Locating Downtown (New York, 23-25 Jan 26)

New York University / Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, Jan 23–25, 2026
Deadline: Oct 31, 2025

Tom Day, Yale

The flourishing of art and culture in downtown New York in the period between New York City's fiscal crisis in the 1970s and Michael Bloomberg's mayoral election in 2001 have seen an explosion of exhibitions and publications, both scholarly and popular in the past two decades There has also been an increased attention paid to earlier iterations of art downtown: in the bohemian art colony of Greenwich Village and in the artist-run storefront galleries of the Lower East Side beginning in the 1950s. This three-day gathering seeks proposals from contributors whose work explores the concept of downtown, opening up different histories and ways of conceiving of what it means today.

Attentive to the multifaceted and deeply interdisciplinary nature of downtown cultural production, Locating Downtown seeks to create opportunities to examine this period anew through cross-disciplinary exploration and cultural exchange. Underpinning this investigation is a desire to bring together different methodological approaches to the study of downtown New York – its artists, archives, institutions, and histories.

Beginning in the mid-2000s, publications and retrospective and thematic exhibitions on different downtown scenes and key figures, collectives, and spaces have helped to establish frameworks for the study of this period. These include thematic shows 'East Village USA' (New Museum, New York, 2005); 'The Downtown Show' (Grey Art Museum, New York, 2006); 'Mixed Use Manhattan: Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to Present' (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2010); 'Laurie Anderson, Trisha Brown, Gordon Matta-Clark: 'Pioneers of the Downtown Scene, New York 1970s' (Barbican, London, 2011); 'Rituals of Rented Island' (The Whitney Museum of American Art, 2013); 'NYC: 1993' (New Museum, New York, 2013) and 'Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City, 1952-1965' (Grey Art Museum, 2017); 'Around Day's End' (Whitney Museum, 2021) as well as exhibitions, publications and documentaries exploring individuals and institutions such as A Gathering of the Tribes, Acts of Art, Kathy Acker, Alvin Baltrop, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Gordon Matta-Clark Jimmy DeSana, Darrel Ellis, Group Material, Keith Haring, Peter Hujar, Tseng Kwong Chi, Zoe Leonard, Lorraine O'Grady, David Wojnarowicz, and Martin Wong, spaces like Club 57, the West Side piers, and Pat Hearn Gallery.

We invite individual and collective contributions that explore cultural production in this period and that connect with broader themes or issues impacting new approaches to downtown New York's histories and geographies. A non-exhaustive list of possible topics includes: activism, archives, location and periodization, gentrification, the ongoing HIV/AIDS pandemic, institutional histories,

performance, popular and experimental music, writing, and urban and spatial politics. The event will build on a 2022 symposium held at The Courtauld's Terra Foundation Centre for American Art (Approaching Downtown: Avant-Garde Cultural Production in New York City, 1970s-1990s, co-organised by Fiona Anderson and Tom Day) concerned with disciplinary approaches to the history of downtown.

We invite scholars, curators, archivists, and artists, whether formally affiliated with an institution or not, to propose sessions for Locating Downtown. Contributions may take the form of a traditional paper, but we encourage attendees to think beyond this format and towards other generative modes such as interviews/in-conversation-style talks, archival explorations, performances, readings, screenings, and collaborative workshop activities. Presentation sessions (Friday at NYU, Sunday at the Whitney) will be complemented by visits to galleries, museums, and archives in New York on Saturday.

Please send a short proposal (c. 300 words) to the organizers Tom Day (Yale University), Megan Heuer (Whitney Museum of American Art), Nicholas Martin (New York University) and Olivia McCall (Bryn Mawr College) via the dedicated symposium email: locatingdowntown2026@gmail.com by October 31, 2025

Please reach out to the organisers if you have any queries or wish to discuss a potential contribution.

Reference:
CFP: Locating Downtown (New York, 23-25 Jan 26). In: ArtHist.net, Sep 22, 2025 (accessed Nov 23, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/50667>.