

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*. 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-fora* 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 rhapsicists, 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, as 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 Unreserved 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)."¹ 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 mass culture, and have periodically been appropriated as such by the *avant-garde*. Here is an (extremely condensed) description of this process:

Improved [subcultural] forms are usually first made salable by the artisan-level entrepreneurs who spring up in an area around an 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 centers 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.²

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, a series of isolated attempts to begin this process again: the reconsecration of SoHo around established high-art traditions has propelled young, sometimes radical artists from an abandoned massage parlor just south of new marginal locations—the South Bronx, an abandoned massage parlor just out 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 base and 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*, 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 classic 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 of 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 artists—beginning with the one-time-end artist-materials 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's* work 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 seek ways 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 symbol. Exhibitions of East Village art have been mounted as far field 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."³ 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 puerilism of the East Village "avant-garde."⁴—Craig Owens



PADD/D (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, Golder, and Solkin, eds., *Modernism and Modernity*, Halifax, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981, pp. 215-64. 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.
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, see entire section VIII (pp. 251-55) should be consulted.
4. Jacques Attali, "Introduction to Bruits," *Social Text* 7 (Spring/Summer 1983), 7.