

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

For nearly seven years, from 1981 to 1987, the New York art world saw the emergence of more than one hundred galleries in the East Village that took root, quickly flourished, and just as rapidly died out. Residents and far-flung observers alike were kept in near-constant thrall by the energy, the artworks, and the sheer audacity of experimentation. From graffiti art to appropriation to Neo-Geo, virtually every major development in American art during that period seems to have originated in one or more of the mostly small, mostly storefront spaces that sprang up in the contested urban zones that characterized a neighborhood in the early stages of transition from slum to middle-class playground. This essay, and the exhibition it accompanies, represent a curatorial effort to shed some much-needed light on that vital era, in danger of becoming more distorted and more remote with each passing year.

Postwar Transformations and Counterculture

With its unique history as the Manhattan neighborhood that maintained the closest ties to its storied past as a hotbed of dissent and social reform—Jacob Riis's historic campaign to institute laws against child labor was rooted only a few blocks south—the East Village provided fertile soil for the explosion of new types of artistic groups and spaces in the 1960s and 1970s. As early as the late 1950s, a number of small galleries (Jane, Hansa, and Tanager were among the better known) turned their back on what was then the center of the New York art world, Fifty-seventh Street and Madison Avenue, to begin showing in their modest storefront galleries work by younger artists of a mostly Abstract Expressionist bent. Although the gallery movement was fairly short-lived and there was never

more than a handful of spaces at any time, a surprising number of significant artists of the period ended up having their first gallery exhibitions in the East Village. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the cultural models defining the neighborhood were transformed by the evolving needs of successive waves of immigrants and transplants—including eastern Europeans (mostly from Poland and the Ukraine), Hispanics (mostly from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico), African Americans, and eventually, hippies—who called the area home. By the late 1960s, the East Village had experienced the flowering of new institutions derived from the burgeoning counterculture: the rock concert hall as exemplified by the Fillmore East; experimental theater as embodied by La MaMa; avant-garde cinema as presented at Millennium Film Workshop; and new literary voices as hosted by the Poetry Project at St. Marks Church. St. Marks Place, still a bustling center of grass roots entrepreneurialism today, functioned for years as a kind of Haight-Ashbury East, a gathering place for dropouts, radicals, and crusaders for new forms of social awareness and activism.

Despite all this cultural ferment and activity, for two decades the art world took very little notice of what was happening in the East Village and the Lower East Side. The artists' loft movement of the 1970s, which was centered mostly in the former industrial spaces to be found throughout Soho and Tribeca, bypassed the East Village almost completely. A handful of spaces on the Lower East Side were converted to living lofts, but generally speaking, this phenomenon tended to occur west of the Bowery. The demarcation was due largely to the studio space requirements associated with minimalist and postminimalist work. As sculpture and painting in the 1960s and 1970s increased in scale, artists were unable to work effectively



in studio spaces the size of Manhattan or Brooklyn apartments, and therefore sought out larger industrial spaces. However, because the East Side had always been more of a residential than industrial neighborhood, and was developed to house a primarily working-class, immigrant population, relatively few of its buildings contained spaces large enough to accommodate the ambitious scale of the newest art movements.

That isn't to say that the East Village in the 1960s and 1970s was in any way lacking an artistic intelligentsia. On the contrary, the steady influx of musicians, actors, and writers had been preceded by a handful of painters who had discovered and developed the few loft-size spaces available in the neighborhood, from Larry Rivers's vast floor-through loft on Thirteenth Street to Milton Resnick's modified garret on Chrystie Street. This set the stage for artists such as Peter Hujar, Hélio Oiticica, Jack Smith, and Paul Thek, who moved into the bohemian zone south of Fourteenth Street and east of the Bowery. Since most of these artists tended to see themselves as outsiders anyway, their relative distance from the art world's established center was considered, if anything, a plus. Certainly these four artists shared a certain antipathy toward the mainstream art community, insofar as they rarely if ever exhibited their work, preferring to enjoy a cultlike status within a much more rarefied group of friends and like-minded contemporaries. Not surprisingly, each of them was also gay, although born to a postwar generation that was not inclined to be overtly political about it. In this sense, the East Village represented a form of respite from the demands of being a full-time artist, while enabling those who wished it a chance to flourish within a lively and engaged community.

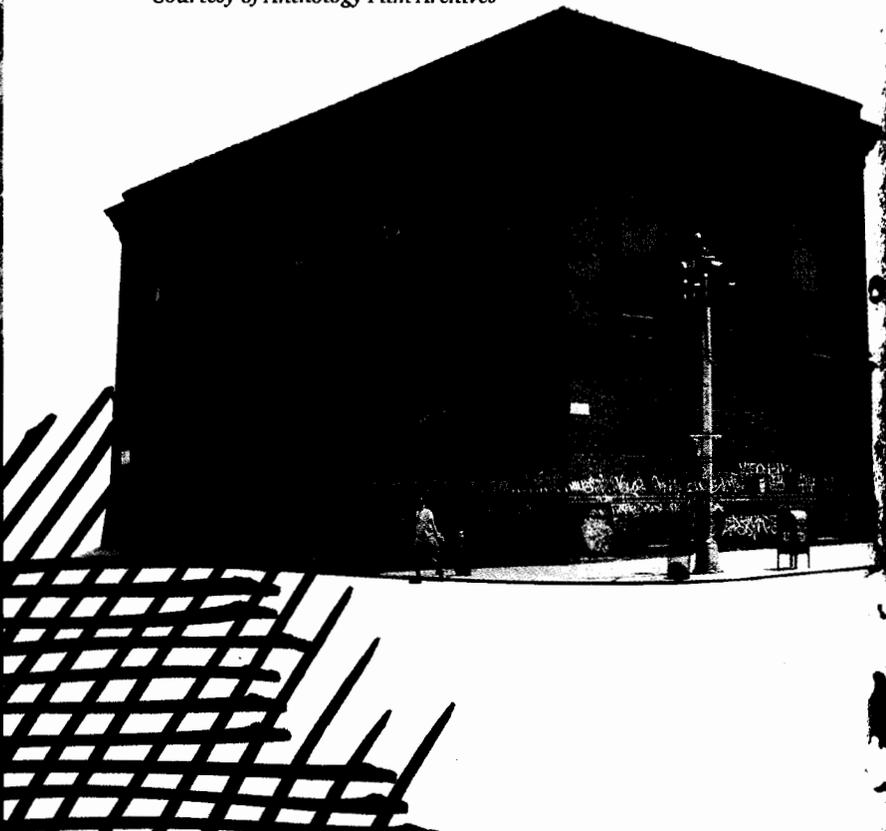
Punk and the Rise of Club Culture

The first development to draw worldwide attention to the East Village was the launch of punk rock music in the mid-1970s at an unassuming Bowery music club called CBGB, owned and run by Hilly Crystal, an unlikely patron of new musical forms. Bands that would soon go on to enjoy worldwide success—among them the Ramones, Talking Heads, and Blondie—enthralled their first audiences at CBGB. Curator Diego Cortez, who in 1981 would organize the epochal *New York/New Wave* exhibition at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, was at the fore of the sea change, immersing himself fully in the music scene while continuing to observe its impact on the many visual artists who began to gravitate to the Bowery and beyond in search of signs of a broader cultural transformation. The impact of punk and (slightly later) new wave was far greater than anyone had anticipated, and it helped to usher in an era in which nightlife was the defining aspect of New York City's self-image. Studio 54 had already accomplished a similar feat during the disco era, but punk music provided club culture with a new aggressive, militant edge. Punk also stressed the do-it-yourself possibilities that came to personify a city virtually on the brink of bankruptcy, and in which ordinary street crime had reached epidemic proportions. Visual artists constituted a key sector of the audience for these new musical forms; in fact, many artists, including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Alan Vega, and Nancy Arlen, formed their own bands. More important, the influence of the punk movement could soon be clearly detected in the studio practices of these and other artists.

Two very different clubs from the late 1970s and early 1980s became harbingers of the new social paradigms that would define



*Façade of Anthology Film Archives, ca. 1988.
Courtesy of Anthology Film Archives*



confrontations in the weeks that followed, city officials finally gave the artists the Rivington Street space, which became ABC No Rio, as a rent-free, permanent home, and the Lower East Side finally had its own place in which artists could show their work and congregate.

As fundamental as CoLab's and CRES's high-profile, group-initiative lobbying and other activities were in establishing the neighborhood as a stronghold of new art, such developments also deserve to be considered in light of other more or less concurrent initiatives. Of particular interest here is the squatter/garden movement, best embodied by Adam Purple's Garden of Eden, which thrived from the late 1970s through the late 1980s, when it was bulldozed for neighborhood development, over the protests of numerous residents. Although Purple was an ecological activist who conceived his garden not as a signature artwork but as a working tool for the community, his idealistic visual contribution to local street life became, for many residents (this writer included), a symbol of the ways in which the obvious drawbacks of the Lower East Side (poverty, drugs, inadequate housing and services) also provided an opportunity for creative spirits who didn't mind bypassing the system altogether.

Because of its quasi-utopian, semi-anarchic leanings, such collective initiatives as the Rivington School's early 1980s transformation of an empty lot on Ludlow Street into an ongoing sculpture park owe as much to the Garden of Eden example as to CoLab. In the Rivington School formula, numerous collaborators would work together on

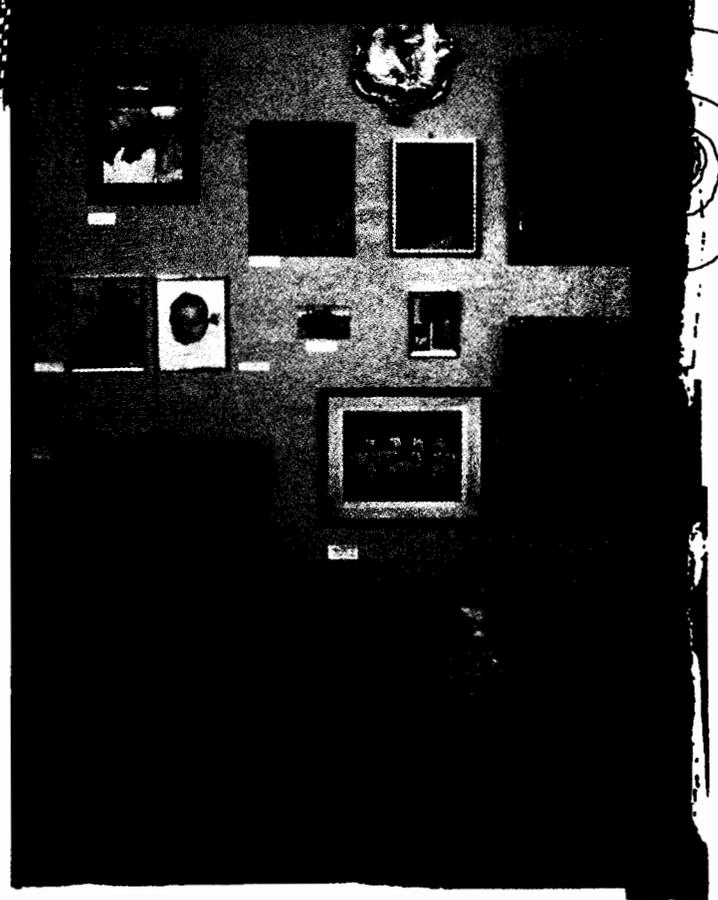
the same large-scale assemblage sculptures, as well as co-organize performance-events that were determinedly nonhierarchical in their unstructured format. Because they were not, strictly speaking, legally sanctioned, such gestures were partly intended to point out the deficiencies of a system that provided no outlet for the cultural producers of the district and was barely able to keep the streets free of the open-air drug trade. Nonetheless, artists whose work would soon find a place in the highly variegated East Village milieu—including Linus Coraggio, David Finn, Ann Messner, the collective Avant, and Ted Rosenthal—first made themselves known to many viewers by way of guerrilla-like installations in the streets and empty lots of the Lower East Side.

North of Houston Street, the situation for smaller nonprofits was considerably more advanced. Community-oriented spaces such as Kenkeleba House and Charas/El Bohio consistently showcased boundary-pushing art and performance in the neighborhood, with a particular focus on the special racial and ethnic diversity of the neighborhood. Their programs augmented those of later arrivals such as P.S. 122 Gallery, which operated from the back of the performance space and visual artists' studios in the same building, and Bullet Space, a former squat that continues to function largely as an exhibition (and later publishing) cooperative based on the fair distribution of profits among its members. One critical factor that made the East Village a far superior launching pad for the new gallery movement than its mirror image below Houston Street was

the prior existence of locally supported, artist-driven initiatives. La MaMa, Danspace Project, Poetry Project at St. Marks Church, Third Street Music Settlement, and Anthology Film Archives, with their roots in artist-generated neighborhood initiatives, had either become or were on the cusp of becoming full-fledged cultural institutions. The early 1980s also saw a flourishing of younger venues for the presentation of work in a variety of media, ranging from the New Cinema on St. Marks Place (cofounded by Becky Johnston and Jim Jarmusch) to the Nuyorican Poets Café to the cutting-edge performance programs at P.S. 122 and (later) Dixon Place, all of which provided an important social context for the explosion of art galleries in those years.

There was a pronounced atmosphere of increased cultural contact among groups that would have otherwise been estranged by differences in class, race, and/or ethnicity. The highly influential artists' collective Group Material, whose membership fluctuated but whose best-known participants were Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, and Tim Rollins, began in 1979 to operate out of a 600-square-foot storefront on East Thirteenth Street. One of its earliest strengths, which became a hallmark of its later practice, was its tendency to open its activities up to people who were not necessarily artists and to projects that were not necessarily art, including collaborations with the mostly Hispanic residents of its block. Also nearby (at Lafayette and Bleecker) was PADD (Political Art Documentation and Distribution), begun in 1979 as more of a clearinghouse for information related to political issues but also occasionally functioning as an exhibition space. In short, many of the underlying principles of the multicultural society that were to form such an important part of the culture wars of the ensuing decade had already been set in motion by the East Village's capacity to manifest and project a far scrappier and more idiosyncratic view of American society than that being promoted by the policies of Reagan's first-term administration.

The rapid growth of artists' cooperatives in the neighborhood at the end of the 1970s, along with the sheer volume of public interest in punk and its offspring, helped to lay the foundation for the art-plus-nightlife formula that would become essential to New York society



and culture in the 1980s. Although in 1980, with a few exceptions, the East Village was not yet considered a neighborhood one visited to see art, its increased significance as a destination for live music, dance, spoken word, performance art, and independent film meant that the eventual development of hybrid club-performance spaces—beginning with Life Café and Pyramid Club and reaching its apogee with 8BC, Limbo Lounge, Darinka, and dozens of other venues—was not (in retrospect anyway) such a startling development.



Zephyr (Andrew Witten), *Zephyr*, 1984. Private Collection; courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery, New York, NY. See checklist

Jean-Michel Basquiat in Edo Bertoglio's *Downtown 81*, 1981.
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Wild Style: Hip-Hop and Graffiti Art

One of the least understood but most inescapable facts about the East Village art scene is that the grafting of South Bronx hip-hop culture onto the East Village was the fundamental catalyst that enabled everything else to occur. Far from being a simple declaration of fact, however, this observation requires a viewpoint that, at least in principle, acknowledges the period's broad range of cultural activities—fashion, music, club life, independent film, art—as more or less equivalent in value. Considering the number of other cross-pollinations taking place in the culture at large (music being the most evident), it would stand to reason that graffiti, as the visual manifestation of the hip-hop movement, would serve, inadvertently, as the flash point that forced the art world to pay attention to the East Village.

Fashion Moda, an alternative space founded by Stefan Eins and Joe Lewis in the South Bronx in 1978, was a pivotal force in this transformation, in part because it hosted the first-ever graffiti art exhibition (organized by Crash in 1979), in which participants made their works on recycled pieces of 4-by-8-foot plywood. However, Fashion Moda, which billed itself as an anti-alternative space, was founded on a mission that brought together conceptual art, street art, painting, and sculpture in a resolutely nonhierarchical context. There were, of course, a handful of gallerists of the period, from Hugo Martinez to Sidney Janis, who also served as springboards for the highly talented young artists who eventually spearheaded the East Village scene. But the serendipity that brought “train writers” from all over the city together in a commercial art gallery

environment continued with the anointing of underground actress Patti Astor and her partner Bill Stelling as best suited to spread the message to lower Manhattan.

If there is a single archetypal image from which the entire myth of the East Village gallery scene was formed, it is unquestionably the still from Charlie Ahearn's groundbreaking 1981 film *Wild Style* that shows Astor gamely joining a circle of break-dancers and doing her pseudo-debutante best to show that she is, before and above all else, a young lady with soul. Even today, the image has lost almost none of its capacity to evoke a moment in popular culture when the divides of race and class in American life could be so awkwardly, and charmingly, summed up and dispensed with. *Wild Style*, which was the first film to feature the stars of the still nascent hip-hop and break-dancing movements, had an extraordinary impact on the culture at large, but especially on the South Bronx, where these movements had germinated. For Astor and the many graffiti artists who were also featured in the movie—not least of whom were its stars Lee Quinones and Lady Pink—Ahearn's improbable plot device of a young blond maven of the downtown club scene opening a gallery to promote her new graffiti friends soon became a reality.

Ahearn had been a founding member of CoLab and, along with his wife, artist Jane Dickson, was closely involved with Fashion Moda. His brother, sculptor John Ahearn, was already active in the neighborhood at the time, and Charlie Ahearn soon found himself in the midst of some of hip-hop's most vital transitional moments, photographing performers and paving his way toward making a music documentary, a project that would eventually be scrapped in favor of a film about graffiti artists and their world. Once Cortez's



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New York/New Wave exhibition had established a curatorial dialogue between graffiti art and a punk sensibility, it hardly required a great leap of imagination to predict that the establishment art world might soon venture where a handful of adventurous (mostly European) collectors and dealers had already gone: into the buying and selling of graffiti as fine art. What no one could have guessed at the time was that the resulting phenomenon would trigger a series of changes, resulting in a radical transformation in how the New York art world saw itself.

If it is hard to exaggerate the transcultural allure projected by Astor’s subculture adventure in *Wild Style*, it is equally difficult to overstate the complex reactions that greeted the graffiti artists once they emerged within the art world context. Since this is not the place to attempt even a brief history of the complex origins and evolution of New York graffiti art, suffice it to say that a certain degree of possibly deliberate ambiguity about what constitutes graffiti art took root almost from the inception of Cortez’s P.S. 1 exhibition, when in fact, two quite distinct groups of practitioners, one of which specifically grew out of the other, came together in that summer of 1981. The first was associated with the evolution during the 1970s of the popular art of painting subway trains, beginning with the crude writing of one’s “tag” on every available surface to the creation of complex multicolor, multiauthor murals, which became dazzling evocations of a generation of urban youth’s adamant refusal to go unnoticed. With few exceptions, these

works were produced by teenagers growing up in the city and not necessarily aiming to be professional artists. However, a partial list of those who went on to show with galleries, both downtown and abroad, includes Quinones, Crash, Daze, Pink, Futura 2000, Dondi, Phase II, Rammellzee, LA 1, and Zephyr. Painter Fred Brathwaite, who would exhibit his works under both his given name and his rap moniker, Fab 5 Freddy, was the quintessential uptown-downtown catalyst. It was Brathwaite, for example, who introduced himself to Astor after seeing a screening of Eric Mitchell’s *Underground USA* (in which she appeared) and brought her uptown, who encouraged and helped Ahearn to make *Wild Style*, who first booked Afrika Bambaataa into East Village spots such as Club 57, and who eventually introduced Blondie singer Debbie Harry to hip-hop, resulting in the epochal song and video *Rapture*.

The second group consists of those who were attending art school in the late 1970s and early 1980s in New York, where it would have been virtually impossible not to have encountered graffiti in its unadulterated form. For aspiring hipsters from the heartland, graffiti represented the intimidating underside of New York life—one that was, nonetheless, so visually stunning at its finest that it could not help but inspire a sense of awe toward the young daredevils who

would take such risks to create a work of art that many of their fellow New Yorkers (and the city government in its entirety) despised, and which would end up being painted over in a day or two. Even before the outcry over graffiti artist Michael Stewart's death, in 1981, while in the custody of MTA police, graffiti had become an outsider's cause, one that could be championed in the form of an indirect homage, which is essentially the best way to describe the early "street art" practiced by Basquiat, Haring, John Fekner, and to a much lesser degree, Scharf. Although Basquiat's now-legendary street scribbles as SAMO and Haring's formative chalk drawings on sidewalks and in subway stations were just as illegal as graffiti on trains, they engaged the urban infrastructure in a considerably more self-conscious way. For starters, both Basquiat and Haring were interested not only in having their urban interventions, which usually took place during broad daylight, documented in photographs but also in having themselves recorded in the act. Although this use of the camera to immortalize urban guerrilla art actions is very much a page from the postconceptualist handbook, the well-known photos of Haring at work by Tseng Kwong Chi and the filming of SAMO's scrawls in Edo Bertoglio's *Downtown 81* are, in the end, not that different from Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper's more rigorous photographic investigations of trains and the pseudonymous teenagers whose artworks covered them.

When FUN Gallery opened its doors in June 1981, in a tiny storefront on East Eleventh Street that Astor's future partner Bill Stelling had been using as a fabric-printing studio, the academic distinction between the neo-graffitists and their immediate forebears seems to have been rendered moot by the tidal wave of energy and excitement with which it was greeted. In the same way that Brathwaite set out to build bridges between uptown and downtown, so Haring became a highly visible champion of hip-hop music, dance, and art, promoting all three as artistic equivalents to his own practice. It was in this optimistic and slightly amateurish spirit that the gallery's three-year reign as the epicenter of the East Village art scene unfolded: with tastemakers such as Cortez and curator-art advisor Jeffrey Deitch suddenly touting graffiti as representing a seismic shift in the way art was made and distributed, the mainstream art world, represented by the more established galleries in Soho and on Fifty-seventh Street, was caught entirely by surprise. In the same way that the *Times Square Show* the previous year had shown what could happen when artists got hold of a temporary space, FUN Gallery extended the challenge a step further by staking claim to a tiny piece of real estate as the new center of activity, in a neighborhood where the very notion of a wildly successful art gallery was completely incongruous. And yet, even before the November 1982 opening, in brand-new quarters, of a show of paintings by Basquiat, when the inevitable crush of limousines heralded another degree of exposure, FUN Gallery had a more eclectic mix of art than is often acknowledged. In addition to its graffiti-related roster, FUN also presented work by more Pop-inflected artists such as Kiely Jenkins, Arch Connelly, and Nicolas Moufarrege, thus positioning graffiti as a natural fusion of high art and popular culture.

There was, however, an intrinsic problem of slippage in marketing graffiti art to a community for whom it was generally no more than an exotic detour in taste. Despite concerted efforts by collectors such as Dolores and Hubert Neumann to contextualize graffiti through formats the art world was comfortable with—academic symposia, for example—it was often discounted as too urban to be folk art, too self-taught to be avant-garde, and/or too Pop-inflected to be primitivist. In addition, few graffiti artists had a formal art education, and in the absence of any systematic critical or curatorial attempts to establish standards of quality and authenticity, the

rapid emergence by the mid-1980s of an art world subculture of artists, dealers, and collectors devoted almost exclusively to various permutations of graffiti meant that the art world mainstream gradually lost interest. However, what is amply proven by graffiti's more discerning connoisseurs—among them the late painter Martin Wong, whose extensive collection is now owned by the Museum of the City of New York—is that in order to appreciate graffiti, it is first necessary, as with any other school or genre, to see a wide range of examples. Unfortunately, little if any scholarly attention has gone into a post-facto study of graffiti, creating a self-perpetuating information vacuum. As a result, the most significant examples of a local art movement universally recognized for its impact on visual culture continue to be terra incognita for the mainstream New York art world and its audiences, including (and especially) art students.

Despite this nearly total lack of attention from museums, critics, and curators, graffiti's moment in the limelight was a busy one. Due in part to the rapidly growing listener base for hip-hop, graffiti became the visual touchstone for a musical mass culture that quickly became a sensation. By 1985, nearly two years after FUN closed its doors, one-person exhibitions had already taken place of Quinones at Barbara Gladstone, Brathwaite at Holly Solomon, Crash and Daze at Sidney Janis, Basquiat at Mary Boone, and perhaps most visibly, Haring, Scharf, and Futura 2000 at Tony Shafrazi. By this time, however, the East Village had undergone a dramatic transformation, one in which graffiti would come to play an ever-diminishing role. Gallerists such as Rich Colicchio of 51X and Barry Blinderman at Semaphore East would continue to show Dondi and Pink, respectively, well into mid-decade, and an increasing number of artists whose work was graffiti-inflected, including Fekner, Bobby G, Richard Hambleton, and David Wojnarowicz, continued to find a growing and interested audience. However, it is revealing that by late 1984, when curator Phyllis Plous, at the University Art Museum of the University of California, Santa Barbara, organized the East Village-themed exhibition *Neo-York: Report on a Phenomenon*, only one graffiti painter, Zephyr, was included among a group of sixty-seven participating artists.

In addition to 51X, three other significant East Village galleries opened in 1982 and almost perfectly set the tone for the avalanche that was to come. Civilian Warfare, run by Dean Savard and Alan Barrows, cultivated exactly the angst-ridden ambience that its name implies. There was a burned-out, slightly seedy, even dangerous quality to the art shown there, as if it had been roughly dragged in off the street and slapped directly onto the gallery walls. Although a degree of Civilian Warfare's nihilism was a form of posturing for the sake of image, the gallery provided a suitable context for the early work of artists such as Wojnarowicz, Luis Frangella, Judy Glantzman, and Greer Lankton, each of whom had been influenced to varying degrees by the wave of German Neo-Expressionist painters who were then just beginning their rapid ascension to blue-chip status. Wojnarowicz, who was alternately a writer, musician, painter, photographer, and even an actor, had begun seriously making art while under Hujar's tutelage and was one of the motivating spirits behind the artist invasion (itself inspired by the example of graffiti) of Pier 43 during the summer of 1981, which resulted in numerous site-specific works created in the cavernous and dangerously rickety spaces of this West Side pier.

In some ways, Civilian Warfare was the gallery that most accurately projected the existentially overwrought aesthetic that would eventually come to identify the entire East Village movement. Lankton's melodramatic cloth sculptures of distorted and/or mutated figures seemed to be part of an effort to repopulate the world according to her own imagination, while Glantzman's first exhibition

was made largely from recycled materials being thrown out from her day job at Artists Space. Frangella, whose background practicing architecture in Argentina was in keeping with his mild-mannered personality, used expressionistic tropes to deconstruct familiar icons of visual culture in witty and often ironic ways.

Gracie Mansion, whose PR instincts helped her parlay an outsider, on-a-shoestring status into a formidable marketing tool as the East Village's best-known gallery, began her professional career in 1981 by hiring a limousine with longtime partner Sur Rodney (Sur), and parking it on West Broadway in Soho to lure in prospective clients (they made sure it was stationed along Leo Castelli's daily walking route) to view the works of mail artist Buster Cleveland. In early 1982, Mansion was operating out of the bathroom of her East Ninth Street apartment, with a provisional gallery fittingly called Loo Division. Although her gallery would later have a series of more or less fixed East Village addresses, Mansion's offbeat sense of entrepreneurship lent the space a playful, zany edge that felt like the exact opposite of the Sturm und Drang of Civilian Warfare—her Club 57 to their Mudd Club, so to speak. A true believer in the values of good salesmanship, Mansion painted the gallery's walls a different color for each exhibition, and her closest artist-counterpart was probably Rodney Alan Greenblat, whose irrepressibly silly installations and furniture sculptures belied their extremely canny use of animation and color to push familiar forms into unfamiliar territory.

The highly eclectic nature of Mansion's sensibility encompassed artists as diverse as Mike Bidlo, Greenblat, Hujar, Christof Kohlhöfer, Stephen Lack, Marilyn Minter, Gary Panter, David Sandlin, Hope Sandrow, Rhonda Zwillinger, and later, Wojnarowicz. While Bidlo was already becoming well known for his highly performative appropriations from Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol, and Hujar was something of an underground celebrity, Sandrow's large-scale black-and-white photographs were a bit of a departure in that they employed fragmentary and abstracted imagery that was far less flamboyant than the typical East Village work. Lack and Sandlin, who specialized in painterly treatments of pop-culture (Lack) or pop-apocalyptic (Sandlin) imagery, would over time develop into two of the gallery's most influential artists.

Aside from her personal aesthetic, Mansion's greatest impact at the time was her seemingly offhanded but unerring ability to attract press attention for herself and her artists, and she appeared regularly in *People* and other popular magazines throughout the early 1980s. Her casual, affable manner became one of the most publicly identifiable symbols of the East Village scene, even after the neighborhood galleries had largely migrated to Soho's greener pastures.

The opening of the tiny gallery Nature Morte on East Tenth Street in May 1982 presaged the stark differences in style and sensibility that would soon symbolize the East Village's internal tumult for years to come. Although co-owners Alan Belcher and Peter Nagy, both practicing artists, may not have positioned their space as being the anti-FUN Gallery, their tastes, which ran along the lines of the cooler, more ironic Neo-Conceptual art associated with Metro Pictures, helped demonstrate that there was a strong resistance in the community to transforming everything in sight into a sloppy, Neo-Expressionist bacchanal. While Nature Morte did help launch the careers of a number of influential 1980s artists, including Gretchen Bender, Barbara Bloom, Jennifer Bolande, Joel Ottersen, David Robbins, Haim Steinbach, and Julie Wachtel, it is perhaps best remembered for having given the careers of Bleckner and Sherrie Levine a new momentum. Eschewing the unspoken formula by which East Village gallerists showed only new artists of their

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own generation, Nature Morte sometimes chose to make an enthusiastic case for slightly older artists who enjoyed a strong following among younger artists but were still largely overlooked by the gallery mainstream. As a result, Levine's exhibition *1917*, held at Nature Morte in the fall of 1984, attracted exponentially more attention from both the press and collectors than it likely would have at the artist's "home" gallery in Soho, Baskerville + Watson. This strategy was later copied by other galleries of a Neo-Conceptual bent, such as Cash/Newhouse (Allan McCollum), Richard Prince, and International with Monument (Laurie Simmons).

Eye on the East Village

By late 1982, media coverage of the East Village had begun with a trickle, first in the form of Moufarrege's articles championing the scene in both *Arts Magazine* and *GQ*, and ending with Rene Ricard's FUN-oriented perspective in the November issue of *Artforum*.¹ In any discussion of East Village galleries and the media, however, the central role played by Leonard Abrams's publication *East Village Eye*, which enjoyed a seven-and-a-half-year run from 1979 to early 1987, must be cited. Although the launching of the *Eye* preceded



the opening of FUN Gallery by two full years, the paper proved itself a devoted and reliable showcase for the multitude of neighborhood art practices. It had already proved itself a strong supporter of CoLab, ABC No Rio, and Fashion Moda, and Abrams devoted extensive coverage to the *Times Square Show* during the summer of 1980. One of the *East Village Eye's* most important contributions was the framing of gossip coverage in such a way that artists were treated as demi-gods, so that in a typical column by Beauregard Houston-Montgomery, for example, the appearance of Zwillinger or Futura at a gallery opening received the same breathless attention that Bianca or Andy would in another part of town. Another of Abrams's key contributions was the paper's commissioning of local artists to transform the centerfold into an artwork. This simple but effective tool not only helped disseminate their images far beyond the limits of the artists' immediate circles but meant that heretofore unknown artists—a brief list would include Keiko Bonk, Dickson, Greenblat, Kohlhofer, Michael Roman, and John Sex—became part of a broader campaign to showcase new art as the defining factor of the East Village's draw as a distinctive place to live, work, or visit. The *Eye's* unswerving editorial position was to advocate for the neighborhood's uniqueness; even when money became a central part of the equation, it was as important for Abrams in 1984 to support Gracie Mansion and 51X as it had been to support CoLab and Fashion Moda a few years earlier.

Nightlife and the Interdisciplinary Club

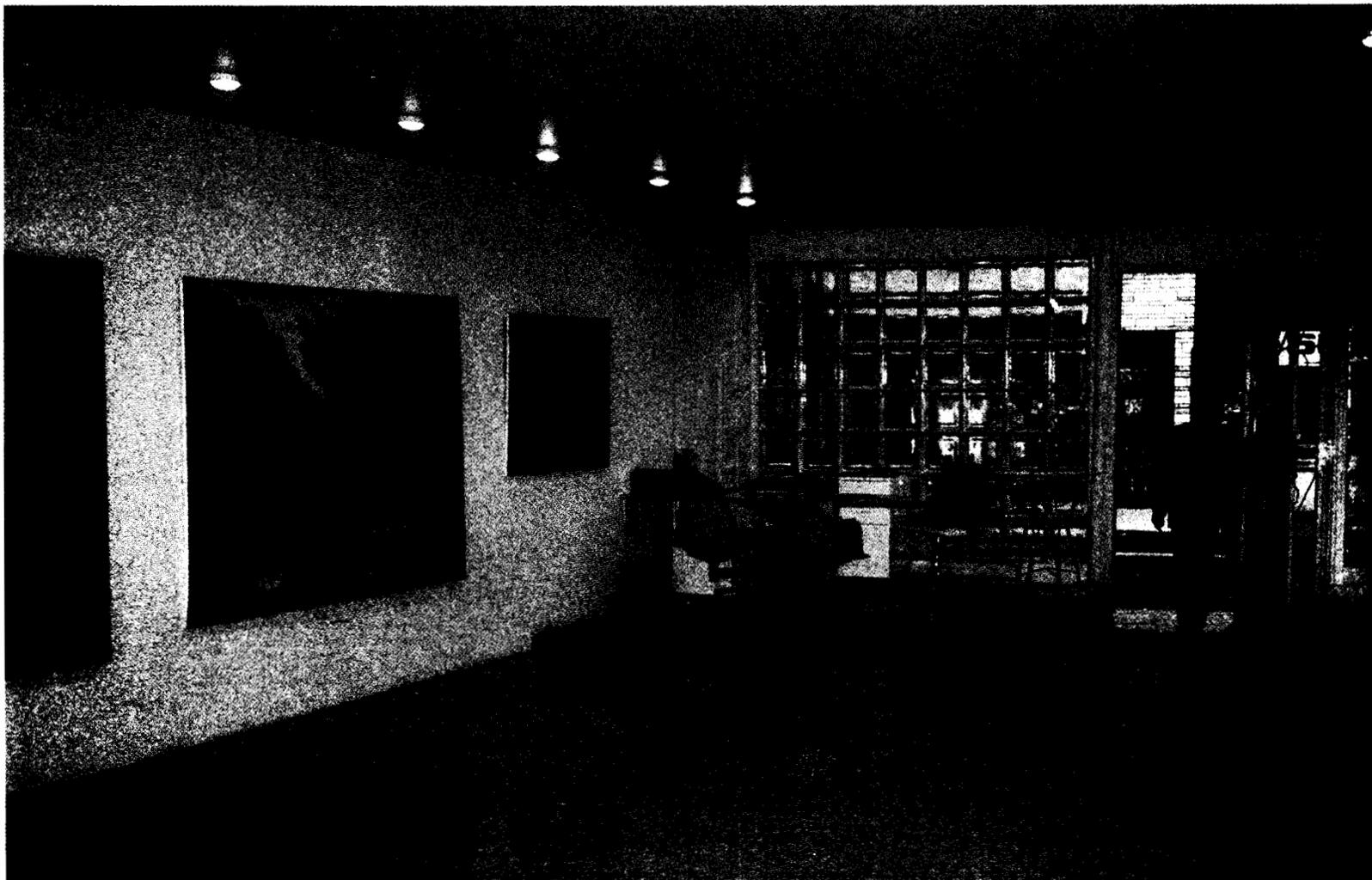
By 1983, one of the cornerstones of the East Village art scene, its nightlife, began to fall definitively into place. Nocturnal visibility has always been vital (and still is) to achievement in various sectors of New York's cultural intelligentsia, but what became evident in the early years of the East Village was the first glimmerings of a truly interdisciplinary practice. To the surprise (and disappointment)

of some in the East Village, this did not mean that the new galleries were going to combine art openings with performances (although there were always exceptions). What did happen—following the example of the cutting-edge programs at Club 57, P.S. 122, and Pyramid Club, and in response to artists who were turning increasingly to performance, theater, and music as a way of expanding their work into social spaces—was that a new type of venue developed in which links were intentionally created between artists, musicians, performers, and playwrights. One extremely successful early example of high art in a club setting was John Jesurun's landmark serial play *Chang in a Void Moon*, which ran every Monday night at the Pyramid Club from June 1982 to June 1983, and featured a number of startling stage effects that were no less surprising for having been created on an infinitesimal budget. With the opening in 1983 of Limbo Lounge (where John Kelly's *Diary of a Somnambulist* was staged a year later) and 8BC, the East Village was suddenly home to a new generation of clubs that were open to an unimaginably broad array of activities. Furthermore, with so many East Village art denizens also moonlighting as members of bands, it was never a surprise to drop in a club and hear live music performed by artists Bonk (Bite Like a Kitty, His Master's Voice), Wojnarowicz (3 Teens Kill 4), or David Humphrey (Details at Eleven).

East Village performance had a number of different outposts, the most short-lived being Club 57. Closing its doors for good in 1983, Club 57 nevertheless spawned an enormously influential group of performers, the most memorable of whom was Magnuson, whose vast array of clichéd middle-American characters is best summarized in her 1984 video collaboration with Tom Rubnitz, *Made for TV*. Although not strictly speaking a musician, Magnuson fronted two bands, Bongwater and Vulcan Death Grip, and was always goading musician friends such as Joey Arias and Wendy Wild to pull out all the stops.

The most consistent product of the Club 57 aesthetic, however, was an outspokenly gay cabaret style that was mass-marketed as a kind of crossover sexuality. The early techno-pop singer Klaus Nomi, the flamboyantly show-biz-style performer John Sex, and the female impersonator Lypsinka became, with Arias, the vanguard of a new East Village drag queen prototype: tough, wised-up, and with an aggressive use of androgyny to make him/herself irresistible. At P.S. 122, Mark Russell's program was responsible for championing an extremely varied array of performers, from relative veterans such as Eric Bogosian and Spalding Gray to the new generation represented by Karen Finley, Penny Arcade, Ismael Houston-Jones, and Ethyl Eichelberger. Largely because of its consistently high level of support for the most innovative voices, P.S. 122 found itself in the eye of the hurricane during the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) crisis of the late 1980s; three of the artists for whom NEA grants were rescinded (Finley, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller) were regulars on the P.S. 122 stage. Eichelberger was one of the most unforgettable figures of the period, appearing regularly at Pyramid Club, P.S. 122, and more theatrical venues. Coming out of the tradition of the Ridiculous Theater, pioneered by Charles Ludlam in the 1960s, Eichelberger's specialty was re-creating, in drag, the roles of the stage's greatest heroines, rewritten in high absurdist dudgeon and performed with a score of original songs, which he sang while accompanying himself on accordion.

Another way that art intersected with nightlife was through the rapid flourishing of art-themed clubs throughout the mid-1980s. Danceteria, one of the most popular dance clubs, sponsored a number of East Village-related events, and its proprietors, Steve Fouratt and Rudolph, became ubiquitous presences in the art world as well. Area, in Tribeca, was equally ambitious in its treatment of the downtown art scene as a bohemian wonderland, and party-throwers of the moment, such as Tracie Steele, aspired to assemble events with just the right balance of scandal, invention, celebrity, and fun. For a while, Area's claim to fame was its revolving interior art installations, which changed once a month, confusing returning clubbers with a constantly updated milieu. The most ambitious of the mid-1980s night spots, however, was Palladium, a converted rock theater on East Fourteenth Street that became, overnight, the place where downtowners spread their wings. Along with a multitude of art-themed temporary installations (by the likes of Vito Acconci) and exhibitions, Palladium's most desirable room was a VIP lounge named the Mike Todd Room, which featured room-length "permanent" murals by Basquiat. All of these larger clubs—only Palladium was actually located in the East Village, and only barely—were in symbiosis with the East Village art scene, with the major difference being the more intimate scale of most of the nightclubs east of Avenue A, and the occasional hazards in getting to and from them.



From Storefronts to High Style, and the Demise

As the number of new galleries grew into the dozens by the end of 1983, surpassing seventy-five by the end of 1984, the East Village scene became the media face of young New York City art. One attractive feature of the galleries' economies was that inexpensive rents meant that art could be sold at more reasonable prices, which in turn spurred more collectors to buy, enabling the artists to produce more work. This formula appealed especially to those who saw themselves as specialists in emerging artists, and the East Village quickly became a magnet for ambitious young gallerists for whom the neighborhood's low rents represented a previously nonexistent chance to make a splash in the art world, without requiring a lot of start-up cash. On the one hand, 1983 saw the opening of both C.A.S.H. Gallery and International with Monument, spaces run by artists whose determinedly antiexpressionist stance was later credited (inaccurately) with having brought an end to the local scene. On the other hand, galleries such as P.P.O.W. and Pat Hearn, whose influence and impact on the New York art world far outlasted the East Village heyday, were the creations of discerning young dealers who entered the East Village at a point when to do so still meant reinventing oneself from whole cloth.²

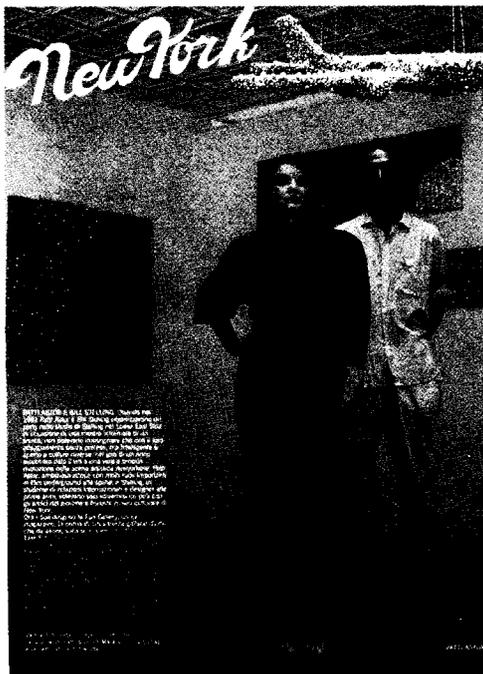
Pat Hearn's was the first East Village gallery to transform the storefront space itself into a highly calculated statement about

style. With its glass-brick facade, mosaic-patterned tile floor, and built-in planter, Hearn's Avenue B refuge created a subtle and precise visual set piece in which the first exhibitions of George Condo, Peter Schuyff, and Philip Taaffe found a perfect formal complement. Neo-Surrealism, the nickname coined to describe the work of Condo, Schuyff, Stephen Pollack, Milan Kunc, and others, was never actually a bona fide movement, but there was enough of a shared cohesion between the artists that such distinctions didn't matter, since the art, the gallery, and the dealer all seemed to be of a piece. While Schuyff's biomorphic abstractions incorporated geometric patterns, Taaffe's understated appropriations from Bridget Riley and Barnett Newman used techniques of collage and printmaking that deftly concealed their author's deeper intentions.

Hearn's matchless ability to continually expand her horizons enabled her to abandon her doll-house space less than two years after opening it and move to much more spacious and elegant quarters on a virtually abandoned stretch of Ninth Street between Avenues C and D. Just as she had broken one mold by opening her doors, Hearn became the first neighborhood gallerist to scrap the whole stereotype of a uniquely "East Village" artist, choosing instead to work with a diverse roster, including painter Mary Heilmann, sculptor Ti-shan Tsu, and photographers Mark Morrisroe and Jimmy de Sana, none of whom shared any discernible relationship to the local zeitgeist.

As galleries such as Pat Hearn, Nature Morte, International with Monument, and C.A.S.H. began to develop a stylistic counter-movement within the East Village, they were quickly outnumbered by the sheer force of galleries representing the consensus style of the moment—Neo-Expressionism—characterized by a loose, brash form of brushwork whose sheer velocity seemed to be a statement about the speed with which the scene itself was growing. By mid-1984, with artist Walter Robinson and critic Carlo McCormick already doing regular coverage of the galleries for the *Eye*, *Art in America*, and other journals, a coherent image began to emerge. The East Village artist was a kind of media-savvy throwback to an earlier species of bohemian: the 1950s action painter (or sculptor) whose hard-drinking reveries had been updated to include drugs, hard and soft. Although a careful consideration of the early 1980s paintings of Glantzman, Frangella, or Lack would show that their styles are not as fully compatible as they might once have appeared, subtleties of distinction were often lost in the momentary frenzy to declare the neighborhood style an extension of the works of older German artists such as Kiefer, Lupertz, and Baselitz, whose art was only then becoming familiar to American viewers.

One of the most striking distinctions between the Cologne and the East Village schools of early 1980s Neo-Expressionism is the latter's almost naive romanticism, which was quite removed from the melancholic depictions, weighted by history, that were espoused by the former. Sue Coe and Anton van Dalen, who were only half-willing to play into the East Village's self-mythologizing antics, were firmly rooted in an activist position that would have linked them more closely to earlier figures such as Otto Dix and John Heartfield. This was a far cry from the work of Dickson or Wong, for example, who were more focused on recording and interpreting the urban adventures unfolding all around them. Frangella produced a seemingly carved approach to representation that was unlike other artists' work, deploying heroic forms and mythological subjects to suggest a classicism based on the ruins of the future. At other points on the painterly spectrum, one can appreciate the crude but highly effective romanticism of Bonk's modest paintings



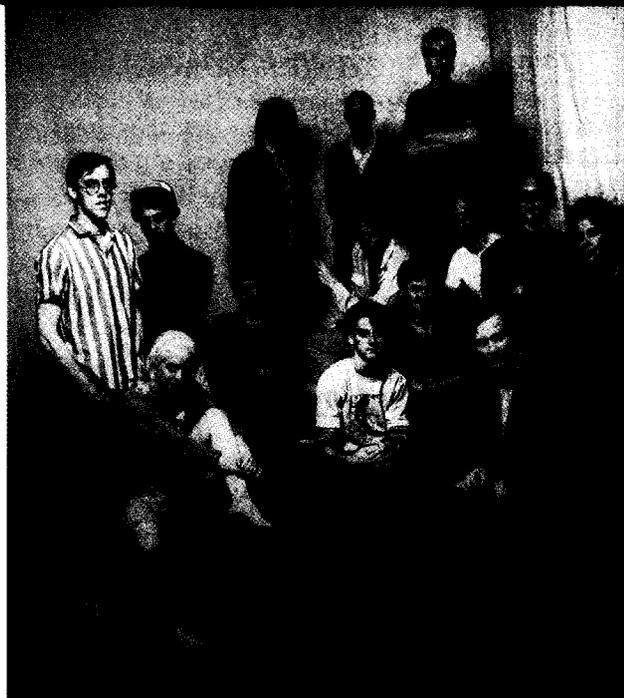
Patti Astor and Bill Stelling inside
FUN Gallery, 1984

of lovers in the moonlight, Robinson's hard-boiled look at pulp paperback covers, Zwillingner's sequined decalcomania, or the sugar-sweet sarcasm and bravura technique of Lack's idealized bits of discarded Americana.

A vital fact about art of the early 1980s, which is rarely absent from any account of the East Village, is the key role played by the general art market boom that lasted roughly from the late 1970s to late 1987/early 1988. For emerging artists, that meant not only that somebody was almost always around to pick up the tab but also that the relatively minor amount of money flowing through the East Village galleries was only a minuscule portion of the overall New York art market purse, access to which was always just a phone call away. Though perhaps a dirty secret, it is nonetheless true that at the very moment that gallerists, artists, and collectors were beginning to flood the East Village, the artists most responsible for the initial boom were already looking for a way out. FUN Gallery's premature closing may have had more to do with internal business problems than with the art market per se; but the reality that Basquiat, Haring, and Scharf were already firmly ensconced with Soho galleries surely played a significant role. This was nothing new; many of CoLab's early members, including John Ahearn (with Rigoberto Torres), Jenny Holzer, Joseph Nechvatal, Tom Otterness, and Judy Rifka, had also begun showing in Soho by that time, and any possible disconnect between their earlier idealism and their current marketability did not seem to preoccupy them much. Nevertheless, the underlying tension and fraught exchange between mainstream and periphery were probably the most telling factors in the neighborhood's eventual demise as a gallery locale, since some artists who had started out seeing themselves in opposition to the art establishment ended up feeling that validation by museums and important collectors would happen only under the aegis of a more established gallery. The ideal solution was to combine the best of both worlds, as when Pat Hearn and Leo Castelli joined forces in 1987 to mount a double exhibition of Schuyff's work, for example; but it was usually difficult for the East Village gallerists to compete, and increasingly the neighborhood dealers came to be seen less as ends in themselves and more as springboards to the big time, which invariably meant Soho.

The classic East Village look probably peaked around 1985, at galleries such as Piezo Electric and Semaphore East, which combined a deliberately eclectic approach to style with a calm demeanor that was in keeping with the prospect that the East Village might last forever. Piezo, run by Elizabeth McDonald and Doug Milford, presented the works of Bonk, along with experimental photography by Philip Pocock, the process-based landscapes of Freya Hansell, Becky Howland's sculptural renditions of power-line towers, Louis Renzoni's shadowy figure paintings, and Robinson's offhand homages to a lost era of true cynicism (as opposed to its fairy-tale variety). Semaphore East, run by future museum curator Barry Blinderman, leaned toward a more comics-derived style, with Wong's obsessively rendered paintings of the Lower East Side shown alongside Lady Pink's graffiti-derived work, Mark Kostabi's cartoonish imitations of Haring's work, and Ellen Berkenblit's small, enigmatic paintings of semi-abstract figures and animals.

Also by this time, the sheer density of East Village galleries made the original style seem more or less generic, with the result being that painters such as Kostabi and Rick Prol began to intentionally blur the distinctions between the notion of a bohemian artistic intensity and the careful packaging of a commercial product. At a certain point, in fact, it seemed that in order to thrive, East Village galleries had to keep upping the ante, whether in the form of Mo David Gallery's sponsorship of Stelarc's 1984 body suspension piece



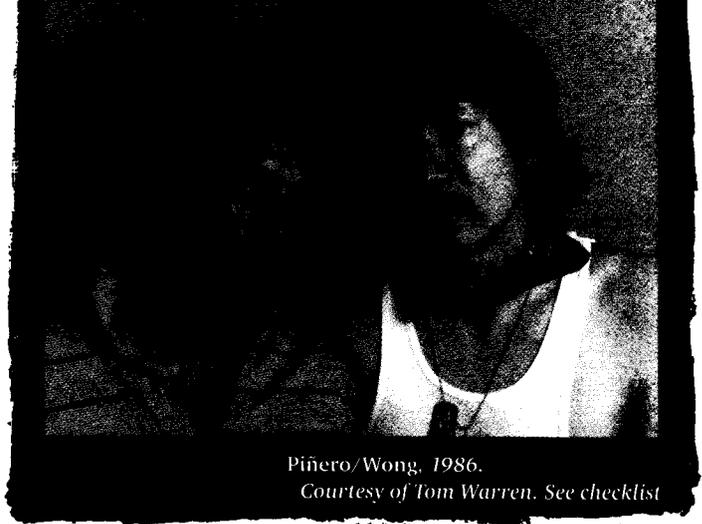


over East Eleventh Street, or James Romberger and Marguerite van Cooke's legendary all-night parties, which were often remembered more vividly by their participants than the exhibitions for which they had served as openings.

Strains of a somewhat more overripe East Village style began to appear by 1985, in the form of galleries whose content seemed completely unrelated to any previous manifestation of East Village sensibility, such as the Sharpe and Wolff galleries, run by Deborah Sharpe and Jamie Wolff, respectively. Sharpe's roster featured a cheerful, almost decorative group of painters and sculptors, including Cheryl Laemmele, Mark Dean, and Michael Lucero, whose predominantly imagistic work was based on strong, simple color schemes. Wolff Gallery, whose space presented itself as a Fifty-seventh Street gallery in miniature, specialized in such Soho-inspired fare as the midwestern Surrealism of Will Mentor and the process-based abstractions of Suzanne Joelson. Massimo Audiello, whose roster was a somewhat more eclectic version of his best friend Pat Hearn's, ran one of the few late-blooming East Village galleries that managed to exude a renegade taste, whether in the form of exhibitions of the paintings of McDermott & McGough, whose theatrical antics had been mainstays of the downtown scene for years, or group shows such as *The Chi Chi Show*, which was dedicated to Hearn's pet Chihuahua.

The first inside mortal blow to the established conventions of East Village taste came in the form of a curatorial double-header attained in 1984 by the husband-and-wife team of Collins and Milazzo, who organized two completely different group shows, with different titles and artists, concurrently at Nature Morte and International with Monument. Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo, whose textual specialty was a brand of overheated poststructuralist debate that frequently straddled the boundaries of stream-of-consciousness poetry, were deft proselytizers of the antiexpressionist ethos that had sprung up around these and like-minded galleries. Prior to their appearance, the East Village had enjoyed the attention of a number of art writers, but no curators had identified themselves so thoroughly with a particular group of artists, some of whom would appear in virtually all of their projects. Although their work as curators may not have had an underlying mandate beyond their personal affinity for some artists whose work was clearly of a more conceptual bent (Gretchen Bender, Peter Nagy, Sarah Charlesworth) and others whose work was clearly not (Jonathan Lasker, Saint-Clair Cemin, Kevin Larmon), Collins and Milazzo were fervent believers in the eventual triumph of their cause, and the energy and direction they provided helped propel a nascent movement into the spotlight.

Although a second wave of conceptual artists, focusing specifically on photographic practice, had begun exhibiting in New York by the end of the 1970s and had even been publicly recognized through the work of Cindy Sherman, the local art scene in the early 1980s was still largely identified by the much-publicized resurgence of painting as the dominant medium. In the East Village, a conceptual strain had been actively fostered from the beginning, with the activities of Group Material and Nature Morte, but it was still very much a minority position. This situation changed radically in 1985, when the two artists whose work would ultimately transform the East Village from the inside out—Peter Halley and Jeff Koons—each had his first one-person gallery show at International with Monument, run by dealer Elizabeth Koury and artist Meyer Vaisman. Both of these exhibitions had a seismic effect on the art world, but of a very different nature than Basquiat's FUN Gallery limousine-led phenomenon only three years earlier. Gone without a trace were the street credibility, the music and dancing, and the



Piñero/Wong, 1986.
Courtesy of Tom Warren. See checklist

out-of-control all-night antics; in their place was a perfectly replicated version of the official art world that was no different for its being located on East Seventh Street between First Avenue and Avenue A. Koons's riveting May 1985 debut, which featured his now-legendary aquariums with basketballs suspended underwater, bronze rafts, and aqualungs, was the art world's first sustained glimpse of an artist whose passionate aesthetic embrace of banality would quickly galvanize an international audience. Halley's first exhibition, that October, consisting of early Day-Glo abstractions of luminous "cells" made with artificial stucco, drew a somewhat more hostile reaction, partly because his industrial-looking work was so drastically removed from the established East Village prototype, but also because it was accompanied by densely argued theoretical essays that linked his work persuasively to historical figures such as Donald Judd and Robert Smithson.

Although the accepted wisdom about this moment in New York art history is that the success of the artists associated with International with Monument helped to hasten the demise of the East Village scene, this claim doesn't take into account that the very myth of the neighborhood as a serious challenger to the ways of the established New York art world was never supported by the facts. The East Village was certainly a viable alternative for some years, but its successes were invariably dependent on recognition by the mainstream, and once its novelty had worn off, this equation became increasingly difficult to sustain. Furthermore, International with Monument's formula of championing a new generation (Halley and Koons, and eventually, the highly synthetic semiotic paintings of Ashley Bickerton) in tandem with underappreciated older artists such as Charlesworth, Prince, and Simmons meant that Koury and Vaisman harbored few illusions about their gallery being an "alternative" to Soho. It was, for all intents and purposes, Soho East, a fact that was dramatically underscored barely a year later when the legendary Sonnabend Gallery hosted a four-person exhibition of Bickerton, Halley, Koons, and Vaisman, which became one of the most talked-about exhibitions of the year. Neo-Geo was the new catch-phrase on everyone's lips. In a matter of four short years, the art world had evolved from making its tentative way to FUN Gallery and celebrating the outré surroundings to expressing shock and dismay over the fact that an established East Village gallery seemed to have little if any desire to remain in the neighborhood. The position of Vaisman in particular, who was representing the other three artists in his gallery while showing his own artwork at Jay Gorney's gallery a few blocks away, was increasingly recognized as that of someone who had little to no interest in the counterculture roots of the East Village, but whose entrepreneurial instincts were at least as keenly honed as those of Astor, Mansion, or Hearn.

As if on cue, within six months of the Sonnabend opening, the



scene-makers and had every intention of outlasting them as well.

Another factor explaining the haste with which the cultural establishment pushed the East Village out of its collective memory was AIDS, whose impact on the East Village was nothing short of catastrophic. Certainly the deaths from AIDS of Haring and Wojnarowicz are well known, in part because both artists used their high public profiles to bring AIDS to the forefront by making it a subject of their work. The same is true for Nomi and Eichelberger, whose deaths had a heavy impact on the performance community. Conversely, although Hujar, Smith, and Thek all succumbed to AIDS, it is not emphasized as much in their respective biographies, perhaps because they were already highly esteemed as artists years before the deadly 1980s began. But one poignant truth that emerges when examining the names of artists included in the current exhibition is the surprisingly high number of them whose works are not known to a larger public, most likely because they died at such a dauntingly early age: Connelly, Frangella, Moufarrege, Frank Maya, Tseng Kwong Chi, and Lankton are the most obvious examples, but there are certainly many others. Although there is no solid evidence to back up this conjecture, when one factors in to the above equation the many early AIDS-activist events that took place in the East Village, Nan Goldin's unvarnished photographic record of several friends' deaths from the disease (along with her 1989 group exhibition, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, at Artists Space), and the political demonstration that accompanied Wojnarowicz's memorial in 1992, it is easy to imagine that many of those who prefer not to think about the East Village today do so because they experienced the end of that highly charged, and ultimately tragic, era as a decisive turning of the historical page, for themselves and for the art community at large.

In strictly art-historical terms, the impact of the East Village era on the larger trajectory of New York art at the end of the twentieth century was probably not quite as profound as its most avid supporters claim, or as negligible as its detractors wish to believe. Unquestionably, many of the artists whose careers prospered after 1987 eventually chose to disavow the importance of the East Village on their artistic and professional development, and those choices had a significant impact on how the period is remembered today. Furthermore, the absence of any prior museological effort to evaluate the art that emerged from that time and place—the last East Village survey exhibition in a museum took place twenty years ago, while the movement was still in full swing³—has left a noticeable void for younger artists and students today wishing to access significant examples of the work that might enable them to evaluate the period for themselves. In this light, *East Village USA* aspires to fill in some of the gaps in private memory and public record, and to permit viewers at the beginning of the twenty-first century to examine firsthand the diverse, often bizarre, and sometimes exotic-looking remnants of a lively and contested era, one that, while quite recent in actual human memory, often seems to have occurred a thousand years ago on a planet far, far away.

NOTES

1. See Nicolas Moufarrege, "Another Wave, Still More Savagely Than the First, Lower East Side," *Arts Magazine* (September 1982): 71–72, and Rene Ricard, "The Pledge of Allegiance," *Artforum* 21, no. 3 (November 1982): 49.
2. The earliest space to remain in continuous operation, P.P.O.W. worked with Sue Coe, Paul Benney, and Paul Marcus during the mid-1980s; today, it represents the estates of David Wojnarowicz and Martin Wong.
3. *Neo York: Report on a Phenomenon*, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1984, curator: Phylis Plous.

gradual movement of galleries out of the East Village was already underway. In March 1987, Wolff Gallery was the first to pull up stakes and move to Broadway (at that point the easternmost fringes of Soho), and by the end of the year the number of galleries that were closing or transferring was already greater than the number of new spaces opening up. Some of this transformation was inevitable, resulting from the accelerating downturn in the art world economy, and it is hard not to at least suggest that "Black Friday," the October 1987 stock market meltdown, might have been a significant factor in the East Village's demise. However, a more telling force was probably the momentum generated by the galleries' overall success rate. Given that many other demographic factors contributed to the sudden and rapid gentrification of the East Village, it appears that what the art scene of the 1980s managed to accomplish inadvertently was something no amount of real estate PR could have ever engineered alone: they made the neighborhood desirable. The invariable outcome was that building owners and landlords, after years of vacancies and deteriorating property values, suddenly saw a profit to be made by raising rents, and galleries (not to mention artists) who had signed short-term leases for a pittance found themselves, for the first time, facing serious increases in their monthly overhead. Many of these gallerists were determined to run an art business no matter which neighborhood they were in, so it was not an emotionally difficult decision to pack it up and head west.

Though it is a relatively straightforward matter to discuss the formation and dissolution of the East Village gallery scene, and to revisit some of the work by the vast range of artists who first showed in its confines, any discussion of the neighborhood's legacy risks navigating a very slippery slope. The most critical factor in this risk is the ruthless tyranny of fashion: long before the last East Village galleries had petered out—and even longer before an entirely new generation of galleries began the slow return to the Lower East Side—the neighborhood had become something of an embarrassment to its former (or still aspiring) success stories. If it is difficult to be the last one to get in on a trend, it is even more difficult to linger at the scene once its popularity has disappeared. As a result, the East Village was not simply the New York art neighborhood with the shortest lifespan on record, it was also the most quickly discarded and disowned, except perhaps by those who had preceded the