

PAULA COOPER GALLERY

Miller, Michael H. "A Storied New York Gallery Comes Home," *T Magazine*, September 8th, 2022;
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/08/t-magazine/paula-cooper-gallery.html>

A Storied New York Gallery Comes Home

After her building was damaged in 2018, Paula Cooper and her staff return to West 21st Street in Chelsea.



Paula Cooper in her office at 534 West 21st Street. The work above her is "Untitled" by Dan Walsh, from 1996, and her desk was made and gifted to her by Donald Judd. Donavon Smallwood

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By M.H. Miller

Sept. 8, 2022

Here's a story that serves as a worthy metaphor for the current state of the art world: In 2018, the construction of an imposing mixed-use real estate development on West 21st Street in New York City damaged its neighbor, Paula Cooper Gallery, a beloved exhibition space that was then forced to close and relocate to a different building a few blocks north. Shortly after, the development stalled, leaving behind a shuttered gallery and a vacant lot.

Cooper had moved before. The noted art dealer, now 84, opened the first serious art gallery in SoHo in 1968 and almost single-handedly dragged the industry below Houston Street. Among the artists who owe her their careers, at least in part, are Jennifer Bartlett, Lynda Benglis, Mark di Suvero, Donald Judd and Claes Oldenburg. When she bought the building on 21st Street, in 1995, the neighborhood was, as SoHo had been in 1968, mostly an industrial wasteland. The structure had a dirt floor and a decrepit plaster ceiling. Across the street was an active taxi garage. Before remodeling, she invited the artists she showed for a champagne toast. Cooper recalled that only the sculptor Jackie Winsor could see its potential.

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Sol LeWitt's "Wall Drawing 485" (1986) is the first work visitors encounter in the reopened space.
Donavon Smallwood

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Large windows offer a view of West 21st Street from inside the gallery. Donovan Smallwood

“It was a dump,” Cooper told me. Her vision for what the space could become was cemented during an initial round of renovations, overseen by the architect Richard Gluckman, when one of the ceiling panels fell to the floor, revealing beautiful wooden latticework that the previous owner — a company that made air ducts — had obscured. Once she was done with it, Cooper’s gallery looked like a chapel, with dramatically high ceilings and windows that let in lots of natural light.

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This week, almost four years since it was damaged, she's reopening the space with an exhibition of wall drawings by Sol LeWitt. It's a homecoming for a gallery that has acquired a mythology to which others can only aspire: The New York Times's co-chief art critic Roberta Smith worked there before becoming a full-time writer; Benglis occasionally helped out with clerical work; for years, the gallery hosted an annual marathon reading on New Year's Eve of Gertrude Stein's 1925 novel, "The Making of Americans," at which readers would include John Cage, Philip Glass and Meredith Monk. Under Cooper's purview, artists could get away with pretty much anything they wanted.



The gallery's second floor, containing offices and an archive. Donavon Smallwood

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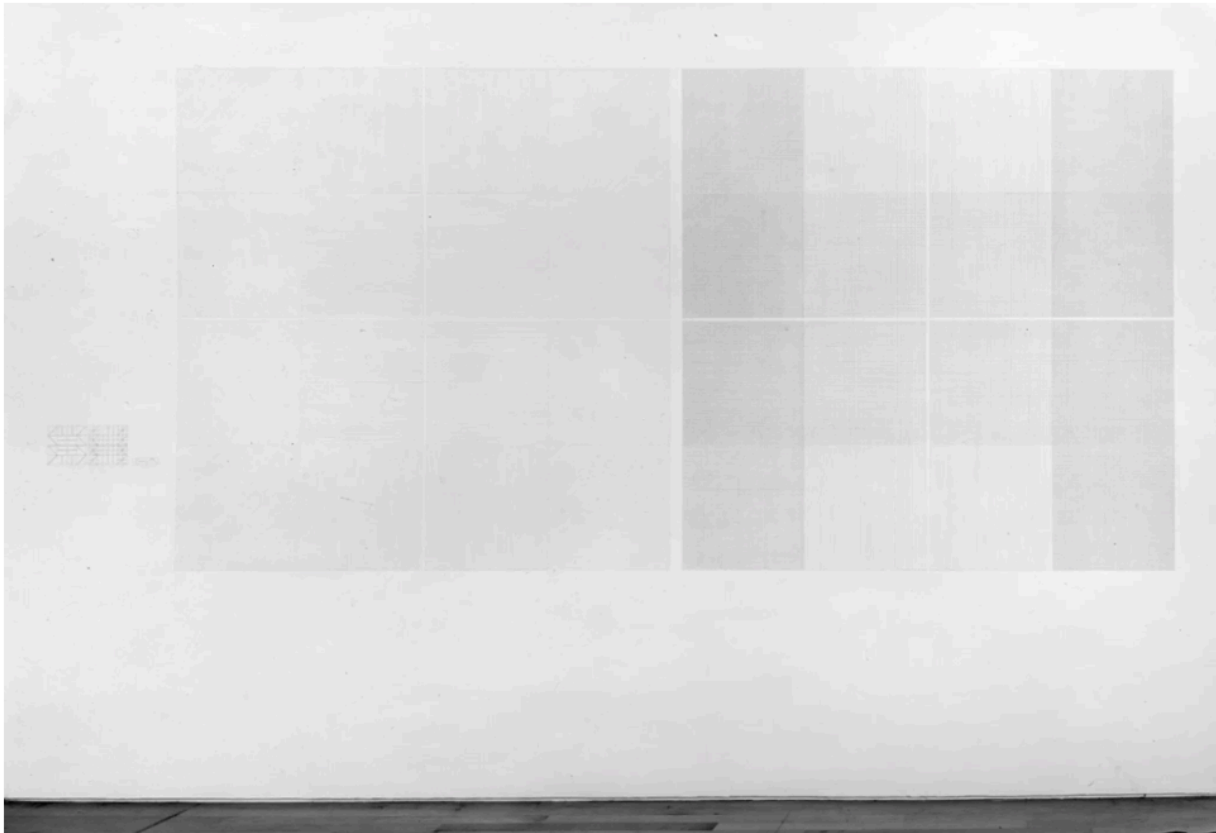
Cooper's archives, which tell the story of the art business since 1968. Donavon Smallwood

There are certain rooms in New York that have a particular mojo — Carnegie Hall, the Temple of Dendur at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the main reading room at the New York Public Library's Stephen A. Schwarzman Building — and Paula Cooper Gallery at 534 West 21st Street is one of them. Several artists who show there, including Jonathan Borofsky, Robert Grosvenor and Rudolf Stingel, have built out their own studios based on the gallery's dimensions. "The proportions are so perfect," Cooper said. "You feel good in that space. It just feels right, you know?"

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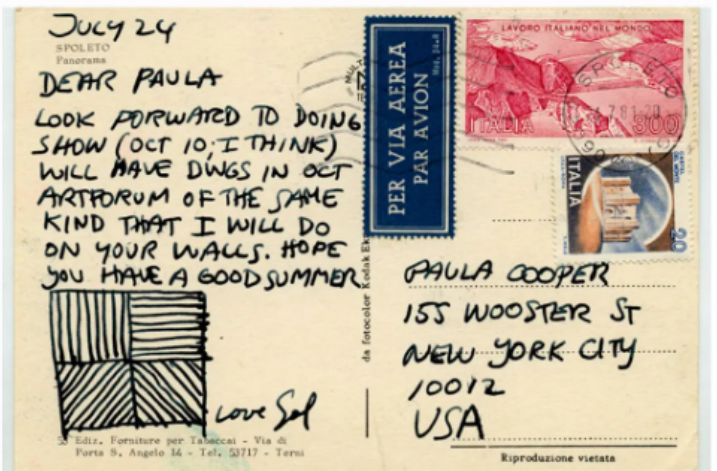
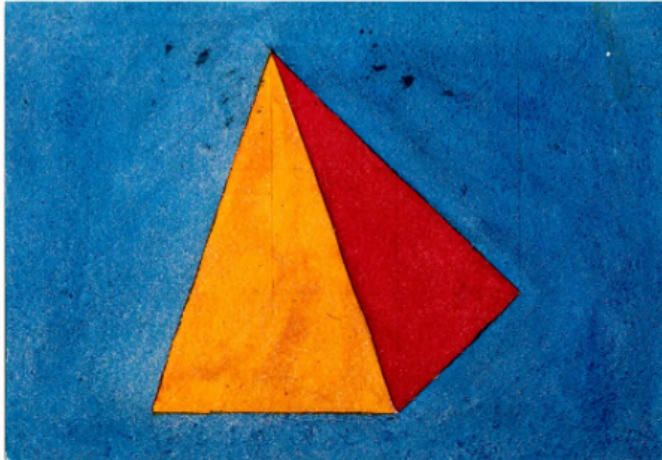
It's appropriate that she's reinaugurating the space with work by LeWitt, a friend with whom she had a long working relationship. "He was a hero of mine," Cooper said. Wherever LeWitt traveled — for example, to Thailand or Oslo — he'd send her a postcard with a geometric drawing (sometimes just a series of horizontal lines) and well wishes. Cooper showed LeWitt at her first exhibition in SoHo 54 years ago, where he made his first wall drawing, in pencil. At the end of the show's run, she asked him what she should do with his work, how to preserve it; he told her to just paint over it, which she reluctantly did. (Installing a wall drawing by LeWitt, who died in 2007, is different today: it takes a team of about 12 people, with forklifts and scaffolding, working from the artist's meticulous instructions.)



The inaugural installation of Sol LeWitt's "Wall Drawing #1: Drawing Series II 14 (A & B)" (1968) at the Paula Cooper Gallery in SoHo for the October 1968 show "Benefit for the Student Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam." Courtesy of the Paula Cooper Gallery

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Two postcards sent by LeWitt to Cooper, in 1983 (top) and 1981 (bottom). Courtesy of the Paula Cooper Gallery

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It goes without saying that the art world has changed since 1968. For one thing, Cooper hasn't really come around to Zoom meetings. And then there's the commercial shift. "Every damn thing in this world is about money," she said, sounding more sad than annoyed. She compared certain galleries in the neighborhood to Amazon, which she refuses to use. "I won't buy anything from there," she said, shaking her head. (Amazon is, in fact, something of a competitor: Cooper also co-owns, with her husband, Jack Macrae, 192 Books, an independent bookstore around the corner from her gallery.)

This has been a transitional year for everyone, Cooper in particular. Two artists in her stable, Bartlett and Oldenburg, died in the past few months. She opened a new space in Palm Beach, Fla., which she has yet to visit personally, installing shows remotely instead, and she now shows a generation of younger artists that includes Tauba Auerbach, Ja'Tovia Gary and Eric N. Mack. That she's not only still in business but thriving — through some combination of integrity, taste and sheer willpower — is a sign of hope for a market that tends to cannibalize itself in search of the next big thing.

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The arched wooden ceiling of Paula Cooper Gallery, which a previous owner had obscured, is the space's defining feature. *Donavon Smallwood*



More work by LeWitt, in a side room on the first floor. *Donavon Smallwood*

While talking about the return of in-person work after a long pandemic, Cooper told me she's been walking over to the gallery several times a week to oversee the install of the LeWitt show. She'll be going in more now that the building is open again. I told her she was going slightly against the grain; quite a lot of people are resistant to returning to the office. "Well," she said, "they probably don't love what they do."

M.H. Miller is a features director for T Magazine.