VOGUE
MAY 1989

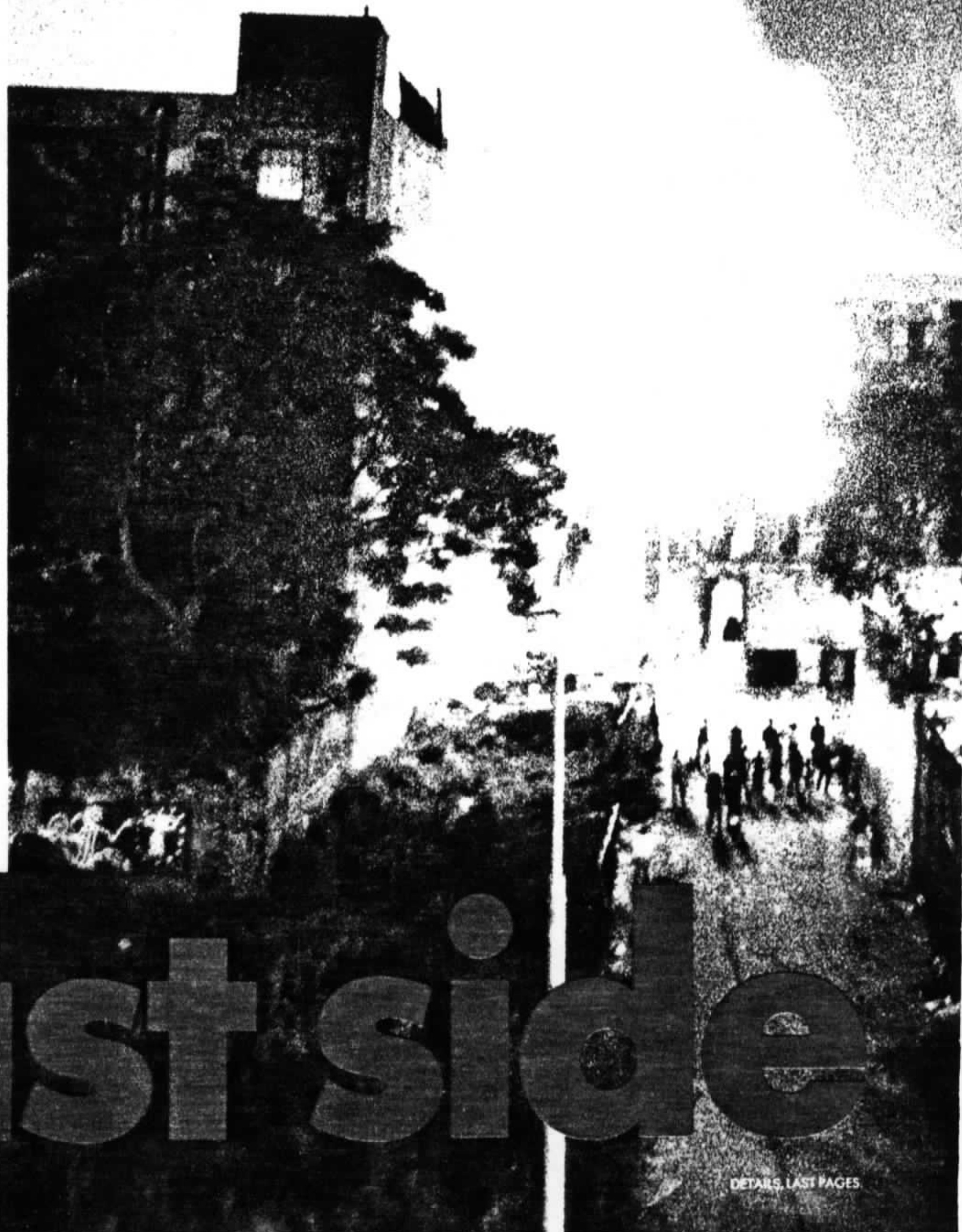
High up in Christadora House, a landmark building that overlooks Tompkins Square Park in New York City's East Village, SoHo art dealer Christine Burgin was hosting a dinner party when somebody looked out the window and saw flames. A nearby building was being consumed by fire; indeed, scorching red light electrified the hull of the tenement and burst out and illuminated the sky. To the guests, all of us from the art world, the image was just another apocalyptic East Village scene—the stuff of a thousand Neo-Expressionist canvases. But to Burgin's thirty-year-old husband, Amos Harris, the stepson of Ann Clark Rockefeller and an owner of the Christadora and other neighborhood properties, the fire spelled danger. It might have been one of his own buildings down there burning.

Harris ran off to check while the eating continued with gusto. On his return, the young landlord was all smiles: his holdings were safe. Nothing substantial had been harmed—except for a couple of junkies who, apparently, had made their home in the slum. "Do you mean they burned to death?" I asked. "Yeah, but those people are lower than cockroaches," came the reply.

That was a year ago, shortly before the Christadora became a target in last summer's Tompkins Square riots. The demonstrators turned the luxury condominium complex into a symbol of the gentrification of the area.

A few years ago, their targets might have been the art galleries. The rapid rise and decline of "East Village art"—

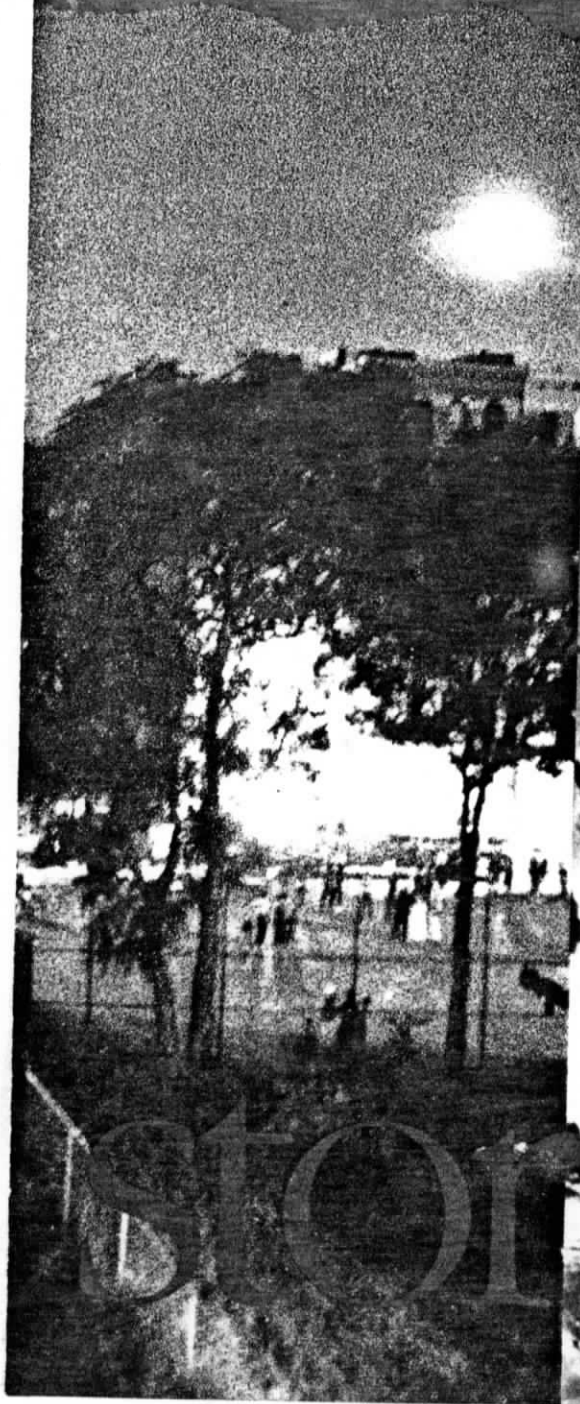
A tenement on fire in the East Village, opposite, emblematic of the area's raging real estate battles. This page: Graffiti at a neighborhood hangout expressed the spirit of the East Village art scene and became the name of its most famous gallery.



eastside

DETAILS, LAST PAGES

In the face of riots and real estate, art has died in Manhattan's East Village. **Paul Taylor** looks at what happened to the once-vital scene



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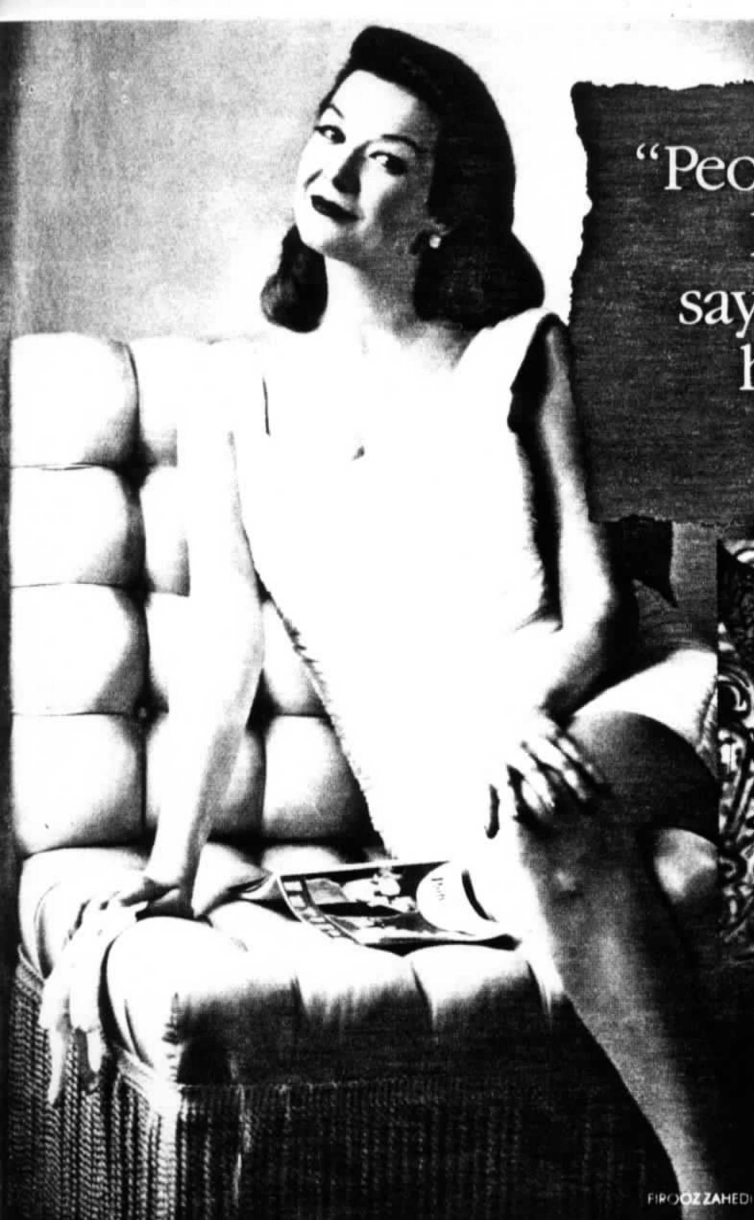


"People are happy to have the East Village scene over," says Patti Astor. "They don't have to worry anymore. Everything's safe"

Patti Astor, above, the bleached-blond symbol of the East Village art scene, in 1983 at an exhibition/ installation by her friend Keith Haring at the Fun gallery, which she helped run. Left: After making the transition from Avenue A to Sunset Boulevard, a new, sleek, and stylized Astor today. She now lives in Hollywood, where she is attempting to break into the movie business.

embodied by the sudden appearance and disappearance of little storefront galleries that sprang up between the Bowery and the East River, Houston and Fourteenth streets—created one of the most startling developments of the contemporary art scene. The galleries showcased all the varieties of 1980s neo-Pop, but they also served as the avant-garde of gentrification on the Lower East Side.

By 1987, the galleries themselves had fallen prey to the inflated real estate values they had helped create. As they attracted new residents and businesses to the area, they priced themselves out of the market. One by one, the East Village art dealers have closed down or shifted their wares farther downtown—particularly to SoHo.

"Architecturally, the East Village was unsatisfactory," says Mera Rubell, a prominent art collector whose company, Rubell & Miller, rents out new gallery spaces in SoHo—especially in the large gallery malls on Lower Broadway. "It's sad that it all came to an end in the East Village. It was a wonderful community and opportunity for young artists and galleries. But the artists need other, larger spaces. And galleries feed off one another—they want to be near other successful galleries. And at $16 to $25 per square foot, SoHo today is cheaper than the East Village storefronts."

"It was the landlords," agrees dealer Jay Gorney, who moved from the East Village to SoHo in 1987. "They became incredibly greedy."

Of course, the East Village wasn't always Real Estate Hell. In the 1960s—the era of Love-Ins, Be-Ins, and Smoke-Ins—the neighborhood was a haven for alternative activity, an East Coast Haight-Ashbury. In those days, the Dom on St. Mark's Place (now a community center) was home to Andy Warhol's Velvet Underground. Bill Graham's Fillmore East on Second Avenue (which eventually became the Saint, a gay disco, and is now slated to become a cinema complex) showcased Jimi Hendrix, The Who, and Janis Joplin. The neighborhood was also the site of sore conflicts among local Hispanics, hippies from all over, and the Ninth Precinct police force.

The area's clubs have always monitored the changes. When New Wave music hit in the mid-seventies, CBGB's, an old bikers' bar on the Bowery, became the East Village headquarters of the sleazier side of the New Wave scene. It was followed by the brighter and more juvenile Club 57, which opened in the basement of a Polish church on St. Mark's. "Club 57 was like a clubhouse," says Keith Haring. "The best thing about those days was that they were so unselfconscious and unpretentious. And there was so much talent. Everyone was supporting everyone else."

An art-music-fashion scene emerged out of Club 57 crossed with the hip-hop music scene from uptown and the Bronx, exemplified by such musicians as Grandmaster Flash

and Afrika Bambaataa. Jean-Michel Basquiat was still a pseudonymous graffitist, the Collaborative Projects group was gathering a swath of aggressive erotica, punk graphics, graffiti art, and political manifestos for its historic Times Square Show, and new alliances were being made between filmmakers, designers, writers, and artists to whom the SoHo scene seemed hopelessly out of touch. In those days, the neighborhood was inexpensive and its novelty an untapped resource. Soon enough, the idea of selling the East Village image in commodity form hit home, and a movement was born.

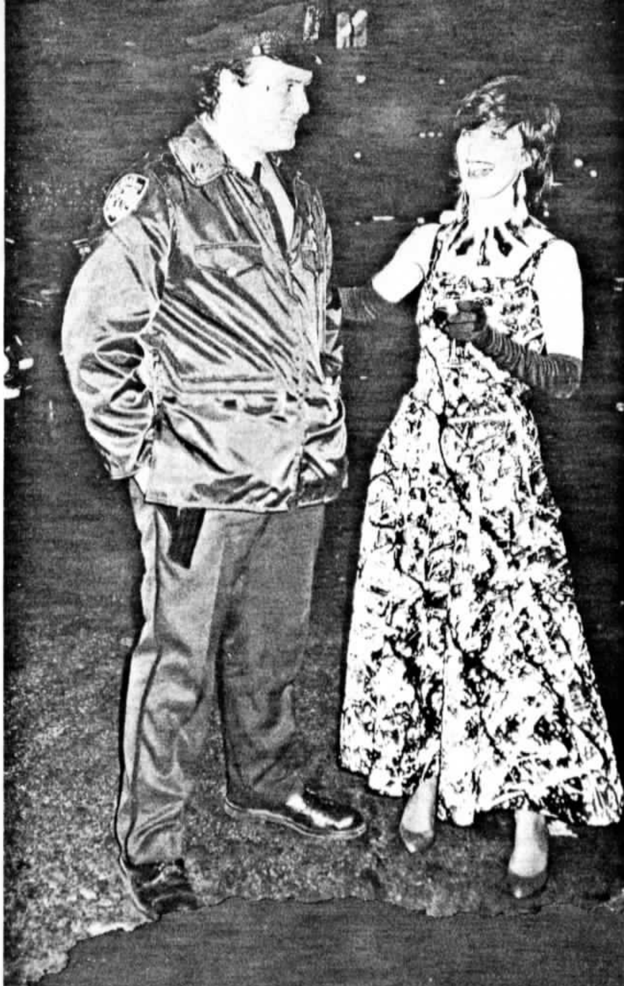
Bill Stelling, a twenty-nine-year-old small-time East Village landlord, opened the Fun gallery in 1981 in a rented studio with Patti Astor, an underground movie actress he employed at his roommate referral service. Their little gallery showcased the first wave of the new East Village scene—the graffiti, hip-hop, and psycho-pop painters. The art was dirt-cheap (at Kenny Scharf's first show, the most expensive painting cost $900), and the dealers naively took a mere thirty percent on sales rather than the usual fifty. Stelling owned a building on Third Street that housed Quentin Crisp in the attic and a young artist named Peter Nagy in the basement.

Within a year, Nagy joined forces with his friend Alan Belcher and opened another of the new wave of art galleries. Nature Morte occupied a small storefront on Tenth Street, a stone's throw from Fun and close to other pioneering spaces—Group Material, Gracie Mansion, and Civilian Warfare. "Fun wanted more galleries in the area," says Nagy, "and for a while, there was a real sense of camaraderie.

"When Alan and I opened the gallery," says Nagy, "we were really naive. We weren't that serious. We just thought,

ERIC BOMAN

At last summer's riot in Tompkins Square Park, top, protesters faced off against the police. Above right: Pat Hearn in SoHo today. Right: A beehived Hearn in 1984, in her East Village gallery with its cactus garden and tile floors.



'Let's do a show,' like Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland. But it was a watershed period. So many people from our generation wanted to be artists. We were all raised on art rock, pop fashion, low culture, so the art world had to split right open. It had to accommodate three new aesthetics: the appropriation thing, the graffiti thing, and the kitsch-punk thing.''

Then came the boom. At its height, magazines like *Flash Art* and *Art in America* were publishing splashy supplements on the East Village scene, and there were no fewer than seventy new little galleries. The influx was on, with fledglings from all over the country descending on the neighborhood in a bid to be the next Madonnas and Kenny Scharfs. The whole mood changed. Deborah Sharpe, whose gallery opened in 1983, just ahead of Michael Kohn, PPOW, and Pat Hearn, remembers, ''When I moved my gallery in, there wasn't exactly a friendly welcome. We weren't part of the clique. We were considered the young professionals.''

Patti Astor is more explicit. ''The point was lost when people like Pat Hearn took grungy 5,000-square-foot tenements and renovated them with all this money,'' she complains. ''I thought there was something sick about it—the adventure had gone out of things. The whole scene had become a real money factory.'' Soon, Fun gallery closed. Bill Stelling moved his share of the business to 56 Bleecker gallery, and Astor moved to Hollywood, where she has worked in a deli while awaiting

An amiable police officer with gallery owner Gracie Mansion, above, in a Pollock dress by Mike Bidlo, 1982. Below: A mixed crowd at the Fun gallery in 1983.

The galleries showcased all varieties of 1980s neo-Pop, but they also served as the avant-garde of gentrification on the Lower East Side

East Village chic: gallery co-owners Sur Rodney Sur and Gracie Mansion, above, with artists Rhonda Zwillinger and Mike Bidlo, 1983. Right: Kenny Scharf performing at Club 57. Far right: Actress Ann Magnuson in Kenny Scharf's performance piece *Closet* at the Fun gallery in 1982.

her big break as a movie producer, screenwriter, and actress.

The most revealing East Village art success story belongs to International With Monument, which was opened in 1984 by artist Meyer Vaisman and two friends from art school. Within two years, however, Vaisman and his artists made the symbolic leap to the big SoHo galleries, a sign that bigger money was finally in the offing. ''The East Village was great for a couple of years,'' Vaisman claims, ''and it was initially important to me to have a friendship with artists. Soon the museums got involved, too, and the gallery got out of the red. But the East Village scene died from a lack of adequate spaces and from artists' ambitions to show in bigger galleries. As more and more shitty galleries opened every day, with more cheap versions of SoHo art and Neo-Expressionism, the situation became less interesting. I wanted to get out.''

Vaisman and one of his partners sold back their shares in the gallery, which were purchased by Ealan Wingate, who had worked for the Sonnabend gallery. But within months, the gallery's stellar lights—Richard Prince, Sarah Charlesworth, Jeff Koons, and Peter Halley—were grabbed by SoHo dealers. (Vaisman landed at three galleries—Gorney, Sonnabend, and Castelli.)

The other galleries saw the writing on the wall and began to follow suit. By now a hit as both a dealer and a painter, Nagy was exhibiting his own art at International With Monument, and he too jumped ship. He also closed Nature Morte, in 1987. ''I could tell the whole scene was falling apart,'' he says.

Among the last of the fashionable galleries to abandon the district was Pat Hearn's. But her gallery has been stylishly out of sync all along. ''When Pat Hearn first opened,'' recalls dealer Michael Kohn, who reopened his East Village ▶401

whole idea of national differences are being sent up.

He seems, too, to owe nothing to any other actors. Laurence Olivier is the subject of some of his best stories, but if Gambon acquired the trumpets in his voice from Olivier, the orchestration is so different that you'd never notice. He speaks with awe of Brando and De Niro, but what he has taken from them is summed up in his dictum that "you've got to be brave, haven't you?"

And brave, above all, is what he is—whether in the cockpit of the plane he flies in his spare time ("I like the power, the authority") or on the stage. I caught his *Uncle Vanya* in the last week of its run. I was startled by something he did in the third-act confrontation. At the height of his tirade against Serebryakov, he fell to the floor, apparently in the throes of a heart attack. Pumping his arm, he dragged himself to his feet and retired to the corner of the stage. I rushed back to see him and asked why? and how? "The scene needed it," he said darkly. Chekhov doesn't ask for it, I don't know how one would ever think of it, but it was perfectly right, and at the same time was the single most audacious piece of physical acting I've seen in a decade.

He is the great original of our theater.

EAST SIDE STORY

(Continued from page 361)

gallery in Los Angeles in 1985, "everyone thought it was the most ridiculous thing they'd ever seen. She had this big beehive hairdo, and her gallery had a sort of sixties fake rock garden in the interior and ceramic tile floors. It was like a B-52s album come to life."

But Hearn's artists transcended her image. One of them, Philip Taaffe, is arguably the most successful of the new generation of neo-Pop, -Op, and -Conceptual artists to come out of the East Village. When Hearn sold his paintings at her first space, they went for a few thousand dollars; last year one sold at auction for $95,000. And this month, Hearn is showing Taaffe in a two-gallery show, at her new three-story SoHo gallery and at Mary Boone's $100-per-square-foot West Broadway gallery. Gore Vidal is writing the introduction to the show's catalog. Says Boone, "To Pat, I guess I represent the older generation."

There are hardly any galleries left in the old neighborhood, and the storefronts are again for rent, while the galleries get better value per square foot on Broadway, but the spaces are bigger, the overheads higher. "There is no question that this is going to be a tough new time for young artists," says Mera Rubell. "In the East Village, works could sell for $500 to $1,500. Now SoHo commands $5,000 to $6,000 for an artist's first show."

According to Patti Astor, "The SoHo dealers are real happy to have the East Village scene over in SoHo now. They don't have to worry about having black people running around. Everything's safe. I think art should be dangerous and they think art should be safe. Safe makes money. Dangerous makes history."

But who makes history in a scene inflated by money and media attention? In the East Village, as in the art world at large, fashion and marketing maneuvers have taken the place of real change. When last year's Tompkins Square riots erupted, a few survivors from the East Village of the 1960s remarked to me that at last the people were asserting their power against the trendy young landlords. But conflict in the East Village has become ritualized posing, and change purely illusory. Those were no ordinary riots—they were designer riots. I saw the neopolitical protestors and the new gentry, and there was no visible difference between them. In the East Village these days, both sides are wearing Gaultier.

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