

White Columns

From The Archives: White Columns / 112 Work- shop, 1970 — 2021

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From The Archives: White Columns & 112 Greene Street – 1970-2021 ..., installation view, 2021. (Nine archival records installed in two rows on a gallery wall. Handwritten notes on the wall read “MARJORIE STRIDER, 1971,” “BILL BECKLEY, 1971,” “1971 GROUP SHOW, ORGANIZED BY ITALO SCANGA” and “JIM BURTON, 1972.”).

In 1976, artist Bill Beirne etched an extensive message in white capital letters on the windowed storefront of White Columns. Legible from outside was text describing the public-facing role of the gallery; decipherable from indoors was a passage reflecting on the internal processes involved in mounting an exhibition. The crux of this gesture? According to the artist’s statement: “By more or less labeling the gallery, I hope to illuminate it as an object.”

White Columns's 50th anniversary, "From The Archives: White Columns & 112 Greene Street / 112 Workshop, 1970 – 2021..." deals with similar ideas to those that Beirne addressed. The institution's past—as the oldest alternative art space in New York City, founded in 1970 by a group of artists that included Gordon Matta-Clark and Jeffrey Lew—is illuminated, explored, and celebrated. The archival materials capture the essence of White Columns's venerable biography within the broader history of alternative art spaces in an ever-shifting downtown scene over the past fifty years.

Through a chronological array of ephemera, selected by the current Director and Chief Curator, Matthew Higgs, the exhibition retains the improvisatory, experimental spirit that the institution has possessed from its beginning. When White Columns first opened in a defunct factory building at 112 Greene Street in Soho, a series of installations were constructed on-site amid borderline dilapidated conditions. Across the current reflection, Post-it notes label exhibition documentation and press clippings—which includes a review in the New York Times penned by Peter Schjeldahl—while other captions, appearing directly on the wall, have been written by hand in pencil.

The collective archival material sheds light on the ethos of the non-profit art historical gem: See, for instance, photographs of Matta-Clark planting a cherry tree in the Greene Street basement, or the brochures announcing a comeback show for Louise Bourgeois following a decade-long hiatus. Vintage installation shots also register periodic changes in its venue. After a rent hike ended its tenure at 112 Greene Street in 1978, White Columns was christened with its current name, by then-23-year-old director Josh Baer, as a homage to the architectural feature at both its former and updated locations.

Though White Columns's latest space—its fifth to date—also happens to contain, well, more white columns, a commitment to the zeitgeist more than anything else is what cements it at a foundational level, from the politically-inclined shows of ACT UP in the 1980s to the eclectic exhibitions of the 1990s to the performance and video works of the 2000s and beyond. Higgs, while keeping true to the mission of the New York non-profit, has also looked away from New York, and presented shows from Creative Growth, an Oakland based non-profit that provides studio spaces and programs for artists with disabilities—a reminder of the of the lesser-known, but equally important artists White Columns has supported over the years, alongside the now household names—whose careers it has both nurtured and helped launch.