

GEORG GATSAS, THE SWISS INSTITUTE, NEW YORK

New York's downtown art scene has enjoyed more fêted chroniclers than most other city's art worlds. Nan Goldin is undoubtedly the most revered of recent years, but the twenty-something Ryan McGinley has been celebrated by many as a successor, and one recent afternoon I met with another, though more reluctant candidate, Georg Gatsas, who is about to open a show at the Swiss Institute in New York of his photographs of several young downtown icons, alongside a selection of their artwork.

It sounds like an onerous task documenting the lives of New York's young avant-garde. Nan Goldin's existence never looked too tranquil, and the anarchic lifestyle of McGinley's close friends, Dash Snow and Dan Colen, was somewhat lampooned recently in a profile article in New York Magazine. Would you really want to be too close to all that? Personally, no, but Gatsas clearly doesn't mind, and if I was at all worried that he might not be close enough to the action, he had details to reassure me: his landlords, heaven help him, are Breyer P-Orridge, the duo formed by the veteran performance artist Genesis P-Orridge and Jackie Breyer.



Breyer P-Orridge, 2003, ©Photo, Editor of S



Ira Cohen, 2003, ©Photo, Editor of S

Gatsas moves with all sorts. It's a testament to the fact that a city's artists are always taking on the influences of other varieties of young artists who are coming to life on their doorstep. Maybe it was jazz musicians in the 1950s; dancers like Yvonne Rainer for a certain slice of the '60s generation; and it was hip-hop stars and DJs for '80s artists like Keith Haring. So, I wondered, as Gatsas and I sat down to coffee on Orchard Street, what other artists do today's young fine artists respond to most?

Gatsas never trained as an artist. He was born and raised in St. Gallen in Switzerland (he comes from Grabs, the same small town that produced Pipilotti Rist); he studied languages at university and only took up the camera a few years ago. Shortly after that, he began spending part of the year in New York, and in that time has initiated a series of projects, successively numbered under the umbrella title of The Process, which have fused his own photography with curatorial projects bringing together other artists.

The new Swiss Institute show, 'Process VI', is typical, including work by a hugely diverse range of figures such as Breyer P-Orridge, musician and performance artist Kembra Pfahler, poet and photographer Ira Cohen, and other well-regarded artists such as Brian DeGraw and Lizzi Bougatsos. And there are portraits of other musicians, artists and performers like Foetus, former Suicide musician Marty Rev and Stephen O'Malley of the drone metal band Sunn O))), invariably, they are informally captured shots, figures pictured at night on the street, shadowed in corridors, sheltered in doorways.

Gatsas says that the artwork which will accompany this will be something like "a second portrait" of the people he has portrayed; everything will come together in an informal, almost domestic installation, with bands like the Young Gods playing sets on nights during the show; and, rather aptly, the slide installation in the show will unfold amidst a sound piece by Danish artist Jacob Kirkegaard, entitled Broadway, which amplifies the sounds shooting through the building's supporting columns, effectively introducing to the gallery the sounds of the street.



Kirkegaard, 2006, Gauguin Print, Edition of 5



Stephen O'Malley, 2005, C-Pink, Edition of 5, part of the Black T series

Kirkegaard's installation will no doubt reinforce the feeling that the Process VI is locally grown, yet when I asked Gatsas what, for him, was the essence of the downtown art scene, he said he was uncomfortable with the whole label. "Most of the people know each other, and most are from the New York art and music scenes, but I don't know if I'd say it is 'downtown' - some live in Brooklyn, some in Manhattan". The city itself has changed, in any case, he says, breaking up the old clusters of artists in places that created vibrant scenes like the East Village in the 1980s. So even though Gatsas admits that Nan Goldin is an influence on his work, he says that photographers like him simply can't find the kind of city she portrayed in the early 1980s, even if they wanted to. "If you take a look around the Lower East Side, it's not as it was ten or twenty years ago, it has gentrified very quickly. You can't just go to friends houses now and watch them shooting up!"

The wider world has changed as well, Gatsas says, and now artists travel much more widely than they used to. That may have destroyed the local grounding of older networks of artists, yet in many ways those networks have only been reborn in different forms. Gatsas told me, for instance, how he set out to get a portrait of the musician Stephen O'Malley: he emailed someone in Australia who knew Gatsas through their common friend Norbert Moslang who lives in St. Gallen. Similarly, Gatsas came to know Ira Cohen after meeting him in Switzerland. And today, when he isn't taking pictures and curating, he also books dates for New York bands to play in Swiss towns. "It's not only the New York scene," he says. "I want to capture all kinds of people who have a particular attitude, a particular outlook on the world. It's a portrait of a global avant-garde."

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