

April 6, 2016

The Changing Face of the Lower East Side



Lower East Side at Dusk. Photo: Jens Schott Knudsen.

Manhattan's art scene is one that fluctuates and migrates. Watching it over time, it starts to look like a natural process, like herding patterns, or erosion: galleries pop up in neighborhoods where rents are relatively low; attracting more galleries and other businesses; rents rise and property values go up; stalwart, established galleries remain and smaller galleries start to move out, finding lower rents in a different neighborhood; the process then repeats. In the 1950s and 60s the 10th Street Galleries were established as an alternative to 57th Street. In the 1970s it was SoHo. The 1980s ushered in the era of the East Village. In the late 1990s it became all about Chelsea. And most recently, as neighborhood attractions like the Highline and the new Whitney Museum have driven up rents in Chelsea, we've seen more and more of a concentration of galleries on the more-affordable Lower East Side.

Between 2010 and 2015 Artnews reported the number of galleries in the neighborhood rose from 71 to 132. Each month seems to bring news of a new gallery opening or relocating to these densely packed streets around the Bowery and Delancey Street, but there have also been major closures—such as Laurel Gitlen Gallery, shuttered in February 2016, after seven years on the Lower East Side. To examine the changing face of the neighborhood, we collected opinions from a selection of galleries—from galleries who began on the Lower East Side, to those who have moved in from other areas, or found a “second home” there—on why they opened up shop in the area, how they've seen the neighborhood, business, and their foot traffic change, and what differentiates the LES from other art hubs around New York.



On Stellar Rays' new space, 213 Bowery, which will open April 10th with an exhibition by John Houck, *Playing and Reality*, April 10 - May 22, 2016. Courtesy On Stellar Rays.

On Stellar Rays
1 Rivington Street, 213 Bowery
Opened: October 2008

On Stellar Rays has long been one of the beacons on the Lower East Side. This month, they expand at their 1 Rivington address, opening a new, ground-floor space in the same building.

“On Stellar Rays opened in October 2008—right on the heels of the financial meltdown. The gallery actually opened one day after Lehman Brothers announced bankruptcy. The timing, while challenging, afforded the gallery the opportunity to take more risks with programming—showcasing video, performance, and sculptural installations—a defining characteristic of the gallery that carries through to today. The LES was the logical neighborhood for the gallery to open because the rents were among the most affordable options at the time. The opening of the New Museum certainly propelled a lot of the movement downtown as well. On Stellar Rays has a dedicated core audience visiting regularly, but we are very excited to expand our reach with an imminent move to the ground floor on April 10. This move to a storefront space on the corner of Rivington and Bowery, steps from the New Museum, provides our artists with a more visible and flexible opportunity to realize their projects. We are doubling our gallery square footage, and as a result, our capacity to provide dialogue and experimentation via talks, screenings, performances, discursive events, and partnerships with other arts organizations.

“The neighborhood is certainly more active all times of the day now, and I see this dynamic only expanding in the months to come. We are in the company of several friends’ galleries, just within a few steps down the block. Our friend Andrew Edlin recently moved directly across the street, and we look forward to opening of the International Center of Photography a block north. I feel that the next phase of change will coincide with the opening of hotels around either corner from us. The programming at LES galleries is more experimental and risk-taking, and we do not see that changing anytime soon. Galleries live side-by-side with a dynamic and thriving creative community, and are not as silo-ed off as other art hub areas tend to be.” -Kristen Wawruck, Director

—Natalie Hegert