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Galleries Being Galleries, But More So

by Roberta Smith
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Excerpt from the article...

There are several ways to unpack the first New York Gallery Week, which will take place across the city in 50 art galleries, 5 alternative spaces and a park (the High Line) from Friday to Monday. Most obviously, this four-day “week” – with its coordinated solo exhibitions, special events and extended gallery hours – is a promotional ploy. But it’s also an impressive number of galleries doing what they usually do, only more intensely and overtly, in a legitimate effort to take back the spotlight too often hogged by art fairs and auctions. And it’s a somewhat off-putting assertion of hipness and exclusivity, what with only 50 of the city’s several hundred galleries invited to participate.

But, bottom line, just having so many galleries open on Sunday and Monday – many with intriguing talks and other events on offer – is a luxury that’s nothing to sniff at.

The idea for New York Gallery Week came to Casey Kaplan, the owner of an eponymous gallery on West 21st Street, about a year ago, during the post-bust doldrums. He felt a need to soften what he saw as the “icy veneer” of many art galleries (not least his own, one might point out) and a desire to emphasize the collegial rather than the competitive aspect of the gallery world.

“It seemed like time to put the focus back on artists and their exhibitions,” he said in a telephone interview on Monday, “and to emphasize the educational and curatorial ways that galleries function.”

Mr. Kaplan joined forces with David Zwirner, of the Zwirner gallery on West 19th Street, and they hashed out the details with a core group of other dealers. A few dozen more were invited to participate, and all who agreed were asked to schedule solo shows for the weekend and to try to organize – judging from the list – a related, appropriately elevating event.

The participants cover the gamut of Manhattan gallery neighborhoods, from the Upper to the Lower East Side, and SoHo to the South and West Villages, but roughly two-thirds are concentrated in and near Chelsea. Several of the shows are solo debuts, including (yikes!) that of the white-hot clothing designer Rick Owens at Salon 94. Others focus on historical material, like Mr. Zwirner’s display of Edward Kienholz’s first environmental tableau, “Roxy’s,” from 1961-62. This emblematic work – a characteristically macabre rendition of a brothel – is owned by a German collector who is now selling it and has not been seen in New York since the artist’s 1996 retrospective at the Whitney Museum. Nyehaus will feature paintings from the 1950s and ’60s by John Altoon (1925-69), a founder of the Los Angeles art scene, while Matthew Marks Gallery is devoting its West 24th Street space to the painted wood plinths of the sometime Minimalist Anne Truitt (1921-2004).

A few serendipitous coincidences add bulk: the inauguration of expanded space at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise; the opening of the new gallery of Tracy Williams Ltd., which has relocated to West 23rd Street from West Fourth Street and will start things off with a show of the veteran Conceptual tableau-ist Barbara Bloom as well as the unveiling of “Viewing Station,” a new site-specific artwork by the British artist Richard Galpin on the High Line.