

East Village '84

Commentary: The Problem with Puerilism

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—exchanges mediated by the avant-garde.¹ 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 the latest episode in that history. An attempt magically to resolve a classic overproduction crisis (overproduction by artists, overproduction of artists), 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 exchange between high and low sectors of the cultural economy takes place. By the mid-19th century, the progressive marginalization of the artistic 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—the ragpickers, streetwalkers and street entertainers, etc., who appear in the poetry of Baudelaire, the paintings of Courbet, Manet, Daumier, etc. From the very beginning, however, the avant-garde's relation to subcultural types was ambivalent; hence, its celebrated irony—Baudelaire's recommendation that beggars wear gloves—which allowed contradictory attitudes to exist side by side.

Avant-garde irony was not, of course, reserved for the underclasses, but was often turned on the bourgeoisie as well; in either case, what it expresses is the avant-

TITLE DEED
SECOND AVE.

RENT \$250.

With 1 Wine Bar \$500.

With 2 Boutiques 675.

With 3 Gourmet Shops 950.

With 4 Galleries 1100.

With CO-OPS \$1400.

If a landlord owns ALL the buildings on a block, the rent is Doubled on Unrenovated Units in those buildings.

garde's intermediary position between the two. As Stuart Hall, who has written extensively on the politics of subcultural formations, observes, "The bohemian subculture of the *avant-garde* that has arisen from time to time in the modern city, is both distinct from its 'parent' culture (the urban culture of the middle class intelligentsia) and yet also a part of it (sharing with it a modernising outlook, standards of education, a privileged relation vis-à-vis productive labour, and so on)."² The fact that avant-garde artists had only partially withdrawn from the middle-class elite—which also constitutes the primary, if not the only, audience for avant-garde production—placed them in a contradictory position; but this position also equipped them for the economic function they would eventually 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 collectivity of their being-as-a-group.") Grounded in concrete social practices, these "styles" offer an alternative to the sterility of museum culture, and have periodically been appropriated as such by the avant-garde. Here is an (extremely condensed) description of this process:

Improvised [subcultural] forms are usually first made saleable by the artisan-level entrepreneurs who spring up in and around any active subculture. Through their efforts, a wider circle of consumers gains 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 subtle ritual which had first informed them. At this point, it appears to the large fashion and entertainment concerns as a promising trend. Components of an already diluted stylistic complex are selected out, adapted to the demands of mass manufacture, and pushed to the last job-lot and bargain counter.³

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 we have witnessed a series of isolated attempts to begin this process again: the reconsolidation of SoHo around established high-art traditions has propelled young, sometimes radical artists out to new marginal locations—the South Bronx, an abandoned massage parlor just south of Times Square—where they have regrouped with new subcultural recruits. The recent centralization of this tendency in the East Village provides it with both a geographic and, more importantly, an economic base, a network of artist-run commercial galleries established specifically for the marketing of subcultural productions (graffiti, cartooning and other vernacular expressions) or puerile imitations of them. (The youth of the new avant-garde, rather, "enfant-garde" indicates that Youth itself has become an important subcultural category.) The prevalence of subcultural models in contemporary "avant-garde" production—both the "new" British sculpture and the French *figuration libre*, to cite but two examples, are entirely dependent upon them—suggests that this is a global, rather than local, phenomenon; but it also documents the importance subcultural appropriation in the maintenance of a global cultural economy.

If we regard the East Village art "scene" as an economic, rather than esthetic, development, we can account for the one characteristic of that "scene" which seems to contradict more conventional notions of avant-garde activity. I am referring to the surrender, by the East Village artist-entrepreneurs, to the means-end rationality of the marketplace: "Paintings are doorways to collector's [sic] homes," one East

Village painter proclaims in a recent interview, no doubt hoping his candor will be mistaken for cynicism. Despite attempts to fabricate a genealogy for the artist-run galleries of the East Village in the alternative-space movement of the '70s, 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 pose created, moreover, through affiliation with a variety of deviant and delinquent subcultural types. (Recently, an East Village artist staged a simulacrum of the Factory—itsself a simulated Bohemia—thereby confirming Warhol's precedence.) Whether ironic or not, Warhol's acquiescence to the logic of the culture industry—his transformation of the studio into a Factory, his adoption of the techniques of serialized production, etc.—stands as a pivotal moment in the history of the avant-garde, the point at which its function in the mechanisms of cultural economy first became visible. (Without Warhol, the above analysis of the avant-garde would not have been possible.) By destroying the avant-garde's pretense to autonomy, Warhol has left subsequent "avant-gardes" two alternatives: either they openly acknowledge their economic role—the alternative pursued by the East Village "avant-garde"—or they actively work to dislodge an entrenched, institutionalized avant-garde production model.

If Warhol exposed the implication of the avant-garde in cultural economy in general, the East Village demonstrates the implication of that economy in broader social and political processes. For



this expansion of the market also participates in the ongoing "Manhattanization" of New York—the uprooting and displacement, by a coalition of city politicians (headed by the Mayor) and real-estate speculators, of the city's subcultural populations, and their replacement with a young, upwardly mobile professional class. Artists are not, of course, responsible for "gentrification"; they are often its victims, as the closing of any number of East Village galleries, forced out of the area by rents they helped to inflate, will sooner or later demonstrate. Artists can, however, work within the community to call attention to, and mobilize resistance against, the political and economic interests which East Village art serves (as the artists affiliated with PADD, who are responsible for the illustrations accompanying this text, have done).

The East Village is not only a phenomenon, but also a global syzygy of East Village art mounted as far afield as Ams reception in the European and American art press has been a all too familiar reaction to the homogenization, standardization, and categorization of contemporary social reception is yet another manil what Jacques Attali describes a ious search for lost difference logic from which difference itse excluded.⁴ Searching for lost has become the primary acti contemporary avant-garde. But out and develops more and mo areas of social life for mass-c sumption, the avant-garde only the condition it attempts to all appropriation of the forms wl cultures resist assimilation is p er than an antidote to, the gene of real sexual, regional and cul ences and their replacement w ture industry's artificial, mas generic signifiers for "Differen present instance, the empty di puerilism of the East Village "av



PADD (Political Art Documentation/Distribution) Project against Displacement: Posters by Day Geeson & Dennis Thomas (opposite), Jerry Kearns (above right), Nancy Sullivan (above), all 1984.

1. See Thomas Crow, "Modernism Culture in the Visual Arts," in *Bu baut and Solkin, eds., Modernism, ity, Halifax, The Press of the Novi lege of Art and Design, 1983. Although I would argue with Cro to treat the modernist avant-garde i subculture, the following treatment industry-subcultural relations is ind 2. Hall and Jefferson, eds., *Resist, Rituals*, London, 1976, p. 13. A Crow, p. 259. 3. Crow, p. 252. For a more com of these mechanisms, Crow's entire (pp. 251-55) should be consulted. 4. Jacques Attali, "Introduction to cial Text 7 (Spring/Summer 1983), 7*