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## Alternative Art Pioneer Is Back With ‘Forty’

Alanna Heiss returns to MoMA’s PS1 with a survey celebrating its radical foundational spirit



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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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When Alanna Heiss founded P.S. 1 in Queens, she envisioned it as an alternative space for adventurous art—an “anti-museum” to take up a position against institutions of the old guard.

Four decades later, she has organized a survey celebrating its radical foundational spirit.

At MoMA PS1—the name of Ms. Heiss’s upstart enterprise since its merger with the Museum of Modern Art—a 40th-anniversary show assembles work by artists associated with the outpost’s founding in 1976.

The inaugural exhibition “Rooms” transformed an abandoned school building in Long Island City into a series of unusual gallery spaces, with artwork in former classrooms, hallways, playgrounds and a boiler room down below. Now, the retrospective “Forty” presents artists from that original show or otherwise affiliated with Ms. Heiss’s early organizational experiments.

In the early 1970s, Ms. Heiss had emerged as a kind of renegade leader of New York’s burgeoning “alternative space” movement, founding an organization called the Institute of Art and Urban Resources to help find studio, exhibition and performance space for the city’s artists. In addition to the abandoned Queens school, Ms. Heiss reimagined many unused and overlooked city spaces, launching the Clocktower Gallery, the Idea Warehouse and the Coney Island Sculpture Factory, among others.

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—Richard ‘Dickie’ Landry

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From the beginning, the building now known as MoMA PS1 avoided museum conventions. It had no collection, no gift shop and no allegiance to art of historically sanctified or market-sanctioned kinds. Morning visitation was avoided in favor of more amenable times at night—“artist’s hours,” Ms. Heiss said. “I ran it like a hip restaurant or a nightclub, a place you would go.”

Richard “Dickie” Landry, who has four minimalist drawings in the “Forty” show, knew Ms. Heiss at the start of her career.

“She had a purpose in mind and always emanated that,” he said of the contemporary art champion who hails from rural Illinois. “What Alanna wants, Alanna gets—she had a strong presence and went to bat for artists in the art world, which is not an easy thing to do sometimes.”

For Ms. Heiss, trial and error come with the territory of investigating new art.

“It’s an idiotic notion that an institution dealing with the new would be afraid and have to evaluate how ‘successful’ a show would be,” she said. “These were places where people said, ‘We’re making this kind of art and no one is looking, so we want to put it the way it should be seen.’”

Ms. Heiss recalled a performance at her Clocktower Gallery featuring the musician and artistic muse Charlotte Moorman, who played the cello while topless and covered in molten chocolate.

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“It was a terrible mess,” she said, with a grin.

Ms. Heiss seeded early exhibits like “Rooms” with artists who were then barely known. “Forty” harvests a bumper crop of those ’70s-era stalwarts.

Among the 42 artists in the show, on view through Aug. 28, are now-canonical figures like Sol LeWitt, Gordon Matta-Clark, Laurie Anderson, Lawrence Weiner and Robert Ryman. Others represent a historical milieu devoted to questioning the art world’s formalities and precious airs.

“The clearest way of talking about the difference [Ms. Heiss made] was getting rid of the pedestal and those aspects that made art important by giving it prestige,” said Richard Nonas, an 80-year-old artist included in “Forty.” “Alanna changed the way art is seen and thought about publicly more than almost anybody else of my generation.”

Mr. Nonas’s large steel sculpture “Alligator” lies on the floor of a second-floor gallery, in the same spot it occupied in “Rooms,” though the setting has evolved. In 1976, the walls of the derelict building were raw and falling down. Now, they are museum-grade white and cooled by air conditioning.

“Uncarved Blocks” by Carl Andre employs a floor-bound arrangement of cinder blocks first used in “Lament for the Children,” a piece conceived 40 years ago for the space’s outdoor playground. “One Candle” by Nam June Paik commands a room of its own with a wax candle burning inside an empty TV.

Up a creaky set of wooden stairs, an immersive installation by the artist Colette transforms a spacious attic into a sort of stage set for a modern costume drama.

“Her strength is in her moodiness and her understanding of excess,” Ms. Heiss said of mirrored glass and fabric draped all around.

Klaus Biesenbach, the director of MoMA PS1 and chief curator-at-large for MoMA, said

the institution has worked to maintain its founding spirit since Ms. Heiss stepped down from her directorship in 2008.

“I hope we are true to her principles for how to work in a building that was built not as a museum but for a different purpose,” Mr. Biesenbach said.

Ms. Heiss, now 73 years old and busy with roaming exhibitions and projects supported by her nonprofit organization Clocktower Productions, said her return to the institution she founded was welcome for the chance to reacquaint herself with artists from a generation she helped shape.

“I expected it to be more bittersweet than it was, but I was happy I had chosen them so many years ago to guide me,” she said of the artists. “One of the things we talked about was the graceful aging of an outlaw.”