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. 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...
Commentary: The Problem with Puerilism

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

The history of redneckism can be told in detail, and in detail it has been a story of complex conflicts between the upper class and the lower class, both of which are in turn divided into subgroups. The conflict is fought over the means and methods of production, over the marginalization of the social classes, and over the social and cultural institutions. In the recent history of the Southern United States, the tensions between the upper class and the lower class have been especially intense. The upper class has been characterized by a high degree of social exclusivity, political power, and economic privilege. The lower class has been characterized by a low degree of social mobility, political power, and economic privilege. The conflict between the upper class and the lower class has been characterized by a high degree of cultural and emotional intensity. The conflict has been fought over the means and methods of production, over the marginalization of the social classes, and over the social and cultural institutions. The conflict has been characterized by a high degree of social exclusivity, political power, and economic privilege.
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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1 Craig Owens, “The Problem with Puerilism,” Art in America 72, no. 6 (Summer 1984): 162-163.