



Juan Puentes stands outside his new Lower East Side gallery last week before its planned Sept. 17 opening.

Chelsea gallery makes the White move to emerging LES

By Scott Stiffler

As New York observed its annual Sept. 1 ritual of students returning to the city and leases turning over, one pioneering resident of the Chelsea art scene was packing boxes for a move of its own.

A nonprofit gallery that has been featuring innovative and provocative installations for the past decade, the White Box's exodus from Chelsea to the Lower East Side marks its fourth move in just over a decade. But more symbolically, the decampment represents a chink in the armor of Chelsea's art community—and a shot in the arm for the emerging Lower East Side's.

White Box founder and artistic director Juan Puentes first established the gallery in Philadelphia in 1997, then headed for New York a year later to take space on W. 26th St. Three years on, he moved again to another space at 525 W. 26th St., where the gallery resided for 10 years, before deciding to vacate Chelsea completely for a radically new space in an entirely different neighborhood.

In 1998, the gallery provided the relatively desolate area of Chelsea with a unique and alternative not-for-profit art space committed to presenting conceptually driven shows by emerging and established artists. That mission statement would eventually become incompatible with the cost of maintaining space in the market-driven gallery district, which the space's very presence helped create.

So, on Sept. 17, White Box will present its inaugural exhibition at 329 Broome St. near the Bowery, hoping to get more bang for its buck on the burgeoning LES scene.

"If I were to renew my lease next year, it would be double and a half of what we're paying today, which means we cannot afford it," Puentes said, adding that "rents were very reasonable" a decade ago. "I loved the industrial warehouse world that Chelsea was. There were only a handful of galleries, most of them in upstairs spaces."

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Back then, as more Soho galleries responded to the call of lower rents and higher square footage in Chelsea, “it was interesting to see blue-chip names arrive little by little,” he said. But soon, Chelsea evolved into the “mega gallery district” of today—where Chinese, French and British galleries started jockeying for space and prominence alongside established brand names.

Puntes identifies that as the tipping point—when an increasingly congested Chelsea approached its present figure of nearly 400 galleries.

“It became suffocating,” he said. “Now, every door in the street is a gallery. Little by little, the landlords have gotten very smart and doubled or tripled our rent.”

Puntes recalled how only 10 years ago, the work on display was attracting “a full spectrum audience: the art industry, academia, critics, professors, art school students, the collectors, and the general audience that loves to go and see art,” he said. “That’s what kept me in Chelsea all these years.”

Much of that same audience remains, Puntes noted, but now they merely arrive to “see art—and that’s it. They go to eat and drink elsewhere; they go Downtown.”

The loss of visitors who linger throughout the day means that galleries no longer benefit as much from overflow traffic, he said. Furthermore, “a lot of young artists are beginning not to come to Chelsea. They feel the artwork being shown is bright and polished. It doesn’t have appeal for youth.”

Brenda Taylor, owner of Brenda Taylor Gallery at 511 W. 25th St., offered a different and decidedly more optimistic perspective than Puntes. Her gallery has been in its current space since 2005 but saw the building change ownership in 2007. Taylor is determined to stay at her present location because “We’ve had nothing but positive communication with them. They’re offering spaces at a very reasonable expense.”

Although she’s been “inundated with offers to leave our space,” Taylor said the current price is still right—and points out that a Chelsea location is still good for her particular business. “I can’t see any reason to leave Chelsea to save a few dollars,” she said. “We have too many high-end dealers that own their own spaces here.” (The rumor at Taylor’s W. 25th building months ago was that prices could increase to upwards of \$1,000 per square foot after the property purchase, whereas recent asking prices for gallery space on the Bowery near Puntes’s new location were going for around \$80 per square foot.) Taylor has been able to thrive in Chelsea, she said, thanks to good relations with the landlord and a mutually beneficial relationship with other area residents. Puntes, however, placed a higher priority on what he speculated will be a location that affords him the pioneering spirit Chelsea has outgrown. He described the current climate in the Lower East Side as “a scenario that’s ideal. It’s very hip and very alive. Right now, we still have the Bowery with its kitchen pots, lighting and electrical stores.”

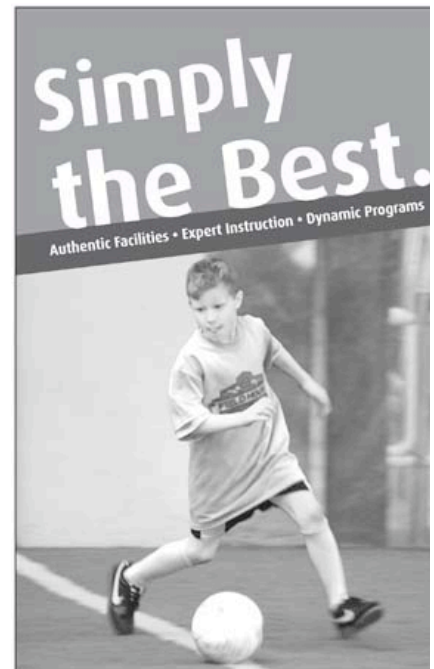
But for how long? New luxury high-rises and boutique hotels are threatening the area’s Latino, Chinese and Italian residents. And with the influx of galleries as well, the White Box could again be compromised by the same rapid expansion that occurred in Chelsea over the past decade.

Acutely aware of this possibility, Puntes is confident that the arrival of his and like-minded spaces will provide a counterpoint to the Lower East Side’s ongoing crush of real estate development. “It’s a natural pattern we have in New York, where things constantly change,” he said. He also observed that what the LES and Bowery are going through now is not dissimilar to what took place when gallerists moved from Soho to the then-baren Chelsea years ago.

“Yes, this neighborhood has changed and will continue to change irrevocably,” Puntes noted. “Three months ago, there were about 40 galleries in the Bowery. A few of them big, but most of them small. Now, there’s about 55. Eventually, I think 150 to 200 galleries will move here, while Chelsea will go from 400 to 200 in the next decade.”

For Puntes, that means “more than one single district in which to go see things.” Taylor, however, believes that the ascendance of a new neighborhood will by no means signal the death knell for hers. “It’s so new that people are wanting to say that this is going to be a burgeoning scene,” she said. “But it won’t have any bearing on what’s going to happen in Chelsea. People didn’t stop going to Madison Avenue because Chelsea began.”

Puntes sees his new neighborhood as a window of opportunity to “bring about an echo of Downtown as it used to be,” he stated. “We had art, music, film, video-makers. It was not door-to-door galleries or bars.” The blueprint for this type of change, he added, exists today in London, Berlin, and Paris—places that “integrate art into the fabric of society.” Currently, the Bowery and its surrounding area offers patrons a non-congested and pedestrian-friendly area “in which to move around,” Puntes said. “Your eye and brain gets clean; you have time to digest an exhibition. You can stop for a cup of coffee or beer with a friend and comment on a show you’ve just seen.”



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In addition to the challenge of revitalizing the neighborhood, Punes also hopes to diversify the programming offered by White Box so it plays a part in “reviving some of the Downtown of the ’70s and ’80s.”

The new space, designed by Robert Marino Architects, was outfitted with that goal in mind. Its interior has been subdivided into two sections, with the rear consisting of an “expansive exhibition space providing 30 percent more space than offered in the Chelsea location.” The elevator shaft will house Tower Projects, “a one-of-a-kind, vertical exhibition space for site-specific light and sound installations,” while the front section “will be used to facilitate education programs and panel discussions that will highlight and illuminate our visual arts programming.”

The basement space will house an online “Art Library” free to the public, and works from the gallery’s emerging video, film and media artists will be displayed at street level and viewable from the sidewalk.

This significantly expanded space will, Punes promised, “enable us to realize large-scale, multi-disciplinary exhibitions and installations with far greater scale and scope.”

And what appears to be Chelsea’s loss will be the Lower East Side’s gain, where he plans on “recovering some of the greatest moments of Downtown at its best.”

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