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GAME CHANGER

As the pioneering New York gallery Sperone Westwater marks its 45th anniversary with three new exhibitions, we talk to its co-founder about past successes and future projects



NEW YORK Sperone Westwater

'It's not only about showing past work accomplished, but also working together for ongoing projects that we can't even quite achieve. It's more about a dream than it is a specific artwork,' says Angela Westwater, trying to sum up her role as one of New York's most respected gallerists at the head of Sperone Westwater.

The gallery is celebrating its 45th anniversary in the glamorous surroundings of its elegant vertical gallery, designed by Norman Foster, at 257 Bowery near Houston Street, where it moved in 2010. This was the

area of New York where, as a young, wide-eyed graduate from Smith College, Westwater would visit artists such as Roy Lichtenstein when she first entered the art world, starting as a 'gallery girl' for John Weber at 420 West Broadway.

She remembers it as a time of eating bad sandwiches, cleaning the bathrooms and typing very poorly, but in retrospect it sounds almost mythical, as she rubbed shoulders with artists including Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, Bob Smithson and William Wegman. 'Everyone seemed to be in New York at the time. It was pretty amazing,' she says. 'There was a real



This page, Angela Westwater inside Bruce Nauman's Double Steel Cage Piece, 1974. Courtesy of subject. Photo: Foster + Partners. Opposite, portrait by Greg Kessler



Above, Angela Westwater inside Bruce Nauman's *Double Steel Cage Piece*, 1974, and, opposite, at the gallery's HQ with Susan Rothenberg's *Outline*, 1978-79. Left, the exterior of 257 Bowery

community feel to the art world then.' Three years as managing editor of John Coplans's legendary and highly influential *Artforum* magazine extended her art-world contacts and widened her horizons.

But she left in 1975 to open a gallery with her partners, the Italian art dealer Gian Enzo Sperone and the German dealer Konrad Fischer (who left in 1982 and died in 1996), in a space at 142 Greene Street, SoHo, at that time the new heart of the contemporary art scene. 'I was interested in the creative process and wanted to work with artists directly, rather than just with words,' says Westwater. 'It was a really exciting, burgeoning opportunity at a time when a lot of interesting art, which represented change, was being made. I wanted to use my energies directly in ways that would serve and benefit the artists.'

The gallery specialised in bringing to America European avant-garde artists whose work was little known - Mario Merz, Lucio Fontana, Alighiero Boetti, Joseph Beuys, Gerhard Richter - showing them alongside rising American artists whose work the »



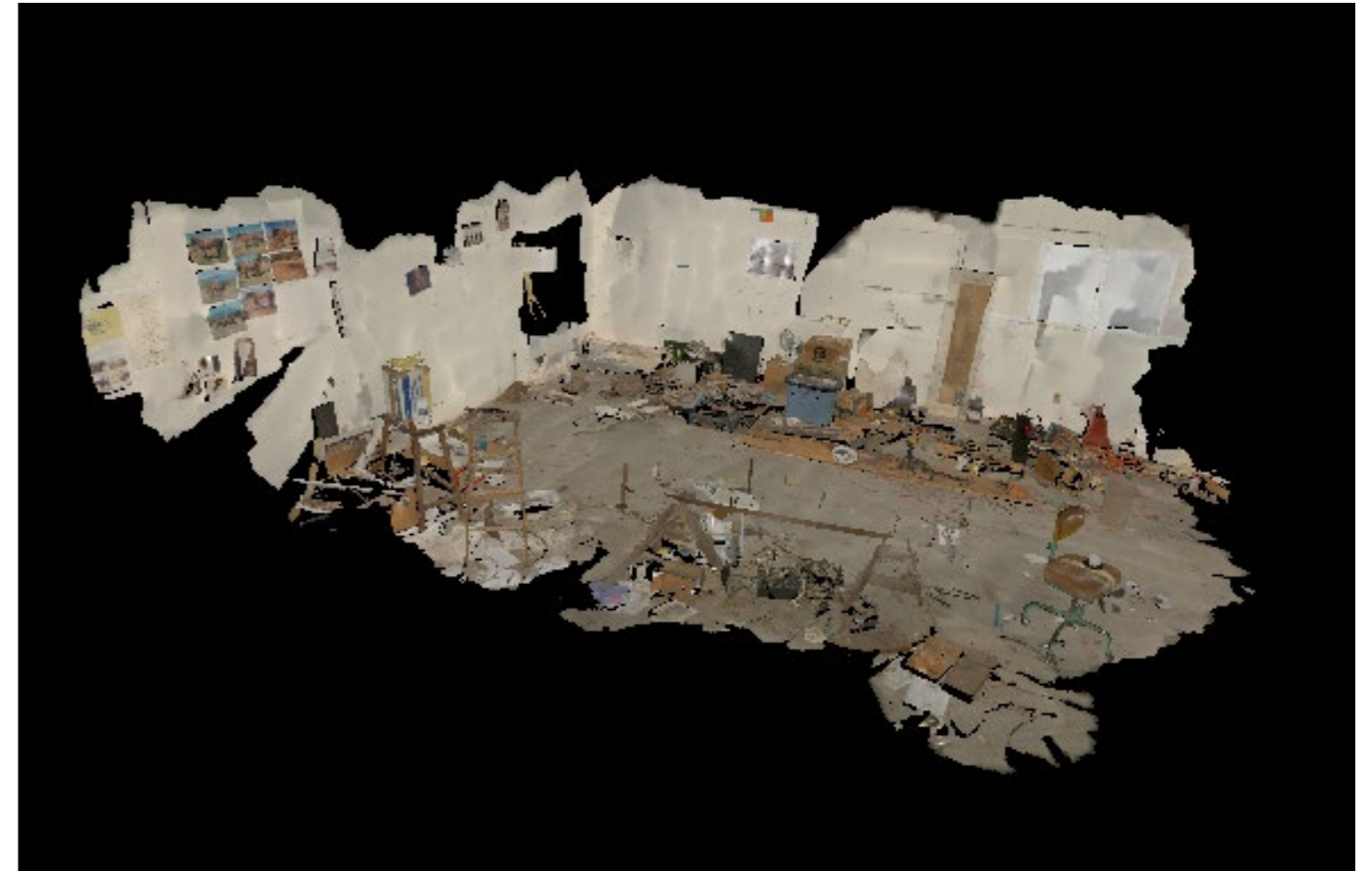
Left, Susan Rothenberg, *Buddha Monk*, 2018-19. Below, Richard Long, *MUDDY HEAVEN*, 5 March-18 April 2020

founders were committed to, such as Carl Andre, Brice Marden and Cy Twombly. 'I think it very much opened up the whole scene,' says Westwater. 'The American art world was rather parochial in those days, and it was a question of looking beyond the borders of North America to see what there was in other parts of the world.'

One of the major changes in the lifetime of the gallery has been the art world's new internationalism. Much else has altered, too, of course. Westwater remembers that when the gallery opened, in September 1975, New York itself was on the brink of bankruptcy, with the then President Gerald Ford refusing to bail the city out. Her first office wasn't the elegant, white-walled space she occupies today but a room with a makeshift desk made out of a door laid across two filing cabinets.

'When we started, I really wasn't thinking about making money at all,' she recalls, with

This page, Susan Rothenberg, *Buddha Monk*, 2018-19, oil on canvas © 2020 Susan Rothenberg/DACS, London, courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York. Photo by James Hart, Richard Long, *MUDDY HEAVEN*, Photo by Steve Jackson, Artwork © 2020 Richard Long/DACS, London, courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York. Opposite, Bruce Nauman, *Nature Morte*, 2019-20, video © 2020 Bruce Nauman/DACS, London, courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York



Westwater says that trust is the quality at the heart of the gallery's longevity, adding that 'Patience and fortitude have also been crucial'

Above, a still from Bruce Nauman's video *Nature Morte*, 2019-20, on show 24 April-6 June 2020

a laugh. 'Of course, supporting artists' work, meant selling it, and I did that.' But the gallery's philosophy was to build relationships on trust - and, in a changing world, that has stood them in good stead. Their 45th anniversary spring programme is made up of exhibitions featuring three of the artists with whom they have built long-standing and enriching relationships: Susan Rothenberg, Bruce Nauman and Richard Long.

'We have focused this year on artists with whom we are close,' Westwater says. 'But I also just think that what each of these artists is doing is frankly as relevant as ever, so what could be more satisfying?'

Talking to Westwater, you get the clear sense that she couldn't be happier doing what she is doing in the way that she is doing it. 'When you look at the art world today and all these mega-galleries, you notice there are a

lot of testosterone-driven young gallerists out there who are going after everyone,' she says, thoughtfully. 'Sometimes this can be good, having many different venues, many different galleries. Sometimes it can be the opposite. I think it really depends on the nature of the artists themselves. What might be good for someone might not be good for someone else. What we have is a great team of people who spend time with artists and understand what their needs are.'

This trust is the quality she places at the heart of the gallery's longevity, adding that 'Patience and fortitude have also been crucial. We've survived economic recessions, the ups and downs of the hot lists of artists and other unpredictable changes. If you've been doing this long enough - as I have - you weather it all and keep going, no matter what.' ● www.speronewestwater.com

