

# Rivers and Just Above Midtown

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A meditation on why *Rivers, First Draft* might not have existed without the Just Above Midtown Gallery's challenging and supportive environment.

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## Intro

The *Rivers, First Draft* installation consists of photos from a performance done in Central Park as part of "Art Across the Park" in Summer 1982. Together, the curator and I made an exhausting tour of the Park to look at suitable locations.

When she and I reached The Loch, a little-known section at the Park's northern edge, it captured me. This wasn't the Frederic Law Olmsted I thought I knew. It was wild and frighteningly unkempt, like something out of literature, not the city. And it was perfect for the piece I needed to create.

*Rivers* would be a one-time only event with a cast and crew of 20, several of whom, including a young Fred Wilson and the late George Mingo, were part of Just Above Midtown,<sup>i</sup> the black avant-garde gallery I was associated with then. The piece would be performed for an invited audience barely twice as large as the cast, no more than 40 people, nearly all with JAM or part of its environment. And there was an uninvited audience of about five passers-by who'd come on the scene accidentally and stayed. One, a young Puerto Rican taking a short-cut from the pool where he worked as a lifeguard, said afterward it was like walking into one of his dreams.

The piece was a narrative three-ring circus, about a woman trying to become an artist. In it, her present and past happen simultaneously.

It was called *Rivers, First Draft* because it was done quickly and I knew I would have to go back to it. It was always meant to be the first of a three-part piece called *Indivisible Landscapes: Rivers, Caves, Deserts*. But perhaps when I revisit it, it will be unrecognizable. For me now, the making of *Rivers* and what it uncovered was one of the most important moments of my artistic and personal life and could not have happened without Just Above Midtown, a nurturing space when others would not have us.

For me, doing *Rivers* in the context of Just Above Midtown was a unique art-making moment, one when the enabling audience—the audience which allows the work to come into existence and to which the work speaks—and the audience that consumes the work were one and the same.

The installation here is silent on the wall or on pages in a catalogue, titles newly added. Imagine my voice reading a text which bears on it only tangentially. Of course, you will not be able to follow the installation and the text simultaneously. But whether you wander in and out of the installation and the text in alternation, or attend to them sequentially, it's OK. Cognitive dissonance can be overcome when you slow down and repeat.

## **Text<sup>ii</sup>**

She'd been invited to speak, asked to address the differences between East Coast and West Coast artists at Just Above Midtown. But she hadn't experienced it that way. She'd come late to the party, late to art. By 1980, when 57th Street was gone, when the gallery was re-opening in Tribeca, they had long forgotten their resentments. It was a family now, dysfunctional perhaps, but one where everyone felt free. On one wall, an installation of *Artforum* covers. On another, an altar to Santería gods. And in the basement, directors who were often better artists than some of those they showed.

JAM was a complete world. Between the business model of the gallery and the clubhouse model, JAM was definitely the clubhouse where people gathered. It was sometimes hard to

know who was a JAM artist and who was not. David definitely, and Senga and Maren, and Houston and Randy. But what about Tyrone? He was nominally with Cinqué, but was he ever not at JAM? Did George ever have an exhibition there? Did it matter? Everyone knew how good his work was. Then there were young artists finding their voices, like Sandra and Cynthia.

But artists were just one part of the whole. There were art historians *in potentia*, like Judith Wilson and a young Kellie Jones. Photographers documenting others' work and doing their own, like Coreen, like Dawoud. There were intellectuals like Danny and pure spirits like Charles. And there were curators. Lowery was always there. Kynaston never was, but his presence hung like a shadow on the wall. That was one way to be, she thought. That could have been her goal. It was easy when whiteness was part of what you were. But instead she had come HERE.

JAM was an *esprit* formed in exclusion. A kind of isolation that brings strength, brings weakness, brings freedom to explore and to fail, to find the steel hardened within. David did his ordinary work there, as did others. Refinements would come later, of course, but if they were lucky, the rough edges would remain. Integrity, originality, adventurousness, those were Linda's ideals. In truth, she was inspired by Linda, the founder-director, more than by the artists there. But mostly she felt at home. JAM was a place as much as a world, a place where people ate together, discussed and argued, drank and smoked together, collaborated on work, slept together, pushed each other to go further, and partied 'til the cows came home. There was even space for those who didn't quite fit, like Dan, like her. She was embarrassed by her age. She was becoming aware of it. It was now or never.

The new space on Franklin Street took longer to finish than expected. The sun beat down outside the Riverrun Café, on tables laden with large glasses of ice-cold white wine.

Arguments inspired by articles in *Artforum* sometimes went nowhere. For each person peering out at the art world of Castelli and Sonnabend, there was another for whom THIS was the art world that mattered, the one where the art was most advanced,

and where the artists were most cosmopolitan. It was hard to argue with that. Whereas for white artists, traveling between European capitals was still considered urbane, by 1980 Senga had lived in Japan, Tyrone had lived with the Dogon in Africa. The mid-day discussions were sharp, funny, sarcastic. In the evening, they got even more so as the scene switched to outdoor tables in the East Village where the arguments were complicated by the circles around Steve Cannon, Quincy Troupe and Ishmael Reed.

It's hard to remember what happened where, but JAM's energy seemed always the focus. An endless progression of the toughest jazz she'd ever heard, dance performances alone and as part of the art work. It seemed Pina Bausch's influence was God. And always, JAM was a place to hook up with friends. Dawoud and Candida had their wedding there.

These, finally, were her people. When she did *Rivers, First Draft*, she wanted them to understand. . . what route she'd taken to becoming an artist, what being West Indian was like, the mapping of the world of the Black Bohemian. And then she wondered if it were not already too late, if the Black Bohemian were not long enough gone to be almost inscrutable. But she felt herself gain in incremental respect as the audience of JAM watched her struggle and grow. That was enough.

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<sup>i</sup> Just Above Midtown/Downtown members mentioned in text: Linda Goode-Bryant, David Hammons, Senga Nengudi, Maren Hassinger, Houston Conwill, Randy Williams, Tyrone Mitchell, George Mingo, Fred Wilson, Sandra Payne, Cynthia Hawkins, Coreen Simpson, Dawoud Bey, Danny Dawson, Charles Abramson, Dan Concholar, Candida Alvarez, plus Lowery Simms and Kynaston McShine.

<sup>ii</sup> This text was first read by Lorraine O'Grady as she stood in front of a slideshow showing the images of *Rivers, First Draft* in a presentation for the *Now Dig This!* Symposium at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City on February 8, 2013