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The New York Neighborhood Where the Art Bookstore Is Alive and Well

by Chris Black



Photograph by Emily Andrews

The alternative art scene found a home in the East Village in the early 1980s. Artist-run collectives and unconventional exhibition spaces started to fill the empty storefronts; before long, however, the slept-on real estate became bank branches and chain coffee shops. But, as of late, the East Village has been reclaiming its reputation as a cultural haven with a series of new independent art bookstores. Here, a rundown of some nostalgic additions to the neighborhood.

Karma Bookstore

When Brendan Dugan took over the former St. Mark's Bookshop space on East Third Street, he knew that he was treading on hallowed ground, so to speak. For many in the downtown art scene, the shop's original location at 13 Saint Marks Place (where it operated from 1977 to 1989) functioned as the community's creative nucleus: It's where Allen Ginsberg first met Philip Glass and where William S. Burroughs shopped for science fiction books. Following three more relocations, a continual back-and-forth with its landlord, Cooper Union, and several campaigns to save it, the bookstore closed in 2016, leaving behind its East Village storefront and eulogies from *The New Yorker*, *The Daily News* and *The Observer*.

Dugan approached his decision to acquire the space from a practical standpoint: A year and a half ago, he moved his contemporary art gallery, Karma, to the East Village and had hoped to put a bookstore inside, but found that he needed more room, so he settled on the former St. Mark's Bookshop nearby. "It's a great neighborhood — there's a lot of life in the street," he says. Karma Bookstore, open since April, stocks artists' books and catalogs along with used and rare titles that focus on contemporary art, photography and classical

painting. “Neighbors” by the photographer Roe Ethridge sits next to “Boats Crosses Trees Figures 1977–78” by the painter Peter Halley. “The bookstore, for me, is about having the right mix,” Dugan explains, noting that he also mines the shelves for inspiration and reference materials for his own publishing imprint. He also plans to host events: After all, he has a reputation to maintain, thanks to a book signing that the artist Rob Pruitt did in the nude at Karma’s old West Village location in 2012. 136 *East Third Street*, karmakarma.org.