

# Gay Gotham: Art and Underground Culture in New York

by Phillip Griffith

MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
OCTOBER 7, 2016 – FEBRUARY 26, 2017

When the New York poet Eileen Myles appeared in a brief cameo in the second season of *Transparent*, it felt like an experience of New York City had been turned inside out. For one thing, set in Los Angeles, the show depicts life in the West Coast's capital, on the other side of the looking glass from New York. For another, Myles appeared as a groupie of the college professor-poet played by Cherry Jones, a part inspired by Myles's life and work.

Like *Transparent*, *Gay Gotham: Art and Underground Culture in New York*—a historical look at queer art and culture in 20th-century New York City at the Museum of the City of New York—stages a network of queer affiliations. In two galleries, one treating the years 1910 – 60 and the other 1960 – 95, the exhibit maps, both literally and metaphorically, the physical and psychological spaces opened by the work of ten exemplary artists and historical figures, including Mercedes de Acosta, Richard Bruce Nugent, Lincoln Kirstein, George Platt Lynes, Leonard Bernstein, Andy Warhol, Robert Mapplethorpe, Harmony Hammond, Bill T. Jones, and Greer Lankton. The names alone make space, and even among the lesser-known names in this archive, we encounter the better-known ones we expect, such as Natalie Barney, Langston Hughes, Frank O'Hara, and Keith Haring who appear in the work of their contemporaries, emphasizing the social bonds and artistic collaboration that connect all of these artists across the history and geography of the city.



Chantal Regnault, *From left, Whitney Elite, Ira Ebony, Stewart and Chris LaBeija, Ian and Jamal Adonis, Ronald Revlon, House of Jourdan Ball, New Jersey, 1989.* Courtesy Chantal Regnault.

The curators have made these networks visible by including within the organization of the exhibit a series of themes, such as printing (muscle mags and lesbian pulp novels), posing, performing, and place making (with cruising and protest as subcategories), that give equal weight to the material and visual culture of this underground. In turn, the exhibit compels its visitors to make space for themselves amidst the networks

and coteries it puts on display. For me, that space first emerged through the charm of a 1928 letter, with its text designed in the shape of a tulip, written by Janet Flanner to Mercedes de Acosta. Following the sinuous lines of the letter-drawing, a Sapphic *calligramme*, you can make out such phrases as this one: “She ate flesh talking of flowers and flesh.” There’s also de Acosta’s Bible, its pages pasted over with devotional images of Garbo.

Portraits of the writers Frank O’Hara (by Larry Rivers, 1954) and James Baldwin (by Beauford Delaney, ca. 1957) stand watch over the first gallery’s exit. A funny duo side-by-side, the two are lopsided in scale and palette—O’Hara nude, nearly bigger than life size, in dusty tones of brown, gray, and flesh, and Baldwin posed seated to appear slight, but popping from the colorful canvas—and that’s the charm of seeing them together.

In the second gallery, Hammond’s sculptural, editorial and curatorial work and writings brings the mythic into the material. Included in the documents and photographs that trace her unparalleled importance to feminist and queer art communities since the 1970s is a poster by Amy Sillman for Hammond’s 1978 *A Lesbian Show* exhibit at 112 Greene St., as well as a group portraits of the co-founders of the first all female gallery, A.I.R., and the feminist collective Heresies.

As in many archives, these photographs connect us back to earlier queer culture as intensely psychological and material objects. The photographs gathered under the rubric of posing in the 1980s and 1990s are especially rich: Tseng Kwong Chi’s persona portraits, partyers at a House of Jourdan Ball in 1989 photographed by Chantal Regnault, the women performers of WOW Café, photos taken at the Clit Club by Alice O’Malley. Photographs elsewhere in the exhibit are arresting, too, including portraits by Carl Van Vechten (especially ones of Alvin Ailey, 1955, and Anna May Wong, 1932), George Platt Lynes (*John Leapheart and R.X. McCarthy #375*, 1952), and Nan Goldin (Greer Lankton and Paul Monroe at their wedding, 1987). Then, there is a series of small street photography snapshots, of men cruising in the 1960s, arranged in a long recessed section of the first gallery’s central wall and set a bit lower than eye level. Bending over to peer into the almost miniature photos, an entire world opens up.



Cecil Beaton, *Andy Warhol and Candy Darling*, New York, 1969. © The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive at Sotheby’s.

The hall outside the entrance to the first gallery includes a large-scale photographic reproduction of Max Ewing’s *Gallery of Extraordinary Portraits* (1928), for which the artist – an interracial sculptor, pianist, novelist, composer, and photographer – transformed his walk-in closet into a semi-public gallery of wall-to-wall queer photographic portraits. Leaving the exhibit, I noticed the museum’s running feed of Instagram images, tracked by the hashtag #GayGotham, projected on the wall beside the documentation of Ewing’s *Gallery*. The projection, as described by the museum, suggests a digital analogy to Ewing’s work and a future for such expressions of queer community.

This move to connect the exhibit’s archive to social media (as well as to market the exhibit to future visitors, we shouldn’t forget) raises a question about what makes an underground. This question is one of representation and visibility. Place making, the exhibit convincingly argues, is an essential activity for underground cultures. But what happens when the members of an underground community demand a

space—through visual *and* political representation—that exceeds those they have carved out for themselves?

To return to *Transparent*, how is the underground that Eileen Myles represents received, or even perceived, by the viewer who stumbles upon the TV show while shopping for the latest bestseller or bulk paper towels? Concluding with work from 1995, just before the Internet would expand into the most daily and intimate moments of our lives, the exhibit leaves the legacy of Gay Gotham's underground culture in the resolution of these questions.

**CONTRIBUTOR**

**Phillip Griffith**

PHILLIP GRIFFITH is a scholar and poet, and a doctoral candidate in French at the Graduate Center, CUNY.