

# 4

**THE COLLECTIVE  
MAKING OF  
ABC NO RIO  
(1980-2010)**

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## CHAPTER 4: THE COLLECTIVE MAKING OF ABC NO RIO (1980-2010)

In December 1979 a group of artists broke into a city-owned property in the Lower East Side and installed an exhibit, the *Real Estate Show*. The works displayed by the artists expressed outrage at the exclusionary housing and land use policies that had destroyed neighborhoods and rendered many of New York City's poor homeless. The artists' manifesto announced their anti-institutional stance, but even as the police shut down the show, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) of the city of New York offered the artists the use of an alternate space—a commercial storefront in a four-story tenement building in the same neighborhood. The artists accepted the offer and formed a volunteer-run art center at 156 Rivington Street, in a predominantly Latino neighborhood.<sup>1</sup> They named the place “ABC No Rio,” in playful reference to a Spanish sign, “Abogado Notario,” with partially erased letters directly across the street from the building.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter examines the changing form of this “counter institution” produced over a period of thirty years (1980–2010) by looking at the history of its occupation in a dilapidated four-story residential walk-up in Downtown Manhattan. (Figure 4.1) The building and its community melded in a catalytic moment when the municipal government, despite its antipathy toward the renegade artists, saw an arts center as a temporary way to deflect negative media coverage and possibly enhance the value of a building depleted by years of neglect and mismanagement. ABC No Rio made the most of this opening and proceeded to develop the building as a venue for experimentation and exhibition for local artists, run by the artists themselves.<sup>3</sup> What began as an impromptu occupation of city-owned property and a critique of real estate speculation paradoxically crystallized into an institution in its own right. Over three decades, the constant reshaping of the idea of a volunteer-run art space by successive waves of politically committed countercultural collectives enabled this building to survive the constant pressure from the city to evict its tenants. The process of building collectivity in opposition to the bureaucracy of the city and the individuality embedded in the anarchic ethos of the many artists at ABC No Rio arguably generated a space that was guarded but open to different types of creative possibilities.

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4.1  
Street view, ABC No Rio, 2012.  
Photograph © Jade Doskow.



The domestically scaled tenement building, located in an economically depressed and municipally neglected neighborhood in 1980s New York, facilitated a specific brand of DIY collectivity. The publicity garnered by the quick shows at this bootstrap undertaking in the first five years of its operation was consciously recorded in the book *ABC No Rio Dinero: The Story of a Lower East Side Art Gallery*.<sup>4</sup> This early period that launched the careers of many of the artists involved in the shows was followed by a contentious period of squatting, battling the HPD, and negotiating the right to occupy the building. The publicity garnered by the early shows and the space-based activism was instrumental in creating an oppositional institutional history for ABC No Rio that was subsequently leveraged to gain the support of a larger community and raise funds for the building. The survival of ABC No Rio was the outcome of a collective development of an institution that creatively used the space as a byproduct, a symbol, and finally as the goal of their social activism.

## THE ART CONTEXT 1970–1980 NEW YORK

### THE ALTERNATIVE SPACE

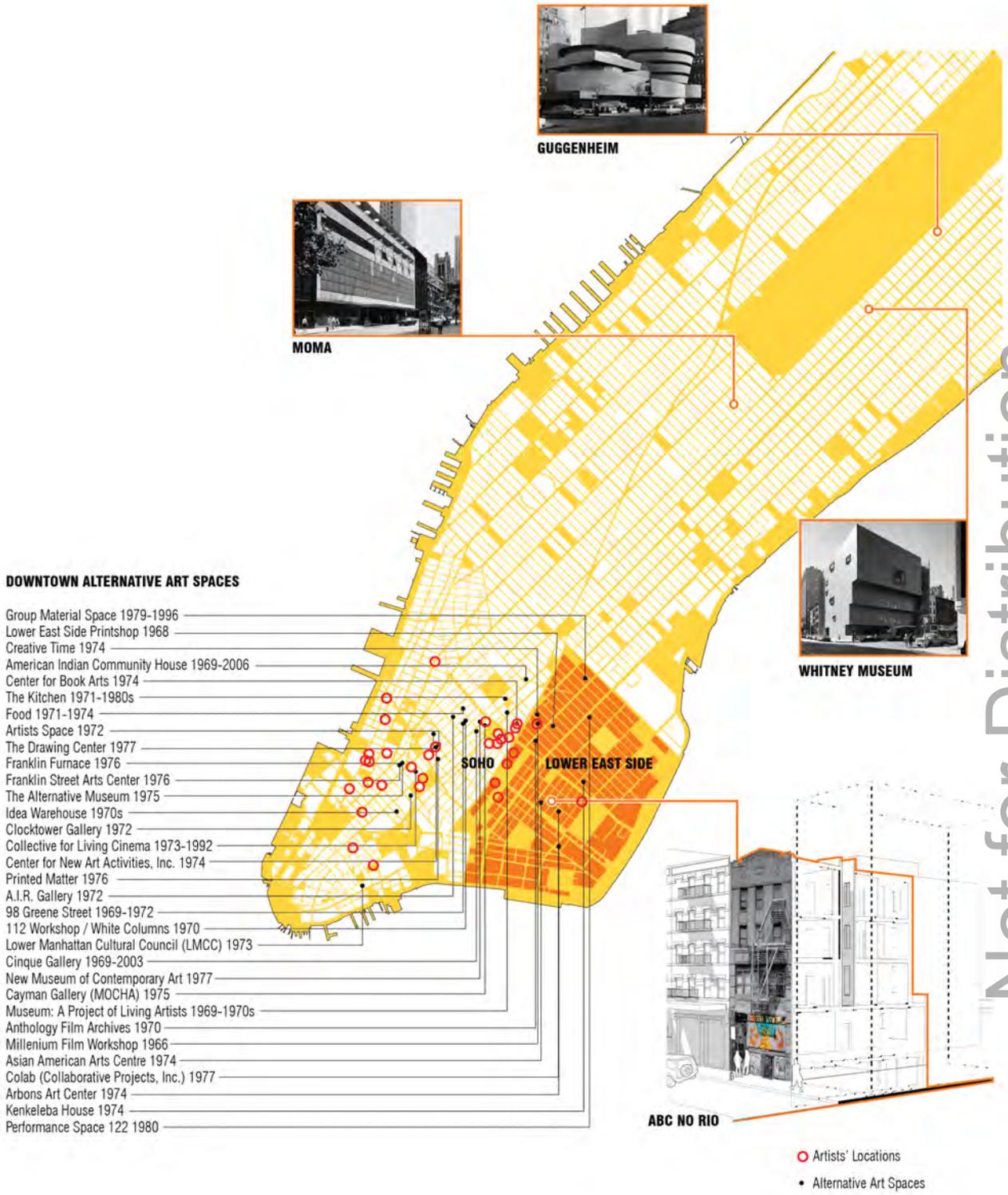
The emergence of the artists' collectives seeking social change through political art-actions was an outgrowth of an alternative art movement in 1970s New York.<sup>5</sup> This movement fomented opposition to the limitations of institutionalized art practices and focused on providing alternatives to artists excluded from museums and commercial galleries. This exclusion included prejudice against minorities and women and a process of weeding out work that was not salable based on the content and aesthetic parameters deemed valuable by the art market. In 1969 artists' collectives, such as the Art Workers Coalition (AWC) and Guerrilla Action Art Group (GAAG), targeted these inequities arising from established museum practices. The manifestos, picketing, and direct-action interventions called for the major New York museums (MOMA, Whitney, Guggenheim, and the MET) to change their discriminatory policies and to play a more active part in the political and social life of the city.<sup>6</sup> These actions did not directly transform the institutional policies of the targeted institutions per se but rather led to the foundation of alternative neighborhood museums and art centers in the Bronx, Harlem, Queens, and Downtown Manhattan. The process of challenging the art establishment also led artists to expand their practices of art making and to explore the role of the artist as a political and cultural agent. The opposition to the established art world represented by the museums and commercial galleries took shape in many different cities across the United States, where

organized artist groups or curators set up nonprofit “alternative” galleries with funding from state and federal grants. In New York the pluralistic and often cross-disciplinary practices that included performance, video, music, and new media arts in addition to the traditional visual arts practices occurred in the context of a postindustrial city, where commercial lofts and vacant storefronts were co-opted by artists, curators, and gallerists to make and exhibit new types of work. The availability of affordable living, working, and exhibition spaces in locations such as the warehouse district of SoHo yielded a concentration of artist-run galleries.<sup>7</sup> (Figure 4.2) The architectural quality of the SoHo lofts—industrial, unfinished spaces with big windows—invited artists to experiment with materials and methods to create expansive installations. The site specificity of these interventions made the work more connected to the place and foregrounded the relevance of the physical potential of the “alternative” space. This attention to the actual site, typically outside the gallery/museum context, led artists to challenge the norm of product or object-oriented art practices.

#### AN ALTERNATIVE TO ALTERNATIVES

Fueling these experimental practices in the mid-’60s and ’70s was the availability of inexpensive living and working quarters for the small community of artists that sought out these situations. The Flux house project of Maciunas, discussed in Chapter 1, in effect tried to formalize and structure this process into a type of collectively controlled real estate. In reality the process was fairly ad hoc, and the presence of artists and the success of art galleries in former manufacturing locations quickly fueled speculation and, consequently, priced out the artists themselves.<sup>8</sup> By the late ’70s, some artists felt that the alternate art spaces initiated in opposition to commercial galleries were compromised by the ever-expanding art and real estate market, which, once again, left very little control and agency to the artists themselves.

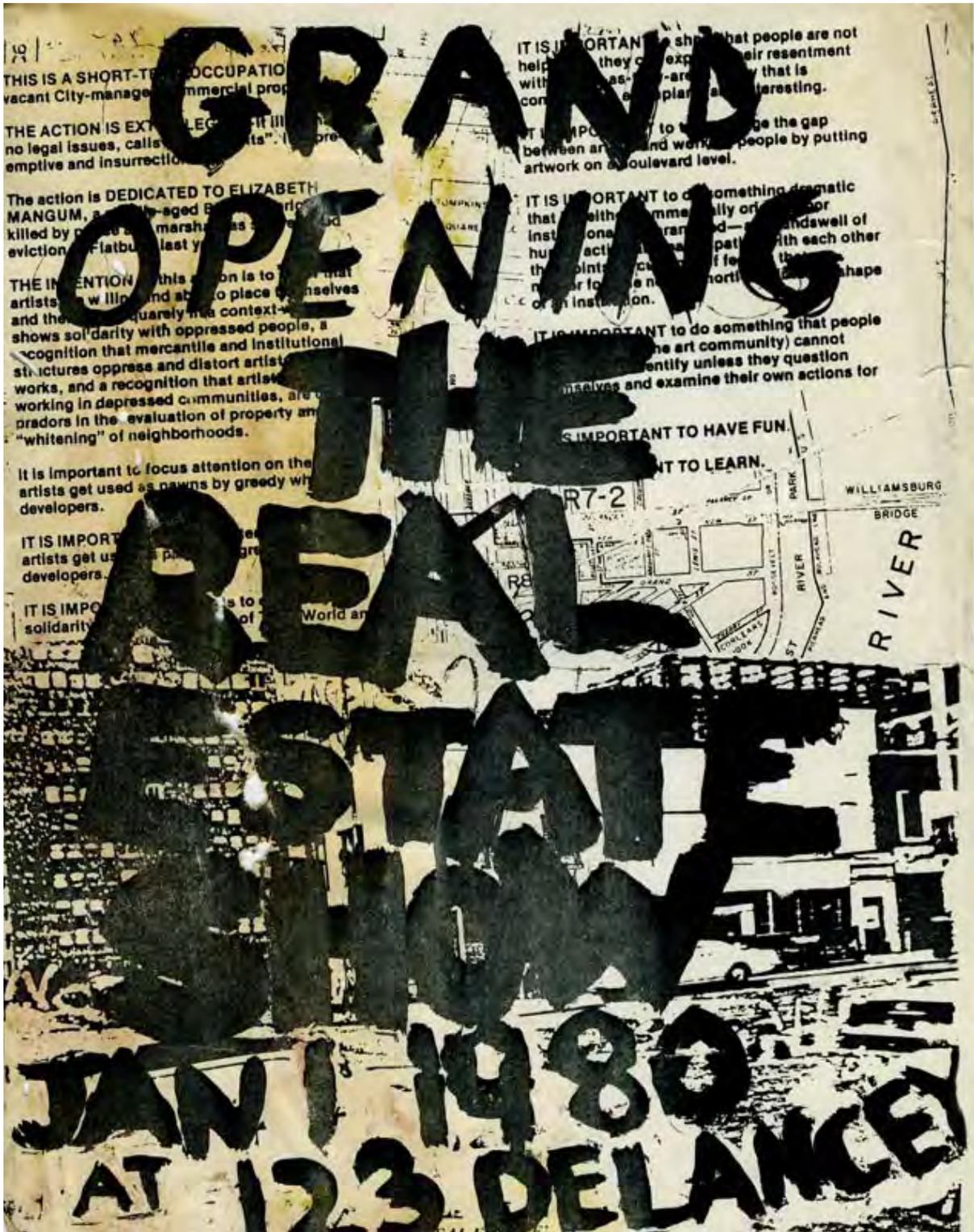
Critical of this set up, the artists’ collective Collaborative Projects (Colab), a confederation of about forty artists, banded together in 1977 to create an alternative to the “alternative” institutions (Figure 4.3).<sup>9</sup> Their motivation was to circumvent the additional costs and attendant control of the alternative space administrations. Their goal was to apply for the same federal and state arts grants allocated to the established alternative spaces but use these funds to develop “collaborative works directed to the needs of the community at large.”<sup>10</sup> The community for the Colab artists was a reference to themselves—a large heterogeneous artist collective that sought direct support and exposure for its members’ work. The production of the work—a



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4.2  
A map of major art museums and alternative art institutions in downtown Manhattan in the '70s.  
Illustration by Nandini Bagchee.





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minimalist singularity of the artwork from the previous decade and instead gravitated toward the figural, expressive, and conceptually direct.<sup>12</sup> An interest in crime, sex, and drugs—pervasive realities in the downtown neighborhoods—were explored in the sensationalist style of a generation influenced by the oppositional punk culture popular in Downtown Manhattan. Work hung off ceilings and walls in a closely packed juxtaposition became a hallmark of these shows. Rather than respond to the expansive site of the loft and studio and the site-specific work of '70s artists, the Colab-themed shows generated a new site within the loft through accumulation and aggregation. The spatial collectivity was a product of proximity rather than agreement, consensus, or intentionality.<sup>13</sup>

The *Real Estate Show* (Figure 4.4), planned for the first two weeks of the New Year (1980) in a public venue by a few of the Colab cohorts, was an offspring of these open participation, all-inclusive shows. The idea of using city-owned property as a community arts center was in the air.<sup>14</sup> The artists initially approached the HPD for permission to use the vacant city-owned property on 123 Delancey Street. When they received no response, they decided to move forward with an insurrectionary occupation instead. A small group broke into the building on December 29, 1979, with a pair of large bolt cutters and invited their colleagues to covertly install a show.<sup>15</sup> This show was themed around real estate. Unlike previous Colab shows, this one was a critical response to the interests of a city that had allowed hundreds of properties to lie vacant as displaced residents struggled to find accommodation. The building selected for this provocation was appropriately located at the corner of Delancey and Norfolk Street, on a parcel of land cleared in 1967 to make way for an urban renewal project on the Lower East Side. The proposed mass-housing project, which was intended to provide moderate-income accommodation along Delancey Street, had displaced over two thousand families but failed to materialize thirteen years later at the time of the *Real Estate Show*. By targeting the city and the real estate industry, the artists felt like they were finding common cause with the residents in this, at the time, low-income neighborhood, and through the reclamation of public land. The exhibiting artists, in stated solidarity with resident citizens, pushed against the city's policy by attempting, in the words of participating artist Becky Howland, to create not just another art gallery but a "Citizens Center".<sup>16</sup> She mounted a seven-foot-long octopus on the façade of the building at Delancey Street (Figure 4.5) and made multiples of a poster for the show, also featuring the octopus grasping alternating tenement buildings and dollar bills in each of its tentacles. The artists installed their work inside the building, and the show opened on January 1, 1980, for barely a day before being shut

#### 4.4

Flyer announcing the *Real Estate Show*, 1980.

Courtesy of ABC No Rio Archive.

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4.5

Top: Artist Becky Howland wheat pastes an Octopus to the façade, 1980.

Bottom: 123 Delancey Street — the location of the Real Estate Show.

Top photograph by Ann Messner. Bottom photograph by Alan Moore. Courtesy of Becky Howland.



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down by the HPD. The contents of the show were confiscated, the property was padlocked, and police were posted outside to prevent the artists from entering. This created a public outrage and the event was well reported in local newspapers.<sup>17</sup> The dexterity of the organizing artists lay in the way they successfully advertised the lack of spatial access and turned the failed exhibit into a political coup. The appearance of the visiting artist Joseph Beuys, photographed by the media at the barricaded exhibit, and seen milling around with the police and people, brought international attention and validation to the show.

## **A COMMUNITY OF ARTISTS IN SEARCH OF A COMMUNITY (1980–1983)**

The HPD offered the artists the use of an alternative storefront space, at 156 Rivington Street, in an effort to stem the negative publicity generated by the closing of the *Real Estate Show*. In February 1980 Becky Howland, Alan Moore, and Robert Goldman, aka, Bobby G, signed a monthly lease with HPD and took over the day-to-day running of an art gallery on the first floor at 156 Rivington Street. This storefront gallery, located a few feet above street level, was entered via a short flight of stairs and stoop shared with the residential tenants of the apartments above. A large plate glass window with the welcoming sign “Venga Ahora” was one left over from the days when the first floor had been used as a beauty salon. A deep backyard connected to first floor allowed for the expansion of activities and projects into the outdoors during the summer months. The basement below, with direct access from the street, was also co-opted by No Rio shortly after their residency. The upper three floors of the narrow building configured as floor-through apartments, with a kitchen and bath at each floor, were occupied with residential tenants.

The early years of ABC No Rio’s history<sup>18</sup> were marked by a flurry of short artist-curated shows built upon concepts of coming to grips with the living conditions and social realities of the neighborhood. This neighborhood, home to a working-class Puerto Rican, Dominican, and African American community, was severely impacted by the economic crisis in the ’70s. The lack of jobs and the cycle of disinvestment, drugs, and violence caused all but the poorest families to stay on in the neighborhood. The remaining bodegas, street vendors, and people playing dominos on the streets were a mere fragment of what had once been a lively commercial and residential street. In the early ’80s a *New York Times* article reported that a “multi-million-dollar heroin trade” was being run from the “215 city-owned tenements” of the Lower East Side. This same article on the drug trafficking in the

Lower East Side singled out Rivington and Eldridge Streets as “one of the busiest areas for drugs.”<sup>19</sup> This and other types of issues arising from maintaining a large stock of old buildings made the city view the tenements it owned as liabilities. Not unlike the negligent private landlords, the city, in its role as landlord, deployed similar tactics like frequently cutting off the basic amenities—heat, water, and electricity—within their buildings in an attempt to drive out the remaining tenants.

The artists, having procured a month-to-month rental of the storefront from the city, earnestly desired to establish a relationship with the “local.” In a 1980 article in the *Village Voice*, the writer Richard Goldstein labels ABC No Rio as an “Anti-Space”—one formed in opposition to the alternative galleries that responds directly to the social context of a city and a neighborhood in dire straits.<sup>20</sup> For the newcomers at ABC No Rio, the street and the storefront provided a potentially fecund context for the development of anarchist artistic practices. The ad hoc curation of themed shows by different artists foregrounded the deteriorating walls and ceilings inside ABC No Rio, and the gritty street outside provided a strong context that framed the brutal content and rough punk realism of some of the artworks. However, there was also a desire to engage with the place and include the community. This ambition for inclusivity was at the core of some early shows such as Christy Rupp’s *Animals Living in the City* (1980), where artwork contributed by artists, scientists, and school children was displayed nonhierarchically in the long gallery space.<sup>21</sup> The storefront window was cordoned off from the main gallery with chicken wire to house a live hen, mice, pigeons, and even cockroaches in an attempt to explore the intersection of the animal world with the human one in the degraded environment of a neglected city (Figure 4.6). The exploitation of the authentic site of an ill-maintained tenement building led to art practices that were an odd combination of the domestic and the anarchic.<sup>22</sup>

The goal to create a citizen’s center found traction with the neighborhood’s children, but it proved harder to engage the adult population who were confronted with the hardships of survival and perhaps mistrustful of a critical, white middle-class artist in their neighborhood. Despite the good intentions to create a nexus for the local community, the projects were unable to bridge the social divide between the artists and the working-class and poorer adult population at Rivington Street.<sup>23</sup> For instance, Tom Warren’s *Portrait Show* (1981), envisioned as an icebreaker, brought people from the street to willingly pose for one-dollar portraits of themselves that were then enlarged by the artist and mounted in the gallery. (Figure 4.7) The ABC No Rio book notes,

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4.6

Bottom: Exterior view of ABC No Rio storefront Top: Detail of same storefront with live hen and dog stencils by Anton van Dalen, *Animals in the City Show*, 1980. Photographs courtesy of Anton van Dalen.



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4.7  
 Installation by Tom Warren, *Portrait Show*, 1981.  
 Photograph by Tom Warren.

“These portraits, posed for by people who wanted to look good, show the enduring aspect of an Hispanic neighborhood often overlooked by those focusing on slum realities.” This project, replicated in other settings by the artist with different participants, won acclaim but also received this comment from a fellow artist, Richard Armijo, who questions the political intentions as follows:

Why do anonymous images of the so-called underclass elicit our interest and appreciation, even monetary patronage, while the people themselves are confined to ghettos, encouraged to concentrate in projects, restricted to mostly blue-collar jobs, their intelligentsia too late acknowledged, and their daily movements monitored by cops, sociologists, liberals and now artists?<sup>24</sup>

The desire to create a place—one that welcomed all manner of informal public participation—produced an energetic locus for artistic exchange for the young artists practicing, at the time, in the margins of the art and cultural world. There was a critical awareness on the part of the artists and outside critics that evaluated the situation in terms of the success or failure to create a solidarity with the “community.” To



challenge the mores and preconceptions of established art world practices on the one hand, and to become a more accessible art center within a primarily low-income Latino neighborhood on the other, were sometimes irreconcilable impulses. The economic, cultural, and social differences between the artists and the many residents of the neighborhood were insurmountable. The open community art center, with its controversial art shows with themes such as “Murder, Junk, and Suicide,” (Figure 4.8) was not a place that resonated with residents struggling to survive the intractable problems of a neighborhood that was plagued by these same problems while making a living, educating their children, and finding a way out of their misfortunes.

There was, in turn, wariness on the part of the artists, especially those who saw to the everyday running of the space. The gallery openings invariably followed by break-ins strained the resources of the gallery, recalled artist Bobby G.<sup>25</sup> Within the first few months of the gallery opening, he moved into the basement to be able to secure the building around the clock and to benefit from the rent-free accommodation. Other tenants within the building, at the time, included an extended Dominican family who occupied some of the apartments on the second and third floors. Maria Acosta (seen in many of the

4.8

Installation by John Morton, *Murder, Junk, and Suicide Show*, 1980.

Photograph by Tom Warren.

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photographs from the time) and her brother, Manny, the children from this family, became regulars at the gallery and created artworks and participated in the shows. The children were always welcomed by the artists, but relations with some of the other family members associated with the drug dealing within the hallways of the building were somewhat strained. The flow of clientele, through the broken front door to the residential apartments, jeopardized the safety of the building as whole and discouraged visitors to the gallery.<sup>26</sup> The ongoing maintenance issues stemming from the negligence of their landlord—the HPD—created hostilities between the various users of the building.

In the first three years of its existence at Rivington Street, the core users of ABC No Rio mainly consisted of a circle of exhibiting Colab artists and some of the local children curious about the happenings. The so-called gallery was, in fact, used as a workspace and a place of social gathering on a daily basis. Artist Christy Rupp remembers a period in her life when she would show up at the storefront space regularly to produce work and enjoy the camaraderie of whoever else might happen to be there (Figure 4.9).<sup>27</sup> The open interior, with the large street-facing storefront window, was more generous and communal than the cramped quarters of her own apartment in Downtown New York City. Weekly meetings on Monday, open to all, were a forum to pitch ideas about shows and to discuss grant proposals and other matters pertaining to the space itself. Gallery organizers did not formally vet the shows but accepted proposals on the understanding that the artists would take full responsibility to install their own shows. Although officially open to all, the meetings and the shows advertised

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4.9

Left to Right: Leonard Abrams, Christy Rupp and Layne Redmond at ABC No Rio, 1981.

Photograph courtesy of Marc Miller.



by word of mouth tended to remain within the Colab network. Colab did not directly sponsor the storefront of ABC No Rio, but its connection to the larger collective kept it well used and vibrant.<sup>28</sup>

This situation at ABC No Rio began to change after about three years, as the success and notoriety of the Colab shows<sup>29</sup> presented new opportunities to the artists associated with the collective, and they moved on to explore new directions within their respective artistic practices. The founding members, though resolute in their desire to hold on to the space for future collaborators, felt that the managerial aspects of running the art center took too much time away from their own work as artists and art critics. As they looked for new types of programming to bring into the space, a new leadership sympathetic to the ambition of creating the “Anti-Space” presented itself.

### **BODIES IN CLUB SPACE AND THE INCORPORATION OF ABC NO RIO (1983–1990)**

In 1983 the performance collective POOL (Performance on One Leg) proposed a week-long show entitled *Seven Days of Creation* in the gallery at ABC No Rio. This show, curated by dancers associated with the downtown club scene of 1980s New York, brought a new genre of performance to ABC No Rio. Staged inside the gallery during the month of April, at Easter, the seven-day, twenty-four-hour performance involved several different artists and their troupes.<sup>30</sup> A different group took charge of each of the seven days and choreographed and improvised the performances for that day. The varied perspectives and multimedia interests of the invited artists—film, painting, theater, sculpture, and dance—combined in this collective oeuvre. The biblical title of the show was allegorical because it celebrated the creativity of the artists and the birth of their ideas.<sup>31</sup> The project involved the participation of dancers trained in classical and modern balletic traditions as well as untrained performers. The POOL collective, influenced by German Expressionism and the theories of Bauhaus Total Theater, incorporated experimental body movements with words, images, props, and costumes.<sup>32</sup> The sets, like the performance, were prepared quickly and roughly from salvaged trash and readily available materials. The “screaming raw ruined and vibrant shelter”<sup>33</sup> that was ABC No Rio provided the performance with the unorthodox exuberance of the nightclub but remained, at its core, an artist-run collaborative space.

While poetry, music, and spoken word had always been a part of the earliest ABC No Rio visual art shows, the multimedia, collaborative production of the *Seven Days* performance created a different current

within the space. On the heels of this performance, Jack Waters and Peter Cramer of POOL took over running ABC No Rio. Like Bobby G before them, they moved into the basement in the mixed company of the ABC No Rio archive, the rats, and the smells of matzo from the factory next door. They lived here for two years while coordinating shows in the gallery and looking after the premises as the live-in codirectors of ABC No Rio. They continued the tradition of open Monday meetings and facilitated different artists to install shows and conduct poetry readings. Their own interests in performance, however, became the driver of ABC No Rio in the first years of their tenure as codirectors. Their performance circle at the Pyramid Club—a dance, music, drag venue on Avenue A—became a resource they exported to ABC No Rio. The *Extremist Show*, another long durational event modeled after the *Seven Days* show, and choreographed by Kembra Pfahler, involved the same cortege of artists. The multimedia event was staged within the gallery and outside in the yard, and it provided a venue in which “Audience and performers merged in a series of mock ceremonies, some commencing at dawn, executed with orgiastic fervor.”<sup>34</sup> Photographs document the bodies of the performers taking over the entire space in action (painting and engaging with the debris in the yard) and in repose (sleeping, examining, listening, and becoming a part of the physical space) (Figure 4.10).

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4.10

Left: Peter Cramer and Jack Waters perform in the backyard; Center: Kembra Pfahler sleeps in storefront window; Right: Kembra Pfahler and Samoa seated on paintings. The *Extremist Show*, 1983.

Photographs by Toyo. Courtesy of Toyo Tsuchiya estate.

In comparing the politics of the performance artists to the previous Colab generation, Peter Cramer describes the artists as “less didactic, more amorphous,” and the resultant atmosphere at ABC No Rio in the mid-’80s as more “clubby and colorful.”<sup>35</sup> The concept of making do with very little, or whatever happened to be available, contributed to the ethical and aesthetic aspect of these performances. This concept, labeled “availabilism” by Pfahler,<sup>36</sup> was in part a reaction to the



shrinking federal grant monies to art institutions and the censorship that marked Reagan's second term in office. Having founded their own nonprofit performance "Allied Productions" in 1980, Jack and Peter were well versed with the bureaucratic procedures needed to run an arts organization. They used this umbrella organization to apply for New York State-funded Cultural Council Foundation grants for ABC No Rio. With these grants, they instituted a residency program whereby the artists who exhibited at the gallery taught at the Marta Valle High School in the neighborhood. This collaboration with children in the neighborhood via the schools, first initiated by Colab artists Jody Culkin and Christy Rupp, became a cornerstone of community practice within ABC No Rio.

In 1983, still on a month-to-month lease with the city and with no formal structure for ABC No Rio, Waters and Cramer inherited the creative potential latent within the space as well as the combative relationship with their landlord—the HPD. HPD had reluctantly handed the keys over to the Colab artists in the aftermath of the *Real Estate Show* in 1980. The building at 156 Rivington was one among hundreds of such properties under the jurisdiction of the city.<sup>37</sup> Each passing year the city tried to evict its low-rent-paying tenants living in these old and hard-to-maintain buildings in order to demolish and/or sell them to private developers. It was in the interest of the city to have the flexibility of short-term leases. The monthly arrangement with ABC No Rio allowed the city to deny a renewal of the commercial lease and evict them with thirty days' notice.

After five years of being in the building, and with some advice from a pro bono housing attorney, ABC No Rio found a way to elude a series of near-evictions by going on a rent strike. They then leveraged the rent money to make much needed repairs to the building. Just a few steps ahead of their negligent landlord, through a combination of circumstance and strategy, the new management at ABC No Rio began a process of stabilizing their claim to the space. One basic strategy initiated by Waters and Cramer was to establish a board and begin a process of incorporating ABC No Rio as an official nonprofit organization.<sup>38</sup> This transformation of an informally run art space to a board-governed institution took several years,<sup>39</sup> during which time the demographic of the users at ABC No Rio changed from the visual arts-based first generation to a second generation of performance and multimedia-based artists.

In 1988, because of the construction at the adjacent site, a bulldozer rammed into the eastern party wall of the building, and the city took this opportunity to serve an evacuation notice to the gallery and the

residents' upstairs. The few remaining residential tenants from the apartments above the gallery were hastily relocated into subsidized housing by the city. However, after verifying the structural integrity of the building from an independent professional, ABC No Rio refused to leave and forced HPD to rescind their evacuation notice. At this point, with the whole building empty—the entire facility became available to the ABC No Rio. In what had become an unofficial tradition at ABC No Rio, Lou Acierno, the new director of ABC No Rio, availed of this opportunity and moved into the fourth-floor apartment in the vacant tenement building.

Acierno was a videographer by training and liked the open-ended DIY attitude at ABC No Rio. He felt that this aspect allowed new and nonconforming radical interests to emerge.<sup>40</sup> In his capacity as the new director, Acierno was keen to explore new projects and build upon the international reputation of ABC No Rio. He viewed some of the efforts to engage with the “locals” as paternalistic and untenable, given the substantial sociocultural differences between the countercultural artists and the families striving to attain some normalcy in their everyday existence. In a period of mounting uncertainty about the building, Acierno saw the potential for ABC No Rio to become a part of a “global” community, with its radical history and its continuing role as a countercultural haven.<sup>41</sup> In pursuit of this idea, Acierno, along with artist Fly Orr, devised the idea of a touring ABC No Rio. To counter the attachment to one physical space as the driver for programming, they thought that ABC No Rio should become an itinerant institution and visit other cities nationally and internationally to widen its practices and create a global exchange.<sup>42</sup> The resultant Cult X Change project traveled, exhibited, and performed in different “sympathetic” locations and, in turn, invited out-of-town alternative institutions and collectives to curate shows at ABC No Rio. The first of these exchanges brought a small group of artists from the Purple Institution in Toronto to New York City. They installed the *Jungle Show* in the basement after spending a substantial amount of energy cleaning and emptying out the space. Old props, furniture from the past residencies, and all manner of junk surfaced from this effort and formed “a wall of trash” on Rivington Street.<sup>43</sup> Besides the exchange with Toronto, the ABC No Rio team, comprising Lou Acierno, Fly Orr, Jack Waters, and Peter Cramer, traveled to Bowdoin College in Maine and the Künstlerhaus in Hamburg in 1990. The multimedia presentation in Hamburg, titled “Ten Years, Seven Days,” encapsulated ABC No Rio’s short but vibrant organizational history. Performances, lectures, workshops, and exhibits from the ABC No Rio archive were a part of this itinerant operation that attempted to create a future for No Rio that could distance itself from the ties to the property.

In the decade since the *Real Estate Show*, the physical structure of the building had deteriorated even further. The plate-glass storefront window that had made the gallery an inviting place for exhibition and exchange was broken and replaced with a piece of painted plywood. Within this windowless interior, there were ongoing problems with heat, water, electricity, and the interminable leaks. Outside, the increased drug trade made the streets and avenues around the building unstable and threatening to residents and visitors alike. The controversial “Operation Pressure Point,” begun in 1984 on the Lower East Side, further exacerbated the situation by incarcerating small-time dealers and buyers in the streets. As the police purged one corner or block, the operators simply relocated their flexible businesses, moving further south or east in the geography of the Lower East Side, away from areas that were well policed. By the ’90s, the block that housed ABC No Rio was a well-known market for all manner of illicit heroin. A *New York Times* article focused on a drug bust on Rivington Street reported, “Teams of eight officers have been working undercover, buying heroin and arresting sellers, while other officers on rooftops and in parked cars have been observing sellers and signaling for arrests.”<sup>44</sup> The changing police tactics impacted buildings like ABC No Rio that were shabby, boarded up, and therefore fair game to sudden incursions by dealers, junkies, and armed undercover police in equal part.<sup>45</sup>

Under these precarious circumstances, the building had to be guarded 24-7. In 1990 Steven Englander joined Acierno as codirector and moved into the third floor at 156 Rivington Street. There were no official leases for any of these residential occupancies, but for a short period, the HPD was tolerant of the unauthorized living arrangements because it ensured that the building had free live-in caretakers. Englander recalls picking up trash bags at the HPD and taking care of the snow, and he realized that the city begrudgingly tolerated his presence in the building.<sup>46</sup> For the codirectors, the rent-free living in the building functioned as compensation for running the bootstrapped operation.<sup>47</sup> The ’90s were a difficult time for art institutions. The budget cuts, censorship, and reevaluation of federal and state funding for the arts specifically impacted the smaller, more experimental art spaces all over the country.<sup>48</sup> The many nonprofit galleries, performance spaces, and venues that opened almost overnight a decade earlier closed or moved out of the neighborhood just as quickly. ABC No Rio, with its contentious politics, its resistant spirit, and its shifting cast of stakeholders, persisted but not without a degree of upheaval and turnover within its ranks.

ABC No Rio was finally incorporated in 1990. The first board of directors comprised first-generation Colab artists, former director Jack Waters, and other well-wishers of ABC No Rio. After ten years of existence and different ebbs and flows of artistic energy, the space needed fresh programming and vision. Monday night meetings, the previous forum for a local collective decision-making, became sporadic. The organizers of the day-to-day workings of the space struggled internally as the pressure of incorporating and battling with HPD and the hostile street conditions created what codirector Steven Englander described as a “fortress mentality.”<sup>49</sup> The Cult X Change initiated by Acierno was short-lived and created a certain amount of friction between the people running the space daily and the board of directors. The board questioned the wisdom of a project that distanced itself from the building, and the management in turn felt the board was out of touch with the many crises affecting the space and its constituents. In 1991 Englander and Acierno resigned, leaving the building in the hands of the board.

### **PUNK/HARDCORE TO THE RESCUE (1990–1994)**

In the '90s the Lower East Side, or the “East Village,” as it was frequently being referred to by those hoping to cash in on its bohemian prestige, attracted large crowds of revelers from the different boroughs of the city; from the many suburban townships in Long Island, New Jersey, and New York; and from an international cortege of artists and students. Despite the substandard living conditions of many of its long-standing residents, the process of gentrification was under way in the Lower East Side. The dilapidated state of the buildings and performance venues seemed to add more cache and brought larger audiences to the nightclubs and bars of the neighborhood. The open drug markets, the hyper-policing, and the resistant spirit made this a dangerous and exciting neighborhood for young people of all stripes to explore. Subcultures proliferated, mingled, and ultimately coalesced into “scenes” that catered to artists, musicians, and their audiences of young, followers.

For a small but ardent group of fans, CBGB, the self-proclaimed birthplace of punk rock, was the place to be in New York City. The Sunday Punk Matinees at this venerable institution were prized events that attracted an enthusiastic audience of young adults. “These weekly moshathons,” reminisces Jim Testa, in *Jersey Beats*, a fanzine covering punk and alternative music, “were hugely popular but plagued by violence—skinheads beating up suburban kids,

4.11  
Flyer for all ages, Saturday Matinee  
at ABC No Rio, 1990.  
Flyer design by Java Dave, courtesy of  
Freddy Alva.

# THE MATINEE



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Photo: Chris Boarts Design: Java Dave

straightedgers bashing drinkers, as well as the usual mayhem, fistfights, bloody lips, and black eyes that resulted as an inevitable consequence of NYC slamming.”<sup>50</sup> The anti-authoritarian anarchic leanings and the rebellious sound associated with punk rock manifested itself in a variety of nuanced and oppositional social and political cliques across the country. Stephen Duncombe explains the group identity within punk culture as a kinship among the alienated. His work points out the many “divisions and subdivisions” that formed around identities—gay, Latino, feminist—as well as ethical positions—skinheads, straightedge—all driven by the need to reconstruct a “community” of the disenfranchised.<sup>51</sup> The violence in clubs such as CBGB, often the result of a “macho posturing”<sup>52</sup> directed against gays, women, and other perceived minorities, was particularly repugnant to many who attended the shows. In 1989, following some particularly hair-raising incidents that involved guns and police, CBGB’s owners decided to terminate their matinees.

The story goes that Mike Bullshit, the enterprising author of the fanzine *Bullshit Monthly*, an openly gay musician, in a simultaneous effort to keep the music and eliminate the homophobia, found ABC No Rio to be the right place to revamp the CBGB matinee tradition.<sup>53</sup> By 1990, Mike began booking bands regularly on Saturday afternoons at ABC No Rio. The show was open to all interested parties of all ages, but as the flyers stipulated, “no racist, sexist or homophobic bands will be booked.” (Figure 4.11) The lyrics for the performing bands were screened in advance for these criteria, but almost all performing bands were generously allowed to play. The egalitarian politics, relaxed sociability and location of the venue in an old tenement in the Lower East Side brought forth a host of local and touring bands. Shows cost three to five dollars typically, and within a year, this event built a unique reputation within the circuits of the punk rock community.<sup>54</sup> The anarcho-punk camaraderie, minus the intimidation of the New York “hardcore social scene,” was a relief to the regular and visiting audience at ABC No Rio. ABC No Rio also became a point of contact for the DIY punk culture, where bands and fans that distributed self-produced music, made zines, and communicated via mail had a place to meet in person.

This community is celebrated by Chris Boarts, a regular chronicler of the ABC No Rio punk scene in the early ’90s and author of the fanzine *Slug and Lettuce* (S & L):

A good show is a great way for this community to really be seen. To be sitting at ABC and have friends of mine come through; while I’m meeting people I’ve known through the

mail; putting it all together can be a bit overwhelming at times. I'm always blown away and astounded by the feeling of a community network. When all those things get working, and people are brought together, the energy is good, people are having fun, more acquaintances are being made, it makes me excited and happy seeing the way this community works.<sup>55</sup>

The importance of ABC No Rio, a known location where the “regulars” could interact with the transient but well-networked punk community was prized by the many young punks who attended. Although the music itself could be experienced at other nightclubs or squats, the potential permanence and radical politics at ABC No Rio was something that the punk volunteers were keen to preserve. The ethos of anti-consumer entertainment as active production (making zines/making music) rather than passive consumption (getting wasted/feeling alienated) was the aspect of the punk movement that began to shape the spatial politics at ABC No Rio in the '90s. The hardcore/punk (HC/Punk) collective at ABC No Rio emerged as different people pitched in to organize the shows, print fliers, set up the sound system, man the door, and clean up after shows.<sup>56</sup> The larger group of volunteers fluctuated, but a core group of active “doers” remained attached to the place. The desire for collectivity that had always been at the core of previous practices at ABC No Rio (Colab and POOL) began to have a new direction in the early '90s within the hardcore punk model of organization. Over time, with the help of volunteers, the HC/Punk collective cleaned up the basement, constructed a stage, and installed a PA system.<sup>57</sup> In this subterranean space, with its steel columns and open wood joists, the energies of the punk crowd gathered momentum.

In addition to the HC/Punk Matinees, there were other regular ongoing events at this time: Poetry Readings on Sundays, followed by the long-standing Matthew Courtney's Wide Open Mike. The latter was an immensely popular event where Courtney, in his role as emcee, encouraged everyone to get up and perform. Spoken word, music, points of view, and “political raving and ranting” characterized this riotous and irreverent weekly event at ABC No Rio.<sup>58</sup> The punks, poets, and artists who were involved with the day-to-day activities at ABC No Rio from the early '90s were also actively involved in the political movements centered on housing, anti-war activism, and gentrification unfolding in the Lower East Side. In 1990 a subgroup from the punk matinee series initiated the local chapter of Food Not Bombs. This collective cooked vegan food in the makeshift kitchen in the second-floor apartment and served it on the streets and parks in the

Lower East Side. These free meals were made with materials collected from dumpster diving, donations from restaurants, and slightly over-ripe produce from grocery stores. This vegan-anarchist version of charity joined the other soup kitchens that fed the homeless in Tompkins Square Park by drawing sustenance from the discarded surplus of the city.<sup>59</sup>

Although ABC No Rio was not technically a residential “squat,” various individuals within the circle that organized shows were connected to the squatter movement unfolding in the Lower East Side in the late ’80s.<sup>60</sup> This movement was centered on a series of buildings around Tompkins Square Park and was part of a larger and increasingly contentious homesteading movement in the Lower East Side. The squatters, like other organized homesteaders discussed in the previous chapter, aimed at occupying vacant buildings and converting them into housing by first occupying and then repairing them. Not unlike other homesteaders, most of them believed in the concept of sweat equity. The difference between the “homesteaders” and “squatters” was the anarchic leanings of the latter and their refusal to negotiate the process of their occupancies as per the mandate of the HPD. The heightened police presence in public spaces like Tompkins Square Park, initiated by the campaign against drugs, had by the late ’80s mutated into an all-out battle against the homeless and the marginalized. In solidarity with the homeless and in a series of direct confrontations with the police, the squatters maintained a clearly anti-authoritarian stance.<sup>61</sup>

Many within ABC No Rio were directly connected to the squats or sympathetic to the squatters. The same bands that played at ABC No Rio often played concerts in the more makeshift spaces within the squats. Some buildings such as the C-Squat on Avenue C between Ninth and Tenth Streets had a dedicated space within the building for concerts. Other squats such as those on Thirteenth Street, between First Avenue and Avenue A, hosted punk art shows and performances on a more informal basis. The local anarchic network also cultivated a decisively “global” punk/political awareness with many divergent interpretations and understandings of their shared interests in anti-authoritarian, anti-consumer politics. Esneider, for example, immigrated from Colombia as a teenager and founded the band Huasipungo, named after a famous socialist novel by that name written by an Ecuadorian writer. Huasipungo performed regularly at ABC No Rio and had a connection to what Esneider describes as a thriving underground punk scene in Latin America.<sup>62</sup> Esneider, along with Freddie Alva, a Peruvian who also was intimately involved with the

HC/Punk collective, brought a Latin American political consciousness to ABC No Rio. Having escaped from Colombia under adverse circumstances and living in New York City as an illegal immigrant, the politics of punk culture meant something different to him than, say, his colleague Neil Robinson, a London transplant with strong connections to the European squatter movement. This is just to register and cycle back to the point made earlier about the heterogeneity of the '90s punk culture, even within the anarcho-pacifist crowd gathered at ABC No Rio. In the early '90s, the HC/Punk collective at ABC No Rio hosted benefit concerts, Food Not Bombs, for the squatters and—with the outbreak of the first Gulf War in 1991—for the anti-war group from 339 Lafayette Street, the War Resisters League (Figure 4.12).<sup>63</sup> The ferment over housing within the neighborhood, the neocon politics of the nation, and the rebellious anti-consumer element of punk culture created a broad-based, post-modern, and charged political community at ABC No Rio.

The energy and creativity of the HC/Punk generation at the building kept the reputation of ABC No Rio alive, even as the directors (Lou Acierno and Steven Englander) quit and moved out of the building. The board struggled under the constant pressure from HPD to vacate the premises. In 1994, at the start of Mayor Giuliani's first term in office as Mayor of New York City, the HPD began a vigorous campaign to rid itself of its properties in a series of public auctions.<sup>64</sup> That same year, the HPD served a thirty-day eviction notice to ABC No Rio, following what it saw as a violation of certain "stipulations" that the board had signed to maintain the lease on the gallery space. The old board resigned for fear of being legally liable and left the management and organization of the building squarely in the hands of the HC/Punk collective.<sup>65</sup> The DIY solidarity, the connections to the squatters, and the antipathy toward authority were qualities that would serve ABC No Rio well as the HC/Punk collective confronted a city agency that was aggressively trying to force them out of the building. When the city stopped accepting rent from the gallery in 1994, a group of squatters moved into the empty apartments on the third and fourth floors to protect ABC No Rio from impending eviction. A cycle of squatting and eviction ensued for nearly three years. The city would confiscate the belongings and install new locks, and the squatters would respond by breaking in again and again. Steven Englander, who had resigned as codirector in 1991, returned at some point during these years to help the squatters. His experience with running the building, his understanding of its physiognomy, and his involvement with the anarchist-squatter movement made him a great resource.<sup>66</sup> A lawyer working for ABC followed an evasive tactic of

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getting each of the evictions dismissed on technical grounds. This strategy did not solve the problem but essentially delayed the HPD from taking more drastic actions.

Unable to oust the ABC No Rio by eviction notices and police interventions, the HPD came up with a new ruse. They offered the property to another neighborhood group, the Asian Americans for Equality (AAFE), as a potential site to develop new low-cost housing. This method of pitting one, more established nonprofit against the other was common practice as the city capitalized on rifts and conflicts of interest between community organizations. The relatively small size of the lot (twenty-three by one hundred feet) made the project of creating low cost on the site quite impossible. In January 1997 the ABC No Rio activists targeted the AAFE offices in Chinatown, accusing this once progressive civil rights organization of “greed,” “profiteering,” and “corruption.”<sup>67</sup> These accusations in the media led AAFE to withdraw its interest in the property. That same year another smaller, more radical group of ABC No Rio activists snuck into the HPD commissioner’s office in downtown and staged a sit-in. This act of civil disobedience, which they expected would get them arrested, got them a seat at the negotiating table with the HPD commissioner, Lillian Barrios. Following this more civil turn of events, the city stopped eviction proceedings in 1997 and agreed to transfer the ownership of the building to ABC No Rio for a dollar, provided they raise the funds to repair the building and remove all squatters from the premises.<sup>68</sup> With this turn of events, the eighteen-year trajectory of the counter-institutional history of ABC No Rio entered a new phase (Figure 4.13).

## **BARN RAISING (1998–2010)**

The years of legal and semi-legal occupation, broad programming, and creative activism around saving the space created many supporters of ABC No Rio. These included the first generation of artists who petitioned on behalf of the building and other more recent participants who had stood on the frontlines, demonstrated, and temporarily squatted the building. This varied group perceived the outcome—potential ownership of the property with the city’s blessing—with mixed feelings. With the many brutal evictions of squatted buildings still fresh on the mind of many, there could be no reconciliation with the city.<sup>69</sup> On the other side, from the city’s perspective, the eight or so squatters had to vacate so that ABC No Rio could fully become what it claimed—a community arts center. The city was officially at war with the squatters, but was willing to tolerate a squat transformed into an art center with a clear program and mission.

4.12

Flyer for War Resisters League benefit concert at ABC No Rio, 1991.

Courtesy of ABC No Rio HC/Punk Archive.

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**STOREFRONT**



1981

**VISUAL ART**

1980-1982



Artists For Survival

Murder, Suicide, & Junk

Animals Living in Cities

Portrait Show

Tube Show

**PERFORMANCE**

1981



Cardboard Band

1983-1985



Seven Days of Creation



Extremist Show

**MUSIC/POETRY/  
SPOKEN WORD**

1982



Haunted Circus

1990-Present

ABC No Rio Hardcore/Punk Matinee

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4.13

A selective time line of art, performance, music, and the spoken word at ABC No Rio, 1980–1998.

Illustration by Nandini Bagchee.



1990



1991



1997



Island of Negative Utopia



1990



1991



1994



1995



1997



1998

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4.14  
Darkroom with red light, ABC No  
Rio, 2012.  
Photograph © Jade Doskow.



In the first year, under the new agreement with the city, new uses for the second, third, and fourth floor apartments were envisioned. Relieved from the pressure of imminent eviction, ABC No Rio invited all interested parties to a series of open meetings, where plans for the future use of the building were debated. It was through these open discussions, rather than the closed board meetings typical of nonprofit organizations, that the programs and the next phase mission of ABC No Rio evolved. The resilient HC/Punk Matinee that had survived the eviction phase, moved into the first-floor gallery to comply with the building code for assembly space. The ongoing Food Not Bombs collective commandeered the back room on the second floor and continued to prepare meals in what was once an apartment kitchen. The computer room, screen print shop, and darkroom were introduced on the upper floors as different people expressed their interests in setting

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4.15  
Zine Library, ABC No Rio, 2012.  
Photograph © Jade Doskow.

up these facilities. A group of invested photographers adapted the bathroom plumbing on the third floor and turned it into a darkroom to develop film (Figure 4.14). Different people or groups of people organized each of these spaces initially, and the attendant programs run by interested volunteers grew into separate collectives. In 1998 ABC No Rio accepted a collection of zines that had traveled from an anarchist bookstore, Blackout Books, on Avenue B, to a Bronx squat and was eventually housed in a zine library in the front room on the second floor of the building. This room was once occupied by the artist and prolific zinester Fly Orr.<sup>70</sup> Her words “There is always something hanging above your head” boldly painted on the ceiling of this space portends the uncertainty that has always been the narrative at ABC No Rio (Figure 4.15).

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A new board, comprising different generations of ABC No Rio artists and well-wishers, made decisions concerning the legal and fiscal matters of the institution, but the different collectives—HC/Punk, Print, Food Not Bombs, Zine, and others—ran the programming and the day-to-day operations within the newly established spaces in the building. In 1997 Steven Englander was the first squatter to move out of the building from the fourth floor. This apartment was converted into the Print Shop. Nine months later, Englander became the first paid administrative manager for ABC No Rio and began to organize a fund-raising campaign in conjunction with the board.<sup>71</sup>

After the extended battle against eviction and episodic squatting, ABC No Rio was the worse for wear. The apartment interiors were full of abandoned furniture and assorted trash—the debris of squatter domiciles. The walls were full of holes, the ceilings stained, and the floors encrusted with dirt. The whole place needed a thorough cleaning and an exhibit planned by the newly formed visual arts collective to launch the new arts center. Steven Englander and Scott Seaboldt coordinated the first installation of the *Ides of March* show in 1998. Seaboldt, like Englander, had lived in a squat and participated in the squatter movement on the Lower East Side and was enthusiastic about helping steer ABC No Rio in the post-squatter paradigm.<sup>72</sup> Conceived in the spirit of the “sweat equity” enterprise, they issued an open call for participation to artists who could invest some time cleaning up the space in order to participate in the show. This meant attending the planning meetings leading up to the show and carving out a bit of space for the display of the artworks by cleaning up a corner and painting a portion of the grimy walls.<sup>73</sup> This show, designed in the inclusionary tradition of ABC No Rio, was non-juried, but there was some dialogue among the participating artists about the relevance of their proposed installations within ABC No Rio.<sup>74</sup>

The first *Ides of March* opened on Friday, March 13, 1998, and included works by sixty-one artists (Figure 4.16).<sup>75</sup> The works were installed throughout the building, on the roof, and in the backyard. The first floor gallery—the original leased storefront—was intentionally left empty to draw the visitors up the stairs through the apartments into the most domestic reaches of the tenement to discover works hidden in closets, lurking inside the broken plaster walls, and hanging from the ceiling of a former bedroom.<sup>76</sup> In response to the theme of the show *The Ides of March*, the artist Roberto Martinez drew a historic time line on the ceiling of the third floor apartment of the events leading up to the assassination of Julius Caesar. Along the perimeter was a personal calendar of the artist’s own life in the month leading up to the show. This work, according to the artist, spoke of the capacity of



1997



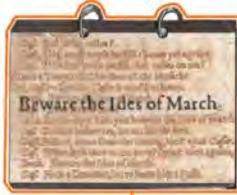
2008



2011



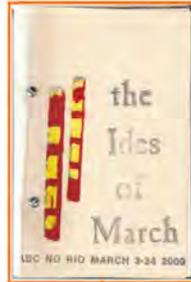
2012



- ACME
- B. Adler
- Johanna Bartlet
- Chris Benfield
- Kim Bennett
- Deborah Berkson
- Angela Bocage
- Matt Callinan
- Eneas Capalbo
- Caroline
- Valerie Chirigos
- Josephine Coniglio
- Darren Corona
- Kurt Dantzer
- Okra P. Dingle
- Anne Marie Farinacci
- Jon Feinstein
- Fly
- John Fragala
- Nancy Goldenberg
- Charles Hancock
- Steve Harrington
- Thomas Jerold
- John B. Johnson
- Anikka Lachman/Andrew Stern
- Victoria Law
- Lindsay
- Chris Lowery
- Robert Martinez
- Stacy Miller/Scott Scaboldt
- Jason Moriber
- Robert Nelson
- Jan Nunn
- Mark A. Randolph
- Chris Rucker
- Judy Tompkins
- Victoria Veedell
- Maria Yoon



- Osman Akan
- Elaine Angelopoulos
- Paul Biedrzycki
- BOOKLYN
- Frank Caprino
- Christopher Cardinale
- Rodrigo Chazaro
- Brendan Coogan
- Matthew Courtney
- Doña
- Jade Doskow
- Matthias & Emily Duwel
- Angel Garcia



- Jon Allen
- Aaron Auslander
- Andre Barbosa
- Kristin Cassidy
- Mike Estabrook
- Kevin Farley
- David E. Franck
- More Gardens!
- John S. Hancock
- Rob Horn
- Robin Islam
- Alex Khost
- Rob Lecuyer
- Hakim Maloum
- Mac McGill
- Tim McVicker
- Stacy Miller
- Jill O'Bryan
- Oden
- Nico Ramirez
- Georgia Russell
- Tom Sanford
- Peter Stankiewicz
- Laurie Stalter
- Chris Thieke
- Khan Vo
- Erick Zuenskes



- Michel Bayard
- Brock
- Ernest Concepcion
- Martin Dust
- Exploitme.com
- Kevin Farley
- Lambert Fernando
- A.P. Ferrara
- Eugene Fiore
- Kate Henderson
- Peter Hofmiester
- The Lower East Side
- Biography Project
- Maya McCarthy
- The Met Guard
- Nineteen9ighty
- Scott Nobles



- Dormafe Baluyos-fox
- Andrew Baron
- Suzanne Baron
- Fabian Berenbaum
- Alexander Bevington
- Garry Boake
- Lizxnn Bolger
- Alexi Rutsch Brock/Chelsea Bruck
- Michael Cataldi
- Maureen Catbagan
- Greg Cisneros
- Peter Cree
- Fei Cui
- Sandy Edmonds
- Stefan Eins
- Meredith Gaydosh
- Steve Harrington/ Miranda Edison
- Anna Hutchings
- Sarah Julig
- Hyeon-Seok Lee
- Jason Lujan
- Isabelle R Lumpkin
- Riza Manalo
- Anna Marra
- Moira McCaul
- John Mejias
- Anthony Meloro
- Emmanuel Migrino
- Judith Modrak
- Pierre Obando
- Lina Pallotta
- Sara Parkel



- Collective Gesture
- Concepcion/Estabrook AKA The Shining Mantris
- Cueva & Wells
- E.V.E. (Erase Your Ego)
- Flux Factory
- Harrah & Kipp
- it/EQ Community
- Arts Collaborative
- Justseeds Visual Resistance
- Artist Cooperative
- PerfectEight
- Shepperson/Stein/Radford
- Subject To Change
- Three Wise Goats
- Zuvuya Collective

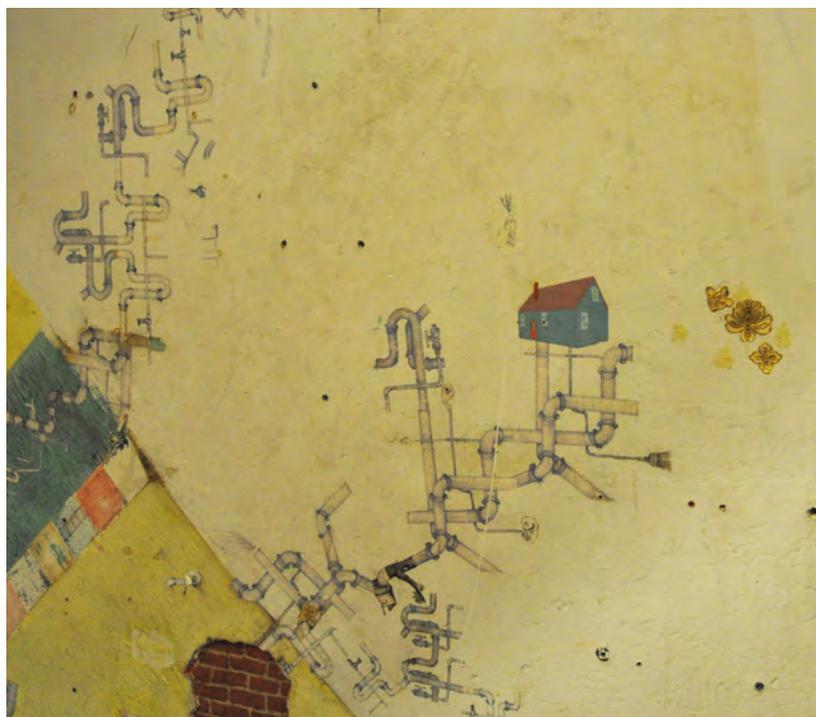


- Cesar Arredondo
- Kevin Caplicki
- Chris Clary
- Peggy Cyphers
- Charlotte Doglio
- Joann Harrah
- Rebecca Howland
- Akiko Ichikawa
- Julie McCabe
- Alan Moore
- Nsumi Collective
- Olek
- Douglas Einar Olsner
- Dave Pugh
- Vydavy Sindikat

1998 2000 2002 2004 2006 2008 2010

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4.17  
The Pipeline Project by artist  
Lamberto Fernando in the ABC No  
Rio stairway.  
Photograph by Nandini Bagchee, 2014.



architecture to “unhinge time” and to juxtapose larger official histories with the immediacy of the everyday life.<sup>77</sup>

Beginning with this first show, the *Ides of March* became a biennial event in which artists would install works connected to the building and its history of resistance. Lamberto Fernando began drawing in the stairway for the annual *Ides of March* show in 2002 and continued to develop his wall mural/relief over the course of eight years (Figure 4.17). The show’s catalog in 2004 notes that “The Pipeline Project is a mixed media collage that began with the creation of Brick Boy, inspired by the youthful spirit of ABC No Rio.”<sup>78</sup> Fernando, who began this project while still in high school, found inspiration in the existing brick as he scraped the plaster. Depicted in exquisite detail, his renderings of the exposed plumbing “symbolize the interconnectedness of the subconscious. The addition of the houses made of plaster explored the hidden connections of people in their private spaces.”<sup>79</sup> The private house, with its connection via plumbing to the subconscious in the work of the artist, seeks to connect to a larger public. The squatter politics and reconciliation of the public agenda within a semi-private realm made this and other works within ABC No Rio particularly potent. The fragile materiality of the building was clearly celebrated and exposed through these physical interventions and political mobilizations.

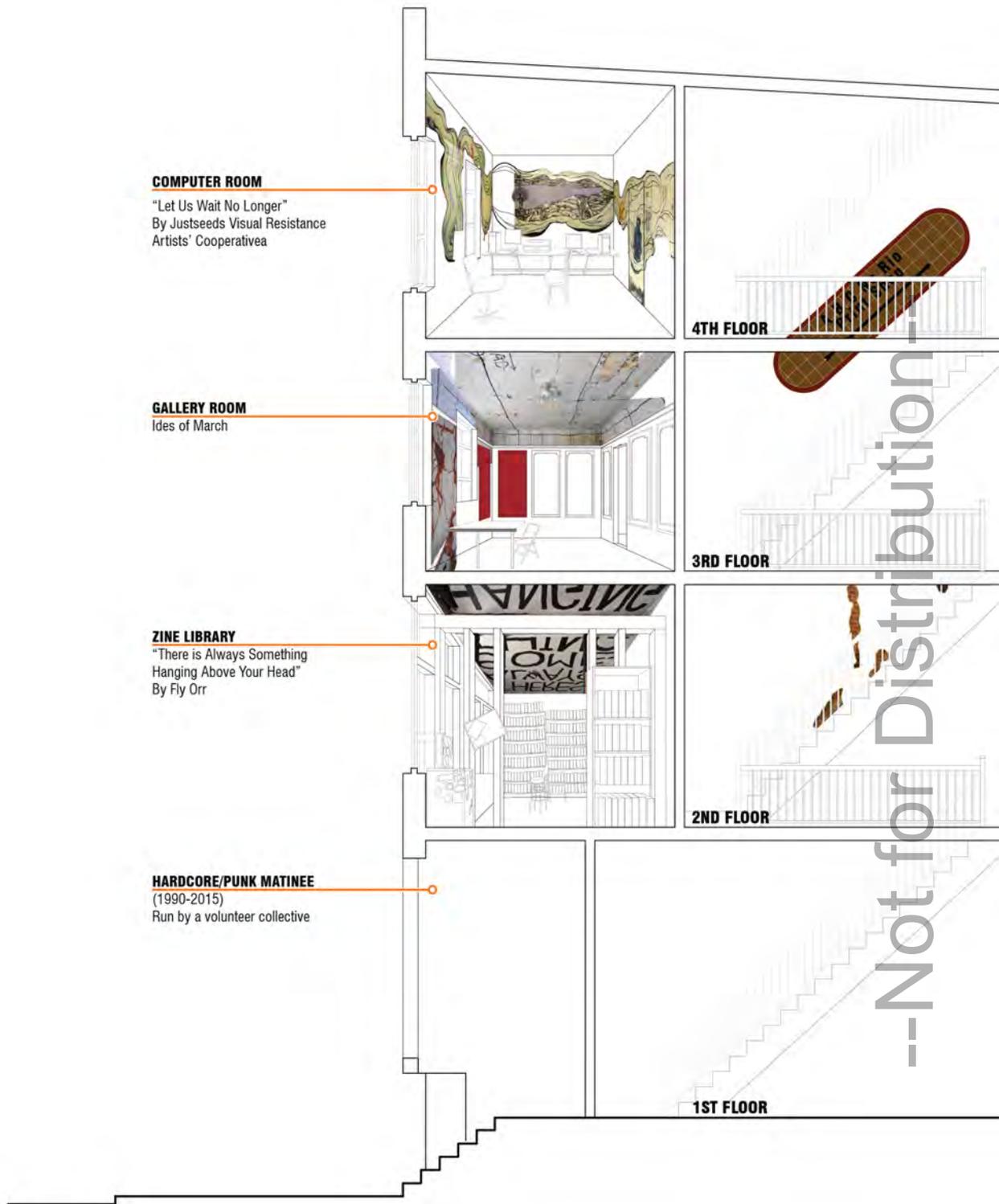
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The building became a living archive of these multifaceted undertakings. Artwork from past shows often remained on the interior stairwell, landings, and rooms within the building. The drawings, paintings, and reliefs that encrusted the walls felt like an extension of the exposed guts of the building. Questions of eviction, dispossession, and the “right to space” appear as themes within the artwork. Old symbols acquired new meanings as the political landscape of the country and the urban landscape of the city changed. Becky Howland’s Octopus from the *Real Estate Show* peeked out from the peeling layers of wall paper in on the second-floor dining room. The wheat paste mural on immigration by the Brooklyn-based collective Just Seeds (2008) incorporated the bolt cutter—a powerful symbol of squatter resistance—into the far-more perilous journey of an immigrant crossing a border (Figure 4.18). The quintessential representation of the labor movement, the garment worker in the Lower East Side began at the edge of the fourth-floor window in a crumbling tenement on Rivington Street. The image enveloped the computer room, unfurling from the fabric of the garment workers sowing machines.

These building-wide shows and the institution of programs in each of the rooms made the entire building more open, more public, more accessible. The print room, darkroom, and computer lab were available

4.18  
Immigration Project by Just Seeds  
collective in the ABC No Rio  
computer room.  
Photograph by Nandini Bagchee, 2014.





4.19

Section through ABC No Rio showing wall paintings in select locations, 2015.

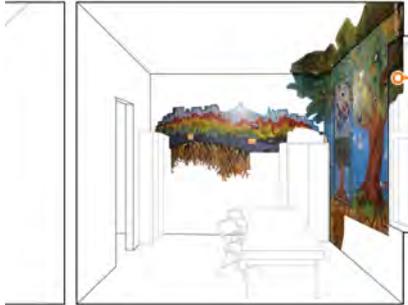
Illustration by Nandini Bagchee.



**PRINT SHOP**  
"Wall Wound Relief"  
By Fabian Berenbaum



**PHOTO LAB**



**DINING ROOM & KITCHEN**  
"Giving Tree Mural"  
By it/EQ Community Arts  
Collaborative

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for community use, and the zine library was open to browsers at scheduled times. Each of these facilities attracted new contingents of volunteers from different parts of the city who, like the others before them, cherished not only the sense of community but also the strong survivalist history of the space (Figure 4.19).

Alongside this sprucing up of the building and the establishment of new space-based community programs was the important task of fund-raising. An art center that had distinguished itself by its thrift and by its anti-capitalist self-sufficiency had to shift gears and approach donors and funders for help. By organizing in-house concerts, benefits, and auctions, the collective raised the agreed-upon sum of a hundred thousand dollars by the year 2000. Reconsidering the deteriorated condition of the building, HPD felt the collective needed more funds and a robust development plan to make sure the project moved forward.<sup>80</sup> This process took another six years as the board members reached out to the wider network of established artists and politicians who could invest in the future of the institution. A twenty-fifth anniversary benefit held at “Mega dealer Jeffery Deitch’s uber-hip exhibition space” in SoHo raised twenty thousand dollars auctioning off work by famous ABC No Rio alumni and other supportive members of the established art world. The reporter for this event hints at the paradox of the “defiantly downscale ABC No Rio, the Lower East Side’s original ‘anti-space’ turning to help from the moneyed gallery scene.”<sup>81</sup> The fight to acquire ABC No Rio had no holds barred and a place that had initially been a result of a subversive action (the *Real Estate Show*), and a part of an anarchist movement became an end in itself. In 2006 ABC No Rio, having raised \$700,000 in private funds, was able to convince HPD to sell them the building. On June 26, 2006, ABC No Rio was the proud owner of 156 Rivington Street.<sup>82</sup> That same year, they began the process of planning a renovation of the building with Paul Castrucci, an architect who had been in the shows at ABC No Rio and was a part of the art/squatter movement in the Lower East Side.<sup>83</sup> The first feasibility study of the building revealed the building to be far less sturdy than imagined. The supporting walls of the building were made of an old wood frame infilled with brick. The foundations were precarious, and any effort to preserve the shell of the building would require substantial shoring and underpinning. This type of preservation work would make the project costly and inefficient. The architect advised a complete teardown to erect a brand-new building—one that would be better suited to the future mission of the institution and bring the structure into compliance with the building code.

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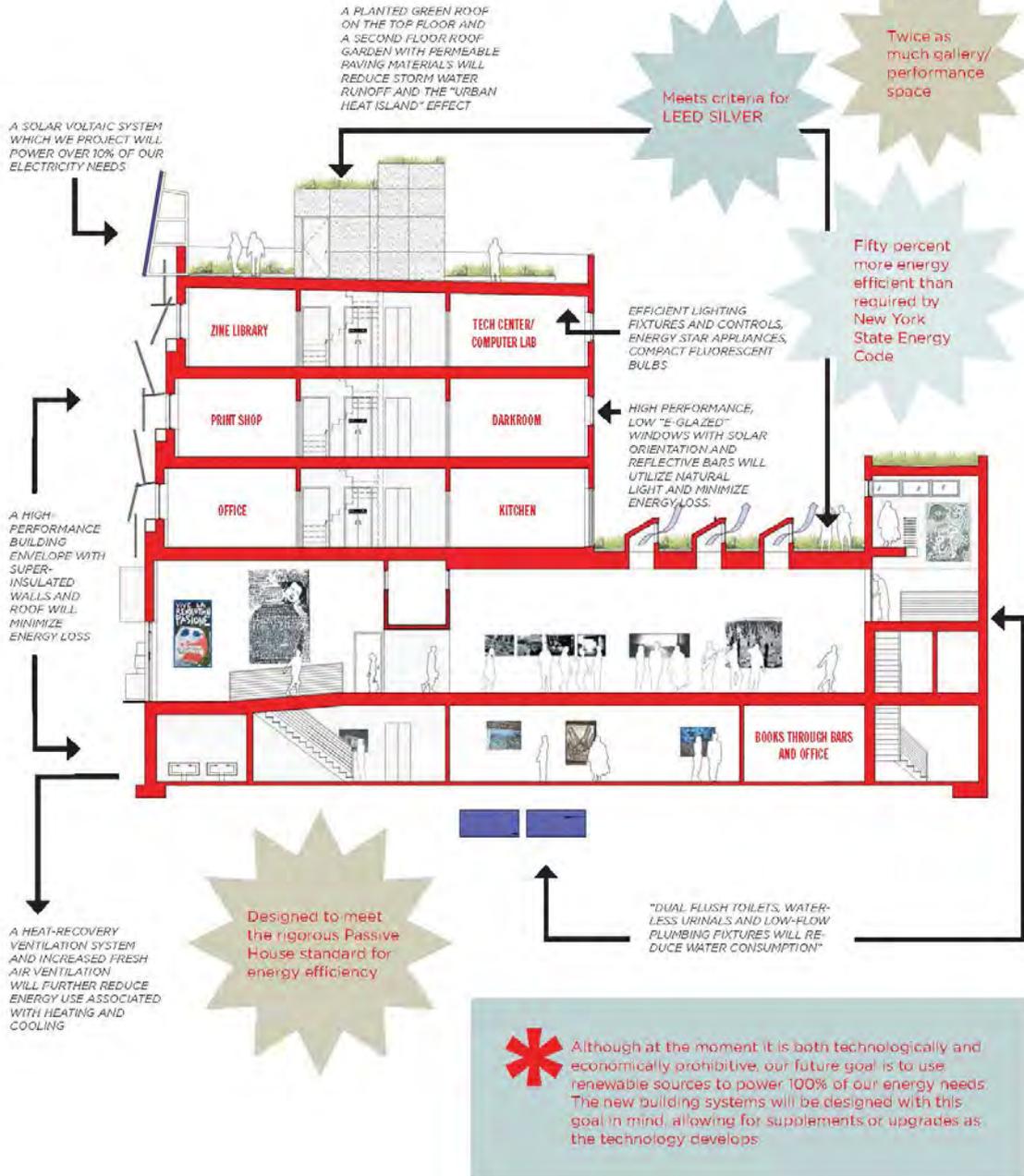
This revelation was difficult for the ABC No Rio community to process on two levels: First, the construction cost of a ground-up building was significantly more than the \$700,000 it had raised. Second, the existing building, complete with all its defects, was a symbol of the resistance that fueled the spirit of this particular institution. How could a new building possibly embody the aspirations of the future ABC No Rio?<sup>84</sup>

The first problem of funding was eventually overcome as ABC No Rio, after several years of contention, found a sympathetic and generous partner in the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) in New York City.<sup>85</sup> The DCLA is “the largest cultural funding agency in the nation.” Among other types of spending, it also subsidizes construction and renovation at certain institutions that it sees “as providing cultural services to the citizens of New York City.” This funding is given at the discretion of elected officials. In 2009 ABC No Rio received a combined \$1.65 million grant from Manhattan borough president Scott Stringer and City Councilman Alan J. Gerson.<sup>86</sup>

The second problem of redesigning the building, without losing the spirit that had nurtured the organizations that had and would call it home, was tackled by working with the architect in consultation with a building design committee. The proposed new building design included a space for housing the existing programs (the kitchen, the darkroom, the zine library, and so on) with an enlarged gallery and performance space below. Envisioned with a façade composed of solar panels and green-walls, the building was designed to be 100 percent energy efficient. The organization saw the sustainable principles that dominated this architectural scheme as an appropriate symbol of the endurance of ABC No Rio (Figure 4.20). The architect’s renderings showed a minimal white interior composed of galleries and artwork that sit neatly within its frame. The preservation the collective espoused was not that of the Lower East Side nostalgia for the punk-artifact but rather the social project of a volunteer-run arts center dedicated to exhibiting the works of young artists and providing a base for political mobilization. The future engagements will determine the actual shape and constitution of the new space.

## **ART, POLITICS, AND PLACE**

Rosalyn Deutsche, in her book *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (1996), wrote, “Social space is produced and structured by conflicts. With this recognition, a democratic spatial politics begins.”<sup>87</sup> The conflicts arising from saving a building and making it meaningful have, in



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4.20  
 New building proposal for ABC No Rio showing passive design principles, 2010.  
 Drawing courtesy of Paul A. Castrucci  
 Architect for ABC No Rio.

large part, informed the practices of generations of patrons at ABC No Rio. The Real Estate Show artists who founded ABC No Rio saw it as an extension of their living situation and used its domestic shabbiness to mount a critique of the ways in which government failed to respond to the needs of its citizens. The second “performative” phase allowed for the development of multiple identities locally that moved ABC No Rio into a global orbit in search of that elusive “community.” The last phase with the punk-squatter resistance was a return to the anarchic roots of the Lower East Side, where the building itself became the object of a more militant activism. After the stalwart occupiers of ABC No Rio finally won the battle for the building but lost the war of the neighborhood (Figure 4.21), their focus was redirected from the practices that resisted institutionalization to what Gerald Raunig calls “the process of instituting.”<sup>88</sup> The broader ambition of this process, as Raunig sees it, was to move from “a belligerent critique of the state” to finding ways of self-governance.<sup>89</sup> By prioritizing its legitimacy as a *community center* that benefits from the ever evolving collectives of artists, *ABC No Rio*, in this phase, managed to distinguish itself from the alternative spaces that were pressed to return to the art institutional fold to survive. The constant renegotiation of the contours of that community was driven by the changing demographics of the neighborhood, the space, and its users in unison.

By the 2000’s, the prohibitive rents in the neighborhood pushed both the Latino and younger artist communities that still visited ABC No Rio to live further and further away from the building. The crowd that gathered at the building for the HC/Punk Matinees and the *Ides of March* shows in 2010 was more than ever before a dispersed community of commuters. The institution thus stands at the cusp of this tenuous relationship between a past when space and politics were fiercely contested in this part of the city and a future where a resistance to consumerism still strives to hold a place in the cracks of the city, where it was injected with collective will and determination. The anarchic domesticity within the old building allowed generations of artists, activists, squatters, and performers to capture space and make it meaningful through the DIY approach that ABC No Rio celebrates. The proposed new space and functioning utilities will, no doubt, make the experience of being part of this building very different. The challenge of overcoming the odds will no longer be tied to the lack of amenities but rather to forming new criteria that address the question of the artist’s response to civic agency in the shifting terrain of the new urban politics.

REAL ESTATE SHOW

TOMPKINS SQUARE RIOT



"When Police and Protestors Break an Unwritten Code"



"Heavily Tested by the Crowds in Tompkins Square, Police Discipline Broke"



"Tompkins Square Protest is Marked by Restraint"



"Facing Wall of Silence"



**REAL ESTATE SHOW**  
"Artists Ejected In 'Occupation' Of a Storefront: Views of City Planning"

**ABC NO RIO OPENS**

**BULLDOZER HITS ABC NO RIO**

**PROTEST AT AAFE**

**ABC NO RIO SERVED EVICTION**

**ABC NO RIO INCORPORATED**



**Ed Koch**

January 1st, 1978  
December 31st, 1989



**David Dinkins**

January 1st, 1990  
December 31st, 1993



**Rudy Giuliani**

January 1st, 1994  
December 31st, 2001

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**SQUATTER EVICTIONS**

**HOUSEHOLDING**



"Riot Police Remove 31 Squatters From Two East Village Buildings"



"The Wild, Wild, Lower East Side"



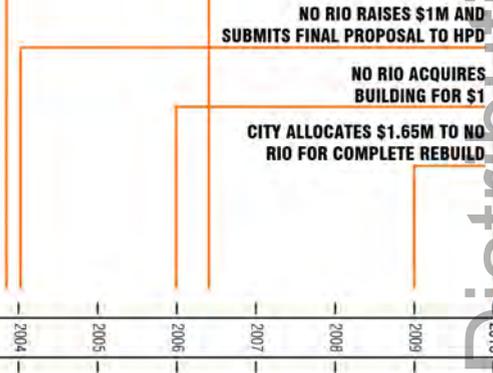
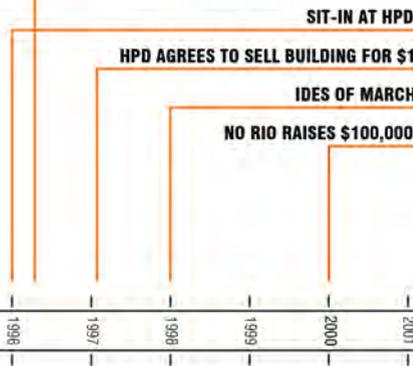
"Homesteading a Little Place in History: Archive Documents Squatters' Movement on Lower East Side"



"For \$1, a Collective Mixing Art and Radical Politics Turns Itself Into Its Own Landlord"



"Exhibit Celebrates a Tenement! And Squatters Who Made It a Home"



**Michael Bloomberg**  
January 1st, 2002  
December 31st, 2013

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