

**CITY AND ART**  
CROSS-DIALOGUES ON SPACE  
**NEW YORK**  
**IN THE 1970s**

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# ABSTRACT.

“A void  
Once a store, a church, an old red barn, a hall  
Gone—left only empty walls  
Decaying light  
A Dream  
In search of space  
Arms to spread  
Life to share  
A Void No More.”

P.J. Gibson. *Dealing with space*, 1975.<sup>1</sup>

The brochure for the artistic event from which the *Institute for Art and Urban Resources* was born read, “By allowing its artistic community involvement in urban landscape, disused and abandoned areas can be meaningful space.”<sup>2</sup> At the turn of the 1960s, certain art organizations stood out as providers of “urban resources” for the practice of art throughout the emblematic city of New York, promoting singular connections with the obsolete urban environment. “Urban curatorship,” “public art,” “creative time,” and “artistic playscape” were some of the concepts relating to the city context derived from the activity of such associations. The involvement with the city of the 1960 generation of artists was to culminate in the formation of unique structures aiming to research, enquire, record, and recycle neglected urban space, all of which are the object of study of this dissertation. How could they take advantage of the obsolete urban landscape? What was the search and decision-making process as regards urban contexts like for these art organizations? What was the architecture of this art—the alternative spatial form beyond conventional cultural confinements—like? And, even more relevant to this field of discipline: what can be inferred from their procedures and practices to improve an obsolete cityscape?

1. *Dealing with spaces*, National Endowments for the Arts (Media Associates Inc.: Washington D.C., 1975).

2. From annotated flier for *The Brooklyn Bridge Event*, New York, NY, May 24, 1971. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art Archives, MoMA PS1, 2202, 2013).

This thesis focuses on the formal relationship between New York City and 1970s art. During this period, including its diffuse beginnings in the 1960s and its long-drawn-out conclusion in the 1980s, artists participated in an expansion of its field of action which was to reach the soil, subsoil and sky of this city. The wide variety of art forms and creative procedures emerging in this decade were related to the “place”. Certainly, the setting for numerous artistic practices was the entirety of the urban landscape. The high porosity of this urban stage, together with the artists’ need for workspace and living space at the time, was to boost the specific dialogue addressed here between city and art. In this regard, the thesis first argues the particularity of the New York cityscape in the 1970s, symbolically obsolescent due to the creative-destructive nature of the city and economically obsolescent due to two consecutive fiscal crises. The previous suburbanization trend and the intense urban renewal processes affecting entire neighborhoods and districts, together with deindustrialization, outlined the decadence of this urban scenario. Specific analyses are carried out on the context and the geographical boundaries of art are also studied. In addition to assessing procedures, this work expounds on how the artists and art organizations of this period, acting almost as researchers of urban obsolescence, provided the first creative responses to the urban situation.

While the case of the “art district” and the individual incursions into the urban fabric had been largely addressed (by Lucy R. Lippard, Rosalind Krauss, Lawrence Alloway and Julie Ault, as well as by Pilar Parcerisas and Iria Candela), this research put together and analyzed the specific case of lesser known organizations which took on the specific role of detecting and managing neglected and vacant space in the city. The history of the origins of the *Institute for Art and Urban Resources* (IAUR), the *Public Art Fund*, *Creative Time*, and the *Athena Foundation* has revealed how artists created specific strategies, plans and projects to connect with the cityscape of this period. This study focuses on their symbolic procedures and urban tactics used for a temporal “artistification” of obsolete urban spaces which, in a reverse reading, are also presented as strategies of urban improvement through art.

According to the above, “space” is the unit measure to trace the activity of such organizations in this research. In view of this and in order to conduct the research on the achievements of these art structures, a collection of urban resources, “workspaces”, “public spaces”, “collective”, and “waste spaces” is used here to present their artistic life –the *art as life* of that period.

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Life to share  
A Void No More.”

P.J. Gibson. *Dealing with space*, 1975.<sup>1</sup>

El folleto para el evento artístico del cual nació el *Institute for Art and Urban Resources* decía: “Al permitir la participación de su comunidad artística en el paisaje urbano, las áreas sin uso y abandonadas pueden llegar a ser espacios significativos.”<sup>2</sup> En el cambio de década hacia los años setenta, ciertas organizaciones artísticas comenzaron a destacar por toda la emblemática ciudad de Nueva York como proveedores de “recursos urbanos” para la práctica del arte, propiciando singulares conexiones con su entorno urbano obsoleto. “Comisariado urbano”, “arte público”, “tiempo creativo” y “paisaje de juego artístico,” eran algunos de los conceptos relacionados con el contexto de la ciudad que derivaban de la actividad de dichas asociaciones. La implicación de la generación de artistas de 1960 con la ciudad culminaría en la formación de estructuras únicas cuyo fin era investigar, interrogar, registrar y reciclar espacios urbanos excluidos, y que son objeto de estudio de esta tesis. ¿Cómo se beneficiaron del paisaje urbano obsoleto? ¿Cuál fue el proceso de investigación y de toma de decisiones llevado a cabo por estas organizaciones en relación a sus contextos urbanos? ¿Cómo era la arquitectura propia del arte de 1970 —esa forma espacial alternativa que superaba los límites convencionales de la cultura? Y, lo que es incluso más relevante para este campo: ¿qué puede extraerse de sus procedimientos y prácticas para mejorar el paisaje obsoleto de la ciudad contemporánea?

Esta tesis se centra en la relación formal entre Nueva York y el arte de la década

1. *Dealing with space*, National Endowments for the Arts (Media Associates Inc.: Washington D.C., 1975).

2. Procede de un folleto anotado de *The Brooklyn Bridge Event*, Mayo 24, 1971. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art Archives, MoMA PS1, 2202, 2013).



de los 70. Durante este período, que incluye desde los difusos comienzos de los 60 hasta su prolongado final en los ochenta, los artistas participaron en una expansión de su campo de acción que alcanzaría el subsuelo, el suelo y el cielo de esta ciudad. La amplia variedad de formas artísticas y de procedimientos creativos que emergieron en esta década estaban casi todos relacionados con el “lugar,” siendo, efectivamente, la extensión del paisaje urbano el nuevo marco de numerosas de sus prácticas. La alta porosidad del escenario urbano unida a la necesidad de los artistas de espacios en los que trabajar y vivir a la vez, estimularía este diálogo específico entre ciudad y arte. De acuerdo a esto, la tesis primero argumenta la particularidad del paisaje de la ciudad de Nueva York en los setenta, obsolescente de forma simbólica debido a su naturaleza creativo-destructiva, y también de forma económica debido a dos crisis financieras consecutivas. La previa tendencia a la suburbanización y el intenso proceso de renovación urbana que afectaba a barrios y distritos completos, junto a la desindustrialización, remarcaban la decadencia de este escenario urbano. Analizando este contexto de manera específica y, posteriormente, estudiando los límites geográficos del arte, así como los procedimientos existentes tras sus prácticas, este trabajo explica cómo los artistas y organizaciones de arte del período, casi actuando como “investigadores de obsolescencia urbana,” proporcionaron las primeras respuesta creativas a dichas circunstancias de la ciudad.

Mientras el caso del “distrito artístico” y las incursiones individuales en el tejido urbano han sido ampliamente estudiadas, esta investigación analiza el caso específico de organizaciones menos conocidas que tomaron el papel de detectar y gestionar espacios abandonados, desechados y vacíos en toda la ciudad. La historia del origen del *Institute for Art and Urban Resources* (IAUR), del *Public Art Fund*, de *Creative Time*, y de la *Athena Foundation* revela la manera en la que los artistas crearon estrategias, planes y proyectos específicos para conectar con el paisaje de la ciudad de este período. Este estudio se focaliza en los procedimientos simbólicos y tácticas urbanas utilizados para una “artistificación” temporal de espacios urbanos obsoletos, los cuales, en una lectura inversa, son también presentados como estrategias de mejora urbana a través del arte.

En coherencia con lo anterior, el “espacio” se convierte en la unidad de medida para rastrear la actividad de estas organizaciones en la presente tesis. Así, con el objeto de descubrir los logros de estas nuevas estructuras de arte – el arte como vida de la década de 1970–, se presenta una colección de recursos urbanos “espacios de trabajo”, “espacios públicos”, “colectivos” y “espacios residuales” donde acontecieron sus proyectos.

**INTRODUCTION.**

Where is the place of art in contemporary cities? This ever-present question is of major relevance today. There was a time however, when inquiries into art and city were very much alive in the public debate, and led to extraordinary proposals and projects which were somehow sidelined by city thinkers. A lesser known part of the art history of New York and the 1970s milestone –covering both past and future– hides an incredible source of inspiration for current cities. Artists found a way of recycling their valuable urban contexts by expanding the confines of the cultural experience. Such was the scope of their actions that new structured ways were invented to connect with a postmodern society throughout the obsolescent urban landscape. To do so, they pioneered research on the inactive spaces within the city, and developed methods to appropriate them for their purposes. The result was a wide range of new artistic platforms where the symbolic production of the contemporary city could be reformulated. When exactly did this occur? How did the artistic forces interfere in the development of their contexts? Could fiction replace function in the contemporary city?

## **OBJECT OF STUDY AND BACKGROUND.**

The object of study of this dissertation is the relationship between art and city, alternative art practices and obsolete urban space, in the paradigmatic case of New York City in the 1970s.

This choice is greatly explained by the artistic worldwide relevance of this city since the late 1940s when, to quote Serge Guilbaut, it stole “the idea of modern art to Paris.”<sup>3</sup> In keeping with this, New York, and mainly the area of Lower Manhattan, was to become the experimental arena for late 1960s artistic counterculture and the area of SoHo was to be declared an unprecedented artistic phenomenon. The National Endowment for the Arts was founded in 1965, and other collectives and groups which

3. Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

promoted the arts in American cities from the institutional and private sector were established subsequently. During the 1970s, there was an expansion of the field of art toward new experimental practices in which the urban context acquired great relevance. The city had already undergone profound renewal processes prior to experiencing two fiscal crises. This meant that artists were faced with a context with enough flexibility to allow further development of their experimental creations. This situation evolved into a mutually beneficial relationship. Artists, who struggled in a period of crisis, found an alternative space where they could work and live, and the obsolete space was reactivated, -restored even- by the artistic activity.

In addition to the above, in the same decade this city also built a new concept of Public Art in response to the great number of unqualified privately owned public spaces created after the 1961 Zoning Law. It was also around this time that new urban regulations were created in order to preserve New York Landmarks and the artistic activity within them. The 1960s and the early 1970s were crucial in forging the idea of urban heritage in New York City. Additionally, at the turn of the decade, a growing economy of the arts was acknowledged by city and economic experts, boosting the presence of “art in architecture” in the public debate.

In this general context, this dissertation has focused specifically on the study of the activity of four organizations that covered the spectrum of artistic practice within obsolete urban space throughout the entire decade of the 1970s. The selection of these organizations can be attributed to several reasons. From a conceptual perspective, they all share the common goal of providing the artist with urban resources, as well as generating urban improvement through their art projects. Despite what is usually thought, artists’ invasion of alternative urban spaces was not just the result of improvised acts. There were organizations that fostered advanced procedures and innovative projects to connect art and cityscape. From an instrumental point of view, these organizations have never been addressed together in relation to the urban resources that they utilized or the procedures that they used. The field of art is examined from an unprecedented urban focus aiming to eliminate any boundaries between disciplinary areas to the benefit of a major goal: retrieving the history of the city from as many points of view as necessary to feed the creative urban experience of the present time.

Each organization has been an object of study in itself, following the difficult task of documenting their ephemeral projects and hidden procedures. The exceptionality

of the information found—a number of unpublished materials from direct research sources—served as further encouragement in the path undertaken in this research. Therefore, stemming from this, the subsequent objects of this study are:

***INSTITUTE FOR ART AND URBAN RESOURCES, IAUR.*** This case study is featured here because of the special interest of its beginnings. This organization managed to keep the spirit of SoHo alive by getting local SoHo artists involved and mainly focusing its activity on the reutilization of obsolete workspaces of many sorts: factories, industrial lofts, police precincts, port waterfronts—also including landmark buildings. Its founder Alanna Heiss embraced the experience of SoHo and reinvented new forms to provide artists with New York urban resources. The work of Alanna Heiss and her last significant project PS1 (at the first Public School of Long Island City), known today as MoMA PS1, is very notorious and largely acknowledged. However, the early years of this organization have remained relatively unknown, as has the principle of its conception: Alanna Heiss’s “Urban Curatorship”. This dissertation contributes to revealing the aims, procedures and projects formulated by Heiss from 1970 until 1976, when PS1 was created.

***PUBLIC ART FUND.*** This object of study is selected because of its relevance in the integration of art in public spaces. Although this organization is usually classed as an “institution” and frequently kept separate from the alternative art movement, its advanced understanding of the situation of the New York public arena—especially of privately owned public space—and its innovative methods and projects for the reactivation of the dormant public space deserve to be included in the study of the “cross-dialogue on space” held between city and art in this period. Founder Doris C. Freedman combined her experience of the non-profit organization *City Walls* and of the Municipal Art Society organization *Public Art Council* to create the *Public Art Fund*, in order to support art projects in plazas, parks, subways, and landfills. Freedman greatly contributed to the reformulation of the concept of Public Art in New York with her numerous projects and the creation of new urban regulations that took into account the importance of art for improving the urban context—the *One Percent for Art Law*. This thesis studies and presents the Fund’s most revealing projects from the foundation of these two original organizations in 1972, until 1980 when one of its most significant projects was executed within Battery Park Landfill, shortly after Freedman ceased her involvement with the Public Art Fund.

**CREATIVE TIME.** This organization dealt directly with one of the most significant urban areas of the city in this period, the financial district. This area had been reconfigured in the previous decade and had already hosted the inauguration of the World Trade Center in the 1970s. Due to the 1970s crises, some of these new venues, and some landmark buildings, were left unoccupied for the first few years, the privately owned public spaces around them were too aseptic and there was a general lack of social and creative life in the area. Its director in the early years, Anita Contini, invented the concept of “creative time” to connect the art activity with the business activity of the area. This organization originally provided the artists with new vacant office space, landmark buildings and outdoor spaces, such as parks, plazas and landfills. This study covers its early years during Contini’s tenure as director, from its foundation in 1973 up until 1986 when its most popular project “Art on the beach” ended up in the Battery Park Landfill.

**ATHENA FOUNDATION.** With this organization, the study fully reached the 1980s. Mark di Suvero set up the Athena Foundation in 1976 in order to support young artists. This small organization moved to Queens in 1980 where di Suvero founded the *Socrates Sculpture Park* with the help of Isamu Noguchi. This object of study is of use in addressing the case of American Art Parks, specially developed during the 1960s and 1970s. This project is the perfect representation of one of the richest “playscapes” for sculptors and neighbors in the US. While the utopia of SoHo was dissipating, di Suvero found a new way to relate artists and urban communities which is still current today. This dissertation examines the early years of the Athena Foundation, the expansion of the arts toward the margins of Manhattan, the unique urban case of Queens and the project of the *Socrates Sculpture Park*, paying special attention to the figure of Isamu Noguchi as a pioneer in the art invasion of this area.

In addition to the above, the unit measure of the thesis has been the “space”, which has also been used rather fittingly to describe the organizations. In order to diversify the possible ways of interpreting the thesis, a parallel reading of projects and places has been created within the document.

These four cases cover the entire decade of the 1970s –also examining what stemmed from it in the 1980s. Over the years, the four founders have proven to be key figures in New York City Life. Their work was interconnected, developing different yet complementary projects which this thesis addresses as a whole in order to put together

a comprehensive narrative of the “city-art dialogue on space” of this period.

beyond SoHo.

## **STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS.**

The first chapter of the dissertation, *1970s New York and its Creative Destruction*, aims to introduce the context in which these organizations were created. First, it presents the phenomenon of “Manhattanism” that was to propitiate intense processes of “creative destruction” in the development of the city, leading to an extended “devastation of the forest of New York symbols” over the following two decades (Marshall Berman, 1987). The processes of infrastructural and residential urban renewal before and during the 1950s, together with financial expansion in the form of offices in the 1960s, boosted the destruction of numerous architectural landmarks and the disintegration of community life in many neighborhoods. The two consecutive oil crises in the 1970s especially affected the industrial sector and halted the destructive wheel on which the city functioned, setting the stage of industrial obsolescence and urban ruin that was so attractive to the artists of this period –the expert “researchers of urban obsolescence.” The second part of the chapter examines the cultural confinement of art during this period. It argues how art space went from being the square-white box to mutating its boundaries and disintegrating into this particularly porous cityscape. The urban phenomenon of SoHo is addressed at the end of this chapter to analyze the most notorious art invasion of the city context. This occurred at the turn of the century and influenced the development of the relationship between art and city throughout the 1970s.

The next four chapters constitute the core of the dissertation referring to the history of each of the four major organizations, differentiated but brought together by a common commitment to the search for spatial alternatives for art within the urban context. The activity of the *Institute for Art and Urban Resources (1971-1976)* is examined from its achievements in Downtown Manhattan to the foundation of its permanent headquarters in Long Island City, [MoMA] PS1. The study of the first stage of this organization introduces the concept of “urban curatorship”. Particularly noteworthy is the use that its founder, Alanna Heiss, makes of organizational procedures characteristic of museum techniques in order to deal with the temporal availability of these urban spaces. In keeping with its name, it can be observed how the curatorship of urban

resources made it possible to program a constellation of available spaces scattered and provisionally encrypted in the city. This dissertation presents an unknown process arising from the belief that “programs survive spaces”, reflecting the advanced understanding of the urban components and their life cycles.

The life of the *Public Art Fund (1972-1977)* was the result of a merger between the Public Art Council (1972), founded under the auspices of the Municipal Art Society, and City Walls Inc. (1968), led by Doris C. Freedman, the first director of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (1967). The projects reviewed mainly correspond to the period of Freedman’s leadership, since she was a major exponent of the development of “public art” in New York City. While the urban resources used by IAUR involved all kinds of obsolete urban spaces, the organization focused on improving public space of the city through art experience. This chapter first presents the prolific production of unqualified public spaces after the 1961 Zoning Law, including a large number of privately owned public spaces (Jerold S. Kayden, 2000), and describes Freedman’s determination to upgrade these collective environments. The dissertation illustrates the different art procedures used in a wide range of urban settings, including public infrastructures, urban plazas or provisional landfills.

The chapter devoted to *Creative Time (1973-1986)* examines the art interventions led by its founder Anita Contini in the Financial District. Contini was to coin the concept of urban “creative time” as an antidote to the destruction of public life, setting apart a lapse of time for collective creation. Unlike its sister organization the Public Art Fund, Creative Time did not merely use public space locations, but transformed other sites into public grounds through generous doses of experimental art. Creative Time’s consideration of what was public extended to unexpected spaces, locations that were not labeled as public but could be collectively used by citizens. This study first addresses the conformation of the Lower Manhattan business district in the 1960s, illustrating the frenetic office production and the effects of the 1970s crisis. After presenting this specific urban context, it shows the organization’s activity within spaces suffering from early or temporal obsolescence, including empty offices, landmark buildings, and vacant lots. The research on this organization covers the period up to the end of its most significant project *Art on the beach*, produced on the landfill of what was to become Battery Park City (1978-1985).

The fourth organization addressed in the thesis is the *Athena Foundation*



(1976-1986), whose urban function showed another possible formula to relate to obsolete urban spaces. While the Institute for Art and Urban Resources, the Public Art Fund and Creative Time were organizations which aimed to curate urban spaces for artistic productions, the Athena Foundation focused on a singular process for legitimizing specific spaces in the city to link art, industrial sites and neighborhoods. This organization, led by the artist Mark di Suvero, culminated in the creation of the Socrates Sculpture Park (1986) in Long Island City, the first urban park of its sort in New York City. The contribution of the Athena Foundation was to establish the art-city dialogue on dialectical landscapes (Robert Smithson, 1973): vacant outdoor spaces in constant transformation where the spontaneous dynamics of nature, as well as the experimentation of creative forces, could take place. This organization invented a creative playscape as a sort of new kind of public space which was community-based and open to art experimentation. In this regard, the dissertation theorizes on the concept of Art Park throughout the 1960s and 70s. After presenting the urban setting for this organization, which extends from Manhattan to Queens, the research further examines the history of this park, which was the creative response of two main art workers, Mark di Suvero and Isamu Noguchi, to a landfill.

Each chapter devoted to an art organization and its urban context discloses a different yet complementary “dialogue on space”, based on the search and appropriation of New York modern ruins, those belonging to the obsolete, neglected, and vacant urban fabric of the city. This dissertation contributes to clarifying the geographies of art of this period. Just as the artists took advantage of flexible urban spaces, the thesis shows how certain artistic procedures were tools for city healing. It reveals how through their processes and practices, by broadening the artists’ possibilities for workspace, there was a temporal revitalization of those urban spaces. There was also an upgrading of the symbolic weight of public space by creating outdoor galleries, and an improvement of the emotional urban experience by differentiating an artistic playscape in cities and by instituting a time for collective creativity within its existing urban spaces. All the projects selected exemplify pioneering creative responses to the urban lands of obsolescence created in a time of crisis. The dissertation ultimately contributes to setting up the background of certain contemporary urban methods and models of inner city development which are based on city recycling, scarcity of means, strategies of symbolic production and community involvement. Therefore, the concluding chapter of this dissertation briefly presents current urban theories that follow similar procedures for creative city-making which are widely accepted in the context of the

present crisis.

The Annex attached to this research, *A current journey around the 1970s art workspaces*, compiles graphical information of the art spaces in New York today and starts an oral history project with agents that witnessed this period.