



## Somewhere Downtown: Art in 1980s New York

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2022.10.1 – 2023.1.29

**Location:**

UCCA Great Hall

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**UCCA presents “Somewhere Downtown,” a group exhibition celebrating the creative ferment of Downtown New York in the 1980s and spanning mediums including graffiti, painting, drawing, photography, film, sculpture, and installation. The exhibition features the work of icons such as Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Cindy Sherman alongside that of lesser known trailblazers, many of whose art is being shown in China for the first time.**

Beijing, CHINA — From October 1, 2022 to January 29, 2023, UCCA Center for Contemporary Art presents “Somewhere Downtown,” a group exhibition evoking and celebrating the uninhibited creativity of Downtown New York City in the 1980s. The exhibition reveals the heights of expression that arose from within the urban landscape of America’s largest city at its economic nadir. Artists from vastly different backgrounds, working across a remarkable range of media, emerged in New York during this era and went on to become some of the most important artists of the late twentieth century. In galleries and museums, but also on the streets, in nightclubs, and at new alternative spaces that artists founded themselves, it was a time of radical experimentation and open dialogue, but also a turbulent period in which artists and their communities were buffeted by—and responded to—the AIDS crisis, New York City’s accelerating gentrification, and the expansion of consumer culture. Eschewing chronological or genre-based organization, the exhibition is arranged into ten sections that trace out themes through the work of artists in a wide variety of media: from interventions in painting, sculpture, photography, and performance, to explorations of then-nascent forms such as graffiti and new media installations. “Somewhere Downtown” features the work of sixty artists and groups, from the most celebrated artists of the era to unsung innovators. The exhibition is curated by Carlo McCormick and UCCA Curator-at-Large Peter Eleey.

Participating artists include Charlie Ahearn (b. 1951), John Ahearn (b. 1951), Ellsworth Ausby (1942-2011), Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988), Gretchen Bender (1951-2004), Edo Bertoglio (b. 1951), Ashley Bickerton (b. 1959), Mike Bidlo (b. 1953), Diane Burns (1956-2006), Sarah Charlesworth (1947-2013), Papo Colo (b. 1946), Arch Connelly (1950-1993), Jimmy DeSana (1949-1990), Jane Dickson (b. 1952), Chris “Daze” Ellis (b. 1962), Luis Frangella (1944-1990), Futura (Leonard McGurr, b. 1955), Peter Halley (b. 1953), Keith Haring (1958-1990), Robert Hawkins (b. 1951), Jenny Holzer (b. 1950), Peter Hujar (1934-1987), Valerie Jaudon (b. 1945), Kiely Jenkins (1959-2005), Robert



Kushner (b. 1949), LA2 (Angel Ortiz, b. 1967), Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt (b. 1948), Louise Lawler (b. 1947), Robert Longo (b. 1953), Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989), Maripol (b. 1957), John “Crash” Matos (b. 1961), McDermott (b. 1952) & McGough (b. 1958), Nicolas Moufarrege (1947-1985), Elizabeth Murray (1940-2007), Lorraine O’Grady (b. 1934), Joe Overstreet (1933-2019), Nam June Paik (1932-2006), Judy Pfaff (b. 1946), Richard Prince (b. 1949), Lee Quiñones (b. 1960), Rammellzee (1960-2010), Judy Rifka (b. 1945), Walter Robinson (b. 1950), Martha Rosler (b. 1943), Christy Rupp (b. 1949), Kenny Scharf (b. 1958), Julian Schnabel (b. 1951), Cindy Sherman (b. 1954), Laurie Simmons (b. 1949), Kiki Smith (b. 1954), Nancy Spero (1926-2009), Haim Steinbach (b. 1944), Sturtevant (1924-2014), Tabboo! (b. 1959), Rigoberto Torres (b. 1960), Tseng Kwong Chi (1950-1990), Dondi White (1961-1998), David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992), and Martin Wong (1946-1999).

The advent of the 1980s saw America entering a conservative moment, a reaction to the urban unrest, protest movements, and economic crises of the 1960s and 1970s. While a Wall Street boom would put New York at the heart of the era’s free market fervor, in other ways the city seemed to exist at a far remove from the new cultural climate. As New York teetered on the edge of bankruptcy and crime soared in the 1970s, many middle-class white residents fled for the suburbs, leaving Downtown ripe for reinvention by its more deeply rooted communities (often racially and economically marginalized) and new arrivals (themselves escaping the parochialism of small-town America). Though in some ways inspired by or linked to earlier avant-garde movements, artists sought to break with the past, pushing to go beyond Modernism’s unfulfilled promises.

The exhibition’s ten sections highlight different aspects of this extraordinarily vibrant period. “The City as Muse” showcases New York itself as a setting and subject, featuring art made and performed in public spaces by Diane Burns, Papo Colo, and Keith Haring; and scenes of the city by Jane Dickson and Peter Hujar, among others. “Global Taste” demonstrates how Sarah Charlesworth, Louise Lawler, Martha Rosler, Laurie Simmons, and others appropriated images from art history, mass culture, and advertising to critique American consumer culture’s expansion at home and abroad. “Blacklight” features painting and sculptures that Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf created for nightclubs, illustrating how the art world melded together with a booming, queer-focused nightlife scene.

On a more somber note, “The Body in Crisis” concerns the rise of the AIDS epidemic. Whether facing their own mortality or seeking to commemorate lost friends, artists



created delicate works evoking the fragility of the body. In the face of tragedy, many sought refuge in the communal, as shown in “The Scene” through Maripol and Tseng Kwong Chi’s photographs of musicians, divas, and club-goers gathering together. Alongside the personas showcased in the clubs, artists explored new identities and modes of self-performance. “Shifting Identities” places the stylized signatures of graffiti in the context of Ashley Bickerton’s work with corporate logos, Sturtevant’s repetitions of Keith Haring, and Lorraine O’Grady’s performances that challenged the construction and reception of Black identity in and beyond the art world.

As suggested by the eclectic group of artists featured in “Myths and Archetypes”—including Robert Hawkins, Jenny Holzer, Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, Nicolas Moufarrege, Cindy Sherman, Nam Jun Paik, Richard Prince, and Nancy Spero among them—artists repurposed and critiqued imagery from comics, pulp novels, and mythology to intervene in narratives of American exceptionalism and unsettle gender stereotypes. “Curtain and Stage” draws together works by Robert Kushner, Julian Schnabel, Laurie Simmons, and others that took a considered approach towards their backdrop, whether by referencing theater, dance, or the walls and subways on which graffiti first appeared. In “The Future that Never Happened,” Rammellzee and Ellsworth Ausby revel in the liberatory potential of Afrofuturism, while Kenny Scharf’s brightly colored Jetsons characters foreshadow the nostalgia-for-futures-past that would become widespread in the coming decades.

Fittingly, the exhibition’s final section “Obsolete Creatures”—named after a painting of dinosaur skeletons by Martin Wong, one of the many brilliant artists tragically lost to AIDS—turns to the era’s melancholic aftermath. As 1990s dawned, New York City and its artist communities had been transformed. In some cases, their visionary fusions of street culture, high art, and cutting-edge technology were co-opted by advertising and mass media. The development of the Internet over the decade that followed offered new ways to connect, and challenged New York’s self-image as the world’s cultural capital.

Yet the art shared in “Somewhere Downtown” remains urgently vital today, not least of all in China, where the Downtown scene was a key inspiration throughout the early days of the development of Chinese contemporary art. The works on display still have the power to fire imaginations, guiding us in a moment of uncertainty and change to dive into the myriad possibilities of art and all forms of creative self-expression.

Exhibition co-curator Carlo McCormick comments, “It has been a thrill to work with



UCCA, a museum with such a remarkable record of bringing truly important Western art to the Chinese audience. We embarked on 'Somewhere Downtown' very much in that spirit of sharing, of trying to explain something about our experiences, our fears and our hopes, in the belief that the challenges we face and the way we try to deal with them are something people can find great commonality in despite their differences.

This period of the early 1980s in NYC was one of tremendous promise and problems, when a collective discontent with how things were done, in the arts and society, led to a questioning of the accepted or status quo, and an enthusiasm to find fresh directions. The past had begun to fail us—the great projects of Modernism, Industrialism, and Urbanism had come crashing down—and into this void of doubt, abandonment, and neglect a new generation stepped in with the remarkable energy that comes from community as much as individuality.”

#### **Support and Sponsorship**

The exhibition is proudly supported by BMW. UCCA thanks presenting sponsors DIOR, Sotheby's, House of Inspiration, and Jing Daily for their generous support. Exclusive wall solutions support is provided by Dulux and Genelec contributed exclusive audio equipment and technical support. Gratitude to UCCA Fifteenth Anniversary AR partner Nreal and exhibition music partner Tencent Music (TME). UCCA also thanks the members of UCCA Foundation Council, International Circle, and Young Associates, as well as Lead Partner Aranya, Lead Art Book Partner DIOR, Presenting Partners Bloomberg, Voyage Group, Yinyi Biotech, and Supporting Partners Barco, Dulux, and Genelec.

#### **About the Curators**

##### **Carlo McCormick**

Carlo McCormick is an American culture critic and curator living in New York City. He is the author of numerous books, monographs, and catalogues on contemporary art and artists. McCormick lectures and teaches extensively at universities and colleges around the United States on popular culture and art. His writing has appeared in *Effects: Magazine for New Art Theory*, *Aperture*, *Art in America*, *Art News*, *Artforum*, *Camera Austria*, *High Times*, *Spin*, *Tokion*, *Vice*, and other magazines. McCormick was Senior Editor of *Paper*. He was guest curator of the exhibition "The Downtown Show: the New York Art Scene from 1974 to 1984" (in consultation with Lynn Gumpert, and Marvin J. Taylor) which was held at New York University's Grey Art Gallery and Fales Library in 2006 and subsequently traveled to the Andy Warhol Museum



(Pittsburgh) and Austin Museum of Art. The exhibition was chosen as first place winner by the International Association of Art Critics/USA (AICA USA) for best thematic show in New York City in 2005-2006.

#### **Peter Eleey**

Peter Eleey is UCCA Curator-at-Large, based in New York. He previously served as chief curator of MoMA PS1, where he organized more than 40 exhibitions between 2010 and 2020. Most recently, he curated exhibitions of Barbara Kruger at The Museum of Modern Art (with Lanka Tattersall), and Deana Lawson at the ICA Boston and MoMA PS1 (with Eva Respini). In addition to his many shows of emerging and established artists, Eleey has curated a number of major group exhibitions, including “September 11” (2011), organized on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks, and the 2015 edition of MoMA PS1’s survey Greater New York, for which he led the curatorial team of Douglas Crimp, Thomas (T.) Jean Lax, and Mia Locks. In 2019, Eleey co-organized “Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991-2011” with Ruba Katrib. Before joining MoMA PS1, Eleey was visual arts curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and a curator at Creative Time in New York. He has written and lectured widely about contemporary art.

#### **Exhibition Catalogue**

Accompanying the exhibition “Somewhere Downtown,” UCCA will publish a bilingual catalogue that dives deep into the art and culture of 1980s New York. In addition to a preface by UCCA Director Philip Tinari, other contributions include Carlo McCormick’s musing on the Downtown scene, Peter Eleey’s curatorial survey of the exhibition, and artist Sur Rodney (Sur)’s reflections on the art ecology from the perspective of a participant. In addition to these contemporary texts and full reproductions of the show’s works, the catalogue will also feature a selection of poetry, art criticism, and other excerpted writings from the 1980s, capturing the broader cultural milieu of the period. The catalogue is designed by Zhang Qian and published by Zhejiang Photographic Press.

#### **Public Programs**

During the exhibition period, UCCA will take inspiration from the Downtown art scene’s free spirit and sense of community, positioning them as a starting point from which to explore the state of Chinese youth culture at its present critical juncture. Programs will be organized around four different “voices”: Community, The City, Culture, and The Global. Cinema Arts programs for this exhibition focus on two



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leading figures in the Downtown artist community: Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. Performing Arts programs aim to introduce audiences to the informal and unconventional performance spaces which were part of Downtown culture, while also drawing attention to Beijing's independent music spaces and the vital sounds being made there. In collaboration with street style brands and leading cultural organizations, throughout the exhibition UCCA will also organize a series of DIY fashion, graffiti, and DJ workshops, offering our community the opportunity to experience firsthand the artistic forms featured in the exhibition. Among these, a graffiti workshop will be set up in the UCCA Atrium throughout the duration of "Somewhere Downtown," allowing visitors to drop in and enjoy the fun of graffiti after viewing the exhibition.

#### **About UCCA**

UCCA Center for Contemporary Art is China's leading contemporary art institution. Committed to bringing the best in art to a wider audience, UCCA shares a wide range of exhibitions, public programs, and research initiatives to a public of more than one million visitors each year across three locations. UCCA Beijing sits at the heart of the 798 Art District, occupying 10,000 square meters of factory chambers built in 1957 and regenerated in 2019 by OMA. UCCA Dune, designed by Open Architecture, lies beneath the sand in the seaside enclave of Aranya in Beidaihe. UCCA Edge, designed by New York-based architecture firm SO – IL, opened in Shanghai in May 2021. Formally accredited as a museum by the Beijing Cultural Bureau in 2018, UCCA also operates non-profit foundations, licensed by the Beijing Bureau of Civil Affairs and the Hong Kong government. UCCA's commercial ventures include the retail platform UCCA Store, the children's education initiative UCCA Kids, and collaborations and projects under the rubric UCCA Lab. Opened in 2007 and revived by a committed group of Chinese and international patrons in 2017, UCCA works to bring China into global dialogue through contemporary art.

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