

# After the Flood: How Will Hurricane Sandy Change New York's Art World?

by Ben Davis

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Canvases and dry wall from CRG studio  
(Photo by John Vorwald)

Frankenstorm Sandy has shaken the city, from the [aeries of its postmodern penthouses](#) to the obscure reaches of its [still-flooded subways](#). Many thousands remain without power, and the return to normalcy will be long and trying. Truth be told, the[transformation](#) of Chelsea's sparkling gallery neighborhood into [waterlogged chaos](#) is probably a minor episode within the greater drama, but it is a highly visible one. These images — and others from [inundated studios](#) and [spaces](#) from across a blighted New York — are upsetting, representing [livilihoods lost or at least transfigured](#).

When, a few months ago, a pipe broke at I-20 gallery on 23rd street and flooded the space, ravaging its unprotected art, owner Paul Judelson [decided that it wasn't worth moving back in](#). Observers will be watching to see what effects Sandy has on the art neighborhood, which until now has [tilted inexorably towards](#) the ever-greater consolidation of the mega-galleries and the slow-motion exodus of smaller spaces,

squeezed out by rising rents and decreasing audiences for anything above the street level. (Which now, ironically, proves to be precisely where you want to be.)

Over at my office, on 26th, they are still pumping out the sludge, still waiting for power. On the other side of the East River, in my dry though stuffy Brooklyn apartment, I try to think of a way that art might respond in a constructive manner to the whole mess. A few images of relevant artworks flicker through my brain, though they are mainly grim.

As Sandy churned towards the city, and the banality of local storm coverage reached a numbing crescendo, a few jokers [circulated stills from Danish art collective Superflex's "Flooded McDonald's" video on social media](#), under the guise of front-line reportage. Probably more people have now seen this work and mistaken it for a real event than ever witnessed it in its initial incarnation as gallery art. But in reality, "Flooded McDonald's" looks tame and formalistic compared to the grubby nightmare of the real deal.

In the initial hours after the storm, as stores emptied out and shuttered, and reports had it that [a plague of rats](#) was to be feared, I couldn't help but think of Laura Ginn's recent art show at Allegra LaViola gallery, "[Tomorrow We Will Feast Again on What We Catch](#)." Imagining "a dystopian future in which urban survival will depend upon taking advantage of available resources," the project invited visitors to dine on fine meals made from rat meat. If only I had snagged that Laura Ginn cookbook when I had the chance!

Apocalyptic whimsy, survivalist daydreams... Very few themes are so culturally omnipresent today as the onrushing end of civilization, which shows up everywhere from our [zombie plague fascination on TV](#) to [Britney Spears anthems on the dance floor](#). If you want to know just how many times New York has imagined itself drowned, deluged, besieged, or evacuated, click on over to "[Unclear Holocaust](#)." The 65-minute feature by the anarchist art collective known as the Anti-Banality Union offers a supercut of all the scenes from movies where New York is wiped out, arrayed into one long essay on the anxiety that haunts the antiseptic Bloomberg-era Big Apple.

And yet, I fear that the real message to be read within the soggy tea leaves left in the superstorm's wake concerns art's fragility, not its prophetic potency. Despite these

endless waves of cultural anxiety (not to mention a very similar hurricane just last year), the city was still caught unprepared. It's as if all the horrific images we consume serve to inoculate us from the reality we are living through, rather than warning us to prepare for or prevent them. That's something for artists to ponder, when it inevitably comes time to imagine how this dreary calamity can be processed into pictures or words and turned towards something constructive.

As the pathetic and touching photos of sodden art [continue to come in from Chelsea](#), the main thing that arrests my eye is that bathtub ring wreathing everything, marking how high the water rose. I find this mark really unsettling, and really symbolic. The white nowhere-space of an art gallery is, of course, meant to create a placeless context for art, to remove it from everyday concerns. But smudged and debris-flaked walls make the space visible; you are reminded that these are physical venues, infrastructure that has to be maintained and defended.

I suspect that this is not a particular revelation for dealers, who concern themselves with the labor of keeping a gallery, or artists, who are well familiar with the material demands of creating an artwork in a real space. But for us consumers of art shows, the materiality that underpins it all is easy to forget; the whole magic of the thing is that new art appears, month after month, deposited there in the white light as if that is what it was spun from. That illusion is deliberate: It is the mark of a civilization that likes to take its highest pleasures well removed from the daily reality of life and its labors.

Art capitals are rare things. Typically, they are thought to require two difficult-to-replicate ingredients: a large population of creative people, and gobs and gobs of disposable capital. That's why only London and New York really fit the bill (Berlin has artists aplenty but not a robust market; Dubai has lots of money, but not the same deep bench of striving artists). Now, we have been brutally reminded that there is an invisible third ingredient: physical stability. It may be that in the age of superstorms, this factor makes the isle of Manhattan unsuited to retain its status. That's a glum prospect.

Yet I am hopeful. We are living through a historical moment, and dramatic times shake things up. Perhaps Sandy might actually change art for the better. I am hopeful that, say, raising one's voice against climate change — which, as [Chris Williams points out](#), is an issue that went unaddressed in recent political debates, even as both

candidates rushed to declare fervent dedication to gun rights and Predator drones — might be seen as something integral to the future of what we do. Clearly, there should be at least as much unifying interest in this as there is in, say, preventing resale royalty rights. Perhaps a new sense of the urgency of the present can sink into the whole ecosystem of art.

There is much cleaning up to do, but then there is plenty of rethinking and reimaging to be done as well.

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