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## Art-in-Flux- Leanne Stella

### Leanne Stella, Founder of Art In Flux, Uncovers Harlem's Thriving Art Scene

One of the greatest things about New York City is that it is constantly changing. Everything is in flux. Downtown areas have gone from sketchy to practically unaffordable within a matter of years, and the neighbourhood under the brightest spotlight of change this time around is Harlem (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem>).

But Harlem isn't giving up its hood reputation in favour of luxe just yet, but rather fostering and expanding a culture of artists and creativity that has been there all along. One of the people helping to bring this about is Leanne Stella, founder of Art In Flux (<http://www.artinfluxharlem.com>). After moving to Harlem, she was determined to uncover her new neighbourhood's art scene. What she found was that the area was ripe with artists and performers but with nothing cohesive to bring them together. Leanne Stella founded Art in Flux, a creative community manifesting through pop-up galleries, shows, and interactive events through which Harlem artists can showcase their work and introduce themselves to the rest of the art world without gallery fees. Through Leanne's vision, Art in Flux is fostering Harlem's growing art scene, bringing the neighbourhood's creatives under the spotlight and stimulating a vibrant community of collaboration where the boundaries of different art forms merge through innovation.

Creative Mapping met up with Leanne to find out more about the visionary creative behind Art in Flux and what Harlem's growing creative underbelly is really like. Leanne's words might just make you want to pick up and move there just to be a part of this thriving and intimate creative community.

**"The artists come from a vast background of cultures but also there is diversity in their practice, styles, mediums. The artists are very supportive of each other." - Leanne Stella, Art in Flux**

#### **CM: Where are you from?**

I grew up in a family of 7 kids in Northern New Jersey just 20 minutes outside of NYC. My mom would frequently take us (especially the 4 youngest ones) with her to museums in Manhattan and roaming around

SOHO exploring artists' lofts.

**CM: Your creative background? Did you go to art school?**

I did not go to art school but was always surrounded by the arts and creative people. My mother started a business producing antique and art fairs and eventually these included some of the biggest antiques fairs on the East Coast. I ran the business for 15 years up until 2007, but my interest was leaning more and more towards contemporary art. The antiques business had also passed its peak while contemporary art is still on an upward curve so I followed my passion.

**CM: Tell us about your relationship with Harlem?**

Your love affair with it?

Harlem is an amazing place. Out of all the places I have lived in New York and outside of New York, Harlem is the place where I have felt most part of a community. When I embarked on my pop-up project, I also made a point of meeting everyone!

**CM: Can you tell us more about the fabric and culture of Harlem?**

Harlem is not only a very artistic place with many people in the arts living and working here but it's a place where you engage with your neighbours. People help each other carry groceries and shovel snow and look out for each other's kids. In Harlem you don't just wave, you stop and ask "how are you doing?" You share recipes on the grocery line and where you bought your coat.

**CM: How did you start your career?**

Which one? My first career at the age of 19, just out of culinary arts school was owning and operating restaurants. I bought closed or run down restaurants and turned them into fresh, interesting profitable establishments. By the time I was 25, I had turned over 3 places and launched a franchise, sold them and moved back to NJ which is when I took over the family antiques and art fair business. I directed that business for 15 years and added a number of major NYC and Chicago events to the annual book of business.

**CM: How and why did you begin Art in FLUX ?**

When I moved to Harlem - it was after working in the non-profit sector for a couple of years and after 2 years outside of New York City helping a family member. I was finishing up some consulting projects and determining what was next for me I was ready to work for myself again and I wanted to be working in the arts. I looked back on my events management experience and thought I should be pulling from this valuable experience. At the same time I met a friend who was producing pop-up shops for the fashion industry downtown. And there were still many empty retail spaces in Harlem. I thought I should pull all this together, create opportunities for artists living and working in Harlem to show and sell their work, make art more accessible in Harlem and activate neglected spaces with art. And this started Art In FLUX pop-up art galleries.

**"I am presenting artists and selecting artworks that tell a story and/or initiate a discussion. I present the work in the best way possible and create a dialogue between the physical space and the art. I'm introducing artists to collectors, press and arts enthusiasts." - Leanne Stella, Art in Flux**

**CM: Art in FLUX brings a collective of creatives together. What is the biggest challenges in connecting artists in Harlem?**

I don't think it's a challenge. Artists uptown rally around each other, support each other.

There are other challenges:

- How do we expose the arts and artists in Harlem to the broader Metropolitan area and the International arts community.
- How do we make arts in Harlem sustainable?
- Who is a Harlem artist? Harlem is more than a geographic definition.

These are questions I ask all the time.

I engage other professionals in these conversations and reach for a bigger audience for everything I present.

**CM: Would you call yourself an art curator?**

Yes, I shied away from it at first because it can be an overused title. But I'm proud of my work. I am presenting artists and selecting artworks that tell a story and/or initiate a discussion. I present the work in the best way possible and create a dialogue between the physical space and the art. I'm introducing artists to collectors, press and arts enthusiasts.

**CREATIVE HARLEM**

**CM: How has Harlem changed in recent years?**

Restaurants are proliferating. There is a lot less vacant housing stock – hardly any. A few years ago people still had to do downtown to shop, eat, play. Now if you leave here you can find everything in Harlem.

**CM: Your favourite Harlem spots/creative hubs?**

There are new places every day. I can't tell you which restaurant or bar is my favourite because the restaurant owners are my neighbours and I love them all. But I enjoy jazz on Monday nights at Red Rooster (<http://redroosterharlem.com/>) and on Thursday nights at Lenox Sapphire (<http://lenoxsapphire.com/>), a special celebration at Cheri, a glass of wine at Barawine, oysters on Monday nights at Maison Harlem (<http://maisonharlem.com/>)...the list goes on. And at all of these places and more I'll meet up with friends and always have a conversation with an artist I know or a musician friend will pop in with an instrument or an actor will stop in and share info about their new play or film.

**CM: Which forms of art would you say are growing the fastest?**

I'm seeing more and more artists using technology in their art or in some fashion influencing their techniques.

**CM: Where are the collaborating artists from? (Native to Harlem or from elsewhere?)**

It is difficult to define a Harlem artist. Harlem is more than a place. There are artists who grew up here but don't live here now, artists who have a studio here but don't live and vice versa. Artists who live in other places but spend a lot of time here and/or are influenced by Harlem. Some artists are being forced out of places because of new construction, etc., yet new artists continue to move in. I always make sure that Harlem artists are highly represented in every show but I also work with artists from outside of Harlem.

**CM: How would you define the creative DNA of Harlem today?**

Diverse. Harlem is a very diverse neighbourhood. The artists come from a vast background of cultures but also there is diversity in their practice, styles, mediums. The artists are very supportive of each other. And

what I see happening more and more is visual artists, musicians, fashion designers, theatre, film professionals all working together and taking an interest in each other's work and successes.

**CM: Do you ever get involved in the creative processes of the artists you work with?**

Yes, but usually only if they ask. Visual artists most often work in isolation and sometimes they need to bounce ideas off someone. I do encourage artists to try new things and stretch themselves into new mediums or new directions. I will make suggestions or offer guidance when it comes to the business side of things.

**CM: How difficult is it to find spaces in Harlem for the exhibitions you curate?**

Finding space in New York is always difficult. It's at a premium. The particular challenge in Harlem is that even though you may still see some empty retail spaces they are often owned by people who are not living or working in the community so they don't have any incentive to open them up to art.

**CM: You must have a lot of energy to conquer the community of artists in Harlem? How big is your team?**

Ooh conquer is not a word I would use.... Navigate maybe. I work full time. Ken Weisensee (<http://www.artinfluxharlem.com/#!/ken-weisensee-works/c1sw7>), who started with me as an intern works one day per week. I work with freelancers for many projects.

**CM: What do you hope to communicate with your pop-up art galleries and art events?**

I have a few things that I would like to accomplish which change and adjust as Art In FLUX grows, Harlem changes, etc. I want to attract attention to the arts and artists in Harlem and Harlem to be recognized for the artistic hub that it is. I want visual arts to be sustainable in Harlem. I can affect this by creating a market for artists in Harlem and attracting collectors and art press. Hopefully other groups are simultaneously working on affordable housing and studios for artists. I want artists of color to have more inclusion in the arts. I want more art to be visible in Harlem where it is accessible to everyone in the community.

**CM: What were your most inspiring and satisfying moments with Art in FLUX?**

Your most challenging? Some of my most satisfying moments are when someone goes home with a piece of art and I can see they really love living with it... and at the same time an artist can now create more. The most challenging was probably managing 3 pop-up galleries at the same time – all open 5 or 6 days a week after just 6 months of launching the first pop-up.

**CM: What would be your dream collaboration?**

My dream collaboration is to work on a very large installation in a non-arts space. When I visit a space like a cathedral with an art installation I am always inspired to dream bigger and reach for bigger projects.

**CM: Your latest exhibition?**

I'm in between exhibitions right now so I am hosting the "Cocktails & Conversations – In Studio Series" where I bring a small group of people to an artist studio so that we can expose the work and engage potential collectors in an intimate setting

**CM: What is next for you? FLUX Art Fair.**

I am launching the first FLUX Art Fair in Harlem this May 14-17, 2015 (<http://www.fluxfair.com/>) featuring emerging artists. I'm very excited about this. An art fair will have a much bigger impact than any one pop-up art gallery on the perception of visual arts in Harlem. It is scheduled during an international art week in NYC

when there are 6 international contemporary art fairs, the contemporary auctions at Christie's and Sotheby's and the new Whitney Museum (<http://whitney.org/>) is opening. All of these events attract upwards of 100,000 arts patrons to NYC.

**More info here: [www.fluxfair.com](http://www.fluxfair.com) (<http://www.fluxfair.com/>)**

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