

**CRITIC'S PICK**

When 'New Art' Made New York the Culture Capital

Artists in the early 1960s drew from a heady mix: Mad magazine and Marilyn; the civil rights movement and the death of a president; queer bodies and "Pieta." It's all at the Jewish Museum.



By **Holland Cotter**

Published July 21, 2022 Updated Aug. 27, 2022

When I was a kid in the early 1960s, my Eisenhower-Republican physician-father always had the latest copies of his favored subscription publications on his home office desk: Time, Life, the Journal of the American Medical Association, and Mad magazine.

To me, Time and Life pegged him an engaged citizen; JAMA, as a conscientious professional. But Mad? With its Alfred E. Neuman mascot and anarchic, sacred cow-skewering humor? It signaled some whole other kind of reader, one with a taste for cultural weirdness akin to the one I was developing.

That taste ran through the early '60s, a manic era and a hinge moment between the Cold War and Vietnam, Civil Rights and Black Power, repression and liberation; beatnik and hippie; Ab-Ex and Pop. It's the era documented in the smart, split-level show called "New York: 1962-1964" at the Jewish Museum, an institution that, we learn, played a significant role in the cultural shifts.

This survey of close to 300 works of art and ephemera, in a suave design by Selldorf Architects, starts by putting us smack in the middle of downtown Manhattan with a mural-size photo of foot traffic on West 8th Street in Greenwich Village. With a neon liquor-store sign installed overhead and a soundtrack of urban static, you've got a classic, could-be-anytime New York City scene.



Foreground, Mark Di Suvero's "Untitled (hungblock)," 1962. Background, three works by Claes Oldenburg, from left: "Soft Calendar for the Month of August," 1962; "Brasette," 1961; "Poster for the Store," 1961. Lila Barth for The New York Times



"The Eye of Lightning Billy," 1962, by Harold Stevenson. Lila Barth for The New York Times

It becomes era-specific in the first gallery with a selection of shots by the early '60s pavement prowlers: Diane Arbus on the city's waterfront, Lou Bernstein on the Bowery, Leonard Freed in Harlem, Frederick Kelly on the subway, and Garry Winogrand at the Central Park Zoo. There's a soundtrack here too, emanating from a vintage jukebox featuring a selection of period cuts, and what an upstart moment in pop music this was: Bob Dylan, Chubby Checker, John Coltrane, the Shangri-Las.

A new abnormal in art starts here too. Just a few years earlier, new art in New York still meant Abstract Expressionism: brushy, drippy, spattery painting, epic in scale, operatic in pitch. But that's not what's here.

In the center of the gallery we see a skinny, tilting scarecrow of a sculpture made of construction site scraps by a 20-something artist named Mark di Suvero. On the wall behind it hangs a hyper-realistic close-up painting, by Harold Stevenson, of a single staring eye. A shrine-like niche nearby frames a roughly hand-molded, plaster-and-paint relief of feminine underwear by a young Claes Oldenburg.



“New York: 1962-1964,” a survey of nearly 300 artworks and archival objects, starts with a mural-size photo of foot traffic in Greenwich Village. Lila Barth for The New York Times

All three artists operated outside the Ab-Ex world. Stevenson (1929-2018) was a friend of another young realist, Andy Warhol, and an early Factory habitué. Oldenburg, who died this month at 93, was taking his images — shoes, sandwiches, street signs — from things in his East Village neighborhood. Di Suvero, part of a new loft-dwelling generation, lived far downtown near the Wall Street area, where he scoured the streets for materials at night.

And not far from his South Street Seaport studio, at Coenties Slip, was a small community of artists who had, for reason both of economic necessity and self-definition, distanced themselves from the art establishment. These outliers included Robert Indiana, Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin, James Rosenquist and Lenore Tawney, and, forming a community of their own nearby, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. All are represented in the show, Johns and Rauschenberg extensively. And all were as different from the each other as they were from the dominant styles of their day.

It wasn't long before uptown came knocking, with the Jewish Museum heading the institutional pack. A new director, Alan Solomon, arrived in 1962 determined to make the museum a groundbreaker in introducing what he called "the new art," and he didn't waste a minute.

In 1963, he gave Rauschenberg his first retrospective. The following year, he did the same for Jasper Johns. Also in 1964, on commission from the United States government, he took a substantial group show of young American artists to the Venice Biennale and there scored a hit that tipped the art world power balance from Europe to New York.



The artist Robert Rauschenberg designed costumes for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company's "Antic Meet," 1958. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Lila Barth for The New York Times

The Jewish Museum could easily have packaged "New York: 1962-1964" as a small, tight institutional tale. Instead, it makes the story part of a much larger one, with an expansive view to be credited to its original organizer, the Italian curator Germano Celant, who died from complications of Covid in 2020. (The exhibition is billed as a collaboration between his studio and a Jewish Museum team that includes Claudia Gould, director; Darsie Alexander, chief curator; Sam Sackeroff, associate curator; and Kristina Parsons, curatorial assistant.)

The larger history, multidisciplinary and much of it grassroots political, unfolds chronologically on the show's second floor. In 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the suicide of Marilyn Monroe, in different ways and to different degrees, shook up the nation. The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was a lifted-up moment, and the show gives it, and the civil rights movement itself, spacious attention, through archival materials and work produced by artists and collectives — the Spiral group, the Kamoinge Workshop — inspired by the movement.

Then, just a few months later, the country experienced a head-on psychic crash with the assassination of John F. Kennedy. And here the predigital popular press becomes the chief expressive voice in gallery displays of newspapers, magazine covers and a video clip of Walter Cronkite's choked-up, on-air announcement of the president's death.



A gallery display of period magazines, including Time, Life and Ebony. Lila Barth for The New York Times



The country experienced a head-on psychic crash with the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Lila Barth for The New York Times



Mad magazine captured the zany anxiety of the era, including the Cuban Missile crisis. Lila Barth for The New York Times

Through it all, much of Solomon's "new art" was on the job, plugged into the manic national mood. The show ends with an extended shout-out to the curator through documentation of the 1964 Venice Biennale triumph, when Rauschenberg became the first American to win its grand prize, the Golden Lion, in painting. In fact, in the context of "New York: 1962-1964," the Venice event feels anti-climactic. It's the audacity of much of the art that preceded it, and the political issues that this work brings to the fore, that keeps you looking and thinking.

Solomon's Venice group show — intended, he said, to "impress Europeans with the diversity of American art" — had no women, but Celant's includes several. Materially rich assemblages by Nancy Grossman and Carolee Schneemann seen here are more interesting to look at and think about than almost anything around them. (Schneemann had to wait decades for her own Venice moment; she won the Biennale's Golden Lion for lifetime achievement in 2017.)

And in an exhibition of what could be taken as, among many other things, a mini-survey of the rise of Pop Art, the single most dynamic Pop image is Marjorie Strider's big, bold "Girl with Radish." The relief painting originally appeared in a 1964 Pace Gallery exhibition called "The First International Girlie Show" which, in line with the warped irony that has always shaped the market, had work by only two women, Strider and Rosalyn Drexler, among its ten artists. (Clearly intent on righting this balance, Celant also included the Drexler piece, an antic self-portrait and, in other sections of the show, works by Lee Bontecou, Chrissy, Sally Hazelet Drummond, Martha Edelheit, May Stevens and Marisol Escobar.)



Detail of "Self-Portrait," 1961-1962, by Marisol Escobar. Estate of Marisol/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Lila Barth for The New York Times



Detail of "Freedom Now!," 1963, by Reginald Gammon, a member of the Spiral collective that was inspired by the civil rights movement. Estate of Reginald Gammon/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Lila Barth for The New York

Finally, it's worth noting — the museum barely does — that in a pre-Stonewall era when having non-heterosexual sex could get you beat-up, arrested or killed, the “new art” world had a dense gay population. Evidence of it is here, in the Coenties Slip crowd, in Johns and Rauschenberg, in Stevenson and, of course, Warhol. John Cage and Merce Cunningham, in a section of the show devoted to experimental dance, can be counted in, as can the likes of John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, whose voices ring out from recordings of avant-garde poetry.

And then there's the great Jack Smith and his film “Flaming Creatures” (1963), in which a bevy of nonbinary bodies, some clothed, some not, orgiastically tumble and swirl to the music of Top-40 radio hits. It's pure, daft poetry. And it got the filmmaker and critic Jonas Mekas hauled up on obscenity charges when he screened it in March 1964, at a time when the city was frantically trying to clean up its act in advance of a World's Fair that would feature, among other edifying entertainments, Michelangelo's revered “Pietà,” imported from the Vatican.



“Two Marilyns,” 1962, by Andy Warhol. The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Lila Barth for The New York Times

Michelangelo. Jack Smith. Queer bodies. “Pietà.” Art in New York in the early 1960s made for a heady mix. Culturally, we were perched on the edge of something and leaning forward. And a fast flip through the show’s catalog, an illustrated three-year timeline edited by Celant and designed by Michael Rock, gives a sense of a larger — national, global — teetering condition.

Here’s a shot of Jacqueline Kennedy leading her televised White House tour, and one of the segregationist George Wallace blocking entrance to the University of Alabama. There’s Martin Luther King Jr. talking civil rights with Lyndon Johnson in the Oval Office; and there’s the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc self-incinerating in Saigon to protest American intervention in South Vietnam. Here’s a studio shot of the “Leave It To Beaver” television family; here’s a blurry clip of two guys kissing in a Warhol film.

Most of these images appeared at one time or another in popular magazines. I don’t know what my father might have thought coming across them in Time or Life. But his devotion to Mad makes total sense.

New York: 1962-1964

July 22 through Jan. 8, 2023 at the Jewish Museum, 1109 5th Ave at 92nd Street, Manhattan; 212-423-3200, jewishmuseum.org.