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Lessons from Chelsea

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# Lessons from Chelsea

## A Study in Contemporary Art

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*Abstract: Chelsea, on Manhattan's Far West Side, has with startling speed become the center of Contemporary Art in New York City and the United States. Between 1998 and 2005 (December), the number of galleries there grew from 71 to at least 239, dwarfing other art districts in the United States and supplanting SoHo, once the most dynamic gallery neighborhood in New York City. This mega-gathering of publicly accessible, Chelsea galleries offers a magnificent window of opportunity for research on Contemporary Art, both on the art works and on their audience. Our research, extending over five years, suggests that the current Contemporary Art gallery scene in Chelsea is too complex and interesting to be adequately grasped through a single theoretical lense. Approaches that stress the commercialization and (in stronger versions) the commodification of art are consistent with some features of Chelsea such as the agglomeration of commercial galleries, the rise of the global gallery, and the threat that the commercial real estate market may replace galleries with residential condominiums and/or stores selling more profitable merchandise. Yet some of Chelsea's most interesting features do not fit this model. These include Chelsea's role as providing a giant free art show for people few of whom are "consumers" (i.e. purchasers) of art, its place as a flexible and open structure of opportunity for artists that far surpasses the opportunities offered by museums, and the fact that the vast majority of galleries are not global or star but small, boutique-like operations selling unique products each one of which proclaims its individuality and the creativity of the artist who produced it. Above all, a commodification theory fails to jibe with the active way the audience attributes meaning to the art and with the way the audience often scrutinizes the art for ways in which it may be significant for their lives.*

Keywords: Art, Globalization, Commodification

### Overview

**C**HELSEA, ON MANHATTAN'S Far West Side, has with startling speed become the center of Contemporary Art in New York City and the United States. Between 1998 and 2005 (December), the number of commercial galleries there grew from 71 to at least 239, dwarfing other art districts in the United States and supplanting SoHo, once the most dynamic gallery neighborhood in New York City. The number of galleries in SoHo has now fallen to 56 from its 1990 peak of 262. (See Figures 1 and 3.)<sup>1</sup>

This mega-gathering of publicly accessible, Chelsea galleries offers a magnificent opportunity for research on Contemporary Art, on the art works and on their audience, as well as the galleries. For the art works, this opportunity opens after they have left the privacy of the artist's studio for display in Chelsea galleries. It later closes when the works enter the privacy of a purchaser's home or the semi-privacy of a purchaser's workplace or the seclusion

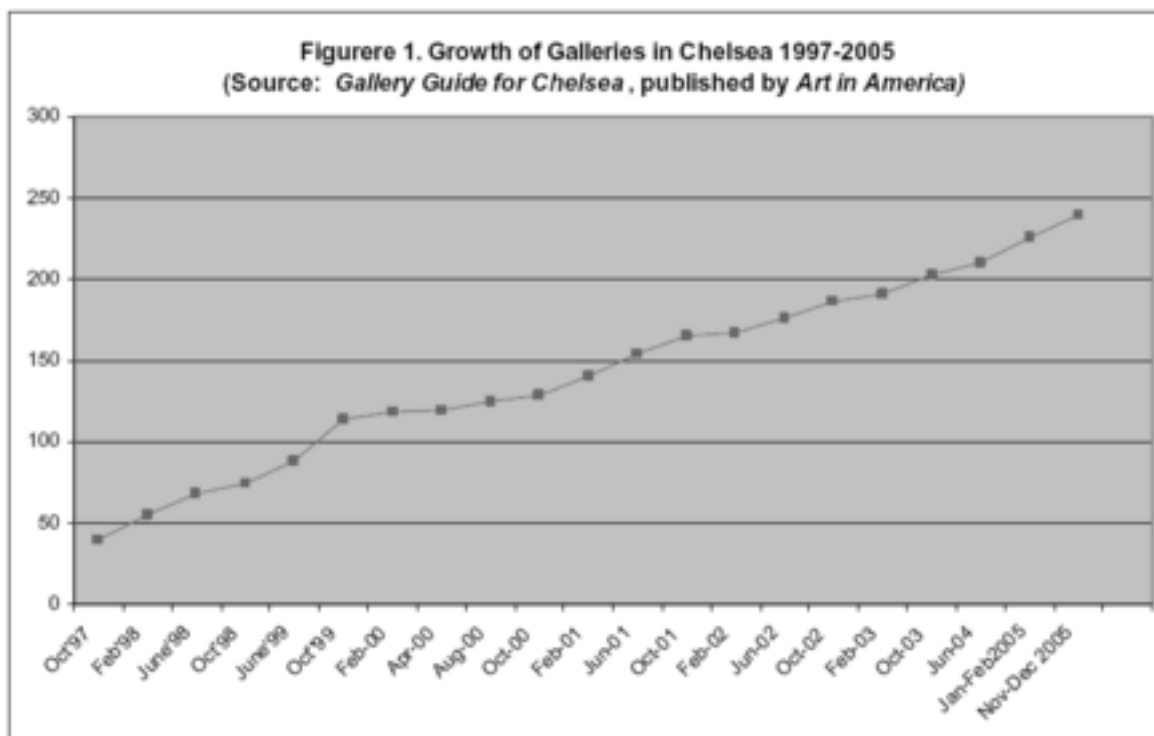
of a museum's collection, most of whose acquisitions actually languish in storage.

Chelsea offers an equally fine chance to study the audience for the art and the meaning that the art has for the audience. Art works, of course, have an objective existence, but much of their dynamism derives from the meaning that the audience assigns to them. Yet throughout the history of art we rarely know more about this meaning than can be gleaned from the comments of a limited, albeit important, group—the artist, patron, purchaser, dealer, or critic. We typically lack any systematic knowledge of the views of the interested general public. The Chelsea gallery audience is not, of course, a cross-section of the general public, but it is reasonably representative of the public who are interested in Contemporary Art. As such, it includes a sizeable minority of art professionals (artists, curators, designers, critics etc.). It is a plausible assumption that the rest of the public (i.e. those who do not attend galleries that display Contemporary Art) do not on the whole have clearly defined views on the subject and indeed probably

<sup>1</sup> *The Art in America Gallery Guide for Chelsea*, the source of the data in figure 1, appears every two months as a fold-out map. Galleries must pay an annual fee of \$175 to be included in the guide, so the actual number of galleries in Chelsea is likely to be somewhat higher than in figure 1. The comparative data in figure 3 are not from the same source as figure 1, which explains any differences.



have only a hazy notion of what “Contemporary Art” is.



### The Debate Over the Commercial Market and its Dominance

The mega concentration of commercial galleries in Chelsea represents an opportunity to engage, with empirical data, the long debate over the impact of the rise of the market, and the decline of patronage, as the major way that art is produced.<sup>2</sup> Chelsea represents the latest stage in a lengthy dialectic in art between commercialism (i.e. market forces and processes) on the one hand and counter forces on the other. Our research suggests that the current balance is complex and pluralistic and far more interesting than allowed by perspectives that just stress the dominance of commercialism in a one-dimensional way, or conversely by approaches that just ignore the market's role or celebrate the freedom that it confers. An adequate understanding of contemporary developments needs to take account of a variety of currents and motifs.

An important line of twentieth century thinkers decried the growth of market forces and the commercialization of art as, for example, it is processed through the modern corporation. These included F.R. Leavis and the “mass culture” school as early as the 1920s and 1930s, the (Marxist) Frankfurt School such as Adorno and Horkheimer in the 1930s and later, and Western and Central European intellectuals such as Baudrillard and Václav Havel in the 1970s as they contemplated the penetration of their societies by Western capitalist culture, especially the products of Hollywood. Although there are differences of emphasis and degree among these theorists, they tend to believe that this commercial system imposes products onto a largely passive mass public that this public would not otherwise purchase, and that it flattens out the tastes and critical sensibilities of the public. They also often argue that the system “contaminates” the works by forcing the artists to produce what the market will sell, not what the artists would like to

<sup>2</sup> There have been a number of empirically based studies of the role of the market, at other stages in its development, in the art world. A broadly historical study of the evolution of the commercial art market is Getty Research Institute, *The Business of Art: Evidence from the Art Market* (Getty Research Institute: Los Angeles, 2004). A recent study of how art galleries in New York and Amsterdam set prices is Olav Velthuis, *Talking Prices: Symbolic Meaning of Prices on the Market for Contemporary Art*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). An earlier study of the art market in France is Raymond Moulin, *The French Art Market: A Sociological View* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1967.)

Theorists who have called for the open-minded, empirical study of art markets include Fredrick Jameson who considers the market to be “the most crucial terrain of ideological struggle in our time” and calls for examining the market not just as an ideological or rhetorical trope but as a “real market just as much as about metaphysics, psychology, advertising, culture, representations, and libidinal apparatuses.” See “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in Foster, Hal ed. *The Anti-Aesthetic; Essay on Postmodern Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1998).

produce. Theorists who subscribe to this entire package of views often refer to the whole process as the “commodification” of art.<sup>3</sup>

Such views have been repeatedly criticized as, at the least, exaggerated. For example, it has been said that it is simplistic and condescending to imply that, for the audience, art and culture has just one set of meanings (or one “basic” set of meanings) that are somehow attached to commodified cultural products and that the audience simply absorb. Why should cultural products have just one set of (basic) meanings and even if they do where is the evidence that people more or less passively accept these meanings?<sup>4</sup>

The evidence from Chelsea’s commercial gallery system suggests that the current situation is fascinatingly complex, in sometimes unexpected ways. There are, for sure, several ways in which the market is important and even dominant in Chelsea. These include the sheer numerical presence of the commercial galleries, the fact that they are subject to New York’s brutal commercial real estate market, and the rise of the global gallery. These factors explain why affirmations of the power of the market, in all kinds of ways, continue to be plausible.

Several factors, on the other hand, offset this picture of the dominance of the market. There is the role of Chelsea galleries in providing “the best free show in town,” a show that at least rivals, and in many ways surpasses, that provided by New York’s museums almost all of which charge an entrance fee. A related development is that, for most of the artists, the system of commercial galleries is a welcome opportunity for the display and sale of their work and constitutes a system that artists view as, on the whole, far more open than that offered by museums. Important too is that the overwhelming majority of galleries are neither global nor just “star” but small shops that offer a plethora of uniquely crafted products whose collective effect amounts to a crucible of creativity. In many ways this is the

opposite of commodification and echoes an earlier, artisanal structure, though in a modern market context. A fourth factor that needs to be considered comes from a content-analysis of the art displayed in Chelsea and from interviews with the audience that attend the galleries there. Audience interviews reveal that the meaning of the art for the spectators who view it is often intimately connected with central issues in the audience’s lives. These issues reflect too central themes in the art, as revealed by an analysis of the works. We identified five major, and three minor, such themes. For example, there is (in the works and among the audience) a concern about the destruction of the modern landscape, and there is an interest in depictions of inter-personal life that either avoid the romantic image of the nuclear family, or present it in a highly critical light. It is not plausible to analyze such themes as being pre-packaged and imposed by commercial forces. Critics who argue that the audience are not well-understood if represented as basically passive receptacles for art are certainly correct.

In what follows we first discuss those factors that affirm the importance of the market. We then turn to the significant developments that either run counter, or are unrelated, to this

## Data and Methods

We have been analyzing Chelsea for the last five years. In order to make the research systematic, we organized our study around the galleries, and did so in two main ways. First, we drew a sample of 40 galleries selected at random from all those in Chelsea. We refer to this as the “general” sample/list. Second, we looked at all of the most famous and economically successful galleries. We identified 16 such galleries, which we refer to as the “star” list. These include Gagosian, Paula Cooper, Metro Pictures, Matthew Marks, Pace Wildenstein and Luhring Augustine. (Table 1, note 2 contains the full

<sup>3</sup> For Leavis see F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1937.) For the formulations of theorists of “mass culture,” see Bernard Rosenberg and David White, eds., *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (Glencoe, Ill: The Free Press, 1957). The formalist art critic Clement Greenberg also believed that the market system often encouraged mass-produced products of low aesthetic quality (“kitsch”) that were largely passively absorbed by an uncritical audience. See “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), reprinted in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961). For some of the original Frankfurt-school formulations see Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), trans. by John Cummings (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972); Theodor Adorno, “Perennial Fashion: Jazz” in *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1983). More recent Western theorists in a similar tradition include Jean Baudrillard, “Market and Hypercommodity” and “the Beaubourg Effect” in *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Frederick Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” *Social Text* 1 (1979), pp.130-48. For Václav Havel see “The Power of the Powerless” (1979), in John Keane, ed., *The Power of the Powerless* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), p.91. Havel writes that in “the traditional parliamentary democracies...people are manipulated in ways that are infinitely more subtle and refined than the brutal methods used in the post-totalitarian societies...[for example by] the omnipresent dictatorship of consumption, production, advertising, commerce, consumer culture, and all that flood [sic!] of information.”

<sup>4</sup> For some of the critics see Raymond Bauer and Alice Bauer, “America, ‘Mass Society’ and Mass Media,” *Journal of Social Issues* 16, no 3 (1960); Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of rock ‘n Roll* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), chap.3; Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); and David Halle, *Inside Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

list.) In this way, we were able to study both what is going on throughout Chelsea generally and also to focus on the famous galleries that attract the best-known artists and are often international leaders in the art world.

Basing our research on these two lists, we refined the strategy as appropriate for each topic being studied. For example, when studying the content of the art displayed in Chelsea, we selected one show at random from each of the 40 “general” list galleries, and (to obtain comparable numbers) three shows at random from each of the 16 star galleries. Famous artists whose shows appeared by this method on our “star” list sample included Damien Hirst, Cecily Brown, Lisa Yuskavage, Andy Warhol, Robert Adams, Gregory Crewdson, Frank Stella, Roy Lichtenstein, Diane Arbus, and Claus Oldenburg. When ascertaining the views of gallery owners/directors, we interviewed the 40 gallery owners/directors from our general list, and almost all the gallery owners/directors from our star list (only Gagosian declined to talk).

## Commercialism/The Market

### The Gallery System

Chelsea does represent the triumph of the commercial gallery system as a mode of showing and distributing art. Unlike SoHo, which was initially colonized by artists, Chelsea was developed primarily by commercial galleries, although the not-for-profit DIA Foundation was a key initial pioneer in 1986. (DIA was founded and funded by the De Menil family much of whose huge fortune comes from Texas oil.) Then in 1993 DIA’s director, Lynne Cooke, found space for the young gallery owner Mathew Marks, who purchased it. Matthew Marks quickly encouraged his friends Pat Hearn and Paul Morris to move their galleries from SoHo to Chelsea, and the growth of commercial galleries in Chelsea had begun. For example, Paula Cooper purchased a dilapidated Chelsea garage in 1995 and left SoHo. Note, however, that few artists live in Chelsea.



Photo 1. Matthew Marks Gallery, Chelsea. This was built from a former garage, which is a typical form of Chelsea conversion. Unlike SoHo, which was founded by artists (with galleries coming later) Chelsea as an art district was developed primarily by commercial galleries (after the DIA Foundation’s pioneering move).



Photo 2. Gagosian Gallery, Chelsea. This gallery approaches, in size, a small museum. Gagosian has several galleries in the United States and abroad. There are just a handful of such global galleries in Chelsea, but they represent a new direction for the art world

They could not afford it even when Chelsea began to develop as an art gallery area, still less now. (This important difference between Chelsea and SoHo is discussed later in the paper.)

### **Global Galleries**

Several global gallery Behemoths such as Gagosian, Marlborough and LeLong, are active in Chelsea. These are trans-atlantic operations, some originating in the United States and others in European cities. They have the economic resources to attract (or poach) artists from smaller galleries, and from “star” but not global galleries too. The United States dealer Gagosian, for example, has two galleries in Los Angeles, two in New York City, two in London, and a Paris office. The French gallery LeLong, which has outlets in Paris and Switzerland, recently opened a branch in Chelsea, as did another large French gallery, Yvon Lambert. Such international corporations, long dominant in other economic spheres, are still fairly new in the gallery world. Their importance is likely to grow. (Still, the overwhelming majority of galleries in Chelsea are neither global nor just “star” but often struggling boutique operations, as we discuss later.)

Andrea Rosen, a “star” list Chelsea gallerist who owned just one gallery, complained:

Gagosian has a different agenda from 99% of the other galleries. He’s not interested in recording the place of his artists in history or in long-term relationships or in preserving the archives of his artists. For Gagosian, it’s all about money. It’s really about the business model that didn’t exist before. He’s instilled a sense of competition. Still, it’s not all bad. He does bring art to a wider audience, and he’s had many fabulous shows.

Paula Cooper, who opened the first gallery in SoHo, and eventually moved to a medium-sized space in Chelsea as discussed, was less critical of the globalists:

It’s a huge world now, the art world is enormous. It’s completely intertwined e.g. there are shows all over the world of everybody. The American-European thing has exploded. Artists are coming from all over the world. There are so many big international shows.

### **The Manhattan Real Estate Market**

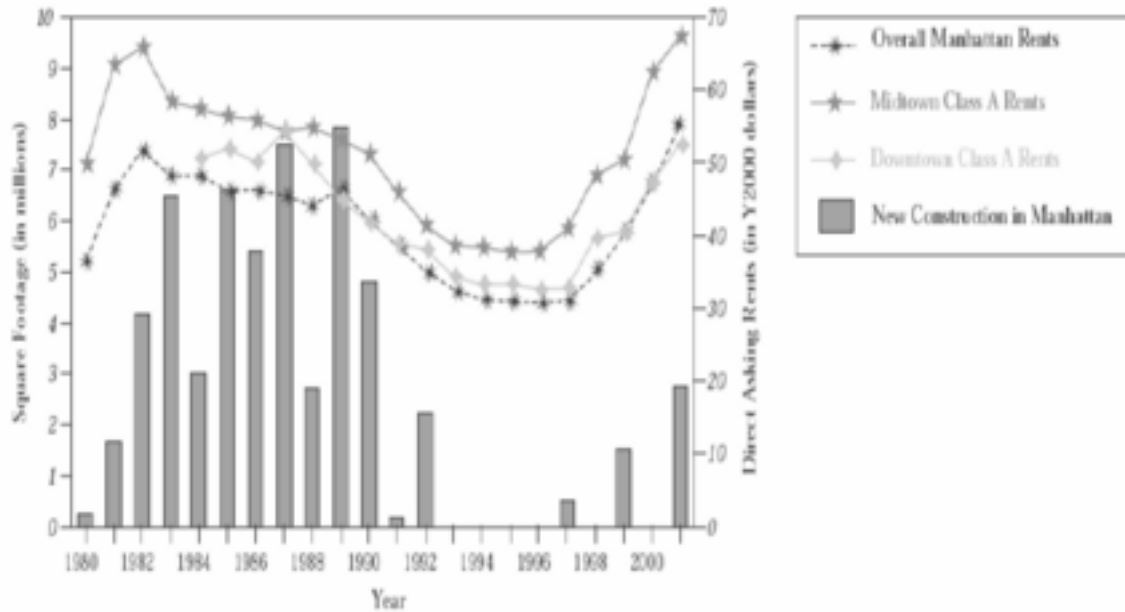
Every Chelsea gallery must deal with Manhattan’s ferocious real estate market. Indeed. SoHo’s decline and Chelsea’s rise were above all real estate-driven. Rents soared in SoHo from 1995-1999, fuelled by an influx of clothing boutiques and forcing a mass

exodus to Chelsea of galleries that could not afford the new rents. Figure 2 shows how commercial rents in Manhattan basically doubled during this period.

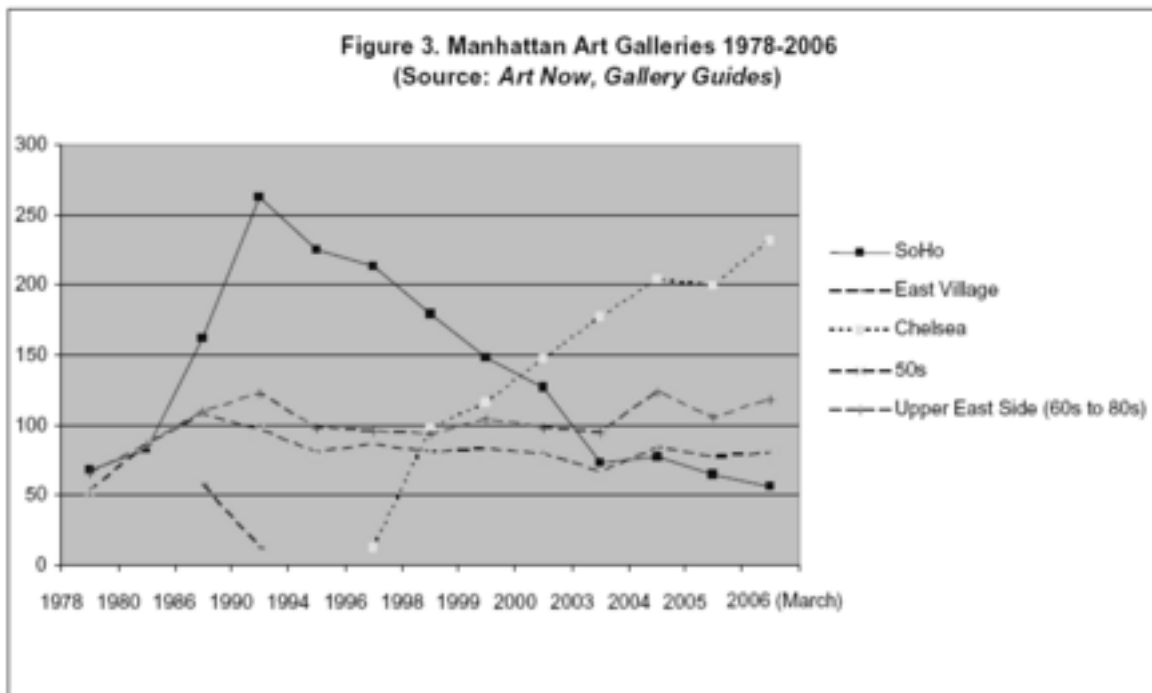
Figure 3 depicts the associated decline in SoHo galleries, gradual until 1998, steep thereafter, and the highly correlated rise of Chelsea.

◆ FIGURE 2

TRENDS IN DIRECT ASKING RENTS AND NEW CONSTRUCTION COMPLETIONS IN MANHATTAN, 1980 - 2001<sup>18</sup>



Source: Charles Schumer and Robert Rubin (co-chairs), Preparing for the Future: A Commercial Development Strategy for New York City, June, 2001



The havoc wreaked by rising commercial rents in the late 1990s on those SoHo galleries--the majority-- that were on commercial leases and did not own their spaces, is affirmed in interviews with Chelsea

gallery owners and managers (both those on the "general" gallery list and the "stars") who fled Soho in search of affordable space. The interviews are



replete with references to “greedy landlords/developers” who do not care about art.

Miles Manning, now manager of the Danish Contemporary Art gallery (DCA) in Chelsea, worked for the DCA in SoHo in the early 90s. The DCA rented the ground floor of 420 Broadway, SoHo’s most famous art gallery building. The building had a star cast of gallery owners--John Weber, Leo Castelli, Ileana Sonnabend. Manning explained what then happened:

The DCA had a two year lease (in SoHo) with a three year option beyond. Our landlords, two Dutch businessmen, started coming to us in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year [1997] to get us up to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, but they really wanted to get us out. Meanwhile most of the ground floors in other buildings were closing or moving, because the fashion stores were moving in. We saw the handwriting on the wall. Mary Boone was across the street. She had the same landlord as we did. Her lease came due, they had a fight, and Rene Lazard, the German fashion designer, moved in.

There were 28-30 galleries here (in Chelsea) then. Finally the landlord said (to us) ‘We want you to get out. What will it take?’ We said: ‘If you find us comparable space in Chelsea.’ They offered us \$250,000 plus they found this space. Here we have 5,000 square feet and we’re paying 1/3 less than we paid in SoHo. November ’97 we opened our doors and since then, all around us, more and more galleries have moved in.

Moving early was our luck. Otherwise our lease would have played out last year [2000] and the gallery would have ended. We would have been priced out of the market and unable to afford to move here. Survival stories in the art world are about knowing when to act and leave. Those who don’t make it right end up as footnotes in history!

Most of the gallery owners who fled SoHo commented on a change in the composition of the SoHo audience in the mid-90s and beyond. High-end shoppers now largely replaced those who came to view art. The new audience was despised by most of the gallerists. For example, Barbara Gladstone (star list), who rented space for her gallery in SoHo from 1983 to 1996 until high rents drove her to Chelsea, commented:

When I first moved to SoHo it was very quiet. Then, once rents got so high [her landlord wanted to triple her rent], the crowds were now a detriment. The real collectors couldn’t get into the gallery. The new crowd didn’t know the difference between a gallery and a furniture

store. There’d be fifty people in the gallery, and no collectors, because they’d [the crowds] be going down the street to shop, from one shop to the next. Anything is better than that.

Seeming to affirm these judgments, a recent (March 26, 2006) feature article in the *New York Times* Real Estate section described SoHo as a “shopping nirvana. Bloomingdale’s arrived last year, and it would be hard to find a major designer or upscale retail outlet that hasn’t.”

### Will Chelsea go the way of Soho?

Not surprisingly, a much debated topic among Chelsea gallery owners and other observers is whether real estate developments will eventually cause a similar debacle for the art galleries as happened in SoHo. Learning a lesson from SoHo, most of those galleries that came to Chelsea with sufficient capital bought their spaces so as to insulate themselves from the commercial rental market. The other galleries signed leases and were keenly aware of what Chelsea insiders called the “2005” factor, a reference to the year when leases expired for the cluster of galleries that had moved to Chelsea around 1996 and had signed the typical ten-year lease. Many of these galleries worried that an influx of boutiques would eventually drive them from Chelsea too.

Barbara Gladstone, who co-owns her Chelsea building—a converted warehouse-- with Matthew Marks (his second Chelsea gallery) and Metro Pictures, commented:

I have mixed feelings about Chelsea. I moved here four years ago [1996] because my rent in SoHo was going to triple. I was looking for a place where I could buy something in order to be protected from landlords.

What I like about Chelsea is there’s nothing to do here. So if you come, you come to look at the art. But the neighborhood here is changing. The way it happens is first you have galleries, then restaurants because the rich people who buy the art want somewhere to eat and someone figures out there are rich people around. And they [the rich people] want to buy things, and then you get the boutiques, and ‘that’s the end of the neighborhood’. SoHo went like that.

Still, I feel protected here because I’ve bought my space. Most of the gallery owners that moved here early bought. There weren’t that many Chelsea spaces to rent. This building was a warehouse. Now they’re building an apartment house across the street. It’s a rental building. ‘There goes the neighborhood.’

Gallery owner Clement Glasser was less sanguine, commenting (in 2002):

Chelsea will go the way of SoHo surely in fifteen years. I'm 100% sure. There'll be a lot of boutiques. The main difference is there are no high buildings here. The only fixed point in New York is the Upper East Side--that's always the right place to show secondary artists, Vermeer to Balthus. The super-rich people live there.

A member of the audience for a show by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen commented:

It's a real estate play...I've seen the same thing in New York for 30 years. They (ie the real estate industry) bring in the art. Then the real estate prices go up, the real estate people bring in the fancy shops, then they build fancy apt buildings, then the rent goes up so the galleries will have to leave.

Still, 2005 came and went without a cataclysm. Indeed, the number of galleries in Chelsea continued to rise that year, from 226 in January to 239 in December. (See Figure 1.) The global and star galleries were in expansionist mode. By 2005 Matthew Marks owned four Chelsea galleries, Paul Cooper had opened a second.

One crucial factor that had (to early 2006) limited the rise of rents in the art gallery area of Chelsea was the fact that, zoned as manufacturing, it had no resident population of artists who could give the district a special caché. By contrast the process of SoHo becoming an art neighborhood had began when artists moved into the neighborhood to live from 1959 onwards.<sup>5</sup> SoHo's cast-iron industrial buildings were ideal for the space artists needed. Artists were able to afford to move there because landlords could charge only very low rents. This was because almost no-one else wanted to live in SoHo since the neighborhood seemed doomed. In 1959 Robert Moses had announced plans for a ten-lane Lower Manhattan Expressway, which would have wiped SoHo out. But, after an epic struggle, the Lower Manhattan Expressway was finally defeated in 1969. The ensuing promise of stability, and the presence of artists, created a demand for bars and restaurants and then galleries (Paula Cooper opened the first in 1968), and then tourists came including art buyers. By the mid 1990s SoHo was a "hot" neighborhood.

Thus in SoHo, the upward pressure on rents had come primarily from clothing stores, small boutiques and large chain stores, selling to residents and tourists (shoppers).

The artists' industrial lofts in SoHo were, at first, illegal residences, since the area was zoned M1-5 permitting light industry and commercial establishments such as galleries and retail stores but not residential. In 1971, after the defeat of the Lower Manhattan Expressway, the Department of City Planning legalized the residences, but only for artists, changing the zoning to M1-5A and M1-5B, with the A and B designations permitting artists to live there so long as they were certified as such by the DCP.<sup>6</sup> Actually, the certification requirement was, and still is, widely ignored (by the DCP too), so SoHo lofts traded freely on the residential market. This created an on-the-spot coterie of wealthy residents/shoppers to help support the clothing and now furniture stores and to add to the upward pressure on commercial rents that eventually displaced most of the galleries.

In Chelsea, the zoning was also M1-5, which is why the art galleries were able to move there. But a crucial difference between Chelsea and SoHo is that Chelsea never came under the rent reducing apparent death sentence of a project like the Lower Manhattan Expressway. So even from the start few artists could afford to live in Chelsea. Chelsea also lacked SoHo's multitude of attractive, cast iron buildings, although it did have some very large warehouse and industrial buildings into which artists could have moved had they been able to afford to. The heart of the Chelsea gallery district was concentrated on the midblocks between W. 20th and W. 27th streets and 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Avenues, in converted warehouse buildings and garages. The wealthier galleries tended to occupy first floor converted garages in expensive remodellings designed by architectural minimalist gurus like Richard Gluckman. The ordinary galleries more often occupied an upper floor, and smaller section, of one of the large warehouse buildings.

Without a resident artist population willing to live there illegally in exchange for tiny rents, there was little demand for services such as restaurants and stores to open in Chelsea's art gallery district. Nor, under existing (M1-5) zoning, was there an opportunity for owners of the buildings in which the galleries were located to sell to a developer who would build condominiums or residential rental buildings on the site, an enormously profitable proposition in Manhattan's current (to 2006) real estate market. Thus Chelsea had no coterie of

<sup>5</sup> The main study of SoHo as an art neighborhood is Charles Simpson, *The Artist in the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). For some artists SoHo also represented an attempt to escape the commercial art gallery market by showing their work directly to the public in alternative spaces—e.g. artists co-operatives or private lofts. There is no such movement in Chelsea.

<sup>6</sup> For a lucid guide to these zoning designations see Department of City Planning, *Zoning Handbook* (2006). M1-5 is a manufacturing designation with the 5 indicating a permitted floor area ratio (FAR) of 5. FAR is the ratio of total building floor area to the area of its zoning lot.

condominium residents (artists or supposed artists) in the art gallery district to provide wealthy, on-the-spot shoppers. As a result most of the upward pressure on the rents paid by galleries in Chelsea in 2005 was coming from other galleries seeking to move to prime space there, although a handful of boutiques had moved in by 2005 (e.g. Comme les Garçons was an early pioneer).

This, however, was perhaps about to change. In 2005 the Department of City Planning ushered a West Chelsea rezoning plan through the approval process (supported by the local Community Board,

CB4). The crux of the plan, which would create a special purpose zoning district, was to rezone much of the manufacturing area around the art gallery section, but not the art gallery section itself, to a Commercial (C) designation which allowed residential development. (See Figures 4-5.) The DCP deliberately retained the original manufacturing zoning for the core of the gallery section, with the intention of protecting the galleries from the commercial pressures that would be unleashed in the surrounding areas by the ability to build residential buildings.

## Existing Zoning



Figure 4: SPECIAL WEST CHELSEA DISTRICT REZONING AND HIGH LINE OPEN SPACE EIS

Figure 5.

### Subareas, Proposed Zoning & Proposed FAR



The entire West Chelsea rezoning had been triggered by another intricate dance between ferocious commercial considerations and other concerns, revolving around the High Line, a long disused elevated railway that ran through the art gallery area. A local group, including some architects, had come up with a plan to turn the High Line into a public

park along the model of the Promenade Plantée in Paris. A crucial part of this plan, which had the strong support of Mayor Bloomberg, the DCP and a group of local architects, involved finding a way to compensate the property owners who owned land under, and adjoining, the High Line and who had long sought to demolish the High Line so that they

could develop their properties. Organized as the Chelsea Property Owners, they had threatened to hold up the High Line project indefinitely with legal and political action unless they were financially compensated for being unable to develop their properties when the High Line was turned into a park rather than demolished.<sup>7</sup>

The compensating mechanism that City Planning settled upon was to allow the High Line property owners<sup>8</sup> to sell their air rights to owners/developers in a special transfer zone composed of “receiving sites”. This special transfer zone did not immediately adjoin the High Line, so the visibility of the High Line for its park mode would be somewhat preserved from the encroachment of tall buildings. The zone’s value as a development site (whose owners would be willing to pay for air rights so they could build construct taller buildings) was assured by its having been rezoned from manufacturing (M1-5) to commercial (C), which allowed residential, as well as art galleries.

As well as providing a mechanism to satisfy the Chelsea Property Owners, the whole West Chelsea rezoning suited one of City Planning’s broader goals of fostering residential development in West Chelsea and throughout the city. Thus DCP planned to encourage the creation of 65,000 new residential units throughout the city over the next few years, on the reasonable grounds that this allowed more people to live in the city and also increased the city’s tax revenue.

It is unclear whether retaining the art gallery section zoning as manufacturing, while rezoning the area around the art gallery section to allow profitable residential development (C), will have the desired effect of insulating the galleries. The DCP said, bluntly, that the large galleries’ current protection consisted mainly of the fact that they were already commercially strong enough to afford high rents. As it wrote:

The proposed action is not anticipated to diminish the viability of the art gallery industry in West Chelsea. Most of the larger art galleries,

which represent the bulk of the industry, are not vulnerable, as they currently pay premium rents, particularly ground floor establishments (\$45 to \$60 psf).

Actually, the fact that many of the large galleries owned their own spaces certainly provided even better protection than their sheer commercial power.

City Planning said nothing about how the many smaller galleries in Chelsea would fare beyond its highly ambiguous assertion that the large galleries constituted the “bulk of the industry”. This might have been true as a statement of the proportionate value of Chelsea art sales attributable to the large galleries, but it was not true as a statement of the relative number of small and large galleries. Anyway, presumably retaining the manufacturing designation provided some insulation for the small galleries.

Overall, the ability of galleries to occupy a niche position in the real estate market was critical to the original establishment of Chelsea as an art district and will be critical to its survival. Under the prevailing manufacturing zoning, galleries were able to move to Chelsea because they could compete with such uses as garages, and yet were protected from the hopeless task of competing with condominiums. Whether commercial considerations will eventually lead to Chelsea’s demise as an art gallery area, as they did with SoHo, is unclear but the possibility will always be there.

### **Non-commercial Forces**

While the previous points are consistent with a perspective that stresses the importance, and sometimes the dominance, of the commercial market, there are several other developments that offset, or modify, an image of the world of Contemporary Art as ruled by the commercial market Behemoth.

#### **“The Best Free Show in Town”**

Unlike the established art museums in New York City, which charge admissions (entry to the recently

<sup>7</sup> In 1992 the Chelsea Property Owners obtained a court order requiring CSX, the railroad that owned the High Line, to demolish it. But demolition had been held up because not all the owners of property under the High Line had signed the agreement that specified how the demolition costs would be shared. Meanwhile, in 1999 a group of neighborhood residents, businesses, design professionals, and civic organizations joined forces to form Friends of the High Line, a not-for-profit hoping to turn the High Line into an elevated park. The mechanism that they identified to convert the High Line to a public open space was called rail-banking. As part of the 1983 National Trail Systems Act, the U.S. Congress passed legislation that allowed out-of-use rail corridors to be utilized as trails while being “banked” for future transportation needs. Then in December, 2001 in the final week of his administration, Mayor Giuliani signed a Demolition Agreement with the Chelsea Property Owners seeking to compel CSX to demolish the railroad.

The new Bloomberg administration supported the plan to preserve the High Line, though only after an economic feasibility study that showed that over a 20 year period the revenue generated in taxes for the city would be about 140m and the cost to the city only about 65m. (The High Line had long been a favored project of DCP’s Director Amanda Burden, who lived in the West Village, just to the south of Chelsea.) As a result, the city on Dec 17, 2002 filed an application to the federal Surface Transportation Board (STB) requesting that negotiations begin to transform the High Line into an elevated public walkway. But the STB made it clear to the city that it would not give final approval for the rail-banking unless a majority of the Chelsea property owners were supportive, at which point the DCP came up with the rezoning and special air-rights transfer plan.

<sup>8</sup> Those in a High Line Transfer Corridor, 100 feet wide, encompassing lots occupied by the High Line or immediately to its West.

re-opened MoMA is \$20), Chelsea galleries impose no entry charge, do not pressure the onlookers to buy, and are open and welcoming. Chelsea gallery owner Barbara Gladstone (“star list”) referred to the Chelsea scene as “one of the best free shows in town,” and the spirit of this comment was repeated by many owners and viewers. This absence of an admission charge runs counter to the strong tendency in the modern world towards the “commercialization of leisure life”, whereby a growing proportion of spare time consists of events for which admission is paid. A large commercial locus such as Chelsea offers, ironically, this huge, no-charge benefit for the public.

The gallerist Andrea Rosen (“star list”) argued, plausibly, that this constituted a radically new relationship between gallery and audience:

The wonderful thing about Chelsea is that there has been a change in the public’s attitude to the art. The spaces are accessible. Galleries are free, unlike most museums. On a typical Saturday 1,000 people come through the gallery. Sometimes I say to friends who haven’t been here before, ‘Why not come by the gallery?’ Often they’re hesitant, they’re thinking of the older galleries where they’re expected to buy.

Hence Chelsea galleries have a dual role. To the traditional role of the gallery as a place where art is sold has been added the role of the gallery as a place where huge numbers of people can come to just view contemporary art, including the latest work by the stars of the field, without feeling the slightest obligation to buy or even to pretend that they might buy.

This shift in the function of the gallery is institutionalized in current gallery practices. On not one occasion during our research did a gallery employee make the classic “can I help you” sales approach. The typical Chelsea gallery has an unobtrusive reception desk well to the side of the entry so that viewers can walk straight into the gallery without feeling any need to interact with the person at the desk.

The vast majority of the audience comes just to look, with absolutely no intention of purchasing art. They are, therefore, viewers but arguably not “consumers” if that term refers to people whose role is to purchase goods in the market.

Illustrative are a random sample of twenty-five of the spectators who came to an exhibition of drawings by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen at the Paula Cooper Gallery, in May 2004. The show consisted mostly of small drawings, watercolors done on lined paper depicting standard restaurant food items—shrimp cocktail, banana split and so on. Being small drawings, these were selling for about \$15,000,

far less than art usually sells for in “star list” Chelsea galleries. So assuming that the demand for art is inversely related to its price—the standard economic assumption—the audience for this show could be expected to be somewhat more inclined to purchase the art than the audience for the average “star list” show.

Still, only one person in this sample had even a thought of buying anything in this show. He was a man in his mid 40s, dressed in a smart yellow jacket, who identified himself as a “collector” of “modern and contemporary art.” He was with a woman who identified herself as his “art adviser.” She explained she was taking him around to “see as many galleries as we can fit into the next forty-five minutes.” A chauffeur waited outside so they would waste no time.

The rest of the audience had no intention of buying. Indeed, for about half, the question whether they came to buy elicited satirical comments on their financial condition. Consider the following examples:

A female professor of speech pathology at Lehman College, who had come with her husband and another male friend: “No we’re not here to buy; unless the price is in the two digits [the group laughs heartily].”

A married couple, a photographer and a designer, who live in Greenpoint, Brooklyn:

“We come to look, not to buy. We’re living in Brooklyn! “[They laugh at the point that if they could afford to buy this art they would not be living in Brooklyn].

### Galleries versus Museums

Almost half (46%) of the audience members interviewed (for all the shows where we interviewed audience members) preferred going to Chelsea galleries over going to museums. Only 10% preferred museums. The rest liked museums and galleries equally. Those who preferred galleries did so partly because galleries are free, partly because they perceived galleries as more open and innovative than museums in their choice of artists, and partly because they found the Chelsea galleries less intimidating than museums. For example, a female in her 40’s from the upper east side of Manhattan who worked as a secretary said she felt uncomfortable in museums and found galleries more inviting. Two recent unemployed male grads from Yale University, asked if they frequented galleries or museums more often, laughed and said “It’s easier to go to galleries because they don’t cost \$20.” A museum curator from Utah felt that New York museums (MoMA, Whitney, Met) tended to show over and over again the same canonical contemporary artists to the detriment of the younger and off-beat artists. Chelsea

offered her an opportunity to see what was new and different.

### **The Gallery System as Opportunity for the Artist**

The artists that we interviewed do not, on the whole, see the gallery system as a structure of dominance or oppression. Rather, they believe that it offers them a range of market venues for displaying their work that contrasts with the more restricted opportunities available through the museum world. Most artists consider that museum directors and curators tend to be more conservative and focused on established art and less open to new art and artists than the typical gallery owner/director. These views are generally shared by more successful artists showing in star Chelsea galleries (e.g. Mike Bidlo, Dan Graham or Bill Owens) but also by artists who are struggling, many of whom were part of the audience that we sampled.

While no artist that we interviewed would refuse patronage work (a commission from a museum or private person), none see this as a viable alternative to the main system, the operation of the commercial market through the gallery system. Thus the call, in the writings of some of the “commodification of art” school, for a return to patronage as the main way of funding art, seems hopelessly distant and foreign.

### **The Multiplication and Persistence of Small Galleries**

Despite the presence of a handful of global galleries, Chelsea would not be the dense art gallery neighborhood that it is without the plethora of small, boutique size galleries, owned by individuals not corporations, that make up by far the majority of the gallery scene.

In this sense the Chelsea gallery world is still a far cry from, and seems to refuse to conform to, the oligopolistic concentrations (Gaps, Starbucks and so on) that mark so much of the rest of the economy including the leisure and entertainment sector. This is, of course, a central reason why the gallery system offers, for most artists, a far more open system than the museums.

Thomas Crowe has commented on this peculiarity of the gallery system, with so much of it existing at

the “artisanal level.”<sup>9</sup> Crow theorizes that what underpins this system is that the art sold in the galleries constitutes a form of unique intellectual property, a highly creative product akin to some of the unique software programs that permeate the “continually beta” world of high technology. The Contemporary Art world too requires continual novelty. This analogy between art/art galleries and artisanal shops selling unique products in a “continually beta” world suggests a complex situation that does not fit simply into a model of market dominance.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Content of the Art Displayed in Chelsea (The Structure of Contemporary Art).**

Analysis of the content of the art in Chelsea shows, along with interviews with the audience, also fails to provide support for a “commodification” perspective. Five topics dominated the content of the art, to the point of being arguably obsessions. Each of these topics constituted at least 13% of all the works in the sample. See Table 1.

Depictions of landscapes/nature constituted 25% of all the topics. These landscapes divide into two main kinds. There is the classic “good stretch of countryside/water/sky” (13% of all the topics). In this vision, human figures, animals and other items are either absent or small enough to avoid detracting from the view. This vision featured prominently in Western landscape art over the last 200 years.<sup>11</sup> It clearly remains immensely popular.

The second type of landscape, 9% of all topics and almost as common among Chelsea landscapes as the first, is “radical environmental.” These landscapes foreground concern, and often alarm, about the deterioration of the natural environment. This world is depicted as threatened by human development in numerous ways. It is variously shown as shriveled by suburban growth, criss-crossed by freeways and other transportation devices such as power lines, littered with garbage, polluted by devices that ruin the atmosphere, and subject to apocalyptic nuclear and other holocaust-style shocks. This “environmental art” is, in many ways, a new genre that has appeared since the 1960s.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Crow, “Mass Culture in the Visual Art” in *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, (New Haven and London; Yale University Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> It would, for example, be unlikely for 300 shoe stores, selling products of varying styles, to exist in a single neighborhood.

<sup>11</sup> For a recent study see Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (Oxford, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> The “classic landscape,” which basically presented a “beautiful view,” did of course sometimes hint at such environmental themes. For example, certain artists and patrons of the Hudson River school of landscape were motivated by concern about the harmful impact of the railroad on the landscape and by a related desire to document still unspoiled natural scenery. As early as 1836 Thomas Cole, one of the most important Hudson River school artists, after extolling the American wilderness, lamented that:



% OF ALL SHOWS (n=32) <sup>1</sup>	TABLE 1. SUBJECT MATTER OF THE ART SHOWS IN THE SIXTEEN MOST IMPORTANT (“STAR”) CHELSEA GALLERIES <sup>2</sup>
MAJOR TOPICS <sup>3 4</sup>	
25%	LANDSCAPES Classic landscapes (Beautiful views) (13%) Environmental Landscapes (Landscape is threatened) (9%) Political (2%)
26%	SEX Sexual activity and/or focus on sex organs (13%) Nudes or semi-nudes (without sexual activity or focus on sex organs) (13%)
16%	DECORATIVE/ABSTRACT
16%	TROUBLED NUCLEAR FAMILY
16%	NATURAL FORMS/MAN-MADE BASIC MATERIALS
MINOR TOPICS	
9%	POOR, THOSE IN TROUBLE (Poor, addicts, etc)
6%	MASS PRODUCTION/COMMODITIES
6%	POLITICAL
3%	RELIGION

<sup>1</sup> The research is still in progress, with n=32 so far. The plan is to sample each “star” gallery three times, once in October 2005 (completed), and the second and third time during 2006, a total of 48 shows.

<sup>2</sup> The galleries include: Paula Cooper, Matthew Marks, Barbara Gladstone, Larry Gagosian, Metro Pictures, Robert Miller, Marlborough, Mary Boone, Andrea Rosen, Luhring Augustine, James Cohan, Pace Wildenstein, Cheim and Read, Galerie Lelong, Sonnabend, Marianne Boesky. A different group of experts would probably not pick an exactly similar list of “star” galleries, but we believe there would be agreement on the vast majority in the list.

<sup>3</sup> Classifying the content of the art is not straightforward. For example, a depiction of a naked female could, in theory, be about at least one or several of the following-- classic mythology, anatomy of the nude, eroticism, or feminism. The depiction might, on scrutiny, not even be unequivocally a female. This objective ambiguity is obviously one reason why artists usually title their work, to endow it with, and narrow it down to, particular meaning(s). So, in classifying the works we supplemented this “objective” look with a second perspective that considers the artist’s intentions. We derived these intentions from the written materials that accompany most shows, since these typically have the artist’s approval. These materials include the title of the works, any other wall text, and any catalogue and press release. These two perspectives—the “objective”, supplemented by the artist’s intention/commentary-- are the basis for the classifications in Table 1.

<sup>4</sup> Multi-topic works/shows. Several of the works/shows covered more than one topic. If the topic constituted a third or more of the show (or if it had some other prominence e.g. the first room in the gallery as with Warhol’s movie *Blow Job*) it was assigned 1 point. Thus some shows could count for up to 3 points. For example, Cecily Brown’s images depict landscapes and sex and are decorative. These “multi-topic” works/shows therefore have more weight in the overall table than single topic works/shows. We did this because our aim is to understand which topics are most widespread in Contemporary Art, so if a show has three topics that should be recorded. Hence the percentages in Table 1 sum to over 100.

An alternative way of handling “multi-topic” shows/works would have been to assign to each topic a fraction of a point that corresponded to the importance of the topic in the show. For example, Cecily Brown’s work/show could receive half a point for landscape, a quarter for sex and a quarter for decorative. As it turned out, this counting procedure did not give especially different results, in terms of determining the main topics of the art, than the procedure that we used in Table 1.

Sex is about as popular as landscapes, constituting 26% of all the topics of the art displayed in Chelsea. About half of these images depict sexual activity—most often intercourse between male and female, sometimes same-sex intercourse, and

sometimes male or female masturbation. (Counted here are a few cases where the image focuses primarily on the sex organs, though without showing sexual activity.)

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...the beauty of such landscapes is quickly passing away—the ravages of the axe are daily increasing, [leading to]...deseccation by what is called improvement...which generally destroys Nature’s bounty without substituting that of Art...I hope the importance of cultivating a taste for scenery will not be forgotten. See Thomas Cole, “Essay on American Scenery” *The American Monthly Magazine* (January, 1836).

Such anxiety was, too, a background motif in some Impressionist paintings, where for instance a railroad sometimes popped up in a corner of the picture. Still, the Impressionists for the most part viewed technology positively where it became a metaphor for modernity and modern life.

But these environmental concerns rarely, if ever, intruded center-stage in these classic landscapes, as they do in the radical environmentalist landscapes of Contemporary Art in Chelsea. In his paintings Cole depicted the still beautiful scenery, not the “ravages of the axe.” Hence art historians have noted the emergence in the 1960s of a basically new genre “environmental art.”

The other half of the images classified as “sex” here just depict people naked or semi-naked, usually women. They are not engaged in sexual activity and are therefore more akin to the classic nude of art history. Often these naked (but not sexually active) images shade into feminism as the artist and audience use them to muse on the role of women in modern society. In some cases, where the people naked are men, the images trigger musings on homosexuality.

Like “radical environmental art,” sexual intercourse is unusual in Western art, at least for the last two millennia. Of course naked or semi-naked men and women pervade the history of Western art, but they have rarely been depicted as engaged in sexual activity. Nor have sexual organs usually been the image’s primary/exclusive focus, rather than just an important part of the overall composition. This is one reason why in art history, even in the twentieth century, such naked or semi-naked figures have basically been classified as “the nude”, not sex. The term “sex” is not even indexed in the two classic histories of art, Gardner and Janson.<sup>17</sup> From time to time the adjective “erotic” occurs in histories of Western art, but this is always attached to descriptions of particular works, rather than to an epoch’s and/or society’s entire genre.

There are some possible exceptions. Indian art has a well known “tradition of eroticism” which, for example, depicts pairs of men and women (mithunas) embracing or engaged in sexual intercourse in an extraordinary range of positions. Still, Indian art is “Asian” not Western art. Further, this tradition is usually classified as a basically religious, not secular, phenomenon, with the figures seen as deriving from the Hindu and Buddhist religion and rooted in the symbolization of fertility and the propagation of life. Another interesting case are the rooms in ancient Pompeii, which contained depictions of mortals in sexual intercourse with mythological figures. Still, these rooms were hidden at the time—art historians call them the “secret rooms.” They were also apparently linked to mystical religious cults—the rites of the Greek god Dionysius (Roman Bacchus). They are now housed in the Archaeological Museum of Naples, viewable only by adults. Sexual intercourse was sometimes depicted on ancient Greek pottery, but that was over two millennia ago. This handful of possible exceptions underlines the point that sexual intercourse has not, in the last two millennia, been a mainstream topic of Western art until Contemporary Art.

Clearly in depicting sexual intercourse Contemporary Art is influenced by other widely available components of modern culture such as pornographic magazines and web sites.

A third topic is the nuclear family, but typically depicted with a critical or satirical edge as a troubled institution (16% of all topics). Serenely confident families and individual family members, of the kind depicted by Norman Rockwell, are so rare as to be almost taboo. This topic—the problematic family—also seems a new genre in art history. While troubled families have obviously existed in actuality throughout history, in the past artists or patrons have not wished to depict them in a sufficiently systematic way as to make them a recognizable genre.

The fourth topic (16% of all topics) is the decorative/mostly pure design. Grouped under the umbrella of “abstract” art, this topic was seen by an “avant garde” in the twentieth century as the apogee of art, superior in almost every way to other specific topics depicted in representative or figurative art. The anthropologist Franz Boas even argued that the aesthetic core of “primitive art” too was formalistic abstraction. These claims are now widely seen as not only exaggerated, but as having alienated much of the broader public.<sup>18</sup> Thus in Contemporary Art nowadays as it is displayed in Chelsea the abstract/decorative has settled into a more modest, though still important, position as (just) one of five themes.

A fifth topic is raw/basic materials, either of nature (wood, stone etc) or manmade (steel I beams, plastic structures), along with a related interest in the basic constituents of our world. This topic also clearly has affinities with the first topic of landscapes as well as with discoveries in modern science especially molecular biology.<sup>19</sup>

Considering these five topics suggests a general picture that is far more interesting and complex than could be derived from some view that the art is imposed on people. On the contrary the topics are mostly rooted in modern life and in the complex and varied ways that people (artists and audience) experience today’s world. For example, environmental landscapes seem rooted in post 1960s alarm about the deteriorating natural environment. Landscapes as “beautiful views” gained a massive fillip from the suburbanization of life that has been ongoing now for two hundred years. Sexual intercourse seems to mimic current interest in pornography and modern feminist themes. The troubled nuclear family is a basically new art genre.

<sup>17</sup> Gardner’s *Art Through the Ages* (Fred Kleiner and Christin Mamiya, Wadsworth, 12th edition, 2006); H.W. Janson et. Al., *History of Art* (Pearson, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Gardner’s comments that “The prevalence of abstraction and the formal experimentation in much of postwar art had alienated the public.”

<sup>19</sup> The concern with raw material also represents a formalist interest in the material of art, expanding the discourse on “process art” that began in the 60’s and that rejected the traditional academic material of art like marble and bronze and sought to examine materials more relevant to life.

The decorative, downgraded now to a more realistic place as one among several motifs and currents, is a perennially popular genre in art. The interest in basic materials (natural and fabricated and in the constituents of the world seems to derive from the stunning advances made by molecular biology, mixed with interest in the landscape environment.

### **What the Audience See in the Works**<sup>20</sup>

Interviews with samples of the audience for particular shows likewise suggest that these themes flourish because they resonate with the audience's lives in an ongoing, creative, and interactive way. This is the best interpretation of the main reasons that the audience offer when asked why they like a particular work. It undercuts the idea that the dominance of market forces and commercialism has led to a homogenization of the audience's views, which mechanically reproduce a set of meanings somehow attached to the works.

### **Lisa Yuskavage**

Consider two case studies. First, Lisa Yuskavage at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in June, 2003.

Yuskavage paints usually buxom women many of whom seem absorbed with sex. Sometimes they are scrutinizing their breasts, buttocks, or crotches. (Figures 4-6) The artist says that her work is autobiographical and that it focuses on depicting personal subject matter about which she was at least embarrassed and verging on ashamed. My work, she said, "has always been about things in myself that I feel incredibly embarrassed by....I never intended to paint just nudes. I was and always have been interested in depicting intense psychological states. Obviously, nudes are a way to show this."

In a random sample of 20 members of the audience for the show, sixty-two percent said they liked the work. All the women in this group liked the work because they empathized with what they believed Yuskavage was saying about women's private feelings about their bodies and lives. In general they liked the fact that the artist was not idealizing women, but rather presenting them in private situations where, semi-dressed, they are musing about their sexuality and their physical imperfections and are engaged in less than happy thoughts related to those topics.

<sup>20</sup> In order to study systematically the views of the audience, we started with the sample of shows selected for the study of the content of the art (Table 1) and then focused on a sub-group of these, 14 so far. For each show in this sub-group we interviewed 20 audience members chosen at random. Our first criterion for selecting shows for this sub-group was to ensure that the topics (content) of the shows were representative of the topics that our content-analysis had revealed as typical of Chelsea Art (Table 1) After grouping shows by content, we selected equal numbers of shows at random from each group.



Figure 4. Couch, 2003



Figure 5: Lupe and Lola 2003



Figure 6: Copy of Babie 1

A woman in her later 20s:

It's gripping, very beautiful, and disturbing. There is something sad about the women, something about their imperfections. They are being caught off guard.

An Asian woman in her early 40s who lives in Belgium and visits New York on occasion:

I like her. She gives the woman as it is, not better, not worse. Also, it's like a fairy tale. In fairy tales, young girls are not so happy. I saw several works from her (LY) in the past e.g. an exhibit in SoHo. She's a bit like John Currin. I like his work too, it's the same, like fairy tales. But there is something behind the façade, it's deeper, there is the history of the person, the drama.

Men liked the work almost as much as women but for different reasons. Not surprisingly, none of the men were interested in the way Yuskavage portrayed women's inner feelings about sex and their bodies. Instead, they mentioned technique, or the work as giving an erotic charge, or its place in art history.

A male in his 40s, originally from Japan, who lives in Queens, and works as a graphic artist, found the work erotic, and liked the technique too.

I like figurative painting well done. Her technique is good. She has a world she experiences. Also, it's sexuality, and that is always attractive. It's erotic.

It's interesting with the return of figurative painting. It's very easy to do something old fashioned or not interesting, so people [i.e. artists] have to find some kind of concept to sustain it [the art]. She's a great painter but today you have to have something else. In her case, there is a certain weirdness, you just have to differentiate yourself

About a third of the audience disliked, or were indifferent to, the work. In all cases this was because they did not see how the work related to their lives, or if they did, saw it doing so in a way that was uninteresting:

A man in his mid 30s thought the paintings were banal:

What do I think of these? Horrible! Do you know what "Precious Moments" are? They are little kitsch figures in Kansas e.g. kids praying.

Lisa Y's work reminds me of those. She's a one hit wonder, she can paint well enough [points to *Babie I*] It's nicely done. But they don't seem to have any meaning. I read a review that said its "postmodern sexism; she is isolating the individual parts of women." But I just think its kitsch.

### **Nigel Cooke**

The work of Nigel Cooke, a 31 year old British artist, was on display at the Andrea Rosen gallery in April, 2003. The works consisted of two types of landscape. The first are littered with man-made debris--the rubble of abandoned buildings, severed heads, skulls and insects, and abandoned cars, with nature growing

over this matter (e.g *Silva Morosa*). The second are mostly desolate, post apocalyptic scenes, sometimes with an occasional sign of life such as a flower or solitary butterfly (e.g. *Chrysalis*).

The artist commented:

I'm often told that my paintings look like certain places in the world, some that I've visited, others that I haven't. Mexico City, Sri Lanka, Central Illinois, Iceland, and Rome have all been mentioned recently. It's because in all these places there are areas where human constructs and natural processes have collapsed into each other through neglect or other kinds of change.



Figure 7: Nigel Cooke, *Silva Morosa*



Figure 8: Nigel Cooke, Chrysalis

The views of a sample (20) of the audience for Cook's show mirrored fairly closely the artist's expressed intentions. The vast majority, 80%, liked the show, in all cases but one because it resonated with their own concerns about a degraded and threatened natural environment.<sup>21</sup> About half of these respondents focused on those works which seemed to depict the aftermath of an apocalyptic attack on the landscape.

A male retiree who lives on Manhattan's Upper West Side commented:

This is the way the world ends, not with a bang, but a whimper. I didn't say that, T.S. Eliot did. [Points to a little red flower at the base of a picture that otherwise shows a mostly blackened and devastated landscape.] The artist is telling us: 'That's the only life that's managed to survive.' So maybe there's some hope but it's overwhelmingly weighed down. I like it [the picture]. But would I like to live with it. No! It's too monumental, the emotional impact, you walk in you get sledgehammered. It's post-apocalyptic.

A female professor of speech pathology, who lives in Manhattan:

It's devastating, scary. It looks like it's [the picture] saying 'What have we done to ourselves?' There's just a little glimmer of hope. It's interesting that in most of the paintings there are little brains and birds. The birds are hopeful, the brains I'm not sure [Do I like it?] It's interesting art, makes you think. I don't want to live with it! But I'm glad there are galleries and museums where I can go to look at it.

The other half of those who liked the show said that it reminded them of specific places, debris-littered or decayed, in the current city or broader megalopolis. These included graffiti marked sections of the inner city, or access roads to the freeway where litter gathered.

For example, a young female designer from Orange County, California, who now lives in Brooklyn and comes to Chelsea every month:

It's interesting. It reminds me of growing up in Southern California. [Points to *Silva Morosa*] This one reminds me of a place where you get on the Pacific Coast Highway to go to Dana Point, South of Orange County. [Draws attention to the trash and other debris in the woods in *Silva Morosa*] The point where you see that is when you're driving along on the

<sup>21</sup> Just under half of these also stressed the artistic merit of the work.

entry way. It blends the picturesque and the reality of the scene and also it's interesting to look for something intriguing in the trash. There's a lot of areas of California like that.

When I went to Europe I was shocked to see how much graffiti there was there too. I thought you only had that in Southern California. I remember coming into Paris and being shocked to see the graffiti just off the highway.

Her male companion, an artist originally from Korea, found the art reminiscent of Detroit where he grew up:

It [the work] seems very familiar. One of my friends in grade school did a project on graffiti in Detroit. [Points to *Silva Morosa*.] This reminds me of the project. The landscapes are a bridge between Rothko/abstract expressionism and realistic/representational art.

The audience who did not like the work, a fifth of the sample, just found the subject matter to be too downbeat:

A male in his 40s, a freelance writer, said:

I don't like this. It's depressing. I'm the wrong guy to ask, there's other stuff that is really nice. A few blocks down [i.e. in another gallery] there's a Spanish guy [artist] who is interesting and does nice, bright colors. You should go and see his work.

A female actress in her early 30s, who lives in Chelsea and comes to the galleries about once a month, said:

It doesn't grab me, it doesn't hold my attention. [Ponders for a few minutes] I've realized why

I don't like it, it's very cold and two-dimensional. It's post-apocalyptic troll art of the 60s.

Thus the audience for Cooke's show, like that for Yuskavage's work, demonstrate the active way the audience typically react to the works.

## Conclusion

The current Contemporary Art gallery scene in Chelsea is too complex and interesting to be adequately grasped through a single theoretical lens. Approaches that stress the commercialization and (in stronger versions) the commodification of art are consistent with some features of Chelsea such as the agglomeration of commercial galleries, the rise of the global gallery, and the threat that the commercial real estate market may replace galleries with residential condominiums and/or stores selling more profitable merchandise. Yet some of Chelsea's most interesting features do not fit this model. These include Chelsea's role as providing a giant free art show for people few of whom are "consumers" (i.e. purchasers) of art, its place as a flexible and open structure of opportunity for artists that far surpasses the opportunities offered by museums, and the fact that the vast majority of galleries are not global or star but small, boutique-like operations selling unique products each one one of which proclaims its individuality and the creativity of the artist who produced it. Above all, a commodification theory fails to jibe with the active way the audience attributes meaning to the art and with the way the audience often scrutinizes the art for ways in which it may be significant for their lives.

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