

Simon Sheikh
**Positively East
Village
Revisited: The
Problem with
Puerilism**

01/04

e-flux journal #1 — december 2008 Simon Sheikh
Positively East Village Revisited: The Problem with Puerilism

Craig Owens' 1984 essay, "The Problem with Puerilism," was written for a very specific context: as a response to the predominantly celebratory tone taken in *Artforum* at the time with regard to the emerging East Village art scene.¹ Much hyped for its energy, youthfulness, and general coolness, the scene was widely taken for granted. As such, it was exported as a generation rather than as a style or an -ism, or, for that matter, as individual artists (though individual artists were inevitably to emerge from it once its moment passed). The packaging of the East Village art scene is exemplary – it was, after all, the first conscious attempt at establishing and selling such a scene. It was also significant for having marketed itself through an idea of seamless connection between art production and general, generational (sub)cultural production in the form of cultural artefacts such as fashion, music, and a certain lifestyle.

Rather than celebrate this model, Owens attempts to deconstruct and historicize it at the very moment of its emergence. Without the convenience of art historical hindsight at his disposal, Owens employs an acute understanding of the power of sign value, of inscriptions on and projections into the economy of the sign. For this reason, *his* contribution can be seen as exemplary as well – exemplary of a possible art criticism that is as involved as it is distanced, establishing a position beyond the choice of simultaneity and reportage on the one hand, and historical and critical distance on the other (a position sorely missed in most contemporary art magazines). Owens traces the construction of the East Village scene far beyond the simple contention that it constituted a reaction to the alternative scene of the 1970s, returning to the seminal merger between art production and cultural industry in Andy Warhol's Factory of the 1960s, and further, to the emergence of the *bohème* figure of early modernism.

Both the advent of the early avant-gardes and that of Warhol's Factory coincided with critical moments in the development of capitalism, marked in the first instance by a shift from artisanship to industrial labor (from workshop to factory), and in the second by a shift from Fordism (factory production) to post-industrialism (immaterial labor). The importance of this shift from formalist to materialist critique marks the emergence of an art scene as an *economic* enterprise rather than an *esthetic* one, and Owens shows how artistic trends can be analyzed according to overall changes in both capitalist production *and* consumption.

Furthermore, this shift enables Owens to tie art production to urban development – the (capitalist) production of space – to show how

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 rappers, 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 modernizing 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 salable 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-or, 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 aesthetic, 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 local phenomenon, but also a global symptom. Exhibitions of East Village art have been mounted as far afield as Amsterdam; its reception in the European and, now, the American art press has been ecstatic. An all too familiar reaction to the increasing homogenization, standardization, rigidification of contemporary social life, this reception is yet another manifestation of what Jacques Attali describes as our "anxious search for lost differences within a logic from which difference itself has been excluded."⁴ 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 persistence of the East Village "avant-garde."

—Craig Owens



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 and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," in Buchloh, Gullabaum and Solkin, eds., *Modernism and Modernity*, Halifax, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983, pp. 213-64. Although I would argue with Crow's tendency to treat the modernist avant-garde as a resistant subculture, the following treatment of culture-industry-subcultural relations is indebted to his, pp. 251-55) should be consulted.

2. Hall and Jefferson, eds., *Resistance through Rituals*, London, 1976, p. 13. Also cited in Crow, p. 259.

3. Crow, p. 252. For a more complex analysis of these mechanisms, Crow's entire section VIII (pp. 251-55) should be consulted.

4. Jacques Attali, "Introduction to *Bravot!*," *Social Text* 7 (Spring/Summer 1983), 7.

the emergence of an ever "new" art scene is always more complicit with processes of gentrification and marginalization than it is critical of such byproducts of urban renewal. In stark opposition to the alternative lifestyle and contestation of space they advertise, artists and "scenesters" are in fact essential to the post-Fordist turnover of obsolete industrial space from spaces of production to spaces of consumption. In Sharon Zukin's influential *Loft Living*, a more thorough study contemporary with Owens' text, she named this process, with a sly paraphrasing of Marx's notion of an Asiatic mode of production, an "Artistic Mode of Production!"² Exemplified by the East Village scene described by Owens, an AMP has less to do with the production of actual goods (or artworks, if you will) than it does with the related task of producing urban forms, lifestyles, and consumption. Indeed, an AMP is integral to the connections between accumulation and consumption in a post-Fordist economy.

For Owens, this link is found in the very sign value of scene-making itself as it was present in the East Village, where the subculture emerged not as a product of the urban development of capitalism, but rather as (co)producer of the actual shift from spaces of production to spaces of consumption. As such, Owens here presents the social formation of the bohemian as little more than a simulacrum. Never removed or detached in his critique, Owens asked involved, difficult questions on a soft topic, linking hot, young artists and the apparently benign forces of innocent scene-making directly to the principles of a cultural – or even consciousness – industry, and his analysis still stands today. Indeed, the East Village art scene became the template for an endless succession of new scenes destined to take hold in cities such as Berlin and London, as well as for the globalization of the cultural industry itself, seen in the growth of the art market and the formation of an international circuit.

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Craig Owens, "The Problem with Puerilism," *Art in America* 72, no. 6 (Summer 1984): 162-163.

2

See Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989): 176-192.

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