Q&A: Leanne Stella, on Founding Harlem's Art in FLUX Pop-Up Gallery

By Candace Wheeler
Published Tue., Aug. 14 2012 at 1:05 PM

When Leanne Stella moved to Harlem last fall, she was on a personal quest to discover the area's art scene. She quickly realized that her neighborhood was filled with local artists and performers with no space to showcase their work. Enter Art in FLUX, a pop-up gallery that began this spring that gives local artists a chance to introduce themselves to the community without gallery fees.

Art in FLUX opened in the Morellino Building on Adam Clayton Powell for the second time this summer to take advantage of the bustling corner of 118th Street. We stopped by this month's exhibit, "Small," on opening night to chat with Leanne Stella about the pop-up art gallery business, upcoming exhibitions, and what makes the Harlem art scene unique.

What's the meaning of the name Art in FLUX?

I came up with the name to reflect the idea of the project -- especially it being a pop-up gallery. It should always be changing, and "flux" means change; as the project grows, we should consider that it could take any different route. Every opening, we have some sort of music, poetry, or book launch. I think it's important to have this cross of creative people, and it's been really interesting to get people talking and have them overlapping.

Where did the idea for Art in FLUX come from?

I've lived in New York City for about 20 years, but I just moved to Harlem in the fall. I was so excited to find all the artists, both visual and performing, that were living and working up here. But it was something that I was definitely looking for because I like to go to plays and galleries. Eventually, I started being invited to a few brownstone galleries, which is a hidden sort of thing that you don't know about unless someone invites you. I felt that the artists that are living and working here should have the opportunity to show and sell in the communities where they live and work, and I didn't see a lot of that happening.

Why do you think there aren't as many spaces in Harlem for artists to exhibit their
work?

I think that part of it is that Harlem real estate is priced a little ahead of itself, which doesn't allow artists, designers, or other creative people the opportunity to build a neighborhood like a Hoboken, Williamsburg, or Soho. We're trying to work with landlords in a creative way so that we can provide that opportunity for artists to be seen and for people to be walking down the street and see that creative energy and engage with the art.

Right now you're in the Morellino Bulding. Where were your previous exhibits?

We've been in two spaces so far. This one, which we thought we would only be in for two months, but we've been getting to know the landlord, and so we extended our stay. Right now, we're actually working with him to develop this building as an arts destination, because there are five empty spaces here. We will probably be doing some more things in the adjacent spaces over the next few months. I think this is really a pocket between Lenox and Douglass that could be a nice connector.

Before we were in the Morellino building, we worked with a nonprofit organization down the block called Artistic Noise, which works with teens that are incarcerated who are coming out of the system to do art projects and teach them how to be curators.

Have you previously worked in galleries?

My background is primarily event planning, which I've been doing in New York City for about 20 years, mostly consumer, antique, art, and garden shows. I've also worked within the nonprofit world with a focus on youth-related things. I'm kind of driving the project with my events background and understanding the concept of a pop-up where you come in temporarily and fast. There are challenges because it's a tight budget, and you have to do things quickly, but it comes together.

What has been the community response?

Really positive. The community is really happy that we're here and that was part of the reason we even decided to stay in this space. We've gotten a lot of support either from people wanting to show in the gallery or help us with little things, and that's been amazing. I don't think that with anything I've ever worked on that I've gotten this much positive feedback and support. It really feels as though people want it to succeed.

Can you talk a little bit about this month's exhibit, "Small"?

What we wanted to do over the summer was introduce a lot of the Harlem artists so we decided to do a small artwork show, 19 artists, with 17 of them from Harlem. We're starting to introduce an occasional guest artist from another area just to expand our audience. We wanted to be able to introduce a lot of artists to the community and also provide affordable, fun works for the summertime. Everything in this show is between $50 and $2,000. There is quite a bit that you could walk home with, even if it's a small New York City apartment or a suitcase back to Europe.

How did you find the artists for this exhibit?

Some applied online with us; they started to hear about what we were doing and applied online. A
few of the artists had exhibited in our previous two shows, and the rest were sort of just through connecting with some of the artists that have started to build a network for us.

**What role do you see Art in FLUX playing in the Harlem art scene?**

I see us as being the conduit between property owners and creative people, and I think that's our real niche and advantage. In this economy, there are plenty of artists of all genres that want to do things, but they can't because they can't afford a 10-year lease. If we can create a structure that landlords will trust, then they might lend us the space for one month, three months, or six months. It gives the artists a test market, and it's a great opportunity for the landlord to have a tenant.

**What else is in the works for Art in FLUX?**

We're working on a few collaborations and are actually partnering up with a local theater group, Black in the Bubble, through the fall. It will be a gallery collaboration with their play that supports the message of diversity, and throughout the month, we will have talk-backs at the gallery space. That will open October 3.

Our exhibit for next month is called "Bedtime Confessions," and it's a little bit different from anything we've ever done. One of the artists is from Harlem, and the other is from Bolivia. Lea, who is from Harlem, creates these sculptures of beds, and most of them sit on a table, but I think she's going to create ones that are full-sized. Each of the beds has a pun or story to it, like *The Princess and the Pea* with a twist. The other artist was a priest in Bolivia, and he does these mini-confessionals. He left the priesthood because he wasn't happy with the things that happened, and now he creates sculptural objects that he calls mini-confessions.

"Small" is open through September 13, Wednesday through Saturday, noon to 7 p.m., and Sunday, noon to 5 p.m. You can check out the exhibit at 1961 Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard and learn about future events at [artinluxharlem.com](http://artinluxharlem.com).