Free For All: A Conversation at apexart

by Ratik Asokan

On October 7, apexart in New York hosted a discussion between artists Jane Dickson and Becky Howland, moderated by art historian Melissa Rachleff Burtt. Among other things, they reflected on their affiliation with Colab, short for Collaborative Projects, an influential, porous group of artists that organized exhibitions and television shows in the 1970s and early 1980s. The panel was part of SoHo Art Network’s Downtown Culture Talks, an ongoing series of events that, this fall, focuses on the history of women artists active on the downtown scene. Highlights from the conversation are presented below.

MELISSA RACHLEFF BURTt I met Jane and Becky when I was a curatorial assistant at Exit Art Gallery in the early 1990s. I met Jane at her studio on 43rd Street, which is where I first saw her series of drawings and paintings of New Year’s Eve revelers tossed to and fro amid waves of euphoria and drunkenness. To me, New Year’s Eve in Times Square was a television event. People were indistinguishable. Jane took a different view. Her figures are isolated and magnified. This duality of purpose filters across her work.

I met Becky when she was installing her work in Exit Art’s 1993 all-female show. She had made drawings, delicate, but with a bite. I thought they were anatomical depictions of a female pelvis. Looking more closely, with Becky as my guide, I saw the Dalkon Shield, a contraceptive device from the 1970s that caused injuries and deaths.

Becky’s drawings are beautiful and disturbing, distressing in their sensitivity.

So let’s get started: Do either of you remember the first time you met one another? Was it around “The Real Estate Show”? Or maybe before that?

BECKY HOWLAND It must have been before that. I met Jane through her husband, Charlie Ahearn.

JANE DICKSON Yeah. And Charlie and I met in ’78. So we must have met in ’78. Charlie and Becky and a lot of Colab people had been in the Whitney program. I feel like I did Whitney by proxy.

HOWLAND We were probably going to parties together. Were you at “The Manifesto Show”?

DICKSON “The Manifesto Show” was one of the only Colab shows I didn’t contribute to. To me what was fantastic about these Colab shows was that it was like trying on your friend’s clothes in high school. Anybody could propose an idea and you could decide if it fit you well. “The Manifesto Show” was Jenny Holzer’s idea, because she does manifestos. Words aren’t my thing so I didn’t participate. But I remember that I participated in “The Dog Show.”

HOWLAND “The Dog Show” was my first show in New York.

DICKSON Mine too. So maybe we met there.

BURTT You describe New York as if it were an open playground. Could you talk a little bit about your relationship with the city, and why you felt a sense of freedom here?

HOWLAND I’ve always lived downtown. I moved here from Pennsylvania and subletted all over. I rode my bike everywhere. You’d go to restaurants and there would be longshoremen with hooks having kale soup. There just weren’t that many people here! So you felt a sense of freedom.

DICKSON The economic model of the ’40s and ’50s had begun to disintegrate by the ’60s, and it was just gone by the ’70s. Today we think of downtown as redeveloped seafronts, but there was none of that then. There was no South Street Seaport! If you walked down Broadway at night, from NYU down to the Mudd Club in Tribeca, there were no lights, there were no stores open. The city was...
bankrupt. Nobody cared. So if Becky did a public sculpture, nobody from the city was going to stop her.

**BURTT** There were many female artists working in the '50s and early '60s in New York. Do you remember spending time with any of them? Were these interactions important to you?

**HOWLAND** I was lucky. I met Jack Tworkov at my first artist residency in Provincetown. I was so naive that I didn't realize what it meant that he was the head of the Yale School of Art. He was just a really nice guy. Anyhow, knowing that I was moving to New York, a friend of his made a list of artists who might need help. It was all women: Nancy Graves, Barbara Kruger, others. I called all of them. And I met half of them. Nancy needed help renovating her studio. She wasn't going to sit down and talk with me about stuff, but she changed my life. She said, “Go to the Whitney program. At your age you need community.” She was very helpful in getting me in that situation. Plus, there were female curators who were really out there: Marcia Tucker, Alanna Heiss, Anita Contini.

**BURTT** Jane, did you have any similar relationships?

**DICKSON** My older brother had moved to New York before me. So when I finished school in Boston I just decided to join him. He had a studio apartment in the Upper West Side and the day I walked in there—to sleep on the floor—he said that someone had just called. It was Susan Pitt, who had been my animation teacher in college, and she was offering me an animation job. So the next day I started working at an office downtown full time. It is through Susan that I know everybody that I know now.

Susan was very close to Mimi Gross and they were both really generous to me. I felt like I was an instant part of a community, one that continues to extend today.

I should say that those women did not get attention in the '70s. Even though they were a decade older than us, they only started getting attention in the '80s, because the world was beginning to contemplate giving women artists attention. People like Yvonne Jacquette who were much older than me were professionally my peers. I remember asking her once, “How did you juggle having children and having a career?” And she said, “Honestly, we never thought about having a career. It was just impossible. We would make our paintings and we'd sit around in the playground with our children and we didn't anguish about a career because it seemed impossible.”