Just Above Midtown, where David Hammons, Fred Wilson, and others exhibited, received slightly more press than Kenkeleba. But a black friend active in the East Village scene later said that at the time, he hadn’t heard of JAM. A month before the show, an announcement came from Adrian Piper in California. It was black with gold print. I asked her to do it in black and white, and she did. This photocopy was destroyed later.

The gallery, invisible from the street, had five rooms—one, a cavern—plus a corridor, and dared you to use the whole of it. It was perfect for an impossible ambitious Mlle Bourgeoise Noire event, thirty artists, half white, half black, with all the work in black and white. Achromaticity would heighten similarities and flatten differences. And it would be the first exhibit I’d seen in the still virtually segregated art world with enough black presence to create dialogue. A sudden opening meant only three weeks to do it. And of course, no money. But the Whitney Brennan’s inclusion of Jean-Michel Basquiat as a mascot was salt in the wound. That, and the daily bravado needed to walk on that block where even the air was strange—dawn felt like twilight here—kept me going. Race would not be on the labels. Would it be on the wall? In what way? I wanted to see for myself.

Keith Haring had audited my Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism course at the School of Visual Arts. I called him first. Then contacted Jean-Michel, who could be reached only by telegram. Gave that boy another chance! But after promising two new canvases for the show, Basquiat pulled out. Obligations to Bruno Bischofberger came first. Walking down East Second Street was like passing stacks of dreams in mounds. I looked mutual John Fekner to connect the inside with the outside. Downtown had a multitude of talents and trends, some being bypassed by the stampede to cash in. The show ended with twenty-eight artists, many still worried that cadmium red cost thirty-two dollars a quart wholesale. Each day as I approached the block, I wondered, “Where is my mural?” On the day before the opening, it was there. John had done it at 4 a.m., when even junkies sleep.

Inside the gallery, it pleased me that, even across so many styles, the images gave off language. But who would come? Compared with Kenkeleba, Gracie Mansion and Fun Gallery were like SoHo. The chasm between East Second and East Tenth streets might be too great to bridge. The answer was, friends and East Villagers who understood that people “in the game” leave “citizens” alone. Getting reviewers to the gallery was like beating your head against air. The show received a single paragraph in the East Village Eye, nothing more. Looking back, it’s clear the artists have had differing careers. A few became household names; more disappeared without a trace. Of some I’ve wondered, what might their work have become had money and critical attention been paid? There are so many coexisting tendencies in any given time. What is lost when the present reduces the past, ties it up with a ribbon so it can move on to the future? Is that result necessary? Is it real?
Keith Haring’s cooperation when called on helped the show come together. He had been my student at SVA and I’d been following his work since the earliest white-on-black graffiti done in the subways.

These small paintings on canvas by Judy Blum, a detail from the forty-eight-part arrangement Small Songs, could be read as either poems or sentences, depending on the viewer.

The Card Players, by Gerald Jackson, is a large painting on canvas from the mid-’70s. Gerald had a studio on the Bowery in the ’70s and ’80s. He was a friend of Keith’s. I wonder if the figure in the lower right may have influenced the “radiant child.”

A piece about perception and artmaking by Fluxus artist Jean Dupuy. The tiny periscope in the center magnifies the image in the mirror, so you see the top of your head. And it’s projected that the accumulated sweat of five thousand foreheads and noses will turn the paper into the desired golden print. That couldn’t happen here.

As a painter, Willie Birch moved through several styles, from Color Field to faux naïveté. This gridded cardboard diptych from the “New York City jazz” series, notations made while listening to experimental music such as John Coltrane’s, is from a period when simultaneously his work was at its most “folk” documentarily.

A piece about perception and artmaking by Fluxus artist Jean Dupuy. The tiny periscope in the center magnifies the image in the mirror, so you see the top of your head. And it’s projected that the accumulated sweat of five thousand foreheads and noses will turn the paper into the desired golden print. That couldn’t happen here.

Randy Williams, a sculptor, made a new piece for the show. It’s the black and white toilets of his southern childhood. On the floor between the toilets, the quote by William Faulkner, lay in a field of razor blades, as was work from the journey of the month when they were both油漆, the Williams and the Dupuy worked together as if they were made by the same artist.
In noir paintings that were both voyeuristic and vulnerable, Louis Renzoni iterated a threatening quality of the early ‘80s. This was his first group show in New York. He went with Piezo Electric, an East Village gallery, shortly after.

Besides jazz, the abstract sculptors were often influenced by African attitudes to form and materials. One of the sculptors who showed at Just Above Midtown, Tyrone Mitchell, actually spent time living with the Dogon people.

In our paintings that were both evocative and abstract, Lynne Augeri created a threatening quality of the early ’80s. She was the first group show in New York. He went with Piezo Electric, an East Village gallery, shortly after.

Some of the artists were a revelation. A wall of small collages and drawings by Marc Eisenberg, most done in the '70s, anticipated many things that were happening. This 1975 self-portrait was one of the highlights. Some of the artists were a revelation. A wall of small collages and drawings by Marc Eisenberg, most done in the '70s, anticipated many things that were happening. This 1975 self-portrait was one of the highlights. The show had been built around Basquiat, and even after he pulled out, he remained present.

Stephen Lack had promised to do a painting for the show. Instead, he did a drawing of an upsetting incident that happened to Jean-Michel Basquiat and his graffiti friends shortly before the show opened.

George Mingo, a graduate of Cooper Union, was a faux primitif. He painted this expressly for the show and told me I HAD to put it in. I did. Its black-and-white-in-living-color made the perfect coda. It was in the last room.