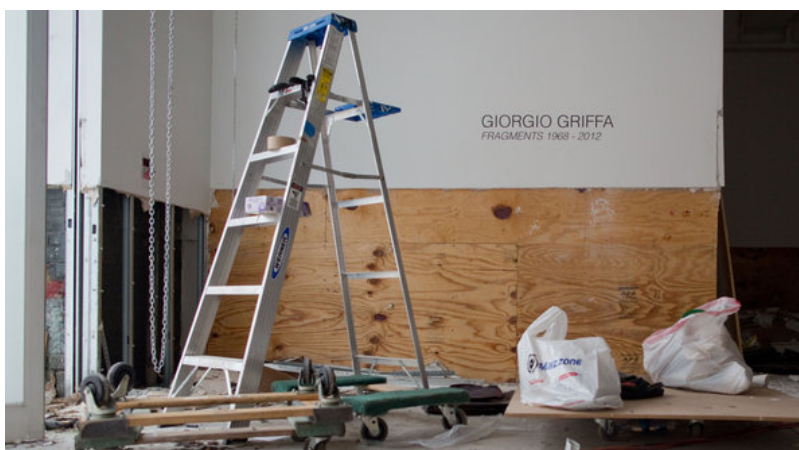


The New York Times

Chelsea Art Galleries Struggle to Restore and Reopen

By ROBERTA SMITH

Published: November 2, 2012



The Casey Kaplan Gallery is recovering from damage caused by Hurricane Sandy.

There are many pleasures to being an art critic in New York. One, in my view, is definitely the late Saturday afternoon crunch in Chelsea, that day's-end rush through a last few galleries, seeing shows and squirreling away experiences and ideas just before they all close for the weekend.

I had a great final 60 minutes in Chelsea last Saturday and, consequently, one of the last looks at what would suddenly become, on Tuesday, the old, pre-Sandy Chelsea gallery scene. That day, as I started hearing reports of flooding in the neighborhood, some of the art I had seen on Saturday became increasingly vivid in my mind, as did the weird thought that I might be one of the last people who would ever see it.

I had enjoyed Eberhard Havekost's show at Anton Kern on West 20th Street, a don't-pin-me-down stylistic array that gave this German painter a sharper, slyer edge than he had ever had for me. There were hard-edge abstractions, diaphanous images of sunsets and one quirky, crusty Expressionist exercise that seemed laden with enough paint to make the rest of the show.

On West 21st Street, a small new gallery named Guided by Invoices (talk about sly) had been showing small abstractions on Masonite, enlivened by spurts of spray paint and rugged lines that appeared to be more sawed than incised. They were by a virtual unknown: Rafael Vega, a 2012 graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, making his New York debut.

Farther down the block, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery had been offering an unusually gimmick-free show by Olafur Eliasson, with photographs of Iceland's hot springs and volcanoes and a wall-to-wall floor piece made of large chunks of dark

obsidian, or volcanic glass. It was a welcome alternative to the immersive, perception-distorting environments that have become an Eliasson specialty.

One of the most beautiful and surprising shows had been next door at Casey Kaplan: a four-decade survey of the paintings of Giorgio Griffa, a little-known Italian artist born in 1936 who had not shown in New York since the early 1970s. His sparse, plain-spoken works constitute a kind of visual counting: simple brush marks, lines or bands of radiant color applied one after another to expanses of raw, unstretched canvas. They expanded history on several fronts for me, adding to my understanding of European abstraction of the late 1960s, speaking to the efforts of American painters as disparate as Alan Shields and Agnes Martin, and presaging the low-tech painting of younger artists like Sergej Jensen.

I had left Chelsea, as I often do, feeling a little high at the sight of different kinds of art made at different points in artists' lives: starting out, continuing, approaching the end. Whatever you think of the actual art on any given day in Chelsea, regulars to the neighborhood are privy to a lot of human endeavor on the part of artists and art dealers. It is a gift.

That point was brought home with special intensity when I returned on Wednesday and then again on Thursday, witnessing devastation everywhere, and also the purposeful reaction to it. On Wednesday, to the thunderous clatter of water pumps and generators, ashen-faced, sometimes teary-eyed art dealers, along with their staff members and often their artists, were pulling sodden furniture, computers and irreplaceable archival documentation and artworks from their dark, water-blasted galleries.

There were huge piles of wet, crumpled cardboard on the street. "You know, most people look at this and think it's just cardboard," said Michael Jenkins, a partner in Sikkema Jenkins & Company, on West 22nd Street. "They don't realize that all of it was wrapped around works of art."

At Bonakdar, there was no sign of the Eliasson photographs, just the long, Donald-Judd-style wooden table and bench that have become friendly landmarks on the ground floor, severely warped by water. At Kaplan, the front desk had already been removed, and the Griffa paintings were, I was told, at the restorer.

Everywhere there were signs of water's relentlessness, but also odd exceptions. At Guided by Invoices, which sits as far west as you can go on 21st Street, on the corner of the West Side Highway, the Vega show was still hanging, and the gallery was almost completely dry. Something — perhaps unusually watertight gates — had saved it.

Anton Kern was locked when I went by, but through the window there were no Havekost paintings to be seen, only what would become the increasingly familiar sight of works on paper spread out on tables and the floor for drying.

I ventured north to find that the floods had not touched the galleries on West 29th Street, and then back down to 27th Street, between 11th Avenue and the West Side Highway, where the string of small galleries nestled in the south side of the old Terminal Warehouse building — Derek Eller, Wallspace, Winkleman, Foxy Production and Jeff Bailey — had lost huge amounts of art when the building's common basement flooded.

At every turn there was evidence of salvage and conservation, as well as rebuilding. Even on Wednesday workers were cutting away ruined drywall in galleries so it could be replaced; on Thursday trucks from lumber yards were delivering drywall and plywood. At CRG at 548 West 22nd Street, a floor that had been slick with water on Wednesday was a day later arrayed with tables for drying works on paper. Upstairs, where the Artist's Book Fair was to have been held this weekend but had been canceled, the space had been converted into a kind of art hospital for drying out.

For all these efforts, it was easy to wonder, on first encounter, if Chelsea would ever come back as an art district. And when I talked to dealers about what they thought, reactions were mixed. Asya Geisberg, whose 23rd Street gallery was flooded, said: "I worry about the longevity of Chelsea for smaller galleries. We don't have the staff or resources to deal with this."

"My artists are helping me out," she added. "Other people are helping me out, but it's not enough."

On 22nd Street Andrew Kreps confirmed that he had lost most of his inventory in his flooded basement, and my next, perhaps undiplomatic, question to him was "Will you close?"

But his immediate reaction was "No." James Yohe, another 22nd Street gallerist, put it more romantically, "We're here because we're true believers."

Mr. Kaplan said he was determined to reopen and to continue his Griffa show when he did. "I have to do this for him," he said, referring to Mr. Griffa. "He's been kind of written out of art history."

"We won't come back in the same way — we might be on one leg financially," he added. "But we will."

His commitment was echoed on 19th Street, where David Zwirner was overseeing an immense conservation effort spread, in his case, through three large spaces. He said his faith in Chelsea was unshaken. Referring to both the density of Chelsea's galleries and their lack of entrance fees, he said, "It's the craziest freebie in the world." He sounded as if he didn't want to miss a minute of it.