

David Reed, "Streets and Studios," *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-75* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2006), 16-23.



Streets and Studios

David Reed

In 1971, I moved into a Lower Manhattan loft building on Broadway between Duane and Thomas streets. On Saturday afternoons I would often go to see the exhibitions in SoHo. Sometimes, while walking north to the galleries, I counted the balconies on the buildings overlooking Broadway. They had been built for viewing parades, which no longer continued uptown past City Hall. Before reaching Houston Street, I could count over eighty, and wondered about the absent audience, the missing parade. But once I got to SoHo, I thought that perhaps I had found that audience: the crowd of young artists for David Diaó's opening at Reese Palley Gallery, for example, who spilled out across the street and into Fanelli's bar. Or were they the parade?

The late 1960s and early 1970s were exciting times of innovation for art—Minimalism, Conceptual art, experimental film and video, sound works, earthworks, and various kinds of performance art. The experimental painting that I saw in the New York galleries and museums fit right in. Brave and alive, it was painting that learned from other forms of art, as well as other media, and produced its own innovations. At its core was freedom—the right to be equal and different. Insights and perceptions could be turned into new ways of seeing and living in the world.

The experimental painters whose work I followed during those years were represented by galleries in SoHo and uptown, and were shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art and sometimes at the Guggenheim Museum. Their work was readily accessible to an aspiring artist like myself. In SoHo, I first discovered Mary Heilmann's paintings in the back room of Paley & Lowe Gallery, where I also followed shows of Joan Snyder and Pat Steir. Elizabeth Murray, Alan Shields, Lynda Benglis, and Richard Van Buren exhibited their works at Paula Cooper Gallery, while Jo Baer and Harriet Korman were at LoGiudice, Mel Bochner at Sonnabend, and Blinky Palermo at Galerie Heiner Friedrich. At an opening of one of Alan Shields's shows, I was amazed by his multicolored painted fingernails. Dorothea Rockburne and Ralph Humphrey showed their work uptown at Bykert Gallery, where, like other young artists, I could walk into the director Klaus Kertess's office to chat with him about his and other shows. In those years, within the painting community, there was a sense of shared concerns that could be debated and discussed. I could join in the ongoing conversations of friends and colleagues as I viewed shows. We often disagreed, but because we had a mutual vocabulary, the conversations continued—anyone could join.

The paintings that I saw fit into a larger context that was also discussed. Friends and I attended performances at 112 Greene Street of *The Natural History of the American*

**View from 43 West Broadway,
looking south toward the World
Trade Center, July 13, 1974**

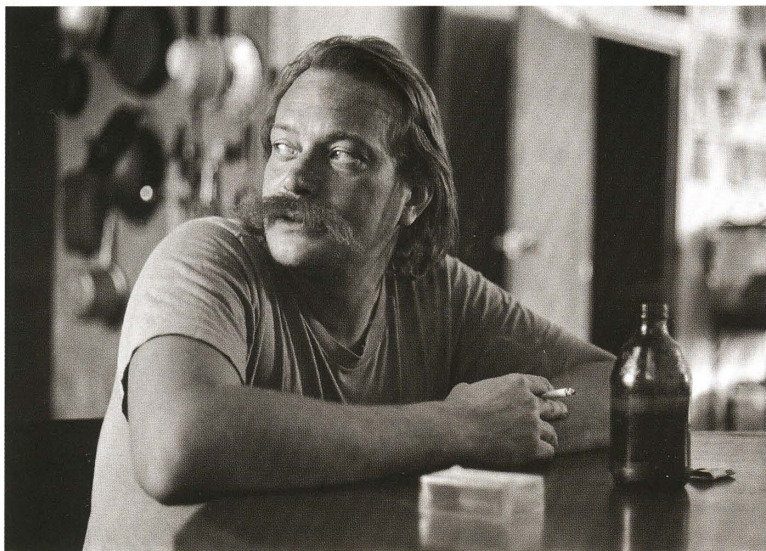


Fanelli's bar, on the corner of Prince and Mercer streets, 1975

Dance and Grand Union, improvisational dance groups. At a Joan Jonas performance at LoGiudice, I saw live action and media images juxtaposed for the first time. Screenings at Anthology Film Archives introduced me to the films of Ernie Gehr and Yasujiro Ozu.

When the SoHo galleries closed for the evening, there were several bars where the discussions continued. The Spring Street Bar was ultramodern with slanting walls (proto Zaha Hadid architecture). A block down West Broadway, Ken's Broome Street Bar was cheaper and rather homey—good for late-night meals. Still further downtown, on the corner of West Broadway and Walker Street, was Mago's, with its pool table and red-and-white checked tablecloths. The owner, Tommy, exchanged art for a tab. The Three Roses, Fanelli's, and Barnabas Rex were other choices—all sometimes a little rougher. In the evening, I went to these bars in search of two not always compatible goals: romance and conversations about painting. The urban social interaction was wonderful. You never knew whom you would run into or what might happen. Addresses for a loft party often circulated and everyone was welcome to go for dancing (bring your own drinks), or I would exchange information with artists for later studio visits.

There was a sense of great potential at the beginning of these evenings, a feeling that was usually replaced by a familiar disappointment on the walk home. I often thought of a story about Eugène Delacroix. A younger painter—I think it was Auguste Renoir—noticed him walking in

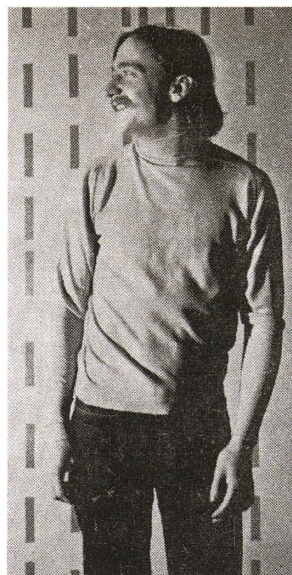


Paris and trailed him across most of the city. Delacroix finally stopped and stood outside the lit window of his mistress's apartment, watched the light for a while (I imagined him in a black top hat and elegant evening attire), and then turned and returned alone back across Paris to his studio. There were two unconsummated interactions: Delacroix and his mistress, and an intimidated Renoir, who was afraid to approach Delacroix. This story consoled me as I thought about the missed opportunities and frustrations of many evenings.

I had heard of philosopher Walter Benjamin's take on writer Charles Baudelaire's *flâneur*. But just as I was no Delacroix, I was no painter of modern life. There was no crowd to merge with on these walks home at night, nothing to look at except the emptiness, no idle wandering—it was too dangerous. In the early 1970s, almost no one lived in Lower Manhattan; Dan Christensen recalls that he could walk home from Max's Kansas City on Park Avenue and Seventeenth Street to his loft on Great Jones Street and not see a single person. Coming home late, the streets were abandoned and empty, totally quiet—no pedestrians, no traffic, no open restaurants or stores. There were no lit storefront displays along the street, almost no streetlights; higher up in the buildings, illegal residential tenants kept their windows dark. Only the World Trade Center towers were always lit: whole floors were turned on or off with one switch by the janitor services while they worked. Like many of the

Above: Kenneth Showell at his loft on Lispenard Street, 1975

Below: Portrait of Dan Christensen published in *The National Observer* with an article on the 1969 Corcoran Biennial in Washington, D.C.





Roy Colmer's loft on Walker Street, 1968

artists I knew, I hadn't grown up in a big city, and my street smarts were learned. With my senses on full alert, a piece of paper blowing off the street could make me jump. If I felt especially nervous about getting mugged, I would walk in the center of the street. I tried to carry as little cash as possible and dressed to look like a bum.

I was always aware of how populated and busy the now-empty streets had been during the day. This sense of missing activity made these walks even lonelier, and I was reminded of Franz Kafka's descriptions of New York at the beginning of *Amerika*, which combined a sense of aloneness and crowds. In the novel, Karl Rossmann, a new immigrant, is staying in his uncle's light and airy steel commercial and residential building. From a balcony outside his room, he watches the constant stream of vehicles and people on the narrow street below, until his uncle warns him that such solitary, idle gazing will lead to his sheer ruination. Like Rossmann, as an artist I felt totally separate from the business that went on during the

day in Lower Manhattan, the center of American commercial culture. Sometimes it seemed as if I was walking through a city in a science fiction movie—post-disaster, after an atomic bomb or an alien invasion.

Along with these deserted streets, the studios are the other spaces that I remember well. The lofts were big and open, much like the building Kafka imagined in *Amerika*. They were built for nineteenth-century industrial uses—sweatshops and factories—and these inhospitable spaces had often been abandoned before the artists moved in. In a photograph from this time, Roy Colmer's studio looks like a church—a grand space—with light streaming in through the tall arched window. Looking carefully, one can find evidence of his studio's previous industrial use: on the floor to the right was a slightly raised platform to support a heavy machine, and near the window there was an old electrical box with a disconnected conduit. Colmer left a huge machine in the center of his kitchen, because it was too heavy to move. Sometimes there were still smells in the lofts from previous use: oil leaked from machines, the spices, fish, or cheese that had been in storage. These spaces seemed haunted by the past industrial work done there: perhaps that is why we were so obsessed with work.

Painting was under attack as an outmoded medium in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the experimental painting that interested me was caught in the middle. It was condemned by the conservative defenders of tradition, who used outmoded definitions and old-fashioned criteria to make judgments against it. At the same time, it was dismissed by those who did not see how painting could be connected to other forms of experimental art. For these critics, no kind of painting was possible. Such attacks stemmed from a lack of understanding

**Harriet Korman's studio on
West 37th Street, 1970**





Peter Hujar, *Loading Dock at Night*, 1976. Gelatin silver print, 14½ × 14½ in. (36.8 × 36.8 cm). Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

and sympathy for experimental painting, or from ideological turf wars and posturing. Often, experimental painting was not acknowledged because in such an old and distinguished, male-dominated medium, the innovations had come from unexpected, new sources—women, blacks, lesbians, gays, counterculture radicals, and bohemian sensualists. These attacks, however, did not stop the artists from painting.

Of the artists that I followed, some had sudden and remarkable success and fame, while others achieved recognition much later. By contrast, some lost what success they had, and other painters never got a break at all. The critical attacks did not eliminate the practice of painting, but they took a toll in a human way, making survival for individual painters more and more difficult. Many doors closed for them. New York was a difficult place to live in the mid-1970s. It was a hopelessly decaying city, and after the conflict of the Vietnam War, Watergate, political assassinations,

and race riots, many artists, feeling that improvement was not possible, left.

The artists in this exhibition tried to extend the possibilities of abstract painting. These experiments need to be recognized for the health of the practice. Forgotten except by other painters, this work has been mostly overlooked by art historians and curators in their critical discussions and exhibitions. This may well be the reason that so many young artists involved with installation, film, and performance can be put into historical contexts, while the narrative of painting remains muddled and confused. And perhaps this is why young painters today so often circle back and revisit these same issues in their work, practicing painting in a multidisciplinary context. When discussing painting now, it is even difficult to come up with common terms to make a conversation meaningful. There is no sensible history of painting since the mid-1960s, and there can be none until the contributions of artists like those in this exhibition are recognized.

Today, the once-derelict neighborhood of Lower Manhattan is being completely revamped. Within a decade, it will likely be a tourist attraction for the 9/11 memorial and home to wealthy business leaders and movie stars. Behind and between all of the new condominium towers, some nineteenth-century steel buildings still exist—they will always remind people of the cultural history of downtown New York art in SoHo, Tribeca, and the Bowery. At the small park on Duane Street, I think about Elizabeth Murray in her studio nearby. On Walker Street, I think of my studio visits there with Harriet Korman. I love to pause at the intersection between Church and Franklin streets and imagine Guy Goodwin squatting in the empty street at 3 A.M., drawing the view uptown.

Despite all of the changes in Lower Manhattan, on some days in the fall and spring, especially during Indian Summer, there is still a very particular clear silver or golden light, created by the reflections from the water in the harbor. This non-material, crystalline light fascinated Henri Matisse when he visited in 1930—in New York, he said he found the light he vainly sought in Tahiti. Through the 1970s, Battery Park City was an empty landfill created from the ground excavated during the building of the World Trade Center. At night I would break into the construction site with friends; we entered an unexpected desert. Rising behind the sand dunes, lit up and sparkling, the Twin Towers were a mirage on the horizon.

On August 7, 1974, I was one of the lucky bystanders to observe Philippe Petit's unauthorized high-wire walk between the two towers. Petit, describing his experience, said that he could see people congregating a quarter mile below, and even hear voices as the crowd reacted when he jumped or kneeled. For a few moments, the routine of Lower Manhattan was interrupted. Stock traders, artists, vendors, police officers, lawyers, janitors, messengers, and construction workers looked up, collectively acknowledging this daring act of artistic inspiration—it was not unlike many others at the time that anonymously surrounded them—unseen, everyday.