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Hells Kitchen is the newest home of Exit Art, a non-profit center for contemporary arts and culture.

"I think we're interested in the radical ideas of the culture and in showing art that didn't have a venue in other places," said cofounder Jeanette Ingberman.

That's why Exit Art was founded in the early 1980s.

"There were mostly the commercial galleries, and artists were beginning to make work that couldn't be shown in galleries, that couldn't be sold, that was very political," Ingberman said.

Today that mission brings them to Hells Kitchen, at a new 17,000-square-foot space on 10th Avenue and 36th Street. But back then, the perfect neighborhood for such a place was SoHo.

"SoHo 20 years ago was nothing what it looks like today, with all these really high-end stores," said Ingberman. "Mostly there was nobody walking around at night, so it was a spooky neighborhood. It was quiet."

The neighborhood was perfect for an alternative art space, and somewhat like Hells Kitchen today.

"There are not a lot of art things around here," Ingberman says of her now home, "although a lot seems to be suddenly happening. Baryshnikov is opening his dance center just around the corner. There are a lot of theaters in this neighborhood. There are dance groups. There are a lot of artists living here that we didn't know."

The first exhibition in Exit Art's new space mirrors its own move. The theme is reconstruction and renovation.

Alternative Art Center Finds New Home In Hells Kitchen

"These artists have come up from the poetic to the conceptual to the political to the philosophical ideas about renovation and reconstruction," Ingberman said.

Jesse Bercowetz and Ward Shelley, along with a third partner, are building a sweatshop.

"I think people will read different things into it," Bercowetz said. "We're not making any overt political statements, but there are obviously plenty of issues that you can read into this project."

Alessandra Torres is recreating her initial experience in life.

"This is a blown up replica of the incubator I was in," the artist says of her work. "And I have pictures that'll be displayed with it. But I'll repeat the week that I was in it, just sleeping I'll be blindfolded with the light on, exactly how it was."

But even if you can't make the current exhibition, you might drive past the next one.

"Fortunately or unfortunately there's a lot of traffic," said Ingberman. "So every day at about 5:30 we have thousands of people that are our captive audience right outside our window on 10th Avenue, on the way to the tunnel. And we're going to be doing projects in the window for the people in their cars as they go by."

SoHo doesn't have that kind of rush hour traffic.

For more information or to check out Exit Art's online magazine, with articles all about Hells Kitchen, go to www.exitart.org.

- Paul Messina