

Catalyst: Art and Social Change at Gracie Mansion Conservancy
February 20, 2019 – August 2021
Curated by Jessica Bell Brown

ACT UP	Guerilla Girls	Miguel Luciano
Adam Rolston	Hank Willis	Naima Green
Alexandra Bell	Thomas	Nari Ward
Aliza Nisenbaum	Jeffrey Gibson	Peter Hujar
Allan Sekula	Jenny Holzer	Philip Guston
Baseera Khan	John Edmonds	Robert
David Wojnarowicz	Kameelah Janan- Rasheed	Rauschenberg
David Hirsch	Kay Rosen Keith	Sable Elyse Smith
Devra Freeland	Haring	Shirley Gorelick
Diana Davies	LaToya Ruby	Steven Tucker
Dread Scott	Frazier	Tania Bruguera with Mujeres en Movimiento
Emily Chow Bluck and Jennifer Harley	Linda Goode Bryant	Tattfoo Tan
Felix Gonzalez- Torres	Lorraine O'Grady	Tatyana Fazlalizadeh
Faith Ringgold	Lucia Hierro	Torkwase Dyson
Glenn Ligon	Martha Rosler	Visual AIDS
Gordon Parks	Martine Fougeron	
	Mierle Laderman- Ukeles	

Project Overview

In classrooms across the country at the start of each morning, school children recite the same six words: “...with liberty and justice for all”. We understand this utterance to be paramount to the founding democratic ideas of this country: that we all, no matter our walks of life, have access to liberty, justice, and the pursuit of happiness. There have been no greater witnesses to the evolving truths of these ideas than artists, whose work ostensibly follows the ebbs and flows of social change and transformation. Our exhibition, entitled *Catalyst*, is a reminder of how creativity holds space for the nuanced examination of life, liberty, and justice, as experienced by artists with great connection to New York City. Through photography, installation, painting, sculpture and archival ephemera, the artworks selected for this exhibition will situate art and its complex relationship to social change from the early 1960s to now. *Catalyst* brings together artists whose work broaches several topics of equal importance: environmental activism, racism, ability, education, gentrification, food justice, prison reform, immigrant rights, LGBTQIA advocacy, and HIV/AIDs, war and conflict, and labor. Under three unifying and enduring themes at the root of our humanity: life, liberty, and justice, we welcome these artworks to Gracie, which will undoubtedly convey the simple message that living can be radical, liberty is not taken for granted, and justice is an ongoing fight.

Catalyst will place a framework on the ways in which existence can be radical. Food and our environment are two of the most basic ways that we can make small but impactful changes to our world. Project Eats, founded in 2008 by Linda Goode Bryant is a decade-long engagement with art, urban agriculture, civic partnership, and social enterprise. Bryant equitably distributes essential resources within and between working class black and brown communities through urban farming and sustainable produce. Bryant, with access to the grounds of Gracie, will partner with us to develop garden and food justice-oriented programming for youth and teen moms. Tattfoo Tan’s Sustainable Organic Stewardship (S.O.S.) project will offer a free library of seeds to be distributed to the public with birdhouses installed on the grounds. The seeds will be the same ones that transform into the food harvested from Gracie’s gardens, while artworks of Torkwase Dyson and Lucia Hierro will amplify the present fight for food and environmental justice inside the mansion.

Other artworks examine ideas around liberty, or the freedoms that we enjoy in America and as New Yorkers. Print ephemera from Tania Brugera and Mujeres en Movimiento's collaboration, *Cycle News*, which launched in 2017, will be on display. *Cycle News* established a direct line of communication between the city government and immigrant and undocumented communities, connecting them to critical services such legal services. English conversation classes, and know-your-rights materials. The stirring call to action of MacArthur award-winning queer and indigenous artist Jeffrey Gibson, "The Future Is Present", will welcome guests in the ballroom alongside iconic sculptural works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Miguel Luciano. Baseera Khan and Kameelah Janan-Rasheed's collage and text-based works will explore the complexities and nuances of identity in a post-9/11 world, while images of Mierle Laderman-Ukeles's *Touch Sanitation* performance will place questions of labor and feminism into productive tension with the city's municipalities.

Catalyst is rooted in the contemporary moment, but documentary photography and historical ephemera will play a critical role in mounting a more historically-nuanced understanding of the art of social engagement, and how creatives capture the fight for justice. The history of graphic art and protest will come together in the yellow parlor, bringing together anti-war protest imagery from the Vietnam era with AIDS awareness ephemera from the historic activist group ACT UP. Diana Davies' 1960s documentary photographs of LGBTQ activism in the era of Stonewall and gay liberation will amplify Peter Hujar's intimate and deeply empathetic portraits of queer communities in the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s. Archival memos and letters of Robert Rauschenberg, on view in the parlors, beckon us to remember that "artists have always been the first to respond to the needs of others". All in all, in considering the idea of art as a catalyst for social transformation, the words of Rauschenberg ring clear: "Art has always been a necessary ally to justice and freedom", he wrote in June of 1976. It is our hope that visitors will not only experience this complicated and historically grounded narrative, but that they will take *Catalyst* as a call to create a more just and equal world.