

Every Exit Is an Entrance

Alternative Spaces Migrate to Survive

by C. Carr

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We're in the 'hood once known as Hell's Kitchen (now Clinton, or is it North Chelsea), standing in what was once, perhaps, a dark Satanic mill—if not an auto showroom or elephant barn. The new Exit Art on Tenth Avenue is as big as the old one in Soho, 17,000 square feet including the ground floor and a basement, or "bunker." A chain-link fence topped with barbed wire runs down one side of the main floor, separating the office from the exhibition space. Co-founder Papo Colo explains with a mischievous twinkle, "I want to protect the staff against terrorism."



Exit Art's Jeanette Ingberman and Papo Colo at their new Tenth Avenue digs

photo: Robin Holland

Co-founder Jeanette Ingberman flips through a binder filled with the proposals they selected for the show opening March 8—the first Exit Biennial, "The Reconstruction." An open call for work related to relocation/renovation/rebirth elicited over 400 responses in a matter of weeks. They chose 34 hard-to-categorize projects: an artist who will live in a life-size incubator for seven days, 24 hours a day; an artist who will clean the floor with a toothbrush; artists who will build a wall out of Jell-O and mortar; an artist who says she can turn anyone into a Puerto Rican (Ricanstruction); three artists who will build themselves a sweatshop and emerge with a product on May 4, the day the show closes.

After 20 years in Soho, Ingberman and Colo are thrilled with their new digs. They're going to build two theaters in the bunker, one for film, one for performance. Colo also promises "the most exotic bar possible" down there. Ingberman likes the fact that they have street-level space for the first time. Looking out at Tenth Avenue, where traffic moves at a glacial pace towards the Lincoln Tunnel, she sees a captive audience and wonders what they might put in the windows.

Of course, Exit Art has always reinvented itself, coming at the art world from unexpected angles, sometimes a lab, sometimes a museum. The first show they ever did remains a benchmark. That was "Illegal America," an examination of censorship that still embodies a core value: representing the underdog. Upcoming exhibits include work on the environment, "The Homo Museum," and four more biennials, the next dealing with traffic.

As Colo once put it: "We say 'exit' to suggest moving away from the established art system and its stereotypical way of thinking. Every exit

is an entrance."

The plate tectonics of the art world are shifting again. Exit Art is one of several nonprofit arts organizations currently in transition, though Dixon Place, Artists Space, Movement Research, and Roulette have yet to make their moves.

Exit Art has a 10-year lease and a rent Ingberman calls expensive yet "generous," thanks to a landlord who pursued them. "He knew it would be good for his building and good for the neighborhood." At Tenth Avenue and 36th Street, they sit at the heart of the area Mayor Bloomberg recently proposed redeveloping with a subway extension, a tree-lined boulevard, and high-rises galore. Commercial galleries haven't crept this far north—yet—but the new Baryshnikov Center for Dance will open around the corner on 37th next year. Last year and two avenues away (on 36th and Eighth), the Alliance of Resident Theaters took a 20-year lease on a couple of floors which they've sublet to 24 arts organizations. Meanwhile, the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts bought a building on 39th Street behind the Port Authority in 1998, since converted into studio space for 110 visual artists. It's full, with a two-year waiting list for those who've already made it through a rigorous selection process.

Space to live and work is the biggest problem artists face now. "What happens when everybody gets pushed out to the point they have to send in slides like people in Iowa do?" says Jane Stephenson of the Elizabeth Foundation, a public charity devoted to finding space for artists. Only a few other organizations are trying to address this crisis. The Maria Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation gives studio space to 14 artists a year. Chashama, the artists' organization in Times Square, just got access to a building on 18th Street with space for another 14 studios.

It isn't news that artists get used like detergent—cleaning up a neighborhood, then flushed away. What does seem like a huge shift is that some artists spaces are trying to buck this trend by buying buildings. Organizations as diverse as the Bowery Poetry Club and the SculptureCenter already have.

Considering its origins, Dixon Place may be the most unexpected among the would-be purchasers. DP operated for 13 years in the living room of its founder and executive director, Ellie Covan, first in an East Village storefront, then in a loft on the Bowery. Tired of a life in which she could never go home, Covan found a theater in 1999 on 26th Street—in a formerly subsidized space that returned to market rate. So DP went into exile this season, with every performance at a different venue, from the Public Theater to Patio Bar, while the office and rehearsal space returned to the old DP on the Bowery. (Covan walled off a third of it as her apartment.) Exile has been "fun but exhausting," she says. She hopes to find a single venue for next year's work. And she has her eye on a building on the Lower East Side that she wants to own.

Covan is also one of many in the nonprofit world now talking about earned income to supplement that shrinking funding pie. A building would have rehearsal space they could rent. A building could have a bar—with acts, of course. And Dixon Place would build equity.

The SculptureCenter, for example, owned its old building on East 69th Street. They were founded by artists in 1928, bounced to three different locations much the way nonprofits do now, then managed to buy in

1948. By the end of the century, East 69th was prime real estate, but isolated from any arts scene. Selling enabled the SculptureCenter to buy a building halfway between P.S.1 and MOMA Queens, pay for the first stage of renovation, and set up a \$1 million endowment.

Artists Space, founded in 1972 as one of downtown's first "alternative spaces," also wants to buy—perhaps on the Lower East Side. Executive director Barbara Hunt says they know for sure that they won't follow the commercial galleries to Chelsea. "We'd rather be where the artists are." This is another aspect of the ongoing flight from Soho and Tribeca. Roulette, the new-music and multimedia venue, is in one of the last artists' buildings in its Tribeca vicinity. High-end condos have changed the ambience, and a new bar downstairs means they can't do a quiet concert. Roulette's Jim Staley says they're looking in Brooklyn, for a rental. Movement Research, with studio space in Soho and an office in Noho, hopes to move the two together somewhere in Manhattan.

The scene is atomizing. While artists like to be in proximity, they seem to be moving into clusters now. If Hell's Kitchen, or whatever the developers name it, becomes a new artists' neighborhood, it will be one of many. Meanwhile, a wise landlord might take a look at what greed accomplished in Soho. A few important galleries remain, but there are lots of empty storefronts, and no buzz. It's a wealthy wasteland.

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