

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

ESTABLISHED 1950

# The New York Times



Whitfield Lovell, one of the many artists to call 404 East 14th Street home,  
Katie Orlinsky for The New York Times

## A Building Famous for Its Parties (Not to Mention Art)

By CELIA McGEE

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From the outside, 404 East 14th Street, a former warehouse near First Avenue that runs through the block to East 13th Street, is unremarkable at best. The 13th

Street facade is dominated by its fire escape; the focal point on the more commercial 14th Street side is a McDonald's with a 24-hour express window.

Yet over the course of almost five decades, the building in Manhattan has been home to a remarkable collection of artists — among them Claes Oldenburg and his first wife, Patty (now Patty Mucha); Larry Rivers; Fred Wilson and Whitfield Lovell; Tom Burckhardt and Kathy Butterly; Richard Hell; and the filmmaker Wes Anderson.

Each floor in the building — not including the ground floor — was divided into only one or two lofts, but over the years the main entrance has shifted to the 13th Street side at No. 405.

In the earlier years, parties raged around the clock, with ad hoc performances by residents like the dot-obsessed Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama; the neo-Dada Frenchman Jean Dupuy, who also organized several on-site exhibitions; the Oldenburgs and Mr.

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Claes Oldenburg, on the roof of 404 East 14th Street in 1967. Ugo Mulas

Rivers; and visitors like Philip Glass, Charlotte Moorman, Gordon Matta-Clark and Laurie Anderson.

Ms. Kusama, the subject of a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art last year, learned a lot about Day-Glo colors from a fellow resident, Herb Aach, a painter who had also been high up at the Sargent Art crayon company.

“Larry was the king of all that,” Mr. Burckhardt said of Mr. Rivers. “Nowadays it’s quieter. But the people here have always been creative, which gives it energy.”

As Mr. Burckhardt, who has lived in the building since 1995, heard stories about its past and made discoveries, he felt someone should remedy the building’s obscurity. He has organized an exhibition, “404 E 14,” which opens at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery on Thursday, and will include paintings, sculptures, photographs, correspondence, poetry and various ephemera.

Recently, seated at his dining table surrounded by some selections for the show, Mr. Burckhardt marveled at the idea that before Mr. Rivers and his wife, Clarice, could move into the top floor, they “had to get rid of squatters.”

The person who first opened up the building to residential use was Jack Klein, a real estate impresario at the forefront of downtown loft conversions. In the mid-1960s, he negotiated leases with the building’s owner, Bloom & Krup, a housewares retailer that was using it as a warehouse, and subleased lofts at low rents to eager artists.

The 1920s industrial pile, an anomaly among the neighborhood’s tenements, was presented to its new tenants as a former button factory, and Mr. Burckhardt figured that “people from the neighborhood had worked here.” But the discovery of a single, upended piano in the space Mr. Wilson now shares with Mr. Lovell made some think that pianos had been manufactured there. The couple kept the instrument.

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Ms. Mucha, who was married to Mr. Oldenburg from 1960 until 1970, said the fifth floor, which they took over, wasn't just raw but "crude."

"There were pigeons flying through broken windows and such," she said. "We put metal-embossed ceilings up to keep out the dust, and we had an 18-foot bathroom."

(The bathroom is featured in a full-page photograph of Mr. Oldenburg's shaving in the catalog accompanying "Claes Oldenburg: The Street and the Store," currently at the Museum of Modern Art.)



Tom Burckhardt and Kathy Butterly, Katie Orlinsky for The New York Times.

In the back, they put Mr. Oldenburg's studio, where his famous soft sculptures evolved.

Mr. Oldenburg lived and worked in the building until 1969. "It was the first really big studio I had," he said, "which was important because I could do so much with that."

To sew the soft sculptures — Ms. Mucha's task, on an industrial sewing machine — the pair had a very long table, which doubled for entertaining.

Because of the building's thin floors, noise carried everywhere. So when, say, Ultra Violet, the Andy Warhol "superstar," showed up at the sculptor John Chamberlain's loft for a nighttime rehearsal with her band, Mr. Oldenburg said he and his wife would have to move from one of several bedroom spaces to another in order to sleep.

It didn't help living underneath Mr. Rivers's notorious all-night bacchanals, either — except to go to them.

Mr. Lovell remembered that one night, soon after he moved in in 1981, he heard "a weird sound upstairs. And Fred said, 'Oh, that's just someone roller-skating.'"

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Mr. Wilson added, “You weren’t here for the Brazilian soccer team.” He arrived in the building in 1976.



The building's 13th Street entrance, Katie Orlinsky for The New York Times

Mr. Oldenburg found lots of ideas for his bathroom-and-kitchen-themed soft sculptures around the corner on First Avenue at H&W Hardware Company, according to Mitch Hymowitz, the store’s third-generation proprietor.

On occasion, the neighborhood filtered in. One time, Mr. Dupuy, a tenant from 1972 to 1976, bored a tiny hole into the wall he shared with the Immaculate Conception Church next door, in hopes of ecclesiastical sounds for his performances. Then he felt guilty, and tapped into the neighboring beauty parlor for ambient sound instead.

By 1969, the building had been transformed, and this was the atmosphere that a young Richard Hell — then still Richard Myers — stumbled into when he and the 15-years-old Ms. Mucha started an affair. “I was working menial jobs. I had never seen that scale of ease of existence before,” he said. “It reeked of this natural, graceful attitude toward life — of books being everywhere and art being everywhere, and Claes’s work.”

Residency almost always came through word of mouth. The painter and art critic Walter Robinson, who lived in the building from 1995 to 2000, heard about it from his sister-in-law, the sculptor Kiki Smith. “It wasn’t that social by then,” he said with regret. Ms. Butterly and Mr. Burckhardt found out about the building from his father, Rudy Burckhardt, the photographer and filmmaker integral to several generations of the New York School.

After Mr. Rivers bought the entire building, he converted it to a condominium in 1992.

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Allen Ginsberg had attended some of the parties at 404 East 14th Street, said Peter Hale, who helps run Mr. Ginsberg's estate. So, Mr. Hale said, when the poet came to look at a condo to buy in 1996, "he said, 'Oh, I know this building.' Then he ran into Larry, and Larry said, 'Come on, Allen. Buy it already. We can push each other around in our wheelchairs and grow old together.' "

Mr. Burckhardt likes to allude to earlier artists in some of his work. One of his two pieces in the show, "FULL STOP (Palet Table)," makes references to Jasper Johns's Savarin Coffee can imagery and Jackson Pollock's drip paintings. The other, from his recent "Slump" series, is a nod to Mr. Oldenburg. Living at 404 East 14th Street allowed him to crank up the scale of his work, he said. Ms. Butterly, on the other hand, creates diminutive, ornate ceramics. However, she said, "you need a large space to think clearly."

But for their children, the building's influence is different. "Ask my son what this space means to him," Mr. Burckhardt said, "and all you have to know is that he's a skateboarder."

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