



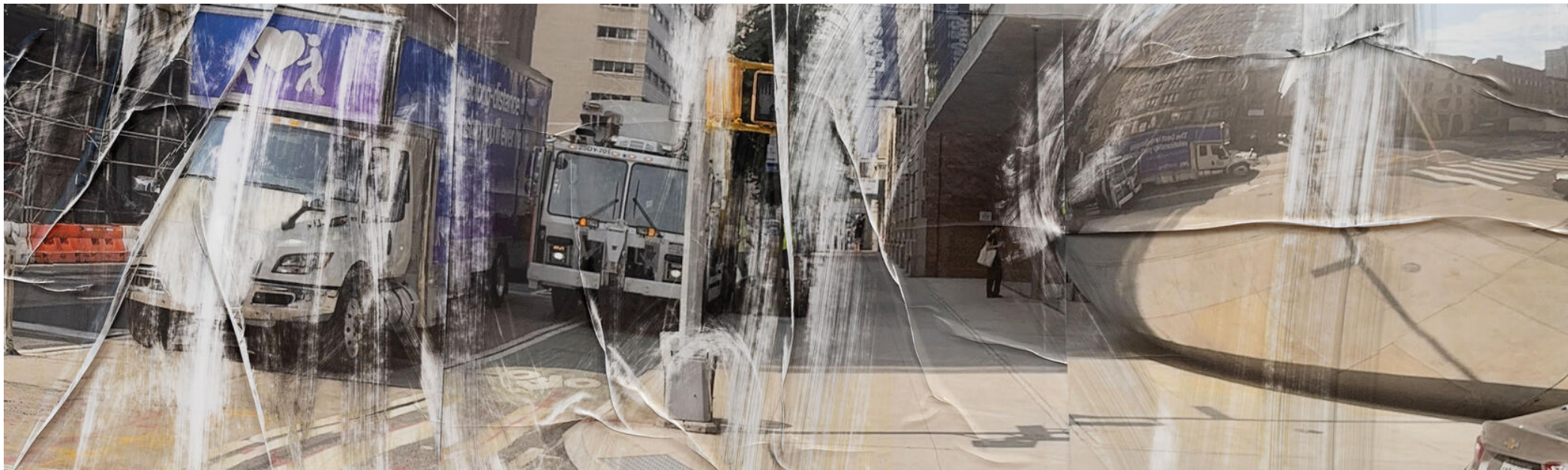
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Issue 251

The New York Galleries Shaping the Scene

As the city's art world feels the strain, Francis Irv, KAJE and Soft Network lead a bold new wave of risk-taking spaces

+5 BY TRAVIS DIEHL, WILL FENSTERMAKER, MARKO GLUHAICH, JANE URSULA HARRIS AND TERENCE TROUILLOT IN ROUNDTABLES | 23 APR 25



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It's no secret that New York's art ecosystem is under strain. As institutions slash budgets and corporate sponsorships evaporate, the ripple effects have hit small and mid-sized galleries hardest – many shuttering just as they hit their stride. We witnessed this instability firsthand while working on this feature: Dunkunsthalle, a space we had planned to highlight, was forced to close following urgent structural issues and the sale of its building by the landlord. Founded in a former Dunkin' Donuts, the space embodied both resourcefulness and a sharp commentary on cultural scarcity. 'I, like many Americans, grew up with no access to art or culture but awash in chain stores, like Dunkin' Donuts, in strip malls,' founder Rachel Rossin told us. Without spaces like these, we risk creating that same cultural vacuum in New York – one that augurs a future of unsettling homogenization, dominated by mega-galleries and corporate influence.



Left to right: Tony Tirador, Rebecca Picanso, Rachel Rossin, 2025. Image commissioned for *frieze*; photograph: Ahmed Gaber

And yet, despite these headwinds, a resilient group of galleries continues to carve out space for experimentation, community and new voices. At Soft Network, programming addresses real structural gaps in the art world – from providing essential support to artists’ estates, to forging new models of collaboration and care. Francis Irv operates with a spirit of friendship and curiosity, resulting in exhibitions that feel both rigorous and deeply personal. And KAJE, with its nimble programming and commitment to emerging artists, has quickly become a vital platform for experimentation and dialogue. These are not just galleries but living communities, sustained by conviction, mutual trust and a willingness to take risks. — *Terence Trouillot, senior editor*

Francis Irv

What started as an impromptu exhibition has become one of Tribeca’s most intriguing new galleries



Left to right: Sam Marion Wilken and Shane Rossi, 2025. Image commissioned for *frieze*; photograph: Ahmed Gaber

My first encounter with the New York gallery that would later be called Francis Irv was in Los Angeles in February 2022, when co-founders Shane Rossi and Samuel Marion Wilken staged their first group exhibition at As It Stands gallery in Lincoln Heights. Titled ‘A Fool’s Game Played by Cowards’, and co-curated with artist Aria Dean, the show featured works described in the press release as ‘b-sides’ – prototypes or rejects by Dean and fellow artists including Hannah Black, Benjamin Echeverria and Jordan Wolfson. The crowd overflowed from the gallery onto the sidewalk and the atmosphere was convivial: guests drank Modelo beers and enjoyed tacos from around the corner.

Francis Irv – a combination of its founders’ middle names, Rossi told me when we spoke at the gallery earlier this year – emerged from conversations over burgers and martinis at the art-world haunt Fanelli Cafe in SoHo, New York, in late 2020. At the time, both were working as studio assistants. Rossi and Marion Wilken tell me that they recognized in each other a ‘shared appreciation for artists our peers weren’t looking at’. Their New York *début* came together by accident. A shipping snafu meant that three paintings from Berlin-based artist Angharad Williams’s series ‘Untitled (1–18)’ (2021–22) didn’t arrive in LA in time to be included in ‘A Fool’s Game Played by Cowards’. Rather than return them to the artist, Rossi recalls, they thought: ‘We should put them in an exhibition!’ and so they had them shipped to New York. By November 2022, they had opened their Chinatown gallery with a dual exhibition featuring works by Williams and Sophie Gogl.



Rachel Fäth, *Locker 5*, 2024, steel, 56 × 23 × 37 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Francis Irv, New York

While Rossi and Marion Wilken didn't initially plan to start a commercial gallery – the original idea was to organize only 'two exhibitions a year', Marion Wilken tells me – it didn't take long for them to adopt the trappings of one. During their first exhibition in New York, someone contacted them out of the blue to purchase one of the works. In the first half of 2023 alone, they opened four shows, featuring an impressive array of artists including up-and-comers like Echeverria and Asta Lynge, as well as more established names such as Georgia Gardner Gray and Matthias Groebel. By June 2024, Rossi and Marion Wilken found themselves in Basel exhibiting Echeverria's work at the alternative art fair Basel Social Club. Upon their return, they closed the gallery for four months in preparation for a big move to their new and current location on Walker Street in Tribeca.

The first year they opened in New York, I remember running into Rossi and Marion Wilken on their way to a bar to share their research and come up with the gallery's programming. 'The artists we've exhibited are the ones that were on those early mood boards,' Rossi tells me. 'People like Benjamin [Echeverria] and Karla [Kaplun]. We would ask ourselves, "How have they never been shown in New York?"' When pressed, however, the two don't betray a specific conceptual throughline unifying their diverse interests. What drew them to artists like Banks Violette and Reinhard Mucha, for instance, was 'the [artists'] level of commitment to their practices', Marion Wilken clarifies. Mucha's 2022–23 exhibition across K20 and K21 in Düsseldorf 'was a total knockout to see in person', Rossi tells me. The two opened their own Mucha exhibition, a collaboration with Luhning Augustine, in late 2023 because they felt, despite the Düsseldorf show, 'he was still relatively underappreciated in the US'. The sole artwork on display at Francis Irv, *Kassel* (2013) – a deconstructed architectural object mounted horizontally on the wall – demonstrated 'the way Mucha tackles scale, craftsmanship and history while maintaining a sense of humour and restraint', also 'establishing a generative dialogue' with sculptors they had already worked with, like Rachel Fäth.



Asta Lyng, *Audience*, 2024, plywood, upholstery foam, adhesive spray, 3.8 × 3.2 × 1 m. Courtesy: the artist and Francis Irv, New York; photograph: Jain Emaline

The gallery space itself is unassuming; Marion Wilken interjects that it's been described to him as resembling a detective's office from an old movie. Openings tend to spill into the mixed-use building's hallways, fostering a sense of community around them. But this is all part of the collaborative ethos that defined Francis Irv from the beginning – one that has fuelled relationships with artists and is now growing with other galleries in the area. 'So much of the joy of doing this', Rossi says, 'is engaging with your peers and commiserating with them. It affords empathy and a lot of relationships.'

Soft Network

A nonprofit dedicated to the often-overlooked work of artists' estates



Left to right: Chelsea Spengemann, Marie Warsh, Sara VanDerBeek and Max Warsh, 2025. Image commissioned for *frieze*; photograph: Ahmed Gaber

No one wants to think about their legacy until it's too late. Many artists dread the thought of organizing their archives, confronting the inevitable. Yet, art is supposed to outlast us – that's one reason we make it.

‘Without artists’ estates, we’d only have a narrow conception of art that’s determined by the market,’ says Chelsea Spengemann, the executive director and co-founder of Soft Network, a nonprofit dedicated to artists’ estates. ‘Any time you see a work by a dead artist, there’s someone living who makes that possible – often a widow, a daughter or another artist who’s taking care of someone’s legacy, even as they’re trying to contribute their own work to the world. It’s a social service that they provide for the rest of us.’

Soft Network’s mission is to bring visibility to estate work and to advocate for more formalized structures and philanthropic aid. Spengemann co-founded the New York-based nonprofit in 2021 with artist Sara VanDerBeek after realizing that, despite the vital role of estate work, there was no established model for it. Having managed the archive of experimental filmmaker Stan VanDerBeek while working at Guild & Greyshkul – the influential cooperative gallery started by his children, Sara and Johannes, with fellow artist Anya Kielar – Spengemann found that, despite enjoying the work and the close view it offered on VanDerBeek’s practice, she was frustrated by the lack of material support and general dearth of appreciation from curators and dealers. ‘At times, institutions overlook the role of artists’ estates,’ Spengemann says. ‘They often embark on research without consulting the living person who knew the artist intimately and has become a custodian of their legacy.’



Susan Brockman, *Depot*, 1974, film still. Courtesy: © 2025 Estate of Susan Brockman and Soft Network, New York

Funding estate work is notoriously difficult, even in the lavishly gilded arts economy. Expenses for photography, cataloguing, archiving, digitization, conservation, preservation and research quickly add up, yet few grants are available to estates – and fewer still to family operations without nonprofit status. If an artist lacks a certain market cachet, how do you build a sustainable legacy?

Massive enterprises like The Andy Warhol Foundation and the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation provide one model, licensing artworks and archives to preserve works of art, shape public perception and fund initiatives such as residencies and grants. But for artists whose work is not as dominant in the cultural arena, such structures aren't always feasible. 'When we thought about what kinds of models could make this work more functional,' says Spengemann, 'I realized it was important to run it as a cooperative – to share resources, space and expertise.'

Soft Network now operates Artist Foundation and Estate Leaders List, a professional organization for estate workers and a two-year residency programme that provides necessary infrastructure for fundraising and the custodial work of estate management. Its third resident, following the estates of Paul Gardère and Susan Brockman, is Turkish-American photographer Sheyla Baykal, who captured New York's downtown art scene in the 1970s, including portraits of Jackie Curtis and Peter Hujar. Lacking the resources to print and exhibit her work during her lifetime, Baykal bequeathed her archive to her friend, performance artist and playwright Penny Arcade, upon her death in 1997. Soft Network has solicited a council of experts – including conservator Marina Ruiz-Molina, art historian Marcelo Gabriel Yáñez and director Steve Zehentner – to help prepare Baykal's work for exhibition in April.



Paul Gardère, *First Letters*, 1987, acrylic, plaster and mixed media on canvas board and wood, 76 × 122 cm. Courtesy: © Paul Gardère Studio

‘Even if you have a full team of people who can photograph and catalogue everything in a week, it takes many years – even decades – for this kind of legacy work to pay off,’ acknowledges Spengemann. Nor is publishing a book or exhibiting at an art fair a ‘light switch’ that ensures an artist is properly incorporated within broader historical narratives or public collections. But Spengemann believes that an organization like Soft Network, operating independently from larger institutions, can work with greater flexibility and clarity of purpose.

She points to the case of artist Scott Burton, whose late-career ‘pragmatic sculptures’ took the form of site-specific furniture-objects that blend seamlessly into their surroundings. Soft Network helped display his work at Darling Green, a West Village project space, where they facilitated discussions about the challenges of pre-serving and showing art that was designed for conditions which can’t be replicated in a gallery. Burton’s *Atrium Furnishment* (1986) is now restaged at SculptureCenter in New York, as part of Álvaro Urbano’s exhibition ‘Tableau Vivant’. In February, the museum also hosted a panel exploring how Burton’s public artworks – at once present and discreet – informed Urbano’s understanding of gay cruising culture. ‘We were able to open up people’s minds,’ says Spengemann, ‘and to create a space for preserving and exhibiting this unique body of work.’ Their careful efforts ensure that the historical thread between Burton’s and Urbano’s practices is preserved. The more we attend to cultivating artists’ legacies, the more richly illustrated becomes our tapestry of art history.

KAJE

A Brooklyn nonprofit is redefining what an art space can be



Left to right: Elizaveta Shneyderman and Kate Levant, 2025. Image commissioned for *frieze*; photograph: Ahmed Gaber

KAJE is located on 15th Street in Gowanus, Brooklyn, an industrial area that has yet to be gentrified – visibly, at least. Walking down 3rd Avenue to visit the non-profit space and talk with its co-directors, Kate Levant and Elizaveta Shneyderman, I pass shuttered sheet-metal fabricators and empty buildings. Hanging above a nearby section of the Brooklyn Queens Expressway is a massive sign for Bruno Truck Sales, a lonely beacon of the neighbourhood’s former past as a thriving hub of cement works, machine shops, chemical plants and other manufacturing. Mounted on a New York City Department of Sanitation building, its iconic cursive letters and scaffold design (c.1965) have somehow escaped the fate of others, like the once-adjacent Kentile Floors sign torn down by developers in 2014, despite efforts by local artists to save the landmark.

Artists have been in the area for decades, turning defunct factories and warehouses into affordable studios. KAJE sits on the far fringes of such enclaves. Established in 2018 as an ambitious, experimental art space, KAJE is dedicated to ‘forms of investigation the market over- looks or deems unprofitable’, according to its website. Fittingly, you’d never know it was there unless you were looking for it. Still, KAJE has built a loyal following of likeminded folks drawn to its mandate, and the diverse range of physical and digitally native programming that reflect it: research residencies, theatrical and durational performances, video screenings, artist and scholarly publications, curated and participatory exhibitions, among others. From recent screenings of video work by Reza Abdoh and Michel Auder to a series of events hosted by Car World – the mythic ‘sci-non-fi’ social movement invented by comedian William Banks that revolves around an alien planet ruled by human-headed worms – KAJE offers up a heady mix of the renowned and the eccentric.



Car World, *Quuarux: The Sex Ride*, performed at KAJE, 2024. Performance installation shot.
Courtesy: John Filmanowicz for Car World

Both Levant (who is also the organization's co-founder) and Shneyderman are artists whose respective practices often challenge traditional systems of knowledge and cultural production. Their shared vision for KAJE is rooted in a desire to explore and support what they've outlined on their website as the 'creative impulses that are difficult to define and in need of participatory testing grounds'. This mutual interest in the uncategorizable and collaborative has led them to court the unknown, expanding the possibilities of what an art space can offer, especially in terms of opportunities. Their open call for a forthcoming thematic summer group show titled 'Arachnophobia', for instance, does not seek art-works but, rather, exhibition-design proposals. When I ask about their expectations for this, they tell me: 'It might invoke a physical architecture, but we're not even trying to limit it to that. We're open to all kinds of strange ideas from artists, curators, architects and designers. We're ultimately looking for new systems of display.' And, of course, the show is not really about spiders. As Shneyderman, who is also a practising psychoanalyst, explains, 'It's about the phobic object and the terror it produces – projections and perceptions that can't really be encapsulated in words.'



Adam Soch, *Reza Abdoh's Tight Right White*, 1993, video still. Courtesy: the Rezarta Abdoh Estate

As we sit together talking on the upper level of their two-storey space, I am shocked to learn that they have secured a 32-year lease. I've lived in New York for exactly that long and I have never heard of a commercial lease that extends beyond 15 years. Like their 'angel seed donor' who has helped keep them afloat since the beginning, it almost seems too good to be true. I also learn that efforts to clean up the nearby Gowanus Canal, due to its designation as a superfund site (a heavily polluted area in the US), have brought developers into their parts, and the prospect of full-blown gentrification – like the high-rise towers it will bring – looms large. It's ironic, Levant bleakly notes, since the area is already below sea level and is projected by the New York City Panel on Climate Change to be under water by 2050. Still, Levant and Shneyderman remain obdurately optimistic, continuing to cultivate discourse around novel forms of art-making that resist the demands of market capitalism. Their ultimate goal is to buy a building and turn KAJE into a community centre – a place where diehard fans and locals can come together and experience what happens when artists endeavour not only to 'subvert the existing model, but to reinvent it'. I, for one, am here for it, even if it is intentionally open-ended, because the art world needs more eclectic visionaries.

This article first appeared in frieze issue 251 with the headline 'Three Galleries to Watch in New York'

Main image: Win McCarthy, Day Residue at Church and Leonard (Crosswalk) (detail), 2024, Epson 770 Ultrachrome ink, adhesive transparency, paper, dibond mount, 244 x 70 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Francis Irv, New York; photograph: Zeshan Ahmed

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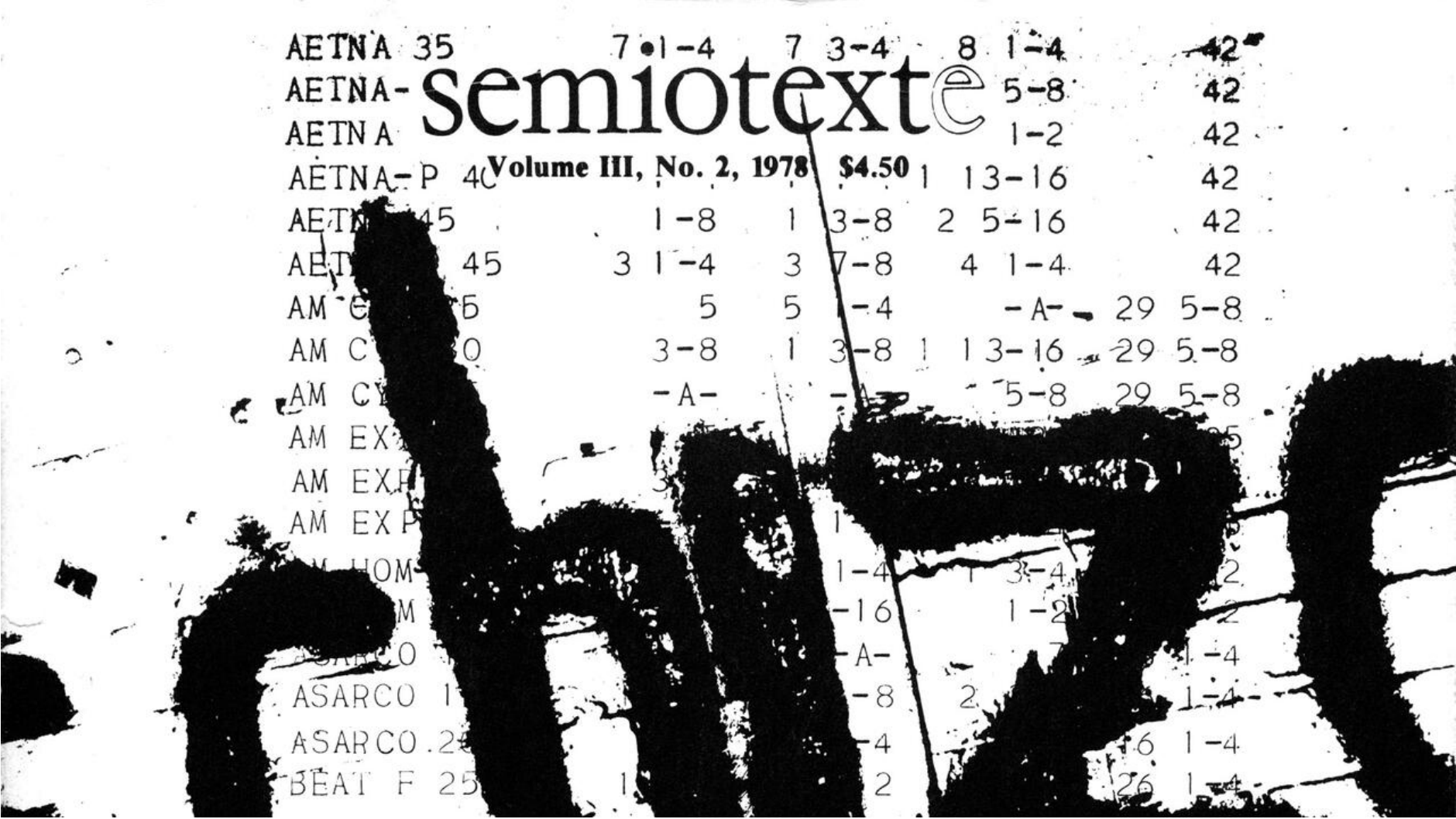
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