens back to the golden age of television production in New York City. It also constitutes documentation of real-time performance, whether showcasing a short live music performance or considering an episode in toto as an hour-long ensemble production. Even when viewed thirty-plus years later, such indicators of liveness infuse the program with documentary “realness,” and in terms of partying, existing in and living for the “now.”

Associated with the well-known theoretical debate between Peggy Phelan and Philip Auslander, performance studies has been preoccupied by theories of liveness in relation to definitions of performance. Challenging Peggy Phelan’s ontology of performance as only located in the present, and dependent upon its qualities of liveness and disappearance, Philip Auslander argues that liveness and mediation are not in binary opposition, but extensions of one another in the same cultural economy.⁴⁴⁶ Auslander argues that live performance, whether theatrical, musical, social, or ritual, are actually only imitative versions of mass-media technologies to begin with. Key to the validity of *TV Party* as critical intervention, the most important and dominant mode of imitation for Auslander happens to be television.

Liveness has been professed as the ontological essence of television, based on television’s capability of instantaneous transmission and reception, yet mostly in relation to network television. According to the principle of liveness, television’s defining qualities become described as immediacy, intimacy, “being there,” actuality, and presentness, as initially relational to the medium of film. To clarify, *TV Party* pre-dates the advent of digital transmission and high-definition television and was viewed on cathode ray tube (CRT) television displays during a

⁴⁴⁶ Although Phelan’s argument and conception of liveness is not discussed at length here, one of her central claims against mediatized versions of performance is the following: “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.” See Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, 146.

period of cable growth and struggle. It also aired in the time of low rates for both cable penetration and VCR adoption.

Significantly, liveness allowed *TV Party* to directly address the viewer that called-in, confronting its very own audience head-on, and incorporating audience response into the text of the show. Usually occurring in the last third of the show, the live call-in segments were a real-time gauge for audience reception, and a spontaneous means of altering and creating the show. However, there is no way to tell how many people actually watched *TV Party* per channel or per year. By 1979, the first full year of *TV Party*, there were 170,000 cable subscribers in Manhattan who could potentially view public access shows, keeping in mind that comparatively there were far fewer channels to choose from by today's standard of digital cable.⁴⁴⁷ Before the time of programmable cable boxes with remote control, viewers changed channels by a turn of the dial and were obliged to spin past the content of cable access channels. In addition, access programming schedules were difficult to locate, and were not available via *TV Guide*. John William Hohausser, a public access producer, comments on technological availability in conjunction with the unavailability of scheduling information: "There were no listings and you couldn't find out what was going to happen next. Just these sparks of wackiness that you would come across when you turned the dial on the cable box."⁴⁴⁸ Because of the cable technology at the time, now considered a limitation, there was arguably a higher incidence of browsing cable access channels and of gaining the drop-in viewer, who might opt to call-in.

⁴⁴⁷ Terry Clifford, "Vanity Video," 36.

⁴⁴⁸ Quote from William Hohausser, public access producer of *The Vole Show* (1977-1997) and studio manager at ETC Studios (1977-1984). See Leah Churner, "Un-TV: Public access cable television in Manhattan: an oral history," *Museum of the Moving Image*, February 10, 2011, accessed April 20, 2011, <http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/un-tv-20110210>.

As *TV Party*'s schedule was relatively unfixed, drop-in viewers often called *TV Party* asking what the show was about, either to provoke ire or to show genuine curiosity. Although the audience was primarily Manhattan subscribers, the show at times beamed to Los Angeles local cable, live for only the first half-hour. Because of the late-night weekday "party" time slot, viewers could have been drunk or stoned themselves and in the same state of social lubrication as the majority of *TV Party* participants. Watching *TV Party* potentially provided the fun of joining the party, in perhaps a shared state of mind, or the fun of crashing the party as a disruptive crank caller or party pooper.

While anonymous callers were sometimes happily provided with free group therapy or career advice, the majority of the calls were hostile. The viewer call-in portion was a prominent part of the show and likewise, *TV Party: The Documentary* (Vinik, 2005), devotes a "greatest hits" sequence to viewer calls to indicate their range, from positive to negative. The selected history of call type offered by the documentary's caller montage does fairly represent the scope of calls one could witness per individual episode, with a sensational emphasis on some of the more abhorrent calls. The more charming exchanges include a Mr. Bill imitation, with the high-pitched character voice squealing, "oh come on, don't hang-up, no noooooo," to the laughter of O'Brien and Stein. Another caller, with a female voice, tells O'Brien that he's cute, to which O'Brien happily accepts the ego-boosting adoration. The verbally abusive aspects of *TV Party* include bigoted and homophobic vitriol directed to Stein and O'Brien: "can I jerk off in your mother's face, you prick faggot fucking cunt, you fucking commie bastard cock [hang up]." Half-shocked, they simply laugh it off and hang-up. In a sequence with Nile Rodgers, multi-talented music producer and founding band member of Chic, the caller exclaims [half laughing]"your mother takes it up the ass you fucking black bastard cock sucker nigger fuck,

fuck you, fuck you.” Stunned, Rodgers laughs-off the blatant racism surprisingly reacts, “Who me?,” recognizing that the caller could not possibly be directing his anger towards him personally, but widely to all African Americans.

Sometimes, the more negative callers attempted to offer a constructive critique of *TV Party*. One home viewer criticized *TV Party*'s failure to conquer the problems of network television programming, as its supposed idealistic alternative. The caller comments, “I was just sitting here watching commercial television, and I turned to the cable television and I saw you guys. And I said to myself, God these guys are a bigger bunch of assholes than the people on commercial television.” To which Chris Stein retorts, “there is a special phrase for that...that’s show biz baby.” Stein’s quick retort reflects how *TV Party* blurs the boundaries between the hierarchies and ideologies of network versus public access television, stating that its all “show business” to him, as a high-profile member of Blondie at the peak of the band’s success.⁴⁴⁹

Despite the extent or intentions behind the joke or prank, the live call-ins presented the opportunity for exhibitionism and shock, and moreover flagrant expressions of racism, homophobia, and sexism. Callers berated *TV Party* for being too black, too gay, and too clothed (for its female performers). From endearing sing-a-longs to downright hate speech, the scope of the calls challenges the central tenets of public access, which essentially assumes that “the people” can provide “the people” with the television programming that “they” want. The assumed positive energy of community expression through cable’s circuitry of video feedback, as famously espoused by guerilla television, falls apart and inverts here.⁴⁵⁰ Issues of quality

⁴⁴⁹ Blondie’s *Parallel Lines*, the band’s most highly acclaimed and popular album, was released in 1978 and ascended the US charts through 1979. The album is commonly noted to mark the moment where Blondie broke into the American mainstream, and out of both CBGB and UK/Australian markets.

⁴⁵⁰ By encouraging widespread participation in television, proponents of guerilla television felt that the public could finally serve its own best interests to capably survive in “Media-America,” or the current privatized media ecology.

control, and the idealism of feedback as necessarily productive, come into relief through these calls as *TV Party* depended upon them as an intricate part of its programming and improvisational gold for the unscripted show. No matter how abusive the exchanges, negotiating America's "electronic soapbox" became part of the fun, and a means of television production. *TV Party* members would "talk back" not only to mainstream corporate media, but also directly to their TV audience to assert difference. An unlikely civic custodian, *TV Party* exposes the potential ugliness as well as the delightful unpredictability of publics, constantly rearticulating how notions of community and publics are not necessarily positive in formation, but can be.

Illuminating another way that *TV Party* critically adopts liveness, Auslander importantly argues that live performance is actually always already mediatized: "Far from being encroached upon, contaminated or threatened by mediation, live performance is already inscribed with traces of the possibility of technical mediation (i.e., mediatization) that defines it as live."⁴⁵¹ These traces of "older" forms, from vaudeville to retro network formats, are evident in the text of *TV Party*, while it was still at the very forefront of experimental public access television production, and Downtown tastemaking. *TV Party* connects to Auslander's theories of liveness and mediation as a performance type that is always already mediatized (on top of constituting live mediatized performance). This is most evident in *TV Party's* appropriation from public access and network television shows past and present, pop culturally inspired theme parties, and penchant for cultural parody and political satire.

During the production of *TV Party*, a public access producer could choose to either air a tape or rent a facility and its equipment for live broadcast (and opt to record the live cablecast) as

Broad participation in video, coupled with cable television, was crucial to guerilla television's aspirations of leveraging the current media ecology to keep the nation in check.

⁴⁵¹ Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 53.

TV Party did at ETC Studios. A live black and white broadcast averaged \$60 an hour for the studio and equipment, and \$20 for a tape recording of the live broadcasted program.⁴⁵² By this time, live television was sparse on network schedules, which mostly consisted of programs pre-recorded in Hollywood, amongst the many spin-offs and reruns also permeating airspace. In an evaluation of live versus recorded television programming, O'Brien reflects:

That's what I wanted to do. Live television. That's the way TV was when I was a kid. It was exciting. Anything could happen. I remember watching Playhouse 90 and the U.S. Steel Hour in the fifties and a set might fall over, or someone would blow a line badly or a stagehand would accidentally walk in front of the camera with a ladder. I saw prizefighter Benny "Kid" Paret killed in the ring live on TV on April 3, 1962 when I was fifteen years old and Lee Harvey Oswald shot and killed live on TV on November 24th, 1963. I knew live was where it's at.⁴⁵³

While liveness connotes presence, intimacy, immediacy, and even theatricality, it is also bound up in the operations of nostalgia in the case of *TV Party*. Along these lines of the everyday, or better yet, the everynight, liveness creates the optimal party environment for O'Brien as a media platform for the talents of Downtown New York. As a retro television concept, he romanticizes television's "Golden Age" and the recurrent accidents of the live teleplay.

Through *TV Party's* quotation of the live anthology drama as historical commemoration, and given the provincial, pro-New York mentality of the "*TV Party Manifesto*," as outlined in the following section, the program also recuperates the "Golden years" of television—when New York was the center of the television industry (1946-1958). This was also a time when the medium of television was recognized for its experimentation, diversity, freedom of expression, and growth.⁴⁵⁴ Liveness conflates theatre with television, and by extension, perceptions of high

⁴⁵² Glenn O'Brien, "The *TV Party* Story," <http://www.tvparty.org/>

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ CBS executive Charles Underhill stated circa 1960, "The golden age of television was a golden age only in that it enabled us to learn, experiment, to develop, to be ready to go into the golden age which 'Playhouse 90' began to tap

culture (theatre) with low culture (television) through television's history in the 1950s. Liveness also generated dichotomies within television production when considering live versus filmed shows, which included 60 minute versus 30 minute shows, "real" characters as opposed to stereotypical characters, character-oriented versus plot-oriented programming, and the urban versus the suburban. In fact, William Boddy cites an "anti-urban animus" in television criticism prior to Newton Minow's "Vast Wasteland Speech" (1961). In contrast to many supporters of live drama in the press who championed live television's urbanity for its theatrical aesthetics of "high art" (such as Jack Gould for the *New York Times*) socially conservative television critics actually attacked New York-based television due to its urban propensity for nightlife:

What is acceptable to broad-minded night club audiences in Manhattan, Hollywood, or Las Vegas is rarely apt to be fare for admission in homes in any city or town...Jaded and liquored celebrants in a night club will accept as sophisticated humor and wit what is actually nothing but smut...What many entertainers fail to realize, actually, is that the areas containing bistros, night spots and bright lights are only a minute segment of America. And yet, somehow they insist on broadcasting to the entire nation comic and other material which is definitely not acceptable in the average American home.⁴⁵⁵

Big city tastes were deemed elitist or were equated with the "smut" of nightlife. And both were historically connected to live television and to the temptations of big city living in New York.

By 1958, television production moved west to Hollywood as television-as-stage-play quickly turned into television-as-filmed-B-movie, otherwise known as lowest common denominator programming. The coastal move also indicated a loss of creative control by the networks, or television production usurped by the film industry, and multiple as opposed to single commercial sponsors. Television production studios, which initially had more control over creative content by housing large creative staffs and production studios in New York, were

and which was cut off, and which really marked the demise of good, live drama." See William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 106, 2.

⁴⁵⁵ A statement by Carroll O'Meara in *Television Program Production* (1955), *Ibid.*, 101-102.

suddenly shut down. Through a nostalgic impetus to recreate an environment for live television-as-performance, *TV Party* returns television to its formative theatrical status and prior glory days in New York. Ironically, this move undermines the cultural stranglehold of network television, as *TV Party* was more of a Happening or event, as opposed to a scripted stage play. Moreover, the highly experimental and impromptu show benefited from the humor and drama created by its own unpredictability, as well as the exhibitionism and banality of liveness, or what Mimi White calls a “television of attractions,” a term that encapsulates much of public access television production.⁴⁵⁶

Scholars in television studies have debunked the network liveness myth for perpetuating network domination and corporate advertising interests, and acting as a false conduit to reality or “truth.”⁴⁵⁷ Liveness has been organized into five categories of common usage: 1) it describes television as apparatus and its technology; 2) it historically refers to the period of television’s “golden age” defined by the anthology drama; 3) it is a mode of television production and broadcast; 4) it is a mode of audience reception and associated psychology; and 5) it is a characteristic specific to the medium of television.⁴⁵⁸ This taxonomy applies to *TV Party* as text, in both its liveness and modes of appropriation, *but* on the platform of cable public access, as opposed to network television. Recalling how *TV Party* transforms the history of liveness,

⁴⁵⁶ Mimi White has reconsidered aspects of liveness through the everyday spectacle of television. Based on Tom Gunning’s theory of “the cinema of attraction” White develops a sister concept, a “television of attractions,” to account for how liveness has been severed from “historicity, spatiality, and banality.” Although not explicitly linked to public access programming, White argues that liveness encompasses banal informational and commercial programming, such as traffic and weather reports or even home shopping. See Mimi White, “The Attractions of Television: Reconsidering Liveness,” in *Mediaspace: Place, Scale, and Culture in a Media Age*, Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy, eds., (London: Routledge, 2004), 75-91.

⁴⁵⁷ See Jane Feuer, “The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology,” in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—An Anthology*, Ann E. Kaplan, ed. (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1983), 12-22; and Robert Vianello, “The Power Politics of ‘Live’ Television,” *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 37, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 26-40.

⁴⁵⁸ Vianello, “The Power Politics of ‘Live’ Television,” 26.

Vianello argues that liveness must be understood as an “evolving historical practice” and cannot be simply taken for granted as the axiomatic essence of television.⁴⁵⁹ Along this train of thought, *TV Party* marks a historical shift in liveness to that of the cable era, and predates how cable channels such as CNN or ESPN would soon adopt liveness.

TV Party embraces a radical potentiality for liveness through a celebratory criticality of its qualities—*TV Party* was highly aware of the implications and viewing structures embedded in network and public access television, as the text actively appropriated from both formats. Liveness can operate in relation to the political potentials of alternative media, as well as in the more mundane daily life spectacles of public access television, as its programming could oscillate between positions. As live mediatized performance, *TV Party* manipulates characteristics of liveness through a celebratory criticality of “authenticity” and “realness,” but it does so by representing Downtown personas and random callers enacting a spectrum, from the ordinary to the unexpected, and the inspirational to the inflammatory.

TV Party’s live, quirky, and self-conscious qualities, demonstrate liveness as a “television of attractions” on the idiosyncratic format of public access television, but as a commentary on the limitations of network television, music industries, and the artworld. However, given all of *TV Party*’s live qualities, the program still perpetuates the liveness myth, a myth that O’Brien was admittedly attracted to. *TV Party* aired on both public and leased access channels, with structures, or “flows,” at odds with the principles and cultural politics of network television. The short period of the show’s run also precedes cable deregulation in 1984, and the dawn of MTV in 1981. MTV conquers the pop cultural landscape just as *TV Party* begins to wind down, and as

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

Madonna left Danceteria to ascend to MTV royalty.⁴⁶⁰

By collapsing performance with the technological and interactive processes of live public access television production, *TV Party* disseminated the images, sounds, styles, and attitudes of Downtown through the very personalities that created and constituted the program. *TV Party*'s engagement with liveness, in relation to both network and public access television varieties, reinforces the cultural history of Downtown New York as marked by experimental and communitarian ambitions *alongside* aspirations for stardom. *TV Party* manipulates qualities of liveness in 1) its spontaneous, improvisational, and interactive televisual modes, as exemplified by the call-ins, and 2) its camp recycling and referencing of popular culture, which includes television's formative history of liveness. Taking media appropriation into account, *TV Party* provides a double-line of inquiry to interrogate liveness, organized around its "live" textual aspects, versus its modes of appropriating media history. By manipulating qualities of liveness; appropriating and loosely re-performing network formats from television's past and present; and ultimately redefining the party show genre on public access television; O'Brien produced and hosted his own low-budget derelict party show, showcasing the glitterati of Downtown's "new" countercultural generation.

Socializing as Socialism: The "*TV Party* Manifesto"

SOCIALISM begins with GOING OUT EVERY NIGHT—Glenn O'Brien, "*TV Party* Manifesto" (1980)

TV Party exists primarily as a television text, yet, the Downtown press, O'Brien's own

⁴⁶⁰ While debuting in 1981, MTV did not actually enter cable markets in New York and Los Angeles until the end of 1982. Madonna's eponymous debut album was released in the summer of 1983, with its videos in heavy rotation on MTV. Her iconic performance of "Like a Virgin" soon follows in 1984 at MTV's first Video Music Awards.

presence in journalism, and the pre-established public notoriety of some of its participants (through extra-textual discourse or gossip) were also important parts of show's discourse. Moreover, in 1980, O'Brien first published the "*TV Party* Manifesto" in the local newspaper, the *East Village Eye*. The "Manifesto" was printed again in 1981 in the first issue of *BOMB* magazine, a culturally oriented magazine staffed by creative "Downtown" types.⁴⁶¹ O'Brien's publication of the "*TV Party* Manifesto," demonstrates an acute awareness of the marginalized status of *TV Party* as localized media, and the broader parameters of the show's political intervention and motives.⁴⁶² Given the party and entertainment aspects of the show, it would be easy to dismiss the program's more political aspects as trivial or superficial. O'Brien's account of socializing as having the potential of inciting a social movement, no matter how tongue-in-cheek at times, is certainly political even if under the rubric of fun. The show also questions why not: why can't one's attempts at empowerment, and reclaiming political control also be affectively experienced as fun? Televisually representing a gathering of friends, or like-minded people, to forge a new political reality in direct opposition to the neo-conservatism of the Reagan Era is a feature of *TV Party* that should not be disregarded or glossed over, in reevaluating the

⁴⁶¹ While a comparative visual analysis between the two print formats of the manifestos is not vital to this section, briefly, *BOMB*'s version (as magazine) incorporates five small on-set pictures of different theme nights (along with a large image of O'Brien) and runs under the title "Glenn O'Brien's TV Party." The *East Village Eye*'s version is clearly labeled and emphasized as "Manifesto" in the title. The word is underlined and hand written in Whiteout-like fluid, further foregrounding it from the surrounding letterpress text. There is only one large half-page photograph of O'Brien, with a small rolled joint in hand, against a poster of Vladimir Lenin, with the cropped head and sunglasses of Chris Stein in the background. See O'Brien, "T.V. Party Manifesto," 18, 28; and O'Brien, "Glenn O'Brien's TV Party," 22-23.

⁴⁶² Given the financial crisis, O'Brien perceives *TV Party*'s intervention as having political resonance in 2011, and worthy of revisiting. O'Brien posted the "*TV Party* Manifesto" on his blog in solidarity with the Occupy Wall Street movement. The prologue to the "*TV Party* Manifesto" reflects: "Although TV Party never offered a field of candidates, we did get a few points in the air. The ideas here are still relevant. President Obama's standoff with intransigent and obstructionist Republicans and the complete lack of reform in the institutions that created a global financial catastrophe have demonstrated that our present form of "government" doesn't work. Not to say I told you so, but the following manifesto outlines in broad and amusing strokes the nature of our problems, and this manifesto, along with what's happening with Occupy Wall Street and its kin around the globe suggest possible solutions. Democracy, in its earliest and purist form, executed Socrates. And we've only made it worse since then. Let's try something new!" *Glenn O'Brien*, October 18, 2011, accessed December 4, 2011, <http://glennobrien.com/?p=178>.

genre of the party show and the political theatrics of partying.

If partying is considered as a leveling and democratizing concept, it makes perfect sense that it paired with the open, free, and non-discriminatory policies of public access television. While parties can demonstrate social hierarchy and exclusive cliques, parties, or at least some of the historic ones, furnished the opportunity to rub elbows with different kinds of people from different walks of life. Door policies of legendary Downtown nightclubs such as The Mudd and Danceteria were seemingly random, or erratic, to create the perfect party mix, intentionally differing from night to night. The flipside of this egalitarianism is of course policing by brutal opinion, as notoriously demonstrated in Studio 54's selective appeal to the jet set.⁴⁶³ *TV Party's* "door policy" for the in-studio audience was that if you can find it (at ETC Studios) you can come.⁴⁶⁴

Crossing the social nightclub with politics and television, O'Brien has commonly referred to *TV Party* as "socialist realist TV." *TV Party* participants were highly conscious of their political situation, and *TV Party* episodes included outright political satire. At the same time, O'Brien was also the singer/song writer for Konelrad, "the world's first socialist realist rock band," a similar creative project that used live rock performance (as opposed to the live mediated performance of *TV Party*) as a vehicle for satirical political commentary.⁴⁶⁵ This constant campy play with socialism is underscored by the show's slogan: "its the show that's a

⁴⁶³ On mixing, Jim Fouratt who helped to reopen Studio 54 in 1981 stated: "We've always tried to mix the artist community, the fashionettes and the regular audience. That's a very Manhattan attitude. We get the Nautilus boys side by side with the adult beautiful people and the downtown kids. Now it's important to mix music styles: disco, white soul, funk, electronics." See "1981, Six golden rules for keeping Studio 54 ahead of the pack," *Shapers of the 80s*, accessed April 1, 2013, <http://shapersofthe80s.com/clubbing/1981-six-golden-rules-for-keeping-studio-54-ahead-of-the-pack/> (first published in *Disco International*, October 1981).

⁴⁶⁴ Rephrased quote, originally stated by Glenn O'Brien on a untitled/undated episode. See Vinik, et al., *The TV Party Documentary*, 2005.

⁴⁶⁵ Konelrad produced politically inspired, yet comedic, anti-nuclear songs, such as "Cancer Kamikazees" and "Hard Core Meltdown." See Glenn O'Brien, "Toward A No Nukes Lifestyle," *Glenn O'Brien*, May 4, 2011, accessed January 13, 2012, <http://glennobrien.com/?p=25#comments>.

cocktail party but which could also be a political party,” and poster décor of revolutionary socialist figures strewn about the set, sometimes wearing band pins (e.g. Vladimir Lenin, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong).

TV Party participants were children during the McCarthy-era Red Scare, and during that time, Reagan was an active anti-communist as the President of the Screen Actor’s Guild, testifying in 1946 to the House Committee on Un-American Activities. The Red Scare was not a retro concept, but a Reagan-induced political reality in the 1980s, fueled by his own anti-communist roots that had been developing for thirty plus years. Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980 with a strict anti-communist political campaign. “Winning one for the Gipper” translated to the “Evil Empire” losing and communism ending. Shifting the Cold War foreign policy of “containment” in its later years, The Reagan Doctrine was implemented to defuse the Soviet Union’s global expansion of communism by correspondingly supporting all anti-communist insurgencies (e.g. Nicaragua, Afghanistan). Fear tactics of nuclear annihilation by the Soviet Union was further manipulated through Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), or more cinematically termed, “Star Wars,” a massively expensive space military defense system program. While *TV Party* ironically rebelled against the anti-communist discourses they were raised on as children, they also spun “socialism” to protest against the current policies of the Reagan administration and to counter the “Reagan Revolution.” This stratagem was not just in superficial symbolism or costume, as a shock tactic of punk appropriation, but was performative and embodied, week after week, as an extension of the show’s collective and imaginative permutations of socialism.⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁶ Here, *TV Party*’s version of socialism, differentiates from Dick Hebdige’s well known explanation of the British punk’s subcultural appropriation of the swastika, a symbol he deems as redeployed only to shock older generations, yet emptied of its historic political meanings. *TV Party* is clearly anti-Reagan, and not just in a sense of style or

On the conflation of socialism and socializing, O'Brien's brand of socialism requires the foundational base of an active and productive social life: "social action started with socializing."⁴⁶⁷ This mind set was plainly endorsed and discussed on *TV Party*. In a conversation between O'Brien and Steding on socialism and the purpose of *TV Party*, O'Brien remarks:

Socialism can only begin in the modern age with socializing. That means if you want a more just government you have to get out there at night and talk with your friends about what happened during the day. You gotta go out there and have a few drinks, discuss the issues, discuss the *New York Times*, discuss Bill Boggs, discuss Walter Kronkite. Have a few joints. Take your favorite drug, and talk about the news, get active. That's socialism, at work!⁴⁶⁸

TV Party's concern is not just with the issues of the day at hand, but also with how they are represented and controlled by the media, in newspaper print or by the performed televised scripts of the celebrity anchorman. The program itself employs different types of public forums and media (public and leased access television, newspaper/magazine, and live *TV Party* performances at nightclubs) as grassroots representation and outreach, to both promote and gain support for the show. While all of these modes are certainly forms of public declaration, a printed manifesto is particularly unusual for a television program, although political rants and the pronouncements of various self-declared revolutionaries were common to the "soapbox" format of public access television. By definition, a manifesto is a written or spoken expression of political intervention. This type of annunciation proclaims a desired change to the current political, cultural, and/or technological situation. As expressed in the show's manifesto, *TV Party* is concerned with all of these spheres (political, cultural, technological) and how they are

decor. Participants are well aware of socialism's implications, beyond hanging political posters of socialist and communist figures to shock Reagan supporters. *TV Party's* brand of socialism, which promotes general social ownership across multiple spheres, moves beyond the appropriation of an "emptied-out" symbol of the past. See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture, the Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), 116-117.

⁴⁶⁷ O'Brien, "TV Party Story," <http://www.tvparty.org/>.

⁴⁶⁸ Quote transcribed from the DVD extra segment, labeled, "Glenn and Walter on Socialism." The segment is undated. See extras, Glenn O'Brien et al., *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party The Time and Make Up Show*, 2005, DVD.

mutually constitutive. In solidarity with Yippie media politics, *TV Party* too commandeered television airwaves with their own brand of political guerilla theater, but wanted more: nothing short of an independent and free city.

The “*TV Party* Manifesto” begins with, what else, a plug of its airtime and description of the show. Highly aware of how *TV Party* appropriates television history, and is situated in that history, O’Brien names the show’s long list of influences including, “Jack Paar, Steve Allen, Johnny Carson, Woody Woodbury, Fulton J. Sheen, Ed Sullivan, Hugh Hefner, Dick Clark, Dinah Shore and Don Cornelius.” *TV Party* is self-described as “a medium for establishing a party network,” and as “the highest expression of social activity.” Such an allusion to medium recalls McLuhan’s famous catchphrase, “the medium is the message,” which indicates that it is not the content that’s important, but the method of delivery. Which in this case, the party is both “medium and message.” Postulating that technology is an extension of the human nervous system, McLuhan’s catchy aphorism implicates the social:

This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves— result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology...For the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs...it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.”⁴⁶⁹

As technological determinism, McLuhan accentuates the impact of technologies on culture and society at large: the message is the ability of media to alter the “scale or pace or pattern” of “human affairs.” Expanding upon McLuhan, *TV Party* reasserts the social use-value of technology, as the party is both medium and message, and a political platform as mediatized party.

⁴⁶⁹ See Marshall McLuhan, “The Medium Is the Message,” in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), 7-9.

The manifesto announces that “*TV Party* will run a full CAST of candidates in the 1981 NEW YORK CITY ELECTIONS,” with O’Brien running for Mayor.⁴⁷⁰ As a historical note, there was a great deal of mudslinging and contention in the 1978 New York City Mayoral race between incumbent Ed Beame, and challengers Bella Abzug, Ed Koch and Mario Cuomo, fueled by the 1977 blackout riots. Although *TV Party’s* campaign does not come to fruition, and plays out only as political theatre, *TV Party’s* platform aspires to liberate New York City as a “free port.” In seceding from the United States, “TV PARTY will make New York a truly FUN CITY by eliminating harmful laws, deregulating personal relationships, achieving full employment status, and reinstating Rent Control.” These goals can only be achieved through local control over government, and media, to better serve the interests of the local population, argued here as Downtown New York. In fact, the document declares that *TV Party* will use cable literally as a governing tool, by airing all government processes on TV for public scrutiny and immediate approval, recalling the utopian “Blue Skies” rhetoric of Ralph Lee Smith.

TV Party, as a local media enterprise with provincial politics, desires nation status for New York City. The only kind of culture espoused by the “*TV Party* Manifesto” is *local culture*: “CONTINENTAL PROGRAMMING is the enemy of culture, which is always local.” Accusing programming at the national-level of imperialism and deregulated capitalism, national culture is viewed to inherently and purposefully destroy all forms of local culture. This form of government control via control of media representation is certainly reminiscent of *Radical Software’s* media philosophies. To solve the problems of “Media America,” *TV Party* proposes: “The only cure is MASS LOCALIZATION.” And to conquer this rather monumental task, it is crucial for citizens to reclaim local control of television from the national grip of corporate mass

⁴⁷⁰ *TV Party’s* campaign to run across the board in New York City elections recalls the Youth International Party’s protest in which they nominated a pig for president, “Pigasus,” during the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

media, or specifically Hollywood:

But the first task will be for the FREE PORT OF NEW YORK to repossess the local electromagnetic spectrums from foreign interests such as THE CONTINENTAL AND GLOBAL COMMUNICATIONS MONOPOLIES. CALIFORNIA based ENTERTAINMENT CARTELS and ANTI-NEW YORK “cultural” propagandists. In America TV is the form of government. Nothing can be governed but people and TV has proved to be the greatest modern instrument for their control. TV PARTY presents and reveals ENTERTAINMENT as the ACTUAL form of GOVERNMENT.⁴⁷¹

And similar to the rise and quick fall of guerilla television before them, the solution to this lack of local representation is the alternative structure of cable television.

Combining the “social” formats from both network and public access television, namely the talk, variety, and party show, *TV Party* electronically transmits the cultural pulse of Downtown New York to level the field of representation. In the final paragraph, or last word, *TV Party* demands localized control of broadcasting to specifically promote local culture:

Culture begins with LOCAL PROGRAMMING. The failure of the National Networks is the same as the failure of the National Government. Local programming and fully empowered local government can make this city as good as it is in REALITY. But as it is our REALITY is constantly assaulted by dreams and visions of an inferior quality. NEW YORK is America’s greatest center of culture, but this culture is nearly totally blacked out of radio and television communication. NEW YORK has dozens of the greatest bands in modern music but their music is not played on the radio. New York performers are not seen on television. Why should we import all of this “talent” so inferior to our own? We are not doing it. It’s being beamed in. The Networks are polluting our environment. TV PARTY demands local control of the Electromagnetic Spectrum. No image irradiation without representation!⁴⁷²

O’Brien’s gripe is with mainstream media, and although unnamed, Los Angeles’s cultural takeover as the creative center for the music and television industries in the United States, in addition to film. Given the Downtown audience address and the local cultural mission of the *East Village Eye* (and this too holds for its *BOMB* reprint) when O’Brien refers to the “greatest bands in modern music” local to New York, he implies the Downtown music scenes that he and the

⁴⁷¹ O’Brien, “T.V. Party Manifesto,” 18.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

publication ardently support. *TV Party* broadcasted representations of local culture by making Downtown scenes and its performers visible and audible, along with more accessible and personable. Although *TV Party* too “imported” special guests, they only invited those that appealed to their tastes, as representative of local fan cultures. The episodes effectively transmitted the cultures of Downtown New York, and provided “behind the scenes” details about artists in support of their fan bases, or to gain new ones. *TV Party* effectively represented Downtown as a local and collectively constructed experience, specific to the live and interactive format of public access television.

Conclusion

Pushing the democratic possibilities of live public access television as a new wave/new media, *TV Party* is critical to understanding Downtown as a cutting-edge experimental culture, across location, attitude, life style, and aesthetic sensibility. Furthermore, *TV Party* explicitly asserted a Downtown brand of cultural politics through its very own published manifesto. By retooling and at times queering traditional network formats, and reveling in the quirkiness, theatricality, and unpredictability of live television, *TV Party* produced Downtown’s very own party show. This chapter establishes how the art-party became televisually anchored, and advances the alternative media environment of Manhattan as conducive to both creative placemaking and queer worldmaking as realized via the art-party.

TV Party also importantly functions as archival documentation and evidence of the interests, politics, and the varied cultural production of Downtown New York. The open public access television format granted the space for the creation and transmission of Downtown as a multiplexed neighborhood identity, or an attitude that transpires through televisual

representations of aesthetic sensibilities. *TV Party* is representational of local community dynamics and its surrounding public discourse by cablecasting the images and sounds of Downtown cultural scenes through the very people and personalities that collectively produced, and/or were showcased, on the program. The performances and interactions of participants recorded in the live broadcast moment render the show's content. *TV Party*, whether considering it as a singular episode or as archive, exposes the organic evolution and cross-pollination of various scenes through its loose structure and improvisational form, conducive to and connotative of Downtown New York.

Similar to my previous chapter on Club 57, *TV Party* too reprocessed popular collective memory to create possibilities for new and alternative modes of artistic production and living one's "every-night-life." Like Club 57, *TV Party* is simultaneously process and product, and is Club 57's sister site for displaying a wide range of performance types, from ritual to play to the performing arts. Further, as an alternative media history, different from Club 57's alternative art space history, *TV Party* has only just begun to receive attention as a vital space of artistic exchange, expression, and media experimentation in the historiography of Downtown New York.⁴⁷³ The "fun" of both nightlife arts and public access television have eluded "serious" academic consideration. These art-party arenas also stand outside of histories acknowledging the high cultural spaces of the white cube (museums and galleries), the low spaces of the "boob tube" (e.g. television and music industries), or even alternative art spaces (which often adhere to gallery-like structures and narratives). Expanding upon my chapter on Club 57, *TV Party* also

⁴⁷³ Carmack, "Anton Perich Presents and TV Party Queering Television Via Manhattan Public Access Channels, 1973-1982," 2010; Butt, "Welcome to the TV party," 2014; and Benjamin Olin, "Circuit Breakers: Glenn O'Brien's TV Party 1978-1982," in "Underground Networks: Artists' Television in New York City, 1974-1986," PhD dissertation, unpublished draft (as cited in Butt, 2014); and Daniel R. Quiles, "TV Parties," *Dis Magazine*, undated post, accessed September 3, 2011, <http://dismagazine.com/discussion/15641/tv-parties/>.

contemplates how nightlife fuels and informs the arts, and enhances the cultural life and appeal of a city. As Downtown art-party sites, both *TV Party* and Club 57 throw the current creative state of New York City into sharp relief, emphasizing how it is increasingly no longer a place for making and doing, but a marketplace for selling, collecting, and viewing.

In the televised nightworld created by *TV Party*, socializing, or hanging out with some of your closest friends, or with artists that you admire, incites a social movement to forge a new political reality and to create new kinds of cultural expression. *TV Party*'s format of live mediatized performance and spontaneous creativity doubled as a promotional platform for various emerging cultures and artists. An underlying goal of this chapter has been to reveal the deep connections between nightlife and public access television, which were also tied to the cultural production of Downtown New York and achieved via *TV Party*'s creative placemaking and queer worldmaking practices. In conclusion, *TV Party* was not just an hour-long program. It was a means of creating, disseminating, and accessing a real-life creative community that projected various political, social and cultural imaginaries.

Chapter 3

A New Wave Conference Like None Other: The Nova Convention

He [Burroughs] was the first person who was famous for things you were supposed to hide — he was gay, he was a junkie, he didn't look handsome, he shot his wife, he wrote poetry about assholes and heroin. He was not easy to like.

—John Waters⁴⁷⁴

We didn't realize that this huge event [the Nova Convention] would be an adieu to the American avant-garde. No other event after that gathered so many of the artists, poets, musicians of the underground scene.

—Sylvère Lotringer⁴⁷⁵

Introduction

Known as the godfather of punk, a guiding saint to all social misfits, and a symbol of anti-censorship, counterculture, and queer cultural history, it makes perfect sense that the legacy of William S. Burroughs was rekindled during the heyday of Downtown New York—with its unprecedented social and cultural freedom. Although Burroughs has remarked, “I don't like parties and miscellaneous gatherings with no particular purpose,”⁴⁷⁶ he is historicized as a deft conversationalist, effortlessly drawing the party to him, with a penchant to “party hard.”⁴⁷⁷ In addition, it was the book-length poem, *The Wild Party* (1928), by Joseph Moncure March that first inspired Burroughs to become a writer.⁴⁷⁸ Moreover, it was an ill-fated party trick that

⁴⁷⁴ See footage of John Waters in the documentary film by Ilko Davidov, Carmine Cervi, Yony Leyser, et al. *William S. Burroughs: A Man Within* (Chicago, IL: Yonilizer Productions, 2011), DVD.

⁴⁷⁵ Marcus D. Niski, “Interview with Sylvère Lotringer on the Nova Convention,” <http://realitystudio.org/interviews/interview-with-sylvre-lotringer-on-the-nova-convention/>.

⁴⁷⁶ Excerpt Taken from the quote, “I do spend a great deal of time alone. I'm not very gregarious. I don't like parties and miscellaneous gatherings with no particular purpose. I think parties are largely a mistake. The bigger they are the more mistaken they are.” In “Dinner with Sylvère Lotringer, Gerard Malanga, and Debbie Harry: New York 1979,” William S. Burroughs and Victor Bockris, *With William Burroughs: A Report from the Bunker* (New York: Seaver Books; distributed by Grove Press, 1981), 93.

⁴⁷⁷ Tom King, “The Burroughs Guy: An interview with James Grauerholz,” *Lawrence.com*, July 30, 2007, accessed November 15, 2013, http://www.lawrence.com/news/2007/jul/30/burroughs_guy/?burroughs_2007.

⁴⁷⁸ Victor Bockris, “Introduction: A Passport for William Burroughs,” in *With William Burroughs*, xiv.

precipitated Burroughs's serious pursuit of writing as a means of surviving his own tragic life circumstances. Both heavily under the influence, Burroughs accidentally killed his wife, Joan Vollmer, by misfiring a shot to her head while performing an act of William Tell for the couple's guests.⁴⁷⁹ Recalling the incident later in life, Burroughs claims that it was the creative act of writing that enabled him to pull through such tragedy and battle his inner demons.⁴⁸⁰

My opening point here is that parties actually played pivotal roles in Burroughs's life and work. Moreover, they activate the popular memory of Burroughs, as his art and philosophies have been repeatedly celebrated through time beginning with the Nova Convention.⁴⁸¹ Substantiated by the work of my previous two case studies of *Club 57* and *TV Party*, art-parties are conducive to collaboration, experimentation, spontaneity, and recombination, which are in fact, all impulses of the cut-up method. A technique famously pioneered by Burroughs and Brion Gysin, the cut-up is a creative process in which text and/or images (found or created) are randomly rearranged to produce new and unexpected results. Like the art-party, the cut-up also functions as a creative engine.

Demonstrating a perpetual collective fascination with Burroughs, the Nova Convention, along with subsequent celebrations of Burroughs in its wake, indicates how the legacy of Burroughs is actively constructed, and how his ideas continue to circulate and resonate. In the form of commemoration, the art-party also doubles as a mode of historicization. Simultaneously,

⁴⁷⁹ This tragic and regrettable incident has been replayed numerous times in Burroughs scholarship, and is a defining point in his life and art by consensus. For accounts during this period, see Jorge García-Robles and Daniel C. Schechter, *The Stray Bullet: William S. Burroughs in Mexico* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); and James Grauerholz, "The Death of Joan Vollmer Burroughs What Really Happened?" (unpublished paper prepared for the Fifth Congress of the Americas at Universidad de las Americas Puebla, October 18, 2001, final manuscript January 7, 2002).

⁴⁸⁰ While similar statements are made in interviews, for documentary footage of Burroughs's recollection of the incident see Alan Yentob and Howard Brookner, *Burroughs: The Movie* (United States: Citifilmworks, 1983), VHS.

⁴⁸¹ Celebrations of Burroughs include, but are not limited to, the Nova Convention (New York, 1978), Burroughsday (Brighton, England, 1994), The Nova Convention Revisited (Kansas, 1996), and events affiliated with The Burroughs Century (Indiana, New York, London, etc., 2014).

such celebrations of Burroughs are highly generative as creative expression of fan culture because new discourses and art forms emerge through the vehicle of Burroughs. A three-day art-party and the subject of this third chapter, the Nova Convention honored Burroughs as a creative, queer and cultish 20th century Downtown icon. The event marks a grand-scale production of the collective popular memory of Burroughs, and demonstrates Burroughs's own image production through Downtown's distinct cultural filter.

Therefore, this third chapter argues that Burroughs's status and notoriety, across geographic, generational, and cultural registers, in fact materialized through the Nova Convention, an art-party framed within this specific Downtown cultural moment. An untraditional and unusual academic symposium, the Nova Convention joined artists, academics, publishers, and countercultural figures in celebration and recognition of the wide cultural impact of Burroughs's lifework for the first time in the U.S. Peers, friends, collaborators, and admirers of Burroughs all performed or lectured with no honorarium, in true homage to Burroughs, with only a small amount of pay going to the bands.⁴⁸² The event enlisted a cross-generational "who's who" of New York's avant-garde, and was comprised of performance art, theatre, dance, readings, poetry, academic panels, concerts, a curated film series, and an art exhibition. Yet, the main events of the Nova Convention were a veritable live performance extravaganza, and, it is no coincidence that the Nova Convention occurred when performance art had just become legitimized within the New York art world. Nova performers and panelists indeed represent a range of personalities, histories, mediums, and agendas—across generations of cultural producers. For example, the event included appearances by an older generation of cultural figures, represented by Allen Ginsberg, John Cage, Phillip Glass, Merce Cunningham, and

⁴⁸² This is my current understanding of performer compensation garnered from my research in archive collections and press coverage of the Nova Convention.

Timothy Leary; alongside up-and-coming artists and bands such as Patti Smith, Laurie Anderson, The B-52s, and Suicide.

The issue of multi-generationality, especially in terms of actual art-party performers and participants, is key to this chapter.⁴⁸³ Moreover, this quality helped to propel the creative economy of Downtown New York. The Nova Convention clearly depicts Downtown's cultural geography as true palimpsest, and as a fertile ground for new artists and cultural works to emerge in distinct conversation with the longer cultural continuum of New York's vanguard, and vitally, its queer history as embodied by the complex figure of Burroughs. The event remembered and reintroduced the Beat (then in his mid-sixties) and the cut-up method during the youth-oriented cultural explosion Downtown, when punk, hip hop, new wave and no wave freely intersected. The event served to level generations and cultural contributors as different types of knowledge production were equally validated in their comprehension, appropriation, adoption, and even promotion of Burroughs's ideas, themes, and methods. Like the cut-up method itself, Burroughs and the Nova Convention were also types of cultural democratizers, and to culturally productive ends.

The focal point of the Nova Convention was Burroughs's life and work, inextricable from the production of his own public image; and as this chapter argues, specifically mediated through the space of Downtown. The event was, for the most part, a social gathering centered upon his fan-like adulation, the first one to recognize Burroughs's accomplishments and influence in the

⁴⁸³ While not the focus of this chapter, the issue of multi-generationality speaks broadly to notions of queer mentorship during this time. Burroughs acted as an artistic mentor and creative figurehead to numerous Downtown creatives, including female artists such as Patti Smith, Kathy Acker, Adele Bertei, and Laurie Anderson.

U.S.⁴⁸⁴ But, the Nova Convention was also an intentionally curated performance and conversational space for different kinds of encounters and exchanges, whether intellectual, artistic, or social, which legitimized existing Burroughsian discourses while creating new ones. Because the Nova Convention also involved academic and publishing oriented lectures and panels, the hybridized conference format also encompassed a certain level of scholarly expectation in terms of dialogue and debate, alongside rock concerts. Yet, the Nova Convention was palpably different from your average academic conference. Writer and publisher Jan Herman, who attended the events remarked, “the convention was a far cry from the MLA thank god.”⁴⁸⁵

The mega-conference was produced by then Columbia Professor Sylvère Lotringer, founder of the journal *Semiotext(e)*;⁴⁸⁶ Burroughs’s assistant and manager, James Grauerholz; and poet and performance artist John Giorno, a mainstay in New York’s avant-garde since the days of Warhol’s Silver Factory.⁴⁸⁷ The conference was originally Lotringer’s idea and the Burroughs camp was initially skeptical of the event’s realization. Considered from this perspective, the Nova Convention was also a vehicle for popularizing “French theory” in the U.S. by mixing theory with the cool cachet of the Downtown’s underground and avant-garde, both past and present. Furthermore, two publications were released in time with the Nova Convention, 1) *Semiotext(e)*’s *Schizo-Culture* issue, debuting its new and improved visual and

⁴⁸⁴ Discussed later in this chapter, some audience members were not interested in Burroughs, or his cultural impact, and even heckled as certain performers. Some bought tickets specifically to see Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones perform. Initially scheduled, Richards was a last-minute no-show at the Nova Convention.

⁴⁸⁵ For an account of the events of the Nova Convention, see Letter from Jan Herman to Carl Weissner, December, 11, 1978. Correspondence: Carl Weissner, Jan Herman Archive, box 11, Folder 1, Archival and Manuscripts Collection, Northwestern University Library. Published online, Jed Birmingham, “Jan Herman and William S. Burroughs,” *Reality Studio*, updated April 5, 2010, accessed November 10, 2013, <http://realitystudio.org/bibliographic-bunker/jan-herman-and-william-s-burroughs/>.

⁴⁸⁶ Here I am referring to *Semiotext(e)*, the journal that was started in 1974, as opposed to the title that also names Lotringer’s independent publishing press. Therefore, the name of the journal is in italics.

⁴⁸⁷ Giorno was a lover of Andy Warhol and was the star and main subject of Warhol’s minimalist film, *Sleep* (1963).

“Downtown” identified format; and 2) Burroughs and Gysin’s, *The Third Mind* (1978 English edition), a book demonstrating the cut-up method to a new audience of cultural producers. Lotringer reflects on the ideas of hybridity, creativity and connection as symbolic of Downtown at the time: “*Schizo-Culture* was about New York, and trying to connect the most creative minds from France to the most creative minds in the States, that was the idea.”⁴⁸⁸ These publications certify how new ideas and artistic techniques were marketed through the Nova Convention, which in turn indicate Downtown’s cultural interests, but also how the Nova Convention shaped such interests.⁴⁸⁹

Significantly, the Nova Convention transpired during the period of Burroughs’s physical residence Downtown in an old YMCA building at 222 Bowery fondly named the Bunker. Open in regards to his homosexuality, drug addiction, and criminal past, Burroughs’s queer rebel history, along with his involvement in rock music cultures, made him accessible and admirable to youth cultures across time. Burroughs’s influence upon Downtown New York is evident in numerous examples and quotations, from providing bands with names and song lyrics; artists with a method of experimentation; to basic “junkie” idolatry. However, the upswing of his career was catalyzed by his working relationships and queer mentorship of Grauerholz, his biographer Victor Bockris, and his film documentarian Howard Brookner, director of *Burroughs: The Movie* (1983). All three were decades his junior and more in step with Downtown youth cultures at the time of the Nova Convention. While Bockris became the social coordinator and recorder of dinner parties at the Bunker, Grauerholz reinvigorated Burroughs’s career through performance,

⁴⁸⁸ Sylvère Lotringer, interview with author, April 2015.

⁴⁸⁹ While I’m aware that I cannot assume that the audience was predominantly composed of Downtown residents, or those even identifying with the Downtown state of mind, the event was primarily marketed to a Downtown audience because of its advertisements in *SoHo Weekly News* and the *Village Voice*, in weeks prior to the event. As comparative example, *The New York Times* covered the Nova Convention in articles on December 1 and 4, 1978.

adopting a rock-tour format at concert venues and nightclubs at a time when avant-garde performance was going mainstream and vice-versa.⁴⁹⁰

Named to the male pantheon of postmodern artists by Frederic Jameson in the opening of his influential essay, “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Burroughs, and by association the cut-up, became symbolic of postmodern art practices. These tactics are readily associated with appropriation and collage across the arts, which also resonate with the art-party’s knack for mixing.⁴⁹¹ However, shedding new light on such a reductive label, recent scholarship has debated whether Burroughs is best understood and contextualized by postmodernism. Edward S. Robinson’s history of the cut-up, with the majority of his study extending beyond Burroughs, locates Burroughs and the cut-up as somewhere in-between postmodern theories and the modern traditions of the avant-garde.⁴⁹² Also finding neither modernism nor postmodernism to be suitable categorizations for Burroughs, Timothy S. Murphy develops an alternative theoretical framework for his work, the *amodern*. Free from the binary limitations of modern and postmodern, Murphy reframes Burroughs to acknowledge his overlooked radical philosophies and politics for social change.⁴⁹³

More important to my examination of the Nova Convention, and to adopt Murphy’s term taken from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Burroughs’s work (and life) is about the politics of

⁴⁹⁰ See Philip Auslander, *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992). Auslander’s argument is supported by analyses of the Wooster Group, Andy Kaufman, Sandra Bernhard, Laurie Anderson, and Spalding Gray, whom, in different ways, mix popular media forms, aesthetics, tropes, and personas in their work.

⁴⁹¹ Along with Burroughs, Fredric Jameson also mentions punk and new wave as examples of postmodernism in the introductory paragraph framing his iconic essay. See Jameson, “Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, no. 146 (July–August 1984): 53-92.

⁴⁹² See Edward S. Robinson, *Shift Linguals: Cut-up Narratives from William S. Burroughs to the Present* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011).

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

survival, which dynamically imagines “a plan of living.”⁴⁹⁴ For Burroughs, writing, which also extends to his other creative practices, was a means of survival. Allen Hibbard argues that the amodern Burroughs: “carves out a space/place in which constructive, positive resistance is possible. Rather than simply launching attacks on the existing structures, it allows alternative forms of organization based on libertarian principles to emerge.”⁴⁹⁵ Rather than postmodernism, it is this amodern notion of “positive resistance,” as a means of both survival and creation that resonates so strongly with the art-party as a mode of cultural production, which opens and forges creative space through acts of creative placemaking and queer worldmaking. A Downtown art-party that rejoices in the queer narrative and hybrid work of Burroughs, the Nova Convention articulates a queer futurity, based on Burroughs’s philosophies, that centered on the future, survival, and embraced both living and creating despite New York’s challenges and even cruelties.

While Burroughs was outspoken about his homosexuality in his life and work, he has only recently been reclaimed for his queer literary contributions and political commitments.⁴⁹⁶ Ardently opposing both homonormativity and heteronormativity, yet at times with troubling misogynist and effeminophobic intimations, Jamie Russell argues that Burroughs’s assimilation into a heterosexual literary canon has only reinforced how his queer themes and political agendas

⁴⁹⁴ For context, Ellison’s original quote reads, “And the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived. That goes for societies as well as for individuals.” Murphy finds political resonance and commonality between Ellison and Burroughs, through the very concept of “a plan of living” in the face of social systems of oppression. See Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 580; and Timothy S. Murphy, *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1-7.

⁴⁹⁵ Allen Hibbard, “Shift Coordinate Points: William S. Burroughs and Contemporary Theory,” in Davis Schneiderman and Philip Walsh, eds., *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 18.

⁴⁹⁶ Jamie Russell offers the first queer reading of Burroughs’s work in *Queer Burroughs* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

have been continually effaced.⁴⁹⁷ This comes as somewhat of a surprise given that Burroughs wrote a book entitled *Queer* in the early 1950s (but not published until 1985) when the term was still derogatory and abusive in parlance. A mix of autobiography and fiction, and laden with homosexual desire and sex, Burroughs comments in the introduction of *Queer*, “While it was I who wrote *Junky*, I feel that I was being written in *Queer*.”⁴⁹⁸ The writing process of *Queer* was fundamental to Burroughs’s own being and becoming, and informed his own craft and expressions of homosexuality: *Queer* made Burroughs. This sentiment also corresponds with Burroughs’s own interrogation of the limits of gay sexuality in the 1950s (his own masculinity famously symbolized by his gun-slinging and gray bankers suit and hat), which runs counter to popular assumptions of gay effeminacy at the time, including the adherence to masculine/feminine role play in gay coupling. Further underscoring Burroughs’s exploration of the fluidity of queer identification, Burroughs views his alter ego, William Lee, as “self-contained” and “sure” in *Junky*, and “disintegrated” and “unsure” in *Queer*.⁴⁹⁹ Burroughs’s queer subjectivity is tied to process, creation, and fluidity, within the context of the multiple locations where he lived and worked. These qualities resonated with Downtown as a motley collection of social misfits, who were also searching and coming into their own.

In this chapter, I examine the Nova Convention as a groundbreaking forum for cultural and intellectual exchange through the lens of Burroughs as a Downtown idol. To understand how the Nova Convention is emblematic of Downtown in connection to Burroughs, and how this art-party, and even Downtown itself, can both be theorized as a social collage, I first historically ground this case study in an overview of the evolution of the cut-up method, and its qualities and

⁴⁹⁷ Russell, “Queering the Burroughs Canon” in *Queer Burroughs*, 1-9.

⁴⁹⁸ William S. Burroughs, *Queer* (New York: Viking, 1985), xiv.

⁴⁹⁹ Burroughs in Russell, *Queer Burroughs*, 17.

processes as outlined by Burroughs and Gysin. After, I reconstruct a history of the Nova Convention's organization and intent, with attention to how Lotringer crossed French theory with the American avant-garde through his prior Schizo-Culture conference and his journal, *Semiotext(e)*. Then, I examine the event's patchwork of intellectual and artistic inclusions, as well as disappointing exclusions and dramas, mostly through its coverage by Downtown's local newspapers, the *SoHo Weekly News* and the *Village Voice*.⁵⁰⁰ Because the Nova Convention marks a high point in Burroughs's career and influence at a precise Downtown moment, I then consider the social life of Burroughs in his Downtown pad, the Bunker. In closing, I briefly address the Nova Convention's 1990s resurrection, "The Nova Convention Revisited," a re-celebration of Burroughs and a remembrance of the event itself. Like my previous two case studies, the Nova Convention has only been very peripherally acknowledged in scholarship on Downtown New York, and within the larger body of work on this mythic American figure. This chapter is pioneering in both its historical excavation and reconstruction of the Nova Convention, and its wider acknowledgement of Burroughs's ascent within the time and place of Downtown.

In the late 1970s, Burroughs reached new heights of recognition in the U.S. Biographer Barry Miles in his chapter entitled, "The Return of the Prodigal Son," encapsulated his Bunker period in the 1970s in New York.⁵⁰¹ Alluding to the biblical parable of wasteful extravagance, the story ends with the father throwing his lost son a welcome home party. His residence at the Bunker, which coincided with his cultural acceptance and influence Downtown, marked Burroughs's return to the U.S. Moreover, Burroughs's work is often read through place, whether in terms of his temporary residences in Tangiers, Mexico, Paris, or even growing-up St. Louis. The Nova Convention symbolizes a pivotal and historic point in Burroughs's career and

⁵⁰⁰ The Nova Convention predates the *East Village Eye*, which released its first issue in May 1979.

⁵⁰¹ Barry Miles, *William Burroughs: El Hombre Invisible* (London: Virgin, 1992).

demonstrates how his public image and legacy could only take shape through Downtown New York, which, in turn, influenced the cultural production, identities and attitudes associated with “Downtown” itself.

The Third Mind and the Evolution of the Cut-Up

The cut-up has many meanings and implications, and deeply resonates with the form of the art-party. Burroughs scholar Oliver Harris comments on the theorization of the cut-up, “Although the temptation to generalize [the cut-up] is a basic error—to speak of the ‘the cut-up’ is to falsify a great range of cut-up procedures, the enormous variety of texts they produced, and the multiplicity of purposes they served, all of which vary over time.”⁵⁰² That being the case, Burroughs and Gysin’s experimental technique also extends to the operations of Downtown New York’s inventive and generative creative economy. In other words, both Downtown New York and the art-party can be conceived of as sociocultural collage or cut-up spaces. To understand the cut-up in relation to Downtown, or as a metaphor for Downtown’s creative economy, the cut-up’s social and DIY impulses that celebrated spontaneity, hybridity, and collaboration, are highlighted in this section. Burroughs’s discovery and development of his writing process and practice, indebted to the cut-up, was also socially ingrained through his personal relationships with a group of writers known as the Beats. The cut-up, an anti-authorship technique that Burroughs would ironically turn into a signature style, was directly a product of his lasting friendship and collaborations with the multimedia artist and preeminent dilettante, Brion Gysin. Both artists were ardent experimenters and thoroughly embraced collaboration as an artistic process. Burroughs and Gysin’s experimental techniques are detailed in *The Third Mind*, their

⁵⁰² Oliver Harris, “Cutting up Politics,” in *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization*, Davis Schneiderman and Philip Walsh, eds. (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 175.

joint novel on the cut-up and its related methods. At once a guidebook and manifesto, *The Third Mind* was released at the Nova Convention, outlining a historical mode of avant-garde impulses and proposing a model for art making and living to a Downtown readership.

In the spring of 1958, in room #15 of the “Beat Hotel,” at 9, rue Git-le-Coeur in the Latin Quarter of Paris, Burroughs and Gysin together embarked on a new creative adventure, the cut-up. Marking a prior prolific turn, from 1958–1963, Beat scholar Barry Miles describes the Beat Hotel scene as “a creative epicenter” with “an amazing inventory of activity” and names its key players as Burroughs, Gysin, Peter Orlovsky, Allen Ginsberg, and Gregory Corso.⁵⁰³ As a kind of queer worldmaking, the iconic Beat Hotel photographer Harold Chapman recalls the scene as “outside society” and a “threshold into another world.” Similar to Steven Hager’s quote describing Downtown New York during the late 1970s and 1980s, Chapman describes it as a social mix: “an entire community of complete oddballs, bizarre, strange people, poets, writers, artists, musicians, pimps, prostitutes, policemen, and everybody you could imagine.”⁵⁰⁴ In contradiction to the dominant conservative values of post-World War II America, Paris in the 1950s offered social freedom and cultural tolerance, with its progressive views on race, sexuality, art, and drug use. Ginsberg and Orlovsky originally lead the Beat charge to Paris. They took refuge in the city during the sensationalized obscenity trial of Ginsberg’s *Howl* (1956), over its illicit sex and drug references—keeping in mind that the censorship battle occurred during the time of U.S. sodomy laws.

Encouraged by Ginsberg, Burroughs relocated to Paris (1958–1960) and struck up a life-altering friendship with Gysin. He quickly followed suit and moved into the Hotel to eventually

⁵⁰³ Barry, Miles, *The Beat Hotel: Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Corso in Paris, 1958-1963* (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 5.

⁵⁰⁴ Chapman in Alan B. Govenar, Harold Chapman, Peter Golding, Elliot Rudie, Jean-Jacques Lebel, and Oliver Harris, *The Beat Hotel* (New York, NY: First Run Features, 2012), DVD.

replace Ginsberg as Burroughs's central social and creative focus.⁵⁰⁵ Although both Burroughs and Gysin identified as gay, their close relationship was completely platonic (Burroughs and Ginsberg had once been lovers, with Burroughs spurned by Ginsberg). They held a mutual artistic respect and fondness for one another, and shared offbeat interests in the occult and consciousness. Burroughs was deeply impacted by Gysin's paintings, pronouncing that they opened-up "ports of entry"—moments of accessibility into new realms and worlds, ultimately breaking habitual modes of perceiving reality and creating new spaces for exploration.⁵⁰⁶

According to Burroughs, the cut-up method was a tool to wield against systems of power and subordination, or control, which is a major theme in Burroughs's work. His "Control," "control machine," or "control society" implicates any social system of control, as evidenced through government, technology, media, religion, family values, heteronormativity, drug addiction, etc. For Burroughs, language is a "word-virus" and is distinctly manipulated by systems of social control. Through the cut-up, a cutter could discover breaks in the "control machine." For example, cutting-up a newspaper's text was a way to subvert both language and the media as control systems.

Moreover, at the time of the Nova Convention, Burroughs's essay "The Limits of Control," based upon his talk "The Impasses of Control" at the Schizo-Culture conference of 1975, was published in the *Schizo-Culture* issue of *Semiotext(e)*.⁵⁰⁷ His essay included such thoughts on the relational aspects of control: "All control systems try to make control as tight as possible, but at the same time, if they succeeded completely there would be nothing left to

⁵⁰⁵ Phil Baker, *William S. Burroughs* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 112.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 111-112.

⁵⁰⁷ For a history of the Schizo-Culture Conference, including its proceedings, and a full reprint of the *Schizo-Culture* issue, see Sylvère Lotringer and David Morris, *Schizo-Culture: The Event* and *Schizo-Culture: The Book* (Los Angeles, CA; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Semiotext(e), The MIT Press, 2013).

control;” and that “control also needs opposition or acquiescence; otherwise, it ceases to be control.”⁵⁰⁸ Emphasizing the controlling aspects of language, he claims, “words are still the principal instruments of control. Suggestions are words. Persuasions are words. Orders are words. No control machine so far devised can operate without words.”⁵⁰⁹ Gilles Deleuze, an avid reader of Burroughs, cites him as the first to name the shift from Foucault’s *disciplinary society* of surveillance through enclosure, to that of a *society of control*, achieved through “continuous control and instant communication.”⁵¹⁰ By challenging and questioning control societies, the cut-up opens “ports of entry,” to creative and political ends.

Yet, on the other hand, the cut-up was also deemed generative for its aspects of play, humor, and entertainment. Appropriate to the cut-up method, Gysin accidentally discovered the technique in his Beat Hotel room, immediately finding the method hilarious. As the origin story goes, Gysin cut through a stack of newspapers with a blade when making his artwork. He found that the freshly cut layers of text and image combined in random and amusing ways from the various newspapers, producing new texts with different meanings. Excited by his artistic breakthrough of chance operations, Gysin promptly shared his creative finding with Burroughs. Gysin and Burroughs discussed the fun factor of Gysin’s cut-up discovery:

Gysin: The pieces sort of fell together and I started matching them up, and I thought Wow-o-ow, its really funny. And I took some of them and arranged them in a pattern which was visually pleasing to me and then typed up the results, and I have never laughed so heartily in my entire life.

Burroughs: Nor I.

Gysin: The first time around, doing your own Cut-Ups and seeing the results, there’s a sort of feeling of hilarity...

⁵⁰⁸ William S. Burroughs, “The Limits of Control,” *Schizo-Culture, Semiotext(e)* vol. III, no. 2 (1978): 38.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁵¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October*, no. 59 (Winter, 1992): 4.

Burroughs: Almost like laughing gas.⁵¹¹

Once the initial giggles passed, the two began to diligently apply the cut-up technique across the arts to explore its iterations within a variety of media. While the cut-up battles systems of control, it is pleasurable and equates artistic process with fun. This dual nature and purpose of the cut-up is also present in the art-party, describing how its brand of fun could also be politicized.

Burroughs and Gysin's *The Third Mind* incorporated collage, photographs and calligraphic drawings, and served as a manual and manifesto on the cut-up. Burroughs compared the dissemination of the cut-up to the urgency of military training, and expressed to Gysin, "Our book of methods could take the form of an army bulletin—that is, an illustrated lecture to a group of cadets on enemy methods and techniques of combating the enemy—cut-ups, fold-ins, photo montage, permutations, etc."⁵¹² Burroughs and Gysin worked together on the book at the Chelsea Hotel in New York, another mythic site of New York's underground. Although at one point interested in publishing *The Third Mind*, Grove Press soon became disgruntled with the book's high cost of production, due to its numerous illustrations, and dropped the project in 1965. Initially, Burroughs and Gysin wanted to create a visual collage in response to every page of text, which would have the effect of alternating text and collage on every other page.⁵¹³

However, *The Third Mind* was eventually published, although in a more distilled form, considering the many years it existed as Burroughs and Gysin's perpetual work-in-progress. The book was first published in 1976 in French, with the title of *Oeuvre Croissée*. The interpretive

⁵¹¹ "Interview, William Burroughs And Brion Gysin By Bob Palmer," 36, William S. Burroughs Papers, 1951-1972, Folio 122, Box 44, Folder 2, The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library.

⁵¹² Ibid.

⁵¹³ Rochelle Ratner, "Words Ain't Sacred," *SoHo Weekly News*, December 7, 1978, 87.

French translation of the title, suggested by Gérard-George Lemaire, literalizes the notion of intersection, or a crossroads of the minds. The French title also implies the book's cross-disciplinary agenda, which integrates the processes and practices of writing with those of the visual arts. Two years later an English version of the French-edition was published by Viking Press, but with the "original" title, *The Third Mind*. In Burroughs's most extensive description of the cut-up in *The Third Mind*, "The Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin," the cut-up embraces the accident, spontaneity, appropriation, collaboration, and even democratic production, while Gysin values the cut-up more for its "possibility of permutations, particularly of images."⁵¹⁴

Historically, both artists were well aware that the cut-up was a rediscovery and revival of Surrealist and Dadaist techniques that manipulated the accident and the automatic in artistic practice. Burroughs wrote, and has repeated on several occasions in both interviews and in his editorial pieces, "The cut-up method brings to writers the collage, which has been used by painters for fifty years," implying that writing was stagnant, and lagging behind the visual arts.⁵¹⁵ By making writing more "visual," or applying collage and montage techniques commonly used in visual arts and media to writing, the art of writing was pushed out of the past and into the present, forcing it to catch up with the advances of visual culture. In Burroughs and Gysin's writings on the cut-up, they both reference Surrealism, Dadaism, and Cubism as origin points, which demonstrate an awareness of art historical narratives and how their version of the cut-up continues legacies of the avant-garde.⁵¹⁶ Burroughs too relays the power of the cut-up through a

⁵¹⁴ "Interview, William Burroughs And Brion Gysin By Bob Palmer," 36, William S. Burroughs Papers, 1951-1972, Folio 122, Box 44, Folder 2, The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library.

⁵¹⁵ William S. Burroughs, "The Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin," in William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 29.

⁵¹⁶ Gysin was actually once affiliated with the Surrealist movement and was an art prodigy at the young age of nineteen in 1935, only to be quickly ousted from the movement by its founder, André Breton. There is conjecture that Andre Breton expelled Gysin because of his homosexuality. This painful rejection was symbolized by Breton's

predecessor, in the performative poetic antics of Dadaist, Tristan Tzara. At a Surrealist rally in 1920, Tzara pulled cut-up words out of a hat to recite an impromptu poem that resulted in a riot. Burroughs was a believer in the power of art, and specifically the capability of the cut-up to disrupt and alter control systems within capitalist society, across language and personhood. The cut-up was a liberating proposition, aligned with the anti-establishment rhetoric of avant-garde movements from Dada to Downtown New York.

The cut-up, in its endless permutations and experimentations, also signifies Gysin's career trajectory as polymath, even more so than Burroughs, which corresponds to the experimental practices and attitudes of Downtown cultural scenes. On the occasion of Gysin's first and long overdue posthumous retrospective at the New Museum in New York, a rhetoric of failure and youthfulness was linked to his persistent dabbling: "Another probable reason for Gysin's failure to achieve fame was the one he grudgingly acknowledged toward the end of his life, his restless zinging from one discipline to another, a disregard of boundaries that resonates strongly today with young 'I'm in a band; I paint; I design clothes; I'm an actor' artists."⁵¹⁷ This "restless" erasure of boundaries certainly agrees with the attitudes and hybrid practices of young Downtown cultural producers in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Describing his term "renaissance punk," Glenn O'Brien comments: "We all did everything. We were all musicians, songwriters, actors, filmmakers, painters, writers, producers, directors, comedians...drug addicts.

removal of Gysin's drawings from a show on the very day of the opening. The exhibit included works by Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, Pablo Picasso, and René Magritte. See Martha Schwendener, "With Failure as an Ingredient, He Made His Own Magic," *New York Times*, July 29 2010, accessed August 8, 2013, <http://briongysin.com/?p=41#sthash.GIPhDGRD.dpuf>; and John Perreault, "Brion Gysin: Bigger Than Life," *Artopia: John Perreault's Art Diary*, August 10, 2010, accessed August 8, 2012, http://www.artsjournal.com/artopia/2010/08/brion_gysin_bigger_than_life.html.

⁵¹⁷ Randy Kennedy, "The Unknown Loved by the Knowns," *The New York Times*, June 23, 2010, accessed August 4, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/27/arts/design/27gysin.html?_r=0.

Why not?”⁵¹⁸ Following O’Brien, I would classify Burroughs and Gysin as the “original” renaissance punks.

Moving forward to the practice of the artistic cut-up itself, Burroughs proclaims the following generalizations about the cut-up, “the best writing seems to be done almost by accident;” and that “all writing is in fact cut-ups.”⁵¹⁹ While spontaneity cannot be willed, conditions can be set to encourage it. As outlined by Burroughs, this can be simply achieved by using a scissors to cut-up elements and to randomly remix media into a new reconstituted text. Moreover, a cutter can opt to work with or appropriate any available text from whatever “poet or writer you fancy.” In other words, the cut-up can force your favorite writers to involuntarily collaborate with you—Burroughs mentions a proclivity for William Shakespeare or Arthur Rimbaud—and to re-present the voices of your chosen authors in a new work.⁵²⁰ As an appropriation strategy, the cut-up places different sources, texts, and/or photographs into conversation with one another, for the purpose of creating new unexpected dialogue, connections, and recontextualizations.

Beyond potentially having an infinite number of creative partners through the cut-up, Burroughs declares, “Cut-ups are for everyone. Anybody can make cut-ups. It is experimental in the sense of being *something to do*. Right here write now.”⁵²¹ To stress the points of immediacy, accessibility, and availability the first working title of *The Third Mind* was technically, “Right Where You Are Sitting Now.”⁵²² Invoking Dadaist and Surrealist Tristan Tzara’s catchy egalitarian sentiment, “Poetry is for everyone,” Burroughs explains that you don’t have to be

⁵¹⁸ Glenn O’Brien, “The Light Side of the Dark Side,” in *Chris Stein/Negative: Me, Blondie, and the Advent of Punk*, Chris Stein, ed. (Rizzoli, New York: 2014), 17.

⁵¹⁹ Burroughs, “The Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin,” 29.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵²² John Geiger, *Nothing Is True, Everything Is Permitted: The Life of Brion Gysin*. New York: Disinformation Co, 2005, 195.

highly trained, nor of a certain status, to cut-up, and that cut-ups can be practiced by all.⁵²³ Often employing clever word play in his writing, Burroughs adds urgency and immediacy to the act of cutting-up, and being a creative novice, in his play with the homophones “Right/write.” This DIY sentiment was also expressed by Gysin in *Minutes to Go* (1960) where he literally states, “the writing machine is for everybody/ do it yourself.”⁵²⁴ To further prove his claim that anyone can perform and produce a cut-up, he calls it a “simple method,” and shares a short cut-up recipe with the reader.

Although Burroughs does not cite Tzara directly here, his instructions are reminiscent of Tzara’s “To Make a Dadaist Poem” (1920), a recipe for art requiring a newspaper, scissors, and a bag, in Tzara’s “Dada Manifesto on Feeble & Bitter Love.”⁵²⁵ Although Burroughs is careful to state that there are many ways of producing cut-ups, his instructions are as follows:

Take a page. Like this page. Now cut down the middle and across the middle. You have four sections: 1 2 3 4...one two three four. Now rearrange the sections placing section four with section one and section two with section three. And you have a new page. Sometimes it says much the same thing. Sometimes something quite different.⁵²⁶

While there are other examples of Dadaist poems and chance operations worthy of mention in relation to the cut-up,⁵²⁷ Burroughs and Tzara’s “recipes” both embrace a simple and democratic DIY ethos, as anyone can adopt the cut-up as a basic writing process. With its DIY,

⁵²³ In terms of ownership, property rights, and authorship, Robin Lydenberg goes so far as to claim that the very nature of cut-ups challenge copyright laws. See Lydenberg, *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs’ Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 49.

⁵²⁴ Gysin in Harris, “Cutting up Politics,” 187.

⁵²⁵ In his Introduction, “Before Burroughs: The Prehistory of the Cut-Ups,” Robinson discusses Tzara’s poem as a precursor to the cut-up, although not in connection with Burroughs’s particular “recipe” in *The Third Mind*. See Robinson, *Shift Linguals*, 6-8.

⁵²⁶ Burroughs, “The Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin,” 29-31.

⁵²⁷ For a more complete “pre-history” of the cut-up, prior to Gysin and Burroughs’s implementation and subsequent popularization of the method, see “Before Burroughs: The Prehistory of the Cut-Ups,” in Robinson’s *Shift Linguals*, 1-21.

appropriate, spontaneous, and democratic impulses, the cut-up predates and prescribes many of the experimental practices and attitudes of Downtown New York as a creative model.

Burroughs also compares the cut-up to urban life itself, finding the act of walking down the city street, with its many stimulations, as an audio-visual cut-up:

Cut-ups make explicit a process that goes on all the time. Every time we walk down the street or look out the window, our stream of consciousness is cut by random factors, random events, random people, random objects. In fact life is a cut-up.⁵²⁸

Burroughs considers the cut-up as an everyday urban and distinctly modern mode of perception, that is “close to, particularly the perception of urban dwellers.”⁵²⁹ Diversity and the capacity for mixing is characteristic of large cities, and are in fact constitutive of urbanity. Cityscapes are constantly in flux, whether in terms of the changes in urban space (design, building, destruction, abandonment, gentrification), or the flows of people migrating in and out of the city, or walking through different neighborhoods and streets in daily life. Burroughs spatializes the cut-up within the city, substantiating its affinities with urban cultures, or the concept of Downtown New York itself as a kind of social cut-up or collage.

In a special “SoHo Arts” section of the *SoHo Weekly News*, designated to covering the many activities and events of the Nova Convention, Rochelle Ratner’s article on *The Third Mind* was suitably half book review and half art review. As part of the Nova Convention, Burroughs and Gysin had a joint art exhibition, displaying their *Third Mind* collages and collaborations at the “Uptown” bookstore, Books & Company, at 939 Madison Avenue near 74th Street.⁵³⁰ While

⁵²⁸ Angelo Lewis, “The William Burroughs Interview,” *Rocky Mountain Musical Express*, January 1978, 20.

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁰ Note that the more happening and contemporary uptown galleries, such as McKee Gallery (est. 1974) and Marian Goodman (est. 1977) were located in the arts district known as the 57th Street Corridor, near 57th Street and 5th Avenue. Galleries such as Sonnabend, Andre Emmerich, John Weber, Leo Castelli had already set-up shop in SoHo by 1971, and Mary Boone by 1977. Books & Company (est. 1977) was not in an area known to show contemporary works, but was a new bookstore on the Upper Eastside near The Whitney Museum of American Art. The bookstore was eventually “known for its diverse collection of hard-to-find books on philosophy, literature and art,” and loved

it is standard to have art-for-sale hanging in bookstores, or in cafes, the location of *The Third Mind* show in a bookstore is rather fitting in its transmutation, spatially transforming the bookstore into a gallery, and vice-versa. Ratner adopts a ten-pointed list for her review, to attempt to cover the complexity of the book's content. Her more salient points explain *The Third Mind* to be about friendship, collaboration, instruction (a "textbook" on the cut-up process), and the historicity of the cut-up. Most important to this study on the Nova Convention, she ends her dual-review by stating, "For anyone interested enough to buy this book, the exhibition is a must. It makes the whole collaborative experience come to life."⁵³¹ The cut-up, as practiced by Burroughs and Gysin, was multi-sensory and traversed media types. It could only be fully realized, as well as understood, through looking at its uses across varied media, and ultimately encouraged experimentation and hybrid art practices.

The Third Mind, a "textbook" on how to cut-up, was therefore a conduit between creative generations Downtown.⁵³² The book, and by extension the Nova Convention, were avenues for the younger Downtown set to learn from and adopt the techniques of Gysin and Burroughs. Burroughs scholar Oliver Harris notes on Burroughs's own promotion of the cut-up: "Burroughs knew he needed to promote the method in order to ensure understanding of his work, which could be guaranteed most effectively by creating an audience of producers—an audience, in

for its "eclectic offerings and home-away-from-home atmosphere." It was shut down due to a 300% rent increase blamed on The Whitney. See David Chen, "Books and Company on East Side to Close Down," *New York Times*, April 26, 1997, accessed March 18, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/04/26/nyregion/books-and-company-on-east-side-to-close-down.html>; and *NYC Art Space*, accessed July 9, 2014, "History of New York's Gallery Districts," and "Gallery Districts," <http://www.nycartspaces.com>.

⁵³¹ Ratner, "Words Ain't Sacred," 87.

⁵³² For such a history on the impact of the *The Third Mind*, see Robinson's chapter, "Kathy Acker: Plagiarism and Adaptation- From Cut-Up to Cut-and-Paste." The chapter details *The Third Mind's* influence on the work on the Downtown writer and persona, Kathy Acker. See Robinson, *Shift Linguals: Cut-up Narratives from William S. Burroughs to the Present*, 151-199.

effect, made in his own image.”⁵³³ One of the more prominent examples of such tutelage was Club 57 member, Keith Haring. He was strongly influenced by Burroughs and Gysin, and even collaborated with Gysin to provide cover artwork and illustrations for two publications.⁵³⁴ Burroughs and Haring famously got together to produce *Apocalypse* (1988) and *The Valley* (1989), Haring illustrating Burroughs’s texts and editioning them in silkscreen and etching respectively. Being in the right place at the right time, Keith Haring states that he “accidentally stumbled across the Nova Convention and the Entermedia Theatre in N.Y.C.”⁵³⁵ Haring commented repeatedly on the importance of the event, and recounted in his journal soon after the Nova Convention:

The major influence, although it is not the sole influence, has been the work of William S. Burroughs. His profound realizations, which I encountered in radio broadcasts of the Nova Convention, and in the book, *The Third Mind* by Burroughs and Brion Gysin, which I have just begun to read, are beginning to tie up a lot of loose ends in my own work and thinking.⁵³⁶

Haring too declared, “The Nova Convention changed my life,” maintaining again that the event had occurred at a critical historical point in time, as well as in his life.⁵³⁷ John Giorno, to whom Haring expressed his gratitude, also fondly recalls the story of Haring’s arrival in New York City as significantly timed with the Nova Convention.⁵³⁸

To begin to understand the resonance and significance of the Nova Convention, the cut-up and *The Third Mind* needed to be historically, philosophically, and aesthetically outlined first. The cut-up, as espoused in *The Third Mind*, is a descriptor of, and model for, Downtown’s cultural economy as a whole, and the individual creative and social practices of its producers.

⁵³³ Oliver Harris, “Cutting up Politics,” 182-183.

⁵³⁴ Brion Gysin and Keith Haring, *Fault Lines* (München: Edition Schellmann, 1986); and Gysin, *The Last Museum* (New York: Grove Press, 1986).

⁵³⁵ Journal entry dated July 15 or 16, 1986, in Keith Haring, *Keith Haring Journals* (New York: Viking, 1996), 104.

⁵³⁶ Journal entry dated January 11, 1979, *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵³⁷ Journal entry dated September 13, 1987, *Ibid.*, 171.

⁵³⁸ Giorno in John Gruen, *Keith Haring: The Authorized Biography* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991), 185.

But, in the case of the Nova Convention, it is also in direct conversation with academic and popular discourses of Burroughs, in addition to depicting Downtown New York as a metaphoric site analogous to the cut-up.

Where French Theory and the American Avant-garde Meet

The Nova Convention was an art-party that introduced new concepts, ideas and expressive forms, across intellectual and artistic registers, through the celebration of Burroughs. His central question of survival within control systems, or how to develop “a plan of living,” not only speaks to the narrative of Burroughs’s alternative lifestyle and dramatic life events, but also to living and creatively producing through adverse circumstances. And, it was Gysin’s cut-up method that Burroughs specifically adopted as a weapon to battle insidious systems of control. Such foundational Burroughsian sentiments define the very outlook of the Nova Convention, which also asserted French theory as having a particularly corrosive impact upon control systems, as well as disciplinary boundaries. As Allen Hibbard astutely claims, Burroughs was “way ahead of the theory game,” and “grappled with issues that later became central concerns of deconstruction, cultural studies, and queer theory.”⁵³⁹ And, the consideration of Burroughs as theorist was in fact realized early on by Lotringer. The efforts of Lotringer and his journal, *Semiotext(e)*, mark the Nova Convention as a juncture where French theory and the American avant-garde intersect, through the shared cultural terrain of Burroughs. To this end, Lotringer attempts to “smash the control machine” of American capitalism by encouraging a wider recognition of Burroughs’s work in the U.S. through the context or portal of Downtown. Furthermore, Lotringer’s *Semiotext(e)* and his developments leading to the Nova Convention

⁵³⁹ Hibbard, “Shift Coordinate Points,” 13.

broke new ground in the academy, ironically by escaping from it and embracing the creative and social inner workings of Downtown.⁵⁴⁰

In the following statement, Burroughs provides a summation of the Nova Convention. It was delivered by Burroughs himself as an introduction to the conference and framed by the Nova Convention's marketing materials:

I am primarily concerned with the question of survival—with Nova conspiracies, Nova criminals, and Nova police. A new mythology is possible in the Space Age, where we will again have heroes and villains, as regards intentions towards this planet. I feel the future of writing is in Space, not Time.⁵⁴¹

This explanation, or tag line for the conference, is directly derived from Burroughs's own work, the Nova Trilogy. While the Nova Trilogy (*The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*) thematically categorizes the three works by their social criticism and satire, they are also marked by a heavy reliance on the cut-up technique—garnering the name, the Cut-Up Trilogy. Both titles name the same trilogy, and therefore engender the *cut-up* and *nova* as interchangeable terms. This emphasizes how collage and juxtaposition, amongst other characteristics of the cut-up, are transferable to Downtown and can lead to the production of “new” cultures. Furthermore, the language in the event poster/introduction to the Nova Convention also parallels Burroughs's self-description of his trilogy:

In *Naked Lunch* and *The Soft Machine* I have diagnosed an illness, and in *The Ticket That Exploded* and *Nova Express* suggested remedy. In this work I am attempting to create a new mythology for the space age. I feel that the old mythologies are definitely broken

⁵⁴⁰ Lotringer has commented upon his “double-life” as an academic and Downtown denizen, going out “practically every night of the week.” He felt that these Uptown (Columbia) and Downtown worlds were separate and that Schizo-Culture marked his own break with the academy. “Schizo-Culture was seminal for that, that it was something that I did not exactly want to do. So it meant that I didn't care to have a career, because if you choose to be connected Downtown, you couldn't do both.” Sylvère Lotringer, interview with author, April 2015.

⁵⁴¹ This statement exists on varied printed marketing materials, located in the Lotringer Papers at Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries; and the William S. Burroughs Papers at Special Collections and Manuscripts, Ohio State University Library. You can also hear it as part of *The Nova Convention* album, where the quote itself emblazons the cover of the album. See Burroughs, William S, John Giorno, Brion Gysin, et al. *The Nova Convention* (New York, N.Y: Giorno Poetry Systems Institute, 1979), album.

down and not adequate at the present time. In this mythology, I have Nova conspiracies, Nova Police, and Nova criminals. I do definitely have hero and villains with respect to overall intentions with regard to this planet... I may add that none of the characters in my mythology are free. If they were free they would not still be in the mythological system, that is, in the cycle of conditioned action.⁵⁴²

To clarify the narrative elements above, in the hybridized hardboiled-science fiction world of the Nova/Cut-Up Trilogy, the Nova Mob is a gang of criminals whom caused the supernova responsible for the Crab Nebula. After descending upon earth 3,000 years ago, the Nova Mob has since controlled the human race through an addiction-inducing virus. Burroughs's concept of language as "a virus from outer space" is central to the trilogy, as again, it is an alien-viral-linguistic control that subjugates humanity. By instigating the highest level of disorder and conflict, the Nova Mob can ultimately achieve their goal of detonating planet earth, creating yet another supernova. To prevent this catastrophic event, the intergalactic liberators, the Nova Police, arrive and ally with the humans to combat the Nova Mob.

According to the field of astronomy, a nova refers to a particular physical state of a star. A result of an explosion, it names a star's sudden level of brightness, or in other words, a star in its best shining moment, only to quickly diminish to the star's average state (as the saying goes, you can only burn so hot for so long). Most obviously, nova also means new, and is the Latin root found in words such as novel, novelty, novice, and innovation. Victor Bockris commented on yet another meaning of nova: "In late 1978–1979, a heroin supermarket opened up on several blocks directly across from Burroughs' building at 222 Bowery. They used to sell a bag called Dr. Nova."⁵⁴³ When James Grauerholz left New York, soon after the Nova Convention,

⁵⁴² Burroughs as quoted in Eric Mottram's, "The Algebra of Need," in *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs, 1960-1997*, William S. Burroughs and Sylvère Lotringer, eds. (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2001), 55.

⁵⁴³ Bockris also notes that Burroughs relapsed on heroin in 1979-80, and that moving to Lawrence was in part an effort to get clean (he was also in his late sixties). See Bockris in Dave Teeuwen, "Interview with Victor Bockris on

Burroughs relapsed on heroin. Dubbed Burroughs's "punk phase," young junkies affiliated with the punk scene scored heroin for Burroughs and turned the Bunker into a shooting gallery.⁵⁴⁴

Such derivative terms of "nova" and their meanings elucidate Downtown New York during this time, in association with avant-gardism, amateurism, and drug, youth, and celebrity cultures. Nova dually represents both the merits and downfalls of Downtown's "new wave." Furthermore, nova alludes to the explosive brevity of underground and nightlife scenes in Downtown New York, as bursts of creative energy that quickly transform and reabsorb into other scenes, or just fade away. The Nova Convention is emblematic of a particular kind of Burroughsian space that becomes physically embedded and actualized in Downtown New York. Davis Schneiderman considers two meanings of "space" in Burroughs's work: 1) a push for humans to evolve into new kinds of beings, and 2) a postmodern world no longer bound by Enlightenment era reason or more generally, limits. Schneiderman elucidates that Burroughs's call to move from *time* into *space*: "can be productively analyzed in terms of the material vagaries of global politics that are contemporaneous with his movement, not away from writing, but into a creative space (in the second sense of the term) populated with a variety of multimedia projects."⁵⁴⁵

Applying the above sentiment to Burroughs's opening address of the Nova Convention, creativity in Burroughsian space is multimedial and dissolves boundaries as a means to evolve and seek out possibilities. And, it is not only the future of "writing" alone at stake, but also the larger field of experimental practice, as Burroughs was a hybrid artist as well as a philosopher.

William Burroughs," *RealityStudio*, May 27, 2010, accessed June 5, 2013, <http://realitystudio.org/interviews/interview-with-victor-bockris-on-william-burroughs/>.

⁵⁴⁴ Miles, *William Burroughs*, 187-188

⁵⁴⁵ Davis Schneiderman, "Nothing *Hear* Now but the Recordings: Burroughs's 'Double Resonance,'" in Davis Schneiderman and Philip Walsh, eds., *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 146-147.

While the Nova Convention showcased new ideas and expressive art forms, through the vehicle of Burroughs, his “question of survival” and belief in “possibilities” also speak to queer and alternative narratives, which in turn mirror the sociality of Downtown. Yet, his statement also addresses living and creatively producing through adverse circumstances, by carving out new spaces, or new worlds, as creative placemaking and queer worldmaking tactics. The Nova Convention becomes an apropos descriptor for the creative spirit of Downtown New York as place, where dystopia could briefly transform into utopia, in a concrete or heterotopic space.⁵⁴⁶

While the Nova Convention is a critique of systems of control, and calls for different possibilities for living and future solutions, it is also about the “newness” and experimental possibilities of the avant-garde and intellectual thought. The Nova Convention abetted another significant cultural explosion, a theoretical one known as the “French Invasion.”⁵⁴⁷ Marking the 1970s as a “turning point” in French theory that would “thoroughly shake up the American intellectual field,” intellectual historian Francois Cusset remarks, “The ‘wild seventies’ were decidedly paradoxical decade. This is true for French theory as well... This was the decade of French theory’s countercultural temptations. Its anarchic expansion, by way of alternative journals and rock concerts, but it was also the decade of its first academic uses...”⁵⁴⁸ Falling into the former sensationalized category of “wild countercultural temptation,” the Nova Convention celebrated different types, formations, and generations of avant-garde cultural producers by melding them with the latest critical and cultural theory from France, as advanced in Lotringer’s journal, *Semiotext(e)*.

⁵⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, “Other Spaces: the Principles of Heterotopia,” 9-17.

⁵⁴⁷ Paralleling the cultural impact of the “British Invasion,” the humorous term is used by François Cusset in *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 10.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid, 54.

An extension of Burroughs's cut-up and intersections, the juxtaposition of the American avant-garde with French theory created new meanings through unexpected associations and recontextualizations. Lotringer describes the Nova Convention and the *Schizo-Culture* issue in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's theories of juxtaposition: "it was like and, and, and, and... its about putting things together that don't quite belong together...by adding things, it resonates in a different way...if you put a musician with a writer both of them are effected by it...theory and artistic practice were very close."⁵⁴⁹ At the time, the theoretical and artistic camps were proverbially "speaking the same language," although up until the time of the Nova Convention, it was an unknown and unnamed alliance across media and continents. Lotringer further reflects on his work as a kind of social practice of art, "I suddenly realized that there was a congruence between the theory that I was involved, and the art and the scene that was there (Downtown), and that I could just put it together, and that was my art."⁵⁵⁰ French theory became "the site of an American *practice* for artists and activists who had no place of their own...these figures were committed to shaking up American neuroses and conventions from within by intensifying them in experimental forms."⁵⁵¹ Reminiscent of Burroughs's expatriation to Paris, French theory is claimed as an artistic home and productive site for the American avant-garde. Although it once may have seemed like a passing intellectual trend, echoing the tides of the avant-garde, French theory would eventually become an intellectual force in the U.S., and thoroughly institutionalized as the bedrock of American critical and cultural theory studies.

While the Nova Convention was a long overdue acknowledgement of Burroughs's artistic and intellectual accomplishments in the U.S., he historically found more critical acclaim

⁵⁴⁹ Sylvère Lotringer, interview with the author, April 2015.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid, 71.

and support abroad, especially in France. Recalling, not only did the Beats self-exile to Paris, it was the French press, Olympia, that first published Burroughs's work in the late 1950s and early 1960s, followed by subsequent translations and critical analyses of his work.⁵⁵² And further, it was a French label, The English Bookshop, which released Burroughs's first spoken-word album, "Call Me Burroughs" (1965).

Born and educated in France, Lotringer moved from country to country and from teaching job to job, to finally land in New York at Columbia University in 1972. Dissatisfied with the limits of academia, Lotringer created the inventive journal, *Semiotext(e)*, with his colleagues and graduate students at Columbia. While the journal itself is widely credited for bringing French theory stateside, Lotringer explains his intentions quite differently:

I didn't want it to be "French Theory," I wanted the magazine to be American. It's all a big misunderstanding. My purpose wasn't to introduce French thought to America, but to get America thinking along those lines. The idea was that it would get absorbed in the culture and used to figure out what capitalism is about, not "French intelligence," or just art for that matter. Artists need to understand the world they live in, too, in order to make art. Americans don't know what capitalism is, they don't have the distance."⁵⁵³

Flatly denying his reputation as a missionary, Lotringer wished to facilitate understandings of capitalism by Americans, and particularly artists. Lotringer desired to rectify and adjust an American nearsightedness of capitalism, as opposed to merely facilitating French theory's importation and its blind applications. Moreover, it was about his own cultural participation and devotion to a spirit of collectivity as opposed to capitalistic individualism. Lotringer remarks on this sense of belonging and fulfillment within the exciting and vibrant culture that he was so attracted to Downtown: "None of it was planned. I just wanted to create a context in which I

⁵⁵² For the French reception of his work prior to the Nova Convention, see Miles, *William Burroughs*, 16-17.

⁵⁵³ Lotringer in Joan Waltemath, "A Life in Theory: Sylvère Lotringer with Joan Waltemath," *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 2, 2006, accessed June 7, 2013, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2006/09/art/a-life-in-theory>.

would feel good, and its not only I. I wanted to have an impact on American culture. I really wanted to be part of it... I wanted to be a New Yorker, and bring something to New York.”⁵⁵⁴

Embodying its name, *Semiotext(e)* focused on a brand of materialist semiotics that quickly transformed into a deep interest in the visual arts. Lotringer recounts this shift:

It took me two or three years before I got the magazine off the academic ground and gradually moved it towards the art world. I was lucky enough to hit the art world in the mid-70s, when it was still doing art, not business. At that time, artists had a life, not just a career. Some of them got interested in our project, and together we did the first issue, “Schizo-Culture,” that really put us on the map.”⁵⁵⁵

In 1975, at the time of the Schizo-Culture conference, *Semiotext(e)* had already published three issues, which were primarily text-based. Three years after the Schizo-Culture conference, the journal veered towards a more visual format, supported by Downtown artists as staff members, which “instead consummated the magazine’s rupture with academe” and a “shift towards art.”⁵⁵⁶

This change was perhaps inflected by Burroughs’s own cut-up philosophies of image/text transmutation and recombination. Remembering, Burroughs spoke on the subject of control at the Schizo-Culture conference and was included in *Semiotext(e)*’s *Schizo-Culture* issue.

Furthermore, the new format stressed an underlying purpose of the initial conference: *connecting*.⁵⁵⁷ This intent is found in the promotional language of its flyers at the time of the Nova Convention. *Semiotext(e)* advances itself as the “New York-French Connection”:

“SEMIOTEXT(E), a ‘New Wave’ magazine, is the French Connection of the New York cultural

⁵⁵⁴ Sylvère Lotringer, interview with the author, April 2015.

⁵⁵⁵ As referenced in this quote’s pointed nostalgic remarks, Lotringer defines the mid to late 1970s as a unique time period for the arts with the Nova Convention representing the last gasp of the American avant-garde. See Waltemath, “A Life in Theory,” <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2006/09/art/a-life-in-theory>. For another description of this shift in the art world from the late 1970s to the 1980s in New York see Sylvère Lotringer, “My 80’s: Better Than Life,” *Artforum International*, vol. 41, no. (2003): 194.

⁵⁵⁶ Sylvère Lotringer, “Notes on the Schizo-Culture Issue,” in *Schizo-Culture: The Book*, Lotringer, ed. (Los Angeles, CA; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Semiotext(e), The MIT Press, 2013), v.

⁵⁵⁷ Lotringer states, “if I had to define what this colloquium is about in one word, I would simply say, *connecting*.” See “Introduction: The French Connection,” in *Schizo-Culture: The Event*, Lotringer and Morris, eds. (Los Angeles, CA; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Semiotext(e), The MIT Press, 2013), 43.

scene. Bringing together two continents of thought through a revolution of desire, *Semiotext(e)* attempts to define soft strategies to deal with the new algebra of control.”⁵⁵⁸ Here, *Semiotext(e)* appropriates Burroughs’s language of control for its marketing materials, and arguably adopts the cut-up in its visual format, while, as a “New Wave magazine,” it couples Downtown’s new wave to trends in French thought. Yet, a major difference that developed in a few short years was that *Semiotext(e)*, as a publication and producer of events, became more visible and visual. The Nova Convention received considerably more New York press (and photographic) coverage than its precursor, the Schizo-Culture conference,⁵⁵⁹ while the journal adopted a more visual format.

Indirectly alluding to multiple characteristics of the cut-up, Lotringer details the journal’s larger and experimental visual layout:

We used pop artifacts not high culture...collages and no explanation. The magazine was made of displaced visual cues bouncing against untutored texts. We could treat our readers like adults, and have fun at the same time. It was up to them to get the hints, make their connections, think for themselves.⁵⁶⁰

This collage space, similar to the cut-up, was adopted to empower the reader.⁵⁶¹ And, reminiscent of the humorous pleasures of the cut-up, Lotringer’s “fun” extends to the creators of the journal and its readers alike, whom both actively work to produce meaning. For some of the *Schizo-Culture* articles, pages were split into two columns, with articles running down a left or right column, to create an alternating effect to challenge the reader and create permutations of

⁵⁵⁸ Promotional flyer. See Lotringer Series IIA, Box 10, Folder 36, The Sylvère Lotringer Papers and *Semiotext(e)* Archive, The Downtown Collection, The Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University.

⁵⁵⁹ David Morris, “Schizo-Culture in Its Own Voice,” in *Schizo-Culture: The Event*, Lotringer and Morris, eds. (Los Angeles, CA; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Semiotext(e), The MIT Press, 2013), 214.

⁵⁶⁰ Lotringer in Waltemath, “A Life in Theory: Sylvère Lotringer with Joan Waltemath,” <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2006/09/art/a-life-in-theory>.

⁵⁶¹ While similar, Lotringer states that “we never referred to the cut-ups that way” and the issue was more about Downtown aesthetics as Burroughs was not yet a seminal figure during the time of its production. Sylvère Lotringer, interview with the author, April 2015.

meaning.⁵⁶² Therefore, visuals were not “mere illustrations,” but integral to the text’s meaning, and not subordinate to it. This perhaps was a turn-off for some of the publication’s more academically inclined readers.⁵⁶³ Beginning with *Schizo-Culture*, the subversive and playful issues of *Semiotext(e)* combined essays, interviews, poetry, and song lyrics. These varied texts were interspersed with drawing, collage, mock advertisements, and appropriated visual culture (e.g. comics, graffiti, anthropological photographs, content from S/M magazines), often in the form of détournement.

Similar to the *The Third Mind*, the *Schizo-Culture* issue was purposefully released at the time of the Nova Convention.⁵⁶⁴ Benefiting from this synchronicity and the burgeoning cultural scenes of Downtown New York, *Schizo-Culture* sold-out in three weeks, selling all 3,000 copies.⁵⁶⁵ For Lotringer, *Schizo-Culture* is linked to the Nova Convention, as well as the last gasp of the American avant-garde: “*Schizo-Culture* was published in 1978 when the three-day ‘Nova Convention’ celebrating William Burroughs was spreading all over ‘downtown.’ It was the last extravaganza of the American counter-culture we got involved with, because there never was one after that.”⁵⁶⁶ And in fact, by 1985 Lotringer would halt *Semiotext(e)* for this very reason— his disenchantment with the arts in the space of Downtown New York, which transformed from a culture of the collective to that of the capitalist-minded individual: “Creative activities were being reduced to the same futile goals: money, careers, ‘private initiative’— gratifications into the void.”⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶² See *Schizo-Culture, Semiotext(e)* vol. III, no. 2, 1978.

⁵⁶³ Lotringer, “Notes on the Schizo-Culture Issue,” xviii.

⁵⁶⁴ Sylvère Lotringer, interview with the author, April 2015.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁶ Lotringer in Waltemath, “A Life in Theory,” <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2006/09/art/a-life-in-theory>.

⁵⁶⁷ Sylvère Lotringer, “Introduction to Schizo-Culture,” in *Schizo-Culture: The Event*, Lotringer and Morris, eds. (Los Angeles, CA; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Semiotext(e), The MIT Press, 2013), 11. Lotringer also talks at length about shifts in the art world and the total decline of the avant-garde in Waltemath, “A Life in Theory,”

Directly reflecting the young creative energy of Downtown, the staff of the *Schizo-Culture* issue included CoLab organizer Diego Cortez, and experimental filmmakers Katherine Bigelow and Michael Oblowitz, then Columbia film students, who also curated the Nova Convention's "Cine Virus" film series.⁵⁶⁸ Lotringer comments on how the staff was assembled through Downtown's social space: "The new art team resulted from a series of encounters and not from a deliberate choice, people I met in clubs, parties or downtown events and found interesting."⁵⁶⁹ Moreover, it was during this time that Lotringer had moved from Columbia to share a loft in the Fashion District with Cortez, in a relationship that Lotringer explains as, "He was my mentor, and an unlikely mentor [laughing]. But I learned a lot about Downtown from him."⁵⁷⁰ Adding to *Schizo-Culture*'s art-party qualities, the issue itself represents a spectrum of contributors across disciplinary fields, media, and generations, with contributions by Burroughs, the Ramones, Jean Francois Lyotard, Jack Smith, Kathy Acker, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and the Police Band—not to be confused with the Police.⁵⁷¹ *Semiotext(e)*'s pop, amateur, decidedly visual, and alternative response to the business-as-usual academic journal format, debuted within the experimental atmosphere of the Nova Convention, and with the direct support Downtown's creative community.

The perception of Lotringer and *Semiotext(e)* in the Downtown press also matches a correlation between *Semiotext(e)*/French Theory and punk/Downtown New York. *SoHo Weekly News* describes Lotringer and *Semiotext(e)*:

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2006/09/art/a-life-in-theory>, and Sylvère Lotringer, "Biography," *The European Graduate School*, accessed October 2, 2103, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/sylvere-lotringer/biography/>.

⁵⁶⁸ For an account of participation Downtown artists in the issue, see Lotringer, "Notes on the Schizo-Culture Issue," xviii-xxiv.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, xxi.

⁵⁷⁰ Sylvère Lotringer, interview with the author, April 2015.

⁵⁷¹ *Schizo-Culture, Semiotext(e)*, 1978.

...[Lotringer] reads a lot of Michel Foucault and listens to the Ramones. When he's not teaching French thought at Columbia, Lotringer edits *semiotext(e)*, a weighty journal that appeals to punks, artists and eggheads alike. The journal has been plagued by money problems from the start, but its share of the Nova gate—the net from the film and new-wave music event at Irving Plaza should keep the thrice-yearly journal afloat.⁵⁷²

Lotringer, *Semiotext(e)*, and the Nova Convention are a reflection of Downtown as a complex cultural melting pot, and as a space for creative production on a low to no budget. Here, punk, artist and egghead meet or can actually be the same person. And furthermore, it is where the editor of a “weighty journal” not only listens to the Ramones, but also actually gives the band creative space in the pages of his critical journal.

Validating *Semiotext(e)* and Downtown as fluid spaces where boundaries are broken and forms are reinvented, Burroughs comments on the definition of schizo-culture: “I think ‘schizo-culture’ here is being used rather in a special sense. Not referring to clinical schizophrenia, but to the fact that the culture is divided up into all sorts of classes and groups, etc., and that some of the old lines are breaking down. And that this is a healthy sign.”⁵⁷³ Similarly, French theory also had the capacity to gnaw away at cultural borders and binaries, including that of modernism and postmodernism. Cussett addresses this point in his history of French theory:

French theory intervened precisely on the border separating counterculture from the university, at the point where their propositions become indiscernible, and where their mediators are often the same, whether they are anticonformist teachers or party-loving poets...Above all, it emerged in an American cultural field in which the elitist austerity of ‘modernism,’ accused of having frozen life in museums and libraries, was being confronted with the liberatory experiences of what was not yet called ‘postmodernism,’ a deeply experimental culture with no assigned territory or disciplinary compartmentalization.⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁷² Gerald Marzorati, “Blame It on the Boss o’ Nova” *SoHo Weekly News*, December 7, 1978, 27.

⁵⁷³ Burroughs in “William Burroughs Q&A,” in *Schizo-Culture: The Event*, Lotringer and Morris, eds. (Los Angeles, CA; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Semiotext(e), The MIT Press, 2013), 161.

⁵⁷⁴ Cusset, *French Theory*, 69-70.

What would be identified as postmodern attributes by Cusset, specifically the cross-pollination, mutation, mixing, interdisciplinarity and “cutting-up” happening Downtown, was simultaneously occurring in the pages of *Semiotext(e)*, as evidenced by its content, design, and artsy Downtown staff. Furthermore, as stated by Cusset, modernism signified stagnation or death, while postmodernism signified life, energy, and experimentation. During this pivotal shift from the 1970s to the 1980s, *Semiotext(e)* too embodied the phenomenon of Downtown as a “postmodern” amalgam, and a site for breaking artistic boundaries and confines of thought.

A predecessor of the Nova Convention, the Schizo-Culture conference investigated the heated topic of madness and prisons, with theoretical heavy-hitters including Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. What would in retrospect become a landmark theoretical event, Schizo-Culture first introduced Deleuze’s concept of the rhizome, and Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (Volume I published in French in 1976; English translation 1978). Similar to the credo of the Nova Convention, the panels and lectures of the Schizo-Culture conference were intentionally mixed in with appearances by artistic personas of the American historical avant-garde, such as Burroughs and John Cage. In 2013, the conference was recognized along the lines of performance by the Whitney Museum of American Art with an inclusion the exhibition, “Rituals of Rented Island: Object Theater, Loft Performance, and the New Psychodrama—Manhattan, 1970–1980.” Moreover, *Semiotext(e)* as a publishing entity was included in the 2014 Whitney Biennial as an installation, and thereby credited as an American art collective. It seems that the umbrella of *Semiotext(e)*, in its forms of conference (as performance) and as publisher and publication, has just been validated as “art” by one of New York’s major museums.

Given Schizo-Culture’s overtly political theme, the conference was well attended and received a turnout of over 2,000 people. However, the “French theorists” did not enjoy their

experience at the Schizo-Culture conference because some were heckled and openly insulted by audience members. As a result, they all passed on Lotringer's subsequent invitation to the Nova Convention, not wanting to relive the past unpleasant experience in New York. Yet, partnering "the most formidable French theorists with the most creative American artists and writers"⁵⁷⁵ at Schizo-Culture had proved a winning combination that Lotringer wished to repeat. The journal, along with its satellite Schizo-Culture conference, were in a sense practice runs for dovetailing the intellectual theories of France, with the art of the American avant-garde, and for throwing a much more ambitious event of cultural commemoration.

Based upon the success of the Schizo-Culture conference, Lotringer decided to pitch his idea for what would come to be called the Nova Convention to Burroughs, Grauerholz, and Giorno. Following the lead of Norman Mailer, who pronounced that Burroughs was "the only American writer conceivably possessed by genius,"⁵⁷⁶ Lotringer remarks on his idea to connect Europe and the U.S. through Burroughs:

I realized that Burroughs was widely considered a "has been" in America. He had had his 15 minutes of fame in the 50s, and he had a hard-time finding a publisher in New York. Burroughs was revered in Europe, and once more, I tried to bring the two together by organizing another event—The Nova Convention—but exclusively around him this time.⁵⁷⁷

When Burroughs moved to New York at age 60 in 1974, he was broke, and accepted a teaching job at The City University of New York, which he detested. In 1976 he moved to the Bunker on the Bowery. It was an area known at the turn of the century for its prostitution and saloons, often catering to queer clientele, and in the 1970s for its "Bowery Bums." Burroughs was also down-

⁵⁷⁵ Marcus D. Niski, "Interview with Sylvère Lotringer on the Nova Convention," <http://realitystudio.org/interviews/interview-with-sylvre-lotringer-on-the-nova-convention/>.

⁵⁷⁶ This quote is referenced in the promotional material for the Entermedia theatre, as well as in biographical writing on Burroughs. See Lotringer, *Burroughs Live*, 758; and Baker, *Burroughs*, 189.

⁵⁷⁷ Niski, "Interview with Sylvère Lotringer on the Nova Convention," <http://realitystudio.org/interviews/interview-with-sylvre-lotringer-on-the-nova-convention/>.

and-out, and desired financial stability and critical recognition in the U.S. after falling into relative obscurity and poverty since the controversy and obscenity trial of *Naked Lunch* in 1965. Lotringer wanted to spread Burroughs's appreciation stateside, or in other words, expand European discourses of Burroughs.

Thus, the Nova Convention hailed Burroughs as America's forgotten genius, but by European and American avant-garde standards. The event served to set the record straight in terms of the institutional recognition of Burroughs. One of the Nova Convention's more academically inclined events, "Burroughs Now," consisted of lectures in both English and French, and a panel of publishers and translators. The introductory text of the event's flyer announces:

All over Europe, William Burroughs is now considered "the greatest living writer" (Michel Foucault) and a prophet of the present. After the Colloque de Tanger in Geneva (1975), the Kunstmuseum in Berlin (1976) and the Beaubourg program in Paris (1977), all honoring Burroughs's work, the Nova Convention intends to draw attention on the single most important writer of this century whose literary metaphors have become metaphors of reality.⁵⁷⁸

Valorizing Burroughs, and indirectly pointing to the intellectual lag of the U.S. (or that the U.S. cannot recognize or appreciate its own "genius"), it is the Europeans, and especially French thinkers such as Foucault, who comprehend the significance of Burroughs. Yet, that is not entirely true as Philip Glass, who performed at the Nova Convention, reflects on the cultural contribution of Burroughs as quintessentially American:

For me, he's the most important writer of our day. Twenty years ago the crucial events of my life were coming across his work and John Cage's work. They were both completely new and completely American, with no connection to the European tradition. Burroughs really created a new American artistic tradition.⁵⁷⁹

⁵⁷⁸ Flyer for "Burroughs Now," 4-7pm on Friday, December 1st, 1978, at Schimmel Auditorium, Tisch Hall, New York University; Sylvere Lotringer Papers and Semiotext(e) Archive; MSS 221; Lotringer Series IIA, Box 10, Folder 36, The Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University.

⁵⁷⁹ *The New York Times*. "Avant-garde Unites over Burroughs," December 1, 1978, C11.

Cage cherishes Burroughs for his authentic Americanness and newness, severed from European modernism, as he upholds the fundamental American ideologies of individuality, innovation, and freedom. Such laudatory language continues in *Semiotext(e)*'s description of the panel's purpose in the flyer, to "illuminate his unusual career and the singularity of his literary achievement."⁵⁸⁰ Lotringer also comments on Burroughs's Americanness and "America's problem" to the *SoHo Weekly News*: "The limited goal of the Nova Convention is to make people aware that only America could produce William Burroughs... Burroughs best understands the post-industrial society... In France he's considered a philosopher of the future... But in America? They know little of him."⁵⁸¹ Burroughs is considered a highly American product, and moreover "a great American writer," yet Lotringer's conception of "America" does not appreciate nor understand its own cultural achievements, and potential, by having even a remote awareness of Burroughs. By Lotringer's estimation, America desperately needs to be more cognizant of Burroughs in order to better understand the problems of the post-industrial world around them, and forge better futures. And, this introductory gateway was the context of Downtown New York.

While Lotringer attempts to school America on its great lost artist, the rhetoric of genius bolstering Burroughs is curiously at odds with the anti-authorship stance of the cut-up itself, as well as postmodern theory surrounding authorship, epitomized by Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1967) and Foucault's, "What is an Author?" (Lecture, 1969).⁵⁸² This conflict in the nature of the cut-up, as an anti-authorial procedure, versus the rhetoric of the genius, highly

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁸¹ Gerald Marzorati, "Blame it on the Boss o' Nova," 27.

⁵⁸² At the time, theories of authorship had already started to influence art criticism Downtown. Such theories framed Douglas Crimp's conception of the Pictures Generation. See Douglas Crimp "Pictures," in *Pictures*, Exhibition Catalogue (New York: Artists Space, 1977); "About Pictures," *Flash Art*, no. 88-89 (March-April 1979): 34-36; and "Pictures," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 75-85.

pro-author, was a tension that Burroughs even felt. Burroughs believed in the art of collaboration, and the creative benefits of developing a work through multiple authors. He also believed in the richness of diversity and mutation as opposed to homogeneity or even a singular narrative. To further complicate matters, although Burroughs hailed the cut-up for its collaborative potential and for its capabilities for deconditioning control methods and mechanisms in society, amongst its more mythological powers, Burroughs also asserted his own decision making process in the cut-up, using it selectively later on in life.

The seeds of the Nova Convention were planted and began to grow as early as 1974 with the founding of *Semiotext(e)*, followed by the organization of its precursor conference, Schizo-Culture. Through Lotringer's recognition of Burroughs's importance, and potential to act as an artistic and intellectual conduit across continents, French theory was coupled to Downtown New York, in terms of its cultural production as well as its interpretation. The influence was mutual and bi-directional, as evidenced in *Semiotext(e)*'s shift to a visual collage format with eclectic content, which both showcased and was created by Downtown artists. Breaking artistic boundaries and confines of thought, the Nova Convention and *Semiotext(e)*, both byproducts of Lotringer's cultural agenda, further propagated Downtown attitudes and its creative processes. This sentiment was further reinforced by the release of *The Third Mind*, promoting the cut-up technique, which embraced the accident, spontaneity, appropriation, collaboration, amateurism, and a DIY attitude—qualities that were already practically criteria for Downtown cultural production. The fearless experimentation of Burroughs and Gysin predates, but also corresponds to, the cultural explosion and experimentation of Downtown, as indicated by the Nova Convention itself and the release of the “new and improved” *Schizo-Culture* issue.

Downtown as Stage: The Events of the Nova Convention

The Nova Convention represents a constellation of people, performances, and parties, taking place mostly in the East Village on Friday and Saturday, December 1–2, although events technically ran from November 30–December 2, 1978 (table 3.1). When Timothy Leary was asked about his impression of the Nova Convention and his experience of participating on a panel with Burroughs, he remarks, “This kind of conversation could only take place in New York.”⁵⁸³ Like Burroughs, Leary was also a countercultural icon and pioneer. Leary implies that it is the social and cultural geography of New York City that both engenders and permits the dialogue of the Nova Convention, and moreover, offers a public forum for such countercultural minds to meet. In a comment to the *Village Voice*, Lotringer reinforces Leary’s conviction and compares the contributions of France to the U.S. by tersely stating: “We have the theory, but you

⁵⁸³ Marzorati, “Blame it on the Boss o’ Nova,” 27

Table 3.1. Events of the Nova Convention

Event	Description
Reception at La Maison Francais	New York University. (Thursday 5-7pm, free)
<i>The Third Mind</i> book signing party	Books & Co., 939 Madison near 74th Street. The party included a preview of the connected <i>The Third Mind</i> art exhibition. (Thursday 7-10pm, free)
<i>The Third Mind</i> art exhibition	Books & Co. Art exhibition of <i>The Third Mind</i> 's cut-up techniques, including collage, photostat, and writing. (Friday December 1-12, free)
"Cine Virus I & II" film screenings	Schimmel Auditorium, Tisch Hall, New York University, and Entermedia Theatre for the second evening. Curated by Kathryn Bigelow and Michael Oblowitz. Films by Oblowitz, Bigelow, Seth Tillet, Eric Mitchell, Tina L'hotsky, Michael McClard, Amos Poe, Bruce Conners, Kathy Acker, Marc Olmstead, Steven Lowe, and Anthony Balch featuring Burroughs. (Thursday and Saturday, 7-10pm, \$2)
"Burroughs Now" panels and lectures	Shimmel Auditorium, Tisch Hall, New York University, in both French and English. Speakers include Lotringer, Udo Breger, John Calder, Maurice Girodias, Richard Seaver, Serge Grunberg, Jean-Jacques Lebel, Gérard-Georges Lemaire, Philippe Mikriammos, Christian Prigent, and Jurgen Ploog. (Friday, 4-7pm, free)
Evening Show	Entermedia Theatre, 189 Second Avenue. Performances by Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky, John Cage and Merce Cunningham, Ed Sanders, Anne Waldman, and Laurie Anderson and Julia Heyward; with an opening production of "A.J.'s Annual Party," by The BBC Project Theater Company (adapted from <i>Naked Lunch</i>), directed by Donald Sanders. (Friday, 8:30pm, \$6)
"New Wave Rock Concert"	Club 57 at Irving Plaza. Performances by the B52s, Suicide and Walter Steding. Deborah Harry, Chris Stein and Robert Fripp make guest appearances. (Friday and Saturday, 10pm, \$6)
Party at the Mudd Club	77 White Street (Saturday, 12am)
"Conversations" panel	Entermedia Theatre. Moderated by Les Levine, with panelists Burroughs, Gysin, Timothy Leary, and Robert Anton Wilson. Susan Sontag was originally scheduled but cancelled. (Saturday, 1pm, \$2)
Evening Show	Entermedia Theatre. A pre-sold out evening show with readings and performances by Terry Southern, Frank Zappa, Patti Smith and Lenny Kaye, Philip Glass, Giorno, Gysin, and Burroughs. Keith Richards was originally scheduled but cancelled. (Saturday, 8:30pm, \$6)
Party at Mickey Ruskin's Kipling's Last Resort/Chinese Chance	1 University Place. (Sunday, 12am)
"The Penny Arcade Peep Show"	Westbeth Theatre Center, 151 Bank Street. Performance by Belgian theatre troupe Le Plan K. (Thursday November 30-December 15, 8pm, \$4)

Source:

Table 3.1 is a comprehensive event list gathered from press coverage by *The New York Times*, *SoHo Weekly News*, and *Village Voice*; contents of The Sylvère Lotringer Papers and Semiotext(e) Archive, The Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University; and William S. Burroughs and Victor Bockris, *With William Burroughs: A Report from the Bunker*, 144. As expected, the staff of the *SoHo Weekly News* conducted the most extensive coverage of the event. The newspaper devoted most of the following week's "SoHo Arts" section to a collection of four articles commentating on various aspects of the Nova Convention. While there were other satellite events and private parties occurring at the time of the Nova Convention, they are not represented here. This Table represents publicly promoted events, open to all by a price of admission or noted as free.

have the environment.”⁵⁸⁴ In *Cruising Utopia*, José Muñoz questions how one can possibly stage utopia, and this question certainly applies to the Nova Convention. On the one hand, utopia indicates an imaginary place, but on the other, its staged form represents an “ideal, something that should mobilize us, push us forward,” characterized by “flux and temporal disorganization.”⁵⁸⁵ With Downtown as stage, the Nova Convention—an avant-garde conference and a proposition for a new genre of symposium—provides this “potential blueprint” for a “world not quire here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema.”⁵⁸⁶ The site where this new Burroughsian discourse could flourish, and where such an unconventional and ambitious event could actually be pulled off, was Downtown New York.

With a name worthy of an interdisciplinary conference, the Entermedia Theatre was the central hub of the Nova Convention, hosting all of the main evening events.⁵⁸⁷ The space, located on 189 Second Avenue in the East Village, alludes to “intermedia,” a concept that designates an in-between liminal space. According to the history of Fluxus art, one of its early founders, Dick Higgins, coined “intermedia” to name the movement’s more interdisciplinary activities that freely crossed genres and combined varied media.⁵⁸⁸ Entermedia’s brochure for the Nova Convention was prefaced:

Entermedia, located in an historic playhouse in New York’s original theatre district, the Lower Eastside, has a rich colorful past and a vibrant future: Originally built to house Maurice Schwartz’s Yiddish Art Theatre in 1926, it has seen a succession of companies and policies in its half century on Second Avenue. It was the home of the original Phoenix Theatre in 1953 and in more recent years launched such long running Broadway hits as “Grease,” “Oh!Calcutta!” and “The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas.” In 1977 it

⁵⁸⁴ Richard Goldstein “Nietzsche in Alphaville,” *Village Voice*, December 11, 1978, 33.

⁵⁸⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 97.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁷ Since 1991, the space has been the site of the East Village Cinema, a smaller multiplex theatre, with an old lettered marquee. In previous incarnations it was the Stuyvesant, the Phoenix and the Eden Theatres. See the “Entermedia Theatre,” *Lortel Archives: The Internet Off-Broadway Database*, accessed October 3, 2013, http://www.lortel.org/lla_archive/index.cfm?search_by=theater&id=159.

⁵⁸⁸ Dick Higgins, “Intermedia,” *Something Else Newsletter*, February 1966.

became the home of Entermedia, a not-for-profit arts complex designed to provide a complete creative environment for both emerging and established artists to do innovative work in all facets of the performing and media arts...Committed to the revitalization of the Lower East Side as one of New York's vital cultural districts, Entermedia is active in neighborhood restoration projects.⁵⁸⁹

Taking pride in the rich theatrical legacy of the Lower Eastside, and their “new” place within that trajectory, Entermedia debriefs the Nova Convention audience on the space's theatrical history and community goals in the Lower East Side. The organization's mission statement embraces the intermedial practice of infusing performance with media arts, as well as a commitment to “revitalizing” the economically depressed Lower East Side, through “intermedial” productions.

Partnering with Entermedia as the main venue, the conference was co-organized by Giorno (his record label Giorno Poetry Systems released the Nova Convention recordings), Grauerholz, and Lotringer, in association with the Department of French and Italian of New York University, and *Semiotext(e)*. Funding for the convention came from Poets & Writers, Inc., supported by the New York State Council on the Arts. The *Village Voice* reports on the funding breakdown, “Money was scarce. Lotringer provided the first few hundred. A crucial \$1500 came from Tom Forcade a few days before he died. Poets and Writers provided \$600—the only public funding in a city whose arts budget pushes \$50 million.”⁵⁹⁰ For the Nova concert series at Irving Plaza, Lotringer maxed out his credit cards to rent a PA system, only to break even after ticket sales.⁵⁹¹ Given these numbers, the Nova Convention seems to have been produced for approximately \$2,500 plus its concert ticket sales. This amount is low, given the breadth of the

⁵⁸⁹ “The Nova Convention, Brochure” (produced by the Entermedia Theatre), Sylvère Lotringer Papers and Semiotext(e) Archive; MSS 221; Lotringer Series IIA, Box 10, Folder 36, The Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University.

⁵⁹⁰ Goldstein, “Nietzsche in Alphaville,” 34.

⁵⁹¹ Lotringer, “Notes on the Schizo-Culture Issue,” xxiv.

event and the art and pop celebrities that were actually involved, even by 1978 standards of the dollar.

Given the small budget and larger-than-life personalities involved, issues surfaced between the main organizers running the event. In reflection, Lotringer remarked upon helping to organize the ambitious event as a collaboration: “That’s why the Nova Convention was so difficult, there were so many people with huge egos. It was very difficult to manage.”⁵⁹² From the very beginning, the *Village Voice* claimed that it took a lot of “humanistic rhetoric” by Lotringer to persuade Burroughs and his supporters to get on board with the conference.⁵⁹³ The *SoHo Weekly News* reported financial strain between Burroughs/Giorno/Grauerholz versus Lotringer, “Word has it that the Grauerholz camp was less than pleased with the semiotext(e)’s profit-making ventures: Grauerholz says that he, unlike Lotringer, only ‘broke even.’”⁵⁹⁴ While the Nova Convention was considered a success, personal disappointment was also expressed in a letter from Grauerholz to Lotringer, immediately following the event:

It appears that the Nova Convention was, all in all, a resounding success and I am--as ever--very happy and proud that we were able to create this event. Certainly there were problems, and certainly you and I have our complaints for each other, but obviously these things will be much easier to express now that there is no further possibility of changing the past.⁵⁹⁵

Grauerholz goes on to complain about logistics, that he himself had to work backstage and as a result missed many of the events. Furthermore, the academically oriented event at the Schimmel auditorium on Friday was poorly attended due to poor marketing, with the blame placed on NYU’s French Department. Lotringer also commented upon a sense of competition between the

⁵⁹² Sylvère Lotringer, interview with the author, April 2015.

⁵⁹³ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁴ Marzorati, “Blame it on the Boss o’ Nova,” 27

⁵⁹⁵ Letter dated December 19, 1978, from James Grauerholz to Sylvère Lotringer, Sylvère Lotringer Papers and Semiotext(e) Archive, MSS 221: Folder 129, Box 1, Series I: Correspondence, The Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University.

events *Giorno* primarily organized at Entermedia, versus the concert series at Irving Plaza that he was mostly responsible for.⁵⁹⁶ Again, the overall sentiment was one of success, but there were residual bitter feelings, which may have also been inflected by Grauerholz's personal life. Disenchanted with New York and Burroughs's newfound celebrity, Grauerholz relocated to Kansas shortly after the Nova Convention, with Burroughs following him in 1981, to dry-out and refocus on his work. In addition, Burroughs's move occurred after a steep rent hike at the Bunker, as gentrification encroached upon Downtown.⁵⁹⁷

Inspired by budget troubles and Grauerholz's gripes, a conference as adventurous and ambitious as the Nova Convention, which is nearly impossible to imagine by today's academic standards and decreasing university and arts budgets, was of course not without its problems. The organizers, performers, and audience members were a diverse lot with a multitude of personalities, agendas and vested interests. In a letter from Grauerholz to Gysin, the first mention of the conference appears as early as September 1977.⁵⁹⁸ The conference, in a nebulous and fragile state, was initially referred to as the "New Words Colloque," with Grauerholz commenting, "The Punk angle must bear much further conceptualization before any commitments are made; remember that this 'Nouvelle Vague' phenomenon has very different meanings in N.Y.C., London, and Paris."⁵⁹⁹ Grauerholz, a guitarist himself and ex-band manager, frequented Downtown music scenes and was friendly with band members, such as Bob

⁵⁹⁶ Sylvère Lotringer, interview with the author, April 2015.

⁵⁹⁷ Baker, *Burroughs*, 180-181.

⁵⁹⁸ A letter dated September 27, 1977, from James Grauerholz to Brion Gysin. *The William S. Burroughs Papers*, "Brion Gysin - Correspondence, 1977-1979," Box 42, Folder 417, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Ohio State University Library.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Quine, the guitarist for Richard Hell and the Voidoids.⁶⁰⁰ There are other accounts of initial hesitancy, with Lotringer reflecting, “I discussed it with James at the Bunker and it took a while before they took my suggestion seriously. But then John Giorno mobilized the entire artistic scene, the Beats, Timothy Leary, Patti Smith, the Rolling Stones, and I mobilized my won friends in the art world, like Laurie Anderson, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, etc. and the ball started rolling...”⁶⁰¹ The Nova Convention represents a true social and creative network, one that was spatialized Downtown, physical and face-to-face, as the collaborative and combined organizational efforts of Lotringer, Grauerholz, and Giorno. Their will and social ability to place the academy in contact with the avant-garde, whether the experimental sounds of Philip Glass and Laurie Anderson, or the punk, new and no wave bands of Downtown, this contact between these different networks constituted the very social and cultural fabric of the Nova Convention.

While *Semiotext(e)* desired an alliance with Downtown’s underground sound, namely those affiliated with punk, no wave, and new wave, unfortunately the social ties between the bands were rather mercurial. Assessing the flyers produced by *Semiotext(e)*, the conference’s title “Nova” is aligned with “no wave,” as interchangeable. No wave, named after the 1978 compilation album *No New York*, produced by Brian Eno, designates a distinctly “Downtown” mode of production where punk attitudes and DIY practices combined with experimental noise, poetry, minimalism, and performance art. More of an underground moment than self-defined cultural movement, no wave embraced dissension, dissonance and the deconstruction of the immediate cultural past. Manifesting most prominently in Downtown’s music and film scenes,

⁶⁰⁰ A letter dated December 13, 1977, from James Grauerholz to Brion Gysin. Box 42, Folder 417, “Brion Gysin - Correspondence, 1977-1979.” *The William S. Burroughs Papers*, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Ohio State University Library.

⁶⁰¹ Niski, “Interview with Sylvère Lotringer on the Nova Convention,” <http://realitystudio.org/interviews/interview-with-sylvre-lotringer-on-the-nova-convention/>.

no wave represented a small community of artists and has been readily associated with the bands Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, Mars, DNA and the Contortions, and the films of Amos Poe and Eric Mitchell.⁶⁰²

Putting the “No” into Nova” this repositioning first exists in textual play at the top of a *Semiotext(e)* flyer, through the title: “NO VA/NO WAVE.”⁶⁰³ This minimalist typed-text-only flyer lists the no wave bands Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, Contortions, DNA, Mars, Beirut Slump, and Dilaudid on the bills for the evenings of Wednesday November 29 and Thursday November 30, 1978. In a second flyer produced by *Semiotext(e)*, a similar tactic is used but “NO VA” and “NO WAVE” are found in a different textual and graphic arrangement, and followed by a description of the no wave musical line-up:

TWO NO VA
----- ROCK CONCERTS
NO WAVE

The NO WAVE concerts offer in two evenings an unprecedented selection of the groups that make-up the Post-Punk New York Rock scene. Graphically arrogant, thoroughly nihilistic, they are on the cutting edge of chaos.⁶⁰⁴

The bands are also given Burroughsian taglines as descriptors. For example, Mars is described as “language shredding seizure scream,” while DNA is referred to as “Machine-Gun algebra.”

Through the language of the flyers, Burroughs, *Semiotext(e)*, and no wave bands are equaled and interwoven to endorse the same politics and aesthetics of “smashing control machines,” to use Burroughs’s term.

⁶⁰² For a history of New York’s no wave music movement, see Marc Masters and Weasel Walter, *No Wave* (London: Black Dog, 2007).

⁶⁰³ Nova Convention Flyer, Sylvère Lotringer Papers and Semiotext(e) Archive; MSS 221; Lotringer Series IIA, Box 10, Folder 36, The Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University.

⁶⁰⁴ Nova Convention Flyer (2), Sylvère Lotringer Papers and Semiotext(e) Archive; MSS 221; Lotringer Series IIA, Box 10, Folder 36, The Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University.

While demonstrating *Semiotext(e)*'s solidarity with Downtown New York's no wave music movement, unfortunately, these flyers prove inaccurate as none of the bands actually play the Nova Convention. The *Village Voice* reports on the discords of the event, "As the date approached, squabbles developed like cold sores. Certain No Wave bands would not be seen on the same stage as certain New Wave Bands."⁶⁰⁵ And at one point, squabbles were physical fistfights, with some of the Stimulators, a punk band, receiving assault charges.⁶⁰⁶ There were also reservations concerning the academy mixing with punk. Prior to the convention, New York University, which hosted the academic events Downtown as opposed to Lotringer's "Uptown" Columbia University affiliation, had second thoughts about "leather pants clogging up the French Department."⁶⁰⁷

Eventually, the troublemaking no wave bands were replaced with the more low maintenance, or less intense and aggressive, new wave bands. The B-52s, Suicide, and Walter Steding plus special guests, would eventually play "Club 57" at Irving Plaza, billed as a benefit concert for *Semiotext(e)*.⁶⁰⁸ An unannounced performance, Deborah Harry, Chris Stein and Robert Fripp joined their *TV Party* music pal, Steding, onstage. Similar to the electronic tinkering of Steding's *TV Party* band, the surprise experimental jam session was full of phasing, droning, and Steding's signature gadgetry. Alan Platt, music critic for the *SoHo Weekly News*,

⁶⁰⁵ Richard Goldstein, "Nietzsche in Alphaville," 34.

⁶⁰⁶ Lotringer was accused of withholding payment from the punk band, Stimulators. A fistfight broke out and two of the band members attacked a photographer, and were charged with assault, *Ibid.*, 36. Lotringer has also commented that because he could not secure money in a locked room at Irving Plaza, due to a mistrusting Polish man who ran the space, profits from ticket sales were moved Uptown for safety. When the Stimulators came to collect late at night after playing, Lotringer could not immediately pay them. Angry and not wanting to wait, they attacked Lotringer's students that assisted him at the event, breaking one of his student's arms. Lotringer ended up going to the police the next day to testify, and to help release the Stimulators upon the request of Allen Ginsberg. Sylvère Lotringer, interview with the author, April 2015.

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶⁰⁸ Sylvère Lotringer Papers and *Semiotext(e)* Archive; MSS 221; Series IIA: Issues and Conferences, Folder 37, Box 10, The Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University.

called this performance “a perfect end to a weekend of creative disdain.”⁶⁰⁹ In the newspaper’s issue just prior to the Nova Convention, another staff music critic, Michael Shore, lists the Nova concert series in his “Music Picks.” Reinforcing the marketing language of *Semiotext(e)*, Shore too sensationalizes the concert and artists for innovation and trend-setting, “A New Wave Spectacular...Suicide and Walter Steding represent the cutting edge of New York’s most uncompromising and creative New Wave wing...The B-52’s are just as much an experimental synthesis—go-go music meets sci-fi modality.”⁶¹⁰ The concert was purposefully advertised as the epitome of the new wave and of Downtown New York’s exciting music scene.

The *SoHo Weekly News* followed-up its concert teaser with a description of the Nova Convention’s final concert event as forward-looking and prematurely ringing-in the new decade:

Sid Vicious strolls through the convention’s wind-up concert at Irving Plaza Saturday night, but no one seems to notice. On stage the B-52s bang out a Burroughs like vision of TV junk, cosmic Beach parties and a place called Planet Claire. Foucault-laced Frenchmen do the frug. Poets pogo. Burroughs is nowhere to be found, but chances are he would dug it all. “A new mythology is possible in the Space Age.” Burroughs said Saturday night, and the B-52s have gotten the message. Welcome to the 1980s.⁶¹¹

Here, the B-52s embrace Burroughs’s call for new possibilities, and the future as represented by the 1980s. As a side note, the Nova Convention was also means of exposure as the band’s big break. Not yet known in New York, the B-52s subsequently picked up a record contract and management after their Nova concert performance.⁶¹² Furthermore, the quote reflects that the 1970s were over—punk had already started to fade, and in the case of Sid Vicious suffered a tragic end. But, punk’s Neo-Dada energy had been quickly reabsorbed and transformed into the new wave. The nihilism of punk, and to some extent no wave, was quickly left behind for the

⁶⁰⁹ Platt, “Music of the Nova Convention: Eleven Dollar Bill,” *SoHo Weekly News*, Dec 7, 1978, 29.

⁶¹⁰ Michael Shore, “Music Picks,” *SoHo Weekly News*, November 30, 1978, 39.

⁶¹¹ Marzorati, “Blame it on the Boss o’ Nova,” 28.

⁶¹² Sylvère Lotringer, interview with author, April 2015.

campy new wave music of the B-52s. With songs like “Planet Claire” and “There’s a Moon in the Sky (Called the Moon)” and the incorporation of Theremin-like pop space-age sounds, the B-52s inhabit their own version of the “Space Age.” The connection to Burroughs and the future seems apropos given the B-52s lyrical obsession with outer space, and the band’s female performers, who look “like waitresses at a diner on Mars.”⁶¹³ Yet, without the link of the Nova Convention, the work of the B-52s and Burroughs are an unusual comparison. The B-52s tend to be categorized as an upbeat party band, symbolic of the fun and aesthetics of Club 57, while Burroughs is often characterized as a downbeat and reclusive misanthrope, who muddles conceptions of utopia with dystopia in his science fiction worlds.

The fun and youthful dance-rock of the B-52s seems at first to be an odd soundtrack for the literary curmudgeon. However, in pushing beyond such popular conceptions, the aesthetics and philosophy of the cut-up resonates with the B-52s as they mash-up pop cultural references, and musical genres (e.g. Motown, surf, punk, garage, rockabilly, Samba). Furthermore, both Burroughs and the B-52s represent different and varied articulations of queerness and straight-queer alliances, as modes of possibility for living and being in the world. In the lyrics of the B-52s and the science fiction worlds of Burroughs, with his themes of revolution and transformation, they both imagine and create in the words of the B-52s, “Song[s] For a Future Generation.” This sentiment is further confirmed by Patti Smith who claimed during her performance that Burroughs, “gave me the freedom to communicate with the Future through sound.”⁶¹⁴ There is a thematic of positive queer futurity that presents itself in the “new wave” in connection with the Nova Convention. This manifests through art that imagines the potentiality of outer space as social solution, first expressed in the queer science fiction of Burroughs.

⁶¹³ Platt, “Music of the Nova Convention,” 29.

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

But, the replacement of “negative” no wave bands with “positive” new wave groups, was not the most significant change to the Nova Convention’s scheduled line-up. The biggest and most memorable disappointment would be Keith Richards’s last minute no-show. Adding to the confusion, the *SoHo Weekly News* headlined Richards for the event in their “Music Picks,” before Burroughs or Patti Smith, in the issue just prior to the event.⁶¹⁵ Richard Goldstein wrote on behalf of the *Village Voice*: “As for Richards, he had cancelled after a Canadian prosecutor decided to appeal his lenient sentence for possession of drugs. Frank Zappa filled in with a passage from *Naked Lunch*, but his appearance was more of a vote of confidence from California.”⁶¹⁶ While Zappa and Smith had achieved some mainstream success, they were not on par with the popularity and influence of Richards as a Rolling Stone. Throughout the convention, audience members would scream, “Where’s Keith?” and repeatedly chant “Keith, Keith, Keith” or “Stones, Stones, Stones.”⁶¹⁷ The *SoHo Weekly News* reporter Gerald Marzorati relays rumors circulating within the audience such as Richards performing the Rolling Stones’ “Shattered” with fellow rockers Smith and Zappa, and Richards reading a poetic version of “Satisfaction.” He also shares his observations of the audience in the balcony, assumed to be the cheap-seats of the Nova Convention:

The balcony—suburban kids in Jethro Tull T-shirts, Rolling Stones T-shirts, Grateful Dead T-shirts—is bored. They’ve already spent a few hours booing Philip Glass, ignoring Brion Gysin, and listening to Burroughs himself... ‘Rock and Roll,’ a fan screams as Patti Smith saunters on stage... She reads them a poem. They want ‘Because the Night... ‘You call this a concert?’ a burly lad asks his friends. ‘I say fuck no.’⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁵ Shore, “Music Picks,” 39.

⁶¹⁶ Goldstein, “Nietzsche in Alphaville,” 36.

⁶¹⁷ “Brookner Sound Rolls,” The William S. Burroughs Papers, Box 57, Audio cassette N9-N10-N11, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Ohio State University Library.

⁶¹⁸ Marzorati, “Blame it on the Boss o’ Nova,” 27-28.

The kids in the audience were disillusioned by the false advertisement of Richards performing at the event. They endure the musings of New York's avant-garde when they specifically came to rock out to the Rolling Stones. In sound recordings of the event, the crowd becomes increasingly agitated and restless over the course of the evening. To quell their anger over Richards's absence, Smith offers to refund any dissatisfied audience member: "I will personally pay you back...Let's deal with it right now." However, no audience member wants to publicly out him or herself. When no one takes advantage of her money-back guarantee, she moves forward with her performance and resolves the "Keith" problem stating, "so that's over, right, its over."⁶¹⁹

The situation that Smith navigates, and Marzorati describes, is comical in hindsight, but not necessarily funny to those onstage or in the audience at the time. It represents a taste clash due to age (young) and geography (suburban), which extends to education, class and gender (in the booing of the older avant-garde and the "lad's" disappointment). It also suggests that all of the mixing at the Nova Convention sent mixed-messages in terms of audience expectations and reception. Some of the audience was not equipped with the patience to handle the long repetitive looping sounds of Philip Glass; or the poetic multimedia extravaganza (combining music, permutation poetry, and visually projected slides) of Gysin, when all they wanted was the greatest hits of the Rolling Stones and the Patti Smith Band.

Bernard Gendron coins the term "borderline aesthetics" to describe the destabilization between avant-garde art and popular music in the Downtown scene.⁶²⁰ At the end of the 1970s, the Nova Convention too encouraged and supported "borderline aesthetics" in its attempts to fuse high and low culture and to articulate these poles in new ways and as not so far apart.

⁶¹⁹ "Brookner Sound Rolls," The William S. Burroughs Papers, Box 57, Audio cassette N9-N10-N11, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Ohio State University Library.

⁶²⁰ Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, 310.

Remembering that at the time, Downtown's musical vanguard was just beginning to enter the mainstream and receive radio play. For example, in the case of two prominent female Nova Convention participants, Patti Smith had already achieved mainstream success with the single, "Because the Night" (1978), and Laurie Anderson was about to crossover with "Oh Superman" (1981)—albeit scaling higher on the European charts. Perhaps the *Village Voice's* coverage summed it up best when Richard Goldstein remarked that Lotringer wanted too much, to "mix the '60s with the '70s; he wanted film and rock...the whole schizoid tamale."⁶²¹ The organizers, performers, and audience members were a diverse lot with a multitude of personalities, agendas and vested interests. As a result, the Nova Convention was a risky, complex, and complicated endeavor. While there is an inherent danger in wanting the impossible, or too much, at least such possibilities could be imagined and realized within the parameters of Downtown New York.

The Social Burroughs of New York

The social life of Burroughs, embedded in Downtown New York during the time of the Nova Convention, outlines the sociocultural world that Burroughs inhabited, as well as the cultural impact that his writing and multimedia works would have upon younger generations. In the first documentary film about Burroughs, released just five years after the Nova Convention and with only a few shots documenting the event, Giorno claimed that Burroughs "hates parties," and that he never goes out and lives "an enclosed life."⁶²² Complicating Giorno's generalization, Bockris commented, "Burroughs always said he was not a gregarious person and

⁶²¹ Goldstein, "Nietzsche in Alphaville," 34. Using a mash-up of references to Burroughs, he creates "the whole schizoid-tamale" by referencing Burroughs's "Whole Tamale," a short essay and reading that ardently protested against California's Proposition 6 of 1978, making it illegal for any out homosexual, or heterosexual supporters of homosexuality, to work in the public school system; and "schizoid" citing Burroughs's "schizo-culture."

⁶²² John Giorno in Alan Yentob and Howard Brookner, *Burroughs: The Movie* (United States: Citifilmworks, 1983), DVD.

did not like parties, but from what I could see there was a nearly constant party going on around him, at least in the evenings.”⁶²³ While the Nova Convention was an art-party celebrating Burroughs, Burroughs was in fact, frequently hosting dinner and cocktails parties at the Bunker. Burroughs’s home, once a men’s locker room, windowless, and sparse—a space that could be considered rather inhospitable—was transformed into dinner party central. Like the Nova Convention, these parties helped to form Burroughs’s image and reputation: “Burroughs’s very high profile in the late seventies was caused, to a great extent by a book project undertaken by Victor Bockris, who arranged a succession of dinner parties in New York from 1974 until 1979 at which famous people would dine with Burroughs.”⁶²⁴

This is also the moment when Burroughs became more publicly engaged with the dissemination of his work through performance. At the Nova Convention, Burroughs performed several readings and participated on a panel in celebration of his own career. International and domestic tours and readings became a public mode of outreach for his writing, promoting works throughout his career. Burroughs’s celebrity, on top of his cult status, precipitates from a shift to performance that occurred in his home and in public, both being stages for entertainment. In addition, the broadening appeal of Burroughs was aided by his friendships with, and support from, young men in their twenties, namely Grauerholz and Bockris.⁶²⁵ The Nova Convention is an emblematic turning point in Burroughs’s career that was enabled by the cultural politics and social context of Downtown New York.

⁶²³ Victor Bockris, “King of the Underground: The magic world of William Burroughs,” *Gadfly*, August 1999, accessed April 10, 2013, <http://www.gadflyonline.com/archive/August99/archive-burroughs.html>.

⁶²⁴ Miles, *William Burroughs*, 16.

⁶²⁵ Howard Brookner, embedded in the Downtown film scene and a friend of Burroughs, shot and produced the documentary film, *Burroughs: The Movie*, during the time of the Nova Convention, and between 1978-1983. It certainly made Burroughs’s image more public in its circulation, as the first documentary on Burroughs with his full participation and consent. Because it was not released until 1983, five years after the Nova Convention, I chose not to discuss it in detail in this particular section.

Supporting his own research and book on Burroughs, Bockris recounts, “In 1979 when I started having dinner with him several nights a week, Burroughs was the worshipped King of the Beats and Godfather of Punk as well as King of the Underground. He was definitely one of the coolest people in the city.”⁶²⁶ Bockris’s book, *With William Burroughs*, loosely documents roundtable-style conversations from cocktail and dinner parties, often at the Bunker. Bockris claims that years of his book (1974–1980) were “extremely active, exciting and productive for Burroughs and constitutes a watermark in his career.”⁶²⁷ Those years also mark Burroughs’s time back in the U.S. after nearly 25 years abroad. He first moved to New York in 1974 to a loft on Broadway, followed by an apartment on Franklin Street, and finally to the Bunker, where he lived from 1976–1981.⁶²⁸ Burroughs toured during these years, and continued this performance practice after he left the Bunker for his final destination in Lawrence, Kansas.

Burroughs was itinerant for decades of his life and lived all over the world, from Mexico City to Tangier to Paris to London, before holding the Bunker on the Bowery. Despite the fact that Burroughs felt more at home outside of the U.S., mostly due to the repressive mores and codes of the 1950s–1960s, the perception of Burroughs, and his personal aesthetic, has been undoubtedly and enthusiastically labeled “American” as discussed earlier in this chapter. Aside from a mutual adoration of heroin chic, which Burroughs was also a figure of, Downtown cultural scenes, as sites of creative placemaking,⁶²⁹ also exuded and relished in their misfit, rebel

⁶²⁶ Dave Teeuwen, *Interview with Victor Bockris on William Burroughs*, <http://realitystudio.org/interviews/interview-with-victor-bockris-on-william-burroughs/>. TX Erbe in *The East Village Eye* also refers to Burroughs as “godfather of punk,” in “Bill Burroughs: Gone Fishin,” *East Village Eye*, April 1984, 19, 56.

⁶²⁷ Burroughs and Bockris, *With William Burroughs*, xix.

⁶²⁸ Baker, *William S. Burroughs*, 170–174.

⁶²⁹ Creative placemaking is a term that designates how the social and physical characteristics of a neighborhood develop cultural activities, through a network of various cultural producers. See Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa “Creative Placemaking,” 2010.

and “deviant” status, all the while finding comfort in a scene or community of like-minded others.

Music critic Alan Platt refers to a kind of pessimism mixed with avant-gardism as a specifically Burroughsian influence on Downtown’s “Hip” youth cultures:

Paranoia, insolence and the knowledge that a vote for pessimism is a vote for fun are only three of the founding principles of current Hip for which we are indebted to William Burroughs. Burroughs, by dint of his cut-up and fold-in techniques of composition, is also a major link in the chain that has kept the divinity alive for the random factor, the monkey wrench in the works of art that somehow manages to keep imagination from nodding out every five years.⁶³⁰

Taking into account the subjective nature of fun, there was a discernable fun that was laced with pessimism Downtown. It is marked as a sentiment shared between Burroughs and Downtown’s younger generation, and more importantly, evidentiary of Burroughs’s influence. Moreover, the historical avant-garde has simultaneously embraced both negative and positive social attitudes. Avant-garde movements, such as Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism, demonstrate an impulse to tear down traditions and buck accepted norms and notions of what exactly constitutes art, while concurrently desiring (and at times attaining) new ways for creating and living. The place where hope and cynicism collide is often a site where possibilities are discovered and change ensues, and is symptomatic of European and American avant-garde movements.

Representative of the younger Downtown generation, both *TV Party* and Club 57 were influenced by Burroughs. Glenn O’Brien’s conversations with Burroughs and others are documented in Bockris’s *With William Burroughs*, and Bockris himself appeared on episodes of *TV Party*.⁶³¹ Ann Magnuson labeled Burroughs as influential upon the taste cultures and sense of community at Club 57, reflecting, “We were suburban refugees who had run away from home to

⁶³⁰ Platt, “Music of the Nova Convention: Eleven Dollar Bill,” 28.

⁶³¹ See Glenn O’Brien, Chris Stein, et al. *TV Party: The Documentary*, 2005; and Burroughs and Bockris, *With William Burroughs*, 1981.

find a new family, a family that liked the things we liked– Devo, Duchamp, and William S. Burroughs.”⁶³² While this project frames *TV Party* and *Club 57* as arenas for fun, that does not mean that these spaces were not critical. The creative productions of *TV Party* and *Club 57* were often fueled by dissatisfaction with the current political situation and economic predicament. Furthermore, both scenes delighted in rehashing American popular culture through adopting partying as a creative forum for sharing and expressing popular memory. And more literally, *TV Party* and *Club 57* appropriated pop cultural elements from the past and present, and wielded cultural critiques through barbed satire and camp humor. As observed by Platt in the aforementioned quote, Burroughs’s techniques, owing to spontaneity and chance, sustain artistic imagination and allow the avant-garde to cycle forward and evade cultural stagnation. Improvisation and a “devil-may-care” attitude were also central to the creative philosophies of *Club 57* and *TV Party*, and these qualities augmented the productivity of each space.

While Burroughs was stereotypically not known for his “fun” personality, he was recognized for his wicked sense of humor. And, the fun of the Nova Convention was documented as campy, punk, and queer. In a letter to his friend Paul Bowles, who could not attend the Nova Convention, Burroughs responds to his inquiry, “Was it fun?” by replying:

The Nova Convention was great fun but very strenuous. There was a big party the last night with an aluminum washtub fill of Khool [sic] Aid and vodka just like Jonestown and everybody agreed it was tasteful. Tim Leary got pied at the party by Aron Kay the professional pie thrower. He was searched at the door but sneaked into the kitchen some way and got a pie. He has covered Mayor Kock, [sic] Anita Bryant, Andy Warhol and other luminaries. One hasn’t arrived until one has been pied.⁶³³

⁶³² Ann Magnuson, “The East Village 1979-1989, A Chronology: Ann Magnuson on Club 57,” *East Village Issue: Artforum International*, v. 38 no2 (October 1999): 121.

⁶³³ Spelling errors seemingly intentional are kept here, as Burroughs often punned in his spelling “errors.” Most significantly, “Mayor Kock” is a humorous jab at Ed Koch’s notoriety as a closeted homosexual. Letter from Burroughs to Paul Bowles, dated February 26, 1979, The William S. Burroughs Papers, “Paul Bowles Correspondence, 1974-1979,” Box 30, Folder 250, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Ohio State University Library.

Burroughs's description of a Nova Convention after party, likely at the nightclub Kipling's Last Resort,⁶³⁴ reads like an episode of *TV Party*, or a night out at Club 57, with all the Yippie pie throwing and themed punch. Playing with notions of taste, Burroughs conveys to Bowles the highly self-aware and offbeat humor of supplying guests with Kool-Aid, which camps the tragedy of the Jonestown Massacre, the mass murder/cult suicide which had just shocked the U.S. On November 18, 1978, over nine hundred members of the People's Temple perished at the Jonestown colony in Guyana by drinking fatally poisoned Flavor-Aid under the coercion of their leader, Jim Jones. Subsequently the colloquialism, "Drinking the Kool-Aid," would connote the blind following of a belief system to the extent that one is uncomprehending of any (potentially dangerous) outcome. Burroughs distinctly appreciates this irreverent humor, in both pie and punch. However, the *SoHo Weekly News* reported another Kool-Aid party as occurring on the first night—at a party at the Westbeth Theatre with the punk band the Invaders, which followed the Thursday night opening of Troupe Plan K's "The Penny Arcade Peep Show." Marzorati commentates on the events of the party:

Plenty of leather, lots of beer, and quite apparently enough Quaaludes. A pretty boy lights another's cigarette: the other reciprocates, dropping to his knees and blowing smoke rings into the other's crotch. As the bash breaks up, someone grabs the microphone: 'All true believers. All true believers. Strawberry Kool-Aid is now being served.'⁶³⁵

Whether the date of the event has been mis-recorded or misremembered by either Marzorati or Burroughs does not so much matter here. What does is that Marzorati's description of this Nova Convention party is punk in music and dress, and queer in sexuality, as he makes a point to describe the cruising moves and flirtation between two party-goers, prior to his reportage of

⁶³⁴ Located on University Place, Kipling's Last Resort was owned by Mickey Ruskin, the famous proprietor of Max's Kansas City (1965–1974), which was the favorite nightspot of Andy Warhol and his Superstars.

⁶³⁵ Marzorati, "Blame it on the Boss o' Nova," 28.

Kool-Aid antics. Through the proto-punk and queer figure of Burroughs, punk and queer combine Downtown in a campy and offbeat party thematic referencing Jonestown.⁶³⁶

However, prior to his reintroduction through the Nova Convention, Burroughs could have been known amongst young music fans that subscribed to rock magazines. In the 1970s, rock journalism was booming with critical voices and magazines popping-up across the U.S. and U.K., which would soon cover Downtown music scenes. Burroughs crystalized his relationship to rock and youth culture in the 1970s by writing regularly for *Crawdaddy!*, a groundbreaking magazine of rock criticism. In 1975, Burroughs interviewed guitar-hero Jimmy Page, connecting his legendary rock band, Led Zeppelin, to the concept of “rock magic.”⁶³⁷ After the success of his article, with Burroughs and Page photographed together on the cover of the magazine (along with a few rainbows added), editor Peter Knobler immediately offered Burroughs his own column, acknowledging him as “such a compelling figure to *Crawdaddy!*’s audience.”⁶³⁸ In fact, Adele Bertei, a Downtown no and new wave musician and all-around scenester, first came into contact with Burroughs through this Zeppelin article, which subsequently inspired her to read his work. As a Burroughs fan, and coming full circle, she humorously covers the Nova Convention in her own unique voice in an article for the *New York Rocker*, a punk and new wave paper. Her writing includes blunt and witty descriptions such as “Ginsberg sings and reads like he is on thorazine,” while Anne Waldman was apparently “looking like a bad actress trying out for a

⁶³⁶ As previously stated in a footnote in my chapter on Club 57, a club that combines punk, queer and camp, this Downtown intersection of punk and queer been overlooked in the figure of Burroughs. Tavia Nyong’o has written on punk and queer in the 1970s, but he does not mention Burroughs. See Nyong’o, “Punk’d Theory,” *Social Text*, no. 23 (2005): 19-34; and Nyong’o “Do You Want Queer Theory (or Do You Want the Truth)? Intersections of Punk and Queer in the 1970s,” *Radical History Review*, no. 100 (2008): 103-119.

⁶³⁷ William S. Burroughs, “Rock Magic: Jimmy Page, Led Zeppelin, and a Search for the Elusive Stairway to Heaven,” *Crawdaddy!*, June 1975, 34-40.

⁶³⁸ Letter from Peter Knobler to Burroughs, dated April 18, 1975, The William S. Burroughs Papers, “*Crawdaddy!* Correspondence, 1974-1978,” Box 23, Folder 183, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Ohio State University Library.

part.”⁶³⁹ She gave rave reviews to other performers and of course, Burroughs himself, who was “a big hit tonight” and had her “rolling on the floor laughing.”⁶⁴⁰

Over decades and until his death, Burroughs interviewed and had relationships and creative exchanges with many famous rocker stars across music genres.⁶⁴¹ To begin, Burroughs was in London during the swinging 1960s and embraced its exploding youth, drug and music cultures.⁶⁴² Again, he was noted for “partying hard” and had a penchant for picking-up the young and fashionable hustlers, known as the Dilly Boys, who hung around Piccadilly Circus.⁶⁴³ Mostly attributed to his relationship with London scenester Barry Miles, Burroughs’s portrait was included in the album cover art for the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), a collage of famous figures by pop artist Peter Blake. In 1974, a conversation between Burroughs and the glam icon David Bowie was featured in *Rolling Stone*.⁶⁴⁴ *Rolling Stone* also used Burroughs’s countercultural street credentials in a venture to win-over the college demographic at the turn of the 1980s, known as *Rolling Stone College Papers*. Burroughs was interviewed for the inaugural issue of the short-lived magazine late in 1979, which attempted to define the scope and mission of the publication. *College Papers* was promoted as a continuation of *Rolling*

⁶³⁹ Adele Bertei, “Call Him Burroughs: News From the Nova Convention,” *New York Rocker*, no. 17, February-March 1979, 13-15.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid, 15.

⁶⁴¹ Later in his life, Burroughs collaborated with 1990s alternative superstars Michael Stipe of REM and Kurt Cobain of Nirvana. Some other bands and musical personalities that he had contact with included the Rolling Stones, Blondie, the Clash, Sonic Youth, U2, Tom Waits, and even Madonna.

⁶⁴² Barry Miles, famously part of the swinging 60s scenes, introduced Burroughs to the Beatles and eventually became a biographer of Burroughs, writing *William Burroughs: El Hombre Invisible* (London: Virgin, 1992), and *Call Me Burroughs: A Life* (New York: Twelve, 2014).

⁶⁴³ King, “The Burroughs Guy: An interview with James Grauerholz,” http://www.lawrence.com/news/2007/jul/30/burroughs_guy/?burroughs_2007.

⁶⁴⁴ William S. Burroughs and Craig Copetas, “William Burroughs Interviews David Bowie,” *Rolling Stone*, February 28, 1974, 24-27.

Stone's pro-sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll outlook, along with its history of anti-war protesting and pro-student politicking, but in tune with the new 1980s college generation.⁶⁴⁵

Interviewed in *College Papers* by the *Village Voice*'s Richard Goldstein, Burroughs's musical sway, especially on the genres of new wave and punk, was substantiated: "There is not a band in new wave music that doesn't owe at least one twitch or spasm to Burroughs' work. In fact, the very word "punk" came from the Beats, who themselves appropriated it from prison slang of the time when it referred to a boy who accepted the passive role in homosexual sex."⁶⁴⁶ Goldstein cites a similarity between the 1950s and 1970s, stating, "The 70s are like the 50s in one crucial respect: Once again, it's hard to live on your own terms. No wonder there is a current revival of interest in William Burroughs, the seminal Beat writer."⁶⁴⁷ Burroughs pronounces an affinity with the punk movement, and claims that many of the characters in his books qualify as punks. Burroughs also witnessed the historical shifts in the meanings of the term punk, from prison slang for a bottom, to a thief, and finally to a music genre and global cultural movement. Securing Burroughs's pro-punk relationship within the punk press itself, Burroughs and Gysin were profiled in volumes of *RE/Search*, the punk magazine based out of San Francisco. A later iteration of his junkie rebel cool, Burroughs facilitated gay filmmaker Gus Van Sant's rise to Indie film fame, essentially performing as himself in *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989). Finally, it is widely known that Chris Stein and Debbie Harry of Blondie, and especially Patti Smith, all progenitors of the iconic CBGB's music scene, had deep admirations for Burroughs, which was confirmed in their performances at the Nova Convention.

⁶⁴⁵ See the statement by Kate Wenner, Managing Editor, "Issue No. 1," *Rolling Stone College Papers*, no. 1, Fall 1979, 5.

⁶⁴⁶ Richard Goldstein "An interview with William Burroughs: The Beat Goes On," *Rolling Stone College Papers*, no. 1, Fall 1979, 38.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

When Burroughs was well into his sixties, his close relationships with the younger “gent” set, namely Grauerholz and Bockris, also provided an immediate in, understanding of, and access to, emerging Downtown cultures. Bockris was a Downtown scenester, frequenting the Mudd Club, working for Andy Warhol, and appearing on episodes of *TV Party*. In a 1981 article on the charismatic Bockris, he is described as a goofy party boy, doing back flips while sporting a yellow SWAT helmet at the Mudd Club: “[he] zeroed down helmet first into a beer puddle; demonstrating his cranial invulnerability to a pair of admiring teenage punkettes, and endearing me to such a brash creator of the wild antic. In the chemically altered nightlife of NYC, such feats pass without too loud a report.”⁶⁴⁸ Through the vivacious Bockris,⁶⁴⁹ Burroughs socialized with celebrities and competing cultural icons, such as Mick Jagger and Andy Warhol.

Bockris made a career out of writing about cultural giants such as Warhol, Lou Reed, Muhammad Ali and Keith Richards, attempting to render the real person behind each popular image, and to “write a mythology for the counterculture.”⁶⁵⁰ Bockris claims that he was Burroughs’s aide during the Nova Convention, and he reminisces about his own book project, which fell on the heels of the convention: “At the time I started to write the book, January 1979, William Burroughs was one of the most glamorous and hip people in New York.... I think the fact that he had never sold out, and had come back to seize his throne at the same time that great yahoo Nixon fell from his, was a true and irresistible story.”⁶⁵¹ Similar to Lotringer’s fascination with Burroughs, Bockris too capitalized on the Nova Convention as a turning point in Burroughs’s career. Lotringer and Bockris both shaped a history of Burroughs that suited their

⁶⁴⁸ Terence Sellers, “Victor Bockris: Positives,” *Vacation Magazine*, No. 7, Summer 1981, 28.

⁶⁴⁹ From 1979 to 1981, Bockris worked on two Burroughs-related book projects: *With William Burroughs: A Report from the Bunker*, and an edited anthology, *The Adding Machine*. See Bockris, “King of the Underground,” <http://www.gadflyonline.com/archive/August99/archive-burroughs.html>.

⁶⁵⁰ Teeuwen, “Interview with Victor Bockris on William Burroughs,” <http://realitystudio.org/interviews/interview-with-victor-bockris-on-william-burroughs/>.

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*

own personal projects and/or constructed narratives. Bockris comments on the prior obscurity of Burroughs, “Burroughs returned to New York in 1974, after twenty-five years of self-imposed exile from America...Most of his American fans thought he was dead. Nobody recognized him on the street.”⁶⁵² The Nova Convention celebrated the reclamation of Burroughs, as the prodigal son of American culture, lost and then found. Yet, the time was hardly a one-note celebration for Burroughs himself, as he “was plagued by so many problems then—from poverty, through the death of his son and unrequited love, to writer’s block.”⁶⁵³ Another downside to Burroughs’s fame was a relapse on heroin from 1979–1980, which coincided with Grauerholz’s departure from New York to a quieter life in Kansas.

Influenced by Burroughs’s methods, Bockris describes his biographical portrait of him as a cut-up of audio interviews. Addressing the liberties of Bockris’s cut-up journalism Grauerholz comments, “Victor’s editing of his material was very creative, kind of a hash of slice-and-dice. Conversations would be assembled from different days and places—that’s his license.”⁶⁵⁴ The interviews are claimed to occur in many locations in the U.S. and otherwise, but a good majority happened at the Bunker. Bockris describes the dinner party culture of the Bunker:

The great thing about going to the Bunker...was that Burroughs and Grauerholz had created one of the very few real literary salons in New York. ... Ninety percent of the time I visited in the evening, there were at least two other people, and sometimes there were four or five. The majority of the guests drank vodka and smoked pot, and there was a lot of laughter and acting out. Bill would suddenly transform himself into one of his characters and talk in an accent. Over dinner he would hold court, telling stories or coming up with dry comments.... He was not distant. He was with us, even though most of us were forty years younger than he was. Like Andy Warhol’s Factory, the Bunker was hermetic and individual, and it ran on the same principles of love and tension.⁶⁵⁵

⁶⁵² Ibid.

⁶⁵³ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁴ King, “The Burroughs Guy: An interview with James Grauerholz,” http://www.lawrence.com/news/2007/jul/30/burroughs_guy/?burroughs_2007.

⁶⁵⁵ Bockris, “King of the Underground,” <http://www.gadflyonline.com/archive/August99/archive-burroughs.html>.

Running in New York circles of celebrity, media and nightlife, Bockris evaluates the Bunker as part Factory and part literary salon. As salon, the Bunker was a site for conversation and exchange, artistic and intellectual, but also fun. Salons also circulated around a host or hostess, and in this case, Burroughs. Like the Factory, it was its own world, operating with its own set of rules and creating its own star system built on “love and tension.” At the time, Bockris was also working for Warhol’s *Interview* magazine, using the tape-recorded interview format for his articles. The idea of taping conversations of dinner parties, of bringing different kinds of people from all walks of life to the Bunker to talk to Burroughs, stemmed from his work for *Interview*.⁶⁵⁶ Bockris comments on the process of creating these party scenarios and situations for interesting dialogue:

... I did arrange to introduce him to those I thought he’d like to know better, and whom I thought would like to meet him. Like Christopher Isherwood. I took Susan Sontag but she knew him from before. I took Andy, but he’d met him before...it wasn’t like he’d never been introduced to these people, but it was just giving them an opportunity to have dinner together and talk, just have a little party. It was a hell of a lot of fun. And I did it with a lot of different people and not just famous people. With kids who were friends of his, totally unknown kids...⁶⁵⁷

Bockris essentially viewed the Bunker salon, or the creative exchanges of the dinner party, as something of cultural merit, and worth historicizing. Aside from the book project, Bockris published transcripts of these conversations in a variety of publications including *National Screw*, *Chic*, and *The New Review*, which subsequently encouraged Burroughs related stories to be picked-up by *Oui*, *High Times* and *Interview*.⁶⁵⁸

As Barry Miles notes in his biography of Burroughs, his “very high profile in the late seventies was caused, to a great extent, by a book project undertaken by Bockris, who arranged a

⁶⁵⁶ Sellers “Victor Bockris,” 28.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁶⁵⁸ Bockris “King of the Underground,” <http://www.gadflyonline.com/archive/August99/archive-burroughs.html>.

succession of dinner parties in New York, from 1979 until 1980.”⁶⁵⁹ However, Bockris’s book, which further propelled Burroughs into the media spotlight, was also critiqued for being exploitative and superficial by the Burroughs biographer Ted Morgan, an author whom Bockris has since accused of misinformation and fabrication.⁶⁶⁰ On the issue of fame in relation to Bockris’s project, Grauerholz addresses criticisms that Bockris was merely mapping a Factory model onto the world of the Bunker. Grauerholz endorses Bockris, and comments that he was self-aware of the Factory/Bunker comparison, and Warhol’s manipulations of celebrity: “Bockris was not only a student of, but also resonated with, the Warholian outlook on fame... So sure, you read ‘Report from the Bunker’ and you’re going to get an impression that it was a constant world of superstars.”⁶⁶¹ Bockris and Grauerholz’s contrasting views on celebrity caused them to work with Burroughs and produce his image in different ways. Grauerholz blames the mechanisms of celebrity as the reason for his relocation to Kansas in 1979, right after the Nova Convention:

I left New York because I’m not down with glamour—the whole phenomenon of celebrity and fame, and how distorting that is to the famous individual’s life. And even though I have some responsibility-or credit, or blame—for helping make William more famous, I got fed up with how delusional people become with their mental image of Burroughs, someone that they *have to* talk to.⁶⁶²

Grauerholz was highly aware, and skeptical of, the machine that constitutes an icon, or in other words, the discursive structures and legitimizing forces that constitute constructions of celebrity, authorship, and genius. Burroughs’s public image had been in the making for years, starting with *LIFE*’s sensational 1959 cover story on the Beats, entitled “Beats: Sad But Noisy Rebels.”⁶⁶³

But, his star did not truly rise until the late 1970s. Grauerholz refers to the formation of celebrity

⁶⁵⁹ Victor Bockris quoting Barry Miles, *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁰ Ted Morgan, *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs* (New York: H. Holt, 1988); and Bockris’s refutation of Morgan in “King of the Underground.”

⁶⁶¹ King, “The Burroughs Guy: An interview with James Grauerholz,” http://www.lawrence.com/news/2007/jul/30/burroughs_guy/?burroughs_2007.

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶⁶³ Paul O’Neil “Beats: Sad But Noisy Rebels” *Life Magazine*, November 30, 1959, 114-130.

as a “collaborative creation” and a “projection”⁶⁶⁴ of which Bockris, Grauerholz, and the Nova Convention all played significant roles.

Specifically, Grauerholz was key to helping Burroughs go public with his work, setting up performance dates and domestic and international tours. Similar to Bockris and Lotringer’s estimation of Burroughs’s status, Grauerholz quips, “When he got back to New York, he was in the category of: “Oh, him? Is he still alive?”⁶⁶⁵ A self-trained scholar of the Beats, Grauerholz wrote fan letters to both Allen Ginsberg and Burroughs, and was finally introduced to Burroughs through Ginsberg in 1974. After a briefly love affair, Grauerholz became Burroughs’s assistant, manager, and roommate. With an explicit interest in the art of communication, he was appointed head of their business, William Burroughs Communications. Grauerholz also felt like he was more of a son to Burroughs, and experienced a rivalry with Burroughs’s only child, Billy, whom Burroughs had a very complicated and tempestuous relationship with.⁶⁶⁶ The journal, *High Performance*, describes Grauerholz’s contribution to Burroughs’s performance career:

[He] is perhaps, more than anyone, responsible for directing the once-reclusive Burroughs out into his relatively lucrative career as a sort of latter-day Mark Twain of the reading circuit. With his absolute efficiency and rigorously high standards, Grauerholz was and still is the first poet’s manager to adopt the techniques of the entertainment industry.⁶⁶⁷

However, adopting entertainment industry techniques to book engagements was mostly due to financial need, and moreover, that Grauerholz recognized public readings as a viable source of income. Bockris further remarks on Grauerholz’s talent to get Burroughs gigging, and the overall impact of performance on his career and long-overdue recognition:

⁶⁶⁴ King, “The Burroughs Guy: An interview with James Grauerholz,” http://www.lawrence.com/news/2007/jul/30/burroughs_guy/?burroughs_2007.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁶ See footage of Grauerholz in Alan Yentob and Howard Brookner, *Burroughs: The Movie*, 1983.

⁶⁶⁷ Lewis MacAdams, “Nightclubbing With William Burroughs, John Giorno, and Laurie Anderson,” *High Performance*, Winter 1981-2, 42.

The first effective thing James did was quickly set up some readings. As soon as Burroughs started to give public readings of his work in New York and beyond, a brush fire was lit. Apart from that great record *Call Me Burroughs* recorded in Paris around 1964-1965, his voice had rarely been heard.⁶⁶⁸

After seeing and hearing recordings of Burroughs's readings, which are highly entertaining and engaging, I find it nearly impossible to read his words without filtering them through an imitation of his distinct vocal quality and cadence, and mentally imaging his stillness as he sat hunched in his suit, behind an aluminum desk. Adding to the allure of his fantastic narratives, Burroughs created a magnetic and definitive vocal-performance style and stage persona, evident through his voice-over recordings, and his live reading performances. Burroughs's voice, disseminated through live public readings and Bockris's Bunker conversations, promoted Burroughs in a way unparalleled to book sales and the circulation of his voice through writing alone.

In the fall of 1981, Grauerholz organized a U.S. tour with Burroughs, Laurie Anderson and Giorno performing at various nightclubs. They played The Ritz in New York City and the Roxy in Los Angeles, where David Byrne, Brian Eno and Devo were in the audience, and Burroughs received a standing ovation.⁶⁶⁹ At this time, Anderson's song, "O Superman," was topping international musical charts and increasing her mainstream popularity in the U.S. Grauerholz deliberately headlined Anderson over Burroughs to maximize the tour's publicity and to fill venues to capacity. *High Performance* reports on Grauerholz's philosophy and touring success: "Grauerholz is convinced that poets and artists, if they are good performers, can make good livings in the public eye. A very seductive argument, and one which is so far proving accurate, with Burroughs on *Saturday Night Live* and Anderson in *Newsweek* and the Top

⁶⁶⁸ Teeuwen, "Interview with Victor Bockris," <http://realitystudio.org/interviews/interview-with-victor-bockris-on-william-burroughs/>.

⁶⁶⁹ MacAdams, "Nightclubbing With William Burroughs, John Giorno, and Laurie Anderson," 37, 42.

This avant-garde performance tour also resulted in the collaborative album, *You're the Guy I Want to Share my Money With*, produced by Giorno Poetry Systems Records. Surprisingly, the album was panned in the *SoHo Weekly News* in winter of 1982, and specifically for representing a “Downtown” cliché. The artists were criticized for looking too artsy and “Downtown” on the album cover, with music columnist Time Page sarcastically remarking, “They are photographed in a loft, and I’ll just bet they live in downtown Manhattan; so that clinches it. They’re Artists!” He then goes on to chastise the album itself:

You're the Guy I Want to Share My Money With strikes me as the epitome of everything that is wrong with much of the downtown mentality. This is an album of juvenile posturing—it presents the Artists as personality, as packaged attitude, art as lifestyle...This is nothing but another face for would-be-bohemians, just the latest thing to talk about at the rock club... As for me, this disc makes we want to never set foot below 14th street again.⁶⁷¹

The harsh review implies a shift in perception of Downtown cultures by 1982, from within the Downtown press, supposedly the biggest advocate for Downtown artists. The cross-generational avant-garde collaboration between Burroughs, Giorno, and Anderson represents a cardboard Downtown identity that is tritely all too familiar to the reviewer.

As previously noted, Burroughs performed on *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* in November 1981, during the time of his tour with Anderson and Giorno.⁶⁷² Significantly, it was Burroughs’s first television appearance, and it was on *SNL*, the nationally aired, popular and edgy late night sketch show broadcasted live from New York City. Host Lauren Hutton introduced him as “the

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid., 43.

⁶⁷¹ Tim Page, “Groovin’: Laurie Anderson, John Giorno, and William Burroughs, *You’re the Guy I Want to Share my Money With*,” *SoHo Weekly News*, February 9, 1982, 56.

⁶⁷² Burroughs’s *Saturday Night Live* segment of November 7, 1981 can be viewed in full in Alan Yentob and Howard Brookner, *Burroughs: The Movie*, 1983. Lauren Hutton hosted the episode and the musical guest was Rick James.

greatest living writer in America.” Epitomized by his *SNL* appearance, his performance is comic and laughter from the audience is prominent. Bockris comments on Burroughs’s natural comedic talent, “And Bill was a great reader of his writing, with perfect timing and the delivery of a stand-up comedian.”⁶⁷³ On *SNL* Burroughs reads an excerpt about the infamous Dr. Benway who attempts to resuscitate a patient in cardiac arrest with a toilet plunger. Appropriate to the sketch television format, his reading was filled with the slapstick and gag humor, delivering “set-up” lines such as, “Did I ever tell you about the time I performed an appendectomy with a rusty sardine can?” Burroughs’s performance also resonated with drug culture affiliated with the early days of *SNL*, with lines like, “Dr. Benway sweeps instruments, cocaine and morphine into his satchel.” The studio added sound effects to enhance the humor of his narration, including explosions and a grand soundtrack finale of “The Star Spangled-Banner.” Like Burroughs’s live stage readings in nightclubs, the staging and camera work was simple, and stood apart from the usual blocking and framing of the ensemble, skit-based show. The segment emphasized Burroughs’s voice, and mostly consisted of a simple medium close up of Burroughs reading in his signature suit and tie, spot lit from behind a desk.

In a recent interview for *Reality Studio*, a popular website on the universe of Burroughs, Dave Teeuwen, develops an interesting line of inquiry when he asks Victor Bockris, “In *With William Burroughs* I get the impression he was something like an event that people attended — ‘Oh, have you been to see Burroughs? No? Oh, you just have to go!’ — rather than a writer.”⁶⁷⁴ Although this question speaks to the popular criticisms of Bockris’s book, the concept of a gathering of people as a productive art experience (whether performance, Happening, or social

⁶⁷³ Teeuwen, “Interview with Victor Bockris,” <http://realitystudio.org/interviews/interview-with-victor-bockris-on-william-burroughs/>.

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid.

event), relates to this dissertation's overall evaluation of the art-party. Burroughs was a writer, performer, and a multimedia visual artist, and created a range of viewer/reader experiences. Transforming a person into an event is common to celebrity, entertainment, and amusement cultures, and certainly has exploitive connotations and histories attached. However, the idea of "a person as event" as a shared art experience, also dependent upon conversation and exchange, aligns with contemporary theorizations of the social practices of art.⁶⁷⁵ And, I would further argue that such experience is always already social to begin with (art is socially engaged, and viewer dependent, even if only an audience of one). Burroughs performed and created experiences in the space of his home as host, and on the public stage as countercultural figure and "great" American writer and reader. Burroughs's shift to performance, across both registers, was undoubtedly influenced by Downtown New York as his immediate environment and support structure.

Conclusion: The Nova Convention Revisited

In November of 1996, a crowd of 2,000 people gathered at the Lied Center at the University of Kansas for the event, "The Nova Convention Revisited." The one-evening-only performance spectacular was a compressed update of the 1978 Nova Convention. It re-celebrated the 82-year-old Burroughs, while also remembering the iconic performances and significance of the original event, for the first time. Many performers from the original 1978 roster paid a second homage to Burroughs, including John Giorno, Patti Smith, Lenny Kaye, Deborah Harry, Chris Stein, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, and Ed Sanders (of the Fugs). "The Nova Convention

⁶⁷⁵ See Claire Bishop, *Participation*, 2006, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, 2012, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," 178-83, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," 51-79; Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 2002; Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, 2011); and Grant H. Kester *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, 2004.

Revisited” was a three-and-a-half hour-long mix of music, performance art, poetry, with mixed media slides and videos projected between acts. However, this time, “The Nova Convention Revisited” was part of the University’s larger cultural initiative, “A Festival: William S. Burroughs and the Arts,” which also included the acquisition of “Ports of Entry,” a traveling retrospective of Burroughs artwork, originally shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, on view at the University’s Spencer Museum. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that “Ports of Entry” was centered upon twenty-two collages, collaboratively produced by Burroughs and Gysin in the mid-1960s and originally intended for inclusion in *The Third Mind*.⁶⁷⁶ Again, *The Third Mind* plays a prominent role in representing and remembering Burroughs, and is perpetually tied to the Nova Convention and how the event itself is commemorated.

However, superseding the Frank Zappa role (who replaced Keith Richards in 1978), a major 1990s rock star was first rumored to perform, and in fact showed for a surprise appearance. Michael Stipe, frontman for the band REM, added a 1980s–1990s alternative music spin to this Nova event. REM emerged from 1980s college radio, but by 1996, the band had fully crossed-over to commercial pop, dominating MTV’s 1991 Music Video Awards amongst having subsequent radio and video hits. Like the original Nova Convention, the “Revisited” version was also hyped by rumor, excitement, and surprise, but with much less disappointment at least for the rock enthusiasts in the crowd.

In contrast to my previous case studies, the Nova Convention differs in terms of its short duration over the course of full days, multi-venue format, and academic interdisciplinarity. The conference was a series of events, running for only three days, as compared to the multi-year

⁶⁷⁶ Christopher Knight, “The Art of Randomness: ‘Ports of Entry’ Attempts to Show How Visual Ideas Were Important to Burroughs’ Literary Endeavors,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 1, 1996, accessed September 26, 2013, http://articles.latimes.com/1996-08-01/entertainment/ca-29922_1_modern-art.

runs of *TV Party* and Club 57. Although the Nova Convention had a schedule of events during daylight hours, the majority of the performances and all main events happened at night. While this schedule reinforces ideologies and dichotomies of appropriate day versus nighttime activities and social behaviors, when assessed in totality, the Nova Convention challenged and experimented with the symposium format. Spatially, the Nova Convention was a constellation in arrangement, spread across various sites in Manhattan. However, the Nova Convention's main events were exclusively located in the East Village and housed at the Entermedia Theater, New York University, and Club 57 at Irving Plaza. Lotringer states on why he sought the support of NYU over Columbia, where he worked: "I never involved Columbia because it was too far away and I didn't want to mix the two scenes, Uptown and Downtown, it was not good for me...I knew the French Department at NYU, they were very competitive with Columbia so I always worked with them [laughing]. I was very welcome Downtown at NYU."⁶⁷⁷ While *TV Party* was an extension of Downtown nightlife, it was mostly shot just above 14th Street at ETC Studios (with some episodes shot onsite at Downtown venues such as the Mudd Club). Club 57 was located at 57 St. Marks Place but held affiliated concert programming at Irving Plaza, which hosted the new wave concerts of the Nova Convention. Unlike *TV Party* and Club 57, the Nova Convention explicitly extends to the arenas of intellectual, academic, and literary history. Furthermore, the term "interdisciplinary" can be fully employed in its academic context to describe the Nova Convention's chain of events and intent, as opposed to the other two case studies, which both have multi-media formats, with *TV Party* as multi-spatial in its live broadcast.

⁶⁷⁷ Sylvère Lotringer, interview with the author, April 2015.

To briefly recap, *TV Party* was based on a live variety-style television format; Club 57 had an infinite array of events, exhibition types and themes; and the Nova Convention was too a heterogeneous collection of performers, performance types, and attendees, with a common purpose of producing a Burroughs tribute. Specific to the art-party format, all three case studies creatively embrace combination, variation, and collaboration. As sociocultural practices they also bridge the popular and mainstream with the avant-garde and underground, and embrace a DIY ethos. Applying the cut-up method reintroduced and popularized by the Nova Convention, an art-party can also be interpreted as a cut-up or collage— which subsequently demonstrates a range of possible outcomes though socially engaged/ participatory/ collective/ collaborative art practices. When considering the social arts of the everynight as an experimental cut-up, elements are unpredictably mixed-up in random and spontaneous ways to achieve new and surprising experiences or products. A Downtown-identified art-party, the Nova Convention links Burroughs and Gysin’s cut-up to the concept of a party as a social and creative practice, and as a method for generating new and diverse art forms.

The 1978 Nova Convention represents a nexus of forces that tells the story of Burroughs’s relationship to Downtown New York, and how this particular time and space allowed the forgotten author to rise to cultural and critical acclaim. When considered a Burroughsian social cut-up or collage, the Nova Convention celebrates Burroughs’s career and influence to depict how creative drive, or art itself, navigates “a plan for living” and can “cut-through” life to find new ways to survive. The cut-up, as a means for social change or to express social possibilities, is apparent in the narrative content of Burroughs’s novels. But, it is at the Nova Convention where this call to action takes physical shape Downtown through a variety of personalities, performance types and social activities, while simultaneously connecting

Burroughs to the rhetoric of postmodernism stemming from French theory (e.g. Lyotard, Baudrillard, Foucault). The site of Downtown New York in the 1970s and 1980s is also a story of sustainability and enduring multiple crises, from severe debt to the early AIDS epidemic. The question of how one not only survives, but also creatively thrives to produce new culture within western systems of oppression, against government, social or cultural mechanisms of control, is reintroduced and addressed by discourses of the Nova Convention, as supported by the distinct cultural climate of Downtown New York.

Conclusion

It is important to have fun.

— Committee for the Real Estate Show, affiliated with ABC No Rio, from the “Manifesto or Statement of Intent,” December 1979⁶⁷⁸

Will art have fun?

—Jake Yuzna, *THE FUN: The Social Practice of Nightlife in NYC* (2013)⁶⁷⁹

The After Party

In the late 1970s through the early 1980s, the art-party established conditions for experimentation, collectivity, participation, and social interaction that structured Downtown’s vibrant creative economy, and opened up pathways for envisioning city life. If perceived as one big art-party, Downtown was not *made* through the work of individual artists alone, but through active collective endeavors of creative *placemaking* and queer *worldmaking*, from public access television shows to the nightclub theme parties. Yet, Downtown was not defined by geography and time alone. It denotes aesthetics, attitude, and a lifestyle that were formed, communicated, and shared through the art-party and its non-normative politics of fun. Individual scenes developed through processes of collaboration, conversation, avant-garde impulses, active/critical appropriation of retro and pop culture, and an abundance of creative and social energy to burn. It was also a culture of fearless spontaneity and do-it-yourself projects, which were more about *doing-it-yourself-with-others*. Downtown was a site for producing and consuming underrepresented and challenging works, which were not housed or nurtured within mainstream

⁶⁷⁸ Committee for the Real Estate Show, “The Real Estate Show, Manifesto or Statement of Intent,” *Abcnorio.org*, “History,” December 1979, accessed July 14, 2013, http://www.abcnorio.org/about/history/res_manifesto.html.

⁶⁷⁹ Jake Yuzna, “Will Art Have Fun? The Social Practice of Nightlife,” in *The Fun: The Social Practice of Nightlife in NYC*, Jake Yuzna, ed. (New York: Museum of Arts and Design and powerHouse Books, 2013), 12-23.

or art institutional support structures. To this end, this “new wave” of furious Downtown activity critiqued mainstream society and cultural institutions.

Through this dissertation’s historical reflection and reassessment, Downtown marks a break, or rupture that defines modes of cultural production in terms of *before* and *after* the Downtown period in question. This project’s larger claim is that when conditions of the art-party are shutdown, creative potentialities are obstructed and the processes in which culture can organically progress are impeded. The spaces and activities that in fact *make* cities exciting cultural centers, and places where creative inhabitants can live/work/play in a fulfilling manner breakdown and disappear, along with the ability to produce innovative and experimental cultural forms. The art-party, while at times enacting modes of appropriation of past cultural forms, requires participants to both *live in* and *for* the particular moment at hand, marking and branding art forms in the time and place in which they were made. Although this seems a given for any cultural product, this is not the case any longer, and this quality is slowly eroding away. As Lotringer poignantly remarked on the current state of culture, “Everything is instantaneous but not in a way that makes the present richer. You are always ahead of yourself—the present doesn’t exist.”⁶⁸⁰ If society is indeed forgetting how to enrich the present, along with quality of life, there runs a risk of losing touch with the current cultural moment to the extent that we lose sight of how to even create a better time and place in which to live.

In conclusion, I first address the rhetoric surrounding the end of the Downtown scene. As advanced by this dissertation, recollecting and understanding the mechanics of the historic art-party, as illustrated by my three case studies, is critical to grasping the long-term costs of creative stasis in New York City. In discussing its “death,” Downtown is equally construed as a cultural

⁶⁸⁰ Sylvère Lotringer, interview with the author, April 2015.

perspective and mindset. Michael Musto remarks in his *Village Voice* article of 1987, “The Death of Downtown”:

Fortunately downtown is more than real estate. Its also a state of mind so entrenched that the property developers can’t eliminate it; they can only shift borders. Chunks of downtown will have to relocate...to boroughs and the ‘burbs where they’ll find manageable rents if not the kind of creative convergence that makes for stimulation. For that, they’ll have to reconvene after midnight in the city scene, where the downtown state of mind will somehow manage to become a location again.⁶⁸¹

As hinted by Musto, these psychic qualities are more difficult for neoliberalism to obliterate through its patterns of privatization, gentrification, and social conservatism. Yet, he emphasizes that the “downtown state of mind” is place-based, even if just temporary. Sarah Schulman describes a “gentrification of the mind and creativity” in New York City, and outlines gentrification’s nefarious affairs in the wake of the AIDS crisis. However, she still holds on to change and hope, and a pursuit of new definitions of happiness within the homonormative present, or what she calls the “Gay fifties”:

Can the Gay Fifties last forever? Thankfully not. Just as with straight people, these 1950s values of control and homogeneity will probably prove to be unbearable at some point and we will have a swing back in the other direction towards LGBT communal living, sexual revolutions, and collectivity. I hope I live long enough to see my prediction come to pass.⁶⁸²

Reminiscent of Burroughs’s self-exile from the oppression of the U.S. in the 1950s, and his subsequent relocation to the Bowery in the 1970s, Schulman anticipates a future “prodigal return”— an impending pendulum swing in the socio-cultural sphere and zeitgeist. Put into the

⁶⁸¹ Michael Musto, “The Death of Downtown: Who Took the Life out of Nightlife?,” *The Village Voice*, April 28, 1987, 20.

⁶⁸² While Schulman’s book describes the gentrification of the mind, and what has been lost through its processes, she still holds out for change and hope. “Just as with straight people, these 1950s values of control and homogeneity will probably prove to be unbearable at some point and we will have a swing back in the other direction towards LGBT communal living, sexual revolutions, and collectivity. I hope I live long enough to see my prediction come to pass.” See Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, 160.

words and topic of this dissertation, it is a call for the revival of the urban modality of the art-party.

Despite dramatic declarations of Downtown's end, and following Musto and Schulman, I too hold on and out for systematic change. This conclusion acknowledges that artists affiliated with my three art-party case studies are still making work, and that the memory of Downtown continues to be reactivated and revisited through various forms of cultural and intellectual production. A palpable legacy of Downtown lives on through the ongoing creativity of ex-Downtown art-partygoers, as well as their public recognition. Club 57's funky recombination of queer, pop, punk, and retro aesthetics are alive and well, and still very visible in a variety of recent alumni works and exhibitions. Through a slick millennial update, *TV Party* has recently been reincarnated online with four new episodes available for digital play.⁶⁸³ And, more than a few parties were thrown in honor of Burroughs as part of "The Burroughs Century," or his worldwide 100th birthday celebration in 2014. Furthermore, a younger generation of artists and impresarios has recently embraced the art-party. Although there are more instances of art-party updates than this conclusion can possibly address since the early 1980s, this trend is most evident in the Museum of Arts and Design's THE FUN Fellowship, a distinctive program supporting social practices of nightlife arts in New York City, and the *Wildness* projects by the multi-media artist, Wu Tsang. Moving into a longer trajectory of this dissertation's implications, a brief discussion of such contemporary practices unhinges the art-party from the past to reveal how it has adapted, and can even find institutional partners.

⁶⁸³ The *TV Party* website has undergone two design changes and is still finding its digital legs. As of December 2014, three episodes have been recorded and can be viewed in full on *TV Party*, accessed 12 December 2014, <http://www.tvparty.tv/>.

While the Downtown scene is a place-based cultural movement that ended decades ago, with this dissertation examining its short apex, its lessons can shed light on the current cultural situation of New York City. Nevertheless, various creative types, whether immediately affiliated with the Downtown scene or emerging artists creating art-parties in its aftermath, still carry on the spirit and potentialities of Downtown, and the art-party as a cultural mode of production/consumption, exchange, and inspiration. In eager anticipation of all tomorrow's parties, this conclusion also explores and considers Downtown *now* through the art-party's more contemporary traces and rearticulations.

The Death of Downtown

The transitional site of Downtown New York at the onset of the 1980s is a story of negotiating multiple crises, whether in terms of city bankruptcy, the AIDS epidemic, the burgeoning drug economy, police violence, or the displacement of gentrification. In addition, making money emerged as a new neoliberal anxiety. As described by Kenny Scharf, "Suddenly money got in the picture, and that changed everything...It created a bit of a panic with everyone."⁶⁸⁴ Ann Magnuson further remarks on the influence of money and the impact of the Downtown underground moving above-ground and into the art market and mainstream:

Money just seemed unimportant, until around the end of Reagan's first term, when the pockets of Jean-Michel's paint-splattered Armani suit were overflowing with hundred-dollar bills, Madonna was hitting it big on MTV, and Keith Haring was treating us all to our very own bottle of Cristal at Mr. Chow's."⁶⁸⁵

⁶⁸⁴ Wolff, "Where the Radiant Baby Was Born," <http://nymag.com/arts/art/features/keith-haring-2012-4/>.

⁶⁸⁵ Ann Magnuson, "The East Village 1979-1989, A Chronology: Ann Magnuson on Club 57," *East Village Issue: Artforum International*, v. 38 no2 (October 1999): 121. For additional and similar commentary on the demise of the scene by both Magnuson and Scharf, also see Richard Metzger's interview, "East Village Preservation Society: Club 57," <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/12458/1/east-village-preservation-society-club-57>

Together, such factors altered Downtown's cultural climate to the distinct detriment of the art-party. While Downtown performers still carried-on their acts into the 1980s and beyond, and immediately set-up shop in East Village spaces such as the Pyramid Club, Limbo and 8BC,⁶⁸⁶ they too changed alongside the shifting-terrain of Downtown in the time of the mega-club and the art boom. Burlesque superstar John Sex commented that he spent under \$50 for all of his events in the year 1981, while a stage set for just one of his shows at the Palladium in the mid-1980s cost over \$5,000.⁶⁸⁷

The bond between art and nightlife was no longer self-made in small unconventional spaces, but a cog in the profiteering wheel of larger nightlife venues such as the Palladium and Area. Christopher Mele states, "The opening of the Palladium marked the symbolic end of a long subcultural journey from youthful angst and mainstream rejection to full-blown commodification and assimilation into the mainstream."⁶⁸⁸ Moreover, the Palladium is the nightclub where Haring, Basquiat and Scharf were commissioned to do permanent paintings and installations as part of the décor, further solidifying their East Village art superstardom. And as their careers skyrocketed, they were condemned in art academic circles: "EV artists were an easy target for *October*—who hated their popular acceptance, and in turn blamed them for gentrification."⁶⁸⁹ Schulman also comments on Area's objectification and depoliticization of artists by turning them into a new, nighttime culture of "display":

Area, in 1985, was one such space, but unlike loose participatory clubs, Area was all about Display: It was heralded as a performance club, but they put artists literally into display cases to be looked at as background, not to be heard. This shifted a venue/neighborhood focused on artistic production into a destination venue/neighborhood for tourists who wished to drink and socialize surrounded by artists as the background

⁶⁸⁶ See Parnes, "Pop Performance in East Village Clubs," 5-16.

⁶⁸⁷ Frank and McKenzie, *New Used and Improved*, 81-85.

⁶⁸⁸ Mele, *Selling The Lower Eastside*, 232-233.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 234.

scenery. The role of the clubs changed from incubators of new artistic ideas into businesses whose primary task was the reproduction of status through sexual, social and business networking.⁶⁹⁰

The relationship between art, creativity and nightlife drastically changed in just a few short years Downtown. Its culture and outlook evolved from active participation amongst many, to one of passive “display” controlled by few. Instead of making space and a sense of place through creative placemaking and queer worldmaking, artists seemed to superficially provide decoration. This was literal, in the case of the wall based works of Basquiat, Haring, and Scharf, and even performative, as locals became nightclub ambience and a draw for “tourists.” While I do not want to completely dispossess Area and the Palladium of their worldmaking capacities, these nightclubs were huge financial undertakings. They were well oiled and funded enterprises managed by non-artists and people with distinct desires to *make* money through the vehicle of nightlife— with Downtown as a chic and attractive veneer. The Palladium, a symbol of Downtown’s gentrification, was eventually refurbished into a 12-story New York University residential dormitory in 2001. As a throwback to its former glamour and glory, it is named “Palladium Hall.” As part of NYU’s real estate expansion, it still stands today to drive up rents and market inflation in the neighborhood.

By 1987, both the East Village art and club scenes had been declared dead in the Downtown press by its central advocates, alongside the vast damage caused by the AIDS epidemic. Musto notes in the *Village Voice* that the death of nightlife is symptomatic of neoliberalism’s rule on creativity: “Money is now the driving force on enterprises that used to rely on creativity. Starting a new club or restaurant requires a talent for drumming up a million

⁶⁹⁰ Sarah Schulman, “Making Love Making Art: Living and Dying Performance in the 1980s,” in Molesworth, *This Will Have Been*, 422.

dollars or more. Anyone who has any creativity left after that probably bought it.”⁶⁹¹ Furthermore, the *East Village Eye*, a newspaper whose lifespan reflects the very rise and fall of East Village art scene (1979-1987),⁶⁹² assumed responsibility for instigating the art boom and then wanted “to take credit for killing it.”⁶⁹³ After covering the scene for two short years, Carlo McCormick hailed its demise in 1985 with the epitaph, “East Village RIP,” claiming “the *Eye* has officially run out of gimmicks to repackage the same old drivel.”⁶⁹⁴ Most prominently, death hangs heavy over Downtown’s history, as the national tragedy of the AIDS epidemic was responsible for extinguishing the lives of so many Downtown artists and inhabitants in the 1980s and 1990s, depleting its creative community and crushing the spirit of its survivors. Ann Magnuson comments on the end of the scene, “Ironically, about the same time money and fame entered the picture, so did AIDS. By that time, Club 57 was winding down. The place closed around 1983. After that, a good third of our surrogate family died from the Plague and we were forced—reluctantly, and painfully—to grow up.”⁶⁹⁵ Under the weight of such forces, Downtown’s once thriving creative economy collapsed.

The expiration date of 1983 also speaks to larger pop cultural trends, and the contemporary cultural crisis to engender the “new.” Simon Reynolds and the cultural critic Mark Fisher both identify an entropic cultural phase beginning in 1983. This occurs immediately after the ascendance of post-punk, where the site of Downtown plays a prominent role.⁶⁹⁶ As the dominant practices of remix and appropriation condition a sense of time flattening in the 21st

⁶⁹¹ Michael Musto, “The Death of Downtown,” 16.

⁶⁹² Liza Kirwin, “The East Village 1979-1989, A Chronology: Timeline,” *East Village Issue: Artforum International*, v. 38 no2 (October 1999): 121.

⁶⁹³ Carlo McCormick, “East Village R.I.P.,” *East Village Eye*, vol. 7, no. 59, October 1985, 23.

⁶⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁵ Magnuson, “The East Village 1979-1989, A Chronology: Ann Magnuson on Club 57,” 121.

⁶⁹⁶ Reynolds, *Retromania*, 198; and Mark Fisher *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009), and *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014).

Century, Downtown or the era of post-punk and new wave have become popular cultural “go-tos” as both producers and consumers now “shop” through time to perpetually revisit this moment. In agreement with their claim of cultural entropy and a failure of contemporary American visual culture to produce “the new,” or as I would like to phrase it, works with recognizable margins of difference in their appropriation of past forms, 1983 aligns with my own bracketing of the Downtown scene. The year 1983 marks the beginning of Downtown’s swift end—with Reagan’s reelection in 1984 the final nail in Downtown’s coffin. In an attempt to understand the recent stasis of both the avant-garde and the popular in American visual culture, the Downtown art-party demonstrates the urgency of creativity, customization, and the will to imagine and shape better worlds to inhabit.

Partying On: (Re)Locating Downtown

Although Downtown has been historically declared dead, its queer and alternative legacy is actually still alive and well in a variety Club 57 “alumni” works and exhibitions. Club 57, as an origin story, has been mentioned in relation to the Brooklyn Museum’s 2012 retrospective of Keith Haring’s early work, and the productions of Marc Shaiman and Scott Whitman, including the Tony award-winning musical and film *Hairspray*.⁶⁹⁷ There have been a few gallery exhibitions devoted to the space of Club 57, and most notably the show, “East Village West” in Los Angeles. The 2011 exhibition was part of the Southern California cultural initiative, “Pacific Standard Time: Art in LA 1945-1980,” spearheaded by the Getty Foundation and Getty Research

⁶⁹⁷ See Rachel Wolff, “Where the Radiant Baby Was Born,” <http://nymag.com/arts/art/features/keith-haring-2012-4/>; and Mary Kay Schilling, “Girls, Girls, Girls! Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman put showbiz back on Broadway.” *New York Magazine*, April 3, 2011, accessed March 6, 2012, <http://nymag.com/arts/theater/features/marc-shaiman-scott-wittman-2011-4/>.

Institute. Jointly curated by Magnuson and Scharf, the exhibition depicts the cultural exchanges between east and west coasts, illuminating how the East Village was influenced by the pop culture of Hollywood, across film, television, and music. Individually, Scharf has continued to show his pop-inspired works, including an art-party series called “Cosmic Cavern.”⁶⁹⁸ Ann Magnuson also carries on a Club 57 aesthetic in her recent multi-media and performance work. Magnuson’s “The Jobriath Medley: A Glam Rock Fairy Tale” was performed at SFMOMA in 2011 and in Los Angeles’s 2012 Outfest. In 2014 she celebrated the life and work of friend and collaborator, Mike Kelley, by throwing him a “One Hour Art Bacchanal,” or an honorary art-party, at his postmortem retrospective at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA in Los Angeles. The iconic queer nightclub performer, Joey Arias, also continues to actively tour to this day. His theatrical production, *Arias With a Twist*, a surreal pop-cultural fantasy (complete with aliens, an octopus, and the devil) in collaboration with puppeteer Basil Twist, was also turned into a vivid documentary of the same name (Bobby Sheehan, 2010). Briefly covering only a small set of Club 57’s more prominent alumni here, there are many participants who have gone unmentioned that are still working and creating out of this particular scene.

Improvisational and interactive, *TV Party* is an antecedent of the music and reality television programming of MTV, and the DIY aesthetics and eclecticism of user-generated video cultures such as YouTube. It is unsurprising then that after a 30-year hiatus, Glen O’Brien has digitally rebooted the show, stating, “the Internet is the new public access.”⁶⁹⁹ While the *TV Party* website has undergone redesigns and has existed as a work-in-progress since 2013, the concept of *TV Party* has received a full Web makeover as “tvparty.tv.” In an early iteration, the

⁶⁹⁸ Ann Binlot, “Kenny Scharf delivers Cosmic Cavern Museum this Fall,” *ARTNEWS*, November 13, 2014, accessed January 15, 2015, <http://www.artnews.com/2014/11/13/kenny-scharf-cosmic-cavern-museum/>.

⁶⁹⁹ See “About,” <http://tvparty.tv/>.

website posted a manifesto “addendum” and two episodes. The newer version in 2015 includes four full episodes, with social media links to featured guests. As new shows are shot on location at different parties and venues, as opposed to the public access studio, there is also a predominance of ambience, and hand held camera shots of party conversation. However, the digital update of *TV Party* appears to be a one-way video-sharing platform, consistent with the online predominance of short form video, which then can be shared, liked, or tweeted.

While the new episodes do highlight original *TV Party* cast members and special guests representative of Downtown, such as Chris Stein, Debbie Harry, and Walter Steding, James Chance and Andy Shernoff, most of the content contains new musical performances, artists, and personas. Symbols and histories of Downtown’s past remix online in the cultural present, with O’Brien now playing a Warholian mentor and ringleader to emerging artists amongst New York’s cultural elite. While the story of *TV Party* continues to unfold online, the remaining episodes of what the site calls “original” *TV Party*, which now can be ordered via Netflix, distinctly illuminate the social and media dimensions of the Downtown scene.

In addition, one of the most rewarding aspects of my dissertation is the ways in which it has connected me to new conversations through the innovative format of the conference. Dialogue and exchange is central to the form of the art-party, and my experience producing this very project echoes these qualities. This extends not only to the participants that generously shared their thoughts and memories with me via interviews, but also to the social format of the conference itself, as illustrated but my case study of the Nova Convention. During my dissertation research, I participated in two “art-party” conferences, THE FUN Conference on Nightlife as Social Practice (Museum of Arts and Design, New York City, 2013), and The Burroughs Century (University of Indiana, Bloomington, 2014).

At THE FUN Conference I chaired a session provocatively titled, “States of Excess and Undress: Fashion, Performance, and Taboo in Nightlife,” featuring panelists from New York’s contemporary queer nightlife scene. Established in 2011, THE FUN Fellowship is an innovative program supporting social practices of nightlife arts in New York City. Interestingly, it is institutionally funded through the Museum of Arts and Design, complete with its own publication and conference (2013). The panel included party impresarios Cameron Cooper of Gag! and Leo GuGu of My Chiffon is Wet, who both showed up appropriately and fashionably late on a Sunday morning at 11am. There were also participants from two art-party collectives, JUDY (Benjamin Haber and Brian Belukha) and WOAHMONE (Nica Ross, Nath Ann Carerra, and Savannah Knoop). Both Cameron Cooper and JUDY were FUN Fellowships recipients in the Program’s inaugural year of 2011.⁷⁰⁰ WOAHMONE’s parties of inclusive radical lesbian chic were voted “Best Queer Dance Party” in 2011 by the *Village Voice*,⁷⁰¹ while Leo Gugu’s My Chiffon is Wet grew in popularity to eventually bring Alan Cumming on board. As a fan and emcee, Cumming praises the event: “‘My Chiffon is Wet’ is what I think people mean when they talk about the good old days of New York...People of all ages and sexualities and genders are dancing and dressing up and performing and talking and having fun.”⁷⁰² Despite the difficulty of maintaining a balance of live/work/play in and around New York City, the nightlife artists on this panel still manage to create art-parties in the spirit of the Downtown scene.

Ruminating on the politics of fun, the panelists demonstrate how nightlife arts, and especially queer spaces and practices, trouble categorical distinctions and social norms to open

⁷⁰⁰ For information on these 2011 FUN Fellowship recipients, see “THE FUN: Fellowship in Social Practice of Nightlife,” *The Museum of Arts and Design*, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://madmuseum.org/series/fun>.

⁷⁰¹ “Best Queer Dance Party New York 2011-Woahmone,” “Best of NYC 2011,” 2011, accessed March 2, 2015, <http://www.villagevoice.com/bestof/2011/award/best-queer-dance-party-3130243/>.

⁷⁰² James Michael Nichols, “Alan Cumming Becomes Regular Host Of NYC’s ‘My Chiffon Is Wet’ Party,” *Huffington Post: Gay Voices*, May 6, 2014, accessed March 2, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/06/alan-cumming-my-chiffon-is-wet_n_5274190.html.

up new types of experiences and creative expressions in New York City. These art-party potentialities are accessed through questioning and destabilizing the assumed boundaries between queer and normative, taboo and traditional, work and play, alternative and mainstream, entertainment and activism, good and bad taste, and fantasy and reality. During the roundtable, the parameters of excess and undress were applied to new nightlife practices, whether as an event, installation, performance, or self-fashioning. Similar to Club 57, or as Cumming suggests, “the good old days of New York,” excess and undress were explored as maximal versus minimal aesthetics and strategies to acknowledge a DIY ethos of new social nightlife practices within late capitalism. This included their penchant towards trash cultures—whether through a camp love of pop culture’s unwanted leftovers, or the use of vintage/recycled materials. As excess and undress similarly imply taboo behavior, they are also readily associated with nightlife’s more permissive modes of consumption and exhibitionism. In reflection, the conversation surveyed how new art-party practices playfully shape and reimagine the relationship between art, creativity and nightlife in New York City today.

As a second example, I also participated in the multifaceted celebration, The Burroughs Century, at Indiana University (although centennial events were held internationally). Comparable to the hybridity of the Nova Convention, which mirrored Burroughs as a multi-media artist, it was only apropos that The Burroughs Century include exhibits of Burroughs’s paintings and papers, a screening series, various performances, an academic conference, and after party.⁷⁰³ Special guest and no wave doyenne Lydia Lunch not only gave a public lecture at the University, but she also delivered a second performance at The Bishop Bar with the punk-garage band, The Tsunamis, in true Nova Convention-style. Resonating with the party antics of

⁷⁰³ For a comprehensive list of events and links see “Press Release,” January 13, 2014, accessed January 28, 2014, <http://news.indiana.edu/releases/iu/2014/01/william-s-burroughs-century.shtml>.

Club 57, the conference's costume-themed after-party was held at a local queer nightclub, the Back Door. It was billed as "a climactic night of Burroughs-themed dance, interactive art, games and theatre, spirits, mutations and the unabashed, full-on 'systematic derangement of the senses.'" ⁷⁰⁴ While I traditionally participated in the conference by delivering a business-as-usual academic talk, I also appeared in an impromptu stage performance at the nightclub. I had the distinct pleasure of tying up Burroughs scholar/performance artist/Associate Dean from Lake Forest College, Davis Schneiderman, while he read Burroughs and extinguished matches in his mouth. As a grand finale, the arts festival ended in a séance led by a professional medium attempting to contact Burroughs and any other spirits who happened to be hanging out at the Back Door that evening.

Demonstrating a perpetual collective fascination with the life and work of Burroughs, whether in 1978 (Nova Convention), 1996 (Nova Convention Revisited), or just in 2014, art-parties provide a forum for the active remembrance of Burroughs. As fan cultures, they are also highly generative and creative as new discourses and works both spring forth and circulate through Burroughs. Moreover, Burroughsian art-parties provide a criticism of academia itself: when symposia are run along strict disciplinary lines and regimented expectations, which tend to standardize many conferences today, a particular kind of conversation and intellectual and artistic potentiality is lost. As an interdisciplinary scholar of visual cultural studies, with a past history of creating video and performance art, I am admittedly drawn to inventive and experimental conferences. Interestingly enough, it is through Burroughs that this symposium

⁷⁰⁴ "Disobey the Cloth: A Costume Ball and a Channeling of William S. Burroughs," Facebook event, February 8, 2014, accessed February 18, 2104, <https://www.facebook.com/events/192583907608574/>. For more information on the venue and its events, see *The Back Door*, accessed February 18, 2104, <http://backdoorbloomington.com/index.html>.

model is repeatedly broken, and cut-up into a new genre that is multifaceted and multimodal, as he is continuously reevaluated, remembered, and celebrated through time.

Downtown's legacy of the art-party can also be found in the work of an emerging artist within the contemporary art scene, Wu Tsang. The art-party series and documentary film, *Wildness* (Wu Tsang, 2012), based on the *Wildness* parties by Wu Tsang with DJs NGUZUNGUZ and Total Freedom (Ashland Mines and Asma Maroof, and Daniel Pineda), is to date the most critically acclaimed art-party update within art world circles. *Wildness* was a weekly performance event night held at the Silver Platter, a transgender and queer bar catering to the Latino community in the MacArthur Park area of Los Angeles. Immediately identifying with this community, Tsang is a young second-generation Chinese-Swedish-American artist who describes himself as "transfeminine" and "transguy."⁷⁰⁵ Spanning installation to performance to documentary film, the *Wildness* related works have been featured in the 2012 Whitney Biennial and New Museum Triennial in New York, which subsequently lead to other accolades and international exhibits for Tsang. An alumni of prestigious art programs, Tsang has a BFA from the Art Institute of Chicago, and was undergoing his MFA (2010) training at the University of California, Los Angeles, when his *Wildness* parties coalesced in 2008. Like Club 57, Tsang brought his art-school energy into the queer nightclub to revitalize its space through independently produced and mixed performance types.

⁷⁰⁵ Holland Cotter, "Wu Tsang," *New York Times*, July 7, 2011, accessed January 7, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/08/arts/design/wu-tsang.html?_r=0; and Alex Gartendfeld, "Wu Tsang," *Interview*, February 2011, accessed January 7, 2015, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/wu-tsang-whitney-biennial-2012>.

Tsang describes *Wildness* as “a fun party that evolved into a more explicitly political platform.”⁷⁰⁶ As another part of his practice, Tsang conducted grassroots community organization and activism by forming a legal clinic next door to the Silver Platter, called *Imprenta*, to serve low-income queer and trans people of color. However, like most scenes, *Wildness* lasted for a brief two-years. The gaining popularity of *Wildness* came with inherent costs and the project soon eclipsed. Tsang wrestled with the notion that *Wildness* compromised the community integrity of the Silver Platter and its existence as a safe space for “las chicas” of the Latino LGBTQ community.⁷⁰⁷ From Silver Factory to Silver Platter, the art-party is a form that has taken on various iterations, mixing fun with a spectrum of politics and allowing for expression and empowerment on individual and community levels.

Reinstating A Downtown State of Mind

As implied by Ward Shelley’s “The Downtown Body,” analyzed as this dissertation’s point of departure, New York City has been at the center of innovative cultural production and avant-garde movements since the postwar period. It has also been a leader in cultural gatekeeping and tastemaking for decades. However, while New York struggles to be a place where creative types can satisfactorily live/work/play, other cities have yet to fully pick-up the mantle to carry the inspirational torch (e.g. the well-known passing of the European avant-garde from Paris to New York in the early 20th Century). While there are instances of place-based

⁷⁰⁶ Interview with Wu Tsang in “Wu Ingrid Tsang in Conversation with Mary Kelly,” in *Retrospective of Sharon Hayes and Andrea Geyer*, Andrea Geyer and Sharon Hayes, eds. (Switzerland 2010): 72.

⁷⁰⁷ For more information on the sensitivity and complexity of Wu Tsang taking on the “voice” of a community through his work and political advocacy, see his untitled statement and “Wildness” in *Charming for the Revolution: A Congress for Gender Talents and Wildness*, essay for the publication of the event series of the same name, Tate Modern, February 1-2, 2013, accessed January 8, 2015, <http://wutsang.com/writing/>; and “Wildness” in *Whitney Biennial 2012*, Jay Sanders and Elisabeth Sussman, eds. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2012), 286-289.

scenes in London in the 1990s, and Tokyo and Berlin post-millennium in terms of the visual arts, it is now a market-dominated, mobile art fair and biennial driven art world. But, moreover, as noted by *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter, the art market shapes the cultural life of New York City: “The reality is that, directly or indirectly, in large ways and small, the current market system is shaping every aspect of art in the city: not just how artists live, but also what kind of art is made, and how art is presented in the media and in museums.”⁷⁰⁸

Of course, there has been a general finger-point towards “globalization,” including the pros and cons of globalization as a paradoxical means of both diversification and standardization.⁷⁰⁹ Yet “globalization” cannot be entirely to blame for draining Downtown’s creativity, although it certainly plays a part. Gentrification too enabled Downtown’s demise, displacing creative types and various ethnicities to homogenize the previously mixed neighborhood of the East Village as New York City literally sold itself, and sold-out, through real estate.⁷¹⁰ While the years of my project bracket Downtown’s cultural surge, it also agrees with the consensus that the end of the 1970s marks the neoliberal turn, and its economic policies and social conservatism have yet to derail.

Downtown, which extends to American culture more generally, was manically prolific when there were low barriers of entry. Now entry is beyond high, with prohibitively high costs of living and producing that have begun to smother the city’s creative life. High barriers of entry impede wide cultural participation and the conditions that both produce and sustain creativity, such as the basic necessities of access to space and the time to produce work. The lack of

⁷⁰⁸ Holland Cotter, “Lost in the Gallery-Industrial Complex: Holland Cotter Looks at Money in Art” *The New York Times*, January 17, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/19/arts/design/holland-cotter-looks-at-money-in-art.html?_r=0.

⁷⁰⁹ Pamela M. Lee, *Forgetting the Art World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

⁷¹⁰ Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, 2012.

response, or care to maintain lower barriers of entry, is partially because those in power do not care to sustain urban creativity as they still profiteer despite the financial crisis of 2008 or the next impending “bubble-burst.” Put plainly, neoliberal greed has obstructed Downtown New York’s history of cultural development by placing a stranglehold on creativity itself and ignoring how its processes shape urban life and make cities more livable.

Moreover, artistic innovation has historically depended upon countercultural space as a hotbed for experimentation and cross-pollination, with the site of Downtown as epitome. Yet, new subcultures, avant-gardes, and cohesive cultural movements have increasingly ceased to emerge from urban centers in the U.S. since the postwar period. Meanwhile, notions of a contemporary avant-garde, along with the production of *new* forms of popular culture free of formal nostalgia, appear to be in dissolution. If we accept that we exist in a period of general visual cultural inertia, or a quandary to engender the *new*, cultural producers are therefore, inevitably, running out of a past to recycle, remix, and reclaim.

I believe that this issue is connected to the critical loss of autonomous urban space, where creativity can flow and visual culture can flourish. But, the procession of newness is also cumulative, reactive, and highly social. And importantly, the art-party is its breeding-ground. This dissertation’s analysis of the art-party questions the *dislocated* status of the avant-garde, subcultures, youth cultures, and the underground, and together, their *place-less-ness* in the urban environment. If cities are no longer sites for artistic risk and failure—qualities vital to any vanguard—cities will lose their creative edge.

Yet, this also due to forgetting the past itself and eschewing the vital histories of marginalized communities by cultural producers today. In a recent account, Luis Manuel Garcia professes the importance of writing a nightclub history of sexual, gender and racial diversity

from a queer archival perspective. This work runs counter to what he believes is the current trajectory of the dance club scene and electronic dance music (EDM), a large global circuit dominated by straight white men. He also emphasizes the importance of evaluating nightlife cultures within the context of continued intolerance and hate crimes against LGBTQ communities worldwide, as subjects in his article report a decrease in sexual diversity and acceptance in nightclubs.⁷¹¹ And furthermore, it is disclosed that participation in DJ cultures is especially exclusionary for females, whether straight or queer. This is radically different from the Downtown scene where women played prominent roles: Dany Johnson (an out lesbian) was the house DJ of Club 57, while Anita Sarko was a premier DJ at the Mudd Club, Danceteria, and the Palladium. According to those who participate in and create contemporary nightlife scenes, there is a perception that nightlife has become increasingly severed from its queer and nonwhite past to its own detriment. Forgetting how nightlife promoted civil rights, community, and heterogeneity, impacts the kind of culture that gets produced and consumed today: cultures without those histories and values in mind.

Agreeing with Elizabeth Currid-Halkett's claim that "Art and culture are at their most efficient within social life," the nexus of art-culture-social life needs to be recognized, strengthened and sustained in large American cities, as a creative urban life is no longer a given (or an existing condition as it had been in the past).⁷¹² In Manhattan, cultural participation has dangerously become relegated to a viewing-only, tourist-only, moneyed-to-play-only, creative economy, whether you are local or not. Obviously, one can participate in the creative economy as an employee within the larger cultural industry or art world. However, it has become

⁷¹¹ Luis-Manuel Garcia, "An Alternate History of Sexuality in Club Culture," *Resident Advisor*, January 28, 2014, accessed January 8, 2015, <http://www.residentadvisor.net/feature.aspx?1927>.

⁷¹² Currid-Halkett, *The Warhol Economy*, 183.

increasingly difficult to *make* a creative world of one's own, or any kind of alternative to the art market or Broadway, or to *make* the time and space to satisfactorily live/work/play in New York City.

Remembering, and dare I say reincarnating a “Downtown state of mind” through the form of the art-party is needed now more than ever. In doing so, queer and alternative cultures will not only revitalize cities, but American culture at large. Whether in New York, or in other urban locales, a collective and concentrated effort must be made to nurture, sustain and protect the processes of creativity, as vitally embedded in sociality across the arts. And as Musto also evocatively reminds us in “The Death of Downtown,” money cannot necessarily buy fabulousness or creativity, but further propels a copycat syndrome of culture, and one predicated on self-promotion and worship.⁷¹³ While it is highly doubtful that such motivation to cultivate creativity will come from the art market, or the commercial mainstream, I am optimistic for change and support through select cultural and academic institutions. While I am well aware of the collusion between the art market and major museums,⁷¹⁴ THE FUN Fellowship at the Museum of Art and Design in New York is a groundbreaking model for what museums can do to nurture experimental cultures that capitalize on the productive intersections of art and nightlife. The unconventional symposiums and programs that I have encountered during my research give me hope for future inventive alliances with institutions that support experimental works and eclectic intellectual forums. Moreover, such alliances and resourcefulness are fundamental to successful practices of creative placemaking and queer worldmaking. Although one has to

⁷¹³ Musto, “The Death of Downtown,” 15-20.

⁷¹⁴ For recent examples supporting this generalization, see Julia Halperin, “Almost one third of solo shows in US museums go to artists represented by just five galleries,” *The Art Newspaper*, April 2, 2015, accessed April 20, 2015, “<http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Almost-one-third-of-solo-shows-in-US-museums-go-to-artists-represented-by-just-five-galleries/37402>”; and Cotter, “Lost in the Gallery-Industrial Complex: Holland Cotter Looks at Money in Art,” http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/19/arts/design/holland-cotter-looks-at-money-in-art.html?_r=0.

search, and maybe via the roundabout process of dissertation research, there are fellow risk-taking academic and art institutional “revelers” out there, who you might just happen to meet at an art-party.

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