

IS 190 BOWERY EVERYTHING WE IMAGINED?

by Chloe Dewberry
May 20, 2015



Humberto Leon, Spike Jonze, and Bennett Miller in front of the 190 Bowery space.

For years, the northwest corner of Bowery and Spring Street has been a mysterious home to urban legends, and a symbol of a seemingly lost NYC. Among the throng of glitzy retail stores, sterile gallery exteriors, and pricey restaurants, the daunting six-story space has existed in its own detached world, where grit and graffiti are the norm. The heavily gated space, otherwise known as the former Germania Bank building, has been closed to the public since it was purchased as a family home by photographer Jay Maisel for \$102,000 in 1966.

For years, curious New Yorkers have gazed up at its locked iron gates, some even breaking in, hoping to get a peek at what lies inside. Yesterday, I got to tag along with OC co-

founder Humberto Leon, Spike Jonze, and Bennett Miller to take a look inside the building and see if it matched the fantasy in our imaginations.

While there are no (visible) basketball courts inside as Humberto had heard rumored, the open space just past the wooden doors and iron locks is as cavernous as expected. For the first time since '66, curator Vito Schnabel was slowly opening the gates for viewings of his new exhibit, titled First Show, Last Show. "I grew up in New York City, walking by the former Germania Bank countless times," Vito writes in the program. "I always wanted to go inside, thinking it might be a perfect place for an exhibition."



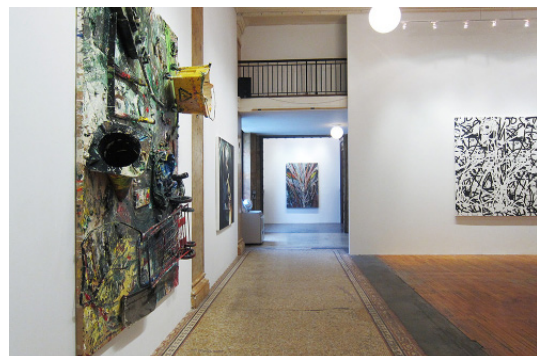
Spike in front of Dan Colen's *The Woman's Movement/Crazy Mama*

While the exhibit—with its grandiose paintings and multi-faceted works from artists such as Harmony Korine, Mark Grotjahn, and Dan Colen—is a monumental feat, the real star of the show is the building itself and its historical background and artistic ghosts. The Germania Bank Building was built in 1898 and was designed by Robert Maynicke, an architect the *New York Times* called in 1913 “a pioneer in the building of modern loft buildings.” For over six decades, the building acted as a bank, before being sold to Maisel. Maisel used the space as a private residence, all while renting out certain floors to artists like Roy Lichtenstein.

Nothing about 190 Bowery is a typical converted artist's space. The rusty piping, spacious, off-kilter rooms, and preserved flooring identify the building's age and charm. “You see all of the mosaic flooring and the vaults going into the basement,” noticed Humberto. “There's also this little room that almost looks like a little treasure of a ballet room or something weird. You don't even know what was there.”



Dan Colen's *The Woman's Movement/Crazy Mama*



Mark Grotjahn's *Untitled (Orange and Yellow Eye Growing Right Vito Face 45-42)*

FIRST SHOW / LAST SHOW

The preserved vaults in the basement act as a portal to pre-ATM days, guarded by iron gates that seem just as intimidating as they do prehistoric. While this isn't the first time a bank has been refurbished for something creative (Shayne Oliver held his Hood By Air Fall/Winter 2015 show in the 23 Wall Street Bank), 190 Bowery's interior is a unique case. "There are all of these amazing bank buildings, but I feel like no one has gotten to see them in their true form," says Humberto. "They've been transformed so heavily. This space actually captures the original essence of what it was, which is such a big part of New York."

You can't deny the building's historical charm as you walk through the vast space, just like you can't avoid the controversy that surrounds First Show, Last Show. While there has been criticism from the media and the public surrounding it—due to the lack of diversity of artists and the fact that it was originally intended to be a public show, yet was only open by appointment or invitation—one can't ignore the fact that it's being used as an art space for its last hurrah.



Ron Gorchov's Ulysses oil painting is displayed in a converted second-floor studio space.



"I always wanted to go inside, thinking it might be a perfect place for an exhibition." —Vito Schnabel on the First Show, Last Show location.



Jeff Elrod's Dream Machine (for Brion Gysin)



Mark Grotjahn's Untitled (Orange and Yellow Eye Growing Right Vito Face 45-42)

Moving forward, the building, which was purchased by developer Aby Rosen in February for \$55 million, is reportedly being turned into a commercial and retail space for progressive companies (a.k.a. the kinds who prefer to keep graffiti on the exterior). While this transformation will be a vast departure from the artist residence it acted as for the last forty years, First Show, Last Show accurately plays its title, offering what may perhaps be the last remnant of an artist studio inside the location.

One important thing to remember: with just as much authentic art on the outside of the building as there is past the gates, you don't necessarily have to step inside to experience what New York City is all about.



Harmony Korine's Antioch Mall Chex



Spike and Humberto in a room of Harmony Korine's paintings at First Show, Last Show.



Vito Schnabel, Humberto, and Spike in front of a Julian Schnabel inkjet print.



Joe Bradley's Untitled (Diptych)



First Show, Last Show accurately plays its title, offering what may perhaps be the last remnant of an artist studio inside the location.