



# NO NEXT CHELSEA

Survival  
of the fittest

Chelsea is not only the largest art scene anywhere today, it's also the largest ever. According to some sources, there are more than 300 galleries in this Babylon-on-Hudson. The galleries are slick, wanton, wonderful, or whatever; they are high school with money, meat markets, ecstasy machines, and trading floors. As corporate or craven as it seems, however, Chelsea is actually an extremely fragile, constantly fluctuating, complexly interdependent, and even extraordinary ecosystem, reliant as much on appetite, acumen, and ruthlessness as it is on vision, whimsy, and good timing, to say nothing of vanity, insanity, and clout.

Like many systems nowadays, the Chelsea one has heated up. The rise in temperature is so dramatic that it's quite possible that Chelsea as we know it could go under within 10 years or be nothing but a handful of super-high-end galleries surrounded by designer boutiques, restaurants, day spas, and fancy shops. This likelihood has nothing to do with the possibility that New York City might be under water one day. It is entirely about another force that dictates change: New York real estate.

But before we fast-forward to the near future, it should be pointed out that some of Chelsea's most prominent galleries own their space, notably the Bermuda Triangle of supersouks and megatemples on West 24th Street. These galleries alone account for more than 100,000 square feet of exhibition space. Elsewhere, heavy hitters like David Zwirner and Larry Gagosian rent and own galleries. The former just opened not one but two new spaces, on

either side of his already large HQ. The latter is not only building a large gallery on land he only leases, he is becoming an ecosphere unto himself—with an empire that operates in more cities than the Guggenheim and emits a honey-money scent that ambitious artists are apparently unable to resist. At the rate he's expanding and sucking up artists from other dealers, it sometimes seems like Gagosian might be the only gallery of contemporary art in 10 years.

In the meantime, Marianne Boesky has built her own new building in Chelsea; Marlborough is moving into the ground floor of a just-completed 25-story condominium. Andrea Rosen and Luhring Augustine have completely gutted and rebuilt their spaces (cement trucks inside their galleries this summer were a fairly impressive sight); and Bortolami Dayan, only in operation for a year, purportedly plans to build a new gallery. Envy, excess, or admiration aside, some of these dealers had the wherewithal to buy early, when the neighborhood was iffy, prostitutes still worked Eleventh Avenue, and real-estate prices were low. Then again, some just have the money to do whatever they want whenever they want. Either way, all these owner-galleries are essentially working with safety nets.

## *Sprechen Sie Deutsch*

The dangers to the Chelsea ecosystem aren't so much in the air, however, they're in the superheated ground beneath the galleries. The vast majority of Chelsea art dealers—more than 90 percent by my reckoning—don't own their galleries. They rent, and in seven to 10 years many of these leases will need renewing. Some galleries will be financially better off; others will have closed; still others may have moved.

But rental prices in Chelsea will probably be too expensive for scores, if not hundreds, of operations—especially for the all-important fledglings and other midlevel spaces that solidify and oxygenate the mix. A massive die-off of more than 90 percent of galleries could take place in the neighborhood.

If and when that happens, commercial rental prices in Manhattan will likely prohibit any concentration of galleries in any one neighborhood. That means that not only will there be no more Chelsea, there'll be no next Chelsea, either. For the first time since the birth of the SoHo art scene, in the late 1960s, the New York artworld may not have the thing that really makes it different: a one-stop art district. In a decade, real estate will be more expensive in Berlin, London, and Los Angeles as well. But none of these are island-cities. Each has room to grow. Culver City in L.A. is almost endlessly porous; London galleries can move east and to sundry other areas for the foreseeable future; and Berlin real estate is so inexpensive and wide open—I still can't get over the massive amounts of space even the most fly-by-night galleries operate out of—that we should all be thinking about learning German.

The prospect of a Chelsea meltdown will prompt many to say, "Three hundred galleries in one neighborhood is ridiculous anyway," or "A die-off would eliminate much of the crap." These points have validity. I love having one neighborhood where you can see so much art, yet the harrowing thing about Chelsea is the mind-numbing amount of bad art you can see in such a short time. A bad day in Chelsea can seem like a season in hell.

Obviously, there are bad shows in London, Berlin, and L.A. But in those

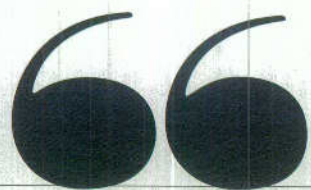
places you have to drive, bus, and train around for days to see any shows, let alone bad ones.

## *Bad Is Good*

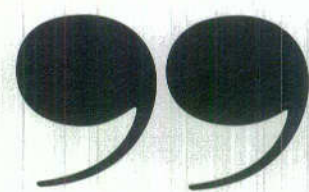
But just because you can see more bad shows in Chelsea in a day than you sometimes can in a year in other cities doesn't mean that art in Chelsea is worse than elsewhere. In fact, something that is often overlooked and quite underappreciated is that bad art tells you as much as good art. Damien Hirst's recent New York flameout was not only informative, it was majestic—here was an artist so desperate for your attention that he was willing to do anything. And Martin Eder's kitschy paintings of bare-breasted girls and pussycats were so buyer-friendly and formulaic, they revealed the limits of the Berlin wing of the Leipzig school.

For everyone who complains about how bad the shows in New York are, the ratio of good art to bad art is the same everywhere and is fairly constant. About 85 percent is not good; 15 percent might be good. For every 50 shows you see, one or two things might throw you for a loop (and you and I will be thrown by different things). This bad-to-good ratio has people complaining that art is in decline. Sorry, doomsayers: the ratio was no better in the Renaissance. In fact, this ratio may be a natural law. Having 85 percent of shows be bad is a brilliant, absolutely Darwinian survival mechanism. The artworld is continually spawning huge amounts of art so that a minuscule portion will survive. You begin to see art as a life force unto itself, seeking to guarantee its survival. An art scene can only be an art scene if it's big and diverse enough to support this high ratio of bad shows. (If this weren't true





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the Leipzig scene would be the best in the world since, according to the moneybags who buy every painting made there simply because it was made in there, no bad painters exist in Leipzig.) The way to tell that Berlin, London, and Los Angeles are thriving is that the majority of shows there are bad—although it can take you days to reach that conclusion.

#### **More Bad Is Better**

Just when rising New York rents and the rabid art market would seem to signal that Chelsea is about to go into a death spiral and that it's time to start scanning the Berlin real estate listings, a fascinating paradoxical ecology is forming—one that bears a striking, even exciting similarity, only in reverse, to the early-'90s rebirth of the artworld that was triggered by the bottom falling out of the art market in the late 1980s.

Galleries that are finding ways to open in Chelsea and in other neighborhoods are benefiting from the very thing that makes this city so daunting. Because there are so many galleries in such close proximity, new ones can remain under the radar at a crucial stage of their existence. This initial

cloaking or hiding in the pack acts as a kind of shield while a gallery hones its vision, learns how to do business, and makes some of its more stupid mistakes out of the spotlight. This is how Andrew Kreps, Greene Naftali, Anton Kern, Elizabeth Dee, and many others got started. Even a powerhouse like Barbara Gladstone went through years of showing iffy and even awful artists (ahem, *moi*). It's just that few people saw her do this (fortunately for me).

#### **A Thousand Plateaus**

The interesting thing about right now is that while a gallery may not be visible to a large number of people, it can still be visible to just enough people with money. More money means that more artists and galleries survive longer. This increases the chances for bad art, but it also makes for more chaos. And chaos creates mutations, disruptions, and change within the system. Darwin said that survival is not dependent on being big or strong but on being "best suited to change."

A subtle selection is taking place. While big Chelsea galleries are getting bigger and sometimes better, newer galleries are asserting themselves in interesting ways (for example, Taxter &

Spengemann, John Connelly Presents, Derek Eller, Freight + Volume, and Bellwether, as well as Clementine, Oliver Kamm 5BE, Josée Bienvenu, Buia, Tracy Williams Ltd., and Ingrid Dinter). These galleries aren't better than the big guns; often they're worse. But they are brewing difference.

Moreover, the underground never went away; it has simply become more fluid. Jeffrey Deitch can seem like a chain store one month, showing a blue-chip artist like David Salle, and an underground outlet for skateboarders the next. Sikkema-Jenkins shows Kara Walker and artists you've never heard of back to back. Galleries like The Project, Gavin Brown, 303, Rosen, Tanya Bonakdar, D'Amelio Terras, James Cohan, Feature Inc., Team, or Salon 94 may be underground and blue chip at the same time, showing artists who sell for huge prices at auction as well as artists who don't sell at all.

The most important thing to keep in mind when thinking about the pros and cons of Chelsea is that an art scene doesn't have to have 300 galleries in one neighborhood. It doesn't have to have 100, 50, or even 20. An art scene may have many neighborhoods, each with five or 10 galleries, or one or two.

And the truth is, New York already has this. There are only a handful of galleries on the Lower East Side right now, but almost everyone I know goes to every one of them every month. Here (and in other neighborhoods), the older artist-driven model is mutating in fascinating ways in galleries like Orchard, The Proposition, Harris Liebermann, Maccarone Inc., Triple Candie, and a collective like Scorched Earth. In these places, commerce and experimentation are blending without compromising new or challenging ideas. Meanwhile, the New Museum is set to move into a new building on the Lower East Side, and the super (but possibly too hip for its own good) Reena Spaulings gallery has relocated from its tiny LES storefront to larger quarters nearby.

Finally—and this is something New Yorkers had better understand—there's always not-Manhattan. I'm not talking about Williamsburg, which is already too expensive for real growth. There are many other neighborhoods that galleries and artists might occupy. If the New York artworld is to survive, it will do so in a more spread-out, less monolithic fashion. If that doesn't happen, it'll be *gute Nacht*, New York.



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