

**This is a perfect New York story—
about art and money, ambition, and betrayal.
And like all New York stories,
it ends up being about real estate.**

Marilu Lannon is a visionary. She was the first art dealer on West 22nd Street, and she pioneered the area so successfully that she can no longer afford the rent on her gallery.

On Friday, September 16, 1994, she threw open the doors of the Lannon Gallery, with a show of 24 contemporary British and American painters. This year, on the same date, just before she vacated the premises, we photographed her with some of her artists in the freshly empty gallery space.

What happened to Lannon is what often happens with visionaries. They think and see, begin and beget and believe, often without knowing all that their actions will bring into existence. By seizing an opportunity, by taking the big risk that is actually a test of merit in disguise, they end up creating new neighborhoods, sparking new movements in the arts, spawning new industries—because they change the way we perceive things. But when visionaries don't have enough capital to last through the start-up period, they sometimes find that they are too far ahead of economic forces to reap the financial rewards that would lend them stability and permanence.

Lannon remains undaunted, though. After all, she has been through this before: she's a woman who creates gallery districts. Her blue-collar, Polish, small-town upbringing in Wisconsin gave her drive and ambition, and when she moved to Boston at the age of 18, she developed a passion for art. In 1986, at the age of 21, she was the first to open an art gallery in Boston's South End. In 1988, she was the first to open in Chicago's River West neighborhood, an area that is now the site of many galleries, before moving on to Chicago's River North area in 1991. Finally, in 1994, she set her sights upon a dark and greasy stretch of 22nd Street between 10th and 11th Avenues in New York.

There were two factors in her decision. One was the presence of DIA Center for the Arts and The Arnulf Rainer Museum on the block. The other was her growing friendship with a couple who owned a cab company on the block and were planning to buy the building that housed their company. They were extremely supportive, and Lannon was to have a ten-year lease on her gallery space—but everything was contingent upon the mortgage agreement they were negotiating for the building.

Well. Lannon renovated the 5,000-square-foot space herself—while there were cars still parked in it—and then hopped a plane to London, where she visited 257 studios to find six artists. She found other artists in the Susan Kasen Summers private studio program in Bantam, Connecticut, which awards six-month scholarships to British artists to live and work in the United States. And, of course, she had ongoing relationships with many young American artists.

So she opened her gallery in September 1994. She sent out 3,000 invitations and told everyone about the neighborhood; she worked night and day to create buzz. She sold five paintings opening night, and her artists' work continued to sell. When her space was under construction earlier that summer, people from other galleries came around to say that they too were looking for space. Matthew Marks purchased the building two doors down and opened in late October 1994. Then two more galleries opened next door in February 1994—the Morris Healy Gallery and the Pat Hearn Gallery—and suddenly, this was valuable real estate.

This is how it happened that, just when the art scene on 22nd Street was taking off, Lannon discovered she didn't have a lease after all. She had sold a hundred thousand dollars worth of paintings since her opening, but it wasn't enough. She doesn't really blame her landlords, though: "After all, they're not wealthy people, and they need to cover the mortgage on the building, and now, obviously, they can get more for my space."

Annina Nosei, an established Soho art dealer, has now taken over the Lannon Gallery space at 530 West 22nd Street. But the Lannon Gallery phone number still connects callers directly to Lannon, who is busy representing all her artists as a private dealer. When we were visiting one evening, the phone was ringing off the hook—so it's quite doubtful we've heard the last of Marilu Lannon. ■