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CHELSEA

With SoHo submerged by shoppers, the New York art world has shifted to the fringes of Chelsea. Charles Gandee charts the rise of a whole new scene.

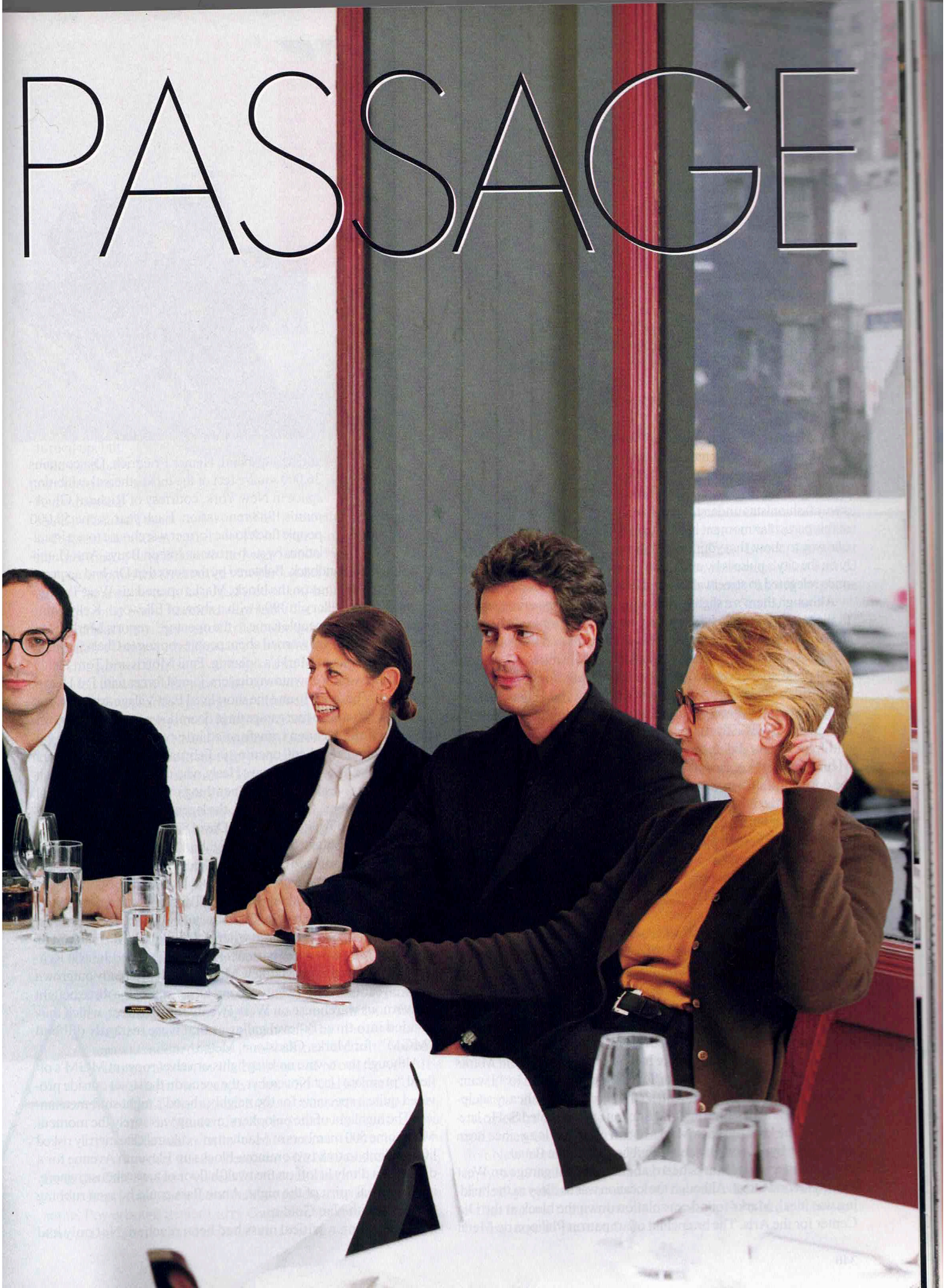


art forum

Seven of the Chelsea art district's heavy hitters convene at Zucca, the dealer's choice for a decent power lunch. FROM LEFT: Barbara Gladstone, Howard Read, Janelle Reiring, Matthew Marks, Paula Cooper, John Cheim, and Helene Winer.

Photographer: Todd Eberle
Sittings Editor: Miranda Brooks

PASSAGE

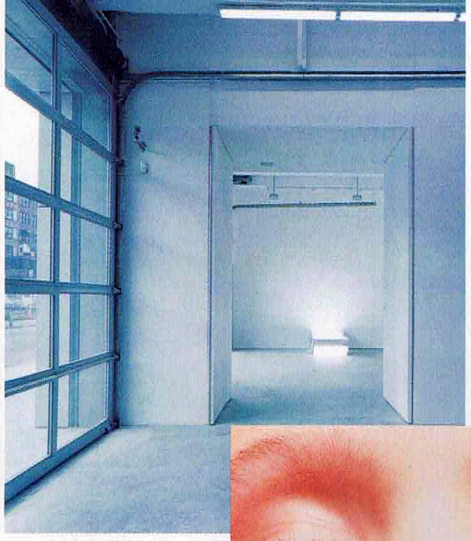


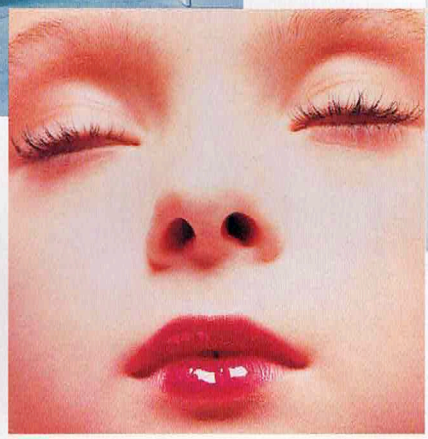




o pioneers!

The rediscovery of Chelsea's western frontier owes much to the vision of such gallery owners as (LEFT TO RIGHT) Bill Bartman, Pat Hearn, Christopher D'Amelio, Tom Healy, Xavier LaBoulbenne, Linda Kirkland, Jessica Fredericks, Andrew Freiser, Paul Morris, and Pamela Auchincloss. Photographed at the Empire Diner.







Among the architects and designers who have changed the face of Chelsea, RIGHT: David Piscuskas, Andrew Ong, John Keenen, Annabelle Selldorf, and Richard Gluckman. BELOW: Inez van Lamsweerde & Vinoodh Matadin's *Kirsten*, 1996, at Matthew Marks. LEFT: Barbara Gladstone's gallery, designed by Selldorf.

Last November, Calvin Klein turned his back on the tents in Bryant Park and staged his spring '97 runway show at the Dia Center for the Arts on West Twenty-second Street in Chelsea. Although the defection raised eyebrows, savvy fashionistas understood. After all, at this particular moment in Manhattan, one way to show that your finger is firmly on the city's pulse is by affiliating yourself with that part of Chelsea once relegated to streetwalkers and devotees of leather bars.

Although there's a slightly menacing "scene of the crime" quality to those industrial blocks stretching west of the Empire Diner, over the last two years the young women in hot pants and the young men in chaps have had to share the cracked sidewalks with a somewhat different population. Nowadays, if you take a walk along what used to be considered Chelsea's wild side, you stand a good chance of running into, say, newlyweds Maya Lin and Daniel Wolf checking out the James Turrells at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery. Or Bette Midler and John Waters gliding by each other on the stairs at the opening of Metro Pictures' Louise Lawler show. Or Paula Cooper out walking the dog ("Buffalo") in vintage Gaultier and a full-length mink.

Dubbed "the Nouveau SoHo" by *The New York Times,* Chelsea is in the midst of the kind of radical transformation that makes developers salivate–and urban pioneers come prowling. This time, however, art dealers are the agents of change, having staked their claim with a speed that can best be described as lightning-like. Even if the rumors about Charles Saatchi buying the former laundry building on West Twenty-fourth Street aren't true, the current tally of galleries in Chelsea now stands at 26. Two and a half years ago, that number was one.

It all started in the summer of '94, when Matthew Marks, a young dealer with a radar-like instinct for controversy, realized that his Madison Avenue gallery was fine for drawings by Brice Marden, Ellsworth Kelly, and Richard Serra, but not for large paintings and sculpture by those same artists. The pivotal moment came when Marden presented Marks with four canvases that filled "every square inch" of his gallery. "What would I have done if Brice had made five paintings?" Marks says. What he did was go shopping for a new gallery in SoHo: "I wanted a big space with no basement, so that I could show heavy sculpture, and I wanted natural light." As anyone who's visited SoHo lately knows, the kind of space Marks had in mind has long since been spoken for–by J.Crew, Banana Republic, and Eddie Bauer.

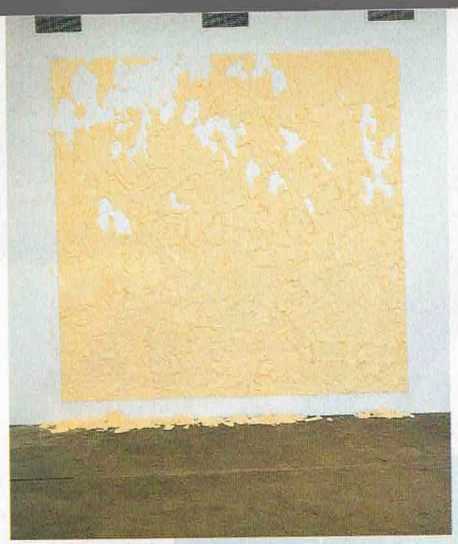
At a dinner party, Marks heard about a derelict garage on West Twenty-second Street. Although the location was as dicey as the building was ideal, Marks found consolation down the block at the Dia Center for the Arts. The brainchild of art patron Philippa de Menil and her husband, Heiner Friedrich, Dia contains 36,000 square feet of the most ethereal exhibition space in New York, courtesy of Richard Gluckman's 1988 renovation. Each year, some 50,000 people flock to the former warehouse to see installations by such artists as Joseph Beuys, Ann Hamilton, and Fred Sandback. Bolstered by the news that Dia had acquired two other buildings on the block, Marks opened his West Twenty-second Street gallery in 1994 with a show of Ellsworth Kelly paintings. "A thousand people came to the opening," reports Marks. "After that night, I never worried about people coming to Chelsea again."

Within weeks of Marks's opening, Paul Morris and Tom Healy, two dapper young downtown dealers, joined forces with Pat Hearn, a veteran of both SoHo and the short-lived East Village art scene, and leased a 5,000-square-foot garage three doors down from Marks–which designer John Keenen transformed into two pristine, skylit galleries. After a "mobbed" opening in February 1995, nothing much happened for a few months, says Healy, who made ends meet by renting out the gallery for, among other things, a Snapple commercial. But by November, Annina Nosei, the legendary dealer who discovered (but couldn't quite hold on to) David Salle, Barbara Kruger, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, became a neighbor.

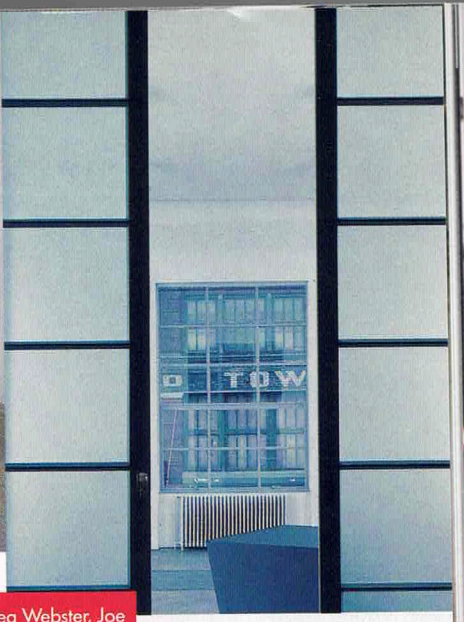
If Chelsea was off and running, it picked up considerable speed last year, when SoHo pioneer Paula Cooper kick-started her career by purchasing a pair of buildings on West Twenty-first Street and inviting Richard Gluckman to do for her what he'd done for Dia. Close on Cooper's heels came three other SoHo players–Barbara Gladstone and Metro Pictures partners Helene Winer and Janelle Reiring. Joining forces with Matthew Marks, who had already outgrown his two-year-old West Twenty-second Street space, the three bought a cavernous warehouse on West Twenty-fourth Street, which they divided into three bi-level galleries that were instantly dubbed "MGM"–for Marks, Gladstone, Metro.

Although there were no klieg lights or velvet ropes at MGM's official "premiere" last November, the scene on the street outside provided quite a spectacle for the neighborhood's night-shift mechanics. The highlight of the onlookers' evening was surely the moment when some 500 members of Manhattan's cultural elite merrily risked life and limb to trek two ominous blocks up Eleventh Avenue for a dinner in a dimly lit loft on the twelfth floor of a warehouse, where, in the surreal spirit of the night, Anne Bass could be seen rubbing shoulders with Nan Goldin.

At this point, a critical mass had been reached. Not only had









April brings new work by Meg Webster, Joe Scanlan, and Stephan Balkenhol to Chelsea's Morris-Healy, D'Amelio Terras, and Barbara Gladstone galleries. FROM FAR LEFT: Webster's *Butter*, 1996; Scanlan's *Growth Medium*, 1992/4; Balkenhol's *Man with a Fish*, 1996; and Paula Cooper's gallery.

the big guns from SoHo turned up, but "the Chelsea Art District" had expanded south to Richard Feigen's gallery on West Twentieth Street, and north to Pamela Auchincloss's gallery on West Twenty-sixth Street. Adding another kind of imprimatur to the neighborhood was Opera, a new nightclub across the street from Cooper's gallery that advertised itself as "an artsy fartsy intellectual place." (Although whether Alex Lundqvist and Tyson Beckford were really discussing Juan Muñoz's installation at Dia as they waited to hear who won the Best Hair award at the club's February fashion-week party was impossible to know.)

If this part of Chelsea was beginning to look more like the promised land than a no-man's-land, it was also beginning to offer the kinds of auspicious sightings (for instance, Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and Dutch photographer Inez van Lamsweerde huddled together in front of the Matthew Marks Gallery) that reassure the cognoscenti that they're in the right place at the right time. Also making the arrivistes feel at home is Zucca, a two-year-old restaurant that spent its first year "trying to stay alive," according to owner Eric Stapelman. But lately there are signs that Zucca may be to Chelsea what Ballato's and then Da Silvano were to the SoHo art scene. "Business is booming," says Stapelman. "In addition to the whole art crowd, we've had Uma Thurman and Ethan Hawke." Also helping to destroy the long-standing quiet of the neighborhood is the telltale sound of gentrification echoing through the Spears Building, an abandoned furniture warehouse on West Twenty-second Street that was snapped up in January 1995 for $3 million, and converted into 30 "luxury" lofts selling for between $300,000 and $1.6 million.

As we know from SoHo, luxury lofts and trendy restaurants have a way of multiplying. For now, the "Chelsea Art District" is a place where you can still take "the slow gallery crawl," according to Robert Storr, a curator of contemporary art at the Museum of Modern Art. "It's wonderful to escape from what SoHo has become, which is the biggest, highest-concentration shopping mall in Manhattan," says Storr, who counts among Chelsea's virtues the absence of "distractions." In other words, there's no Miu Miu to lure you away from the Carl Andres. At least for the moment.

Not surprisingly, the pace of the slow gallery crawl is too slow for some. Powerhouse dealer Larry Gagosian, for example, regards Chelsea as "somewhat desolate." But even go-go-Gagosian, as he's sometimes called, confesses that he's checked out real estate in the area: "With all the galleries down there, you have to pay attention." As has Mary Boone, who bypassed Chelsea in favor of midtown when she moved her nineteen-year-old SoHo gallery last year. "[Midtown] was a personal decision," says Boone, noting that Chelsea's remoteness was not a factor. "In 1978, when I first opened my gallery at 420 West Broadway," recalls Boone, "a lot of the phone calls were from people asking for directions to SoHo."

"I think this business is best conducted in a nearly deserted place," says Barbara Gladstone. "Because people who are really interested in art will go anywhere. Besides, galleries aren't department stores." The sentiment is echoed by Metro Pictures' Helene Winer: "The changing nature of SoHo made us feel that a gallery such as ours didn't belong there anymore." There was also the fear of becoming old hat: "We'd been in the same space for fifteen years, and most of our artists have been with us for a long time," says Winer. "So they've all had five or six shows in the gallery. Which gets a little repetitious."

Also repetitious, according to Gladstone, are the kinds of spaces available in SoHo: "All those loft buildings are pretty much the same—cast-iron columns down the middle and sprinklers up above. Plus, they're not so solid." The industrial spaces in Chelsea, on the other hand, are substantial. "Besides," says Gladstone, "it's great to be able to drive a truck into the gallery."

If this part of Chelsea's blue-collar building stock makes it ideal for exhibiting contemporary art, it also helps explain why the last neighborhood billed as "the Nouveau SoHo" didn't work out. With their tiny dark rooms and low ceilings, the East Village's tenements and row houses are physically inhospitable to the display of art. (Also contributing to the demise of East Village galleries, of course, was the crash of the art market in the late eighties.) Unlike SoHo, which took 20 years to mature after a generation of artists claimed its loft buildings as their own, Chelsea is already steeped in serious money and a now-or-never urgency.

"I think maybe I missed the boat," says Gagosian, noting not only that the cost of space in Chelsea is rapidly rising, but also that many of the best spaces are taken. The irony, of course, is that in 1985 when Gagosian moved East from Los Angeles, he opened his first New York gallery on West Twenty-third Street. Not surprisingly, by 1988 he had packed up his Twomblys and fled what was in the days before Dia a very lonely outpost indeed. What this proves is that the one thing worse than turning up too late in Chelsea is having turned up too early. □