Ehrlich Steinberg
5540 Santa Monica Blvd
Los Angeles, CA 90038
+1 (213) 584-1709
Wednesday - Saturday 11am-5pm

Once More, With Feeling
2026

By Blake Oetting



Exterior sign of Nature Morte designed and hand-painted by Alan Belcher.
Photo: Mary Agnes Smith

Leaving aside the complexities involved in putting together a show for a single artist, the present exhibition, which aims to reconstitute the spirit and set of aesthetic affinities spanning an entire gallery—the legendary Nature Morte—is an altogether different challenge. Nature Morte was active between 1982 and 1988 in New York City's East Village, one of the venues alongside Fun Gallery, Civilian Warfare, Gracie Mansion, Cable Gallery, International With Monument, Cash/Newhouse, Jay Gorney, Pat Hearn Gallery, and American Fine Arts, Co. that helped define the neighborhood's vexed ascendence within the U.S. art world. While the gallery was subsequently reopened in 1997 in New Delhi by founder-artist Peter Nagy, this show zeroes in on its earlier, fabled years in Manhattan. Despite these clear chronological parameters, which certainly narrow the show's scope, such a project cannot help but encounter a series of challenging methodological questions. For instance, how many artists does it take to sufficiently survey the gallery's New York years? Is an exhibition about a gallery also—or actually—a story about bureaucracy, debt, and financial maneuvering? Is it possible to restage an ephemeral aesthetic and social scene in a way that avoids ossifying the aims and ambitions of its original protagonists?

Each of these questions makes the curious rhetorical move of positioning a business rather than an artist as curatorial protagonist, a shift in focus that emphasizes Nature Morte's significance as a proper noun in its own right, a non-human entity nevertheless imbued with a certain type of author-function. Indeed, showing your work at Nature Morte was a consequential choice, different in meaningful ways from exhibiting with the other galleries listed above. In stark contrast to the heroic painting and marketization of "street-chic aesthetics" carried out at places like Fun Gallery or Gracie Mansion (think Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, or Kenny Scharf), the artists that composed the camp around Nature Morte aligned themselves with the analytical thrust of Conceptualism, while nevertheless swapping out the sixties' "aesthetic of administration" for a more Pop-inflected dissection of logos, advertising, and television.[1] As Nagy admitted in a 1983 interview in *REALLIFE* with co-founder Alan Belcher and artist David Robbins (the latter appearing under the pseudonym Rex Reason), "We knew that we didn't want to show what was being seen in most galleries, which was neo-expressionist figurative paintings. The 90% of that that you see is pretty useless. So from the beginning that was our only direction—we knew we weren't



Left to right: Peter Nagy, Steven Parrino, Joel Otterson, and Alan Belcher; renovation of 204 E. 10th Street (NYC) a month before the opening of Nature Morte in May of 1982. Photo: Robin Weglinski

showing neo-expressionism."[2] Further specifying this competitive atmosphere between galleries in the neighborhood, Nagy recalled in 1999 that "Belcher and I identified strongly with the Metro Pictures school of art: media-derived, critical, and ironic. Consequently, we loathed the initial definition of the East Village by way of Gracie Mansion's kitsch (had seen it all before at Holly Solomon's on West Broadway) and Civilian Warfare's Urban Punk (now seemingly the most true-to-the-neighborhood aesthetic)."[3] Putting this war of positioning more simply, critic Gary Indiana described the East Village divide as that between "instinctive" and "intellectual" factions of the downtown art world.[4]

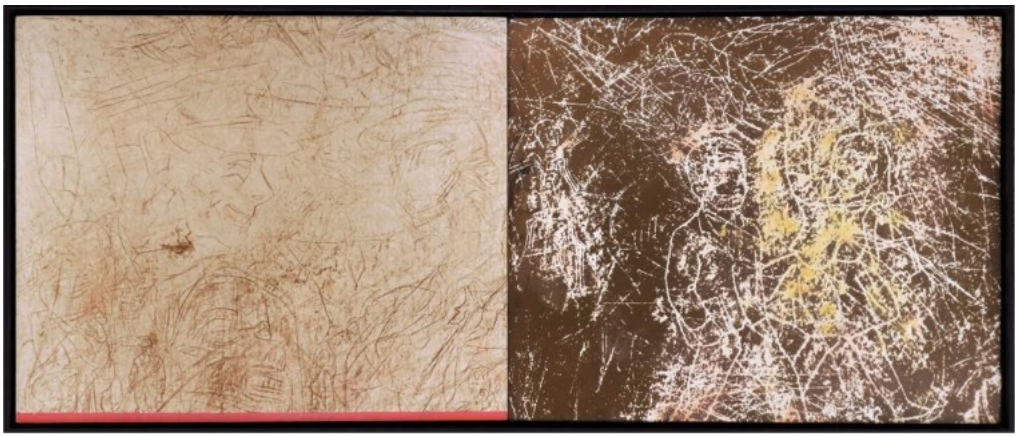
And indeed, among the various East Village coteries that cropped up in the 1980s, those artists associated with Nature Morte like Sherrie Levine, Julia Wachtel, Ken Lum, Allan McCollum, Louise Lawler, Haim Steinbach, and Gretchen Bender, among others, most fully embodied the postmodern "shift in position" identified by critic Hal Foster in which "the artist becomes a manipulator of signs more than a producer of art objects."[5] Of course, one shouldn't hyperbolize these artists' rebellion—the artworks displayed at Nature Morte were ultimately commercial *objects*—but Foster's description gets at the semiotic thrust of the artists that showed at the gallery, their desire to recode, degrade, or irreverently mash together the visual mechanisms defining their age of "infotainment."[6]

Examples of this critical practice abound in the exhibition at Ehrlich Steinberg. For instance, Belcher's work, *$51.49* (1983), features defaced bottles of Solo fabric softener replete with reissued labels that brandish a haphazard array of words from "AIDS" to "MARLBORO" to "NUCLEAR" to "LOGO." The generic nature of the latter points to the uselessness of the overall graphic, its infinite modularity, while the inclusion of "INDIANA" at the top left of the logo slyly confirms its visual reference to Pop artist Robert Indiana and the eventual transformation of his work into its own sort of branded, replicable style. Belcher's cacophonous slew of language strikes a chord with Ken Lum's *Untitled Language Painting (Kudifly)* (1987), which is similarly filled with verbiage but here in a made-up language that strips letters of their communicative function and instead directs our attention to the graphic conventions around color, typography, and font that underpin the calculated lure of advertising. Such orphaned words also appear in Richard Pettibone's painting *The 50's* from 1986, strewn with verbiage quoting reactions to



Alan Belcher, *$51.49,* 1983. Dye transfer on bottles of solo fabric softener, edition of 12, 8.75 x 3.75 x 1.75 in. (22.2 x 9.5 x 4.8 cm)

50s jazz like “hipster,” “cool sounds,” “so fucking cool,” or “shades,” each utterance not really tied to jazz but its (perhaps cynical) construction as part of a bohemian habitus. The tension here between authentic expression and its fossilization as representation (i.e. language) is staged in Joseph Nechvatal’s *HMMM* (1984) from his “Photomechanical Blow-ups” series. In these works, Nechvatal enlarges and flattens a cacophony of gestural, textural graphite markings into pure photographic surface, the denuded vitality of these palimpsestic drawings striking a similar chord to the fragmented language floating throughout Pettibone’s and Lum’s paintings.



Joseph Nechvatal, *HMMM,* 1984. Oil, graphite, photo-mechanical blow-up on paper mounted on board, 18.5 x 45.5 in. (47 x 115.5 cm)

Furthermore, Belcher’s reconstitution of a domestic object into a platform for creative manipulation overlaps with the work of Nature Morte artist Joel Otterson. Characteristic of his practice more broadly, *Euro-Chic* (1986) combines everyday objects like bronze casts of a Hulk Hogan figurine and bottle of laundry detergent (found on an Italian beach), a coil of copper piping, and a shallow stack of barbell weight plates into elements within a tightly vertical sculptural assemblage. Taking the collage format from two to three dimensions, Otterson’s work bucks each object’s intended use-value, fundamentally changing the identities of his chosen materials in an iconoclastic gesture that suggests a stance against the stultifying, prescriptive power of consumer capital. At the same time, however, the title of *Euro-Chic* suggests Otterson’s interest in denaturalizing a prevailing, europhilic hierarchy of taste that disregards such consumer goods as vulgar and common. Lovingly combining a talisman of Hulkamania or the ubiquitous plumbing of American homes into syntagmatic compositions, Otterson provocatively collapses the vaunted history of European aesthetics (indeed, the work at Ehrlich Steinberg might very well be read as a sendup of Brâncuși’s pedestals) with emblems of American popular culture.



Joel Otterson, *Euro-chic*, 1986. Brass, copper, and iron fittings, bronze, cast-iron free weights, 64 x 11 x 11 in. (162.6 x 27.9 x 27.9 cm)

Julia Wachtel’s *Cartoon/Cartoon* (1984), an example of the artist’s early, fully hand-painted work before she embraced the silkscreen, takes its animated source imagery from greeting cards and other banal relics of popular media. Both cartoon characters hold up empty signage, our focus landing instead on their exaggerated facial expressions. Precursors of the emoticon, these cartoons are avatars of a culture industry that standardizes human exchange, standing in for more personal forms of congratulations or commiseration. Through a similar tactic of visual pruning, Kevin Larmon’s paintings pare down still life (*nature morte*) to



Jennifer Bolande, *Movie Chair,* 1984. Wooden chair, velvet, bronze, enamel paint, light stands, lights, gaffer's tape, 60 x 72 x 36 in. (152.4 x 182.9 x 91.4 cm)

its zero-degree, leaving only a fruit bowl hovering amidst an obsidian background as a cipher for the painterly genre as a whole, distilled to its component pieces. Jennifer Bolande's enigmatic *Movie Chair* (1984) translates this practice of effacement to the realm of cinema. The work consists of a plush, red velvet chair—with "MOVIE" inscribed on its backrest in gold text—that is ultimately rendered inaccessible by a conical bronze sculpture, roughly resembling a mountain range, which sits on the seat. Here, like the "LOGO" on Belcher's retrofitted bottle, a director's chair becomes a semiotic tautology, referring only to the generic context of cinema itself, the surrounding lamps lighting the work dramatically exposing Bolande's representational refusal. Rather than approach film as a stream of consumable content, *Movie Chair*, like much of the work in this exhibition, is primarily focused on the apparatus subtending media formats' behind-the-scenes machinations, a move from "work to frame" emblematic of postmodern critical practice.[7]

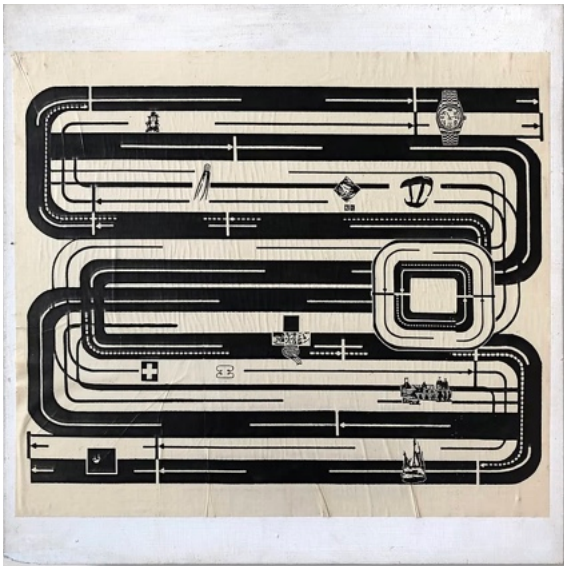
Elsewhere in the show, Sherrie Levine and Richard Pettibone's appropriations of Aleksandr Rodchenko and Andy Warhol, respectively, blur the specificity of these figures' looming personae—now indelibly matrixed with the insurgent denominations "Levine" and "Pettibone"—in a way that echoes the disfigurative quality of Allan McCollum and Laurie Simmons' series, *Actual Photos* (1985), which show close-up shots of the small-scale, non-specific figurines used in model train sets. Turning his attention to art history, Steven Parrino's early painting *Seek and Destroy* (1982) transforms Josef Albers's rigorous geometric abstraction—and its many predecessors and subsequent quotations—into a shlocky background for superhero action sequences, drawing out modernism's decorative streak through a sly form of aesthetic anamnesis. Equally resistant to stable signification are Not Vital's quasi-archaeological sculptures, which float uncomfortably between animalistic fossils and Twombly-esque, cycladic abstractions. As if "still wet from the womb," Not Vital's work appears frozen in its embryonic beginnings, crystallizing representation's dead-end debate between figuration and non-objectivity (a dyad schematically presented in a 1985 fiberglass screen painting by Richard Milani, *Someone Who Will Make Things Right*, also on view here).[8] Perhaps the most totalizing semiotic manipulation in this exhibition, however, comes from Gretchen Bender. For her *TV Text & Image* works, Bender adds captions across television screens tuned in to live broadcasts, her chosen phrases and words—like "SELF-CENSORSHIP" in the work at Ehrlich Steinberg—becoming heuristics for everything that flashes across the screen. Through this infinite regress of critical interpolation, all advertising, sporting events, sitcoms, and the like become estranged from their native context and harangued by Bender into a politicized prism of her choosing.



Gretchen Bender, *TV Text & Image (SELF-CENSORSHIP)*, 1986. Live television broadcast on a monitor, vinyl lettering, edition 1/3 + 1 AP, dimensions variable. Photo: Evan Walsh

If many of the Nature Morte artists looked to the ideologically dense, increasingly diffuse landscape of mass media and advertising in the 1980s to make their work, it is crucial for this current reconsideration of Nagy and Belcher's project that the gallery itself as a sign was taken up by the artists who showed there. This self-reflexivity is quite explicitly

portrayed, for instance, in Nagy's *Nature Morte Timeline* (1984), which narrates the history of the gallery through the visual metaphor of a racetrack. Along the track's twists and turns, we find small illustrations of work by various Nature Morte artists, like a minuscule Kevin Larmon still life in the bottom left corner, a sculpture by Not Vital (the same work depicted in the drawing is on view at Ehrlich Steinberg, in fact), Levine's appropriation of a Malevich cross, or one of Steven Parrino's signature torqued and twisted paintings. Recalibrating the competition animating the East Village art scene to the intra-gallery relationships at Nature Morte, Nagy's racetrack suggests a rush among its artists for critical acclaim and market positioning. With Robbins's 1987 work, *The Art Dealers' Optical Tests*, the artist shifted his focus directly onto the role of the gallerist. Working with dealers like de Land, Lisa Spellman of 303 Gallery, Helene Winer of Metro Pictures, and, most importantly for the present discussion, Nagy, the artist asked each model to pose with props from a mock eye exam. The resulting photographs, shot through with satirical camp, lampoon the role of dealers like Nagy as professionals whose success depends on the acuity of their "eye" for talent, the objectivity of the medical test jarring with the obviously subjective whims of each dealer's aesthetic preferences. More elaborate and socially oriented in its appraisal of Nature Morte was Louise Lawler's 1985 exhibition at the gallery, *Interesting*, which is partially reconstituted for the first time at Ehrlich Steinberg, and deserves some extended attention for its grandiose manipulation of Nature Morte as a signifying machine.



Peter Nagy, *Nature Morte Timeline,* 1984.
Xerox mounted on board, 21 x 21 in. (53.3 x 53.3 cm)



Detail. David Robbins*, The Art Dealers' Optical Tests*, 1987. Wood, paint, string, paper, flashlight, black and white photographs, edition 1/2, dimensions variable; 12.5 x 17 in. (31.8 x 43.2 cm) each. Photo: Evan Walsh

The exhibition consisted of a wall-to-wall installation where the artist set up a faux-bank teller stand, a mural of the titular word "Interesting" (bisected after the second "t" in a way that emphasizes the monetary connotations of its root, "interest"), three photographs of Japanese Gaiking Bazoler toys, and a wall text that quotes from *Aesop's Fables*. Lawler considered all aspects of the gallery setting as sites of ideological transmission and constructed them accordingly, identifying not only the wall labels, but other peritexts like the show's announcement card and its press release as "additional locations" of her work (indeed, quite tellingly, these materials are now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art, respectively).[9] Beyond merely pointing at the aesthetic apparatus governing the gallery as in more anodyne forms of Institutional Critique, however, Lawler aimed to draw viewers' attention to a more specific socioeconomic condition undergirding the gallery's location in the East Village.

As Nature Morte and others settled into the neighborhood, it became clear that their presence was part and parcel of the East Village's rapid gentrification, a widespread "uprooting and displacement…of the city's subcultural populations, and their replacement with a young, upwardly mobile professional class."[10] Rosalyn Deutsche and

Cara Gendel Ryan even relate the ease with which these nefarious changes took place in the East Village and Lower East Side to the neighborhoods' aforementioned predilection for neo-expressionist painting, that style's belief "in the efficacy of individualized, subjective protest" (which, as Deutsche suggests elsewhere, is parodically embodied by the Gaiking Bazoler's fierce visage) closely aligning with the liberal belief that aesthetic exploration trumps art's relationship with and responsibility to the social world—that is, the idea that art need only be "interesting."[11] Lawler's exhibition, then, triangulated neo-expressionism, gentrification, and the physical site of Nature Morte in the East Village, surfacing internal dynamics within the neighborhood's field of cultural production—expressionistic painting versus her own brand of cool, incisive Conceptualism—as well as art's concomitant role in racial and class displacement. In doing so, *Interesting* offered a baroque map of the gallery's multiform contingencies and complicities.



Installation view. Louise Lawler, *Interesting*, 1985. Nature Morte, New York

It turns out, then, that Nature Morte's artists were unwilling to allow the gallery to remain unmarked even in the 1980s. Their critical deconstruction of the gallery and its positioning kept it an unsettled, inchoate sign always up for renegotiation. Taking the self-reflexivity of Lawler's press release as a prompt for the text appearing here, however, the continued efficacy of the work shown at Nature Morte and the gallery itself as an historical actor might also be queried as part of *this* show. To what extent do recent technological shifts put into relief or pacify the media critiques of the artists who showed at Nature Morte? How are visual languages of promotion and corporate capital differently assembled in 2026 than in the 1980s? What role does Ehrlich Steinberg play within Los Angeles's local artistic ecosystem and spatial contestations? Are the sorts of conceptual scruples between galleries that animated the East Village decades ago still active here in Hollywood?

It is by formulating such questions in which Nature Morte is asked to *still perform* that its history of critical practice might remain active and, more vitally, be measured. Carving out the space for such considerations is the great gift of the current exhibition.

Notes:

1 Liza Kirwin, "Timeline of the East Village, 1979-1989: A Chronology," Artforum 38, no. 2 (October 1999): 122. The term "aesthetic of administration" comes from Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105-143.

2 Rex Reason, interview with Alan Belcher and Peter Nagy, "Brie Popcorn," *REALLIFE* 11/12 (Winter 1983): 31.

3 Peter Nagy, "Dual Nature," *Artforum* 38, no. 2 (October 1999): 167.

4 Gary Indiana, "Crime and Misdemeanors," *Artforum* 38, no. 2 (October 1999): 159.

5 Hal Foster, "Subversive Signs" in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1985), 100.

6 "Infotainment" was a show organized by Anne Livet in collaboration with Nagy and Belcher that focused on the work of the East Village gallery scene. The exhibition was never actually staged in New York but was rather hosted by Texas Gallery in Houston, TX, Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago, IL, and the Aspen Art Museum in Aspen, CO.

7 Craig Owens, "From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After 'The Death of the Author'" in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, Culture*, eds. Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 122-136.

8 Donald Kuspit, "Not Vital's Relics of the Present," *Artforum* 27, no. 5 (January 1989): 88.

9 Louise Lawler, press release for *Interesting*, Nature Morte, New York, NY, May 1985.

10 Craig Owens, "Commentary: The Problem with Peurilism," *Art in America* (Summer 1984): 163.

11 Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, "The Fine Art of Gentrification," *October* 31 (Winter 1984): 106. Deutsche's mention of the toys' affective relationship with neo-expressionism comes in her discussion of Lawler's installation in *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 150-158. For a more theoretical discussion of what "interesting" means in relationship to the history of aesthetics, see Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 110-173.

Blake Oetting is a Postdoctoral Fellow between the Departments of History of Art and Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley and a Curatorial Fellow at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. In 2023-2024 he was a Critical Studies participant in the Whitney Independent Study Program.