

2008

On the Ground

Any consideration of the recent history of the Lower East Side, however, must take Orchard, a cooperatively organized exhibition space that closed this past May (as had been planned at its inception three years ago), squarely into account. Created in 2005 by a loose, cross-generational assembly of twelve artists, filmmakers, curators, art historians, and critics, Orchard would become central to a community of spaces that shared a common geography, all setting up shop below Delancey Street and east of Allen Street, but which were better grouped (or “localized”) according to their small scale, discursive orientation, and political outlook. (Many of these were also, as a matter of principle, commercial.) In fact, Orchard’s anchoring presence—like that of the nearby Reena Spaulings Fine Art—helped create and sustain a kind of intimate internationalization of the area’s art scene, generating ties across continents as much as between neighborhoods. For example, last February saw the opening a few blocks away (above the speakeasy basement space of just-in-time publishers Dexter Sinister) of Ludlow 38, the downtown annex of the Goethe-Institut New York, jointly run with the Kunstverein Munich. The space kicked off its first year of exhibitions with “Publish and Be Damned,” wherein an assortment of zines and small-run journals, from *Made in USA* to the *Journal of Aesthetics & Protest*, were hung by binder clips along the walls for anyone to page through. It has since hosted lectures and screenings, including a showing of a noteworthy 1992 VHS distributed by Cologne-based *Spex* magazine, which featured shorts by younger versions of some sixty artists who are now well established, from Josef Strau and Stephan Dillemath to Wolfgang Tillmans and Angela Bulloch. The occasion offered a poignant sense of continuity between that earlier scene and the international exchanges now in play on the Lower East Side. This fall, in a telling coincidence, one could have left Stephan Dillemath and Nils Norman’s show at Reena Spaulings only to happen upon a video clip here by Dillemath, teaming up with Norman and Strau, from a decade and a half ago.

Attuned to such particularities of the neighborhood’s changing environment, Orchard, of course, heeded the local arrival of the New Museum, whose SANAA-designed building brought with it an iconic silhouette of irregularly stacked boxes ascending into the sky. The institution’s new face was introduced by a slick, if savvy, marketing campaign by design firm Wolff Olins (also responsible for the visual identity of the 2012 London Olympics), which covered the city with posters on which opaque, Pantone-calibrated fields of color enveloped a negative space mirroring the building’s idiosyncratic shape. These fields were filled variously with views of installed works of art or faux-defaced subway posters—the former reading as a kind of reinscription of art to the clean walls of the institution, the latter a romantic framing of the grittier New York out of which the New Museum had, historically speaking, been born. Mindful of this framing of the museum, artist Christian Philipp Müller created *Infill*, 2008, conceived for Orchard’s storefront window and installed as part of “Cookie Cutter,” his January exhibition there. Müller made the work by taking a three-section sheet of plywood and removing from its center an area whose jagged outline, on first glance, echoed the SANAA architecture. But in fact, this irregular shape was based on the architecture of Orchard’s space, determined not by the gallery’s vertical profile but rather by its floor plan—since the artist sought to underscore his belief in “foundational” transparency. To accompany this piece, Müller presented four of the six original vitrines belonging to an older work, *Interpellations*, 1994, which contained travel guides for the New York of that time. Into each booklet’s coverage of SoHo, the artist had inserted, by hand, an entry about American Fine Arts Co., the gallery he showed at in the ’90s. In this way, Müller self-consciously rendered the space as a character in the narrative that the surrounding neighborhood had been assigned.



View of “Publish and Be Damned,” 2008, Ludlow 38, New York. Photo: Peter Lueders.