



[Overview](#)

[History](#)

[News](#)

[Future](#)

[Privacy](#)

THE PORTABLE LOWER EAST SIDE

Volume 4, Number 1
Spring 1987

"The Fine Art of Gentrification"
by Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel
Ryan

"One day I walked with one of these middle-class gentlemen into Manchester. I spoke to him about the disgraceful unhealthy slums and drew his attention to the disgusting conditions of that part of town in which the factory workers lived. I declared that I had never seen so badly built a town in my life. He listened patiently and at the corner of the street at which we parted company he remarked: 'And yet there is a good deal of money made here. Good morning, Sir.'"--Friedrich Engels, THE CONDITION OF THE WORKING CLASS IN ENGLAND

New York's Lower East Side is valuable property for today's art and real estate markets, and speculators have every reason to feel optimistic. A working class neighborhood for 160 years, the area has become in the 1980's the scene of a new art "phenomenon": over forty commercial galleries displaying their wares to a clientele of corporate art

consultants and wealthy international collectors. In the fall of 1981 Fun Gallery and 51X opened. "When we started," explained Bill Stelling of Fun, "we didn't want to be considered a little podunk gallery in the East Village. We wanted people to see that we were as serious as any gallery on 57th Street." -1

By the spring of 1982 Nature Morte, Civilian Warfare, and Gracie Mansion were also ready for serious business. During the 1983 art season the number of galleries escalated to twenty-five. Scattered throughout an area of twelve square blocks, these galleries coalesced into "Manhattan's third art district, after Uptown and Soho" -2 Most observers attribute the flurry of activity to a mystical vitality electrifying the Lower East Side and thus refuse to account for the interests operating to create the scene: "UNACCOUNTABLY, at different times certain places--Paris's Left Bank, New York's Tenth Street-- have an aura of art that attracts painters and sculptors" -3 Far from the natural development that words such as PHENOMENON and AURA suggest, however, Art District Three has been constructed with the aid of the entire apparatus of the art establishment. This role was uncritically applauded in a brochure accompanying one of the first exhibitions devoted exclusively to art from the Lower East Side galleries: "[The galleries] have been enthusiastically embraced by the full complement of the art world--public and private institutions, journalists, collectors and artists...This development affirms the perpetual renewal of the artists' community." -4

When articles on East Village art as a new collective entity began to appear in the major art publications in September 1982, there were only the original five galleries. Four months later these "pioneer" enterprises were lauded in the VILLAGE VOICE as the "heroes" of the art world for their dealings on the "Neo-Frontier"⁵. In 1983, as an outpouring of articles on the new scene appeared in the VOICE, ARTS, ARTNEWS, the NEW YORK TIMES, FLASH ART, and ARTFORUM, galleries began to proliferate. By May 1984 the WALL STREET JOURNAL announced that the art scene had moved to the East Village, and that summer ART IN AMERICA published a lengthy round-up in a special section entitled "Report From the East Village."

An aura of fascination suffuses all of these accounts. The adulatory tone was engendered by a group of writers who continue to build their careers on regular updates of East Village art developments. These "East Village critics" --who are, in fact, not critics but apologists--celebrate the scene with an inflated and aggressive rhetoric of "liberation," "renewal," "ecstasy." Nicholas Moufarrege, one of the most prolific and rhapsodic of these propagandists, sums up the local zeitgeist as a savage and invigorating explosion of repressed energies. "It's the law of the jungle and the fittest survive...ultimately quality prevails," is his glib explanation for the scene's success.⁶ Bill Stelling attributes the "turning point" in Fun Gallery's success story to an ARTFORUM article by Rene Ricard revealingly entitled "The Pledge

of Allegiance." Using a militaristic language imbued with a dangerous romanticism, Ricard spells out his notion of the ideal artist--an East Village artist: "I want my soldiers, I mean artists, to be young and strong, with tireless energy performing impossible feats of cunning and bravura..."-7 Like Ronald Reagan's campaign optimism, these writers' enthusiasm knows no bounds, and, also like that optimism, ignores hard social realities and complex political questions: questions in the first case, about what is being done to other people's countries and, in the second case, to other people's neighborhoods. For unlike other recent art developments, this time New York's two-billion-dollar art business has invaded one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. As an integral element of "a major phenomenon of the early-80s art scene,"-8 essential to its packaging, the Lower East Side has been described in the art press as a "unique blend of poverty, punk rock, drugs, arson, Hell's Angels, winos, prostitutes and dilapidated housing that adds up to an adventurous avant-garde setting of considerable cachet."-9 The area is hyperbolically compared with Montmartre-- "...we may be witnessing a kind of American Bateau Lavoir, eighties style. It is perhaps too soon to predict which of the artists is our Picasso or Stravinsky."-10 A recent novel about the racy adventures of a young East Village painter is entitled IT WAS GONNA BE LIKE PARIS.

The representation of the Lower East Side as an "adventurous avant-garde setting," however, conceals a brutal

reality. For the site of this brave new art scene is also a strategic urban arena where the city, financed by big capital, wages its war of position against an impoverished and increasingly isolated local population. The city's strategy is twofold. The immediate aim is to dislodge a largely redundant working-class community by wresting control of neighborhood property and housing and turning it over to real-estate developers. The second step is to encourage the full-scale development of appropriate conditions to house and maintain late capitalism's labor force, a professional white middle class groomed to serve the center of America's "postindustrial" society.-11 "We are so close to the Twin Towers and the financial district. They are both within walking distance from here," explains Father Joaquin Beaumont, the vicar for the Lower East Side, "and there are so many people who work there. I'm sure they would love to live closer instead of commuting to the suburbs every day. I think the plan is for the middle class and upper class to return to Manhattan. That's the gentrification process. It's so unjust. Those with a lot of money are playing with the lives and futures of people who have so little hope."

It is of critical importance to understand the gentrification process--and the art world's crucial role within it--if we are to avoid aligning ourselves with the forces behind this destruction. Definitions of gentrification--most generally issuing from the gentrifying classes--describe moments in the process, not the process itself. For the "urbanologist" gentrification is the

"transfer of places from one class to another, with or without concomitant physical changes taking place." -12 For the mass media it is a "renaissance in New York City." -13 For one member of an urban minority, however, "gentrification is the process of white people 'reclaiming' the inner cities by moving into Black and Latin American communities..." -14 But none of these definitions adequately sets out the reasons for this "transfer" of property, for this "renaissance." Nor do they explain the resettling of a white population in neighborhoods where until recently they would never have dared to venture. For gentrification cannot be defined unless we first isolate the economic forces that are destroying, neighborhood by neighborhood, city by city, the traditional laboring classes.

Between March 1977 and March 1984, over 215,000 jobs were added to New York City's economy. Most of these were created either in the business service sector or in the financial industries. During the same period over 100,000 blue-collar jobs disappeared from the city's industrial base. This shift from blue-collar to white-collar industries makes the economy of the city, according to the NEW YORK TIMES "even more incompatible with its labor force." -15 Such an incompatibility between the work force and the economy is by no means specific to New York City; it is, rather, a national trend that began in the 1950's. In 1929, fifty-nine percent of the labor force was blue-collar; in 1957 the percentage slipped to forty-seven. By 1980 less than one-third of the total work force in the United

States consisted of blue-collar workers.-
16

These percentages do not, however, reveal the profound nature of the "incompatibility." For the period between the end of the Second World War and the late '50s witnesses the "third industrial revolution," the increasing automatization of labor power. While between 1945 and 1961 the number of blue-collar workers increased by fourteen million, only two and a half million new jobs were created in the industrial sector. As the rate of unemployment increased, the rate of surplus value and profit also increased, in part because of the reduction of the relentless substitution of machines for men was, according to Ernest Mandel, "the very rapid reappearance of the industrial reserve army which had disappeared in the course of the Second World War." As long as the presence of this reserve army allowed the rate of surplus value to grow, there were no obstacles to unlimited capitalist expansion. Thus the years between 1951 and 1965 comprised, in the United States, a "genuine halcyon period for late capitalism." -17

The economic and social policies of the Reagan administration reflect the nostalgia of the present capitalist classes for those "halcyon" days. It is, then, not surprising that these policies have had a disastrous effect on every stratum of the laboring classes, from the skilled "middle-class" blue-collar worker to the poor unskilled worker at the margins of the labor force. During the past four years this immiseration of the working

classes has taken two forms. On the one hand, high interest rates, ballooning deficits, and an intractable dollar have swelled the ranks of the industrial reserve army with unemployment figures that have duplicated post-Depression records. During the first six months of 1984 the economy surged ahead with a growth rate of 8.6 percent, leaving in its wake eight million skilled and semi-skilled laborers out of work. -18 On the other hand, the second prong of Reagan's domestic policies, directed against those who will never serve the interests of "postindustrial" society, as either workers or consumers, carries the full vengeance of two hundred years of capitalism. These people, dwelling in the lower strata of what Marx identified as capital's surplus population, are victims "chiefly" of their own "incapacity for adaptation, an incapacity which results from the division of labor." -19 Thus, by tightening eligibility requirements for welfare programs, the Reagan administration has pushed some five and a half million working poor into official poverty. Then, by slashing funds from human resources programs, the government has insured that both the new and the old poor, who now number thirty-five million, will remain--if they survive at all--the "underclass" well into the next century.-20

Gentrification is an important aspect of this strategy of impoverishment. By creating neighborhoods and housing that only the white-collar labor force can afford, the cities are systematically destroying the material conditions for the survival of millions of people. Expelled from the economy by

Reaganomics, turned out of their homes by state legislation, these cast-offs of late capitalism are fast losing the right to survive in society at all.

The process of gentrification in New York City takes various forms. On the Lower East Side these have included abandoned buildings, harassing and evicting tenants, and rapidly turning over neighborhood property in order to escalate real-estate values. Generating a crisis of survival for the displaced class, this process contributes substantially to the plight of homeless people, who are now estimated to number at least 60,000 in New York City. Referring to these growing numbers of displaced families, an attorney for the Coalition for the Homeless recently stated, "We're talking about survival needs. They need a bed or a crib to sleep in. They need a blanket. They need milk."-21 A position paper issued by the Lower East Side Catholic Area Conference in response to the city's newest housing plan for the Lower East Side--the Cross-Subsidy program--states that "displacement is one of the most serious and socially disorganizing processes at work on the Lower East Side," and that the "need for low and moderate income housing for the people of our community cannot be left to the market place." Through gentrification, "low and moderate income people with few options...become the powerless victims of dynamic economic forces that are beyond their control."-22

As one agent of these economic forces, the city--which owns sixty percent of the neighborhood's property through tax

defaults and abandonment of buildings by landlords--employs well-tested tactics to facilitate the transformation of the Lower East Side. The first of these is to do nothing at all, to allow the neighborhood to deteriorate of its own accord. Through a strategy of urban neglect, the city has been biding its time until enough contiguous lots can be put together to form sums of money at municipal auctions to developers who thus amass entire blocks for the construction of large-scale upper-income housing. Another tactic of the city is the 421-a tax abatement program. Since 1971, 421-a--which provides tax exemptions to developers of luxury housing--has been instrumental in converting entire areas of Manhattan from middle- and low-income neighborhoods into neighborhoods that only the rich can afford. Recently the city council approved a bill that restricts from further tax-exempted development the area between 96th and 14th Streets, an area already saturated with the results of this program. The new bill now leaves the Lower East Side even more vulnerable to what amounts to subsidized housing for the rich. As President Nixon's Council of Economic Advisors discovered fifteen years ago, "Investing in new housing for low-income families--particularly in big cities--is usually a losing proposition. Indeed the MOST PROFITABLE INVESTMENT is often one that demolishes homes of low-income families to make room for business and high-income families." -23

The 421-a program makes clear the city's choice of succession to the Lower

East Side. The rights of the beneficiaries are being contested, however, by those whose claim is more legitimate. "The basic issue," in the words of Carol Watson, Director of the Catholic Charities' Housing Leverage Fund, "is who owns the land. By 'own' I mean in the very real sense, morally. And we believe that that land belongs to the poor, literally, in every way, legally, morally. It belongs to the people. Because they were the people who struggled when nobody else wanted the Lower East Side."

While it might be tempting to view this current situation as merely the latest development in an unchanging immigrant history of the Lower East Side, there are fundamental differences between the past and the present. The experience of European immigrants was one of gradual assimilation; for today's minorities, it is one of attrition. Any attempt to equate these experiences would result in profound distortions. The immigrants admitted to this country from the mid-nineteenth century to the close of the First World War belonged to a displaced, "floating" labor force following capital, which had itself emigrated to the New World.⁻²⁴ Because most of these European immigrants were allowed a niche either in the closed circuitry of the immigrant economy or in the city's burgeoning manufacturing industry, there were opportunities for many eventually to move out of the tenements and beyond the borders of the Lower East Side. The present inhabitants of the area have no equivalent role to play in today's economy, and therefore "upward

mobility" is not the reason that fifteen percent of the residents left the neighborhood between 1970 and 1980. The exodus was due instead to arson and the wholesale abandonment of buildings by landlords. In many ways the demographic and economic transformations that have overtaken the Lower East Side coincide with what Michael Harrington described in 1962 as the evolution of the old ethnic slums into new slums for the "rejects of the affluent society." As Harrington stated it, "Where the ethnic slum once stood, in the 'old' slum neighborhood, there is a new type of slum. Its citizens are the internal migrants, the Negroes, the poor whites from the farms, the Puerto Ricans. They join the failures from the old ethnic culture and form an entirely different kind of neighborhood. For many of them, the crucial problem is color, and this makes the ghetto walls higher than they have ever been."-25 But the "new slum" of the Lower East Side is itself being radically transformed as the affluent classes invest millions to live there themselves at the expense of displacing a population that has nowhere else to go. It is this process of displacement that is often termed "renewal" or "revitalization." A cover story about gentrification in the NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE, for example, featured a glittering New York skyline with the stripped-in caption: "Rediscovering the City: The New Elite Spark an Urban Renaissance."

The concurrence of the two Lower East Side "renewals"--the process of gentrification and the unfolding of the art scene--is rarely remarked in the art

press. The possible interrelationship is treated in two ways: either it is ignored altogether or it is raised only as a side issue to be quickly dispensed with. Although they give the neighborhood a central role in their promotion of the scene, Moufarrege and Ricard never mention the word gentrification. Carlo McCormick and Walter Robinson, two other apologists for East Village art, concede in passing that artists affect gentrification, but that done, they immediately return to the business at hand: a lavishly illustrated, empirical categorization of the art and a paean to the pleasures of the scene. "Early coverage," they write, "came in the form of 'human interest' stories and pseudo-sociological examination of shifts in neighborhood population. More serious attention came from the area's own critics--Nicholas [sic] Moufarrege, for example." -26 Hidden within the reportorial style of these two sentences is a strategic maneuver that dictates the focus of art-world attention. It is, of course, gentrification that causes these shifts in neighborhood population so casually dismissed by the authors. We, however, are encouraged to make a shift of our own, to direct our attention away from "pseudosociological" concerns to the "more serious" matter of art criticism. The reality of gentrification is in this way severed from what are deemed to be proper cultural concerns. Artists' relationship to gentrification may be a controversial issue for the Lower East Side community, but for the art world it is of marginal interest at best. Thus, Irving Sandler, in his essay "Tenth Street Then and Now," keeps his

social commentary safely within the limits of parenthetical statement: "(Ironically, the emergence of the East Village art scene is a major cause of gentrification or Sohoization of the neighborhood)...Be all that as it may, at the moment there are a number of lively artists identified with the East Village...and that's the bottom line." -27 And at the end of an article which poses a number of questions about the problematic nature of the East Village galleries, Kim Levin concludes succinctly, "in the end, who cares, as long as they are trying to show good art." -28

Such a closure having been effected at the level of the aesthetic, it has been perpetuated by writers who claim to reorient earlier texts in a more rigorous direction, sobering up the intoxicated assessments of the "East Village critics." Among these is Roberta Smith, who in her VILLAGE VOICE piece entitled "The East Village Art Wars" responded to the special East Village section in ART IN AMERICA. In that section, a brief commentary by Craig Owens follows the long article by Robinson and McCormick. Owens's essay is, to date, the only attempt in the art press at an economic and social analysis. He indicts the East Village scene as a "surrender...to the means-end rationality of the market-place" and as a "culture-industry outpost" where "subcultural" forms are fed to that marketplace as products of consumption, their vital resistance to dominant culture thereby defeated. The implication of Owens's argument is that, by advertising and validating the products of the East Village scene,

preceding press coverage forms part of the scene's alliance with the market and its leveling of meaning and difference. By drawing attention to the economic and social functioning of the East Village scene, which has been suppressed by previous commentators, Owens's article clears the way for a meaningful inquiry into the implication of that scene in the process of gentrification. -29

Roberta Smith assumes a liberal posture towards the two ART IN AMERICA texts, positioning herself as mediator between extremists. "To denounce or embrace the proceedings absolutely is simplistic," she writes, and then castigates Owens for what she terms his "unworldly and not-a-little repressive brilliance." -30 It would be a study in the workings of distortion to explain why the author of a single article on the East Village scene that addresses the material operations of power in the real world is called "unworldly," why the author of the only two critical pages amidst a deluge of celebratory articles is considered "repressive." This is yet another example of an increasing tendency in the art world for critics who are themselves steeped in prejudices to characterize as authoritarian anyone who raises difficult questions about the oppressive workings of the cultural apparatus. Smith has missed the point of Owens's article entirely. Owens is not functioning as the other side of the promotional enthusiasm for East Village art by becoming its censor; rather he explores the ways in which the East Village scene participates in the dominant culture even as it poses as

"subcultural." To adopt what Smith sees as the correct thing to do--to decide whether any given East Village artist's work is "good" or "bad"--is once again to preclude questions about the scene's complex relation to the concrete conditions of contemporary life. Smith, then, is not a mediator at all; she has placed herself squarely within the dominant camp. Similarly, writers who pose "critical" questions about whether or not artists can survive early success, and whether or not the galleries can survive economically, keep the discussion well within the limits of the art-world self-interest, bolstering the scene they purport to criticize. Is it after all, the GALLERIES' survival that is in question? What of the survival of the people of the Lower East Side?

Although the new East Village art scene and its legitimators in the press ignore the workings of gentrification, they have, in fact, allowed themselves to become enmeshed in its mechanism. Galleries and artists drive up rents and displace the poor. Artists have placed their housing needs above those of residents who cannot choose where to live. The alignment of art-world interest with those of the city government and the real-estate industry became explicit to many residents on the Lower East Side during the ultimately successful battle which community groups waged to defeat Mayor Koch's Artist Homeownership Program (AHOP). "The Artist Homeownership Program was like the discovery of power," as Father Beaumont put it. "We never thought that we would win, but we won, and then we discovered our own strength."

In August 1981 the city, acting through its Department of Housing Preservation and Development, issued a Request for Proposals for the development of AHOP. The request solicited "creative proposals to develop cooperative or condominium loft-type units for artists through the rehabilitation of properties owned by the city." The goal, according to the city administration, was "to provide artists with an opportunity for homeownership to meet their special work requirements, to encourage them to continue to live and work in New York City and to stimulate unique alternatives for the reuse and rehabilitation of city-owned property." - 31

By May 1982 the mayor's office announced that five groups of artists and two developers had been selected to rehabilitate sixteen vacant tenement buildings on the south side of East 8th Street between Avenues C and B, and on the east side of Forsyth Street between Rivington and Stanton Streets. The seven buildings to be rehabilitated by artists would eventually yield fifty-one units ranging in size from 1,500 to 3,000 square feet, at an estimated purchase price of \$50,000 and a monthly carrying charge of \$500. After three years these original owners would be free to sell their spaces to other artists at market rates. The nine buildings designated for rehabilitation by developers were first to be converted into sixty-nine units and then sold to "moderate income artists." The cost of AHOP, calculated by the city to total seven million dollars, was to be partially financed through the Participation Loan Program. This program consists of

twenty-five million dollars in federal funds designated for low and moderate income people to help them secure mortgages at below market rates. The city's eagerness to allocate three million dollars of these public funds for the housing needs of white, middle-class artists was seen as a clear indication of the city's attitudes toward the housing needs of the poor. "It's like taking food out of the mouth of someone who is hungry and giving it to someone who is eating everyday," commented one community worker.-32

For the fifty-one artist participants in AHOP, however, it was "vital to the cultural community that this program be approved by the City's Board of Estimate because it may offer an ongoing solution to the housing problems faced by artists in our City."-33 Various art institutions also wrote in support of the program:

--Artists are "working-class" individuals who often hold two jobs in order to support their families and art-making activities. It is fitting that the people of the City of New York support them in their efforts to lead less "nomadic" lives.-34

--Before all our artists are forced out of Manhattan, [it is sincerely hoped that] the City will look into this problem with sensitivity and foresight. It should be recognized by the City that artists have very special housing needs.-35

--An art city does not exist without a thriving community of committed, working artists. Without this community

and the manifold peripheral activities it generates, New York will lose a great deal--not only intellectually but economically as well as collectors and tourists go elsewhere to buy and be stimulated by new art forms [sic]. The Artists Homeowners [sic] Program now being proposed is a means to combat this dilemma.-36

Despite the fact that members of the art community lobbied hard to have AHOP implemented, it was defeated in February 1983. Considerable pressure brought to bear by various community groups forced many supporters in the art world and member of the Board of Estimate to change their minds.

No matter how thoroughly obscured by the art world, the role that artists and galleries play in the gentrification of the Lower East Side is clear to those who are threatened with displacement, as well as to the community workers who are trying to save the neighborhood for its residents. "I think that artists are going to find themselves in a very unfortunate situation in the coming year," says Carol Watson. "There is going to be a real political struggle, a very serious struggle on the Lower East Side. And those who line up on the side of profit are going to find themselves on the enemy list. It's just that simple. Certainly the gallery, new artists, white artists." It is not a case of mistaken class identity for the people of the Lower East Side to place artists among the neighborhood enemies. For despite their bohemian posturing, the artists and dealers who created the East Village art scene, and the critics and museum

curators who legitimize its existence, are complicit with gentrification on the Lower East Side. To deny this complicity is to perpetuate one of the most enduring, self-serving myths in a bourgeois thought, the myth that, as Antonio Gramsci wrote, intellectuals form a category that is "autonomous and independent from the dominant social group. This self-assessment is not without consequences in the ideological and political field, consequences of wide-ranging import." -37

The influx of artists in the late '70s and the opening of galleries in the early '80s constituted the first moment in the sustained process of the Lower East Side's gentrification. It is not surprising that young artists, as well as more established ones priced out of the loft market in Soho and Tribeca, found the neighborhood attractive. The median rent was \$172, and a space, a precious commodity everywhere else in Manhattan, was being squandered by the city in a display of calculated neglect. According to the Census of 1980, well over half the area's housing stock was built before 1939, including old-law tenements dating back to the days of Jacob Riis. "This neighborhood was always like starting over," recalls Marisa Cardinale of Civilian Warfare. "I've lived here a long time and there was nothing here." This attitude, common among many art-world "pioneers," is reminiscent of the late nineteenth-century Zionist slogan, "a land without a people for a people without a land." -38 And like the existence of the Palestinian people, the existence of the original residents of the

Lower East Side is in the eye of the beholder. There were, in fact, over 150,000 people living in the area, thirty-seven percent Hispanic and eleven percent black. The median income for a family of four living in the neighborhood in the 1980s is \$10,727, while that of an individual is \$5,139.³⁹ The fact that more than forty percent of the total population lives in official poverty might account for their high rate of invisibility.

The second moment in the process of gentrification is contingent upon the success of the first. As one "urban expert" discovered, "For all the manifest political and 'social' liberalism of the gentrifying classes, its members display the same anxieties with respect to living among or near racial minorities as everyone else."⁴⁰ On the Lower East Side it was not until artists, the middle-class's own avant-garde, had established secure enclaves that the rear guard made its first forays into the "wilderness." The success of these forays can best be measured by the rapid escalation in real-estate activity. According to a December 1982 article in the VILLAGE VOICE, Helmsley-Spear, Century Management, Sol Goldman, and Alex DiLorenzo III had all invested in empty lots, apartment houses, and abandoned buildings. Rents in the last two years have risen sharply. A small one-bedroom apartment rents for approximately \$1,000 a month, and storefront space that once rented for \$6.00 a square foot now costs as much as \$35.⁴¹

"I get irritated," says Dean Savard of

Civilian Warfare, "when people point their finger at a gallery and say 'that's the reason why.' I know damn well that I'm not the reason why. It's a city plan that has been in existence for over twenty years." Gracie Mansion agrees that it is too "easy to point a finger at art galleries and say 'that's the problem.' Because if all galleries got up and moved it would not stop gentrification. Or if the galleries hadn't opened at all it wouldn't have made any difference. You see, the area was marked for gentrification way before a single gallery opened up." Peter Nagy of Nature Morte admits that he feels guilty. "I mean, what is this monster we created?--a monster that may end up causing more harm than good. The good angle is that more younger artists have spaces to exhibit their work. The bad angle is that it is certainly going to gentrify the neighborhood by turning it into something like Soho. But I also think that it would have happened whether the galleries had been here or not. I also can't help but feel that in some ways the battle against gentrification is a provincialist attitude towards Manhattan."

Common threads of denial and rationalization run through these responses from East Village dealers to questions about their role in gentrification. Attitudes range from aggressiveness through puzzlement to the genuine concern expressed by Jack Waters and Peter Cramer of the alternative space ABC No Rio. "I don't see how [the galleries] can't be implicated," says Jack Waters. "We fall into that area of implication because

we've got the best deal in town. We've got low rent and minimal pressure. And the reason that we're here is because we're attractive, because we represent an art organization. Whether or not that's a save-face for the city, allowing it to say it's not involved in gross speculation... 'Look we gave the building to ABC No Rio'...it's really complex and for that reason I don't want to project an image of purity."

ABC No Rio is an exception, however, Similarly, certain artists and artists' groups who are not part of the commercial scene have taken a public position against gentrification. Most gallery dealers and artists, however, are all too eager to avoid the implications of their place in the neighborhood's recent history and to present themselves as potential victims of gentrification. This is the trap that Craig Owens falls into when he claims that "Artists are not, of course, responsible for 'gentrification'; they are often its victims, as the closing of any number of the East Village galleries, forced out of the area by rents they helped to inflate, will sooner or later demonstrate." -42 To portray artists as the victims of gentrification is to mock the plight of the neighborhood's real victims. This is made especially clear by the display of wealth. At this moment in history artists cannot be exempted from responsibility. According to Carol Watson, the best thing the artists of this city can do for the people of the Lower East Side is to go elsewhere. She realizes, however, that the hardest thing to ask individuals is not to act in their own best interest. Nonetheless, they need to decide

whether or not they want to be part of a process that destroys people's lives. "People with choices," she says, "should choose not to move to the Lower East Side."

In addition to the economic impact of artists and galleries, the art world functions ideologically to exploit the neighborhood for its bohemian or sensualist connotations while deflecting attention away from underlying social, economic, and political processes. The attitudes that permit this exploitation are the same as those that allow the city and its affluent residents to remain indifferent to the fate of the displaced poor: assessments of poverty as natural and gentrification as inevitable and in some ways even desirable. Armed with these attitudes and received notions of artists' exemption from social responsibility, together with more recent cultural trends--crass commercialism and the neoexpressionist ideology whereby subjective expression obfuscates concrete social reality--the participants in the new East Village scene arrive on the Lower East Side prepared to make it over in their own image. Consciously or unconsciously, they approach the neighborhood with dominating and possessive attitudes that transform it into an imaginary site. Art journals, the mass media, galleries, established alternative spaces, and museums manipulate and exploit the neighborhood, thereby serving as conduits for the dominant ideology that facilitates gentrification. Myriad verbal and visual representations of the neighborhood circulate in exhibition catalogues, brochures, and magazines.

Through such representations a neighborhood whose residents are fighting for survival metamorphoses into a place "that encourages one to be the person he is with greater ease than the other parts of the city." -43 Inevitably, concrete reality evaporates into thin air: "One must realize that the East Village or the Lower East Side is more than a geographical location--it is a state of mind." -44

Why have exploitative representations of the Lower East Side and its residents met with so little resistance from today's art-world audience? What is responsible for this acquiescence in power and for the ease with which social considerations about the Lower East Side are pushed into the background? Would this cooperation between the art scene and a process like gentrification have been so easily achieved in the past? Throughout the '60s and '70s significant art, beginning with minimalism, was oriented toward an awareness of context. Among the radical results of this orientation were art practices that intervened directly in their institutional and social environments. While a number of artists today continue contextualist practices that demonstrate an understanding of the material bases of cultural production, they are a minority in a period of reaction. The specific form this reaction takes in the art world is an unapologetic embrace of commercialism, opportunism, and a concomitant rejection of the radical art practices of the past twenty years. The art establishment has resurrected the doctrine that aestheticism and self-expression are the proper concerns of

art and that they constitute realms of experience divorced from the social. This doctrine is embodied in a dominant neoexpressionism which, despite its pretensions to pluralism, must be understood as a system of rigid and restrictive beliefs: in the primacy of the self existing prior to and independently of society; in an eternal conflict, outside of history, between the individual and society; in the efficacy of individualized, subjective protest. The participants in the East Village scene serve this triumphant reaction. But the victory of neoexpressionism and its East Village variant, like the victory of all reactions, depends on a lie in order to validate itself, in this case the lie that neoexpressionism is exciting, new and liberating. Such a lie obstructs critical thinking by obscuring the social subjugation and oppression that such "liberation" ignores and thereby assists.

The rule of the neoexpressionist regime and its culmination in the legitimation of the East Village scene depend on yet another lie--the falsification of art's recent history with the purpose of concealing its radical basis and presenting it as, instead, oppressive. This enables the new scene to congratulate itself for breaking the bonds of tyranny. The specific content of this revision of history authorizes the current rejection of politics and the prevailing false definitions of liberation that justify both art-world support for the East Village scene and its blindness to the social struggle on the Lower East Side. For it is not "energy" that has produced the distorted perspective of neoexpressionism. Since this rewriting

occurs within our most prestigious art institutions, it is not surprising that they are also extending their approval to the East Village phenomenon.

One of the clearest instances of this reconstruction of recent art history in the name of neoexpressionism is the Whitney Museum's 1983 exhibition **MINIMALISM TO EXPRESSIONISM**, which attempted to supplant earlier views of minimal art. Originally understood as a materialist critique of the artwork's autonomy, a consideration which led to a recognition of the contingency of perception. In contrast to this initial assessment of the radicality of minimalism, the Whitney presented the movement as conservative, thereby setting it up as a foil for neoexpressionism's pretense to liberation. To effect this, the museum guided the deceptive judgements of minimalism as the following:

--Art adopted inflexible and authoritarian qualities.

--In Minimalism individual personality was repressed.

--Cool precise icons of formalism filled pristine, white-walled, and artificially lit exhibition spaces.

--In Minimalism life and art were compartmentalized.-45

INFLEXIBLE, AUTHORITARIAN, REPRESSIVE, COLD, FORMALIST, LIFE-DENYING--these words have grown increasingly familiar. They are the simplistic charges leveled against any critical questioning of received

idealist notions of art. An art practice that challenged the prevailing authority of formalism and entrenched ideas of individual creation is now called authoritarian and formalist; art that made context part of the work through attention to real time and space now becomes divorced from life or simply cold. The hidden agenda of the Whitney's exhibition was to bolster the pretensions of neoexpressionism to a radicality purported to reside in its excessive emotion. According to the exhibition's curator Patterson Sims, this emotion CONTRASTS with our conservative era, while minimalism's "coldness" was at odds with the radical society of its day: "The heightened realities of the Neo-Expressionists seem as contrary to their numbed, impoverished, and conservative times as Minimalism's denial of the eccentricities and energy of the 1960s. Now, at a time of cutbacks and retrenchment, artistic excess has taken over." Within the terms of this inverted view, RADICAL and CONSERVATIVE are depoliticized into synonyms for EMOTIONAL and INTELLECTUAL, HOT and COLD. It is only within the restricted confines of such an argument that neoexpressionism's retreat from political art practice into the expression of solipsistic feelings can be heralded as a significant development.

But this is exactly what is being done by the artists, dealers, and critics of the East Village scene:

--The art world has done it again...A new avant-garde has been launched.-46

--Art too long repressed, exploded with savage energy.-47

--One finds here a sophisticated sense of current issues and trends, unrestrained by any stylistic borders.-48

--Politically and socially relevant, a reaction to the reckoning severity of the '70s, lives in the art itself...-49

--...the East Village is greatly a reaction against intellectualization...If there is indeed nothing new in the East Village, it is because its basis of individuality does not rely on such measures. Artists seek only to express themselves.-50

While it might seem that this last passage is intended as criticism of the scene, Carlo McCormick actually supports the notion of individual liberation embodied in an expressive painting. This program of individual, as opposed to social or political liberation is so unthreatening to the status quo that Fun Gallery does fifty percent of its selling to art consultants. The graffiti art that Fun specializes in is now largely indistinguishable from standard neoexpressionism, with its gestural painting, mythological motifs, and apocalyptic themes. "Art consultants," says Bill Stelling, "obviously like the art that is less controversial. This is why this kind of art works in corporate headquarters...It's not something that would offend someone in the Moral Majority."

Individual liberation is yet another element of the dominant ideology that determines the way in which the art

world represents the neighborhood. East Village scene makers view the Lower East Side as a liberating place that offers "a choice which allows one to be oneself." -51 But who has such choices? To characterize the neighborhood as a place of choices is to base one's assessment on nonpolitical concepts of freedom, and is therefore to be unconscious of the crippling lack of options that is the real condition of Lower East Side residents. The limitations on these people's lives are not all a result of emotional repression but of the formidable economic forces arrayed against them.

Last fall the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania mounted the first museum exhibition of East Village art. It took only three years from the opening of the first East Village galleries for the most prestigious of art-world institutions--the museum--to authorize the new system. The University of California at Santa Barbara quickly followed suit with NEO-YORK, an exhibition augmented as a "public forum," film and video about the Lower East Side, as well as a "street party" featuring "East Village food and drink." The ICA show was more modest, accompanied only by an illustrated catalogue containing three essays. The exhibition was motivated, according to its curator Janet Kardon, by the museum's mandate to be on the "cutting edge of the newest art issues," and the catalogue's introductory essay, written in a matter-of-fact, informative manner, expressed the hope that the show would inspire a critical discourse. The catalogue itself, however, offered not a

single critical assessment. Filled instead with clichés about the freedom, spirit, and diversity of the East Village scene, Kardon's introduction refers to gentrification in terms of the appearance of new restaurants and boutiques. One essay notes that there has been a "youthful restoration of the inner city." - 52 With these museum exhibitions, the neighborhood has once again been exploited for its promotional value.

The Lower East Side enters the space of the ICA catalogue in three forms: mythologized in the texts as an exciting bohemian environment, objectified in a map delimiting its boundaries, and aestheticized in a full-page photograph of a Lower East Side "street scene." All three are familiar strategies for the domination and possession of others. The photograph, alone, is a blatant example of the aestheticization of poverty and suffering that has become a staple of visual imagery. At the lower edge of the photograph a bum sits in a doorway surrounded by his shopping bags, a liquor bottle, and the remnants of a meal. He is apparently oblivious of the photographer, unaware of the composition in which he is forced to play a major role. Abundant graffiti covers the wall behind him, while at the left the wall is pasted over with layers of posters, the topmost of which is an advertisement for the Pierpont Morgan Library's Holbein exhibition. The poster features a large reproduction of a Holbein portrait of a figure facing in the direction of the bum in the doorway. High art mingles with the "subculture" of graffiti and the "low-life" represented by the bum in a photograph which is

given a title, like an artwork: **FIRST STREET AND SECOND AVENUE (HOLBEIN AND THE BUM)**. The photograph displays familiar elements of an easily produced artfulness: the "rightness" of the image, its "meaningful" juxtaposition of high culture and low life, and the compositional unity achieved through the figure's placement at the bottom of the graffitied spiral and the manner in which the bum and portrait in similar dress appear to face each other. While its street subject has long been popular among art photographers, this photograph is inserted into the pages of a museum catalogue for the purpose of advertising the pleasures and unique ambience of this particular art scene. Only an art world steeped in the protective and transformative values of aestheticism and the blindness to suffering that such an ideology sanctions could tolerate, let alone applaud, such an event. For this picture idology sanctions could tolerate, let alone applaud, such an event. For this picture functions as a tourist shot, introducing the viewer to the local color of an exotic and dangerous locale. It is, however, ironic that the site of this photograph is also the place where a very different kind of photograph was first produced in the United States. At the turn of the century, Jacob Riis published texts illustrated with photographs of the Lower East Side in books such as **HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES** in order to stimulate social reform. Whatever the manifold failings of this mode of liberal social documentary, they pale beside the photograph in the ICA catalogue, which

is untroubled by any social conscience whatsoever. Whereas Riis's muckraking attempted to force attention on unpleasant realities that people would rather have ignored, *HOLBEIN AND THE BUM* exemplifies a completely degraded, aestheticized documentary of the present, the petted darling of the monied, a shiver-provoking, slyly decadent, lip-smacking appreciation of alien vitality or a fragmented vision of psychological alienation in city and town." -53 This is the documentary-cum-art-photograph that, like *HOLBEIN AND THE BUM*, is intended not to call attention to the plight of the homeless but to fit comfortably into the pages of an art catalogue, unveiling to art lovers the special pleasures of the East Village as a spectacle for the slumming delectation of those collectors who cruise the area in limousines.

To such missions a dazed bum presents no barriers. He is, rather, a consummate lure, since his presence forecloses complex thoughts about the reality or social causes underlying "ambiance." The figure of a bum is laden with connotations of the eternally and deservedly poor. It thus holds historical analysis at bay. A recognition of the entrenched bourgeois social codes in images of bums lies behind another work that deal with Lower East Side subject matter, *THE BOWERY IN TWO INADEQUATE DESCRIPTIVE SYSTEMS* by Martha Rosler. Rosler's *BOWERY* is notable for its *ABSENCE* of bums, for its refusal to perpetuate the codes and thereby serve the workings of power. "The buried text of photographs of drunks," Rosler writes, "is not a

treatise on political economy." -54
Rather, as a member of that group which Marx referred to as the "refuse of all classes," -55 the bum is poor but avoids placement in class struggle. Insofar as he signifies laziness and a conscious refusal to earn his own living, he provides an alibi for revelers in the East Village scene to earn his own living, he provides an alibi for revelers in the East Village scene to indulge in the most callous attitudes toward poverty, and like the gentrifiers on the Lower East Side they remain indifferent to the miseries surrounding them. This is the difference that the young Engels described with such amazement in 1844, after his first trip to the industrial city of Manchester. Even in his horror, Engels could point to the reasons, engendered by capitalism, for such callousness: "The middle-class have a truly extraordinary conception of society. They really believe that all human beings...have a real existence only if they make money or help to make it." -56 The beggar in middle-class society is therefore "stamped forever as one who has lost all claim to be regarded as a human being." -57 Yet, because the bum also signifies a decision not to work, he has been commandeered by the art world for another purpose--as a metaphor for the artist's own purported refusal of bourgeois convention. In this way, the figure of the bum provides the requisite identification with marginal figures and social outcasts by which avant-garde and the bohemian glamour accrues to the East Village scene despite its embrace of conventional values.

In the image of the bum, the problems

of the homeless poor, existing on all sides of the East Village art scene, are mythologized, exploited, and finally ignored. Once the poor become aestheticized, poverty itself moves out of our field of vision. Images like *HOLBEIN AND THE BUM* disguise the literal existence of thousands of displaced and homeless people who are not only produced by late capitalism but constitute its very conditions. As a process of dispersing a "useless" class, gentrification is aided and abetted by an "artistic" process whereby poverty and homelessness are served up for aesthetic pleasure.

Footnotes:

1. All quoted statements, unless otherwise specified, are taken from interviews conducted by the authors in October and November 1984.
2. Grace Glueck, "A Gallery Scene That Pioneers in New Territories," *New York Times*, June 26, 1983, p. 27.
3. Irving Sandler, "Tenth Street Then and Now," in *The East Village Scene*, Philadelphia, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1984, p. 10 (emphasis added).
4. Helene Winer, *New Galleries of the Lower East Side* (exhibition brochure), New York, Artists Space, n.d. (January 1984), n.p.
5. Kim Levin, "The Neo-Frontier," in Richard Goldstein and Robert Massa, eds., "Heroes and Villains in the Arts," *Village Voice*, January 4, 1983.
6. Nicolas A. Moufarrege, "The Year After," *Flash Art*, no. 118 (Summer 1984), p. 51.
7. Rene Ricard, "The Pledge of Allegiance," *Artforum*, vol. XXI, no. 3

- (November 1982), p. 49.
8. Winer, n.p.
 9. Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick, "Slouching Toward Avenue D," *Art in America*, vol. 72, no. 6 (Summer 1984), p. 135.
 10. Janet Kardon, "The East Village Scene," in *The East Village Scene*, p. 8.
 11. The Panglossian notion of a "postindustrial society" has entered political discourse at all levels. Used by its main theoretician Daniel Bell and other neoconservatives to describe a social order evolved from an economy that produces services rather than goods, the concept "postindustrial society" holds the promise of a "communal society wherein public mechanism rather than the market becomes the allocator of goods, and public choice, rather than individual demand becomes the arbiter of services" (Daniel Bell, as cited in Michael Harrington, *The Twilight of Capitalism*, New York, Simon&Schuster, 1976, p. 221). As Ernest Mandel points out, however, "far from representing a 'postindustrial society', late capitalism . . . constitutes generalized universal industrialization for the first time in history. Mechanization, standardization, over-specialization and parcellization of labour, which in the past determined only the realm of commodity production in actual industry, now penetrate into all sectors of social life" (Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, trans. Joris De Bres, London, Verso, 1978, p. 378).
 12. Peter D. Salins, "The Limits of Gentrification," *New York Affairs*, vol. 5 (Fall 1979), p.3.
 13. Blake Fleetwood, "The New Elite

- and an Urban Renaissance," *New York Times Magazine*, January 14, 1979, p. 16.
14. " 'Gentrification' or Genocide?" *Breakthrough*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 1981), p. 32.
15. William R. Greer, "Business-Services Industries Pace Growth in Jobs in New York City," *New York Times*, December 3, 1984, p. 4.
16. Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1981, p. 32.
17. Mandel, pp. 177, 178.
18. Jonathan Fuerbringer, "Jobless Rate Held Steady in October," *New York Times*, Nov. 3, 1984, p. 46.
19. Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes, New York, Vintage books, 1977, vol. 1, p.797.
20. The term underclass is used with predictable contempt and callousness by neoconservatives to characterize the lower classes. Their explanations for the existence of such a category run the gamut from the biological to the cultural, from the economic to the social, but, in the final analysis, they believe that many members of this class are socially and economically irredeemable because of their inability to assimilate bourgeois values and behavior. Edward Banfield presents the most distorted version of this view of the underlying conditions of poverty: "Most of those caught up in this culture are unable or unwilling to plan for the future, or to sacrifice immediate gratifications in favor of future ones, or to accept the disciplines that are required in order to get and to spend. . . . Lower-class poverty is 'inwardly' caused (by psychological inability to

provide for the future and all that this implies)" (Edward Banfield, *The Unheavenly City*, cited in Murry Hausknecht, "Caliban's Abode," in Lewis A. Coser and Irving Howe, eds., *The New Conservatives*, New York, New American Library, 1976, p. 196.)

21. Quoted in Sara Rimer, "Homeless Spend Nights in City Welfare Office," *New York Times*, November 19, 1984, p. B4.

22. Statement issued by Lower East Side Catholic Area Conference on the Cross-Subsidy Plan, November 5, 1984. Cross-subsidy is, according to a mayor's office press release of July 1984, an "innovative financing technique . . . to restore and create low and moderate income housing on the Lower East Side. "It is, in reality, the old technique of turning over city-owned property to developers who will be "encouraged" to create twenty percent lower income housing. Supposedly the proceeds of the sale of city property will be used to rehabilitate over 1,000 housing units in the area, "many of which will eventually be sold to tenants at low cost." In Carol Watson's view, "Three years ago the mayor wouldn't have proposed such a program because the development community wouldn't have been interested. But the development community is now coming on a large scale to the Lower East Side. The Cross-Subsidy program was born of that interest and the mayor's need to satisfy that interest."

23. Cited in Harrington, *The Twilight of Capitalism*, p. 224. For analysis of the 421-a tax abatement program, see Maria Laurino, "Trickle-Down Real Estate,"

- Village Voice, December 4, 1984, p. 5.
24. Marx, p. 794.
25. Harrington, *The Other America*, p. 151.
26. Robinson and McCormick, p. 141.
27. Sandler, p. 19.
28. Kim Levin, "the East Village," *Village Voice*, October 18, 1983, p. 79.
29. Craig Owens, "Commentary: The Problem with Puerilism," *Art in America*, vol. 72, no. 6 (Summer 1984), pp. 162-163.
30. Roberta Smith, "The East Village Art Wars," *Village Voice*, July 17, 1984, p. 79.
31. The New York City Artist Homeownership Program, Request for Proposals, p. 1.
32. Nilda Pimentel, as cited in Richard Goldstein, "Portrait of the Artist as a Good Use," *Village Voice*, December 14, 1982, p. 20.
33. Open letter to artists and art organizations requesting letters of support for Artists Homeownership Program issued by the fifty-one participants, January 27, 1983.
34. Martha Wilson and Barbara Quinn, Franklin Furnace, letter in support of AHOP, October 19, 1982.
35. Linda Shearer, Artists Space, letter in support of AHOP, October 19, 1982.
36. Barbara Haskell, Whitney Museum of American Art, letter in support of AHOP, October 20, 1982.
37. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowel-Smith, New York, International Publishers, 1980, p. 7.
38. Edward W. Said, *The Question of Palestine*, New York, Vintage Books,

- 1980, p. 9.
39. Income and Poverty Status, 1980 Census.
40. Salins, p. 6.
41. Ann-Byrd Platt, "The Art Scene Moves to the East Village," *Wall Street Journal*, May 2, 1984, p. 28.
42. Owens, p. 163.
43. Nicolas Moufarrege, "Another Wave, Still More Savagely Than the First: Lower East Side, 1982," vol. 57, no. 1 (September 1982), p. 69.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
45. Patterson Sims, *Minimalism to Expressionism* (exhibition brochure), New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, n.p.
46. Robinson and McCormick, p. 135.
47. Moufarrege, "The Year After," p. 51.
48. Kardon, p. 8.
49. Moufarrege, "Another Wave," p. 69.
50. Carlo McCormick, "The Periphery of Pluralism," in *The East Village Scene*, p. 47.
51. Nicolas Moufarrege, "East Village," *Flash Art*, no. 111 (March 1983), p. 37.
52. McCormick, p. 33.
53. Martha Rosler, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)," in *MARTHA ROSLER, 3 WORKS*, Halifax, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981, p.80.
54. *Ibid.*, p.,79
55. Karl Marx, *THE EIGHTEENTH BRUMAIRE OF LOUIS BONAPARTE*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1954, p.63.
56. Friedrich Engels, *THE CONDITIONS OF THE WORKING CLASS IN ENGLAND*, New York, Macmillan, 1958, p.311.

57. Ibid, p.314.

[Back to Index of ABC No Rio History](#)

[about](#) | [events](#) | [facilities](#) | [arts ed & training](#) | [calendar](#) | [online galleries](#) | [affiliated projects](#) | [make contact](#) | [support](#)

ABC No Rio: The Culture of Opposition Since 1980