

WELCOME TO NEW YORK

In 1962 New York was the largest and most diverse city in the United States, home to nearly eight million residents spread across the boroughs of the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island. Radio stations flooded its airwaves, broadcasting in more than a dozen languages including Armenian, French, Greek, Hungarian, Spanish, Polish, and Yiddish. Like the rest of the country, the city was in the midst of an economic boom that reshaped its skyline. On West Fifty-Second Street construction workers were preparing to apply panels to the facade of the CBS Building. A few blocks north, construction of Lincoln Center was underway, which Governor Nelson Rockefeller was rushing to complete in time for the New York World's Fair. Plans were being finalized to demolish Pennsylvania Station to make space for a new Madison Square Garden. Tourists filled the city, some venturing downtown to watch poets and musicians performing in coffee houses on MacDougal Street; a few blocks away residents struggled to defend their neighborhoods against “urban renewal,” a euphemism for the city’s slum clearance campaign. Everywhere the city pulsed with an energy that the author and activist Jane Jacobs likened to a dance performed on the sidewalk, a “complex order composed of movement and change.”

EXHIBITING THE CITY

New York saw a surge of public interest in art during the early 1960s. Between 1960 and 1965, museum attendance swelled and the number of galleries grew from 154 to 246. These galleries promoted cutting-edge art to an audience that was expanding beyond the art world to include the public. Happenings—artistic events in which spectators were encouraged to participate—proliferated throughout the city in dedicated art spaces and everyday settings alike, including streets, subway platforms, and fire escapes.

The works on the surrounding walls are drawn from key exhibitions that took place in New York in 1962 and 1963. The *International Exhibition of the New Realists* opened in October 1962 at the Sidney Janis Gallery on East Fifty-Seventh Street. The presentation was one of the earliest shows of what came to be known as Pop art, which responded to popular culture and mass media, mining its images, techniques, and materials. *Six Painters and the Object* opened at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in March 1963 and showcased work that, in the words of its curator, Lawrence Alloway, drew their energy from “the communication network and the physical environment of the city.” Dorothy C. Miller organized the survey *Americans 1963*, which opened at the Museum of Modern Art in May 1963 and featured fifteen artists, most of whom lived in New York. While each show had a different emphasis and structure, all three explored the relationship between art and the city’s urban landscape, which was being newly synthesized in the works on view.

THE JEWISH MUSEUM AND THE “NEW ART”

Alan Solomon became director of the Jewish Museum in July 1962, organizing a series of exhibitions dedicated to what he called the “new art.” The term referred to an emerging generation of New York artists who “turned with relish and excitement” to the “television commercials, comic strips, hot dog stands, billboards, junk yards, hamburger joints, used car lots, jukeboxes, slot machines, and supermarkets” that made up “the visual environment and probably most of the aesthetic experience for 99 percent of Americans.”

The exhibitions Solomon organized at the Jewish Museum included the first-ever museum retrospectives dedicated to Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, as well as daring surveys that considered the rapidly changing environment of New York City. *Toward a New Abstraction* opened in May 1963 and featured works by Ellsworth Kelly, Kenneth Noland, Miriam Schapiro, and Frank Stella, among others. Their pieces demonstrated an interest in “the intricacy, the ambiguity, and the indeterminacy of experience” of life in the swiftly evolving city. *Recent American Sculpture* opened in October 1964, and included the artists Lee Bontecou, John Chamberlain, Mark di Suvero, George Segal, and Richard Stankiewicz. Their work incorporated hunks of wood and sheet metal, transforming the raw material of the cityscape into an artistic medium.

Along with these innovative artists came the Jewish gallerists who represented them. The Jewish Museum provided a home for many Jewish dealers and collectors who later became influential in the city and across the country. Although Solomon left in July 1964, he succeeded in transforming the Jewish Museum into one of the most important and dynamic spaces for contemporary art on the New York scene.

THE STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

1962 to 1964 was a pivotal period in the struggle for civil rights. Building on earlier sit-ins and freedom rides, people marched across the country to demand racial justice. In Birmingham, Alabama, thousands of demonstrators pursuing freedom were subjected to violence by the Ku Klux Klan and state-funded police. These endeavors culminated in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963. Led by the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and organized by A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin from Harlem, the march brought two hundred thousand Americans to the nation's capital, contributing to the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act the following year.

The most intense demonstrations took place in the American South, and in response racists enacted a terrifying campaign of murders and bombings. Activist organizations mobilized in the North, too. The New York chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) protested persistent segregation in the city's schools. Jesse Gray, the leader of Harlem's Community Council on Housing, urged the city to invest in safe and affordable housing for Black families, who suffered as a result of redlining.

New York was an intellectual center for the civil rights movement. The city was home to the celebrated author James Baldwin, who called for a reckoning with America's racist history. Harlem's Temple No. 7 was the East Coast headquarters of the Nation of Islam, where Malcolm X served as its spokesman until 1964.

Artists in New York responded to the struggle for equality as well. Some participated in fund-raising auctions organized by CORE and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Others made work that reacted to the civil rights movement directly. In 1963 Black painters created the Spiral Group to explore activism's role in art. The next year a group of Black photographers formed the Kamoinge Workshop, dedicated to documenting daily life in Harlem.

THE “NEW ART” IN VENICE

The United States Government asked Alan Solomon to organize an exhibition of work by American artists to represent the country at the Thirty-Second Venice Biennale, opening in June 1964. The Biennale, which began in 1895, is arguably the most influential global survey of contemporary art and attracts visitors to the city from all over the world. Selected as curator because of his “excellent exhibitions of contemporary art presented at the Jewish Museum,” Solomon chose work by eight artists, many of whom he had previously shown at the museum: John Chamberlain, Jim Dine, Jasper Johns, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Claes Oldenburg, Frank Stella, and Robert Rauschenberg, who was awarded the Biennale’s prestigious International Grand Prize for Painting.

Solomon stressed the close relationship between the works on view and the urban terrain of New York. The pieces had been, according to him, “distilled from the rawness and disorder of the metropolitan scene.” Solomon emphasized Rauschenberg’s work in particular, which, in his words, demonstrated “an optimistic belief that richness and heightened meaning can be found anywhere in the world, even in refuse found in the street.” The plan for the United States Pavilion was ambitious, and the space ended up being too small to contain the ninety-nine selected works. With the help of United States officials, Solomon extended the exhibition into the pavilion’s courtyard and the former American consulate, resulting in accusations of improper influence.

The Biennale was a major cultural event and precipitated a tectonic shift in prominence from Europe to the United States, establishing New York as the global capital of the art world. Solomon summed up this shift, declaring, “The fact that the world art center has shifted from Paris to New York is acknowledged on every hand.”