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Magical Mystery Tour: In an Enigmatic Performa Work, Anu Vahtra Reveals SoHo's Past

BY [Grace Halio](http://www.artnews.com/author/gbalio/) (<http://www.artnews.com/author/gbalio/>) POSTED 11/17/17 1:37 PM

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On Wednesday evening, about 20 people, each bearing a flashlight, gathered outside on the corner of Broadway and Howard Street in New York's SoHo neighborhood. They were there for Anu Vahtra's Performa 17 commission, *Open House Closing. A Walk*, a lo-fi tour of sorts. At the start of the performance, the Estonian artist stood on a loading dock facing the crowd. She asked them to point their flashlights at her and began to describe the Cast Iron District, which, in her estimation, has become more of an open-air shopping mall than an art-world hub, the way it was for the 1970s Conceptualists. "I'm an outsider here," Vahtra told the crowd, "but I'm interested in how this was a place for artists and collectivity."

The crowd followed her through SoHo, pausing briefly every few buildings to shine their lights on empty structures. Vahtra would offer a few words, or sometimes none at all, letting her silence speak for itself. (She will stage the performance again today at 5:30 p.m. and 7 p.m.)

First up was 144 Spring Street, the last empty lot in SoHo. It was once purchased in 2012 for \$30 million by a developer, Vahtra said, but it's still on the market, despite the fact that the building plans were approved. It stood in sharp contrast to 101 Spring Street, the site of the Judd Foundation, a space that Donald Judd himself purchased for \$68,000 in 1968. She paused briefly and said, "Let's continue."

Zig-zagging across the cobblestones, Vahtra and her audience went next to 102 Wooster Street, soon to be the Paragon Touch Lab, an offshoot of a nearby sporting-goods store. The space is still under renovation—there are holes in the walls that expose metal frameworks, and geometric shapes are cut into the floor. It reminded Vahtra of Gordon Matta-Clark, the artist who, during the 1970s, was known to slice holes out of buildings.

At 127 Prince Street, Vahtra paused for a moment to project old images of Matta-Clark's FOOD restaurant-cum-conceptual art project onto the concrete sidewalk nearby. She stood angled away from a poster wheat-pasted to an electrical box that read, "Too many empty storefronts / Lack of cultural awareness."

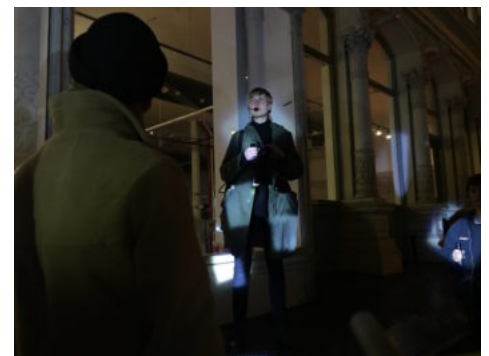
As the group traversed a neighborhood street, a security guard outside a high-end jewelry store asked what was going on. Was this some kind of tourist group? He got no answer, and neither did other annoyed pedestrians.

As she led the group down Mercer Street and across cobblestoned streets, Vahtra continued projecting images of old New York onto the concrete, offering a glimpse of what SoHo used to be. Outside 32 Howard Street, Vahtra explained that the four-story building used to belong to the family—three generations of it, in fact—that owned the Putnam Rolling Ladder Company. The family was nearly all packed up and ready to move out because of the skyrocketing rent. She led the group inside, inviting them to experience the history and the silence of the building. Family portraits, blueprints, and framed awards are all that remain among a few boxes.

On the walk, one woman passing by asked, "Is this a protest?" In a sense, the performance felt like one, as though Vahtra were arguing against the rapid gentrification of the neighborhood. It was if Vahtra was reminding us that the neighborhood *could* be vibrant again, especially when we stopped at a large glass building at 52 Mercer Street. Audience members shined their flashlights through the building, letting their beams run across a gaping, unoccupied first-floor space. "Look at it," Vahtra said. "It's beautiful."

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ARTICLE TAGS



Anu Vahtra outside the Performa Hub at the start of *Open House Closing. A Walk*.

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