



# UNNATURAL SPECULATIONS

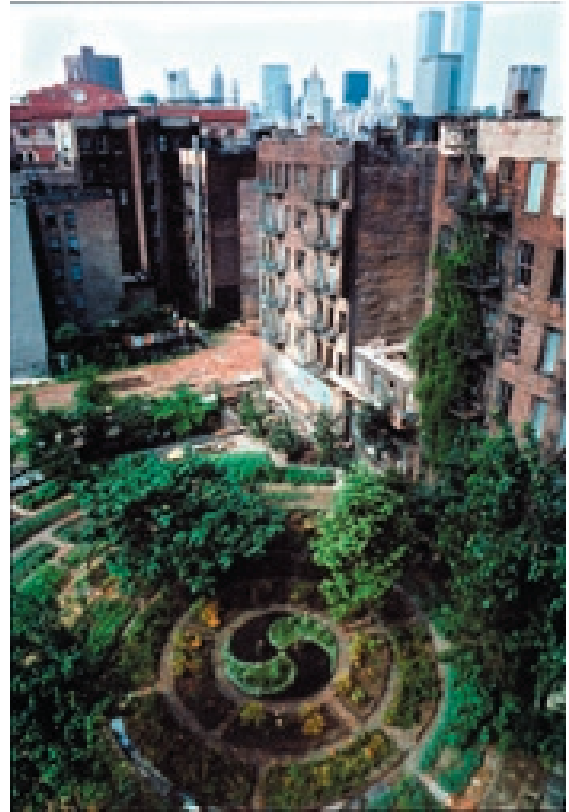
**Nature as an icon of urban resistance on NYC's Lower East Side 1979-1984\***

GREGORY SHOLETTE

*"The state of this Lower East Side of New York City provides pictures for painters, operas for actors and poets from urban shambles of a slum where monstrous inequity is met with savagery, a nearly perfect specimen of malignant city life....yet this neighborhood has also functioned as a cultural insulator. Within its bosom minority cultures have remained intact, and new ideas have incubated."*<sup>1</sup>

*"Urban cycles of decline, decay, and abandonment followed by rebirth through rehabilitation, renovation, and reconstruction may appear to be natural processes. In fact however, the fall and rise of cities are consequences not only of financial and productive cycles and state fiscal crises but also of deliberate social policy."*<sup>2</sup>

**M**etaphors of urban decay, of rebirth, and incubation suggest that the process of "constructing nature" -- the occasion for this special issue of *Afterimage* -- has its corollary in the act of naturalizing culture. This complementary operation ascribes organic processes to the workings of human labor and economic systems. In



21st Century community garden on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Adam Purple's now destroyed Garden of Eden.



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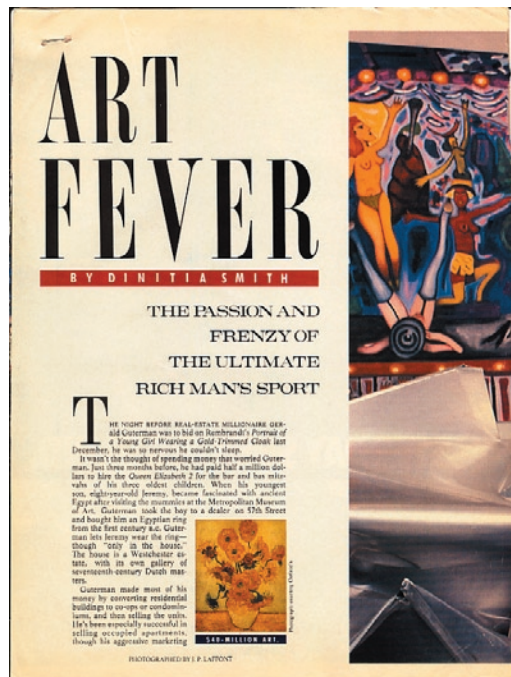
this essay I will be looking at the way the inner city is naturalized<sup>3</sup> through the work of several artists active in Manhattan's Lower East Side between 1979 and 1984. What makes these artists' works exceptionally coherent is that each uses natural iconography — nature as image or as idea—to critically respond to the entwined processes of real estate speculation and class displacement known as gentrification.<sup>4</sup> while effectively treating the neighborhood itself as a thing brimming with “malignant city life.”

By and large the work examined below was initially seen in outdoor locations, often on abandoned buildings. These “street” settings presented their own artificial ecology where competing species of images inhabited an environment of licit and illicit visual noise that included: wheatpasted hand bills, commercial advertising, signage from retail businesses, fluorescent graffiti, as well as stencils and posters, some of which also presented anti-gentrification messages to the public.

How and why artists chose natural imagery to agitate or comment on housing and economic issues is the concern of this text. The answers which present themselves place the battle to maintain low income rents in inner-city neighborhoods within a broader cultural and political context.

Rebecca Howland octopus image for the Real Estate Show, 1979.





One response these artists made was to satirize the naturalizing language of the real estate industry itself. Through advertisements and press releases, land developers speculators, and even the city would described low income neighborhoods like Hell's Kitchen or the Lower East Side as "untamed territories" where upwardly mobile white renters were called on to serve as "trail blazers" or "urban pioneers."<sup>5</sup>

The other way artists "naturalized" or challenged the myths surrounding gentrification on the Lower East Side is less straightforward. It involves what Craig Owens described as a search "for lost difference [that] has become the primary activity of the contemporary avant-garde..."<sup>6</sup>

Owens critical remarks were aimed at the shallowness of the East Village art scene in the early 1980's which: "...seeks out and develops more and more resistant areas of social life for mass-cultural consumption."<sup>7</sup> His analysis frames in historical terms what he called the "shifting alliances between artists and other social groups..." by comparing the 1980's avant-garde fascination with the "racial and ethnic, deviant and delinquent subcultures..." of the Lower East Side to the infatuation of a previous avant-garde with the "...ragpickers, streetwalkers and street entertainers... " of mid-19th Century Paris. Yet despite Owens important insights he misses the complex irony of his subject matter.

Against the "puerilism" of the East Village art, Owens champions the anti-gentrification imagery produced by members of Political Art Documentation and Distribution, a project that I helped organize and which I detail in part below. Yet in describing PAD/D's work as "mobilize[ing] resistance against, the political and economic interests which East Village art serves..."<sup>8</sup> Owens overlooks the way that the same

New Yorker Magazine April 20th, 1987.



search for “lost difference” also operated within progressive cultural formations, including the work of PAD/D, even if this longing occasioned more reflexive practices, as I will show.<sup>9</sup>

In various and often unexpected ways therefore the work under consideration naturalizes urban culture, extending this process to all parts of the Lower East Side including: the streets, the political economy, the history, and even the heterogeneous population of the neighborhood. Within the work of these artists, “Loisaida” is represented variously as: an endangered species or as one that is biologically out of control, as a tableau in which predators and prey are locked in a primeval struggle, as a cyclical organic process revealed to be man-made, or as a corrupted ecological utopia in need of liberation. It is this last instance that I will turn to in my conclusion when examining some of the art from the late 1990’s that reworks the ecological themes of the last decade but so far remains primarily wedded to art world display.

## Malignant City

Like myself, many of the artists immigrating to the lower east side in the mid to late 1970s were voluntary refugees from the managed communities of New Jersey, Long Island or in towns in the mid-West or California, places where life’s rough-edges and natural disorder had been evacuated in favor of the regularity of landscaped yards, shopping malls, and parking lots. To these children whose parents had themselves fled the cities, the mix of Afro-Caribbean, European, and Asian cultures proved enduringly vital despite the crumbling tenement buildings and empty lots.

In many places the Lower East Side circa 1979 indeed looked like a B-movie version of life amidst the ruins of a nuclear or ecological catastrophe. Overturned cars, resembling animal carcasses, with their chassis stripped of parts, were strewn along the sides of streets especially on the alphabet Avenues B, C, and most of all D. Burnt out or demolished properties cut spaces between tenement buildings. These openings became filled with rubble, trashed appliances, syringes, condoms, as well as pigeons, and rats. Often they appeared to be returning to a state of wilderness as weeds and fast growing locust trees began to sprout from the piles of fallen bricks and mortar. Along some stretches of Avenues B, C, and D there were more square feet of this antediluvian looking scenery, than there was extant architecture.

Still, residents in this predominantly Hispanic community could

## Koch's Government of the Rich, by the Rich, for the Rich

By Joe Conason with Martin Rosenblatt

Political contributions, unlike the ones made by the average citizen, are not made to the city. The financial reports that are made by the major contributors are not made to the city. The financial reports that are made by the major contributors are not made to the city. The financial reports that are made by the major contributors are not made to the city.

These facts add an eerie side to the July 1981 and June 1982 tax returns that were submitted to the city. The tax returns that were submitted to the city. The tax returns that were submitted to the city. The tax returns that were submitted to the city.

The report will reveal the government's tax returns. The report will reveal the government's tax returns. The report will reveal the government's tax returns. The report will reveal the government's tax returns.

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The Village Voice, September, 21 1982

LES Neighborhood Magazine City Limits, June-July 1984, featuring PAD/D NFS art



be seen organizing gardens amid the rubble and hurrying in and out of tenements to work (always elsewhere), fetch food or to go to a social clubs. in the summer. Ukrainian men played checkers in Thompkins Square, while the women would sit together on the opposite side of the park conversing. Black leather and mohawks, remnants from the already fading punk scene shared sidewalks with kids chilling in open hydrants. Always a conga drum sounded, meting out a near 24 hour pulse.

Even the neighborhood's ethnic and cultural vitality could be read as a dense forest of signs where typographical tracings, some in Spanish or English but others in Hebrew, Chinese or Slavic characters, overlapped on brick or stucco walls and in shop windows. Along with this melange of texts was the visual chaos of newsstands, billboards, wheat pasted handbills, graffiti, political slogans and murals that depicted angry looking brown or yellow workers raising their fists.<sup>10</sup>

The total effect was that of a mongrel thing: part living, part mineralized ruin, part text but always more authentically "natural" than the genteel communities of either SoHo or Nassau County. Before discussing the art in detail, let me present a highly abbreviated history of the neighborhood and the arrival of a new wave of artists beginning in the late 1970s.

## The anti suburb

Celebrated by many who were raised on the Lower East Side, this working class neighborhood formed the first home to generations of Americans entering the United States beginning in the 1850s. Along with consecutive waves of Irish, Germans, Italians and later, eastern European Jews, Chinese, Puerto Ricans it was also a place where the artistic avant-garde, from the publishers of the radical paper *The Masses* to the first cooperative galleries to the Beat poets flourished alongside one another. Like an American left-bank, aspiring actors and artists drank coffee, ate ethnic foods and encountered the urban poor, the chemically dependent, and the slumlord.

By the late 1960s and Lower East Side was still a place for political activists, small businesses, hippies, Yuppies, and



Along the streets of Lower East Side 1984

Not For Sale opening Ave. A and 10th St. Summer, 1984



junkies, and a vibrant Hispanic culture (mostly Puerto Rican but also Dominican) of social clubs, sidewalk domino games, botanicas and bodegas. At this point the falling property values sped on by bank red-lining and municipal neglect, made much of the intact rental property a target for arson as some landlords who preferred insurance money over some unlikely rise in property values contracted for the destruction of their own miserable investments.

Then in the later half of the 1970s came a new wave of young immigrants. Many of these young people who moved to the streets west of the Bowery, south of 14th street, and north of Delancey were artists -- a class of individuals traditionally willing to forego bourgeois comforts, even risk their safety, in the pursuit of two goals. One of these was to be discovered in the traditional manner by a patron, a ticket out of the East Village for the lucky few.

The other hope was to come into contact with something authentic such as the imagined organic quality of other peoples (ethnic) communities. However the national and regional economy of the 1970s was in a virtual depression and the low-income areas of the city were the worst hit. This malaise was reflected in the *fin de siècle* spirit of the art and club scene in the Lower East Side. Downward mobility caused by high unemployment and a tight money supply literally cut off any route leading out of low rent neighborhoods and back into the middle class (at least until the boom years of the mid-1980s, and then at the price of 70 hour work-weeks.)

Yet in spite of this sense of “zero” option combined with such ominous signs as the energy “crisis,” where people shot each other at gas stations or the unprecedented global nuclear build-up of the 1970’s, the punk years were filled with a sense of macabre festivity. As one observer put it:

“The first generation to grow up under the specter of nuclear annihilation angrily came of age in an era of diminishing expectations. It was in this atmosphere that a rock club CBGB [in 1975] opened in New York’s East Village.... CBGB launched the punk movement, and it’s no coincidence that many of the early punks looked like survivors from a nuclear holocaust...”<sup>11</sup>

By 1979 Presidential contender Ronald Reagan offered tax cuts for the wealthy and trickle down left-overs for the working poor (in a plan dubbed Supply Side Economics AKA “Voodoo Economics.”) Together with bizarre remarks made about a coming biblical showdown, Reagan was proof enough that the world had all but ended and that the only option was to party (or to imitate one at any rate.)

Nevertheless throughout the 1970’s there were artists folded into this anarcho-apocalyptic mix that claimed a specifically political agenda. These art activists understood that they were themselves central to the



displacement process because as artists they enhanced the desirability of the neighborhood to middle and upper income residents. When a second wave of artists began arriving in the late 1970s these political possibilities would become exceptionally if temporarily focused.

## Copping an Octopus

“The smoke of burning buildings fills the street Rats and dogs are coming out to eat...the rich have been buried in the basements of their buildings... throw away your clothes you no longer need them...”<sup>12</sup>

In the last weeks of 1979 a splinter from the four year old artists group Collaborative Projects (COLAB) entered a city-owned building on Delancey Street that had been sitting empty in Loisaída for years . Aiming to liberate and occupy the site as a means of exposing “ ... the system of waste and disuse that characterizes the profit system in real estate.”<sup>13</sup> the Committee for the Real Estate Show opened their “squat-gallery” to friends and the public on January 1st 1980. The show was filled with coarsely made artworks that decried rent gouging landlords, city run development agencies, and what would become a favorite target of the new scene: the “suburbs,” as a series of suburban real estate photographs with sardonic captions like “3 BR, no rats, no unemployment” demonstrated.<sup>14</sup>

Outside the building, in a move that pre-figured the pop-piracy of east village art, Rebecca Howland copped the image of a monstrous octopus - the consummate left-caricature of big business - and painted it onto the bland facade of The Real Estate Show. In the creature’s tightly coiled arms were two tenement buildings, a bundle of cash, a gem (signifying the speculator’s perception of the building,) and a dagger. But one of the beast’s arms had been violently severed. The artist positioned this liberated limb just above the entrance to the building forming an arrow that directed the eyes of the neighborhood toward both the exhibition and to the example set by the artist’s collective action.

Within the context of the Lower East Side with its graffiti covered brickwork, hand made store signage, street graphics, and didactic murals the Real Estate Show’s polymorphic sea creature appeared inevitable, natural, like a denizen attracted to the region’s visible ecological fatigue. Howland also put her octopus icon on the Real Estate Show’s fliers and posters some of which were printed over actual page-spreads from the New York Times Real Estate section thus turning the creature into a veritable logo for the squat-action.

Howland would in fact continue to use the mollusk-image in her work for years, her most ambitious version a large three-dimensional sculpt-metal piece from 1983 titled the Real Estate Octopus with Dead Horse, that she made for the walkway of the Williamsburg Bridge. Real



Rebecca Howland's Manhattan as a Dead Horse, 1983, at the Drawing Centre

Estate Octopus... presented Howland's now emblematic invertebrate writhing beneath the towers of the world trade center as if it were the radioactive spawn of a secret Port Authority experiment.

One likely source for Howland's initial octopus effigy may have been the mural *Chi Lai--Arriba--Rise Up!* by Alan Okada on a building just five blocks to the south of the Real Estate Show. Within Okada's four story high painting a squirming cephalopod, draped in a US flag, clings like a parasite to the figure of a money-grubbing landlord. Another source for Howland's image is undoubtedly the 1901 novel "Octopus" by radical socialist author Frank Norris where the railroad is represented as a many armed monster. This connection is all the more interesting in that Norris's beastie symbolizes the expansion of capital into the western frontier. In the following passage Norris's protagonist Presely, first encounters the rail-road made monster:

"...Presley saw again, in his imagination, the galloping monster, the terror of steel and stream, with its single eye, Cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon...with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus."<sup>15</sup>

It is difficult to miss Howland's version of Real Estate speculators with their "tentacles.. clutching the soil" of the Lower East Side. But the Real Estate "insurrection" was itself a mixture of anarchistic bravado and analytical naiveté. The artists mimicked the direct action strategies of 1968 and in doing so they imagined that the community would be inspired to take similar action and stop the irrational warehousing of useful property. There was however nothing irrational about the city's plan for the neighborhood. It was part of a long standing grand design to weaken investment and living conditions in certain low income areas so that re-development could later be carried out that would attract real estate developers and upper income residents.<sup>16</sup>

Neither did neighborhood people necessarily get the point of the exhibit. According to artist Joe Lewis, a fellow COLAB member, "...a lot of people saw the show, the community people, they thought it was just a group of artists protesting that they could not show their work anywhere."<sup>17</sup>

The day after the opening of the Real Estate Show the city padlocked the building. Then, after receiving some bad press helped along by the appearance of artist Joseph Beuys, the city reversed itself and offered the artists a smaller space a few doors away to resume the exhibition.<sup>18</sup>

The Real Estate Octopus was just one specimen in an ersatz natural history of the Lower East Side targeting landlord abuse and neighborhood degradation. While Howland's tentacled speculator cast the real estate wars in terms of natural predation and defense,



artists such as Christy Rupp and Michael Anderson presented images of animals as signs and victims of an urban environment gone wrong.

### **Rats, king fishers, and voodoo economics**

In works like “Rubble Rats” and “Rat Patrol,” artist Christy Rupp approaches the Lower East Side as if it were the locus of an ecological disaster. In 1979 Rupp pasted some four thousand offset images of running rats throughout the city. The action titled “Rat Patrol” was intended to make “visible during the day what went on at night.”<sup>19</sup> It also played on traditional images of plagues or miasma where corruption spreads like an infection throughout the urban body.

What was the source of this contagion? In an interview with the New York Post in 1980 Rupp stated “Rats are not terrorists.... I see them as part of the history of ecology, in the whole chain of things. It’s simply that they’re out of control in the cities.”<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere the artist has commented that “Rats are a symptom,” insisting that garbage and “the environment and economics” are the cause, presumably of natural imbalance in cities.<sup>21</sup>

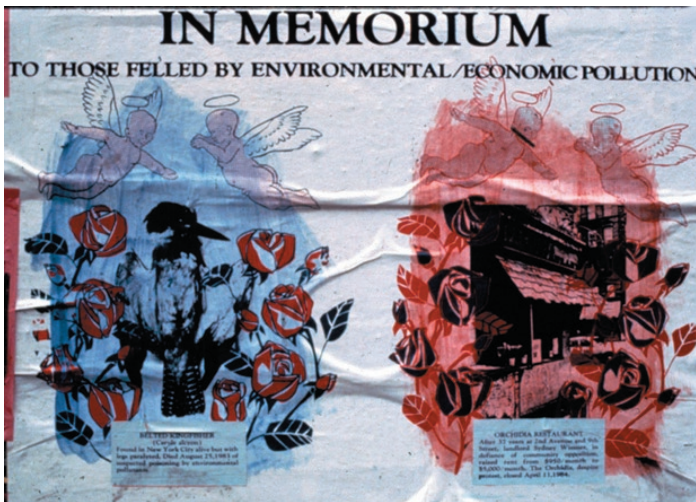
The success of “Rat Patrol” was followed by a series of rodent-sized sculptures such as “Rubble Rat.” In 1980 Rupp made the work by casting a cement rat directly onto a pile of bricks she found in the debris and weed covered backyard at ABC No Rio. In keeping with the camouflaging common to the animal kingdom Rupp’s small concrete sculpture is at first indistinguishable from other chunks of broken building that littered the area. Partly embedded in the debris it is only when the rat figure is at last discerned that are we tipped-off to the artifice of the work.

A somewhat different reading of the work places it in the category of the post-traumatic souvenir along with other petrified curiosities such as the melted watches in Hiroshima or the mummified inhabitants of ancient Pompeii. The piece first appeared in No Rio’s inaugural exhibition put on by the anti-nuclear coalition Artists for Survival in may of 1980. In contrast to Rupp’s more recent, skillfully crafted and assertively beautiful animal sculptures, these scabrous rodents retain a strong ambivalence about art as commodity production.

The abject look of Rupp’s sculptural vermin hints at another ambivalence by reflecting at once the rawness of “malignant city life” on The Lower East Side as well as an uneasiness over the absence of bourgeois standards. Once again my speculation is that for Rupp as well as other east village artists, the inner city landscape appeared as pathological, as “malignant city life.” And whether her



Christy Rupp street posters, late 1970s



Michael Anderson street poster for Not For Sale, 1984

representations of rodents were intended to make visible a nocturnal urban ecology or to amplify the already abundant evidence of New York's social and environmental crisis, these works are symptomatic of art that used the poor ecological hygiene of the city to agitate for social improvement.

In 1984 artist Michael Anderson added another specimen to the zoological garden of the Lower East Side. Anderson's silk-screened poster "In Memorium" featured the unusual pairing of an endangered animal, a bird known as a Kingfisher, together with an altogether different endangered species, the neighborhood "mom and

pop" store, in this case the Orchidia which was a popular Lower East Side restaurant serving the unique combination of Ukrainian and Italian cuisine. The Orchidia had recently been forced to close down because of unregulated commercial rent increases brought about by the "upturn" in the neighborhoods property values. But it was also one of the focal points for neighborhood anti-gentrification activists such as the Lower East Side Joint Planning Council who used the Orchidia situation to expand community participation and garner media attention.

Anderson was an exhibition preparator for the American Museum of Natural History at the time, and was also actively involved in anti-gentrification work in Brooklyn and on the Lower East Side. The poster, which was made for a neighborhood-wide art project called Out of Place: Art For the Evicted, has a bold headline that is dedicated: "To those felled by environmental/economic pollution." On the

PAD/Ds newsletter from 1983



left side of the 24 X 30 inch piece is the image of a dead bird. Beneath it in small type is a label-like caption reading: "Belted Kingfisher (Megacerle Alcyon) Found in New York City alive but with legs paralyzed. Died august 25th 1983 of suspected poisoning by environmental pollutants." To the right of the Kingfisher memorial Anderson has printed an image of the neighborhood eatery along with another testimonial that reads: "Orchidia Restaurant: almost 37 years at 2nd avenue at 9th street, landlord Sydney Wiener in defiance of community opposition raised rent from \$950/month to \$5,000/month. The Orchidia, despite protest, closed April 11, 1984." Surrounding both images is an irregular color smudge -- one blue one red, like the color of the dyes used to stain microscopic specimens -- and within these blots are images of roses and hovering cherubs.

Out of Place was a project of PAD/D - Political Art Documentation and Distribution the activist art collective

founded in 1980 that lasted until about 1987 and whose archives of socially committed art are now housed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Since 1982 some eight PAD/D members had been meeting as a reading group when in 1983 they decided to put ‘theory into practice’ by organizing an exhibition about the changes taking place in the neighborhood where they met and where most of them lived. In 1983 the PAD/D Reading Group became the PAD/D Not For Sale (as in “this neighborhood is not for sale”) Committee.<sup>22</sup>

The group’s first project was planned as an ambitious interactive gallery display showing a city skyline with viewer manipulated information panels on economics, racism, landlord abuses and city housing policies. A lack of funds as well as an inability to agree on the precise look of the installation led to the organizing of a large but traditional art exhibition on the theme of the Lower East Side that was held at El Bohio, a former public school building appropriated by neighborhood activists.

The following year the PAD/D Not For Sale Committee changed tactics moving into the public sphere with a parodic street project called Out of Place: Art For the Evicted. The readers turned activists solicited from some -- artists multiple graphic works on the subject of gentrification and displacement. The group then designated four specific street locations in the east village as mock “art galleries” going so far as to spray paint the names of these fake establishments -- The Discount Salon, The Leona Helmsly Gallery, Another Gallery, and the prophetic Guggenheim Downtown -- on the sides of boarded up buildings. Over the course of -- weeks in the summer of 1984 the group would wheat-paste the various works at each location - replacing those that had been damaged or covered over by other unrelated street advertising and graffiti. The opening for the project was held in front of the Guggenheim Downtown on the corner of Avenue A and Tenth Street complete with refreshments and local housing activists.

Along with Anderson’s memorial to economic and environmental pollution was another lament for a lost neighborhood business that was part of the Out of Place project. The Garden Cafeteria had been a Jewish cafeteria style restaurant located on East Broadway which had recently been bought out by a Chinese Restaurant (more likely a symptom of the changing demographics of the Lower East Side than real estate gouging). The artist Marianne Nowak paid tribute to the establishment’s passing in the form of color Xeroxed images of actual gardens interspersed with Cafeteria diners. Arranged in the form a single horizontal panorama on the deteriorated building that would temporarily be known as the Guggenheim Downtown, the work linked urban life and personal memory with natural cycles of growth and dis-



Detail of PAD/D's Not For Sale project poster showing the four ersatz street galleries, 1984



solution. But where Anderson's dirge-like "In Memorium" worked as a visual and conceptual pun, mixing document with lamentation and patently confusing the categories of nature and culture, "Garden Cafeteria" resolves this opposition by using nature to invoke the rapture of dwelling on what has recently been lost.

In general, the re-configuring of the economic sphere -- labor and capital-- as a natural process is the same ideological slight of hand that Marx and Engels once charged the young Hegalian philosopher Ludwig Feurbach with perpetrating when they pointing out that:

"He does not see how the sensuous world around him is, not a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same but the product of industry and of the state of society..."<sup>23</sup>

The authors further demystify Fuerbach's idealization of the German landscape using the history of a species of tree arguing: "....The cherry-tree, like almost all fruit-trees, was, as is well known, only a few centuries ago transplanted by commerce into our zone, and therefore only by this action of a definite society in a definite age it has become "sensuous certainty" for Feurbach."<sup>24</sup>

Sensuous certainty may have been on the minds of Ronald Reagan's publicity handlers when they "spun" their offensive against working class interests in terms of bucolic national scenery. The Republican's vision of the American landscape was not unlike that of Fuerbach's Germany over a hundred and thirty years before, only here just as melting snowcaps on mountain peaks wondrously find their way to your kitchen's faucet, so too claimed Reagan would unprecedented federal tax cuts for the wealthy mysteriously and assuredly "trickle down" to those in the economic lowlands. This is the background from which Ed Eisenberg's street poster titled Reaganomic Galleries is derived. In it a silvery waterfall is surrounded by several boxes filled with text. Upon inspection these diacritical captions serve to trace the history of the economic assault on the neighborhood in terms of the trickle down metaphor.

Eisenberg's waterfall starts with the 1981 tax bill cutting taxes to corporations and the upper class, splashes its way down to the revitalization of the luxury art market before passing through the gush of the East Village Art Scene and landing in a pool where the caption reads: "some young art stars profit handsomely; communities poor residents continue to dehydrate."

Other works the Not For Sale group "exhibited" in the streets invoked concepts of natural history in a more ethnographic mode including the ironic poster by Nancy Sullivan that depicted an iconic cowboy on horseback with a bold caption that read "Area Natives make your Reservations Now." Behind the lasso wielding horseman is an image of a desert in the Southwest. Both images appear on a sheet of graph paper suggesting the rationalizing of natural landscape in the wake of invading capital.

This Euro-expansionist sentiment carried over to --- Edgar Heap of Birds' poster with the word Natural spelled backwards:

LARUTAN  
we don't want Indians  
just their names  
mascots  
machines  
cities  
products  
buildings  
LIVING PEOPLE.

Like artist John Feckner whose spray paint stenciled slogans Growth/Decay and Broken Promises labeled the exterior of crumbled buildings and torched car bodies both downtown and in the South Bronx, Heap of Birds and Sullivan's posters functioned as ironic warnings about the effects of what might be termed ecological urban colonialism.

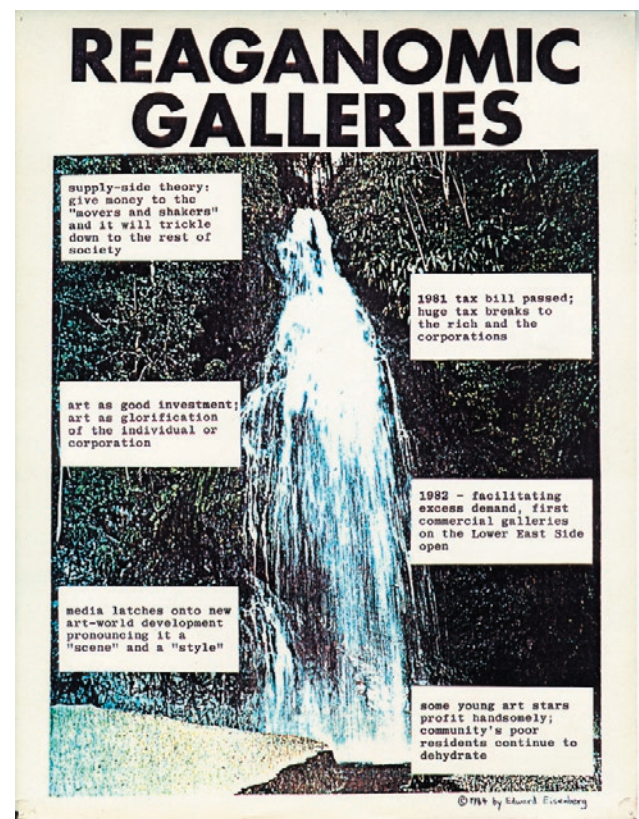
But as Janet Koenig, another member of the Out of Place project, had already observed, the contradictions involved in making art against gentrification were not going to be resolved within the cultural sphere:

"In many Manhattan communities the leading edge of gentrification has been artists... What relationship then, do politically conscious artists have to this situation? For artists, mere awareness of their roles in gentrification is not sufficient. On the one hand, this project attempts to raise consciousness about the issue, on the other hand, it can be seen as another "Off Off West Broadway" encroachment on the Lower East Side community."<sup>25</sup>

### Ecotopia on the Lower East Side?

Within these varied re-configurations of city as nature, and nature as city another tendency is visible. This includes artists who presented designs, often of a fantastic nature, for a new ecological-urban utopia. In fact the Lower East Side already had a tradition of both pragmatic and fantastical ecological undertakings that combined the recycling of natural resources with the existing architecture and community. Though not the subject of this essay, a short list of these attempted projects would include: the Plaza Cultural and garden on east 9th Street, Adam Purple's Garden of Eden, buildings with solar

Ed Eisenberg's street poster 1984.



panels and windmills located on East 5th and East 11th Streets, the Quondo urban agricultural collective on Houston Street and even a purported fish farm in the basement of an abandoned tenement building. At one time even Buckminster Fuller had been involved in demonstrating to members of CHARAS, a former Latino gang turned community activists, how to construct geodesic living structures for the neighborhood.

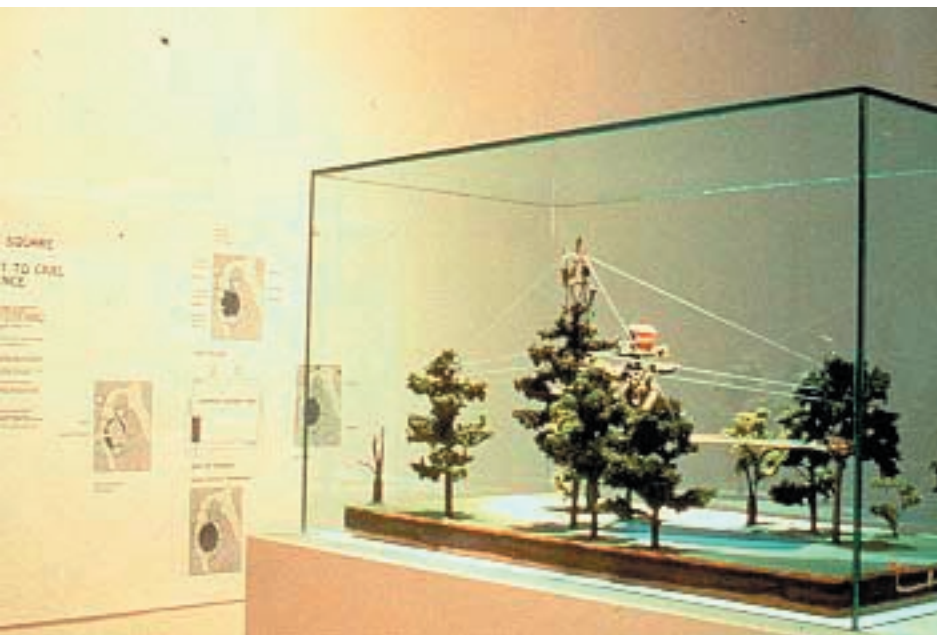
The list could also include the home of Anton Van Dalen, a senior member of the east village art scene. Born in Holland during the Second World War, Van Dalen moved to the Lower East Side in the mid 1960s. On the roof of his building were pigeon coops and in the first floor an indoor “farm” of rabbits and chickens.

Van Dalen’s surrealist inspired art enlarged upon this improbable urban agrarianism by offering a three dimensional, wooden pigeon coup car and the Auto Botanica: a Ford made of leaves, as well as emblematic street stencils of a women’s shoe with a dove nestled inside, a flying bus launching missiles, and an x-rayed arm with a vine sprouting from its lace-like arteries. The latter both a reference to shooting galleries and the potential for grass-roots revival on the mean streets of Loisaída.

In a more theoretical hybrid of ecology and activist ideals artist and architect Peter Fend who was active with the Real Estate Show, presented his plan for a project he called OECD or Ocean Earth Construction Development. Fend’s idea was to set up a “community corporation” that would design environmental engineering projects and then channel the profits from these into neighborhood improvements. Stock would be held exclusively by residents of the Lower East Side who would democratically vote on how profits would be used.

Under the slogan of “Delancey Street Goes to the Sea” Fend aimed to secure autonomy for the neighborhood by establishing “an independent energy and wastes-conversion cycle, possibly in Jamaica Bay or the shoals off Staten Island, and to build structures which -- being elevated above existing structures or lots-- are virtually exempt from taxes or rents.” Exactly where the “profit” would come in Fend’s project is unclear. Together with fantastic re-workings of topographical maps so that nations might be organized around shared resources and drainage basins, Fend was a sort of east village version of the

Nils Norman Thompkins Square Park  
Monument to Civil Disobedience,  
1997 mixed media





conceptual art team of Helen and Newton Harrison. But Fend's Libertarian-like schemes fit the entrepreneurial style of the eighties more than the anti-commercialism of early 70s conceptual art.

Proposing to fix the environmental and social-economic problems of the inner city through conceptual projects has recently reappeared in the work of 90s artist's like Mark Dion and Nils Norman. Dion's project for the exhibition, *Culture In Action in Chicago* in 1992/93, combined a high school science project with a field trip to a South American rain forest and resulted in temporarily recycling an abandoned building in Chicago into what Dion described as an "eco-drop in center and clubhouse." According to the curator of the project Mary Jane Jacob, the participating young Chicagoans learned "to frame nature in art context and to frame art in relation to the natural world. It initiated in the students a way of thinking about nature."<sup>26</sup>

Far closer to the present subject of the Lower East Side are the conceptual schemes and prototypes made by British born artist Nils Norman. In an exhibition at American Fine Arts in SoHo last April Norman presented detailed scale models and blue-prints for a number of utopian architectural and/or garden projects including *The Sky Village* for Thompkins Square Park (designed for both habitation and defense against city marshals and police), a communally owned solar powered news kiosk for senior citizens, and a proposed agricultural workers collective to be known as the *Underground Agrarians*.

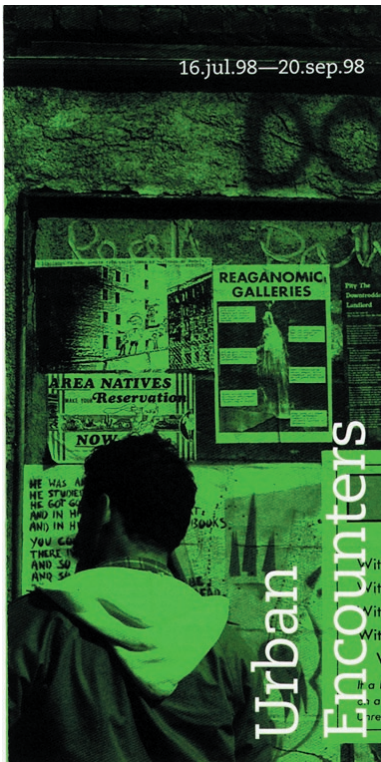
*Underground Agrarians* would be constructed at Norfolk and Delancey Streets on the Lower East Side. (Recall that the Real Estate Show was held on Delancey in 1979.) With each of the precise plexiglas covered miniatures in the exhibition is a Site Analysis. The model-site is broken down in the document into various proposed functions including: "Food Coop, Specialized info/book shop (gardening, tenant rights, autonomous energy use), Prosthetic Gardening Limbs Shop, Self-composting toilet, and Sustainable model permaculture roof garden."

The Organizational Structure is composed of work detachments and democratically voted commanders who supervise "composting, watering, weeding, sowing." Norman has even proposed re-naming Delancey Street: *Wobblies Street* after the radical turn of the century workers organization known as the Industrial Workers of the World or *Wobblies*.

Norman's models even more than Dion's largely symbolic investigations, borrow from the little known history of left politics and eco-



Nils Norman *Geo- Cruiser*, 2004



Brochure for the author's 1998 exhibition at the New Museum.

logical utopianism, including the kind of iconographic and polemical uses of nature that I have touched on in this essay. Nevertheless in light of the present anti-progressive and the self-satisfied insularity of the 90s art industry, it is this often less than ideal history of actual political work by artists in places like the Lower East Side, that is in danger of being romanticized like an exotic, organic thing.

Nevertheless there is a seductive pleasure in the new ecological art, not least of all derived from the conceptual linkage, especially strong in Norman's projects, to the history of collective practices and militant political resistance. And while New York City's Lower East Side continues to serve as the "natural" site for locating these alternate histories, what can not be stressed enough is the need to move beyond idealized exhibition settings into long range commitments where conceptually refined concepts are put to use in the malignant landscape of urban activism. ■

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## NOTES

1 Alan Moore and Marc Miller, "The ABC's of No Rio and its Times" *ABC No Rio Dinero: The Story of a Lower East Side Art Gallery*, ed. Moore and Miller ( USA: Copyright 1985, ABC No Rio): 1.

2 Martha Rosler "Fragments of a Metropolitan Viewpoint," *If You Lived Here : The City in Art, Theory and Social Activism*, Ed. Brian Wallis (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991): 25.

3 The city appears as a malevolent natural thing in sources like the detective novel and film-noir cinema as well as in the urban naturalism of writers like Frank Norris or Theodore Dreiser. Reading the city as a form of second nature appears in the work of Walter Benjamin especially his unfinished *Arcades Project*, as well as in certain discussions about public space see for example the work of Richard Sennett or Simon Pugh.

4 A concise analysis of the gentrification of the East Village that also focuses on the role of artists within this process can be found in Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gnedel Ryan, "The Fine Art Of Gentrification," *October*, no. 31 (Winter 1984): 91-111.

5 Consider the language used in this advertisement from a full page ad in the New York Times as quoted by urban geographer Neil Smith: "The Armory [a new condo facility] celebrates the teaming of the Wild Wild West with ten percent down payment and twelve month's free maintenance. The trail blazers have done their work. West 42nd street has been tamed, domesticated, and polished into the most exciting freshest most energetic neighborhoods in New York. " Wallis, *If You Lived Here* : 108.

6 Craig Owens, "Commentary: The Problem with Puerilism," *Art in America* (Summer 1984): 135

7 Here Owens is applying arguments made by Thomas Crow in his essay *Modernism and Mass Culture* to the phenomena of the East Village art scene. Crow understands what he terms "resistant subcultures" to be the source material for high-art avant-garde re-cycling. But Crow also bestows upon these marginalized groups an "...original force and integrity..." that is later appropriated by high art and turned into a commodity. Therefore both Crow and Owens tacitly invest subcultures and marginalized communities with an exploitable, organic richness manifest as difference. Thomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass" in Buchloh, Guilbaut and Solkin, eds. *Modernism and Modernity*, (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Culture, 1983): 252-55.

8 Owens: 163.

9 For example, one year before Owens text cultural activist Lucy Lippard chose a distinctively organic metaphor to stand for the Lower East Side. Note the way Lippard uses the street as the place where difference is manifest as scar tissue: "...Loisaida's wounds are bandaged with posters, stencils, and graffiti that bear witness to the internal struggles and triumphs of its diverse populace..." Lucy R. Lippard "Too Close to Home" *The Village Voice* (June 14, 1983): 94-95.

10 I refer the reader to Lippard cited above as well as to this fragment from Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* where he compares faded wall posters in the Paris Arcades to: "the first drops of a rain of letters that today pours down without let-up day and night on the city and is greeted like the Egyptian plague" or shop signs "...recording not so much the habitat as the origin and species of captured animals." as quoted by Susan Buck-Morss *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press 1989): 66

11 Steven Hager in *Art After Midnight, The East Village Scene* (New York: Copyright 1986 S. Hager): 1.

12 Excerpted from the poem, "Thermidor" by Alan Moore in *Moore ABC No Rio Dinero*: 185

13 Excerpted from the "'Manifesto or Statement of Intent' Committee for the Real Estate Show, 1980" Moore: 56

14 Moore : 61

15 Frank Norris, *The Octopus: A Story of California* (USA, Doubleday 1901): 48

16 A useful account of Manhattan's planned urban restructuring from an industrial working class city to a professional service economy can be found in *The Assassination of New York* by Robert Fitch (New York: London Verso books, 1993)

17 Moore: 57

18 Soon after the Real Estate Show the city offered the artists still another storefront a few blocks north on Rivington Street to use as an ongoing gallery. The new space was named ABC No Rio after a garbled nearby sign reading ABOGADO NOTORIO. Since 1980 the space has occasioned changing exhibitions, musical events, happenings, and an occasional educational art project with neighborhood kids.

19 Rupp quoted in the catalog for the exhibition *Committed To Print* by Deborah Wye (New York, the Museum of Modern Art, 1988): 86

20 Moore: 78

21 *Committed to Print*: 86

22 see Lucy R. Lippard *Lure of the Local*, forthcoming.

23 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in *The German Ideology 1845-46* (New York International Publishers, 1979): 62



24 Marx and Engles: 62

25 Janet Koenig from PAD/D's journal Upfront No. 6-7 (Summer 1983): 3

26 Mary Jane Jacob in "Outside the Loop" from the catalog to the exhibition Culture in Action (Seattle, Bay Press): 114