



## The Artists Who Defined the East Village's Avant-Garde Scene

For a short time in the early '80s, the Manhattan neighborhood was the epicenter of experimental art. Jeff Koons, Peter Halley, Ashley Bickerton, Joan Wallace and Barbara Bloom remember the moment.

by M.H. Miller  
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A reunion of sorts for a group of artists who got their start in the East Village. From left to right: Peter Halley, Barbara Bloom, Ashley Bickerton, Joan Wallace and Jeff Koons. Photographed in front of Katz's Delicatessen on September 19, 2017. Credit Andrew Moore

By 1981 in New York City, the contemporary art scene was a booming business, with SoHo as its epicenter. Dealers like Leo Castelli, Ileana Sonnabend and Mary Boone championed artists such as David Salle and Julian Schnabel, whom critics labeled Neo-Expressionists, and whose style appealed to a growing art market willing to pay large sums of money for young painters. But just a few blocks and a world away – in the East Village – a smaller but no less important community of galleries was emerging as well, a kind of conceptual and anti-commercial satellite orbiting the art world's mainstream.

What was the East Village art scene? A historical footnote? A cautionary tale? A sincere artistic movement? It was a little of all of these things. Artists and writers from Peter Hujar to Allen Ginsberg had long populated the neighborhood; in the early '80s many of them started opening their own businesses there. In 1981, Patti Astor, an underground film actress, and her friend Bill Stelling opened the Fun Gallery, which became a popular hangout for the hip-hop scene and where artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf – then known primarily as graffiti artists – had early exhibitions before decamping to SoHo. Many galleries in the East Village (International With Monument, Nature Morte and Cash/Newhouse, among others) were opened and operated by visual artists showing the work of like-minded peers, all categorized under short-lived names (Neo-Geo, Neo-Conceptualism, Commodity Art) that offered an alternative to Neo-Expressionism. These artists – who were raised on television and Andy Warhol – were concerned with critical theory and punk rock in equal measure. Perhaps most of all, they were fascinated by what the culture's growing consumerism was doing to people's minds, and to art in particular. The influence of the art of this era is wide-ranging and, as contemporary art becomes increasingly co-opted by the ever-ballooning market surrounding it, is felt even more today than perhaps it was at the time.

Last fall, I gathered some of these artists to discuss the East Village and its influence: Ashley Bickerton, 58, who moved to New York in 1982 and now lives in Bali, whose work includes assemblages made of found objects and corporate logos; Barbara Bloom, 67, a New York-based conceptual photographer and installation artist who lived in Berlin for much of the '80s but was a fixture in the East Village galleries, unsparingly documenting American greed and shallowness; Peter Halley, 64, a born-and-raised New Yorker, abstract painter and co-founder of the influential *Index Magazine*; Jeff Koons, 63, who moved to New York in 1977 and whose use of banal objects like vacuum cleaners and basketballs later made him, for many, an emblem of the avarice his generation had started out critiquing; and Joan Wallace, 58, who came to New York in 1981 and, in those years, collaborated with her artistic partner GERALYN DONOHUE on monochrome paintings that also included found commercial objects such as rearview mirrors. They were joined by Gianni Jetzer, 48, who curated a show about this era at Washington D.C.'s Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden called "Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s" (closing May 13).

We met at Katz's Delicatessen, the iconic restaurant on the corner of East Houston and Ludlow Street – besides Katz's, there really aren't many other structures or landmarks from the era that remain, unchanged. Art in the East Village expanded rapidly in the early '80s as collectors began to embrace conceptualism and the avant-garde, but by 1988 most of the hundred or so galleries that had sprouted up in the previous seven years had gone out of business or moved to SoHo, and then later, Chelsea. Some could no longer afford the rent in a neighborhood they had helped gentrify. Far from a complete view of this scene, the following conversation, which has been edited and condensed, illustrates the range of work being made by artists that had been lumped together mostly by some miracle of geography. – M.H.M.

*Did you feel in the East Village in the 1980s that you were part of a coherent culture or scene? What was your sense of it while it was happening?*

Ashley Bickerton: There were distinct battle lines drawn across the East Village. It was a real sense of us versus them. There was a sense of turf. I look back at people who were my allies or my supposed adversaries, and I just sort of shake my head. But it was definitely like that.

Barbara Bloom: Are you talking about the Neo-Expressionists?

AB: [Julian] Schnabel represented the grand bugaboo. And his henchmen and spawn: Jean-Michel, Kenny Scharf, the Fun Gallery and all its associations. It seems rather silly now.

Peter Halley: I think the important thing is that three groups of young artists started galleries in little storefronts.

*They were artist-run galleries.*

PH: People in their mid-20s, just out of school – I don't know why, it just happened at the same time: International With Monument, Nature Morte, Cash/Newhouse. And they had a different point of view than the other galleries that existed at the time, and they were particularly interested in the Pictures Generation [a loose affiliation of conceptual photographers and painters who emerged in the mid-70s and appropriated media and advertising in their work], which by that time had become almost underground. They had no popular support in the galleries or collector base, but a big following with a younger generation of artists.

BB: But don't you think the fact that people who started the galleries were artists themselves had a big effect on how one thought about showing work? You had a sense you were with people who understood your ideas. It wasn't so much about the commerce of it.

PH: Exactly. Artists were actually creating the dialogue, or deciding what artists themselves were showing. The fact that there were these three galleries with interlocking programs made, I think, an impact.

Jeff Koons: It was a different hierarchy. SoHo had this hierarchy and the gallery structure, but when all these artists opened these fresh, young galleries, there was no hierarchy there. It was really about showing exciting works. Things weren't set up as business-oriented. I went through some of the SoHo galleries, but I was never completely accepted there. And as outsiders we finally had a place where we were embraced.

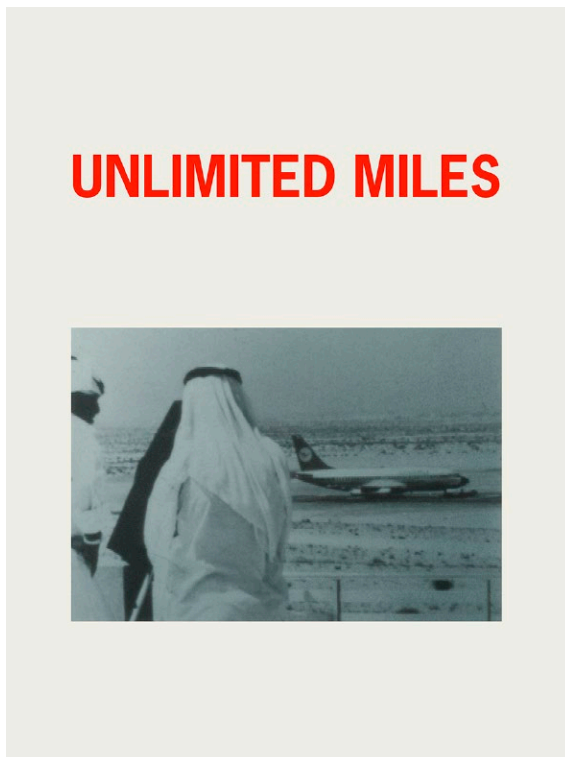
AB: Let's not forget the backflow from SoHo of figures who started to be attracted to the youthful energy.

JK: I think what really helps things happen is the generosity of other artists. And if you look at SoHo, the generosity of Julian – Julian was very generous to his friends, he would bring a lot of people to the attention of different collectors or gallerists or artists. I think in the East Village, Peter [Halley] was extremely generous. He brought someone like myself into the picture.

AB: Is that true?

JK: Yeah! Absolutely.

BB: I don't think that's unusual though. I think that's how it always was. I think it continues to work that way.



Barbara Bloom's "Travel Posters (Unlimited Miles)" (1981).  
Credit Archival digital print. Courtesy of David Lewis, New York

PH: I always admired the artists who came here in the late '70s. Because, you know, New York was a real mess. It was the aftermath of the near-bankruptcy. All these people – Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine – I envisioned it as a very small, insular, downtown world of people doing really experimental work having something to do with media. And I always think of that time as just as important as the emergence of Pop and minimalism or anything else.

JK: There was really a sense of trying to work on global ideas. Of really being open to the possibilities of art. I don't really think any of us ever cared about money. The discourse about money came through some of the success that we had. But we didn't care about money. We wanted to make our work.

AB: This gets into an area that has to be parsed a little bit more. There were some of us that specifically addressed this idea.

BB: Which idea is that?

AB: One term that was leveled at us that I actually preferred was Commodity Art. Because I thought some of us were addressing that. You know, if the spiritual essence of America is consumerism, which it credibly is, Jeff nailed the actual moment of spiritual precision. When you get an object and you unwrap it and before it becomes a utilitarian thing, it exists in that perfect pristine state. You stopped right there and nailed it. We were definitely addressing these questions. There was Donald Judd and people saw a box, but suddenly this box was bought and sold, and it was branded, and we began to see the other side of that. How it was put into play – as it played through the auction houses, as it played through the whole process of brand identification, as it existed as an object. And this became part of the equation of our conceptual thinking, of our understanding of conceptual art. It was no longer pure.

BB: When you use the word “our,” who are you referring to?

AB: Well, there are different aspects.

BB: Because I think that's one aspect, but there are so many other ways of looking at the use of an object. So if you think of an object as somehow a placeholder for a thought, and if you think of an object as having poetic or narrative qualities, and if you place one object next to another object next to another object, how that can be a staging for some kind of narrative. There are other ways of looking at the use of objects.

AB: Sure.

BB: And those ways of looking at objects may be a quieter, less flashy way of thinking about the use of objects, and because it hasn't been argued as loudly, it becomes somehow pushed to the side about commodity exchange. I think it's important to remember that there are aspects about your work, Jeff, that are not about commodity critique. It's about the poetic quality of objects and the way when you isolate an object, or when you place one object next to another one, the ricochet of meaning that takes place. It's important to remember those things and discuss those things, because I think other arguments – particularly culture in relation to money – those things get pushed away.

AB: But don't forget, I started this by referring to Judd. If Schnabel represented a bugaboo on one side, Donald Judd represented a bugaboo on another.

BB: Bugaboo to whom? That's a particular kind of boys' club way of thinking about it.

Joan Wallace: I felt that commodity culture was something I had to fight almost. I didn't want to be commodified. But that doesn't negate what you're saying either.

JK: When I hear “Commodity Art,” I always feel I was never involved in that. My intentions with my work have always been philosophical and social. I've worked with objects, but it's never been about a dialogue of money. It's been about a dialogue of desire. But I think what happens during certain times you live in, you know, in the '80s

the market was very strong, and so people want to box everything up and package everything. It's reduced to this level of being about money when it's really about, I believe, communicating ideas. When I've worked with objects I always tried to remove critique, it's really about the removal of judgment. Something can be accepted for being perfect as what it is. So it's about removing hierarchy, removing judgment, removing discrimination and to use objects as metaphors for people.

PH: I don't know whether this is embarrassing at all, but I'd love to tell the story of the first time I saw Jeff's work.

*Please do.*

PH: I was organizing a group show for John Weber Gallery, and someone who was a mutual friend said I should look at the work of a guy I'd never met called Jeff Koons. He had some photographs of your work. And it was like one of those "oh my God" moments. It was vacuum cleaners in Plexiglas boxes, lit by a means of a sort of glowing, mysterious fluorescent light. For me, it combined aspects of Minimalism, aspects of Pop Art, this strange use of light almost to give it transcendence, and it was one of the moments when I saw something that I responded to immediately –

*Money was one backdrop, but there were several things going on at this time. You are all among the first generation of artists to grow up with television.*

AB: We didn't go into this thinking there was any possibility of actually having any career or making money in this. There was no intention of ever making money. But I've gotta stress here that when I talk about commodity, I'm not talking about money at all. You can find a poetry in that. Warhol in his endless repetitions found a poetry, a certain beauty, a balance in the banal.

PH: Joan, I think you started showing a little later than all of us, what were your perceptions of all of this?

JW: Yeah, because my teachers were David Salle and Sherrie Levine and Jack Goldstein, there is a lot I took for granted.

PH: Where was that?

JW: That was in Hartford, Conn. [at the Hartford Art School]. You're looking puzzled.

AB: I was just thinking of Hartford at that moment and how art schools have these moments where they suddenly ignite because a cluster of faculty come together at one time. A whole lot of great students came out of Hartford at that moment.

JW: I think it was a very passing thing.

PH: The late '70s and early '80s were really a time in which certain basic assumptions about art and creativity changed. All these questions about authorship. The idea of nature was a question in so many artists' work. And third, the traditional idea of history was pretty much discredited under the guise of this term "appropriation." This was a time when there were major changes in the way artists and other people were thinking.

AB: Can I just present a vignette? I'll never forget the time at White Columns, when at the end of the opening there was one of Jeff's stacked vacuum cleaners – just to show you the time we were living in – at the end of the opening it was full of empty and half-full wine glasses and plastic glasses with cigarette butts in them and beer bottles on top.

BB: On top of it?

AB: On top of the vacuum cleaner at White Columns.

JK: If I had seen it I would have moved them.

PH: Can I just be provocative for a moment? I'm not quite sure how I snuck in here, because I'm really not interested in objects or consumer culture. It's not my focus. I'm mostly interested in systems. How people move around in space, how things are connected, how we order things in our own minds. So as interested as I've always been in Jeff's work or a number of other people's, there's a connection, but my own field of interest is different. I think the thing in common in the background is Warhol.

BB: Do you mean the sense that one has a cognizance and some kind of distance in understanding the display of what you're doing?

PH: Well, I mean in terms of repetition, boredom, deadpan-ness and his sort of detached view of what's going on in the world.

*Was Andy Warhol at all present in the galleries of the East Village?*

BB: You mean physically?

*Yeah. Did he loom over the place?*

AB: He loomed. He certainly loomed. But he wasn't really a physical presence at that point. He had been more or less abducted by the Haring, Scharf, Basquiat set. All of them were on that side.

JW: Did you know he died – Warhol died the day after Geralyn [Donohue] and I were doing a show called “The Electric Chair Series” at Tony Shafrazi Gallery [in 1987]. He was supposed to come to the opening, but then he had his [gallbladder] operation and he died.

AB: Holy [expletive].

JW: Yeah. So it kind of haunted the show.

PH: How did you connect your own work to him?

JW: I thought of it in terms of persona. The work was there and I loved it, really, but I think of the artist as a persona when I think of Warhol.

AB: If there was ever an elephant in the room –

JW: Warhol is like the Big Man.

JK: Peter, he did your portrait.

PH: Yes, I felt very lucky.

*When did he do that?*

PH: About six months before he died.

Gianni Jetzer: Was Warhol in some sorts interesting also because he changed his own persona into a very powerful brand that was almost equivalent to the work itself?

BB: No, no, no.

PH: I would never call it a brand. It was more of a kind of philosophical persona. The persona represented a point of view, not a selling point.

GJ: I think in general you all have a very negative idea of the brand, which I don't have. I think advertising got much more complex in the 1980s. The spectacle became the commodity. All the predictions of Guy Debord became a reality. The product was no longer the thing; it was the spectacle, the idea behind it.

JK: I know I believed in ideas. Ideas create brands. Brands don't create ideas. If you have a great idea you can affect people's lives. If you have a brand, you're not going to affect people's lives.

JW: I was thinking before doing this about how if I had to talk about my work, what would be the first thing I'd say? I had a note written down. It was "containing the real against the unreal." That resonates even now. We're all in our heads on the internet. In my mind there's a real danger there. I think people are conflating artificial intelligence with human intelligence.

AB: I think we're just a bunch of old vaudevillians. Give us a hat and cane and we'll do it on a stage, a street corner, a television.

*Did people understand what you were trying to do at the time? Do you think people understand it better now?*

BB: I went to art school in the '70s, to CalArts. Across the entire world there were maybe less than a thousand people – probably in the hundreds – who were concerned and thinking about a contemporary conceptual art. I didn't go into this thinking I would have a mass audience. And it wasn't that you were interested in doing something arcane, but something precise, and serious, and humorous, and beautiful, and meaningful. I'm very happy to think a small number of people could comprehend aspects of what we were doing. That we had an audience with each other and an appreciation for each other. And you could see Jeff's work or Ashley's work or Peter's work or Joan's work as part of a dialogue. But it's surprising to me that the audience is so large today.

JK: You know, it's so nice to sit here today and that our lives crossed paths. We were able to go through the development of what it means to be of a certain generation of a city and developing ideas together. Our work is a product of collaboration, of sharing ideas, of sitting around and drinking beer.

*In retrospect, what do you think the legacy of this period of time was?*

JW: Epistemologically, we were in a difficult spot. There was a disconnect. There wasn't a direct relationship to meaning. And that's bearing out now. When you hear fake news, post-truth. We're now seeing the end result of this. But that was there. And that was probably one of the earliest generations really dealing with that. I think later generations didn't actually have to think about it as much because it had permeated everything. We were right on the edge, really, from Modernism to postmodernism.

PH: In the '70s, there were people around like Richard Serra, and a bunch of others, who were kind of Marxist and felt they represented an alternative to capitalism. They had revolutionary aspirations. It turns out that didn't happen. This generation instead embraced the image, embraced the replacement of real experience with all these media experiences divorced from the old idea of nature and the idea that: International globalist capitalism – it ain't going away, so you better deal with it.

BB: I was thinking, Where did I ever go that really epitomized the East Village? And I think it would probably be St. Marks Cinema. You could see a double feature for a dollar. I went all the time. It was a place where if you were seeing "The Towering Inferno," someone would be catching something on fire in the aisle. Or if you saw "Rollerball," people would be rolling around. I remember the very best experience there was seeing John Cassavetes's "A Woman Under the Influence." And people outside the theater were having breakdowns and sobbing. On one hand it was sort of a ridiculous camp re-enactment of what was going on onscreen, but on the other it was so beautiful and

funny and heartfelt and real. Because it was really funky over here! This was not a cleaned-up neighborhood. When you have something, which has not been styled, when you have moments of odd –

JW: Currents.

BB: Currents, or strange prescient moments, where things would happen and be incredibly meaningful. I don't know. Maybe that was true of many more places in New York at the time, but it seemed to epitomize that oddness.

AB: We used to joke about getting nosebleeds if we went above 14th Street.

PH: Another thing is, I think this is a pretty nerdy generation.

BB: I agree!

PH: When we came up, because the work dealt with things in the culture of capitalism, we got blamed for the life-style excesses of a previous generation of artists that were so proud of their over-the-top lifestyles. Over the years it prevented people from looking at this work seriously. And it's been a distraction. And I hope today reflects just how nerdy most of these artists are.

BB: I'll speak as a fellow nerd here. I grew up in Los Angeles, with the film industry in the background. And I remember on a Sunday being in the station wagon and driving up the Pacific Coast Highway to go out for dinner, I was maybe 5 years old, and I remember looking out of the car and realizing that what I was seeing was exactly the same shot that I had just seen on TV. Looking out the back of the window, the whole drive up there, which is maybe a 20-minute drive, and trying to think about what was the difference between what I was looking at out the window and what I'd seen on TV, and if they were the same or if they were different, and if they were different, how? So I grew up thinking about these things. And I think we all probably had a similar experience of trying to understand what it is we were seeing.

AB: I had that exact feeling coming out of a film and standing at a urinal and there was Dennis Hopper: *What is reality?*

BB: My job is to create works that put that into question and allow someone to slowly learn how to see. It's about giving people an opportunity to look at the world and think about what they're looking – to feel about what they're looking at. That's our job. And it's a wonderful job.

AB: A lucky job.

PH: Correct me if I'm wrong, but a big night out for us was going out for Thai food.

JK: Yes, that's right.

BB: There you go.

PH: We were really wild.