

Making art, and money, in East Village

Unconventional galleries rise in a bombed-out ghetto

By Hunter Drohojowska

A certain Los Angeles art collector visits Manhattan regularly to keep abreast of the latest goings-on and, these days, before dropping in at the Museum of Modern Art or scouting SoHo, he heads straight for Gracie Mansion. No, not the mayoral residence — the art gallery located in the East Village, a bombed-out ghetto most recently populated by Tompkins Square drug dealers. Along with galleries sporting such unconventional monikers as Fun Gallery, Civilian Warfare, Nature Morte, Sensory Evolution, New Math and International With Monument, Gracie Mansion is part of the burgeoning East Village art scene. The phenomenon began with a handful of showcases nearly four years ago and now boasts some 50 galleries — as many as exist in all of L.A.

But the novelty of this development is that the earliest galleries were started by young artists rather than dealers. These artist-entrepreneurs grew up under the influence of Andy Warhol, who baldly claimed that good business is the best art. This generation of baby-boomers has taken the philosophy to heart. Rather than play the game of grantsmanship and establish non-profit alternative spaces — or wait to be discovered by Leo Castelli — they opened their own storefront spaces to show their own art and that of their friends.

The hard-line Abstract Expressionists of the 1950s might roll over in their graves at the thought, but these artists don't fight the Establishment. They parody and emulate it. Poverty is seen as a limiting rather than ennobling situation.

In the beginning, the galleries were a lark, an experiment, an arena of promise and possibilities. One of the owners of Civilian Warfare casually remarked that, in the first years, area neighbors would regularly firebomb someone's car during gallery openings. They were all in the risk zone together, right on the streets, and

those influences filtered into the art. Graffiti was the first identifiable style, as practiced by Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, Futura 2000, Jean Michel Basquiat and others. It is now the most widely accepted art, shown in galleries in SoHo and on 57th Street. What prevails today — evident in the current exhibition, "Neo York," at UC Santa Barbara — is a melange of often violent, messy, irreverent, Day-Glo images. Such paintings and sculptures borrow from numerous sources: expressionist figurative

town collectors on frenzied buying sprees.

Regina Trapp, a Manhattan art consultant, concentrates on placing East Village work in corporate offices, museums and private collections. Graffiti is the easiest to sell, she explained during a recent interview at her apartment on Manhattan's West Side: "It seems to be the most accessible to corporations — Futura 2000, Ero, artists from the Fun Gallery. It is relatively inexpensive, colorful and easygoing."

Trapp, an art historian, is so convinced of the significance of the East Village that she has helped organize exhibitions mounted in Europe — a broad survey recently at Berlin's Zellermyer Gallery and, next year, a critical selection of some 14 artists for the Beaubourg in Paris. "What I like about the East Village is that it grew out of an uncommercial setting," she continued. "Artists produced art they never thought would sell. They had the freedom of doing things without worrying about how it would look in a gallery, so they all developed individual styles. Now they are all getting to the next stage. *Everyone* has been buying since September of last year. Before that, if anyone sold a painting, they would call everyone else up and tell them about it."

This commercial success has brought about jealousy and competition, clouding the climate of camaraderie so appealing during the early days. Said Trapp, "In the early days, it was not uncommon to see one dealer serving wine at another gallery's opening. There was an unpretentiousness, a helpfulness. It's the first time I experienced this since I came to New York. With more money involved, it gets more complicated. Now if one gallery sells something for \$10,000, all the others want to sell for that much too. They don't think about what will happen to these prices in 10 years."



An East Village piece of graffiti.

painting, kitsch, cartoons, pop art and rock 'n' roll. Critically, the art has been both celebrated and decried; but as critic Rene Ricard once pointed out, people are paying attention because no one wants to miss the next Van Gogh. Hence, East Village art has become a magnet for journalists and out-of-

Paul Smith

much it costs. They can throw it away later."

Trapp is also alarmed that many of the collectors are from Europe. "Just as with the early days of art in SoHo, the best pieces will end up in European collections again."

A local art consultant who has been escorting collectors around the East Village for the past three years said she thought serious collectors were turned off by more than the hype. "Most of the stuff... has a raw energy but that's about it. I think that's why museums are staying away. I've been looking a lot down there, at those prices — \$500, \$800, \$1,000, why not? But most of the good people are already being shown in SoHo: Sue Coe, David Wojnarowicz, Keith Haring."

Paradoxically, many of those interviewed felt similarly about the East Village scene, that much of the work, even in the Santa Barbara exhibition, is of substandard quality, and a scam. Former gallery owner Michael Kohn, who wrote an essay in the "Neo York" catalog, criticized the lack of critical objectivity among dealers. "Owning a gallery has become fashionable," he said. "The galleries are more well-known than the artists, while dealers and artists are self-consciously aware of making art history." The publicity and the surge in galleries has pressured some artists to churn out paintings; according to Kohn, many have had "three one-man exhibitions, 12 group shows and a bibliography the length of your arm all in one year." Being connected to the East Village scene is perceived as "a chance to become a part of what the artists imagine as the history of art," he added. "But it's not the art which has caused so much excitement, it's the idea of artistic profusion. Gallery owners may end up being remembered in posterity for their blatant and indiscriminating support of mediocre works of art."

The creators of the East Village scene are equally cynical about the sudden explosion of new galleries. "They are all moving here because they think we're making so much

money," observed Peter Nagy, co-owner with Alan Belcher of Nature Morte. "But both of us have part-time jobs. We only make enough money to keep the gallery going. If you make a little more you have to put a lot back into the gallery."

Nagy also feels newcomers are opening galleries with less consideration and selectivity. "The first generation of galleries had distinct identities; the art and the names were distinct, had personality. Now, with tons of new galleries, what distinguishes them most, unfortunately, is the lack of creativity. St. Marks Place, E. Seventh Street, Avenue B — these are just the names of the streets the gallery is on. How do they expect to know what artists to have when they cannot even choose a name?"

Nagy claims galleries are being opened by transplants from 57th Street and SoHo, so "they have nothing to do with neighborhood artists or art. They are appropriating the turf of the avant-garde, and they've brought an influx of mediocrity." This is not an entirely negative development, however, for he believes it makes the original cluster of galleries "more distinct, and more recognizable. Relatively, we end up doing better, but it's also being watered down. There is so much art — and a lot of it mediocre — that it can erode the impetus, the energy and the neighborhood."

On the positive side, Nagy thinks attention soon will shift toward the art itself, and away from the phenomenon of the East Village. "Every kind of art (imaginable) is in the neighborhood now, so the term 'East Village art' is ridiculous. By next season, people will stop writing about the scene and real estate and will start writing about individual artists and their work."

At least, he added, "That's what we hope happens, so the art gets more attention than it's getting now. Artists will become more respectable on their own terms — and we will see who sinks and who swims without the scene behind them."

Trapp blames this problem on lack of experience and is trying to advise different artists in standard gallery procedure: building prices slowly and placing work with "serious" art collectors and museums. The latter has been difficult. "The incredible P.R. has put the artists in a negative light for many serious collectors. They think, 'We're not going to collect in the East Village because one day (a painting) is \$1,000, the next day, it's \$2,000.' The newer collectors see it in the newspaper and don't care how