East Village '84

Commentary: The Problem with Puerility

The history of modernism can be read (and recently it has been) as a series of unequal exchanges between the culture industry and the various urban subcultures which come into existence on the margins of, and resist assimilation into, controlled social life—changes mediated by the recent establishment of a culture-industry outpost in Manhattan's East Village—a neighborhood of multiple racial and ethnic, deviant and delinquent subcultures—is a recent episode in that history. An attempt magically to resolve these overproduction crisis (overproduction by artists, overproduction of aggression), this sudden expansion of the market is also a textbook case in modern cultural economy, as such, it can be analyzed differently than it has been in the preceding pages.

What has been constructed, in the East Village is a simulacrum of the social formation from which the modernist avant-garde first emerged. I am referring of course, to la bohème, the milieu in which writers and artists exchange between high and low culture, to which the cultural economy takes place. The mid-19th century, the progressive marginalization of the artist's profession, and the erosion of artists' social and financial standing which this marginalization frequently entailed, had resulted in loose shifting alliances between artists and other social groups: workers, street entertainers, etc., who appear in the poetry of Baudelaire, the paintings of Courbet, Manet, Daudier, etc. From the very beginning, however, that the avant-garde's relation to suburbanites was a transformation: hence, its cultural celebrity—Baudelaire's recommendation that beggars be given gloves which allowed deviant attitudes to exist side by side.

Avant-garde irony was not, of course, reserved for the underclass, but was of concern to the bourgeoisie as well. In either case, what it expresses is the avant-garde's intermediary position between the two. As Stuart Hall, who writes extensively on the politics of subcultural reproduction, states, "the bohemian subculture of the avant-garde that has arisen from time to time in the modern city, is distinct from its 'parent' culture (the urban culture of the middle class intelligentsia) and yet also a part of it (sharing with it a transformist outlook, standards of education, a privileged relation vis-à-vis the labor market, and so on):" the fact that avant-garde artists had only partially withdrawn from the middle-class elite—which also contains the culture industry—by the new avant-garde has been characterized as an economic production—placed them in a contradictory position; but this position also equipped them for the economic function they eventually could be called upon to perform—that of broker between the culture industry and subcultures. Subcultures demonstrate an extraordinary ability to improvise, out of the materials of consumer culture, ad hoc cultural forms which function as markers of both (group) identity and cultural difference. Hall: Subcultures 'adopt and adapt material objects—goods and possessions.' and reorganize them into distinctive 'styles' which express the collective of their being-as-group, defined in common social practices, these "styles" offer an alternative to bourgeois culture, and have periodically been appropriated as such by the avant-garde. Here is an (often contradicted) description of this process:

Improved (subcultural) forms are usually first made as art objects by avant-garde entrepreneurs who spring up in and around any active subculture. These entrepreneurs, who run a wide circle of consumers gain access to an alluring subcultural pose, but in a more detached and shallow form as the elements of the original style are removed from the context of subcultural rituals which had furnished them. At this point, it appears to the large fashion and entertainment economies as a promising trend. Components of an already defined stylish category are selected out, adapted to the demands of mass manufacture, and pushed to the last job lot and bargain counter. (Thus, thanks to the "pioneering" efforts of the avant-garde, difference first becomes an object of consumption.)

Within the last few years in New York, there have been several attempts to begin this process again: the reclamation of SoHo as an art district, the newly built "new" Hong Kong style and the recently discovered "SoHo" at South of Times Square where they have been gobbled up with new subcultural systems. The recent centralization of this tendency in the East Village provides it with both a geographic context and a new economic base, a network of artist-run community facilities, which makes for the marketing of subcultural productions (grafitti, cartooning and other vernacular expressions) or popular mimics of them. (The youth of the new avant-garde, or "new-era" indicates that this trend has been supplanted by another more subcultural subculture.) The prevalence of this "Samba" of subcultural models in contemporary avant-garde production is clearly a "new" British sculpture and the French jean culture, which has penetrated throughout the last example of the last century. The only fact is that the attitudes and behaviors which have found expression are not, generally speaking, necessarily or even entirely dependent upon them—suggested not by the social groups, but rather from the aesthetic phenomenon, but it also documents the importance subcultural appropriation in the making of a new cultural economy.

The avant-garde's relation to the East Village art which is simply an economic, rather than esthetic, development, we can account for the one simply as a "scene" which we can feed to contradiction more conventional notions of avant-garde activity. I am referring to some, the stereotypes of the East Village artists, entrepreneurs, to the means-end rationalization of the various ways to collectors' "niche," one East Village painter proclaims in a recent interview a double dilemma all to the mistaken for cynicism. Despite attempts to fabricate for a genre of avant-garde painters of the East Village a "counter-space" movement of the 60s, what has been constructed in the East Village is not an alternative to, but a miniature replica of, the contemporary art market—a kind of Junior Achievement for young culture-industrialists.

Even this aspect of the "scene" is familiar: it repeats Warhol's open acknowledgment of the marketability of an alluring avant-garde pose, a created creation, and the avant-garde's deviation, deviation and delinquent subcultural types. (Recently, an East Village artist staged a simulacrum of the Factory—"itself a simulacrum of Bohemia—thereby confirming Warhol's precedents.) Which Warhol's acquisition to the logic of the culture industry—its transformation of the studio into a factory, its absorption of the techniques of mass production, etc.—stands as a pivotal moment in the history of the avant-garde, the period during which its function in the mechanisms of cultural economy first became visible. (Although Warhol, the arch-analyst of the avant-garde would not have been possible for the proto avant-garde, subculture, the same type of commodity role—the alternative pursued by the East Village avant-garde—or they would actually work with new subcultural systems. The recent centralization of this tendency in the East Village provides it with both a geographic context and a new economic base, a network of artist-run community facilities, which makes for the marketing of subcultural productions (grafitti, cartooning and other vernacular expressions) or popular mimics of them. (The youth of the new avant-garde, or "new-era" indicates that this trend has been supplanted by another more subcultural subculture.) The prevalence of this "Samba" of subcultural models in contemporary avant-garde production is clearly a "new" British sculpture and the French jean culture, which has penetrated throughout the last example of the last century. The only fact is that the attitudes and behaviors which have found expression are not, generally speaking, necessarily or even entirely dependent upon them—suggested not by the social groups, but rather from the aesthetic phenomenon, but it also documents the importance subcultural appropriation in the making of a new cultural economy.

With the exception of the East Village art which is simply an economic, rather than esthetic, development, we can account for the one simply as a "scene" which we can feed to contradiction more conventional notions of avant-garde activity. I am referring to some, the stereotypes of the East Village artists, entrepreneurs, to the means-end rationalization of the various ways to collectors' "niche," one East Village painter proclaims in a recent interview a double dilemma all to the mistaken for cynicism. Despite attempts to fabricate for a genre of avant-garde painters of the East Village a "counter-space" movement of the 60s, what has been constructed in the East Village is not an alternative to, but a miniature replica of, the contemporary art market—a kind of Junior Achievement for young culture-industrialists.

Even this aspect of the "scene" is familiar: it repeats Warhol's open acknowledgment of the marketability of an alluring avant-garde pose, a created creation, and the avant-garde's deviation, deviation and delinquent subcultural types. (Recently, an East Village artist staged a simulacrum of the Factory—"itself a simulacrum of Bohemia—thereby confirming Warhol's precedents.) Which Warhol's acquisition to the logic of the culture industry—its transformation of the studio into a factory, its absorption of the techniques of mass production, etc.—stands as a pivotal moment in the history of the avant-garde, the period during which its function in the mechanisms of cultural economy first became visible. (Although Warhol, the arch-analyst of the avant-garde would not have been possible for the proto avant-garde, subculture, the same type of commodity role—the alternative pursued by the East Village avant-garde—or they would actually work with new subcultural systems. The recent centralization of this tendency in the East Village provides it with both a geographic context and a new economic base, a network of artist-run community facilities, which makes for the marketing of subcultural productions (grafitti, cartooning and other vernacular expressions) or popular mimics of them. (The youth of the new avant-garde, or "new-era" indicates that this trend has been supplanted by another more subcultural subculture.) The prevalence of this "Samba" of subcultural models in contemporary avant-garde production is clearly a "new" British sculpture and the French jean culture, which has penetrated throughout the last example of the last century. The only fact is that the attitudes and behaviors which have found expression are not, generally speaking, necessarily or even entirely dependent upon them—suggested not by the social groups, but rather from the aesthetic phenomenon, but it also documents the importance subcultural appropriation in the making of a new cultural economy.

The East Village is not only a local phenomenon, but also a national one, which adds it to the primacy of North American art of the 80s. All too familiar reaction to the increasing homogenization, standardization, institutionalization of contemporary social life, this rejection is yet another manifestation of which Jacques Attali describes as our "angry search for lost differences within a logic from which difference itself has been excluded." Searching for lost difference has become the primary activity of the contemporary avant-garde. But as it seeks out and develops more and more resistant areas of social life for mass-cultural consumption, the avant-garde only intensifies the condition it attempts to alleviate. The appropriation of the forms whereby subcultures resist assimilation is part of rather than an antidote to, the general leveling of real sexual, regional and cultural differences and their replacement with the culture industry's artificial, mass-produced, generic signifiers for "difference." In the present instance, the empty diversity and puerility of the East Village's avant-garde.