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49 Episodes of Intimate History

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ARTISTS' SOHO

49 EPISODES OF INTIMATE HISTORY

RICHARD KOSTELANETZ
EDITED BY SUSIE RANNEY LEMMER



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First edition

ARTISTS' SOHO

*To the memory of
George Maciunas and Ivan Karp,
Artists' SoHo's godfathers*

Preface

This book brings together two long-standing interests of mine: avant-garde arts, about which I've written much before, and New York City, the sound of which was the subject and theme of my longest electroacoustic audiotape composition. Better yet, it takes place in downtown Manhattan, where I went to elementary school and have lived most of my life, where my parents lived for their last decades, and an area I continue to love even after I've left it. Since my cultural roots remain in downtown Manhattan, I've tried to speak of SoHo as though I still lived there, preferring, say, "here" over "there." If this recalls my participation in some uniquely rich American cultural history, consider that, much like my artist neighbors, I wasn't aware of an experience so special until it had ended, so that writing about it now, some decades later, I have become an outsider looking back much as a disinterested historian might.

Meant to be read from beginning to end, this panoramic episodic essay in intimate cultural history mixes the spatial with the sequential, as well as the personal with the general, in a series of interrelated episodes about various phenomena, individuals, and issues. On the other hand, for more selective readers this book opens not with a table of contents but an abridged index, identifying exactly where discussions of particular subjects can be found.

Of the many people who generously helped, mostly by responding to emailed questions and drafts, I'm grateful especially to Douglas Puchowski. The first draft was written between ocean swims during a

post-residency respite at the Atlantic Center for the Arts in New Smyrna Beach, Florida. Some chapters from the first edition previously appeared in *NY Arts*, *Provincetown Arts*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and several sections of the *Sunday New York Times*.

Artists' SoHo is the second edition of a book first published with a different title a decade ago. Sooner than reprint, I've rewritten, adding more than I subtracted, once again thanking people who corrected and updated me, particularly Susie Ranney. Having completed her master's thesis on Artists' SoHo for Columbia University's Historic Preservation program, she interned on this project, criticizing, suggesting, and indexing, with my gratitude. This book has stood as definitive, less because it said everything but because no one tried to say more. This first hardback edition is still available from me (as Archae Editions) and choice antiquariats. It contains some prose and photographs not available here.

As this cultural history covers a terrain about which much has been forgotten or has disappeared, I welcome not only correction of details but additional information, if not for a possible third edition, at least to post as addenda on my eponymous website.

—Richard Kostelanetz, RidgeWood-SoHo,
NY 11385-5751, 14 May 2014

In the 1840s and 1850s, when Broadway between Canal and Houston streets emerged as the city's grand shopping and entertainment boulevard, New York's bawdy houses trekked northward too. They clustered directly behind the commercial strip, in the small cobbled streets of Mercer, Greene, Howard, and Wooster—present-day SoHo.

—Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace,
Gotham (1998)

For seventy-five dollars a month we got raw space: no elevator or sprinklers, just exposed wooden beams, brick walls, and wooded floors, big windows at either end, a toilet, and a sink. We were working artists, living in lofts zoned for light manufacturing in the center of the raw fabric district, bounded by produce and meat-packing warehouses with carcasses hanging from their canopies. The neighborhood was a residential desert.

There were no subdivisions in our life. We did not leave to go to work: that would have been bourgeois. It felt good to be persecuted; everyone knew real artists had to pay dearly for their freedom. When we moved in, our downstairs neighbor, Bob Huot, a painter, told us to tear up our envelopes so no one could track our address and to distribute our garbage in all the neighborhood trash baskets, not just the one on

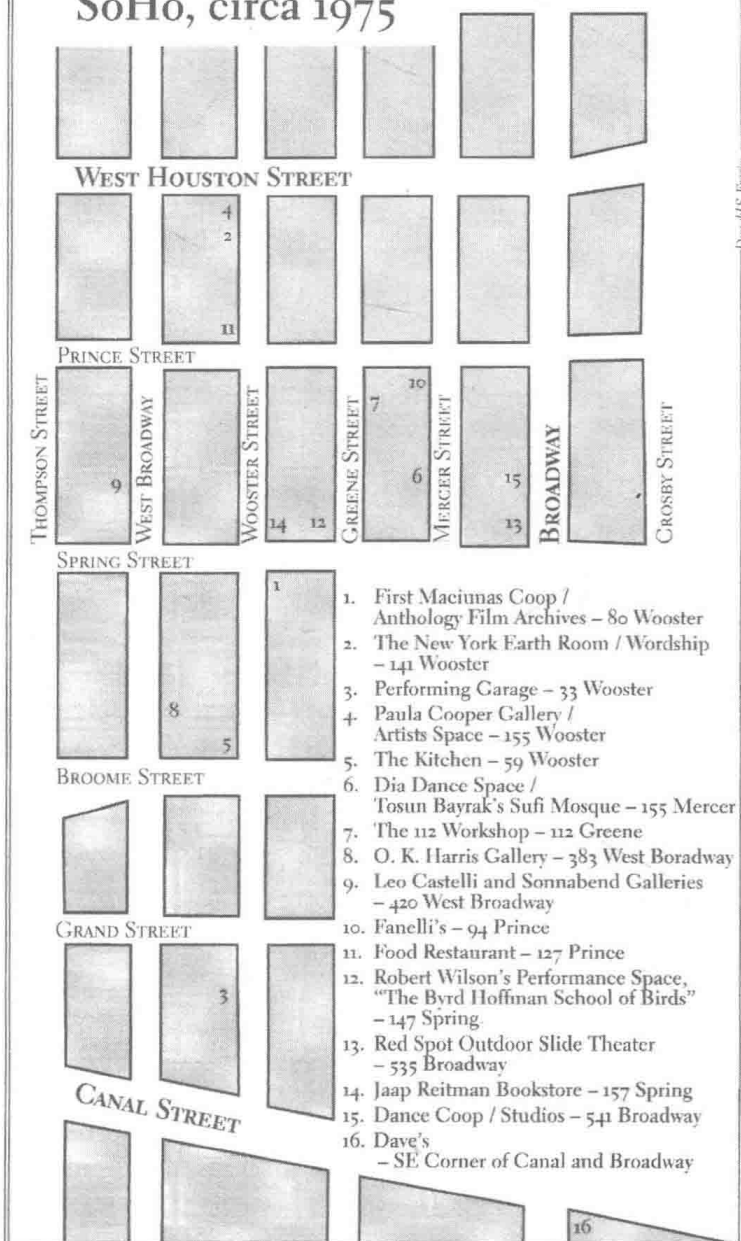
our own corner, lest we draw attention to the fact that someone was living in the building.

—*Twyla Tharp*, *Push Comes to Shove* (1992)

141 WOOSTER STREET, NEW YORK, NEW YORK, 1974 to the present. A loft renovated to my design, in the SoHo section of Manhattan. Finally, I have enough space for me and my stuff—several thousand books, works of art, seven worktables, prints and photolines, copies of my previous publications, etc., etc. I have both a writing room totally free of distracting books and an adjacent room for drawing and tv-watching and yet other spaces for reading and proofreading. S. lives with me at the beginning; but when she leaves, I live alone. On the low floor in the back of the building, this “loft” has little direct sunlight and little noise—a disadvantage entwined in an advantage. As the neighborhood is populated by artists, themselves hyper-productive, one feels inclined to work at one’s art all the time, and does.

—*Richard Kostelanetz*, *Autobiographies* (1981)

A walk around artists' SoHo, circa 1975



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Although the creation of a single work of art may be an individual effort, artists have often clustered together to share ideas, offer mutual support, and provide a sympathetic audience for one another. The dynamics of rapid change in artistic styles over the past forty years have required that artists who want to remain current with the latest developments in art be close to the important galleries as well as accessible to others working in their particular field.

—James R. Hudson, *The Unanticipated City* (1987)

What I experienced in Artists' SoHo was a cultural hothouse unlike anything anywhere else or any community before in American life. I'd already known about bucolic "artist colonies," to be sure, but this was an urban oasis created not by a dozen or two artists but by hundreds, if not more, acting independently. As most of us got to know everyone in our buildings as well as many neighbors, SoHo eventually came to feel more like a one-industry town or a residential university campus than a typical urban neighborhood. Working the majority of our waking time on our art(s) we never needed to explain to our neighbors that nothing should get in the way of our art-making. No artists' colony in the world was ever so populous, or even half as populous. None before had housed so many people soon-to-be distinguished in not one or two arts but several: painting, sculpture, photography, architecture, performance, dance, playwriting, music, even literature. Esthetically rich, deep, and various this 'hood certainly was.

As an artists' colony, SoHo became an educational domain where, thanks to a certain generosity of spirit, younger people were inadvertently teaching one another all the time. Living there, at least at the beginning, was an intense learning experience, simply from going to openings, walking through galleries, and listening to our neighbors talk. The SoHo atmosphere was noncompetitive, in part because few of us saw our economies appreciate highly. Furthermore, whereas painters working in a similar style might have measured themselves against each other, many of us did art so original that we had no immediate competitors. Should anyone earn more from his art than others, he or she didn't change his dress or behavior.

In my observation, visual artists, more than poets or composers, require professional social interaction to learn what cannot be taught in classrooms or gained from journalism about art. That accounts for why historians of painting so often write about groups or why visual artists rarely acknowledge teachers in their professional biographies, in contrast, say, to poets and especially composers, who nearly always do.

Painters and sculptors need to exchange esthetic intelligence and see important new works first hand, particularly at crucial points in their creative lives. Young visual artists are more inclined to influence each other, if not steal esthetic ideas or technical tricks from each other, than young writers, for instance. For the same reason that, say, Diego Rivera needed to go to Paris before World War I prior to returning to his native Mexico, so ambitious artists from around the world made their way to SoHo in the 1970s to look, to see, and to hear. One institution perhaps peculiar to artists' communities is Artists Talk on Art, established in SoHo in 1975, where on many Friday nights, in a gallery usually, a panel is convened to address a certain theme. (Such weekly gatherings of New York City writers or composers are less likely.)

Painters and sculptors teaching in provincial colleges often rented SoHo lofts for the summertime, Manhattan's notoriously humid heat notwithstanding, simply to assimilate what could not be learned back home. By contrast, aspiring artists who choose not to participate in this kind of art-center educational experience will forever reveal in their art, as well as their discourse, an absence of esthetic moxie. Simply, they don't learn what surely not to do. As a de facto anarchist community, the university that was Artists' SoHo was a school without walls with no tuition, no hierarchy, no tests, and no degrees; it had scant connection with the accredited university (NYU) just on the other side of Houston Street.

Another sign of SoHo's de facto anarchy was the fact that no one planned or expected that it would become an artists' enclave. City officials certainly didn't. Nor did any arts institution or artists' conglomerate. Nor did the art galleries or any major real estate developers. This sometime industrial slum became an art town thanks to the initiative of hundreds of independent individuals who seized a unique opportunity, some of them settling in outright violation of city law, as self-defined anarchists are predisposed to do, often against the advice of their lawyers.

I have met more than one aspiring artist who had been advised against purchasing in an area formally illegal for living. "You could lose everything," their lawyer warned at the time, looking dumber and dumber in the years since. As artistic aspirations were more likely to enervate outside SoHo, more than once I thanked my lawyer father's junior partner, a few years younger than I and then married to a painter, for approving a purchase that might have frightened a more conservative counselor.

Subtly perhaps, SoHo represented the culture of the 1960s without its radical politics (based at the time in antiwar protests). Everyone qualifying for an artist's variance could buy into its co-ops regardless of age, race, gender, political affiliation, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or any other category of discrimination popular in the larger world. No one would have proposed any blanket exclusions, in part because they knew damn well they would be unacceptable. (Nor was "affirmative action" necessary.) Besides, no oldtime SoHo landlord thought he or she had property with enough value to require any cunning discriminations until the 1980s. Women owned nearly as often as men, and they renovated by themselves as well. In my own co-op, from the beginning at least one-third of the partners have been divorced, unattached women. Approximately one-third of my partners could be called gay.

Though artists are frequently described as predisposed to rabid radicalism (especially by conservative polemicists with fanciful imaginations), most of my neighbors were registered Democrats, if they cared at all, and conservative about property, especially if they owned, as I did, real estate through their co-ops. Though artists forged alliances within the community, no one was ever dubbed the "mayor of SoHo," at least not for more than a minute for someone's amusement.

Early in the history of my co-op, probably around 1975, one-third of my original partners had to fill out some official form that incidentally asked for our annual income. I recall noticing at the time that everyone had independently written \$10,000. Even though some might have earned more, he or she didn't want to invite unnecessary comparisons

and thus envy. Cooperation counted more among us than competition, in part because downtown loft space was plentiful at least until the late 1970s. After all, artists were pleased to discover in their renovated industrial slum an agreeable alternative to the tradition of their isolation and alienation in America.

Many of my artist neighbors were indeed scraping by financially (and continued scraping for decades later). When artist couples split, it was not uncommon for them to divide in half their principal asset, which was their SoHo loft: one living on one side of a new wall that went to the ceiling and the other on the other side. Their kids, if they had any, would simply run down the hall to fulfill their legal obligations. (And when one divorcé moved elsewhere, this adjacent space was sometimes sold to the ex-spouse.) Indicatively, only one of my co-op partners, the least active artist, had the academic-bourgeois amenity of a country house until the late 1990s, when a second partner purchased one.

My hunch is that, in the hidden history of New York City, the subsequent boom in Manhattan and then Brooklyn real estate from the 1980s to the present originated in Artists' Soho in the 1970s; but since the development of residential SoHo wasn't planned by any prominent agency or real-estate mogul, no publicity-making entity could claim credit for turning the market for New York City real estate around.