

In this photograph taken just after John Fekner's mural was finished, dawn is rising, the street is empty, the dealers and junkies have not yet come. The mural later became the emblematic image of the East Village art scene, but few connected it to Kenkeleba or to "The Black and White Show."

Funk is dead. Funk is something you can learn in school.
—Morris Day

Adrian Piper
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Just Above Midtown, where David Hammons, Fred Wilson, and others exhibited, received slightly more press than Kenkeleba. But a black friend active in the East Village scene later said that at the time, he hadn't heard of JAM. A month before the show, an announcement came from Adrian Piper in California. It was black with gold print. I asked her to do it in black and white, and she did. This photocopy was destroyed later.

The Black and White Show

LORRAINE O'GRADY

OUTSIDE, EAST SECOND STREET between Avenues B and C in 1983 was Manhattan's biggest open-air drug supermarket. It was always deathly quiet except for the continual cries of vendors hawking competing brands of heroin: "3-5-7, 3-5-7" and "Toilet, Toilet." From the steps of Kenkeleba, looking across at the shooting galleries, you saw unreflecting windows and bricked-up facades, like doorless entrances to Hades. How did the junkies get inside? There was almost no traffic. Behind the two columns flanking Kenkeleba's doorway unexpectedly was a former Polish wedding palace in elegant decay owned by a black bohemian couple, Corrine Jennings and Joe Overstreet.

The gallery, invisible from the street, had five rooms—one, a cavern—plus a corridor, and dared you to use the whole of it. It was perfect for an impossibly ambitious *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* event, thirty artists, half white, half black, with all the work in black and white. Achromaticity would heighten similarities and flatten differences. And it would be the first exhibit I'd seen in the still virtually segregated art world with enough black presence to create dialogue. A sudden opening meant only three weeks to do it. And of course, no money. But the Whitney Biennial's inclusion of Jean-Michel Basquiat as a mascot was salt in the wound. That, and the daily bravado needed to walk on that block where even the air was strange—dawn felt like twilight here—kept me going. Race would not be on the labels. Would it be on the wall? In what way? I wanted to see for myself.

Keith Haring had audited my Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism course at the School of Visual Arts. I called him first. Then contacted Jean-Michel, who could be reached

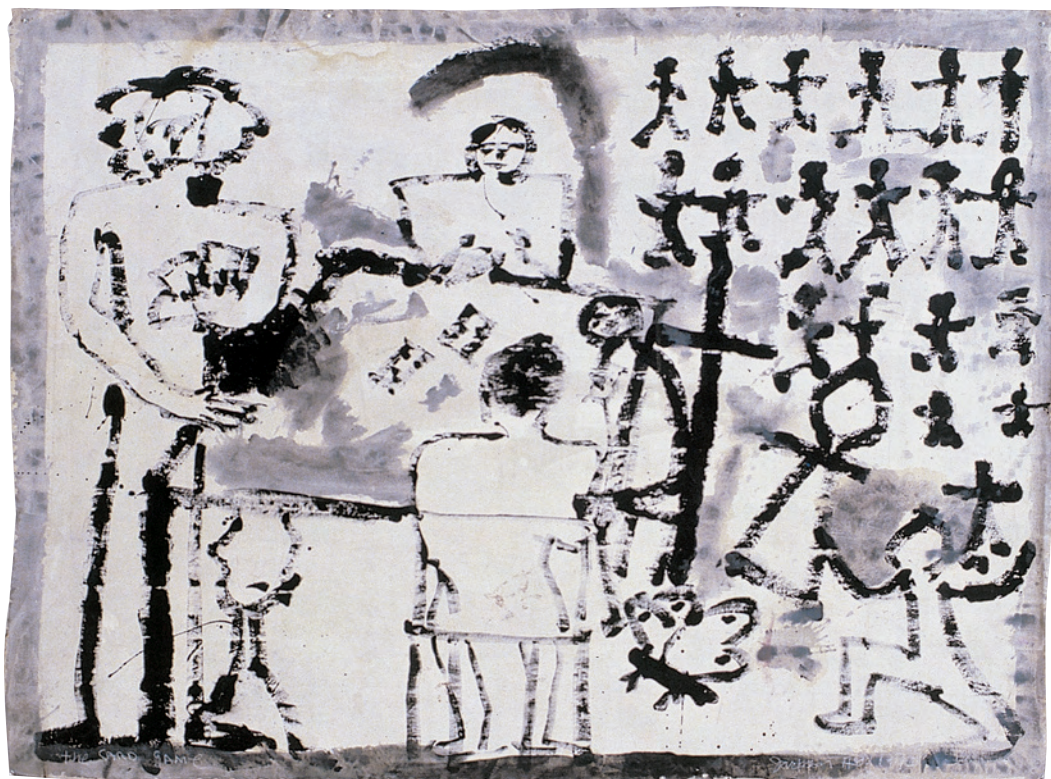
only by telegram. Give that boy another chance! But after promising two new canvases for the show, Basquiat pulled out. Obligations to Bruno Bischofberger came first. Walking down East Second Street was like passing stacks of dreams in mounds. I asked muralist John Fekner to connect the inside with the outside. Downtown had a multitude of talents and trends, some being bypassed by the stampede to cash in. The show ended with twenty-eight artists, many still worried that cadmium red cost thirty-two dollars a quart wholesale. Each day as I approached the block, I wondered, "Where is my mural?" On the day before the opening, it was there. John had done it at 4 AM, when even junkies sleep.

Inside the gallery, it pleased me that, even across so many styles, the images gave off language. But who would come? Compared with Kenkeleba, Gracie Mansion and Fun Gallery were like SoHo. The chasm between East Second and East Tenth streets might be too great to bridge. The answer was, friends and East Villagers who understood that people "in the game" leave "citizens" alone. Getting reviewers to the gallery was like beating your head against air. The show received a single paragraph in the *East Village Eye*, nothing more. Looking back, it's clear the artists have had differing careers. A few became household names; more disappeared without a trace. Of some I've wondered, what might their work have become had money and critical attention been paid? There are so many coexisting tendencies in any given time. What is lost when the present reduces the past, ties it up with a ribbon so it can move on to the future? Is that result necessary? Is it real? □

For complete caption information, see page 264.

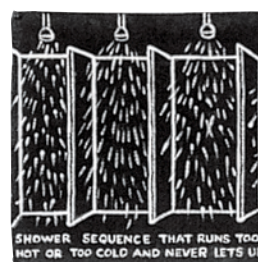
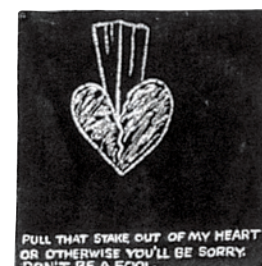
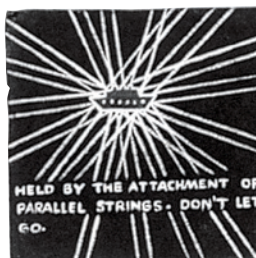
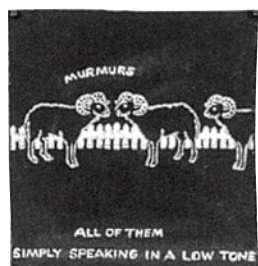
1983–84, the breakthrough year of Nancy Spero's career, was marked by US interventions in such countries as Grenada and Nicaragua. This sketch would become her 1984 *El Salvador*.





The Card Players, by Gerald Jackson, is a large painting on canvas from the mid-'70s. Gerald had a studio on the Bowery in the '70s and '80s. He was a friend of Keith's. I wonder if the figure in the lower right may have influenced the "radiant child."

Keith Haring's cooperation when called on helped the show come together. He had been my student at SVA and I'd been following his work since the earliest white-on-black graffiti done in the subways.

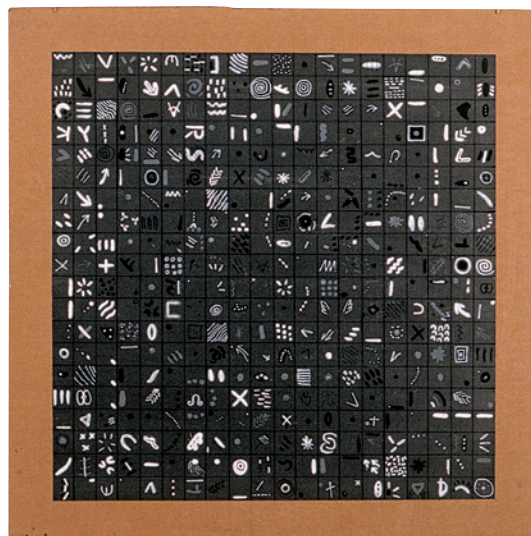
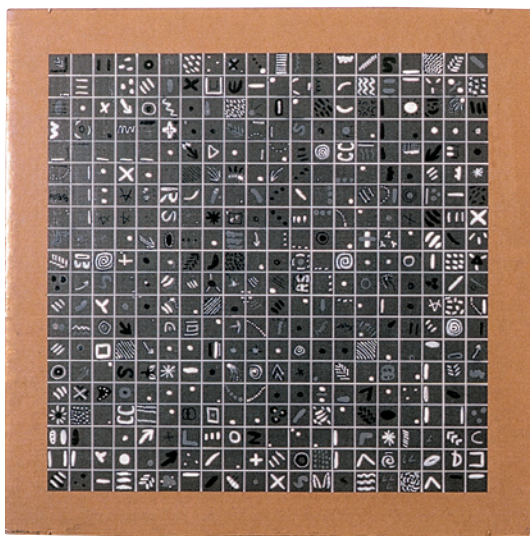


These small paintings on canvas by Judy Blum, a detail from the forty-eight-part arrangement *Small Songs*, could be read as either poems or sentences, depending on the viewer.

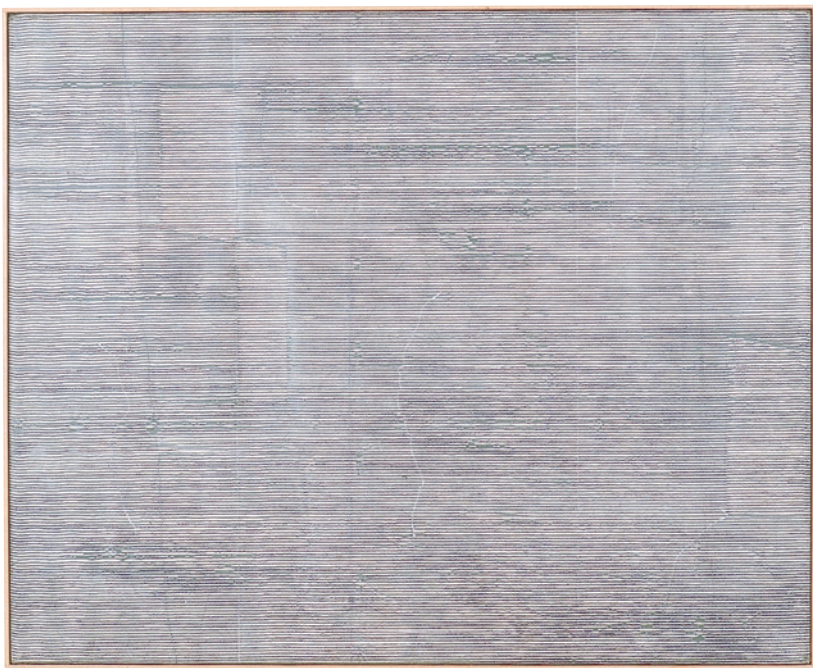


A piece about perception and artmaking by Fluxus artist **Jean Dupuy**. The tiny periscope in the center magnifies the image in the mirror, so you see the top of your head. And it's projected that the accumulated sweat of five thousand foreheads and noses will turn the paper into the desired golden print. That couldn't happen here.

Randy Williams, a Just Above Midtown sculptor, did a new piece for the show about the black and white toilets of his southern childhood. The quote on the floor (BETWEEN THE WHITE MAN AND THE LAND THERE WAS THUS INTERPOSED THE SHADOW OF THE BLACK MAN), by William Faulkner, lay in a field of razor blades. It was eerie. From the doorway of the room where they were both placed, the Williams and the Dupuy looked as if they were made by the same artist.



As a painter, **Willie Birch** moved through several styles, from Color Field to faux naïveté. This gridded cardboard diptych from the "New York City Jazz" series, notations made while listening to experimental music such as John Coltrane's, is from a period when simultaneously his work was at its most "folk" documentary.



In a call-and-response counterpoint to abstract or free jazz by musicians such as Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Cecil Taylor, many painters of the '70s and '80s, **Jack Whitten** among them, profoundly mined a kind of jazz abstraction. I saw this painting again just recently in the viewing room at Alexander Gray.

Besides jazz, the abstract sculptors were often influenced by African attitudes to form and materials. One of the sculptors who showed at Just Above Midtown, **Tyrone Mitchell**, actually spent time living with the Dogon people.



Lynne Augeri, a former student of mine, was a self-portrait photographer. She used costumes and extreme poses to explore child and sex abuse with adroit technique. It came as a shock to have to defend such serious work from accusations of pornography.

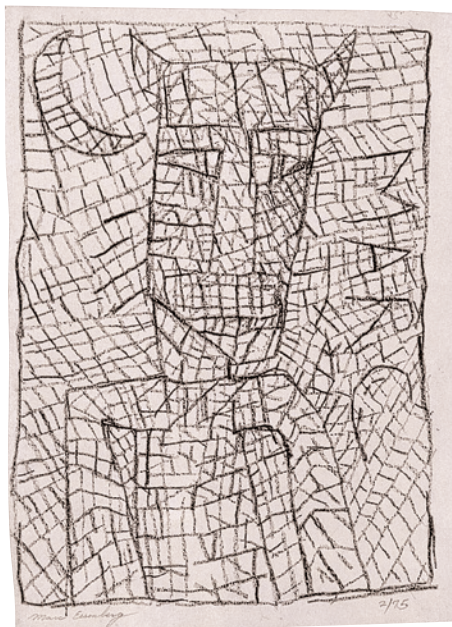
In noir paintings that were both voyeuristic and vulnerable, **Louis Renzoni** iterated a threatening quality of the early '80s. This was his first group show in New York. He went with Piezo Electric, an East Village gallery, shortly after.





Stephen Lack had promised to do a painting for the exhibit. Instead, he did a drawing of an upsetting incident that happened to Jean-Michel Basquiat and his graffiti friends shortly before the show opened.

George Mingo, a graduate of Cooper Union, was a faux *primitif*. He painted this expressly for the show and told me I HAD to put it in. I did. Its black-and-white-in-living-color made the perfect coda. It was in the last room.



Some of the artists were a revelation. A wall of small collages and drawings by Marc Eisenberg, most done in the '70s, anticipated many things that were happening. This 1975 *Self-Portrait* seemed to contain elements of Jean-Michel. The show had been built around Basquiat, and even after he pulled out, he remained present.

