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Luring Artists to Lend Life to Empty Storefronts

By Diane Cardwell
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At the end of a dark passageway at the Port Authority Bus Terminal, almost 50 artworks have suddenly parked in a bright, spare gallery. On a grim stretch of the Flatbush Avenue Extension in Brooklyn, pastel portraits and interactive sculptures are squeezed between a McDonald's and an Applebee's. In the window of a former dentist's office in downtown Jamaica, Queens, a clutch of faceless mannequins cradle various forms of roadkill.

The art may vary in style and shock value, but the settings are essentially the same — spaces donated or leased for a song by building owners unable to rent or develop them.

As the recession drags on and storefronts across New York remain empty, commercial landlords are turning to an unlikely new class of tenants: artists, who in flusher times tend to get pushed out rather than lured in. And the price of entry is not deep pockets, but vivid imaginations and splashy exhibits — anything to lend the darkened buildings a sense of life.

On terms that are cut-rate and usually temporary — a few weeks or months — the artist gets a gallery or studio, and the landlord gets a vibrant attraction that may deter crime and draw the next wave of paying tenants.

"Any sort of activity is better than no activity," said Jed Walentas, a Brooklyn developer whose company, Two Trees Management, routinely lends space in Dumbo and Downtown Brooklyn for art projects. "As long as it's short enough and it's flexible, then there's no real cost. So the question is who can you find that's going to make an investment in a space with that level of uncertainty, and often it's the artist."

These "pop-up galleries," as they are known in Britain, where the phenomenon is well established, are increasingly taking hold in New York as development

advocates and landlords struggle to keep up appearances where commerce and construction have stalled.

The demand among landlords is so high that Chashama, a group that has been working for almost 15 years to find vacant real estate for visual and performing artists, no longer has to go looking. Its founder, Anita Durst, said she got calls every day from landlords asking her to find art projects for them. Some even offer to cover basic expenses like electricity.

Chashama was enlisted to find artists for the former dentist's office and another vacant space by the Greater Jamaica Development Corporation, one of several business groups working to bring artists and landlords together.

An exhibit that opened on Wednesday and will run for four months in six empty storefronts on the Flatbush Avenue Extension near DeKalb Avenue is a collaboration between the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership and the New Art Dealers Alliance, a contemporary art association. A few blocks away, the MetroTech Business Improvement District approached Ad Hoc Art, which promotes street, pop and underground artists, to organize a similar installation on Willoughby Street that will run through Nov. 4.

At the Port Authority terminal, where a 2,500-square-foot retail space at West 41st Street and Eighth Avenue has gone unrented while a development deal remains in limbo, executives have relied on the Fashion Center Business Improvement District and the Times Square Alliance to bring in a series of pop-up tenants, including fashion designers and, in a show that opened on Thursday, artists working in a range of media.

The sudden glut of available space has even spawned a new player in the art world.

No Longer Empty, an outfit formed by a group of established curators about five months ago in response to

the recession-fueled vacancies, has staged several exhibitions and events. One opened the weekend of Oct. 3 at a former belt factory in Brooklyn that once made “invisible dog” novelty leashes, and another installation is planned for the empty Tower Records store at East Fourth Street and Broadway in Manhattan.

“I really do think it’s something that’s here to stay,” said Manon Slome, a founder of the group. “I obviously hope the economic crisis will be over, but I see it as a great way for the public to interact with art in a different way. And it does provide a great platform for artists because they can do things that are maybe more experimental or larger than they could in a gallery space.”

Lishan Chang, an environmental artist who secured studio space in the former dentist’s office in Jamaica, said the storefront was perfect for his current project, “Accident Realm,” which features the dead raccoons, hawks, opossums, skunks and other creatures he finds along highways.

“I need a large sink when I do my taxidermy, and this office has a large sink,” said Mr. Chang, who learned to preserve the carcasses at the National Taiwan University and on YouTube. “I use chemicals and dentists use chemicals, so it fits.”

For neighborhoods, windows filled with stencils or weavings rather than brown paper and “for rent” signs have been a marked improvement.

“The lights are always on, the artists come and go late at night, and it’s even had more of an impact in activating the street than we anticipated,” said Andrew M. Manshel of the Greater Jamaica Development Corporation. As the redevelopment of the area continues, he said, he will work to find a way for the artists to have more permanent space.

The shows have played well with the locals. Passers-by and workers say they like having something different to look at and a chance to talk with the artists. On 161st Street in Jamaica one afternoon, two barbers from the block said they appreciated how accessible the artists had been.

“The first time they were there, they welcomed anybody, it was free and on the way out they gave you a little wine, they had food,” said one barber from the Haircutter shop, who gave his name as Junior. “It’s great.”

His co-worker, James Tucker, said it was “different, cultural-wise,” saying that he liked some of the artwork but that he found Mr. Chang’s roadkill project “really creepy.” Junior added, laughing, “He should do a Halloween thing with that.”

Two weekends ago on the Flatbush Avenue Extension near the Fulton Mall, Kenny Scharf, a psychedelic painter and performance artist, spray-painted what he described as “a big red monster mean guy being parasitically sucked on by some yellow guys” for a group show concentrating on large-scale works. As he worked, people stopped by to ask what he was doing and snap pictures with their cellphones.

“I really like that,” said Demetria Hayes, who was waiting for the bus outside the impromptu gallery. “He could do a lot with that.”

Ms. Hayes, who is pregnant, stood outside to escape the spray-paint fumes while her daughter, Danisia Peterson, 12, who likes to draw faces, chatted with Mr. Scharf inside and watched him work.

“A lot of people, especially kids, like to work like that through art,” Ms. Hayes said, “and to show how easy it is to just draw on the wall hopefully shows them they can do it and be creative, too.”