

SEPT 2009

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[Next Section >](#) [Next Article >](#)



- LOCAL
- ART
- BOOKS
- DANCE
- THEATER
- POETRY
- LASTWORDS
- EXPRESS
- ARTSEEN
- MUSIC
- FILM
- FICTION
- STREETS
- CONTENTS

[Search All Issues](#)

A Note from the Publisher by Phong Bui

"From the Crooked Timber of Humanity, nothing ever came out straight"

INCONVERSATION



JOHN YAU with PHONG BUI

Another World: The Washington Square Outdoor Art Exhibit

by Sharon L. Butler

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In 1931, during the early days of the Depression, before the Works Progress Administration was put in place, an outdoor art exhibition, modeled on those in Europe, was held in Washington Square to help struggling artists make a living. Not yet thinking in terms of their careers, but simply trying to pay the rent, artists like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Alice Neel are said to have been among the more than 200 artists who participated. In the exhibit's halcyon days, all the major museums embraced the show, and over 100,000 people visited each day. Today, art world insiders are more attuned to blue-chip galleries and international art fairs; MFA-trained artists rarely give the exhibit a second thought. Rather than investing in the booth fees, framing, and display racks required to show in Washington Square, ambitious emerging artists are inclined to hold open studio events where gallerists, collectors, and curators are most likely to see their work. However improbable it may be, the typical 21st-century MFA is intent on being discovered, making an international reputation, and somehow influencing the course of art history. Selling artwork to the untutored masses is not a priority.

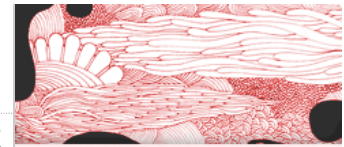
In the beginning, the exhibition was organized by the Artists Aid Committee, founded by Vernon Carroll Porter and comprising ten anonymous artists. The show lasted for nine days and was limited to artists who lived in New York.

Most resided below 14th Street, the rest in Brooklyn. Art dealers scoured the shows, buying work that they would later resell in their uptown galleries. There was a "no censorship" policy, but when works were deemed offensive, as Alice Neel's "Degenerate Madonna" was in the inaugural year, the canvases were proudly turned to the wall, as badges of avant-garde honor. Paintings sold for between \$5.00 and \$250.00 (sculptures for slightly more), and in a good year, the show could yield the artists collectively up to \$35,000.



In the early days, there was a "no censorship" policy at the exhibit, but when works were deemed offensive, as Alice Neel's "Degenerate Madonna" was in the inaugural year, the canvases were proudly turned to the wall, as badges of avant-garde honor. Alice Neel, "Degenerate Madonna," (1930), Oil on canvas. 31 x 24 inches. © The Estate of Alice Neel, courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

For the first few years of its existence, critics held the Washington Square event in high regard, and it succeeded in keeping artists working. By 1948, however, its reputation diminished by a surplus of predictably conservative



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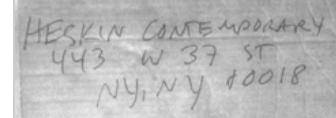
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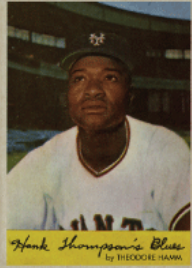
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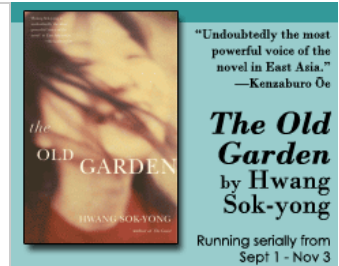
artwork and the show began to struggle. To save the exhibit, a community steering committee, led by Nell Boardman, a respected Greenwich Village painter, stepped in and took control. The event grew to include more than 1200 artists. The aesthetic quality of the work was uneven, but the event became extremely profitable and was officially incorporated as the "Washington Square Outdoor Art Exhibit." The steering committee curiously declared that the organization's new mission was to "stimulate, promote and preserve contemporary American Art" even though it was moving in the opposite direction. By 1960, no doubt owing to its economic success, politicians and mainstream media wholeheartedly embraced the event as one of the city's enduring cultural resources. Eventually, the open admission policy ended. A selection committee was established; and artists were required to frame work, provide professional-quality display racks, and pay entry fees.

In the meantime, Abstract Expressionism had gripped the intelligentsia, who eschewed traditional representational art and scorned easel painting as staidly bourgeois. A schism thus developed and deepened. Uptown galleries began to show more intellectually challenging, non-mimetic large-scale work for an informed audience, while the outdoor exhibit continued to present traditional 'scapes and portraits with a more transparent aesthetic, made mainly to please the eye rather than test the mind, to the uninitiated public. The unabashed goal of many WSOAE artists was to make appealing work that would *sell*, and pointedly would *not* challenge the status quo. As the event evolved, then, the selection committee came to value craftsmanship and traditional drawing skills rather than innovative approaches. In 1973, the committee famously rejected Gordon Matta-Clark when he submitted hand-colored photographic scrolls depicting graffiti-covered surfaces. In response, he staged his own "Alternatives to the Washington Square Art Fair" on Mercer Street. After inviting graffiti artists to paint his truck, he parked it outside the exhibition and proceeded to cut the vehicle into pieces, which he offered as salable objects.

The schism has persisted. To be sure, most WSOAE artists have taken classes at art centers or with private instructors. Some of the older artists, often retired from jobs in advertising or other commercial fields, may have studied with famous teachers at the Art Students League years ago. But MFAs are rare. Since exhibit participants have not been intoxicated by the art-star fantasy that art schools purvey, the outdoor exhibit circuit therefore scans as an untainted, attractive, workably bohemian lifestyle that enables them to make art half the year and spend the other half selling it.

Many of the 100 artists who will be showing at the WSOAE over Labor Day weekend will indeed offer cityscapes, landscapes, portraits, and still-lives. The exhibit continues to feature these traditional representational forms not because the selection committee self-consciously spurns more contemporary work, but because the WSOAE has come to serve the market—and it is a substantial one—for that type of art. The exhibit's current Executive Director, John Morehouse, wishes that young artists living in Williamsburg, Bushwick, and other local artist communities would apply. I met Morehouse at the fabled Salmagundi Club (which is also looking for new, young members) on Fifth Avenue.

"The show has gone up and down over the decades but it's time, I hope, for an upswing," he told me. "The basic idea of artists selling directly to the public at a free outdoor show seems to me quite sound and exciting."



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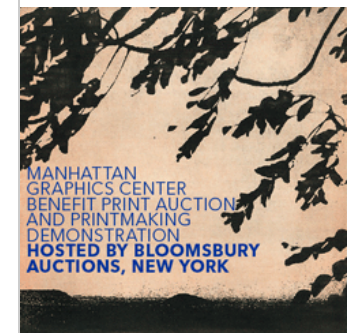
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Ben Frey, a Montreal-based, self-taught artist who travels the outdoor art fair circuit with fellow artist Sarah Bean, noted that it's a lot more interesting than tending a bar for a living.

In this light, and given the tremendous odds against finding representation with a prestigious gallery, it is surprising that a greater number of artists don't approach their careers more eclectically and pragmatically, and, in a creative DIY spirit, embrace the WSOAE. The main impediment may be economic. Requiring artists to bear the costs of an exhibition is an outdated approach. Most nonprofit art organizations in the city finance group exhibitions through grants and other funding, not by charging fees directly to the artists. The WSOAE fees (\$20 to apply, \$330 for a three-day weekend) can be prohibitive. Professional display racks and framing are further burdens for young artists and won't necessarily ensure better artwork—they just skew the applicant pool toward more financially secure artists. But with hard economic times shrinking exhibition opportunities, ambitious young contemporary artists may have to find alternative means of showing and selling their work. Perhaps the next Pollock, de Kooning, or Alice Neel will be discovered at the WSOAE. If not, Winslow Homer will prevail—and sell.

 [Print](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sharon L. Butler is an artist and associate professor at Eastern Connecticut State University. Over Labor Day weekend, look for her installation at the Washington Square Outdoor Art Exhibit.