

Trickle Down Bohemia and the Anti-Capitalist Art of Ed Eisenberg

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Look, out! - here it comes, East Village Arte as eighties rebel culture. Like a hammed-up Fox news alert we are told that a bold community of young, dissident *artistes* stood shoulder to shoulder against Ronald Regan's "trickle-down economics and gunboat diplomacy."* We learn that their peroxide spikes and incipient metro-sexuality spawned a mutinous, "dark underside" angrily opposed to the American dream. Really? Well, I was there too as the Clash sang. Therefore, given that we now live in a post-rational universe where torture is morality, and armed occupation is liberation, it seems only fair that I offer my own parable of the East Village USA. (* Citations from wall text of New Museum's *East Village USA*.)

The year was 1983. It was the half-way mark for the East Village art scene. It was also the formative years for what would later become the new, cosmopolitan creative class; all of us artistic service workers who provide the intellectual labor, the graphics, the gag lines, the hip marketing trends for the global culture industry. For several years a small group of artists had been meeting in my apartment on 7th and B reading and discussing the writings of Marcuse, Brecht, Adorno and Toni Negri. Most of us were also members of Political Art Documentation and Distribution or PADD, a left to liberal artists' collective founded in 1980 and originally headquartered in El Bohio, on the east side of Tompkins Square Park. PAD/Ds stated mission was to provide artists with,

"... an organized relationship to society, to demonstrate the political effectiveness of image making, and to provide a framework within which progressive artists can discuss and develop alternatives to the mainstream art system."

By the winter of 1983 our reading group had grown restless. We decided to put theory into practice by developing a project that focused on the encroaching gentrification of the Lower East Side, the neighborhood many of us lived in. No longer would we be the PADD Reading Group, now we were the PAD/D *Not For Sale Committee*, as in, The Lower East Side is "not for sale."

The first Not For Sale project was a massive, multi-media event at El Bohio in May of 1983. It included an exhibition of some two hundred art works, a film and video program, guerilla street-stencil brigades, assorted Punk bands and a cabaret series hosted by the Wow Cafe and Limbo Lounge. However, when New York Times art critic Grace Glueck listed our "anti-gentrification" event in her round-up of the emerging, East Village art scene portentously entitled "Pioneering in New Territories," the irony was not lost on our anti-gentrification committee. As group member Janet Koenig commented: the Lower East Side was fast becoming SoHo's **Off-Off** West Broadway, and we had just added more sizzle to the show.

In the months that followed the NFS Committee reflected on these contradictions. We re-thought our strategy and came up with a more tactically flexible project that we called, "Art for the Evicted: A Project Against Displacement." In spring of 1984, we circulated an open call for artists to produce twenty copies of a poster on the theme of anti-gentrification, and pledged to paste and re-paste these in neighborhood streets until we ran out of

copies. An exhibition poster was also produced at the Lower East Side Print Shop that sardonically announced four, new art galleries:

1. *The Discount Salon*,
2. *Another Gallery*,
3. *The Leona Helmsley Gallery* which was located on the then derelict Christa Dora now filled with multi-million dollar condos, and most prophetically,
4. *The Guggenheim Downtown*

All of these were in fact boarded up buildings.

In April the NFS exhibition opened at The Guggenheim Downtown at the corner of Avenue 'A' and 10th Street. Local housing activists joined PADD and set up card tables with housing literature and voter registration forms. Several months later, cultural critic Craig Owens championed the project in an essay for *Art in America*. Owens stated that PAD/D had mobilized, "resistance against, the political and economic interests which East Village art serves..." Notably, Owens generous and also sadly mistaken commentary was one of the few occasions in which PAD/D was discussed within an art world context. (Craig Owens, *Commentary: The Problem with Puerilism in Art in America*, Summer 1984.)

Now, the balance of my remarks will focus on one particular member of PAD/D's Not For Sale Committee, Ed Eisenberg and his contribution to the 1984 Not For Sale street exhibition. My concern here is of course to present you with an alternative reading of the East Village phenomenon, but also to fulfill my promise of spinning a new East Village parable that I call: **"Trickle Down Bohemia and the Anti-Capitalist Art of Ed Eisenberg."**

Eisenberg was a founding member of PAD/D in 1980, he also produced the anti-nuclear, street stencil project *Groundwork* in 1988, and was a founding member of *REPOhistory* in 1989. Trained as a classical musician, Eisenberg was also a gay man whose strident, anti-capitalist outlook often placed him at odds with the identity-oriented politics of the 1980s, and continued to do so until his death in 1997 from complications brought on by AIDS.

Eisenberg's sexual politics linked him to the radical mission of the early Gay Rights movement when personal liberation was understood to be part of the larger struggle waged against authoritarianism, militarism and economic injustice. As historian Richard Mayer recently argued in a paper at the College Art Association: the 1970s notion of a broad-based, sexual revolution was supplanted in the 1980s by the packaging of homosexuality as a hip, urban lifestyle. At the same time, Eisenberg's point of view had a profound connection with the history of left wing political resistance that characterized New York's Lower East Side.

Eisenberg's street poster, *Regonomic Galleries* explicitly lampooned the *Laissez Faire* "supply-side" economics of Ronald Reagan who was then about to enter his second term as president. Reagan's enormous tax cuts for the wealthy and for corporations were often derided as "trickle down economics." In theory it worked like this: capital diverted from the public sector would now be invested in the private, business sector. This would allegedly generate new job opportunities up and down the economic ladder. Thus the trickle-down metaphor was born. In reality

however, Reagan's constriction of the money supply coupled with the de-regulation of markets and the de-funding of worker's security benefits led to a widening of the income gap, longer work hours and accelerated production schedules.



Curiously however, supply side economics appears to have fared better within the rarified market of the art industry than it did in the general economy. (Which may in fact have been its underlying objective: that is, to transform a blue collar, unionized work force into a malleable, service oriented work force better suited for the Post-Fordist, global economy.) Regardless, with surplus capital to burn why would anyone but the state want to invest in such loosing propositions as day care centers or legal aid? The logical place to park excess money is in long-term investments such as real estate and of course art. And there is an added bonus that comes with buying art: prestige.

Unquestionably the market for contemporary art soared in the 1980s. Suddenly there were more dealers, more artists, more art programs training more art students. Not surprisingly, fledgling commercial galleries found financially depressed urban niches —such as the East Village— sensible places to set up business. But soon enough, these start-up ventures were feeding new talent to established art world venues, much in the way the not-for-profit, alternative spaces did for commercial galleries in the 1970s. Looked at this way, the 1980s **art star** phenomenon was a logical outcome of the glutted market. Rather than spread the wealth, artistic overproduction eventually led to the implementation of mechanisms for differentiating and concentrating artistic value. (And one might say that the exhibition East Village USA is merely a belated effort to achieve this same distillation.)

Meanwhile, the local, non-art world economy of the East Village was forcibly being adjusted to meet changing demographics needs. Unprecedented numbers of low income and blue-collar residents were driven away from New York City thanks to a combination of lost manufacturing jobs, and rising rents. (There was a 25% loss in manufacturing in the 1980s, and the median rents **doubled** city-wide.) On the streets of the Lower East Side this

meant that ethnic restaurants, used clothing stores, dive bars and funky book shops were exchanged for the cornucopia of faux bistros and cafés, flower shops and French cleaners that make up what Saskia Sassen calls the luxury zones of global cities.

Ed Eisenberg's poster sought to comment on this process by mapping Regonomics onto the New York art world of the 1980s. The trickle down metaphor is visualized in his artwork as a waterfall, color-photocopied onto an 8 1/2 by 14 inch sheet of legal paper. Superimposed over the scene are six cascading text boxes. These are filled with terse descriptions of supply side economics that the artist adapted to fit the evolving stages of the East Village art scene:

Step 1: Reagan's unprecedented tax cut for corporations and upper income households in 1981.

Step 2: The sharp increase of investment by corporations in cultural capital (Not Eisenberg's term.)

Step 3: The invention of a new art scene for managing this rising demand, and finally,

Step 4: A limited prosperity for some artists; and what Eisenberg terms "dehydration" for the urban poor.

Visually, **Reaganomic Galleries** looked incongruous on the boarded up buildings of Loisida. This was not Christi Rupp's scurrying rats or Becky Howland's insatiable real estate octopus. **Instead, Eisenberg's poster** offered an absurd, pastoral image with unambiguous iconography resembling a medieval emblem or allegory. Eisenberg's approach most likely borrowed from John Heartfield's agitational photomontages of the 1930s, (Note, the PADD reading group discussed Heartfield at length.) I am thinking in particular here of Heartfield's use of natural history and zoology as political allegories. In such works as German Natural History the image of nature functions *negatively* drawing our attention to the way political and economic structures are transformed into seemingly natural events by bourgeois ideology. And certainly Regonomics with its explicit invocation of Adam Smith represents the epitome of such naturalization: a retrogression that continued to pupate, if more slowly, under Bush Senior followed by Bill Clinton, only to emerge full-blown under the present administration.

Therefore, in conclusion, by situating Ed Eisenberg and his work within the East Village of the 1980s one cannot avoid dragging along overlapping concerns involving real estate, politics, activism and so forth. Looked at this way, the East Village USA was really more like a train wreck involving multiple histories and tendencies all accelerated by a rapidly evolving economic engine. At the same time, the lasting cultural influence of East Village USA may have nothing to do with art, at least in the sense that we are using that term here, and have much more to do with the ascendancy of the new, immaterial labor force and its craving for a trickle down, watered down version of urban bohemia. Gregory Sholette, 3/18/05

For more on PAD/D see:

"A Collectography of PAD/D, Political Art Documentation and Distribution: a 1980's Activist Art and Networking Collective," <http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=03/04/01/1532234&mode=nested&tid=22>

For more on the relationship of art, gentrification and the new cosmopolitanism see:

"Mysteries of the Creative Class, or, I Have Seen The Enemy and They Is Us,"

<http://www.metamute.com/look/article.tpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=1&NrIssue=29&NrSection=10&NrArticle=1476>