L.E.S. IS MORE
No longer Chelsea's seedy little sister; Manhattan's Lower East Side art scene is moving on up. BY DAVID COLMAN

When was it exactly?

It depends who you ask. For Salon 94's Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, it was 2007, the first time she walked up Freeman Alley, on her way to dinner with Marilyn Minter. For the Museum of Modern Art. PS. 1's Klaus Biesenbach, it was about 2004, when he stumbled into Reena Spaulings's gallery on Grand Street and wondered where he was. For Bureau's Gabrielle Giattino, it was back in 2001, after Michele Macarone opened her space with a full-building installation by Christoph Büchel. Angela Westwater can trump them all: The longtime co-owner of Sperone Westwater remembers feeling that Manhattan's Lower East Side had shifted into some new, major gear when she went to visit Roy Lichtenstein at his studio on the Bowery in 1970.

Whenever it sprouted, there is no doubt that the Lower East Side art scene is now in full bloom. Once characterized by scruffy art projects and meta-galleries that felt as if they had corned into the area's cramped, low-ceilinged storefronts under the auspices of the Homestead Act, today the neighborhood prides that Chelsea has not cornered the market on Benjamin Moore Decorators White—or on name-brand architects. Sprinkled throughout the 1002 zip code, but increasingly organized around Bowery at Rivington and Orchard at Hester, more than 60 galleries fuel the L.E.S. scene, many of them opened within the past three years.

The area received an important injection of credibility when Chelsea's Lehmann Maupin gallery, which represents big-name artists like Tracey Emin and Gilbert and George, opened a second location there in 2007. "Opening here was an opportunity to appeal to a more cutting-edge, younger crowd," says Rachel Lehmann, a partner in the gallery. "Now, we see the critics coming down here on Sunday." That same year, the Bowery Hotel colonized what had once been considered Skid Row. And, just as Chelsea had Dax's flagship luring the art world to the neighborhood back in the Nineties, the Bowery got its own cultural heavyweights, when the New Museum moved into its new seven-story home, designed by the Japanese firm SANAA. This, plus the Cooper Union's Thom Mayne-designed academic building at the Bowery's north end, and the now Norman Foster-designed Sperone Westwater gallery, explains why architecture wags have taken to calling this once destitute stretch of pavement "Pritzker Place." Greenberg Rohatyn
is opening her biggest Salon 94 space there in September, and earlier this year the street received Keith McNally's blessing with his pizza restaurant, Polinick. As the Bowery gets glammed up, the south end of Orchard Street is trying to stay true to its anarchic roots, but gentrification is also happening there. Most significant, the cerebral heyday of the gallery as theoretical art project seems to be pretty much on its last legs. The fabled Orchard—the experimental, experimental art-space-thingy, run for three years by 12 partners who probed the links between art, commerce, and politics with sharp-edged group shows—is gone. Spauldings's B-bop mantle has been spirited away by On Stellar Rays, which this year managed to get four artists into "Greater New York," at P.S. 1. The free-floating endeavor called Dispatch—whose directors would find spaces, then create and curate shows—has become the solid-sounding Bureau, a real gallery with a street-level space, an artist roster, and a schedule. And the cool but confusing Rental gallery has been renamed Untitled and moved from its weird East Broadway location to a big space nearby.

Still, abstract thinking hasn't completely given way to polished concrete. Michele Macaroni decamped to the West Village, and Mirabelle Marden's pioneering Rivington Annex (where star artists like Ida Applebroog and Vivian Maier were on the scene, but the four artist-partners behind Canada are still showing six geniuses, work, like the obsessively geometric paintings of Yksi Jane (a beehive reclusion in western Massachusetts), or the large West African idol made of wood, clay, and plaster designed by Polish artist Joanna Malinowska with the intention of making the world implode. ("It didn't work," Suzanne Butler, one of Canada's partners, notes drily). And plenty of galleries—an impressive number of them women, including Lisa Cooley, Laurel Gitlen, Rachel Uffner, Participant Inc.'s Lia Gangitano, and On Stellar Rays' Candice Maday—are cultivating a colorful DIY aesthetic that permeates everything from performance to painting. The hilarious videos shown last year at Participant by the Los Angeles performance collective My Barbarian put a comic spin on the banalities of modern life. In one episode a woman tries to marry her extraterrestrial lover to get a better insurance plan, but is turned down because the alien is the same sex as she.

"It's more improvised here, and that's what I like," says Biesenbach, who moved to the nearby Seward Park co-op complex four years ago. When it came to selecting works for "Greater New York," he notes that it was no accident that so many of the show's artists came from L.E.S. galleries. "A little over a year ago, I was walking up Orchard Street, and I noticed a pirate standing on the street. He said 'Come downstairs!' So I went down the street, and there was a crazy performance by Debo Eilers; then I went upstairs, and there was a fantastic show by Tommy Hartung. Both of them ended up in 'Greater New York.'"

Hartung's was fairly minimal: a glowing fish tank inhabited by two live koi and a video re-creating a 1973 BBC documentary about evolution. Meanwhile, the Eilers piece, frau-Oh-Oh Fundamental, was a spoof of art school that included a smoke machine, seedy green lights, and phonemes, as well as a cast of young artists selling things like T-shirts, pills, and one-night stands. Eilers stood by in what Maday describes as a "hoodie G-string."

But a big component of the scene's anarchic oomph is not in the art but in the framework around it. "Part of it is that the small physical size of the galleries," explains Cooley. "When you come in here, you talk to me. It's like those eight-seat restaurants where the chef brings you your food, or how the Swiss Institute and Margaret Lee had a crazy dance party at this space on Canal, and Lee thought, Hey, this could be a space for me; and now that's her gallery, 179 Canal. So it's really a social connectivity that leads to inventiveness—you know, Hey, wouldn't this be a great idea?"

Unlike Chelsea, there's a scarcity of high ceilings on the Lower East Side's tenement-lined streets. The focus here is on thinking outside the white box, for artists and dealers alike. "I could never move," explains Miguel Abreu, whose claustrophobic, postage stamp-size space at Hester and Orchard was one of the first in the neighborhood, and whose high-quality, small-scale conceptual program has helped define Lower Orchard art. "It would be a complete and total betrayal of everything I've worked for, in a spiritual sense."

So if the perfect big white cube became available—say, next to the New Museum—he would of course have to say no, right?

Writer David Cohen’s guide to gallery cruising on New York’s Lower East Side:

1. Lisa Cooley
24 Orchard Street, 212-475-7771, lisacooley.com
A dealer who buys art from a young artist and shows them for the first time, Lisa Cooley is best known for her space in the LES. She was one of the first galleries in the neighborhood, and her shows are always fresh and innovative.

2. Miguel Abreu
26 Orchard Street, 212-256-1774, miguelabreu.com
One of the most respected galleries on the East Side, Miguel Abreu has a vast collection of works by renowned artists. He has been in the business for over 20 years and is known for his unique approach to art.

3. Rachel Uffner
27 Orchard Street, 212-941-1908, racheluffner.com
Rachel Uffner’s gallery is known for its diverse collection of works. She has been in the business for over 10 years and is known for her commitment to emerging artists.

4. Simon Preston
244 Bowery Street, 212-302-6355, simonpreston.com
Simon Preston is a well-known gallery in the LES. It was founded in the late 1980s and has since become one of the most respected galleries in the neighborhood. Known for its innovative and contemporary works, it is a must-see for any art lover.

5. Lehmann Maupin
204 Chrystie Street, 212-475-4064, lehmannmaupin.com
Lehmann Maupin is one of the most respected galleries in the LES. Founded in 1983, it has been at the forefront of the art world for over 30 years. Known for its innovative and diverse collection of works, it is a must-see for any art lover.

6. Canadian Art
25 Chrystie Street, 212-226-4300, canadianart.com
Canadian Art is a well-known gallery in the LES. It has been in the business for over 20 years and is known for its innovative and diverse collection of works. It is a must-see for any art lover.

7. On Stellar Rays
58 Orchard Street, 212-255-3030, onstellarrays.com
On Stellar Rays is one of the most respected galleries in the LES. Known for its innovative and diverse collection of works, it is a must-see for any art lover.

8. Pace
278 Broadway, 212-475-2010, pace.com
Pace is one of the most respected galleries in the LES. Known for its innovative and diverse collection of works, it is a must-see for any art lover.

9. Steven Kasher
265 Bowery Street, 212-966-9292, stevenkasher.com
This gallery is known for its innovative and diverse collection of works. Known for its commitment to emerging artists, it is a must-see for any art lover.

10. Participant
244 East Broadway, 212-255-4899, participantny.com
Participant is one of the most respected galleries in the LES. Known for its innovative and diverse collection of works, it is a must-see for any art lover.

11. Untitled
20 Orchard Street, 212-226-1000, untitled.com
Untitled is one of the most respected galleries in the LES. Known for its innovative and diverse collection of works, it is a must-see for any art lover.

12. RENTAL
20 Orchard Street, 212-226-1000, rental.com
RENTAL is a well-known gallery in the LES. Known for its innovative and diverse collection of works, it is a must-see for any art lover.

13. Fine Art Source
180 Bowery Street, 212-966-9292, fineartsources.com
Fine Art Source is a well-known gallery in the LES. Known for its innovative and diverse collection of works, it is a must-see for any art lover.