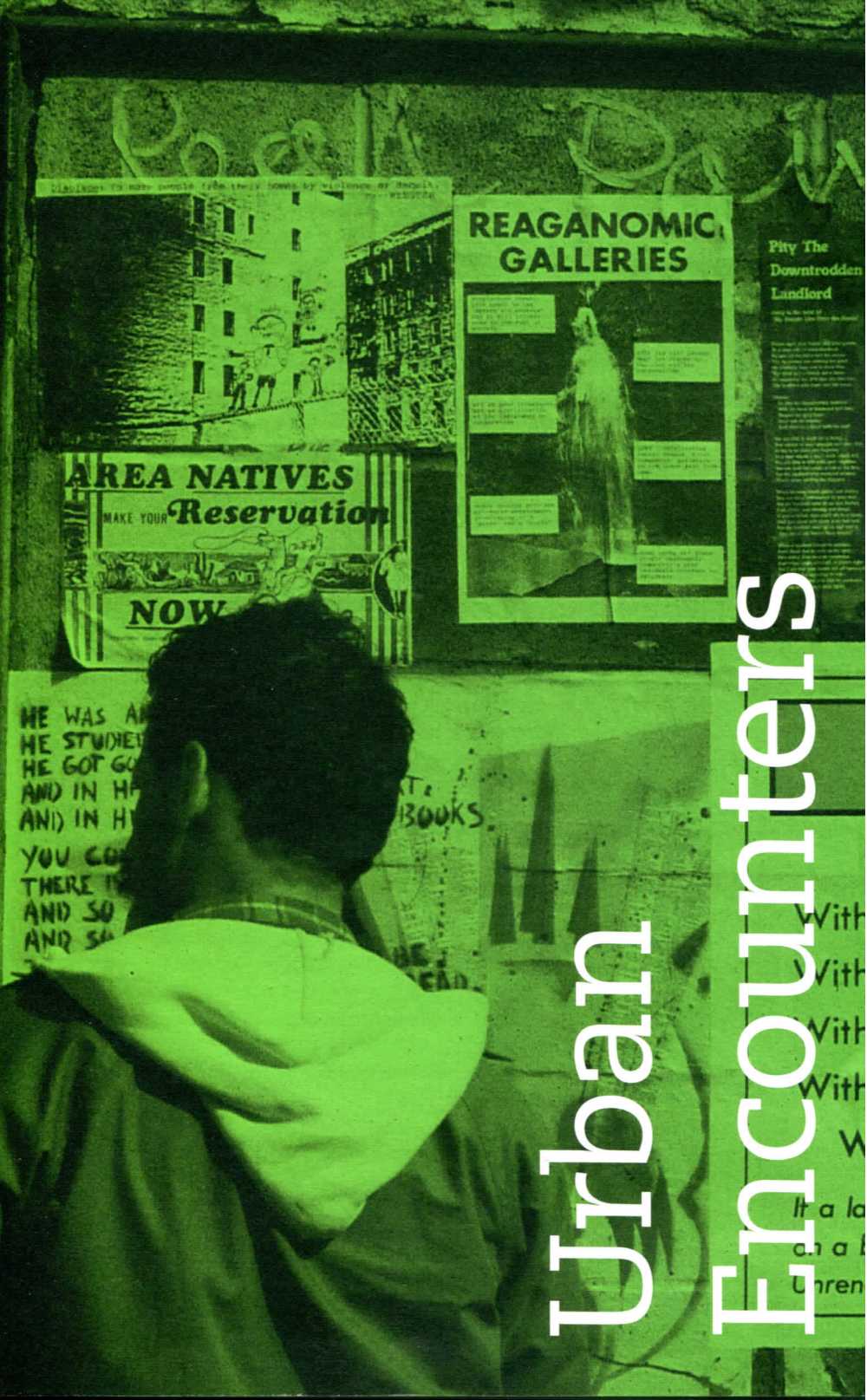


16.jul.98—20.sep.98

Urban Encounters



Pity The
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Landlord

REAGANOMIC
GALLERIES

AREA NATIVES
MAKE YOUR *Reservation*

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Urban Encounters

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A Public Access exhibition

Organized by Gregory Sholette

Urban Encounters offers viewers an opportunity to interact with installations produced by six New York City activist art collectives — ABC No Rio, Bullet Space, Godzilla, Guerrilla Girls, REPOhistory, and World War III Illustrated. Embodying the activist culture that emerged on the Lower East Side at the start of the 1980s, these half-dozen organizations comprise more than one hundred members. They continue to assert the need for a socially engaged art practice that advances cultural diversity and the establishment of a democratic civic space of public debate and dissent. For *Urban Encounters*, each group has examined its own history in light of current political and aesthetic realities and designed an installation to convey this legacy to a contemporary audience.

The cumulative effect of the work in *Urban Encounters* is to challenge conventional views of contemporary art. Indeed, it is difficult to fully understand many recent practices, including post-conceptual and site-specific art, performance art, and so-called “new genre” public art without taking into account the impact of political activism on artists over the last thirty years. Recent tendencies such as installations using ephemeral materials which are all but impossible to sell, the linking of artmaking to personal identity and class status, and the emphasis on social interaction in public space as art, all have direct precedents in the activist culture of the early 1980s with its bold appropriation of vernacular forms, street aesthetic, and antipathy toward commodity production.

Indeed, this rich chronicle of political dissent among artists and intellectuals is as old as the twentieth century and intimately connected to the role played by the metropolis in this history. From the avant garde of revolutionary Moscow and the Dadaists of Zurich and Berlin following the First World War, to the political muralists of Mexico and many United States cities in the 1930s, to the “happenings” and Pop art of New York and Los Angeles at the height of the anti-war and civil rights movements of the 1960s, to the New Wave and Punk movements of London, New York, Berlin, and Paris in the 1970s — on each occasion that artists encountered a defiant, urban working class or the culturally marginalized, a radical transformation in both the content and form of contemporary art took place.

One of the most wide ranging and productive of these urban encounters involves a cluster of ethnically diverse neighborhoods located on New York City's Lower East Side. The languages overheard on these streets — Yiddish, Italian, Polish, and Ukrainian dialects along with more dominant Spanish, Chinese, and English utterances — reveal more than a century of working-class immigration. This inner city tract has witnessed a ceaseless pageant of dissident culture as successive waves of artist bohemians, political radicals, and an array of subcultures has swept over the area. Among the movements that developed here were the Beats, Hippies, Punks, Hell's Angels, as well as assorted pacifists, squatters, feminists, socialists, communists, anarchists, and militant ecologists.

Sometime during the late 1970s, the Lower East Side, or Loissaida as it has become known to its Spanish-speaking residents, underwent a sweeping economic and social makeover. Young professionals and suburbanites willing to pay higher rents began moving into the community, displacing



ABOVE ABC No Rio Dinero: flyer for the Real Estate Show; Rebecca Howland, artist, 1980.

COVER Political Art Documentation and Distribution's 1984 anti-gentrification street poster project Not For Sale on New York's Lower East Side.

long-term, low-income residents. At the same time the Lower East Side developed its own art market, aesthetically distinct from either 57th Street or SoHo. This demographic and cultural shift placed artists and gallery owners in a dilemma. They wished to identify with the energy and cultural diversity of the neighborhood, yet their presence in the community was helping to accelerate the process of displacement and homogenization.

Some artists, such as Sue Coe, David Wojnarowicz, Rebecca Howland, Anton Van Dalen, Jane Dickson, and Martin Wong, responded to this dilemma by producing dynamic paintings and sculpture reflecting the day-to-day conflicts of their adopted neighborhood. Commenting on this difficult mixture of longing and spectatorship, Dan Cameron, Senior Curator of the New Museum, describes Martin Wong's paintings of crumbling tenement facades and street poetry as a "complex exchange between representation and reality" that "charts a world of seemingly unquenchable desire."

Meanwhile, activist artists working collectively in public spaces responded much differently to the situation. Disregarding conventional artistic categories or stylistic imperatives, the activist artist employed direct action, agit-prop posters, street stencils, photocopied flyers, graffiti, performances, and squat art exhibitions to bridge the gap between art and politics, aesthetics and living. Yet even if these artists favored social and political action over object making, the passion and intelligence of aesthetic production were embodied throughout the entirety of their practice. When it comes to contemporary art, the activist artist insists more is at stake than the failure of modernism or the compulsive irony of much postmodernism. Against the eternal return of art for art's sake and amidst appeals by certain critics for the convalescence of artistic beauty, activist culture holds out the possibility of a contrary space or oppositional public sphere, one resistant to the imminent merger of fashion, art, and global cultural tourism.

The history invoked by *Urban Encounters* begins on New Year's Day 1980, when a group of activist artists broke into a derelict property on Delancey Street and swiftly arranged an illegal exhibition entitled *The Real Estate Show*. Organized by a splinter group from the artists' organization COLAB, or Collaborative Projects, *The Real Estate Show* was an acerbic attack on New York City's housing policies. As a result of this direct action, City Hall granted the artists a lease for another Lower East Side building, at 156 Rivington Street. Taking the name ABC No Rio from a faded street sign, the

artists' collective and exhibition center has remained in operation for the past eighteen years.

The organizing of *Urban Encounters* led the current membership of ABC No Rio to embark on a process of self-examination and reinterpretation. The result is a combination monument and information kiosk that offers an emblematic set of images representing various moments in the history of the group. The message gleaned from this kiosk might be best described as advice to a young, aspiring cultural activist and is best summarized by the slogan "Direct Action Gets Satisfaction." Through a set of serialized zines and an interactive database, ABC No Rio extends its educational message while offering the public the group's collective insights on art, politics, and the Lower East Side.

The same year of the Delancey Street break-in, a very different kind of artists' collective was forged on the Lower East Side. Initially, World War III Illustrated was a group of underground comic-strip artists opposed to nuclear weapons. Gradually they became involved in the local politics of the neighborhood, offering moral support to neighborhood squatters by furtively wheat-pasting anti-real estate imagery on the street or selling inexpensive photocopied editions of their comic books at local newsstands. For *Urban Encounters*, the group has designed a miniature retrospective of its own publication history located in the Selections area of the New Museum Bookstore.

Five years later, in 1985, a group of activist artists following in the bolt-cutting footsteps of ABC No Rio entered an abandoned building on East 3rd Street between Avenues C and D. Here they established a squat gallery and community print shop, adopting the name Bullet Space after a brand of heroin sold in the neighborhood. Still producing newspapers and street posters that denounce homelessness and gentrification, Bullet Space continued its illegal squat even as the city increased pressure on the group to vacate. Its contribution to *Urban Encounters* is a funky street shack covered inside and out with ephemera and posters. Not only does the installation relate to the history of the collective, it cites a 1913 event involving John Sloan, Marcel Duchamp, and Gertrude Drick as an historical and artistic precedent. One night that year the artists spent an evening on top of the Washington Square Arch, declaring Greenwich Village an "independent state." Seventy-five years later a group of homeless squatters living in Tompkins Square Park confronted an army of police charged with evicting them. The situation turned into a riot as police chased and clubbed squatters, activists, and even bystanders in the streets of the East Village. To coincide with the tenth anniversary of this *melée*, Bullet Space has drawn a curious, even surreal link between two urban encounters divided by time but connected in principle.

Also in 1985, two new, dynamic advocacy groups emerged—Gran Fury and the Guerrilla Girls. Although neither group was based specifically in the Lower East Side, both re-worked the handmade aesthetic of East Village activism into carefully designed graphics that had the look of commercial advertisements. They campaigned forcefully against gender discrimination in the art world and the politics of AIDS research. Of the two, only the Guerrilla Girls, its membership secret, remains active today. At once humorous and irate, the Guerrilla Girls' contribution to *Urban Encounters*, "Guerrilla Girls Spy Mission," conscripts viewers into becoming co-conspirators for the activist work that lies ahead. Guerrilla Girls Spy Kits, complete with make-your-own Guerrilla Girl posters, gallery and museum diversity questionnaires, and fact sheets about discriminatory practices, are available through the New Museum Bookstore.

In 1989, several veteran members, myself among them, from the collective Political Art Documentation and Distribution, or PAD/D (1980–1986), gathered on the Lower East Side and initiated a new activist collective under the name REPOhistory. Punning on the title of the independent film *Repo Man*, the new group's stated goal was to "retrieve and relocate absent historical

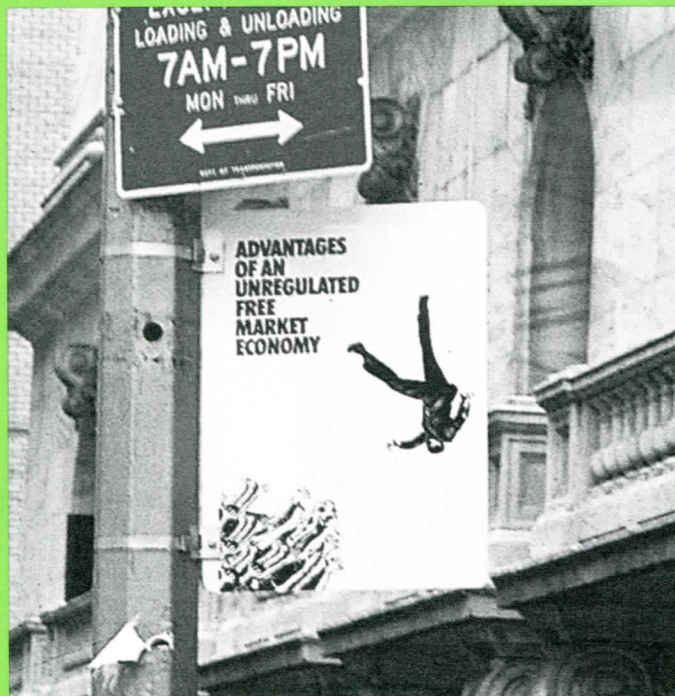
narratives at specific locations through counter-monuments, actions, and events." Since its first public project in 1992 the group has reinterpreted little-known history of Lower Manhattan, unearthed a forgotten African-American community in Atlanta, Georgia, revealed sites important to New York's gay and lesbian community, and, most recently, commemorated the ongoing battle for legal rights in New York City.

In keeping with its own mission, REPOhistory's "Archive & Action" kiosk is an excavation of the group's own history, re-presenting the work of its predecessor, PAD/D. REPOhistory also re-visits a 1984 PAD/D project entitled "Not For Sale / Art for the Evicted," an elaborate parody mocking the explosive, often self-indulgent East Village art scene that called on artists to take a stand against real estate speculation. PAD/D's lasting contribution is a substantial archive of political art posters, mailings, letters, minutes, and publications now housed at the library of the Museum of Modern Art. REPOhistory has replicated the index card file from the PAD/D Archive and made it the centerpiece for its contribution to *Urban Encounters*. Viewers are invited to examine and interact with facsimiles of the index as they add comments or new information while gaining an overview of a repossessed activist art history.

One year after the founding of REPOhistory, a diverse group of Asian / Pacific Islander American artists and curators established the collective Godzilla. For this exhibition, group members have revealed the unseen legacy of Asian-American artists in New York. What they discovered came as a surprise to the mostly youthful constituency of the organization. Tracing the group's genealogy through such earlier entities as EPOXY, the Asian American Arts Alliance, the Asian American Arts Center, and the New York Chinatown History Museum, the members eventually discovered an even earlier foundation. Established in Chinatown in 1970, Basement Workshop brought together several 1960s New Left groups operating in the Asian-American community with activist artists in order to support community-based health care, music, artmaking, and political organizing. A boxed collection of poetry and art entitled "Yellow Pearl" was one of the projects that emerged. For its segment of *Urban Encounters*, Godzilla has diagrammed this archeology, videotaped key players in its layered story, and produced a new version of "Yellow Pearl," thus bringing both the collective and our brief narrative of activist art full circle.

Not represented in *Urban Encounters* are media activists such as Paper Tiger, Deep Dish, and Pirate Radio, as well as some groups that no longer exist including Group Material (1979-1997) and Carnival Knowledge (1981-1985). And while the New York groups present in the exhibition are a generation or more old, there is a stirring among younger European artists and intellectuals to work collectively on socially engaged art. Such groups as STRIKE! (UK), A-Clip (Berlin), and Sex & Space (Zurich), have recently peered across the Atlantic, and located their own historical impulse in the activist legacy of New York's Lower East Side. The richness of this history, only touched upon here, together with the suggestive reemergence of new collective and critical art practices and the ongoing work of the artists in *Urban Encounters*, offers compelling reasons for art historians, curators, artists, and educators to rethink the history, practice, and pedagogy of contemporary art.

Gregory Sholette, Curator of Education



REPOhistory: "Advantages of a Free Market" by Jim Costanzo. Metal street sign in front of New York Stock Exchange, 1992. Photo credit: Tom Klem.



Guerrilla Girls: "Do Women Have to Be Naked to...", offset poster, 1990.



Bullet Space: Your House is Mine, 1988-92. Book & Street Project. Photo by Andrew Castrucci.

Lesson Plan

Urban Encounters and the Legal Rights of Young People

The following lesson plan is proposed for educators to use in the classroom. It is compatible with Social Studies curricula and its objective is to inform young people about the history and impact of the legal system on their day-to-day lives. This lesson plan is offered as part of the New Museum's Visible Knowledge high school outreach program for at-risk youth, which develops and implements interdisciplinary curricula using contemporary art theory and practice.

This course is based on the REPOhistory project entitled "Civil Disturbances: Battles for Justice in New York City." It consists of twenty colorful street signs depicting court rulings or significant events that had impact on the civil rights of citizens. The project was a collaboration involving artists, community groups, and legal advisors.

Suggested Procedure

Discuss the impact of the legal system on young people. Consider highlighting the outcome of specific rulings on the adolescents in your own community. You may wish to have a member of your local legal services provider, such as someone from the Legal Aid Society, speak to the class. Some issues that you might consider addressing include:

- legal rights for immigrants
- police misconduct
- municipal curfews
- legal rights at school and in the workplace
- freedom of speech
- the history of the Miranda ruling as it pertains to young people

Show students the work of contemporary artists who use public art to address issues of social or political concern. Present the work of San Diego-based artists Louis Hock, Liz Sisco, Deborah Small, and David Avalos who collectively took out advertising space on city buses and billboards in order to raise awareness about undocumented Mexican laborers. Show students the posters of the Guerrilla Girls, Gran Fury, or the graffiti slogans of Keith Haring such as "Crack is Wack." (All of these images are reproduced in *Contemporary Art and Multicultural Education*, published by the New Museum and Routledge in 1996.) In each case students should consider the following questions:

- Who will see this art and how might it affect them?
- If this same art were on display in someone's living room or in an art museum, how would its message be different?
- How do the message of the work, the medium of the work, and the public location of the work combine to produce the strongest possible meaning?

Assignment

Have the students work in groups of two or three. Ask them to choose a particular legal issue or case that is of interest to them. Each student should research the case and write a one to two page essay on the topic. From this

essay extract a short, sixty-word abstract. Work with the students to identify the key elements of their text until what remains is a clear, succinct description of the case or issue.

Encourage these miniature collectives to brainstorm about possible imagery to go with their case histories. Using some combination of collage, drawing, or photography, have them construct a graphic image that represents their approach to the subject. Possible sources of raw material for collages include magazines, newspapers, television stills, or Internet files. Students can even re-stage pivotal events in order to provide illustrations for their projects. Keep in mind that space is needed for the text explaining each case. This could be a second poster that accompanies the image, or text and visuals can be combined. Stencils may be traced onto sheets of mylar and cut with a matte knife.

Evaluation

When the image and texts are done, have the class critique the work. Consider having an exhibition of the art and invite community activists, interested attorneys, and other people directly involved in the issues under discussion. A student panel discussion is a good way to open a dialogue about the topics they have engaged.

Variation on the project

Involve a community activist group right from the start. Consider groups that work with young people in trouble with the law, antidiscrimination activists, people organized to defend free speech, church-based organizations, or community members who scrutinize police behavior. Discuss with these groups the possibility of working together to produce and display your public art project.

Explore the possibility of installing work in an actual public space. Use the group exhibit to stimulate potential interest. Is there a billboard that a community group might consider donating or renting for the project? Would a local store owner tape the work inside her window? Are there abandoned walls on which posters or stencils could be displayed? If available, you might scan the work and uplink it onto a class website. Using computer graphics, you can even simulate a billboard in a realistic-looking public setting.

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Lippard, Lucy R. "Trojan Horses," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*. Brian Wallis (ed.) New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984.

The Lure of the Local. New York: The New Press 1997.

Museum of Modern Art, *Committed to Print*. Exhibition catalog, 1988. Catalog essay by Deborah Wye.

Moore, Alan & Marc Miller. *ABC No Rio Dinero: The Story of a Lower East Side Art Gallery*. New York: Collaborative Projects Publishers, 1985.

O'Brien, Mark (ed.) *Reimaging America*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990.

TONG ZHI:

COMRADE, A GAY PERSON.

Godzilla: Tong Zhi, Laserprint by Ken Chu from the Godzilla portfolio, 1998



World War III Illustrated: *Gentrification*, Peter Kuper, artist, 1984.



Gathering for Protest, East 13th Street. Photograph by John Ranard, 1990.



REPOhistory: "Advantages of a Free Market" by Jim Costanzo. Metal street sign in front of New York Stock Exchange, 1992. Photo credit: Tom Klem.



Guerrilla Girls: "Do Women Have to Be Naked to...", offset poster, 1990.



Bullet Space: Your House is Mine, 1988-92. Book & Street Project. Photo by Andrew Castrucci.