

HEAD SPACE

Artist Stefan Eins's alternative art space in the Bronx, Fashion Moda, laid the foundation for the '80s downtown art scene. After starting out in the early '70s in Soho in Manhattan, Eins relocated to the Bronx by the end of the decade to create a more democratized art experience by and for the people. Playing host to the first graffiti art show, Fashion Moda worked at the intersection of high and low with a global, multicultural perspective. By the early '80s, as downtown was blossoming, Eins quietly shuttered Moda's doors. Upon the thirtieth anniversary of its closing, amid an ever-disappearing New York, Fashion Moda still serves as a pivotal touchstone in the development of the city's cultural landscape.

by **Francesco Spampinato**



FASHION 時髦 MODA МОДА

3 MERCER STORE

Stefan Eins, who moved to the U.S. from Vienna in 1967, belongs to that generation of post-conceptual artists who, in the early '70s, chose downtown New York as the ideal place to observe folk and street culture. Like site-specific installation artists Gordon Matta-Clark and Paul Thek, Eins transitioned from traditional sculpture: “I made sculptures that consisted of individual parts and pieces. The viewer was invited to change their positioning,” he recalled. “Subsequently, I began to focus on multiples and correlations to science.”¹

In 1973, he transformed his storefront studio at Three Mercer Street, Soho, into a hybrid space, between science lab, avant-garde art gallery, and bric-a-brac shop such as those of the nearby bustling Canal Street. But his “commercial intentions were utopian,” asserted Alan Moore, militant scholar of New York underground art.² Eins didn’t want to sell out, only propose a different way of making and distributing ideas.

Three Mercer Store, as Eins baptized it, was active until 1978 and hosted exhibitions, performances, and film screenings, involving appropriationist artists such as Sherrie Levine and Susan Hiller. Charlie Ahearn and Tom Otterness



had their first solo exhibitions here as well. Willoughby Sharp, artist and theorist behind the “performance art” journal *Avalanche*, was involved as curator.

Three Mercer Store is part of a long, articulated movement of resistance to the institutional system of art, born downtown in the late '60s and grown around art collectives (from Art Workers Coalition to Group Material) and so-called alternative art spaces (from Artists Space to ABC No Rio). As Brian Wallis suggested, these activities allowed artists to “discuss and understand their role as workers within an economically and politically regulated system.”³

SOUTH BRONX HALL OF FAME

Eins, however, didn’t just reposition himself within the art system, he decided to create his own. In 1978, he moved to 2803 Third Avenue, South Bronx, at 147th Street, a storefront he called Fashion Moda—“museum of science, invention, technology, art, and fantasy.”⁴ “The New York art system was too exclusive,” says Eins, “Fashion Moda changed that. It was the end of Modern Art.”

With Joe Lewis, currently Dean of the Claire Trevor School of the Arts at the University of California, Irvine, and William Scott, a neighborhood kid, as codirectors, Fashion Moda became an extension of the East Village art community, an engine for the emerging hip-hop culture, and, as Lewis wrote, a “sensitive nexus and polylogue between the multifarious ethnocentric groups that live in and/or pass through the stressopolis, New York City, via the South Bronx, an area all too often mistitled ‘Criminals Paradise Regained.’”⁵

That bad reputation attracted Eins and artists like John Fekner and Charlie Ahearn. Fekner impressed marks of shame on disused services, dilapidated buildings, and abandoned factories with huge stencil graffiti: “Broken Promises,” “Save Our School,” and “Industrial Fossil.” For a campaign speech, Ronald Reagan chose some ruins on which Fekner had painted “DECAY” as the background.

The Ahearn twins also used the South Bronx as studio, subject, and support of their works. Charlie filmed *Wild Style* (1983), soon to become the documentary manifesto of hip-hop. “He was close to [Eins], the artist behind Fashion Moda, so as we were putting *Wild Style* together and researching in the Bronx, we would visit often,” remembers Fab 5 Freddy.

John Ahearn, instead, made casts of locals with the help of Rigoberto Torres. He showed them in *South Bronx Hall of Fame*, 1979, at Fashion Moda, after a yearlong residency. “I went there to cast Stefan. We did it in the front window and a crowd gathered from the street,” John remembered. “There was a place called Narco Freedom directly across the street, which was a very busy methadone rehabilitation clinic, so we had a regular group of friends that we got to know there.”⁶

John then installed them on public walls and was even commissioned for some sculptures for the local police district. His naïve attempt to celebrate the “South Bronx attitude,” however, was not always appreciated by the residents, tired of negative stereotypes. “In their eyes,” noted art historian Miwon Kwon, “Ahearn had literally elevated the derelict, criminal, and delinquent elements of the community.”⁷



(previous spread) Fashion Moda poster by Stefan Eins, 1980. (above) William Scott, Junior Director, and Joe Lewis, Director. Photographed by Lisa Kahane at Fashion Moda, 1981, during *Animals Living in Cities*, curated by Christie Rupp. (left) Stefan Eins, 1985. Photo by Peter Bellamy. (right top) John Fekner's *Decay*, Charlotte Street Stencils, Bronx, 1980; Fashion Moda xerox flyer, courtesy J. Fekner Research Archive. (right bottom) The closing party for John Ahearn's South Bronx Hall of Fame exhibition.



THE FIRST GRAFFITI SHOW EVER

Fashion Moda had a major role in the birth of graffiti art with *GAS (Graffiti Art Success for America)*, the first legendary show in the history of graffiti, curated by a nineteen-year-old John “Crash” Matos in October 1980. Among the artists featured were Fab 5 Freddy, Futura 2000, Lady Pink, Lee Quinones, Fekner, Zephyr, Disco 107.5, Kel 139th, Mitch 77, Nac 143, Noc 167, and Stan 153. “From that first show, everything started,” recalled Futura.⁸

Before becoming stars of downtown galleries and before the international success, Bronx-based graffiti artists had been recognized in their neighborhood, in a space they must have looked at as an offshoot of the “true” art world. “Fashion Moda’s premise was that art/creativity can happen anywhere and that art can be appreciated and made by people who are known and unknown, trained and untrained, rich and poor,” wrote Eins recently.⁹

Graffiti artists from other boroughs—Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Kenny Scharf—found legitimacy through Fashion Moda, because of its position at the epicenter of where hip-hop was flourishing. “They understood and agreed to the whole approach,” says Eins, who saw graffiti as an instrument of institutional critique, shifting the axis of art from the center to the periphery, in a material but also figurative sense. His following quote says a lot: “Creative expressions that address the public directly, as in Subway Graffiti, do so without the Involvement of the collector, the gallery owner, the critic, and the curator. For this type of art, the modus of communicating is dramatically different. Such a difference makes it a freer and more independent art.”¹⁰

Exhibitions and events were usually accompanied by musical performances. Among the performers over the years were Afrika Bambaataa, Fab 5 Freddy, Phase 2, Sugarhill Gang’s Master Gee, Rammellzee, A-One, no-wave band Y Pants, and jazz musicians Jerome Cooper, Rasul Siddik, Patrick Brennan, and Jeanne Lee.

ESCAPE FROM MANHATTAN

Fashion Moda’s activities and exhibitions were linked to the downtown scene and the art collective Colab, which Eins and many collaborators of Fashion Moda—Jenny Holzer, the Ahearn brothers, Otterness—were tied to. Their idea was to get rid of

the market and the cultural hegemony of museums and academies. “We’d like to challenge the prejudice that art should be for an élite and that only someone who’s been to school can understand,” declared Eins.¹¹

The first of Colab’s attempt to evade the art system was 1980’s *The Real Estate Show*, an illegal exhibition in an abandoned building on Delancey Street, which used “gentrification” as its medium and message. That same year, Colab and Fashion Moda joined forces in the *Times Square Show*, in a former NYC massage parlor—“a month-long party, business enterprise and loosely curated exhibition of art, film, fashion, and exotica,” wrote Jeffrey Deitch.¹²

Both shows were simulations: they used a language similar to the official one but through chaotic installations, mock stores, and the confusion between avant-garde and folk, high, and street culture. It is this balance between art and non-art to attract downtown artists to the South Bronx, not the desire to foster a cultural renaissance of the neighborhood (as Longwood Art Gallery and the Bronx Museum of the Arts were already doing).

Theirs was a tactic of disappearance from the traditional art world. “We were part of a movement that was interested in moving art out of the white cube and the small world that served and talked to itself all the time,” stated Colab artist Jane Dickson, who also exhibited at Fashion Moda.¹³ And Lisa Kahane, who more than others documented the activities of the gallery and its unusual setting, tells me: “The Soho art scene seemed tightly scripted. The Bronx was just the opposite—unknown with glimpses of the familiar.”

CONCEPTUAL STREET ART

Not only was Fashion Moda pivotal in the birth of graffiti art, but also of a more complex definition of *street art*. Many artists were fascinated by the democratic dimension of the street and the chance to relate to an audience of poor and uneducated, often immigrants, with “other” parameters of judgment, reading, and expectations towards art. Fashion Moda gave them the opportunity to develop interactive performances, street happenings, and workshops.

Tim Rollins, already active in the Bronx with Longwood Art Gallery with Pepón Osorio and Fred Wilson, realized some stages of K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) at

Fashion Moda, a pedagogical project that involved pupils from a local school. Holzer carpeted the facade with posters for one of her first public interventions, *Sentence Philosophy*. In 1980’s *Changing Displays*, Haim Steinbach assembled objects collected from the streets. Other artists linked to Fashion Moda are David Wojnarowicz, Richard Hambleton, Justen Ladda, David Finn, Christy Rupp, Peggy Cyphers, David Wells, and Rebecca Howland.

“Fashion Moda people say they want nothing to do with concepts, labels, or schools,” wrote the *East Village Eye*.¹⁴ So, in 1980, when invited to show at the New Museum, Fashion Moda insisted on presenting as a group, “creating its own context, where the installation dominated over the individual works.”¹⁵

Even for its official presentation to the art world, in the January 1981 edition of *Artforum* magazine, it maintained a strong anti-authoritarian identity by offering a brief manifesto in English, Chinese, Spanish, and Russian—which was an extension of its logo, Fashion 時裝 MODA МОДА—accompanied by posters by Eins, Ahearn, Fekner, and Rupp. As Lewis explained recently, “Ideologically, Fashion Moda was quadra-lingual with a global philosophical perspective that talked about multiculturalism before it was part of a the larger conversation in the art world.”¹⁶

We’d like to challenge the prejudice that art should be for an élite and that only someone who’s been to school can understand.





FROM DOCUMENTA TO THE WORLD

In 1982, Fashion Moda was invited to Documenta 7, the prestigious art exhibition in Kassel, West Germany. It presented a store selling T-shirts and gadgets designed by Eins, Haring, Holzer, and others, an artists’ store that reflected on the condition of art as commodity and its power as a medium for social messages. “I already sold my multiples at 3 Mercer,” Eins says, “The most expensive art is not necessarily the most accomplished and best.”

Art theorist Benjamin Buchloh reviewed the project in the journal *October* as “one of the few courageous curatorial choices” of Documenta. “Through its petty-commodity program, the hidden order of exchange value underlying Documenta’s high-art pretenses was revealed,” he wrote.¹⁷

Fashion Moda’s revolutionary impact consisted in its transnational, ahistorical, and ubiquitous nature. Speculating on the idea of “franchise,” borrowed from business, it created an expanded network, which made the South Bronx a hub for the development of cross-media and universal projects.

It also broke with the distinction between high and low culture, center and periphery, mainstream and alternative, individual and collective, global and local. “In the Bronx, I found creativity as a basic human trait,” Eins says, “applicable anywhere, everywhere.”

In 1983, a year after Lewis’s departure, Eins decided to close up shop. The space became community-oriented, as others in the neighborhood, closing ten years later. Today, its memory lives in the stories of those who were there, in Kahane’s and Martha Cooper’s photographs, and in several boxes archived at NYU’s Fales Library.

“The South Bronx looked like history,” says Kahane, “an unwritten story of decay, nostalgia, and frustrated expectations. Recorded history favors the successful. If I hadn’t photographed the Bronx back in the day, even I would have a difficult time remembering it. The Bronx has been rebuilt, but this new reality has yet to displace the old image. The rebirth of the Bronx is a continuing story.”

The three directors were right when they said, “Fashion Moda has been around forever.”¹⁸ And it will always be. Because Fashion Moda embodied the desire of art to convey universal values above intellectual and economic conventions. “This is the hopeful and angry product of a spreading art world crisis of faith,” wrote Lucy Lippard in 1980.¹⁹ A “product” that, with the identity and financial crisis the world is facing today, still serves as a model for redefining the role of the artist as a catalyst for democracy. ●

NOTES

1. Joyce Manalo and Daniel Feral, *Pantheon: A History of Art from the Streets of New York City*, (Pantheon Projects, 2011).
2. Alan W. Moore, *Art Gangs: Protest & Counterculture in New York City* (Autonomedia, 2011).
3. Brian Wallis, “Public Funding and Alternative Spaces,” *Alternative Art New York: 1965–1985* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
4. Stefan Eins, Joe Lewis, and William Scott, interviewed by Thomas Lawson, “Fashion Moda,” *Real Life* magazine #3 (January 1980).
5. Joe Lewis, “What Is Fashion Moda?” (unpublished, from Fashion Moda Archive).
6. John Ahearn and Cecilia Alemani in *Conversation* (pamphlet published for John Ahearn, *South Bronx Hall of Fame*, Frieze Projects, Frieze Art Fair, New York, May 2012).
7. Miwon Kwon, “Sittings on Public Art: Integration versus Intervention,” *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (MIT Press, 2004).
8. Martha Cooper, *Hip Hop Files: Photographs 1979–1984* (From Here to Fame Publishing, 2004).
9. Stefan Eins, “The Art of Graffiti Writing, A Historical Evaluation,” *Tattooed Walls* (University Press of Mississippi, 2006).
10. Ibid.
11. Francesca Alinovi, *Arte di Frontiera* (catalog of the exhibition at GAM, Bologna, Mazzotta, 1984).
12. Jeffrey Deitch, “Report from Times Square,” *Art in America* (September 1980).
13. Tanyanika Samuels, “The Legacy of Fashion Moda, a shuttered art and performance space, to be spotlighted,” *New York Daily News*, February 15, 2013.
14. Steven Vincent, “Fashion Moda at The New Museum,” *East Village Eye* (“Xmas” 1980).
15. Lynn Gumpert, *EVENTS: Fashion Moda, Taller Boricua, Artists Invite Artists* (catalog of the exhibition at the New Museum, New York, 1981).
16. Shawna Cooper and Karl Wurzelbacher (ed.), *The Times Square Show Revisited: Accounts of the Landmark 1980 Exhibition* (Hunter College Galleries, 2012.)
17. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Documenta 7: A Dictionary of Received Ideas,” *October* Vol. 22 (Autumn 1982).
18. “Some Posters from Fashion Moda,” *Artforum* (January 1981).
19. Lucy Lippard, “Real Estate and Real Art a la Fashion Moda,” *Seven Days Magazine* (April 1980).



(above top) Fashion Moda store at Documenta 7, 1982, organized by Jenny Holzer and Stefan Eins. They sold inexpensive artists’ multiples in several locations at the show. Photo by Lisa Kahane.
(above right) T-shirt (offset print on cotton; detail of sleeve) created for the Fashion Moda store at Documenta 7, 1982. Courtesy of 98 Bowery.



Kendra Morris

Mockingbird

Kendra Morris drops new album of cover songs, *Mockingbird*, on July 30, featuring “Wicked Game,” “Ride the Lightning,” “Shine On You Crazy Diamond,” and the new single “Miss You.”



Photography by Marc McAndrews and styling by Kate Dwyer.

Wax Poetics Records