

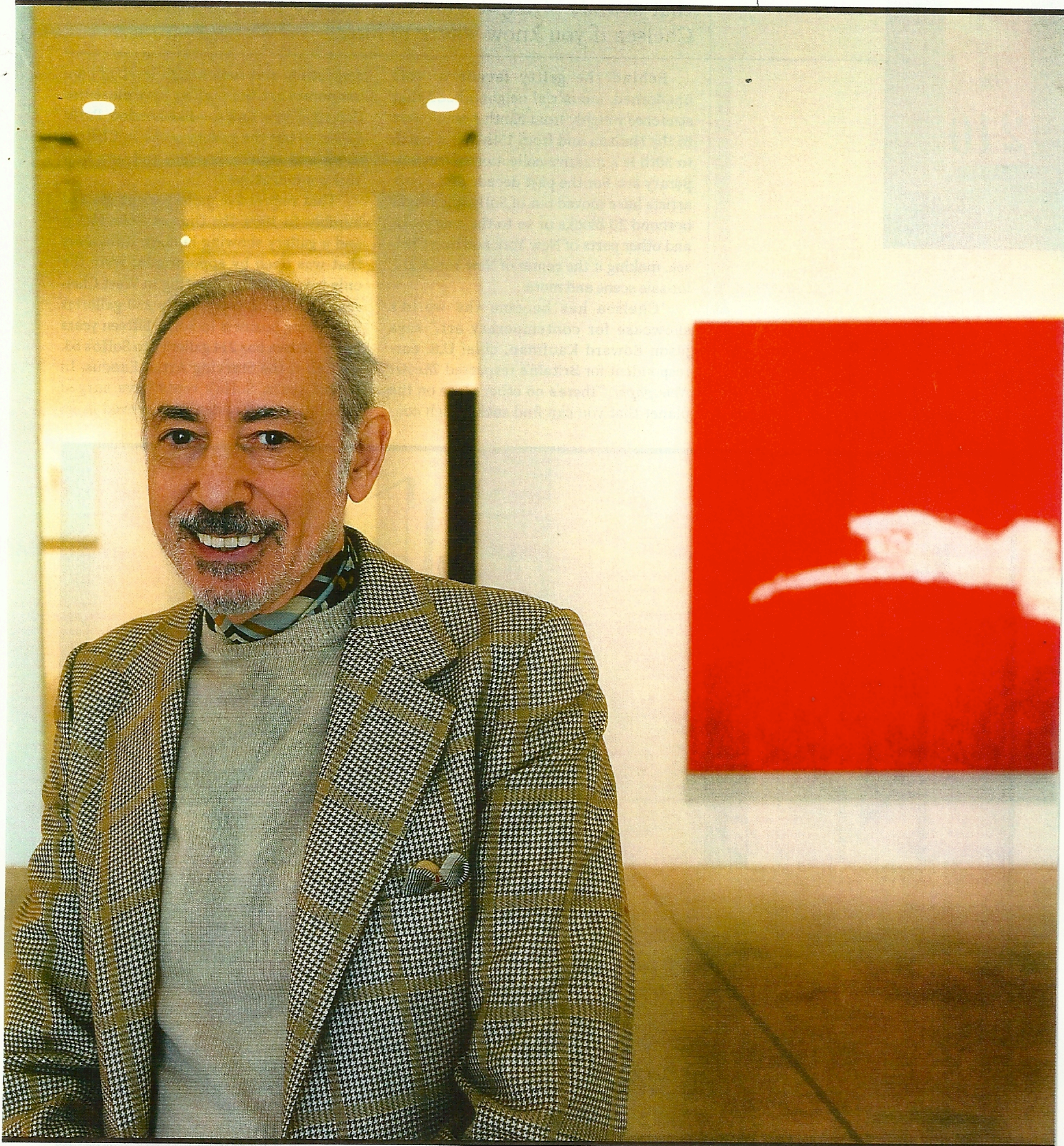
So Long, SoHo

New York's
contemporary art
scene has left the
neighborhood it
once dominated
for West Chelsea

"Chelsea is now the center of the art world," says Stephen Haller, who moved his gallery there from SoHo four years ago. "We have museum directors, major curators, and collectors visiting us from all over the world, on a daily basis. In two or three days they can see everything."



By Necee Regis ■ Photography by Jack Reznicki





The streets of West Chelsea can be unforgiving. On a hot day, the sun beats down on treeless pavement. In winter, winds whip from the nearby Hudson River, unimpeded by the skyscrapers that dot much of Manhattan. There's no subway station nearby, and restaurants are few. But if all of that sounds bleak, it shouldn't. Beauty is all around in West Chelsea if you know where to look.

Behind the gritty facade of this unadorned, industrial neighborhood that stretches roughly from Ninth Avenue west to the Hudson and from 15th Street north to 30th is a massive collection of contemporary art. For the past decade and a half, artists have moved out of SoHo, the neighborhood 20 blocks or so to the southeast, and other parts of New York and into Chelsea, making it the center of New York's art-for-sale scene and more.

"Chelsea has become the world's showcase for contemporary art," says Jason Edward Kaufman, chief U.S. correspondent for Britain's respected *The Art Newspaper*. "There's no other place on the planet that you can find such a high con-

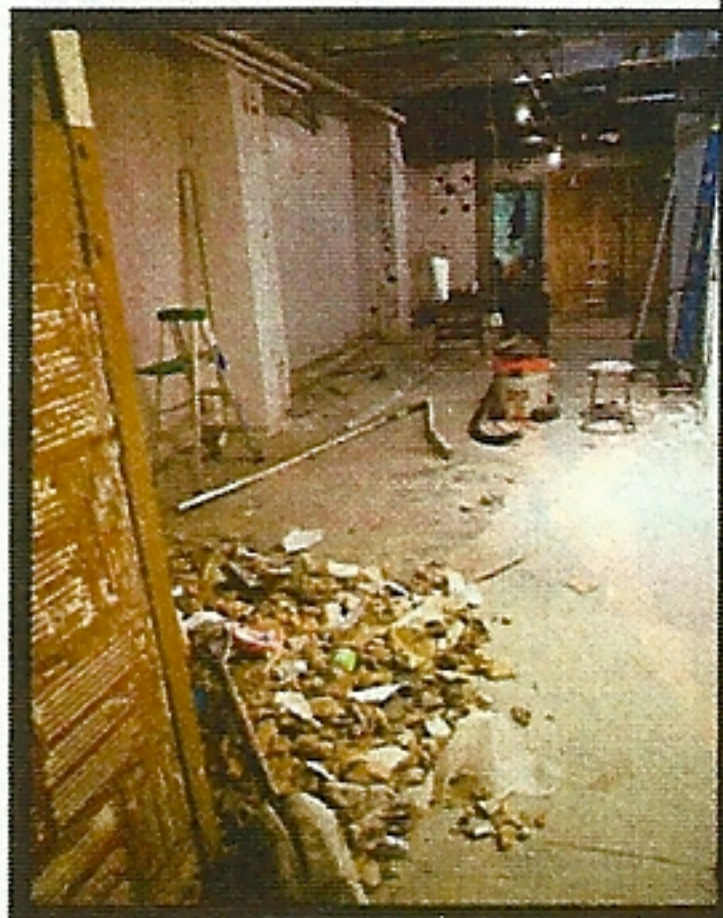
centration, and such a high level, of contemporary art. Some cities have museums that rival New York's — like London, Paris, Berlin — but the gallery scene in Chelsea is without equal anywhere and sets New York a notch above."

That impressive gallery scene started humbly. In 1989, the Dia Art Foundation and a gallery showing modern Italian art that was open by appointment were the only two galleries operating in West Chelsea. That same year, nearly 250 galleries were doing business in SoHo. Fifteen years later, Chelsea has 214 galleries to SoHo's 53.

Call it the Starving Artist Exodus. In recent years, SoHo's rents have surged as retailers and restaurants moved in en



The Max Protetch Gallery focuses on architecture's contemporary masters, as well as other forms of public and contemporary art.



Left: the Capsule Gallery under renovation, right: an installation in the Capsule Gallery's finished area

LA LUNCHONETTE

Don't-Miss Spots on a Gallery Tour of West Chelsea

Stephen Haller Gallery
542 W. 26th St.
(212) 741-7777
www.stephenhallergallery.com

Matthew Marks Gallery
523 W. 24th St.
(212) 243-0200
www.matthewmarks.com

Empire Diner
210 10th Ave.
(212) 243-2736

La Luncheonette
130 10th Ave.
(212) 675-0342

masse. Gallery owners were squeezed out in the process, and sought out less expensive digs. They found them among the grimy buildings of West Chelsea.

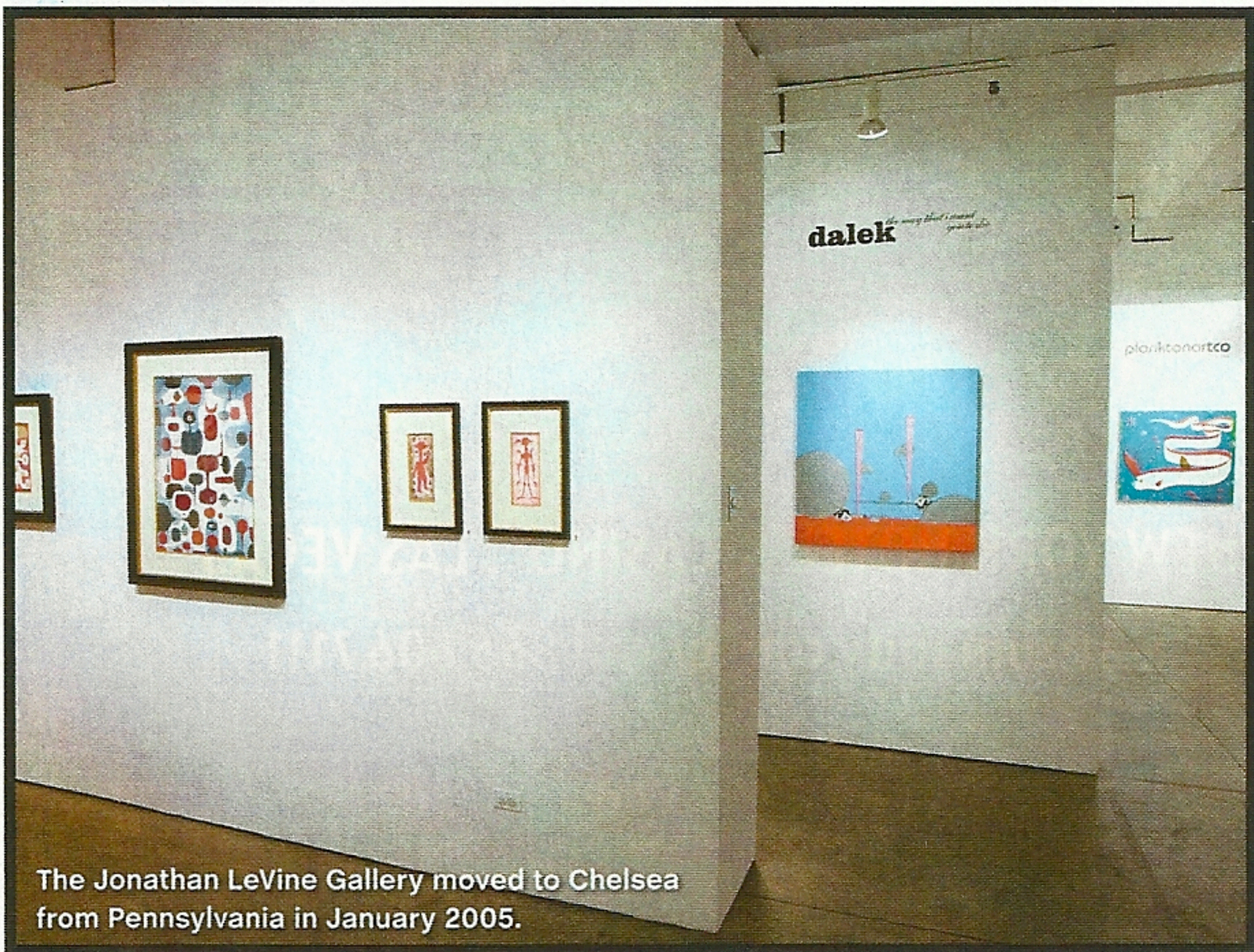
Literally, in Stephen Haller's case. Haller, who spent 20 years on the top floor of a tall building in SoHo, moved to West Chelsea four years ago, putting his gallery inside an old garage. He gutted the interior, covered the greasy mechanic's pit with flooring, added new lights and windows, and ended up with triple the space he had in SoHo. Since Haller moved in, he's seen numerous other galleries follow.

"Chelsea is now the center of the art world," Haller says. "We have museum directors, major curators, and collectors visiting us from all over the world, on a daily basis. In two or three days they can see everything. People also like to see all the different designs and renovations in each gallery."

Wending your way about the streets in West Chelsea, some of the renovations stand out more than others. Some street-level gallery spaces feature 12-foot glass and steel doors that open to spacious exhi-

bition rooms, like at Matthew Marks or the Stephen Haller Gallery. Other spaces aren't as obvious — some sit almost hidden inside buildings with only a dingy, painted door serving as a clue that there are several small galleries within. And then there are large buildings like 529 W. 20th St., where many people take the elevator to the top floor and walk, almost Guggenheim-like, down stairwells, visiting galleries at every level.

"Some multistory buildings have become like department stores of art," Kaufman says. "You can go from gallery to gallery, first on one floor, then on another. The galleries are spacious, and they're all free. They want people to come in and see them."



The Jonathan Levine Gallery moved to Chelsea from Pennsylvania in January 2005.



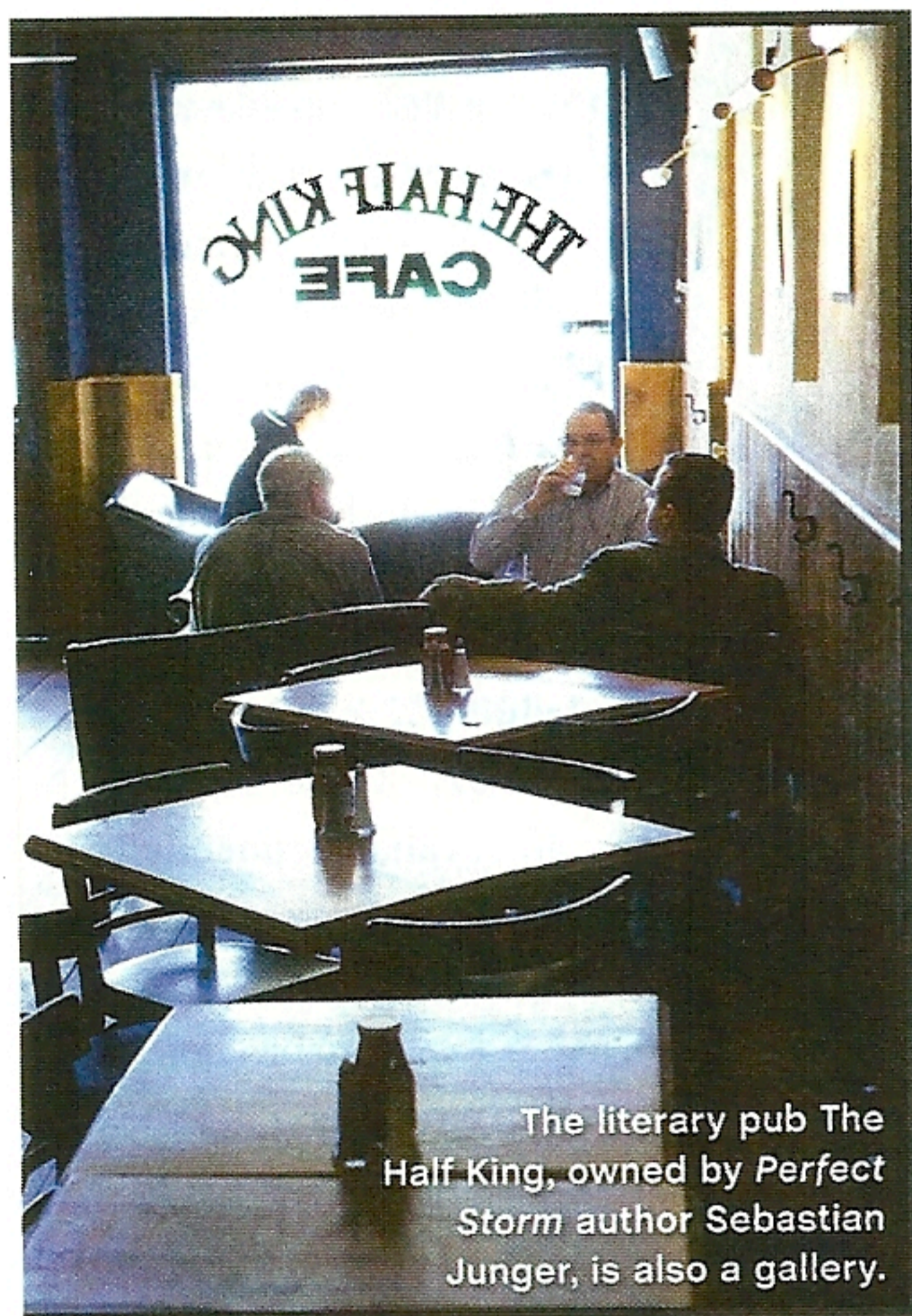
Jack's Chili Sundae at Empire Diner

GETTING THERE

The closest subway to most galleries is the C train, located at 23rd Street and Eighth Avenue, a moderate walk from where the galleries begin. Cabs can also get you to West Chelsea, though, once there, the best way to explore is on foot.

PLANNING THE TOUR

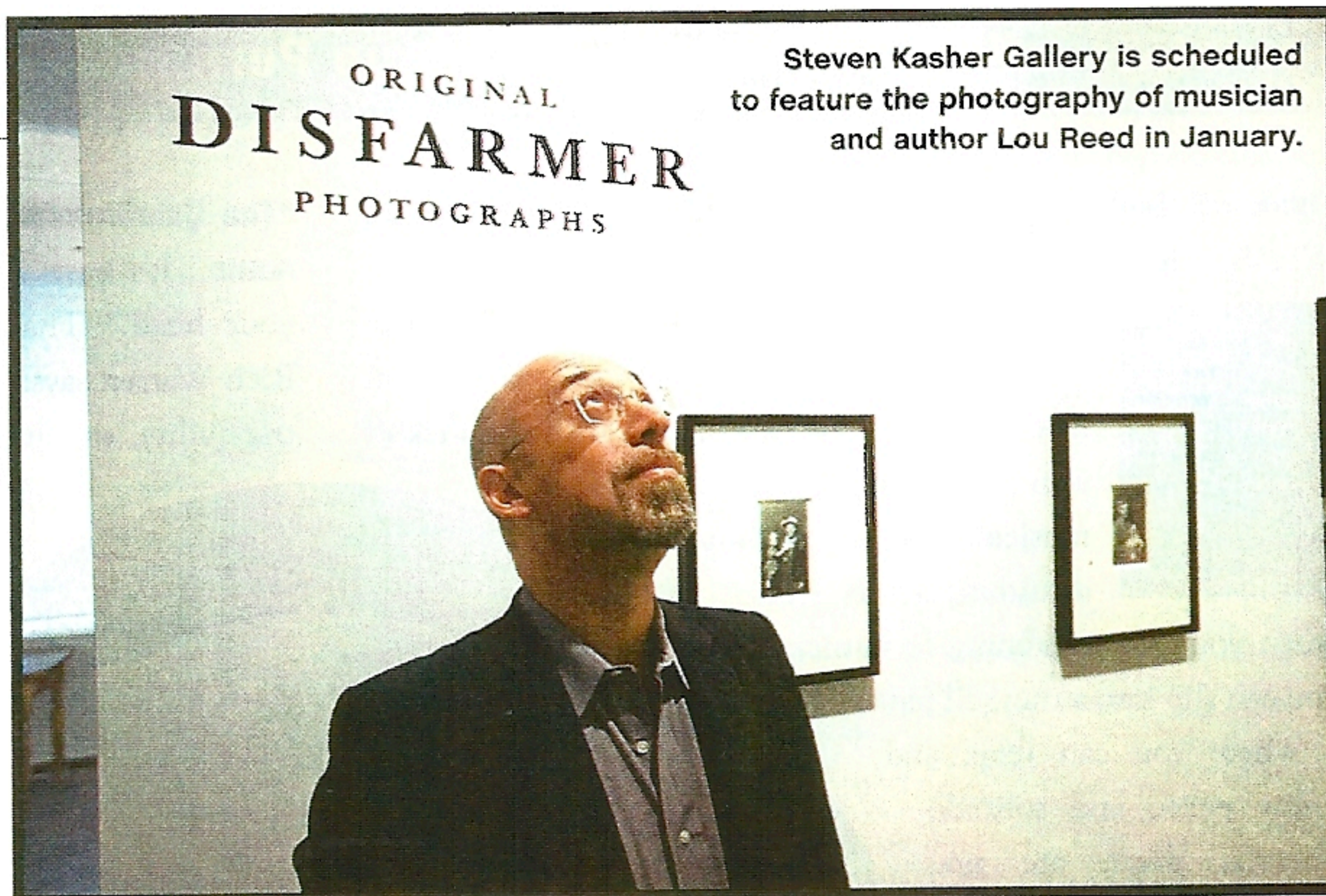
Let's say you're one of the ones who want to see those galleries. Your first stop might be to pick up *The Village Voice* or another of New York's free weekly papers. Gallery showings change frequently, so get a current weekly, check the listings, and make a list of the shows or galleries you want to see.



The literary pub The Half King, owned by *Perfect Storm* author Sebastian Junger, is also a gallery.



The people, pasta, and paninis make Pepe Giallo worth a visit.



Steven Kasher Gallery is scheduled to feature the photography of musician and author Lou Reed in January.

Beyond the weeklies, there is also a brightly colored, map-size pamphlet called *Chelsea Art* that's available at many of the galleries in the area. The free pamphlet lists galleries in alphabetical order, with addresses, phone numbers, and exhibitions. It also plots them on a map.

Or, the *Art Now Gallery Guide* is a thin, book-size monthly listing of all the galleries in New York, with maps of each neighborhood. Ask for a free copy at a gallery desk, though they often run out by the third week of the month, or view the *Art Now Gallery Guide* online at www.galleryguide.org.

IN THE GALLERIES

Once you set out, know that the galleries operate in essentially the same way a museum does, except here, you can take home what you see. There are often brochures at the front describing each work in an exhibit in terms of size, materials used, year of completion, and title. If you want to learn more about an artist, there's often a

binder at the desk with the artist's résumé, reviews, and images of other work. If you don't see it, ask. Most galleries are happy to provide the information, and no one will try to sell you anything unless you indicate you are interested.

Galleries are open Tuesday through Saturday, from 10 a.m. until 6 p.m., though times and days may vary.

DINING

Start your day at Empire Diner, which was part of the neighborhood long before West Chelsea became an art hot spot. It's open 24/7, and the menu includes sufficiently arty quotes from a diverse group of writers including Rabelais, Job, and Fred Allen.

Most other restaurants will be found outside West Chelsea, along 10th Avenue. Pepe Giallo has a good selection of salads, panini sandwiches, and pastas, and an outdoor garden that stays open year-round with a little help from a tarp and some heaters.

The Half King, a pub-style restaurant and bar, plays host to weekly literary readings. One of its owners is Sebastian Junger, author of *The Perfect Storm*.

La Luchonette is a French bistro serving escargot and cognac and steak au poivre in a cozy interior, with white-paper-topped tablecloths and red leather chairs that are perfect to sink into after a long day of hoofing it in the pursuit of art.

TAKING BREAKS

Because West Chelsea isn't chockablock with restaurants, restroom stops can pose a problem. Some galleries have a key to a restroom in their building. Others allow visitors to use their private restrooms. But this isn't always the case. As a fallback, mark this spot on your map: 529 W. 20th St. Restrooms in this building are clearly marked and available on every floor. ♡

Necce Regis is a Boston-based writer. She first covered this story for *The Boston Globe*.