Viva Loisaida: art and contested space in the Nuyorican Lower East Side, 1978-1988

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Abstract

In the wake of New York City's devastating fiscal crisis of 1975, the cycle of demolition and rebuilding that had typified the urban development of Manhattan came to a grinding halt. In poor neighbourhoods like the Lower East Side, with high numbers of residents of colour, derelict buildings proliferated as landlords abandoned their properties and municipal authorities cut services, leaving behind a crumbling and depopulated urban environment. At the time, the neighbourhood was home to a large Puerto Rican community, also known as Nuyoricans, who had long contested racialised and classed discrimination in housing, education, and employment. Embracing a turbulent but potential-filled reprise in capitalist urbanisation's endless expansion, in the late 1970s, residents, artists, and activists in the Nuyorican enclaves of Loisaida and Pueblo Nuevo transformed derelict spaces into community gardens, cultural venues, and other sites for artmaking, social reproduction, and community organising, where new forms of collective life were imagined and instituted.

In this thesis, I trace collective struggles to preserve and extend these practices and spaces in the 1980s, as the Lower East Side, bolstered by New York's economic resurgence, became the site of a new art movement—the East Village scene—and rampant property speculation, both of which threatened to displace existing residents culturally and physically. Utilising a mixed-methods approach that incorporates archival research, oral history, and digital research, and draws on art history, critical urbanism, and social theory, this thesis analyses projects that brought together different neighbourhood constituencies to critique and resist gentrification-led displacement. I argue that foregrounding Nuyorican art and activism offers vital perspectives on the conflicting social, cultural, political, and economic forces that reshaped the Lower East Side in the 1980s, the uneven ways in which these contested narratives have been remembered, and the archival practices that can facilitate their recognition in the present.

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Introduction

On a bitterly cold Saturday afternoon in January 2022, with the temperature hovering around minus eight degrees celsius, I stood, shivering, in front of a huge, derelict school building on East Ninth Street in New York City's Lower East Side (Figure 1). Known formerly as Public School (PS) 64, the five-storey building's elegant copper-red brick and light sandstone façade, divided from the street by a thick iron fence, offered a vibrant counterpoint to the featureless grey sky that hung overhead. Single-storey wooden hoardings, plastered with advertisements for luxury trainers and video games, had been erected around the perimeter of the site in order to keep trespassers out; an abundance of broken windowpanes and graffiti in the building's upper levels suggested that this strategy had been unsuccessful. As I looked up at the former PS 64, I was struck by how unusual it was to see such a large building standing completely empty in the middle of one of Manhattan's most expensive neighbourhoods, where the median rental price in 2022 was over $4,000 a month.[1] Looming over the crumbling shell of PS 64 was the sixteen-storey Christodora House, which once housed new immigrants to the United States, but where apartments now changed hands for upwards of a million dollars.[2]

The Lower East Side was not always this upscale, and the tumultuous history of PS 64 echoes the transformation that this storied Manhattan neighbourhood has undergone since the early twentieth century. Designed by the influential school architect Charles B.J. Snyder in the French Revival style and completed in 1906, PS 64's innovative 'H-plan' layout maximised air and light inside classrooms in what was then a dense immigrant neighbourhood, home to large Jewish and Catholic populations from Ireland, Germany, Eastern Europe, and Italy.[3] In the decades after the Second World War, as suburbanisation and deindustrialisation reshaped declining working-class districts like these, the school served the neighbourhood's growing Puerto Rican community, which jostled for space alongside white ethnic 'old timers' who were unable or unwilling to leave.[4] Two years after New York's 1975 fiscal crisis, in response to rapid

[1] Jennifer Epstein, 'NYC Renters "Squeezed to Their Limit" With Record-High Costs', *Bloomberg UK*, 26 July 2022, https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/property-prices/nyc/.

[2] Alex Williams, 'How the Christodora House Became the Chelsea Hotel of the East Village', *New York Times*, 31 August 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/01/fashion/christodora-house-east-village-book.html.

[3] Virginia Kurshan, '(Former) Public School 64', Designation Report (New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, 20 June 2006), 1–2, http://s-media.nyc.gov/agencies/lpc/lp/2188.pdf.

[4] Christopher Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate, and Resistance in New York City* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 121–22.

depopulation in the neighbourhood, PS 64 was closed by the Board of Education.[5] In 1978, the now-vacant building was occupied by the Puerto Rican community groups Charas and Adopt-A-Building, who turned it into a cultural and community centre known as El Bohío, which translates as 'the hut'.[6] Over the next two decades, as the Lower East Side became New York's newest art district and began to gentrify, El Bohío prioritised the neighbourhood's low-income residents of colour, organising plays, screenings, and exhibitions by local artists and providing meeting space for community groups.[7] In 1998, after a fierce battle between residents, activists, and the city, El Bohío was sold by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to the property developer Gregg Singer.[8] Singer's plan to redevelop PS 64 into a student dormitory was blocked in 2006, leaving the building in a state of limbo that has persisted ever since.[9]

The creation of El Bohío was part of a vibrant social, artistic, and political movement initiated in the Lower East Side by Puerto Ricans who came of age in New York in the 1960s and 1970s, and became known colloquially as Nuyoricans.[10] Politicised by the racialised and class-based discrimination in housing, education, and employment that they and their families had faced since arriving in the city, these young Nuyoricans, who counted many artists, writers, and poets among their number, became political activists and community organisers.[11] In the years following New York's near-bankruptcy in 1975, the 'vibrant and often chaotic' cycle of 'destruction and rebuilding' that Max Page argues had long defined Manhattan's urban development had stalled indefinitely.[12] In the late 1970s, as burned-out buildings and rubble-strewn lots proliferated rapidly, and the social burden of austerity was passed along to the most marginalised New Yorkers, groups of Nuyorican Lower East Siders living in the poorest parts of the neighbourhood collectively transformed derelict, city-owned spaces into community gardens, urban homesteads, cultural venues, and other sites of communal artmaking, social reproduction, and community building. As part of this reclamation of space, local artists and activists renamed the neighbourhood. The poet Bimbo Rivas and organiser Carlos 'Chino' García renamed the

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[5] Allegra Hobbs, 'Gentrification's Empty Victory', *New York Times*, 1 June 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/01/nyregion/fight-over-charas-community-center.html.

[6] Nandini Bagchee, *Counter Institution: Activist Estates of the Lower East Side* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2018), 102.

[7] Bagchee, 130–38.

[8] Hobbs, 'Gentrification's Empty Victory'.

[9] Hobbs.

[10] Ed Morales, *Latinx: The New Force in American Politics and Culture* (London: Verso, 2019), 100.

[11] Johanna Fernández, *The Young Lords: A Radical History* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 4.

[12] Max Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900-1940* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2.

lettered avenues north of East Houston Street 'Loisaida', a phonetic transliteration of the Spanish pronunciation of 'Lower East Side'.[13] A smaller, nine-block area just south of East Houston became 'Pueblo Nuevo' (New Town) after a grassroots housing organisation active in the area (Figure 2).[14] The Loisaida movement quickly grew into a multiracial, cross-class coalition of Nuyorican organisers, activists, artists, residents, and their non-Nuyorican friends, neighbours, and collaborators, who sought to build lasting social, cultural, and political alternatives to the corrosive dictates of capital and the state.[15]

In this thesis, I trace the histories and geographies of this Nuyorican-led art and activist movement between 1978 and 1988. This was a turbulent decade, characterised by deep transformations in the social, cultural, political, and material character of the Lower East Side. Long viewed by many New Yorkers, including its political and economic elites, as a crime-ridden wasteland populated only by expendable poor people of colour, in the 1980s the Lower East Side became a highly desirable neighbourhood, known for its thriving cultural sector and booming property market. For many socially and economically marginalised Lower East Siders, this shift was marked by the looming threat of displacement, as the neighbourhood gentrified, gradually becoming whiter, wealthier, and more homogeneous. At the same time, many of the new social, sexual, artistic, and political practices and communities that flourished amidst the crumbling tenements and storefronts of the Lower East Side between the late 1970s and late 1980s carried with them the possibility of generative new coalitions across difference. The upheaval and uncertainty that characterised this period, argues Andrew Strombeck, 'helped innovations proliferate and blurred the boundaries between groups.'[16]

In this thesis, I analyse several innovative, boundary-blurring artistic projects that took place in the Nuyorican Lower East Side between 1978 and 1988. These projects include *Viva Loisaida* (1978), a documentary by the German émigré photographer Marlis Momber on the work of Charas and other Loisaida groups; the multifaceted creative practice of the Puerto Rican-born,

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[13] Liz Ševčenko, 'Making Loisaida: Placing Puertorriqueñidad in Lower Manhattan', in *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York City*, ed. Arlene M. Dávila and Agustín Laó-Montes (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 298.

[14] Tom Robbins, 'Community Profiles: Building Pueblo Nuevo', *City Limits Magazine*, July 1983, 18; Marlis Momber, 'Oral History Interview: Marlis Momber', interview by Liza Zapol, Village Preservation, 15 June 2015, 37, 41, https://media.villagepreservation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/15035050/Momber_MarlisTranscriptFinalforWebsite-1.pdf.

[15] See Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 200–212; Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 101–51; Timo Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory: Puerto Rican Community Activism in New York* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2020), 1–22.

[16] Andrew Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side: Books, Buildings, and Art after the 1975 Fiscal Crisis* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2020), 22.

Loisaida-raised artist Maria Domínguez; paintings of derelict Nuyorican Lower East Side buildings by the East Village artist Martin Wong; and *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues* (1985), a large-scale political art project by the multi-ethnic mural collective Artmakers. In different ways, each of these projects harnessed the energy and skills of a wide array of Lower East Side residents, from veteran community activists to relative neighbourhood newcomers. Collectively, they incorporated a range of ostensibly 'artistic' and 'non-artistic' activities, from painting, filmmaking, and muralism, to community gardening and urban homesteading. Crucially, each project was oriented, in distinct ways, towards the Nuyorican Lower East Side as a site where radical new practices and spaces of creative, sustainable, and egalitarian urban living could be imagined and instituted.[17] The period examined in this thesis was characterised by an intensifying struggle over the meanings, values, and uses of urban space. As part of a broader Nuyorican-led movement in the Lower East Side, I argue that the artistic projects examined in this thesis played a key role in shaping these struggles, and are therefore crucial to understanding the neighbourhood's transformation in the 1970s and 1980s.

This thesis is guided by several interconnected research questions. What new practices and spaces of cultural production, social reproduction, and community building emerged to fill the social and material gaps left in the Nuyorican Lower East Side in the wake of the 1975 fiscal crisis? What role did these new practices and spaces play in both resisting and facilitating the social, cultural, political, and material transformation of the neighbourhood in the 1980s, as disinvestment gave way to gentrification? Why has the history of the Nuyorican Lower East Side been marginalised within existing art histories of Lower Manhattan in the 1970s and 1980s? What kind of archival methodologies can help to bring the marginalised history to the Nuyorican Lower East Side to light?

As I walked around the Lower East Side in early 2022, I was struck by the traces of the Nuyorican-led art and activist movement that were still visible, from gardens with Spanish names like La Plaza Cultural (The Cultural Plaza) or El Bello Amanecer Boriqueño Jardín (The Garden of the Beautiful Puerto Rican Dawn), to street signs honouring Loisaida activists (Armando Pérez Way a.k.a. East Ninth Street), and even fragments of public art projects, including a faded mural from 1985 and a tiny 'anti-gentrification gargoyle' clinging to the front of El Bohío. These are present-day traces of what Strombeck calls 'the struggle for another world' that animated and shaped the neighbourhood in the 1970s and 1980s.[18] They also support Amy Starecheski's

[17] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 3–4.

[18] Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*, 187.

assertion that, while gentrification in the contemporary Lower East Side is often described as 'complete', 'there are still many low-income people, people of color, and longtime residents in the neighborhood.'[19] The complex and contested history that I examine in this thesis thus haunts the present, continuing to shape the neighbourhood's material realities and undermine settled narratives of its transformation; 'that which appears to be not there', writes Avery Gordon in an examination of the analytic and transformative power of haunting, 'is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities.'[20] At a moment when, as Wilfred Guerron argues, present-day New Yorkers 'find themselves at the beginning of another period of city disinvestment and mass displacement […] that has already begun to disproportionately impact marginalized communities', revisiting an earlier moment of collective, creative resistance to these forces is increasingly important.[21]

I. Historical context

The development of the Nuyorican Lower East Side in the twentieth century was inseparable from the broader political and economic transformation of New York City (and the U.S. as a whole) during this period. Underpinning these changes were the changing imperatives of U.S. capitalism, which expanded rapidly throughout the twentieth century in search of new markets and new sites of capital accumulation. One such site was Puerto Rico, which, from 1898 onwards, provided cheap labour and raw materials for U.S. manufacturing, initially within the mainland's growing industrial sector, and, after the late 1940s, on the island itself.[22] Another was the Lower East Side; long seen as a dangerous slum populated only by threatening outsiders, by the late twentieth century the neighbourhood was being restructured by state and capital as an 'adjunct to Wall Street', designed to serve New York's growing finance, insurance, and real estate industries.[23] Flows of capital into or out of certain areas, points out David Harvey, produce 'new geographies and new space relations', but this process is always shaped and delimited by both

[19] Amy Starecheski, *Ours to Lose: When Squatters Became Homeowners in New York City* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 66.

[20] Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 8.

[21] Wilfred Guerron, 'CHARAS and the Reimagining of Loisaida', *Intervenxions* 2 (2023): 70.

See also Dan Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia: On Social Ecology and Community Development* (Porsgrunn, Norway: New Compass Press, 2014), 120.

[22] Lisa Pierce Flores, *The History of Puerto Rico* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2010), 21; Naomi Klein, *The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalists* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2018), 25–26.

[23] Jim Feast, 'AIDS on the Lower East Side', in *Resistance: A Radical Political and Social History of the Lower East Side*, ed. Clayton Patterson, Joe Flood, and Alan W. Moore (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 591.

external crises of capitalism and by resistance movements from below.[24] With this in mind, the history and geography of the Nuyorican Lower East Side that I outline in this section foregrounds the struggle between different social, political, and economic forces, within and beyond the neighbourhood, that continually reshaped its 'intricate physical and social geography' throughout the twentieth century.[25]

Smalls groups of Puerto Ricans, mostly political exiles engaged in revolutionary activity against the Spanish colonial government, had been present in New York since the mid-nineteenth century.[26] Their numbers were swelled by the Spanish-American War of 1898, when the United States government, looking to expand its territories in the Caribbean, embarked on a military operation to expel the Spanish from Cuba and Puerto Rico.[27] Puerto Rico's annexation in August 1898 (Cuba was not incorporated as a U.S. territory) prompted a new wave of migration.[28] Newcomers settled in growing Puerto Rican enclaves in Brooklyn, East Harlem (soon known as Spanish Harlem or El Barrio), and, to a lesser extent, the Lower East Side, where they worked as carpenters, bricklayers, and cigarmakers.[29] The Lower East Side at that time was home to large Irish, German, Eastern European Jewish, Italian, and Chinese communities, who arrived in successive waves between 1820 and 1910, displacing the small Black population that lived in the neighbourhood's Five Points section in the early nineteenth century.[30] While the 1917 Jones-Shafroth Act granted Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship, easing the financial and bureaucratic burden of moving between the two countries, the relationship remained deeply colonial, with the island acting primarily as a source of cheap labour for the Northeastern U.S.'s burgeoning industrial centres.[31] In the 1920s and 1930s, following restrictions on immigration from Asia and Europe, Puerto Rican and Black American workers found work primarily in Lower Manhattan's exploitative garment industry, which became, in Ramón Grosfoguel's words, 'an undesirable

[24] David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2011), 180–81.

[25] Harvey, 180.

[26] Mario Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land: Ethnic Cultures on New York's Lower East Side* (Amsterdam, NL: Editions Rodopi, 1994), 28.

[27] Flores, *The History of Puerto Rico*, 70–71.

[28] Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land*, 28; Flores, *The History of Puerto Rico*, xxii.

[29] Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land*, 28.

[30] Maffi, 65–68.

[31] Maffi, 28; Ramón Grosfoguel, 'Puerto Rican Labor Migration to the United States: Modes of Incorporation, Coloniality, and Identities', *Review* 22, no. 4 (1999): 508.

economic sector identified with racialized minorities', who were paid far less than their white ethnic counterparts.[32]

Puerto Rican presence in New York exploded after the Second World War, and a driving factor continued to be the changing needs of U.S. capitalism. Growing numbers of people left Puerto Rico following the initiation of Operation Bootstrap in 1947, an industrialisation programme that sought to entice U.S. and foreign investment to the island with the promise of tax breaks, real estate subsidies, and cheap labour.[33] Operation Bootstrap fuelled the mass migration of one-third of the island's population between 1947 and 1970, mostly poor farmers and rural labourers who were forced out of Puerto Rico's rapidly developing industrial economy.[34] According to census data, 61,500 Puerto Rican-born people lived in New York in 1940.[35] This figure quadrupled to 245,900 by 1950, and would continue to rise, jumping to 612,600 by 1960, and 811,800 by 1970.[36] These newcomers arrived in a city undergoing rapid deindustrialisation facilitated in part by programmes like Operation Bootstrap.[37] A quarter of a million manufacturing jobs disappeared overseas and to the suburbs between the 1950s and the 1970s, as New York's economy shifted towards the soon-to-be-dominant finance, insurance, and real estate sectors.[38] Manufacturers that remained in the city, such as Lower Manhattan's garment producers, informalized their activities, subjecting Black American and Puerto Rican employees to worsening conditions and forcing them into competition with other racialised workers (particularly other Latine migrants, whose often precarious immigration status granted them even fewer rights).[39] By ensuring the revitalisation of U.S. capitalism after the costly Second World War, and by facilitating its smooth expansion into new territories, Operation Bootstrap played an early role in shaping what would come to be known as neoliberalism.[40]

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[32] Grosfoguel, 'Puerto Rican Labor Migration to the United States: Modes of Incorporation, Coloniality, and Identities', 508.

[33] Fernández, *The Young Lords*, 53.

[34] Fernández, 53.

[35] Christopher Mele, 'Neighborhood "Burn-Out": Puerto Ricans', in *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side*, ed. Janet L. Abu-Lughod (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994), 129 table 6.1.

[36] Mele, 129 table 6.1.

[37] Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 188.

[38] Meagan Day, 'The Purge of New York', *Jacobin*, 10 January 2018, https://jacobin.com/2018/01/new-york-gentrification-real-estate-deindustrialization.

[39] Day; Grosfoguel, 'Puerto Rican Labor Migration to the United States: Modes of Incorporation, Coloniality, and Identities', 515.

[40] Fernández, *The Young Lords*, 53; Klein, *The Battle for Paradise*, 25–26.

Mass migration in the aftermath of Operation Bootstrap led to the rapid growth of Puerto Rican enclaves in the South Bronx and the Lower East Side, which had remained small compared to those in El Barrio or Brooklyn, but quickly expanded to accommodate the overflow from these older core communities.[41] Locked out of opportunities in employment and education, young Puerto Ricans and their families were forced to take the cheapest housing in the worst condition in neighbourhoods that were already socially isolated and economically marginalised.[42] Large-scale urban renewal programmes like the Cross-Bronx Expressway or the Lincoln Center, initiated by the powerful urban planner Robert Moses, destroyed Black and Puerto Rican neighbourhoods, displacing families from one overcrowded and dilapidated area to another.[43] As Moses' biographer Robert A. Caro put it, projects like these 'contributed to the ghettoization of the city, dividing up the city by color and income.'[44] This segregation was compounded by redlining, a process described by Bench Ansfield as 'the state-sanctioned denial of credit and services to poor and working-class communities of color by insurance companies, banks, and other financial institutions since the 1930s'.[45] Redlining not only led to the proliferation of crowded and poor quality housing in neighbourhoods of colour across the city, but also justified substandard public services such as schools, hospitals, and rubbish collection, and the creation of food deserts.[46] Redlining was made illegal by the Fair Housing Act of 1968; however, as Min Li and Faxi Yuan argue, this 'did nothing to reverse or undo patterns of residential segregation that had become deeply entrenched'.[47]

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[41] Mele, 'Neighborhood "Burn-Out"', 129.

[42] Mele, 130.

[43] Mele, 130–31.

See also Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 19–20, 860–63; Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 290–312; Peter L'Official, *Urban Legends: The South Bronx in Representation and Ruin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 38; Lorrin Thomas, 'Displacement and Survival in Puerto Rican New York: Broken Promises in Lincoln Square', *Legacies of San Juan Hill* (blog), 30 January 2023, https://lincolncenter.org/feature/legacies-of-san-juan-hill/displacement-and-survival-in-puerto-rican-new-york-broken-promises-in-lincoln-square.

[44] Caro, *The Power Broker*, 20.

[45] Bench Ansfield, 'Born in Flames: Arson, Racial Capitalism, and the Reinsuring of the Bronx in the Late Twentieth Century', *Enterprise & Society* 23, no. 4 (2022): 924, https://doi.org/10.1017/eso.2022.40.

[46] Min Li and Faxi Yuan, 'Historical Redlining and Resident Exposure to COVID-19: A Study of New York City', *Race and Social Problems* 14, no. 2 (2022): 87, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-021-09338-z.

[47] Li and Yuan, 87.

For most of the twentieth century, New York had one of the country's largest public budgets.[48] The product of decades of organising by poor and working-class New Yorkers and their labour unions, the city's expansive public sector was central to its distinctive democratic character; as Kim Phillips-Fein argues, New York's local health clinics, free museums, and affordable transportation reflected a deep-rooted belief, held by politicians and ordinary residents alike, in 'a right to belong to the city and have the city belong to you', regardless of wealth or status.[49] By the 1960s, sustaining this debt-financed public sector was proving increasingly difficult. Massive job losses forced New York to expand its welfare provision and borrow more money, even as the capital flight triggered by suburbanisation and deindustrialisation decimated the city's ability to raise revenue through taxation of wealthier individuals and businesses.[50] Rising anger amongst the city's communities of colour, who had long been excluded from New York's postwar prosperity and now bore the brunt of deepening poverty, was met by what Johanna Fernández calls a 'racially coded nativist backlash by journalists and city residents', which accused Puerto Ricans in particular of 'abusing the welfare rolls, carrying infectious diseases, exhibiting criminal behavior, and "suffocating the culture of their adopted city"'.[51] This view proliferated in films like *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *The Young Savages* (1961), and *West Side Story* (1961), which linked Puerto Rican New Yorkers with juvenile delinquency and violence.[52] Media representations were shaped by sociological studies like Oscar Lewis's 'culture of poverty' thesis, which argued that poverty among Puerto Rican families was the product of dysfunctional cultural behaviours within these communities, rather than the result of structural inequalities.[53]

Since the nineteenth century, each wave of newcomers to the Lower East Side had reshaped the social, cultural, political, and material texture of the neighbourhood, and despite their marginalisation, Puerto Rican New Yorkers were no different. The Puerto Rican community settled primarily in the lettered avenues east of Tompkins Square Park and the area just south of East Houston Street, which had previously formed part of the neighbourhood's vast Jewish

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[48] Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*, 172; Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017), 5.

[49] Phillips-Fein, *Fear City*, 20.

[50] Phillips-Fein, 29.

[51] New York World-Telegram, October 20, 1947, quoted in Fernández, *The Young Lords*, 53.

[52] Mario Menéndez, 'Puerto Ricans in Film, Puerto Rican Movies: The Struggle for Recognition', *Revue Française d'Études Américaines* 57, no. 1 (1993): 293–94, https://doi.org/10.3406/rfea.1993.1507.

[53] Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty-San Juan and New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).

For a critique of Lewis's theory, see Fernández, *The Young Lords*, 67, 169–70.

quarter.[54] In the 1950s and 1960s, as it became increasingly clear that unlike for previous generations of immigrants, the neighbourhood no longer offered a starting point on the journey into 'mainstream' American society, Puerto Rican Lower East Siders established a vibrant, tight-knit enclave that embraced, in Christopher Mele's words, a 'fusion of island culture and New York experience'.[55] Avenue C in particular became a key thoroughfare, home to beauty parlours, bodegas, churches, restaurants serving *cuchifritos* (fried pork), and other social and commercial spaces.[56] As a younger, mostly U.S.-born generation came of age in the late 1960s, the Lower East Side also underwent a cultural and political renaissance, becoming, alongside El Barrio in the north of Manhattan, a centre of the Nuyorican movement.[57] This sprawling art, literary, and political movement, whose oppositional, polyglot identity was encapsulated in the term 'Nuyorican', a portmanteau of 'New York' and 'Puerto Rican', promoted radical new forms of painting, poetry, and music, organised against racial and class discrimination, and agitated for Puerto Rico's independence from the U.S.[58] The New York chapter of the revolutionary Puerto Rican organisation the Young Lords, who became known for a series of spectacular direct actions in El Barrio and the Bronx, announced their formation at a rally in Tompkins Square Park in July 1969, emphasising the interrelation between different parts of 'Nuyorico'.[59]

By the early 1970s, the already sizeable gap between New York's spending and its revenue was stretched to breaking point.[60] A nationwide recession, brought on by the stock market crash of January 1973 and compounded by the oil embargo that October, diminished the federal and state credit that had been keeping New York afloat.[61] In the spring of 1975, the city's few remaining private lenders also disappeared, causing a full-blown fiscal crisis.[62] President Gerald Ford's initial refusal to provide federal aid, immortalised in the *New York Daily News* headline of October 30—'Ford to City: Drop Dead'—reflected a widespread belief that, with its liberal social policies, expansive public spending, strong labour unions, and diverse population, the

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[54] Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land*.

In the 1970s, these areas became known as Loisaida and Pueblo Nuevo; see Figure 2.

[55] Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 183.

[56] Mele, 183.

[57] Mele, 183–84, 200–203; Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land*, 30–34.

[58] Morales, *Latinx*, 99–117.

[59] Fernández, *The Young Lords*, 88.

[60] Phillips-Fein, *Fear City*, 29.

[61] Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*, 8.

[62] Joshua Freeman, 'If You Can Make It Here', *Jacobin*, 3 October 2014, https://jacobin.com/2014/10/if-you-can-make-it-here.

city's problems were entirely of its own making.[63] As it became clear that New York's looming bankruptcy would have wider repercussions than initially assumed, New York State Governor Hugh Carey oversaw the creation of a series of powerful agencies, dominated by corporate and financial leaders, which wrested control of the city's finances from Mayor Abraham Beame.[64] The Municipal Assistance Corporation forced the city to fire thousands of public sector workers, freeze wages, cut welfare benefits, and increase transit fares, while the Emergency Financial Control Board, which had the power to remove uncooperative city officials, enacted further budget cuts.[65] Thanks to these and other drastic measures (including dipping into the city's substantial public sector pension pot), in December 1975, President Ford finally signed off on a federal bailout.[66]

New York's bankruptcy may have been averted, but the legacy of the crisis was far-reaching. Across the city, writes Joshua Freeman, 'budget cuts combined with the recession meant laid-off city workers, overcrowded schools, shuttered hospitals, high crime, widespread arson, broken subways, and collapsing streets.'[67] The social and material impact of the crisis was felt most acutely in already poor, racialised neighbourhoods like the Lower East Side or the South Bronx. In 1976, Roger Starr, Mayor Beame's Housing and Public Development Administrator, proposed what he called 'planned shrinkage', arguing that, as people were already leaving the poorest and most dilapidated neighbourhoods, it made good economic sense to cut public services from these areas, and prioritise wealthier parts of the city instead. [68] Starr was forced to resign over the controversial proposal, which prompted a fierce outcry from the City Council's Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, and was rejected by the Beame Administration.[69] Nevertheless, planned shrinkage, which was justified by what Rebecca Amato describes as the widespread belief among New York's elites 'that poor and minority populations were […] unjustified drains on public funds', closely resembled the disinvestment that was already underway in many

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[63] Freeman; Phillips-Fein, *Fear City*, 1–3.

[64] Phillips-Fein, *Fear City*, 127–28, 153.

[65] Freeman, 'If You Can Make It Here'.

See also Phillips-Fein, *Fear City*, 111–61.

[66] Freeman, 'If You Can Make It Here'; Phillips-Fein, *Fear City*, 200–201.

[67] Freeman, 'If You Can Make It Here'.

[68] Roger Starr, 'Making New York Smaller', *New York Times Magazine*, 14 November 1976, https://www.nytimes.com/1976/11/14/archives/making-new-york-smaller-the-citys-economic-outlook-remains-grim.html.

[69] Phillips-Fein, *Fear City*, 207–8.

neighbourhoods.[70] As the city shuttered schools, fire stations, and other public services, private landlords in the Lower East Side burned down their properties for the insurance money, or simply abandoned them, rather than rent them out to increasingly precarious tenants.[71] Between 1974 and 1979, the neighbourhood's population dropped by two-thirds, with the biggest losses occurring in the area east of Avenue B, which housed the largest Puerto Rican population, and where burned-out tenements and rubble-strewn lots proliferated at a terrifying rate.[72]

Since its advent as an immigrant quarter in the nineteenth century, the Lower East Side had been conceptualised as kind of urban laboratory, a place where generations of immigrants, people of colour, artists, queer people, and other socially marginalised outsiders had, out of both choice and necessity, experimented with radical new forms of artistic practice, political activism, and community building in the midst of an often hostile environment.[73] If there was one moment that crystallised the neighbourhood's experimental character, it was the 1975 fiscal crisis.[74] As the city's resources dwindled in the aftermath of the crisis, Benjamin Holtzman writes that New Yorkers 'experimented':

> They tested new ideas and sometimes reimagined older ones to alleviate these circumstances and sustain key areas of urban life, particularly as officials proclaimed that municipal resources could do little.[75]

Nowhere was this more evident than in Loisaida and Pueblo Nuevo, where, Nandini Bagchee writes, 'deteriorating buildings and public spaces became the staging ground for experiments in alternative community organization.'[76] These experiments drew on the skills and energy of a wide array of neighbourhood residents—not just veteran community organisers, activists, or artists, and not only Nuyoricans.[77] Local groups like Charas and Adopt-a-Building, whose support

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[70] Rebecca Amato, 'On Empty Spaces, Silence, and the Pause', in *Aesthetics of Gentrification: Seductive Spaces and Exclusive Communities in the Neoliberal City*, ed. Christoph Lindner and Gerard Sandoval (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 248, https://doi.org/10.5117/9789463722032.

[71] Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 188–94.

[72] Guerron, 'CHARAS and the Reimagining of Loisaida', 43.

[73] On the experimental character of the Lower East Side, see Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land*, 8; Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 26; Marvin J. Taylor, 'Playing the Field: The Downtown Scene and Cultural Production, an Introduction', in *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene, 1974-1984*, ed. Marvin J. Taylor, Exhibition Catalogue (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 17; Sara Blair, *How the Other Half Looks: The Lower East Side and the Afterlives of Images* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 1, 14; Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*.

[74] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*.

[75] Benjamin Holtzman, *The Long Crisis: New York City and the Path to Neoliberalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2–3.

[76] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 104.

[77] Bagchee, 104.

among fellow Nuyoricans had been growing since the late 1960s, expanded their activities, transforming abandoned buildings and vacant lots into low-income housing and mural-filled gardens, which became communally-run sites for socialising, performance, and even food production.[78] The Nuyorican Lower East Side was animated by what Mario Maffi calls

> a visionary and transgressive, utopian and pragmatic creativity, born of (and in response to) the very material conditions of disarray and abandonment that have always characterized the area.[79]

While accelerated by the fiscal crisis, the development of this visionary yet pragmatic creativity in the late 1970s was the latest iteration of a deep-rooted culture of resistance that had long existed in the neighbourhood.

While the fiscal crisis fostered new practices and spaces of collective grassroots urbanism, it also gave rise to more exclusionary forms of urban development. Again, this was particularly evident in the Lower East Side, where conflicting understandings of what space was worth and how it should be filled characterised the 1970s and 1980s. As an intentional process aimed at 'devalu[ing] and deplet[ing] urban areas and their residents, only to spur growth' at a later stage, Amato argues that disinvestment in New York 'served as the backdrop of gentrification and a precipitating agent for the rise of neoliberalism'.[80] In the late 1970s, disinvestment created gaps in the neighbourhood's social provision and built environment that residents themselves were compelled to fill in order to ensure their survival. At the same time, disinvestment kept certain spaces available for future reinvestment, and in the early 1980s, the neighbourhood's cheap land values, bohemian atmosphere, and proximity to a resurgent Wall Street kick-started a process of rapid gentrification.[81] Like disinvestment before it, gentrification was characterised by displacement of the neighbourhood's most precarious residents. Unlike disinvestment, however, gentrification sought to replace those displaced with predominantly white, middle-class newcomers, many of whom worked in the city's booming finance, real estate, insurance, and culture industries.[82] Harvey argues that this state-sanctioned, capital-led urban restructuring process 'pioneered the neoliberal ideological and practical political turn' that would soon 'be

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[78] Bagchee, 104; Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 98.

[79] Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land*, 293.

[80] Amato, 'On Empty Spaces, Silence, and the Pause', 248.

[81] Amato, 251–52.

[82] Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, 'The Fine Art of Gentrification', *October* 31 (Winter 1984): 93, https://doi.org/10.2307/778358.

deployed worldwide in the struggle to perpetuate and consolidate capitalist class power.'[83] As Phillips-Fein points out, the emergence of neoliberalism in New York was racialised as well as class-based: 'the crisis saw a group of almost universally white elites remake life in a city that was becoming increasingly black and brown.'[84]

The 1975 fiscal crisis is thus often seen as a moment that 'changed everything', not only reconfiguring New York's cultural and political economy, but also defining the neoliberal trajectory of the U.S. in decades to come.[85] Holtzman argues that in the 1970s and 1980s, many different political and economic actors capitalised on the crisis 'to deconstruct key tenets of New Deal Liberalism and expand the role of the market and private sector in American life', and much of this struggle played out in the Lower East Side.[86] However, following Andrew Strombeck's insistence on the importance of 'avoid[ing] notions that everything after the 1975 fiscal crisis was determined from the beginning', in this thesis I foreground the latent possibilities embedded in this period, when 'culture workers, activists, and city planners alike thought that circumstances were up for grabs, and a variety of outcomes possible.'[87] From the mid-1970s onwards, community organisers, activists, artists, and other Lower East Side residents collaborated across growing differences of race, ethnicity, and class to develop new practices and spaces of artmaking, social reproduction, and community building in the Nuyorican Lower East Side. Here I argue that, while filling the social and material gaps left behind by disinvestment, and, later, critiquing and contesting gentrification-led displacement, those who participated in the Loisaida movement sought to move beyond the violence of the present in order to collectively imagine and institute new worlds in the Lower East Side.

II. Scholarly context

Marvin J. Taylor, the archivist behind the Downtown Collection at New York University, describes the 1970s and 1980s as a period 'of unprecedented expansion, rethinking, reimagining, and realignment in twentieth-century art', which cemented the reputation of Lower Manhattan, in particular SoHo and the East Village section of the Lower East Side, as sites of social and

[83] Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*, 172.

[84] Phillips-Fein, *Fear City*, 8.

On the racial dynamics of disinvestment, see also Bench Ansfield, 'The Crisis of Insurance and the Insuring of the Crisis: Riot Reinsurance and Redlining in the Aftermath of the 1960s Uprisings', *Journal of American History* 107, no. 4 (1 March 2021): 899–921, https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jaaa533; Ansfield, 'Born in Flames'.

[85] Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*, 1.

[86] Holtzman, *The Long Crisis*, 3.

[87] Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*, 187, 22.

sexual freedom, artistic experimentation, and political radicalism.[88] Existing art historical scholarship on the sprawling Downtown scene has expanded the canon of late twentieth century U.S. art, literature, and music: its participants, spaces, and practices. Foregrounding the contributions of women artists, queer artists, and artists of colour, this expansive body of work has contextualised and analysed the collaborative, artist-run, and site-specific practices that flourished in Lower Manhattan's dilapidated lofts, tenements, piers, and streets in the 1970s and 1980s.[89] Significant for my own research, much of this scholarship has emphasised the Downtown scene's contradictory relationship—often oppositional, sometimes conciliatory—to the exclusionary, market-oriented logics of the city's commercial and institutional art worlds.[90] However, Nuyorican (and non-Nuyorican) artists associated with the Loisaida movement, including Maria Domínguez, Armando Pérez, Freddy Hernandez, and Marlis Momber, have

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[88] Taylor, 'Playing the Field', 33.

[89] See, for example Robert Siegle, *Suburban Ambush: Downtown Writing and the Fiction of Insurgency* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994); Amy Scholder, ed., *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong* (New York: Rizzoli, 1998); Julie Ault, ed., *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective* (New York and Minneapolis, MN: Drawing Center and University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Dan Cameron, ed., *East Village USA: New Museum of Contemporary Art, December 9, 2004 - March 19, 2005* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004); Marvin J. Taylor, ed., *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene 1974–1984* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Ricardo Montez, '"Trade" Marks: LA2, Keith Haring, and a Queer Economy of Collaboration', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 3 (2006): 425–40; Brandon Stosuy, ed., *Up Is Up, but So Is Down: New York's Downtown Literary Scene, 1974-1992* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Lynne Cooke and Douglas Crimp, eds., *Mixed Use, Manhattan: Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to the Present* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2010); Lydia Yee, ed., *Laurie Anderson, Trisha Brown, Gordon Matta-Clark: Pioneers of the Downtown Scene, New York 1970s* (New York: Prestel, 2011); Alan W. Moore, *Art Gangs: Protest and Counterculture in New York City* (New York: Autonomedia, 2011); Lucy R. Lippard, 'Seven Stops in Lower Manhattan: A Geographic Memoir', in *The Suburbanization of New York: Is the World's Greatest City Becoming Just Another Town?*, ed. Jerilou Hammett and Kingsley Hammett (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012), 75–86; Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Staniszewski, eds., *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces, 1960 to 2010* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2012); Jordana Moore Saggese, *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014); Claire Grace, 'Spoils of the Sign: Group Material's Americana, 1985', *October*, no. 150 (1 October 2014): 133–60, https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO_a_00204; Tim Lawrence, *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Aaron Shkuda, *The Lofts of SoHo: Gentrification, Art, and Industry in New York, 1950-1980* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2016); Fiona Anderson and Amy Tobin, 'Collaboration Is Not An Alternative: Artists Working Together in London and New York, 1974–1981', in *Collaboration and Its (Dis)Contents: Art, Architecture, and Photography since 1950*, ed. Meredith A Brown and Michelle Millar Fisher (London: Research Forum of The Courtauld Institute of Art, 2017), 158–78; Fiona Anderson, *Cruising the Dead River: David Wojnarowicz and New York's Ruined Waterfront* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2019); Chaédria LaBouvier, ed., *Basquiat's Defacement: The Untold Story* (New York, NY: Guggenheim Museum, 2019); Ricardo Montez, 'Virtuosic Distortion: Nelson Sullivan's Queer Hand', *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 2 (2017): 395–421; Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*; Ricardo Montez, *Keith Haring's Line: Race and the Performance of Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Claire Grace, *Art Demonstration: Group Material and the 1980s* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2022); Alan W. Moore, *Art Worker: Doing Time in the New York Artworld* (Los Angeles: Journal of Aesthetics & Protest Press, 2022); Krist Gruijthuijsen and Agustín Pérez Rubio, eds., *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief* (Cologne, Germany: Walther König, 2022).

[90] See, for example Carlo McCormick, 'A Crack in Time', in *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene, 1974-1984*, ed. Marvin J. Taylor (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 67–69; Montez, *Keith Haring's Line*, 64; Moore, *Art Worker*, 68–74.

typically been excluded from existing accounts of the Downtown scene, despite occupying similar spaces and embracing comparable approaches to collaborative artmaking. Arlene Dávila argues that Nuyorican artists played a key role 'in opening up grassroots/ethnic specific arts and cultural institutions in New York City in order to challenge their exclusions in the arts.'[91] However, while some spaces, like Taller Boricua and El Museo del Barrio (both of which formed in El Barrio during the heyday of the Nuyorican movement in the late 1960s, and helped foster the careers of several prominent Nuyorican artists), have entered the canon of (predominantly white) artist-run alternative spaces in New York, others, most notably El Bohío, which fostered a broad mix of ostensibly artistic and non-artistic activities, have been excluded.[92]

Several critical studies of the Lower East Side's late twentieth century transformation, drawn mostly from the social sciences, have foregrounded what Nandini Bagchee calls 'the contestation of space in this multivalent neighborhood', which forms a central theme in my own research.[93] *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side* (1994), edited by the urban sociologist Janet L. Abu-Lughod, brought together seventeen contributors, from a range of disciplines, in a rich ethnography of the neighbourhood that emphasised the social, political, and economic heterogeneity of different groups—from the unhoused to property developers—that fought for space in the 1980s and early 1990s.[94] This dense polyvocality also characterises a more recent anthology, *Resistance: A Radical Political and Social History of the Lower East Side* (2007), edited by Alan W. Moore, Clayton Patterson, and Joe Flood, which contains essays written by over fifty artists, writers, activists, squatters, and academics, most with lived experience of the neighbourhood.[95] *Resistance* includes contributions from several people associated with the Nuyorican Lower East Side, including the community organiser Alfredo Irizarry, and Mary McCarthy, founder of the magazine *The Quality of Life in/La Calidad de Vida en Loisaida*.[96] Given

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[91] Arlene M. Dávila, *Latinx Art: Artists, Markets, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 38–39.

[92] See Julie Ault, 'A Chronology of Selected Alternative Structures, Spaces, Artists' Groups, and Organizations in New York City, 1965-85', in *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective*, ed. Julie Ault (New York and Minneapolis, MN: Drawing Center and University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 17–76; Rosati and Staniszewski, *Alternative Histories*.

[93] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 4.

[94] Janet L. Abu-Lughod, ed., *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994).

[95] Clayton Patterson, Joe Flood, and Alan W. Moore, eds., *Resistance: A Radical Political and Social History of the Lower East Side* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007).

[96] Alfredo Irizarry, 'Profile: Alfredo Irizarry', in *Resistance: A Radical Political and Social History of the Lower East Side*, ed. Clayton Patterson, Joe Flood, and Alan W. Moore (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 505–6; Mary McCarthy, 'My Loisaida: An Overview', in *Resistance: A Radical Political and Social History of the Lower East Side*, ed. Clayton Patterson, Joe Flood, and Alan W. Moore (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 568–82.

the breadth of contributors, the collection occasionally presents highly divergent viewpoints on similar developments in the neighbourhood, emphasising its contested history.[97]

Several contributors to Abu-Lughod's volume undertook their own studies of the Lower East Side during the 1990s.[98] In *New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (1995), Neil Smith theorised gentrification in the context of a broader urban restructuring process taking place in New York between the 1970s and 1990s.[99] Smith's vital emphasis on gentrification as the product of the interplay of powerful political and economic forces somewhat downplayed the role of cultural production in this process; he limited his discussion of art to the 'culture industry' that developed in the East Village in the early 1980s, and this scene's promotion of a new 'frontier myth' in the Lower East Side.[100] In *Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate, and Resistance in New York City* (2000), Christopher Mele analysed how different cultural representations and popular discourses of the neighbourhood had shaped its development since the nineteenth century.[101] Highlighting the neighbourhood's longstanding cultures of resistance, Mele offered a more nuanced perspective on art's role in gentrification than Smith, although he

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[97] One essay, for example, is written by Michael Rosen, a property developer who built one of the Lower East Side's first luxury high-rises, before becoming a campaigner against similar properties elsewhere in the neighbourhood. In another essay, the journalist Sarah Ferguson highlights the irony of

> penthouse owner Rosen, who developed the swank Red Square apartment complex on Houston Street in the late '80s, and who now speaks earnestly about the need to preserve the "sanctity" of [the] neighbourhood against high-rise incursions.

Sarah Ferguson, 'The Struggle for Space: 10 Years of Turf Battling on the Lower East Side', in *Resistance: A Radical Political and Social History of the Lower East Side*, ed. Clayton Patterson, Joe Flood, and Alan W. Moore (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 162.

See also Michael Rosen, 'Once Here and Again', in *Resistance: A Radical Political and Social History of the Lower East Side*, ed. Clayton Patterson, Joe Flood, and Alan W. Moore (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 568–82.

[98] Mele, 'Neighborhood "Burn-Out"'; Mario Maffi, 'Appendix: The Other Side of the Coin: Culture in Loisaida', in *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side*, ed. Janet L. Abu-Lughod (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994), 141–48; Neil Smith, Betsy Duncan, and Laura Reid, 'From Disinvestment to Reinvestment: Mapping the Urban "Frontier" in the Lower East Side', in *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side*, ed. Janet L. Abu-Lughod (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994), 149–68; Christopher Mele, 'The Process of Gentrification in Alphabet City', in *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side*, ed. Janet L. Abu-Lughod (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994), 169–88.

[99] Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996).

See also Neil Smith, 'Toward a Theory of Gentrification A Back to the City Movement by Capital, Not People', *Journal of the American Planning Association* 45, no. 4 (1 October 1979): 538–48, https://doi.org/10.1080/01944367908977002; Neil Smith and Michele Lefaivre, 'A Class Analysis of Gentrification', in *Gentrification, Displacement, and Neighborhood Revitalization*, ed. Bruce London and John Palen (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1982); Neil Smith, 'Opinion: Home on the Range, Urban-Style', *New York Times*, 12 August 1985, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/08/12/opinion/home-on-the-range-urban-style.html; Neil Smith, 'After Tompkins Square Park: Degentrification and the Revanchist City', in *The Blackwell City Reader*, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 201–10.

[100] Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 12–20.

[101] Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*.

mainly discussed the content of individual artworks, rather than their form or context.[102] Arguing that each new groups of immigrants to the Lower East Side 'conquered its spaces, redrew its map, rewrote its alphabet, [and] remoulded its cultural and social geography', in *Gateway to the Promised Land: Ethnic Cultures on New York's Lower East Side* (1994), Mario Maffi traced a dense history of social, artistic, and political practices in the neighbourhood, and the traces they had left behind.[103] In the book's introduction, Maffi foregrounded Nuyorican artmaking and activism as a key force shaping the neighbourhood's 'impressive mixture of decay and vitality' in the 1970s and 1980s.[104]

Rosalyn Deutsche's *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (1995) and Miwon Kwon's *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (2002) remain two of the most thoroughgoing art historical studies of what the former called 'urban-aesthetic' discourse, which 'combines ideas about art, architecture, and urban design, on the one hand, with theories of the city, social space, and public space, on the other.'[105] Neither Deutsche nor Kwon focused exclusively on the Lower East Side, but analysed the politics of public art in several contested spaces around New York, including Union Square, Federal Plaza, Battery Park, and the South Bronx.[106] Crucially for my own research, both Deutsche and Kwon's work highlighted the inherently political nature of artistic practices that take place in ostensibly public spaces. Despite being conceptualised as inherently oppositional to 'conservative', gallery-oriented practices, Deutsche and Kwon argued that many of the new forms of community-oriented, socially engaged, and/or site-specific practices that proliferated in the United States and Europe in the 1980s and 1990s remained reliant on closed or nostalgic notions of space or community, and an adherence to the myth of the 'great artist', thus undermining their claims of aesthetic or political radicalism.[107]

Both Deutsche and Kwon focused primarily on the work of established white artists, including Richard Serra, Suzanne Lacy, and Hans Haacke, who, as the geographer Gillian Rose noted in a review of Deutsche's *Evictions*, 'are all lauded by critical art commentators, and all are also

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[102] See, for example, Mele's somewhat one-dimensional take on David Wojnarowicz's *Junk Diptych* (1982) in Mele, 235.

[103] Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land*, 99.

[104] Maffi, 19.

[105] Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), xi.

See also Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

[106] Deutsche, *Evictions*, 3–13, 19, 48, 79–93, 257–68; Kwon, *One Place after Another*, 56–99.

[107] Deutsche, *Evictions*, xxii, 267–68; Kwon, *One Place after Another*, 1–2.

extremely successful within the art world itself'.[108] As such, they excluded a discussion of less visible alternative practices, such as those examined in this thesis. Despite these absences, Deutsche and Kwon's emphasis on the complex social and spatial politics of art in the public sphere is aligned with accounts of Nuyorican cultural production and political activism between the 1960s and 1980s, the bulk of which has focused on the work of the Young Lords in El Barrio, and the Nuyorican Poets Café in the Lower East Side.[109] Importantly for my own research, this scholarship has highlighted what Urayoán Noel called a 'cultural politics of survival and struggle', which places artmaking and other forms of cultural production at the centre of the struggle for community self-reliance and political enfranchisement, and foregrounds the possibility of intervening in one's social and material environment through creative practices.[110] As I argue throughout this thesis, the artists and organisers of the Loisaida movement sought to transform derelict buildings into sustainable cultural and community spaces, like the Nuyorican Poets Café, El Bohío, or La Plaza Cultural, where, as Noel argued, 'the complicated relationship between art and community' could be explored.[111]

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[108] Gillian Rose, review of *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* by Rosalyn Deutsche, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 15, no. 5 (1 October 1997): 627, https://doi.org/10.1068/d150627.

[109] See for example, Miguel Algarín, 'Introduction: Nuyorican Language', in *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Words and Feelings*, ed. Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1975), 9–19; Miguel Algarin, 'Nuyorican Literature', *MELUS* 8, no. 2 (1981): 89–92, https://doi.org/10.2307/467156; Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 167–90; Urayoán Noel, 'In the Decimated City: Symptom, Translation, And The Performance Of A New York Jíbaro From Ladí To Luciano To Lavoe', *CENTRO Journal* XIX, no. 2 (Fall 2007); Urayoán Noel, *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2014); Darrel Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords and the Struggle for Liberation* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2015); Frances Negrón-Muntaner, 'The Look of Sovereignty: Style and Politics in the Young Lords', in *American Shame: Stigma and the Body Politic*, ed. Myra Mendible (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016), 84–106; Arnaldo Manuel Cruz-Malavé, 'Memorialization and Presence: Capturing the Legacies of the Young Lords in New York', *ARTMargins* 6, no. 2 (June 2017): 72–90, https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM_a_00177; Urayoán Noel, '"The Geography of Their Complexion": Nuyorican Poetry and Its Legacies', in *The Cambridge History of Latina/o American Literature*, ed. John Morán González and Laura Lomas (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 411–34, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316869468.021; Steven H. Jaffe, '"¡Basta Ya!": The Young Lords and Puerto Rican Activism', in *Activist New York: A History of People, Protest, and Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 231–45; Nate Mickelson, 'Organizing "El Barrio" and the "Loisaida": Poetics of Neighborhood II', in *City Poems and American Urban Crisis: 1945 to the Present* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 149–76; Fernández, *The Young Lords*; Patricia Herrera, *Nuyorican Feminist Performance: From the Cafe to Hip Hop Theater* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 20–72; Karen Jaime, *The Queer Nuyorican: Racialized Sexualities and Aesthetics in Loisaida* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 27–56; Felipe Hinojosa, 'The People's Church in East Harlem', in *Apostles of Change: Latino Radical Politics, Church Occupations, and the Fight to Save the Barrio* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2021), 89–119, https://doi.org/10.7560/321980.

[110] Noel, '"The Geography of Their Complexion"', 411.

See also Noel, *In Visible Movement*, 50; Arlene Dávila, 'Culture in the Battlefront: From Nationalist to Pan-Latino Projects', in *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York City*, ed. Arlene M. Dávila and Agustín Laó-Montes (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 159; Fernández, *The Young Lords*, 183; Jaime, *The Queer Nuyorican*, 28–29.

[111] Noel, *In Visible Movement*, 45.

The last few years have seen a proliferation of interdisciplinary scholarship on the transformation of the Lower East Side that foregrounds Nuyorican-led practices and spaces of artmaking, social reproduction, and community building.[112] Three recent monographs have played a particularly important role in my own research. In *Counter Institution: Activist Estates of the Lower East Side* (2019), Nandini Bagchee traces the history of three derelict buildings that became 'counter institutions' in the Lower East Side in the 1960s and 1970s: the Peace Pentagon, El Bohío, and ABC No Rio.[113] These 'insurgent, grassroots efforts', which occupied abandoned, city-owned properties across the neighbourhood, 'provided direct deliverables and generated alternative forums of empowerment to communities under pressure'. [114] The communities examined by Bagchee are the war resisters who founded the Peace Pentagon, the Loisaida artists and community organisers based in El Bohío, and the political artists and punks who coalesced around ABC No Rio. In order to 'parse out the reciprocity between urban space and global events, between people and buildings', Bagchee analyses these counter institutions as key physical and organisational nodes within larger networks of politically engaged art and activism in Lower Manhattan.[115] Following Bagchee, I emphasise Charas's role as an important catalyst within the wider Loisaida movement.[116] Each chapter of *Counter Institution* analyses a different space, outlining the activities that took place within and in relation to each site during its lifespan. Reflecting the hybrid, private-public nature of the spaces themselves, Bagchee combines image and text, reproducing archival material alongside maps and timelines.[117] While this approach foregrounds the distinct approaches to political organising that proliferated in the neighbourhood, the siloed nature of each chapter inadvertently downplays the relationship between these spaces, and the overlapping communities that operated and frequented them.

In *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory: Puerto Rican Community Activism* (2020), the geographer Timo Schrader examines what he calls the 'alternative urbanisms' that were developed by the Loisaida

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[112] See, for example Ševčenko, 'Making Loisaida: Placing Puertorriqueñidad in Lower Manhattan'; Dan Chodorkoff, *Loisaida: A Novel* (Burlington, Vermont: Fomite Press, 2011), https://www.fomitepress.com/loisaida.html; Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 30–34, 81–120; Benjamin Shepard, 'DIY Urbanism as an Environmental Justice Strategy: The Case Study of Time's Up! 1987-2012', *Theory in Action* 7, no. 2 (April 2014): 42–73; Syeus Mottel, *Charas: The Improbable Dome Builders* (New York: Song Cave and Pioneer Works Press, 2018); Amato, 'On Empty Spaces, Silence, and the Pause'; Guerron, 'CHARAS and the Reimagining of Loisaida'.

[113] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*.

[114] Bagchee, 1–2.

[115] Bagchee, 6.

[116] Bagchee, 127.

[117] See, for example Bagchee, 119–20.

movement between 1964 and 2001.[118] Through discussions of the work of activist groups, mural organisations, individual artists, and cultural and community spaces, Schrader highlights the array of activities that animated the Nuyorican Lower East Side during this period. Following Schrader, I emphasises the heterogeneity of spaces, practices, and people that comprised the Loisaida movement, and foreground the co-constitutive nature of cultural production, community activism, and material transformation in this part of the neighbourhood. Schrader pays careful attention to the contradictions that shape community organising, particularly when undertaken in constrained social and material conditions. In a discussion of the mural project *Ave C Faux Storefronts* (1982), for example, Schrader highlights the conflict between those who wanted to revitalise Avenue C by painting imaginary shops onto shuttered storefronts, and those who saw this project as hastening gentrification by making the street more attractive to property developers.[119] The scope of Schrader's thesis sometimes comes at the expense of more precise cultural analysis. For example, he compares the group exhibition *The Ninth Street Survival Show*, held at El Bohío in 1981, to *The Real Estate Show* (1979) and *The Times Square Show* (1980), two group exhibitions that were also held in disused buildings (a storefront and a massage parlour, respectively).[120] In collectively describing these exhibitions as 'protest shows', Schrader downplays the important differences between them; while *The Ninth Street Survival Show* is little-known today, the other exhibitions, organised by the influential collective Colab, have come to define the anarchic, collaborative practices that characterised the Downtown art scene of the early 1980s.[121]

Literary scholar Andrew Strombeck's *DIY on the Lower East Side: Books, Buildings, and Art After the 1975 Fiscal Crisis* (2020) examines the experiments in art and writing that developed in the derelict spaces of the neighbourhood in the aftermath of the 1975 fiscal crisis.[122] Through close readings of the work of several Downtown artists and writers, Strombeck tracks a multifaceted 'do-it-yourself' ethos that underpinned cultural production and social reproduction in the Lower East Side in the late 1970s and early 1980s, 'whether that meant knitting radiator covers,

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[118] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*.

[119] Schrader, 90.

[120] Schrader, 113.

[121] Schrader, 113.

On the legacy of *The Real Estate Show* and *The Times Square Show*, and Colab more broadly, see Moore, *Art Gangs*, 99–106; Alan W. Moore, 'Excavating Real Estate', *House Magic 6*, 2014; Francesco Spampinato, 'Colab Again: The Real Estate Show and The Times Square Show Revisited', *Stedelijk Studies*, no. 2 (30 July 2015), https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/colab-again/; Stephen Zacks, 'Where Can We Be? The Occupation of 123 Delancey Street', *Places Journal*, August 2015, https://doi.org/10.22269/150810; Moore, *Art Worker*, 57–58, 65–69.

[122] Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*.

rehabilitating buildings, starting [a] literary journal, or dealing drugs'.[123] My research is indebted to Strombeck's analysis of the doubled-edged nature of DIY.[124] On the one hand, the late 1970s was a period when 'cultural workers, activists, and city planners alike thought that circumstances were up for grabs, and a variety of outcomes possible', and took matters into their own hands to bring about one outcome or another.[125] On the other, 'the lived critique of DIY' could easily be folded into 'the self-management demanded by neoliberalism', which first took shape in the wake of the crisis.[126] In tracking the 'contradictory possibilities' of DIY, Strombeck foregrounds the social networks and new forms of collaborative practice that developed in the late 1970s and 1980s.[127] A chapter on the 'Puerto Rican working class', for example, highlights housing renovation as a metaphor in the work of Miguel Algarín and other Nuyorican poets, and frames Bimbo Rivas, a poet and Charas member, as 'the most visible hinge' between Loisaida's artistic sensibilities and its activist orientation.[128] Strombeck also analyses Miguel Piñero's collaborations with the painter Martin Wong.[129]

III. Conceptual keywords

Space

In this thesis, I understand space as relational, heterogenous, unfinished, and conflictual. I draw on the work of the geographer Doreen Massey, who insists 'that we recognise space as the product of interrelations', as the sphere 'of coexisting heterogeneity', and as being 'always under construction.'[130] Massey's work on the fluid multiplicity of space aligns with that of the Marxist theorist Henri Lefebvre, who conceptualises space as the product of a dialectical relationship between three elements: top-down 'representations of space', created by architects, urban planners, and those in power; everyday 'spatial practices' enacted in physical sites across the city; and 'representational spaces', created by those who want to intervene in the dominant spatial order.[131] Building on Massey and Lefebvre's work, cultural scholars have argued that conflict

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[123] Strombeck, 7.

[124] Strombeck, 7.

On the double-edged nature of DIY, see also Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*, 192.

[125] Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*, 22.

[126] Strombeck, 24.

[127] Strombeck, 57.

[128] Strombeck, 76.

[129] Strombeck, 77–82.

[130] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE, 2005), 9.

[131] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991), 33.

underpins the production of space, and have emphasised this conflict as an ambivalent force that can be both destructive and generative. In a discussion of the work of Gordon Matta-Clark, Pamela M. Lee states that 'space is determined conflictually—it is riven at its foundation, heterogenous and structured around difference'.[132] Stuart Hall argues that dominant forces often respond to difference not by violently stamping it out, but through a slower process of assimilation and homogenisation:

> by allowing it to exist within the places that it assigns, by slowly allowing it to be recognised, but only within the terms of a process which deprives it of any real effective or oppositional force.[133]

In the face of these efforts to blunt the oppositional power of difference, Rosalyn Deutsche argues that conflict does not 'ruin' the democratic production of space, but 'is the condition of its existence.'[134]

This conceptual understanding of space as relational, heterogenous, unfinished, and conflictual underpins my elastic use of the term in this thesis. Firstly, I use the term space to describe distinct parts of the city, the ways in which their borders touch, overlap, or are nested within one other, and how this fluid geography can change over time. The Nuyorican Lower East Side, for example, forms part of the larger (and older) Lower East Side, and is itself comprised of two smaller enclaves, Loisaida and Pueblo Nuevo.[135] Secondly, I use the term space to describe the derelict structures that dominated the landscape of the Lower East Side in the 1970s and 1980s, whose abandonment in the wake of the neighbourhood's disinvestment reflected their reification as exchange value by the state and real estate capital.[136] Finally, I use the term space to describe the permanent and ephemeral sites of artmaking, social reproduction, and community building that occupied these derelict structures in the 1970s and 1980s. This last usage is aligned with uses of the term by artists, curators, gallerists, and art historians to describe 'alternative' or 'artist-run spaces', and emphasises the use value of these ostensibly unwanted structures to those who

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[132] Pamela M. Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 92.

[133] Stuart Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, ed. Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 50.

[134] Deutsche, *Evictions*, xiii.

For art historical scholarship that also draws on Lefebvre's work, see Kwon, *One Place after Another*.

[135] Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, x–xiii.

[136] Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed*, 93.

occupied them.[137] Central to my research is an understanding that the meanings and values of these spaces grew increasingly contested throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and that these struggles were expressed in, and shaped by, the ways in which different actors perceived, represented, and inhabited these spaces.

There is perhaps no better example of the contested nature of space in this part of New York than the different names used for overlapping parts of the same geographical area (see Figure 2). In this thesis, I use 'Lower East Side' to refer to the entire neighbourhood, from East Fourteenth Street to the Manhattan Bridge Approach and Fourth Avenue/the Bowery to the East River. I use 'Loisaida' to refer to the northeastern section of the neighbourhood, between East Fourteenth and East Houston Streets, and Avenues A and D. I use 'Pueblo Nuevo' to describe the area directly south of Loisaida, between East Houston and Delancey Streets, and Pitt and Clinton Streets.[138] Collectively, I refer to Loisaida and Pueblo Nuevo as the 'Nuyorican Lower East Side'. The term 'East Village' is often used to disaggregate some or all of the area north of East Houston Street from the Lower East Side's working-class, immigrant history; here I mostly use the term to describe the art scene that developed in the section west of Tompkins Square Park in the early 1980s, although I also use it to emphasise this area's distinct social and cultural character compared to Loisaida and Pueblo Nuevo.[139] I do not use the term 'Alphabet City', which was invented by the real estate industry in the 1980s as a more marketable name for Loisaida.[140]

Practice

In this thesis, I employ an interdisciplinary understanding of practice that encompasses a wide range of individual and collective, artistic and non-artistic activities. The social scientists Allison Hui, Theodore Schatzki, and Elizabeth Shove describe practices as organised 'arrays of action' that are embedded in specific material and social contexts, and relate to one another to form

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[137] Julie Ault, 'For the Record', in *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective*, ed. Julie Ault (New York and Minneapolis, MN: Drawing Center and University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 5; Lauren Rosati, introduction to *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces, 1960 to 2010*, ed. Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Staniszewski (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2012), 9.

[138] Robbins, 'Community Profiles: Building Pueblo Nuevo', 18; Momber, 'Oral History Interview', 37, 41.

[139] As Christopher Mele notes, business owners and landlords, hoping to attract white, middle-class bohemians from the gentrifying Greenwich Village, coined the name 'East Village' in the 1960s, branding the area with a distinct countercultural identity that shaped its development in subsequent decades. Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 160.

See also Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*, 5; Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 174.

[140] Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*, 5.

wider constellations.[141] Practices mediate between individuals and wider social and material structures; they provide a mechanism through which these structures are reproduced and can potentially be transformed. As the anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner argues, it is through different kinds of practice that 'social beings, with their diverse motives and their diverse intentions, make and transform the world in which they live.'[142] I am particularly interested in the role of art in this world-making process, and the co-constitutive relationship between very different forms of social, artistic, and political practices in the Nuyorican Lower East Side in the 1970s and 1980s. Beginning in the mid-1970s, the artists and activists of the Loisaida movement employed a range of practices in order to creatively reimagine and rebuild the derelict spaces of the Nuyorican Lower East Side, while working to improve the neighbourhood's oppressive social and economic conditions. These included artistic practices such as muralism, poetry, music, painting, and filmmaking, as well as other types of creative, collective activities, including community gardening, urban homesteading, squatting, and the development of sustainable energy projects.

Community

In this thesis, I understand community as being rooted in multivalent notions of shared identity, shared space, and shared practices. Many of those who lived and worked in the Nuyorican Lower East Side in the 1970s and 1980s were first, second, and third generation Puerto Ricans.[143] Like 'Latine' more broadly, 'Nuyorican' is a hybrid, multiracial ethnic identity; there were (and are) white, Black, and Brown Puerto Ricans in New York.[144] Regardless of their skin colour, however, the discrimination that Puerto Ricans faced in housing, education, and employment was racialised and class-based, rooted in supposedly incommensurable differences between this group of perpetual outsiders and white American society.[145] As an expression of cultural pride and political agency, Nuyorican identity developed in opposition to this discrimination, and the concentration of Puerto Ricans in certain parts of the Lower East Side imbued these areas with a distinct social, cultural, and commercial character.[146] It was not only Nuyoricans that lived in areas like Loisaida or Pueblo Nuevo, however; also present in the neighbourhood were older

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[141] Allison Hui, Theodore R. Schatzki, and Elizabeth Shove, introduction to *The Nexus of Practices: Connections, Constellations, Practitioners*, ed. Allison Hui, Theodore R. Schatzki, and Elizabeth Shove (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 2.

[142] Sherry B. Ortner, *High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 193.

[143] Mele, 'Neighborhood "Burn-Out"', 136 figure 6.1.

[144] Morales, *Latinx*, 4–6.

[145] Fernández, *The Young Lords*, 53–59.

[146] Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 182–86.

white ethnic residents who had been either unable or unwilling to leave in earlier decades, and who often faced similarly poor housing conditions as their Puerto Rican neighbours.[147] As the artist Maria Domínguez recalls, whether Black, Jewish, Italian, or Puerto Rican, 'we were all together fighting the struggle of housing.'[148] In addition, there was a handful of mostly white, mostly middle-class artists and activists living in the neighbourhood in the early to mid-1970s. Many of them, including Marlis Momber, lived, worked, and collaborated with their working-class neighbours; as an anonymous activist insisted in a 1990 *Midnight Notes* interview, this was a period before white newcomers became intrinsically linked with gentrification in the minds of many older residents of the Lower East Side.[149]

In the early 1980s, as new social, artistic, and political networks developed in the neighbourhood, the demographics and practices of the Loisaida movement grew and shifted. The artistic projects I examine in this thesis sought to celebrate the Nuyorican character of the Lower East Side, and continue the transformational work of the Loisaida movement in some way; regardless of their own race, class, or ethnicity, the artists who initiated these projects understood that the new practices and spaces of artmaking, social reproduction, and community building that had flourished in the Nuyorican Lower East Side were key to the neighbourhood's continued vitality. It is important to note that any sense of solidarity within or between different groups living in the Nuyorican Lower East Side, even those who shared certain visions of the neighbourhood or participated in shared practices, could never be guaranteed, particularly as the struggle for limited space and resources intensified over the course of the 1980s.[150] As I examine throughout this thesis, art and activism in the neighbourhood was structured around uneven power relations, and shaped by forms of difference that could be both generative and destructive. With this in mind, following Miwon Kwon, in this thesis I pay careful attention to 'the extent to which the identity or definition of a community remains open […] as a scene of political struggle.'[151] As Eva Cockcroft, John Pitman Weber, and James Cockcroft put it in their history of muralism in the

[147] Mele, 121–22.

[148] Maria Domínguez, interview by the author, March 7, 2022.

[149] 'RW', quoted in Midnight Notes, 'Land, Wealth, and Self-Determination in the Lower East Side', *Midnight Notes*, no. 10: The New Enclosures (1990): 70.

[150] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 6.

[151] Kwon, *One Place after Another*, 7.

U.S., '[c]ommunity cannot be outlined on a map; rather, it is built, and it can be dispersed again.'[152]

Gentrification

In this thesis, I understand gentrification as a socio-economic, cultural, and spatial process of direct and indirect displacement, replacement, and homogenisation. I examine the gentrification of the Lower East Side in the 1980s as it was experienced and resisted 'from below', by those most at risk of displacement.[153] Driven by reinvestment of capital in a previously devalued area, gentrification often displaces existing low-income and racialised residents, substituting them with wealthier and, often, white newcomers, and transforming the area's built environment in the process.[154] Emphasising gentrification's class dimensions, Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly describe it as 'the transformation of a working-class or vacant area of a city into middle-class residential and/or commercial use.'[155] The notion of a 'vacant area' resonates in the context of the Lower East Side, where conflict revolved around what constituted empty space and how it should be filled.[156] As Peter Kent-Stoll highlights, gentrification in the U.S. is also a racial and colonial process that 'targets Indigenous, Black, and other negatively racialized people for spatial removal […] and targets those same spaces of violence' for 'the spatial reproduction of white colonial desire and consumption' and 'the social reproduction of majority white middle-class gentrifiers.'[157] Adam Elliot-Cooper, Phil Hubbard, and Lees argue that displacement does not just entail direct replacement but 'also involves forms of social, economic and cultural transition which alienate established populations'; this 'slow violence' is often less visible than more 'direct

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[152] Eva Cockcroft, John Pitman Weber, and James Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, [1977] 1998), 72.

[153] On the importance of giving agency to those most at risk of gentrification, see Tom Slater, 'Gentrification of the City', in *The New Blackwell Companion to the City*, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 572; Adam Elliott-Cooper, Phil Hubbard, and Loretta Lees, 'Moving beyond Marcuse: Gentrification, Displacement and the Violence of Un-Homing', *Progress in Human Geography* 44, no. 3 (2020): 500, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132519830511.

[154] Mark Davidson and Loretta Lees, 'New-Build "Gentrification" and London's Riverside Renaissance', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 37, no. 7 (July 2005): 1187, https://doi.org/10.1068/a3739.

[155] Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin K. Wyly, *Gentrification* (New York: Routledge, 2008), xv.

[156] Tom Slater, 'Missing Marcuse: On Gentrification and Displacement', *City* 13, no. 2–3 (September 2009): 294, https://doi.org/10.1080/13604810902982250.

[157] Peter Kent-Stoll, 'The Racial and Colonial Dimensions of Gentrification', *Sociology Compass* 14, no. 12 (2020): 13–14, https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12838.

and forceful acts of expropriation.'[158] As Charles V. Bagli argues in relation to the Lower East Side,

> [F]or those fighting against gentrification, the battle is never just about affordable housing. It can also be about the preservation of culture, community gardens, and institutions that bind a neighborhood together when city government has largely abandoned its responsibilities.[159]

Sarah Schulman describes gentrification as a process that, over time, '*homogenizes* complexity, difference, dynamic dialogic action for change and *replaces* it with sameness', substituting 'communities of diverse classes, ethnicities, races, sexualities, and languages, and points of view' with homogenised groups that are whiter, wealthier, and in many contexts—including the Lower East Side—straighter and less politically active.[160]

IV. Archival methodology

The archival methodology I utilise in this thesis has been shaped by both the relative absence of archival material on the Nuyorican Lower East Side (even as collections of Downtown art have grown), and the often fragmented and partial nature of what *is* available. At a structural level, this archival inconsistency is a product of the exclusionary nature of archives themselves, particularly those contained within museums, universities, and other dominant sites of knowledge production, which have historically privileged certain histories over others.[161] More specifically, it is the result of the turbulence of the Nuyorican Lower East Side in the 1970s and 1980s, which made formal collecting and archiving difficult, if not impossible.[162] In the case of my own research, these factors were compounded by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, which delayed archival research and made certain institutions inaccessible. In undertaking this research, I have thus abandoned what Candace Epps-Robertson calls the 'traditional singular, hierarchical

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158 Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, and Lees, 'Moving beyond Marcuse', 504.

On displacement as a key characteristic of gentrification in New York, see also Peter Marcuse, 'Gentrification, Abandonment, and Displacement: Connections, Causes, and Policy Responses in New York City', *Urban Law Annual ; Journal of Urban and Contemporary Law* 28, no. 1 (1985): 195–240.

159 Charles V. Bagli, '"Bleak House," New York–Style', *Air Mail*, 25 November 2023, https://airmail.news/issues/2023-11-25/bleak-house-new-york-style.

160 Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 14. Emphasis in original.

161 Samuel Burgum, 'This City Is An Archive: Squatting History and Urban Authority', *Journal of Urban History* 48, no. 3 (1 May 2022): 506–7, https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144220955165; Marika Cifor, *Viral Cultures: Activist Archiving in the Age of AIDS* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 19, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.cdbmfhq5f.3.

162 Mario Maffi, *New York City: An Outsider's inside View* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2004), 19.

archival approach', which espouses 'the notion that one database, one physical location, or one person can document a holistic history that crosses borders, languages, and cultures.'[163] Following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who draw on a type of horizontally-structured subterranean plant stem, known as a rhizome, to describe acentred networks 'in which communication runs from any neighbor to any other', I have embraced a rhizomatic archival methodology, one that is open-ended, improvisatory, and non-hierarchical.[164] Moving continually between different kinds of formal and informal, physical and digital archival spaces, I have assembled something akin to what Marika Cifor, in an account of AIDS activist archiving, calls 'entangled networks of objects, people, and institutions, carefully collected ephemera and fragments, and artifactual and visual surrogates for departed loved ones and activists still fighting.'[165]

Like the universities and museums with which they are typically associated, archives play a significant role in shaping, in Silvia Federici's words, 'our conception of what knowledge is and who can be considered a knowledge producer'.[166] Western archival models are underpinned by patriarchal, racist, colonial, and heteronormative classificatory structures, which privilege linearity, hierarchy, and wholeness, and play an often exclusionary role in defining which subjects, objects, and practices are legitimised and recorded for posterity, and which are not.[167] Even archives that seek to challenge these exclusionary power structures can be marked by significant omissions. Since 1994, for example, the Downtown Collection at New York University's (NYU) Fales Library and Special Collections, has documented the vibrant art, music, and literary scenes that flourished in SoHo and the Lower East Side between the mid-1970s and

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163 Candace Epps-Robertson, 'Archiving with Everyday People: What a Transcultural Fandom Can Teach Historians of Rhetoric', *Rhetoric Review* 40, no. 4 (Octalog IV: The Politics of Rhetorical Studies in 2021) (2 October 2021): 322–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2021.1981108.

164 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 'Introduction: The Rhizome', in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 17.

On the key characteristics of the rhizome, and their potential for generative archival practices, see also Wendy M. Duff and Jessica Haskell, 'New Uses for Old Records: A Rhizomatic Approach to Archival Access', *The American Archivist* 78, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2015): 40–42, https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.78.1.38.

165 Cifor, *Viral Cultures*, 30.

166 Silvia Federici, 'The University: A Knowledge Common?', in *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019), 101.

167 See, for example Melissa Adler, *Cruising the Library: Perversities in the Organization of Knowledge* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 23–26; Duff and Haskell, 'New Uses for Old Records', 40–41; Robb Hernández, *Archiving an Epidemic: Art, AIDS, and the Queer Chicanx Avant-Garde* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 6–10; Cifor, *Viral Cultures*, 17–24; Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2021), 17–24; Burgum, 'This City Is An Archive', 506–7; Hannah Waters, 'Sites of Multiplicity: Anarchiving, Feminism, and Performance', *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 44, no. 1 (2 January 2024): 193, https://doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2024.2342709.

the early 1990s.[168] Aiming to build 'the widest possible collection of materials related to the Downtown scene', Marvin J. Taylor, the archive's founder, spoke 'with a wide range of people from different parts of the scene', a process that led him 'to new facets of the period', and fostered for the preservation of 'more of the historical materials, even the detritus, than would otherwise be kept.' [169] Thanks to Taylor's relational, non-hierarchical collecting strategies, the Downtown Collection has helped to expand traditional archival methodologies and enlarge the established canon of late twentieth century U.S. art and literature.[170] Despite this, the archive's subjects remain predominantly white and male. By my count—and the archive's own admission—women artists make up just a third of the total collections, while fewer than twenty have a non-white artist, writer, or organisation as their primary subject.[171] The Downtown Collection's urgent formation at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis, when gay and bisexual men in particular were dying in their thousands, goes some way towards explaining these omissions, but only if one ignores the impact of HIV on New York's communities of colour, and the social heterogeneity of the Lower East Side at the time.[172]

Between January and March 2022, after waiting almost a year for Covid-19 travel restrictions to ease, I was finally able to undertake archival research in New York City. I had planned to revisit the Downtown Collection, which was essential to my Masters dissertation on the work of the Downtown artists Joe Brainard and David Wojnarowicz.[173] Like most archival institutions in the city, the Fales Library had closed in 2020 at the onset of the pandemic. Unlike many other archives, however, which gradually reopened over the course of 2021, the Fales Library remained inaccessible to researchers without NYU affiliation until the summer of 2022. As a result, I spent longer than originally anticipated in the archives of CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College. Over the course of several fruitful weeks, I pored over the records of Charas and El Bohío, the Lower East Side documentarian Marlis Momber, the Nuyorican poet Pedro Pietri, and the bilingual community magazine *The Quality of Life in/La Calidad de Vida en*

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168 Taylor, 'Playing the Field'.

169 Taylor, 29.

170 Cifor, *Viral Cultures*, 23.

171 Charlotte Priddle, 'Collection Development Policy', Research Guides: Downtown Collection at the NYU Special Collections, accessed 9 April 2024, https://guides.nyu.edu/downtown-collection/coll-dev-policy.

172 René Esparza, '"Qué Bonita Mi Tierra": Latinx AIDS Activism and Decolonial Queer Praxis in 1980s New York and Puerto Rico', *Radical History Review*, no. 140 (May 2021): 109, https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-8841706; Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, 26.

173 Al Hoyos-Twomey, 'Witnesses to a Lost Imagination: Disintegration and Queer Worldmaking in the Downtown Comics of Joe Brainard & David Wojnarowicz' (MScR dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2019).

Loisaida.[174] I also spent time in other archives, including the Carolyn Ratcliffe collection on La Plaza Cultural at the New-York Historical Society Museum and Library, and The Political Art Documentation/Distribution Archive at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), which has recently been moved from the MoMA Library into its archives.[175]

With its focus on Nuyorican cultural production and coalitional community organising, the CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records in particular go a long way towards rectifying the racialised omissions of an archive like the Downtown Collection.[176] Compared to Taylor's expansive yet highly curated collecting strategy, however, the CHARAS/El Bohío Records contain an array of material retained (rather than actively collected) by Chino García, the director of Charas and El Bohío, between the 1960s and early 2000s.[177] These were highly turbulent decades in the Lower East Side, during which, as Maria Domínguez puts it, 'we weren't thinking we were making history. We were surviving.'[178] During the first few years of its existence, El Bohío had a leaking roof, no heating system, and was struggling to get a long-term lease to PS 64 from the city.[179] This precarity, coupled with the apparent lack of a systematic collecting process in the moment, means that the archive's holdings, while extensive, are unevenly distributed. Charas's earliest activities in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including its dome building project and the University of the Street, are well documented, as are El Bohío's popular film and theatre programmes, and both organisations' administrative records. By comparison, there is relatively little material on El Bohío's visual art programme, or its concert series—a surprise given the neighbourhood's reputation for exciting new developments in these

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[174] CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records, MSS233, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City, accessed 24 May 2023, https://centroarchives.hunter.cuny.edu/repositories/2/resources/76; Marlis Momber Lower East Side Photograph Collection, MSS203, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City, accessed 18 July 2024, https://centroarchives.hunter.cuny.edu/repositories/2/resources/161; Pedro Pietri Papers, MSS111, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City, accessed 24 July 2024, https://centroarchives.hunter.cuny.edu/repositories/2/resources/32; Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection, MSS134, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City, accessed 24 May 2023, https://centroarchives.hunter.cuny.edu/repositories/2/resources/120.

[175] Carolyn Ratcliffe Collection on La Plaza Cultural 1980s-2006, MS 3051, New-York Historical Society Museum & Library, New York City, accessed 18 July 2024, https://findingaids.library.nyu.edu/nyhs/ms3051_ratcliffe_laplaza/; Political Art Documentation/Distribution Archive, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York City, accessed 18 July 2024, https://www.moma.org/research/archives/finding-aids/PADDf.

[176] In some contexts, Charas is written as 'Charas', with just the first letter capitalised and in others, it is written as 'CHARAS', with the entire word capitalised. In this thesis, I predominantly use the former iteration; I use the capitalised version only when referring to the CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records at CENTRO, as this is how the archive spells the group's name.

[177] CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records.

[178] Maria Domínguez, interview by the author, March 7, 2022.

[179] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 138.

areas at this time. I was also surprised at the lack of material on Charas's support of community muralism, which was one of the most prominent public art practices in the neighbourhood in the late 1970s and 1980s, and one that, as I argue throughout this thesis, shaped the neighbourhood's built environment in hugely significant ways.[180]

'[M]any of the stories and histories I'm most interested in', writes Epps-Roberston in an article reflecting on the challenges of researching marginalised histories, 'may not be in historical societies or university libraries. Some will be revealed perhaps as a fragment online, or others buried in a backyard shed.'[181] Similarly, having found certain facets of the Nuyorican Lower East Side's history absent from archival institutions, in this thesis I have embraced other modes of archival enquiry. While I was in New York, for example, I interviewed Domínguez at her home in Brooklyn, and spoke with the mural historian Jane Weissman at her apartment in Greenwich Village.[182] These interviews offer a crucial reminder that just because a history has not been institutionally 'legitimised' does not mean it does not exist in the memories of those who experienced it. Domínguez and Weissman's homes were private archives filled with books, artworks, and ephemera; my interview recordings are peppered with moments when Domínguez or Weissman disappeared into other rooms, returning each time with something different to show me, whether this be an exhibition catalogue, a poster, or a photograph. This material was not 'buried in a backyard shed', as Epps-Robertson puts it, but rather tucked away inside a Brooklyn duplex and a Greenwich Village walk-up.[183] In a discussion of 'AIDS's *near* obliteration' of the queer Chicanx avant-garde in East LA in the 1980s and 1990s, Robb Hernández argues that the crisis 'yielded other modes of recordkeeping, custodial interventions, vernacular preservation, and storage technologies for these posthumous oeuvres and pulverised fragments.'[184] Domínguez and Weissman's private archives highlight that in the Lower East Side, where the destructive effects of disinvestment and gentrification were compounded by the devastation of HIV/AIDS, 'other modes of recordkeeping' were crucial.[185]

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[180] On muralism in the Nuyorican Lower East Side, see Susan Shapiro Kiok, 'Cityarts Workshop: Out of the Gallery and into the Streets', in *Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*, ed. Eva Sperling Cockcroft, John Pitman Weber, and James D. Cockcroft (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, [1977] 1998), 169–85; Janet Braun-Reinitz and Jane Weissman, *On the Wall: Four Decades of Community Murals in New York City* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 15–36.

[181] Epps-Robertson, 'Archiving with Everyday People', 322.

[182] A subsequent interview with another muralist, Joe Stephenson, took place over Zoom in July 2022.

[183] Epps-Robertson, 'Archiving with Everyday People', 322.

[184] Hernández, *Archiving an Epidemic*, 6. Emphasis in original.

[185] Hernández, 6.

In New York, I visited the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space (MoRUS), which has occupied the lower levels of a Lower East Side squat-turned-housing cooperative named C-Squat since 2012.[186] Through exhibitions, events, and walking tours, MoRUS is dedicated to preserving 'the history of the Lower East Side's grassroots activism' and promoting 'environmentally-sound, community-based urban ecologies' in the present.[187] Positioned somewhere between the institutional and private archives described above, MoRUS is an alternative archival space where 'the dominance of those histories produced by mainstream archival institutions' can be challenged in order to build what Samuel Burgum, in a discussion of London's squatting history, calls 'territorial authority […] from below.'[188] This is particularly important in a neighbourhood like the Lower East Side, which, as I emphasise throughout this thesis, continues to be shaped by power struggles over the meanings and uses of urban space. MoRUS's permanent displays on squatting, community gardens, and ecological activism include work by Marlis Momber, Seth Tobocman, and other artists discussed in this thesis, while *Viva El Bohio*, a recent zine produced by museum volunteers, outlines both the history of El Bohío and the recent battle to reopen it, and includes material from the museum's as-yet uncatalogued archival collection.[189]

One Sunday afternoon, I joined a radical history walking tour, organised by MoRUS and led by Bill Weinberg, a journalist and long-time Lower East Side resident.[190] Weinberg's tour takes visitors to 'legendary historic sites' across the Lower East Side 'where the community faced off with gentrification and financial power.'[191] These sites include an array of extant, long-lost, and still contested spaces, from thriving gardens like La Plaza Cultural and the Ninth Street Community Garden, to the derelict shell of El Bohío, and even a nondescript apartment building on East Seventh Street, formerly the site of El Jardin de la Esperanza (The Garden of Hope), whose planned demolition in 1999 prompted a now legendary three-month standoff between

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[186] Bill Di Paola and Jem Stern, *Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space* (New York: Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space, 2020), 51, http://www.morusnyc.org/catalog/.

[187] Di Paola and Stern, 51.

[188] Burgum, 'This City Is An Archive', 507.

[189] Archives Committee of the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space, *Viva El Bohio* (New York: Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space, 2021).

[190] For Weinberg's investigative reporting, see Bill Weinberg, *War on the Land: Ecology and Politics in Central America* (London: Zed Books, 1991); Bill Weinberg, *Homage to Chiapas: The New Indigenous Struggles in Mexico* (London: Verso, 2000).

[191] 'Regular Tours: Lower East Side Radical History Tours', Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space (MoRUS), accessed 29 August 2022, https://www.morusnyc.org/sundays-300-radical-alphabet-city-tour/.

residents and the city's bulldozers.[192] Through walking tours like these, argues Burgum, the built environment 'becomes refigured as a palimpsest with a history that belies its current appearance and speaks toward an alternative memory of the space.'[193] Nowhere is this clearer than in La Plaza Cultural, a verdant oasis that is haunted by traces of its tumultuous past. Tucked away in the corner of the garden's recycling area, for example, is a sign honouring the artist Gordon Matta-Clark, who, as I discuss in Chapter One, worked with Charas in 1977 to construct a small amphitheatre out of material salvaged from the many abandoned buildings overlooking what was then a vacant lot (Figure 3).[194] On the other side of La Plaza Cultural, a faded mural, painted as part of the community mural project *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues* (1985), which I examine in Chapter Four, indexes a tense moment in the mid-1980s when the garden had fallen into disrepair and was on the verge of being abandoned once again (Figure 4).

In addition to these physical archival sites, I have drawn on a series of key digital resources throughout this thesis. The subject of the first chapter, for example, is Marlis Momber's long out-of-print documentary *Viva Loisaida* (1978); while a copy of the film is contained within the CENTRO Library & Archives film collection, it is much more accessible thanks to an upload on YouTube.[195] One of the comments underneath this upload is from the son of a former Charas member, whose own efforts at honouring the radical history of the Nuyorican Lower East Side are touched on in the conclusion of this thesis.[196] My interviews with Domínguez and Weissman in New York in early 2022 coincided with the discovery of another important resource: the online exhibition website *La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues: 1985-2017*, which was created by Weissman to mark the belated thirtieth anniversary of the mural project of the same name, (whose list of participating artists included Domínguez).[197] Created in conjunction with a physical exhibition held at the Loisaida Center in 2017, the website includes photographs, ephemera,

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[192] Hannah Jones, 'New Yorkers Attempt to Prevent Garden Demolition (El Jardin de La Esperanza), 1999-2000' (Global Nonviolent Action Database, 3 April 2010), https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/new-yorkers-attempt-prevent-garden-demolition-el-jardin-de-la-esperanza-1999-2000.

[193] Burgum, 'This City Is An Archive', 516.

[194] Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*, 38.

[195] *Viva Loisaida*, directed by Marlis Momber (New York: Gruppe Dokumentation & Tylis, 1978), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHCLQzHH344.

[196] @DasoMonster, 4 August 2015, comment on *Viva Loisaida* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHCLQzHH344), uploaded to YouTube by @SusanLYung, 14 November 2014.

[197] 'La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues: 1985 & 2017', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org.

artists' recollections, and a wealth of material on the project and its legacy.[198] Other digital resources I draw on include Gallery 98, an online database (and marketplace) for Downtown art ephemera, and the 1980s Tax Department photograph collection, held by the New York City Municipal Archives.[199]

Given the inaccessibility of the Downtown Collection at Fales Library and Special Collections, which houses the Martin Wong Papers, I was grateful for the publication of the Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné by Stanford University Libraries in October 2022.[200] This expansive online resource includes new essays (by Margo Machida, Louise Siddons, and others), a narrative chronology, selected bibliography, list of exhibitions, and several primary sources. Particularly invaluable for my own research into Wong's Loisaida paintings is an exhaustive image catalogue that combines digital reproductions with information about each work's provenance, exhibition history, and related publications.[201] In order to attend to the vital materiality of this work, I visited the retrospective exhibition *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief* twice in 2023: first at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, and then again at the Camden Arts Centre in London.[202] *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief* included material from the Martin Wong Papers, much of which has been reproduced in the exhibition's lavish catalogue.[203] In both iterations of the show, Wong's almost life-sized storefront paintings were hung at floor level, echoing their original mode of display at Semaphore Gallery in SoHo in 1986 (discussed in Chapter Three). The embodied encounter facilitated by this curatorial strategy allowed me to speculate on the complex ethical dialogue that this body of work might have set up with its contemporaneous viewers, and to conceptualise the paintings themselves as constituting 'queer archives of feelings', capable of forging generative links between past and present that are, in Hernández's words, neither 'ephemeral nor entirely concrete'.[204]

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198 'The Exhibition', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/the-exhibition2.

See also Jane Weissman, *La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues: 1985 & 2017* (New York: Artmakers Inc., 2017).

199 Gallery 98, New York City, accessed 19 July 2024, https://gallery98.org; 1980s Tax Department Photographs, New York City Municipal Archives, New York City Department of Records and Information Services, accessed 19 July 2024, https://nycrecords.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/SO_d1a15702-bc15-474b-9663-c1820d5ae2e3/.

200 Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong.

201 'Image Catalog', Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/browse.

202 'Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief', KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2023, https://www.kw-berlin.de/en/exhibition-martin-wong/; 'Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief', Camden Art Centre, 2023, https://camdenartcentre.org/whats-on/martin-wong.

203 Gruijthuijsen and Pérez Rubio, *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief*.

204 Hernández, *Archiving an Epidemic*, 9–10.

Clare Hemmings argues that 'historical enquiry and investment [is] an affective dynamic as well as a process of patient interrogation and investigation', and throughout this thesis, I have paid careful attention to moments of disjuncture in the archive, particularly those that have troubled my own 'affective investments' in the Loisaida movement as an exemplary force for change in the neighbourhood.[205] An example of one such moment is a 1982 letter, contained within the CHARAS/El Bohío Records at CENTRO, in which the tenants of El Bohío, who rented studio and meeting space, expressed their dissatisfaction over what they perceived as 'a lack of honest communication' from El Bohío's management about the continued lack of heating in the building (Figure 5). Another is a post-exhibition report by Eileen Whalen, contained in the Museum of Modern Art Library, that discussed disrespectful altercations between Political Art Documentation and Distribution's Gregory Sholette and Charas/El Bohío's Chino García during the organisation of an anti-gentrification exhibition at El Bohío in 1983 (Figure 6).[206] These and other moments of conflict and ambivalence are not there to be reconciled or smoothed over, but speak to the messy realities of urban transformation as it was experienced, negotiated, and felt by different groups in the Lower East Side between the late 1970s and late 1980s. They reflect the shifting power relations that structured people's often contradictory responses to change, and the fact that marginality in one context could translate to a form of relative power or privilege in another. As such, they are suffused with the fraught but ultimately generative potential to expand, rather than close down, meaning.

The rhizomatic archival methodology that I have utilised in this thesis is, in the first instance, a response to the specific challenges of researching the Nuyorican Lower East Side, whose archival footprint, characterised by absence, dispersal, and fragmentation, has made a traditionally linear, hierarchical archival approach impossible. By working laterally rather than hierarchically, I have brought together several different archival spaces in order to assemble an entangled, decentralised network of artworks, photographs, video works, digital images, publications, memories, and other ephemeral and material traces of the Nuyorican Lower East Side and its tumultuous history.[207] By resisting any kind of 'neat historical mapping', to use Catherine Grant's phrase, in favour of exploring more ambivalent and open-ended 'connections felt across time and space', this archival network, despite being the product of exclusionary power structures in the past and present, foregrounds the generative historiographic potential of

[205] Clare Hemmings, *Considering Emma Goldman: Feminist Political Ambivalence and the Imaginative Archive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 5, 3.

[206] This exhibition is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

[207] Duff and Haskell, 'New Uses for Old Records', 46; Cifor, *Viral Cultures*, 30.

practices of recontextualisation and recombination within archives.[208] Taking Ann Cvetkovich's insistence that the 'history of any archive is a history of space' somewhat literally[209], I argue that my archival methodology is aligned with the creative approach to reimagining and transforming urban space that characterised the work of Charas, Maria Domínguez, Marlis Momber, and the rest of the Loisaida movement; for these artists and activists, argues Mario Maffi, developing new spaces and practices of artistic production, social reproduction, and community building was made possible by 'the use and reuse of the city's fragmented objects'.[210]

V. Chapter outlines

Chapter One, 'Doing More with Less: *Viva Loisaida* (1978) and the prefigurative socio-spatial practices of the Loisaida movement', examines a documentary produced by the Lower East Side documentarian Marlis Momber. Originally from Berlin, Momber began documenting what Mario Maffi called 'the lively scene of resistance to decay' in the Nuyorican Lower East Side in the mid-1970s.[211] This work, argued Maffi, presents a vision of the neighbourhood that 'exalts its more communal dimension, its stubborn will to create with the raw materials of experience and in the face of so many adversities.'[212] In this chapter, I analyse *Viva Loisaida* as a rich archive of what I call the prefigurative socio-spatial practices of Nuyorican collectives like Charas and Adopt-a-Building, who sought to collectively transform Loisaida's crumbling built environment and improve its social conditions, while imagining and instituting new forms of collective life in the neighbourhood. In the first half of the chapter, I outline key aspects of these practices that Momber foregrounded in *Viva Loisaida*. In the second half, I place the desire to build a new society in Loisaida into critical dialogue with theories of social change developed by Dan Chodorkoff and Silvia Federici. In contrast to existing readings of *Viva Loisaida*, which prioritise the work's more conventional documentary characteristics, I emphasise the multifaceted visual and narrative strategies that Momber utilised to document the work of the Loisaida movement. Ultimately I argue that the film does not just record but *is itself* an example of the prefigurative socio-spatial practices reshaping Loisaida in the late 1970s, whose transformational aims Momber shared.

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[208] Catherine Grant, *A Time of One's Own: Histories of Feminism in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 8, 2.

[209] Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 245.

[210] Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land*, 294.

[211] Maffi, 35.

[212] Maffi, 35.

Chapter Two, 'The Art of Survival: the visuality of gentrification and the Nuyorican practice of Maria Domínguez, 1983-1987', explores three projects undertaken by the artist Maria Domínguez in Loisaida and Pueblo Nuevo. Described by Maffi as 'one of the most accomplished and exhibited artists of the Puerto Rican community', Domínguez's contributions to art and activism in the Nuyorican Lower East Side have nevertheless been underacknowledged in scholarship.[213] Domínguez became a practicing artist just as the Lower East Side became New York's newest art district, and the disinvestment and abandonment that had characterised the 1970s gave way to gradual capital reinvestment and gentrification. Drawing on Nicholas Mirzoeff's notion of 'visuality', which he describes as 'a discursive practice for rendering and regulating the real that has material effects', in this chapter I argue that gentrification is reliant on colonising modes of seeing, representing, and inhabiting space, and that dominant representations of the Lower East Side helped legitimise gentrification by depicting the neighbourhood as 'empty', thus erasing the presence of its low-income Nuyorican residents.[214] Domínguez's multifaceted practice, which encompassed muralism, painting, sculpture, and curation, and was undertaken in collaboration with activists and artists such as Pueblo Nuevo, Charas, and Marlis Momber, sought to critique and contest these exclusionary representations, and the different forms of social, cultural, and spatial displacement they facilitated. By centring Nuyorican voices, cultural forms, and socio-spatial practices in projects that that occupied contested spaces across the neighbourhood, I argue that Domínguez countered the erasure of the Lower East Side's Nuyorican community, insisting, despite assumptions to the contrary, that 'We're still here!'[215]

Chapter Three, 'An Archive of Ambivalence: Martin Wong's Loisaida paintings, 1982-1986', turns to Martin Wong's meticulous depictions of the Nuyorican Lower East Side's changing built environment. Wong's Loisaida paintings, which encompass a series of erotically charged depictions of derelict tenements and vacant lots created in the early 1980s, and a melancholic series of shuttered *iglesias* (churches), *botánicas* (religious stores), and other Nuyorican storefronts painted between 1984 and 1986, have been described by the queer theorist Roy Pérez as 'one of the most prolific visual chronicles of 1980s Nuyorico'.[216] In this chapter, I argue that Wong's Loisaida paintings constitute an informal archive of the changing Nuyorican Lower East Side,

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[213] Maffi, 37.

[214] Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'The Right to Look', *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011): 476, https://doi.org/10.1086/659354.

[215] Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

[216] Roy Pérez, 'The Glory That Was Wrong: El "Chino Malo" Approximates Nuyorico', *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 25, no. 3 (2 September 2015): 280, https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2015.1124665.

which tracks the shift from disinvestment to gentrification as it was interpreted by an artist who moved between overlapping, and often conflicting, Lower East Side publics, including the East Village art scene and the graffiti scene centred around the poet Miguel Piñero. Drawing on Ann Cvetkovich's contention that cultural texts are 'repositories of feelings and emotions which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception', I examine the Loisaida paintings as expressions of Wong's ambivalent feelings towards both Loisaida's derelict spaces, and the different social and cultural worlds that were affected by, and implicated in, the neighbourhood's transformation.[217] I argue that the storefront paintings in particular, which were engaged in a complex dialogue with the recent past and vanishing present at their moment of production and display, continue to invite what Stuart Hall calls an 'active, dialogic, relation to the questions which the present puts to the past'.[218]

Chapter Four, 'Towards a Counterpublic Art: *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues*, community muralism, and activist art in mid-1980s Loisaida', examines a political mural project that was initiated by the multiracial, women-led mural collective Artmakers in 1985. Prompted by a desire to reinvigorate politicised community muralism in New York and restore La Plaza Cultural, a once-thriving community garden in Loisaida that had fallen into disrepair, Artmakers, in collaboration with Charas, assembled over thirty artists to create murals dealing with gentrification and police violence in the Lower East Side, apartheid in South Africa, U.S. military intervention in Central America, and the importance of feminist organising in these struggles. Described by Lucy Lippard at the time as 'the most seamless community/artists social event I've seen in NYC for years', *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues* (1985) brought together Loisaida residents and community organisers with what Artmakers called 'artists of conviction', an inclusive term that encompassed veteran community muralists, younger activist artists, and politically engaged artists who were new to existing art/activist networks.[219] In this chapter, I examine the project's planning and production stages alongside its reception and legacy. Drawing on the work of Nancy Fraser, David Featherstone, and Ewa Majewska, I argue that *La Lucha* fostered what I call counterpublics of solidarity, creating a space in which an expansive coalition of artists, activists, and residents from across (and beyond) the Lower East Side could reclaim an important community site in Loisaida, express and strengthen collective opposition to

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[217] Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 7.

[218] Stuart Hall, 'Constituting an Archive', *Third Text* 15, no. 54 (March 2001): 92, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820108576903.

[219] Lucy R. Lippard, 'Hot Art in the Summertime', *In These Times*, 2 October 1985, 21.

gentrification and police violence, and connect these local struggles with wider solidarity movements in the U.S., South Africa, and Latin America.[220]

The **conclusion** opens with a screening of the video artist Paul Garrin's footage from the Tompkins Square Park Riot, held at El Bohío in November 1988. Taking place in August 1988, the riot saw violent clashes between police officers and Lower East Side residents who were resisting the forced eviction of a sprawling homeless encampment that had grown as the city's housing crisis deepened. The riot marked a turning point in the struggle for space in the Lower East Side, inaugurating an aggressive new phase of neoliberal urbanisation characterised by the criminalisation and displacement of growing numbers of minoritised residents (including the racialised poor, the unhoused, and people living with HIV/AIDS), and the selling-off of city-owned property across the neighbourhood, including many important gardens, homesteads, and art spaces. Having been having been at the core of the Lower East Side's networks of resistance throughout the 1970s and 1980s, I argue that Garrin's screening at El Bohío highlighted the key role that Nuyorican spaces continued to play in the new coalitions of housing activists, political artists, squatters, and AIDS activists that emerged in the wake of the riot. These 'uneasy alliances' between very different Lower East Side constituencies employed a range of activities to hold the neighbourhood's gentrification at bay for as long as possible.[221] I end this thesis with a consideration of the legacy and memory of the Nuyorican Lower East Side by discussing a contemporary campaign calling for the community takeover of El Bohío, which, as of the present day, is no longer owned by Gregg Singer but remains vacant, its crumbling hulk symbolising both a turbulent past and an as-yet-unwritten future.

[220] See Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80, https://doi.org/10.2307/466240; David Featherstone, *Solidarity: Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism* (London: Zed Books, 2012); Ewa Majewska, *Feminist Antifascism: Counterpublics of the Common* (London: Verso, 2021).

[221] Jay Blotcher, 'Alphabet City Finishing School: The Education of an AIDS Activist', in *Resistance: A Radical Political and Social History of the Lower East Side*, ed. Clayton Patterson, Joe Flood, and Alan W. Moore (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 586.

Chapter One. Doing More with Less: *Viva Loisaida* (1978) and the prefigurative socio-spatial practices of the Loisaida movement

1.1 Introduction

Marlis Momber's documentary *Viva Loisaida* (1978) offers a vivid glimpse of Lower Manhattan in the wake of the fiscal crisis that brought New York City to the brink of bankruptcy in 1975. The film opens with a series of elevated shots of architectural landmarks south of Fourteenth Street. Even at this distance, the dilapidation of the city is palpable. In one shot, a grimy tenement building squats in the shadow of the World Trade Center (Figure 7). In another, the wreckage of a broken-down bus lies abandoned at the side of the road (Figure 8). After these brief establishing shots, Momber brings the viewer down to street level, turning her attention to *Viva Loisaida*'s main subject. In a series of medium and low-angle shots, she trains her camera on the crumbling built environment of a section of the Lower East Side north of Houston Street, known to its predominantly Puerto Rican residents as Loisaida. A shot of a rubbish-filled lot surrounded by a cluster of burned-out buildings cuts to a series of boarded up storefronts and abandoned tenements, whose rows of broken windows expose their dark, empty interiors to the street (Figs. 9-11). If Lower Manhattan is pictured in this opening sequence as a bleak and forbidding place, somewhere to observe, if at all, only from a distance, then Loisaida, with its scarred and fragmented urban landscape, appears to represent the barely beating heart of this desolation.

These opening shots document the very real material conditions of the Nuyorican Lower East Side in the late 1970s. This was a period in which the state bodies that were formed to manage New York's spiralling debt, such as the Municipal Assistance Corporation and the Emergency Financial Control Board (both of which had close links to the city's corporate lenders and real estate industry), implemented austerity measures that slashed municipal services, while property owners in the worst-hit parts of the city began walking away from their buildings, allowing them to be taken over by the city.[222] The result, as Momber shows, was the proliferation of abandoned tenements, rubbish-filled lots, and boarded-up shops, whose deterioration indexed the constrained housing, employment, and educational opportunities afforded to the neighbourhood's low-income residents; the anthropologist Dan Chodorkoff, who worked in the neighbourhood in the 1970s and 1980s, estimates that around 70% of Loisaida's housing stock was either abandoned or dilapidated, and youth unemployment was around 40%.[223] Aware of the

[222] Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*, 2.

[223] Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 111; Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 7.

risk of reifying an impression of the neighbourhood as an inherently ruined space, Momber animates each of these opening shots with the movement of people. A group of children chase each other through a rubbish-filled lot, turning the vacant space between buildings into a makeshift playground (Figure 9). A teenager runs across one of Loisaida's wide avenues, seemingly oblivious to the boarded-up shopfront and dilapidated tenements that stretch into the distance behind them (Figure 10). This constant movement, combined with the speed with which these shots are edited together, means that the viewer's gaze is continually pulled away from Loisaida's derelict built environment and towards the residents of the neighbourhood who carve out forms of collective life in the midst of these shattered spaces.

As Momber makes her way through Loisaida, her camera focuses in closer and closer on the people of the neighbourhood, and the different ways in which they occupy space. A series of close-ups show groups of Lower East Siders socialising in Tompkins Square Park: in one shot, a group of old-timers in trilbies and thick-rimmed glasses sit around a table playing cards; in another, a pair of young lovers embrace, smiling coyly at the camera when they realise they are being watched (Figs. 12 & 13). In the voiceover that accompanies this sequence, the Nuyorican poet and activist Bimbo Rivas, who coined the term 'Loisaida' in a poem in the early 1970s, describes his deep love for this 'community that no-one wants'.[224] 'How could there be decay and there could be growth in the same place?' wonders Rivas, as the camera pans across the crowd gathered in front of Tompkins Square Park's bandshell for a celebration of the life and work of a recently deceased local artist named Sarah Berman Beach (Figure 14).[225] He pauses for a moment before answering his own question: 'It's because *creativity* is taking place here.'[226] As if to underscore this point, as Rivas speaks, Momber's camera cuts from the crowd in Tompkins Square Park to a brightly coloured mural painted onto the side of a building (Figure 15).

With this opening sequence, which lasts just under two minutes, Momber, a white German photographer who moved to Loisaida from midtown Manhattan in the mid-1970s, introduces the viewer to the street level, community-focused perspective that characterises *Viva Loisaida*. This perspective contrasts with the images of fires and burned-out buildings that dominated newspaper and television reports of poor neighbourhoods such as the Lower East Side or the South Bronx in the late 1970s.[227] While highlighting these neighbourhoods' dilapidated built

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[224] *Viva Loisaida*, directed by Marlis Momber (New York: Gruppe Dokumentation & Tylis, 1978), 1:38-1:40, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHCLQzHH344.

[225] *Viva Loisaida*, 1:42-1:47.

[226] *Viva Loisaida*, 1:47-1:50. Emphasis added.

[227] Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 192.

environments, these reports, in Christopher Mele's words, emphasised the apparent prevalence of 'crime, fires, drug abuse, and juvenile delinquency among other vices.'[228] This sensationalised reportage was bolstered by fictional depictions of New York in films such as *Taxi Driver* (1976), *The Warriors* (1979), and *Fort Apache the Bronx* (1981), which, as Kim Phillips-Fein puts it, 'portrayed New York as a sea of filth and despair, an urban cesspool.'[229] Rejecting the dehumanising gaze of these narratives, Momber instead focused on those who lived in Loisaida, and the work they undertook to collectively transform the neighbourhood's derelict spaces into sites for artmaking, social reproduction, and community building. Commissioned by German public television and filmed in collaboration with a fellow resident named Tyrone Jackson, who acted as Momber's guide to the neighbourhood and the film's narrator, *Viva Loisaida* offers one of the most comprehensive accounts of the coalition of residents, artists, and activists known as the Loisaida movement.[230] Although the film is now more widely accessible, thanks to an upload to YouTube, it has been screened infrequently in public since its completion in 1978.[231] As such, *Viva Loisaida* itself has received relatively little scholarly attention, and those who have discussed the film focus primarily on its content, with little attention paid to its aesthetic or narrative characteristics.[232]

In this chapter, I offer a more in-depth analysis of *Viva Loisaida*. I contend that while the film offers a rich archive of what I call the prefigurative socio-spatial practices that flourished in Loisaida in the late 1970s, it is in and of itself a key example of these practices; through Momber's non-hierarchical, non-linear approach to documenting the neighbourhood, its residents, and their activities, *Viva Loisaida* embodied many of the same democratic and participatory principles as the artists and activists whose work she documented. This work included renovating derelict tenements, creating community gardens and murals, developing renewable energy systems, and staging public performances of Nuyorican music, poetry, and dance. Some of these activities were ephemeral, while others were sustained. They were initiated mostly by Loisaida's Puerto Rican residents, who brought a range of skills and experience to their work; many participants also worked on other projects in the neighbourhood. Their

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[228] Mele, 192, 217.

[229] Phillips-Fein, *Fear City*, 4.

[230] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 106.

[231] See *Viva Loisaida*, directed by Marlis Momber (New York: Gruppe Dokumentation & Tylis, 1978), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHCLQzHH344.

[232] See, for example, Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 114; Agustin Pérez Rubio, '... It's Not Really What You Think: Martin Wong and the Recreation of the Sociopolitical Landscape of Loisaida', in *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief*, ed. Krist Gruijthuijsen and Agustín Pérez Rubio (Cologne, Germany: Walther König, 2022), 135.

motivations varied, from everyday survival to the creation of new spaces of artmaking and community organising, to the development of permanent solutions to the multiple crises of employment, housing, and education in the neighbourhood. In collectively describing these activities as prefigurative socio-spatial practices, I argue that, despite differences of scale and longevity, each of them transformed Loisaida's derelict spaces in some way, not only to ensure the community's survival, but as a way of imagining and instituting new forms of society in the neighbourhood in the here-and-now. Drawing on critical geography, art history, and radical social theory, the term, whose formulation I outline below, highlights the co-constitutive relationship between the social and the spatial, the potential for different practices within the built environment to intervene in this relationship, and the prefigurative nature of much of this work.

Instituting new practices that could challenge the oppressive socio-spatial order in Loisaida was an increasingly urgent political project in the late 1970s. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, New York's 1975 fiscal crisis took place against the backdrop of larger social, political, and economic shifts in the U.S. In this context, the Lower East Side became an early testing ground for new forms of urban restructuring; as Andrew Strombeck writes, '[d]ecayed buildings made the invisible problems of the welfare state's recession, the rising practices of self-management, and the ascendance of private markets sharply visible.'[233] Rebecca Amato contends that support for austerity programmes in racialised neighbourhoods like the Lower East Side and the South Bronx as a way of solving the fiscal crisis was dependent on the longstanding 'assertion that poor and minority populations were either architects of their own destruction or unjustified drains on public funds.'[234] For many of those working in the city's media, government, and financial institutions, the Lower East Side's crumbling built environment offered an accurate reflection of the perceived worth of those who lived there.[235] Derelict spaces were produced through an intentional process of capital and state disinvestment that aimed to 'devalue and deplete urban areas and their residents, only to spur growth' at a later stage, when profits could be guaranteed.[236] The Loisaida movement's socio-spatial practices were thus

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[233] Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*, 13.

[234] Amato, 'On Empty Spaces, Silence, and the Pause', 248.

[235] On this conflation in other urban contexts in the U.S., see George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011), 245.

[236] Amato, 'On Empty Spaces, Silence, and the Pause', 248.

On the centrality of these processes of uneven development to capitalist urbanisation, see also Prentiss A. Dantzler, 'The Urban Process under Racial Capitalism: Race, Anti-Blackness, and Capital Accumulation', *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and the City* 2, no. 2 (June 2021): 113–34, https://doi.org/10.1080/26884674.2021.1934201.

implicitly anti-capitalist, in the sense that they sought to undermine what John Holloway calls 'the apparently insuperable rigidity of social [and spatial] relations under capitalism', and collectively build a new, more egalitarian society in Loisaida from the ground up.[237]

In this chapter, after a short section outlining my theoretical framework, I examine the work of two community groups that feature prominently in *Viva Loisaida*: Charas and the Eleventh Street Movement. Through a detailed examination of the ways in which these groups' practices are depicted in *Viva Loisaida*, I outline the participatory and democratic approach to effecting socio-spatial transformation that underpinned the work of the Loisaida movement in the late 1970s. In this section, I also discuss a collaborative project developed by the artist Gordon Matta-Clark in Loisaida at around the same time that Momber was filming *Viva Loisaida*. A key participant in the alternative art movement that flourished in the industrial lofts of nearby SoHo in the late 1960s and 1970s, I contend that Matta-Clark's mostly unrealised *Resource Center and Environmental Youth Program for Loisaida* (1977-78), undertaken in partnership with Loisaida activists, exemplifies the possibilities and challenges of artistic collaboration across difference. In the second half of the chapter, I consider the broader implications of Momber's approach to documenting the Loisaida movement. I argue that *Viva Loisaida* makes visible several distinct visions of a more egalitarian society that was being imagined and instituted in Loisaida in the late 1970s. Drawing on the theoretical work of Dan Chodorkoff and Silvia Federici, I analyse two of these visions in detail, identifying points of resonance and dissonance between them. The first was characterised by what Chodorkoff calls 'an ecological sensibility', and was premised on the development of collectivised, albeit highly masculine, new forms of productive labour in Loisaida.[238] The second foregrounded social reproduction through what Federici calls 'commoning initiatives', an ongoing process of sharing resources that reaffirmed the central role played by women in sustaining and transforming collective life in the neighbourhood.[239]

A key argument of this chapter is that through the production of *Viva Loisaida*, Momber developed a collaborative, non-hierarchical mode of documentary filmmaking that did not simply record the prefigurative practices of the Loisaida movement, but sought to meaningfully support this work by enacting many of the same principles in a different artistic medium. As such, I pay close attention to the context and conditions of *Viva Loisaida*'s production, its choice of subjects and interlocutors, the combination of music, sound, and image, and the other

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[237] John Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 79.

[238] Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 92.

[239] Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis, 'Commons Against and Beyond Capitalism', in *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, by Silvia Federici (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019), 89.

aesthetic and narrative strategies that Momber employed to document the neighbourhood, its people, and their practices. Like the film itself, which is structured around a non-linear tour of Loisaida by Tyrone Jackson that takes in many sites across the neighbourhood, this chapter does not move chronologically through *Viva Loisaida*, but instead analyses key scenes and sequences, periodically returning to earlier moments in order to approach them from a different angle.

1.2 Prefigurative socio-spatial practices

As my analysis of the opening sequence of *Viva Loisaida* demonstrates, by focusing her attention on the different activities that took place within Loisaida's dilapidated built environment, Marlis Momber emphasised that the neighbourhood was much more than just a pile of empty buildings. Momber's understanding of space as something mutable and open to reconfiguration was shared by the artists and activists whose work she recorded. *Viva Loisaida* makes clear that while the work of the Loisaida movement was motivated by the proliferation of abandoned buildings in the late 1970s, the structures themselves also offered an almost endless supply of raw material for these activities. Physical elements from existing building were recycled and recontextualised in the production of new spaces. Vacant lots, for example, were transformed into both improvised playgrounds and well-planned community gardens, whose planters and benches were made of wood and metal salvaged from nearby buildings. Burned-out tenements, once owned by negligent slumlords, were gutted and redeveloped into comfortable urban homesteads, which offered safe and affordable housing for low-income residents. Cracked walls became surfaces for the creation of painted murals that expressed the collective needs and interests of local residents. Run-down street corners doubled as sites for everyday socialising and impromptu public performance. Abandoned schools and lofts were turned into cultural and community centres, their expansive interior volumes repurposed for use as studios, galleries, and meeting places. 'In an environment of concrete and decaying tenements', writes Dan Chodorkoff, derelict spaces 'offered valuable sites for recreation, education, economic development, and community cultural activity'.[240]

I argue that for the Loisaida movement, the transformation of the neighbourhood's derelict spaces was inseparable from a simultaneous overhaul of its frayed social relations. In foregrounding this socio-spatial relationship as a key thread running through *Viva Loisaida*, I draw on scholarship in critical geography and art history that highlights the co-constitutive relationship between the social and the spatial, and its articulation in a range of practices. Henri

[240] Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 30.

Lefebvre, for example, argued that space is a social product: 'every society […] produces a space, its own space',[241] through a dialectic between representations of space (typically assembled by those in power), perceptions of space (shaped by repeated practices in the built environment), and subjective experiences of space as it is actually lived (and potentially reimagined).[242] Lefebvre's insistence that lived experiences of space are always 'directional, situational or relational'[243] aligns with Doreen Massey's argument that space is 'the product of interrelations', a sphere of 'coexisting heterogeneity' that is never settled but is 'always under construction.'[244] For Massey, just as social relations produce space, so spatial relations in turn produce (and reproduce) the social; within the 'dynamic simultaneity which is space', wrote Massey, 'phenomena may be placed in relationship to one another in such a way that new social effects are provoked.'[245] As Rosalyn Deutsche has shown, artistic practices that take place within the built environment play a significant role in provoking new social effects by shaping perceptions and lived experiences of space.[246] By participating in the production of 'meanings, uses, and forms for the city', argues Deutsche, artists can 'help secure consent' for the existing socio-spatial order; they can 'also question and resist those operations' by 'revealing the suppressed contradictions within urban processes'.[247]

As an artistic project that involved many members of the Loisaida community and was deeply invested in the collective struggle to transform the neighbourhood's socio-spatial relations, *Viva Loisaida* encompasses aspects of what is often referred to in art history and art criticism as social practice, socially engaged art, or participatory practice.[248] Larne Abse Gogarty argues that despite important differences between these terms, the artistic projects to which they refer share key characteristics:

> [They] are collaborative, ephemeral and usually involve an encounter between artists, and a group of non-artists that may be identified with a particular social group. The work is process-based and durational, usually coming in the form of a project that analyses issues

[241] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 31.

[242] Lefebvre, 38–39.

[243] Lefebvre, 42.

[244] Massey, *For Space*, 9.

[245] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 4.

[246] Deutsche, *Evictions*, 56.

[247] Deutsche, 56.

[248] For a more detailed discussion of the differences between these terms, see Larne Abse Gogarty, *Usable Pasts: Social Practice and State Formation in American Art* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2021), 8–12.

> binding the group together, or alternatively will act as a touchstone for collaboration between previously unfamiliar individuals.[249]

Reflecting the co-constitutive nature of the social and the spatial, social practice is often site-specific.[250] By employing 'the varied forms offered by the expanded field of contemporary art', argue Gregory Sholette and Chlöe Bass, social practice offers 'a collaborative, collective, and participatory social method for bringing about real-world instances of progressive justice, community building, and transformation.'[251]

While drawing on art historical scholarship in my analysis of *Viva Loisaida*, I am mindful, as Claire Bishop has argued, that 'the point of comparison and reference' for participatory projects often 'returns to contemporary art' as the site of meaning and value: 'The aspiration is always to move beyond art, but never to the point of comparison with comparable projects in the social domain.'[252] In my discussion of Gordon Matta-Clark's Loisaida project, I argue that the artist's relationship with New York's art worlds in the 1970s, and his reputation as a forerunner of the kinds of participatory strategies that characterise contemporary social practice, have shaped interpretations of the project in ways that erase the work of the mostly Nuyorican activists with whom he collaborated. In contrast to this, as I discuss throughout this chapter, *Viva Loisaida*'s main reference points were the myriad artistic and non-artistic practices through which Loisaida's socio-spatial domain was already being reimagined and reconfigured, prior to (and regardless of) Momber's involvement in the neighbourhood. Some of these practices were driven by artists (including the film itself), but many others were not. Some practices maintained a division between those with certain forms of expertise and those without, but there was typically an emphasis on troubling these boundaries. Practices ranged from routine, everyday activities through which individuals navigated Loisaida's oppressive socio-spatial order, to sustained

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[249] Gogarty, 9.

For more in-depth theorisations of the social turn in contemporary art, see also Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995); Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Denyse Beaulieu (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 1998); Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004); Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents', *Artforum*, February 2006; Grant Kester, 'Another Turn: A Response to Claire Bishop', *Artforum*, May 2006; Claire Bishop, 'Claire Bishop Responds', *Artforum*, May 2006; Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).

[250] Cara Courage, *Arts in Place: The Arts, the Urban and Social Practice* (London: Routledge, 2017), 1, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315659299.

[251] Gregory Sholette, Chlöe Bass, and Social Practice Queens, 'Art as Social Action (A Preface)', in *Art as Social Action: An Introduction to the Principles and Practices of Teaching Social Practice Art*, ed. Gregory Sholette, Chlöe Bass, and Social Practice Queens (New York: Allworth Press, 2018), 12.

[252] Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 19.

collective activities through which the neighbourhood could be permanently transformed.[253] Momber thus focused on what Magally Miranda and Kyle Laneth-McKinley, in a recent essay examining social practice and gentrification in contemporary Los Angeles, call 'the variety of concrete activities that all social groups are involved in as part of their collective reproduction or survival.'[254] Crucially, Momber was not concerned with 'valoriz[ing] *as artwork* the variety of such practices', but highlighting that they were transformative in and of themselves.[255]

In this chapter, I argue that through their socio-spatial practices, the Loisaida movement enacted what Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin call a prefigurative politics: 'the *deliberate* experimental implementation of *desired* future social relations and practices in the here-and-now.'[256] Artists, activists, and residents sought to build what Tyrone Jackson, *Viva Loisaida*'s narrator, called 'a new society' in the Nuyorican Lower East Side, but they understood that if this new society was to be democratic and genuinely participatory, then the practices through which it was built had to embody these principles as well.[257] A key feature of many grassroots, anti-capitalist social movements, Sherry B. Ortner argues that prefiguration involves:

> not only opposing power and injustice in society at large, but also, at the same time, creating a radically egalitarian social world within their activist groups that "prefigures" the world they hope to make in the future.[258]

Prefiguration is always utopian in that it offers, in Chodorkoff's words, 'a projection of that which does not yet exist.'[259] *Viva Loisaida* foregrounds the prefigurative aspects of practices such

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[253] For a discussion of the different scales of social practice outside of an art context, see Ortner, *High Religion*, 194–95.

[254] Magally Miranda and Kyle Lane-McKinley, 'Artwashing, or, Between Social Practice and Social Reproduction', A Blade of Grass, 1 February 2017, https://www.abladeofgrass.org/fertile-ground/artwashing-social-practice-social-reproduction/.

[255] Miranda and Lane-McKinley. Emphasis in original.

[256] Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin, *Prefigurative Politics: Building Tomorrow Today* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2020), 36. Emphasis in original.

[257] *Viva Loisaida*, 11:39-11:54.

[258] Sherry B. Ortner, *Screening Social Justice: Brave New Films and Documentary Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 71.

See also Carl Boggs, 'Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers' Control', *Radical America* 11, no. 6 (1977): 99–122; Benjamin Franks, 'Between Anarchism and Marxism: The Beginnings and Ends of the Schism …', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 17, no. 2 (June 2012): 207–27, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2012.676867; Ruth Kinna, *The Government of No One: The Theory and Practice of Anarchism* (London: Pelican, 2019), 171–72; Paul Raekstad, 'Prefiguration: Between Anarchism and Marxism', in *The Future Is Now: An Introduction to Prefigurative Politics*, ed. Lara Monticelli (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2022), 32–46; Ortner, *Screening Social Justice*, 71–72.

[259] Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 139.

as homesteading, community gardening, and muralism by emphasising their reliance on non-hierarchical community participation and a reciprocal sharing of knowledge, resources, and time. This is not to suggest that the physical spaces that were produced through these practices were not hugely important, but to highlight that the Loisaida movement's 'ideals and visions for the future', to use Lina Monticelli's phrase, were inseparable from 'the strategies through which [they] pursu[ed] them'.[260]

By weaving together an array of prefigurative socio-spatial practices in a non-linear, non-hierarchical fashion, *Viva Loisaida* offers several distinct visions of a more egalitarian society that was being imagined and instituted in Loisaida in the late 1970s. In order to analyse these prefigurative visions of the future in more detail, in the second half of this chapter, I turn to the work of the social theorists Dan Chodorkoff and Silvia Federici.[261] Chodorkoff collaborated with the Loisaida movement in the late 1970s, and saw in their activities the embodiment of a praxis-oriented approach known as social ecology.[262] His work offers arguably the most sustained ethnographic account of the Loisaida movement in the late 1970s, in whose activities he identified an 'ecological sensibility', rooted in sustainable self-reliance, that is visible also in *Viva Loisaida*; from this ecological perspective, the development of a new society was premised on the expansion of large-scale employment programmes in Loisaida which offered young men in particular new forms of meaningful, collectivised wage labour through the construction of urban homesteads, community gardens, and renewable energy systems.[263] Like Chodorkoff, Federici argues that the most effective social movements are both 'constructive and prefigurative.'[264] Rooted in a feminist standpoint, however, Federici foregrounds the reproductive significance of 'commoning initiatives'[265] such as community gardening or squatting, arguing that the maintenance of collective life in the face of its destruction invariably produces radical 'new forms

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[260] Lara Monticelli, 'Prefigurative Politics Within, Despite and Beyond Contemporary Capitalism', in *The Future Is Now: An Introduction to Prefigurative Politics*, ed. Lara Monticelli (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2022), 18.

[261] Like the notion of prefiguration itself, there is a productive tension between Marxism and anarchism in Chodorkoff and Federici's work. See for example Dan Chodorkoff, 'An Interview with Dan Chodorkoff', interview by Lily Huang, *HTMLGIANT* (blog), 1 June 2011, http://htmlgiant.com/author-spotlight/an-interview-with-dan-chodorkoff/; Jacklyn Weier, review of *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, by Silvia Federici, *The AAG Review of Books*, 9 April 2020, https://doi.org/10.1080/2325548X.2020.1722464; Josefina L. Martínez, 'Feminism and Communism: A Debate with Silvia Federici', *Left Voice*, 17 July 2022, https://www.leftvoice.org/feminism-and-communism-a-debate-with-silvia-federici/.

[262] Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 30.

[263] Chodorkoff, 92.

[264] Silvia Federici, 'Feeling Powers Growing—An Interview with Silvia Federici', interview by Nick Montgomery and carla bergman, in *Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times*, by Nick Montgomery and carla bergman (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 244.

[265] Federici and Caffentzis, 'Commons Against and Beyond Capitalism', 89.

of social organization'.[266] This feminist perspective opens up an alternative vision of Loisaida's future that is present—but submerged—in *Viva Loisaida*, which reaffirms the centrality of women as agents of change in the neighbourhood.

1.3 Work in progress: transforming the spatial and the social in Loisaida

In this section, I take a closer look at several of the socio-spatial practices that were documented in *Viva Loisaida*, in order to better understand the Loisaida movement's collaborative and participatory approach to effecting socio-spatial transformation. In a recent oral history interview with Village Preservation, Marlis Momber, who was living and working as a fashion photographer in midtown Manhattan in the mid-1970s, recalls that she first encountered the Lower East Side in a taxi on her way back from LaGuardia airport after a shoot in 1975.[267] Driving through the neighbourhood's dilapidated built environment, which reminded her of 'the burnt out and rubble bricks strewn lots and properties and houses' of the postwar Berlin of her youth, Momber recalls getting a glimpse of 'this mural, this most beautiful mural', that was painted onto a derelict building along Delancey Street.[268] The mural in question was *Work, Education, and Struggle: Seeds for Progressive Change* (1975), directed by the Asian American artist Alan Okada under the auspices of the community mural organisation Cityarts Workshop, which occupied the entire side wall of a six-storey tenement on the corner of Delancey and Forsyth Streets (Figure 16).

Momber recalls asking the taxi driver to stop so that she could take a photograph:

> He says, "I ain't going there." I said, "What do you mean you ain't going there? This is New York City. This is like, you know, five minutes away from where you're supposed to take me on Fifth Avenue and 25th Street." "I ain't going there."[269]

The taxi driver's refusal reflected a negative impression of the neighbourhood that many New Yorkers shared at the time; undeterred, Momber collected a camera from her midtown studio and cycled back down to Delancey Street to photograph the mural. On the way, she recalls seeing several other murals painted onto abandoned buildings across the Lower East Side.[270] As Momber began taking photographs in Loisaida, her view of the neighbourhood expanded, and

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[266] Silvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019), 3.

[267] Momber, 'Oral History Interview', 4.

[268] Momber, 5, 4.

[269] Momber, 4.

[270] Momber, 4.

she quickly realised that the murals were just one of many art and activist practices underway in Loisaida in the late 1970s.[271] As Dan Chodorkoff recalls, 'A walk through the streets of Loisaida in 1978 revealed some remarkable things if one knew where to look beyond the garbage-strewn lots and abandoned buildings.'[272]

Realising that she now had 'the full choice of getting involved' with this grassroots movement in Loisaida, Momber gave up her career as a fashion photographer to become a full-time documentarian of the Lower East Side.[273] She began recording many aspects of life in the neighbourhood, and making these photographs available to local organisations to support their own endeavours, working with Cityarts Workshop, the Catholic Worker, and many other housing, educational, and religious groups.[274] Through Cityarts, Momber was introduced to Tyrone Jackson, a former member of the Black Panther Party, who started off as Momber's guide to the neighbourhood, but became an important artistic collaborator (and later, the father of her son).[275] The pair initially collaborated on slideshows that were used by Cityarts for fundraising events, with Momber providing the photographs and Jackson assembling a soundtrack of music and ambient sounds recorded on the streets of the neighbourhood.[276] These early collaborations eventually developed into *Viva Loisaida*. Through her connections with the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, Momber secured funding from German public television for a forty-five minute documentary about the neighbourhood.[277] Working under the collective name *Tylis*, a portmanteau of their first names, Momber directed *Viva Loisaida*, while Jackson narrated the film.

Viva Loisaida documents a neighbourhood bursting with cultural and political energy. The opening sequence records an impromptu memorial held in Tompkins Square Park in honour of Sarah Berman Beach, a local Jewish artist who had lived in the Lower East Side since the early twentieth century, when the neighbourhood's Jewish population, comprised mostly of immigrants and refugees from Eastern Europe, was at its peak.[278] In addition to a performance space, the park's graffiti-covered bandshell has been transformed into a makeshift gallery for

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[271] Momber, 6.

[272] Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 95.

[273] Momber, 'Oral History Interview', 4.

[274] Momber, 45.

[275] Momber, 6.

[276] Momber, 6.

[277] Momber, 52–53.

[278] See Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land*, 119–28.

Berman Beach's paintings, which depict seven decades of strikes, housing struggles, and anti-war demonstrations in the neighbourhood (Figure 17). This scene indexes the Lower East Side's long-standing culture of resistance to exploitation in housing and employment, expressed through collective actions such as rent strikes, pickets, and protests that were typically initiated and maintained by women, and crossed religious, racial, and ethnic lines.[279] The film closes with scenes from the Nuyorican Poets Café, showcasing Puerto Rican *bomba y plena* music, spoken word poetry, and a performance by the musician Edgard Rivera.[280] Along with other artist-run spaces, such as the New Rican Village in Loisaida and Taller Boricua uptown in El Barrio, the Nuyorican Poets Café helped shape the artistic and literary character of the Nuyorican movement of the late 1960s and 1970s.[281] Another important strand of the Nuyorican movement was the radical Puerto Rican direct action group the Young Lords, whose New York chapter was founded in the Lower East Side's Tompkins Square Park in 1969.[282] Through a series of high-profile occupations of religious and healthcare institutions in El Barrio and the South Bronx, the Young Lords directly contested the discrimination faced by communities of colour in the city's Puerto Rican *barrios* (neighbourhoods).[283]

Viva Loisaida is steeped in the cultural and political energy of the Lower East Side's longstanding cultures of resistance, and the more recent Nuyorican movement in New York, but the film also foregrounds the uniquely participatory and experimental character of much art and activism in Loisaida in the late 1970s. The neighbourhood's ruined built environment indexed a closing down of options for survival for many residents, but it also created literal and symbolic openings in the urban fabric that the Loisaida movement took advantage of. As Momber put it, 'what was plight to casual visitors was actually a work in progress—saving buildings to us. Saving the streets, saving the parks, the empty lots, turning them into gardens. Playgrounds.'[284] What *Viva Loisaida* makes clear is that in the wake of the fiscal crisis, Loisaida had become an ever-changing 'urban laboratory', in Timo Schrader's words, where residents with a wide range of creative, technical, and organisational skills and experiences innovated to become 'the architects of their own neighborhood', capable of 'tackl[ing] a range of systemic urban ills simultaneously' through prefigurative socio-spatial practices that espoused an ethos of open and fluid participation,

[279] Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 57, 60.

[280] *Viva Loisaida*, 35:45-40:52.

[281] Noel, *In Visible Movement*, 75.

[282] Fernández, *The Young Lords*, 88.

[283] Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 184.

[284] Momber, 'Oral History Interview', 39.

blurred the boundaries between ostensibly distinct spheres of activity, and emphasised collaboration across difference.[285]

1.3.1 Charas as catalyst for the Loisaida movement

A scene that appears two-thirds of the way through *Viva Loisaida* documents a meeting of the activist collective Charas inside their headquarters, a partially renovated loft space at 95 Avenue B.[286] The scene's static opening shot shows one end of the loft's large open-plan space (Figure 18). Architectural features such as wooden parquet flooring and an embossed tin ceiling index the space's previous industrial use. Pinned to the whitewashed walls are posters and floorplans. A large banner facing out onto the street obscures half of the central windowpane, but daylight pours into the space through the loft's other windows. In the centre of this space, a group of men are seated around a small wooden table underneath a large metal frame shaped like a geodesic dome, that stretches almost from floor to ceiling, and from one wall to the other. Most of the men appear to be Latine. The men are meeting to discuss rumours that the building they are currently occupying is about to be sold, a move that would cause their displacement, as well as that of the space's other tenants. Despite the serious implications of this rumour, there is a relaxed sociality to the scene; the group lean back in their chairs, and a couple of them have their feet up on the table. Newspapers and ashtrays strewn across the table and a sound system tucked away in one corner of the room suggest that the space is used for different forms of collective activity. Aside from Momber behind the camera, there appear to be no women present at this meeting (an absence whose implications I discuss in more detail later in this chapter).

The partially renovated loft space and the geodesic dome point to Charas's earliest experiments in new forms of urban living in Loisaida. The collective grew out of an earlier organisation called the Real Great Society, formed in the mid-1960s by a group of young gang members turned self-organised community activists.[287] In response to what they saw as the paternalism and relative ineffectiveness of the anti-poverty and racial justice programmes launched by President Lyndon B. Johnson under the name 'Great Society' in the mid 1960s, Nandini Bagchee argues that the Real Great Society 'sought to achieve bottom-up self-sufficiency within the poverty-stricken neighborhoods of New York City'.[288] The group's best-known project was the University of the

[285] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 4.

[286] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 114.

[287] For a more detailed account of the work of the Real Great Society, and the relationship between them and Charas, see Bagchee, 107–9.

[288] Bagchee, 108.

Street, initiated in 1967, which aimed to remedy the failings of the city's inadequate school system by providing a free supplemental education tailored to the specific needs and interests of local youth.[289] The rapid success and expansion of the University of the Street to other parts of the city strained the young group's informal working structure, and in 1968, Charas was formed as a smaller collective, with a focus on youth-led neighbourhood improvement within the more contained context of the Nuyorican Lower East Side.[290] The group's name was an acronym of the six founders' first names: Carlos 'Chino' García, Humberto Crespo, Angelo González, Roy Battiste, Anthony Figueroa, and Salvador Becker.[291]

Like the Real Great Society before them, Charas's work emphasised community self-reliance in the face of institutional neglect and marginalisation. As García put it in an interview from 1973:

> We want to investigate communal life […] We are now at a stage where we have to look at things—economically, politically, and culturally from different ways. We have to see what we can do as a community and deal with it.[292]

A important Charas practice from the early 1970s was the construction of geodesic domes in collaboration with the office of the radical philosopher-architect Buckminster Fuller (who had been exploring the potential of these structures to be used for housing and shelter since the early twentieth century).[293] As a low-cost alternative to both government-subsidised and privately rented housing, Charas saw domes as a self-organised solution to the housing crisis in the neighbourhood; as Bagchee puts it, 'the urban dome project symbolized a way out of the deadlock between poverty and a dependence on welfare.'[294] The dome project brought together Charas's three core aims, laid out in the collective's by-laws in 1971 (Figs. 19 & 20):

1. HOUSING – To examine, originate, and develop alternative residential housing, low income housing, emergency shelter and prefabricated structures.
2. COMMUNITY – To further develop existing communities by promoting the achievement of a higher level of co-existence […]

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[289] Bagchee, 108.

[290] Bagchee, 108.

[291] Carlos 'Chino' García, 'Oral History Interview', interview by Layla Vural, The New York Preservation Archive Project, 13 November 2017, 11, https://www.nypap.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Garcia_Chino_20171113.pdf.

[292] Chino García, quoted in Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 45.

[293] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 111.

[294] Bagchee, 111.

3. ENVIRONMENT – To use re-cycled materials in the development of alternative structures[.]

In order to facilitate the project, Charas co-founder Roy Battiste rented the third floor of a city-owned warehouse at 903 Cherry Street in the southern part of the Lower East Side, which became a kind of experimental design studio where Charas members lived and worked collectively to design and build domes.[295] Bagchee notes that as the Cherry Street warehouse's 'expansive live-work quarters were gradually filled with tools, models, drawings, and mock-ups', interest was generated 'among the children living nearby, and the teenagers recruited […] for this project became a part of the growing collective'.[296] Indeed, the photographer Syeus Mottel's book *Charas: The Improbable Dome Builders* (1973), which documents the dome project, makes it clear that the construction of these structures involved large swathes of the Loisaida community, 'a loosely knit network of workers' who could be depended on to provide assistance, food, or even just encouragement.[297]

Charas assembled two domes in vacant city lots between September 1972 and January 1973, but the labour and resources involved in their construction meant that they were ultimately not viable as housing. Nevertheless, Wilfred Guerron argues that the domes retained a material and symbolic significance in Loisaida that exceeded their potential use as dwellings:

> As a physical object, the dome was an all-encompassing project: it had a beginning and an end, taught participatory decision making, and showed how communal work can produce a result that would be insurmountable for one person. Symbolically, the dome was a representation of the new environment that [Loisaida residents] actively participated in creating and the dome building process itself was meant to empower the community to continually seek and produce change in their environment.[298]

As Bagchee notes, domes continued to appear regularly in the cultural and community spaces of the Nuyorican Lower East Side long after the original residential dome project had been abandoned and Charas had moved on to other projects: 'These skeletal triangulated structures, clad with different materials, were deployed in street festivals as band shelters, in community

[295] Bagchee, 111.

[296] Bagchee, 111.

[297] Mottel, *Charas: The Improbable Dome Builders*, 38.

[298] Guerron, 'CHARAS and the Reimagining of Loisaida', 75.

gardens as greenhouses, […] on rooftops as temporary shelters', and, in the case of *Viva Loisaida*, in live-work lofts as meeting spaces.[299]

The Charas meeting recorded in *Viva Loisaida* shows only a small proportion of the collective's membership, which by the late 1970s had grown into a sprawling coalition of over two hundred participants.[300] Even the small group that is shown seated around the table, however, encompassed a wide array of artistic and activist practices. Several of those present, such as Edgard Rivera and Bimbo Rivas, were musicians and poets, while others, such as Roberto 'Rabbit' Nazario, the co-coordinator (with Ruth García) of the housing advocacy group Adopt-a-Building, held key positions within other Loisaida movement organisations.[301] Other core Charas members who were not present at this meeting, such as the photographer Armando Pérez, or Roy Battiste, an instructor at the School of Visual Arts' Environmental Research Center, encompassed a similarly broad range of practices. Near the end of *Viva Loisaida*, the dancer and choreographer Angie Hernandez is shown analysing a mural with other residents of the neighbourhood; shortly after this scene, she is pictured performing *bomba y plena* music with a group of dancers and musicians at the Nuyorican Poets Café. If one takes this small group of community activists as an example of the heterogeneity of Charas's membership in the late 1970s, it is clear that the collective was able to draw from a growing pool of participants across the Nuyorican Lower East Side, who brought with them a wide array of skills, knowledge, and experience.

The most striking example of this overlapping of different types of artistic and activist practice is arguably the musician and activist Edgard Rivera, who appears frequently throughout *Viva Loisaida*. The t-shirt that Rivera wears at the Charas meeting reads 'Cuando Energy', which denotes his involvement with Cuando, a local community centre that was instrumental in the development of a solar panel system installed on the roof of 519 East Eleventh Street, a project discussed in more detail in the next subsection of this chapter (Figure 21).[302] Near the start of the film, Rivera is seen performing on a street corner with an acoustic guitar, singing a song about the challenges facing the neighbourhood and the work being done to transform it (Figure 22). As Rivera sings that 'Not one damn block belongs to us yet, no, not one damn block', Momber cuts away to show activities from across the neighbourhood, including a community mural and group

[299] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 113.

[300] Bagchee, 109.

[301] Bagchee, 137.

[302] Cuando was formed in 1971 in tribute to the anarchist educator Paul Goodman, who taught many Loisaida youth at his alternative First Street School. Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 58.

of children playing in the street. Another performance of this song closes out the film; this time Rivera is performing in front of a packed audience at the Nuyorican Poets Café (Figure 23). Around half-way through *Viva Loisaida*, Rivera is shown with his partner Josie Rivera and their young child inside their apartment at 533 East Eleventh Street, discussing the process of sweat-equity by which the residents have come to occupy this city-owned building (Figure 24).

In each of the contexts in which Rivera is pictured, he is adamant that morally, if not legally, Loisaida's abandoned buildings and lots do not belong to the city or private landlords, but to the people of the neighbourhood, those who have struggled to revitalise and rebuild them. As he puts it at the meeting filmed for *Viva Loisaida*, it is Charas and the other tenants of 95 Avenue B who have 'protected the building and given it some respect', not the landlord.[303] At this meeting, Charas discuss plans to collectively purchase the building, although they suspect that the landlord will sell it to someone else before they can finalise a loan. In order 'to find out what game he is really playing', Nazario phones the landlord, posing as a buyer who is unfamiliar with the Lower East Side.[304] In response to the landlord's assurance that the neighbourhood 'is safe… to some extent', or his assertion that the building has no code violations, Nazario furrows his brow in apparent disbelief at what he is being told (Figure 25). It is obvious from this call that the landlord hopes to rid himself of the building by passing it on to a speculative buyer—someone who is attracted to the low asking price but is unfamiliar with the neighbourhood. Nazario's extensive experience of the neighbourhood and its housing struggles, however, honed through his work with the housing organisation Adopt-a-Building, allows him to see through the landlord's sly evasions of the truth.

With this scene, which offers the viewer a behind-the-scenes look at the everyday organisational labour that facilitated the Loisaida movement's creative transformations of space, Momber demonstrates her commitment to making visible 'the sentient run crews', to use Shannon Jackson's phrase, that 'sustain[ed] the social' in Loisaida.[305] In a discussion of the socio-spatial practices through which poor inner-city Johannesburgers are able to survive and thrive within a highly circumscribed urban context, AbdouMaliq Simone examines the 'tentative and often precarious process of remaking the inner city' by attempting 'to derive maximal outcomes from a minimal set of elements'.[306] Simone's description chimes with a motto in Spanish used by Charas

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303 *Viva Loisaida*, 27:43-27:47.

304 *Viva Loisaida*, 28:30-28:40.

305 Jackson, *Social Works*, 32.

306 AbdouMaliq Simone, 'People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg', *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004): 411.

on banners and letterheads to describe the organised yet highly adaptable manner in which they worked: '*Haciendo mas con menos*' (Figure 26). The conventional English translation of this phrase, which was borrowed from the philosophy of Buckminster Fuller and appeared on a Charas banner in the window of 95 Avenue B, is 'doing more with less' (Figure 27).[307] However, the elasticity of the Spanish verb *hacer* means that the phrase can also be translated as 'making more with less', or even 'being more with less'. These intersecting translations highlight the importance of recycling and recombination in Charas's work, and reiterate the co-constitutive nature of the spatial and the social; in Loisaida, doing or making something always brought a new state of being into existence.

As a key creative and organisational force within the Loisaida movement, Charas was connected in some way to almost all of the other activities documented throughout *Viva Loisaida*.[308] For the Nuyorican poet and critic Urayoán Noel, the group's work exemplified 'a model of alternative community development that fuses spiritual uplift and social organization and that is rooted in the creative approach to urban space common to the artist and the activist.'[309] With its large and heterogenous membership, Bagchee describes Charas as a 'catalyst in the neighbourhood', which 'organized on a project-by-project basis and partnered with a variety of people and organizations to launch urban space-based initiatives that brought visibility to their causes.'[310] In a discussion of the work of the Black anarchist organiser Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, Joy James defines the catalyst group 'not as a vanguard seeking hegemony and ideological conformity but as an organic collective.'[311] Charas's approach to community organising certainly emphasised decentralised and non-hierarchal participation; item 'M' on the minutes from an August 1975 meeting stated that one of the collective's key objectives was to 'Create an atmosphere in which people can enter Charas and work with Charas, but still feel free to move in their own directions, still being part of Charas' (Figure 28). In the next section, I examine how this ethos of open, fluid participation, which was not unique to Charas, but characterised the Loisaida movement as a whole, facilitated the ambitious transformation of an entire Loisaida block.

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[307] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 131.

[308] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 20.

[309] Noel, *In Visible Movement*, 50.

[310] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 127.

[311] Joy James, 'Catalyst', in *Anarchism and the Black Revolution: The Definitive Edition*, by Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, ed. William C. Anderson (London: Pluto Press, 2021), xvii.

1.3.2 The movement on Eleventh Street

In a long sequence in the middle of *Viva Loisaida*, Marlis Momber documents the varied activities of a group of residents and activists known colloquially as the Eleventh Street movement, whose participants overlapped with the memberships of Charas, Adopt-a-Building, and Cuando, but whose work was aimed at the comprehensive transformation of a single city block between East Eleventh and Twelfth Streets and Avenues A and B. In this part of the documentary, Momber focuses on three projects through which the Eleventh Street movement worked to improve this small corner of the neighbourhood: the renovation of two derelict tenement buildings; the creation of a community garden, vegetable patch, and mural on East Twelfth Street; and the installation of a renewable energy system on the roof of 519 East Eleventh Street. As Momber's camera weaves in and out of these physical spaces, moving from exterior to interior and back again, and from street level to a position high above the rooftops, she draws attention to their hybrid nature. Not quite private or public, these were spaces that could accommodate both long-term occupation and more ephemeral forms of collectivity, where different forms of artistic, productive, and reproductive labour could take place. Unlike the Charas meeting, discussed in the previous subsection, here Momber makes visible the cross-gender and cross-generational character of the Loisaida movement, although once again, it is men's voices that are called on to narrate these practices.

The Eleventh Street movement sequence opens with a shot of a small group of topless men in hard hats pulling rubble from the basement of a tenement building (Figure 29). This shot, and the driving disco track playing in the background, MFSB's 'Let's Clean Up the Ghetto', comes to an abrupt halt as Momber suddenly cuts to a close-up shot of a sledgehammer crashing through the crumbling plaster lining the interior of a derelict tenement (Figure 30). As Momber shows men working to dislodge the plaster from the interior of the building, Tyrone Jackson, *Viva Loisaida*'s narrator, describes the work of the Eleventh Street movement (Figure 31):

> It was on Eleventh Street that I saw first signs of a struggle to clean up the ghetto. The Eleventh Street movement, sweat equity, and Adopt-a-Building are making an endeavourance [sic] to do something about their neighbourhoods. They are taking over and renovating buildings long ago abandoned by gouging landlords, making them safe to live in again.[312]

With this short scene, Momber and Jackson introduce the viewer to the sweat equity urban homesteading model that was at the core of the housing activism of groups like the Eleventh

[312] *Viva Loisaida*, 20:11-20:37.

Street movement and Adopt-a-Building.[313] As property owners began abandoning their buildings in growing numbers in the mid-1970s, Adopt-a-Building transitioned from a group dealing primarily with emergency repairs and absentee landlords into a large-scale organisation that utilised city and federal funds to train and employ hundreds of people in building renovation programmes.[314] In the mid-1970s, they collaborated with residents from East Eleventh Street (several of whom were also Charas members) to transform two derelict buildings, numbers 519 and 533, into cooperatively-owned low-income housing.[315]

If Charas's short-lived dome project was among the Loisaida movement's most experimental and creative responses to the neighbourhood's housing crisis, then the sweat equity urban homesteading model arguably represented its most sustainable approach. As Malve von Hassell writes, the process 'involved the rehabilitation of city-owned abandoned buildings by low- to moderate- income men and women who were to become resident owners.'[316] In an interview filmed by Momber inside his apartment at number 533 East Eleventh Street, Edgard Rivera explains how properties came under city ownership: 'the city took this building from the landlord when the landlord stopped paying taxes, and therefore those taxes belonged to the city, so the city just said "We'll take the building, rather than the taxes."'[317] This process of landlord abandonment and city takeover was higher in the Nuyorican enclaves of Loisaida and Pueblo Nuevo than the comparatively wealthier western section of the neighbourhood known as the

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313 Homesteading, both rural and urban, has a long and controversial history in the United States. The Homestead Act of 1862, which allowed anyone over the age of 21 to apply for 160 acres of federal land in thirty states, was central to the vast westward expansion of the United States in the late nineteenth century. Government-sponsored settlement in Western states (through bills such as the Homestead Act, the Indian Appropriations Acts of 1851 and 1871, and the Dawes Act of 1887) was responsible for the forced and violent displacement of Indigenous groups who had lived and worked on the supposedly 'vacant' land for generations. The Homestead Act ended in 1976, although it was in operation in Alaska until 1986. Urban homesteading, the renovation and occupation of abandoned buildings, was first developed in Wilmington, Delaware in 1974, but soon expanded to become a national programme under the auspices of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. For a non-Indigenous history of the Homestead Act of 1862, and a re-evaluation of its legacy, see Richard Edwards, Jacob K. Friefeld, and Rebecca S. Wingo, *Homesteading the Plains: Toward a New History* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2017). For a critical history of property struggles in the United States, which includes a discussion of urban homesteading, see Hannah Dobbz, *Nine-Tenths of the Law: Property and Resistance in the United States* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2012). For indigenous feminist and decolonial critiques of both rural and urban homesteading, see Joanne Barker, 'Indigenous Feminisms', in *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous People's Politics*, ed. José Antonio Lucero, Dale Turner, and Donna Lee VanCott (Oxford, UK: Oxford Handbooks Online, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195386653.013.007; Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (8 September 2012): 1–40.

314 Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 70, 78.

315 Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 123.

316 Malve von Hassell, *Homesteading in New York City, 1978-1993: The Divided Heart of Loisaida* (Westport, CN: Bergin & Garvey, 1999), 2.

317 *Viva Loisaida*, 21:26-21:39.

East Village.[318] Many of the thousands of properties that were taken over by the city in this manner throughout the 1970s were completely dilapidated; lacking both the political inclination and material resources needed to undertake meaningful renovations, the city typically auctioned the buildings off to speculative investors or real estate firms, at which point they either sat empty or were promptly re-abandoned.[319]

As an alternative to the city's laissez-faire approach, which did nothing to solve the neighbourhood's chronic lack of safe and affordable housing, the sweat equity urban homesteading model was developed.[320] The term 'sweat equity' refers to the physical labour that was invested by homesteaders, most of whom had little if any prior experience in construction before getting involved in a homesteading project.[321] Offered in lieu of a deposit or down payment on the property, sweat equity reflected the fact, as Rivera puts it, for the most part, the people of Loisaida 'did not have the capital to outright buy the building'.[322] The practice was driven by the understanding that neither profit-driven absentee landlords nor the financially-stretched city could provide and maintain quality housing for low-income residents. Groups like Adopt-a-Building argued that tenants would be less vulnerable to displacement if ownership of buildings was in their collective hands, rather than those of the public or private sectors.[323] The aim of these groups was to decommodify housing by taking a basic human need out of the grasp of capital. In Loisaida this meant that apartment units within homesteaded tenement buildings could not be sold for profit, and were instead to remain permanently available for occupation by low-income residents.[324] In this model, decommodification also extended to the physical work involved in homesteading; as Von Hassell argues, 'the homesteading model envisioned that labor would be treated not as a commodity but as a community property to be shared and made available to those in need.'[325]

Despite developing in response to the perceived neglect of the city, the sweat equity urban homesteading model was reliant on the cooperation of government agencies that controlled

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318 Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 191–94.

319 Mele, 205–6.

320 Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 74.

321 Hassell, *Homesteading in New York City*, 2.

322 *Viva Loisaida*, 21:19-21:24.

323 Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 203.

324 Hassell, *Homesteading in New York City*, 2.

325 Hassell, 2.

access to city-owned properties and provided funding for their renovation.[326] The programme was supported by New York's Department of Housing Preservation and Development, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, a federal programme designed to train underemployed workers for work in the public sector.[327] Although some city officials, such as Nathan Levanthal (Commissioner of Housing Preservation and Development between 1978 and 1979) appeared to be genuinely supportive of community-led housing initiatives, many of those in power understood these programmes as quick and cheap fixes to a housing crisis that the city had neither the resources nor political will to solve.[328] As such, when dealing with these powerful actors, then, the emphasis remained on community autonomy and agency. In the footage of the Charas meeting discussed above, Momber demonstrates Roberto 'Rabbit' Nazario's ability to see through a private landlord's evasions of the truth, but the Adopt-a-Building coordinator was also respected for his dealings with municipal authorities.[329] In the introduction to a 1975 anthology of Nuyorican poetry, for example, Miguel Algarín wrote of Nazario: 'Who is willing to talk his way through the legalese that puts wrinkles on the tongue? Roberto Nazario is willing. He can chew a Municipal Housing Authority contract down to its bold deceits.'[330] 'Roberto […] will chew on a mountain of legal conceits like a rabbit on a giant carrot', wrote Algarín, coining Nazario's nickname with a striking image that reversed the uneven power dynamics that typically attend interactions with state bureaucracies.[331]

With *Viva Loisaida*, Momber made it clear that as a means of resisting disinvestment-provoked displacement, homesteading offered low-income residents a sense of much-needed stability in the midst of overwhelming precarity. The ability to remain in place allowed the Eleventh Street movement and its allies to expand its work to other parts of the block; as Schrader argues, 'efforts on this street emphasized the need to go beyond housing-specific issues.'[332] Among the most notable of these projects was the creation of a community garden on the other side of the block on East Twelfth Street. In *Viva Loisaida*, Momber shows what appears to an older man, a

[326] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 137.

[327] Bagchee, 130; Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 74–75.

[328] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 77–78.

[329] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 137.

[330] Algarín, 'Nuyorican Language', 12.

[331] Algarín, 13.

[332] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 75.

younger woman, and two children tending to the garden, while Jackson explains how it came to be (Figure 32):

> East Twelfth Street community garden was at one time a rubbish-filled plot of land, a dumping space for garbage and a breeding ground for rats and roaches. Now it's a beautiful garden, and during the summer months it produces edible vegetables. It was the Eleventh Street movement that introduced the idea about turning this lot into a garden.[333]

The East Twelfth Street garden (also known as El Sol Brillante) was one of a large number of community gardens created out of vacant lots across the Lower East Side in the 1970s. Community gardens played an important socially reproductive function in Loisaida. As well as facilitating access to fresh produce in a neighbourhood lacking many basic amenities, they provided open green space for socialising, community celebrations, performances, and protests.[334] Some gardens, such as La Plaza Cultural, were planned and named in the tradition of Central and South American civic plazas (like Buenos Aires' Plaza de Mayo or Mexico City's Plaza del Zócalo), while others were derivations of vernacular Caribbean forms.[335] Many drew on the sustainable gardening practices of the *jíbaro*, Puerto Rico's rural subsistence farmers (of mixed Indigenous, Black, and Spanish ancestry), whose displacement from the land during Operation Bootstrap turned the *jíbaro* into a symbol of Nuyorican identity in the second half of the twentieth century.[336]

In *Viva Loisaida*, Momber introduces the East Twelfth Street community garden visually through a wide shot of two figures, surrounded by lush greenery, painting a brightly coloured mural (Figure 33). In the voiceover, Jackson notes that this is the work of Cityarts Workshop, a non-profit community mural organisation, founded by the potter Susan Shapiro Kiok in 1968 (whose work is discussed in detail in Chapter Four).[337] More specifically, this piece is the *El Sol Brillante Mural* (1978), designed by the local Nuyorican artist Freddy Hernández. The placement of this

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[333] *Viva Loisaida*, 23:27-23:53.

[334] Karen Schmelzkopf, 'Urban Community Gardens as Contested Space', *Geographical Review* 85, no. 3 (July 1995): 373, https://doi.org/10.2307/215279; Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro, 'Urban Community Gardens, Commons, and Social Reproduction: Revisiting Silvia Federici's Revolution at Point Zero', *Gender, Place & Culture* 25, no. 9 (2018): 1382, https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1450731.

[335] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 129.

[336] Daniel Winterbottom, 'Casitas, Healing the Wounds of Displacement', *Journal of Mediterranean Ecology* 8 (2007): 79–80.

For a discussion of the trope of the *jíbaro* in Nuyorican music and poetry, see Noel, 'In the Decimated City'.

[337] Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 19.

work within the East Twelfth Street Garden supports Schrader's argument that murals in Loisaida were 'inextricably linked to every aspect of community activism from the end of the 1960s to the mid-1980s.'[338] Existing socio-spatial practices provided murals with their visual content, their audience, their site, and, through the support of groups like Charas and Adopt-a-Building (in fundraising and securing permission from building owners), their organisational and financial base.[339] In turn, the production of murals bolstered these practices by emphasising their long significance in the Nuyorican Lower East Side, and keeping this history visible for present and future neighbourhood activists. Cityarts Workshop murals in particular were highly collaborative and participatory, involving local youth in every step of the muralmaking process, from planning to painting.[340]

The relationship between community gardens and community murals in Loisaida was co-constitutive, with the production of one facilitating the creation of the other. The initiation of La Plaza Cultural community garden by Charas in 1976, for example, prompted the creation of Alfredo 'Freddy' Hernández's *La Plaza Cultural Mural* (1977) onto a wall overlooking the site, which in turn helped rally support for the garden's completion the following year (Figure 34).[341] The East Twelfth Street community garden appears to have been developed prior to the creation of Hernández's *El Sol Brillante Mural*, but the mural extends the garden's emphasis on food autonomy, depicting verdant fields stretching to the horizon, filled with corn, tomatoes, and lettuce (Figure 33). In this scene, Momber underscores the co-constitutive nature of gardens and murals by continually cutting back and forth between shots of people participating in these two practices. As Jackson insists that murals can deepen 'the sense of identity for both the individual involved and the local community', Momber's camera cuts from a close-up of the muralists to the gardeners, and back again, as if to stress that the community-building power of muralism also applies to gardening (Figs. 35-37).[342]

High up above the tenements, Momber films Jackson talking with Eduardo 'Eddy' Standard about the third and final Eleventh Street project featured in *Viva Loisaida*: a bank of solar panels and a wind turbine installed on the roof of the homestead at 519 East Eleventh Street (Figure 38).[343] This project reflected the Loisaida movement's emphasis on community self-reliance, as

[338] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 84.

[339] Schrader, 85.

[340] Schrader, 98–99.

[341] Schrader, 85.

[342] *Viva Loisaida*, 24:37-24:42.

[343] *Viva Loisaida*, 25:09-26:50.

well as a growing concern with environmental issues. For example, Charas's 1971 by-laws stated that they aimed to 'develop structures that conserve and protect the physical environment' and 'educate others regarding ecological measures', and the group opened a recycling centre on East Eighth Street in 1978 (Figs. 39 & 40).[344] The 519 East Eleventh Street solar bank was constructed in 1977 as an attempt to reduce heating bills for the homesteaders; the following year, when the neighbourhood's energy supplier, Con Edison, cut off power to the building, they built a wind turbine in order to generate their own electricity (Figure 41).[345] 'Right now,' says Standard, as the camera pans across to the huge Con Edison building located just a few blocks away, 'there is three power companies in New York City. There's ConEd in Manhattan, there's the Brooklyn power company Brooklyn Union Gas up in Brooklyn, and there's a windmill here on 519 East Eleventh Street' (Figure 42).[346] 'Right on, right on,' comes Jackson's impressed response.[347]

Like Charas's dome building project, Jackson argues in *Viva Loisaida* that the renewable energy system at 519 East Eleventh Street 'has grown to be a symbol of self-help' in the neighbourhood.[348] Like many other practices in Loisaida, the project was a collaboration between core activists and wider participants of several groups, including Charas, Cuando, and the Eleventh Street movement, who came together as the Loisaida Environment Action Coalition, and were supported by Adopt-a-Building and a group of green technology professionals known as the Energy Task Force (Figure 43).[349] The project drew upon the skills and labour of a large pool of Eleventh Street residents and local people, many of whom had no prior experience of this type of work.[350] Jackson comments that 'the windmill has given us a new sense of pride, because it was the unemployed and unskilled peoples of the neighbourhood that put this thirty-seven foot tower into the air.'[351] As if to underscore what a remarkable—and unusual—accomplishment this is, as Jackson speaks, Momber slowly pans her camera vertically upwards, past the solar panels, until all that can be seen is the uppermost part of the wind turbine,

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344 Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 57.

345 See also Shayla Love, 'The Almost Forgotten Story of The 1970s East Village Windmill', Gothamist, 29 September 2014, https://gothamist.com/news/the-almost-forgotten-story-of-the-1970s-east-village-windmill.

346 *Viva Loisaida*, 26:29-26:43.

347 *Viva Loisaida*, 26:44-26:45.

348 *Viva Loisaida*, 25:22-25:25.

349 Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 125; Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 58, 76–77; Charas, 'Doing More with Less: Charas Report 77-78', 1978, n.p., CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records (MSS233), Box 1, Folder 8-9, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City.

350 Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 97.

351 *Viva Loisaida*, 25:09-25:20.

hovering high up above the neighbourhood amidst the endless expanse of a cloudless blue sky (Figure 44).

In the late 1970s, the Eleventh Street movement, Charas, and other groups (such as Cuando and Adopt-a-Building) formed significant catalyst groups within the large coalition of residents and activists that comprised the Loisaida movement. By working together and pooling their extensive resources and membership, Schrader argues that Charas and others were able to 'transform a range of smaller projects, causes, and groups into a Loisaida movement working toward similar goals.'[352] Rooted in the constrained social and material conditions of Loisaida—the crumbling built environment, the lack of safe housing, green space, or fresh food—these socio-spatial practices were, to use Sherry B. Ortner's phrase, 'built on an alternative logic' that sought to not just survive but collectively reimagine and transform these conditions.[353] In order to do so, these practices had to be co-constitutive, they had to facilitate the development of entirely new activities (such as growing food or recycling), and they had to encourage participation from as wide a pool of people as possible, regardless of their prior training or experience. One did not need to have trained as an artist to help paint a community mural, or have experience in construction to participate in the creation of a homestead. Rather, it was through the very act of undertaking these practices in collaboration with other people that these skills were developed and could in turn be passed along; as Jackson puts it in *Viva Loisaida*, 'The things we have to learn, we learn by doing it.'[354] This emphasis on experimental learning through doing was underpinned by an unshakeable belief, as Charas's Roy Battiste put it in 1973, that 'anyone, regardless of their situation, can aquire [sic] the necessary knowledge and skills to effect meaningful change.'[355]

1.3.3 Gordon Matta-Clark and the *Resource Center and Environmental Youth Program for Loisaida* (1977-78)

In a recent history of Latine politics and culture in the United States, the journalist Ed Morales describes Charas as 'an attempt to combine Latinx and Latin American activism with white artist groups.'[356] This comment somewhat downplays the model of community self-reliance and

[352] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 20.

[353] Ortner, *High Religion*, 195.

[354] *Viva Loisaida*, 13:35-13:39.

[355] Roy Battiste, 'History/A Flight on Spaceship Earth', ed. Charas, *Community Initiative* (New York: Charas, Inc., 1973), n.p., CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records (MSS233), Box 7, Folder 29, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City.

[356] Morales, *Latinx*, 253.

participation in Loisaida that Marlis Momber foregrounds in *Viva Loisaida*. Nevertheless, Morales highlights the importance of collaboration across differences of race, class, and ethnicity that powered the movement's work in the late 1970s (and which, as I discuss in the chapters to come, grew ever more vital in the following decade). The Lower East Side's racial and ethnic diversity, its history of social reform, and its longstanding culture of resistance underpinned this collaborative ethos, which, in Bagchee's words, foregrounded the Puerto Rican experience while remaining 'engaged with other Latinos, as well as African Americans and white activists who lived and worked in the neighborhood.'[357] Many of those with whom the Loisaida movement worked, including Momber, were sustained and committed participants in a growing cross-class, multiracial coalition of residents, artists, and activists struggling to transform the neighbourhood. Others, whose practices were not principally based in or oriented towards the Nuyorican Lower East Side, but with whom Loisaida practitioners saw shared affinities, collaborated on a more ad-hoc, project-by-project basis, sometimes over the course of several years. Several such collaborations, including Charas's work with the philosopher-architect Buckminster Fuller on the geodesic dome project, or their relationship with the anthropologist Dan Chodorkoff, are touched on elsewhere in this chapter.

In this subsection, I examine a collaboration of a similar nature: a little-documented, mostly unrealised project initiated in Loisaida by the artist Gordon Matta-Clark at around the same time that Momber was filming *Viva Loisaida*. The project is almost entirely absent from cultural histories of late 1970s Loisaida and remains little more than a footnote in the art historical literature on Matta-Clark.[358] The main reason for this absence, argues Andrew Strombeck (who discusses both Charas and Matta-Clark at length, but touches on the latter's Loisaida project only briefly), is a relative lack of documentation, beyond a handful of letters, a draft proposal, and a couple of photographs (Figure 45).[359] Matta-Clark's Loisaida project does not appear in Momber's film either. However, I discuss the project at length here because it offers an early example of an explicitly political intervention by a white artist in the material conditions of Loisaida, a few years before white artists and activists began moving to the neighbourhood in larger numbers in the early 1980s. The project highlights the complex dynamics that underpinned collaboration across difference, which had the potential to contest social marginalisation and segregation, but could also reinforce these dynamics, particularly when

[357] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 115.

[358] Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*, 196n36.

[359] Strombeck, 196n36.

participants were unevenly situated according to race, class, and ethnicity. If, as Strombeck insists, 'the 1975 crisis provided a built environment that made new associations possible', then in the late 1970s, the exact nature of these associations, and the ways in which they would unfold and change in the years to come, remained profoundly uncertain.[360]

In 1977, Matta-Clark, a key participant in the alternative art movement that flourished in the former industrial lofts of SoHo in the late 1960s and 1970s, worked with Charas to construct an open-air amphitheatre out of wooden railroad ties and architectural salvage, which formed the centrepiece of La Plaza Cultural community garden.[361] The amphitheatre was one of few material outcomes of a larger project known as the *Resource Center and Environmental Youth Program for Loisaida*, for which Matta-Clark was awarded a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship in 1977.[362] Unrealised primarily owing to his death in August 1978, the project would have included a storage and processing facility for donated and salvaged materials that could be used in local renovation projects. As Matta-Clark noted in an early draft of the Guggenheim proposal, 'large amounts of reusable materials have become available because of the increasing rate of abandonment and demolition of buildings.'[363] In addition to this physical space, Matta-Clark proposed the creation of a job training programme, through which local youth would both learn how to run the salvage facility and get hands-on experience 'in converting the all-too plentiful abandoned buildings into social space.'[364]

Matta-Clark's involvement with Loisaida is perhaps surprising, given that, as the Downtown writer Alan W. Moore notes, the predominantly white and middle-class SoHo was 'geographically nearby but another world' compared to the 'crowded polyglot district of the Lower East Side'.[365] However, the proposed Loisaida project brought together several of Matta-Clark's enduring interests.[366] The first was an engagement with site-specificity and the built environment. Matta-Clark frequently used derelict buildings as conceptual and physical materials in his work; *Fake Estates* (1973), for example, used slivers of surplus land in New York to critique capitalism's reification of space through private property, while the Anarchitecture collective

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[360] Strombeck, 23.

[361] Strombeck, 38.

[362] Nicholas de Monchaux, 'The Death and Life of Gordon Matta-Clark', *AA Files*, no. 74 (2017): 193.

[363] Gordon Matta-Clark, draft of *A Resource Center and Environmental Youth Program for Loisaida: A Proposal*, August 18, 1976. Gordon Matta-Clark Archive, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal. Quoted in Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed*, 166.

[364] Quoted in Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*, 38.

[365] Moore, *Art Gangs*, 46.

[366] Ault, 'For the Record', 2002, 4; Moore, *Art Gangs*, 53–55.

investigated the critical potential of ostensibly 'unproductive' urban sites.[367] The second was Matta-Clark's commitment to collaborative, participatory strategies, developed at collectively-run projects such as the alternative space 112 Greene Street or the restaurant Food, which challenged traditional art world methodologies, and positioned audiences, in Frances Richard's words, 'as co-producers of the events that constitute the art, as in the sharing of meals, or the staging of festive undertakings like dance parties or graffiti-writing sessions.'[368] Food, which was co-founded with Tina Girouard and Carol Goodden, and staffed and frequented primarily by artists, marked an interest in exploring the relationship between the reproduction of everyday life and artistic practice.[369] The third was a desire to effect broader social change, what Matta-Clark's biographer Pamela M. Lee describes as his 'communal ethos in keeping with a more conventional strain of social activism.'[370] In a letter to a friend written as he was developing the Loisaida project in June 1976, Matta-Clark wrote that he was 'making good on a longstanding promise to myself involving a move from my past sculptural exercises to a direct collaboration with the people and their problems in a Lower East Side community of New York.'[371]

In her monographic study of Matta-Clark, Lee allocated one page to the Loisaida project, touching on it as an example of the artist's 'communitarian aspirations'.[372] Lee compared the Loisaida project to an earlier unrealised project, the *Arc de Triomphe for Workers* (1975), in which the artist planned to cut an arch into the wall of a derelict factory in Milan in solidarity with a group of young Communists that had been squatting the space for over a month.[373] For Matta-Clark, meeting this radical community was formative to the subsequent development of the Loisaida project: 'this confrontation was my first awakening to doing my work, not in artistic isolation, but through an active exchange with peoples' concern for their own neighborhood.'[374]

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[367] Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed*, 98–104.

[368] Frances Richard, 'Spacism: Gordon Matta-Clark and the Politics of Shared Space', *Places Journal*, March 2019, https://doi.org/10.22269/190305.

See also Ault, 'For the Record', 2002, 4; Moore, *Art Gangs*, 53–55.

[369] Lori Waxman, 'The Banquet Years: FOOD, A SoHo Restaurant', *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* 8, no. 4 (November 2008): 29–30, https://doi.org/10.1525/gfc.2008.8.4.24.

[370] Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed*, 164–66.

[371] Letter from Gordon Matta-Clark to Guy Baldwin, 26 July 1976. Gordon Matta-Clark Archive, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal. Quoted in de Monchaux, 'The Death and Life of Gordon Matta-Clark', 193.

[372] Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed*, 166.

[373] Lee, 166, 168.

[374] Gordon Matta-Clark, draft of *A Resource Center and Environmental Youth Program for Loisaida: A Proposal*, undated, Fall 1976. Gordon Matta-Clark Archive, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal. Quoted in Judith Russi Kirshner, 'The Idea of Community in the Work of Gordon Matta-Clark', in *Gordon Matta-Clark*, ed. Corinne Diserens (London: Phaidon, 2003), 159.

'Well-intentioned as his gesture may have been', argued Lee, the proposed factory cut 'inadvertently contributed to the dispersal of the squatters', as the day before the cut was due to take place, the authorities got wind of the project and evicted everybody from the building.[375] For Lee, both the factory cut and the Loisaida project were doomed to failure because they relied on 'traditional notions of community identity […] conjoined with the terms of a unique site.'[376] In comparison to the more fluid conceptions of community and site that characterised work such as *Fake Estates* (1973), Lee argued that these projects 'made visible, that is to say, objectified, a community that had otherwise functioned without such dramatic exhortation.'[377]

Lee's insistence that neither the young Milanese Communists nor the poor youth of Loisaida had much need for Matta-Clark's 'dramatic exhortation' highlights the fact that the activities that the artist proposed already existed in the neighbourhood, in the form of the Charas recycling centre and the training programmes of Adopt-a-Building.[378] Indeed, Olga Fernández Lopez points out that as Matta-Clark has come to be seen as a forerunner of the kinds of participatory, context-specific strategies that characterise much social practice in contemporary art, art historical interpretations of the Loisaida project have erased or downplayed the existing practices of those with whom he collaborated.[379] Fernández Lopez's comment applies to both critical scholars such as Lee, who dismissed the Loisaida project out of hand without interrogating the specific context in which it was developed, as well as those who have offered more affirmative readings. In a recent catalogue essay, for example, Cara Jordan notes that Matta-Clark's project was designed to 'incorporat[e] the preexisting efforts of the community', which included the prevalence of 'community action groups, gardening initiatives, and alternative living arrangements' in Loisaida.[380] However, Jordan's discussion of the project suggests that it was Matta-Clark, rather than those who were already participating in these 'preexisting efforts', who was responsible for creating 'a positive environment for those who had been marginalized by society and empowering them to take ownership of their neighborhoods.'[381] In these and other discussions of Matta-Clark's Loisaida project, the neighbourhood becomes, in Fernández Lopez's words, a

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[375] Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed*, 168.

[376] Lee, 166.

[377] Lee, 168.

[378] See Olga Fernández López, 'Partisan Dilemmas Between Activism and Socially Engaged Art: Situations in Loisaida at the End of the Seventies', *Artl@s Bulletin* 11, no. 1 (2022): 84.

[379] Fernández López, 84.

[380] Cara Jordan, 'Directing Energy: Gordon Matta-Clark's Pursuit of Social Sculpture', in *Gordon Matta-Clark: Anarchitect*, ed. Antonio Sergio Bessa and Jessamyn Fiore (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 51.

[381] Jordan, 51.

'mere scenario in which the artist performed his last work, barely a footnote with a couple of local names.'[382]

Both critical and affirmative accounts of Matta-Clark's Loisaida project downplay the agency of the Loisaida activists who chose to collaborate with the artist, who likely had little need of his help in empowering themselves, but who may well have seen skills, resources, and experience that could be useful to their own work. Matta-Clark's proposal was put together with the guidance of Ruth García of Adopt-a-Building, to whom the artist wrote in the summer of 1976, stating that although the project was rooted in his own desire to 'get out of the "ego-trocious" isolationism of the art/professional environment', he nevertheless hoped he could 'be of some practicle [sic] use' to Loisaida activists as both 'a willing and able hand' and someone who could help 'programs come to fruition both through planning and fund raising.'[383] As Charas undertook the laborious process of clearing La Plaza Cultural's fifty thousand-square-foot site of rubbish, construction debris, and burned-out cars, Matta-Clark's work building the amphitheatre suggests a genuine commitment to providing 'a willing and able hand' in these labour-intensive efforts.[384] Similarly, Matta-Clark's experience in applying for and acquiring funding would undoubtedly have been useful to groups such as Charas, which were perpetually running on shoestring budgets. Some of Matta-Clark's funding sources, including the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (a federal programme designed to train underemployed workers for work in the public sector), were also utilised by Loisaida groups such as Adopt-a-Building.[385] Others were accessible to Matta-Clark precisely because of his standing as an artist of renown. His application for the Guggenheim fellowship, for example, was supported by letters of reference from Robert Rauschenburg and Richard Serra, among others.[386]

At the heart of all collaborative work is the question of exactly which people, groups, and communities participants see themselves as accountable to. Keeping this in mind is particularly important when analysing artistic practices that endeavour to intervene in entrenched social

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[382] Fernández López, 'Partisan Dilemmas Between Activism and Socially Engaged Art: Situations in Loisaida at the End of the Seventies', 84.

For other accounts of the project in which the work of the Loisaida movement is downplayed or ignored, see Kirshner, 'The Idea of Community in the Work of Gordon Matta-Clark'; Gwendolyn Owens, 'Lessons Learned Well: The Education of Gordon Matta-Clark', in *Gordon Matta Clark: You Are the Measure*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 163–73; de Monchaux, 'The Death and Life of Gordon Matta-Clark'.

[383] Richard, 'Spacism'.

[384] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 128.

[385] Bagchee, 130.

[386] Richard, 'Spacism'.

issues, especially when participants are unevenly positioned according to race, class, and gender. As Magally Miranda and Kyle Lane-McKinley write, 'the difference between artists who seek to speak on behalf of a community in order to appropriate their participation as a form of value and artists whose creative actions are continuous with the struggle of the community is one of accountability'.[387] Matta-Clark's relationship with Ruth García, his work with Charas in La Plaza Cultural, and the long-term nature of the proposed project suggests that he was sincere in his desire to work with, rather than speak for, the community in Loisaida. He was explicit that the resource centre should be horizontally organised and self-sustaining, with clear routes to ownership for the young people that participated.[388] At the same time, the project was rooted in what Matta-Clark described as his 'need to become directly involved in a context that is physically, politically and socially structured, in short to leave the studio and go out on the streets.'[389] From this perspective, Loisaida offered a context within which to exercise this need, which was driven by Matta-Clark's frustrations with the individualised and self-absorbed nature of so much artistic practice, and the hegemonic power of museums and galleries, just as much as his desire for social justice. Alluding to Matta-Clark's somewhat ambiguous sense of accountability, Frances Richard argues that with the Loisaida project, '[h]e was helping himself as well as trying to help Black and Puerto Rican kids.'[390]

Ultimately, the mostly unrealised nature of Matta-Clark's *Resource Center and Environmental Youth Program for Loisaida* means that any interpretation of the project must remain somewhat speculative. An understanding of the neighbourhood's existing socio-spatial practices, however, allows generative points of convergence between Matta-Clark and the Loisaida movement to be identified, even if their motivations differed. There was a shared understanding that space, in Lee's words, was not 'a plane upon which social relations are deposited and unilaterally produced', but that social actors played a vital 'anticipatory and formative role' in its production.[391] At a more local level, Strombeck describes Matta-Clark's practice as interested in 'altering not just the physical landscape of post-crisis New York, but the social fabric of communities like the South Bronx', or, in this case, Loisaida.[392] This investment in the co-constitutive transformation of spatial and social relations hewed closely to the aims of the

[387] Miranda and Lane-McKinley, 'Artwashing'.

[388] Richard, 'Spacism'.

[389] Gordon Matta-Clark, 'Proposal to the Workers of Sesto San Giovanni', quoted in Richard.

[390] Richard.

[391] Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed*, xvii.

[392] Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*, 38.

Loisaida movement to become architects of their own neighbourhood through engaged, sustained participation in large and small practices of spatial appropriation. Ultimately, Fernández Lopez insists that both Matta-Clark's practices and those of the Loisaida movement can be conceptualised as 'actions that re-assemble, relationally, what is available at a certain moment', whether this be cultural production, human labour, funding, social relations, or aspects of the built environment.[393] For the Loisaida movement, the aim of these practices was to make as many of these material and immaterial resources available to as many people as possible, as part of the institution of a more egalitarian society in Loisaida.

1.4 Live collectively or die in pieces: prefigurative visions of the new society in Loisaida

The notion of building a new society is a recurring theme in *Viva Loisaida*, and in the second half of this chapter, I take a closer look at two interlocking visions of the society in the making that can be glimpsed throughout the film. The theme of societal transformation features most explicitly in segments of *Viva Loisaida* that document the many community murals installed around the neighbourhood in the late 1970s. In these scenes, Marlis Momber pans around individual murals in a measured, non-linear fashion, allowing the viewer to take in small details that gradually build up to an image of the whole. With this technique, Momber replicates the effect of encountering this type of large-scale artwork in public, seeing glimpses from a distance that steadily cohere as one moves physically closer. Tyrone Jackson's voiceovers in these scenes indirectly reference the murals' visual narratives, which usually reference other socio-spatial practices in Loisaida. In one scene, for example, Momber shows details from an unnamed mural, which depicts a racially mixed group renovating a bright yellow building. The sign above the doorway, and the Puerto Rican flag hanging from a fire escape, show that this building belongs to the community centre Cuando (Figure 46). Momber turns her camera upwards so that the viewer can see potted plants on the windowsills of what appear to be newly homesteaded apartments. Near the top of the mural, a group of women, their fists raised triumphantly, emerge from the top of the renovated Cuando building (Figure 47). As Momber pans around this work, Jackson insists that 'we must create a new society, by getting rid of the gouging slumlords, the rats and roaches, and the property pimps who are getting fat off of our sweat and blood.'[394]

[393] Fernández López, 'Partisan Dilemmas Between Activism and Socially Engaged Art: Situations in Loisaida at the End of the Seventies', 94.

[394] *Viva Loisaida*, 11:39-11:54.

In another scene, Jackson makes explicit both the urgency of building a new society in Loisaida, and highlights the role of participatory collective practices in this process:

> The things we have to learn, we learn by doing it. By helping each other break the chains that bind us to such wretchedness. We have learned that we will live collectively, or we will die in pieces. And we know this now. We must now rise up from this oppression, yes. Rise so we can live as human beings.[395]

As Jackson speaks, Momber shows details from James Jannuzzi and Susan Caruso Green's *Arise From Oppression (Multi-Ethnic Mural)* (1972), which utilised the vast height of the building to depict a multiracial group pulling one another out of rubble, in what the mural historians Janet Braun-Reinitz and Jane Weissman call 'a communal act of self-determination'.[396] *On the Wall,* Braun-Reinitz and Weissman's history of community murals in New York, contains an image of *Arise From Oppression* in its entirety, taken shortly after its completion in 1972 (Figure 48). Momber's depiction of the mural, however, shows that by the time *Viva Loisaida* was being filmed a few years later, *Arise from Oppression* had been split into three discontinuous bands as a result of new rendering on the building's exterior that obliterated two sections of the work (Figure 49). In this scene, the combination of voice and image suggests that the mural's material fragmentation is inseparable from the ever-present threat of destruction of the community in Loisaida; to paraphrase Jackson, the only alternative to dying in pieces is living collectively.[397]

These scenes in *Viva Loisaida* foreground, to borrow a phrase from Robin D. G. Kelley, the 'generative temporality' of the Loisaida movement, whose work was oriented simultaneously towards 'the moment, the past, the future, and the timeless space of the imagination', as they sought to imagine and institute a new society in the here-and-now.[398] Indeed, while the neighbourhood's socio-spatial practices were rooted in the survival of an oppressive present, they cannot be understood only in these reactive terms. As Silvia Federici points out, it is impossible to 'defend existing communal rights without creating a new reality, in the sense of new strategies, new alliance, and new forms of social organization.'[399] If *Viva Loisaida* makes visible what Christina Sharpe calls 'unlivable worlds' that were being ' materialized, exported, and compounded' in Loisaida in the late 1970s, then it also highlights the Loisaida movement's

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395 *Viva Loisaida*, 13:31-14:02.

396 Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 25.

397 *Viva Loisaida*, 13:42-13:48.

398 Robin D.G. Kelley, 'Foreword: Why Black Marxism? Why Now?', in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, by Cedric J Robinson (London: Penguin, 2021), xxviii.

399 Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*, 3.

'imaginative and material practices of resisting and refusing those unlivable worlds, insisting livable relations into being.'[400] In this section, I interrogate the world-making potential of the Loisaida movement by analysing *Viva Loisaida*'s visions of a new society—free from 'gouging slumlords' and 'property pimps'—alongside two praxis-oriented, anti-capitalist approaches to imagining and enacting societal transformation, developed by Dan Chodorkoff and Silvia Federici.

1.4.1 Social ecology and new forms of labour in Loisaida

With its commitment to developing sustainable and transformative practices in the face of socio-spatial disintegration, the anthropologist and environmental activist Dan Chodorkoff has perceived in the work of the Loisaida movement the actualisation of a theory and practice known as social ecology.[401] Developed between the 1960s and the 1980s by the anarchistic social theorist Murray Bookchin (with whom Chodorkoff co-founded the Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont in the mid-1970s), social ecology insists that 'nearly all of our present ecological problems originate in deep-seated social problems'—specifically, the hierarchy and domination that undergirds capitalism—and that one cannot be understood or ameliorated without the other.[402] For Bookchin, social ecology insisted on the transformation of society according to an ecological sensibility, rooted in principles of mutualism and reciprocity, through which 'human beings [become] conscious ethical agents in promoting the well-being of themselves and the nonhuman world.'[403] As a critique of, and alternative to, the destructive social and environmental effects of capitalism, social ecology rejects the market economy's 'brutally competitive imperative of "grow or die"'; it insists, as Jackson puts it in *Viva Loisaida*, that 'we will live collectively or we will die in pieces.'[404] At its core, argued Bookchin, social ecology 'recognizes that—like it or not—the future of life on this planet pivots on the future of society', and that the work of transforming the latter must begin in the here-and-now.[405]

The relationship between the Loisaida movement and the Institute for Social Ecology was a long and fruitful one, rooted in what Chodorkoff describes as 'solidarity, mutual respect, and

[400] Christina Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes* (London: Daunt Books Publishing, 2023), 98.

[401] Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 30.

[402] Murray Bookchin, 'What Is Social Ecology?', in *The Modern Crisis* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2022), 35.

[403] Bookchin, 55.

[404] Bookchin, 54; *Viva Loisaida*, 13:48-13:54.

[405] Bookchin, 'What Is Social Ecology?', 55.

affection.'[406] In 1974, Chodorkoff organised a conference on 'urban alternatives' in New York that brought together housing activists with advocates of emergent green technologies. There, he was 'approached by grassroots activists from Loisaida and asked if the Institute for Social Ecology could provide technical and program planning assistance.'[407] Over the next decade, members of Charas, the Eleventh Street movement, Cuando, and the Institute of Social Ecology travelled back and forth between both sites, working on renewable energy systems in Loisaida and on geodesic domes in Vermont.[408] Chodorkoff, who lived in New York at the time, acted as a 'volunteer consultant' for the Loisaida movement, and his PhD thesis at the New School for Social Research examined the role of green technologies in the transformation of the neighbourhood.[409] In 1982, Charas hosted the two-day Urban Alternatives conference at El Bohío, the former public school on East Ninth Street that had been transformed into a cultural and community centre in 1978 (Figs. 50 & 51). The conference brought together green technology advocates, housing activists, local politicians, and artists across more than twenty panels (including a screening of *Viva Loisaida*); the keynote address was given by Bookchin, who outlined the parallels between the work of the Loisaida movement and the theory and practice of social ecology.[410]

In *The Anthropology of Utopia*, Chodorkoff reflects on his sustained engagement with the Loisaida movement.[411] He argues that Loisaida residents and activists were 'influenced by an ecological sensibility' at several levels: they understood Loisaida as a complex ecosystem made up of myriad human and nonhuman elements; they focused on the neighbourhood's specific material environment (crumbling buildings, rubbish-filled lots, polluted air, and congested streets); and they worked to alleviate these problems through ecologically sound green technologies such as solar energy and wind power.[412] Participation in these practices offered meaningful 'alternatives to the arenas of survival traditionally presented to Loisaida residents: survival via welfare, street hustling, menial jobs, or, for a very few, assimilation into the middle class.'[413] They met the material needs of those involved, improved the neighbourhood's immediate environment,

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406 Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 83.

407 Chodorkoff, 82.

408 Chodorkoff, 83.

409 Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 125–26.

410 Bagchee, 126.

411 Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 81–120.

412 Chodorkoff, 92.

413 Chodorkoff, 102.

provided a focus for community organising that could incorporate a broad cross-section of residents, and created non-hierarchical organisational structures that emphasised 'learning by doing' and the holistic integration of 'distinct realms of experience'.[414] At quarterly town hall meetings, which brought together Lower East Side residents and representatives from several community organisations, Chodorkoff saw a form of small-scale participatory democracy that countered the top-down decision-making power of the state.[415]

In his discussion of the Loisaida movement, Timo Schrader highlights social ecology's utopian nature, describing an 'insurmountable gap between social ecology as a critical theory and social ecology as a new paradigm for societal organization around the globe'.[416] For Chodorkoff, however, social ecology 'does not propose an abstract ideal society, but rather an evolving process of change, never to be fully realized.'[417] Chodorkoff's insistence on utopia as an 'inspiration and […] a point of orientation in the day-to-day, incremental process of changing the world' is derived in part from his experiences in Loisaida, and his understanding that while they were rooted in the survival of an oppressive present, the prefigurative practices of the Loisaida movement were always concerned with imagining and building more egalitarian futures in the here-and-now.[418] This overlapping of utopian and quotidian elements is prominent throughout *Viva Loisaida*. In the film's opening voiceover, for example, Bimbo Rivas suggests that he and other Loisaida residents 'are crazy, we are out of our heads' for believing that the transformation of the neighbourhood is possible.[419] As Rivas speaks, Momber shows a group of teenagers building a geodesic dome at a community event in Tompkins Square Park, before cutting to a mural painted onto an abandoned building, demonstrating that as quixotic as it may have appeared to outsiders, in the late 1970s the transformation of the neighbourhood was already in full swing.

Chodorkoff was particularly interested in larger and more ambitious projects in Loisaida, such as the construction of urban homesteads, community gardens, and renewable energy systems,

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414 Chodorkoff, 106, 21.

415 Chodorkoff, 119.

For a longer discussion of this form of participatory democracy, which Bookchin called 'libertarian municipalism', see also Murray Bookchin, 'The New Municipal Agenda', in *Urbanization without Cities: The Rise and Decline of Citizenship* (Montréal and New York: Black Rose books, 1992), 225–88.

416 Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 60.

417 Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 25–26.

418 Chodorkoff, 26.

419 *Viva Loisaida*, 1:56-1:59.

which, he argues, 'meant not only the physical reconstruction of the neighborhood, but also the creation of jobs, job training and new sources of income as well.'[420] Chodorkoff writes that

> Such opportunities were desperately needed in Loisaida, where estimates of unemployment among youth ran as high as 40%. Job training was provided to people in the rapidly emerging fields related to alternative technologies like solar energy and retrofitting buildings for energy efficiency. Jobs for those trained could have been developed in the neighborhood itself where about 70% of the housing stock was abandoned or dilapidated.[421]

Chodorkoff's discussion of the need for training and employment opportunities draws attention to the fact that, in a period when wages were falling, traditional industries were disappearing, and the rapidly changing capitalist economy of New York had little need for the waged labour of Puerto Ricans, the possibility of earning a wage while building much-needed community resources offered racialised Loisaida residents a degree of agency in the context of a labour market that saw them as surplus to requirements.

The choice between a slow, dehumanising death under the boot of racial capitalism and the autonomy and dignity offered by new forms of work is expressed in two Nuyorican poems that were first published in the mid-1970s. In 'Puerto Rican Obituary', Pedro Pietro narrated the story of five Puerto Rican immigrants—Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, and Manuel—trapped in exploitative, poorly paid jobs where they 'worked / ten days a week / and were only paid for five'.[422] Despite always being on time, never speaking back when insulted by the boss, and never going on strike, Pietri writes that

> They died broke
> They died owing
> They died never knowing
> what the front entrance
> of the first national city bank looks like[423]

[420] Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 111.

[421] Chodorkoff, 111.

[422] Pedro Pietri, 'Puerto Rican Obituary', Poetry Foundation, accessed 6 December 2023, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/58396/puerto-rican-obituary.

[423] Pietri.

In his poem 'A Job', a performance of which was recorded in *Viva Loisaida* (Figure 52), Bimbo Rivas rejected the grim fates of Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, and Manuel, instead asserting a demand for

> A job with all the benefits
> correlated with the sweat and time
> invested by myself
> a job that don't step on my pride
> a job that doesn't shorten my life on Earth[424]

Rivas's call for meaningful and dignified ways of making a living in Loisaida echoes Bookchin's insistence on the need for 'the replacement of needlessly insensate labor with creative work'.[425] For Chodorkoff, the construction of homesteads, community gardens, and green technology systems offered a 'material base for the development of a cooperatively owned and managed, self-reliant economy for the neighborhood', one predicated on creative and sustainable labour.[426]

Chodorkoff laments the fact that a fully self-reliant economy never materialised in Loisaida, but it is important not to overstate the transformational potential of the new forms of labour that did develop. An article published in the community magazine *The Quality of Life in Loisaida* in 1988 stated that at its peak in the late 1970s, Adopt-a-Building was the largest employer in the neighbourhood, putting 'over 350 people, 98% of them from the neighbourhood, through its training and pa[ying] for their services in rehabilitating buildings.'[427] While this figure speaks to the success of Adopt-a-Building in promoting and developing sweat equity urban homesteading as a viable form of grassroots housing, training, and employment in Loisaida, it also demonstrates how much of the social and economic burden of the fiscal crisis was passed along to those suffering most from austerity. As Andrew Strombeck argues:

> It's all fine and good for the state to enable experiments by tacitly approving the appropriation of city-owned space. It's another thing when the state, and the economy, demands that you manage yourself.[428]

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[424] Bimbo Rivas, 'A Job', in *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe*, ed. Miguel Algarín and Bob Holman (New York, NY: Henry Holt & Company, 1994), 360.

[425] Bookchin, 'What Is Social Ecology?', 56.

[426] Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 104.

[427] 'Adopt-a-Building Through the Years', *The Quality of Life in/Calidad de Vida En Loisaida*, March-April 1988, 13, Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection (MSS134) Box 2, Folder 3, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City.

[428] Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*, 7.

Adopt-a-Building was fuelled by the desire to create a housing system that was oriented towards people rather than profit, but the various government agencies on whose support the homesteading programme was reliant rarely, if ever, shared this vision.[429] As such, homesteading can be seen as an inadvertent legitimisation of the state's abdication of responsibility for its citizens. What's more, Schrader suggests that as Adopt-a-Building grew, the pressures of managing such a large-scale operation meant that it gradually 'transformed into an employer that neglected some of the organization's philosophy of people-oriented housing.'[430]

In addition to this, while Chodorkoff insists that the Loisaida movement 'def[ied] stereotypes, with women taking on a variety of leadership roles, including in traditionally male arenas like construction', *Viva Loisaida* foregrounds what appeared to be a highly gendered division of labour.[431] In an early scene, Jackson introduces the 'new pioneers of tomorrow' who are transforming Loisaida, those from whom 'a new redressing of the neighbourhood will spring.'[432] An establishing shot shows a group of people clearing a vacant lot and constructing a pathway through what will become a community garden, as part of a programme aimed at training local youth 'in certain job skills so that they'll be able to get employment' (Figure 53).[433] As the camera focuses in on the workers's faces, it becomes clear that they all appear to be young men (Figure 54). Despite the apparent absence of any women in this work crew, both their supervisor and Jackson repeatedly refer to this group as 'the youth' of the neighbourhood, erasing any trace of the exclusion. This dynamic is repeated throughout *Viva Loisaida*; whether they are shown at organising meetings, painting community murals, or renovating abandoned tenements, men are continually foregrounded as agents of change, acting as part of but also on behalf of the broader community in Loisaida. This exclusionary representation is repeated by Chodorkoff, who celebrates the stereotype-defying nature of the Loisaida movement while exclusively centring the names and voices of its male leaders in his own account of the neighbourhood.[434]

Chodorkoff describes himself, 'by training and inclination', as 'a storyteller', and his account of Loisaida in the late 1970s, which builds upon a sustained theoretical and practical engagement with the neighbourhood, offers a compelling narrative of the work of the Loisaida movement,

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[429] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 74–75.

[430] Schrader, 79.

[431] Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 106.

[432] *Viva Loisaida*, 6:57-7:03.

[433] *Viva Loisaida*, 8:36-8:41.

[434] Chodorkoff interviews Chino García, Edgard Rivera, the actor Luis Guzmán (who joined Charas as a teenager), and the prison organiser Victor Sánchez.

one that Jackson and Momber also espouse throughout *Viva Loisaida*. Chodorkoff stresses the integrated nature of the neighbourhood's different socio-spatial practices, the feeling of community empowerment they reflected and fostered, and the genuinely innovative ecological sensibility they espoused, going so far as to suggest that the Loisaida movement was 'the first low-income group of urban dwellers in the United States to attempt utilizing alternative [green] technology in the reconstruction of their community.'[435] In *Why Stories Matter*, Clare Hemmings writes that she has 'always loved feminist theory for its utopianism', and that her interest in feminist storytelling is based in a desire to 'contribute to the tradition of dogged optimism that allows its practitioners to understand and experience life differently.'[436] A shared sense of tenacious utopianism animates Chodorkoff and Momber's visions of the new society being imagined and instituted in Loisaida in the late 1970s. The stories they both tell, of a beleaguered community taking on destructive political and economic forces in order to collectively reimagine and transform their neighbourhood from the ground up, articulate the powerful sense of doing, making, and being otherwise that attracted people from within and beyond the neighbourhood to get involved with the Loisaida movement (and can facilitate and sustain participation in social movements more broadly).

While being drawn to the narrative power of Chodorkoff's account of the Loisaida movement, I argue that it flattens out a degree of complexity in the lived experience of the neighbourhood. In particular, there is a tension between Chodorkoff's generative emphasis on the unfinished nature of social ecology—the generative open-endedness of its utopian orientation—and his insistence on the need to 'transcend the forces of fragmentation' in order to 'reconstruct' what he calls 'coherent communities'.[437] Chodorkoff's discussion of social fragmentation highlights 'the disjoining or deactiving [sic] of relations between human beings (and humans and nature)' that Jodi Melamed argues is 'needed for capitalist expropriation.'[438] However, his notion of the reconstruction of a coherent community implies that prior to its dramatic social and material collapse in the mid-1970s, Loisaida comprised a unified social and spatial entity to which the Loisaida movement was invested in returning. On the one hand, this downplays the racialised and classed oppression (and collective resistance to this oppression) that has characterised life in

[435] Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 84.

[436] Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

[437] Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 78, 24.

[438] Jodi Melamed, 'Racial Capitalism', *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 78, https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.1.0076.

the Lower East Side since at least the mid-nineteenth century; this marginalisation was exacerbated by, but did not commence with, New York's 1975 fiscal crisis. On the other hand, it positions Loisaida and its residents as a (once and future) 'substantial unity that must be protected from conflict, heterogeneity, and particularity', to use Rosalyn Deutsche's phrase, in the process disavowing the complex dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that structure any social space.[439]

Chodorkoff's somewhat static understanding of community is at odds with the more nuanced way the term is utilised in *Viva Loisaida*. There, community is used to refer to both those who actively participated in the work of the Loisaida movement, and those who were impacted, directly or indirectly, by these practices. In theory, the relationship between these spheres was overlapping and mutable, with each changing in size and scope as different people got involved in specific projects in Loisaida and moved into or away from the neighbourhood. However, as discussed above, *Viva Loisaida* presents a vision of the neighbourhood that underplays the participation of women in several of the Loisaida movement's most prominent socio-spatial practices, in the process excluding them from meaningful inclusion in the first, more active sphere of community. If, as Schrader argues, 'community is always rooted in territory—physical, spiritual, or imaginative—but social networks are constantly negotiated', then by emphasising the need to reconstruct a coherent community in Loisaida, primarily through a series of practices from which women's participation is downplayed or erased, Chodorkoff disavows a more meaningful engagement with how these negotiations structured the work of the Loisaida movement—and the implications of this tension for the new society that was being imagined and instituted in the late 1970s.[440] As I discuss in the next section, there is an alternative vision of change in Loisaida that can be glimpsed in certain scenes throughout *Viva Loisaida*, one that foregrounds the longstanding role played by women, and particularly women of colour, in reproducing and transforming collective life in the neighbourhood, through many of the same socio-spatial practices that elsewhere appeared to be the exclusive domain of men.

1.4.2 Commoning Loisaida

In documenting the socio-spatial practices of the Loisaida movement, *Viva Loisaida* makes visible the struggle to decommodify and decentralise access to resources that were vital for the maintenance of life in the neighbourhood in the late 1970s, including safe housing, affordable energy, and green space for socialising, food production, and performance. Through this work,

[439] Deutsche, *Evictions*, xiii.

[440] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 6.

the Loisaida movement sought to build commonly-run spaces of social reproduction, community building, artmaking, and other shared practices, which were neither entirely public nor private, but were collectively owned, managed, and controlled by those who used them (rather than the state or an individual).[441] The Marxist feminist philosopher Silvia Federici is one of several activist scholars who have theorised the production and maintenance of such spaces under the framework of 'the commons'.[442] Arguing that commons are not just things but social relations that are premised on sustained cooperation, Federici, writing in collaboration with George Caffentzis, notes that the verb 'commoning' is used to highlight the prefigurative character of the commons, by 'underscor[ing] not the material wealth shared but the sharing itself and the solidarity bonds produced in the process.'[443] Commoning allows new forms of social organisation to develop, which acknowledge the ongoing dominance of the state and capital while struggling to move beyond these structures.[444] Like Dan Chodorkoff, Federici insists that the production of the commons entails the 'recombin[ation of] what the social division of labor in capitalism has separated.'[445] However, Federici and Caffentzis are adamant that while commoning practices have organised human societies throughout history, '[w]e will not construct an alternative society by nostalgic returns to social forms that have already proven unable to resist the attack of capitalist relations'.[446]

As an anti-capitalist critique that imagines and assembles new forms of social organisation, the notion of the commons shares key characteristics with social ecology: both frameworks emphasise principles of mutualism and reciprocity; both insist on the need to rethink the

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[441] Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*, 116.

[442] For Federici's contributions to the theory and practice of the commons, see the essays collected in Silvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019).

See also Maria Mies, 'No Commons without a Community', *Community Development Journal* 49, no. Supplement 1 (1 January 2014): i106–17, https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsu007; Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, 'Defending, Reclaiming and Reinventing the Commons', *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 22, no. 4 (1 January 2001): 997–1023, https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2001.9669952; Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008); Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (New York: Verso, 2012); Massimo De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Postcapitalism* (London: Zed Books, 2017); Camille Barbagallo, Nicholas Beuret, and David Harvie, eds., *Commoning: With George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici* (London: Pluto Press, 2019).

[443] Federici and Caffentzis, 'Commons Against and Beyond Capitalism', 94.

[444] Federici and Caffentzis, 96.

For a more critical perspective on the commons, one that also criticises the practice of urban homesteading as a continuation of Indigenous dispossession in an urban context (but does not consider homesteaders who, as in the Nuyorican Lower East Side, are themselves colonised subjects), see Tuck and Yang, 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor', 28.

[445] Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*, 109.

[446] Federici and Caffentzis, 'Commons Against and Beyond Capitalism', 87.

relationship between humans and their environments; and both advocate forms of collective, directly democratic decision-making.[447] Unlike Chodorkoff, there is no evidence of Federici having interacted directly with the artists and activists of the Loisaida movement. Nevertheless, she was living and working in New York in the 1970s, and her first-hand experience of the 1975 fiscal crisis and its aftermath shaped her subsequent organising and theorising; indeed, Federici has described post-crisis New York, which became a testing ground for burgeoning neoliberal ideology and policies, as 'the first structurally adjusted country in the world'.[448] For Federici and Caffentzis, as for Chodorkoff, community gardening, squatting, and other 'commoning initiatives' offer both a critique of and alternative to the capitalist mode of production: 'They are experiments in self-provisioning and the seeds of a new mode of production in the making'.[449] Federici and Caffentzis are more circumspect about housing co-operatives, which they argue can take the form of 'gated commons' unless they are central to much larger transformational projects, such as in the Nuyorican Lower East Side, where the creation of sweat equity urban homesteads was just one part of the Loisaida movement's multifaceted work.[450]

What distinguishes these approaches is that Federici's perspective on the commons is rooted in a feminist standpoint that has been shaped by the struggle against gendered discrimination and over socially reproductive labour.[451] In 1973, she cofounded the New York committee of the international Wages for Housework movement, developed in collaboration with Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, and others.[452] These theorists and activists insisted that, as the unpaid, invisible, typically gendered labour that underpins social reproduction and thus sustains capitalist modes of production, housework offers a key site of struggle against capitalism.[453] Like earlier decolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon, this analysis critiqued Marxist theories that focused exclusively on waged labour while marginalising the enslaved, the colonised, the unwaged, and other ostensibly 'unproductive' sectors of society.[454] Building on these critiques, Federici argues that

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[447] Federici and Caffentzis, 95.

[448] Quoted in George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici, 'In Conversation with George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici', interview by Carla da Cunha Duarte Francisco et al., in *Commoning: With George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici*, ed. Camille Barbagallo, Nicholas Beuret, and David Harvie (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 13.

[449] Federici and Caffentzis, 'Commons Against and Beyond Capitalism', 89.

[450] Federici and Caffentzis, 91.

[451] Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*, 104.

[452] Federici, quoted in Caffentzis and Federici, 'In Conversation', 18.

[453] Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*, 152–59.

[454] Federici, 153.

> we cannot build an alternative society and a strong self-reproducing movement unless we redefine our reproduction in a more cooperative way and put an end to the separation between the personal and the political and between political activism and the reproduction of everyday life.[455]

As the main subjects of reproductive labour throughout history, Federici argues that women have been most vulnerable to the disappearance and privatisation of communal resources, and most committed to their protection.[456] In arguing that women, and particularly women of colour, have always been at the forefront of commoning practices, Federici does not 'concede to a naturalistic conception of femininity', but acknowledges 'the collective experiences, the knowledge, and the struggles that women have accumulated concerning reproductive work, whose history has been an essential part of our resistance to capitalism.'[457] Following Dolores Hayden, Federici argues that the reorganisation of social reproduction is ultimately not a question of identity, but one of labour, power, and safety.[458]

A feminist perspective on commoning practices uncovers, to borrow a phrase from Cindi Katz, 'a hidden city of social reproduction' in the Lower East Side.[459] It recentres the key role played by women in the neighbourhood's longstanding cultures of resistance to marginalisation and exploitation.[460] Since the mid-nineteenth century, forms of direct action such as rent strikes, pickets, and protests had been initiated and maintained by Lower East Side women, usually in coalitions that crossed religious and ethnic lines.[461] Timo Schrader argues that throughout the twentieth century, housing activism in particular was led by working-class women: the New York rent strikes of 1907, for example, had 'activists such as Pauline Newman, housewives, and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union at the helm.'[462] Later, Puerto Rican women were at the helm of homesteading efforts in the Nuyorican Lower East Side. Activists Ibis Marrero and Ruth García were key to developing Adopt-a-Building's participatory, decentralised approach in the early 1970s, and García became co-coordinator of the organisation in 1973. The

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[455] Federici, 112.

[456] Federici, 107.

[457] Federici, 112, 113.

[458] Federici, 112.

[459] Cindi Katz, 'Excavating the Hidden City of Social Reproduction: A Commentary', *City & Society* 10, no. 1 (1998): 37, https://doi.org/10.1525/city.1998.10.1.37.

[460] Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 57.

[461] Mele, 60.

[462] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 67.

following year, writes Nandini Bagchee, Charas member Luz Rodriguez 'joined the homesteading effort at 519 East Eleventh Street as a "sweater" at the age of seventeen. A year later she had an apartment of her own in the building and was the youngest equity owner within the building.'[463] In 1975, Emma Acevedo organised a rent strike of her dilapidated tenement building at 55 Avenue C. Working in collaboration with Adopt-a-Building, over the next five years, Acevedo organised the renovation of nineteen of the building's twenty-four apartments.[464]

A feminist perspective on commoning also facilitates a more nuanced interpretation of *Viva Loisaida*, one that does not ignore the gendered exclusions that appear to structure the film, and the work of the Loisaida movement more broadly, but takes them as evidence of the ongoing and imperfect struggle—through an array of practices, and from a multiplicity of social locations—to contest the interlocking forms of oppression that undergird capitalism, which as Federici points out, is always both racist and patriarchal.[465] In one scene, this exclusion takes place before the viewer's eyes. Josie and Edgard Rivera are interviewed inside the family's renovated apartment at 533 East Eleventh Street (Figure 55).[466] Despite Jackson's assertion at the outset of this scene that 'both of them are well-known here on the Loisaida', he only directs his question to Edgard, asking him 'who owns this building'?[467] As Edgard begins speaking, Josie, who has been shown chatting and playing with the young couple's child only moments before this, falls silent (Figure 56). The camera focuses in on Edgard, who addresses both Jackson off screen and the camera directly, while Josie and the child gradually slip from view. Soon, only Edgard's face and shoulders are visible on screen (Figure 57). In this scene, while Edgard looks directly at the camera, Josie is briefly looked at, her own gaze turned to her child, until they both disappear. Edgard reappears throughout *Viva Loisaida* (at a Charas meeting, singing on the streets of the neighbourhood, and performing at the Nuyorican Poets Café), while Josie appears just once more, in the crowd at her husband's performance.

On one level, this scene appears to expose, to paraphrase Johanna Fernández's discussion of gendered dynamics of the Young Lords, the deep-rooted nature of patriarchal ideology, even

[463] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 123.

[464] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 65, 69.

[465] Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Penguin, 2021), 11.

[466] *Viva Loisaida*, 20:50-22:24.

[467] *Viva Loisaida*, 20:50-22:24.

within the social structures of those opposed to it.[468] It implicates Momber, a white European woman, in the gendered exclusion of a Puerto Rican woman of colour. Focusing on the visual strategies that animate this scene, however, allows for a different interpretation. By initially placing Josie and the child within the frame, and then forcing the viewer to turn their gaze away from the group and towards the individual as the shot tightens around Edgard, this scene echoes capitalist processes of social atomisation and concealment of gendered divisions of labour. By setting this scene in the urban homestead at 533 East Eleventh Street, one of the neighbourhood's most significant and celebrated projects, Momber draws attention to what Katz calls the 'simultaneous revealing (of spatial forms) and hiding (of social relations)' that structures the built environment—and can undermine attempts to transform it.[469] These would have been preoccupations for the filmmaker at around this time; Momber and Jackson had a son together in 1978, and in a recent oral history interview, Momber recalls her efforts to set up free daycare with a collective of women of colour in Loisaida.[470] With this scene, Momber thus demonstrates that the social and spatial transformation of Loisaida did not necessarily involve a 'clash of wholly distinct opposing forces', to borrow a phrase from the philosopher José Medina, but instead necessitated '*contending with*' oppressive forces, and the ways in which they shaped even the ostensibly oppositional practices of the Loisaida movement.[471]

There is one scene in *Viva Loisaida* in which the key role played by women in socio-spatial practices in Loisaida is foregrounded. Three women of colour are stood on a street corner in front of a Cityarts Workshop mural titled *Wall of Respect for Women* (1974), which was led by the Asian American artist Tomie Arai in collaboration with a multiracial, multiethnic group of women from the neighbourhood (Figs. 58-60). The mural depicts women of colour undertaking waged and unwaged labour, both within and outside the home, as well as participating in strikes and other forms of collective political action (Figure 61). Two of the figures in this scene are unknown to me, but the woman wearing a black beret is the artist, activist, and Charas member, Angie Hernandez, a collaborator on the mural. In the late 1970s, Hernandez was squatting a building on East Fourth Street with her four young children, helping to renovate the abandoned public school that became El Bohío, and performing regularly as the leader of the *bomba y plena*

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[468] On the gender politics of the New York Young Lords, and the work done by Denise Oliver, Iris Morales, and other women of colour to challenge the so-called 'revolutionary machismo' of the organisation, see Fernández, *The Young Lords*, 250–69.

[469] Katz, 'Excavating the Hidden City of Social Reproduction', 39.

[470] Momber, 'Oral History Interview', 45–46.

[471] José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 16, emphasis in original.

troupe Grupo Cemi.[472] In this scene, Hernandez and her friend listen as an older Black woman narrates her love of the mural in front of them. The mural's content offers a counterpoint to the more triumphant narrative espoused by Jackson and *Viva Loisaida*'s male interviewees, by emphasising the liberatory potential of collective labour without shying away from the pressures facing working class women of colour in neighbourhoods such as the Lower East Side.[473] It is this faithful portrayal of the pressures and possibilities of collective life that appeals to this woman, who insists: 'Everything's beautiful. Look at this picture and you can see what's going on in life.'[474]

Federici and Caffentzis argue that commoning is often seen as unproductive because it involves a 'willingness to spend much time in the work of cooperation, discussing, negotiating, and learning to deal with conflicts and disagreements'.[475] This scene demonstrates the ongoing, unfinished nature of this process. Not only was *Wall of Respect for Women* the product of a period of sustained collaboration between a group of women of colour, but even after it was ostensibly 'finished', the meaning of the work was continually being renegotiated and reaffirmed, by those who either participated in its production or else saw some aspect of their experience represented in it. The same can be said of many other socio-spatial practices in Loisaida. The prefigurative character of these practices did not begin and end with the completion of a homestead, community garden, or renewable energy project, but continued for as long as people valued and maintained these spaces as shared resources for the neighbourhood. For example, another scene in *Viva Loisaida* shows an older man, a younger woman, and two children digging plants and flowers in the East Twelfth Street community garden (Figure 62). What this scene highlights is that longer term commoning practices in Loisaida were often undertaken by those who, in *Viva Loisaida* at least, were rarely depicted as being involved in the production of these spaces—but who were nevertheless committed to their maintenance.

If, as Maria Mies insists, there is 'no commons without a community', then a feminist perspective on commoning resists Chodorkoff's notion of a 'coherent community', and reconfigures the more fluid but still divided conception of the term that appears throughout *Viva Loisaida*, where 'the community' is split into those who participated in the creation of certain spaces, and those

[472] Shortly after this scene, Hernandez and Grupo Cemi are seen performing at the Nuyorican Poets Café, alongside a spoken word poet and Edgard Rivera.

[473] Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 31.

[474] *Viva Loisaida*, 33:18-33:25.

[475] Federici and Caffentzis, 'Commons Against and Beyond Capitalism', 94.

who subsequently used or otherwise benefited from them.[476] A feminist perspective makes no distinction between 'commoners' who were involved in the initial appropriation and transformation of derelict spaces in Loisaida, and those whose ongoing maintenance of these sites, through a distinct but complementary set of practices, was vital to their continued existence. As Federici and Caffentzis argue,

> Commons are a perspective fostering a common interest in every aspect of life and political work and are therefore committed to refusing labor hierarchies and inequalities in every struggle and prioritizing the development of a truly collective subject.[477]

In this subsection, I have shown that by moving away from a conception of certain practices as primarily invested in the development of new forms of 'meaningful' waged employment, and by centring the multifaceted role played by women of colour in these practices, a feminist commoning perspective on *Viva Loisaida* focuses attention on the new forms of productive and reproductive labour that were developing in Loisaida in the late 1970s, whose emergent social and spatial relations were potentially transformative but never free of conflict. This reading resists the allure of the grand triumphant narrative, and instead focuses on the 'fragments of the new society potentially in the making', that is glimpsed throughout *Viva Loisaida* in the spaces in-between the film's more masculinist visions of change.[478]

1.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have argued, through a detailed analysis of Marlis Momber's *Viva Loisaida* (1978), that in the late 1970s, the artists, activists, and residents of the Loisaida movement transformed the neighbourhood's derelict built environment and its frayed social relations, not just to ensure their continued survival, but to begin imagining and building a more egalitarian society in the Nuyorican Lower East Side. They did so by embracing 'the tension between space as it is conceived and space as it is lived', to use Hamish Kallin's phrase, and searching out symbolic and material openings in the neighbourhood's socio-spatial order within which to enact change.[479] The prefigurative socio-spatial practices they developed, from muralism to urban homesteading, encouraged the participation of many local people (regardless of prior experience

[476] Mies, 'No Commons without a Community'.

[477] Federici and Caffentzis, 'Commons Against and Beyond Capitalism', 96.

[478] Federici and Caffentzis, 93.

[479] Hamish Kallin, 'Henri Lefebvre and the Spatial Revolution That Never Ends: Towards the Reconciliation of Anarchist and Marxist Approaches in Geography?', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 19 October 2024, 8, https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12726.

or expertise), integrated a range of artistic, activist, and everyday activities, and foregrounded the importance of collaboration across difference. A key argument of this chapter is that while *Viva Loisaida* offers a rich visual archive of these practices, the film itself embodies the same transformative principles as the artists and activists whose work Momber documented, and with whom she collaborated for many years. As such, throughout this chapter, I have analysed both the film's content and form: Momber's technique of filming murals in sections in order to linger over certain details, for example, or the ways in which Tyrone Jackson's voiceovers are integrated into these scenes in order to foreground certain narratives. By playing careful attention to the choice of subjects, the method of filming these subjects, the combination of sound and image, and the myriad other aesthetic and narrative strategies that Momber embraced, I have identified visions of a new society in the making that are visible throughout *Viva Loisaida*.

Viva Loisaida was completed in 1978, but does not appear to have been screened in Loisaida itself until March 1980, by which point the neighbourhood's social, cultural, political, and material character was already beginning to change. A poster for this first screening collages close-ups of the faces of the people who appear in *Viva Loisaida*, emphasising the film's community-oriented perspective (Figure 63). The screening took place at the New Assembly theatre in El Bohío, a community and cultural centre on East Ninth Street that was co-founded by Charas and Adopt-a-Building in 1978 in the former Public School 64, which had closed in 1977 due to neighbourhood depopulation and cuts to public services.[480] In an oral history with the New York Preservation Archive Project, Chino García recalls that PS 64 was initially squatted:

> We requested the City to turn over the building to the community, and they took their sweet time. So one time, one day, Adopt-A-Building and CHARAS just decided to squat in the building and start fixing it, and demanded the City give us a lease. That's how we actually got in.[481]

The transformation of PS 64 into El Bohío was thus predicated on the same emphasis on community self-reliance, and a powerful sense of ethical ownership over the neighbourhood's abandoned spaces, that had long underpinned the work of the Loisaida movement. Rooms were renovated one at a time, and, as Nandini Bagchee writes, Charas (who took over sole responsibility for the building in 1981) 'invited their colleagues and collaborators from the art,

[480] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 102.

[481] García, 'Oral History Interview', 18.

educational, and environmental organizations to join them in populating the expansive interior.'[482]

If the future of Charas appeared somewhat uncertain when *Viva Loisaida* was being filmed, with Jackson wondering whether they would survive their eviction from the loft at 95 Avenue B, then a few years later, they remained a key catalyst group in Loisaida.[483] As a former school building, El Bohío contained an auditorium, a gymnasium, and many classrooms and offices, allowing Charas to offer exhibition, studio, performance, and meeting space to artists, musicians, and community groups.[484] Charas's increased involvement in cultural production in Loisaida operated in two distinct spheres. The first was supporting the work of underrepresented local artists, particularly as part of Seven Loaves, a coalition of local non-profit arts organisations based in El Bohío, that included the Asian American space Basement Workshop, the Black-owned Kenkeleba House Gallery, the local magazine *Quality of Life in Loisaida,* and Momber and Jackson's production company Tylis.[485] Artists that were excluded from mainstream and alternative art spaces in New York were prioritised at El Bohío.[486] El Bohío also brought Charas into contact with the growing numbers of predominantly white, often highly political artists who began moving to the Lower East Side in the late 1970s, drawn to the neighbourhood's cheap rent and alternative forms of collective urban living.[487]

The Lower East Side's abandonment in the 1970s, while undoubtedly intensified by New York's fiscal crisis in 1975, was not an isolated aberration, but reflected the normal functioning of the urban process under capitalism, which, as Lisa Lowe argues, has always expanded by exploiting divisions of race, gender, class, and nationality to identify 'particular regions for production and others for neglect, certain populations for exploitation and still others for disposal.'[488] Just a few

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[482] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 132.

[483] *Viva Loisaida*, 30:14-30:21.

[484] Guerron, 'CHARAS and the Reimagining of Loisaida', 76.

[485] Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land*, 24–25.

[486] García, 'Oral History Interview', 23.

These artists included the Nuyorican muralist Maria Domínguez, whose multifaceted artistic practice in the 1980s (including a stint as El Bohío's Visual Art Coordinator), is the focus of Chapter Two.

[487] Chapter Three examines Martin Wong's paintings of Loisaida. A queer Chinese American artist, Wong was closely associated with the East Village art scene, whose sudden emergence in the Lower East Side in the early 1980s played an important role in the neighbourhood's social, cultural, and economic transformation. Charas's relationship with groups such as Political Art Documentation and Distribution (PADD), who rented space in El Bohío in the early 1980s, and Artmakers, who initiated an ambitious mural project in La Plaza Cultural in 1985, are discussed in Chapter Four.

[488] Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 150.

See also Dantzler, 'The Urban Process under Racial Capitalism', 1.

years after *Viva Loisaida* was completed, through a combination of New York's gradual economic recovery and the emergence of a new art scene in the East Village, the Lower East Side was identified as a potential site of profitable reinvestment. This shift gave rise to a process of gentrification in which the neighbourhood's low-income and working class communities of colour, having been previously earmarked for neglect in the 1970s, were now marked out for intentional removal. In an article printed in a special Loisaida issue of *WIN Magazine* (the magazine of the War Resisters League) in December 1979, Linda Cohen and Brent Sharman described this process:

> Young, white professionals, forced by the overall city housing scarcity, and drawn by the potential charms and conveniences of a renovated East Village, are seeking apartments in Loisaida. Smelling the big breaks, the landlords of the area are attempting to drive out their low income tenants by withholding services and raising rents. The newcomers, meanwhile, snatch up tiny tenement apartments at absurdly high rents, easily double what they would have been a few years ago.[489]

Published as the darkest days of abandonment and disinvestment in Loisaida seemed to be finally ending, Cohen and Sharman's article described a phenomenon that would soon become very familiar and widely contested in the neighbourhood.[490] In this changing context, writes Bagchee, community groups who had spent the 1970s 'laying a physical claim to an unwanted neighborhood' now found themselves struggling to 'preserv[e] these gains [while] warding off new threats of dislocation as investors saw opportunities in a rapidly gentrifying landscape'.[491] In the rest of this thesis, I track the ways in which these new threats of displacement were represented, critiqued, and contested through a range of artistic and activist projects in the 1980s, arguing that as the conflict over space intensified, the prefigurative practices and new socio-spatial relations that the Loisaida movement fostered in the 1970s remained a key terrain of struggle in the Nuyorican Lower East Side.

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[489] Linda Cohen and Brent Sharman, 'Rebuilding a Community', *Win Magazine: Peace and Freedom Through Nonviolent Action*, 20 December 1979, 11.

[490] Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 193–94.

[491] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 138.

Chapter Two. The Art of Survival: the visuality of gentrification and the Nuyorican practice of Maria Domínguez, 1983-1987

2.1 Introduction

In March 2022, I interviewed the Nuyorican artist Maria Domínguez at her home in Brooklyn, New York City, where she has lived and worked as a muralist, painter, and arts educator since the early 1990s. Prior to this, Domínguez was a long-term resident of the Lower East Side, having moved to the neighbourhood from Puerto Rico as a young child with her mother and siblings in 1954.[492] Early on in our conversation, I asked Domínguez what role art and artmaking played in her life growing up in the postwar Lower East Side. Without missing a beat, Domínguez described her mother, a garment worker and tenant activist, as a formative artistic influence: 'She was a seamstress, but everything she did was, to me, creation.'[493] When I asked Domínguez to elaborate, she went on:

> She'd say, "The sofa is in dire condition, and we're gonna change and upholster it." And I'm like [gestures and makes a sound to indicate her mind has been blown]. And she would just collapse this thing apart, buy the fabric, and we have a new sofa. […] And it makes me laugh because it was— I didn't question it, I was like, "Okay, we will," and it was like, "Is that a big job?" "No, we're gonna do it." "Okay!"[494]

For Domínguez, acts like these, which reflected the family's material circumstances (reupholstering an old sofa cost less than buying a new one) but represented a refusal to be constrained by them, fostered an understanding of creative practice as integral to the reproduction of everyday life in the Lower East Side. Unlike those who had the 'financial stability to be able to move out' of New York as its economic fortunes waned in the late 1960s and 1970s, Domínguez and her family 'couldn't leave, so we had to fight every day' in 'a real rough neighbourhood' that was declining rapidly.[495] 'Growing up in that environment', insisted Domínguez, 'you become creative. You problem solve.'[496] In this context, 'art became a problem solving mechanism, not […] an object for galleries. It was creation. You create. You don't have it? You create it.'[497]

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[492] Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

[493] Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

[494] Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

[495] Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

[496] Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

[497] Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

In this chapter, I analyse how this notion of art as a 'problem solving mechanism' shaped Domínguez's artistic practice by examining three projects that she undertook in the Nuyorican Lower East Side in the 1980s: *Baile Bomba* (1983), a mural painted onto three abandoned buildings on Clinton Street; *Gentrification* (1985), a sculpture included in a group show at Kenkeleba House Gallery; and *Contemporaneos* (1987), an exhibition of Latine artists held at El Bohío. Domínguez began working as an artist around 1983, at a moment when art was playing an increasingly visible—and highly contested—role in the life of the Lower East Side. In the early 1980s, the development of a vibrant new art scene in the East Village, bolstered by New York's economic optimism, prompted an influx of cultural and economic capital into the neighbourhood that started to transform its social, cultural, and material character. Around this time, government funding for the kinds of large-scale homesteading and environmental projects that Charas and other Loisaida groups had undertaken in the previous decade began to wane, with grants increasingly coming from federal, state, and local arts funding bodies.[498] As the competition for space and resources intensified in the 1980s, Nandini Bagchee notes that racialised, working-class Lower East Side residents, who had spent the previous decade laying claim to an 'unwanted neighborhood', found themselves facing new threats of displacement 'as investors saw opportunities in a rapidly gentrifying landscape'.[499] Here I argue that Domínguez sought to comment on and intervene in this struggle through the development of a formally, materially, and contextually diverse body of work that drew on established cultural practices (and social networks) in the Nuyorican Lower East Side, while embracing creative new methods for critiquing and challenging gentrification through artmaking.[500]

In this chapter, I argue that gentrification in the Lower East Side was reliant on highly racialised and colonising ways of seeing, representing, and occupying space, which privileged the social, cultural, and spatial reproduction of certain groups by ignoring or actively erasing the existence of others.[501] Drawing on the work of Nicholas Mirzoeff, I examine the ways in which this exclusionary dynamic structured dominant conceptualisations and depictions of the Lower East Side and its inhabitants, produced by powerful actors with a stake in the neighbourhood in the

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[498] These included the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council of the Arts, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, and the Lower Manhattan Art Council. Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 110.

[499] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 138.

[500] The projects that I discuss in this chapter are also the focus of a book chapter, forthcoming from Duke University Press: Al Hoyos-Twomey, 'The Art of Survival: The Visual Art Activism of Maria Dominguez', in *Nuyorican and Diasporican Visual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Arlene Dávila and Yasmin Ramirez (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2025, forthcoming), 131–48.

[501] Kent-Stoll, 'The Racial and Colonial Dimensions of Gentrification', 13–14.

mid-1980s (including the city, the real estate industry, the media, and the art world). I argue that by ignoring or excluding the social, artistic, and spatial practices of the neighbourhood's Puerto Rican community, these representations helped legitimise and hasten gentrification.[502] Through her artistic and curatorial practice, Domínguez sought to critique and contest this erasure, and the different forms of displacement that it facilitated. With *Baile Bomba*, Domínguez challenged top-down depictions of the Lower East Side (produced by municipal agencies like the New York City Department of Finance) that portrayed the neighbourhood as empty and thus ripe for capital reinvestment. With *Gentrification*, Domínguez critiqued mass media narratives that naturalised and aestheticised the forced displacement of the neighbourhood's low-income, predominantly Puerto Rican residents. Finally, with *Contemporaneos*, Domínguez contested the exclusion of Nuyorican and Latine artists (and audiences) from the new art scenes that had flourished in the neighbourhood in the 1980s. While deeply rooted in Domínguez's lived experiences, each project was reliant on and made meaning through collaboration with other local artists and activists, including Charas, Marlis Momber, and others.

Working at the intersections of Nuyorican cultural production and anti-gentrification activism, Domínguez was prolific as an artist during the 1980s, but her contributions to the cultural and political history of the Lower East Side have been overlooked, not just by broader art historical[503] or urbanist[504] accounts of the neighbourhood, but also by scholarship that focuses on Nuyorican art and activism.[505] One reason for this obscurity is the fragmentary nature of Domínguez's archive, which is scattered across several archival repositories, including the

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[502] Mirzoeff, 'The Right to Look', 2011, 476.

[503] Domínguez is absent from key art historical accounts of cultural production in Downtown Manhattan in the late twentieth century, such as Steven Hager, *Art After Midnight: The East Village Scene* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986); Deutsche, *Evictions*; Taylor, *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene 1974–1984*; Ault, *For the Record*, 2002; Moore, *Art Gangs*.

[504] Critical accounts of the Lower East Side's urban transformation invariably discuss the neighbourhood's majority Puerto Rican population, but tend to conflate the category 'artist' with white, middle-class subjectivity in ways that erase the work of people like Domínguez, who were both formally trained artists *and* long-term residents of the neighbourhood. See Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*; Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*.

[505] Recent accounts of the cultural politics of the Lower East Side foreground Nuyorican art and activism, particularly the work of Charas and El Bohío, but Domínguez's work is rarely included in this scholarship, except in passing. This work includes: Bagchee, *Counter Institution*; Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*; Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*. More surprisingly, Domínguez is absent from in Dávila, *Latinx Art*. This absence is perhaps unsurprising given Dávila's focus on the role of art markets in value formation for Latine artists; Domínguez has never had the kind of commercial or institutional career that would perhaps warrant inclusion in accounts like these, although it goes without saying that marginalisation in scholarship and marginalisation by institutions are mutually reinforcing.

Arguably the most sustained account of Domínguez's work is found in Jane Weissman and Janet Braun-Reinitz's history of community murals in New York, *On the Wall*. Even this work, which includes a detailed account of Domínguez's role in the mural collective Artmakers., does not discuss her earliest murals, completed under the auspices of Cityarts Workshop in the early 1980s.

CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records at CENTRO, the Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection (also at CENTRO), Domínguez's home in Brooklyn, and a handful of other, more informal sites in which her work appears (including the Department of Finance's tax photograph project, and a series of photographs by Marlis Momber).[506] Domínguez attributes the scattered nature of her archive in the present to the need for survival in the past; as she puts it, 'we weren't thinking we were making history. We were surviving.'[507]

Here I move between these diverse archival spaces, with further detail and context drawn from my oral history interview with Domínguez, and our subsequent email correspondence. Working with Domínguez's scattered archive embraces an approach to art historical knowledge production which, as Robb Hernandez (writing on the archival 'detritus' of the queer Chicanx avant-garde), puts it:

> questions what discernments are possible through fragments, bit parts, substitutions, or glimpses that depart from institutional preferences for wholeness, authentic originals, unencumbered views, and historical precision.[508]

While embracing the generative potential of this approach, in this chapter I am careful not to fetishise what Fiona Anderson, in a recent essay on the 'debris' of Britain's queer past, calls the 'familiar narrative of archival failure and conspicuous incompleteness' which often attends minoritarian history, and can downplay the uneven power relations that actively 'shap[e] these gaps and exclusions.'[509] Similarly, while my oral history interview with Domínguez allows me to foreground the experiences of someone who, in Stuart Hall's words, has not been considered to be a 'historymaker' at all 'from the viewpoint of the canon and the authority of the historian', I am mindful that like the exclusionary historical narratives it seeks to redress, this form of testimony is an always imperfect interpretation and representation of the past.[510] '[I]t is not

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[506] As of 2024, Domínguez's documents and early artworks are being catalogued for eventual inclusion in the archives of CENTRO. This process was initiated several years ago but was halted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

[507] Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

[508] Hernández, *Archiving an Epidemic*, 23.

[509] Fiona Anderson, 'Please Help Yourself: Queer Preservation and the Uses of the Past', *Third Text* 35, no. 1 (2 January 2021): 54, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2020.1861866.

[510] Stuart Hall, 'Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities', in *Essential Essays Vol. 2: Identity and Diaspora*, ed. David Morley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 79.

possible to use oral histories and testimonies, as if they are just, literally, the truth', argues Hall; '[t]hey are also stories, positionings, narratives'.[511]

2.2 The visuality of gentrification

Scholarship on gentrification frequently draws comparisons between the violent forms of social, cultural, and spatial displacement that are enacted by gentrification in the present (and recent past), and that which characterised settler colonialism in the more distant past.[512] Rebecca Amato, for example, argues that 'displacement and dispossession – two consequences of modern-day gentrification – echo the kind of historical erasure that colonization delivered centuries before.'[513] William C. Anderson and Zoé Samudzi go further than this, insisting that gentrification 'is not a new form of colonization, but rather a continuation of settler colonial dispossession in an urban setting.'[514] For many Puerto Ricans living in the Lower East Side in the 1980s, these contemporaneous forms of displacement had recent echoes. As Johanna Fernández writes, 'the presence and condition of Puerto Ricans in cities like New York were bound up in the U.S. colonial project in Puerto Rico', which began with the annexation of the island in 1898, but intensified after the Second World War with Operation Bootstrap, an industrialisation project that fuelled the mass migration of one-third of Puerto Rico's population—mostly poor farmers and other 'surplus' rural labourers—to the U.S. between 1947 and 1970.[515] As I argue throughout this chapter, gentrification in the Lower East Side was shaped by the continued perpetuation of past colonial power structures and relations of domination.[516]

For Mirzoeff, a scholar of visual culture, colonisation in the past and present has always been dependent on and sustained by exclusionary modes of apprehending, representing, and ordering

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511 Hall, 79.

512 See for example, Deutsche and Ryan, 'The Fine Art of Gentrification'; Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*; Kent-Stoll, 'The Racial and Colonial Dimensions of Gentrification'.

513 Amato, 'On Empty Spaces, Silence, and the Pause', 249.

514 William C. Anderson and Zoé Samudzi, *As Black as Resistance: Finding the Conditions for Liberation* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2018), 42.

515 Fernández, *The Young Lords*, 53.

See also Mele, 'Neighborhood "Burn-Out"', 129 table 6.1.

516 Aníbal Quijano uses the term 'coloniality' to describe this transnational, transhistorical relationship. As Quijano argues, colonialism's 'violent concentration of the world's resources under the control and for the benefit of' a minority of mostly white Europeans and Euro-Americans, and the social and cultural domination that accompanied this process, has persisted, in some form or another, for over five hundred years. Aníbal Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality', *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 168–69, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353.

the world that he calls visuality.[517] In developing this concept, Mirzoeff builds in part on the work of Hal Foster, who introduced the term into art historical scholarship in the late 1980s, arguing that the difference between 'vision' (a 'physical operation) and 'visuality' (a 'social fact') indexed 'a difference, many differences, among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein.'[518] Foster argued that throughout history, powerful 'scopic regimes' sought to dominate different ways of seeing, to flatten out the myriad visualities existing in a given historical context into 'one essential vision', or else 'order them in a natural hierarchy of sight.'[519] Mirzoeff develops Foster's conception of visuality as a contested terrain by turning to the writings of the conservative nineteenth-century historian Thomas Carlyle, who coined the term in English.[520] Mirzeoff argues that for Carlyle, visuality described a hegemonic process of 'order[ing] and narrat[ing] the chaotic events of modern life in intelligible, visualized fashion', assembling a 'clear picture of history' that was inaccessible to 'minor' historical actors, and could only be grasped by the patriarchal, imperialist 'Hero' in the moment, and by the historian in retrospect.[521]

Building on these diverse antecedents, Mirzoeff uses visuality to describe and critique the ways in which certain forms of racial and colonial domination are conceptualised and represented and, in the process, their violence is justified, naturalised, and sustained.[522] Visuality, argues Mirzoeff, is 'both a medium for the transmission and dissemination of authority, and a means for the mediation of those subject to that authority.'[523] It is comprised of three interrelated processes that combine to form 'a rendition of physical and psychic space'[524]:

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[517] See Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'On Visuality', *Journal of Visual Culture* 5, no. 1 (1 April 2006): 53–79, https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412906062285; Mirzoeff, 'The Right to Look', 2011; Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

[518] Hal Foster, preface to *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995), ix.

Vision and Visuality comprised papers delivered at a symposium held at Dia Art Foundation in New York in April 1988.

[519] Foster, ix.

Martin Jay's contribution to *Vision and Visuality* also examined this theme. See Martin Jay, 'Scopic Regimes of Modernity', in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995), 3–23.

[520] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 2011, xiii–xiv.

See also Mirzoeff, 'On Visuality'; Mirzoeff, 'The Right to Look', 2011, 474–75.

[521] Mirzoeff, 'On Visuality', 56, 57.

See Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1906).

[522] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 2011, 3.

[523] Mirzoeff, xv.

[524] Mirzoeff, 'The Right to Look', 2011, 476.

> first, visuality classifies by naming, categorizing, and defining, a process defined by Foucault as "the nomination of the visible." It was founded in plantation practice, from the mapping of plantation space to the identification of cash-crop cultivation techniques and the precise division of labor required to sustain them. Second, visuality separates the groups so classified as a means of social organization. Such visuality separates and segregates those it visualizes to prevent them from cohering as political subjects, such as the workers, the people, or the (decolonized) nation. Third, it makes this separated classification seem right and hence aesthetic. As the decolonial critic Frantz Fanon had it, such repeated experience generates an "aesthetic of respect for the status quo," the aesthetics of the proper, of duty, of what is felt to be right and hence pleasing, ultimately even beautiful.[525]

In a discussion of Mirzoeff's work, Jan Baetens argues that collectively, these three processes 'order and organize the world', naturalising underlying power structures that are simultaneously 'replicated and implemented by these (violent) transformations of the real.'[526]

In this chapter, I argue that as both an articulation of certain forms of authority and a 'discursive practice that has material effects', visuality plays a role in a spatial process such as gentrification.[527] Conceptually, it is aligned with what Henri Lefebvre called 'representations of space'.[528] '[T]ied to the relations of [capitalist] production and to the 'order' which those relations impose', wrote Lefebvre, top-down representations of space are those conceived by architects, urban planners, and other 'technocratic subdividers'.[529] As one-third of the spatial triad that produces (and reproduces) space, Lefebvre argued that representations of space seek to dominate and constrain the movement of both 'spatial practices', which define how space is perceived by those who actively interact with it, and 'representational spaces', which characterise how space is directly lived by its inhabitants, and how various users of space, including artists and writers, reimagine it.[530] Visuality is not limited to the work of architects and urban planners, but animates any depiction of the world that reproduces and thus legitimises relations of domination and exclusion. As Christina Sharpe argues, '[v]isuality is not simply looking' but is a

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[525] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 2011, 3.

[526] Jan Baetens, review of *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, by Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Leonardo* 46, no. 1 (2013): 95.

[527] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 2011, 3.

[528] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 33.

[529] Lefebvre, 33, 38.

[530] Lefebvre, 33.

'regime of seeing and being, and any so-called neutral position is a position of power that refuses to recognize itself as such.'[531] In this chapter, I analyse how visuality structured ostensibly neutral depictions of the gentrifying Lower East Side (produced by municipal agencies, mainstream media outlets, and the art world), by classifying the neighbourhood as empty in order to justify reinvestment by real estate capital, aestheticising the violent displacement of its low-income, racialised residents, and separating Nuyorican and other Latine artists and audiences from one another in the galleries of the Lower East Side.

Mirzoeff argues that the authority of visuality is always already contested by what he calls 'the right to look', a decolonial countervisuality that 'claims autonomy from this authority, refuses to be segregated, and spontaneously invents new forms.'[532] In contrast to the stratified, omniscient, ahistorical perspective of visuality, the right to look is antihierarchical, heterogenous, and profoundly historical, opening up spaces where 'claim[s] to a political subjectivity and collectivity' are made.[533] Mirzoeff insists that the right to look is not a response to or product of visuality.[534] Rather, the right to look comes *before* visuality, and it is on the continued suppression of the former that the latter is dependent.[535] As an example, Mirzoeff describes how the visuality of the colonial plantation system, with its all-powerful overseer, was opposed by resistance movements from below that sought to reinstate the autonomous subjectivity that enslavement curtailed, while abolishing the hierarchised segregation of people and places on which it was dependent.[536] Michel de Certeau argued that '[p]ower is bound by its very visibility'[537], and these movements, which included mass uprisings of the enslaved and the formation of Maroon settlements, undermined the power of the plantation overseer by embracing modes of communication (such as music and dance) that could evade surveillance, or else by escaping colonial oversight altogether by going underground.[538] The right to look is thus not strictly visual,

[531] Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 123.

[532] Mirzoeff, 'The Right to Look', 2011, 476.

[533] Mirzoeff, 473; Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'Empty the Museum, Decolonize the Curriculum, Open Theory', *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 53 (2017): 8; Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 2011, 1.

[534] Mirzoeff, 'The Right to Look', 2011, 473.

[535] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 2011, 2.

[536] Mirzoeff, 10–13.

[537] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 37.

[538] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 2011, 10–13.

but, as I discuss throughout this chapter, embraces an array of embodied and affective practices.[539]

In a review of Mirzoeff's work, Debbie Lisle argues that the right to look names the process by which the 'voices, movements, visions, trajectories, and imaginaries' of marginalised subjects 'can be articulated', and their agency in the face of oppressive and disempowering systems can be upheld.[540] Such an approach is particularly important when discussing gentrification and its effects; as Adam Elliot-Cooper, Phil Hubbard, and Loretta Lees argue, it is vital 'to properly include displacees [and those at risk of displacement] as people with agency and not simply present them as victims' of gentrification.[541] Here I argue that for Domínguez, a long-term resident of the Nuyorican Lower East Side who experienced both the violence of displacement and the strength of collective resistance to it, the agency of what she calls 'my beautiful community' was never in question.[542] Through her artistic and curatorial projects, Domínguez celebrated key practices and spaces in the Nuyorican Lower East Side, affirming the right of Puerto Ricans to not only remain in the rapidly gentrifying neighbourhood, but to continue playing a central role in shaping its social, cultural, and spatial character—collectively, and from the ground up. In doing so, I argue that she enacted alternative ways of seeing, representing, and occupying space in the neighbourhood, which countered the exclusionary, colonising visuality through which gentrification in the Lower East Side was naturalised as an inevitable, if not actively desirable, process.

2.3 *Baile Bomba* (1983) and the representation of empty space

In this section, I analyse a Cityarts Workshop mural project that Maria Domínguez was appointed lead artist on in 1983, while studying for a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the School of Visual Arts. The project took place in Pueblo Nuevo, a nine-block section of the Lower East Side located just south of Loisaida, bordered by East Houston Street, Pitt Street, Delancey Street, and Clinton Street. It was sponsored by the grassroots housing organisation Pueblo Nuevo, whose long-running efforts to redevelop this part of the neighbourhood (which had been slated for demolition by the city in the early 1970s) were immortalised in its name, which

[539] Mirzoeff, 141; Debbie Lisle, review of *The Right To Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, by Nicholas Mirzoeff', *Society + Space*, 16 July 2013, https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/the-right-to-look-by-nicholas-mirzoeff.

[540] Lisle, review of *The Right to Look*.

[541] Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, and Lees, 'Moving beyond Marcuse', 500.

[542] Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

means 'new town' in Spanish.[543] Domínguez was a member of Pueblo Nuevo, having moved to the area in the late 1950s after her family was pushed out of their previous apartment in Loisaida.[544] Across two fifteen by twenty-five-foot walls on three vacant buildings along Clinton Street, Domínguez painted *Baile Bomba* (1983), a pair of murals celebrating the Afro-Puerto Rican musical tradition of *bomba*.[545] With roots in the oppositional musical practices of enslaved West African labourers in Puerto Rico, *bomba* had seen a resurgence in New York during the late 1960s and 1970s as an expression of ethnic cultural pride and political struggle against the discrimination faced by Nuyoricans in the city.[546] In the Lower East Side, performances of *bomba* and *plena* (a closely related musical style) regularly took place in community gardens, street festivals, mural inauguration celebrations, and other public settings.[547]

When *Baile Bomba* was completed, Domínguez hired the photographer Nestor Cortijo, then director of Pueblo Nuevo, to document the work (Figs. 64 & 65). Despite the inherent limitations of photography in fully capturing either the smaller detail or wider context of large-scale, site specific artworks such as these, Cortijo's photographs offer an impression of *Baile Bomba*'s content and form as it would have looked shortly after completion.[548] The first mural, located at 28/30 Clinton Street, presents an idealised depiction of Puerto Rico and its musical traditions as seen from several different viewpoints (Figure 64). On the left hand side, instruments used in the production of *bomba*, including a pair of maracas and a *güiro* (another percussive instrument), perch on the angled balustrade of an oversized white balcony overlooking the sea. To the right, Domínguez shifted perspective by integrating the building's physical features into the mural: inside a blocked-up doorway, a balustrade, painted at human scale and positioned perpendicular to the picture plane, encourages the viewer to approach the work in order to 'look out' over the ocean in front of them. The mural's right hand side is dominated by a top-down view of a *bomba* dancer mid-performance. Against a backdrop of chequered blue rectangles that suggests either a wall, a dancefloor, or the ocean, the dancer locks

[543] Robbins, 'Community Profiles: Building Pueblo Nuevo', 18.

[544] Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

[545] Though *Baile Bomba* was Domínguez's first time directing a mural, the project was not her first experience of working with Cityarts; in 1982, she was assistant to lead artist Joe Stephenson on *Avenue C Storefronts*, a project sponsored by Adopt-a-Building that saw a series of imaginary shops and businesses painted onto shuttered storefronts in Loisaida. See Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 1, 71; Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 88–94.

[546] Bimbo Rivas, 'Loisaida: The Reality Stage', *Win Magazine: Peace and Freedom Through Nonviolent Action*, 20 December 1979, 8.

[547] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 128.

[548] On the relationship between murals and photography, see Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art*, 267.

eyes with the viewer as she glides between a series of potted plants. The dancer's dress billows to resemble the shape of Puerto Rico, while its vivid red hue matches the *flamboyán* bloom she holds in an outstretched hand. The top-down view of the dancer contrasts with the more conventional frontal perspective offered by the *trompe l'oeil* wrought iron arches and wooden pillar that frame this part of the mural.

Unlike a painting hung in a gallery, the number of possible viewpoints from which an external mural can be seen is vast, shaped by factors beyond an artist's control, including the size and character of surrounding buildings, the layout of nearby streets, and the presence (or absence) of traffic.[549] In the first *Baile Bomba* mural, Domínguez emphasised this openness by including several distinct pictorial spaces in the work, building an almost dream-like depiction of Puerto Rico and its musical traditions. In the second mural (painted across two adjacent buildings at 13 & 15 Clinton Street), Domínguez introduced an element of temporal ambiguity in order to foreground the importance of these traditions, particularly *bomba*, in shaping the contemporaneous Nuyorican Lower East Side (Figure 65). As seen in Cortijo's photograph, the second mural is framed by *trompe l'oeil* pillars and a decorative archway that reads 'Pueblo Nuevo'. On the right hand side is a bright yellow grinning *vejigante* mask, of the sort typically seen during festival celebrations in Puerto Rico. One end of the navy and purple ribbon tied around the *vejigante*'s horn morphs into the dancer's dress, under which a bleak landscape of vacant tenements and shuttered storefronts is visible. The other end of the ribbon opens out into a brighter imagined future for the neighbourhood, characterised not by dereliction and poverty, but by lush greenery and what appears to be a community centre and apartment block. On the mural's left hand side, a balcony surrounded by *flamboyán* flowers overlooks these competing visions of the neighbourhood. With this work, Domínguez depicted the clash between the forces of vitality and decay in the Nuyorican Lower East Side, one that was mediated by the presence of *bomba* music.

Scholarship on Latine muralism in the U.S. has highlighted its significance as a medium through which these communities have articulated collective claims to space.[550] Anna Marta Marini, for

[549] Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft, 245–48.

[550] See, for example Eve Simpson, 'Chicano Street Murals: A Sociological Perspective', *Journal of Popular Culture* 13, no. 3 (Spring 1980): 516–25; Erika Doss, 'Raising Community Consciousness with Public Art: Contrasting Projects by Judy Baca and Andrew Leicester', *American Art* 6, no. 1 (January 1992): 63–81, https://doi.org/10.1086/424141; Shifra M. Goldman, 'How, Why, Where, and When It All Happened: Chicano Murals of California', in *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals*, ed. Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnet-Sánchez (Venice, CA & Albuquerque, NM: Social and Public Art Resource Center & University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 23–53; Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 232–33; Guisela Latorre, *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California* (Austin, TX: University of Texas

example, argues that for Mexican Americans living along the U.S.-Mexico border in El Paso, '[p]ainting walls has represented a means of exploration of the borderland heritage, as well as a material claim to urban space'.[551] Similarly, Liz Ševčenko notes that for the Loisaida movement of the 1970s, murals played a vital role in articulating 'a new physical and discursive place for Puerto Ricans and puertorriquenidad in the postindustrial city'.[552] As cultural and economic capital began to flow back into the neighbourhood in the following decade, maintaining and strengthening these claims to space became increasingly urgent. In 1983, the same year that Domínguez created *Baile Bomba*, New York City's Department of Finance initiated an ambitious project to photograph every property in the city.[553] Seeking to raise tax revenue through more accurate real estate valuations, the tax photography project assembled a top-down representation of New York's built environment that actively tried to erase all visual traces of the city's inhabitants. In already depopulated parts of the city like the Lower East Side, this mode of visualising urban space bolstered a view of the neighbourhood that classified it as *terra nullius*: static, lifeless, ahistorical, and ripe for more profitable forms of appropriation and investment.[554] For Domínguez and her collaborators in Pueblo Nuevo, who struggled against this exclusionary view, *Baile Bomba* offered an opportunity to activate and transform the contested space of Clinton Street on behalf of its Puerto Rican residents, insisting, despite claims to the contrary, that 'We're still here!'[555]

Press, 2008), 140–75, https://doi.org/10.7560/718838; Karen Mary Davalos, *Chicana/o Remix: Art and Errata Since the Sixties* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 63–98, https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479877966.001.0001; Erin M. Curtis, Jessica Hough, and Guisela Latorre, *¡Murales Rebeldes! L.A. Chicana/Chicano Murals under Siege* (Santa Monica, CA: Angel City Press, 2017); Timo Schrader, 'The Colors of Loisaida: Embedding Murals in Community Activism', *Journal of Urban History* 44, no. 3 (1 May 2018): 519–32, https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144217699173; Kiley Stokes, 'Murals as Resistance', *Practicing Anthropology* 46, no. 3 (2 July 2024): 141–48, https://doi.org/10.1080/08884552.2024.2345784; Florian Deckers and Anna Marta Marini, 'Re-Writing Latinx Identity in the Barrio: Accumulating Meanings of Graffiti and Murals in Spanish Harlem and Bushwick, Brooklyn', in *Latinx Representation in Contemporary Popular Culture and New Media* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2024), 267–90.

[551] Anna Marta Marini, 'The Materiality of the Wall(s): Mural Art and Counterspace Appropriation in El Paso's Chihuahuita and El Segundo Barrio', in *Exploring the Transnational Neighbourhood: Perspectives on Community-Building, Identity and Belonging*, ed. Gad Schaffer, Britta C. Jung, and Stephan Ehrig (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2022), 219, https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/258/oa_edited_volume/chapter/3259940.

[552] Ševčenko, 'Making Loisaida: Placing Puertorriqueñidad in Lower Manhattan', 294.

[553] William R. Greer, 'New York Takes Photos of Itself for Posterity', *New York Times*, 12 February 1987, https://www.nytimes.com/1987/02/12/nyregion/new-york-takes-photos-of-itself-for-posterity.html.

[554] Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, xiv.

[555] Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

2.3.1 The Department of Finance tax photographs

In 1983, the New York City Department of Finance (DoF) initiated an ambitious project to photographically document every building and every lot on every street across each of the city's five boroughs. Aimed at making tax assessments and property valuations more accurate, the project was carried out over a five-year period by around sixty people, working in teams of two, who produced a total of 891,412 colour photographs on 35mm film (Figs. 66-68).[556] It was the much-needed update of an earlier documentation project, carried out between 1938 and 1943 by the Department of Taxation (as the Department of Finance was then known) with photographers drawn from the Works Progress Administration work-relief programme.[557] This latest project highlighted the profound physical transformation that New York's built environment had undergone since the late 1930s.[558] Like the earlier project, the names of those who created the 1980s tax photographs are mostly unknown; James E. Rheingrover, who oversaw the project, recalls that the DoF 'tried not to hire photographers because photographers wanted to take "good" photographs and Finance wanted fast photographs.'[559] Each photograph features, in Peter L'Official's words,

> a frontal, or nearly frontal, view of the building with the particular angle determined by the building's size and the width of the street. Superimposed […] in the foreground of each image is a sign identifying the building by its address, borough, and block and lot number.[560]

After the project was completed, 4 x 6 inch prints of each negative were made on a minilab machine, recorded frame-by-frame using a video camera, and transferred onto LaserDisc.[561] When connected to a computer database, the LaserDisc system offered a searchable image bank of property across the entire city that was easily accessible to tax assessors and other city officials.[562]

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[556] Greer, 'New York Takes Photos of Itself for Posterity'.

[557] Gabrielle Esperdy, 'A Taxing Photograph: The WPA Real Property Survey of New York City', *History of Photography* 28, no. 2 (1 June 2004): 123, https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2004.10441301.

[558] Esperdy, 123.

[559] James E. Rheingrover, quoted in Michael Lorenzini, 'A Flashback to the 1980s Tax Photographs', *NYC Department of Records & Information Services* (blog), 3 May 2019, https://www.archives.nyc/blog/tag/Tax+Photos.

[560] L'Official, *Urban Legends*, 86.

[561] Lorenzini, 'A Flashback to the 1980s Tax Photographs'.

[562] Lorenzini; Greer, 'New York Takes Photos of Itself for Posterity'.

The tax photograph project served important political and economic functions. L'Official writes that for Mayor Ed Koch, who took office in 1978, revamping New York's outdated and increasingly ineffectual tax assessment system was not just an urgent financial necessity, but a point of pride for a city that had once been one of the U.S.'s most efficiently governed municipalities, but was 'now left to ponder its own embarrassment at the depths to which the system had sunk.'[563] The project's cost is estimated at somewhere between thirty and fifty million dollars (the creation of the minilab prints alone cost almost $100,000, while fifty to one hundred new employees were hired to work on the project, alongside various consultants).[564] This was a substantial amount of money, but as L'Official notes, it paled in comparison to the resources that were needed to correct 'numerous other deficiencies of the city's infrastructure—the cleanliness of the streets, the educational performance of its schools, the suitability of its housing stock'.[565] As such, the project was not only tasked with comprehensively documenting New York's built environment (and making this information easily accessible to tax officials), but also with providing 'a means to monetize that very vision, giving what one might call the "currency" of the image a real economic analogue.'[566] In this latter aim, the project was undoubtedly a success; in 1988, shortly after their completion, the tax photographs were credited with raising nearly half a billion dollars in much-needed tax revenue for the city.[567]

Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that the 'ability to assemble a visualization manifests the authority of the visualizer'.[568] In the case of the tax photography project, this authority underpinned both the DoF's capacity to assemble a 'total representation' of the city through which its built environment could be documented and appraised, but also the power to define exactly what form such a representation took.[569] For example, it is striking when looking through the tax photographs that very few contain any people. For the individual photographers who carried out this relatively poorly paid work, not photographing people was seen as a way of avoiding trouble; as Rheingrover recalls, in neighbourhoods that were perceived to be particularly dangerous, the photographers would remain in their cars and take pictures while seated with the windows rolled

563 L'Official, *Urban Legends*, 79.

564 L'Official, 78; Greer, 'New York Takes Photos of Itself for Posterity'.

565 L'Official, *Urban Legends*, 79.

566 L'Official, 80.

567 Greer, 'New York Takes Photos of Itself for Posterity', 45.

568 Mirzoeff, 'The Right to Look', 2011, 474.

569 L'Official, *Urban Legends*, 76.

up.[570] When on foot, they would keep their DoF identification badges prominently displayed and 'wait until no one was in frame to avoid incidents.'[571] Taken as a collection of images, however, the relative absence of people in any of the tax photographs emphasises what L'Official calls 'the systematic, administrative, archival mode' in which the project was undertaken.[572] The overall effect is that while New York as a whole appears underpopulated, more dilapidated neighbourhoods like the Lower East Side appear to be completely deserted.[573]

To some extent, the tax photographs captured the material reality of the neighbourhood, whose overall population had decreased by around 30% between 1970 and 1980 (this figure rose to nearly 70% in parts of Loisaida where abandonment was highest).[574] However, by excluding the Lower East Side's residents from its visualisation of the city, the DoF played a role in naturalising and reifying this reality, making it appear, in Mirzoeff's words, 'right and hence aesthetic'.[575] This process is not new; as Rebecca Amato points out, from the colonial enclosure of Lenape land in the sixteenth century to the forced removal of working class Black and Latine communities in San Juan Hill to make way for the Lincoln Center in the late 1950s, New York's growth has relied on making 'the extant social fabric disappear' in order to justify certain forms of capitalist urbanisation.[576] Disinvestment in the 1970s was premised on the widespread notion that poor neighbourhoods like the Lower East Side were unproductive and essentially worthless, their racialised, working-class residents an unjustified drain on public funds.[577] In the 1980s, assessing the value of the Lower East Side's built environment in order to raise money for the city by attracting real estate capital required an (over)emphasis on the neighbourhood's real and perceived emptiness, and an active unseeing of those who actually lived there. Using the perception of 'danger' as a justification, the tax photography project helped fix an image of the Lower East Side as a 'blank slate' for capital: barren and likely dangerous, but ripe for potentially profitable reinvestment and redevelopment.

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[570] L'Official, 82.

[571] Lorenzini, 'A Flashback to the 1980s Tax Photographs'.

[572] L'Official, *Urban Legends*, 76.

[573] L'Official, 77.

[574] Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 199.

[575] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 2011, 3.

[576] Amato, 'On Empty Spaces, Silence, and the Pause', 249. See also Katharine Greider, *The Archaeology of Home: An Epic Set on a Thousand Square Feet of the Lower East Side* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), 16–41; William B. Scott and Peter M. Rutkoff, *New York Modern: The Arts and the City* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 351–79; Thomas, 'Displacement and Survival'.

[577] Amato, 'On Empty Spaces, Silence, and the Pause', 248.

This sense of emptiness is intensified by the manner in which the tax photographs have been made accessible in the present. In 2006, the New York City Municipal Archives retrieved the photographs and laser discs from a long-neglected storeroom in the basement of the Municipal Building in Lower Manhattan.[578] Rather than scan each negative or print individually, Municipal Archives staff used automated software to extract low-resolution TIFFs of individual frames from the already poor-quality LaserDiscs.[579] The resulting digital archive, which is accessible on the Municipal Archives website, is comprised almost entirely of these murky, washed-out digital images, whose cumulative effect is to intensify the bleakness of the Lower East Side's built environment: broken windows become gaping, inky-black voids in the façade of a derelict building, while the foliage in a community garden is indistinguishable from the rubble that surrounds it (Figs. 69 & 70). Formally and thematically, the LaserDisc frames call to mind a very different project: the opening, mostly static shots of Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1977), in which Lower Manhattan is depicted, in Fiona Anderson's words, as 'a queerly ruined place, perpetually shrouded in dusk or darkness', that is 'at times empty or nearing abandonment.'[580] From the perspective of the present, both projects offer up an 'indelible image of a now lost New York', but Akerman's eye-level camera angles and preoccupation with roads, subways, and other spaces of circulation imbues *News from Home*'s fixed-camera shots with a sense of palpable (if lethargic) movement and human presence that appears to have been actively excised from the tax photographs (Figure 71).

In four of the grainy, low-resolution digital reproductions of the tax photographs available on the Municipal Archives website (the records for 13, 15, 28, and 30 Clinton Streets), I find *Baile Bomba* (Figs. 72-75). Both murals have been sliced in half by photographers prioritising individual buildings, and the lower edge of one of the murals is obscured by the sign superimposed onto each LaserDisc frame, but the bright colours of Domínguez's work cut through the gloom. The presence of this work, to borrow L'Official's phrase, 'brings the archive into a surprising alignment with narrative, the narrative of a city, of a place, and of a people living amid ruins.'[581] The tax photography project encouraged the Lower East Side's commodification by excising as much of the neighbourhood's messy social life as possible. Despite these efforts, writes L'Official, 'traces of human elements emerge with greater force, personalizing the photographs

[578] Lorenzini, 'A Flashback to the 1980s Tax Photographs'.

[579] The digital images are available on the New York City Department of Records and Information Services website, and the collection is split into individual boroughs: https://nycma.lunaimaging.com/luna/servlet/allCollections

[580] Anderson, *Cruising the Dead River*, 46.

[581] L'Official, *Urban Legends*, 77.

in a way that suggests, and often confirms, a presence, however haunted or real.'[582] From a bright blue Volkswagon campervan parked in front of a tenement on East Sixth Street (Figure 76) to the 'Stop Gentrification' graffiti spray-painted onto an empty warehouse on East Houston Street (Figure 77), the photographs are brimming with traces of the everyday lives of those who struggled to survive in the supposedly empty Lower East Side, offering an important counterpoint to the DoF's depopulated view of the city. Indexing more than just traces of sociality, the presence of *Baile Bomba* in the tax photographs foregrounds the avowedly Nuyorican character of the neighbourhood in the early 1980s.

2.3.2 Redeveloping Pueblo Nuevo from the ground up

With *Baile Bomba*, Domínguez not only made visible the presence of the Lower East Side's Nuyorican community, but also highlighted the neighbourhood's long history of community-led approaches to reimagining and transforming derelict space. One of the murals, for example, featured an austere-looking brown rectangular building, depicted amidst an oasis of green foliage (Figure 78). This seemingly innocuous structure represented the culmination of a decade of sustained organising by Pueblo Nuevo, a grassroots housing organisation that had prevented the city from bulldozing this nine-block section of the neighbourhood in the early 1970s, and had been fighting to redevelop it from the ground up ever since.[583] Pueblo Nuevo's 'ambitious community plan […] to rebuild one of the Lower East Side's poorest sections' had been nixed in the 1970s by a combination of President Richard Nixon's moratorium on subsidized housing, New York's fiscal crisis, and a shift in municipal housing policy, but the group remained highly active in the neighbourhood.[584] Along with confronting negligent landlords, providing social service advocacy, and leveraging city funds to repair neglected buildings, Pueblo Nuevo facilitated the creation of several tenant co-ops through the city's tenant interim lease programme, which allowed tenant associations in occupied city-owned properties to manage their buildings for a year, before purchasing them at vastly subsidized prices.[585] Most significantly, 1983 saw the completion of a six-storey housing block at 210 Stanton Street (previously an empty lot), which would provide 172 rent-subsidized apartments for low-income

[582] L'Official, 77.

[583] Robbins, 'Community Profiles: Building Pueblo Nuevo', 18.

[584] Robbins, 19.

[585] Robbins, 19–20; Martha Rosler and Brian Wallis, 'Discussion: Artists' Life/Work: Housing and Community for Artists', in *If You Lived Here: The City in Art, Theory, and Social Activism*, ed. Martha Rosler and Brian Wallis (New York: The New Press, 1999), 163.

tenants.[586] It was this building, also named Pueblo Nuevo, that Domínguez included in *Baile Bomba* as part of her vision of a radically transformed Lower East Side.

In the previous chapter of this thesis, I outlined community muralism's co-constitutive relationship with other socio-spatial practices in the Nuyorican Lower East Side, and *Baile Bomba* was no exception. The work was initiated as Pueblo Nuevo was developing an ambitious economic plan to revitalise the predominantly Puerto Rican-owned small businesses along Clinton Street. A 1983 article in *City Limits* by Tom Robbins asserted that in addition to organising businesses into a merchants' association, 'the group hopes next year to study the feasibility of launching a co-op super market or a lumber yard to cash in on some of the private renovation being undertaken around the neighborhood.'[587] As part of this project, Pueblo Nuevo received a grant from the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (formerly the Housing Development Administration), to sponsor a Cityarts Workshop mural on Clinton Street. As a long-term resident of the neighbourhood, and a member of Pueblo Nuevo herself, Domínguez was well placed to design for a mural that would celebrate the artistic practices of the Nuyorican Lower East Side, while bolstering attention and support for Pueblo Nuevo's long-running work in the neighbourhood, and their grand plans for Clinton Street.

In the early 1980s, community-led development organisations could wield significant influence over city-led redevelopment plans, and the activists of Pueblo Nuevo in particular were renowned for their fierce and highly organised 'opposition to some plans they feared would subsidize gentrification.'[588] However, with money perpetually an issue, the organisation was reliant on funding from several sources, including two private philanthropic organisations (the New York Community Trust and the New York Foundation), New York State's Neighborhood Preservation Program, and various municipal agencies, including the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD).[589] Unlike the purely economically-motivated Department of Finance, HPD, which was responsible for managing the city's affordable housing stock, was able to forge more cordial relationships with grassroots organisations like Pueblo Nuevo; Robbins, for example, cites Manuel Mirabal, HPD's then-Assistant Commissioner, who 'says the

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[586] Robbins, 'Community Profiles: Building Pueblo Nuevo', 19.

[587] Robbins, 21.

[588] Robbins, 21.

See also Tom Angotti, *New York for Sale: Community Planning Confronts Global Real Estate* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

[589] Robbins, 'Community Profiles: Building Pueblo Nuevo', 21.

group has done "fine work" in the neighbourhood.[590] As discussed in the previous chapter, these forms of tentative collaboration with the state, as a means to access both city-owned spaces and the financial resources needed to redevelop them, had always underpinned the work of the Loisaida movement. It did not mean, however, that the aims of organisations like Pueblo Nuevo and agencies like HPD were in alignment; different stakeholders brought with them distinct and often conflicting claims over space in the neighbourhood, and distinct approaches to filling it.[591]

An incident that occurred during the planning stages of *Baile Bomba* highlights this tension. One of Nestor Cortijo's photographs of the work captures the fake window decals that were applied to the exterior of derelict, city-owned buildings in many poor neighbourhoods across New York in the early 1980s (Figure 78).[592] In the words of Anthony B. Gliedman, then-Commissioner of HPD, the decals, which depicted venetian blinds, curtains, house plants, and other fake amenities, were designed to 'brighten up the face of the neighborhood while waiting for new Federal programs to rebuild.'[593] Initially placed in neighbourhoods where the residents themselves had requested them, in 1983, Gliedman's department began placing the decals on buildings located along heavily travelled corridors, such as the Cross Bronx Expressway, as part of explicit attempts to attract real estate investment to these areas.[594] Domínguez's mural, with its bright colours, expressions of Nuyorican cultural pride, and absence of any explicitly political content, would appear to have aligned easily with attempts to 'brighten up' the Lower East Side. However, Domínguez recalls that when HPD officials were shown the final designs for *Baile Bomba*, they rejected the murals as being, in her words, 'too ethnic'.[595] Domínguez does not specify exactly what they meant by this comment, but given the growing desire to attract private investment to neighbourhoods like these, it suggests that HPD was looking for imagery which downplayed the Lower East Side's Puerto Rican character.[596]

This incident suggests that the changes that Domínguez and other activists wanted to bring about were at odds with HPD's conception of a 'revitalised' Pueblo Nuevo. In response to this

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590 Quoted in Robbins, 21.

591 Amato, 'On Empty Spaces, Silence, and the Pause', 248.

592 Robert D. McFadden, 'Derelict Tenements in the Bronx to Get Fake Lived-In Look', *New York Times*, 7 November 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/11/07/nyregion/derelict-tenements-in-the-bronx-to-get-fake-lived-in-look.html.

593 Anthony B. Gliedman, quoted in McFadden.

594 McFadden.

595 Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

596 In Chapter Four, I examine New York muralism's shift away from community-oriented site-specificity in the 1980s in more depth.

attempt at erasing or downplaying *Baile Bomba*'s Puerto Rican content, Domínguez recalls that Cortijo gathered representatives from the community groups that had collectively approved the design of her mural.[597] Robbins notes that Pueblo Nuevo's strength was its 'broad community base' in the neighbourhood and the ability to mobilise large numbers of people.[598] Together they marched into the HPD offices to insist that Domínguez's design is what the community wanted. As Domínguez recalls, 'we walked into their office one morning, and when they saw all these people, they said "Hmmm". And after about 45 minutes it went [in our favour].'[599] Domínguez's design was approved, and the creation of *Baile Bomba* went ahead as planned. Like Charas or the Eleventh Street Movement in Loisaida, Pueblo Nuevo sought to 'improve conditions for residents in poorer areas while preventing dislocation through direct clearance or gentrification.'[600] The thankless nature of this work required them to work with agencies like HPD, who controlled access to grants and city-owned property in the Lower East Side. As the incident over the content of *Baile Bomba* highlights, these interactions were characterised by highly uneven power dynamics. However, the approval of Domínguez's design sent a clear message to municipal authorities: not only was Pueblo Nuevo far from empty, but its residents would insist on a having a voice in decisions that would affect them and their neighbourhood.

2.3.3 The radical history of *bomba*

It is no accident that Domínguez chose to celebrate a musical form, and specifically *bomba*, in *Baile Bomba*. A rhythmically intricate improvisational form that is performed by dancers, singers, and percussionists in communal settings, *bomba* tells a centuries-old narrative of resistance to colonialism. It is rooted in the musical traditions of enslaved West African labourers from present-day Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Nigeria, who were transported to Puerto Rico by Spanish settlers in the early sixteenth century to work in mines and on sugar plantations.[601] These enslaved workers had been brought to the Caribbean to replace the Taíno, the Indigenous inhabitants of Puerto Rico (which they called *Borinquen*), whose numbers, estimated at between 30,000 and 70,000 when Christopher Columbus arrived in 1493, were rapidly decimated through enslavement, malnutrition, and disease.[602] Music offered a means of spiritual survival and

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[597] Robbins, 'Community Profiles: Building Pueblo Nuevo', 21.

[598] Robbins, 21.

[599] Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

[600] Rowland Atkinson, 'Commentary: Gentrification, Segregation and the Vocabulary of Affluent Residential Choice', *Urban Studies* 45, no. 12 (November 2008): 2630, https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098008097110.

[601] Vimari Colón-León, 'Bomba: The Sound of Puerto Rico's African Heritage', *General Music Today* 34, no. 3 (1 April 2021): 13, https://doi.org/10.1177/1048371321990665.

[602] Alfredo Lopez, *Dona Licha's Island: Modern Colonialism in Puerto Rico* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1987), 9–11.

political resistance to colonial violence: on the sugar plantations surrounding San Juan, Loíza, and Ponce, enslaved workers used *bailes de bomba* (*bomba* dances) to communicate with one another, celebrate marriages and baptisms, and plan rebellions.[603] *Bomba* engendered a potentially insurgent collectivity that was capable of evading the colonial techniques of spatial segregation and surveillance that characterised life on the plantations. The historian Barbara Bush emphasises the subversive power of Afro-Caribbean drum-based music, arguing that forms like *bomba*, *plena*, and *rumba* (from nearby Cuba),

> were not only a threatening reminder [to Europeans] of the unknowable "otherness" of African slaves (and their refusal to become dehumanized chattels), but also the potential threat they posed to white security.[604]

Drawing on this long history of anti-colonial resistance on the island, *bomba* saw a resurgence during the Nuyorican movement of the late 1960s and 1970s as an expression of collective nationalist struggle against the racial and class-based discrimination faced by Puerto Ricans in the city.[605] Across the Nuyorican Lower East Side, performances of *bomba y plena* took place in sites that had been transformed through other socio-spatial practices, with troupes like Baile Boricua and Grupo Cemi performing regularly at community gardens, street festivals, and mural inaugurations.[606]

With *Baile Bomba*, then, Domínguez foregrounded the ongoing cultural and political significance of *bomba* for Puerto Ricans in New York. Rejecting both political didacticism and an uncritically nostalgic celebration of a lost musical tradition from 'back home', the murals embraced spatial and temporal ambiguity by offering neither a fixed nor sequential viewpoint through which to comprehend the work. The first mural's blue chequered pattern, for example, simultaneously suggested a frontal view of the building's brick wall, a top-down perspective on the dancefloor underneath the dancer's feet, and an abstract representation of the more realistic depiction of the sea that was visible just to the left (Figure 79). In the second mural, the *vejigante* ribbon connecting the image of a grey and derelict Pueblo Nuevo with a brighter vision, centred on the new housing block on Stanton Street, suggested that in 1983, both possible trajectories for the neighbourhood, both visions of the future, remained on the horizon (Figure 78). Echoing the

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603 Colón-León, 'Bomba', 13.

604 Barbara Bush, 'African Echoes, Modern Fusions: Caribbean Music, Identity and Resistance in the African Diaspora', *Music Reference Services Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (1 January 2006): 19–20, https://doi.org/10.1300/J116v10n01_02.

605 Rivas, 'Loisaida: The Reality Stage', 8.

606 Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 128.

antihierarchical, circular nature of the music itself, *Baile Bomba* emphasised both muralism and *bomba*'s role in shaping the cultural and material texture of the Nuyorican Lower East Side. Existing in a co-constitutive, rather than subordinate, relationship to more permanent practices of rebuilding the Lower East Side (such as the labour-intensive work undertaken by Pueblo Nuevo or Adopt-a-Building), *bomba* and muralism were both mediums through which Puerto Ricans could, as Timo Schrader puts it, 'politicize neighborhood space as a form of resistance and community building.'[607]

The Charas activist Fred Good recalls the soundscape in Loisaida in the 1970s:

> During the summer, the streets came alive with conga drums. Groups of conga players were often joined by guitar players and other musicians. Throughout the summer, poets recited their lyrics, and there was lots of singing in the streets and parks around the neighborhood.[608]

By the early 1980s, this soundscape was shifting thanks to gentrification. In a discussion of contemporary gentrification in Oakland, California, Margaret M. Ramírez argues that the policing of certain types of sound, through curfews, ordinances, and noise complaints, is aimed at making those already living in a gentrifying neighbourhood 'feel out of place, their soundscapes offensive to new neighbors in the vicinity.'[609] Black and Latine music in New York has historically been targeted in this manner. In the mid-1970s, for example, noise complaints from his neighbours forced the musician Ornette Coleman to close Artist House, a performance venue for avant-garde jazz he had operated out of his SoHo loft space since 1972. '[U]ndoubtedly motivated by the performance space's potential drag on their investment in a market poised to boom,' argues Bill Shoemaker, fellow shareholders in the co-operative building 'first forced Coleman to close Artist House and, eventually, to sell his loft.'[610] Since the mid-twentieth century, Central Park has been the site of a weekly *rumba* session; initiated by Black American and Afro-Latine musicians in the late 1950s, the session grew in popularity and scale throughout the social movement era of the late 1960s and 1970s.[611] However, the late 1990s saw

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[607] Schrader, 'The Colors of Loisaida', 529.

[608] Fred Good, 'The Origins of Loisaida', in *Resistance: A Radical Political and Social History of the Lower East Side*, ed. Clayton Patterson, Joe Flood, and Alan W. Moore (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 31.

[609] Margaret M Ramírez, 'City as Borderland: Gentrification and the Policing of Black and Latinx Geographies in Oakland', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38, no. 1 (February 2020): 159, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775819843924.

[610] Bill Shoemaker, *Jazz in the 1970s: Diverging Streams* (Lanham. MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 127.

[611] Berta Jottar, 'Central Park Soundscapes: The Rumba Cypher', *The Gotham Center for New York City History* (blog), 6 September 2022, https://www.gothamcenter.org/blog/central-park-soundscapes-the-rumba-cypher.

weekly confrontations between Central Park *rumberos* and the New York Police Department, who, in accordance with the 'Quality of Life' initiatives of Rudolph Giuliani's mayoral administration, reclassified the sound of the *rumba* drum as 'unreasonable noise' as a way of justifying sanctions against the musicians.[612]

Threats to the presence of *bomba* and *plena* in the Nuyorican Lower East Side in the early 1980s came less through the active policing of sound, and more through the precarity of the spaces in which the music was performed. Several important performance venues for Nuyorican music in the 1970s, including the Nuyorican Poets Café and the New Rican Village, had closed by the time Domínguez was working on *Baile Bomba* in 1983 (the former would reopen in 1989).[613] Other key sites for musical performance were the neighbourhood's many community gardens, and while the Department of Parks and Recreation had begun formalising these spaces in the mid-1980s through its GreenThumb programme, this took place in what Miranda J. Martinez describes as 'a disempowered, provisional fashion.'[614] The lots on which gardens were built remained classified as 'vacant land,' while the gardens themselves were always considered 'a temporary use', a designation that retained the 'the city's legal right to reappropriate the property if land values increased in the future.'[615] Mayor Giuliani would initiate the widespread selling-off of city-owned land in the mid-1990s, but the ever-present precarity of the neighbourhood's community gardens prior to this is exemplified in the case of La Plaza Cultural (which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Four). Developed by Charas in the mid-1970s, the garden had quickly become a popular venue for Latine music, hosting (among other cultural and political events), performances by Tito Puente, Joe Bataan, and various *bomba y plena* groups (Figure 80). By the early 1980s, however, many of the original gardeners had either left the Lower East Side or stopped tending to the garden, and La Plaza Cultural had fallen into disrepair, taking with it a vital performance space in the Nuyorican Lower East Side.[616]

In this context, *Baile Bomba* offered a vital, if temporary, site for *bomba* performance in Pueblo Nuevo. A photograph taken by Marlis Momber at the inauguration of *Baile Bomba* shows a *bomba*

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612 Unnamed NYPD officer, quoted in Berta Jottar, 'Zero Tolerance and Central Park Rumba Cabildo Politics', *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 5, no. 4 (November 2009): 4.

613 Noel, *In Visible Movement*, 83; Ed Morales, 'Places in the Puerto Rican Heart: Eddie Figueroa and the Nuyorican Imaginary', *Centro Voices (Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños)*, August 2016, https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/centrovoices/letras/places-puerto-rican-heart-eddie-figueroa-and-nuyorican-imaginary.

614 Miranda J. Martinez, *Power at the Roots: Gentrification, Community Gardens, and the Puerto Ricans of the Lower East Side* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 36.

615 Martinez, 36.

616 Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 3.

troupe performing on Clinton Street (Figure 81). In a discussion of the socially reproductive importance of Afro-Caribbean music in contemporary post-disaster Haiti and Puerto Rico, Nathalia Santos Ocasio and Beverley Mullings argue that a key characteristic of practices like these 'are the forms of sociability that they engender and the spaces they create for interaction and encounter across difference.'[617] In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *bomba* had fostered forms of anti-colonial collectivity on the plantations of Puerto Rico. In the 1970s, *bomba* soundtracked the creation of communal spaces where Nuyorican Lower East Siders could build community and challenge the disinvestment-induced destruction of their neighbourhood. The continued creation and maintenance of such spaces, no matter how ephemeral, took on an increased urgency in the 1980s as capital began flowing back into the neighbourhood and new threats of displacement loomed. Santos Ocasio and Mullings insist that expressive cultural practices don't just 'offer participants tools to negotiate the poverty and violence of everyday life', but also a way of making 'community outside of everyday routines of survival.'[618] This was especially true for Domínguez, as it was at the *Baile Bomba* opening that she met Chino García of Charas, who sponsored the event's *bomba* troupe. As I discuss in a later section of this chapter, this meeting would have a significant impact on Domínguez's work in the latter half of the 1980s.

With *Baile Bomba*, Domínguez presented a vision of Pueblo Nuevo that made Nuyorican life both visible and audible in this supposedly 'empty' part of the city, foregrounded the commoning work being undertaken to transform the area, and emphasised the role of Afro-Puerto Rican cultural practices like *bomba* in this process. The work thus encompassed both aspects of what Henri Lefebvre called 'representational space', which describes space as it is 'directly *lived*' by its inhabitants but also the ways in which this 'dominated […] and hence passively experienced space' can be appropriated and transformed by imaginative practices that challenge hierarchical, atemporal representations of space, and the commodification of the built environment that they facilitate.[619] For Lefebvre, representational space is 'alive': 'it speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre […] It embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations, and thus immediately implies time.'[620] *Bomba*'s history of anti-colonial resistance was

[617] Nathalia Santos Ocasio and Beverley Mullings, 'Sociability and Social Reproduction in Times of Disaster: Exploring the Role of Expressive Urban Cultural Practices in Haiti and Puerto Rico', in *A Feminist Theory for Our Time: Rethinking Social Reproduction and the Urban*, ed. Linda Peake et al. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2021), 51.

[618] Santos Ocasio and Mullings, 57.

[619] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 39. Emphasis in original.

[620] Lefebvre, 42.

echoed in the militant community response to threats of censorship by the Department of Housing Preservation and Development, and at *Baile Bomba*'s inauguration, when a *bomba* troupe transformed Clinton Street into a temporary (but public) site of Nuyorican collective action.[621] For Lefebvre, the lifespan of representational spaces is fixed: 'after a time, having provoked a series of manifestations and incursions into the imaginary, [they] run out of steam.'[622] In contrast to this, 'representations of space have a practical impact'; they 'intervene in and modify spatial *textures*', typically 'by way of construction.'[623] As a Pueblo Nuevo member, however, Domínguez collaborated on a counterhegemonic representation of space that the organisation was actively constructing, one that embraced existing social, artistic, and spatial practices in the neighbourhood rather than attempting to dominate or erase them.

2.4 "Pushed east to the river": *Gentrification* (1985) and the gentrification frontier in Loisaida

In this section, I analyse three black and white photographs taken in 1985 by the Lower East Side documentarian Marlis Momber, which show Maria Domínguez carrying a large relief sculpture, titled *Gentrification* (1985), along Avenue C in Loisaida (Figs. 82-84).[624] Digital copies of these photographs, which, to my knowledge, have never been displayed publicly, were sent to me by Domínguez in 2022. As discussed in the previous section of this chapter, the commodification of the Lower East Side's built environment was reliant on the sustained classification of the neighbourhood as 'empty': potentially dangerous, devoid of meaningful life, and ripe for new forms of capital reinvestment. It is striking when looking at Momber's photographs, however, how populated this stretch of the Nuyorican Lower East Side appears to be. While there is certainly some visible material abandonment (most notably a bricked-up, graffiti covered storefront on the corner), Momber's photographs capture the 'intricate sidewalk ballet', to borrow a phrase from Jane Jacobs, which animated Avenue C in the mid-1980s.[625] As Domínguez makes her way along Avenue C with the artwork slung across her shoulder, she attracts the attention of the street's denizens, including a young adult or teenager straddling a bicycle, a child playing on a skateboard, and what appears to be a group of older men hanging

[621] Lefebvre, 42.

[622] Lefebvre, 42.

[623] Lefebvre, 42. Emphasis in original.

[624] It is hard to ascertain exactly where these photographs were taken, but by comparing Momber's photographs with low resolution images from the 1980s Department of Finance tax photograph collection, and advertisements for *joyerias* (jewellers) in *The Quality of Life in Loisaida* from around this time, I believe that Momber and Domínguez are stood on the corner of Avenue C and East Fourth Street, facing in the direction of East Houston Street.

[625] Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 50.

out in front of the bricked-up storefront. These figures gaze over with ambiguous but seemingly benign interest at Domínguez and Momber. Several other figures are visible in the background, including an adult and child holding hands as they cross the street, and a group of people walking past a restaurant.

In two of Momber's photographs, Domínguez is turned away from the camera, most of her body obscured by the large artwork that is slung across her shoulder (Figs. 82 & 83). These photographs offer a frontal view of the piece itself, a series of roughly textured, white rectangular shapes arranged in irregular layers to resemble a pile of bricks or concrete slabs. In the centre of the work, a simplified three-dimensional representation of a human face, contorted in pain, struggles to break free of its surroundings. As this figure pushes against the jagged physical environment within which it has been confined, part of its face appears to dissolve back into this same space. In these photographs, there is no way of seeing how Domínguez holds the work up, and so it appears to float suspended in space, its white, painted surface contrasting with the darker hues that permeate the rest of the image. In the third photograph, Domínguez faces the camera (Figure 84). This photograph shows the back of the frame on which *Gentrification* was assembled; the work's date (November 1985) is visible in the bottom left corner, and across the top are the hooks and wire by which the work would have been affixed to a wall. With a piece of fabric in her hand to prevent the wire from cutting into her fingers, Domínguez uses this hanging system to carry the artwork down the street.

As its title suggests, *Gentrification* commented on a process that, by 1985, was garnering increased attention and concern beyond the Lower East Side's activist circles, who had been critiquing the first signs of gentrification since as early as the late 1970s.[626] The work was included in *Dimensions in Dissent*, an exhibition of political art held at Kenkeleba House Gallery in December 1985. Founded by Joe Overstreet and Corinne Jennings in 1978, Kenkeleba House was one of few artist of colour-run spaces in the Lower East Side in the 1980s. The gallery prioritised artists of colour, with a focus on displaying the work of Black artists and curators. According to Kenkeleba House's press release, *Dimensions in Dissent* examined 'the pressing, unresolved issues of a world in conflict', and the show included work by thirty-three artists, including David Hammons, Faith Ringgold, Jimmie Durham, Joseph Nechvatal, and Juan Sánchez, among others (Figure 86). Two significant installations were exhibited for the first time at *Dimensions in Dissent*: Hammons' *Soweto Marketplace* (1985), which transformed a fruit stand into an arsenal of grenades

[626] See, for example Cohen and Sharman, 'Rebuilding a Community', 11.

camouflaged as oranges and lemons, and Durham's *On Loan From the Museum of the American Indian* (1985), which parodied the racist display practices of Western ethnographic museums.[627]

Despite the breadth of artists that participated in *Dimensions in Dissent*, the exhibition appears to have come and gone with little press coverage. When Domínguez first sent me Momber's photographs, she could not remember the name of the exhibition that *Gentrification* was created for; it was only after she 'dug far and deep' in her own collection that Domínguez found the announcement card for the exhibition (Figure 85).[628] An archive of the work of Kenkeleba House is not accessible in any physical or digital archival repository, although the gallery appears to be in the process of digitising its collection; when I contacted the gallery directly to enquire about *Dimensions in Dissent*, I received a short email from Jennings, attached to which was a scan of the press release for the exhibition (Figure 86). In the absence of any installation shots, then, Momber's photographs of *Gentrification* being carried along Avenue C constitute the only visual record of Domínguez's contribution to the show. They were taken as Domínguez carried the piece from her studio in Loisaida to her home in Pueblo Nuevo.[629] Although Momber formally documented Domínguez and her work several times throughout the 1980s, this series of photographs was taken in a more ad hoc manner as the two women—friends for several years by this point—walked together in the direction of Domínguez's home.[630]

As discussed in the previous section of this chapter, reinvestment in the Lower East Side in the early 1980s was facilitated by top-down representations that erased the social, cultural, and material existence of those who had lived in this ostensibly 'empty' neighbourhood for decades. By the mid-1980s, this vision of an empty neighbourhood had given way to the more violent imaginary of a 'gentrification frontier' sweeping through the Lower East Side, being 'settled' by artists, property speculators, and other, increasingly aggressive, 'urban pioneers'. Here I examine a high-profile account of gentrification in the Lower East Side, published in *New York* magazine in May 1984, which naturalised and aestheticised the displacement of the low-income, racialised tenants and small businesses who stood in the way of the fluid movement of the gentrification frontier. Borne of Domínguez's desire to make people 'understand how devastating it was to be

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[627] David Hammons, 'Interview with David Hammons', interview by Kellie Jones, in *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art*, by Kellie Jones (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 253, https://www.artpapers.org/interview-david-hammons/; 'Jimmie Durham: Humanity Is Not a Completed Project | Room 4', Museo d'arte Contemporanea Donnaregina, accessed 23 June 2023, https://www.madrenapoli.it/en/durham-room-4/.

[628] Maria Domínguez, email correspondence with the author, 15 November 2022.

[629] Maria Domínguez, telephone correspondence with the author, 30 June 2023.

[630] Domínguez, telephone correspondence with the author, 30 June 2023.

moved out of your home', *Gentrification* critiqued the psychological impact of gentrification on those most under threat of displacement, while her informal photographic collaboration with Momber foregrounded Avenue C as a site of both formal and informal resistance to this threat.[631]

2.4.1 There goes the neighbourhood

According to Domínguez, *Gentrification* was created in response to a high-profile article about gentrification in the Lower East Side that was the *New York* magazine cover story in May 1984.[632] Arguing that the 'nowhere have the tensions and dramas of this phenomenon been more starkly displayed' than in this part of the city, in 'The Lower East Side: There Goes the Neighborhood', the journalist Craig Unger spoke with representatives of different groups who were both impacted by and implicated in gentrification, including real estate brokers, property developers, gallerists, community activists, and small business owners.[633] Daniel Makagon argues that:

> Stories about gentrification in the press bestow importance on the topic and help shape our perceptions of the process as a whole, including who benefits from the class [and race] remake of city neighborhoods and who might be considered victims.[634]

Published during a period in which the neighbourhood's gentrification was being commented on with increased regularity in both the alternative and mainstream press in New York, Unger's ten-page article, which was lavishly illustrated with full-colour photographs and a gallery map, offered arguably the most sustained and high-profile coverage of the transformation of the neighbourhood that had been published to date.[635] As such, it is revealing of how gentrification

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631 Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

632 Maria Domínguez, telephone correspondence with the author, 15 November 2022.

633 Craig Unger, 'The Lower East Side: There Goes the Neighborhood', *New York*, 28 May 1984, 33.

634 Daniel Makagon, 'Bring on the Shock Troops: Artists and Gentrification in the Popular Press', *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (2010): 32.

635 See also Rob Derocher, 'Artists Housing Meets Resistance from Local Residents Who Fear Displacement', *The Villager*, 13 May 1982; Grace Glueck, 'Gallery View; A Gallery Scene That Pioneers in New Territories', *New York Times*, 26 June 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/06/26/arts/gallery-view-a-gallery-scene-that-pioneers-in-new-territories.html; Marshall Berman, 'A Struggle to the Death in Which Both Sides Are Right', *Village Voice*, 12 July 1983; 'New Prosperity Brings Discord to the East Village', *New York Times*, 19 December 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/12/19/nyregion/new-prosperity-brings-discord-to-the-east-village.html; Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick, 'Slouching Toward Avenue D: Report from the East Village', *Art in America*, Summer 1984; Craig Owens, 'Commentary: The Problem with Puerilism', *Art in America*, Summer 1984; Lisa Belkin, 'The Gentrification of the East Village: Process Is Too Slow For Some in Area, Too Fast for Others', *New York Times*, 2 September 1984, https://www.nytimes.com/1984/09/02/realestate/the-gentrification-of-the-east-village.html; Patrick J. Carroll, 'Opinion: Lower East Side Did Not Win In Order to Lose', *New York Times*, 12 January 1985, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/01/12/opinion/lower-east-side-did-not-win-in-order-to-lose.html; William R. Greer, 'Squatters and City Battle for Control of Abandoned Buildings', *New York Times*, 2 August 1985, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/08/02/nyregion/squatters-and-city-battle-for-abandoned-buildings.html; William

and its various characteristics—what the process actually entailed, who was involved, and what its impact was—was being narrativized in the popular press in the mid-1980s.

One of Unger's most notable interviewees was Tom Pollak, a property speculator who had 'recently arrived from Aspen specifically to buy into the East Village.'[636] In his interview, Pollak made explicit what many of those aiming to profit from real estate investment thought of the 'rent-controlled tenants' and 'ethnic businesses and services' that had long resided in the Lower East Side.[637] Rent hikes would displace many tenants, said Pollak, while others could simply be paid to leave: 'If you can get rid of rent-controlled tenants, renovate the place, and charge $700 a month, it's worth paying them $10,000 or so just to get them out and raise the rents.'[638] In a comment that is striking for both its candour and its cruelty, Pollak insisted that these low-income residents would disappear, one way or another: 'They'll all be forced out. They'll be pushed east to the river and given life preservers. It's so clear. I wouldn't have come here if it wasn't.'[639] It was this quote, which circulated widely among community activists in the neighbourhood, that Domínguez describes as the primary impetus behind *Gentrification*.[640]

With his violent visualisation of the Lower East Side's most precarious tenants being pushed into the East River, Pollak unintentionally described the metaphorical and physical movement of what Neil Smith called 'the gentrification frontier', which emerged in the comparatively better-off East Village in the early 1980s before pushing into the poorer areas of the Nuyorican Lower East Side over the course of the decade.[641] A 'sharp', but not necessarily straight, 'economic line in the landscape' separating disinvestment from reinvestment, Smith argued that the gentrification frontier in the Lower East Side resembled the frontier of the nineteenth-century American West: 'Behind the line, civilization and profit-making are taking their toll; in front of the line, savagery, promise and opportunity still stalk the landscape.'[642] Closely linked to the gentrification frontier was the figure of the so-called 'urban pioneer' who 'settled' along it and

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R. Greer, 'The Fortunes of the Lower East Side Are Rising', *New York Times*, 4 August 1985, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/08/04/weekinreview/the-fortunes-of-the-lower-east-side-are-rising.html; Lippard, 'Hot Art in the Summertime'.

636 Unger, 'The Lower East Side', 40.

637 Unger, 40.

638 Tom Pollak, quoted in Unger, 40–41.

639 Pollak, quoted in Unger, 41.

640 Maria Domínguez, telephone correspondence with the author, 15 November 2022.

641 Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 189–209.

642 Smith, 189.

facilitated its expansion.[643] Smith argued that the term was 'as arrogant as the original notion of "pioneers" in that it suggests a city not yet socially inhabited; like Native Americans, the urban working class is seen as less than social, a part of the physical environment.'[644] While Smith's critique foregrounded the imagery and language that was used to justify and aestheticise gentrification, as Peter Kent-Stoll has recently argued, he 'reduce[d] the colonial to a metaphor for class', ignoring the 'colonial and racial foundations of gentrifying working-class spaces'.[645] As a process that 'targets Indigenous, Black, and other negatively racialized people for spatial removal […] and targets those same spaces of violence for the social reproduction of majority white middle-class gentrifiers', gentrification does not merely resemble earlier settler colonialism but is an urban manifestation of ongoing racial colonial structures.[646]

In their oft-cited critique of the early 1980s East Village art scene, Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan highlighted portrayals of the Lower East Side that utilised the imagery and language of the frontier, depicting the neighbourhood as 'empty' prior to the arrival of 'a gallery scene that pioneer[ed] in new territories' (as one *New York Times* headline from 1983 put it).[647] In the accounts discussed by Deutsche and Ryan, the young, predominantly white and middle-class artists who began moving into the neighbourhood in growing numbers from the late 1970s onwards were either depicted as or else described themselves as 'urban pioneers' in the Lower East Side.[648] Deutsche and Ryan cited Marisa Cardinale of the gallery Civilian Warfare, who described the neighbourhood as 'like starting over', insisting that 'I've lived here a long time and there was nothing here.'[649] Noting the '150,000 people', mostly Black, Latine, and Afro-Latine, that were 'living in the area', Deutsche and Ryan compared Cardinale's highly selective view, which universalised her own experiences of the neighbourhood, with the exclusionary visuality of settler colonialism: 'like the existence of the Palestinian people [to Zionism], the existence of the original residents of the Lower East Side is in the eye of the beholder.'[650] In 1983, as Domínguez was creating *Baile Bomba*, the curator and critic Carlo McCormick organised *The Wild West Show* at Piezo Electric, a gallery located in Pueblo Nuevo. McCormick has described the

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643 Smith, xiv.

644 Smith, xiv.

645 Kent-Stoll, 'The Racial and Colonial Dimensions of Gentrification', 2.

646 Kent-Stoll, 13–14.

647 Deutsche and Ryan, 'The Fine Art of Gentrification', 103; Glueck, 'Gallery View; A Gallery Scene That Pioneers in New Territories'.

648 Moore, *Art Worker*, 74.

649 Marisa Cardinale, quoted in Deutsche and Ryan, 'The Fine Art of Gentrification', 103.

650 Deutsche and Ryan, 103.

large group show as being 'about how the East Village had become a frontier of the Wild West': a site of liberation for some and intense violence for others.[651]

Following closely on the heels of these early artistic 'pioneers' came what Deutsche and Ryan described as the 'rear guard' of gentrification: the property speculators and developers who were drawn to a neighbourhood that appeared to be primed for reinvestment, but which, crucially, was being 'recolonised' by exactly the sort of people who could guarantee profits through increased rent.[652] The relationship between the rise of the culture and real estate industries in the East Village is a complex and contentious one, which I examine in depth in Chapter Three. In 'Slouching Towards Avenue D', an in-depth survey of the East Village scene that was published in *Art in America* in the summer of 1984, McCormick and fellow East Village critic Walter Robinson noted that 'gentrification, and the artist's function in it, has become a controversial issue in local politics'.[653] While many of the neighbourhood's new artists had a vested interest in the neighbourhood retaining what McCormick and Robinson called its 'low rents and multi-ethnic street culture', property developers were keen to push the line separating profit-making potential from an existing profitable market eastwards as smoothly and rapidly as possible; this was a process that would ultimately displace artists too.[654] The article's title evoked an image of the relentless creep of both art and capital reinvestment across the Lower East Side; if, in 1983, the East Village was the primary site of the gentrification frontier, then by 1984, it was making its way east towards Loisaida.

Unger's *New York* magazine article was framed around the sale of the Christodora House, a sixteen-storey former settlement house located on Avenue A (where the East Village meets Loisaida), whose repeated resale in the early 1980s, several years before it was redeveloped into luxury apartments, was seen by many as a sign of things to come.[655] This framing shaped Unger's choice of interviewees and the relative space offered to different neighbourhood constituencies. The article was dominated by the saga of the Christodora, which was purchased from the city by the developer George Jaffee in 1975 for $62,500 and sold to Harry Skydell in 1983 for $1.3

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651 Carlo McCormick, quoted in Carlo McCormick, 'Interview with Carlo McCormick', in *David Wojnarowicz: A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side*, ed. Giancarlo Ambrosino (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 14.

652 Deutsche and Ryan, 'The Fine Art of Gentrification', 103.

653 Robinson and McCormick, 'Slouching Toward Avenue D', 135.

654 Robinson and McCormick, 135; Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 189.

655 Unger, 'The Lower East Side', 41.

million, who quickly flipped it for $3 million to Robert Weiss.[656] In addition to speaking with Jaffee, Skydell, Weiss, and other 'pioneering developers in the area'[657], Unger interviewed Rose Edwards, a real estate broker who described dramatic rises in property values across the neighbourhood, insisting that '[y]ou can almost taste it when certain buildings get hot'.[658] Compared with these breathless accounts of the booming real estate market, considerably less space was offered to those fighting gentrification. Across two small paragraphs, Pueblo Nuevo's Deborah Humphreys critiqued newly-arrived artists for supplying the 'housing demand that causes rents to be out of reach for low-income residents', while Charas's Chino García decried the absence of commercial rent controls that were forcing 'small, inexpensive restaurants' and services to shut down.[659] Anxieties about rising commercial rents were echoed by a mix of new gallerists such as Gracie Mansion, who noted that she paid more rent along Tenth Street than she would in SoHo, and long-time business owners like Maria Pidhorodecky, whose popular Italian-Ukrainian restaurant, The Orchidia, was shuttered after 27 years when Pidhorodecky's monthly rent leapt from $950 to $5000.[660]

Like many contemporaneous press accounts of the Lower East Side's social, cultural, and material transformation in the early 1980s, Unger limited his discussion to the most visible aspects of gentrification. By focusing on the fortunes of the Christodora and its continually changing owners, and the impact of commercial rent increases on galleries and small businesses, Unger downplayed the effect of gentrification on the neighbourhood's low-income tenants. Residential rent hikes were mentioned throughout the article, but the only housing tenant that Unger actually interviewed was one unnamed man, who noted that while he had paid $115 a month for years for his rent-controlled apartment, 'the young kids who just moved in upstairs pay $700 a month for the same amount of space.'[661] It is striking that Unger does not appear to have interviewed anyone who was either at risk of or already subject to displacement from their home. Despite being 'more difficult to bear witness to' than more conspicuous spatial transformations, Johana Londoño argues that rent increases, landlord harassment, and other insidious forms of 'spatial disempowerment' are vital to bring to light, as they 'reveal power

656 Unger, 41.

657 Unger, 38.

658 Rose Edwards, quoted in Unger, 40.

659 Deborah Humphreys and Chino Garcia, quoted in Unger, 36.

660 Unger, 40, 41.

661 Quoted in Unger, 33.

relations that easily go unnoticed' when understandings of the built environment's transformation are limited 'only to what we *see* in public spaces.'[662]

Domínguez's *Gentrification* can be seen as an anonymous collective portrait of those Lower East Siders who were most at risk of displacement, whose violent demise was so gleefully imagined by Pollak, and whose everyday experiences of gentrification were downplayed by Unger. Stripped of any defining features beyond eyes, a nose, and a mouth, the figure at the centre of *Gentrification* could not be categorised according to gender, race, ethnicity, or class (Figs. 82 & 83). This echoed Domínguez's insistence that while gentrification disproportionately affected the neighbourhood's racialised, low-income tenants, long-term residents, whether Puerto Rican, Jewish, Black, or Italian, had always fought 'the struggle of housing' collectively.[663] With its anguished central figure, made almost monstrous in an effort to break free of the jagged assemblage that threatened to engulf it, *Gentrification* articulated the struggle to retain one's agency and humanity in the context of an increasingly disempowering urban environment. The work's 'inhuman but humanizing face', to borrow a phrase from Judith Butler, expressed what the philosopher John Holloway calls 'a scream of refusal'.[664] Rooted in conditions of oppression but preoccupied with moving beyond them, the scream of refusal

> carries within itself a hope, a projection of possible otherness. […] The scream implies a tension between that which exists and that which might conceivably exist, between the indicative (that which is) and the subjunctive (that which might be).[665]

This tension was encapsulated in *Gentrification*, whose screaming central figure had neither broken free of its oppressive surroundings nor been entirely engulfed by them. Like the competing visions of Pueblo Nuevo that Domínguez depicted in *Baile Bomba* (one characterised by vitality, the other by decay), *Gentrification*'s portrait of 'the displaced' existed in a state of ambiguity, poised on the border between 'that which is' and 'that which might be'.

2.4.2 Everyday sociality in Loisaida

Hung on the wall as part of *Dimensions in Dissent* at Kenkeleba House, *Gentrification* would have articulated an impassioned, if potentially somewhat didactic, critique of the psychological effects

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[662] Johana Londoño, *Abstract Barrios: The Crises of Latinx Visibility in Cities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), xvi, emphasis in original.

[663] Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

[664] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), 141; Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power*, 1.

[665] Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power*, 6.

of gentrification on those at risk of displacement, at a moment when their experiences were being erased from high-profile media narratives such as 'The Lower East Side: There Goes The Neighborhood'. In the absence of any installation shots, however, Momber's photographs of Domínguez carrying *Gentrification* along Avenue C, which are all that remain of the work today, extend and reconfigure the work's critique. As discussed above, Unger's writing and interviews foregrounded the most visible manifestations of gentrification in the Lower East Side. Here I argue that Unger's erasure of those at the sharp end of gentrification was reinforced by Steve McCurry's accompanying photographs, which pictured the Lower East Side as though its transformation into a white, middle-class neighbourhood was all but complete. By situating *Gentrification* within the social and physical space of Loisaida, I argue that Momber's photographs extended the work's critique, offering a counterimage of the neighbourhood as a site of everyday Nuyorican sociality that challenged McCurry's view of an already gentrified Lower East Side.

'The Lower East Side: There Goes the Neighborhood' was the cover story for the 28 May 1984 edition of *New York* magazine, and the photograph used for the cover exemplifies McCurry's approach to documenting the neighbourhood's changes. In the photograph, three people are pictured in front of what appears to be a bricked-up building (Figure 87). Each of these figures, who the viewer is meant to assume are some of the neighbourhood's newest residents, appear to be white. One of the photograph's subjects, an artist or muralist wearing white, paint-spattered overalls, has their back to the camera as they cover the building's graffiti-covered wall with a coat of sky-blue paint. To their left, a figure with bleached blonde hair, patched jeans, and heavy black boots perches on a stoop, looking over at the painter. Lounging at the bottom of the stairs is someone wearing an outfit comprised almost entirely of punk clichés: short spiky hair, dark sunglasses, black leather jacket, Harley-Davidson t-shirt, and scuffed drainpipe jeans. This cover photograph sets out *who* and *what* are the primary focus of McCurry's gaze throughout the article: white people living and working in a gritty but characterful neighbourhood.

Apart from the cover image, fourteen of McCurry's photographs were used to illustrate the article. The central narrative in these photographs espouses a tension between the neighbourhood's bohemianism (its artists, punks, and cheap restaurants) and its rapid embourgeoisement (its yuppies, department stores, and sushi bars), a clash of cultures in which most of the protagonists are white. Four photographs are portraits of gallerists (Pat Hearn, Gracie Mansion, Steven Style, and Bill Stelling) pictured inside their respective East Village galleries (Figure 88). Three photographs are arranged chronologically, their captions suggesting a causal timeline of recent changes in the neighbourhood's food scene: 'Evelyne's introduced French cuisine… …Maria Pidhorodecky had to close her Orchidia… …Avenue A Restaurant

brought sushi to the far East Village' (Figure 89). Two photographs show clients getting their hair done at new salons in the East Village (Figure 90). Finally, an assortment of street photographs show scenes from the neighbourhood: a mural painted onto an abandoned building; a pair of tennis players walking in front of Life café; a fashionable shopper exiting a new Conran's store; and a leather-clad punk walking in front of a suited 'yuppie'. It is striking that the article's only visibly non-white figures appear in a photograph of a drug bust, in which both the officers and the suspect are men of colour (Figure 91). With this work, McCurry documented the Lower East Side as though its transformation into a site of adventurous consumption for the predominantly white middle classes was inevitable, if not already complete.

Momber's photographs of Domínguez work against this visualisation. They present a side of the Lower East Side that Unger, who described the neighbourhood as 'an extraordinary conglomeration of ethnic groups', at least alluded to, but which McCurry excluded from view.[666] Unlike McCurry's photographs, which are dominated by white gallerists, white diners, and white stylists, Momber foregrounded the neighbourhood's residents of colour. While McCurry focused on the most visible aspects of the Lower East Side's transformation (the opening of new galleries, restaurants, and salons, and those who inhabit these spaces), Momber turned her attention towards forms of noncommodified sociality that took place away from these contested spaces, by subjects who were not defined by their identity as business owners, workers, or consumers. At least two storefronts are visible in Momber's photographs, but they are pushed to the background in favour of the social and spatial practices animating daily life along Avenue C: people hang out on the corner, play with bicycles and skateboards, or simply stroll along the sidewalk. What the poet Miguel Algarín called the '*bomba* rhythm' of this 'street rooted' sociality underpinned everyday life in the Nuyorican Lower East Side, expressing a right to survive and thrive in urban space that was not contingent on access to various forms of capital.[667]

Momber's photographs are characterised by what Jacques Rancière calls 'an unpredictable interplay of associations and dissociations' between the different figures who appear in them: Domínguez, Momber, and the mostly male denizens of Avenue C.[668] This interplay is encapsulated in the character of a young man straddling a bicycle. In one photograph, he appears to be engaged in conversation with Domínguez, although both figures' obscured faces make this hard to confirm (Figure 92). In another, he turns to face Momber, his fists raised in a gesture

[666] Unger, 'The Lower East Side', 33.

[667] Algarín, 'Nuyorican Language', 15, 16.

[668] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011), 17.

that is playful, but carries a hint of violence (Figure 93). In the third, he and several other men look on with interest as Domínguez turns and smiles at the camera (Figure 94). Unlike *Baile Bomba*, *Gentrification* was not a site-specific work, but was created in a studio for display in a gallery. The somewhat unusual presence of a work like this on the streets of Loisaida dissolved the boundaries between the artists and their 'audience', some of whom looked upon Momber and Domínguez with a mix of genuine interest and detached bemusement, while others simply ignored them altogether. Rather than 'activating' the passive space of the city, Domínguez and Momber were, to borrow a phrase from Holloway, woven into the 'social flow' of everyday life that already existed along Avenue C.[669] The existence (and increasing precarity) of this street rooted Puerto Rican sociality formed the precondition for Domínguez's work; in turn, Domínguez's movement through the neighbourhood carrying *Gentrification*, and Momber's documentation of this act, added to the 'inherently plural, collective, choral, communal' flow of sociality along Avenue C.[670]

2.4.3 The gentrification frontier along Avenue C

It was no accident that Momber and Domínguez chose Avenue C as the site of their impromptu photographic collaboration. In the mid-1980s, the street, which still contained many derelict tenements and lots, was the site of an intensifying struggle between the encroaching forces of gentrification and those mobilising to resist them. Long the social, artistic, commercial, and political heart of Loisaida, Avenue C and the surrounding streets were home to many community gardens, cultural centres, and homesteads, including El Bohío, La Plaza Cultural, and 519 East Eleventh Street. A glance at the advertisements in any issue of the local magazine *The Quality of Life in Loisaida*, for example, shows how many Puerto Rican businesses were located along Avenue C at this time: Casa Adela, Carmencita's Restaurant, and La Poncena Shoe Store, to name just a few (Figure 95).[671] Notably, none of these establishments were included in 'Boomtown', a map of fifty notable places in the neighbourhood that was printed alongside Unger's 'The Lower East Side: There Goes the Neighborhood' (Figure 96). Paul Meisel's illustrated map included many restaurants and galleries that had opened since the early 1980s, as well as more unusual sites (like the Hell's Angels Headquarters on East Third Street), and older businesses that were popular with new residents, such as Moishe's Bakery or McSorley's Old Ale

669 Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power*, 27.

670 Holloway, 27.

671 As a sign of the significance of Avenue C to the Nuyorican Lower East Side, the street was renamed 'Loisaida Avenue' in 1987. Sam Roberts, 'A History of New York in 50 Objects', *New York Times*, 2 September 2012, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/09/02/nyregion/a-history-of-new-york-in-50-objects.html#/?gridItem=02-fifty-objects-slide-RYEF.

House. Most of these establishments were clustered west of Tompkins Square Park in the East Village, dropping off rapidly east of Avenue A. There were just two map markers along Avenue B (the Pat Hearn Gallery and the then-vacant Christodora House), and a single point along Avenue C (the club 8BC).

What Miesel's map made clear was that in 1985, Avenue C demarcated the cutting edge of the gentrification frontier in Loisaida, which Neil Smith argued was not 'slouching toward Avenue D' (as Carlo McCormick and Walter Robinson put it in 1984), but instead 'moved eastward through the neighborhood at a fair clip.'[672] Using tax arrears data collected by the Department of Finance, Smith demonstrated that the area between Avenues B and D in Loisaida was subject to high levels of property abandonment—much higher than the neighbouring East Village—until around 1985-1986, when property owners began renovating their buildings in order to profit from the neighbourhood's booming real estate market.[673] Even before this shift was fully visible in the form of new developments, it would have manifested in rent hikes, evictions, and other forms of 'spatial disempowerment' that made existing residents feel out of place.[674] For Smith, understanding the movement of the gentrification frontier thus 'provides a tool through which local neighborhood organizations, residents and housing activists can anticipate gentrification and thereby defend themselves'.[675]

The struggle to anticipate and defend against gentrification in Loisaida was followed closely in the avowedly partisan pages of the local magazine *The Quality of Life in Loisaida*, to which Domínguez and Momber contributed illustrations, photographs, and articles. The magazine's July-August 1984 issue, for example, reprinted excerpts from a report prepared by the Lower East Side Joint Planning Council (JPC), a coalition of tenant groups, homesteaders, and housing activists committed to preserving and expanding the neighbourhood's low-income housing.[676] Their research showed that although Loisaida (and Pueblo Nuevo) still had lower rent compared to the rest of the neighbourhood, new rentals in 1983-1984 were on average between 3 and 5 times higher than the 1980 average of $158 per month, suggesting that 'the prognosis for the

672 Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 207.

673 Smith, 203.

674 Londoño, *Abstract Barrios*, xvi.

675 Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 190.

676 Angotti, *New York for Sale*, 119.

limited-income LES resident is very bleak indeed.'[677] Despite this, it was noted that the JPC report, which outlined 'a strong proposal to save the Lower East Side—and Loisaida in particular—from the full impact of gentrification' through tenant protections, the construction of low-income housing in city-owned property, and the creation of a rezoned 'Community Preservation District', had recently been accepted by Community Board 3, the local agency that advised on land-use processes in the neighbourhood.[678] Momber's photographs in this issue of the magazine documented a 'March to Save the Lower East Side' in June 1984, at which several marchers wore life preservers, in reference to property speculator Tom Pollak's comment (recently published in 'The Lower East Side: There Goes the Neighborhood'), that low-income tenants would be 'pushed east to the river and given life preservers' (Figure 97).[679]

In an article published in the May-June 1985 issue of *The Quality of Life in Loisaida*, Julio Colon, the owner of a photographic studio on Avenue C, argued that, faced with extortionate rent increases, the arrival of 'people who don't spend their money here', and real estate-friendly local politicians, '[o]nly a miracle can keep a lot of the businesses here going.'[680] This issue also included an account of a recent 'Save Our Shops' march, which inverted the eastward trajectory of the gentrification frontier by making its way from east to west, from Avenue D in Loisaida to Second Avenue in the East Village. En route, the march stopped outside Mary's Bakery on Avenue B, which had recently been saved from closure thanks to a community petition imploring the landlord not to implement a huge rent hike.[681] These and other stories that appeared in *The Quality of Life in Loisaida* throughout the 1980s made it clear that, while glossy, high-profile articles like 'The Lower East Side: There Goes the Neighborhood' were naturalising and even aestheticising the seemingly unstoppable movement of the gentrification frontier, there was nothing settled, inevitable, or beautiful about this process.[682] In 1985, Avenue C was a site of

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[677] Lower East Side Joint Planning Council, 'Here It Is: The JPC Plan (Excerpts)', *The Quality of Life in/Calidad de Vida En Loisaida*, July-August 1984, 7, Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection (MSS134) Box 1, Folder 7, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City.

[678] John Lesch, 'The Plan To Save The Lower East Side', *The Quality of Life in/Calidad de Vida En Loisaida*, July-August 1984, 4, Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection (MSS134) Box 1, Folder 7, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City; Lower East Side Joint Planning Council, 'Here It Is: The JPC Plan (Excerpts)', 5; Angotti, *New York for Sale*, 104.

[679] Quoted in Unger, 'The Lower East Side', 41.

[680] Julio Colon, quoted in 'Needed: A Miracle', *The Quality of Life in/Calidad de Vida En Loisaida*, May-June 1985, 7, Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection (MSS134) Box 1, Folder 8, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City.

[681] 'SOS: Save Our Shops', *The Quality of Life in/Calidad de Vida En Loisaida*, May-June 1985, 5, Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection (MSS134) Box 1, Folder 8, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City.

[682] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 2011, 3.

struggle, where different ways of seeing, representing, and occupying space in Loisaida were being contested. With their informal photographic collaboration along Avenue C, Domínguez and Momber contributed to this struggle by foregrounding the street's significance as both the site of organised community resistance to gentrification, and a site for everyday socio-spatial practices that resisted spatial disempowerment, and insisted on the right of those most at risk of displacement to 'live and thrive in place'.[683]

2.5 "We didn't see each other": *Contemporaneos* (1987) and the segregated division of artistic labour

In the final section of this chapter, I examine Maria Domínguez's role as El Bohío's first Visual Art Coordinator, a post that she took up in 1985. Domínguez had first met Chino García, the director of Charas and El Bohío, in 1983, at the dedication ceremony for *Baile Bomba*. As their friendship developed, Domínguez recalls García suggesting that they inaugurate a visual art programme at El Bohío. At the time, Domínguez was still at the School of Visual Arts, studying for a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA). By 1985, having finished her degree, and with the help of an artist-in-residence grant from the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), Domínguez joined the team at El Bohío.[684] Domínguez was well placed to develop the centre's visual art programme. Not only was she a regular visitor to El Bohío throughout the early 1980s, attending performances at El Bohío's Teatro Terraza and visiting Marlis Momber in her photo studio, but through her work with Cityarts Workshop, Charas, Pueblo Nuevo, and other organisations, she was firmly embedded in art and activist networks across the Nuyorican Lower East Side.[685] Additionally, Domínguez's art school training opened up access to a broad set of institutional networks and resources, including the NYSCA grant that facilitated her role at El Bohío.[686]

Unlike El Bohío's film and theatre programmes, which, in part due to their higher profile in the neighbourhood, have been meticulously collected and catalogued as part of the CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records at CENTRO, material related to the late 1980s visual art programme is sparse, consisting of a handful of exhibition catalogues, announcement cards, and posters, some photographs, and a small amount of written and printed documentation. The piecemeal condition of the archive makes it impossible to gain a clear overview of Domínguez's three-year tenure as Visual Art Coordinator at El Bohío. However,

[683] Ramírez, 'City as Borderland', 152.

[684] Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

[685] Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

[686] Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

between the material scattered throughout the CHARAS/El Bohío Records, Domínguez's memories of this period, and documents contained within her own collection, it is possible to get a sense of the many ambitious projects that took place at El Bohío between 1985 and 1988. These included the initiation of after-school arts workshops for local youth, sculpture and mural projects installed in and around El Bohío's exterior courtyards, interdisciplinary musical productions that brought together artists, dancers, musicians, and poets, and several large group exhibitions focusing on Puerto Rican and political art.[687] Not all of these activities were instigated by Domínguez, but one project that was her brainchild was *Contemporaneos* (Contemporaries), an exhibition of thirty Nuyorican and New York-based Latine artists that was co-curated with the artist and curator Carmelo Diaz in El Bohío's recently renovated art gallery in 1987 (Figure 98).

For Domínguez, the impetus behind *Contemporaneos* was a familiar feeling of erasure that had underpinned earlier work like *Baile Bomba* (1983) and *Gentrification* (1985). Many galleries had opened in the Lower East Side in the 1980s, mostly around the East Village, and while many of them had either closed down or moved to SoHo or uptown by 1987, Neil Smith estimated that around seventy galleries remained active in the neighbourhood at this time.[688] Despite the proliferation of spaces in the Lower East Side in which to show work, and despite the neighbourhood's multicultural character being a draw for many young artists, Domínguez recalls that for the most part, Nuyorican and other Latine artists 'didn't see each other' in these mostly white galleries.[689] In this section, I argue that the prevailing whiteness of these spaces, which persisted in spite of broader efforts to 'diversify' New York's art worlds in the late 1980s, also shaped early art exhibitions at El Bohío. As a form of cultural displacement, the exclusion of Nuyorican and Latine artists, curators, and audiences from Lower East Side galleries replicated the erasure of certain groups and their practices that underpinned other forms of social and spatial displacement in the neighbourhood. I argue that with *Contemporaneos*, Domínguez contested this exclusion by turning La Galería en El Bohío, the centre's newly renovated gallery,

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687 On the sculpture project, see Dina Bursztyn, 'Gargoyles to Scare Developers', *Ceramics Monthly*, January 1990, 74.

688 Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 19.

689 Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

On the statistical whiteness of exhibitions in Downtown galleries in the late 1980s, see Howardena Pindell, 'Art (World) & Racism: Testimony, Documentation and Statistics', *Third Text* 2, no. 3–4 (March 1988): 173–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528828808576196.

On the racial politics of the Downtown art scene in the 1970s and 1980s, see also Gary Indiana, 'Crime and Misdemeanors', *Artforum*, October 1999; Juan Sánchez, 'Oral History Interview', interview by Josh T. Franco, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1 October 2018, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-juan-snchez-17606; Lorraine O'Grady, 'My 1980s', in *Writing in Space, 1973-2019*, ed. Aruna D'Souza (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 203–12; Montez, *Keith Haring's Line*, 118–20.

into a space where Nuyorican and Latine artists and audiences could come together to see work that was less visible elsewhere in the neighbourhood. In the process, she reaffirmed El Bohío's position as a vital site of social and cultural resistance to gentrification, and foregrounded the role of Nuyorican and Latine visual art as a key tool in this struggle.

2.5.1 An interest in otherness

El Bohío was founded by Charas and Adopt-A-Building in 1978, at the tail end of what Arlene Dávila calls the 'art- and culture-based social movement[s]' of the 1960s and 1970s, which gave rise to nonprofit, artist of colour-run alternative spaces across the city, including, in the Lower East Side, Kenkeleba House, the Alternative Museum, and the New Rican Village.[690] By the mid-1980s, only El Bohío and Kenkeleba House were still active in the Lower East Side: Eddie Figueroa's New Rican Village had closed in 1979, while the Alternative Museum, founded by Geno Rodriguez on East Fourth Street in 1974, had moved to Tribeca in 1980.[691] With roots in the Loisaida movement and a commitment to supporting Nuyorican cultural production and local artists, El Bohío was the ideal venue for the development of an art programme that could continue work being undertaken at other Latine-led spaces (such as the Alternative Museum or the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art), while encouraging productive cross-class, cross-racial encounters between older and newer residents of the Lower East Side. As Alan W. Moore writes, El Bohío 'was hopping with activity' throughout the 1980s, 'rolling along as a big-box people's cultural center' that was known as an important venue for Nuyorican theatre and global independent cinema in particular.[692]

However, while El Bohío had periodically hosted exhibitions of visual art since its formation, no-one had ever overseen the formal development and administration of this programme. As a result, early art exhibitions at El Bohío, such as the *Times Square Show*-inspired *Ninth Street Survival Show* (1981), or Political Art Documentation and Distribution's *Not for Sale* (1983), both of which were large-scale group shows, tended to be one-offs, organised by external curators, which rarely included Nuyorican or other Black, Latine, or Afro-Latine artists (even though *Not for Sale* was

690 Dávila, *Latinx Art*, 12.

There was also El Museo del Barrio and Taller Boricua in El Barrio (East Harlem), the Cayman Gallery in SoHo (which became MoCHA, the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, in 1985), the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Basement Workshop in Chinatown, and Just Above Midtown and INTAR Latin American Gallery in Midtown Manhattan.

691 Morales, 'Places in the Puerto Rican Heart: Eddie Figueroa and the Nuyorican Imaginary'.

692 Moore, *Art Worker*, 165.

designed to protest gentrification and its effect on marginalised Lower East Side residents).[693] This 'hands-off' approach towards visual art programming on the part of El Bohío's management was perhaps understandable, given that the first half of the 1980s had been spent trying to renovate and stabilise a building that was barely functional.[694] An information sheet from 1983 describes 'the extreme difficulty with heating and maintaining the building' that Charas and Adopt-a-Building had been dealing with since taking over the abandoned school building (Figure 99). In this context, an exhibition like the *Ninth Street Survival Show*, which took place the year that Adopt-a-Building left sole responsibility for managing El Bohío in Charas's hands, would have been welcomed in large part because of the organisers' assertion that the show would 'help improve a deteriorating city structure' (Figure 100).[695]

El Bohío's financial situation began to improve in the mid-1980s. In 1984, after years of negotiations and short-term agreements, the city finally granted the newly-formed El Bohío Public Development Corporation a fifteen-year lease to the building, and funding to fix the leaking roof and repair the heating system.[696] The following year, the curator and art consultant Mary-Ann Monforton organised an exhibition and auction of contemporary art to raise money for El Bohío. Accompanied by a full-colour catalogue, and overseen by an auctioneer from Sotheby's, the auction included work donated by over fifty established and emerging Downtown artists, including Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol, Rhonda Zwillinger, and Martin Wong, to name just a handful (Figure 101).[697] The auction raised over $100,000, which made El Bohío eligible for a matching grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.[698] This was a significant jump in funding for the centre, which had been struggling to survive on an annual budget of around $30,000.[699] After the auction, a functional heating system was finally able to be installed in El Bohío; this facilitated year-round use of the building, which until this point had only been open

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693 Gregory Sholette, 'A Collectography of PAD/D, a 1980s Activist Art Collective, and Its Legacy in Twenty-First Century Activist Art and Scholarship', in *The Routledge Companion to Art and Activism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Lesley Shipley and Mey-Yen Moriuchi (New York: Routledge, 2022), 31, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003159698-3.

694 Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 138.

695 See also Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 109.

696 Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 138.

697 Mary-Ann Monforton, ed., *Contemporary Art Auction to Benefit El Bohio*, Auction Catalogue (New York: El Bohio, 1985), 4.

698 David Sweet, 'El Bohio Auction', *Art & Auction*, November 1985.

699 Douglas C. McGill, 'Hispanic Center Holds Benefit Art Auction', *New York Times*, 16 September 1985, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/09/16/arts/hispanic-center-holds-benefit-art-auction.html.

to the public during the warmer months.[700] Increased funding and the ability to use the space year round prompted the expansion of cultural provision that had previously been underdeveloped, including the renovation of El Bohío's art gallery.

Monforton's *Contemporary Art Auction to Benefit El Bohío*, held in 1985, placed the considerable cultural and economic capital of mid-1980s contemporary art in the service of a non-profit space that was seen by many Downtown artists as a vital cultural resource in the rapidly gentrifying Lower East Side. Participation in the auction could be understood as a way for New York's artistic avant-garde to express solidarity with the minority communities served by El Bohío (and, perhaps, to alleviate what Alan W. Moore describes as the guilt felt by some younger artists in hastening the neighbourhood's gentrification).[701] The critic Gary Indiana articulated this attitude in the catalogue's foreword, stating that '[p]articipation in this auction must be recognized as a cry from those who have traditionally raised their voices when other people were afraid.'[702] Certainly, as Moore, Ed Morales, and others have argued, cultural and political events at El Bohío always brought together a large cross-section of the neighbourhood's artists, activists, and residents.[703] Given the sense of solidarity being expressed with El Bohío, however, it is striking that the auction included very few artists of colour. Aside from Martin Wong, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and a handful of graffiti writers (such as Futura 2000 and Fred 'Fab Five Freddy' Brathwaite), all of whom were associated with the booming East Village art scene, the overwhelming majority of the fifty-six artists that donated work to the auction were white.[704]

In many ways, the whiteness of the *Contemporary Art Auction to Benefit El Bohío* simply reflected the relative whiteness of the New York art market at the time, even in the somewhat more diverse alternative gallery scene in the Lower East Side.[705] Furthermore, given that the auction's primary aim was to raise money for El Bohío, the homogeneity of the artists who donated work was perhaps less important than their established commercial value. However, by actively excluding

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[700] Judy Cantor, 'El Bohio: A Matter of Need', *EV58*, 1985.

[701] Moore, *Art Worker*, 74–75.

[702] Gary Indiana, foreword to *Contemporary Art Auction to Benefit El Bohio*, ed. Mary-Ann Monforton, Auction Catalogue (New York: El Bohio, 1985), 3.

[703] Moore, *Art Worker*, 74–75; Morales, *Latinx*, 253; Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 132–37; Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 110.

[704] Mary-Ann Monforton, ed., *Contemporary Art Auction to Benefit El Bohio*, Auction Catalogue (New York: El Bohio, 1985).

[705] See Pindell, 'Art (World) & Racism', 173–75.

the work of local or less well established artists of colour[706], Monforton (an art consultant whose personal art collection included work by several East Village artists), inadvertently endorsed racialised market logics that served to reinforce the ongoing cultural marginalisation of those who the auction claimed to support.[707] Indeed, from this perspective, the auction appeared to contradict one of El Bohío's key aims, as stated in 1986, to 'foster and maintain the emergence of a strong sense of artistic identity with the Loisaida community' (Figure 102). In an interview with the *New York Times*, El Bohío's Chino García expressed an ambivalent but ultimately pragmatic attitude towards the auction and what it meant for both El Bohío and Loisaida. On the one hand, he recognised the danger of the 'upscale investors' who attended the auction, and the impact that the influx of money the new art scene attracted to the neighbourhood was having on the community that El Bohío served.[708] On the other hand, acknowledging that they were 'fighting to stay alive, but the people fighting don't have the money to fight', García was clear that '[o]ne way to make money is this type of auction.'[709]

The *Contemporary Art Auction to Benefit El Bohío*, and its follow-up in 1988, can be understood in the context of what Coco Fusco called a 'resurgent interest in otherness' in U.S. contemporary art in the late 1980s.[710] Prompted by decades of struggle by artists of colour to expand their representation in existing cultural institutions, and to create alternative spaces of their own, Mari Carmen Ramírez wrote that the art world had 'responded with an apparent lamentation of its exclusionary practices, the "correction" of its institutional politics, and its acceptance of multicultural production.'[711] This period saw an increase in solo exhibitions at prestigious New York art museums by Black artists like Adrian Piper or David Hammons, who had typically exhibited first in artist of colour-run Downtown alternative spaces.[712] While these exhibitions offered critical and commercial success to a small handful of artists—very few of whom were

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[706] Including Domínguez, who recalls her work being rejected for inclusion by Monforton.

Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

[707] Cantor, 'El Bohio: A Matter of Need'.

[708] Chino García, quoted in McGill, 'Hispanic Center Holds Benefit Art Auction'.

[709] García, quoted in McGill.

[710] Coco Fusco, 'Fantasies of Oppositionality: Reflections on Recent Conferences in Boston and New York', *Screen* 29, no. 4 (1 October 1988): 81, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/29.4.80.

[711] Mari Carmen Ramírez, 'Between Two Waters: Image and Identity in Latino-American Art', in *Postmodernism and New Cultural Tendencies in Latin America: 500th Anniversary of the Encounter of Two Worlds* (San Francisco, CA: New Earth Press, 1993), 61.

[712] Having previously had solo exhibitions at the Alternative Museum and Exit Art, respectively, Adrian Piper's installation *Out of the Corner* was on display at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1990, while *David Hammons: Rousing the Rubble, 1969-1990* was shown at PS1 in Queens between December 1990 and February 1991.

Nuyorican or Latine—at a structural level, New York's art institutions remained overwhelmingly white.[713] As the Black artist Lorraine O'Grady has put it, by '[f]ostering a few successful careers but staying in control of the narrative', the white art world was '[r]emedying the situation so nothing will change.'[714] A comparable process of what Ramírez calls 'exclusion, incorporation, and domination' also shaped the so-called 'Latin American art boom' of the late 1980s.[715] Big-budget group exhibitions at major U.S. and European museums, typically curated by white European and Euro-American curators, helped raise the critical and commercial profile of some Latin American artists.[716] As Ramírez argued, however, not only did these exhibitions retain the white art institution as the primary arbiter of value, but they also flattened out the formal, thematic, and political differences between artists working in very different contexts across Latin America and in the U.S.[717]

The late 1980s also saw the proliferation of political art projects, usually in non-profit spaces in Lower Manhattan, which dealt with socio-political issues that disproportionately affected New Yorkers of colour: gentrification, homelessness, poverty, and HIV/AIDS.[718] Of particular importance were two curatorial projects, organised at Dia Art Foundation in SoHo, which influenced many of the participatory practices that flourished in U.S. and European contemporary art in the 1990s: Group Material's *Democracy* (1988-1989) and Martha Rosler's *If You Lived Here…* (1989), which explored themes of cultural and political democracy, and housing

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[713] Patterson Sims, quoted in Patricia Failing, 'Black Artists Today: A Case of Exclusion', *ARTnews*, March 1989, https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/black-artists-exclusion-museums-1980s-1234581315/.

[714] O'Grady, 'My 1980s', 212.

[715] Mari Carmen Ramírez, 'Beyond "The Fantastic": Framing Identity in U. S. Exhibitions of Latin American Art', *Art Journal* 51, no. 4 (1992): 66, https://doi.org/10.2307/777286.

See also Ramírez, 'Between Two Waters'; Shifra M. Goldman, 'Looking A Gift Horse in the Mouth', in *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin American and the United States* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 317–25; Ben Genocchio, 'The Discourse of Difference: Writing "Latin American" Art', *Third Text* 12, no. 43 (Summer 1998): 3–12, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528829808576730.

[716] These exhibitions included *Hispanic Art in the United States: 30 Contemporary Painters and Sculptors* opened at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in 1987, alongside *Art of the Fantastic: Latin America, 1920-1987* at the Indianapolis Museum of Art and *Images of Mexico: The Contribution of Mexico to Twentieth-Century Art* at the Frankfurt Kunsthalle; the Bronx Museum opened *The Latin American Spirit: Art and Artists in the United States, 1920-1970* in 1988; and *Art in Latin America: the Modern Era, 1820-1980* opened at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1989.

[717] Ramírez, 'Beyond "The Fantastic"', 60–61.

[718] Notable projects in this vein, which usually included large number of artists of colour, were Group Material's *Americana*, installed at the 1985 Whitney Biennial and featuring the work Faith Ringgold, Juan Sánchez, and Lady Pink, among many others; the anti-gentrification poster project *Your House is Mine* (1988-1992) held at Bullet Space, a squatted art gallery in Loisaida; and *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (1990), a collaboration between the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum and The Studio Museum in Harlem.

and homelessness, respectively.[719] Even these avowedly dialogic projects, however, remained structured around subtle but unmistakeable forms of racial exclusion. The Afro-Nuyorican artist Juan Sánchez, for example, who participated in several Group Material shows in the mid-1980s, decided to stop working with the (then exclusively white) artist collective upon realising that his relationship to the group was not what he had initially assumed: 'I was just brought in to participate in shows, but I was never part of that collective that made decisions together, what they're going to do next, or so on and so forth.'[720] Rosler's *If You Lived Here…* encompassed several exhibitions and public discussions that examined housing, homelessness, and gentrification in New York, and the role of art in exacerbating, critiquing, and potentially ameliorating these issues. Rosler and her collaborators were attentive to the racial, class, and gendered dimensions of these issues, and invited housing activists and homeless advocacy groups to participate in the project.[721] In the preface to the accompanying publication, however, the white dancer and choreographer Yvonne Rainer noted that the public discussions, one of the project's most important elements, were characterised by a 'prevailing whiteness' among their attendees.[722] Rather than interrogate this whiteness, Rainer simply attributed it to 'the ongoing racial inequities in the art world' before moving on, as though white-dominated events like these did not perpetuate these inequities.[723]

When Domínguez recalls that Nuyorican and Latine people 'didn't see each other' in New York galleries and museums in the late 1980s, she is thus not only referring to the exclusion of their work, but to the wider absence of non-white administrators, curators, and audiences in these spaces.[724] The city's alternative and mainstream art worlds had begun opening themselves up to the work of artists of colour, but they remained rooted in what Fusco called a 'segregated

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[719] On the strategies and legacy of these projects, see Nina Möntmann, '(Under)Privileged Spaces: On Martha Rosler's "If You Lived Here…"', *E-Flux*, no. 9 (October 2009), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/09/61370/under-privileged-spaces-on-martha-rosler-s-if-you-lived-here-8230/; Alison Green, 'Citizen Artists: Group Material', *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry, 26. Pp. 17-25.*, no. 26 (2011): 17–25; Adair Rounthwaite, *Asking the Audience: Participatory Art in 1980s New York* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 31–111; Grace, *Art Demonstration*, 294–313.

[720] Sánchez, 'Oral History Interview'.

[721] These included organisers with groups such as Parents on the Move and Emmaus House. See Martha Rosler and Brian Wallis, 'Discussion: Homelessness: Conditions, Causes, Cures', in *If You Lived Here: The City in Art, Theory, and Social Activism*, ed. Martha Rosler and Brian Wallis (New York: The New Press, 1999), 183–205.

[722] Yvonne Rainer, 'Preface: The Work of Art in the (Imagined) Age of the Unalienated Exhibition', in *If You Lived Here: The City in Art, Theory, and Social Activism*, ed. Martha Rosler and Brian Wallis (New York: The New Press, 1999), 13.

[723] Rainer, 13.

[724] Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

division of labour' that assigned different roles to different actors.[725] White art spaces provided 'structures of control' in which people of colour were positioned as the passive beneficiaries of ostensibly inclusive new display practices that tokenised or homogenised non-white artists' work, while remaining oriented towards predominantly white audiences (and collectors).[726] In this model of nominal inclusion, artists or collectives of colour were rarely close enough to the levers of power to effect lasting change on their own terms.[727] Instead, they remained dependent on uneven access to exclusionary cultural institutions that sought to 'maintain whiteness', as Arlene Dávila puts it, 'in the form of an imaginary postracial art world' that continued to offer 'resources, power, and opportunity to those who have historically most benefited from it.'[728] Unlike gentrification's more overt forms of displacement, the 'interest in otherness' that characterised contemporary art in New York in the late 1980s enacted a more insidious process of dispossession, espousing a celebration of difference while maintaining highly segregated cultural spaces.

2.5.2 Curating contemporaries

With *Contemporaneos*, Domínguez sought to strengthen El Bohío's position as a vital space of resistance to cultural displacement, by turning the newly renovated Galería en El Bohío into a site for the production and display of Nuyorican and Latine visual art that was not visible elsewhere in in the Lower East Side. Adopting an approach that had long been utilised by artists working beyond the mainstream, Domínguez and her collaborator, the artist Carmelo Diaz, decided to curate an exhibition of Latine art from their position *as* Latine artists working *within* a Latine space; as Domínguez recalls, 'we knew, as Latinos, that there are these people out there doing these wonderful works of art, and nobody is acknowledging them. So we went out.'[729] The 'artist as curator' model found arguably its most widespread expression during New York's alternative art movement of the late 1960s and 1970s.[730] It was particularly important for feminist artists (such as the cooperatively run A.I.R. Gallery) and artists of colour (including the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition and Chinatown's Basement Workshop), who were not only excluded from New York's white, male-dominated commercial galleries and art museums, but

[725] Fusco, 'Fantasies of Oppositionality', 82.

[726] Fusco, 82.

[727] Fusco, 82.

[728] Dávila, *Latinx Art*, 3.

[729] Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

[730] Ault, 'For the Record', 2002, 5–6.

also from many of the city's new alternative spaces.[731] As Stuart Hall noted in relation to the British Black arts movement in the 1980s:

> in the absence of any sustained attention or critical dialogue within the dominant institutions of the art world, and given a systematic marginalisation over the years […] practitioners themselves have been obliged to act first as curators, and now as archivists.[732]

While typically rooted in an experience of exclusion, the artist-as-curator approach nevertheless offers, in Arlene Dávila's words, 'an important challenge to the idea that there are strict roles in the art world, each demanding unique and narrow types of expertise.'[733]

Drawing on their respective social and professional networks, Domínguez and Diaz (who was an assistant of the painter Julian Schnabel at the time), gathered over thirty New York-based Latine artists, including Juan Sánchez, Candida Alvarez, Papo Colo, and Catalina Parra, to participate in *Contemporaneos*.[734] In the absence of a catalogue, the exhibition is represented in the CHARAS/EL Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records at CENTRO by one object: a single-sided announcement card (Figure 103). From this card, it is possible to get a sense of the exhibition's social and artistic heterogeneity. As the English translation of the exhibition's title highlights, the participating artists were 'contemporaries', who shared certain key commonalities—all were Latine artists, living and working in predominantly Black and Latine neighbourhoods—but who otherwise had distinct racial, national, and class backgrounds, were at different stages of their careers, and worked in different mediums, on a range of themes, in dialogue with distinct networks and institutions in the city. Several of the artists, including Sánchez, Roberto Juarez, and Gladys Triana, had already had solo exhibitions in New York by 1987, while others were less well established. Relatively little is known today about some of the artists, but several were well-known Loisaida figures at the time: Peter Tirado Vidal worked with Cityarts Workshop and drew cartoons for early issues of *The Quality of Life in Loisaida*, while Art Guerra, whose mural of the musician and actor John 'Gringo' Spacely overlooked St Mark's

731 Ault, 'Chronology', 33, 19, 30.

732 Hall, 'Constituting an Archive', 91.

733 Dávila, *Latinx Art*, 136.

734 Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

Place in the East Village for almost twenty years, owned a paint shop on East Thirteenth Street.[735]

The exhibition's title also insisted on the contemporaneity of the artists who participated. As Dávila argues, the term 'contemporary art' is premised on claims to a universality that contends that 'matters of identity and history are irrelevant', despite being 'intrinsically involved in the creation of value.'[736] As such, the term often acts as an unspoken index for whiteness, against which work that is 'marked' in some way by race is understood as 'narrow, didactic, and stuck in the past'.[737] This echoes the logic of colonialism, which views colonised spaces and their inhabitants as existing 'outside of history'; the legacy of this, notes the performance scholar Sandra Ruiz, is that diasporic subjects are perceived to be 'tragically incomplete, fractured, lacking, ahistorical, and/or delayed.'[738] By using the Spanish-language title *Contemporaneos*, Domínguez and Diaz espoused a notion of contemporaneity that did not disavow race but instead drew attention to the exclusion of racially marked artists from dominant conceptions of contemporary art. By asserting the right of Latine artists to be understood as contemporary artists on their own terms, *Contemporaneos* played a small but meaningful role in expanding what Okwui Enwezor describes as 'critical understanding of the artistic heterogeneity of contemporary art'.[739] By taking place in El Bohío, a cultural space that was neither fully a part of nor entirely removed from the new gallery scene that had sprung up around it, the exhibition contributed to the creation of what Enwezor calls 'off-centred zones of production, distribution, and reception of contemporary art' that express 'a dispersal of the universal, a refusal of the monolithic, a rebellion against the monocultural.'[740]

The exhibition card offers useful basic information about *Contemporaneos* but gives no sense of what the show looked like in the space of La Galería en El Bohío. Throughout our correspondence, Domínguez has sent me photographs of the exhibition from her own

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[735] Gregory Williams, 'The Pigment Connoisseur', *Cabinet*, Winter 2001, https://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/5/williams.php.

Tirado Vidal, under the name Pete Tirado, collaborated with Freddy Hernández on the comic-strip *Adventures in Loisaida* in the first three issues of *The Quality of Life in Loisaida*. From the November/December 1978 issue onwards, the comic was attributed only to Hernández, although Tirado Vidal was listed as one of the magazine's Art Assistants until the March-April 1979 issue.

[736] Dávila, *Latinx Art*, 3.

[737] Dávila, 3, 152–53.

[738] Sandra Ruiz, *Ricanness: Enduring Time in Anticolonial Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 25.

[739] Okwui Enwezor, quoted in Hal Foster et al., 'Questionnaire on "The Contemporary"', *October* 130 (Fall 2009): 34.

[740] Enwezor, quoted in Foster et al., 37.

collection. These include Marlis Momber's black and white portrait of Chino García, Bimbo Rivas, and the historian Mario Maffi in the gallery (Figure 104), as well as three snapshots of the opening (taken by Domínguez and Diaz), that show Domínguez with two unidentified guests, Rivas giving a speech, and Diaz surrounded by exhibition visitors (Figs. 105-107). What is immediately apparent in these photographs is the vast white cube of La Galería en El Bohío, which had been renovated to a high standard in the mid-1980s. The viewer's eye is also drawn towards the multiracial, multigenerational crowd, whose relatively casual attire contrasts with the 'jewels and designer clothes' worn by the collectors and dealers that attended the *Contemporary Art Auction to Benefit El Bohío*.[741] The diversity of the crowd at the *Contemporaneos* opening supports Domínguez's recollection that the exhibition attracted a wide audience of 'people who knew what was going on, not just Latinos'.[742]

These photographs offer glimpses of several paintings and sculptures, although most of the work that was included in the show is not visible. A large sculpture suspended from the ceiling appears in both Momber and Domínguez's photographs (Figs. 104 & 107). Domínguez attributes this piece to the sculptor Jorge Luis Rodriguez, and certainly this work, along with a large freestanding metal sculpture that is visible near the edge of Diaz's photograph of Rivas (Figure 106), resembles Rodriguez's sculptural work from this period.[743] Domínguez's photograph of Diaz includes fragments of several paintings (Figure 107). A cartoonish landscape piece resembles contemporaneous work by Tabo Toral, while a mixed-media work that incorporates black and white photographs appears to be by Juan Sánchez. Several of the works appear to have directly addressed socio-political themes, while others were either more abstract, or else figurative but with less immediately legible content. Formally, the exhibition appears to have been somewhat conservatively curated. Paintings and sculpture made up the majority of the show, and each piece appears to have been hung at eye level with plenty of gallery space surrounding it. Missing from this show were artists like Pepón Osorio, Coco Fusco, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, whose interdisciplinary installation- and performance-based work of this period would undoubtedly have animated the space of La Galería en El Bohío in a more unusual (and potentially more compelling) way.

During the installation of *Contemporaneos*, Domínguez produced slides of all the work that was included in the exhibition. They survived Domínguez's own displacement from the Lower East

[741] Sweet, 'El Bohio Auction'.

[742] Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

[743] Maria Domínguez, email correspondence with the author, 15 December 2022.

Side in the early 1990s, but limited space in her new studio meant that she was forced to throw out a lot of material related to the show in the early 2000s, including these slides.[744] Like *Dimensions in Dissent*, Domínguez and Diaz's exhibition, although seemingly well-attended, does not appear to have garnered any press attention. In the absence of any critical write-up or sustained visual documentation, it is hard to know how to assess the success (or not) of *Contemporaneos*. For Mari Carmen Ramírez, two questions must be considered when examining exhibitions of work by so-called 'underrepresented' artists: 'to whom are these exhibitions directed, and who benefits from their accomplishments?'[745]

With regards to the first question, I argue that *Contemporaneos* opened up a vital space of encounter for Nuyorican and Latine artists and audiences, one that rejected the segregated division of labour characterising New York's art worlds in the late 1980s.[746] The organisation of *Contemporaneos* was rooted in Latine artists' experiences of exclusion, homogenisation, and tokenisation, but the exhibition did not essentialise these experiences; instead, by drawing on a wide mix of participating artists, *Contemporaneos* foregrounded the 'racial diversity' and heterogeneous 'diasporic identities' that Dávila argues characterises much Latine art.[747] Domínguez's comment that Latine people 'didn't see each other in these galleries' does not just refer to the work that was on display, but also to those who worked in art spaces and the audiences that attended exhibitions.[748] With this in mind, the show opened up space for the possible creation of a different kind of art public in the Lower East Side. Everyone was welcome in El Bohío, regardless of their race, class, or ethnicity, and the diversity of *Contemporaneos*' opening night crowd seems to attest to the success of the exhibition in this regard. However, by centring the work of Nuyorican and Latine contemporary artists, Domínguez and Diaz invited white and other non-Latine audiences to engage with this work on its own terms, rather than those set by the exclusionary or tokenistic framings of the white art world.

The second part of Ramírez's question is more ambiguous. Those who participated in *Contemporaneos* were at different stages of their careers, and while several artists, including Sánchez, Colo, and Alvarez, have had long and relatively high-profile careers, others do not appear to have continued working as artists. In any case, it would be a stretch to attribute an

[744] Maria Domínguez, telephone correspondence with the author, 15 November 2022.

[745] Ramírez, 'Between Two Waters', 63.

[746] Mirzoeff, 'Empty the Museum, Decolonize the Curriculum, Open Theory', 8.

[747] Dávila, *Latinx Art*, 144.

[748] Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

individual artist's success (or not) to their involvement in *Contemporaneos*. Instead, I argue that a more appropriate measure of *Contemporaneos*' accomplishments are the exhibitions that followed in its wake. By creating a space in which Latine artists and audiences could, in Nicholas Mirzoeff's words, claim an autonomous 'subjectivity and collectivity' away from the art world's segregated division of labour, *Contemporaneos* was already unequivocally political, even if the work on display did not always address explicitly socio-political themes.[749] Crucially, the exhibition laid the groundwork for subsequent exhibitions that transformed La Galería en El Bohío into a key site for the production and display of political art by artists of colour, particularly Nuyorican artists. In 1988, Juan Sánchez curated *Huellas*: *Avanzadas Estéticas por la Liberación Nacional* (Prints: Advanced Aesthetics for National Liberation) (Figure 108). Bringing together seventy artists and writers, including political prisoners such as Edwin Cortés, Elizam Escobar, and Carmen Valentín, *Huellas*, which coincided with the ninetieth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898, offered 'a visual testimony of our people's struggle for independence.'[750] In 1990, Sánchez, Sara Haviland, Loti Reyes, and Yong Soon Min curated *Arte de Resistencia* (Art of Resistance), a show of work by artists of colour that expressed solidarity with Puerto Rican political prisoners and incarcerated Black and Indigenous activists such as Mumia Abu-Jamal and Leonard Peltier.

2.6 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have argued that dominant ways of seeing, representing, and occupying space in the gentrifying Lower East Side in the 1980s were characterised by what Tina Campt, following Nicholas Mirzoeff, calls the 'classifying, segregational aestheticism' of visuality, which depicted the neighbourhood as empty (and thus ripe for reappropriation and reinvestment), erased the social, artistic, and spatial presence of its racialised, working class residents, and naturalised their displacement from the area.[751] Maria Domínguez sought to 'match and overcome [these] complex operations', to use Mirzoeff's phrase, through a series of artistic projects that refused static, exclusionary, and colonising depictions of the Nuyorican Lower East Side and its inhabitants, and instead proposed counterhegemonic modes of representing and occupying space across the neighbourhood. These projects, which incorporated an array of visual, sonic, material, and affective elements, celebrated Nuyorican social, artistic, and spatial

[749] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 2011, 1.

[750] Juan Sánchez, introduction to *Huellas: Avanzadas Estéticas Por La Liberación Nacional* (Chicago, IL: Editorial el Coquí, 1988), 3.

[751] Tina Campt, 'Black Visuality', *Black Visual Frequency: A Glossary* (blog), 8 August 2018, https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/2018/08/08/black-visuality/.

practices, anchoring them firmly in the contested spaces of the neighbourhood, from Clinton Street to El Bohío.[752] *Baile Bomba* participated in the reimagining and transformation of Pueblo Nuevo as a neighbourhood in which low-income tenants could have both secure and affordable housing *and* spaces for Puerto Rican performance and encounter. *Gentrification* offered an affective portrayal of the psychological effects of gentrification those most vulnerable to displacement, while Marlis Momber's photographs of Domínguez carrying the work along Avenue C situated it in the space where anti-gentrification resistance was most concentrated. *Contemporaneos* turned La Galería en El Bohío into a self-organised space for the production and display of Nuyorican and Latine art, and affirmed El Bohío's position as vital site of social and cultural resistance to gentrification.

Domínguez describes her practice as an 'art of survival', a term that carries a certain pathos in the present, given her eventual displacement from the Lower East Side in the early 1990s.[753] As an art of the everyday, the art of survival encompassed a vast repertoire of practices through which Nuyorican life in the Lower East Side was celebrated and reproduced in the face of oppressive economic and political forces that sought to destroy it. The notion of the art of survival highlights a thread running through much Nuyorican cultural production of the 1970s and 1980s, whose work Domínguez's own practice was in dialogue with. Urayoán Noel, for example, describes 'the survivalist poetics' of Nuyorican poet-performers, including Pedro Pietri, whose work was 'formally innovative yet rooted in a communal spirit of innovation', Miguel Algarín, whose performances at the Nuyorican Poets Café and other Lower East Side venues evinced a commitment to 'transformations before the public eye', and Sandra Maria Esteves, who foregrounded 'discredited or marginalized African and Taíno forms' in her work.[754] The art of survival also animated the work of the artist Pepón Osorio. The art historian Jennifer A. González argues that work such as *La Bicicleta* (1985) or *El Chandelier* (1988), which comprise everyday objects embellished with inexpensive plastic trinkets, offer a critical commentary on the tactics of appropriation characteristic of immigrant populations, and the conditions of material poverty that engender these practices (Figs. 109 & 110).[755] *El Chandelier*, writes González, 'was

[752] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 2011, 4.

[753] Maria Domínguez, telephone correspondence with the author, 28 January 2022.

[754] Noel, *In Visible Movement*, 76, 73, 58, 77.

[755] Jennifer A. González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 172–73.

inspired by Osorio's observation that, even in the poorest homes' of the Lower East Side, one could 'glimpse shimmering glass chandeliers through the windows of otherwise drab interiors.'[756]

What united these otherwise diverse practices was both an attentiveness to oppressive social and material conditions, and an unwavering, almost utopian belief in the potential of transforming these conditions through what Stevphen Shukaitis and Anja Kanngieser call 'the labour of imagination and recombination' of existing forms and materials.[757] This labour was perhaps exemplified in the work of the Loisaida movement in the 1970s, whose collective transformations of the neighbourhood's derelict spaces were the focus of Chapter One. Rooted in formative experiences with her mother's upholstery practice, and the notion of art as a 'problem-solving mechanism' that these experiences engendered, Domínguez was closely allied with Charas, Marlis Momber, and other longstanding Loisaida artists and activists, with whom she collaborated frequently.[758] However, the rapidly changing context in which Domínguez rose to prominence as an artist in the Nuyorican Lower East Side accounts for the formal and contextual heterogeneity of her practice, which offered a wide-ranging and resourceful response to the multifaceted, ever-evolving violence of gentrification. The need for survival amidst the turbulence of this period explains the piecemeal nature of Domínguez's archive, with material scattered across several archives. While critiquing and contesting the new forms of social, cultural, and spatial displacement that were emerging in the 1980s, Domínguez never lost sight of the need to assemble tangible, if fleeting, alternatives to gentrification's reordering of the neighbourhood, and the colonising modes of seeing, representing, and occupying space that underpinned this process. Powerful glimpses of these alternatives remain woven throughout the fragmentary archive that I have drawn on in this chapter.

[756] González, 172.

[757] Stevphen Shukaitis and Anja Kanngieser, 'Cultural Workers, Throw Down Your Tools: The Metropolis Is On Strike', in *Critical Cities: Ideas, Knowledge and Agitation from Emerging Urbanists*, ed. Deepa Naik and Trenton Oldfield (London: Myrdle Court Press, 2010), 71.

[758] Maria Dominguez, interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

Chapter Three. An Archive of Ambivalence: Martin Wong's Loisaida paintings, 1982-1986

3.1 Introduction

Martin Wong's *Iglesia Pentecostal* (1986) depicts the shuttered storefront façade of Cedros de Dios (Cedars of God), a Pentecostal church on Avenue B in New York City's Lower East Side (Figure 111). Like so much of the work created during the decade and a half that Wong lived in New York, *Iglesia Pentecostal* renders part of the Lower East Side's built environment in meticulous, practically life-sized, detail. The upper quarter of the painting is taken up with what appears to be a squat tripartite window, whose panes have been blocked out with the same coating of grubby light grey paint that covers the rest of the storefront. Against this drab background, the hard-edged crispness of the sign, painted onto the window's double-width central panel, stands out. Across the upper three rows, the names of the church and its pastor (Reverend Roberto Vasques) are painted in thick black capital letters, while the building's address (25 Avenue B) appears in deep red capital letters across the bottom row. Aside from two tiny smears of reddish orange barely visible along the canvas' top edge, which suggest either rust or brick, these red letters provide the painting's only pop of non-grayscale colour. The rest of the painting depicts the storefront's shuttered entrance. The doorframe's top edge is just visible above the retractable security grilles that dominate the lower three-quarters of the painting, partially obscuring what appears to be a recessed entryway.

Wong's use of what David J. Getsy describes as a 'white, cloudy, and almost otherworldly' grisaille imbues *Iglesia Pentecostal* with a sense of spatial and material ambiguity.[759] In the centre of the painting, Wong meticulously depicts the storefront's physical elements (the latticed security grille, the doorframe, the entryway) and uses contrasting grayscale shades to accurately render the spatial relationship between these forms. As I discuss later in this chapter, since the first exhibition of this work at Semaphore Gallery in SoHo in 1986, *Iglesia Pentecostal* has typically been hung at floor level, where its large scale encourages the viewer to get up close to the painting and linger over Wong's careful attention to detail. At the edges of the canvas, the work's meticulous realism begins to break down. Here, the contrast between light and dark shades is reduced to such an extent that parts of the storefront appear to dematerialise. In the bottom left corner of the painting, for example, the grille's vertical pickets are barely visible through thick smears of light grey and white paint that cover this section of the canvas, while the diamond-shaped lattices

[759] David J. Getsy, 'Bricks and Jails: On Martin Wong's Queer Fantasies', in *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief*, ed. Krist Gruijthuijsen and Agustín Pérez Rubio (Cologne, Germany: Walther König, 2022), 193.

that connect the pickets appear to have disappeared altogether (Figure 112). Elsewhere in the painting, Wong attempts to minimise his mark making in order to offer the viewer the illusion of being stood in front of an actual storefront, but here he foregrounds *Iglesia Pentecostal*'s status as an art object by drawing attention to the movement of his paintbrush across the canvas.

The painting's tightly framed subject, coupled with its unsettled materiality, heightens a sense of temporal ambiguity that pervades *Iglesia Pentecostal*. The present-day viewer is invited to speculate on the past fate of Cedros de Dios. Was the church simply closed until next week's service, or had it been shuttered permanently, a victim of rising rents and changing demographics in what, by the mid-1980s, was a neighbourhood undergoing rapid gentrification? If Cedros de Dios *had* closed down, when did it shut, and did anything occupy the storefront at 25 Avenue B by the time Wong painted it? The painting itself offers no tangible answers to these questions. In the moment that has been captured in *Iglesia Pentecostal*, both outcomes exist simultaneously: Cedros de Dios is both closed temporarily *and* shuttered forever. This temporal ambiguity would undoubtedly have reinforced the work's connection with its contemporaneous viewer, who would have been invited to reflect not only on the uncertain fate of Cedros de Dios, and the fate of the Spanish-speaking community served by the church, but also, potentially, on their own role in the production of one outcome or another. In the present-day, the work retains this sense of dialogue between past and present. If the fate of the physical space itself is likely to have been sealed, one way or another, several decades ago, *Iglesia Pentecostal* urges the present-day viewer to consider the representation of Puerto Rican life in the Lower East Side that the work offers, and to dwell on what Wong's painting can reveal about the history of this contested time and place.

By the time he painted *Iglesia Pentecostal* in 1986, Wong had spent several years 'lingering', as the queer theorist Roy Pérez puts it, 'outside the windows, amidst the rubble, and in the alleyways of Nuyorico'.[760] Having moved to New York in 1978, Wong's primary subjects between 1982 and 1986 were the people and places of Loisaida and Pueblo Nuevo. The body of work he produced during this period is formed of two distinct series, each focusing on a different type of Lower East Side architecture. Between 1982 and 1984, he painted depictions of the abandoned tenements and rubble-strewn lots that were omnipresent in the neighbourhood in the late 1970s and early 1980s, typically filling these street scenes with an array of cosmic images, and depictions of some of the shadowy males figures who passed through these affectively charged

[760] Pérez, 'The Glory That Was Wrong', 286.

spaces at night.[761] Several of these paintings were collaborations with the Nuyorican poet Miguel Piñero, Wong's friend and lover throughout this period, and most of the figures are based on Piñero and the young graffiti writers that Wong got to know during this time. Between 1984 and 1986, Wong turned to the storefronts that he became familiar with when he started visiting Loisaida in the early 1980s. This series, of which *Iglesia Pentecostal* is part, indexes a more quotidian side of life in the neighbourhood, and includes tightly framed frontal depictions of shuttered *iglesias* (churches), *botánicas* (religious goods stores), *cuchifritos* (fried pork) restaurants, and other Puerto Rican businesses and institutions.

These distinct bodies of work, which I collectively refer to here as the 'Loisaida paintings', track an important shift in the Lower East Side's social and material texture in the first half of the 1980s, as the disinvestment and abandonment that characterised the late 1970s gave way to reinvestment and gentrification. As such, they depict buildings that are either already ruined or otherwise on the verge of imminent obsolescence. The work reflects the wide array of overlapping, sometimes conflicting, social and artistic communities that Wong moved between during his time in New York, who were impacted and implicated in various different ways by the neighbourhood's transformation. A gay, middle class Chinese American artist, who had spent time in California's irreverent queer hippy underground, Wong cut an unusual figure in what Pérez calls the 'straightened landscape' of Loisaida, as well as the queerer but much whiter East Village art scene.[762] I argue that this sense of moving on the margins of various social spheres, of simultaneously participating in these scenes and observing them from a distance, made Wong a nuanced and sensitive chronicler of the Nuyorican Lower East Side. Wong's is a queer vision of the neighbourhood, one that reflects, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick puts it,

> the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically.[763]

After two short sections outlining my theoretical framework, in the first half of this chapter, I examine several key works from Wong's tenement series. In the second, I discuss paintings from the storefront series that were displayed collectively as *The Last Picture Show* at Semaphore Gallery in 1986. Throughout the chapter, I analyse the relationship between Wong's meticulous

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761 Dan Cameron, 'Brick by Brick: New York According to Martin Wong', in *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong*, ed. Amy Scholder (New York: Rizzoli, 1998), 2.

762 Pérez, 'The Glory That Was Wrong', 280.

763 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Queer and Now', in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 8, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822381860-002.

approach to depicting the built environment of the Nuyorican Lower East Side through painting, and the artist's complex affective and aesthetic relationship to the neighbourhood and its myriad social and artistic communities. I am interested in what the Loisaida paintings (considered collectively and as two distinct series) can reveal about the conflicts over space and its meanings that intensified as the neighbourhood began to change in the early to mid-1980s.

3.2 An informal archive of the Lower East Side

The sincerity and duration of Wong's engagement with the Nuyorican Lower East Side has led contemporary scholars to laud the accuracy of these paintings in capturing the neighbourhood's built environment as it looked in the mid-1980s. Roy Pérez describes Wong's Loisaida paintings as comprising 'one of the most prolific visual chronicles of 1980s Nuyorico', while the curator Agustín Pérez Rubio calls him 'the painter of Loisaida's reality'.[764] Wong's working method, which involved taking photographic snapshots that became source material for his highly detailed paintings of specific addresses, facilitated this sense of realism[765]; as I discuss later in this chapter, these paintings resemble documentary photography of the period, such as that of the prolific Loisaida photographer Marlis Momber. My interest in this body of work derives in part from what it reveals about the realities of the Lower East Side's social and material texture in the 1980s, and what it indexes of the cultural politics and struggles over space that were reshaping this environment during this period.

Wong's Loisaida paintings, which typically picture the neighbourhood as it looked in the artist's relatively recent past, are characterised by what Hal Foster calls an 'archival impulse'.[766] In his discussion of artists working with archival material in the early twenty-first century, Foster argues that 'archival artists seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present', and typically do so through the 'nonhierarchical spatiality' afforded by installation.[767] This is an apt description of Wong's storefront paintings in particular, which, as I discuss below, were conceptualised and exhibited as a life-sized replica of the area around Avenue B as it existed around 1980. It also characterises work such as *Attorney Street (Handball Court with Autobiographical Poem by Piñero)*, which was completed in 1984, but which depicts a graffitied handball court as it existed two years earlier. Foster argues that an artwork is archival if:

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764 Pérez, 'The Glory That Was Wrong', 280; Pérez Rubio, '... It's Not Really What You Think', 152.

765 See Gruijthuijsen and Pérez Rubio, *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief*, 102–3, 144.

766 Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 3–22.

767 Foster, 4.

> *it not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well*, and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private.[768]

Wong's Loisaida paintings were shaped by an informal archive of material that included photographs of dilapidated tenements that he took around the neighbourhood, the graffiti he saw on walls and other surfaces, individual bricks that spilled out of buildings and lots, and an array of printed ephemera, including a booklet of American Sign Language fingerspelling, tabloid headlines, and Spanish-language *fotonovelas* (photo novels).[769] Following Foster's argument that archival artworks produce their own archives, I argue that Wong's Loisaida paintings themselves constitute an informal archive of the changing Lower East Side in the 1980s, one that was in dialogue with the recent past and vanishing present at the moment of its production and initial display, and which continues to invite what Stuart Hall calls an 'active, dialogic, relation to the questions which the present puts to the past'.[770]

The unconventional archival methodology I adopt in this chapter is partly borne of necessity. While undertaking archival research in New York City in early 2022, the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University (NYU), which houses the Martin Wong Papers along with the other individual and institutional records that comprise The Downtown Collection, was closed to external researchers. As a result, the informal archive I draw on in this chapter takes Wong's Loisaida paintings (which have been accessible online since the publication of his illustrated catalogue raisonné by Stanford University in 2022) as its starting point. I place this extensive body of work into dialogue with growing art historical scholarship on Wong, several exhibition catalogues, interviews, as well as canvases and some archival material that I was able to view in person at *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief*, the artist's first European retrospective, on display in Madrid, Berlin, London, and Amsterdam between November 2022 and April 2024.[771]

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768 Foster, 5, emphasis added.

769 This translation does not capture the cultural specificity of the fotonovela, which Roy Pérez describes in this way:

> A form of Latin American and Latina/o pulp fiction that combined photographs and bubbles of text in the style of a comic book, fotonovelas often featured romantic affairs that climaxed and resolved quickly, ending with a cliffhanger and often a moral lesson or a health advisory.

Pérez, 'The Glory That Was Wrong', 292.

770 Hall, 'Constituting an Archive', 92.

771 *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief* was first shown at the Museo Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo in Madrid, between November 2022 and January 2023. It was then on display at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin between February and May 2023, before travelling to the Camden Art Centre in London, where it was open from June to September 2023. In November 2023, the exhibition opened at its final location, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, before closing in April 2024.

This informal archive loosens the grip of the traditional institutional archive, instead encompassing a broad collection of material in distinct mediums and formats, which spans several different real, imagined, and virtual spaces, and explores the interplay of resonances and dissonances between Wong and several other canonical and non-canonical Downtown figures.

3.3 Ambivalence as affect, object, and methodology

As my analysis of *Iglesia Pentecostal* suggests, to treat Wong's Loisaida paintings as a straightforwardly factual archive of the Lower East Side in the mid-1980s, as a collection of fixed, legible artefacts through which one can assemble a clear and stable view of the past, is to ignore the critical and ethical significance of the ambiguity and contradiction that suffuses the work, which troubles fixed readings of both the paintings themselves and the changing neighbourhood that they document. Stuart Hall argues that an 'archive has to be rich, varied and in a sense 'eclectic' enough to bear the weight of different contested interpretations', and this is certainly the case with Wong's Loisaida paintings.[772] The work is, to borrow a phrase from Clare Hemmings, 'overflowing with ambivalence' in relation to the themes with which his oeuvre is typically associated: marginalised identity, multiracial queer desire, gentrification, urban cultural politics.[773] Abandoned tenements are pictured as sites of both joyful, erotic collectivity and profound loneliness. Black and Brown men are individualised as friends, lovers, and collaborators, but also treated as anonymous symbols of desire and danger. Shuttered storefronts index the disappearance of one of Wong's adopted Lower East Side communities, and the arrival of another. Most significantly, this work indexes a profound uncertainty, on the part of both Wong and the different communities he was a part of, about what these changes mean.

With this in mind, I argue that the body of work examined in this chapter constitutes, to paraphrase Ann Cvetkovich, an archive of ambivalence, a term that I develop in this section.[774] Cvetkovich insists that cultural texts are 'repositories of feelings and emotions which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception', and the repository of mixed emotions that are encoded in and around

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'Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief', Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, 2022, http://ca2m.org/en/exhibitions/martin-wong-malicious-mischief; 'Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief', 2023; 'Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief', 2023; 'Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief', Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2023, https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/martin-wong-malicious-mischief-en.

For the accompanying catalogue, see Gruijthuijsen and Pérez Rubio, *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief*.

772 Hall, 'Constituting an Archive', 92.

773 Hemmings, *Considering Emma Goldman*, 11.

774 Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*.

Wong's Loisaida paintings—including loneliness, desire, fear, anxiety, joy, despair—are structured around, and accessible through, the sense of profound ambivalence that suffuses the work.[775] Ambivalence is typically understood as the state of having mixed or undecided feelings, or of being caught between several potentially conflicting emotions at the same time.[776] Not quite an emotion or feeling itself, ambivalence is an affective state that inflects one's experience of a given emotion at the same time as it brings distinct emotions into proximity with one another, and with the material and immaterial objects that both shape and are shaped by these feelings.[777] Like other affects, ambivalence is 'born in *in-between-ness*', as Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg put it, and 'resides as accumulative *beside-ness*.'[778] Following Seigworth and Gregg's insistence that affect is 'at once intimate and impersonal', I understand ambivalence in Wong's work to act as what Cvetkovich calls 'the hinge' between the 'systemic structures of exploitation and oppression' that the artist witnessed and experienced during his time in and around the Nuyorican Lower East Side, and his complex, often contradictory, 'felt experience of them'.[779]

Clare Hemmings describes ambivalence as a 'continuous political and affective reality for those who want to intervene in gendered, raced, and sexual meanings and structures'.[780] As such, ambivalence has been taken up by queer, antiracist, and particularly feminist cultural scholars as a useful analytic framework, describing both a subject and method of artistic production.[781] In a discussion of the film *Looking for Langston* (1989), for example, José Esteban Muñoz analysed the

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[775] Cvetkovich, 7.

[776] Caitlin Merrett King, 'Unsure Theory: Ambivalence as Methodology', *Arts* 11, no. 4 (August 2022): 4, https://doi.org/10.3390/arts11040078.

[777] On the relationality of emotions, see Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 4.

Ambivalence could also be conceptualised as a 'structure of feeling', to use a phrase coined by Raymond Williams in the 1970s to describe the 'affective elements of consciousness and experience' that characterise a given historical period, mediating between changes in society and an individual's lived and felt experience of them. Raymond Williams, 'Structures of Feeling', in *Structures of Feeling: Affectivity and the Study of Culture*, ed. Devika Sharma and Frederik Tygstrup (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 23.

[778] Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 2 (emphasis in original).

[779] Gregg and Seigworth, 2; Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 12.

[780] Hemmings, *Considering Emma Goldman*, 5.

See also Akwugo Emejulu, 'Ambivalence as Misfeeling, Ambivalence as Refusal', *Post45*, 27 October 2022, https://post45.org/2022/10/ambivalence-as-misfeeling-ambivalence-as-refusal/.

[781] See, for example Nikos Papastergiadis, 'Hybridity and Ambivalence: Places and Flows in Contemporary Art and Culture', *Theory, Culture & Society* 22, no. 4 (1 August 2005): 39–64, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276405054990; Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Saggese, *Reading Basquiat*; Merrett King, 'Unsure Theory'; Michael Dango and Tina Post, 'An Introduction to Ambivalent Criticism', *Post45*, no. 8: Ambivalent Criticism (18 October 2022), https://post45.org/2022/10/introduction-to-ambivalent-criticism/; Emily Coccia et al., 'Ambivalence as a Feminist Project', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 49, no. 4 (June 2024): 779–805, https://doi.org/10.1086/729906.

director Isaac Julien's ambivalent relationship with nude photographs of Black gay men taken by the white photographer Robert Mapplethorpe at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis; by reappropriating Mapplethorpe's contentious imagery in his own film, Muñoz argued that Julien 'acknowledges what is disturbing about the familiar practices of black male objectification that Mapplethorpe participated in' while insisting 'that this pleasure can not easily be dismissed'.[782] Drawing on feminist engagements with the psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein, Mignon Nixon identified ambivalence as a key theme in the sculptural work of Louise Bourgeois, specifically what Nixon described as the artist's longstanding exploration 'of maternal ambivalence as a psychic position of potential imaginative power' through which to challenge patriarchal aesthetic and political authority.[783] Julianne Pidduck has argued that 'a profoundly ambivalent and affectively charged queer stance toward family' characterises the autoethnographic video work of Jean Carlomusto and Richard Fung in the 1990s.[784] This scholarship supports Caitlin Merrett King's assertion that despite often being cast as negative or suspicious, for marginalised subjects in particular, ambivalence 'can be a very useful creative, aesthetic, political, critical, and personal tool.'[785]

This is not to suggest that ambivalence is inherently radical or liberatory. Part of my interest in Wong's paintings is that they resist unambiguously politically progressive readings, despite being created during a period in which residents, activists, and politically engaged artists across the Lower East Side began organising with increased militancy and urgency against gentrification, the HIV/AIDS crisis, and the Reagan administration more broadly. Wong certainly does not appear to have been 'contemptuous of political discourse and its proponents', a charge levelled at some of his East Village contemporaries by Alan W. Moore (co-founder of the art and activist space ABC No Rio), but neither did he attempt to actively intervene in the complex social issues depicted or alluded to in his work.[786] Writing about Wong's prison paintings, David J. Getsy points out that while the artist 'demand[ed] dignity for the incarcerated' (mostly men of colour

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[782] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 70–71.

[783] Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 270.

See also Rosemary Betterton, 'Louise Bourgeois, Ageing, and Maternal Bodies', *Feminist Review*, no. 93 (2009): 27–45; Rozsika Parker, *Torn In Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence* (London: Virago, 2019).

[784] Julianne Pidduck, 'Queer Kinship and Ambivalence: Video Autoethnographies by Jean Carlomusto and Richard Fung', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 3 (1 June 2009): 442, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2008-031.

[785] Merrett King, 'Unsure Theory', 2.

[786] Moore, *Art Worker*, 134.

who were systematically targeted by the U.S. carceral system), he also projected his own racialised queer fantasies about prison life into paintings that often depicted sexual violence between Brown and Black men.[787] Getsy draws attention to Wong's own ambivalence towards the perceived political content of this work, citing a *New York* magazine interview from 1991 in which he stated: 'Some people assume because I paint this subject [prison] I'm really political or something.'[788] Getsy convincingly argues that representing queer of colour life (and minoritarian life more broadly) in the 1980s 'was a political and contentious act made in opposition to forces that would see it erased'.[789] However, Shanté Paradigm Smalls, examining Wong's complex relationship to hip-hop culture, is adamant that his expressions of queer affinity with the people and places of the Lower East Side cannot be uncritically understood as 'metonyms for radical or progressive politics.'[790]

Tracing ambivalence in the tenement and storefront paintings offers a way of attending to these complex and often conflicting aspects of Wong's practice (which made the artist such a compelling chronicler of the Nuyorican Lower East Side), without attempting to resolve their contradictions into a linear narrative of progress. Smalls is insistent that for those examining Wong's engagement with the Black and Brown Nuyorican Lower East Side, it is vital to pay attention to

> coalitions that can bear and hold differing valuation, rather than succumbing to the logics of white supremacy masked as liberalism, which insists on flattening the historical, political, and social differences between racial groups in the U.S. and beyond.'[791]

Heeding Smalls' warning is particularly important at a moment of increased institutional recognition for Wong in Europe and the United States.[792] When examining the potentially

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[787] Getsy, 'Bricks and Jails: On Martin Wong's Queer Fantasies', 186.

[788] Martin Wong, quoted in Getsy, 185n12.

[789] Getsy, 179.

[790] Shanté Paradigm Smalls, *Hip Hop Heresies: Queer Aesthetics in New York City* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 36.

[791] Smalls, 36.

[792] As noted in the previous section, *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief* was the first retrospective of Wong's work in Europe. A previous exhibition, *Martin Wong: Human Instamatic*, was the first U.S. retrospective of Wong's work since the artist's death from AIDS-related illnesses in 1999, and has been credited with raising the artist's critical and institutional profile after decades in relative obscurity. *Martin Wong: Human Instamatic* opened at the Bronx Museum of The Arts in New York in November 2015, before travelling to the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio in May 2016, and finally, to the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, California in September 2017.

On the significance of *Martin Wong: Human Instamatic*, see Tiernan Morgan, 'The Intimate Visions of Martin Wong, Loisaida's "Chino-Latino" Painter', *Hyperallergic*, 15 January 2016, http://hyperallergic.com/255849/the-intimate-

utopian radicality of 'multiracial coalition based on shared space, affinities, sexual desire, and activities' that is present in and around Wong's work, it is vital to also pay close attention to the 'complex negotiations of cultural acumen, racial wariness and prejudice, street savvy, and interpersonal relations' that also animate it, in order to avoid those forms of flattening out of difference that Smalls warns against.[793]

In her discussion of the vexed relationship of the twentieth century anarchist writer and organiser Emma Goldman to contemporary feminism, Hemmings offers a route out of the pitfalls described by Smalls. For Hemmings, ambivalence is both an object and method of historical enquiry:

> It animates political struggles over and with precisely those objects we imagine we inherit as knowable, and it runs back and forth across time to challenge progress or loss narratives about where we come from and what political terrain we occupy now.[794]

In this chapter, I approach Wong's archive of ambivalence *ambivalently*, not as a way of foregoing the 'patient interrogation and investigation' that historical research necessitates, but as a way of acknowledging that, just as 'the past and present are suffused with ambivalence', so too is the affective process 'of putting them in conversation with one another.'[795] I am not simply interested in Wong's work because of his engagement with Nuyorican Lower East Side, but also because of his apparent ambivalence towards these rapidly changing spaces and communities, which puts him at odds with the more explicitly political, actively interventionist practices of the other artists whose work I discuss in this thesis. In order to meet the generative potential of Wong's archive of ambivalence on its own terms, as I move through the materials analysed in this chapter, I resist the allure of certainty in order to embrace the pleasures, dangers, and possibilities of an ambivalent engagement with the past.

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visions-of-martin-wong-loisaidas-chino-latino-painter/; James Cassell, 'Martin Wong on the Lower East Side', *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, June 2016, https://glreview.org/article/martin-wong-on-the-lower-east-side/; Sam Moore, 'Prisoners, Cruising and Bruce Lee: How the World Caught up with Artist Martin Wong', *Guardian*, 22 August 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/aug/22/prisoners-cruising-and-bruce-lee-how-the-world-caught-up-with-artist-martin-wong.

On the exhibition itself, see 'Exhibitions: Martin Wong: Human Instamatic', The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2015, https://www.bronxmuseum.org/exhibitions/martin-wong-human-instamatic; 'Martin Wong: Human Instamatic', Wexner Center for the Arts, 2016, https://wexarts.org/exhibitions/martin-wong-human-instamatic; 'Martin Wong: Human Instamatic', Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2017, https://bampfa.org/program/martin-wong-human-instamatic; Antonio Sergio Bessa, ed., *Martin Wong: Human Instamatic* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2015).

[793] Smalls, *Hip Hop Heresies*, 36, 26.

[794] Hemmings, *Considering Emma Goldman*, 5.

[795] Hemmings, 7.

3.4 Lingering in Loisaida: the tenement paintings, 1982-1984

Martin Wong moved from San Francisco to New York City in 1978. His earliest days in New York are captured in *Meyer's Hotel* (1980-1981), which depicts the artist's first address in the city: a small room at the single-room occupancy Meyer's Hotel, located on the edge of the Financial District in Lower Manhattan (Figure 113).[796] Produced in the wake of his sudden departure from what Sofie Krogh Christensen calls the 'colorful hippie dream and […] utopic self-exploration' of California in favour of 'the dark streets' of New York, this melancholic, lonely painting shows Wong attempting to establish new ways of representing the material and affective dimensions of his radically new surroundings.[797] The painting situates the viewer just outside Meyer's Hotel, peering in at Wong's cramped living space through the open windows. The hotel's deep red exterior wall exemplifies what the artist would later describe as his 'obsession with miniature bricks', which he painted systematically, one brick at a time, with the same pigment used for real house bricks, in order to assemble highly lifelike representations of walls and buildings.[798]

On the interior walls surrounding the carefully made single bed, Wong included miniature reproductions of several paintings from this period. The inclusion of stylised American Sign Language fingerspelling characters in one of these paintings (which Wong began painting after being handed an ASL booklet by a Deaf person on the New York subway), reflects the artist's interest in the depiction of subaltern worlds that are accessible only through alternative forms of communication, including fingerspelling, graffiti, calligraphy, cruising glances, and constellations.[799] Groups of objects are arranged around the room in layers: in the foreground, the exterior wall and a pen pot on the windowsill; in the middle ground, the bed and a painting of an eight ball (*Tell My Troubles to the Eight Ball*, 1978); and in the background, the remainder of Wong's personal effects and items of furniture. The flatness of these objects, and their layered arrangement, call to mind the theatrical and scenographic techniques that Wong developed during his time with the queer performance troupe the Angels of Light in San Francisco in the early 1970s.[800]

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[796] See Mark Dean Johnson, 'Martin Wong: Illustrated Narrative Chronology', in *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief*, ed. Krist Gruijthuijsen and Agustín Pérez Rubio (Cologne, Germany: Walther König, 2022), 319.

[797] Sofie Krogh Christensen, 'A Cosmos of Codes: The Languages of Martin Wong', in *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief*, ed. Krist Gruijthuijsen and Agustín Pérez Rubio (Cologne, Germany: Walther König, 2022), 87.

[798] *Portrait of Martin Wong*, directed by John Ahearn (1998), 06:10-06:14, https://player.vimeo.com/video/152493246.

[799] Krogh Christensen, 'A Cosmos of Codes: The Languages of Martin Wong', 98.

[800] Pérez Rubio, '... It's Not Really What You Think', 131.

Meyer's Hotel demonstrates Wong's early interest in New York's built environment as offering transient sites in which to explore a range of human emotions, as well as his method of depicting specific addresses around the city, often as a way of reflecting on significant moments from his recent past.[801] While these would remain some of Wong's central preoccupations throughout his time in New York, what is missing from an early work like *Meyer's Hotel* are the depictions of the people and places of the Nuyorican Lower East Side that would characterise his work throughout the rest of the 1980s. In this section, I examine the influence that moving to the Lower East Side and meeting the poet Miguel Piñero in 1982 had on Wong's painting practice, arguing that through his ambiguous proximity to Nuyorico, dilapidated tenements and empty lots became sites for the articulation of a complex multiracial queer desire.

3.4.1 Streets are hot: Wong, Miguel Piñero, and the Nuyorican Lower East Side

That Wong developed an obsession with miniature bricks during his earliest days in New York is perhaps unsurprising, given that he arrived in the city just a few years after the fiscal crisis of 1975. As Andrew Strombeck argues, the crisis 'had helped make bricks—strewn across vacant lots, falling out of buildings—more visible than they had been before.'[802] Nowhere was this more apparent than in the Lower East Side, where the visibility of dislodged bricks was taken as unmistakeable evidence of social breakdown, feeding into what Christopher Mele calls the 'representational themes of chaos, danger, and decay' that both reflected and legitimised the neighbourhood's abandonment and marginalisation.[803] In 1982, Wong moved from the Financial District to the Lower East Side, renting a sixth-floor walk-up at 141 Ridge Street, just south of Houston Street in Pueblo Nuevo, that he would occupy for the next twelve years.[804] There, he began producing what he later called his 'neighbourhood scenes': meticulous, brick-by-brick representations of the abandoned tenement buildings and rubble-strewn lots that were

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[801] Cameron, 'Brick by Brick: New York According to Martin Wong', 18.

See also John Yau, 'All the World's a Stage: The Art of Martin Wong', in *Martin Wong: Human Instamatic*, ed. Antonio Sergio Bessa (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2015), 37–62.

[802] Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*, 78.

[803] Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 180.

[804] Amanda Davis, '141 Ridge Street, Manhattan: Martin Wong Residence & Studio', NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, July 2019, https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/martin-wong-residence-studio/.

Wong was diagnosed with AIDS in 1994 and returned to the care of his family in San Francisco that year. He made several trips back to New York over the next five years, and even kept hold of the Ridge Street apartment. See Pérez, 'The Glory That Was Wrong', 291; Barry Blinderman, 'Martin Wong's Chains of Desire', *Evergreen Review*, S/S 2022, http://evergreenreview.com/read/martin-wongs-chains-of-desire/.

omnipresent in the Lower East Side, as well as the characters that occupied these spaces (particularly at night).[805]

Wong's guide to his crumbling new surroundings was the Nuyorican poet, actor, and playwright Miguel Piñero, who was an infamous figure in Loisaida in the early 1980s. Wong and Piñero met in 1982 at the opening of *The Crime Show*, a group exhibition held at the anarchic artist run space ABC No Rio, located on Rivington Street, a few blocks away from Wong's new apartment.[806] They lived together on and off, as friends, collaborators, and lovers, for the next year and a half.[807] *The Crime Show* was one of Wong's earliest group exhibitions in New York. The art historian Yasmin Ramírez has written that '[l]ike many of ABC No Rio's exhibitions, *The Crime Show* was intended to provoke discussion about the social problems that gave rise to the art on display.'[808] Each artist approached the exhibition's theme differently, and the 'crimes' included within the show ranged from corporate malfeasance and landlord greed to vandalism, burglary, and assault: Harvey Wang's colourised photograph showed a teenaged figure taking a baseball bat to the windows of an abandoned car; Ellen Cooper's oil painting depicted a gloved hand wrapping itself around the panicked face of a young woman; and Anton van Dalen's sculpture turned President Ronald Reagan's head into a giant jail, 'incarcerating' students, minorities, and the elderly (Figs. 114-116). Wong displayed several of what he called his 'paintings for the hearing impaired', in which he used stylised American Sign Language fingerspelling characters to spell out sensationalistic, crime-laden headlines from tabloid newspapers: 'Psychiatrists Testify: Demon Dogs Drive Man to Murder' and 'Atlantic City Pandemonium: Beauty Queens in Peril' (Figure 117).

Piñero was not exhibiting work in *The Crime Show*, but as 'Loisaida's reigning outlaw poet', in Ramírez's words, he was asked to give a recital on the opening night of the exhibition.[809] In an interview given towards the end of his life, Wong recalled that when they first met, Piñero 'was supposed to be this big criminal' who 'had people convinced he was still doing holdups.'[810] It was only later that Wong realised that Piñero, a celebrated poet and playwright, whose 1974 prison

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[805] Cameron, 'Brick by Brick: New York According to Martin Wong', 2.

[806] Yasmin Ramirez, 'La Vida: The Life and Writings of Miguel Piñero in the Art of Martin Wong', in *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong*, ed. Amy Scholder (New York: Rizzoli, 1998), 35.

[807] Ramirez, 37–38.

[808] Ramirez, 35–36.

[809] Ramirez, 35–36.

[810] Martin Wong, quoted in Guy Trebay, 'The Bricklayer's Art: Martin Wong's Return from Oblivion', *Village Voice*, 26 May 1998, 30.

play *Short Eyes* had been staged on Broadway and turned into a feature film, was probably 'too famous to be pulling off crimes' in the early 1980s.[811] In fact, although Piñero had won an $80,000 Guggenheim grant the year he met Wong, entanglements with the law remained constant themes in both his life and work; a long-time drug user, in 1983 Piñero was arrested in a Greenwich Village apartment and charged with possession of heroin and a hypodermic needle.[812] In 'A Lower Eastside Poem' (1985), Piñero recounted what Ramírez calls the 'tough life of crime and vice'[813] that surrounded the poet throughout his life:

> A thief, a junkie I've been
> committed every known sin
> Jews and Gentiles . . . Bums & Men
> of style . . . run away child
> police shooting wild . . .
> mother's futile wails . . . pushers
> making sales . . . dope wheelers
> & cocaine dealers . . . smoking pot
> streets are hot & feed off those who bleed to death . . . [814]

Shortly after Piñero's death from cirrhosis in 1988, the theatre critic Mel Gussow argued that the poet 'became famous while never losing his air of notoriety', and it was this sense of infamy that Wong appears to have been drawn to.[815] In a 1989 interview with Margo Machida, Wong recalled the impact that meeting Piñero had on his experience of the Lower East Side:

> He would get me all psyched up, the neighborhood was much more radical then than it is now. There were all these abandoned buildings and empty lots full of burning automobiles. Somehow he made it seem like a more charged up kind of a place, he would be wandering through these places at night.[816]

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[811] Martin Wong, quoted in Trebay, 30.

[812] 'Playwright Seized On Drug Charges', *New York Times*, 3 December 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/12/03/nyregion/the-city-playwright-seized-on-drug-charges.html; Ramirez, 'La Vida: The Life and Writings of Miguel Piñero in the Art of Martin Wong', 37.

[813] Ramirez, 'La Vida: The Life and Writings of Miguel Piñero in the Art of Martin Wong', 44.

[814] Stosuy, *Up Is Up, but So Is Down*, 101.

[815] Mel Gussow, 'From the City Streets, a Poet of the Stage', *New York Times*, 3 July 1988, https://www.nytimes.com/1988/07/03/theater/stage-view-from-the-city-streets-a-poet-of-the-stage.html.

[816] Martin Wong, 'Martin Wong: Interview with Margo Machida', interview by Margo Machida, Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, 1989, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/about/1989-martin-wong-interview-with-margo-machida.

It is notable that Wong's early Loisaida paintings don't focus on the homesteads, community gardens, and other cultural and community spaces that were built in Loisaida by older Nuyorican artist and activist groups such as Charas, Adopt-A-Building, and the Nuyorican Poets Café. These were organizations and spaces that Piñero had been involved with for much of the 1970s. He was one of the 'founding poets' of the Nuyorican Poets Café (initiated by Miguel Algarín and Richey August in a former Irish bar on East Sixth Street in October 1974), and his plays were regularly performed in the theatre of El Bohío.[817] In the CHARAS/El Bohío Records at CENTRO, there is a handwritten note on the back of a resume from the mid-1980s that suggests that Piñero was 'Project Restoration Supervisor' of El Bohío (Figure 118).[818] Despite these connections to the Loisaida movement, Piñero introduced Wong to an different side of the neighbourhood: a nocturnal world of graffiti writers tagging up abandoned buildings, of midnight rendezvous on street corners and in empty lots. Embracing what Fiona Anderson describes as 'the rich imaginative potential emptiness permits', the work that Wong began producing in 1982 focused on this nocturnal world; in these paintings, abandoned spaces in and around Loisaida are depicted as sites of danger and pleasure that offer possibilities for both urban alienation and queer connection.[819]

The first of Wong's 'neighbourhood scenes' was a collaboration with Piñero titled *Attorney Street (Handball Court with Autobiographical Poem by Piñero)* (1982-84) (Figure 119). The work depicts a real handball court on Attorney Street that had been tagged by Little Ivan, one of the young graffiti writers that Piñero was friendly with at the time.[820] At the top of the painting, a poem by Piñero hovers above the abandoned tenement that looms over the handball court; in this tongue-in-cheek work, the poet claims that he has 'Knocked Out Lighting, Drowned a Drop of Water, Put Handcuff[s] on the Wind, Lock[ed] Thunder in Jail, Slapped Jesus in the Face and Run Satan out of Hell.' Piñero's *Attorney Street* poem, notes Ramírez, drew on the Afro-Caribbean tradition of 'toasting', in which 'speakers compete to create the most outrageous statements about

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817 Ed Morales, 'Remembering Miguel Algarín, a Founder of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe', *New York Times*, 4 December 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/04/arts/miguel-algarin-nuyorican-poets-cafe-appraisal.html; Jaime Karen, 'Inside the Early Days of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe', *Literary Hub* (blog), 21 July 2021, https://lithub.com/inside-the-early-days-of-the-nuyorican-poets-cafe/.

Fellow 'founding poets' of the Nuyorican Poets Café include Miguel Algarín, Pedro Pietri, Sandra Maria Esteves, Ntozake Shange, and Bimbo Rivas. 'History & Awards', Nuyorican Poets Cafe, accessed 11 October 2022, https://www.nuyorican.org/history-awards.

818 No further information is evident from the note as to what the role actually entailed or when it took place, and nowhere else in the extensive CHARAS/El Bohío Records is Piñero's role as a 'Project Restoration Supervisor' mentioned.

819 Anderson, *Cruising the Dead River*, 1.

820 Ramirez, 'La Vida: The Life and Writings of Miguel Piñero in the Art of Martin Wong', 38.

themselves in rhyme.'[821] Toasting was a precursor to rapping, which, along with graffiti, deejaying, and breakdancing, was integral to the hip hop culture that had been developing in Black and Latine neighbourhoods such as the South Bronx and Loisaida since the middle of the 1970s.[822] Wong aligned himself with these emergent art forms through his detailed rendering of Little Ivan's tag, as well as through the inclusion of fingerspelling characters at the bottom of the painting, which, Ramírez argues, create 'a strong visual connection between his work and the cryptic signs of self-affirmation found in graffiti art.'[823] At around the time that he moved to the Lower East Side, Wong started working at the art supply store Pearl Paint on Canal Street, where he got to know more of the neighbourhood's young graffiti writers.[824]

Wong's gallerist Barry Blinderman, owner of Semaphore Gallery, describes Wong's early Loisaida paintings as depictions of 'crumbling tenement facades in fantastic landscapes featuring gilded constellation diagrams, stylized hearing-impaired symbols, and street-beat poetry by Miguel Piñero.'[825] Many of these paintings refer to specific addresses and streets across the Lower East Side. Some, such as *Attorney Street* and S*tanton Near Forsyth Street* (1983), are named for their addresses, while others, such as *Everything Must Go* (1983), include a location in their trompe l'oeil wooden frames (Figs. 119-121). Each of the visual elements in these paintings, whether a tenement building, handball court, fingerspelling character, written word, or constellation, are painted parallel to the viewer, '[p]acked into the picture plane with the dense physicality of clothing fastidiously slotted into a drawer', in Mitch Speed's words.[826] This compositional technique distorts and flattens the work's perspective, giving Wong's 'neighbourhood scenes' the appearance of vast theatrical or sound stages, ready to be brought to

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[821] Ramirez, 38.

[822] Ramirez, 38.

[823] Ramirez, 39.

Wong was an important early collector of graffiti art, with an emphasis on 'piece books'; sketchbooks that are used to plan and draw out potential works, as well as to collect other writers' tags. In 1989, Wong co-founded the short-lived Museum of American Graffiti with Peter Broda, and in 1994 his graffiti collection was donated to the Museum of the City of New York. Houda Lazrak, 'Martin Wong's Papers: A Deeper Look at the Graffiti Art Collector', *Museum of the City of New York Blog: New York Stories* (blog), 23 December 2014, https://blog.mcny.org/2014/12/23/martin-wongs-papers-a-deeper-look-at-the-graffiti-art-collector/; Ken Johnson, 'Graffiti Art at the Museum of the City of New York', *New York Times*, 6 February 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/07/arts/design/graffiti-art-at-the-museum-of-the-city-of-new-york.html.

[824] Johnson, 'Martin Wong: Illustrated Narrative Chronology', 319.

[825] Barry Blinderman, 'The Writing on the Wall (Every Picture Tells a Story, Don't It?) Tenement and Storefront Paintings, 1984-1986', in *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong*, ed. Amy Scholder (New York: Rizzoli, 1998), 21.

[826] Mitch Speed, 'Review: Martin Wong's "Malicious Mischief"', *E-Flux*, 22 March 2023, https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/528904/martin-wong-s-malicious-mischief.

life by the human actors that populate many of these works. Some of the tenement paintings, such as *Portrait of Piñero* (1982) or *For My Pito* (1983), are explicit about who is being depicted, while others, such as *War and the Rumors of War* (1983) do not name their subjects (Figs. 122-124). Regardless, these figures almost always resemble real people, usually Nuyorican men that Wong was friendly with at the time. The figures are typically dwarfed by the vast scale of their brick and concrete surroundings, forcing the viewer to linger over the paintings in order to find and identify them. *Compulsion*, for example, isolates its tiny human subject in the furthest bottom left corner of its three-metre-long canvas (Figure 125).

S*tanton Near Forsyth Street* (1983) (Figure 120) depicts an ambiguous interaction between two male figures, who are unnamed, but closely resemble Wong and Piñero. These characters encounter one another in front of the monumental ruins of a crumbling city block on Stanton Street, located just south of Houston Street. Hovering in the apocalyptic sky above the detailed tenement buildings are two sets of fingerspelling characters, outlined in the same grubby cream used for the back wall of the empty lot. The smaller set of characters spells out the painting's title, while the larger one spells out the cryptic, dreamlike phrase 'Morning at the Edge of Time, It Never Really Happened' (which also appears in English on the painting's thin trompe l'oeil wooden frame). At the furthest right, a phrase in mistranslated Spanish, drawn from a Spanish-language romantic fotonovella named *El Sonambulo* (The Sleepwalker), describes a potentially sexual or romantic encounter between 'Rienaldo' and 'Esteban'.[827] Visible in the background are a series of criss-crossing constellations. Finally, there is the right hand figure's cruisy gaze towards the figure on the left, whose own body is turned to face the viewer. Touching on the sense of loneliness, desire, and potential for connection that suffuses the work, Roy Pérez describes *Stanton Near Forsyth Street* as 'a cryptogram of manifold longings in multiple languages from numerous cultural peripheries.'[828]

3.4.2 Pleasures in the rubble: Wong and Wojnarowicz

The cosmic realism of the Loisaida tenement paintings helped Wong establish a name for himself within the East Village art scene, which developed in the Lower East Side in the early 1980s. After taking part in *The Crime Show* at ABC No Rio in 1982, Wong participated in group exhibitions in galleries, clubs, and alternative spaces across and beyond the Lower East Side, including Tibor de Nagy, Danceteria, Kamikaze, White Columns, and PS1. In 1984, Wong had his first solo exhibition at Barry Blinderman's Semaphore Gallery on West Broadway in SoHo;

827 Pérez, 'The Glory That Was Wrong', 292.

828 Pérez, 291.

this was followed by two further solo shows at Semaphore in 1985 and 1986.[829] Wong was far from the only artist associated with the East Village art scene to explore the affective, sexual, and aesthetic allure of abandoned spaces in Lower Manhattan. After all, as Ian Bourland puts it in a recent profile of the artist and East Village gallerist Sur Rodney (Sur), this was an art scene that was set in and made possible by 'the glimmering ruins of the city itself'.[830] In this section, I emphasise the specificity of Wong's engagement with the Nuyorican Lower East Side by comparing his work to that of one of his East Village contemporaries, David Wojnarowicz, who explored his own queerly ambivalent relationship to derelict buildings—and the men who occupied them—in his practice.

In *Cruising The Dead River,* Fiona Anderson argues that Wojnarowicz's work offers 'a guide to the erotic and creative reuses of the piers by queer New Yorkers in the years that preceded the HIV/AIDS epidemic.'[831] Throughout the late 1970s and into the 1980s, Wojnarowicz spent much of his time cruising in and around the abandoned piers and warehouses that dotted Lower Manhattan's mostly obsolescent waterfront, producing poetry, essays, photographs, drawings, and other artworks that, in Anderson's words, 'depicted the derelict piers of the pre–HIV/AIDS era as busy "sexual hunting grounds," and the ruined waterfront as a liminal space "as far away from civilization as I could walk."'[832] In this work, Wojnarowicz explored the ambivalent artistic and erotic appeal of these ruined structures, which were structurally unsound and frequently beset by racial and homophobic violence, but which nevertheless offered queer men in particular a vital space of social and sexual freedom in the city.[833] For the photographic series *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* (1978-1979), Wojnarowicz and his friends and lovers posed wearing a mask

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[829] See Krist Gruijthuijsen and Agustín Pérez Rubio, 'Martin Wong: Curriculum Vitae', in *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief*, ed. Krist Gruijthuijsen and Agustín Pérez Rubio (Cologne, Germany: Walther König, 2022), 328–29.

[830] Ian Bourland, 'Sur Rodney (Sur) on Freaking Out the Art World', *Frieze*, 8 July 2019, https://www.frieze.com/article/sur-rodney-sur-freaking-out-art-world.

[831] Anderson, *Cruising the Dead River*, 4.

In addition to Wojnarowicz, Anderson also examines the work of Alvin Baltrop, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Peter Hujar, among others.

[832] David Wojnarowicz, quoted in Anderson, 11.

For the full interview quoted by Anderson, see David Wojnarowicz, 'The Compression of Time: An Interview with David Wojnarowicz', interview by Barry Blinderman, in *David Wojnarowicz: Tongues of Flame*, ed. Barry Blinderman (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1990), 49–63.

[833] See also David Wojnarowicz, 'Losing the Form in Darkness', in *Mixed Use, Manhattan: Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to the Present*, ed. Lynne Cooke and Douglas Crimp (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2010), 177–84; Jonathan Weinberg, *Pier Groups: Art and Sex Along the New York Waterfront* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), 84–117; Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 131–58; David Wojnarowicz, *The Waterfront Journals* (London: Peninsula Press, 2018), 99–101, 145–51.

of the nineteenth-century queer French poet in various dilapidated sites around the city: not only the crumbling waterfront warehouses of Lower Manhattan, but also the adult theatres of a pre-gentrified Times Square, Coney Island's faded boardwalk glamour, and at least one mural-painted street scene, whose Puerto Rican iconography suggests it was located in the Lower East Side (Figs. 126-129).[834] In this series, argues Evan Moffit, 'Rimbaud' 'haunts the streets of a New York that is falling apart, finding lonely pleasures in the rubble.'[835]

Both Wong and Wojnarowicz were drawn to seemingly obsolescent urban spaces as sites of both pleasure and danger, where an often ephemeral queer male collectivity could be brought into being. For Wong, the erotic charge of the Lower East Side's abandoned tenements and lots was tied up in his relationship with Piñero, while for Wojnarowicz, argues Anderson, '[t]his charge seemed to emanate from the physical form of the harbor, from the ruined buildings themselves.'[836] From this perspective, the border separating cruising men and their surroundings in Wojnarowicz's work appears to disintegrate; Anderson describes journal entries in which Wojnarowicz likened human figures 'to "pillars," like the rotting pier footings that punctuated the Hudson shore.'[837] In one of the *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* photographs, the dark clothing worn by 'Rimbaud' creates a visual echo of a gaping hole in the wall nearby (Figure 126); in another, he appears to dissolve into the building's dark shadows gathering at the edge of the frame (Figure 127). Wojnarowicz's erotic but depersonalized engagement with the men who cruised the piers contrasts with Wong's approach. Even if not always named, the men who populate paintings such as *Stanton Near Forsyth Street* (1983) and *War and the Rumors of War* (1983) are always based on people that Wong knew personally; these figures may be overshadowed by the large structures that surround them, but the integrity of the visual border separating them from their ramshackle surroundings always remains intact (Figs. 120 & 124).

These differences in Wong and Wojnarowicz's depictions of abandoned spaces and the people who occupied them reflect the distinct social and artistic communities that each artist moved

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834 See also Lynne Cooke and Douglas Crimp, 'David Wojnarowicz: Arthur Rimbaud in New York', in *Mixed Use, Manhattan: Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to the Present*, ed. Lynne Cooke and Douglas Crimp (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2010), 163–70.

835 Evan Moffitt, 'Eye Holes', Morán Morán: David Wojnarowicz: I is Someone Else, 2020, https://moranmorangallery.com/exhibition/i-is-someone-else/.

On Emily Roysdon's feminist reinterpretation of the Rimbaud series, see Lynne Cooke and Douglas Crimp, 'Emily Roysdon: Untitled (David Wojnarowicz Project)', in *Mixed Use, Manhattan: Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to the Present*, ed. Lynne Cooke and Douglas Crimp (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2010), 172–75; Anderson, *Cruising the Dead River*, 120–24.

836 Anderson, *Cruising the Dead River*, 32.

837 Anderson, 32.

between. Both artists were participants in the East Village art scene, showing at the same galleries and in many of the same group shows, but each developed a 'passionate connection' to communities beyond this scene.[838] The relative precarity and intangibility of each of these communities gives Wojnarowicz and Wong's bodies of work their distinct temporalities. Wojnarowicz sought fleeting forms of community among the anonymous men who cruised the waterfront, but he also sought to commune with an older queer past, and his work invokes a series of 'queer antecedents' from the nineteenth and early twentieth century, including Arthur Rimbaud, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Jean Genet.[839] Separated from the artist by time and geography (many of them never spent time in New York), Wojnarowicz does not 'write' these ghostly queer antecedents into the present, but, as Anderson (following Elizabeth Freeman) puts it, encounters them 'already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid.'[840] Wojnarowicz described *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*, for example, as an attempt to compress 'historical time and activity' and fuse 'the French poet's identity with modern new york urban activities mostly illegal in nature.'[841] In the 'anonymity of cruising', insists Anderson, Wojnarowicz found

> a model for a poetic practice that fostered an active identification with the dead, playing with the distinctions between presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, and expanding the temporal boundaries of cruising's appropriative action.[842]

While Wojnarowicz was communing with the dead, Wong's attention was turned towards the existing Nuyorican Lower East Side, and the countercultural art and social scene that revolved around Piñero and the neighbourhood's graffiti writers. Like Wojnarowicz, Wong was interested in the layering of past and present facilitated by the queer temporality of abandoned spaces; as Roy Pérez notes, the profusion of constellations and other alternative communication systems in Wong's Loisaida tenement paintings situates them beyond conventional temporality and

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[838] Anderson, 99.

After participating in *Terminal New York* at the Brooklyn Army Terminal in 1983, both Wong and Wojnarowicz were in several of the same group shows in 1984, including *Acid Show* at Sensory Evolution Gallery, Climbing: The East Village at Hal Bromm Gallery, *The New Portrait* and *Limbo* at PS1, *Neo York* at University of California at Santa Barbara Art Gallery. See 'Selected Group Exhibitions', Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/about/selected-group-exhibitions; 'Exhibitions', The David Wojnarowicz Foundation, accessed 28 September 2023, https://wojfound.org/scholarship/exhibitions-1982-92/.

[839] Anderson, *Cruising the Dead River*, 96–97.

[840] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 95, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822393184, quoted in Anderson, *Cruising the Dead River*, 103.

[841] David Wojnarowicz, 'Biographical Dateline', in *David Wojnarowicz: Tongues of Flame*, ed. Barry Blinderman (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1990), 118.

[842] Anderson, *Cruising the Dead River*, 118.

spatiality: in this work, 'the margins hail each other from across time and space.'[843] Unlike the compression of vast historical time that characterises Wojnarowicz's work, however, Wong's tenement paintings embrace a more recent past. *Attorney Street*, for example, was started in 1982 but not completed until 1984, by which time Piñero had temporarily left New York and Little Ivan's tag had been painted over.[844] In an interview with Margo Machida, Wong asserted that although Piñero's friends assumed the pair had known each other for years, in fact they were close only when they were working on the painting: 'After that I would see him in the street and we would always be really friendly or I'd go to his poetry readings but it was most intense right when we were working on the painting.'[845] The work thus depicts a significant time and place in Wong's experience of the Nuyorican Lower East Side in the early 1980s that, by the time of its completion, had mostly been and gone.

Piñero was an important subject and character model in Wong's tenement paintings of the early 1980s, and remained so even after their relationship waned.[846] Pérez uses the spatial metaphor of 'proximity' to describe 'modes of queer affiliation that do not give themselves over to easy representation, but […] appear and unfold their drama in the aesthetic field', and depicting Piñero in his work appears to have offered Wong a way of articulating his complex feelings towards both the poet and the rapidly changing neighbourhood that Piñero introduced him to.[847] In *Stanton Near Forsyth Street*, for example, the figure resembling Piñero has his gaze firmly fixed on the figure that looks like Wong, who refuses to return this gaze, instead turning to face the viewer (Figure 130). The ambiguity of this encounter expresses the complex power dynamics that structured Wong's somewhat ambivalent proximity to Piñero and, by extension, to the Nuyorican Lower East Side. Although it was Wong's artistic profile, rather than Piñero's, that was on the rise during the period in which the pair were close, Yasmin Ramírez asserts that Piñero remained a 'a well-loved figure in Loisaida' throughout the 1980s, even more so after his untimely death in 1988.[848] Pérez notes that today, 'Piñero is always mentioned prominently in scholarship on Wong, while Wong is rarely ever mentioned in scholarship on Piñero.'[849]

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[843] Pérez, 'The Glory That Was Wrong', 291.

[844] Wong, 'Martin Wong: Interview'.

Wong recalled that in 1984, '[Piñero] just didn't come home one day… Then I read that he was in Los Angeles.' Martin Wong, quoted in Ramirez, 'La Vida: The Life and Writings of Miguel Piñero in the Art of Martin Wong', 44.

[845] Wong, 'Martin Wong: Interview'.

[846] For example, depictions of Piñero appear frequently in Wong's prison paintings of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

[847] Pérez, 'The Glory That Was Wrong', 281.

[848] Ramirez, 'La Vida: The Life and Writings of Miguel Piñero in the Art of Martin Wong', 38.

[849] Pérez, 'The Glory That Was Wrong', 278.

Furthermore, argues Pérez, Piñero's bisexuality tends to be downplayed, while Wong 'is subsequently figured as less ambivalently queer.'[850] With *Stanton Near Forsyth Street*, then, Wong inverts this uneven power dynamic by positioning Piñero, rather than himself, as 'the origin of the queer gaze' in this work.[851]

3.4.3 It's not what you thought: chronicling the Nuyorican Lower East Side

In his discussion of Wong's affective and aesthetic relationship with Loisaida, Pérez argues that the artist's meticulous and often highly specific tenement paintings constitute 'one of the most prolific visual chronicles of 1980s Nuyorico.'[852] In a recent catalogue essay, John Yau praises Wong as 'an artist of the local' who 'lovingly painted crumbling tenement walls, one brick at a time, chain link fences, padlocks, and shuttered steel gates.'[853] The meticulous realism of the tenement paintings asserts what Barry Blinderman describes as Wong's ability to see 'deeply into just about any situation he observed, scanning detail after detail, recording them in his mind to later transfer them, embellished, onto canvas.'[854] As Wong put it in a 1989 interview with Margo Machida:

> I just determined everything I use in my paintings, or at least the Lower East Side paintings, would be things I actually saw rather than something I had picked up from something I'd read, from an art source. Just something, just directly what I saw.[855]

In order to aid this working method, Wong took photographs as he wandered around the neighbourhood, which he then assembled into collages.[856] By comparing a work such as *Everything Must Go* (1983) with its corresponding collage, one can see how faithfully Wong has painted the contents of the pile of rubbish, as well as the embellishments he has made to heighten the scene's affective drama: most notably, Wong depicts this rubbish-strewn lot after dark rather than during the day, with fingerspelling characters and a series of constellations hovering in the fiery night sky (Figs. 131 & 132).

Visually, Wong's paintings and photographs bear more than a passing resemblance to the work of another adopted chronicler of the Nuyorican Lower East Side: the photographer Marlis

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[850] Pérez, 279.

[851] Pérez, 279.

[852] Pérez, 280.

[853] Pérez, 280; Yau, 'All the World's a Stage: The Art of Martin Wong', 43.

[854] Blinderman, 'Martin Wong's Chains of Desire'.

[855] Wong, 'Martin Wong: Interview'.

[856] Gruijthuijsen and Pérez Rubio, *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief*, 102–3, 144.

Momber, who moved to New York from Berlin in the 1960s and began documenting the people and places of Loisaida in the mid-1970s (Figs 133 & 134).[857] Wong's colour palette of earthy reds and deep browns is particularly reminiscent of Momber's 1978 documentary *Viva Loisaida*, which is filled with similar images of crumbling tenements, razed lots, and the people of colour who carve out a life within this shattered landscape (Figs. 135-137). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Momber frequently trained her gaze on Loisaida's residents, and their collective practices to transform dilapidated tenements and vacant lots into enduring cultural and community spaces. This was a vision of the Nuyorican Lower East Side that aligned with Momber's long-running participation in community organising in the neighbourhood, and the activist orientation of her photographic and filmmaking practice. In contrast to this, Wong's underpopulated, nocturnal tenement paintings depict abandoned spaces as the setting for more ephemeral and ambiguous forms of collectivity. Unlike Momber, Wong was less interested in capturing the exact material reality of the neighbourhood's derelict spaces than he was in exploring his own highly ambivalent experience of them.

Wong's approach to representing the Lower East Side derived from his position at the intersection of several overlapping social and artistic communities in the neighbourhood; he was, in Dylan Huw's words, a 'chameleonic interlocutor of scenes and cultures'.[858] By all accounts, Wong cut a somewhat idiosyncratic figure in these scenes. 'Throughout the trendy, catchword-ridden East Village scene of the 1980s', insists Barry Blinderman, 'Martin Wong's work defied categorization. While others painted anxious figures in broad strokes and strident colors, he rendered his meticulous urban landscapes in a muted palette dominated by umbers, blacks, and rusty reds.'[859] Not only this, but Wong's personal aesthetic, consisting of cowboy shirt and boots, tie, Stetson hat, and occasionally a fireman's boots and jacket, made him a distinctive presence even in the highly fashion-conscious context of the East Village scene.[860] Within what Pérez describes as the 'straightened landscape' of Loisaida, Wong was similarly marked out, this time for his 'aesthetic lingering over the bodies of Puerto Rican men, his association with notorious Puerto Rican poet Miguel Piñero, and an uneasy social comportment that read queerly to some'.[861] '[I]n the beginning I didn't know what to make of him', recalled the graffiti artist Chris

[857] Momber, 'Oral History Interview', 5.

[858] Dylan Huw, 'The Many Lives of Martin Wong', *Artreview*, 27 June 2023, https://artreview.com/martin-wong-malicious-mischief-camden-art-centre-london-review/.

[859] Blinderman, 'Martin Wong's Chains of Desire'.

[860] Blinderman; Madeleine Pollard, 'The Queer Chinese American Artist Who Captured the Underbelly of 80s NY', *I-D*, 12 April 2023, https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/k7z8an/martin-wong-artist.

[861] Pérez, 'The Glory That Was Wrong', 280, 278.

'Daze' Ellis in an interview in 2013: 'He was a little goofy but at the same time shy, but at the same time kind of a fan, so it was like, ok what are you today?'[862]

There is a sense in these accounts of Wong as a perpetual outsider, lingering on the margins of social scenes, looking in from the margins.[863] If, however, one heeds Pérez's assertion that Wong's proximity to Loisaida should be understood 'as a state of simultaneous lack and excess, rather than belonging or exclusion', then it is clear that the artist was both aware of and embraced the potential of this ambivalent state of being.[864] Walking the line between what James Cassell calls 'anthropological acumen and a vivid fantasism', Wong's tenement paintings oscillate between the local and the cosmic, the past and the present, the real and the imagined, in order to assemble a queer vision of his newly-adopted Loisaida in which abandoned buildings, vacant lots, and cramped rooms don't just index loneliness and despair, but become charged up sites of desire, friendship, and other modes of queer proximity.[865] As such, these works suggest but ultimately undermine the knowability of the Lower East Side through any one mode of representation. As vivid chronicles of the social, affective, and material texture of a post-fiscal crisis Lower East Side, Wong's tenement paintings should be understood as a repository of many of those mixed feelings that abandoned spaces provoke.

The 'core element[s], repeated endlessly' within this archive of ambivalence are the bricks that were omnipresent in the neighbourhood in the early 1980s.[866] David J. Getsy argues that Wong's bricks establish 'surfaces that block, refuse, seal off, and turn their backs on the viewer', while simultaneously articulating forms of 'connection and desire where they were not allowed or expected'.[867] The vast brick wall that dominates *No Es Lo Que Has Pensado* (1984), for example, looks like it could collapse at any moment, crushing the two figures sheltering in its shadow (Figure 138). In the background of this painting, the sky burns a violent red, suggesting a nearby tenement fire (perhaps one of the many acts of landlord-sponsored arson that defined this

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862 Chris 'Daze' Ellis, quoted in Hrag Vartanian, 'Graffiti Legend Daze Explains the Importance of Martin Wong's Graffiti Collection', *Hyperallergic*, 30 October 2013, http://hyperallergic.com/90851/graffiti-legend-daze-explains-the-importance-of-martin-wongs-graffiti-collection/.

863 For an account of Wong's self-ascribed 'outsiderness' that focuses on his time in California, see Solomon Adler, 'Mystic Savage Twilight Child: Martin Wong, Clay, and California Counterculture', Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/feature/mystic-savage-twilight-child-martin-wong-clay-and-california-counterculture-solomon-adler.

864 Pérez, 'The Glory That Was Wrong', 278.

865 Cassell, 'Martin Wong on the Lower East Side'.

866 Getsy, 'Bricks and Jails: On Martin Wong's Queer Fantasies', 197.

867 Getsy, 197, 198.

era).[868] Amidst of this chaos, two young lovers are locked in a tender embrace, oblivious to the threats that loom over them. This work exemplifies Wong's desire to capture, in Glenn O'Brien words, 'the dual-edged glamor of the rubble, the love among the ruins.'[869] An imaginary dialogue painted along the bottom of the canvas can be read as both a conversation between the work's young lovers, and an exchange between the artist and the viewer (Figure 139). The first part of this exchange shares the painting's title, 'No Es Lo Que Has Pensado', which translates to 'It's not what you thought.'[870] 'Si No Es Lo Que Pienso ¿Que es?', comes the response from the second speaker, perhaps attempting to understand the bleak but intimate scene laid out before them: 'If it's not what I think it is, what is it?'[871] On this central question, Wong remains silent, allowing the ambiguity of this exchange to underscore his queerly ambivalent preoccupation, explored throughout his tenement paintings, with the derelict spaces of the Nuyorican Lower East Side.

3.5 Everything must go: the storefront paintings, 1984-1986

Arriving in New York a few years after the fiscal crisis of 1975, Martin Wong's tenement paintings of the early 1980s captured the effects of the post-crisis period of disinvestment, abandonment, and depopulation on the social, material, and affective texture of Loisaida and Pueblo Nuevo. By the mid-1980s, however, he was witness to a different kind of transformation in the Lower East Side, one that impacted and implicated the overlapping social and artistic communities that Wong had spent the past few years moving between. Having become New York's hottest new art district, thanks largely to the rise of the East Village scene in the early 1980s, by the middle of the decade the Lower East Side was beginning to gentrify: rent was spiralling, the neighbourhood's demographics were shifting, and many long-standing commercial, religious, and cultural institutions were closing. As a way of interrogating this process, between 1984 and 1986, Wong turned his attention away from Loisaida's derelict tenements and lots, and towards the predominantly Puerto Rican storefronts that lined Avenue B, one of Loisaida's main commercial streets (along with Avenue C). Occupying prominent places in Loisaida's streetscape, the highly visible changes and closures to these storefronts,

868 Meredith Sell, 'How New York City Beat Arson', *City Limits*, 14 May 2014, https://citylimits.org/2014/05/14/how-new-york-city-beat-arson/.

869 Glenn O'Brien, 'Review: Martin Wong: Semaphore Gallery', *Artforum*, December 1984, 83.

870 Translation by the author.

871 Translation by the author, emphasis added.

which had long served the neighbourhood's predominantly Puerto Rican population, indexed the broader social, cultural, and economic transformations that were then underway.

The work discussed at the outset of this chapter, *Iglesia Pentecostal* (1984), is one of nine storefront paintings that Wong completed in 1985 and 1986 (Figure 140). The series was shown in a solo exhibition titled *The Last Picture Show*, which was displayed at Barry Blinderman's Semaphore Gallery in SoHo in the autumn of 1986 (Figure 141).[872] Other paintings in the series include: another church, *La Iglesia de Dios* (1986), this time rendered in a chilly blue (Figure 142); *Untitled (Green Storefront)*, a shuttered storefront that was originally topped by the sign of a restaurant (Figs. 143 & 144); *Untitled* (*Houston Street)* (1986), what appears to be a shuttered garage (Figure 145); *Untitled (Poetry Storefront)* (1986), which depicts the Nuyorican Poets Café on East Third Street (Figure 146); *Aaron* (1986), a barred window that was used for the poster announcing the exhibition (Figure 147); *Untitled (Stanton and Ridge)* (1986), which shows a large crack in the façade of a brick wall (Figure 148); and two blank storefronts, *Untitled (Stanton Street)* (ca. 1986) and *Untitled (Silver Storefront)* (1985) (Figs. 149 & 150). Installation photos show how these vast paintings were exhibited at Semaphore's large gallery space at 137 Greene Street in SoHo (Figs. 151-153). Hung flush with one another at floor level, the work created what Agustín Pérez Rubio calls 'an immersive installation in which [Wong] replicated the spaces around Avenue B and where the painting[s] acquired body and dimension.'[873]

Wong produced a handful of other storefront paintings in the mid-1980s, but in this section, I focus on the work that comprised *The Last Picture Show*. Although the storefront paintings have received less scholarly attention than the tenement series of the early 1980s, I argue that this later work, which would likely not exist had Wong not spent the first part of the decade lingering in and around Loisaida, not only continued his long-running exploration of the aesthetic and affective potential of abandoned spaces, but also considered the critical and political potential of his meticulous working method in the context of rapid gentrification that was reshaping the neighbourhood around him. As someone who moved between different social and artistic spheres, Wong was well placed to offer an affectively engaged but nuanced chronicle of the changes that were underway in the Nuyorican Lower East Side in the middle of the 1980s.[874]

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[872] Blinderman, 'Martin Wong's Chains of Desire'.

[873] Pérez Rubio, '... It's Not Really What You Think', 152.

[874] Huw, 'The Many Lives of Martin Wong'.

3.5.1 Archives of loss: a changing neighbourhood

At first glance, what Roy Pérez describes as the 'low but always still a bit playful disposition' that characterises Wong's tenement paintings of the early 1980s is absent from the storefront paintings.[875] Devoid of any lingering human figures, or the fingerspelling characters and cosmic constellations that light up the skies of 'charged up' neighbourhood scenes such as *Stanton Near Forsyth Street* (1983), the storefront paintings frustrate the viewer with their apparent intransigence. As Blinderman puts it in a recent essay, '[t]hese are paintings of a scale you could walk into', but no such invitation is offered'; should the viewer, drawn to the work's meticulous detail, approach one of these paintings, they would find that 'the bodegas, pentecostal churches, and poetry stores are all inexorably closed.'[876] Closed these storefronts may be, but as Dan Cameron notes in his discussion of *Iglesia Pentecostal*, the exact nature of this closure remains ambiguous:

> There is nothing to see around or behind the subject, and no visual perspective to offer us a sense of contrast. For all we know, the narrow white storefront depicted in *Iglesia Pentecostal* is closed only until services the next Sunday; or it's possible that Reverend Roberto Vasques, the pastor, departed months earlier, leaving his flock behind to fend for themselves.[877]

Wong employed the same tight framing and lack of contrasting visual perspective for each of the nine paintings that were included in *The Last Picture Show*. Each work is characterised by a similar tension between two possible states of vacancy: one of these states is temporary and reversible, signalling nothing more than the rhythm of everyday life along a busy commercial street; the other is permanent, seemingly irreversible, and suggests a much more radical process of transformation. The temporal ambiguity of the storefront paintings underscore how rapidly the neighbourhood was changing in the mid-1980s, as the disinvestment and abandonment that had characterised the previous decade gave way to reinvestment and gentrification-led displacement. One of the most visible registers of this transformation were the many commercial and religious institutions that had long served the neighbourhood's Puerto Rican population: bodegas,

[875] Pérez, 'The Glory That Was Wrong', 289.

[876] Blinderman, 'The Writing on the Wall (Every Picture Tells a Story, Don't It?) Tenement and Storefront Paintings, 1984-1986', 24.

[877] Cameron, 'Brick by Brick: New York According to Martin Wong', 9.

churches, *botánicas* (religious goods stores), and restaurants serving *cuchifritos* (fried pork) and other types of *frituras* (fried foods).[878]

Tria Giovan's recent photobook *Loisaida: New York Street Work 1984-1990* (2022) documents daily life in Loisaida in the late 1980s, and depicts Puerto Rican storefronts jostling for space with older Jewish and Chinese businesses (Figs. 154-156).[879] As a photographic record of the neighbourhood, Giovan's work inadvertently evidences Wong's meticulous attention to detail, as well as his penchant for embellishment in the service of a more compelling scene. Giovan's *Kimstar Cleaners* (1986) shows a dusty red Volkwagen Beetle parked in front of a dry cleaners on Avenue B (Figure 157). Visible a few doors down from Kimstar Cleaners, at the furthest right hand side of the photograph, is a shuttered eatery named Elena's Restaurant. When Wong's storefront paintings were first exhibited in *The Last Picture Show* in 1986, a painted replica of the sign for Elena's Restaurant (now seemingly lost) was displayed above Wong's *Untitled (Green Storefront)* (1985) (Figure 158). Comparing the painting with the photograph, one can see that Wong appears to have painted a dark green latticed storefront that is adjacent to Elena's Restaurant, rather than the eatery's own tripartite roller shutters (which themselves resemble a different work from the series, *Untitled (Stanton Street)*). Wong has also changed the background colour of the restaurant's sign from crisp white to bright yellow, presumably to better compliment the bright green paint used for the storefront, whose bright green hue suggests a structure that has been abandoned for so long it has been reclaimed by some kind of non-human entity.

Like Marlis Momber's photographs of Maria Domínguez carrying an artwork along Avenue C, which were discussed in Chapter Two, Giovan documents a considerably more populous neighbourhood than that depicted by Wong. In contrast to the melancholic emptiness of Wong's storefronts, Giovan's vivid, sun-drenched photographs move between different scales and viewpoints, and are filled with adults and children working, shopping, playing in arcades, cooking, fixing cars, or otherwise hanging out on street corners, in parks, and on fire escapes. The presence of Loisaida residents going about their daily life allows the viewer to imagine that some shuttered storefronts are only closed temporarily. The boutique pictured in *Barretto's on Stanton Street* (1987), for example, is tightly shuttered, but the light clothing worn by the scene's few human figures, and the long shadows they cast on the pavement, suggests that this photograph was taken near the end of a long summer's day, and that the store will reopen for

878 Phillips-Fein, *Fear City*, 4. Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 182–84.

879 Tria Giovan, *Loisaida: New York Street Work 1984-1990* (Bologna, Italy: Damiani, 2022).

business as usual the following morning (Figure 159). Other storefronts are less ambiguously closed. The photograph used for the cover of the photobook, for example, shows a stretch of Delancey Street filled with electronics goods stores (Figure 160). As a brown sedan eases past a *piraguero* selling fifty-cent shaved ice (*piraguas*) from a bright red handcart, pedestrians and vehicles make their way along the crowded street. The store on the corner of Suffolk Street is shuttered, its swing sign obliterated with thick black paint; in the first-floor window, a sign informs passersby that the owner is 'CLOSING THIS STORE. EVERYTHING MUST GO!'

Wong incorporated this phrase into the handwritten artist statement he produced for *The Last Picture Show*'s press release (Figure 161):

> THE LAST PICTURE SHOW
>
> CLEARING OUT… EVERYTHING MUST GO
>
> LIKE ICE LIKE FIRE LIKE SMOKE
>
> LIKE LIGHTNING LIKE DEW LIKE A DREAM
>
> EVERYTHING MUST GO!

In a *New York Times* review published a week after the exhibition opened, Michael Brenson confirmed what the paintings themselves imply: these storefronts, 'which were part of the artist's daily life in 1980,' and 'sold something, whether it was drugs, poetry, food or religion', are all 'now changed or closed down.'[880] Brenson cited *The Last Picture Show*'s press release, in which Wong outlined the show's concept, recalling that he 'decided to take the opportunity to try something never before tried: a lifesize replica of the Lower East Side around Avenue "B" as it existed six years ago'. In the press release, Wong noted that by 1986, the Nuyorican Poets Café, 'where the Talking Coco-Nut [a.k.a. Jorge Brandon] would recite you four on-the-spot poems for $2.00', had become a gallery, while Cedros de Dios, 'Reverend Roberto Vazquez's Pentecostal Church on Avenue B', was now 'an art bar named "Save the Robots"'. With the storefront series, Wong not only depicted specific parts of Loisaida's built environment at a moment when they were vanishing from the neighbourhood's streetscape; he also highlighted the irony that the disappearance of these establishments was tied up with the rise of clubs and galleries promoting exactly this kind of work.

If these paintings constitute a repository of feelings, then the overwhelming feeling is one of loss. Since their production and display, the storefront paintings have been framed by critical and

[880] Michael Brenson, '"A Distanced View," By Group from Europe', *New York Times*, 3 October 1986, https://www.nytimes.com/1986/10/03/arts/art-a-distanced-view-by-group-from-europe.html.

scholarly perspectives that conceptualise this work as depicting a rapidly vanishing, and now completely lost, time and place. For example, in a January 1986 *Arts Magazine* review of Wong's previous show at Semaphore East in October 1985, which included an early storefront painting, Dan Cameron wrote that 'Wong's paintings show this place [Loisaida] as if it had already passed into memory, to be forever sentimentalized by the former residents who knew it best.'[881] In October 1986, Richard Martin reviewed *The Last Picture Show* for *Arts Magazine*, describing the work as 'haunted, evocative, echoing paintings, not merely because we may know of Wong's earlier [tenement] paintings, but because we know their city and circumstance so profoundly.'[882] In a catalogue essay produced for the 1998 retrospective exhibition *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong*, Carlo McCormick described the storefront paintings as embodying a 'melancholy of loss' that 'resonate with a sensitive nostalgia',[883] More recently, Julie Ault has asked whether Wong's 'powerful storefront paintings [were] also metaphors for yet another dying environment he held dear?'[884] Present throughout these commentaries is the assumption that by the mid-1980s, the Loisaida that Wong had become intimate with in the first part of the decade was on the verge of disappearing, and that all an artist could do was memorialise the neighbourhood as it faded into memory.[885]

Wong's storefront paintings are certainly steeped in the bittersweet pleasures of looking to the past. In *The Last Picture Show*'s press release, Wong reminisced about his time spent hanging out in Loisaida in the early 1980s with Miguel Piñero and 'all those sweet kids [who] used to run the streets with Mikey' (Figure 161):

> Back when Pedro used to get beat up at all those obscure prize fights in Newark. Back when Mikey used to sell red-tape dummies out on the Avenue and Little Brian used to yoke customers with mace. Back when dinner for six was deep fried half & half (gizzards and hearts) Cheetos Ding-Dongs Devil Dogs orange pop and Thunderbird.

'Even now', mused Wong at the end of the press release, echoing the sense of a long-lost neighbourhood described by Cameron and Martin in their reviews, 'it's like the moment in these

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[881] Dan Cameron, 'Image and Authority: The Recent Paintings of Martin Wong', *Arts Magazine*, January 1986, 16.

[882] 'What Is Absent in Objects: The New Paintings of Martin Wong', *Arts Magazine*, October 1986, 53.

[883] Carlo McCormick, 'An Existential Frame', in *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong*, ed. Amy Scholder (New York: Rizzoli, 1998), 71–72.

[884] Julie Ault, 'In Part: Writings by Julie Ault', Impossible Objects, accessed 14 October 2022, http://www.impossibleobjectsmarfa.com/fragments/in-part-writings-by-julie-ault.

[885] This somewhat resigned perspective was not shared by an artist like Maria Domínguez, for whom, as discussed in Chapter Two, the gentrification-led displacement of the neighbourhood's Puerto Rican community remained something to fight against throughout the 1980s.

paintings never existed.' By creating a life-sized replica of Avenue B as it looked in the early 1980s, Wong also cast an eye over his first years in the Lower East Side, which was a personally and professionally fruitful period for the artist. It is unsurprising that critics and reviewers such as McCormick, Ault, and Cameron identified a strain of melancholic nostalgia running through the storefront paintings. Like Wong, each of these writers lived in the Lower East Side in the 1980s, and each had some link to the East Village scene within which Wong had established his name as an artist in the first part of the decade.[886]

Wong's Loisaida storefronts are suffused with a palpable sense of loss. However, it is essential not to frame the work as expressing what Marika Cifor, in her discussion of activist AIDS archiving practices, calls 'conventional nostalgia, a potent longing for [the uncritical restoration of] an earlier time'.[887] In *The Last Picture Show*'s press release, Wong explicitly warned against the futility of such an endeavour, insisting that 'it was the best of times it was the worst of times and the times we had they gone now. They'll never come back' (Figure 161). In a recent catalogue essay, Agustín Pérez Rubio describes the ambivalent temporality that characterises *The Last Picture Show*:

> The feeling that nothing is permanent runs throughout the installation. It is a question of time—of looking back, of destruction, of change, and also of renovation, since the spaces changed again and again due to speculation, gentrification, and the economic push responsible for businesses or spaces closing or changing owners.[888]

To read the storefront paintings through a conventionally nostalgic lens is to ignore the work's complex visual articulation of a moment of rapid and fiercely contested urban transformation in the Lower East Side. In his *New York Times* review of *The Last Picture Show*, Brenson insisted that Wong saw 'his storefronts both as a world of hopeless illusion and as a paradise lost.'[889] In the press release for his previous show at Semaphore East, Wong stated that his intention was to 'to focus in close on some of the endless layers of conflict that has us all bound together… Always

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[886] In the early 1980s, McCormick was a curator, and a writer for the influential local publication the *East Village Eye*, Ault was a founding member of the political art collective Group Material (who opened one of the first galleries in the neighbourhood in 1980), and Cameron was a writer, and a curator straddling alternative and institutional art worlds at the New Museum.

[887] Cifor, *Viral Cultures*, 2.

[888] Pérez Rubio, '... It's Not Really What You Think', 152.

[889] Brenson, '"A Distanced View," By Group from Europe'.

locked in, always locked out, winners and losers all…'[890] This emphasis derived from Wong's first-hand experience of what, by the mid-1980s, were increasingly visible tensions between some of the Lower East Side's overlapping social and artistic communities.

3.5.2 The fine art of gentrification: the rise and fall of the East Village scene

While stealing a backwards glance at Wong's beloved, and, by the mid-1980s, increasingly precarious Loisaida, the storefront paintings also offer a sardonic commentary on the coterminous demise of the East Village art scene, which many local residents and veteran community activists saw as having prompted the neighbourhood's gentrification in the first place. The writer Alan W. Moore argues that 1984, the year that Wong started working on the storefront series, was also the year that 'put the seal on the scene' that had been growing in size and prominence since around 1980-1981.[891] In March 1984, local art critics Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick published 'Slouching Toward Avenue D', an overview of the scene's galleries and key artists, in *Art in America*.[892] In an oral history interview in 2016, the East Village gallerist Sur Rodney (Sur) insisted that Robinson and McCormick's high profile article 'boomed the East Village' almost overnight, making the scene seem 'really viable as like a commercial thing' to serious art collectors and institutions.[893] 1984 saw the opening of several national and international exhibitions with 'East Village' in the title; these shows capitalised on what had become almost a brand name by this point, one that signified both a strand of colourful, mostly figurative, often cartoon-inspired painting and sculpture known as 'neo-expressionism', and the outsized personalities that made up the scene.[894]

By 1984, argued the archivist Marvin J. Taylor, 'the major art journals, galleries, and auction houses had co-opted the field of Downtown art, creating superstars and an influx of economic capital that would eventually overtake the symbolic capital' through which the scene had

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[890] Tessa Solomon, 'The Human Instamatic: Martin Wong's Visionary Paintings of New York Continue to Intrigue', *Art in America*, 7 June 2021, https://www.artnews.com/feature/who-is-martin-wong-why-is-he-important-1234594299/.

[891] Moore, *Art Worker*, 75.

[892] Robinson and McCormick, 'Slouching Toward Avenue D'.

[893] Sur Rodney (Sur), 'Oral History Interview', interview by Theodore Kerr, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 12 July 2016, 10, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-sur-rodney-sur-17369.

[894] Moore, *Art Worker*, 75.

These shows include *The East Village Scene* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, *East Village Art in Berlin* at the Zellermayer Galerie in Berlin, and *East Village* at Galerie Anna Friebe in Cologne. 'Exhibitions: The East Village Scene', Institute of Contemporary Art - Philadelphia, PA, accessed 20 October 2022, https://icaphila.org/exhibitions/the-east-village-scene/; Liza Kirwin, 'A Timeline of the East Village 1979-1989: A Chronology', *Artforum*, October 1999.

developed.[895] The East Village scene had spawned a handful of legitimate and enduring Downtown superstars, including Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Kenny Scharf, as well as artists such as Mark Kostabi, Richard Hambleton, and Lee Quiñones, whose commercial and critical profile accelerated in the early 1980s, but waned as the appetite for graffiti on canvas and graffiti-influenced painting faded in the second half of the decade. Moore argues that the artists who were included in this initial wave of institutional surveys and overviews of the period 'stood a better chance to make it', while those who weren't were left out, 'at least for the first wave of critical and curatorial attention.'[896] Wong arguably falls into this second group, alongside artists such as David Wojnarowicz and Greer Lankton, who exhibited regularly in East Village galleries and alternative spaces at the time, and even had work collected by major institutions, but who have received sustained critical, curatorial, and scholarly attention only in recent years.[897]

By 1985, argues Moore, 'the gas had gone out of the East Village scene.'[898] Several of the galleries that had opened since the early 1980s remained in the neighbourhood for another few years, but many influential spaces had closed by 1985, including Patti Astor and Bill Stelling's Fun Gallery, and the art-nightlife crossover venues Club 57, the Mudd Club, and 8BC.[899] In a scathing *Time* magazine review of that year's Whitney Biennial in June 1985, the conservative critic Robert Hughes singled out the 'young, loud and, except in its careerism, invincibly dumb' work of the East Village artists whose work had been included, such as Wojnarowicz, Scharf, and Rodney Alan Greenblat.[900] In October 1985, McCormick published 'East Village R.I.P' in the local art paper *East Village Eye*, which had long championed East Village art.[901] McCormick's one-page 'eulogy' for the scene opened:

> East Village art is dead. We, who were the first to take credit for the birth of East Village art, now want to be the first to take credit for killing it. But this is what the East Village has always been about, taking credit for other people's work and ideas.[902]

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[895] Taylor, 'Playing the Field', 35.

[896] Moore, *Art Worker*, 75.

[897] Solomon, 'The Human Instamatic'.

[898] Moore, *Art Worker*, 75.

[899] Kirwin, 'A Timeline of the East Village'.

[900] Robert Hughes, 'Careerism and Hype Amidst the Image Haze', *Time*, 17 June 1985, https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,959210-1,00.html.

[901] Carlo McCormick, 'East Village, R.I.P.', *East Village Eye*, October 1985.

[902] McCormick, 23.

While acknowledging that 'after two years of intense coverage of the scene, the *Eye* has officially run out of gimmicks to repackage the same old drivel,' McCormick used the piece to take aim at critics such as Hughes and '[*Village*] *Voice* intellectuals' such as Gary Indiana and C. Carr, who, he argued, had long treated the East Village as 'the [e]asiest target [with which] to attack contemporary culture.'[903]

Given that the death of East Village art was being announced regularly by 1985/86, it is perhaps unsurprising that *The Last Picture Show* was not commercially successful. Semaphore director Barry Blinderman recalls that although the show was 'a tour de force', garnering positive reviews from Brenson and Martin, among others, unlike Wong's previous exhibitions at Semaphore, which had completely sold out, he only sold 'a single painting—of a barred and chain-linked window.'[904] This did not come as a surprise to Wong, who, Blinderman notes, 'had wryly predicted [that] he'd painted me a show I couldn't sell.'[905] Indeed, it is easy to read *The Last Picture Show*'s title, and the opening phrase of its press release ('CLEARING OUT… EVERYTHING MUST GO'), which called to mind the desperate but resigned signage of a business about to close, as a self-deprecating comment on the commercial and critical demise of the much-hyped art scene through which Wong had established his name. The huge size of the storefront paintings also made them too large to be shown in the tiny storefront galleries that dominated the East Village scene, and really only suitable for display in large loft-type spaces such as those found in SoHo; this was a twist of the knife at a moment when East Village galleries that had not yet closed down were abandoning the neighbourhood in favour of the more upmarket and well-established gallery district of SoHo. Blinderman had made the opposite move, founding Semaphore in SoHo in 1980 before opening Semaphore East on Avenue B in 1984, but the writing was on the wall for him too.[906] 'Like the closed storefronts Martin painted', writes Blinderman, 'Semaphore was shuttered nine months' after *The Last Picture Show*, along with Semaphore East.[907]

For some artists and critics, the death of the East Village scene, which appeared at a moment of rising tensions in the Lower East Side, was nothing to mourn. In the same March 1984 issue of

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[903] McCormick, 23.

[904] Blinderman, 'Martin Wong's Chains of Desire'.

The painting that Blinderman is talking about is *Aaron* (1986), which was used for the flyer advertising *The Last Picture Show* (Figs. 141 & 147).

[905] Blinderman.

[906] Blinderman.

[907] Blinderman.

Art in America that featured 'Slouching Toward Avenue D', Craig Owens, the magazine's senior editor, published 'The Problem with Puerilism', a fierce rebuttal of Robinson and McCormick's claims for the scene in which Owens decried not only 'the empty diversity and puerilism of the East Village "avant-garde"', but also its role in hastening gentrification.[908] In a scathing article entitled 'The Fine Art of Gentrification,' published later that year in the influential journal *October*, Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan applauded Owens as one of few dissenting voices among the celebratory tone struck by what they called 'apologists' for the East Village scene, writers such as McCormick, Nicolas Moufarrege, and Rene Ricard.[909] For Deutsche and Ryan, Owens opened up space 'for a meaningful inquiry into the implication of that scene in the process of gentrification' that they developed further in their own article.[910] Noting that 'the site of this brave new art scene is also a strategic urban arena', close to the recently completed World Trade Center and New York's resurgent Financial District, Deutsche and Ryan fiercely critiqued the East Village scene's complicity in the displacement of a 'largely redundant working-class community' to make space for a 'professional white middle class groomed to serve' the city's emergent F.I.R.E. (finance, insurance, and real estate) economy, and the poorly-paid service industries developing around it.[911]

With 'The Fine Art of Gentrification', Deutsche and Ryan helped bolster a critique of the East Village scene that was being advanced by growing numbers of activists, residents, and artists in the mid-1980s.[912] However, by dividing the neighbourhood up into 'gentrifiers' and 'displaced',

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908 Owens, 'Commentary: The Problem with Puerilism', 163.

909 Deutsche and Ryan, 'The Fine Art of Gentrification', 92–93; Craig Owens, 'The Problem with Puerilism', in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture.* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 263–67.

It is worth noting that in the late 1970s, prior to joining *Art in America*, Owens was an associate editor at *October*. See Aaron Peck, 'Craig Owens: Portrait of a Young Critic', *Frieze*, 14 March 2018, https://www.frieze.com/article/craig-owens-portrait-young-critic.

910 Deutsche and Ryan, 'The Fine Art of Gentrification', 99.

911 Deutsche and Ryan, 93.

912 Deutsche and Ryan's article remains a key critical text from this period, one that remains frequently cited in cultural histories of downtown New York in 1970s and 1980s. See, for example Alexander Vasudevan, *The Autonomous City: A History of Urban Squatting* (London: Verso, 2023); Kyle Dunn, 'Whiteness, Contact, Gentrification, and Critical Diversity: A New Racial Ideology of Gentrifying Whites?', *Sociology Compass*, 2023, e13129, https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13129; Andrew Strombeck, 'Art, Graffiti, and the Deskilled Work of the Novelist: The Forgotten 1970s in Don DeLillo's Underworld', *Twentieth Century Literature* 69, no. 2 (1 June 2023): 203–24, https://doi.org/10.1215/0041462X-10580823; Aaron Shkuda, '"Out With the Galleries, Out with the Sellouts:" Arts Organizations and Real Estate Investment in Los Angeles and Detroit', *European Journal of American Studies* 18, no. 2 (3 July 2023), https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.19679; Erin Silver, *Taking Place: Building Histories of Queer and Feminist Art in North America* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2023); Jeppe Ugelvig, 'The Gallery as Contact Zone: Renée Green's Taste Venue, 1994, at Pat Hearn Gallery, New York', *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 12, no. 1 (1 April 2023): 2–21, https://doi.org/10.1386/jcs_00078_1.

they flattened out important differences among those who lived and worked there.[913] On one side of this seemingly intractable divide, according to Deutsche and Ryan, was a new 'white middle class', comprising both artists and young professionals, whose actions, whether consciously or not, were aligned with the broader restructuring of the city's political economy then underway.[914] On the other side was an impoverished, 'largely redundant working-class' community, whose displacement from the Lower East Sid was the vital first step in this restructuring process at a local level. Not only did this binarism ignore the complex realities of class as it was lived in the Lower East Side, but it subsumed race under class as the primary mode of difference between 'gentrifiers' and the 'displaced'. Deutsche and Ryan highlighted gentrification's racial and colonial dimensions, citing an unnamed member of an 'urban minority' who described gentrification as the reclamation of neighbourhoods of colour by white people.[915] Nevertheless, their analysis reproduced a stereotype in which all artists and professionals were, by default, white. As a result, they not only overlooked working-class Nuyorican artists such as Maria Domínguez, Nestor Cortijo, or Bimbo Rivas, who had long challenged displacement through their art and activism, but they also ignored an artist of colour such as Martin Wong, who was part of the East Village scene, but was also intimate with the Nuyorican Lower East Side, and foregrounded this side of the neighbourhood in his work.[916]

This is not to suggest that there weren't significant class divisions between different Lower East Side constituencies, or that the younger, typically college-educated artists who began moving to the neighbourhood in the late 1970s and early 1980s didn't often come from wealthier backgrounds.[917] In his recent memoir, Alan W. Moore reflects that despite calling himself a 'worker' in the Downtown art world, he was 'really a déclassé artist':

> My parents were middle class intellectuals with jobs, a house and savings. Some artists in Colab [the collective of which Moore was a member] came from rich families. Few of us discussed this, and it wasn't really etiquette to make inquiries. To this day the class

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913 Deutsche and Ryan, 'The Fine Art of Gentrification', 110–11.

914 Deutsche and Ryan, 93.

915 'Gentrification or Genocide?', *Breakthrough*, Spring 1981, 32. Quoted in Deutsche and Ryan, 'The Fine Art of Gentrification', 94.

916 For an early critique of 'The Fine Art of Gentrification' that focused on Deutsche and Ryan's exclusion of politically engaged (white) artists, see Anne Bowler and Blaine McBurney, 'Gentrification and the Avant-Garde in New York's East Village: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly', *Theory, Culture & Society* 8, no. 4 (1 November 1991): 49–77, https://doi.org/10.1177/026327691008004003.

917 Marvin J. Taylor claims that between 1974 and 1984, 'more artists were graduating from art schools than at any time in American history.' Taylor, 'Playing the Field', 31.

> background of artists is under-researched, although it surely explains a lot about how the artworld is structured.[918]

Nor am I suggesting that many of the artists and galleries did not act in what Andrew Strombeck describes as 'bad faith with the neighborhood', using the Lower East Side 'as a way to repeat the successes of SoHo' through the circulation of ideas that 'turned out to be congruent with the objectives of real estate investors and city planners.'[919] By shifting focus away from the brash aesthetics and commercial aspirations of the East Village scene (which were preoccupations of mainstream critics such as Robert Hughes), and towards an interrogation of the longer-term material and structural implications of a multi-million dollar art scene located in one of New York's poorest neighbourhoods, Deutsche and Ryan advanced a 'meaningful enquiry' of art's relationship to gentrification. It was in the context of these debates on the role played by East Village art in hastening gentrification that Wong created and exhibited *The Last Picture Show*.

3.5.3 Layers of conflict: drugs, clubs, and churches

With the storefront paintings, Wong grappled with questions about art's role in gentrification. As someone who moved within different social and artistic spheres in the Lower East Side, Wong does not appear to have shared Deutsche and Ryan's pessimism about the apparently intractable divide between those who facilitated gentrification and those who were its victims. At the same time, he did not emphasise the importance of resisting gentrification through coalitional creative practice, an approach characterising the work of the Loisaida movement, and artist collectives such as Political Art Documentation and Distribution and Artmakers, who are discussed in Chapter Four. Embracing his ambiguous position at the intersection of different communities, Wong understood that the closure of a storefront could be mourned by some, celebrated by others, but observed by all as a sign of uncertain, unsettling, but as-yet unpredictable change in the neighbourhood. In order to understand the political potential of this ambivalence, it is important to get a sense of the often conflicting meanings that shuttered storefronts held for different groups in the neighbourhood in the mid-1980s.

A painting such as *Untitled (Stanton and Ridge)* (1986), for example, would have signified profoundly different things to different Lower East Siders (Figure 162). The work depicts a cracked but otherwise unremarkable grey brick wall flanked by a decorative pillar. In the centre of the wall is a deep black hole, out of which the viewer expects a hand or face to suddenly

[918] Moore, *Art Worker*, 74.

[919] Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*, 15.

emerge. Despite its apparent innocuousness, the subject of *Stanton and Ridge* is one of the many drug fronts that were present in the neighbourhood in the early 1980s. For years, community activists and residents in the Nuyorican Lower East Side had fought what Stephen Zacks calls the 'open-air drug market on Avenue B' that prevailed throughout the 1970s and 1980s.[920] When I spoke with Maria Domínguez in March 2022, for example, she recalled that housing and drugs were the two biggest problems facing poor Lower East Siders in the mid-1980s, and were issues around which broad multiracial coalitions formed.[921] Indeed, as I discuss in Chapter Four, *La Lucha Continua* (The Struggle Continues), a large-scale community mural project that Domínguez participated in in 1985, was undertaken in part to 'reclaim' La Plaza Cultural from the drug dealers and users who had taken over what was once a thriving community garden.[922]

Complicating the anti-drug stance of many community activists, however, Christopher Mele argues that in 'the deindustrialized labor market of New York, the thriving drug trade had provided a certain economic and social stability'.[923] Public activities along streets with an entrenched drug economy were monitored closely by dense networks of residents, which encouraged a high maintenance of social order; as Mele notes, along these streets, 'petty crimes, apartment break-ins, and assaults were virtually unheard of.'[924] Additionally, the use of drugs, from marijuana to LSD to heroin, was prevalent in the East Village art scene, and, to a lesser extent, the Loisaida movement. For many younger artists in particular, the visibility and availability of drugs on the streets contributed to the sense of urban malaise that offered both subject matter, as well as an anti-bourgeois, anti-suburban lifestyle for many artists to self-consciously identify with. As Robinson and McCormick put it in 'Slouching Toward Avenue D', for many, the Lower East Side offered 'an adventurous avant-garde setting of considerable cachet' whose 'ambience' was composed of 'a unique blend of poverty, punk rock, drugs, arson, Hell's Angels, winos, prostitutes and dilapidated housing.'[925] One only has to look at East Village galleries with names such as Ground Zero or Civilian Warfare, or Richard Hambleton's ominous *Shadowman* paintings, which appeared on wall and hoardings throughout the Lower East Side in the early 1980s, to get a sense of many artists' complex fascination towards and identification with the neighbourhood's neglected social groups and bleak material conditions (Figure 163).

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920 Zacks, 'Where Can We Be?'

921 Interview with the author, 7 March 2022.

922 Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 3.

923 Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 254.

924 Mele, 254.

925 Robinson and McCormick, 'Slouching Toward Avenue D'.

Andrew Strombeck highlights the ambivalence of this relationship, arguing that it was 'characterized by lurid fascination and genuine sympathy, primitivism and nuanced analysis, opportunism and activism.'[926]

The prevalence of drugs in the Lower East Side led New York Police Department (NYPD) Police Commissioner Benjamin Ward and Mayor Ed Koch to initiate an ambitious law-enforcement programme in January 1984.[927] Operation Pressure Point (OPP) enacted, in Mason B. Williams' words, a 'campaign to "retake" selected public spaces through a highly visible and publicized policing initiative', aimed at eliminating street-level dealing.[928] Over 200 officers swept through the neighbourhood arresting dealers and buyers; for the first six weeks, the NYPD averaged 65 arrests a day, and by August 1986, they had arrested over 21,000 people.[929] While OPP garnered positive writeups in the press, and was seen as a huge political success for Koch, it was clear that the programme's 'retaking' of the neighbourhood was not for the benefit of everybody.[930] OPP initially had support from community leaders in the Lower East Side, but it soon stirred up opposition from community groups and local churches.[931] Officers were found to be indiscriminately arresting Black and Brown men, and an internal NYPD study found that some residents were 'more fearful of the officers than the addicts and dealers.'[932] In addition, by the mid-1980s it was clear that OPP had played a significant role in facilitating gentrification. In a 1985 *New York Times* op-ed, Patrick J. Carroll, the NYPD lieutenant in charge of OPP, decried the rent hikes and evictions that had surged as the neighbourhood was 'retaken', insisting, somewhat ironically given his central participation in the programme, that 'the Lower East Side did not win in order to lose.'[933] In the mid-1980s, then, the fate of the drug front shown in *Stanton and Ridge* was complexly entangled with that of the other Puerto Rican establishments depicted in the storefront series.

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926 Robinson and McCormick.

927 Mason B. Williams, 'How the Rockefeller Laws Hit the Streets: Drug Policing and the Politics of State Competence in New York City, 1973–1989', *Modern American History* 4, no. 1 (March 2021): 81, https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2020.23.

928 Williams, 81.

929 Peter Kerr, 'War on Drugs Shifting Focus to Street Deals', *New York Times*, 13 April 1987, https://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/13/nyregion/war-on-drugs-shifting-focus-to-street-deals.html.

930 Williams, 'How the Rockefeller Laws Hit the Streets', 81.

931 Williams, 81.

932 Jeanne Mulgrave, 'Operation Pressure Point: A Community Perspective', quoted in Williams, 81.

933 Carroll, 'Opinion: Lower East Side Did Not Win In Order to Lose'.

Wong's decision to paint shuttered churches similarly articulated the complex relationship many Lower East Siders had with organised religion. Nancy Gowler Johnson suggests that 'it is not hard to imagine [Wong's church storefronts] as an indictment of the response of many religious communities to the growing AIDS crises' in the mid-1980s.[934] The hugely powerful Catholic Church, led in New York by Cardinal John O'Connor, came in for the strongest criticism from artists and activists for its homophobic and negligent response to the HIV/AIDS crisis.[935] In his searing 1989 essay 'Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell', David Wojnarowicz called O'Connor a 'cannibal from that house of walking swastikas up on Fifth Avenue' who 'has kept safer-sex information off the local television stations and mass transit for the last eight years of the AIDS epidemic thereby helping thousands and thousands to their unnecessary deaths.'[936] 'The house of walking swastikas' is a reference to St Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue, where, in December 1989, members of the direct action groups AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and Women's Health Action and Mobilization (WHAM) staged a mass 'die-in' during a Sunday service led by O'Connor. The writer Sarah Schulman attended the controversial 'Stop the Church' action, which saw 111 people arrested for disrupting mass, and has described it as 'a raw display of power […] to demand that they "stop killing us"'.[937]

Video footage of the 'Stop the Church' protest shows the queer Chicano filmmaker Ray Navarro dressed as Jesus Christ, complete with long brown hair and beard, bright white robe, and a crown of thorns (Figure 164).[938] Reporting from within a large crowd outside St Peter's Cathedral on behalf of the fictional 'Fire and Brimstone Network', Navarro addresses the camera with a barely-concealed grin: 'I'm Jesus Christ, I'm pro-choice, I support a woman's right to

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[934] Nancy Gowler Johnson, 'The Revealing Gaze: Rooted Conversations as Art Engages Justice', 2016, 10, https://www.academia.edu/27573733/The_Revealing_Gaze_Rooted_Conversations_as_Art_Engages_Justice.

[935] The Catholic Church was most vigorously challenged by AIDS activists, but it was far from the only Christian denomination which refused to advocate safe sex as a way of reducing the transmission of HIV. In the late 1980s, several evangelical denominations, including the International Pentecostal Church of Christ, issued statements that, as Anthony M. Petro describes, 'pushed to limit any form of sex education that went beyond advocating abstinence and monogamous heterosexual marriage.' Anthony M. Petro, 'Emerging Moralities: American Christians, Sexuality, and AIDS', in *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 43.

See also Reverend Wilfredo Sepulveda, 'How I View the HIV Epidemic as a Pentecostal', *Journal of Community Health* 20, no. 2 (1 April 1995): 171–75, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02260337.

[936] David Wojnarowicz, 'Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell', in *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (Edinburgh, UK: Canongate, 2017), 122–23.

[937] Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 136.

[938] Navarro, who died of AIDS-related illnesses in 1990, was a founding member of the video activist collective (and ACT UP affinity group) DIVA TV, an acronym that stands for Damned Interfering Video Activist Television. Anthony M. Petro, 'Ray Navarro's Jesus Camp, AIDS Activist Video, and the "New Anti-Catholicism"', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85, no. 4 (December 2017): 920–56, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfx011.

choose, and I am absolutely in favor of condom use – I think that all gay and lesbian Catholic teenagers should be taught about how to have more and healthier safe sex."[939] Several other protestors smile at Navarro's camp performance, which Anthony M. Petro describes as both 'parodic and deadly serious.'[940] Navarro was raised Catholic, and his condemnation of the Catholic Church came from the perspective of someone for whom religion retained a personal significance: 'Cardinal O'Connor is busy spreading his lies and rumors about the position of lesbians and gays. We're here to say, "We wanna go to heaven too!"'[941] For Petro, Navarro's performance resignifies the figure of Jesus, not only reclaiming Jesus from Christian conservatives, but 'also resurrect[ing] Jesus for secular or formerly Catholic AIDS and feminist activists.'[942] In the context of an epidemic that, since its onset in the early 1980s, has disproportionately impacted Black and Latine people in the U.S., who also make up a large portion of the country's Christian congregations, Navarro's revolutionary 'Chicano AIDS activist Jesus' cuts a powerful figure.[943]

Navarro's ambivalent relationship to the Catholic Church exemplifies the complex role that religion played in the lives of many in the city. For generations of poor and racialised New Yorkers, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds, churches, synagogues, and other religious institutions offered vital sites of sanctuary and community in an otherwise hostile city.[944] Some religious institutions, particularly those in poorer neighbourhoods, involved themselves directly with social issues. In the late 1980s, for example, St Brigid's Roman Catholic Church, led by Father George Kuhn, offered meeting space to community groups in the Lower East Side, providing shelter, organising space, food, and medical aid to homeless advocates and protesters during the 1988 Tompkins Square Park Riot.[945] Like Navarro's resignification of Jesus for activist ends, Kuhn understood his mission as practicing 'the gospel of Jesus, so if Jesus said to feed the

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[939] *COMPULSIVE PRACTICE: Ray Navarro*, directed by Ray Navarro and Visual AIDS, 2016, 03:19-03:36, https://vimeo.com/206638513.

[940] Petro, 'Ray Navarro's Jesus Camp, AIDS Activist Video, and the "New Anti-Catholicism"', 940.

[941] *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*, 2012, 38:50-39:01, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrAzU79PBVM.

[942] Petro, 'Ray Navarro's Jesus Camp, AIDS Activist Video, and the "New Anti-Catholicism"', 947.

[943] Esparza, '"Qué Bonita Mi Tierra"', 109; Petro, 'Ray Navarro's Jesus Camp, AIDS Activist Video, and the "New Anti-Catholicism"', 947.

[944] Indeed, it is worth noting that not all of New York's religious congregations were hostile to AIDS activism; in the 1980s, ACT UP conducted outreach sessions in churches across the city. Esparza, '"Qué Bonita Mi Tierra"', 113.

[945] See George Kuhn, 'An Interview with Father George Kuhn, Former Pastor of St Brigid's Church', interview by Clayton Patterson, in *Resistance: A Radical Political and Social History of the Lower East Side*, ed. Joe Flood and Alan W. Moore (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 112–22.

poor and the political climate is anti-poor, then the gospel has political implications.'[946] While some religious leaders, like Kuhn, collaborated with community groups, other institutions were repurposed by activists in opposition to the wishes of their leaders. In December 1969, for example, the New York Young Lords occupied the First Spanish United Methodist Church in East Harlem. Charging the church with what Johanna Fernández describes as 'benign indifference to the social and economic suffering' of one of the city's poorest neighbourhoods, the Lords renamed the building 'The People's Church' and turned it into an impromptu cultural and community centre that they occupied for 10 days.[947]

In the Lower East Side, some former religious spaces were repurposed for altogether different uses. Many viewers encountering *Iglesia Pentecostal* at Semaphore Gallery in late 1986, for example, would have recognised the address as the site of a semi-legal underground club named Save the Robots, which occupied the storefront and basement of 25 Avenue B. Save the Robots was frequented by drag performers such as Dean Johnson and Lady Bunny, and was popular with clubbers and nightlife workers, who would keep the night going there after other clubs and bars in the neighbourhood had closed.[948] The club was part of a queer performance and drag scene that developed in the early 1980s and flourished into the next decade; it overlapped with, but was distinct from, the earlier East Village gallery scene, and its key sites were the Pyramid Club on Avenue A (which had previously been the Nuyorican performance space New Rican Village) and the annual drag festival Wigstock in Tompkins Square Park.[949] Limited archival material means it is difficult to get an exact timeframe of the club's earliest days, but it appears to have opened in 1983 before being shut down for fire safety violations sometime in mid-1984.[950] The club reopened in January 1986 and continued to be periodically raided by police over the next decade, before finally being brought up to code by new owners in 1995.[951]

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[946] George Kuhn, quoted in Kuhn, 122.

[947] Fernández, *The Young Lords*, 1.

[948] Michael Cooper, 'Neighborhood Report: East Village; Club Is Still Late, But Now Legal', *New York Times*, 18 February 1996, https://www.nytimes.com/1996/02/18/nyregion/neighborhood-report-east-village-club-is-still-late-but-now-legal.html; Hilton Als, 'Downtown Chronicles: When the Music Is You', *New Yorker*, 19 August 1996, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1996/08/26/spinning-tales.

[949] The videos of Nelson Sullivan, available online at https://www.youtube.com/user/5ninthavenueproject, offer a good visual chronicle of the drag scene of the mid to late 1980s.

[950] Cooper, 'Neighborhood Report'; 'Ravin' Til Dawn: Save the Robots Edition', *Eatingdrinkingandoverthinking* (blog), 20 April 2013, https://eatingdrinkingandoverthinking.wordpress.com/2013/04/20/ravin-til-dawn-save-the-robots-edition/.

[951] Cooper, 'Neighborhood Report'; 'Ravin' Til Dawn'.

In 1993, the club kid James St James, a regular at Save the Robots, described the most recent police raid as 'the most fun I've had all year.' James St. James, 'James St. James' Club Rub', *Project X*, June 1993, 25.

Wong referred to Save the Robots in the press release for *The Last Picture Show*, but it is unclear if the club had reopened by the time he started working on *Iglesia Pentecostal* in 1986. A snapshot taken by Ben Buchanan in May 1984 shows clubbers queueing outside Save the Robots (Figure 165). Visible at the furthest left of the photograph is a sign for the defunct Cedros de Dios church; like Giovan's *Loisaida* photographs, comparing Buchanan's snapshot with Wong's painting makes clear his attention to detail (Figs. 165 & 166). Although it depicts a business that was, by 1986, long gone, the meticulousness and material heft of Wong's almost life-sized rendering of Cedros de Dios contrasts with the uncertainty surrounding the survival of the semi-legal club that had taken its place; when the storefronts were displayed in the autumn of 1986, the future of 25 Avenue B, whose transformation into a club represented a contested shift in the neighbourhood's social and cultural character, remained profoundly uncertain. For some viewers, Save the Robot's precarity offered the most potent symbol of the neighbourhood's creeping 'yuppification'; for others, the very existence of a club in what had once been a Spanish-language church most obviously indexed the neighbourhood's gentrification. As someone who moved between different social and artistic spheres in the Lower East Side, Wong understood this dynamic well. He appreciated that whether it offered food, religion, or drugs, the significance of a shuttered storefront was dependent on one's standpoint, and one's position in relation to the neighbourhood's shifting structures of social, cultural, and economic power.

3.5.4 Contested meaning: the politics of the storefront paintings

I am interested in the political implications of Wong's ambivalent approach to documenting the gentrifying Lower East Side. As a result of the turbulent context in which he was living and working, his work touches on several key themes that animated both political artmaking and broader social and political struggles in the period, including the aftereffects of economic crisis, questions of racial identity, the significance of queer desire, and the violence of gentrification. And yet, as David J. Getsy has noted in a discussion of Wong's prison paintings of the late 1980s and 1990s, despite working on these themes, the artist did not see himself as a political artist, nor even as an especially political person.[952] Getsy argues that the power of Wong's work is that it makes visible the possibilities for 'connection and desire where they were not allowed or expected.'[953] Wong's queer vision of the crumbling Lower East Side as a site of connection is particularly pronounced in the tenement paintings of the early 1980s. Bearing witness to and representing forms of marginalised collectivity was vital during a decade in which disinvestment,

[952] Getsy, 'Bricks and Jails: On Martin Wong's Queer Fantasies', 185n12.

[953] Getsy, 198.

gentrification, and the HIV/AIDS crisis, all underpinned by the neoliberal restructuring of New York, threatened to erase the symbolic and material existence of the neighbourhood's poorest and most marginalised residents.

My interest in the storefront paintings lies in the tension between what the work makes visible and what it refuses to reveal. In a 1997 review for *ARTnews*, Holland Cotter evaluated several exhibitions in New York that had been programmed to coincide with Visual AIDS' 'Day Without Art' on 1 December 1996.[954] Alongside exhibitions at Gracie Mansion/Fred Dorfman Projects, St Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery, and Printed Matter, one of the shows reviewed by Cotter was *A Living Testament of the Blood Fairies* at Artists Space, which included text-based work by ten U.S. artists living with HIV/AIDS, and two artists who had passed away from AIDS-related illnesses.[955] The exhibition included three paintings by Wong: *Cupcake and Paco (Corot)* (1987-1988), *Time Out for Love* (1990), *Sanja Cake* (1992) (Figs. 167-169).[956] For Cotter, what united these disparate exhibitions, which involved many artists working across an array of mediums, was the non-didactic politics of the work on display:

> Little of the work qualified as "advocacy art" or political art in the ordinary sense: it dealt in metaphor, not polemic. This wasn't art that hammered out a narrow point or that did your thinking for you (in fact, much of it was very slow to reveal its meanings).[957]

What is so compelling about Wong's storefronts is not just that they are slow to reveal their meanings, but that these meanings are often at odds with one another. A painting of a shuttered church on Avenue B, for example, reads at first as an indictment of gentrification, and perhaps as a critique of the East Village art scene's role in this process. This understanding is complicated if one considers Wong's own participation in the East Village scene, if one is familiar with the queer club that occupied the former church's address in late 1986, or if one understands the complex role of organised religion in the life of different Lower East Siders in the mid-1980s.

Wong's storefronts are not typically conceived of as participatory art, but in their meticulous detail and large scale, these paintings facilitate a complex ethical dialogue with the viewer. In a 2009 interview with the artist Dušan Barok, Claire Bishop critiqued socially engaged practices

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[954] Holland Cotter, 'Art & AIDS—The Stuff Life Is Made Of', *ARTnews.Com* (blog), April 1997.

[955] 'Exhibitions: A Living Testament of the Blood Fairies, November 9, 1996 – January 4, 1997', Artists Space, accessed 3 October 2022, https://artistsspace.org/exhibitions/a-living-testament-of-the-blood-fairies.

[956] Wong was no longer living in New York by this point. He was diagnosed with AIDS in 1994, and returned to California; in 1999, at the age of 53, he died from AIDS-related illnesses at his parents' home in San Francisco. See Pérez, 'The Glory That Was Wrong', 291; Blinderman, 'Martin Wong's Chains of Desire'.

[957] Cotter, 'From the Archives'.

'that directly research and/or criticise social policy, gentrification, globalisation, etc', arguing that such projects 'tend to be worthy, but dull', and often less effective 'than a book or report on the subject."[958] For Bishop, the most interesting projects instead 'produce situations of conflict and unease' that are 'more indirect, using formats that require more imagination and generosity from the viewer than a kneejerk reaction of moral outrage'.[959] With its installation-style mode of display, *The Last Picture Show* would have invited contemporaneous viewers to linger in front of Wong's life-sized replicas of shuttered Avenue B storefronts (Figs. 170-172). From this position, they were encouraged to situate themselves in relation to the specific businesses and institutions being depicted, to dwell on the broader social, cultural, and economic transformation that their closure indexed, and perhaps even to reflect on their own relationship to and implication in these changes. Wong was not interested in abolishing the distance between the work and the viewer in order to convey some kind of unambiguous meaning to them. Rather, he encouraged viewers to bring their own experiences of the neighbourhood to bear on their encounter with the work in the space of Semaphore Gallery.[960]

Unlike an artist such as Maria Domínguez, who saw her work as an explicit rejoinder to gentrification and sought to directly challenge displacement, Wong made no claims over the potential outcomes of his non-didactic approach to representing the changing Nuyorican Lower East Side. His desire to explore what he called the 'endless layers of conflict that has us all bound together', and his encouragement of viewers to reflect on this conflict, supported Rosalyn Deutsche's insistence, in an examination of the spatial politics of public art practices in the mid-1990s, that '[e]xclusions are justified, naturalized, and hidden by representing social space as a substantial unity that must be protected from conflict, heterogeneity, and particularity.'[961] Wong, like Deutsche, understood that conflict was not 'the ruin of democratic public space [but] the condition of its existence', and sought to create a version of this democratic space—albeit within the somewhat tenuously public space of the commercial art gallery.[962] In this way, an exhibition like *The Last Picture Show* could activate the viewer, potentially prompting a sense of more direct responsibility towards the changing neighbourhood, or perhaps renewing a feeling of agency

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[958] Claire Bishop, On Participatory Art: Interview with Claire Bishop, interview by Dušan Barok, 29 July 2009, 2, https://monoskop.org/images/9/99/Barok_Dusan_2009_On_Participatory_Art_Interview_with_Claire_Bishop.pdf.

[959] Bishop, 2.

[960] I am drawing here on Jacques Rancière's notion of the 'emancipated spectator'. See Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 15.

[961] Deutsche, *Evictions*, xiii.

[962] Deutsche, xiii.

over its as-yet-unwritten future. However, it could just as easily engender a feeling of indifference or hopelessness in the face of seemingly inevitable gentrification. By refusing to take an explicit position on what for many was among the most urgent struggles of the period, Wong risked inadvertently aligning himself with the dominant forces of state and capital, which sought to transform the Lower East Side according to their own interests.

In 'The Fine Art of Gentrification', their account of class struggle in the Lower East Side, Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan ignored two key arguments that Craig Owens made in 'The Problem with Puerilism', his earlier critique of the East Village art scene. The first was Owens' insistence that, regardless of their own complicity in gentrification, artists 'are often its victims, as the closing of any number of East Village galleries, forced out of the area by rents they helped inflate, will sooner or later demonstrate.'[963] Acknowledging this reality, which Deutsche and Ryan perhaps understandably dismissed as less urgent than fighting the displacement of the neighbourhood's most precarious residents, led Owens to his second point: that artists could 'work within the community to call attention to, and mobilize resistance against, the political and economic interests which East Village art serves.'[964] Owens gave the example of Political Art Documentation and Distribution (PADD), whose anti-gentrification street work project *Out of Place: Art for the Evicted* (1984) was used to illustrate 'The Problem with Puerilism'.[965] As I discuss in more depth in Chapter Four, in the mid-1980s, important solidarity- and coalition-building work was also taking place in spaces and collectives such as El Bohío, ABC No Rio, and Artmakers.

Building solidarity grew increasingly urgent with the advent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, which decimated Downtown cultural production (including the East Village scene), and disproportionately impacted queer, poor, and racialised New Yorkers. As Sarah Schulman has described, the epidemic accelerated gentrification through the immediate turnover of apartments to the market (as tenants died of AIDS-related illnesses), and through the gradual replacement of 'communities of diverse classes, ethnicities, races, sexualities, and languages, and points of view' with 'more homogenized groups.'[966] Wong does not appear to have been involved in the coalition-building and material organising work that characterised political art collectives such as PADD or AIDS activist art groups such as DIVA TV and Gran Fury. However, as someone

[963] Owens, 'Commentary: The Problem with Puerilism', 163.

[964] Owens, 163.

[965] *Out of Place* followed on from an earlier PADD project, *Not For Sale* (1983), which is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

[966] Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, 14.

who moved between different social and artistic communities in the Lower East Side, Wong was able to interrogate some of the many differences that characterised daily life for different groups in the mid-1980s, without trying to flatten out or resolve these differences. Wong's embrace of heterogeneity and contradiction, his refusal to attempt to fix meaning in his work, acknowledged the fact that, as Stuart Hall put it, '[t]here is absolutely no escape from that contestation over meaning' that characterises representation.[967] His storefront paintings thus offered an expansive artistic gesture in opposition to gentrification's drive to 'stop the flow' of meaning to its own homogenising ends.[968] In the Lower East Side in the mid-1980s, argues Andrew Strombeck, 'cultural workers, activists, and city planners alike thought that circumstances were up for grabs, and a variety of outcomes possible'.[969] By layering a proliferation of contested meanings just beneath the surface of their ostensibly closed-off exteriors, Wong's storefront paintings reflect and express the ambiguous potential of this moment.

3.5 Conclusions

Martin Wong's Loisaida paintings offer a detailed visual chronicle of the changing social, artistic, and material texture of the Nuyorican Lower East Side in the early to mid-1980s, as the disinvestment and abandonment of the late 1970s gave way to reinvestment and gentrification. Working brick-by-brick, Wong painted specific tenements, lots, street corners, Puerto Rican businesses, and religious institutions across the neighbourhood, and often foregrounded the names and addresses of these establishments in painting titles, on storefront signs, and on painted trompe l'oeil frames. Wong's meticulous approach to depicting the Lower East Side's built environment was underpinned by a desire, as he put it in a 1989 interview with Margo Machida, to capture 'just directly what I saw' around the neighbourhood.[970] This attention to detail, and the tendency to depict spaces that had either vanished from the neighbourhood or were on the brink of disappearing, reflects Wong's interest, to borrow Hal Foster's phrase, in making 'historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present'.[971]

Comparing this work with contemporaneous photographs of the neighbourhood, taken by Marlis Momber, Tria Giovan, and Wong himself, it is evident that there exists a productive

[967] Stuart Hall, 'Representation and the Media (Transcript)' (Lecture, University of Westminster, 1997), 18, https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Stuart-Hall-Representation-and-the-Media-Transcript.pdf.

[968] Hall, 19.

[969] Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*, 22.

[970] Wong, 'Martin Wong: Interview'.

[971] Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', 4.

tension between the artist's interest in depicting spaces as they looked, and his desire to reimagine and embellish these spaces on the canvas. In the tenement paintings, cosmic constellations and rubbery fingerspelling characters hover ominously in the sky above crumbling tenements, which act as backdrops to unexpected moments of queer collectivity. In the storefront paintings, shuttered restaurants and churches are daubed in unnatural colours to emphasise their dereliction. Embracing the representational flexibility afforded by painting, Wong sought to portray the messy realities of urban transformation as it was felt, experienced, and contested by different groups living and working in the Lower East Side in the 1980s. In this way, his Loisaida paintings capture the ambivalent feelings of despair and desire, loneliness and connection, anger and resignation, loss and potential that accompanied rapidly changing circumstances in the neighbourhood, whose indeterminacy could often elude more traditional documentary and archival methods. Wong's understanding that the existence, closure, or conversion of a particular space could mean radically different things to different people derived from his movement across overlapping social and cultural spheres in the Lower East Side—from Miguel Piñero's queer Nuyorican street life, to the nocturnal world of the neighbourhood's graffiti writers, to the gallery and club scenes of the East Village.

The tension between what James Cassell calls Wong's 'anthropological acumen' and his 'vivid fantasism', and his interest in depicting the neighbourhood's 'endless layers of conflict', does not undermine the archival power of his Loisaida paintings.[972] In fact, it emphasises the heterogeneity and contingency that goes into assembling an archive; as Foster argues, all archival material is, to some extent, 'found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private'.[973] Analysing Wong's Loisaida paintings as if they have an inert relationship with the past is not only undermined by the artist's unconventional method for depicting real physical spaces, but is made impossible by the ambivalent temporalities of archives themselves, which, argues Stuart Hall, are 'discursive formations' that 'always stand in an active, dialogic, relation to the questions which the present puts to the past.'[974] Wong's paintings are suffused with the aesthetic and affective pleasures of looking to the recent past, of documenting social and cultural landscapes on the brink of seemingly imminent obsolescence. However, they are not animated by what Marika Cifor, in her recent book on activist AIDS archiving practices, calls the 'uncritical, restorative yearning' for an earlier time and place that she names 'conventional nostalgia.'[975] As Wong

[972] Cassell, 'Martin Wong on the Lower East Side'.

[973] Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', 5.

[974] Hall, 'Constituting an Archive', 90, 92.

[975] Cifor, *Viral Cultures*, 2.

himself acknowledged in the press release for *The Last Picture Show*: 'it was the best of times it was the worst of times and the times we had they gone now. They'll never come back'.

Wong's refusal of conventional nostalgia aligns with Walter Benjamin's insistence that '[t]o articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was"', but instead 'to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.'[976] Wong's Loisaida paintings troubled fixed representations of the Nuyorican Lower East Side when they were first produced and exhibited in the mid-1980s, and they continue to undermine settled accounts of the neighbourhood's turbulent history, by making space for the feelings of ambivalence that surrounded its rapid transformation. As archives of ambivalence, therefore, Wong's Loisaida paintings are marked also by an archival ambivalence. Benjamin argues that '[t]he past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again', and Wong's Loisaida paintings simultaneously encompass a desire to seize this image of the past, an acknowledgement of the futility of such an endeavour, and an embrace of the dangers and possibilities of undertaking it anyway.[977] In this way, the work is animated by what Cifor calls 'vital nostalgia', which 'emphasizes the longing for the past while also attending to and illuminating the ambivalences, violences, and complexities of that past.'[978]

For Cifor, vital nostalgia is a 'generative practice for interrogating, addressing, and repairing structural power inequities grounded in the bittersweet longing for a past time or space' that 'encompasses the complicated process of critical interrogation of our present through ongoing relation to the past.'[979] Wong's archive of ambivalence draws attention to the uneven power relations that have structured how the contested history of the Nuyorican Lower East Side has been archived and narrated. It highlights that certain experiences of the neighbourhood have been historicised since Wong's time, while others have been ignored or erased. It also emphasises the generative potential of bringing these submerged histories and archival lacunae to light and placing them into dialogue with one another. The ambivalent archival methodology I have employed in this chapter has allowed me to explore associations and disassociations between Wong's practice and that of other artists, in a way that extends the canonical archive contained within The Downtown Collection at NYU's Fales Library—the institutional home of Wong's archive—to include lesser-known Lower East Side figures, including Marlis Momber,

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976 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2012), 255.

977 Benjamin, 255.

978 Cifor, *Viral Cultures*, 26.

979 Cifor, 6, 26.

Miguel Piñero, and Tria Giovan, alongside more recognisable names such as David Wojnarowicz.[980]

[980] Cifor, 137.

Chapter Four. Towards a Counterpublic Art: La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues, community muralism, and activist art in mid-1980s Loisaida

4.1 Introduction

'WANTED: ARTISTS OF CONVICTION TO PAINT POLITICAL MURALS.' In the spring of 1985, a Xeroxed flyer emblazoned with these words appeared on lampposts and walls throughout the Lower East Side (Figure 173). Designed by the artist Karin Batten, the bright yellow and black flyer was posted around the neighbourhood by members of the multiracial mural collective Artmakers, whose director was the white community muralist Eva Cockcroft. It announced the initiation of *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues* (henceforth *La Lucha*), an ambitious political mural project due to take place in Loisaida that summer. The flyer invited interested artists to a planning meeting at El Bohío, the former public school on East Ninth Street that had been transformed into a bustling cultural and community centre by the activist collective Charas.[981] Carefully arranged rows of hand-drawn tenement buildings, complete with miniature windows and tiny water towers, ran along three of the flyer's four edges. Despite their unsteady lines and sketchy details, these drawings projected a sense of solidity and unity at odds with the fragmented landscape of abandoned buildings and empty lots that still characterised much of the neighbourhood at the time. Merging the language and aesthetics of old-fashioned 'Wanted' posters, industrial warning signs, and punk zines, the flyer was designed to stand out amidst the crowded visual and discursive space of the Lower East Side, whose walls, lampposts, and other surfaces were covered with a wide array of painted, sprayed, printed, and photocopied material (Figure 174).[982]

The flyer addressed several distinct but overlapping audiences within and beyond the Nuyorican Lower East Side. For many of those encountering it in the streets of the neighbourhood in 1985, *La Lucha*'s bilingual title, the venue for the planning meeting, and the explicit reference to 'political murals' would have situated the project within a long history of Nuyorican-led art and activism in Loisaida and Pueblo Nuevo. Artmakers's aim was to create a 'political art park' on the site of La Plaza Cultural, a community garden that had been created by Charas out of a

[981] On the flyer, El Bohío is referred to simply as 'Charas', and in many contexts the space was known as 'Charas/El Bohío'. In this chapter, as I have done throughout this thesis, I use 'Charas' to refer to the organisation itself, and 'El Bohío' to describe the cultural and community centre on East Ninth Street.

[982] Kate Eichhorn, *Adjusted Margin: Xerography, Art, and Activism in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 82–83.

vacant, city-owned lot along Avenue C in the late 1970s.[983] The garden had been a popular local resource for several years, offering much needed green space in an overcrowded neighbourhood, and hosting plays, concerts, and meetings in the warmer months. By the mid-1980s, however, La Plaza Cultural had stopped being regularly maintained and the site had once again fallen into disrepair (Figure 175). Mostly vacant during the day, at night the garbage-strewn lot was used primarily for drug dealing and drug use.[984] By painting murals onto the dilapidated buildings overlooking the garden, Artmakers and Charas sought to 'reclaim' the site on behalf of the residents of Loisaida.[985] For the muralists of Artmakers, the project also offered an opportunity to recapture the progressive politics and collaborative ethos of the earliest days of the community mural movement in New York in the late 1960s and 1970s.[986]

Many contemporaneous viewers would also have understood the phrase 'FROM LOISAIDA TO SOWETO…', which appears along the top of the flyer, as a reference to the politics of solidarity that characterised many activist art practices in New York in the mid-1980s. Many of *La Lucha*'s participants were drawn from these networks, which included established collectives such as Political Art Documentation and Distribution (PADD), as well as artist coalitions such as Art Against Apartheid and Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America.[987] The flyer was designed to attract the attention of passersby who were familiar with these existing art and activist communities, but its central address spoke to an even broader, as-yet undefined, audience. 'WANTED: ARTISTS OF CONVICTION': the imagined audience addressed by this urgent exhortation extended far beyond any mappable social, artistic, or political networks, potentially encompassing anyone for whom the term 'artist of conviction' resonated. This highly expansive address encouraged the participation of artists who were not part of existing art or activist communities in the city, and indeed may not have had any prior familiarity with the people, sites, and practices that were at the heart of *La Lucha*.

The flyer's multivalent address was reflected in the social and artistic heterogeneity of *La Lucha* itself, which brought together artists from within and beyond the Lower East Side, many of them women artists and artists of colour, to participate in an ambitious public art project that examined and connected several urgent political issues, including the fight against gentrification

983 Eva Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals: Artists Create Political Art Park in New York City', *Community Murals Magazine*, Winter 1985, 9.

984 Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 91.

985 Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 3.

986 Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 85–87.

987 Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 91.

in Loisaida, police brutality in New York, apartheid in South Africa, U.S. military intervention in Central America, and the role of women-led organising in each of these struggles. Photographs by Eva Cockcroft and Camille Perrottet of the completed *La Lucha* murals captured the breadth of artistic styles and techniques on display. A huge collective mural, also named *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues*, towered over La Plaza Cultural; this work, which is discussed later in this chapter, was created by a group of twelve artists, synthesising their disparate styles into a visually complex piece decrying the violence of gentrification and celebrating the Nuyorican-led socio-spatial practices that had long sustained Loisaida (Figure 176). Many muralists drove their message home through the use of bold figuration and recognisable political language. Seth Tobocman's frenetic *Young People Stand Up to Police*, for example, portrayed what appeared to be a young black man facing off against a mounted police officer, whose violently rearing horse resembled a loaded gun (Figure 177). Willie Birch's *Stop Urban Removal* showed a multiracial, multigenerational group of protesters defending a tenement from police; familiar protest slogans, including 'We Will Overcome' and 'People Before Profit', covered their placards (Figure 178). Noel Kunz's *Octopus* depicted an eight-limbed creature dressed in the Stars and Stripes, whose grasping tentacles were meant to resemble the greed of U.S. capitalism (Figure 179).

Other muralists took more subtle or abstract approaches to their subject matter. Dina Bursztyn's ceramic piece *Life Among The Ruins*, for example, celebrated the vitality and resilience of indigenous cultural production in Central America in the face of sustained colonial invasion (Figure 180). A similar theme was taken up by Maria Domínguez, whose work *Sueño* depicted a *vejigante* mask—a symbol of traditional Puerto Rican culture—being slowly stifled by red, white, and star-spangled blue ribbons (Figure 181). Cliff Joseph's *Rise, People, Rise*, depicted the red, black, and green colours of the pan-African flag of liberation; almost imperceptible in the work's central band was the outline of a group of black protestors, marching together under a vivid red sky (Figure 182). Keith Christensen's *Roots of Loisaida* celebrated grassroots activism in the neighbourhood through the visual metaphor of a root, whose branches were named after local community groups, including Charas, Adopt-a-Building, and Pueblo Nuevo (Figure 183). Every inch of wall surrounding La Plaza Cultural was covered in murals. Collectively, this hugely diverse body of work made the transnational solidarity politics of *La Lucha* visible; as Nandini Bagchee writes, '[d]ispossession, revolution, and community united an array of these global-political envisionings.'[988] The individual murals were visually and thematically framed by a thick black banner with the title of the project painted on it in many languages, including Spanish,

[988] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 142.

Swahili, Ukrainian, and Chinese. As Cockcroft stated in a short documentary produced shortly after *La Lucha*'s completion:

> We felt that wherever there's a struggle for peace and justice, and wherever people are oppressed, whether by right or left, that it's important to express this and to put our solidarity behind their struggles.[989]

Despite being one of the most ambitious mural projects ever undertaken in New York, there has been relatively little scholarly attention paid to *La Lucha*. The most extensive accounts of the project have come from members of Artmakers themselves. *La Lucha* features prominently in the book *On The Wall* (2009), written by the mural historians Janet Braun-Reinitz and Jane Weissman (who is the current director of Artmakers).[990] In 2017, Weissman also curated a belated thirtieth-anniversary exhibition, titled *La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues: 1985 & 2017*, at the Loisaida Center.[991] More recently, Nandini Bagchee and Timo Schrader have included *La Lucha* in their cultural and political histories of Nuyorican community activism in Loisaida.[992] Both Bagchee and Schrader frame their discussions of *La Lucha* in terms of the neighbourhood's gentrification; as Schrader puts it, *La Lucha* 'voiced the concerns of a community that was no longer fighting abandonment and financial disinvestment, but instead found itself the target of gentrification and reinvestment.'[993] They focus on *La Lucha*'s resuscitation of an explicitly political and participatory model of community muralmaking in the Lower East Side, one that was established by Cityarts Workshop in the 1970s, and had been closely aligned with the work of the Loisaida movement, but had fallen from prominence by the early 1980s.

Bagchee and Schrader's emphasis on *La Lucha*'s continuity with the practices of the 1970s certainly highlights two of the most important aims of the project for both Artmakers and Charas, which was to reclaim a significant site in Loisaida through the resuscitation of a once-dominant mode of collaborative artmaking. Equally as important, however, was *La Lucha*'s engagement with some of the newer art and activist communities that were developing in the

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[989] Eva Cockcroft, interview in *You Know... The Struggle*, directed by Ainslie Binder, Silviana Calderero, and Sarah Goodyear (New York: Public Broadcasting Service, 1988), 9:35-9:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anjx_nhkJfM.

[990] Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 91–97.

[991] This exhibition resulted in a catalogue authored by Weissman, and a website that synthesises material from the exhibition and the publication. See Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*; 'La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues: 1985 & 2017'.

[992] See Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 142–43; Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 85–88.

[993] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 85–86.

Lower East Side in the mid-1980s.[994] Of particular importance was the project's relationship to the new forms of politically committed art practice that were developing in the work of activist art collectives and coalitions such as PADD and Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America. In this chapter, I argue that *La Lucha* carved out a much-needed space in which people from across the Lower East Side could articulate and strengthen their opposition to the political and economic forces that were reshaping the neighbourhood in the mid-1980s through gentrification and displacement. At the same time, I argue that by connecting these local struggles with transnational solidarity movements against apartheid and U.S. military intervention in Central America, and by tackling these diverse themes in a site as prominent as La Plaza Cultural, *La Lucha* helped forge generative new relations between different communities, places, and practices across and beyond the neighbourhood.

4.2 Counterpublics of solidarity

In this section, drawing on the work of Nancy Fraser and David Featherstone, I develop the term counterpublics of solidarity as a framework through which to analyse the generative, transnational, coalitional character of *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues*.[995] Fraser, a feminist critical theorist, conceived of counterpublics in a critique of Jürgen Habermas's concept of 'the bourgeois public sphere' that was published in 1990.[996] Habermas first outlined his notion of the bourgeois public sphere in the 1960s, describing it as a discursive arena that developed in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mediating between the private realm of civil society, the market economy, and the family on the one hand, and the public realm of state authorities and political institutions on the other.[997] It consisted of 'private individuals assembled into a public body who as citizens transmit[ted] the needs of bourgeois society to the state', typically through media such as newspapers and literary journals, with the aim of discussing, critiquing, and influencing the state's actions.[998] For Habermas, recuperating the critical function of the bourgeois public sphere, which he claimed had begun to disintegrate under the conditions

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994 Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 139.

995 Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere'; Featherstone, *Solidarity*.

996 Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere'.

See Jürgen Habermas, 'The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)', trans. Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, *New German Critique*, no. 3 (Autumn 1974): 49–55; Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

997 Habermas, 'The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)', 50; Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 31–43.

998 Habermas, 'The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)', 49.

of welfare state mass democracy in the twentieth century, was a vital political project.[999] Critics pointed out, however, that those who could participate in this discursive arena were exclusively white, male, educated, and propertied members of the bourgeoisie.[1000] As Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge put it, 'the bourgeois public sphere exclude[d] substantial life interests' while simultaneously 'claim[ing] to represent society as a whole.'[1001]

The notion of the public sphere as theorised by Habermas was thus not only 'structured by exclusions', to use Rosalyn Deutsche's phrase, but 'by attempts to erase the traces of these exclusions.'[1002] In her critique of Habermas, Fraser contended that 'a plurality of competing publics' had always existed in opposition to the bourgeois public sphere:

> from the beginning, counterpublics contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behaviour and alternative norms of public speech. Bourgeois publics, in turn, excoriated these alternatives and deliberately sought to block broader participation.[1003]

Fraser argued that throughout history, 'subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics.'[1004] Borrowing a term from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Fraser referred to these alternative publics as 'subaltern counterpublics'.[1005] While Spivak was insistent that discursive structures inherited from colonisation meant that 'the subaltern cannot speak'[1006], for Fraser, subaltern counterpublics offered 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated

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[999] Habermas, 54.

[1000] See James Gordon Finlayson and Dafydd Huw Rees, 'Jürgen Habermas', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Uri Nodelman and Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2023 (Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2015), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/habermas/.

[1001] Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xlvi.

[1002] Deutsche, *Evictions*, xiii.

[1003] Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', 61.

In their earlier critique of Habermas, published in German in the early 1970s, Kluge and Negt also used the term counterpublics to describe to these oppositional publics; their focus, however, was limited to the development of a 'proletarian counterpublic sphere' that confronted the bourgeois public sphere on behalf of the working class. Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*, xlvi.

[1004] Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', 67.

[1005] Fraser, 67.

See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 271–313.

[1006] Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', 308.

social groups [could] formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs'.[1007] Fraser emphasised the dialectical character of counterpublics, arguing that they function as 'spaces of withdrawal and regroupment' on the one hand, and 'training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics' on the other.[1008] Fraser gave the example of the myriad journals, bookstores, publishers, galleries, conferences, local meeting places, and other practices and sites of feminist cultural production that flourished in the U.S. between the 1960s and the late 1980s.[1009] Within this 'late-twentieth century U.S. feminist subaltern counterpublic', argued Fraser, feminists invented powerful new ways of describing, critiquing, and contesting gendered oppression, including coining terms such as 'sexism' or 'the double shift,' and developing collective practices such as consciousness-raising.[1010]

Following Fraser, I argue that *La Lucha* helped build and sustain coalitional art and activist counterpublics in the Nuyorican Lower East Side in the mid-1980s, which were rooted in a deep engagement with both conditions in the neighbourhood and wider transnational issues. For the artists and community organisers who had been active in the Loisaida movement since the 1970s, *La Lucha* offered an invaluable opportunity to reclaim a key site in the neighbourhood and build new alliances in the growing struggle against gentrification. This regroupment was vital

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[1007] Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', 67.

In an interview with the poet Leon de Kock, published in 1992, Spivak critiqued a somewhat vague definition of the subaltern that had been taken up in much social theory: 'everybody thinks the subaltern is just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie.' Spivak did not mention Fraser explicitly, but the critique could potentially be applied to the latter's use of the term. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Interview With Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa', interview by Leon de Kock, *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 23, no. 3 (July 1992): 45.

Fraser's broader use of subaltern arguably had more in common with Antonio Gramsci, who used the term 'subaltern social groups' to describe those parts of Italian society, past and present, who had been socially and politically marginalised by the ruling classes, included enslaved people, serfs, peasants, the industrial proletariat, racialised people, and women. Gramsci argued that although the history of subaltern groups was 'necessarily fragmented and episodic', every 'trace of [their] autonomous initiative' was of 'inestimable value' to historians. Antonio Gramsci, *Subaltern Social Groups: A Critical Edition of Prison Notebook 25*, ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg and Marcus E. Green (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 6–7.

For a detailed outline of shifting conceptions of subalternity within the field of postcolonial theory, that includes discussions of both Gramsci's and Spivak's uses of the term, see Meenakshi Thapan, 'Introduction. "Learning to Learn from Below": Understanding Subalternity', *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, no. 28 (2022), https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.7965.

[1008] Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', 67.

On the dialectical nature of counterpublics, see also Michael Warner, 'Publics and Counterpublics', *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (1 January 2002): 50–51, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-1-49.

[1009] Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', 67.

On the importance of alternative cultural forms in the production of counterpublics, see also Eichhorn, *Adjusted Margin*, 81–112.

[1010] Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', 67.

at a moment when, as discussed in Chapter Two, media narratives of gentrification in the Lower East Side often portrayed it as an inevitable, if not desirable, process.[1011] For the women artists and artists of colour who made up the majority of *La Lucha*'s participants, the project also offered a space apart from the constraints of the increasingly depoliticised community mural movement, and the gendered, class-based, and racialised exclusions of the commercial art world. At the same time, through Artmaker's open-ended invitation to 'artists of conviction', through the highly prominent siting of the project in La Plaza Cultural, and through the internationalist themes of the murals themselves, *La Lucha* remained committed to scaling up and reaching ever-larger publics within and beyond the Nuyorican Lower East Side.

Like other counterpublics, *La Lucha* was shaped by relations of solidarity.[1012] In a recent study of the histories and geographies of left internationalism in the twentieth century, the critical geographer David Featherstone describes solidarity as a 'transformative relation' that can reinforce 'existing identities and power relations' while actively constructing new 'relations between places, activists, diverse social groups.'[1013] Featherstone argues that as a practice forged 'from below', solidarity challenges 'assumptions that subaltern groups, those subject to diverse forms of oppression, lack the capacity or interest to construct solidarities.'[1014] Resolutely internationalist, relations of solidarity refuse to stay within the borders of the nation-state, meaning that solidarity is 'constructed through uneven power relations and geographies' that necessitate 'negotiating racialized, gendered and classed spaces of encounter' at different scales, from the local to the global.[1015] Featherstone's emphasis on the uneven power relations that structure solidarity echoes Fraser's insistence that some counterpublics are explicitly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian, while 'even those with democratic and egalitarian intentions are not always above practicing their own modes of informal exclusion and marginalization.'[1016] At its core, Featherstone argues that solidarity is transformative and prefigurative; by 'produc[ing] new ways of configuring political relations and spaces', it can help 'reshap[e] the world in more

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[1011] See, for example, Unger, 'The Lower East Side'.

[1012] On the principles of solidarity that structure counterpublics, see Nancy Fraser, 'Toward a Discourse Ethic of Solidarity', *Praxis International* 5, no. 4 (January 1986): 428; Majewska, *Feminist Antifascism*, 104; Nancy Fraser, 'The Politics of Framing: An Interview with Nancy Fraser', interview by Kate Nash and Vikki Bell, *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 4 (July 2007): 79, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407080097.

See also Fraser, 'Toward a Discourse Ethic of Solidarity', 428; Fraser, 'The Politics of Framing', 79.

[1013] Featherstone, *Solidarity*, 5.

[1014] Featherstone, 5.

[1015] Featherstone, 6.

[1016] Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', 67.

equal terms.'[1017] Similarly, in a discussion of the work of Emma Goldman, Kathy E. Ferguson describes counterpublics as 'multiple, temporal sites of struggle, anchored in concrete material spaces, and capable of enhancing the lives of their participants through the world-making practices of political struggle.'[1018] In this chapter, I foreground the generative, world-making potential of counterpublics of solidarity as I analyse the development, production, and impact of *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues*.

4.3 Artists of conviction: community murals, activist art, and the development of *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues*

In this section, I take a closer look at some of the oppositional art publics that *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues* brought together by examining two political artists groups that shaped the project's development. The public planning meeting for *La Lucha* took place at El Bohío on 7 May 1985. Many artists attended the meeting, joining a smaller group that had assembled at Eva Cockcroft's loft in nearby SoHo a month prior.[1019] After the meeting at El Bohío, artists were invited to submit mural designs on the three themes that had already been identified: gentrification in the Lower East Side; the South African apartheid regime; and U.S. military intervention in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador.[1020] As Cockcroft argued at the time, 'it was an important educational and political statement to link these three struggles and emphasize the fact that they are the same struggle against the same enemy,' namely state-supported racial and colonial capitalism.[1021] As artists presented their designs, two additional themes emerged. Many artists were keen to stress the central role of women, and particularly women of colour, in political struggles across the globe.[1022] Several proposals also engaged with police brutality, specifically the murder of the young Black graffiti writer Michael Stewart, whose

[1017] Featherstone, *Solidarity*, 6, 4.

[1018] Kathy E. Ferguson, 'Anarchist Counterpublics', *New Political Science* 32, no. 2 (June 2010): 198, https://doi.org/10.1080/07393141003722040.

[1019] Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 6.

[1020] Weissman, 6–7.

[1021] Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', Winter 1985, 9.

[1022] As discussed in Chapter One, the long history of women-led organising in the Lower East Side was somewhat obscured in the context of male-dominated community activism in Loisaida in the 1970s. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this particular theme cut across almost all of the other issues that were included in *La Lucha*.

violent death at the hands of New York City Transit Police in September 1983 rocked the Downtown art world.[1023]

The diversity of themes explored in *La Lucha* reflected the heterogeneity of the thirty-eight artists that participated in the project. Over half were women, and as the artist and writer Lucy Lippard noted in her contemporaneous review of the project, their 'ages ranged from teens to fifties, and more than a third were people of color.'[1024] Several were muralists by training or practice, but many worked in other mediums, including painting, graffiti, sculpture, and comics. Most of the artists lived in the Lower East Side; some, such as Maria Domínguez, had lived there for decades, while others, such as Willie Birch and Seth Tobocman, arrived in the 1970s.[1025] Some artists, including Pat Brazill, were newer still, having only arrived in New York in 1985.[1026] The project united artists from several art networks active in the mid-1980s. In addition to the mural collective Artmakers, who initiated *La Lucha* in collaboration with Charas, many artists were members of the sprawling activist art network Political Art Documentation and Distribution (PADD), who had played an important role in two recent artist coalitions: Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America and Art Against Apartheid. These groups were central to *La Lucha*, but they were far from the only artistic communities represented in the project. Cliff Joseph, for example, was a co-founder of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, which protested the absence of Black artists in New York museums.[1027] Karin Batten was a member of the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, formed in 1973 to support the struggle to free Angela Davis.[1028] Seth Tobocman was involved with the squatting

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[1023] Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', Winter 1985, 9–10; Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 52.

On the 15th of September 1983, Stewart was coming home from a bartending shift at the Pyramid Club, a popular East Village nightspot, when he was apprehended by Transit Police for allegedly tagging a subway station; thirty minutes later, officers dropped him off at Bellevue Hospital, hog tied, beaten, and unconscious. Although hospital staff were able to get Stewart breathing again, he slipped into a coma and died thirteen days later, on the 28th of September. See Erik Nielson, '"It Could Have Been Me": The 1983 Death Of A NYC Graffiti Artist', *NPR*, 16 September 2013, https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/09/16/221821224/it-could-have-been-me-the-1983-death-of-a-nyc-graffiti-artist; Chaédria LaBouvier, 'Defacement: Moment, History, and Memory', in *Basquiat's Defacement: The Untold Story*, ed. Chaédria LaBouvier (New York, NY: Guggenheim Museum, 2019), 15–19.

[1024] Lippard, 'Hot Art in the Summertime', 21.

[1025] Charlie 'Isa' Guzman, 'Beyond Walls: A Portrait of Muralist Maria Dominguez', *Centro Voices (Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños)*, 12 February 2016, https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/centrovoices/arts-culture/beyond-walls-portrait-muralist-maria-dominguez; Seth Tobocman, 'Bio', Seth Tobocman, accessed 11 June 2021, https://www.sethtobocman.com/bio.html; Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 30–31.

[1026] Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 48–51.

[1027] Alex Vadukul, 'Cliff Joseph, Artist, Activist and Therapist, Dies at 98', *New York Times*, 4 December 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/04/arts/cliff-joseph-dead.html.

[1028] Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 19.

movement in the Lower East Side and co-founded the radical comics anthology *World War 3 Illustrated*.[1029]

Eva Cockcroft and Lucy Lippard played particularly significant roles in assembling the group of artists that participated in *La Lucha*. Several artists have stated that either Cockcroft or Lippard encouraged them to participate, but the pair's wide-ranging social and artistic networks meant that even without their direct input, news of the project spread rapidly.[1030] A veteran of the community mural movement in the U.S., Cockcroft had been creating, writing on, and talking about murals since the late 1960s, working with mural collectives and organisations in New Jersey, New York, Chile, and Nicaragua.[1031] She was the driving force behind the formation of Artmakers in 1983, and was central to the initiation of *La Lucha* two years later. In 1980, Lippard, who had been writing on feminist and political art since the late 1960s, co-founded PADD, a group whose early members included Gregory Sholette, Elizabeth Kulas, and Jerry Kearns. Having started as an archive of political art, PADD soon became an artist collective that was committed, as Sholette puts it, to theorising and nurturing 'the role of art within a broader movement of progressive, social transformation.'[1032] PADD was closely aligned with the rise of what Lippard called 'activist art' in New York City in the early 1980s.[1033] Activist art, argued Lippard, was 'not a new art form so much as it is a massing of energies, suggesting new ways for artists to connect with the sources of energy in their own experience.'[1034]

As politically engaged artists, Cockcroft and Lippard were friends and collaborators, and the collectives they helped establish were both important parts of what the latter called 'the movement for cultural democracy' in New York in the mid-1980s, of which *La Lucha* was one expression among many.[1035] However, I argue that Artmakers and PADD should be understood as representative of two distinct, but complementary, approaches to politically committed,

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[1029] See Seth Tobocman, *War in the Neighborhood: A Graphic Novel* (New York: Autonomedia, 1999); Peter Kuper and Seth Tobocman, eds., *World War 3 Illustrated: 1979-2014* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2014).

[1030] Cockcroft was of course well known to her fellow muralists in Artmakers, but Keith Christensen recalls meeting her at a conference for activist artists in 1983, while Rikki Asher and Kristin Reed remember seeing Cockcroft present talks on her work with Nicaraguan muralists in 1983 and 1984. Elizabeth 'Betsy' McLindon was told about the project by Lippard. Seth Tobocman was introduced to Cockcroft by Lippard, while Karin Batten knew both Cockcroft and Lippard separately. See Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 19, 21, 37, 41, 49, 63.

[1031] Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art*, 186–88.

[1032] Sholette, 'A Collectography of PAD/D', 23.

[1033] Lucy R. Lippard, 'Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power', in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 341–58.

[1034] Lippard, 341.

[1035] Lippard, 342.

socially engaged artistic production. Artmakers was rooted in an older community arts tradition, which mostly eschewed both alternative and mainstream art worlds to work with grassroots groups in specific locales, while PADD was informed by an emergent and highly networked activist art approach that worked within and beyond existing art spaces. By examining each of these approaches in detail, I aim to understand how the counterpublics that Artmakers and PADD helped foster came together in *La Lucha*, and the ways in which this merging of approaches and audiences shaped the aims, methods, and themes of the project.

4.3.1 Cityarts Workshop and the decline of the community mural movement

In an article published in *Community Murals Magazine* in the winter of 1985, shortly after *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues* was completed, Eva Cockcroft wrote that the project had been borne 'of frustration with the blandness of most currently funded community art', and 'a desire to return to the organic feeling of the early mural movement when the personal conviction and politics of the artists and the aroused communities coincided.'[1036] While Cockcroft remained vague, much of the readership of *Community Murals Magazine* would have understood her comment as a veiled reference to the drastic transformation that Cityarts Workshop, New York's longest running and best known community mural organisation, had undergone in recent years. Indeed, Artmakers, the collective at the core of *La Lucha*, was founded in 1983 by six community muralists who had all previously worked with Cityarts: Cockcroft, Joe Stephenson, Leslie Bender, Maria Domínguez, Willie Birch, and Camille Perrottet.[1037] In order to understand Artmakers's sense of frustration with the community mural movement in New York in the mid-1980s, and the desire for change that motivated the initiation of *La Lucha*, it is useful to compare the earliest days of the movement in the late 1960s and 1970s with the politically and financially constrained situation that faced community muralists in the early 1980s.

Formed in 1968, Cityarts Workshop's first decade was marked by a highly collaborative and politically radical ethos that characterised the broader community mural movement in the U.S. at the time. Ben Keppel describes this movement, which began in Chicago in 1967 with the Organization of Black American Culture's *Wall of Respect* before spreading to other cities throughout the U.S., as 'a refreshing articulation of the democratic spirit and aspirations' of the

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[1036] Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', Winter 1985, 9.

[1037] Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 227n24.

A seventh muralist, Sheila Hamanaka, is listed by Braun-Reinitz and Weissman as being a founding member of Artmakers but does not appear to have participated in *La Lucha*. Hamanaka today is known as a children's book author and illustrator; none of Hamanaka's murals appear in the extensive muralography included at the back of Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, 201–24.

social movements and countercultures that flourished in the U.S. in the late 1960s.[1038] In their seminal insider account of the movement in the U.S., published in 1977, the muralists Eva Cockcroft, James Pitman Weber, and James Cockcroft noted that like the broader community arts movement of which it was a part, the proliferation of community murals in the U.S. overlapped with and supported 'local legal struggles, direct-action movements, self-defense efforts, [and] rising community militancy' in poor and working-class neighbourhoods of colour.[1039] Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft argued that community murals encompassed 'several elements relatively new to art in America'.[1040] They were undertaken by groups of artists working collectively and in collaboration with residents of a neighbourhood, for whom they relied on for 'financial sponsorship, discussion of theme, practical support, inaugural celebrations, and people's protection of the murals.'[1041] Perhaps most importantly, they were often facilitated by women artists and artists of colour, usually from the neighbourhood in which a mural was located.[1042]

In its first decade, Cityarts exemplified community muralism's democratic characteristics. The organisation's first staff members were Susan Caruso Green and James Jannuzzi, two teenagers from the Alfred E. Smith public housing development in the Lower East Side who were hired by Cityarts founder Susan Shapiro Kiok as assistants in the late 1960s.[1043] Beginning in the early 1970s, Cityarts started employing local artists of colour, many of whom were active with other groups in the neighbourhood. Alan Okada and Tomie Arai, for example, were associated with the Asian American cultural and community space Basement Workshop in Chinatown, while the Nuyorican artist Alfredo 'Freddy' Hernandez was a member of Charas and a contributor to *The Quality of Life in Loisaida*.[1044] These 'project directors', as they were then known, collaborated with young residents of the Lower East Side and Chinatown to create murals that highlighted oppressive forces threatening the neighbourhood and celebrated community efforts to resist

[1038] Ben Keppel, 'Introduction: A Historian Reads Toward a People's Art', in *Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*, by Eva Cockcroft, John Pitman Weber, and James Cockcroft (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, [1977] 1998), xxvii.

[1039] Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art*, 18.

[1040] Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft, 10.

[1041] Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft, 11.

[1042] Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft, 11.

[1043] Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 25.

[1044] Ryan Lee Wong, 'Basement Workshop: The Genesis of New York's Asian American Resistance Culture', *Signal: A Journal of International Political Graphics and Culture*, no. 6 (2018): 46.

these forces.[1045] Janet Braun-Reinitz and Jane Weissman argue that during the 1970s, Cityarts muralists

> seized every opportunity to inject politically graphic imagery into what can certainly be called murals of opposition, seeking to raise community awareness to the possibility of social and political change.[1046]

Chi Lai-Arriba-Rise Up! (1974), for example, which was created by Okada, Arai, and Arlan Huang in collaboration with a group of local youth, showed the pressures facing working-class Chinese Americans. As a rat in a bow tie and an octopus draped in the U.S. flag (representing the real estate industry and U.S. capitalism, respectively) threatened to destroy their tenement building, groups of Chinatown residents were shown collectively organising to improve their living and working conditions (Figure 184). In *Wall of Respect for the Working People of Chinatown* (1977), Arai depicted a *loong*, or Chinese dragon, woven through several vignettes depicting the Chinese American labour experience in the U.S. (Figure 185).[1047]

Cityarts 'grew and flourished', as Braun-Reinitz and Weissman put it, 'in the context of local community activism', but the organisation's early murals did more than simply depict activities that were already underway.[1048] As I argued in Chapter One, muralism was an important artistic and spatial practice in Loisaida throughout the 1970s, one that was closely interwoven with other practices, most notably the creation of community gardens. The construction of La Plaza Cultural by Charas, for example, both enabled and was itself facilitated by Hernandez's mural of the same name, which was painted onto a huge wall overlooking the space while construction of the garden was still underway (Figure 186).[1049] For Cityarts, then, the relationship between the artists, the community members with whom they collaborated, and the work's wider audience was closely entwined. As the art critic Brian O'Doherty put it, community murals 'search[ed] not for an audience, but for an arena to display the values of its audience'.[1050] This audience included those who collaborated on a mural's design, those who were engaged in the practices that were often co-constitutive with the creation of a mural (such as a community garden), and those whose physical proximity to a mural's site encouraged a sense of ad-hoc engagement with the

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[1045] Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 18; Kiok, 'Cityarts Workshop', 184.

[1046] Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 17–18.

[1047] Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, 33–34.

[1048] Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, 17.

[1049] Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, 25, 31-32.

[1050] Brian O'Doherty, *Public Art and the Government: A Progress Report* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 1974), 6, http://archive.org/details/publicartgovernm00odoh.

work, with neighbours and passers-by often offering commentary and critique as a mural was painted.[1051] As I discuss later in this chapter, it was community muralism's multivalent engagement with different publics that Artmakers sought to reinvigorate with *La Lucha*.

Community muralism's close relationship with the residents of an area, who acted as collaborators on a mural as well as its primary audience, distinguished the movement of the late 1960s and 1970s from the murals created in the 1930s under the auspices of the New Deal Federal Art Project, initiated by the Roosevelt administration in 1935.[1052] Both movements proliferated during periods of social, political, and economic turmoil in the U.S., and both were undertaken by artists with a commitment to progressive politics.[1053] Like the broader U.S. community arts movement, however, community muralism of the 1970s was rooted in the belief that the community artist's role was to act as a catalyst in a collective process of giving expression to the varied forms of creativity that were inherent to all communities, regardless of their formal training or education.[1054] In contrast, the Federal Art Project was premised on the notion of 'high culture for the masses', a kind of 'trickle-down' cultural policy, in Arlene Goldbard's words, in which murals, while providing employment for artists, were designed to raise the public's spirit and cultural acumen.[1055] In this model, 'bringing art to the people' did not mean painting murals onto crumbling buildings in neighbourhoods that were hardest hit by recession.[1056] Instead, it meant placing murals, typically celebrating American resilience and ingenuity, and often painted in a figurative, narrative style, in public schools, hospitals, housing developments, and government buildings: Ben and Bernarda Bryson Shahn's *Resources of America* (1938) filled the ground floor lobby of the Bronx General Post Office, for example, while Marion Greenwood's *Blueprint for Living* (1940) was installed in the community centre of the Red Hook Houses in Brooklyn (Figs. 187 & 188).

The Federal Art Project murals remained an aesthetic and political touchstone for community muralists working in the 1970s, but the two movements were oriented towards very different

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[1051] Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art*, 75–76.

[1052] Jody Patterson, *Modernism for the Masses: Painters, Politics, and Public Murals in 1930s New York* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 57.

[1053] See Francis V. O'Connor, 'New Deal Murals in New York', *Artforum*, November 1968, 41–42; Patterson, *Modernism for the Masses*, 76; Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art*, 214.

[1054] Arlene Goldbard, 'Postscript to the Past: Notes Toward a History of Community Arts', *High Performance*, Winter 1993, 23.

[1055] Goldbard, 24.

[1056] Jody Patterson, 'The Art of Swinging Left in the 1930s: Modernism, Realism, and the Politics of the Left in the Murals of Stuart Davis', *Art History* 33, no. 1 (February 2010): 99, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.2009.00718.x.

publics.[1057] Steven M. Gelber argued that most of the murals created under the auspices of the Federal Art Project shared the principles of the Roosevelt administration: a 'deep faith in traditional American values of democracy' and an emphasis on hard work, rather than revolutionary political action, as the route to economic prosperity.[1058] Edward Laning's *The Role of the Immigrant in the Industrial Development of America* (1938), for example, which originally hung in the administration building on Ellis Island, depicted different groups of immigrants becoming, in Jane Sherron De Hart's words, '"newly made" Americans' through their participation in railway construction, coal mining, and farming.[1059] New Deal art, insists Gelber, 'was not only to be by and about Americans but also for Americans.'[1060] This emphasis on 'the American people' meant that while subject matter varied depending on location (farm workers appeared frequently in Californian murals, for example, while factory workers proliferated in New York), New Deal murals typically addressed a singular imagined public, emptied of differences between different social groups.

In contrast to this, the community mural movement addressed very different communities in the context of their specific locales. Ushered in by the radical atmosphere of the late 1960s and 1970s, when residents in poor and working-class neighbourhoods of colour across the U.S. were demanding everything from meaningful cultural and political representation to wholesale societal revolution, the community mural movement, argued O'Doherty,

> was carried through in an irrefutable sweep of feeling not by a single artist, but by groups of artists, and not just by artists, but by an entire class, one that is usually far removed from privilege.[1061]

[1057] David Shapiro, review of Toward a People's Art: *The Contemporary Mural Movement*, by Eva Cockcroft, John Weber, and Jim Cockcroft, *Art Journal* 37, no. 4 (June 1978): 358, https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1978.10793457.

[1058] Steven M. Gelber, 'Working to Prosperity: California's New Deal Murals', *California History* 58, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 99, https://doi.org/10.2307/25157905.

[1059] Jane De Hart Mathews, 'Art and Politics in Cold War America', *The American Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (October 1976): 773.

It is fitting that part of Laning's work (which was severely damaged by a storm in the early 1950s) now hangs in the Theodore Roosevelt United States Courthouse in Brooklyn, where, every year, thousands of immigrants are granted U.S. citizenship. See Gary R. Brown, 'Brushstrokes and Pen Strokes: How a Careful Judge Saved an Artistic Treasure', *Judicature* 96, no. 2 (October 2012): 61; Ryan Wong, 'Breathing Free', *Bklynr,* 1 August 2013, https://www.bklynr.com/issue/issue-9/breathing-free/.

[1060] Gelber, 'Working to Prosperity', 103.

[1061] O'Doherty, *Public Art and the Government*, 6.

As a result, Cityarts murals often articulated a much more ambivalent, less idealised relationship towards 'America' than the New Deal murals.[1062] The U.S. flag, for example, appeared in work such as *Chi Lai-Arriba-Rise Up!* (1974) as a negative symbol of the grasping, colonising reach of U.S. capitalism in the late twentieth century (Figure 184).[1063] The mural's trilingual title, and the depiction of a multiracial group rising triumphantly from the top of a tenement building, highlighted the heterogeneity of the Lower East Side and foregrounded the transformative power of coalitional direct action. Similarly, Okada's *Work, Education and Struggle: Seeds for Progressive Change* (1975) depicted solidarity movements of different minority groups in the U.S. and abroad (Figure 189). Without losing sight of what made different communities distinct, Shapiro Kiok argued that Cityarts 'artists tried to show those things that all poor people, working people, and minority groups share in common.'[1064]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given its more oppositional relationship to broader U.S. society, the community mural movement never received the same level of institutional support and funding as New Deal muralism.[1065] For a brief period, Cityarts received federal funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) through The Inner City Mural Programme, which existed between 1970 and 1974 as an offshoot of the NEA's Works of Art in Public Places (WAPP) programme.[1066] During its first decade, WAPP mainly funded large-scale sculptures in spaces such as parks, public plazas, civic centres, and airports; Alexander Calder's monumental *La Grande Vitesse* (1968), for example, was installed outside City Hall in Grand Rapids, Michigan (Figure 190).[1067] Projects like this exemplified what the art historian Miwon Kwon calls the 'art-in-public-places paradigm—modernist abstract sculptures that were often enlarged replicas of

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[1062] These murals arguably had more in common with those of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, the *tres grandes* of Mexican muralism, who influenced both New Deal muralists and the later community mural movement. As Anna Indya-Lòpez points out, while the trio's high-profile murals in the U.S. in the 1930s were celebrated artistically, their commitment to a revolutionary Mexican cultural nationalism, and their ambivalence towards the U.S., was often received with hostility:

> Siqueiros's *Tropical America* (1932) in Los Angeles was painted over because of its critique of U.S. imperialism, conservative critics condemned Orozco's cycle at Dartmouth College (1932-1934) as a foreign attack on U.S. culture, and Rivera's RCA Building mural in New York was intentionally destroyed, in part because of its inclusion of a portrait of Lenin.

Anna Indych-López, *Muralism Without Walls: Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927-1940* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 157.

[1063] As discussed in the next part of this chapter, an image of an octopus draped in the U.S. flag as a critique of American capitalism also featured in Noel Kunz's *Octopus*.

[1064] Kiok, 'Cityarts Workshop', 183.

[1065] Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art*, 214, 223.

[1066] O'Doherty, *Public Art and the Government*, 2, 4.

[1067] O'Doherty, 5.

works normally found in museums and galleries', typically undertaken by internationally established male artists.[1068] Community murals did not align with the 'art-in-public-places' model; nor could they be situated within what Kwon calls the 'art-as-public-spaces' model that emerged in the late 1970s, in which public art was expected to engage in closer dialogue with its material surroundings and offer some kind of tangible 'use' to the public, such as providing shade or seating.[1069] Work in this vein includes Scott Burton's curved balustrades and benches, installed in the lobby of the Wiesner Arts and Media Building at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1985 (Figure 191).[1070]

In 1974, the Inner City Mural programme was reabsorbed back into the wider NEA Art in Public Places programme; a few years later, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, a federal work-relief programme that indirectly funded many community murals in the second half of the 1970s, was also terminated.[1071] As the already limited funding for community murals dried up, even a well-established organisation like Cityarts struggled with the pressure exerted by the NEA and remaining public funders, such as the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA).[1072] The mural historian Timothy W. Drescher describes this constrained atmosphere:

> In the 1980s, funders' desire to avoid conflict or criticism in murals and conflict because of them began to dominate the mural-creating process. The holders of the purse strings also wanted projects that could last longer than with mere paint. These desires combined to exert pressure for more universal, less specific topics and for more permanent media.[1073]

During its first decade, Cityarts had operated as something akin to an artists' cooperative, comprising a small but committed pool of artists who developed both their community organising and artistic skills over several years, and always ensured that new mural opportunities were distributed fairly amongst the group.[1074] By the early 1980s, the organisation faced increased pressure to tone down the political content of its murals and broaden its roster of artists.

[1068] Kwon, *One Place after Another*, 60.

[1069] Kwon, 60.

[1070] Kwon, 69–70.

[1071] O'Doherty, *Public Art and the Government*, 6; Timothy W. Drescher, 'Afterword: The Next Two Decades', in *Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*, by Eva Cockcroft, John Pitman Weber, and James Cockcroft (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, [1977] 1998), 282–83.

[1072] Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 85.

[1073] Timothy W. Drescher, introduction to *On the Wall: Four Decades of Community Murals in New York City*, by Janet Braun-Reinitz and Jane Weissman (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), xvi.

[1074] Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 85.

Kathleen Gupta, Cityarts director between 1979 and 1985, recalls that in 1983, the NYSCA 'told us very clearly that they didn't like the aesthetics of what they were seeing and were unhappy that we used such a limited group of artists.'[1075]

For experienced Cityarts muralists, these demands, coupled with a new policy in which the NYSCA would only fund individual murals (rather than providing core funding for the organisation), meant that that their opportunities to create murals gradually dwindled, and the themes that they could explore in their work became increasingly constrained. Cityarts' long-running practice of collaborating with community groups fell by the wayside in favour of what Gupta calls 'design competitions' that mostly eschewed explicitly political content.[1076] Braun-Reinitz and Weissman note that many of the artists who took part in these competitions 'had never worked as muralists or in community settings prior to their Cityarts association, and few would ever paint other community murals.'[1077] It was in this constrained context that, in June 1983, Eva Cockcroft, Joe Stephenson, Leslie Bender, Maria Domínguez, Willie Birch, and Camille Perrottet broke away and formed Artmakers. As Stephenson recalls, it was Cockcroft who initially suggested that the muralists form their own organisation, 'since we had more clout as a group than as individuals.'[1078] In a 1984 letter to *Community Murals Magazine*, Cockcroft introduced Artmakers, describing it as 'a new collaborative' artist collective made up of experienced community muralists 'from varied artistic and ethnic backgrounds', who were committed 'to the creation of high quality, public art relevant to the lives and work of people in their communities'.[1079]

Artmakers sought to reinstate the generative relationship between artists, activists, and local residents which had been at the heart of community muralism in New York since the late 1960s, but had diminished in recent years.[1080] This dwindling sense of solidarity between community muralists and the neighbourhoods in which they worked had significant implications in the early 1980s.[1081] As the city slowly recovered from the fiscal crisis of the previous decade, and a new political and economic optimism took hold in certain parts of New York, art in public places

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[1075] Kathleen Gupta, quoted in Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, 85.

[1076] Kathleen Gupta, quoted in Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, 85.

[1077] Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, 85–87.

[1078] Joe Stephenson, quoted in Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, 87.

[1079] Eva Cockcroft, Letter to Community Murals Magazine (Winter 1984), 3, quoted in Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, 87.

[1080] Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art*, 236.

[1081] Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft, 236.

played an important role in the processes that were beginning to reshape the city.[1082] As Rosalyn Deutsche put it:

> It is not difficult to understand why an increase in public art commissions accompanied New York's ascendancy. As a practice within the built environment, public art participates in the production of meanings, uses, and forms for the city. In this capacity, it can help secure consent to redevelopment and to the restructuring that constitutes the historical form of advanced capitalist urbanization.[1083]

In the Nuyorican Lower East Side, this restructuring took the form of gentrification, and the social, cultural, and spatial displacement that it caused.[1084] Seeking to revive the community-oriented approach to muralism that Cityarts had pioneered, Artmakers were also committed to supporting social and political struggles in the neighbourhood through collaboration with Loisaida residents and activist groups such as Charas. This approach found its clearest and most ambitious expression in *La Lucha*, the collective's first major artistic and political statement.

4.3.2 PADD and rise of activist art

With *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues*, Artmakers sought to reinvigorate a form of community muralism that harkened back to the movement's heyday in the 1970s (albeit on a much more ambitious scale than anything ever attempted by Cityarts Workshop). However, the political themes that preoccupied Eva Cockcroft and her fellow muralists—from gentrification to apartheid—were decidedly contemporary, and were the focus of many artists and activists in New York in the first half of the 1980s. Indeed, while the seasoned muralists of Artmakers comprised both the artistic core of *La Lucha* and its driving force, the project was successful precisely because it was able to tap into the artistic and organisational energy of the city's broader political art publics. In order to better understand *La Lucha*'s engagement with the artists' solidarity movements that were active in New York in the mid-1980s, it is vital to examine the work of Political Art Documentation and Distribution (PADD), a sprawling collective of political artists that counted several *La Lucha* participants, including Cockcroft, amongst its number. Not only were gentrification, apartheid, and U.S. foreign intervention key thematic and political concerns for PADD, but so was the knottier question, also a preoccupation of many

[1082] Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 89.

[1083] Deutsche, *Evictions*, 56.

[1084] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 138.

community muralists, of the role that art could play in bringing about emancipatory social change.

In the mid-1980s, PADD was a key proponent of what Lucy Lippard called activist art.[1085] Instigated by Lippard in 1979, and conceived of initially as an archive of political art, PADD was formalised in 1980 as an activist-oriented 'progressive artists' resource and networking organization seeking to provide artists with an organized relationship to society and demonstrate the political effectiveness of image making.'[1086] Throughout the decade, PADD, whose early members included the writers Gregory Sholette and Elizabeth Kulas, the painter Jerry Kearns, and a core group of 15 to 20 other participants, promoted political practices and discourses through exhibitions, workshops, public forums, and a newsletter called *Upfront*.[1087] Alan W. Moore has described PADD as 'the inheritor of a lineage of direct political activism', and much of their work involved the production of 'streetworks': placards, posters, and spray-painted stencils, which were conceptualised as a form of agit-prop in the street.[1088] The aim of the group, argues Sholette, was to develop

> an autonomous Left cultural sphere that would operate apart from both the commercial market and mainstream museums and not-for-profit spaces by networking non-art political activists and socially engaged artists and artists' collectives in the U.S., and eventually abroad.[1089]

PADD was, in Moore's words, 'an inclusive organization, with a very general aesthetic program', which rarely employed traditional art practices (such as painting or sculpture), and mostly 'eschewed art institutions and commercial galleries'.[1090] As Lippard put it, this was 'an art that reaches out as well as in', whose practitioners, drawn from avant-garde, political, and community art circles, sought to be 'synthesizers as well as catalysts', combining practice and theory 'in a spirit of multiplicity and integration, rather than one of narrowing choices'.[1091]

[1085] For a longer discussion of U.S. activist art practices in the mid-1980s, see Lippard, 'Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power'.

[1086] Ault, 'Chronology', 61.

See also Moore, *Art Gangs*, 116–20.

[1087] Ault, 'Chronology', 61.

[1088] Moore, *Art Gangs*, 110.

[1089] Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 48.

[1090] Moore, *Art Gangs*, 140.

[1091] Lippard, 'Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power', 342.

Two of the most ambitious projects that PADD participated in during its eight-year lifespan were Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America (1984) and Art Against Apartheid (1984).[1092] Artists Call grew out of the Central American solidarity movement in the U.S., which, in the mid-1980s, mobilised over 100,000 U.S. citizens in protest against military intervention in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, whose revolutionary governments were targets of the Reagan administration's fervent anti-communist foreign policies.[1093] Two years in the making, and led by Latin American organisers, Artists Call encompassed exhibitions and performances across the U.S. throughout January 1984; in New York, over a thousand artists, musicians, and writers participated in events at thirty-one different venues.[1094] A third of *La Lucha*'s artists took part in Artists Call, and almost all of the founders of Artmakers.[1095] Moore suggests that Artists Call's most important outcome was the close relationship that developed between 'politically inclined' white and Latine artists in the U.S. and artists in exile from Latin America.[1096] The anti-apartheid movement also had a sizeable presence in the U.S. in the mid-1980s, and Art Against Apartheid was formed in 1983 as 'an independent, multiracial and politically diverse coalition' of U.S.-based artists, committed to 'speak[ing] out, through our art, against institutionalized racial discrimination in South Africa'.[1097] A year of organising culminated in a month-long series of events across New York in October 1984, which brought together artists from South Africa and

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[1092] Moore, *Art Gangs*, 120, 123; Sholette, 'A Collectography of PAD/D', 31.

PADD wound down its activities around 1988. By this point, writes Sholette, 'all that remained of the group's initial agenda was its archives of political art today housed at the Museum of Modern Art.' Gregory Sholette, 'News from Nowhere: Activist Art and after: A Report from New York City', *Third Text* 13, no. 45 (Winter 1998): 56, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528829808576764.

[1093] Steve Striffler, *Solidarity: Latin America and the US Left in the Era of Human Rights* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 125.

For a longer history of transnational solidarity movements with Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, see also Featherstone, *Solidarity*, 131–57.

[1094] For a longer history of Artists Call, see Moore, *Art Gangs*, 120–24.

[1095] It would appear that Maria Domínguez and Sheila Hamanaka did not take part in Artists Call.

[1096] Moore, *Art Gangs*, 123.

A longer discussion of Artists Call is beyond the scope of this chapter, but a recent exhibition and accompanying catalogue offers an in-depth examination of the project, combining first-hand accounts with retrospective analysis and a large amount of primary material. See Erina Duganne and Abigail Satinsky, eds., *Art for the Future: Artists Call and Central American Solidarities* (Los Angeles, CA and Medford, MA: Inventory Press and Tufts University Art Galleries, 2022).

[1097] Gale Jackson, 'Art Against Apartheid Newsletter', October 1984, Brooklynites Against Apartheid (Tom Keough and Connie Norgren collection), Michigan State University Libraries Special Collections, https://africanactivist.msu.edu/document_metadata.php?objectid=210-808-9123.

See also Gale P. Jackson, 'Art Against Apartheid: The Art of Resistance', *Upfront: A Publication of PADD (Political Art Documentation and Distribution)*, Fall 1984, 6.

For a longer history of the anti-apartheid movement in the U.S., see Donald R. Culverson, 'The Politics of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in the United States, 1969–1986', *Political Science Quarterly* 111, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 127–49, https://doi.org/10.2307/2151931.

the U.S., including several PADD and *La Lucha* participants.[1098] In an Art Against Apartheid anthology published in 1986, Lippard argued that '[t]ogether, Art Against Apartheid and Artists Call mark the high point of artists' solidarity' since the more radical period of the late 1960s and early 1970s.[1099]

While committed to fostering transnational activist art networks, PADD also remained attentive to conditions closer to home. Like many who lived and worked in the Lower East Side, PADD members experienced what Christopher Mele calls 'a frenzy of rampant speculation' that swept through the neighbourhood in the early 1980s.[1100] Seeking to build a coalition that could organise against gentrification, and 'a viable network of politically sympathetic exhibition outlets', in May 1983, a PADD subcommittee organised *Not for Sale: A Project Against Gentrification* at ABC No Rio and El Bohío (where they briefly rented office space in the early 1980s).[1101] In a letter sent out to housing activists, commercial organisations, and galleries to garner support for the project, the *Not for Sale* committee stated that their aim was to 'make visible the ways that displacement and the inevitable process of gentrification affects neighborhoods', to interrogate the role of art in this process, and to establish ways of 'preserv[ing] communities in which people of all incomes and backgrounds can live' (Figure 192). The project contained an implicit critique of the East Village scene, which many in PADD saw as playing an important but underacknowledged role in fuelling gentrification. Jerry Kearns, for example, implored artists to acknowledge that 'we are being used to reshape this city in a very specific kind of way'[1102], while a flyer announcing the follow-up to *Not for Sale* in 1984 addressed artists who were 'sick of […] art market hype about Lower East Side art', 'graffiti on canvas', 'neo-expressionism', 'unfocused angst', and 'skyrocketing rents' (Figure 193).

Over two hundred artworks were shown in *Not for Sale*, including work by PADD members and *La Lucha* artists such as Keith Christensen, Eva Cockcroft, and Leslie Bender (Figs. 194-196). The project also included the installation of streetworks in the area around El Bohío and ABC No Rio, as well as film screenings and performances (Figure 197). While the project was praised

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[1098] These included Susan Ortega, Eva Cockcroft, Seth Tobocman, Cliff Joseph, Noah Jemison, and Robin Michals. See Gale Jackson and Susan Sherman, 'Contributors', *IKON: Art Against Apartheid: Works for Freedom*, no. 5/6 (Winter/Summer 1986): 176–83.

[1099] Lucy R. Lippard, 'Not So Far From South Africa: Visual Art Against Apartheid', *IKON: Art Against Apartheid: Works for Freedom*, no. 5/6 (Winter/Summer 1986): 171.

[1100] Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 251.

[1101] Moore, *Art Gangs*, 118.

[1102] Quoted in Stuart Garber, 'From Soweto to Loisaida: The Art of Sue Coe and Anton Van Dalen', *Upfront: A Publication of PADD (Political Art Documentation and Distribution)*, Fall 1984, 12.

by some critics, such as the *Village Voice*'s Richard Goldstein, who wrote that *Not for Sale* 'confirms the emergence of Charas [El Bohío] as one of the city's most eclectic alternative spaces', others were more negative.[1103] Writing in *New York Beat* in November 1983, for example, Carlo McCormick dismissed *Not for Sale*, arguing that '[g]entrification isn't the issue, it's the reality. This became apparent to all, save misdirected leftists like Lucy Lippard, with the gentrification show at El Bohío this summer.'[1104] As discussed in Chapter Three, McCormick was closely associated with the East Village scene, and his dismissal *Not for Sale* can be read as a rebuttal to critiques of that scene made by groups such as PADD. Even so, McCormick highlighted a significant gulf between those who participated in the project and the communities that El Bohío in particular sought to serve:

> the show included not the Ukrainians or Jews or Italians or Puerto Ricans, who have been long-time residents of the neighbourhood, but the young, upwardly mobile white artists who have lived in the community only a year or two longer than those now moving in.[1105]

In a letter to the editor published in the next issue of *New York Beat*, the *Not for Sale* committee criticised what they called the 'underlying texture of resignation' in McCormick's article, insisting that their project initiated a 'dialogue which could result in a future coalition between the community, the new galleries, and the artists.'[1106] Nevertheless, McCormick's critique chimed with their own sense of dissatisfaction with the project. As Gregory Sholette recalls:

> New to the idea of curating and politically opposed to imposing a selection process on participating artists, virtually anyone with an interest in the exhibition was included. The result was that most of the entries were disappointingly unrelated to the issue of economic and cultural displacement[.][1107]

Emphasising the tension between the project's ambitious aim and its more ambivalent realisation, in a post-exhibition report, Eileen Whalen criticised what she saw as fellow PADD members' 'attitude of disrespect and [hostility] towards Charas' and the 'unnecessary strain' this

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[1103] Richard Goldstein, 'Art Beat: Gentrifexpressionism', *Village Voice*, 14 June 1983, 37.

[1104] Carlo McCormick, 'The Lower East Side Art Boom', *New York Beat*, November 1983, 19.

Lippard was not a member of the committee that organised *Not for Sale*, but was arguably PADD's most high-profile member, and had written a long article outlining the project in the *Village Voice* earlier in the summer.

See Lucy R. Lippard, 'Too Close to Home', *Village Voice*, 14 June 1983, 94–95.

[1105] McCormick, 'The Lower East Side Art Boom', 19.

[1106] Not for Sale Committee, 'Letter to the Editor', *New York Beat*, December 1983, 7.

[1107] Sholette, 'A Collectography of PAD/D', 31.

placed on relations between the two groups.[1108] Whalen singled Sholette out for criticism, insisting that he had been obstructive and 'unprincipled' throughout the process, 'until the opening when he returned to his usual constructive self.'[1109]

A follow-up to *Not for Sale*, entitled *Out of Place: Art for the Evicted*, which took place in the spring of 1984, sought to address some of these issues. Rather than showing work in a gallery, the *Not for Sale* committee invited artists to produce anti-gentrification streetworks that could be pasted onto four 'street galleries' around the Lower East Side; these were actually derelict buildings, whose fictional names directly mocked the 'brave new art boom' in the East Village[1110]: The Discount Salon, Another Gallery, The Leona Helmsley Gallery, and The Guggenheim Downtown (Figs. 198 & 199).[1111] The group asked participating artists to produce twenty copies of their work, and continually replaced the posters as they 'disappear[ed] beneath layers of other street broadsides'.[1112] 'Sometime in late May of 1984', writes Sholette, 'we prematurely ran out of replacements and the exhibition came to an end.' Like the earlier project, the members of the *Not for Sale* committee had mixed feelings about *Out of Place*. Some praised the project as having attracted audiences that did not go to gallery shows, and noted the increased support from local community organisers, while others argued that *Out of Place* continued to exacerbate the very problem it sought to contest.[1113] At a public conversation held in May 1984 (and reprinted in the Fall 1984 issue of *Upfront*), the *Not for Sale* committee announced its dissolution, but not before Sholette reminded the audience of the important role that artists could play in creating 'counter text(s) to what is happening on the Lower East Side.'[1114]

As one such 'counter text', it is striking that *La Lucha* closely resembled an idea that was suggested but never undertaken by the *Not for Sale* committee: the creation of 'a community park/sculpture garden', where artists and residents could 'create sculptures, monuments,

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[1108] Eileen Whalen, 'Analysis of NOT FOR SALE and CHARAS Relationship', 1983, 1, I.1667-I.1672, Political Art Documentation/Distribution Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[1109] Whalen, 1.

[1110] Hoban, *Basquiat*, 207.

[1111] Leona Helmsley, alongside her husband Harry, was a real estate entrepreneur with significant holdings in the Lower East Side. In 1992, almost a decade after *Art for the Evicted*, a branch of the Guggenheim Museum would open in SoHo, in Downtown Manhattan. See Sholette, 'A Collectography of PAD/D', 32.

[1112] Sholette, 32.

On the role played by xeroxed posters, handbills, and other mediums in shaping the highly discursive character of the Lower East Side's streets, see Eichhorn, *Adjusted Margin*, 93.

[1113] Stuart Garber, 'Where Goes the Neighbourhood? Not for Sale, the East Village Art Scene, and the Lower East Side', *Upfront: A Publication of PADD (Political Art Documentation and Distribution)*, Fall 1984.

[1114] Quoted in Garber, 16.

banners, etc., about community issues' and 'the history and culture of the LES.'[1115] The project offered a productive synthesis of both Cityarts-style community muralism and PADD's more innovative approach to politicised cultural production. By building on Cityarts' long relationship with groups such as Charas and Adopt-a-Building, the veteran muralists of Artmakers were able to move away from PADD's self-conscious and often fraught attempts to integrate its work with that of existing community organisers in the Lower East Side. However, by tapping into the expansive activist art publics that PADD helped nurture in the early 1980s, *La Lucha* could embrace a transnational politics of solidarity that connected the struggle against displacement in Loisaida with the struggle for freedom in South Africa and Central America. 'Police killings in Pretoria, death squads in El Salvador, gentrification in Manhattan, and Star Wars "defense screens" are interrelated', wrote Lippard and Kearns in *Upfront* in late 1985[1116], around the same time that Cockcroft highlighted in *Community Murals Magazine* that the struggle against gentrification, apartheid, and U.S. militarism was 'the same struggle against the same enemy'.[1117] With *La Lucha*, Cockcroft and Artmakers sought to give expression to these entangled struggles through a highly collaborative project that could reimagine and transform a once-vital social, artistic, and political space in the Nuyorican Lower East Side.

4.4 'Supportive of each other': the production of *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues* in La Plaza Cultural

In this section, by discussing the production of two murals in detail, I interrogate some of the many different Loisaida publics that *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues* was in dialogue with. As the spring of 1985 gave way to one of the hottest and muggiest summers in New York City in years, Artmakers and Charas prepared to begin work. They reached out to the city's art and activist communities, raising around $3500 dollars to cover insurance, scaffolding, and administrative costs.[1118] Charas's Chino García worked with Adopt-a-Building to secure permission from building owners to paint on the walls overlooking La Plaza Cultural.[1119] Paint

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[1115] Not for Sale Committee, 'The Lower East Side Is STILL NOT FOR SALE', *Upfront: A Publication of Political Art Documentation/Distribution*, Winter 1984, 29.

Cockcroft stated that *La Lucha* was also inspired by the creation of the Balmy Alley murals in 1984, which covered an entire block in San Francisco's predominantly Mexican American Mission District with murals on a range of political themes, including celebrations of Central American indigenous culture and condemnations of U.S. military intervention in the region. Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', Winter 1985, 9.

[1116] Jerry Kearns and Lucy R. Lippard, 'With RR in The White House and Political Art in the Museums, What Next?', *Upfront: A Publication of PADD (Political Art Documentation and Distribution)*, Fall 1985, 7.

[1117] Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', Winter 1985, 9.

[1118] Cockcroft, 9.

[1119] Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 5.

and brushes were provided by Materials for the Arts, a programme of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs that collected donations of surplus supplies and redistributed them to arts organisations.[1120] The muralists themselves donated their time and labour, working for free in order to avoid the bureaucratic constraints and delays that accompanied publicly-funded mural projects, while ensuring that they would not have to compromise over the work's political content.[1121] For these artists, *La Lucha* offered a space away from both the bureaucratic constraints of the community mural movement and the profit-driven and highly exclusionary commercial gallery system. Keith Christensen, for example, recalls that the *La Lucha* artists 'were idealists, open to friendships, committed to the struggle against the right wing political direction of the country and supportive of each other.'[1122] Charas, meanwhile, gained powerful new allies in their struggle to claim and transform the neighbourhood's dilapidated spaces, work that took on an increased urgency in the mid-1980s as the gentrification threatened to reverse the gains of the previous decade.

La Lucha thus offered a space where existing art and activist counterpublics in the Lower East Side could be consolidated and members of different social groups could, in Nancy Fraser's words, 'formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs'.[1123] At the same time, from its earliest stages, the project was orientated towards wider publics, from Artmaker's open-ended solicitation of 'artists of conviction' through to the transnational themes of the murals themselves. What is unclear from existing accounts of *La Lucha*, however, is what role, if any, the wider community in Loisaida played in the project, particularly long-term working-class and low-income residents who were vulnerable to displacement but were not necessarily involved with local art or activist projects. Unlike the murals undertaken by Cityarts in the 1970s, Artmakers did not collaborate directly with groups of local youth to design and paint *La Lucha*. Eva Cockcroft noted that '[d]esign proposals were submitted and approved by a committee composed of Artmakers, Charas, and other concerned community people,' while Janet Braun-Reinitz and Jane Weissman insist that '*La Lucha* united several neighborhood constituencies: Artmakers, Charas and other local organizations, artists, community gardeners, and residents who used the park'.[1124] In these accounts, however, non-art, non-activist Loisaida

[1120] Additional materials were donated by local art supply companies, including Golden Artist Colors and Amsterdam Colorworks. Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', Winter 1985, 9.

[1121] Cockcroft, 9.

[1122] Quoted in Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 21.

[1123] Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', 67.

[1124] Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', Winter 1985, 9; Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 91.

residents are alluded to, but their specific participation in the project remains ambiguous, and Charas is positioned as the primary representative of 'the community'. Similarly, it is unclear from these accounts exactly who was on the mural selection committee, how those who weren't members of Artmakers or Charas were recruited, nor exactly how the committee made its final decisions.

This is not to suggest that other Loisaida residents did not engage with *La Lucha*, particularly once Artmakers and the other muralists started painting in July 1985. Braun-Reinitz and Weissman note that the artists 'enlisted the help of family, friends, and neighbors' in cleaning up La Plaza Cultural each day before painting commenced, and several artists sought out young volunteers as assistants in the painting process, often on an ad-hoc basis.[1125] Furthermore, as a large-scale mural project involving tens of artists, and taking place in a prominent and culturally significant site in Loisaida, *La Lucha* attracted the attention of those who lived and worked nearby, who offered support, comments, and critiques as work progressed. In order to understand the ways in which *La Lucha* both facilitated and was shaped by a mixture of different encounters between different Loisaida publics, in this section I analyse the production and reception of two murals in depth. The first is the project's largest mural, also known as *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues*, but referred to here as 'the collective mural' to avoid confusion (Figure 200). I argue that through a combination of its imagery, its size, and its prominent position, the collective mural addressed several constituencies in Loisaida, inviting them to enter La Plaza Cultural and recognise themselves and/or their practices within the work. The second mural is *The Last Judgement* by Robin Michals and Kristen Reed (Figure 201). I argue that the work's subject matter and its placement facilitated a series of planned and unplanned interactions between the artists, their neighbours, and passers-by that influenced its final form.

4.4.1 Visions of past present, and future: the collective mural

Measuring nine metres high by thirteen metres wide, *La Lucha*'s collective mural occupied three-quarters of the largest wall overlooking La Plaza Cultural. Its overarching theme was gentrification in Loisaida. Cockcroft directed the work, and was responsible for the crystal ball image at its centre, but the final design was decided collectively by the twelve artists who collaborated on the mural (several of whom also created individual murals elsewhere in the garden).[1126] The mural no longer exists, having been painted over in the 1990s, but photographs

[1125] Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 93.

See also Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 27, 33.

[1126] Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', Winter 1985, 10.

by Cockcroft and Camille Perrottet show what it would have looked like shortly after completion (Figs. 200, 202-204).[1127] The collective mural's left-hand side emphasised the class-based and racialised violence of displacement: an unhoused woman of colour is shown sheltering underneath an umbrella with her two young children and their dog, while a parent and their child are forcefully evicted from their home by a shadowy uniformed figure (Figure 202). Above these vignettes, which were painted by Keith Christensen, Marguerite Bunyan, and Judith Quinn, another young family cowers on a fire escape as a wrecking ball demolishes their tenement. The crane from which the wrecking ball swings protrudes from a shark-like vehicle seen near the bottom of the mural (Figure 203). Painted by Christensen, this vehicle was based on an 'evil bulldozer-looking machine' known as the 'gentrificator' that Joe Stephenson designed.[1128] The gentrificator is driven by a grimacing octopus-like creature whose tentacles tightly grip several tenements. The creature's expensive-looking car and the fedora that obscures its face marks it out as one of the many property speculators who were flooding the neighbourhood in the mid-1980s. A small group of protesters block the creature's path, holding tiny placards that read 'STOP GENTRIFICATION.'[1129]

Where the left-hand side of the mural depicted the bleak realities of gentrification, the right-hand side focused on the transformative practices that the Loisaida movement utilised in their struggle against displacement. A geodesic dome, a wind turbine, and a solar panel are visible near the top

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[1127] Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 33.

[1128] Keith Christensen, quoted in Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 16.

[1129] The figure of the octopus was used as an antisemitic trope during the twentieth century, most notably in a Nazi propaganda poster created by the German cartoonist Seppla (Josef Plank) during the Second World War. Although it is important to keep this disturbing usage in mind, especially given the Lower East Side's Jewish history, the historian David Feldman has recently argued that the figure is not inherently antisemitic:

> When the octopus is used in connection with [antisemitism], it doesn't appear on its own, the octopus appears straddling the globe or straddling a country with a Star of David emblazoned on its body or with the head of a known Jewish figure.

David Feldman, quoted in Reuters Fact Check, 'Fact Check: Misleading Antisemitic Claims Made about BBC University Challenge Team', *Reuters*, 24 November 2023, https://www.reuters.com/fact-check/misleading-antisemitic-claims-made-about-bbc-university-challenge-team-2023-11-24/.

Neither of Feldman's examples apply to the depictions of the octopus in either this mural or in Noel Kunz's *Octopus*, which showed the animal draped in the U.S. flag. In these and in earlier murals, such as *Chi Lai-Arriba-Rise Up!* (1974), the octopus was used to symbolise the greed of property speculation in the Lower East Side and critique the predatory nature of U.S. corporate capitalism more broadly.

On the image of the octopus in nineteenth and twentieth century American culture, see also Donald Pizer, 'A Note on S. Behrman as a Jew in Frank Norris's "The Octopus"', *Studies in American Naturalism* 6, no. 1 (2011): 88–91; Regina Lee Blaszczyk, 'The Octopus Transformed: Big Business and American Culture', *Reviews in American History* 28, no. 1 (2000): 69–78; Michael Lundblad, 'The Octopus and the Corporation: Monstrous Animality in Norris, Spencer, and Carnegie', in *The Birth of a Jungle: Animality in Progressive-Era U.S. Literature and Culture* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 77–91; Paul Stangl, 'Geographic and Discursive Wanderings of San Francisco's "Evil" Octopuses', *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 18, no. 3 (15 September 2016): 343–71, https://doi.org/10.5325/intelitestud.18.3.0343.

of the mural in a photograph by Perrottet (Figure 204). Painted by Stephenson, these objects represent experiments in alternative technology developed by Charas, the Eleventh Street Movement, and Adopt-a-Building throughout the 1970s to provide affordable, renewable energy to the neighbourhood. Just below this, a group of figures, painted by Etienne Li, are shown homesteading an abandoned tenement; this long-running practice was still ongoing in the early 1980s, but with nowhere near the same energy as in the previous decade.[1130] Below the homesteaders, Li painted a community centre, a reference to nearby El Bohío, which had recently been granted a fifteen-year lease by the city.[1131] Near the bottom of the mural, an older resident, painted by Rikki Asher, shops at a stall selling fruit and vegetables. In time, farmers markets like these would become synonymous with the consumption habits of gentrification's affluent newcomers, but in 1985 they were a distant dream in a neighbourhood with few places to access fresh, affordable produce.[1132] To the right of the homesteaders, two figures on a hanging rig are shown working on the mural that occupied this wall before *La Lucha*: Freddy Hernandez's *La Plaza Cultural Mural*, which was created as a Cityarts project in 1977, and was painted over with waterproofing tar by the building owner in 1982.[1133] It is difficult to tell where the depiction of one activity ends and another begins, highlighting the closely related nature of these different practices in Loisaida.

Cockcroft and the other muralists arranged these glimpses of Loisaida's past, present, and future around an image of a large crystal ball that dominated the centre of the collective mural. In Cockcroft's photograph of the work, the viewer's eye is continually drawn towards this ball, which is held aloft by a pair of outstretched arms extending up from the bottom edge of the mural (Figure 200). The face reflected in the surface of the ball is that of what appears to be a Black woman, wearing a hard hat, who holds the ball up in front of her (Figure 203). This figure and the small group of people assembled behind her, are meant to represent the imagined viewers of the mural, reflected in the surface of the crystal ball. Alluding perhaps to the heterogeneous demographics of *La Lucha* itself, at least three of these five figures appear to be women, while at least two are people of colour. Three of the figures wear hard hats, and one holds up a placard on which the words 'HOUSING NOW' can be made out. These figures gaze

[1130] Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 206–8.

[1131] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 130–38.

[1132] Pascale Joassart-Marcelli, 'How Farmers Markets and Food Trucks Became a Beachhead for Gentrification', *In These Times*, 16 October 2021, https://inthesetimes.com/article/how-farmers-markets-and-food-trucks-became-a-beachhead-for-gentrification.

[1133] Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 32–33.

into the centre of the crystal ball, which shows a vision of La Plaza Cultural as a utopian space, an oasis of lush green vegetation flanked by soaring buildings, in which a circle of young people dance, seemingly liberated from the everyday struggle for survival in Loisaida.[1134] By highlighting both the reflective and transparent qualities of its surface, the image of the crystal ball layers present and future visions of Loisaida on top of one another.

Perrottet's photograph of the artists working from a scaffold gives a good sense of the vast scale of the collective mural (Figure 205). Another photograph by Perrottet offers a view of *La Lucha* as it would have looked from outside La Plaza Cultural, on the street near the corner of Avenue C and East Ninth Street (Figure 206). Apart from the garden's sparse foliage, the smaller murals that shared wall space with the collective mural are visible through a chain link fence running parallel to the street. In an article published in *Community Murals Magazine*s in December 1985, Cockcroft argued that the principle behind the placement of the murals 'was to have all of the different themes visible from each viewpoint', and this is certainly true of the perspective offered by Perrottet's photograph, which includes Karin Batten's image of a Sandinista-run school in Nicaragua, Keith Christensen's abstract portrayal of the 'roots' of community organising in Loisaida, and Cliff Joseph's celebration of the collective struggle for pan-African liberation.[1135] The photograph is dominated, however, by the collective mural, which towers above La Plaza Cultural and these smaller murals, and is easily visible above the top of the chain link fence. Perrottet's photograph suggests that the collective mural would have been practically impossible to miss by anyone approaching La Plaza Cultural from either Avenue C or East Ninth Street. The work thus acted as the project's outward address to passers-by, inviting them into both the physical space of La Plaza Cultural and the symbolic space of *La Lucha*.

By integrating a series of distinct visions of Loisaida's past, present, and future, *La Lucha*'s collective mural reminded contemporaneous viewers that the transformative potential of earlier practices carried through to the present and could shape the future.[1136] It also suggested that the utopian future, represented by the verdant garden contained within the crystal ball, could be glimpsed in the present, in part through the sharing of time, labour, energy, and resources that accompany collective projects such as these. Painted in bright colours and placed high up above

[1134] This vision calls to mind Maria Domínguez's similarly future-oriented depiction of a transformed Pueblo Nuevo in *Baile Bomba* (1983), which was discussed in Chapter Two.

[1135] Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', Winter 1985, 9.

[1136] A good example of this is the geodesic dome, which was abandoned by Charas as a viable housing option in the early 1970s but remained a prominent symbol of community self-reliance in the neighbourhood long after that, appearing frequently at protests and festivals. See Guerron, 'CHARAS and the Reimagining of Loisaida', 76.

the streets of Loisaida, the collective mural would have invited curious neighbours or unaware passers-by into La Plaza Cultural to share in this sense of collective struggle and joy with the artists. The work's content situated viewers within a long history of Nuyorican-led art and activism in the neighbourhood. The reflection in the crystal ball addressed people of colour, particularly women, inviting them to see themselves at the centre of the activity documented in the mural, as those whose labour had long driven change in Loisaida. Nandini Bagchee describes the mural as 'bringing into focus the contributions of women and an ecofeminist perspective of the struggle for self-sufficiency.'[1137] This perspective was vital in a context in which, as discussed in Chapter One, many of the leaders and most prominent spokespeople of the Loisaida movement organisations were men.

La Lucha's collective mural celebrated the multilingual, multiracial, and multiethnic character of the Nuyorican Lower East Side in the mid-1980s, and the power of women-led collective action and coalition-building in contesting displacement and effecting social change. The mural addressed different Loisaida publics, inviting them into La Plaza Cultural, and into what the art historian Shelley Garrigan, in a discussion of the work of the Chicano painter Cornelio Campos, describes as 'the space of a social encounter that transforms the outside viewer into a participating witness.'[1138] This invitation was not without its complexities. The collective mural located women, and specifically women of colour, at the vanguard of current and past struggles in Loisaida. In so doing, it presented a potentially normative vision of the neighbourhood, one that foregrounded gentrification's destructive effects on children and families. Furthermore, the work risked naturalising certain types of reproductive work like childcare and grocery shopping as uniquely women's labour. Without dismissing these risks, I argue that this emphasis on children and young people highlights the Loisaida movement's longstanding commitment to futurity, which was vital in a context in which discrimination in education, employment, and housing meant that the Lower East Side's racialised, working-class youth had long been denied meaningful futures. Similarly, by foregrounding the transformative potential of socially reproductive labour in comparison to other, more commonly understood 'political' practices (such as protest), the work troubled easy distinctions between public and private modes of political agency and action. As Ewa Majewska argues, it is exactly this 'confrontation with the public/private divide' that characterises counterpublics.[1139]

[1137] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 142.

[1138] Shelley Garrigan, 'Painting as Performance: The Work of Cornelio Campos', *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies* 6, no. 10 (30 June 2018): 47.

[1139] Majewska, *Feminist Antifascism*, 228.

4.4.2 Painting as performance: Robin Michals and Kristin Reed's *The Last Judgement*

Situated high up above La Plaza Cultural on scaffolding, the artists who painted *La Lucha*'s collective mural, although highly visible, remained physically distant from their neighbours as they worked. Even so, Rikki Asher recalls that Loisaida residents often provided the muralists with 'immediate feedback' as they descended the scaffold at the end of each day: 'Some liked what they saw; others offered constructive criticism. We would jot down these comments, integrating most of them into the next day's work.'[1140] These comments do not appear to have been recorded, and it is unclear from either existing accounts of *La Lucha* or the archival record exactly what impact this feedback had on the work. Indeed, the finished mural appears almost identical to a maquette that was used as a guide during the painting process (Figure 207).

By contrast, Robin Michals and Kristin Reed's *The Last Judgement* was shaped by extensive input from Loisaida residents before and throughout its creation. Unlike the collective mural, *The Last Judgement* was painted onto a ground-level wall that was directly adjacent to East Eighth Street, in a small section of the garden that was essentially still a vacant lot (Figure 208). This meant that Michals and Reed worked in close proximity to the colourful street life of East Eighth Street, which included a Hell's Angels chapter, a squat, a plumbing supply store, and an outdoor auto-repair shop.[1141] In addition to this, while very few of the *La Lucha* murals depicted real people, *The Last Judgement* combined portraits of global human rights activists with those of local community organisers and residents, whose friends and family regularly visited the site to watch the mural progress. Reed has described the experience of creating *The Last Judgement* as one of 'painting as performance' for an 'audience on East 8th Street who felt connected to the mural.'[1142] Shelley Garrigan describes performance as 'a mode of perception', discernible in some painting practices, 'that activates the relationships that connect creator, object, and audience', and Reed's comment underscores the role these relations played in shaping *The Last Judgement*'s final form.[1143] This mural, more than any other, embodied *La Lucha*'s attempt to build a generative, transnational counterpublic of solidarity, by bringing together very different publics from within and beyond the Nuyorican Lower East Side.

Michals and Reed knew each other from Ventana, an activist art group that organised exchanges between U.S.-based artists and writers, and members of the Sandinista Association of Cultural

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[1140] Quoted in Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 17.

[1141] Weissman, 51.

[1142] Reed, quoted in Weissman, 50.

[1143] Garrigan, 'Painting as Performance', 39.

Workers in Nicaragua; both also participated in Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America.[1144] Reed saw an advert for *La Lucha* in *Ajá* , a local Spanish-language magazine, and persuaded Michals to submit a joint proposal.[1145] Noting that, '[o]ur politics were close, but our artistic styles were very different', Michals recalls that the pair 'developed a design that allowed us to do what we were good at and, also, have the parts interact.'[1146] The bottom half of *The Last Judgement* was painted by Reed, who depicted a series of white male figures arranged in two rows against a field of green. The tiny missiles and fighter jets strewn around these figures' feet made it clear that they were war profiteers of some sort: arms dealers, perhaps, or the CIA agents that were alleged to be funnelling U.S. government money to the right-wing Contras in Nicaragua.[1147] Above these figures, against a deep brown background that resembled the rich wood panelling of a courtroom, Michals painted two rows of community activists and political leaders, who cast judgement on the 'global war makers' below.[1148]

Like *La Lucha*'s collective mural, *The Last Judgement* no longer exists, but a photograph by Camille Perrottet documents the work shortly after its completion (Figure 201). The figures painted by Reed in the bottom half of the mural are indistinguishable from one another: each wears a black suit and a pair of dark sunglasses that obscures their face. The top row is slightly smaller than the bottom one, which suggests endless rows of figures, identical to these, receding back into the depths of the picture plane, beyond the border of what is visible to the viewer. At first glance, the backdrop of alternating green bands resembles a well-manicured lawn, on which these figures are stood. The bands are uniformly sized, however, and so do not comport to the same perspectival principles as the figures themselves. This severs the relationship between the foreground and the background, leaving the figures floating ambiguously, seemingly unmoored from the space of the painting. Although the individual figures take up relatively little space, the top part of the mural is at least a third larger than the section painted by Michals. The effect of this is twofold. On the one hand, this arrangement emphasises just how much power these few men appear to wield. Reed's section of the mural suggests a vast network of white patriarchal power that stretches beyond what is visible or even comprehensible, whose exact dimensions are

[1144] Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 91.

[1145] Weissman, 49.

[1146] Robin Michals, quoted in Weissman, 49.

[1147] Striffler, *Solidarity*, 134–35.

[1148] Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 49.

impossible to ascertain. At the same time, however, these figures appear inconsequential, almost defenceless, as they line up to await their judgement from above.

Like the figures occupying the bottom half of *The Last Judgement*, each of the twelve figures depicted in Michals' section of the mural wears identical clothing: a long-sleeved black garment with a judge's gavel held in either the right or left hand. Unlike Reed's anonymous war makers, however, each of these figures is meant to be identifiable. Each slightly oversized head has been rendered as realistically as possible, and each figure is labelled with a small name badge on the table in front of them. Bringing together the struggle against both U.S. foreign intervention and apartheid, two of *La Lucha*'s key themes, the top row is made up of political leaders and activists from Central America and South Africa, including the Sandinista National Liberation Front leader (and then-president of Nicaragua) Daniel Ortega; the indigenous feminist activist Rigoberta Menchú, of the K'iche' people in Guatemala; the Salvadoran priest Óscar Romero, who was assassinated by the Salvadoran far-right in 1980; the African National Congress leaders Nelson Mandela and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela; and Ruth First, a South African anti-apartheid activist assassinated by South African police in 1982.[1149]

Like the other artists that participated in *La Lucha*, Michals and Reed connected the struggle for freedom in Central America and South Africa with the struggle against discrimination and displacement in Loisaida. As such, in addition to depicting political leaders and activists from Central America and South Africa, whose faces were known across the globe, and whose causes were at the heart of prominent solidarity movements in the U.S., Michals and Reed also 'wanted the community to select six of their best to sit in judgement'.[1150] Local residents and workers selected Carmen Pabón, a beloved community activist and the founder of El Jardín Bello Amanecer Borinqueño (The Garden of the Beautiful Puerto Rican Dawn) community garden; Junior, a mechanic who repaired cars in the lot next to the wall on which Michals and Reed were

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[1149] Weissman, 49.

Several of these figures would likely not be selected if a similar mural was produced today. Daniel Ortega's first period as president of Nicaragua came to an end in 1990; his second, which began in 2007 and continues to this day, has been marked by the increased repression of political opponents, public critics, and protest movements. See Amnesty International, 'Shoot to Kill: Nicaragua's Strategy to Repress Protest' (London: Amnesty International, 29 May 2018), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr43/8470/2018/en/.

In 1998, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission found that Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's security detail, the Mandela United Football Club, was responsible for at least eighteen violent killings in the late 1980s, several of which took place in Madikizela-Mandela's home with her knowledge. See Amnesty International; Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), 'Volume Two', Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report (Cape Town, ZA: Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), 1998), 549–82, https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/index.htm.

[1150] Reed, quoted in Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 49.

painting; Ralph, a constant presence on the streets around La Plaza Cultural, who many assumed to be unhoused; and Mary, Victor, and Augustine, three popular neighbourhood residents.[1151] Pabón is the only one of these local figures who is referred to by anything beyond a first name, and the only person who could be called an activist or organiser.[1152] This combination of both internationally and locally meaningful figures gave *The Last Judgement* a resonance that was global and enduring while remaining hyper-local and context specific. Although Michals' section of the mural was significantly smaller than Reed's, by naming these figures, including realistic portraits of their faces, and placing them at the top of the mural, the artist imbued them with a sense of physical presence, moral authority, and basic humanity that the war makers below were lacking.

As newcomers to the neighbourhood, Michals and Reed enlisted the help of Loisaida residents in finalising the mural's design.[1153] Reed recalls that the two-week process of selecting local subjects 'cemented our popularity with the community members who participated.'[1154] As the artists worked on the mural throughout July and August 1985, people dropped by to see how the likenesses of their friends and neighbours were coming along; as Reed notes, '[t]he people portrayed became 'celebrities' if they were not already.'[1155] Michals and Reed's ground-level site next to East Eighth Street meant a near-constant audience of residents and passers-by who watched them work. Within the immediate vicinity of *The Last Judgement* was a vacant lot in which Junior repaired cars, an empty tenement turned squat, a plumbing supply store, and a local chapter of the Hell's Angels (Figure 209). Junior's lot in particular was a social hub: 'Folks brought lawn chairs and hung out, chatting with Junior, eating Latin food and washing it down with beer, speaking Caribbean Spanish and laughing heartily.' (Figure 210)[1156] Reed recalls that while initially the men who hung out there 'felt inconvenienced by our presence—two white girls with ladders and paint—and a bit suspicious of our intentions', they quickly 'became our friends, protectors, and helpers. Anything we needed they would provide.'[1157] Michals and Reed's process calls to mind John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres' work in the South Bronx. Throughout the

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1151 Weissman, 50.

1152 For more on Carmen Pabón, who died in October 2016, see Néstor David Pastor, 'Remembering Carmen Pabón, La Madrina de Loisaida', *Centro Voices (Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños)*, 2016, https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/centrovoices/barrios/remembering-carmen-pab%C3%B3n-la-madrina-de-loisaida.

1153 Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', Winter 1985, 9.

1154 Quoted in Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 50.

1155 Reed, quoted in Weissman, 50.

1156 Reed, quoted in Weissman, 51.

1157 Reed, quoted in Weissman, 51.

1980s, Ahearn and Torres cast sculptural portraits of their friends and neighbours on the street outside Ahearn's studio on Walton Avenue, creating a 'South Bronx hall of fame' that Miwon Kwon describes as the product of 'intimate collaborative exchanges and in situ interactions' between the artists and their audiences (Figure 211).[1158]

The Last Judgement's physical proximity and openness to East Eighth Street, combined with Michals and Reed's active enlistment of input from their neighbours, facilitated a series of unexpected in situ interactions between the artists, the mural, and wider Loisaida audiences that summer. The first of these encounters concerned Ralph, one of Michals and Reed's local subjects. The day after Ralph's portrait was finished, Michals returned to the site to find that someone had thrown pink paint bombs at his face. Ralph's perpetually cheery demeanour and omnipresence on East Eighth Street had made him something of a local celebrity, and many assumed that he was unhoused, as he often slept on the streets of the neighbourhood. It turned out, however, that Ralph Feldman (to give him his full name) was a 'notoriously ruthless' local landlord, who was very unpopular with some of his tenants.[1159] Feldman was not unhoused, but in fact lived in a building on East Eighth Street that he had purchased in 1969, the first of several dilapidated tenements in the neighbourhood that he renovated and rented out.[1160] Feldman was a divisive figure in the Lower East Side; when he died in 2015, an obituary published in the local newspaper *AM New York* noted that while some tenants insisted that he had never raised the rent on any of his buildings, others accused him of being 'a slumlord'.[1161] 'You either loved him or hated him', recalled the Lower East Side documentarian Clayton Patterson.[1162] Acknowledging that '[a]s newcomers, we didn't always pick the participants correctly', Michals nevertheless cleaned the pink paint from the mural and, out of respect to those who had selected him, repainted Feldman's portrait.[1163]

[1158] Kwon, *One Place after Another*, 89.

See also Richard Goldstein, Michael Ventura, and Marilyn Zeitlin, eds., *South Bronx Hall of Fame: Sculpture by John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres* (Houston, TX: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1991); 'Swagger and Tenderness: The South Bronx Portraits by John Ahearn & Rigoberto Torres', The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2022, https://bronxmuseum.org/exhibition/swagger-and-tenderness-the-south-bronx-portraits-by-john-ahearn-rigoberto-torres/.

[1159] Reed, quoted in Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 50.

[1160] Albert Amateau, 'Ralph Feldman, 79: Fought Fires and to Save Shul', *AM New York*, 12 February 2015, https://www.amny.com/news/ralph-feldman-79-fought-fires-and-to-save-shul/.

[1161] Amateau.

[1162] Quoted in Amateau.

[1163] Michals, quoted in Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 50.

The second of these encounters was the unexpected appearance in La Plaza Cultural of Rigoberta Menchú, one of Michals and Reed's better-known subjects. A Ki'che' feminist and Indigenous activist, Menchú's autobiography, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, detailing her life and work during the Guatemalan Civil War, was released to commercial and critical acclaim in 1982.[1164] In the summer of 1985, Menchú was in New York for a speaking event at the United Nations, and Reed recalls that she and Michals 'were thrilled to see' Menchú stood in front of their mural one afternoon, 'smiling with a broad grin.'[1165] 'She was humble and grateful to us', remembers Reed, 'pleased we had chosen her for the wall.'[1166] Menchú invited Michals and Reed to a party she was attending that night: 'Of course we went and spent the evening chatting with her'.[1167] What is most interesting about this encounter is that neither Michals nor Reed had any idea how Menchú found out about their mural, only that she turned up unexpectedly in front of *The Last Judgement*. If it was not someone with a direct connection to *La Lucha* that contacted Menchú, then her appearance in Loisaida suggests that as the project was underway, the publics it sought to connect were expanding beyond the borders of Loisaida. Where the incident with Feldman's portrait emphasised *La Lucha*'s intimate scale, Michals and Reed's encounter with Menchú highlighted the project's transnational scope.

With the *The Last Judgement*, Michals and Reed paid homage to South African anti-apartheid activists, Central American human rights activists, Loisaida movement organisers, and East Eighth Street celebrities, uniting these disparate subjects in collective judgement of the capitalist warmongers painted on the wall below them. Not only this, but Michals and Reed's performance of painting *The Last Judgement* facilitated a series of encounters between very different groups of people within the physical space of La Plaza Cultural. As the unexpected appearance of Rigoberta Menchú in front of *The Last Judgement* made clear, these encounters were not, and indeed, could not be predetermined. The artists actively enlisted the help of Loisaida residents in selecting members of the community to include in the mural, but their unfamiliarity with aspects of the neighbourhood's complex social dynamics meant that they could not have predicted the adverse reaction that, for example, Ralph Feldman's inclusion would garner among some residents. Expressed through the medium of bright pink paint, this negative response did not undermine the connection that Michals and Reed sought to build with their neighbours, but rather added another layer to it. Perhaps more than any other individual mural, *The Last Judgement*

[1164] Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, trans. Ann Wright (London: Verso, 2009).

[1165] Reed, quoted in Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 50.

[1166] Reed, quoted in Weissman, 50.

[1167] Reed, quoted in Weissman, 50.

articulated the generative, solidarity-building potential of *La Lucha*. For a few weeks in the summer of 1985, Michals and Reed fostered the creation of a discursive space just off East Eighth Street, where different publics could interact and express their own multifaceted judgements of the work.

4.5 Only a beginning: the afterlives of La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues

In the final section of this chapter, I examine the reception to *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues*, and analyse the project's longer legacy in helping sustain art and activist counterpublics in the Nuyorican Lower East Side. Between July and September 1985, a total of twenty-four murals were created as part of *La Lucha*, covering the walls of four buildings that overlooked La Plaza Cultural and the adjacent Eighth Street Garden.[1168] From Chico's spray-painted *Tribute to Michael Stewart*, which was painted onto a sheet of corrugated metal, to Nancy Sullivan's *Not for Sale*, which incorporated a dog cage attached to the side of a building, the murals covered every inch of available wall space, even when their irregular surfaces made them difficult to work with (Figs. 212 & 213). The space between each mural was filled in with a thick black border, on which the phrase 'The Struggle Continues' was painted in many different languages (Figure 214). On Saturday 14 September, a dedication fiesta was held in La Plaza Cultural to celebrate the project's completion. The event was emceed by Chino García and the Nuyorican poet Bimbo Rivas, and included food and book stalls, as well as performances by the local *bomba y plena* troupe El Grupo Cemi, the Argentinian *nueva canción* (new song) singer Suni Paz, and the Nuyorican poet Pedro Pietri, among others (Figure 215). The program also included speeches from Eva Cockcroft, the housing activist Margarita Lopez, Roberto Vargas, the poet and cultural attaché of the Nicaraguan Embassy in Washington D.C., and Neo Mnumzana, the representative of the African National Congress to the United Nations.[1169]

The filmmaker John Hunt recorded the dedication fiesta, producing *La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues* (1986), a thirty-minute documentary that, in Jane Weissman's words, 'beautifully captured' the dedication fiesta's 'buoyant mood and good will'.[1170] Most of the film is taken up with footage of Cockcroft's speech, but Hunt also offers glimpses of the afternoon's musical performances and the stalls that were set up in La Plaza Cultural, as well as brief interviews with

[1168] Weissman, 3.

[1169] Weissman, 9.

[1170] *La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues*, directed by John Hunt (New York: Artmakers Inc., Charas Inc., and John Hunt, 1986), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spZf7uzz8Pk.

some of the artists, and shots of them at work, that were filmed just before and after the event (Figs. 216 & 217). The documentary captures the palpable sense of camaraderie between the artists assembled on stage (Figs. 218 & 219). As Cockcroft tells the audience that 'this is an amazing moment to me, because it's been very hard to get this entire group of artists together', they can be seen laughing and hugging one another; the speech is continually punctuated by cheers and applause as Cockcroft introduces each artist and their work.[1171] What is also striking about Hunt's documentary is the diversity of those in attendance: a multiracial, multigenerational crowd is shown dancing, chatting to the artists, and watching the speeches from La Plaza Cultural's semi-circular amphitheatre. In a roundup of that summer's activist art events, published in the October 1985 issue of *In These Times*, Lucy Lippard praised the dedication fiesta as 'the most seamless community/artists social event I've seen in NYC for years,' describing *La Lucha* itself as 'the city's biggest and most impressive collective mural project to date.'[1172]

Weissman has highlighted the 'many expressions of community unity' and 'renewed sense of purpose' that were articulated by Cockcroft, García, Rivas, and the other speakers at *La Lucha*'s dedication fiesta.[1173] However, as Ben Keppel insisted in the introduction to the 1998 edition of *Toward a People's Art*, Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft's book on community muralism (originally published in 1977), '[t]he spirit of renewal and understanding brought forward by such community projects required concrete follow-up to achieve more lasting results.'[1174] The heterogeneity of the dedication fiesta highlighted *La Lucha*'s success in bringing together different constituencies within Loisaida, but in order to evaluate the project's lasting legacy, it is necessary to examine what influence, if any, *La Lucha* had on community muralism and the burgeoning activist art movement in New York, as well as the role the project played in the ongoing struggle against gentrification in Loisaida. As Cockcroft herself acknowledged shortly after *La Lucha*'s completion: 'The dedication did not signify an end to the project. In a sense, it is only a beginning.'[1175]

[1171] *La Lucha Continua*, 09:04-09:10.

[1172] Lippard, 'Hot Art in the Summertime', 21.

[1173] Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 9.

[1174] Keppel, 'Introduction', xxxviii.

[1175] Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', Winter 1985, 14.

4.5.1 Critical reception to *La Lucha*

Aesthetically and politically, *La Lucha* appeared to be at odds with much of the art that was being produced and consumed elsewhere in the Lower East Side in the mid-1980s.[1176] Writing for *In These Times*, Lippard noted that *La Lucha*'s dedication fiesta 'attracted virtually no scathing and cynical, much harder "tourists" from SoHo, New Jersey, the Upper East Side, or even the East Village', insisting that '[p]rojects like these are ignored in the "higher" art altitudes'.[1177] Lippard's comment supports Michael Warner's assertion, in a discussion of queer print cultures in the U.S. in the late twentieth century, that a counterpublic always 'maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status.'[1178] For the Artmakers muralist Joe Stephenson, *La Lucha*'s ostensibly subordinate status within the expanded field of Lower East Side cultural production was one of the most important aspects of the project. In an interview that was included in Hunt's documentary on the *La Lucha* dedication fiesta, Stephenson took indirect aim at the commercial gallery scene that had blossomed in the East Village in the early 1980s, arguing that what he liked most about murals is that 'people can't come in and buy it and make a profit off of it. That's what's going on in the quote-unquote "real" art world… Which is really just a stock market.'[1179]

This sense of moving against prevailing trends in the Lower East Side characterised Artmakers's somewhat fraught interactions with 8BC, a club and performance space whose building on East Eighth Street (between Avenues B and C, hence the name) backed onto La Plaza Cultural. Opening in 1983, just as the East Village scene began to boom, 8BC soon became a key venue for off-off-Broadway theatre and avant-garde 'pop performance' in the eastern reaches of the neighbourhood.[1180] Cockcroft recounted that although Cornelius Conboy and Dennis Gattra, 8BC's owners, were initially enthusiastic about *La Lucha*,

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[1176] Warner, 'Publics and Counterpublics', 86.

[1177] Lippard, 'Hot Art in the Summertime', 21.

[1178] Warner, 'Publics and Counterpublics', 86.

[1179] Joe Stephenson, interview in *La Lucha Continua*, 27:56-28:08.

[1180] Uzi Parnes, 'Pop Performance in East Village Clubs', *The Drama Review: TDR* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 12, https://doi.org/10.2307/1145592.

See also Charles Tarzian, '8BC-From Farmhouse to Cabaret', *The Drama Review: TDR* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 108–12, https://doi.org/10.2307/1145608.

> it soon became clear that there was a large gap in taste between them and the more explicitly political artists. They did not like what they considered to be social realist art and wanted their building to convey a more East Villagy [sic] expressionist character.[1181]

As a compromise, Conboy and Gattra chose their own artist to paint the front of 8BC, leaving the building's other, less prominent, walls to the *La Lucha* selection committee.[1182] 8BC picked the East Village artist Luis Frangella, who painted a large neo-expressionist head in red, black, and white across one corner of the building (Figure 220). Frangella was a good fit for *La Lucha*; he often worked at large scales, and in 1983, had participated in an alternative wall painting project, the collaborative Ward Line pier project, initiated by David Wojnarowicz and Mike Bidlo in an abandoned Lower West Side waterfront warehouse (Figure 221).[1183] Frangella's mural, however, was stylistically very different to the other *La Lucha* murals, and contained no overt political content.[1184] Because of its placement, the work was not framed by the black border that united the other murals in La Plaza Cultural, and Frangella does not appear to have attended the dedication fiesta.

Evidencing its marginal status in relation to other practices in the Lower East Side at the time, *La Lucha* was ignored at the time by much of the mainstream and alternative press.[1185] The project was not covered by local papers such as the *East Village Eye* or the *Village Voice*, nor by larger media outlets such as the *New York Times*. On the rare occasions that the project was featured, its oppositional politics were downplayed or erased. In November 1985, for example, a photograph of Maria Domínguez and her assistant Ahmed working on the mural *Sueño* was printed alongside Maureen Dowd's 'Youth – Art – Hype: A Different Bohemia' in the *New York Times Magazine* (Figure 222).[1186] Dowd did not discuss *La Lucha*, or any of the artists or themes associated with the project, and the only reference to a mural was in relation to a piece by Jean-

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[1181] Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', Winter 1985, 9.

[1182] Cockcroft, 9.

[1183] Anderson, *Cruising the Dead River*, 80–81.

[1184] Many East Village artists did examine more overt political themes in their work (although gentrification was rarely one of them). Jean-Michel Basquiat's *Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)* (1983), for example, dealt with the death of the young graffiti writer at the hands of the New York City Transit Police in late 1983. According to Chaédria LaBouvier, who curated an exhibition about the work at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2019, Basquiat was possibly inspired by a poster for a rally protesting the incident created by David Wojnarowicz. See LaBouvier, 'Defacement: Moment, History, and Memory', 19.

[1185] Liza Kirwin, 'EV in the Press', *Artforum*, October 1999.

[1186] Maureen Dowd, 'Youth - Art - Hype: A Different Bohemia', *New York Times Magazine*, 17 November 1985, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/17/magazine/youth-art-hype-a-different-bohemia.html.

Michel Basquiat in the Palladium, another fashionable East Village club.[1187] Instead, Dowd focused on what she called the 'blue-chip bohemia' of the East Village scene, and in particular, the young artists who were 'forging a symbiotic relationship between the counterculture and the culture.'[1188] 'Instead of fleeing the capitalist invaders,' argued Dowd, many young artists in the Lower East Side 'are collaborating with them.'[1189] In a letter sent to the *New York Times Magazine* in response to the article, Cockcroft sought to provide readers with context about *La Lucha* that Dowd had overlooked, noting the irony that 'a political mural project [like *La Lucha*] should be used in an article on the new Lower East Side bohemia, which attempts to deny that this artistic direction exists'.[1190]

Despite being mostly ignored or misrepresented by 'the "higher" art echelons', Lippard argued that the institutional art world had 'acquired a certain tolerance for "political art" over the last few years', thanks in large part to 'the activities of precisely such progressive groups as those involved in La Lucha', including PADD and Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America.[1191] In 1985, arguably the best-known of New York's progressive art groups was Group Material. Formed in 1979, Group Material invited its audiences to 'question the entire culture we have taken for granted' through a series of meticulously curated group shows on political themes, typically staged in non-profit spaces, which featured a mixture of art and 'non-art' objects.[1192] Compared to PADD's sprawling membership, Group Material remained small, comprising a fluctuating core of three of four artists.[1193] Unlike PADD, who eschewed galleries and museums, Alan W. Moore argues that Group Material 'cleaved closer to the institutions of art, both mainstream and alternative'.[1194] This institutionalisation, coupled with what Moore describes as the collective's uncanny ability to identify 'artists whose stars were rising', cemented

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[1187] Dowd, 32.

[1188] Dowd, 28, 33.

[1189] Dowd, 33.

[1190] Eva Cockcroft, 'Letter: A Different Bohemia', *New York Times Magazine*, 12 December 1985, 70, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/12/22/magazine/l-a-different-bohemia-240477.html.

[1191] Lippard, 'Hot Art in the Summertime', 21.

[1192] Group Material, 'WHO is Group Material?', flyer, quoted in Moore, *Art Gangs*, 112.

For a longer history of Group Material, see also Julie Ault, ed., *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material* (London: Four Corners Books, 2010); Anderson and Tobin, 'Collaboration Is Not An Alternative: Artists Working Together in London and New York, 1974–1981'; Rounthwaite, *Asking the Audience*; James Timothy Voorhies, 'Group Material: Reshaping Forms', in *Beyond Objecthood: The Exhibition as a Critical Form since 1968* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), 50–55; Grace, *Art Demonstration*.

[1193] These were Tim Rollins, Mundy McLaughlin, Julie Ault, and later, Doug Ashford and Félix González-Torres. Grace, *Art Demonstration*, 8.

[1194] Moore, *Art Gangs*, 140.

Group Material's position as exemplars 'of a postmodern political art practice', pre-empting the kinds of participatory curatorial strategies that became prominent in much U.S. and European contemporary art in the late 1980s and 1990s.[1195] Adair Rounthwaite argues that projects such as *Arroz Con Mango* (1981), *Timeline of U.S. Intervention in Central America* (1984), and *Americana* (1985) 'reconfigured the solo exhibition into a forum for collaboration and critical thinking'.[1196] Group Material found art institutions particularly receptive to projects that engaged the HIV/AIDS crisis, including *Democracy* (1988-1989) and the *AIDS Timeline* (1989).[1197] This theme is notable in its absence from *La Lucha*, particularly given the crisis' impact on artists and people of colour.[1198]

A key argument of this chapter is that *La Lucha* formed part of a broader wave of politically engaged art practices in the mid-1980s, and that the project's success was in part due to Artmakers's ability to tap into the social and political energy of New York's activist artist movement. However, compared to Group Material's conceptually rigorous and formally innovative approach to politicised curatorial strategies, or even compared to the less institutionalised but still heterogeneous practices of PADD, a community mural project like *La Lucha* may have appeared somewhat old-fashioned and perhaps overly didactic to many audiences at the time, even those with an interest in art as a productive sphere of political mobilisation and contestation. Even Lippard, a staunch advocate of projects such as these, acknowledged that formally, the *La Lucha* murals ranged from 'the predictable to the innovative.'[1199] Lippard praised Robin Michals and Kristin Reed's *The Last Judgement* for being 'formally original and politically savvy', suggesting that the mural 'might point a way out of the stylistic rut that has imprisoned even the best murals in the U.S.'[1200] In the foreword to the

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[1195] Moore, 138, 110.

See also Rounthwaite, *Asking the Audience*, 5–6.

[1196] Rounthwaite, *Asking the Audience*, 5.

[1197] Moore, *Art Gangs*, 140.

The artist Félix González-Torres, who joined Group Material in 1987, died of AIDS-related illnesses in January 1996.

[1198] More people were diagnosed with AIDS in the U.S. in 1985 than in all of the previous years of recording combined. By the end of that year, there were 12,529 deaths, a number which doubled in 1986 and would continue to grow rapidly. 'HIV/AIDS Timeline', New York City AIDS Memorial, accessed 11 June 2021, https://www.nycaidsmemorial.org/timeline.

At least two of *La Lucha*'s participants were queer: Dina Bursztyn, who dedicated her mural to a friend who had recently died from AIDS-related complication, and Luis Frangella, who died of AIDS-related illnesses in December 1990). Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 57; Ruby Sutton, 'The Firm and the Yielding: The Art and Life of Luis Frangella', *Visual AIDS*, 12 March 2024, https://visualaids.org/journal/luis-frangella-ruby-sutton.

[1199] Lippard, 'Hot Art in the Summertime', 21.

[1200] Lippard, 21.

second edition of *Toward a People's Art*, Lippard argued that this tension 'between artistic excellence and political effectiveness', which had long been present in community muralism in the U.S., was also 'a constant bone of contention' in PADD.[1201] Writing in 1998, Gregory Sholette recalled that already by 1985, it was increasingly clear that PADD's activist art approach, which interrogated socio-political themes in spaces that challenged the legitimising power of galleries and museums (an attitude shared by Artmakers) was being overtaken by what he described as 'a prudent version of 'political art", exemplified by Group Material, which had become 'institutionally viable within the art world.'[1202]

4.5.2 *La Lucha*'s longer legacy

Many of *La Lucha*'s afterlives only came into view several years after the project was completed. I argued at the outset of this chapter that Artmakers sought to reinvigorate community muralism in New York, and *La Lucha*'s most significant artistic legacy was arguably its role as a catalyst for several similar projects. The project was Kristin Reed and Dina Bursztyn's first experience with community murals, and both went on to create others.[1203] In 1986, Reed collaborated again with Robin Michals on *The Enchanted Garden*, which incorporated portraits of children from the neighbourhood (Figure 223).[1204] Between 1987 and 1988, Bursztyn worked on *Gargoyles to Scare Developers*, a series of twenty-nine bas reliefs that were installed on buildings throughout Loisaida, including El Bohío, as a declaration that 'these buildings and their residents were not for sale.'[1205] In 1988, Maria Domínguez directed *Views of Loisaida*, a series of six murals painted on the exterior of El Bohío by Eva Cockcroft and five Latine artists, including Domínguez and William Acevedo, and Rolando Vega (Figs. 224 & 225).[1206] That year, Artmakers organised *The Changing Faces of SoHo*, an installation at the Broadway/Lafayette subway station in SoHo that was sponsored by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's Arts for Transit Program. Five of the

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[1201] Lucy R. Lippard, 'Foreword to the 1998 Edition', in *Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*, by Eva Cockcroft, John Pitman Weber, and James Cockcroft (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, [1977] 1998), xii.

[1202] Sholette, 'News from Nowhere', 56.

[1203] Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 10–11.

[1204] Grace Glueck, 'An Immovable Feast: Murals in the City', *New York Times*, 22 July 1988, https://www.nytimes.com/1988/07/22/arts/an-immovable-feast-murals-in-the-city.html.

[1205] Dina Bursztyn, quoted in Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 57.

See also Bursztyn, 'Gargoyles to Scare Developers', 74.

[1206] The other participants were Pedro Tirado Vidal and one artist whose name has been lost. Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 97.

nineteen artists who worked on that project had participated in *La Lucha*.[1207] Also in 1988, Mike Alewitz started work on the *Pathfinder Mural* in the West Village; over two years, eighty artists from twenty countries (including Cockcroft and Keith Christensen) produced a huge mural depicting a history of the international labour movement and the struggle for national liberation across the globe (Figure 226).[1208] Despite the success of these and other collaborative, politically engaged mural projects, by the end of the decade, writes Timothy W. Drescher, 'organizations, not artists [or communities], controlled imagery, and critical politics was shunned' in most mural projects in New York.[1209]

La Lucha may not have been able to shift the trajectory of community muralism in New York, but the project appears to have resonated with artists within and beyond the city well into the 1990s. In 1993, an updated version of Cockcroft's article on *La Lucha* (originally published in *Community Murals Magazine* in late 1985) was reprinted in *Art in the Public Interest*, a volume edited by Arlene Raven that surveyed the expanded field of public art in the early 1990s.[1210] In that essay, Cockcroft wrote:

> We know that photo exhibitions and slide shows of the project were seen in New York, Seattle, Paris, and Ireland, but we are unable to keep track of all the photographers who visited the site. Color postcards of seven of the images were printed and distributed widely outside New York City.[1211]

In the absence of any further detail from Cockcroft, and with no archival record of these screenings, slide shows, or postcards, it is impossible to get a sense of who organised and attended these events, or the kinds of discussions and subsequent artistic undertakings (if any) that were provoked by an encounter with the work. Nevertheless, the transnational circulation of images and accounts of *La Lucha* in the decade or so after the murals were painted is evidence of the project's continued significance among wider art publics.

[1207] The five artists were Eva Cockcroft, Dina Bursztyn, Karin Batten, Thérèse Bimka, and Camille Perrottet. Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, 97.

[1208] Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 12; Braun-Reinitz and Weissman, *On the Wall*, 116–19.

[1209] Drescher, introduction to *On the Wall*, xvii.

[1210] Eva Sperling Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals: Making a Political Art Park', in *Art in the Public Interest*, ed. Arlene Raven (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1993), 119–26.

[1211] Cockcroft, 124.

Despite receiving little media attention at the time, Cockcroft noted in 1993 that 'press coverage has continued on a fairly regular basis'.[1212] This coverage suggested that even as *La Lucha* was reaching audiences beyond New York, the project remained popular in Loisaida. An article by Susan Hartman, for example, published in *The Christian Science Monitor* in August 1987, highlighted the powerful sense of ownership that many Loisaida residents felt towards the murals in their area.[1213] Hartman interviewed Kristin Reed, who recalled being informed on one occasion that some graffiti had appeared on her mural, but that 'by the time I got there, it had already been cleaned up.'[1214] Another resident noted how protective people were of the murals on their block: 'Once I was just leaning against their windows, [and someone shouted,] "Hey, get away from that wall!"'[1215] An article written by Donna Marie Osborne and published in May 1989 in *Streets*, a Lower East Side art magazine, emphasised muralism's longstanding presence in Loisaida, and discussed *La Lucha* alongside other work that had been created during the community mural movement's fallow period in the 1980s, including Domínguez's *Baile Bomba* (1983) and Michals and Reed's *The Enchanted Garden* (1986).[1216] Photographs of *La Lucha* appeared in several issues of the local community magazine *The Quality of Life in Loisaida* between 1985 and 1988.[1217] Cockcroft argued that thanks to *La Lucha*, '[a]n empty lot has become a place of beauty', and certainly, these accounts suggest that several years after its completion, the project remained symbolically and materially significant to many different Loisaida residents.[1218]

Despite Cockcroft's positive use of the term, the concept of 'beautifying' space plays an uncomfortable role in the gentrification process.[1219] In the case of *La Lucha*, turning La Plaza

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[1212] Cockcroft, 124.

In addition to the articles discussed below, see also Glueck, 'An Immovable Feast'; Jimmy Breslin, 'Walls of Sorrow on the Lower East Side', *New York Daily News*, 29 November 1985.

[1213] Susan Hartman, 'These Walls Have a Voice', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 6 August 1987.

[1214] Kristin Reed, quoted in Hartman, 21.

[1215] Dave Bennett, quoted in Hartman, 21.

[1216] Donna Marie Osborne, 'Mural Magic', *Streets: The Magazine of the Lower East Side*, May 1989, 27–30, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records (MSS233), Box 9, Folder 4 (Mixed Materials), CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City.

[1217] Photographs of *La Lucha* appeared on the cover of the November-December 1985 and March-April 1986 issues of the magazine, and were featured inside the March-April 1988 issue alongside other photographs from the neighbourhood taken by Marlis Momber. See Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection, loc. Box 1, Folder 8; Box 1, Folder 9; Box 2, Folder 3.

[1218] Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', Winter 1985, 14.

[1219] See Rafael Schacter, 'The Ugly Truth: Street Art, Graffiti and the Creative City', *Art & the Public Sphere* 3, no. 2 (December 2014): 161–76, https://doi.org/10.1386/aps.3.2.161_1; Maria Tartari, Sabrina Pedrini, and Pier Luigi Sacco, 'Urban "Beautification" and Its Discontents: The Erosion of Urban Commons in Milan', *European Planning Studies* 30, no. 4 (2022): 643–62, https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2021.1990215; Sandi Abram, 'Graffiti, Street

Cultural into 'a place of beauty' through the creation of political murals was intended as a critique of and challenge to gentrification, and a celebration of the Nuyorican-led practices that had first transformed this site in the 1970s.[1220] Artmakers and Charas sought to reclaim the garden as a space of community collectivity, from which further encroachments on the neighbourhood could be mobilised against. This was a grassroots effort, one far removed from what Sandi Abram calls 'the muralization of capital',[1221] which has come to dominate many developer-led beautification projects in New York and elsewhere in recent decades.[1222] Even so, the murals' vivid colours and eye-catching images, which were highly visible from the streets surrounding La Plaza Cultural, undoubtedly drew the attention of those for whom the project's oppositional politics, its engagement with the local community and their concerns were easily dismissed or co-opted. Artmakers discovered this when a photograph of *Sueño*, Maria Domínguez's contribution to *La Lucha*, was used to provide local colour for Maureen Dowd's *New York Times Magazine* article, which posited that many Lower East Side artists were collaborating with, rather than resisting, 'the capitalist invaders.'[1223] As Dan Chodorkoff argues, 'positive actions' that reshaped the social, cultural, and material texture of the Lower East Side, such as murals and gardens, 'made the neighborhood attractive to gentrifiers'; the challenge, therefore, was to 'secure control of the physical neighborhood as well as improve it' so that these actions could be sustained and built upon.[1224]

From this perspective, *La Lucha*, which helped restore La Plaza Cultural to community use, appeared to successfully meet this challenge. It is important to note, however, that although it was dilapidated, La Plaza Cultural was not empty in 1985. Since falling into disrepair, the garden had been occupied by drug dealers, drug users, and some unhoused residents, whose growing presence in the neighbourhood was connected to the same processes of neglect and displacement that *La Lucha* sought to critique. By working to clear La Plaza Cultural of drug use, *La Lucha* inadvertently contributed to a policing of space that converged with the aims of

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Art and Murals in the Age of the Neoliberal City: The Muralization of Capital', *SAUC - Street Art and Urban Creativity* 10, no. 1 (May 2024): 40–53, https://doi.org/10.25765/SAUC.V10I1.918.

[1220] Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', Winter 1985, 14.

[1221] Abram, 'Graffiti, Street Art and Murals in the Age of the Neoliberal City: The Muralization of Capital', 42.

[1222] See Quill R Kukla, 'Capitalist and Anti-Capitalist Placemaking through Street Art', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 16 November 2024, 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaac/kpae040.

[1223] Dowd, 'Youth - Art - Hype', 33.

The co-option of *La Lucha* echoed PADD's dismay at discovering that their anti-gentrification project *Not for Sale* (1983) had been included in a roundup of East Village art events, published in the *New York Times* in June 1983 under the headline: 'A Gallery Scene That Pioneers in New Territories.' Sholette, 'A Collectography of PAD/D', 31.

[1224] Chodorkoff, *The Anthropology of Utopia*, 180–81.

Operation Pressure Point, a 1984 New York City Police Department (NYPD) programme aimed at eradicating 'all drug-prone enclaves, starting with the Lower East Side', by flooding the neighbourhood with officers.[1225] In the context of an increasingly aggressive police presence in the neighbourhood, it is understandable that several *La Lucha* murals dealt with police violence in general, and the murder of Michael Stewart in particular.[1226] This concern, however, sits somewhat uncomfortably alongside Artmakers's apparent antipathy towards illicit activity in La Plaza Cultural. Reed understandably saw the cleaning of graffiti from her mural as a mark of respect from local residents, but the death of Stewart, who had been apprehended by police after allegedly tagging a subway station, highlighted a highly racialised discrepancy in the reception of different street art practices. Throughout the 1980s, Black, Latine, and Afro-Latine graffiti writers, particularly those who did not make PADD-style political stencils, spray-painted murals (such as those created by Chico and Etienne Li for *La Lucha*), or the kind of canvas-based work that was sold in many East Village galleries, remained targets for sustained and often lethal police violence.[1227]

La Lucha thus legitimised certain claims to space over others at a moment when powerful actors like the NYPD, acting on behalf of Mayor Ed Koch and his increasingly aggressive battle against drugs and graffiti, were attempting to do the same.[1228] It is vital to note, however, that while one of Artmakers and Charas's key aims, the reclamation of La Plaza Cultural, may have inadvertently aligned with the interests of the NYPD and the city, the police themselves played no part whatsoever in clearing the garden. Instead, Artmakers embraced a grassroots, do-it-yourself approach to re-commoning the space, one that had been employed by Charas and other Loisaida movement groups since the early 1970s. Each morning, before starting work, the artists cleaned up rubbish and drug paraphernalia, and as *La Lucha* developed, the drug dealers gradually started moving away and Loisaida residents began socialising in the garden once again.[1229] By occupying La Plaza Cultural with brushes, paint cans, and a feeling of artistic

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[1225] Patrick J. Carroll, 'Operation Pressure Point: An Urban Drug Enforcement Strategy', *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, April 1989, 1.

[1226] Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', Winter 1985, 9–10; Hoban, *Basquiat*, 52.

[1227] Nielson, '"It Could Have Been Me"'.

[1228] See Edward I. Koch, 'Letter: The War on Drugs', *Science* 242, no. 4878 (28 October 1988): 495; 'Koch Calls Reagan a "Wimp" in War on Drugs: Says Producing Nations Should Get No U.S. Aid', Los Angeles Times, 29 February 1988, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-02-29-mn-286-story.html; Claudia Barnett, 'The Death of Graffiti: Postmodernism and the New York City Subway', *Studies in Popular Culture* 16, no. 2 (1994): 25; Jonathan Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 325–27, 347–48.

[1229] Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 5.

solidarity, the artists quietly encouraged a range of Loisaida residents to begin using the space again. More than just a beautification project, *La Lucha* represented, to use AbdouMaliq Simone's phrase, 'a concerted effort to create a viable atmosphere for a repurification of collective life.'[1230] Although it would be some time until La Plaza Cultural was fully restored, not long after the project was completed, a newly committed cadre of local community gardeners began the process of replanting La Plaza Cultural.[1231] The artist Pat Brazill, who participated in *La Lucha*, recalls 'walking by the newly thriving neighborhood garden' in the late 1980s, and 'seeing how lovely all the murals looked as a backdrop to the lush greenery.'[1232]

Even after it was restored as a community garden, La Plaza Cultural, whose land was city-owned, remained a contested space in Loisaida. In 1987, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the city's Board of Estimates approved the construction of a subsidised senior-citizens' housing project named Casa Victoria on the site.[1233] Some community groups, including Charas and the Lower East Side Joint Planning Council, offered tentative support for the project, fearing that if they rejected it, La Plaza Cultural would instead be sold off to a private developer.[1234] Other residents, drawn in large part from the Lower East Side's growing squatter and unhoused movements, demanded that La Plaza Cultural be kept accessible to the public as a vital green space in the neighbourhood, pointing out that there were many other vacant lots nearby that could be used for housing instead.[1235] Artmakers, for their part, did not take a public position on the issue.[1236] The campaign to save La Plaza Cultural included protests, a court case, the opening of a soup kitchen in front of *La Lucha*'s collective mural, and the construction of new playground equipment.[1237] In 1990, thanks to several years of vigorous campaigning, and the revelation of a corruption scandal at HUD, approval for Casa Victoria was overturned, and La Plaza Cultural was saved from demolition.[1238] Throughout this period, the

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[1230] AbdouMaliq Simone, *The Surrounds: Urban Life within and beyond Capture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 94.

[1231] Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 9.

[1232] Quoted in Weissman, 10.

[1233] Osborne, 'Mural Magic'; David W. Dunlap, 'Board Refuses Approval For Shelter's Expansion', *New York Times*, 18 November 1989, https://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/18/nyregion/board-refuses-approval-for-shelter-s-expansion.html; Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', 1993, 126.

[1234] Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', 1993, 126.

[1235] Nashua, 'D'amato Sleaze Factor Joins in Lower East Side Corruption Cesspool', *The Shadow*, January 1990, 4.

[1236] Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', 1993, 126.

[1237] Nashua, 'D'amato Sleaze Factor', 4.

[1238] Michael Winerip, 'H.U.D. Scandal's Lesson: It's a Long Road From Revelation to Resolution', *New York Times*, 22 July 1990, https://www.nytimes.com/1990/07/22/weekinreview/the-region-hud-scandal-s-lesson-it-s-a-long-road-from-revelation-to-resolution.html.

coalitional counterpublics that had coalesced around *La Lucha*, formed of community activists, political artists, gardeners, and other residents, found themselves squeezed by political and economic pressure from above, and the demands of new Lower East Side constituencies, most notably squatters and the unhoused.

By the early 1990s, several *La Lucha* murals had already vanished, and others would eventually disappear as they were covered over by landlords, obscured from view by new developments, or destroyed with the demolition of old tenements.[1239] For Cockcroft, writing in 1993, this would not have been a surprise: 'we never anticipated that the murals would last for longer than five years.'[1240] Indeed, despite the substantial time and resources that go into creating community murals, as expressions of the interests and desires of specific communities at particular moments in time, they are highly ephemeral; as the photographer Philip Pocock put it in a short documentary about *La Lucha* in the late 1980s, 'murals are done for the moment, and they're allowed to die.'[1241] When I visited La Plaza Cultural in early 2022, the cracked and faded remains of just two murals, Rikki Asher's *For the Women of South Africa, Central America, and the Lower East Side* and Amy Berniker, Alison Lew & Ken Bloomer's *Stand Up*, were all that remained of *La Lucha* (Figure 227). The murals looked worse for wear, but La Plaza Cultural itself was thriving. Despite several further challenges to its existence in the 1990s (which are discussed in the conclusion of this thesis), the garden was eventually formalised under the aegis of the city's Department of Parks and Recreation, and today, it is in regular use as a site for socialising, gardening, community events, political rallies, art installations, and performances.[1242] Tucked away in the back of the garden, ghostly traces of the *La Lucha* murals remind the present-day viewer of La Plaza Cultural's decades-long history as a site of contestation and community building in the heart of the Nuyorican Lower East Side (Figure 228).

[1239] 'La Plaza Cultural', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/la-plaza-cultural.

[1240] Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', 1993, 126.

[1241] Philip Pocock, interview in *You Know... The Struggle*, 13:13-13:17.

See also Schrader, 'The Colors of Loisaida', 529.

[1242] Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 9–10.

It is possible to get a sense of the breadth of activities that take place at La Plaza Cultural, from Zoroastrian Fire Jumping to the NYC Anarchist Bookfair, by searching for the garden in the archives of a local blog, such as *EV Grieve*: https://evgrieve.com/search/label/La%20Plaza%20Cultural

4.6 Conclusions

La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues was a hugely ambitious project that played a complex role in the social, artistic, and political life of the Nuyorican Lower East Side, not just at the time of its production in 1985, but for many years to come. In this chapter, I have argued that Eva Cockcroft, Artmakers, and the artists who participated in *La Lucha* were committed to a politics of local and international solidarity. They sought to draw attention to a range of local and global issues (including gentrification, police violence, apartheid, and U.S. militarism), while reinvigorating community muralism in New York and reclaiming La Plaza Cultural with and on behalf of the Loisaida community. While analysing the generative, transformational potential of *La Lucha*, I have remained attentive to some of the contradictions and tensions that characterised the project's creation, reception, and legacy. In doing so, I have analysed *La Lucha* on its own terms, without a reliance on what Ewa Majewska calls 'the reduction of every historical scenario to only one end'—a 'flattening tendency' that encourages a hierarchisation of political projects according to their proximity to or distance from some kind of idealised outcome.[1243]

La Lucha had many afterlives that emerged long after the murals themselves had been completed. The project did not ultimately kick-start a revival of community muralism, but it generated several more collaborations between its participating artists, and reached audiences far beyond New York. *La Lucha* was unable to stop gentrification in the Lower East Side, let alone end apartheid in South Africa or U.S. military intervention in Central America; as Cockcroft herself acknowledged: 'Painted images cannot stop wars or win the struggle for justice.'[1244] However, the project facilitated the restoration of La Plaza Cultural as a community garden. Furthermore, by drawing conceptual and material connections between struggles in the Lower East Side and those taking place in other parts of the world, *La Lucha* added a vital new perspective to the politics of transnational artistic solidarity that characterised much U.S. cultural production in the mid-1980s. *La Lucha* blurred the boundaries between private and public by stressing the equal importance of both established political practices such as mass protest or armed resistance, and more localised, everyday forms of resistance to marginalisation and displacement. It addressed, bolstered, and helped forge generative new relations between overlapping publics within and beyond the Lower East Side: political artists, community activists, gardeners, old and new residents, and the many unknown—and unknowable—audiences who encountered the work in the years that followed. As the contested development of La Plaza Cultural between the mid-

[1243] Majewska, *Feminist Antifascism*, 199.

[1244] Cockcroft, 'The La Lucha Murals', Winter 1985, 14.

1980s and the present makes clear, the exact form that these relations would take in the future remained profoundly indeterminate. All of this was facilitated by a democratic mode of public artmaking that was invested in the question of who controlled and had access to visual, discursive, and material space.[1245]

In a discussion of the work of the anarchist writer and organiser Emma Goldman in the Lower East Side in the early twentieth century, Kathy E. Ferguson argues that through Goldman's speaking engagements, newspaper editing, and writing, she looked for

> intersections, where partial interests converged, and built on them. She "crossed over" to speak with groups who often viewed anarchists as the lunatic fringe, yet entertained some partial convergence with anarchist ideas'.[1246]

In a similar manner, *La Lucha*, a broadly leftwing project that had no specific ideological standpoint, maintained an orientation towards consolidating oppositional art and activist publics while expanding them to encompass more people. It did not do this through an authoritarian appeal to total consensus, but by identifying points of convergence between very different communities. Key to *La Lucha*'s success was its placement in a site that, while not entirely open to the street, was less physically and symbolically closed off than other spaces of artmaking and political practice. As Robin Michals and Kristin Reed's experience of painting *The Last Judgement* demonstrated, the act of working outdoors facilitated unexpected encounters that would have been unlikely, if not impossible, in more regulated spaces. *La Lucha* facilitated the forging of new relations of solidarity in Loisaida. This process unfolded, as David Featherstone puts it, without 'guarantees about the kinds of transformations [that would be] wrought' in the future, but with a deep understanding that, as space in the Lower East Side grew ever more contested, the need to build coalitions that could express the needs and interests of a broad range of Loisaida constituencies, while prioritising those most at risk of displacement, was an increasingly urgent project.[1247]

[1245] Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art*, 306.

[1246] Ferguson, 'Anarchist Counterpublics', 198.

[1247] Featherstone, *Solidarity*, 16.

Conclusion: gentrification's empty victory

On 16 November 1988, Films Charas, one of El Bohío's longest running cultural programmes, and one of the most successful at uniting the Lower East Side's myriad social constituencies under one roof, screened two short films by Paul Garrin, a young white video artist who had been living in the neighbourhood since the mid-1980s.[1248] Both films explored themes of state violence in the United States. The first, *Free Society* (1988), juxtaposed footage of American police with images of military repression from across the globe, highlighting the increasing militarisation of U.S. law enforcement.[1249] The second, an early version of *Man With a Video Camera (Fuck Vertov)* (1989), comprised footage filmed on 6 August 1988, when a protest against a proposed curfew in Tompkins Square Park, a move aimed at displacing the park's growing unhoused population, was violently broken up by officers from the New York Police Department.[1250] Having stumbled upon the disturbance on his way home from a late-night editing session, Garrin began recording clashes between police and protestors, which spilled out onto the streets surrounding the park, and lasted into the early hours of Sunday morning.[1251] Occupying a three-block area in the centre of the Lower East Side (bordered by Avenue A, East Tenth Street, Avenue B, and East Seventh Street), Tompkins Square Park is located at the point where the East Village meets Loisaida.[1252] The Tompkins Square Park Riot is seen as a defining moment in the history of the Lower East Side, signalling both the rise of increasingly aggressive state- and capital-led strategies of socio-spatial displacement, and the emergence of new social, cultural, and political coalitions aiming to resist them.[1253]

Utilising a portable Video8 camera and a range of innovative image processing techniques, Garrin captured this clash of emergent forces in the Lower East Side. *Man With a Video Camera (Fuck Vertov)* (1989) juxtaposes footage from the riot with news reports that used Garrin's material in their own coverage (Figs. 229-232). These scenes are overlaid with shots of Garrin talking to camera, describing his experience of the event and the subsequent media attention his

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[1248] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 120.

[1249] Schrader, 120.

[1250] For a detailed account of the events of that night, see Janet L. Abu-Lughod, 'The Battle for Tompkins Square Park', in *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side* ed. Janet L. Abu-Lughod (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994), 240–45.

[1251] Over one hundred reports of police brutality were filed against the NYPD, and while none of these formal complaints resulted in a conviction, several officers were disciplined for their role in the violence. Smith, 'After Tompkins Square Park', 203.

[1252] Dorine Greshof and John Dale, 'The Residents in Tompkins Square Park', in *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side*, ed. Janet L. Abu-Lughod (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994), 274–75.

[1253] Smith, 'After Tompkins Square Park', 203.

footage garnered (Figure 233): 'I've been getting death threats. I've been hounded by photographers, and news crews, and newspapers […] I've had the FBI involved. It was a real trip, man.'[1254] The video borrows its title from Dziga Vertov's experimental documentary *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), which employed avant-garde cinematic techniques, including multiple exposures, freeze frames, and jump cuts, to depict life in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s. For Vertov and other Soviet filmmakers, the film camera was an emblem of modernity, capable of capturing things that 'the ordinary eye cannot see'.[1255] Like Vertov, Garrin sought to make visible 'a new kind of social and political reality' emerging in neighbourhood in the late 1980s.[1256] For him, the rise of accessible recording technology helped foster 'the power of reverse surveillance'.[1257] Garrin urged people to '[s]hoot the cops … with your video camera'[1258] in order to challenge 'the system of surveillance and discipline' that characterised everyday life for many Lower East Side residents.[1259] Thanks to Garrin's footage, which circulated widely in the media after the riot, Mayor Ed Koch and Police Commissioner Benjamin Ward were forced to publicly acknowledge that it was police, not protestors, who instigated the violence on 6 August.[1260]

The Tompkins Square Park Riot ushered in a period of renewed social, political, and economic turmoil in New York.[1261] There were an estimated 70,000 unhoused people in the city in 1988.[1262] Between two and three hundred of these unhoused New Yorkers lived in tents and on benches in Tompkins Square Park.[1263] The majority were Black, Latine, and Afro-Latine men.[1264] Some had lost their homes as a result of drug use; others had been evicted by homophobic landlords after being diagnosed with HIV; many were forced out thanks to gentrification-led evictions or rent hikes. As Timo Schrader writes, 'gentrification gave birth to Tent City — poor New Yorkers

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[1254] *Man With A Video Camera (Fuck Vertov)*, directed by Paul Garrin, 8mm video (New York, 1989), 3:02-3:20, https://stiftung-imai.de/en/videos/katalog/medium/0328.

[1255] Dziga Vertov, quoted in Philip Cavendish, *The Men with the Movie Camera: The Poetics of Visual Style in Soviet Avant-Garde Cinema of the 1920s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 23.

[1256] Cavendish, 19.

[1257] Keith Seward, 'Paul Garrin', *Artforum*, April 1994, 98.

[1258] Seward, 'Paul Garrin'.

[1259] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 2011, 50.

[1260] 'Opinion: Yes, a Police Riot', *New York Times*, 26 August 1988, https://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/26/opinion/yes-a-police-riot.html; Joshua Rothenberger, 'Lower East Side Class War and the Subversive Media Spectacle', in *Resistance: A Radical Political and Social History of the Lower East Side*, ed. Clayton Patterson, Joe Flood, and Alan W. Moore (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 350.

[1261] Smith, 'After Tompkins Square Park', 203.

[1262] This number would grow to around 100,000 over the next three years. Smith, 203.

[1263] Greshof and Dale, 'The Residents in Tompkins Square Park', 270.

[1264] Greshof and Dale, 268.

finding a way to survive a desperate situation not unlike the Hooverville shanty towns that were created during the Great Depression.'[1265] Like the Hoovervilles of the 1930s, Tent City was the product of an existing housing crisis, which was exacerbated by a financial crash and the subsequent onset of economic depression.[1266] Unlike the 1930s, however, the Wall Street crash of 1987 did not give rise to government programmes such as the Roosevelt Administration's New Deal, which aimed at alleviating poverty and preventing future crises (or at least lessening their impact). The 1987 crash may have 'rear-ended' what Smith called the 'stretch limo optimism of the 1980s', forcing a temporary lull in the Lower East Side's booming real estate and art markets, but it did nothing to reverse the city's ongoing descent into anti-welfare, pro-market neoliberalism, which had first taken shape in the wake of the 1975 fiscal crisis.[1267]

In the midst of this turbulence, it is fitting that Garrin's screening took place at Films Charas; '[a]s a guerilla video documentarian', argues Timo Schrader, 'Garrin presented his footage at the longest-standing guerilla activist organisation in Loisaida.'[1268] In this thesis, I have analysed several artistic projects that aimed to reimagine, represent, and/or reconfigure the Nuyorican Lower East Side's dilapidated built environment between the late 1970s and the late 1980s. Not all of these projects were Nuyorican-led, but all of them were somehow connected to what Ed Morales calls 'places in the Puerto Rican heart', and built upon the work of neighbourhood stalwarts like Charas, Adopt-a-Building, and Pueblo Nuevo.[1269] El Bohío, La Plaza Cultural, 519 East Eleventh Street, even the rundown storefronts along Avenues B and C; these collective sites of artistic production, social reproduction, and community building loomed large in the cultural and political imaginaries of many who lived and worked in the Lower East Side in the 1980s. A key argument of this thesis is that as disinvestment gave way to gentrification in the 1980s, it was in and around these spaces that some of the most creative and egalitarian 'definitions of the neighborhood's function in the city's ecology' and 'visions of its future', to use Janet Abu-Lughod's phrase, were imagined and fought for.[1270] In this conclusion, I argue that despite their growing precarity in the 1980s and 1990s, these spaces, and the collective practices and socio-spatial relations they fostered, remained central to what Abu-Lughod calls the new

[1265] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 119.

[1266] Smith, 'After Tompkins Square Park', 201.

[1267] Smith, 201.

[1268] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 121.

[1269] Morales, 'Places in the Puerto Rican Heart: Eddie Figueroa and the Nuyorican Imaginary'.

[1270] Janet L. Abu-Lughod, 'Conclusions and Implications', in *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side*, ed. Janet L. Abu-Lughod (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994), 337.

'coalitions, realignments, and waxing and waning of specific powers' that emerged in the wake of the riot, and have played a role in shaping the Lower East Side's social, cultural, and material character ever since.[1271]

I. Your House is Mine: squatting, AIDS activism, and the Loisaida movement

A press release for Garrin's screening at Films Charas stated that it aimed to 'keep everyone informed about the continuing struggle over the park […] and to remind everyone that it's OUR COMMUNITY, OUR PARK!'[1272] The Tompkins Square Park Riot made visible the powerful new political and economic forces that were mobilising against any vision of the Lower East Side's development that did not serve the needs of neoliberal capitalist urbanisation. As such, it prompted the formation of new coalitional counterpublics that could come together across differences of race, class, and ethnicity to resist efforts to turn the Lower East Side into a neighbourhood premised on housing only the white-collar professionals who served the city's resurgent finance, real estate, and insurance industries.[1273] These coalitions included young white artists like Garrin, who had perhaps seen themselves as detached or insulated from some of these issues, but who, having found themselves 'squirming under the boot-heels of New York City's ruling class and their political stooges', as the AIDS and housing activist Jay Blotcher puts it, became committed participants in the struggle against gentrification.[1274] They also included veteran Loisaida movement artists and activists, for whom, in Schrader's words, 'every single battle for urban space, whether it was housing or public space, was important because every defeat would directly result in the erosion of the neighbourhood.'[1275] As I discuss in this section, in the struggle against gentrification, these groups made common cause with other art and activist counterpublics that had sprung up in the neighbourhood the second half of the 1980s, including squatters, unhoused advocacy groups, and AIDS activists.

The Tompkins Square Park Riot cemented the social and political prominence of the Lower East Side's squatter movement, which had been growing steadily since the mid-1980s.[1276] As Smith argues, between August 1988 and the final eviction of Tent City in June 1991, the park became

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[1271] Abu-Lughod, 337.

[1272] Quoted in Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 120. Capitalisation in original.

[1273] Deutsche and Ryan, 'The Fine Art of Gentrification', 93; Smith, 'After Tompkins Square Park', 203.

[1274] Blotcher, 'Alphabet City Finishing School', 585.

[1275] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 121.

[1276] Midnight Notes, 'Land, Wealth, and Self-Determination in the Lower East Side', 64.

> a focal point of resistance in the city, drawing in homeless people and squatters, some housing and anti-gentrification activists, as well as local anarchists. As many as 100 structures were erected in the park at any one time, and nearly 300 people slept there on its busiest nights; squatters took over as many as 50 buildings in the neighborhood, housing as many as a thousand people.[1277]

Most of these squats were located east of the park in Loisaida.[1278] As discussed throughout this thesis, property speculation and the displacement of low-income tenants was well underway by the late 1980s, but the large-scale redevelopment of this part of the Lower East Side had yet to begin in earnest, and had been halted by the 1987 Wall Street crash; as such, in 1988, Loisaida's crumbling built environment remained largely unchanged since the late 1970s.[1279]

Since the rapid proliferation of squats in the mid-1980s, squatters had been 'rhetorically pitted against other low-income people seeking affordable housing and framed as opportunistic line jumpers' by city housing officials, the media, and some housing activists.[1280] In a history of the Lower East Side squatting movement, however, Amy Starecheski argues that the squatters drew on 'several strands of Latino-led organizing in the neighborhood', including the sweat equity urban homesteading model that had been pioneered by Loisaida movement groups such as Charas and Adopt-a-Building in the 1970s:

> By linking their practices to this tradition, white squatters with class privilege occupying spaces in a low-income, majority-people-of-color neighborhood could hope to share in the legitimacy of organizing led by people of color, identifying themselves not with gentrifiers but with local residents at risk of displacement.[1281]

El Bohío was well-placed, both geographically and politically, to support the burgeoning squatting movement in the Lower East Side; the centre served a broad social base in the neighbourhood, had roots in Charas's housing activism, was located close to Tompkins Square Park and the surrounding squats, and had initially been squatted itself. As such, the building

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[1277] Smith, 'After Tompkins Square Park', 203.

[1278] Starecheski, *Ours to Lose*, 49–51.

[1279] Starecheski, 49.

[1280] Starecheski, 71.

[1281] Starecheski, 55.

Starecheski also identifies the Young Lords's occupations of space in Loisaida in the early 1970s 'as an important and often forgotten antecedent to the squatting movement'. Starecheski, 54.

became, in Starecheski's words, 'a vital space for local organizing' for 'the squatters and homesteaders of the 1980s.'[1282]

Like the squatters, the veteran homesteaders, housing organisations, and anti-gentrification activists of Loisaida firmly believed that a 'home was not supposed to function as an investment'.[1283] They understood that homesteads, squats, and unhoused encampments reflected distinct but comparable responses to the growing commodification of housing in the neighbourhood, and the pressure this put on low-income Lower East Side residents.[1284] As the Lower East Side Joint Planning Council (a multiracial, cross-class coalition of housing advocacy groups) wrote in a statement published in *The Quality of Life in Loisaida* the month after the riot: 'The Lower East Side community is overwhelmed by the terrible problems of homelessness and drug abuse. The lack of affordable housing is the major reason for this situation.'[1285] Just as it had in the previous decade, in the late 1980s, the collective appropriation and transformation of space, whether for artmaking, housing, or political organising, offered a wide array of Lower East Siders what Starecheski describes as the material basis for 'claims to participation in an urban life increasingly inaccessible to the non-wealthy residents of this gentrifying neighborhood.'[1286]

This claim to participation in urban life, which characterised both the Lower East Side squatters and the work of the Loisaida movement on whose socio-spatial practices they drew, exemplified what Henri Lefebvre called 'the right to the city'.[1287] The right to the city, in Lefevbre's theorisation, is more than just the right to existence in the city; it concerns nothing less than 'a transformed and renewed right to urban life' beyond the reaches of state and capital, the right 'to places of encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses, enabling the full and complete usage of these moments and places.'[1288] Marcelo Lopes de Souza rejects liberal interpretations of

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[1282] Starecheski, *Ours to Lose*, 55.

See also Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 121.

[1283] Starecheski, *Ours to Lose*, 69.

[1284] Carmen Pabón, 'Letter to the Editor: What's Happening with the Squatter Buildings', *The Quality of Life in/Calidad de Vida En Loisaida*, July-August 1989, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City.

[1285] Lower East Side Joint Planning Council, 'Statement Regarding Tompkins Square Park Confrontations', *The Quality of Life in/Calidad de Vida En Loisaida*, September-October 1988, 22, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Emphasis in original.

[1286] Starecheski, *Ours to Lose*, 35.

[1287] Henri Lefebvre, 'Right to the City', in *Writings on Cities*, ed. and trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 61–181.

[1288] Lefebvre, 158, 179.

Lefebvre's concept that have reduced it to the '*right to a better, more "human" life in the context of the capitalist city'*, arguing that the right to the city is not only about better housing or lower rent (although it also includes these demands), but is oriented towards an insistence on 'the right to a very different life in the context of a very different, just society.'[1289] In the Lower East Side, the right to the city found expression in the transformation of abandoned tenements, lots, storefronts, and schools into communal spaces that could fulfil the present-day material needs and desires of different groups of urban dwellers, while collectively imagining and instituting a vision of what a different, more equal society could look like.

Your House is Mine (1988-1992), initiated the day after the Tompkins Square Park Riot, was one of the most successful artistic projects that grew out of these emergent coalitions of squatters, community organisers, and activist artists.[1290] This multi-year print project was organised by Andrew Castrucci and other members of Bullet Space, a squat and gallery founded in an abandoned tenement on East Third Street in Loisaida in 1986.[1291] Thirty artists and writers created a series of prints which, in the words of the *Artforum* critic Elizabeth Hess, offered 'an organized response to the current housing crisis on the Lower East Side', describing a 'class war against landlords, drugs, and AIDS and an eloquent protest against the lack of a safe environment for children.'[1292] The project brought together several overlapping social and cultural spheres, including the East Village scene (Martin Wong, David Wojnarowicz), the Nuyorican movement (Miguel Piñero, Juan Sánchez), the graffiti scene (Lady Pink, Lee Quiñones), AIDS activism (Avram Finkelstein, Vincent Gagliostro), and radical comics (Seth Tobocman, Sabrina Jones) (Figs. 234-236).[1293] One hundred and fifty copies of each print were wheatpasted around the neighbourhood, echoing a tradition of political streetworks utilised by Political Art Documentation and Distribution (PADD) in the early 1980s, and later by AIDS art collectives like Gran Fury and Silence=Death (Figure 237).[1294] A further one hundred and fifty copies were bound in a series of limited edition artists' books, alongside a larger (and cheaper)

[1289] Marcelo Lopes de Souza, 'Which Right to Which City? In Defence of Political-Strategic Clarity', *Interface* 2, no. 1 (Crises, social movements and revolutionary transformations) (May 2010): 318. Emphasis in original.

[1290] Avram Finkelstein, 'AIDS, Coca-Cola, and the Tompkins Square Park Riot', *On Curating*, no. 42 (September 2019): 64.

[1291] Marc H. Miller and Jonah Wolf, 'Andrew Castrucci & Bullet Space: A Lower East Side Art Squat, 1980s & '90s', *Gallery 98* (blog), accessed 24 June 2024, https://gallery98.org/collection/castrucci-bullet-space-your-house-is-mine/.

[1292] Elizabeth Hess, 'No Place Like Home', *Artforum*, October 1991, 98.

[1293] Finkelstein, 'AIDS, Coca-Cola, and the Tompkins Square Park Riot', 64.

[1294] Finkelstein, 64; Moore, *Art Gangs*, 124–25.

run of newsprint broadsides (Figure 238).[1295] Like earlier counterpublic art projects in the Lower East Side (such as PADD's *Not for Sale*, or Artmakers's *La Lucha Continua*), the different forms and spaces in which *Your House is Mine* circulated allowed the project to reach different art and activist audiences within and beyond the neighbourhood.

As the breadth of participants in *Your House is Mine* implies, the anti-gentrification coalitions that developed in the Lower East Side in the late 1980s included a large number of AIDS activists and people with HIV and AIDS living in the neighbourhood.[1296] Their involvement reflected the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS on Lower Manhattan's queer communities and communities of colour, and an understanding that the AIDS crisis and the housing crisis were mutually reinforcing; as Blotcher put it, growing numbers of people, regardless of their race, class, or sexuality, were 'unwanted here in New York City' in the late 1980s.[1297] ACT UP New York was formed in March 1987, and quickly became one of the city's most effective direct action groups.[1298] The writer Jim Feast notes that 'ACT UP New York, like the squats and the gardens, opted for a town meeting style of democracy', where anyone in attendance at the weekly meeting could propose an action or project.[1299] This facilitated a flexible, improvisatory approach to organising that made use of the varied expertise and experience represented within ACT UP's wide-ranging membership. Some affinity groups, for example, organised high-profile 'zaps' or demonstrations, such as the infamous 'Stop the Church' protest in December 1989 (discussed in Chapter Two), while others were engaged in sustained medical research and governmental lobbying, or formed art collectives like Gran Fury, DIVA TV, and fierce pussy, which produced what Sarah Schulman calls 'strategic images' aimed at garnering public support.[1300] Two ACT UP projects that were particularly aligned with the concerns of other community organisers in the Lower East Side were the Housing Committee and the Needle Exchange; the former prevented

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[1295] Finkelstein, 'AIDS, Coca-Cola, and the Tompkins Square Park Riot', 64.

[1296] Finkelstein, 61; Blotcher, 'Alphabet City Finishing School', 586; Feast, 'AIDS on the Lower East Side', 592.

[1297] Blotcher, 'Alphabet City Finishing School', 585.

On the mutually reinforcing impact of gentrification and HIV/AIDS, see also Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*.

[1298] Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, xiv.

[1299] Feast, 'AIDS on the Lower East Side', 592.

See also Midnight Notes, 'Land, Wealth, and Self-Determination in the Lower East Side', 64.

[1300] Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 373.

people with AIDS from losing their homes, while the latter provided intravenous drug users—many of whom were unhoused and/or living with AIDS—with clean needles.[1301]

Both the onset of HIV/AIDS in New York and the militancy of AIDS activism had an impact on community organising and cultural production in the Nuyorican Lower East Side. *The Quality of Life in Loisaida*, for example, dedicated its July-August 1989 issue to the 'The Deadly Serious Subject of AIDS' (Figure 239). Alongside a full-page advertisement for the AIDS Hotline, the issue included a series of bilingual articles, written by healthcare professionals, community organisers, and residents, which emphasised the impact of HIV/AIDS on low-income people of colour in the Lower East Side in general, and on intravenous drug users in particular (Figure 240).[1302] This issue printed a reproduction of Maria Domínguez's poster for *El Baquiné*, a musical performance about a drug-using couple and their HIV-positive baby that was staged at El Bohío in May 1988 (Figure 241). In June 1992, La Galería en El Bohío held *Sidastianas Martirologios*, an exhibition, bilingual poetry reading, and *bomba y plena* performance organised by the dancer Roberto Ocasio, which comprised creative 'expressions of lament and imploration for a cure for AIDS' from mostly queer Latines, many of whom were HIV-positive (Figure 242). Several participants, including Robert Vázquez-Pacheco and Moisés Agosto-Rosario, were involved in ACT UP affinity groups like Majority Action and the Latina/o Caucus.[1303] These groups organised around racialised issues that compounded the impact of HIV/AIDS, including immigration status, unemployment, and incarceration.[1304] As the pandemic deepened, El Bohío thus offered another space within these alternative AIDS activist networks, somewhere that, as Vázquez-Pacheco put it, Nuyorican and other Latine activists could 'work in ways that we

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[1301] See Schulman, 281–311, 482–504.

[1302] Ani Sandoval, 'One Family's Experiences with AIDS', *The Quality of Life in/Calidad de Vida En Loisaida*, July-August 1989, Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection (MSS134) Box 2, Folder 6, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City; Donald Lorimer, 'Lower East Side HIV/AIDS Statistics', *The Quality of Life in/Calidad de Vida En Loisaida*, July-August 1989, Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection (MSS134) Box 2, Folder 6, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City; Dionisio Cruz, 'Emotional Support for Families', *The Quality of Life in/Calidad de Vida En Loisaida*, July-August 1989, Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection (MSS134) Box 2, Folder 6, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City; Thomas Eccardt, 'Promising Drugs: Potential Good News', *The Quality of Life in/Calidad de Vida En Loisaida*, July-August 1989, Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection (MSS134) Box 2, Folder 6, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City; Lisa Burdige, 'AIDS: Basic Facts You Should Know', *The Quality of Life in/Calidad de Vida En Loisaida*, July-August 1989, Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection (MSS134) Box 2, Folder 6, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City.

[1303] Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 35–58.

[1304] Julián de Mayo, 'Silencio=Muerte: An Interview with Julian de Mayo on the Legacy of ACT-UP's Latina/o Caucus', interview by Néstor David Pastor, The Latinx Project, 1 December 2020, https://www.latinxproject.nyu.edu/intervenxions/silenciomuerte-an-interview-with-julian-de-mayo-on-the-legacy-of-act-ups-latina/o-caucus.

understand […] using *bomba*, using *plena*, using anything that we need to do to give people the information that they need.'[1305]

II. Uneasy alliances

It is important not to romanticise the coalitions against displacement that formed in the Lower East Side in the late 1980s. These 'uneasy alliances', in Blotcher's words, between very different neighbourhood constituencies, remained structured around racism, sexism, classism, and deep ideological differences.[1306] For example, Blotcher recalls that while some community activists and squatters saw middle class AIDS activists like him as 'a bunch of fabulous fags who had come to the brass tacks of social justice a little late', they nevertheless had to ditch 'their homophobia in order to work […] against a common enemy.'[1307] Starecheski argues that 'Latino antigentrification activists' race- and ethnicity- based claims to neighborhood space' pushed majority white squatters 'to attend to the racial makeup of their buildings'.[1308] Many squats remained overwhelmingly male-dominated, despite most of the neighbourhood's longstanding housing organisations, particularly those that comprised the Lower East Side Joint Planning Council (JPC), being run by women.[1309] Ideologically, the squatters were divided into those who, like the early homesteaders and housing activists, were suspicious of the state but willing to work within a legal framework to secure long-term affordable housing, and those who squatted in direct opposition to property laws, a position that brought them into conflict with both the Department of Housing Preservation and Development and the JPC.[1310] Many of these more avowedly anarchistic squatters saw longstanding housing organisations like the JPC as 'sell outs', who, in Ferguson's words, had 'traded in their radical roots for careers spent grappling with a bureaucracy intent on dispensing crumbs at best.'[1311] Meanwhile, many veteran housing activists 'saw this new generation of squatters as irresponsible, revolutionary wannabes playing a game in which the stakes were too high.'[1312]

[1305] Roberto Vázquez-Pacheco, interviewed in *Sidastianas Martirologios de Roberto Ocasio*, directed by Julián de Mayo, 2014, 58:25-58:34, https://vimeo.com/98493567.

[1306] Blotcher, 'Alphabet City Finishing School', 586.

[1307] Blotcher, 586.

[1308] Starecheski, *Ours to Lose*, 96.

[1309] Abu-Lughod, 'The Battle for Tompkins Square Park', 258–59.

[1310] Ferguson, 'The Struggle for Space', 149; Midnight Notes, 'Land, Wealth, and Self-Determination in the Lower East Side', 71–72.

[1311] Ferguson, 'The Struggle for Space', 159.

[1312] Ferguson, 159.

These tensions were heightened by the broader heterogeneity of the Lower East Side in the late 1980s. Many of the neighbourhood's older white working-class renters (and some homeowners) of Eastern European backgrounds, based mostly in the East Village, espoused what Janet Abu-Lughod called a 'positive view of neighborhood revitalization, so long as it does not displace them from their rent-controlled apartments or make their own housing "unaffordable"'.[1313] Some of these older residents were involved in housing advocacy, working alongside organisers of colour, and middle-class white activists (such as Marlis Momber), who moved to the area in the early to mid-1970s, often as homesteaders, and became involved in the Loisaida movement.[1314] On the whole, however, they were viewed by property developers and city officials as the more respectable counterpart to the neighbourhood's poorer Black and Latine communities, who were based mostly in Loisaida, Pueblo Nuevo, and the housing projects adjacent to the East River.[1315] As I have highlighted throughout this thesis, collectives like Charas and Pueblo Nuevo, which were themselves founded by Puerto Ricans from the neighbourhood, were successful in mobilising longstanding residents of colour while building generative relationships with the mostly white artists and activists that began moving to the neighbourhood in growing numbers from the late 1970s onwards. Marlis Momber and Tria Giovan's photographs of the 'boisterous and welcoming street life' of the Nuyorican Lower East Side, which centred on key thoroughfares like Avenue C and Clinton Street and the neighbourhood's many community gardens, make clear how committed these older residents were to protecting their right to survive and thrive in this increasingly contested space.[1316] Abu-Lughod observed, however, that by the late 1980s and early 1990s, many low-income Black and Latine residents 'seem[ed] mostly demoralized' in the face of sustained pressure from gentrification.[1317]

Tensions between different Lower East Side constituencies would only intensify during the 1990s. While the housing market remained slack until the middle of that decade, the final removal of Tompkins Square Park's unhoused encampments in 1991 marked the onset of what Smith called 'a stern anti-homeless and anti-squatter policy throughout the city', which aimed to "'take back" the parks, streets, and neighborhoods from those who had supposedly "stolen" them from the public.'[1318] In 1991, the Puerto Rican Democratic politician Antonio Pagán was

[1313] Abu-Lughod, 'The Battle for Tompkins Square Park', 258.

[1314] Abu-Lughod, 258–59.

[1315] Abu-Lughod, 258.

[1316] Abu-Lughod, 'Conclusions and Implications', 344.

[1317] Abu-Lughod, 'The Battle for Tompkins Square Park', 259.

[1318] Smith, 'After Tompkins Square Park', 204.

elected as leader of New York's 2nd City Council District, narrowly defeating the long-term incumbent Miriam Friedlander, a longstanding ally of Charas and other Loisaida groups.[1319] Despite his history as a community activist, Pagán was an enthusiastic supporter of gentrification in the Lower East Side.[1320] Despite garnering support from some fellow Puerto Ricans, Abu-Lughod argued that most community activists were

> hostile to Pagan, whom they view as an unprincipled opportunist […] likely to use his ethnic status to advance himself, rather than the interests either of the neighborhood in general or of 'his' people in particular.[1321]

Pagán pushed for a curfew in Tompkins Square Park, opposed the neighbourhood's squatters, blocked the construction of a homeless shelter for people with AIDS, and supported attempts to close many Nuyorican spaces, including La Plaza Cultural (which was earmarked for redevelopment), and El Bohío, whose artistic director Armando Pérez, also a co-founder of Charas, was a bitter political rival.[1322]

Pagán was an ally of Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who ousted the Democratic incumbent David Dinkins, the city's first Black mayor, in 1993.[1323] Dinkins's first term coincided with the aftermath of the 1987 stock market crash and the nationwide recession of 1990-91, and was characterised by a narrative of rising crime, racial tension, and resurgent urban decline in New York.[1324] Promising to tackle these issues, one of Giuliani's first acts on taking power was to appoint William Bratton, formerly the head of the city's Transit Police, as Police Commissioner.[1325] Bratton was an advocate of James Wilson and George Kelling's 'broken windows' theory of policing.[1326] Premised on the notion that 'if a window in a building is broken *and is left unrepaired*, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken', Wilson and Kelling argued that in order to avoid major crimes from taking place, police should prevent small acts of

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[1319] Abu-Lughod, 'Conclusions and Implications', 347; Smith, 'After Tompkins Square Park', 207.

[1320] Smith, 'After Tompkins Square Park', 207.

[1321] Abu-Lughod, 'Conclusions and Implications', 347–48.

[1322] Lincoln Anderson, 'A Complex Legacy: Friends and Foes Reflect on Pagan', *amNewYork*, 10 February 2009, https://www.amny.com/news/a-complex-legacy-friends-and-foes-reflect-on-pagan/.

[1323] Sewell Chan, 'Antonio Pagán, 50, Ex-Councilman, Is Dead', *City Room Blog* (blog), 26 January 2009, https://archive.nytimes.com/cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/01/26/antonio-pagan-50-ex-councilman-is-dead/; Smith, 'After Tompkins Square Park', 207–8.

[1324] Smith, 'After Tompkins Square Park', 201.

[1325] Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton, introduction to *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*, edited by Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton (London: Verso, 2016), 5.

[1326] George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson, 'Broken Windows', *The Atlantic*, March 1982.

'disorder' (graffiti, panhandling, drug use, etc.) from proliferating.[1327] This so-called 'quality of life' approach to crime prevention was introduced by then-Police Commissioner Benjamin Ward in the early 1980s,[1328] but expanded massively under Giuliani, whose administration, argues Christopher Mele, sought to 'purge the public landscape of uses, practices, and behaviors labelled deviant, unpleasant, or simply unorganized'.[1329] When Mary McCarthy called her fledgling community magazine *The Quality of Life in Loisaida* in 1978, the name was meant to describe the transformative impact of grassroots efforts to rebuild the dilapidated neighbourhood from the ground up.[1330] In stark contrast to this, Giuliani's so-called 'quality of life campaign' was part of a neoliberal urban restructuring process dependent on the aggressive criminalisation and displacement of a range of socially, politically, and economically marginal people: the unhoused, drug users, sex workers, queer people, and the racialised urban poor more broadly.[1331]

Like David Dinkins and Ed Koch before him, Giuliani sought to cement New York's ascendency by stimulating the city's finance, insurance, and real estate sectors above all else.[1332] Seeking to turn the Lower East Side into what Jim Feast calls 'an adjunct to Wall Street', Giuliani (whose mayoralty coincided with renewed economic optimism and an uptick in building redevelopment in the city), began aggressively selling off city-owned property, most of which had been vacant since the 1970s, and much of which had been transformed into homesteads, community gardens, cultural spaces, and squats.[1333] One such property was La Plaza Cultural.[1334] Having narrowly avoided demolition in the late 1980s, the garden, which had again become a thriving neighbourhood resource in Loisaida, was saved once more in the 1990s, thanks to vigorous local campaigning supported by district council member Margarita Lopez, a longtime

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[1327] Kelling and Wilson, 31.

[1328] Louis Menand, 'Was Rudy Giuliani Always So Awful?', *New Yorker*, 19 September 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/09/26/was-rudy-giuliani-always-so-awful.

[1329] Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 302.

[1330] McCarthy, 'My Loisaida', 569.

[1331] Alex S. Vitale, *City of Disorder: How the Quality of Life Campaign Transformed New York Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 11–12.

David Harvey calls this process 'accumulation by dispossession', and argues that it is (and has always been) intrinsic to capitalism. David Harvey, 'The "New" Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession', *Socialist Register* 40 (2004): 73–76.

[1332] Vitale, *City of Disorder*, 100–102.

[1333] Feast, 'AIDS on the Lower East Side', 591.

[1334] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 146.

Charas member.[1335] As Nandini Bagchee notes, however, 'the victory was bittersweet', as several 'smaller gardens and properties were bulldozed in exchange for La Plaza Cultural.'[1336]

A similarly uneven clearance of city-owned property took place across the neighbourhood, thanks in part to a deal brokered by the Lower East Side Joint Planning Council and the Department of Housing Preservation and Development.[1337] Under the so-called Cross Subsidy programme, each unit of city-owned property that was auctioned off was to be compensated by an equal amount of low-rent housing.[1338] While 'equitable in theory', Bagchee argues that the programme 'created friction' as 'the city selectively cleared gardens and evicted people to generate vacancies for new market-rate housing.'[1339] This angered squatters, who were easy targets for removal, but it also resonated badly with some Nuyorican residents, who felt that

> their struggle to build Loisaida was given short shrift, as the lottery for the new low-rent housing did not necessarily benefit the people who had toiled so long within the neighborhood.[1340]

This sense of betrayal makes it clear that in enacting their strategy for the Lower East Side, New York's economic and political elites were able to capitalise on tensions between different social groups and their competing visions for the neighbourhood, which deepened throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s as the competition for dwindling space and resources intensified.

This period was characterised by a growing realisation that those who had 'toiled' to keep the Nuyorican Lower East Side alive and thriving between the 1970s and the 1990s had not only made the neighbourhood more attractive to real estate capital, but had inadvertently legitimised what Stuart Hall called 'the long march of the Neoliberal Revolution', with its doctrine of self-management and the devolution of state power.[1341] As Andrew Strombeck argues,

> The withdrawal of the welfare state and the demand for market-based solutions gave DIY a double edge. It's all fine and good for the state to enable experiments by tacitly

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[1335] Bagchee, 146–47; Hobbs, 'Gentrification's Empty Victory'.

[1336] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 147.

[1337] Bagchee, 146.

[1338] Bagchee, 146.

[1339] Bagchee, 146.

[1340] Bagchee, 146.

[1341] Stuart Hall, 'The Neoliberal Revolution', *Soundings* 2011, no. 48 (Summer 2011): 9, https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/vol-2011-issue-48/abstract-7312/.

On the self-management of neoliberalism, see also Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007), 57–101.

> approving the appropriation of city-owned space. It's another thing when the state, and the economy, demands that you manage yourself. […] This self-management was a key facet of the version of capitalism that replaced Fordism, and it's not coincidental that the do-it-yourself aesthetic experiments of the Lower East Side happened at this moment.[1342]

From this perspective, it is possible to see how the work of the Loisaida movement and its allies in the 1970s and 1980s had inadvertently dovetailed with the entrepreneurial values of flexibility and self-reliance demanded by neoliberalism.[1343]

Despite these contradictions, it is important not to undervalue the ways in which the collaborative practices and commonly run spaces that flourished in the Nuyorican Lower East Side posed meaningful, if always precarious, alternatives to the corosive dictates of neoliberal capitalism. Nothing makes this oppositional character more evident than the unexpected sale of El Bohío to a private developer in July 1998, near the end of Charas's fifteen-year lease with the city.[1344] By this point, Tompkins Square Park had been 'cleaned up' and many of the neighbourhood's squats and community gardens had been evicted.[1345] El Bohío thus remained a vital social, cultural, and political space in the Lower East Side, hosting a wide array of theatre groups, musicians, and artists, alongside the nonprofit bike workshop Recycle-A-Bicycle, the Henry Street Settlement youth programme, the anti-globalisation Direct Action Network, and even meetings of the youth gang the Latin Kings.[1346] For many who lived and worked in the area in the late 1990s, El Bohío was not just a relic from an ostensibly more radical period in the Lower East Side's recent history, but was a bulwark against further encroachments on the neighbourhood.[1347]

The auction of El Bohío came as a shock to Charas, given that other local art nonprofits, including PS 122, ABC No Rio, and the Clemente Soto Velez Cultural Center had been offered long-term, affordable leases by the city.[1348] For Charas and its supporters, this discrepancy was racial and political. Of PS 122, for example, Charas's Armando Pérez was insistent that '[t]he

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[1342] Strombeck, *DIY on the Lower East Side*, 7.

[1343] Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 12.

[1344] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 147.

[1345] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 149.

[1346] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 147; Starecheski, *Ours to Lose*, 55; Lincoln Anderson, 'Sale of Charas Building Still on, despite Protests', *The Villager*, 15 July 1998.

[1347] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 121–23.

[1348] Leo Jakobson, 'For a Few $$$ More', *Resident*, 20 July 1998, 8.

only difference between them and us is that their board is mainly white and we are Latino'.[1349] The Clemente, a more recent Nuyorican art space in the neighbourhood founded in 1993, had also been threatened with eviction, but it too was ultimately offered a long subsidised lease by the city.[1350] Here, the primary difference between the two spaces appeared to be political; while the Clemente was described by its director Ed Vega as an avowedly 'nonpartisan and nonpolitical' institution[1351], many saw the sale of El Bohío as the outcome of Pagan and Giuliani's longstanding 'vendetta' against the grassroots political organising that took place in the building.[1352]

Since its founding in 1978, El Bohío had been, in Bill Weinberg's words, 'a key point of cross-fertilization for white and Puerto Rican artists and activists' in the Lower East Side.[1353] As such, the campaign to save the space mobilised people from across and beyond the neighbourhood, from veteran community activists to progressive local politicians, anarchist squatters, and a large number of artists. As Bagchee notes, the two decades between El Bohío's opening and its threatened closure had seen 'a gradual shift in the user base' as the neighbourhood's demographics changed, and many of those who had transformed this abandoned public school into 'a center for Puerto Rican resistance' were no longer around; some, such as Bimbo Rivas and Miguel Piñero, had died, while others, such as Maria Domínguez, had been priced out of the neighbourhood earlier in the decade.[1354] Nevertheless, Bagchee argues that the impending loss of El Bohío, which appeared to spell the demise of the radical Lower East Side altogether, 'brought many of the older generation of the Puerto Ricans back to the building', where they joined a collective campaign to save the space.[1355] After several years of protests, lawsuits, and appeals, on December 27, 2001, the last occupiers of El Bohío were finally evicted.[1356] On that final day, a small group of occupiers chained themselves together on the ground floor, where they were

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[1349] Quoted in Jakobson, 8.

[1350] Jesse McKinley, 'Same Problem, Different Strategy', *New York Times*, 12 July 1998, https://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/12/nyregion/neighborhood-report-lower-east-side-same-problem-different-strategy.html.

[1351] McKinley, 6.

[1352] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 147.

[1353] Bill Weinberg, 'Looking Back on the Tompkins Square War', in *Resistance: A Radical Political and Social History of the Lower East Side*, ed. Clayton Patterson, Joe Flood, and Alan W. Moore (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 372.

[1354] Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 147.

[1355] Bagchee, 147.

[1356] Bagchee, 147.

arrested by riot police.[1357] Across the street, as those inside the building were led away in handcuffs, another group of protesters repeatedly chanted: 'Giuliani, you're no good — you're destroying our neighborhood.'[1358]

III. The struggle continues

In this thesis, I have analysed just some of the many practices and spaces of artistic production, social reproduction, and community building that flourished in and around the crumbling tenements, lots, and storefronts of Loisaida and Pueblo Nuevo between the late 1970s and late 1980s. In and of itself, the work of historicising the Nuyorican Lower East Side, which until very recently has been all but sidelined in most existing historical accounts of the neighbourhood, is crucial in expanding contemporary understandings of the social, cultural, and political vitality of this storied part of Lower Manhattan. While highlighting the disproportionate impact that disinvestment and gentrification had on the neighbourhood's poor and racialised residents in particular, I have continually emphasised the proactive, agential, and highly complex role that Puerto Rican Lower East Siders and their non-Puerto Rican friends, lovers, and collaborators played in the ever-intensifying struggle over space from the mid-1970s onwards. In the final section of this conclusion, I argue that the alternative histories and geographies that have been analysed in this thesis continue to have a role to play in shaping the social, cultural, political, and material character of the present-day Lower East Side.

As New York has continued its transformation into what Kim Phillips-Fein calls a 'wealth-bound metropolis'[1359], and cycles of disinvestment, gentrification, and displacement have become familar urban restructuring strategies across the globe, gentrification in the Lower East Side is sometimes described as being 'complete'.[1360] In fact, while the struggle over space in the Lower East Side has changed dramatically over the decades, the struggle itself has never ceased. In 1994, near the start of a new wave of Giuliani-led displacement, Janet Abu-Lughod argued that

> In the face of the remarkable transformations that have taken place in the form of American cities over the last century and half, the persistence of a multicultural

[1357] Robert F. Worth, 'East Village Community Group Is Evicted', *New York Times*, 28 December 2001, https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/28/nyregion/east-village-community-group-is-evicted.html.

[1358] Quoted in Worth.

[1359] Phillips-Fein, *Fear City*, 306.

[1360] Lees, Slater, and Wyly, *Gentrification*, 166; Starecheski, *Ours to Lose*, 66.

> proletarian quarter near the current governmental and financial core of the country's largest metropolitan center is a stunning anomaly.[1361]

Two years later, Neil Smith observed that Avenue C, by this point renamed 'Loisaida Avenue' in honour of its position at the heart of the Nuyorican Lower East Side, was 'still a very different place from First Avenue.', just a few blocks west in the comparatively wealthier East Village.[1362] More recently, Schrader has noted that 'the Puerto Rican community at the heart of the Lower East Side held out longer than most other areas' in the neighbourhood.[1363] Even today, while the cost of living in the Lower East Side continues to rise, and it becomes home to an increasingly upper-middle class population (bolstered by the gradual expansion of New York University across Lower Manhattan), Amy Starecheski insists that 'there are still many low-income people, people of color, and longtime residents in the neighborhood,' many of whom are based in the homesteads, rent-controlled housing developments, and former squats of Loisaida and Pueblo Nuevo.[1364]

As was the case in the late twentieth century, the struggle over space in the present-day Lower East Side remains inseparable from the convulsions of capital. As David Harvey has observed, 'the solution of the 1970s' lay at the root of the global financial crisis of 2008:

> crush the power of labour, initiate wage repression, let the market do its work, all the while putting the power of the state at the service of capital in general and of investment finance in particular.[1365]

For Harvey, capitalism has always sought to resolve its 'inner crisis tendencies' through the 'spatial fix' of 'endless geographical expansion and geographical restructuring'.[1366] Indeed, like New York's fiscal crisis in 1975 or the Wall Street crash of 1987, the 2008 financial crisis initially prompted a downturn in the city's real estate market, while ultimately offering capital an opportunity to encroach even further on neighbourhoods such as the Lower East Side, in this case through the rise of corporate landlords and venture capital-backed platforms such as

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[1361] Abu-Lughod, 'Conclusions and Implications', 335.

[1362] Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 28.

[1363] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 14.

[1364] Starecheski, *Ours to Lose*, 66.

[1365] Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*, 172.

[1366] David Harvey, 'Globalization and the "Spatial Fix"', *Geographische Revue: Zeitschrift Für Literatur Und Diskussion 3* 3, no. 2 (2001): 24.

Airbnb.[1367] A more recent crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, has further exposed the failure of neoliberal capitalism to provide for people's basic needs.[1368] While the onset of the pandemic in early 2020 saw practices of mutual aid and solidarity, many of which had long found a home in the Lower East Side, develop rapidly in neighbourhoods across the globe, many governments seized the opportunity to further slash social welfare budgets, knowing that 'good neighbours' would do this unpaid reproductive labour for free.[1369] In New York, Wilfred Guerron notes that a rising budget deficit in recent years has prompted 'the beginning of another period of city disinvestment and mass displacement […] that has already begun to disproportionately impact marginalized communities.'[1370] In May 2022, with the city's unhoused population rising rapidly once again, Tompkins Square Park saw renewed clashes between police and protestors as the Department of Sanitation, under orders from New York's new mayor, Eric Adams, carried out a sweep of the park's unhoused encampment.[1371]

[1367] Vivian S. Toy, 'A Downturn Begins', *New York Times*, 7 November 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/09/realestate/09cov.html; Manuel B. Aalbers, 'Introduction To The Forum: From Third To Fifth-Wave Gentrification', *Journal of Economic and Human Geography* 110, no. 1 (February 2019): 5–6, https://doi.org/10.1111/tesg.12332; Guya Accornero, 'Contentious Buildings: The Struggle against Eviction in NYC's Lower East Side', *Current Sociology* 70, no. 7 (November 2022): 1071, https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921211012738.

[1368] Simon Springer, 'Caring Geographies: The COVID-19 Interregnum and a Return to Mutual Aid', *Dialogues in Human Geography* 10, no. 2 (July 2020): 112–15, https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820620931277.

[1369] Springer; Oli Mould et al., 'Solidarity, Not Charity: Learning the Lessons of the COVID-19 Pandemic to Reconceptualise the Radicality of Mutual Aid', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 47, no. 4 (December 2022): 866, 875, https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12553.

On the history of mutual aid in the Lower East Side, see Suzanne Wasserman, '"Our Alien Neighbors": Coping with the Depression on the Lower East Side', *American Jewish History* 88, no. 2 (June 2000): 216, 221, 224; Harry Bubbins, 'Mutual Aid - Then and Now', *Off the Grid: Village Preservation Blog* (blog), 5 May 2020, https://www.villagepreservation.org/2020/05/05/mutual-aid-then-and-now/, https://www.villagepreservation.org/2020/05/05/mutual-aid-then-and-now/; Wren Awry, 'Abundance and Other Lessons on the Lower East Side', *Blind Field: A Journal of Cultural Inquiry*, 15 June 2020, https://blindfieldjournal.com/2020/06/15/abundance-and-other-lessons-on-the-lower-east-side/.

[1370] Guerron, 'CHARAS and the Reimagining of Loisaida', 70.

See also Dana Rubinstein, 'N.Y.C. Mayor to Furlough 495 Staff Members for a Week, Including Himself', *New York Times*, 16 September 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/16/nyregion/furloughs-nyc-budget-coronavirus.html; Mara Gay, 'Opinion: New York's Era of Overspending Ends With a Shudder', *New York Times*, 24 November 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/24/opinion/eric-adams-nyc-budget.html.

[1371] Sean Piccoli and Andy Newman, 'Tompkins Square Becomes Ground Zero in Fight Against Homeless Sweeps', *New York Times*, 4 May 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/04/nyregion/nyc-homeless-tompkins-square-park.html; Annie Iezzi, 'Mayor Adams' Homeless Sweeps Recall History of Tompkins Square Park', *Pavement Pieces*, 5 May 2022, https://pavementpieces.com/mayor-adams-homeless-sweeps-recall-history-of-tompkins-square-park/; James Barron, 'In Tompkins Square, Resistance Builds to Homeless Sweeps', *New York Times*, 5 May 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/05/nyregion/in-tompkins-square-resistance-builds-to-homeless-sweeps.html; Samira Asma-Sadeque, '"Fascism Works like That": Homeless New Yorkers Struggle amid Police Sweeps', *Guardian*, 11 May 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/may/11/new-york-city-homeless-sweeps-eric-adams; Curtis Brodner, 'Serving Homeless New Yorkers in an Age of Sweeps', *Secret Structures* (blog), 4 January 2024, https://medium.com/secret-structures/serving-homeless-new-yorkers-in-an-age-of-sweeps-07c6fc10806c.

Given the echoes of the crises of the 1970s and 1980s that reverberate in the present, it is perhaps unsurprising that there has been a resurgent interest in an earlier period of the Nuyorican Lower East Side's history, when, as Guerron puts it, 'community organizing and activism, coupled with an extensive arts program, provided alternative notions of power and ownership for community members.'[1372] Charas's early 1970s dome-building experiments were included in art exhibitions held at the Americas Society and MoMA PS1 in 2022; the first of these, *This Must be the Place*, exhibited the work of Latin American artists living in New York between 1965 and 1975, while the second, *Life Between Buildings* focused on artists' engagements with the city's interstitial spaces such as lots and sidewalks.[1373] In the Lower East Side itself, tenant activists and community organisations such as Good Old Lower East Side have fought to keep rents affordable, while the neighbourhood's many gardens and cultural spaces, including the Nuyorican Poets Café, the Loisaida Center, and the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space (MoRUS), have kept its Nuyorican history alive.[1374] The Loisaida Center, for example, which has roots in the community activism of the 1970s, put on the Artmakers exhibition *La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues* in 2017 and Nandini Bagchee's *Activist Estates: A Radical History of Property in Loisaida* in 2019.[1375] MoRUS, which has occupied the lower floors of a squat-turned-co-op named C Squat since 2012, foregrounds the co-constitutive nature of many of the neighbourhood's artistic and activist practices in the 1980s and 1990s, with permanent displays dedicated to community gardening, squatting, and environmental activism.[1376] Like the Loisaida Center, which supports underrepresented local artists through its programming, MoRUS does

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[1372] Guerron, 'CHARAS and the Reimagining of Loisaida', 70.

[1373] See 'This Must Be the Place: Latin American Artists in New York, 1965–1975', Americas Society/Council of the Americas, 22 September 2021, https://www.as-coa.org/exhibitions/must-be-place-latin-american-artists-new-york-1965-1975; Aimé Iglesias Lukin and Karen Marta, eds., *This Must Be the Place: Latin American Artists in New York, 1965-1975* (New York: Americas Society, 2021); 'Life Between Buildings (June 2, 2022 – January 16, 2023)', MoMA PS1, accessed 7 October 2022, https://www.momaps1.org/programs/1-life-between-buildings; Jody Graf, 'Life Between Buildings; Or, What Might Grow Where You Least Expect It', MoMA PS1, accessed 28 August 2024, https://www.momaps1.org/post/162-life-between-buildings-curatorial-essay.

[1374] See, for example Accornero, 'Contentious Buildings'; Archives Committee of the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space, *Viva El Bohio*; Sarah Shearman, 'In New York City's Lower East Side, Gardening Is a Political Act of Resistance', *Guardian*, 11 August 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/aug/11/new-york-lower-east-side-community-gardens; Michela Pasquali, *Loisaida: NYC Community Gardens* (Milan, Italy: A+M Bookstore, 2006).

[1375] Weissman, 'La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues: 1985 & 2017'; 'Activist Estates: A Radical History of Property in Loisaida', The Loisaida Center, accessed 13 December 2024, https://loisaida.org/activist-estates/.

Since early 2024, the centre has been hosting Nuyorican Poets Cafe events while that venue undergoes a major renovation. Rachel deAragon, 'WOW! Loisaida Center and Nuyorican Poets Cafe Forge New Collaboration', *Village Sun*, 15 March 2024, https://thevillagesun.com/wow-loisaida-center-and-nuyorican-poets-cafe-forge-new-collaboration.

[1376] 'Permanent Exhibits', Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space (MoRUS), accessed 13 December 2024, https://morusnyc.org/category/exhibits/.

not only preserve an earlier period in the neighbourhood's history, but continues to promote 'environmentally-sound, community-based urban ecologies' in the present.[1377] In these and other spaces in the Nuyorican Lower East Side, including Piragua Art Space, opened by the Puerto Rican musician Daso (David Soto) in May 2022, artistic practice remains firmly embedded with other forms of cultural and political activism and community building.[1378]

Amidst all this activity, a decades-long campaign to reopen El Bohío has edged closer to becoming reality.[1379] In late 2022, Daso and the non-profit arts organisation Thrive Collective initiated the creation of several murals along El Bohío's East Tenth Street façade, honouring, among other Loisaida figures, Charas's Chino García and the late Angie Hernandez, who was Daso's mother (Figure 243).[1380] The following spring, on the other side of El Bohío, Seth Tobocman, Sabrina Jones, and other members of the comics collective World War Three Illustrated painted a mural depicting other Charas members, and some of the many artistic and political activities that El Bohío hosted during its lifetime (Figure 244).[1381] This flurry of artistic activity bolstered increasingly optimistic rumours that after decades of stalemate, the developer Gregg Singer, whose attempts to redevelop El Bohío had been continually blocked over the years, had defaulted on his mortgage on the building.[1382] In January 2024, after much speculation and tireless community organising, the *Village Sun* reported that El Bohío had been bought by an unnamed 'philanthropic entity' with the explicit intention of 'returning the property to community use.'[1383]

1377 'Mission & Vision', Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space (MoRUS), accessed 29 August 2022, https://www.morusnyc.org/about-morus/mission-vision/.

1378 'Hispanic Heritage Month: David Soto', The New York City Housing Authority Journal, 27 September 2022, https://nychajournal.nyc/hispanic-heritage-month-david-soto/.

1379 Hobbs, 'Gentrification's Empty Victory'.

1380 Bonnie Rosenstock, 'The CHARAS Wall Project: An Homage to the Loisaida Community', *Village Sun*, 21 November 2022, https://thevillagesun.com/the-charas-wall-project-an-homage-to-the-loisaida-community.

1381 Bonnie Rosenstock, 'Old P.S. 64 / Former CHARAS Gets a Mural on Its Other Side', *Village Sun*, 11 March 2023, https://thevillagesun.com/old-p-s-64-former-charas-gets-a-mural-on-its-other-side.

1382 'Gregg Singer's Reign as Owner of the Former of P.S. 64 Is Said to Be Over', *EV Grieve* (blog), 29 December 2022, https://evgrieve.com/2022/12/gregg-singers-reign-as-owner-of-former.html; Sarah Ferguson, 'Developer Takes a Nosedive as Court Orders Foreclosure and Sale of Old P.S. 64 in the East Village', *Village Voice*, 30 December 2022, https://www.villagevoice.com/developer-takes-a-nosedive-as-court-orders-foreclosure-and-sale-of-old-p-s-64-in-the-east-village/.

1383 'Sold! "Philanthropic Entity" Now Officially Owns the Old P.S. 64', *Village Sun*, 9 January 2024, https://thevillagesun.com/sold-philanthropic-entity-now-officially-owns-the-old-p-s-64.

See also Lincoln Anderson, 'Final Plea to Restore Old P.S. 64 as Community Center as Building Heads to Private Auction', *Village Sun*, 21 March 2023, https://thevillagesun.com/final-plea-to-restore-old-p-s-64-as-community-center-as-building-heads-to-private-auction; Safiyah Riddle, 'In Epic Battle for CHARAS/El Bohio Building, Owner Gregg Singer Buys Time With Bankruptcy Filing', *The City*, 22 March 2023,

The fight to save El Bohío is far from over. The building appears to have been purchased by Aaron Sosnick, a billionaire hedge fund manager, philanthropist, and Christodora House penthouse owner.[1384] Despite Sosnick's track record of quietly supporting cultural and community spaces in the Lower East Side, placing El Bohío's future in the hands of an individual patron is inherently risky, and is unavoidably at odds with the grassroots, do-it-yourself ethos which underpinned the centre's foundation back in 1978.[1385] Another issue is the appalling condition of the structure itself, which has sat abandoned and slowly crumbling for close to twenty-five years; according to Save Our Community Center, CHARAS/Former P.S. 64 (SOCCC-64), the coalition of community groups leading the campaign to reopen El Bohío, an immense amount of time and resources is needed to make the building usable again.[1386] Perhaps more importantly, as Maria Domínguez highlighted during our correspondence, the question of who exactly comprises 'the community' that the future El Bohío would serve remains an uncertain one.[1387] Many of those whose work has been discussed in this thesis, including Martin Wong, Miguel Piñero, Eva Cockcroft, and Bimbo Rivas, have passed away, while several others, including Domínguez and Marlis Momber, are no longer based in the neighbourhood. In addition, while the Lower East Side remains home to many rent-controlled tenants and people of colour (predominantly Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Chinese residents), its shift towards a whiter, wealthier demographic is undeniable, and one that, as Timo Schrader notes, also characterises the neighbourhood's younger activists.[1388]

Drawing on the energy and expertise of a multiracial, multigenerational, cross-class mix of residents, organisers, artists, and local politicians, the campaign to save El Bohío embraces an open-ended, non-hierarchical, and participatory approach to community organising, one which echoes that of the Loisaida movement in the 1970s and 1980s, for whom 'community' had less

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http://www.thecity.nyc/2023/03/22/charas-elbohio-gregg-singer-bankruptcy-foreclosure/; Lincoln Anderson, 'Editorial: Two Huge Wins — Morton Williams and Old P.S. 64 / CHARAS', *Village Sun*, 29 January 2024, https://thevillagesun.com/editorial-two-huge-wins-morton-williams-and-old-p-s-64-charas.

[1384] Dharma Niles, 'Activists' 25-Year Fight to Revive an East Village Community Center', *Washington Square News*, 12 March 2024, https://nyunews.com/news/2024/03/12/charas-community-center-re-purchased-east-village/; Bonnie Rosenstock, 'CHARAS/Old P.S. 64 Saved: What's next? Status Update', *Village Sun*, 17 July 2024, https://thevillagesun.com/charas-old-p-s-64-saved-whats-next-status-update.

[1385] Bagli, '"Bleak House," New York–Style'.

[1386] SOCCC-64, 'Save Our Community Center, CHARAS/Former P.S. 64 (SOCCC-64)', Save Our Community Center, CHARAS/former P.S. 64 (SOCCC-64), accessed 29 August 2024, https://soccc64.org/.

[1387] Maria Domínguez, telephone correspondence with the author, 15 November 2022.

[1388] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 151.

See also 'Lower East Side/Chinatown Neighborhood Profile', NYU Furman Center, 21 May 2024, https://furmancenter.org/neighborhoods/view/lower-east-side-chinatown.

to do with one's identity, and more with one's orientation towards certain practices and spaces, and particular visions of what shape the neighbourhood should take. Raised among the community activists of Charas, Daso makes this clear: 'we are all a part of this movement. Originally, there were a lot of Puerto Ricans involved, but along the way we have all these families and friends and people that have been a part.'[1389] On East Ninth Street, Tobocman's painted raised fist, accompanied by an assertion that 'we will reclaim the land', has been painted underneath one of Dina Bursztyn's *Gargoyles to Scare Developers*, which has hung at the entrance of El Bohío since the late 1980s (Figure 245). This marks an unlikely collaboration across time between these two artists, who first met painting community murals as part of *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues* in La Plaza Cultural back in 1985.[1390] These veteran artists and organisers, each with their own personal connection to the 'old' Loisaida, are joined by younger activists, who, in Schrader's words, are 'learning about the richness of their neighbourhood's radical history while trying to find their place in this tradition.'[1391]

In the contemporary campaign to save El Bohío, where past and present mingle in the formation of a new community, it is possible to discern what Marika Cifor calls 'a vital nostalgia practice, an activist longing for a past time' that does not look back uncritically, but rather 'interrogates, addresses, and repairs structural power inequities' in the present, with a view to shaping the as-yet unwritten future.[1392] The role that the production and consumption of art will play in this process remains to be seen. Throughout this thesis, I have argued that for many artists and activists in the Nuyorican Lower East Side, artistic practice was—and remains—inseparable from other forms of community organising and political activism, but the Lower East Side has always been home to a plurality of artistic communities (from the hippies of the 1960s to the East Village artists of the 1980s), each offering their own interpretation of the neighbourhood's role in the social, cultural, and political life of New York City, and their own visions of its future. The so-called Dimes Square art scene, for example, which sprang up in the southern reaches of the Lower East Side around 2020/21, as rental prices dropped in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, stands in stark contrast to the broad coalition of artists, activists, and residents fighting to reopen El Bohío. Where the multiracial, multigenerational campaign to save El Bohío celebrates the Nuyorican history of resistance to marginalisation and displacement in the Lower East Side, the Dimes Square scene has been described by one observer as 'the uglier, White

[1389] Quoted in Rosenstock, 'The CHARAS Wall Project'.

[1390] See Weissman, *La Lucha Continua*, 36–37, 56–57.

[1391] Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory*, 151.

[1392] Cifor, *Viral Cultures*, 3.

Supremacist face of gentrification laid bare' on account of the winking reactionary politics of many of its most prominent figures, and its active solicitation of far-right venture capital funding.[1393]

Despite the seemingly inescapable power of neoliberal capitalism in the twenty-first century, David Harvey is insistent that endless crises since the mid-1970s have left state and capital 'on the defensive, their claims to act for the benefit of everyone severely damaged', and their power to shape social, cultural, and spatial relations through 'endless market-based capital accumulation' under threat.[1394] In this context, the promotion of creative collective practices which can critique the present while imagining and even instituting alternative forms of sustainable urban life remains an essential task. As Charas and Artmakers put it all those decades ago: *la lucha continua*. The struggle continues.

[1393] Tamara Velasquez, 'A Few Notes on the Gentrification of The Lower-East Side', *Medium* (blog), 31 May 2022, https://tamaravelasquez.medium.com/a-few-notes-on-the-gentrification-of-the-lower-east-side-ef6dedd31930.

See also Ben Smith, 'They Had a Fun Pandemic. You Can Read About It in Print.', *New York Times*, 8 March 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/07/business/media/the-drunken-canal-media-nyc.html; Nate Freeman, 'What Was Dimes Square?', *Vanity Fair*, 13 June 2022, https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2022/06/what-was-dimes-square; Julia Yost, 'New York's Hottest Club Is the Catholic Church', *New York Times*, 9 August 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/09/opinion/nyc-catholicism-dimes-square-religion.html.

[1394] Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*, 180.

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Illustrations

Introduction

Figure 1: Former Public School 64, East Ninth Street façade. Photograph by the author, 15 January 2022.

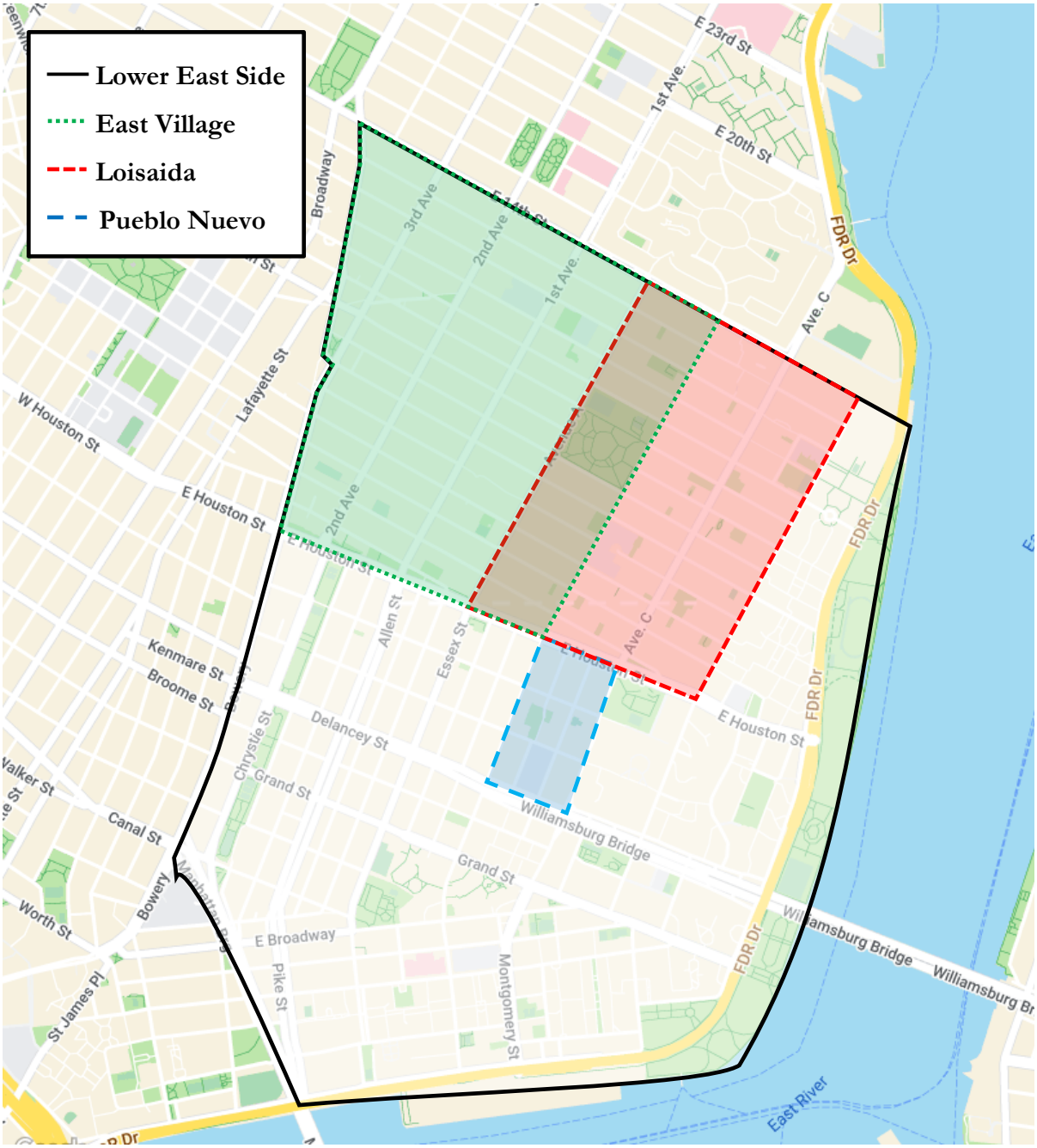
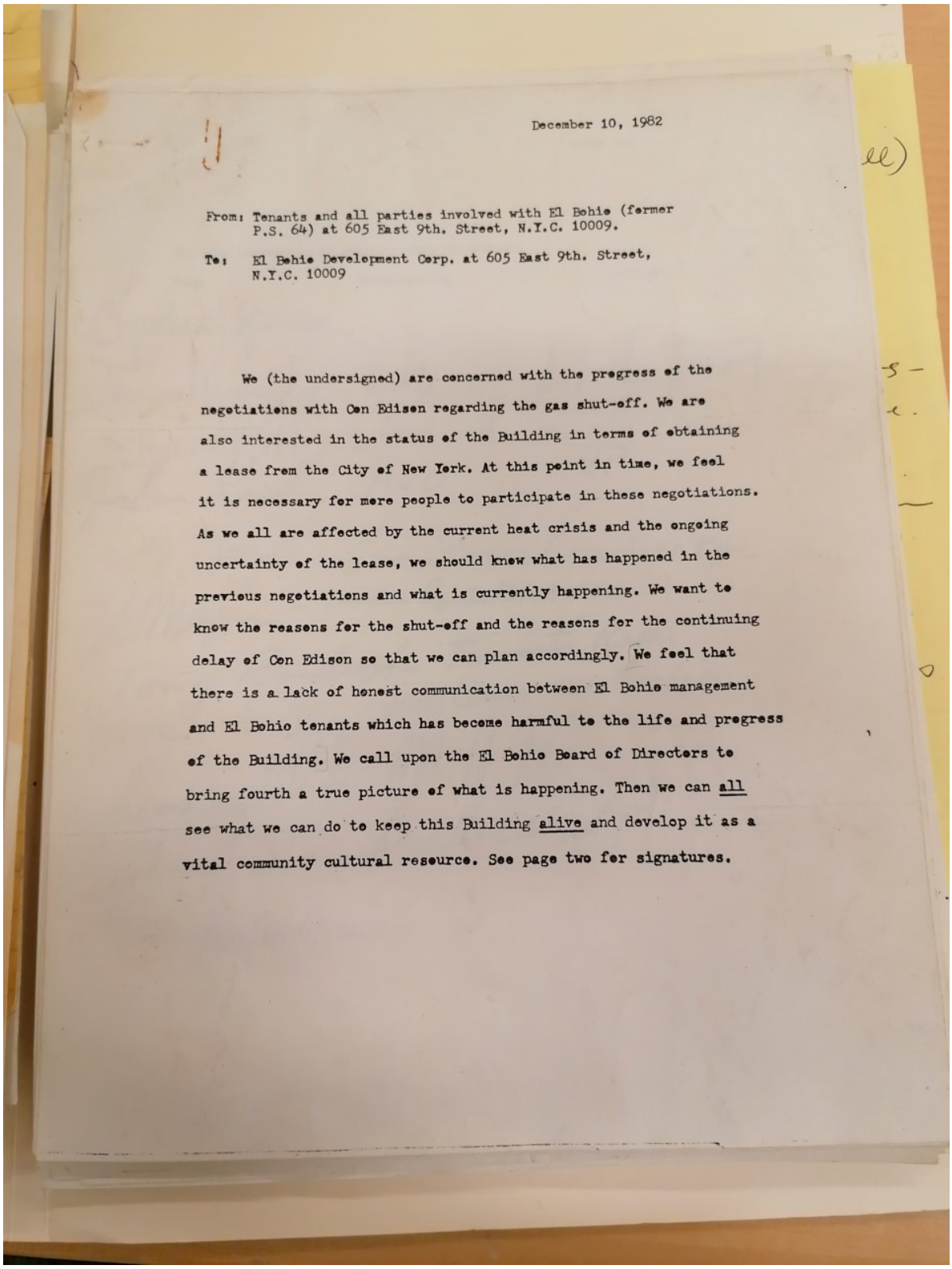


Figure 2: Map of the Lower East Side, showing the distinct sections of the neighbourhood. Map created by the author.

Figure 3: Sign for the Gordon Matta-Clark Environmental Center in La Plaza Cultural. Photograph by the author, 29 March 2022.

Figure 4. Rikki Asher, *For the Women of South Africa, Central America, and the Lower East Side*, mural in La Plaza Cultural, 1985. Photograph by the author, 23 January 2022.



December 10, 1982

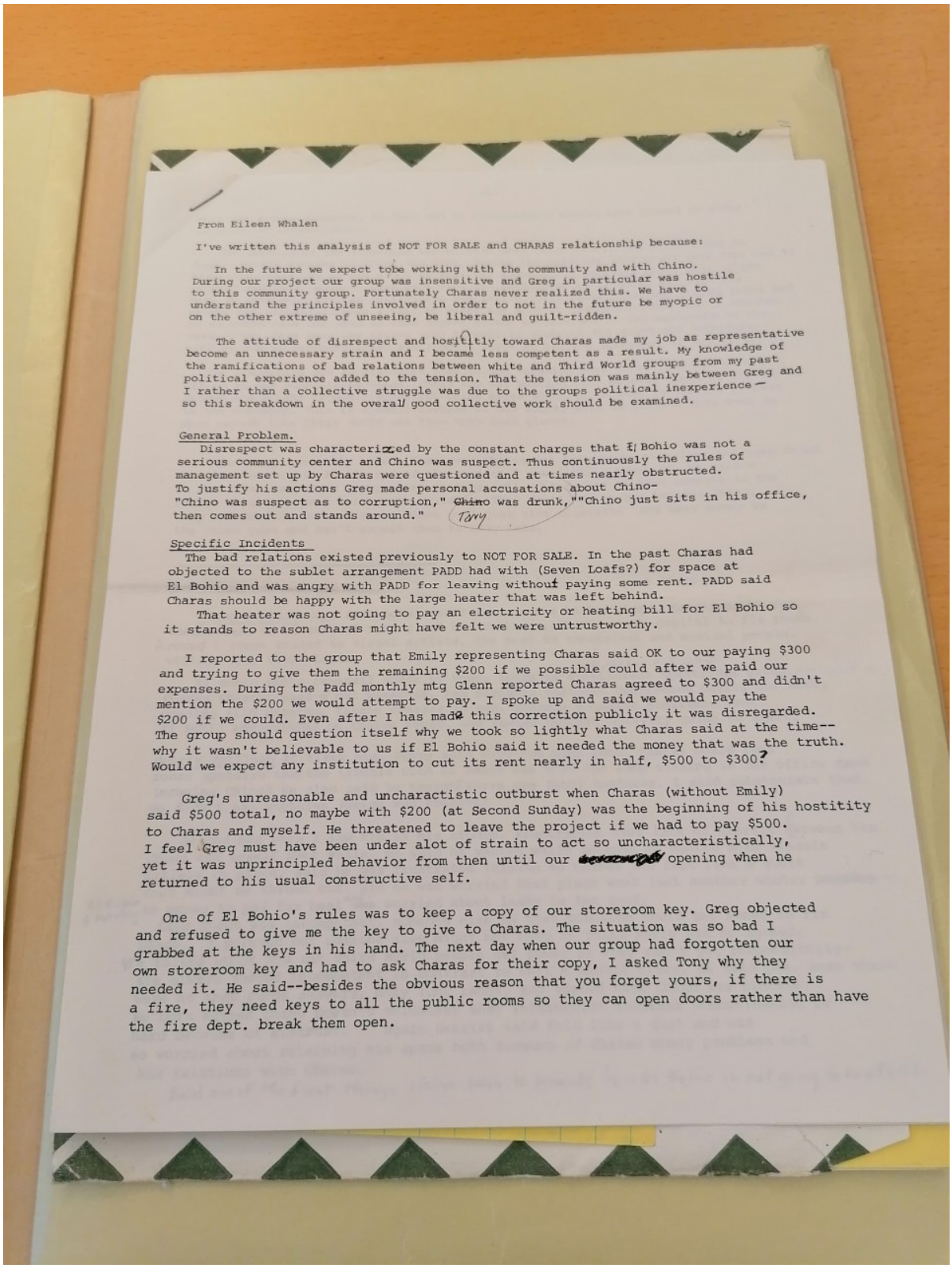
From: Tenants and all parties involved with El Bohio (former P.S. 64) at 605 East 9th. Street, N.Y.C. 10009.

To: El Bohio Development Corp. at 605 East 9th. Street, N.Y.C. 10009

We (the undersigned) are concerned with the progress of the negotiations with Con Edison regarding the gas shut-off. We are also interested in the status of the Building in terms of obtaining a lease from the City of New York. At this point in time, we feel it is necessary for more people to participate in these negotiations. As we all are affected by the current heat crisis and the ongoing uncertainty of the lease, we should know what has happened in the previous negotiations and what is currently happening. We want to know the reasons for the shut-off and the reasons for the continuing delay of Con Edison so that we can plan accordingly. We feel that there is a lack of honest communication between El Bohio management and El Bohio tenants which has become harmful to the life and progress of the Building. We call upon the El Bohio Board of Directors to bring fourth a true picture of what is happening. Then we can all see what we can do to keep this Building alive and develop it as a vital community cultural resource. See page two for signatures.

Figure 5: Letter from the tenants of El Bohío to the building management, December 1982.

Box 1, Folder 42: Tenant Correspondence and Meeting Minutes, 1982-1987, 1996, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 13 January 2022.



From Eileen Whalen

I've written this analysis of NOT FOR SALE and CHARAS relationship because:

In the future we expect tobe working with the community and with Chino. During our project our group was insensitive and Greg in particular was hostile to this community group. Fortunately Charas never realized this. We have to understand the principles involved in order to not in the future be myopic or on the other extreme of unseeing, be liberal and guilt-ridden.

The attitude of disrespect and hostility toward Charas made my job as representative become an unnecessary strain and I became less competent as a result. My knowledge of the ramifications of bad relations between white and Third World groups from my past political experience added to the tension. That the tension was mainly between Greg and I rather than a collective struggle was due to the groups political inexperience — so this breakdown in the overall good collective work should be examined.

General Problem.

Disrespect was characterized by the constant charges that El Bohio was not a serious community center and Chino was suspect. Thus continuously the rules of management set up by Charas were questioned and at times nearly obstructed. To justify his actions Greg made personal accusations about Chino- "Chino was suspect as to corruption," ~~Chino~~ was drunk,""Chino just sits in his office, then comes out and stands around." Tony

Specific Incidents

The bad relations existed previously to NOT FOR SALE. In the past Charas had objected to the sublet arrangement PADD had with (Seven Loafs?) for space at El Bohio and was angry with PADD for leaving without paying some rent. PADD said Charas should be happy with the large heater that was left behind.

That heater was not going to pay an electricity or heating bill for El Bohio so it stands to reason Charas might have felt we were untrustworthy.

I reported to the group that Emily representing Charas said OK to our paying $300 and trying to give them the remaining $200 if we possible could after we paid our expenses. During the Padd monthly mtg Glenn reported Charas agreed to $300 and didn't mention the $200 we would attempt to pay. I spoke up and said we would pay the $200 if we could. Even after I has made this correction publicly it was disregarded. The group should question itself why we took so lightly what Charas said at the time-- why it wasn't believable to us if El Bohio said it needed the money that was the truth. Would we expect any institution to cut its rent nearly in half, $500 to $300?

Greg's unreasonable and uncharactistic outburst when Charas (without Emily) said $500 total, no maybe with $200 (at Second Sunday) was the beginning of his hostitity to Charas and myself. He threatened to leave the project if we had to pay $500. I feel Greg must have been under alot of strain to act so uncharacteristically, yet it was unprincipled behavior from then until our [redacted] opening when he returned to his usual constructive self.

One of El Bohio's rules was to keep a copy of our storeroom key. Greg objected and refused to give me the key to give to Charas. The situation was so bad I grabbed at the keys in his hand. The next day when our group had forgotten our own storeroom key and had to ask Charas for their copy, I asked Tony why they needed it. He said--besides the obvious reason that you forget yours, if there is a fire, they need keys to all the public rooms so they can open doors rather than have the fire dept. break them open.

Figure 6: Analysis of the PADD exhibition *Not for Sale* written by Eileen Whalen, 1983.

Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D) Archive, Museum of Modern Art Archive, New York City. Photograph by the author, 23 March 2022.

Figure 7: Burned-out tenements in the shadow of the World Trade Center. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, directed by Marlis Momber, 1978, 0:05, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHCLQzHH344.

Figure 8: Abandoned bus at the side of the elevated South Street Viaduct. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 0:21.

Figure 9: Rubble filled lot. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 0:58.

Figure 10: Derelict and boarded-up shops. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 1:02.

Figure 11: Vacant tenements. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 1:05.

Figure 12: Playing cards in Tompkins Square Park. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 1:15.

Figure 13: Young lovers in Tompkins Square Park. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 1:23.

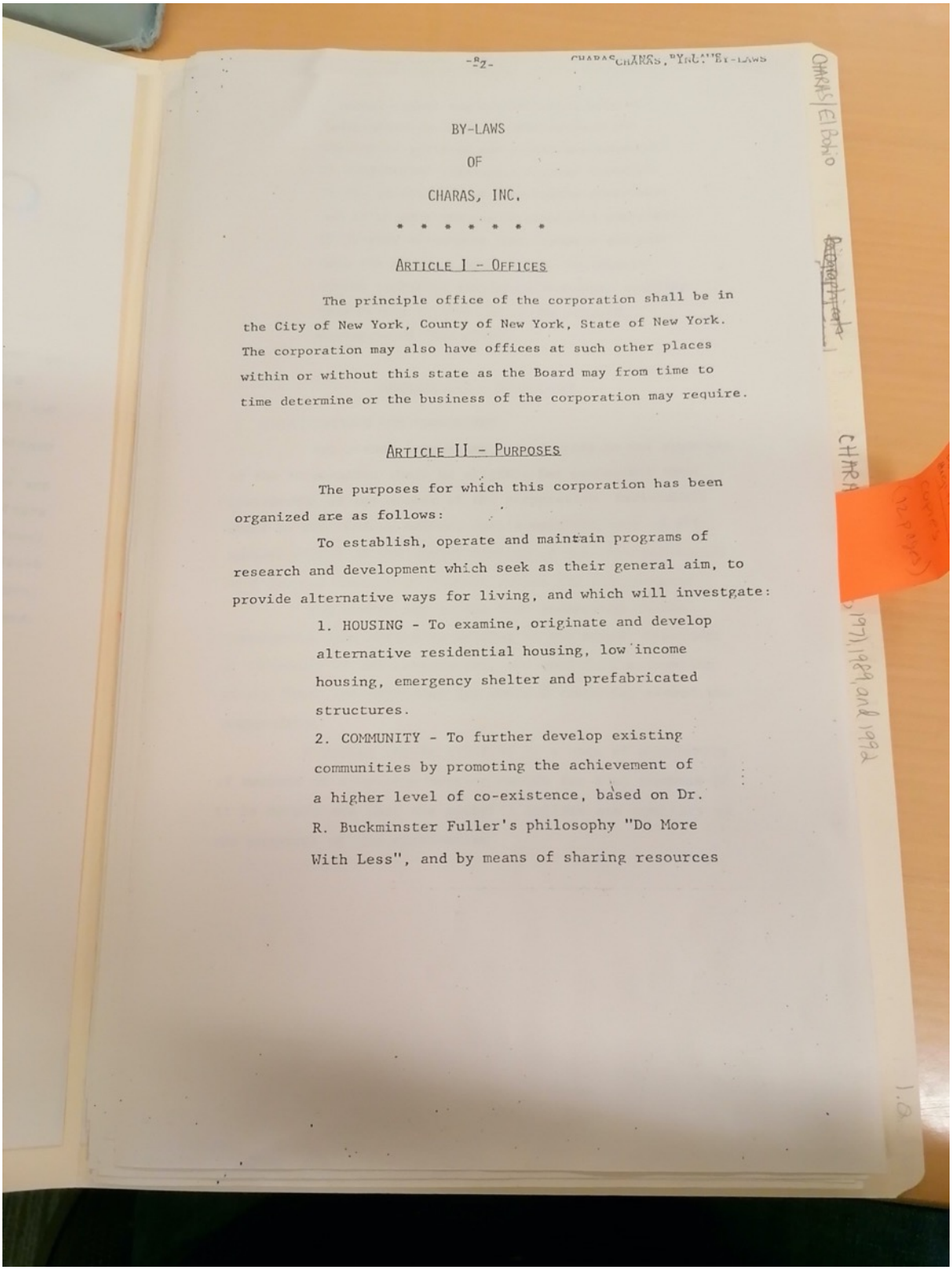
Figure 14: The crowd at a memorial for Sara Berman Beach, held in the Tompkins Square Park bandshell. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 1:49.

Figure 15: Unidentified mural on the side of a building. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 1:56.

Figure 16: Alan Okada, *Work, Education, and Struggle: Seeds for Progressive* Change, 1975, mural. Located at Delancey Street and Forsyth Street, Lower East Side, New York between 1975 and 2011, when it was covered up a new condo. Photographer unknown, in Janet Braun-Reinitz and Jane Weissman, *On the Wall: Four Decades of Community Murals in New York City* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 34.

Figure 17. Tompkins Square Park bandshell as an impromptu art gallery. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 3:29

Figure 18: Meeting inside the Charas loft at 95 Avenue B. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 27:23.



-2- CHARAS, INC. BY-LAWS

BY-LAWS

OF

CHARAS, INC.

* * * * * * *

ARTICLE I - OFFICES

The principle office of the corporation shall be in the City of New York, County of New York, State of New York. The corporation may also have offices at such other places within or without this state as the Board may from time to time determine or the business of the corporation may require.

ARTICLE II - PURPOSES

The purposes for which this corporation has been organized are as follows:

To establish, operate and maintain programs of research and development which seek as their general aim, to provide alternative ways for living, and which will investgate:

1. HOUSING - To examine, originate and develop alternative residential housing, low income housing, emergency shelter and prefabricated structures.
2. COMMUNITY - To further develop existing communities by promoting the achievement of a higher level of co-existence, based on Dr. R. Buckminster Fuller's philosophy "Do More With Less", and by means of sharing resources

Figure 19: Charas By-Laws, 1971. Page 1 of 16.

Box 1, Folders 2-3: CHARAS By-Laws, 1971-1992, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records (MSS 233), CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 14 January 2022.

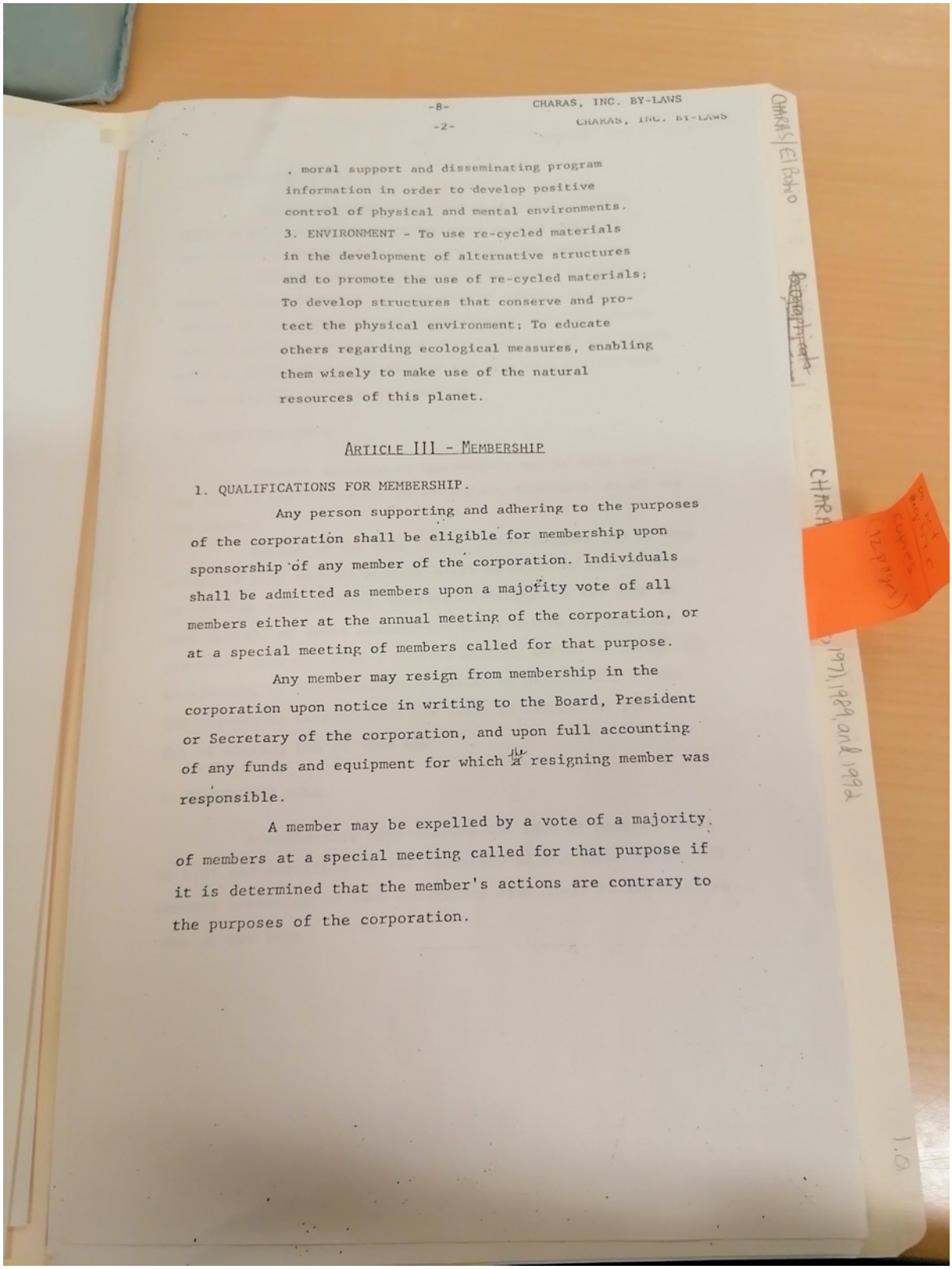


Figure 20: Charas By-Laws, 1971. Page 2 of 16.

Box 1, Folders 2-3: CHARAS By-Laws, 1971-1992, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records (MSS 233), CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 14 January 2022.

Figure 21: Edgard Rivera wearing a Cuando Energy t-shirt at a Charas meeting. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 27:34.

Figure 22: Edgard Rivera performing on the streets of Loisaida. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 12:18.

Figure 23: Edgard Rivera performing at the Nuyorican Poets Café. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 39:48.

Figure 24: Edgard and Josie Rivera in their renovated apartment at 533 East Eleventh Street. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 21:08.

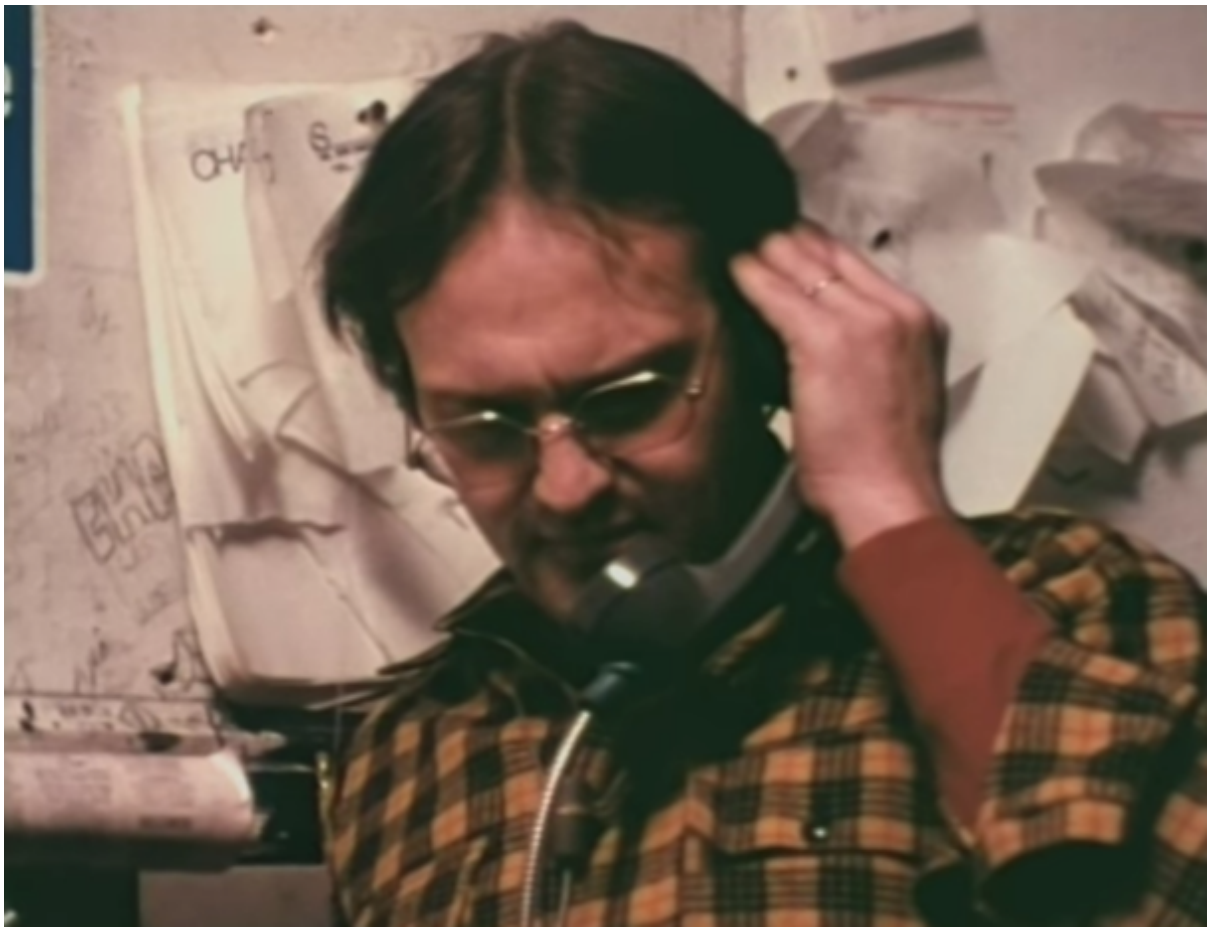
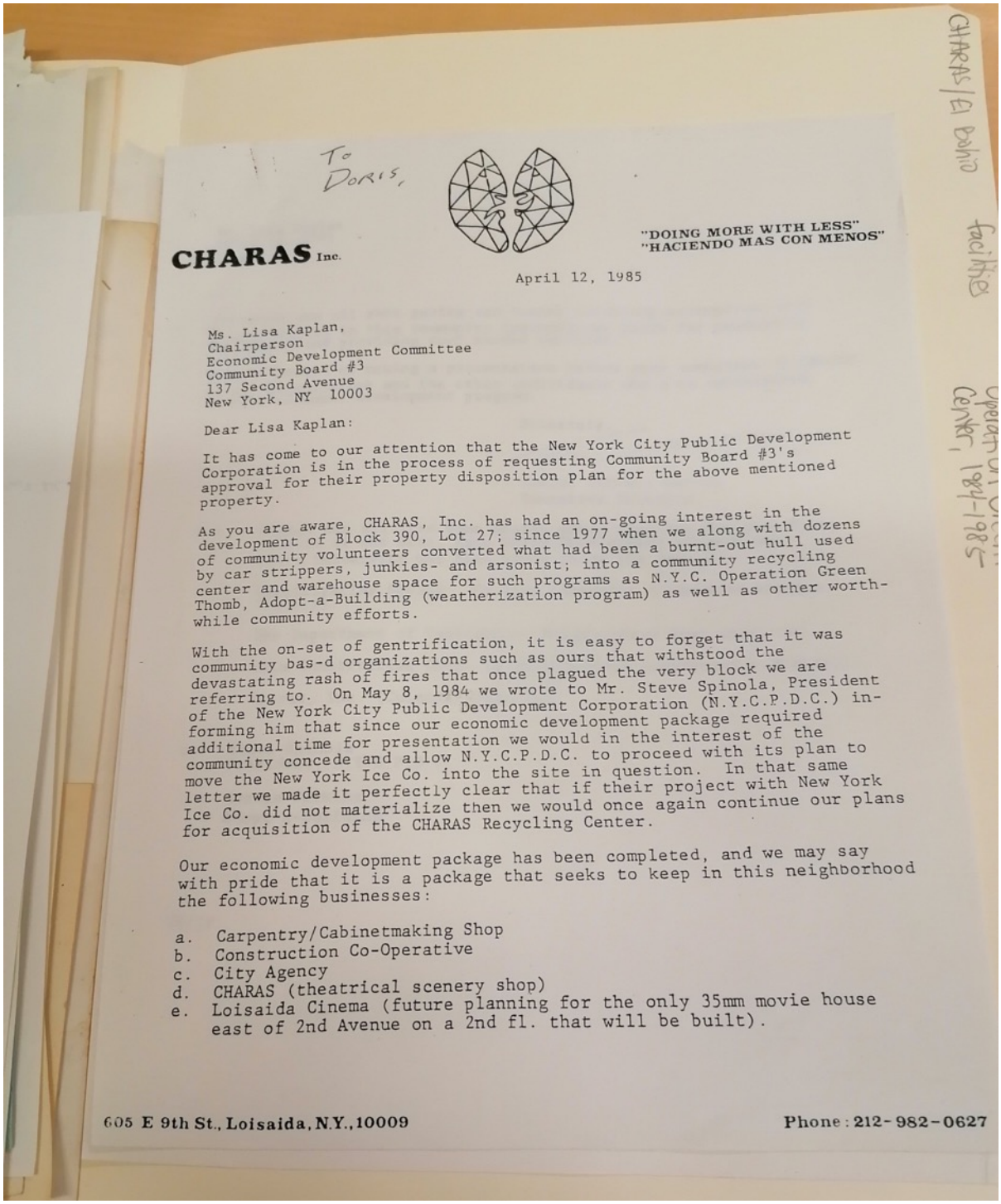


Figure 25: Roberto 'Rabbit' Nazario calls the landlord of 95 Avenue B. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 29:13.



To
DORIS,

CHARAS Inc.

"DOING MORE WITH LESS"
"HACIENDO MAS CON MENOS"

April 12, 1985

Ms. Lisa Kaplan,
Chairperson
Economic Development Committee
Community Board #3
137 Second Avenue
New York, NY 10003

Dear Lisa Kaplan:

It has come to our attention that the New York City Public Development Corporation is in the process of requesting Community Board #3's approval for their property disposition plan for the above mentioned property.

As you are aware, CHARAS, Inc. has had an on-going interest in the development of Block 390, Lot 27; since 1977 when we along with dozens of community volunteers converted what had been a burnt-out hull used by car strippers, junkies- and arsonist; into a community recycling center and warehouse space for such programs as N.Y.C. Operation Green Thomb, Adopt-a-Building (weatherization program) as well as other worthwhile community efforts.

With the on-set of gentrification, it is easy to forget that it was community bas-d organizations such as ours that withstood the devastating rash of fires that once plagued the very block we are referring to. On May 8, 1984 we wrote to Mr. Steve Spinola, President of the New York City Public Development Corporation (N.Y.C.P.D.C.) informing him that since our economic development package required additional time for presentation we would in the interest of the community concede and allow N.Y.C.P.D.C. to proceed with its plan to move the New York Ice Co. into the site in question. In that same letter we made it perfectly clear that if their project with New York Ice Co. did not materialize then we would once again continue our plans for acquisition of the CHARAS Recycling Center.

Our economic development package has been completed, and we may say with pride that it is a package that seeks to keep in this neighborhood the following businesses:

a. Carpentry/Cabinetmaking Shop
b. Construction Co-Operative
c. City Agency
d. CHARAS (theatrical scenery shop)
e. Loisaida Cinema (future planning for the only 35mm movie house east of 2nd Avenue on a 2nd fl. that will be built).

605 E 9th St., Loisaida, N.Y., 10009 Phone: 212-982-0627

CHARAS/El Bohío facilities Operation Center, 1984-1985

Figure 26: Letter from Carlos 'Chino' García to Lisa Kaplan, 12 April 1985.

Box 1, Folder 29: Community Board #3 Manhattan and City Council – Correspondence, 1984-2004, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records (MSS 233), CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 21 January 2022.

Figure 27: Charas banner hung in the window of 95 Avenue B. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 10:25.

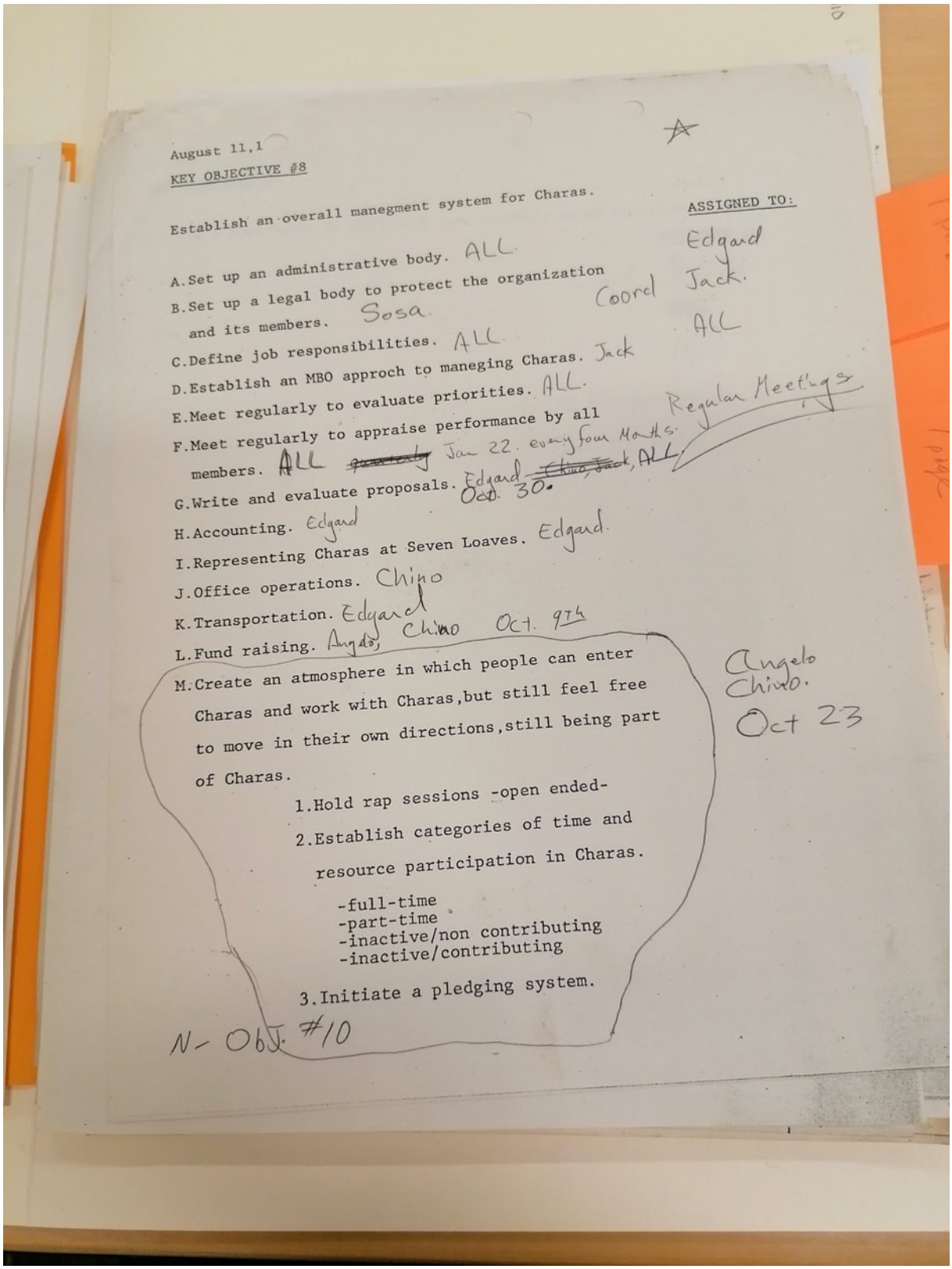


Figure 28: Minutes from Charas meeting, 11 August 1975.

Box 1, Folder 29: CHARAS Mission Statements, Goals, and Other Documents, 1975-2003, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records (MSS 233), CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 14 January 2022.

Figure 29: Pulling rubble out of a tenement basement. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 19.40

Figure 30: Breaking plaster off the wall. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 19:52.

Figure 31: Breaking plaster off the wall. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 20:12.

Figure 32: Working in the Twelfth Street Community Garden. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 23:53.

Figure 33: Painting Freddy Hernandez's *El Sol Brillante Mural* in the Twelfth Street Community Garden. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 23:39.

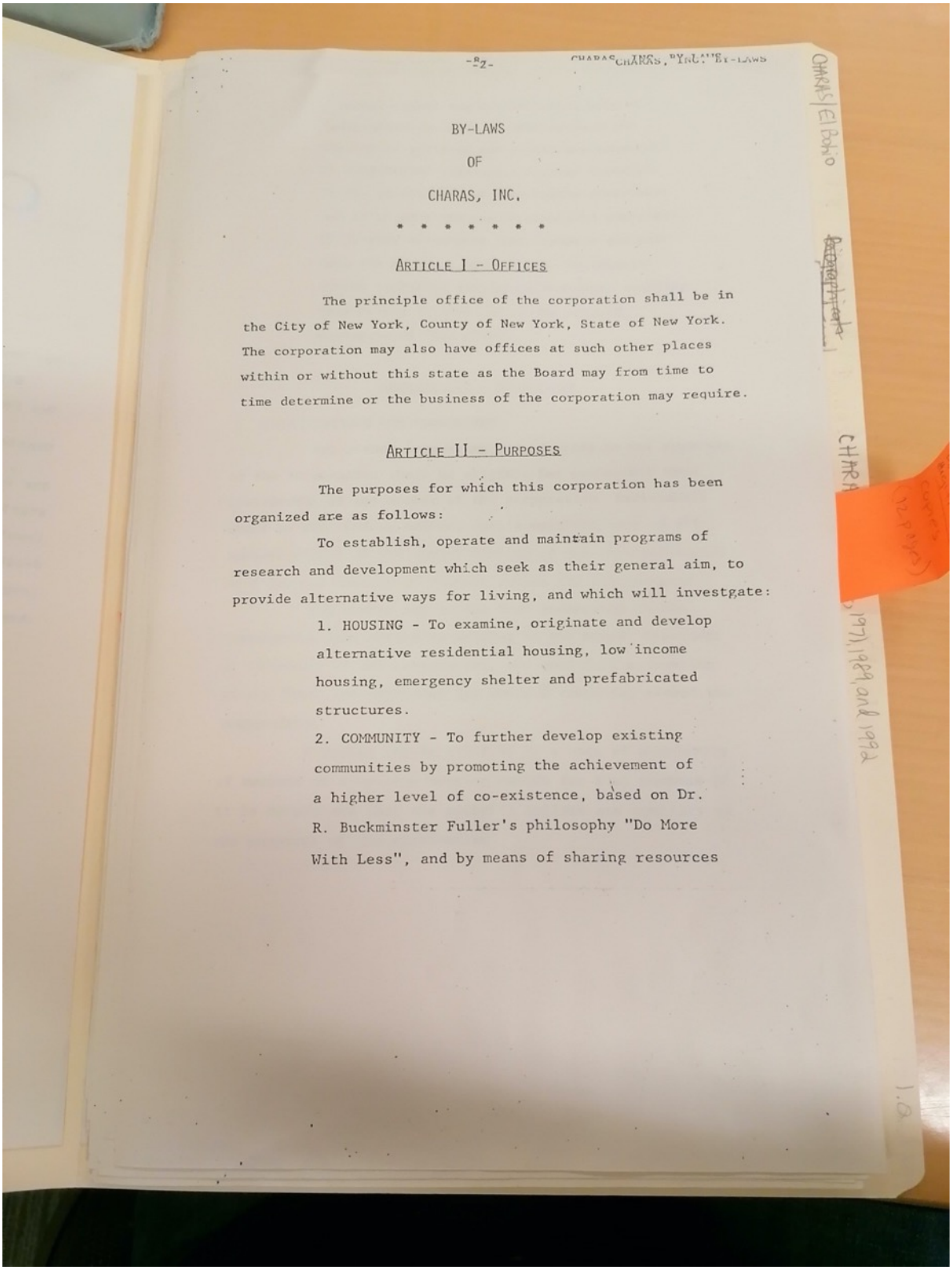
Figure 34: Alfredo 'Freddy' Hernández, *La Plaza Cultural Mural*, 1977. Photographer unknown, in Janet Braun-Reinitz and Jane Weissman, *On the Wall: Four Decades of Community Murals in New York City* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 33.

Figure 35: A close-up of a muralist at work. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 24:33.

Figure 36: A final shot of gardeners in the East Twelfth Street community garden. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 24:35.

Figure 37: A final shot of the muralists. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 25:04.

Figure 38: Eduardo 'Eddy' Standard and Tyrone Jackson on the roof of 519 East Eleventh Street. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 26:43.



-2- CHARAS, INC. BY-LAWS

BY-LAWS

OF

CHARAS, INC.

* * * * * * *

ARTICLE I - OFFICES

The principle office of the corporation shall be in the City of New York, County of New York, State of New York. The corporation may also have offices at such other places within or without this state as the Board may from time to time determine or the business of the corporation may require.

ARTICLE II - PURPOSES

The purposes for which this corporation has been organized are as follows:

To establish, operate and maintain programs of research and development which seek as their general aim, to provide alternative ways for living, and which will investgate:

1. HOUSING - To examine, originate and develop alternative residential housing, low income housing, emergency shelter and prefabricated structures.
2. COMMUNITY - To further develop existing communities by promoting the achievement of a higher level of co-existence, based on Dr. R. Buckminster Fuller's philosophy "Do More With Less", and by means of sharing resources

Figure 39: Charas By-Laws, 1971. Page 1 of 16.

Box 1, Folders 2-3: CHARAS By-Laws, 1971-1992, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records (MSS 233), CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 14 January 2022.

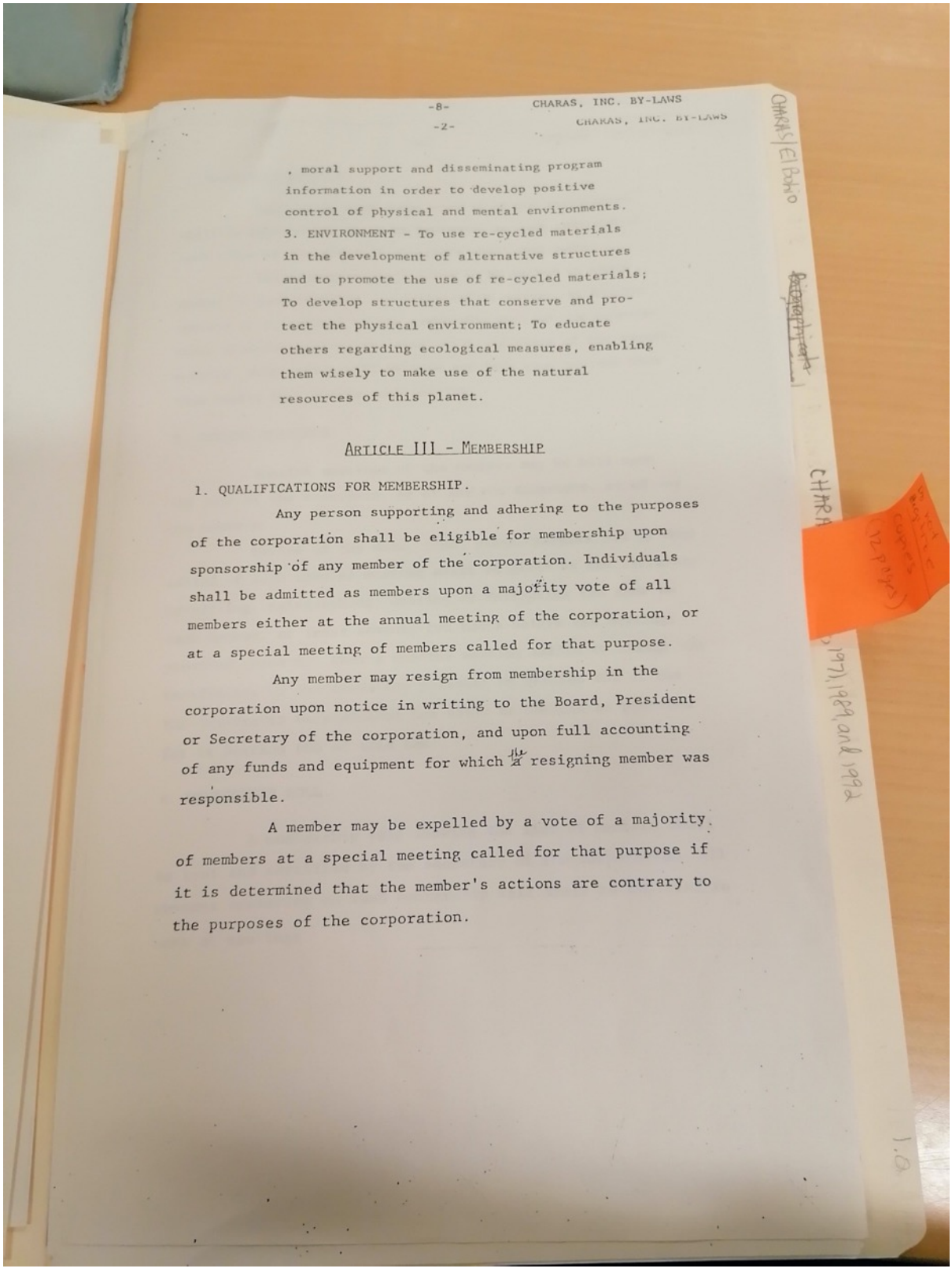


Figure 40: Charas By-Laws, 1971. Page 2 of 16.

Box 1, Folders 2-3: CHARAS By-Laws, 1971-1992, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records (MSS 233), CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 14 January 2022.

Figure 41: The wind turbine and solar bank on the roof of 519 East Eleventh Street. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 22:45.

Figure 42: The ConEd building on the edge of the Lower East Side, as seen from the roof of 519 East Eleventh Street. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 26:31.

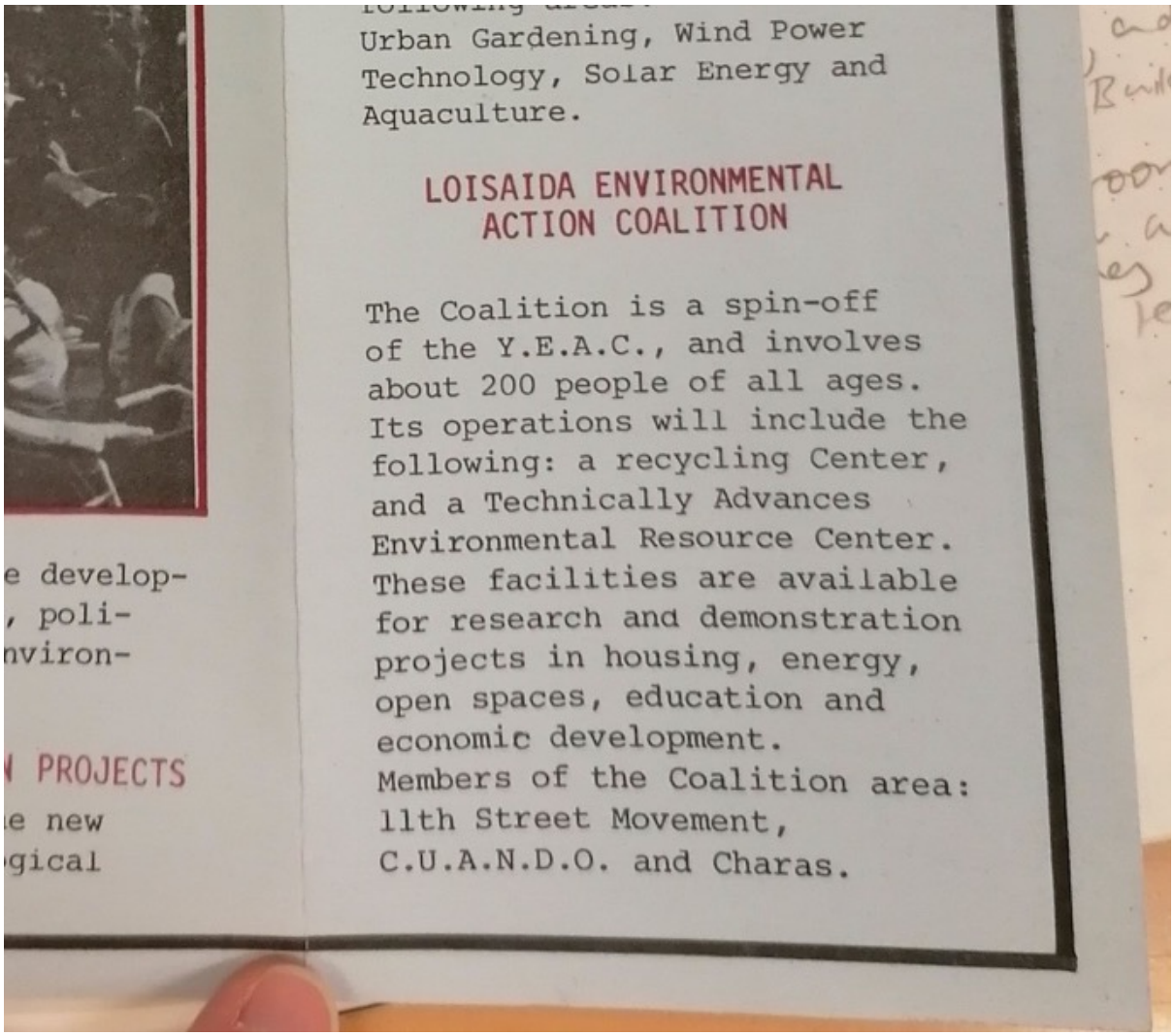


Figure 43: Detail from Charas, 'Doing More With Less: Charas Report 77-78', 1978, brochure.

Box 1, Folder 8-9: CHARAS Reports, 1970s-1990s, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records (MSS 233), CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 19 January 2022.

Figure 44: The windmill on top of 519 East Eleventh Street. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida* 25:26.

Figure 45: Working on the amphitheatre in La Plaza Cultural, late 1970s. Photographer unknown, in Nicholas de Monchaux, 'The Death and Life of Gordon Matta-Clark', *AA Files*, no. 74 (2017), 193.

Figure 46: Detail of unidentified mural. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 11:39.

Figure 47: Detail of unidentified mural. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 11:54.

Figure 48: James Jannuzzi and Susan Caruso Green, *Arise From Oppression (Multi-Ethnic Mural)*, 1972, mural. Photographer unknown, in Janet Braun-Reinitz and Jane Weissman, *On the Wall: Four Decades of Community Murals in New York City* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 26.

Figure 49: Detail of James Jannuzzi and Susan Caruso Green's *Arise From Oppression* (1972). Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 13:18.

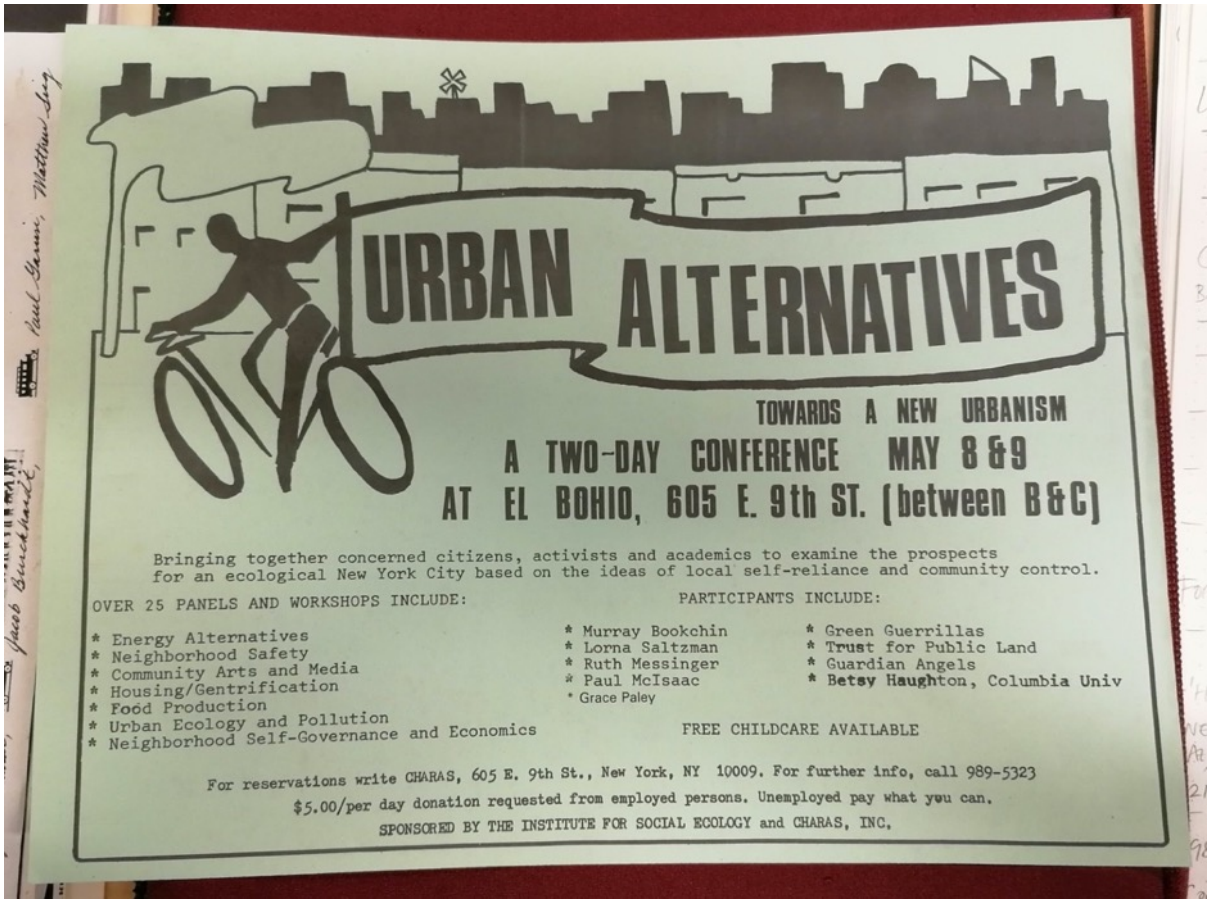
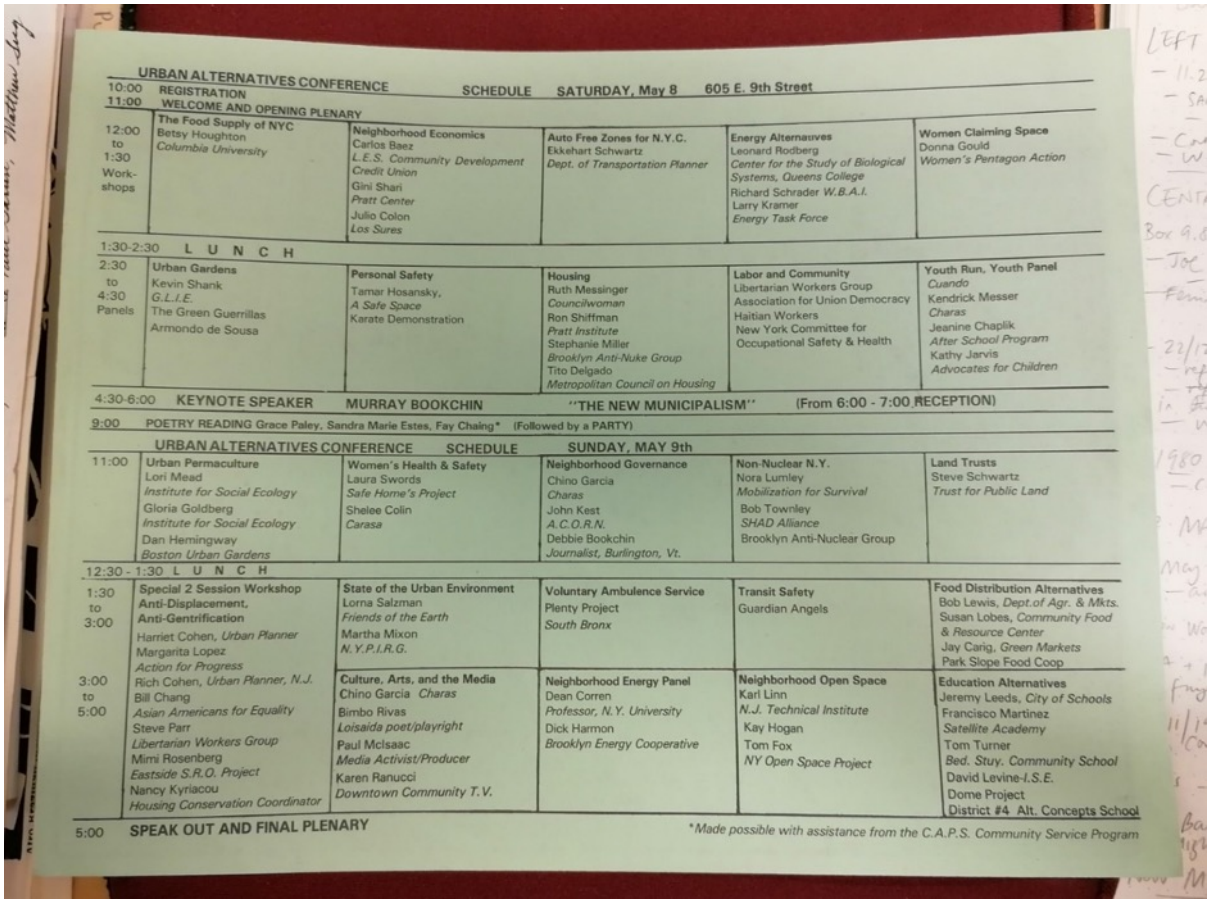


Figure 50: Schedule for Urban Alternatives Conference held at El Bohío in May 1982.

Box 6, Folder 11: Programs, 1970s-2000s, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records (MSS 233), CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 2 February 2022.



URBAN ALTERNATIVES CONFERENCE SCHEDULE SATURDAY, May 8 605 E. 9th Street

10:00 REGISTRATION
11:00 WELCOME AND OPENING PLENARY

12:00 to 1:30 Work-shops	**The Food Supply of NYC** Betsy Houghton *Columbia University*	**Neighborhood Economics** Carlos Baez *L.E.S. Community Development Credit Union* Gini Shari *Pratt Center* Julio Colon *Los Sures*	**Auto Free Zones for N.Y.C.** Ekkehart Schwartz *Dept. of Transportation Planner*	**Energy Alternauves** Leonard Rodberg *Center for the Study of Biological Systems, Queens College* Richard Schrader *W.B.A.I.* Larry Kramer *Energy Task Force*	**Women Claiming Space** Donna Gould *Women's Pentagon Action*
1:30-2:30 L U N C H					
2:30 to 4:30 Panels	**Urban Gardens** Kevin Shank *G.L.I.E.* The Green Guerrillas Armondo de Sousa	**Personal Safety** Tamar Hosansky, *A Safe Space* Karate Demonstration	**Housing** Ruth Messinger *Councilwoman* Ron Shiffman *Pratt Institute* Stephanie Miller *Brooklyn Anti-Nuke Group* Tito Delgado *Metropolitan Council on Housing*	**Labor and Community** Libertarian Workers Group Association for Union Democracy Haitian Workers New York Committee for Occupational Safety & Health	**Youth Run, Youth Panel** *Cuando* Kendrick Messer *Charas* Jeanine Chaplik *After School Program* Kathy Jarvis *Advocates for Children*

4:30-6:00 KEYNOTE SPEAKER MURRAY BOOKCHIN "THE NEW MUNICIPALISM" (From 6:00 - 7:00 RECEPTION)

9:00 POETRY READING Grace Paley, Sandra Marie Estes, Fay Chaing* (Followed by a PARTY)

URBAN ALTERNATIVES CONFERENCE SCHEDULE SUNDAY, MAY 9th

11:00	**Urban Permaculture** Lori Mead *Institute for Social Ecology* Gloria Goldberg *Institute for Social Ecology* Dan Hemingway *Boston Urban Gardens*	**Women's Health & Safety** Laura Swords *Safe Home's Project* Shelee Colin *Carasa*	**Neighborhood Governance** Chino Garcia *Charas* John Kest *A.C.O.R.N.* Debbie Bookchin *Journalist, Burlington, Vt.*	**Non-Nuclear N.Y.** Nora Lumley *Mobilization for Survival* Bob Townley *SHAD Alliance* Brooklyn Anti-Nuclear Group	**Land Trusts** Steve Schwartz *Trust for Public Land*
12:30 - 1:30 L U N C H					
1:30 to 3:00	**Special 2 Session Workshop Anti-Displacement, Anti-Gentrification** Harriet Cohen, *Urban Planner* Margarita Lopez *Action for Progress* Rich Cohen, *Urban Planner, N.J.* Bill Chang *Asian Americans for Equality* Steve Parr *Libertarian Workers Group* Mimi Rosenberg *Eastside S.R.O. Project* Nancy Kyriacou *Housing Conservation Coordinator*	**State of the Urban Environment** Lorna Salzman *Friends of the Earth* Martha Mixon *N.Y.P.I.R.G.*	**Voluntary Ambulence Service** Plenty Project *South Bronx*	**Transit Safety** Guardian Angels	**Food Distribution Alternatives** Bob Lewis, *Dept.of Agr. & Mkts.* Susan Lobes, *Community Food & Resource Center* Jay Carig, *Green Markets* Park Slope Food Coop
3:00 to 5:00		**Culture, Arts, and the Media** Chino Garcia *Charas* Bimbo Rivas *Loisaida poet/playright* Paul McIsaac *Media Activist/Producer* Karen Ranucci *Downtown Community T.V.*	**Neighborhood Energy Panel** Dean Corren *Professor, N.Y. University* Dick Harmon *Brooklyn Energy Cooperative*	**Neighborhood Open Space** Karl Linn *N.J. Technical Institute* Kay Hogan Tom Fox *NY Open Space Project*	**Education Alternatives** Jeremy Leeds, *City of Schools* Francisco Martinez *Satellite Academy* Tom Turner *Bed. Stuy. Community School* David Levine-*I.S.E.* Dome Project District #4 Alt. Concepts School

5:00 SPEAK OUT AND FINAL PLENARY

*Made possible with assistance from the C.A.P.S. Community Service Program

Figure 51: Back page of schedule for Urban Alternatives Conference, held at El Bohío in May 1982

Box 6, Folder 11: Programs, 1970s-2000s, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records (MSS 233), CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 2 February 2022.

Figure 52: Bimbo Rivas reading 'A Job'. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 8:52.

Figure 53: Constructing a community garden. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 7:00.

Figure 54: Members of a youth training programme. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 8:39.

Figure 55: Edgard and Josie Rivera in their renovated apartment at 533 East Eleventh Street. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 21:08.

Figure 56: The camera closes in on Edgard Rivera. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 21:43.

Figure 57: Josie Rivera and the couple's young child has disappeared. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 22:00.

Figure 58: Angie Hernandez and friend in front of Tomie Arai's *Wall of Respect for Women*. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 33:18.

Figure 59: Unnamed woman stood in front of Tomie Arai's *Wall of Respect for Women*. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 33:25.

Figure 60: *Wall of Respect for Women* (1974), mural by Tomie Arai. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 33:33.

Figure 61: Tomie Arai, *Wall of Respect for Women*, 1974, mural. Photographer unknown, in Bonnie K. Norlander, 'Tomie Arai: Now at the Center for Book Arts', *Sftpwr*, 7 March 2013, https://sftpwr.com/tomie-arai-now-at-the-center-for-book-arts/.

Figure 62: Working in the Twelfth Street Community Garden. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 23:53.

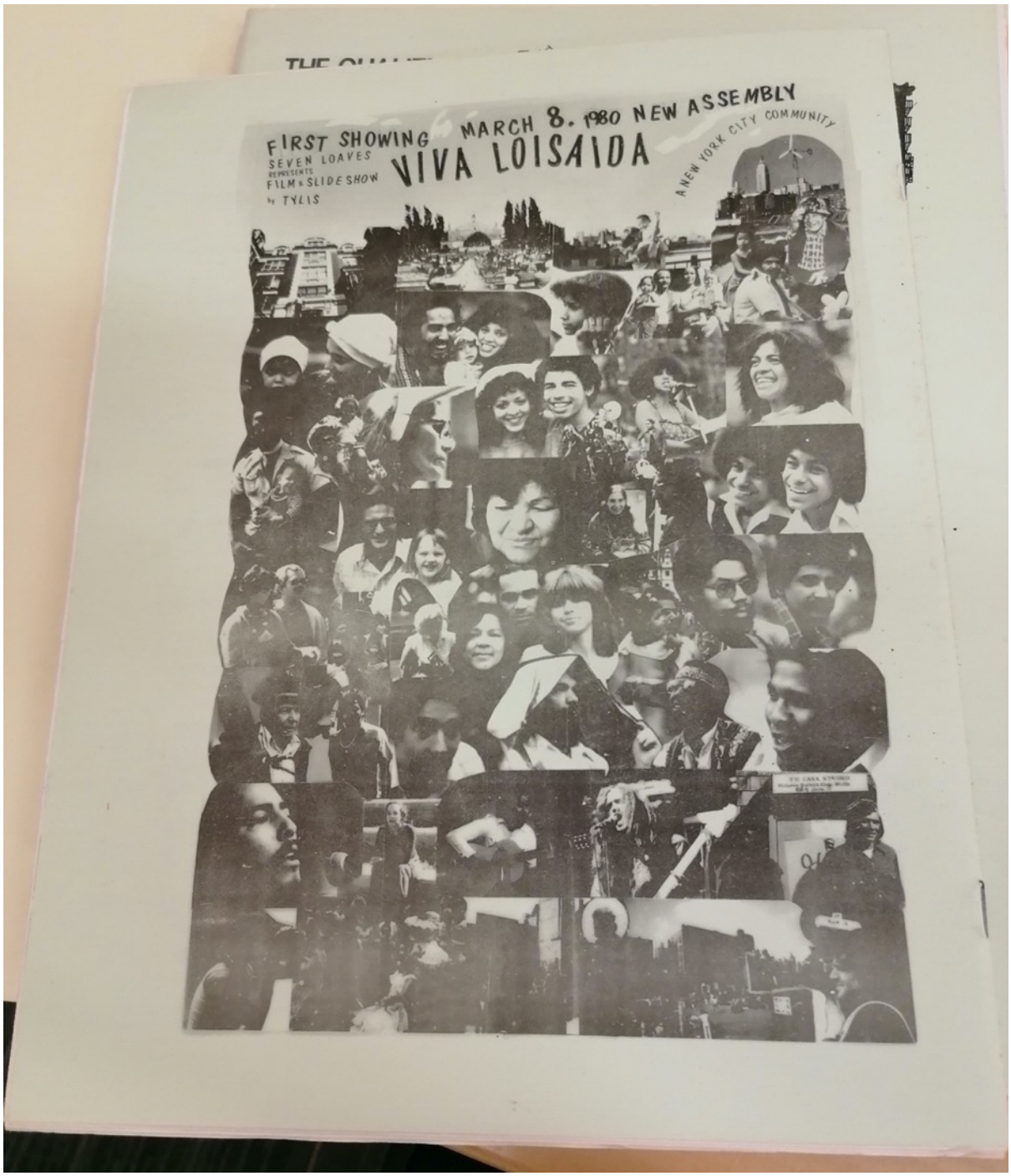


Figure 63: Poster for screening of *Viva Loisaida* at the New Assembly Theater, El Bohío, 8 March 1980.

Box 1, Folder 3: Volume III, Numbers 1-2, 4-6, February 1980 – January 1981, Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection (MSS 134), CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 8 March 2022.

Figure 64: Maria Domínguez, *Baile Bomba*, 1983, mural (1 of 2). Photograph by Nestor Cortijo

Part of Maria Domínguez's private collection.

Figure 65: Maria Domínguez, *Baile Bomba*, 1983, mural (2 of 2). Photograph by Nestor Cortijo.

Part of Maria Domínguez's private collection.

Figure 66: 436-446 East Tenth Street, 1983-1988. Unknown photographer.

Department of Finance Tax Photograph Collection, New York City Municipal Archives, New York City, accessed 19 July 2024, http://80s.nyc/#show/40.7255/-73.9770.

Figure 67: 620-622 East Sixth Street, 1983-1988. Unknown photographer.

Department of Finance Tax Photograph Collection, New York City Municipal Archives, New York City, accessed 19 July 2024, http://80s.nyc/#show/40.7240/-73.9809.

Figure 68: 141 East Houston Street, 1983-1988. Unknown photographer.

Department of Finance Tax Photograph Collection, New York City Municipal Archives, New York City. In Michael Lorenzini, 'A Flashback to the 1980s Tax Photographs', *NYC Department of Records & Information Services* (blog), 3 May 2019, https://www.archives.nyc/blog/tag/Tax+Photos.

Figure 69: 154 Avenue C, 1983-1988. Unknown photographer, digital photograph of Laser Video Disk image.

Image identifier: REC0041_1_00379_0006, Department of Finance Tax Photograph Collection, New York City Municipal Archives, New York City, accessed 19 July 2024, https://nycrecords.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO_f58c3a80-3273-4e61-bc72-e2243b0d5d69/.

Figure 70: East Eighth Street, 1983-1988. Unknown photographer, digital photograph of Laser Video Disk image.

Image identifier: REC0041_1_00377_0011, Department of Finance Tax Photograph Collection, New York City Municipal Archives, New York City, accessed 19 July 2024, https://nycrecords.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO_6953aad1-b215-4701-8cf5-f413baaf1eed/.

Figure 71: Screenshot from *News from Home*, directed by Chantal Akerman, 1976, 03:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ai73JORZfI.

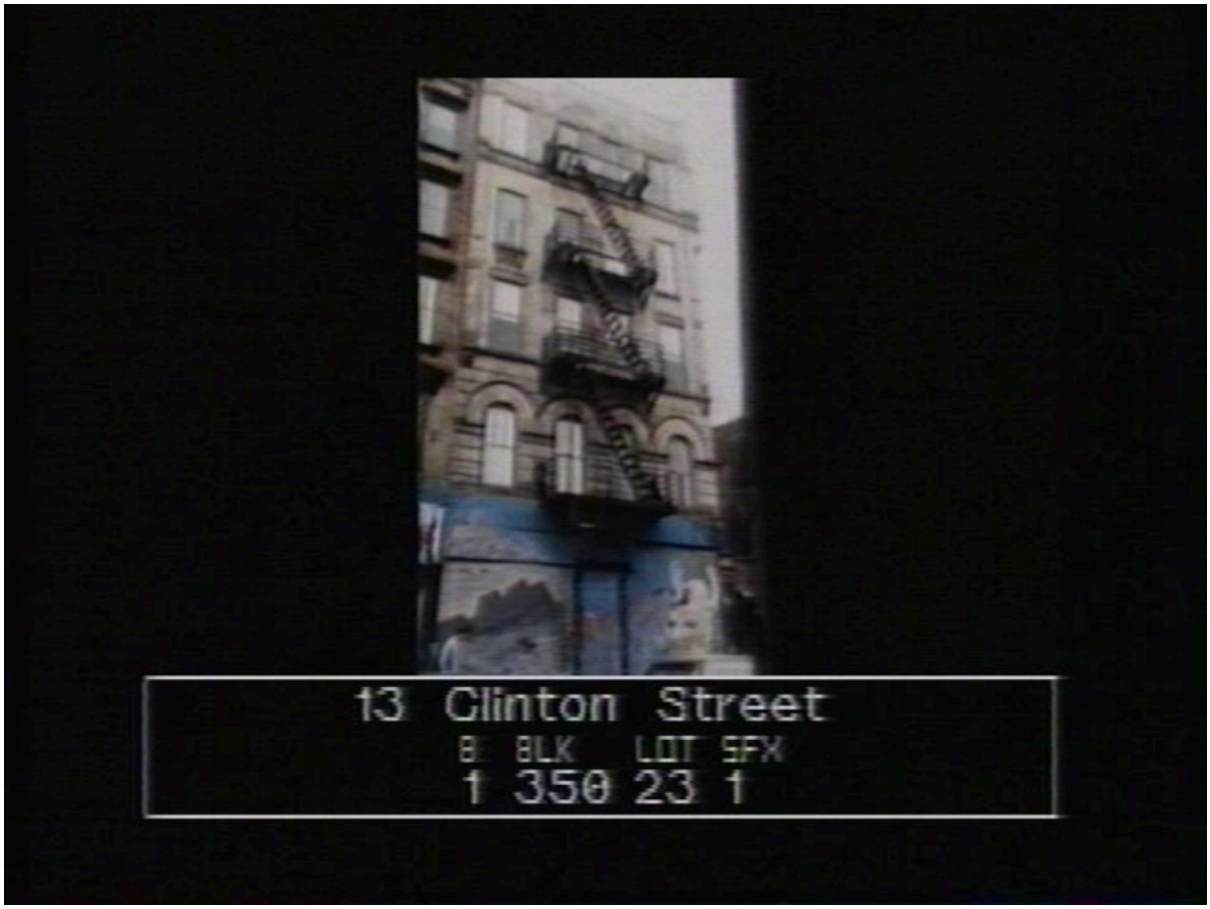


Figure 72: 13 Clinton Street, 1983-1988. Unknown photographer, digital photograph of Laser Video Disk image.

Image identifier: REC0041_1_00350_0023, Department of Finance Tax Photograph Collection, New York City Municipal Archives, New York City, accessed 19 July 2024, https://nycrecords.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO_a7ab78c5-2c64-4739-acff-5552be2acb37/.

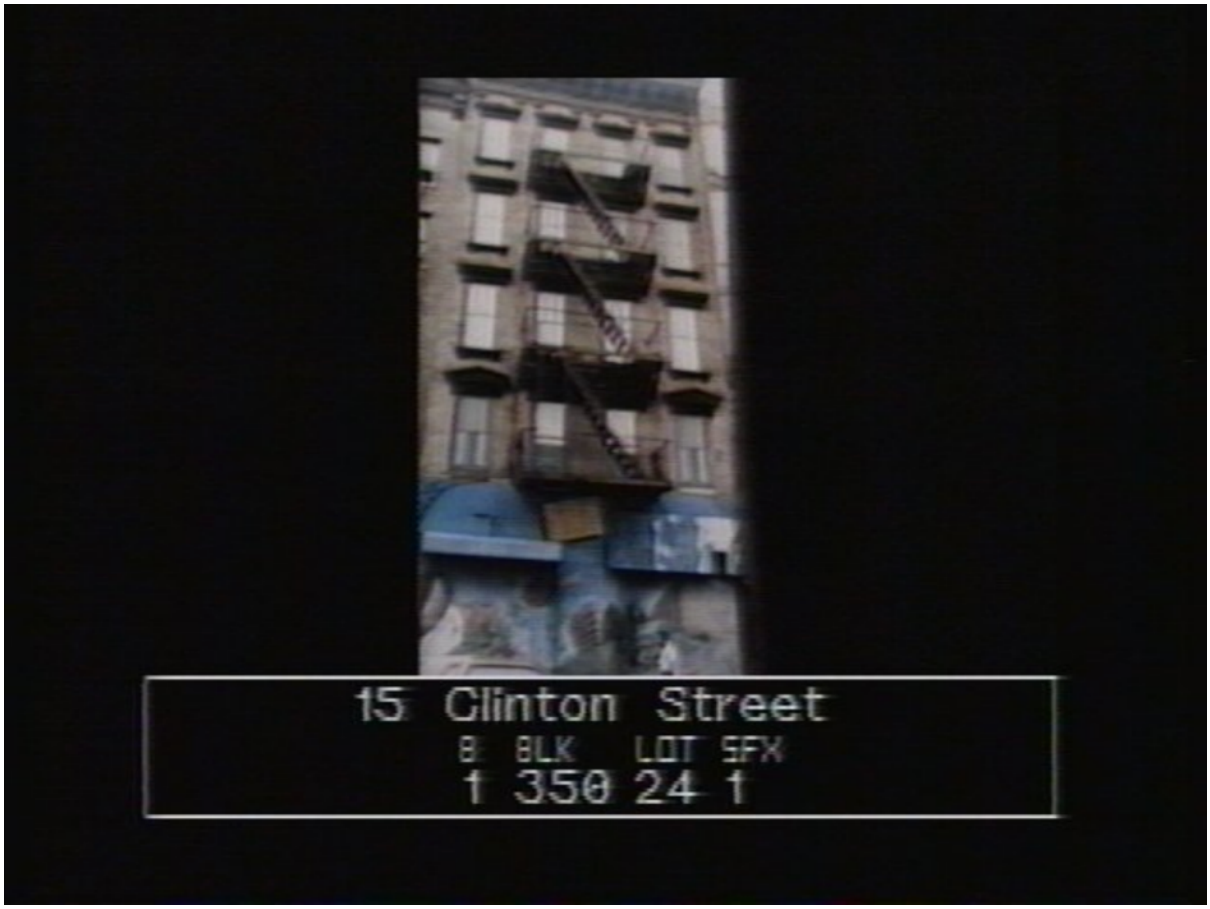


Figure 73: 15 Clinton Street, 1983-1988. Unknown photographer, digital photograph of Laser Video Disk image.

Image identifier: REC0041_1_00350_0024, Department of Finance Tax Photograph Collection, New York City Municipal Archives, New York City, accessed 19 July 2024, https://nycrecords.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO_7b7c32cf-3516-49fa-b65d-9ae11ec8499f/.

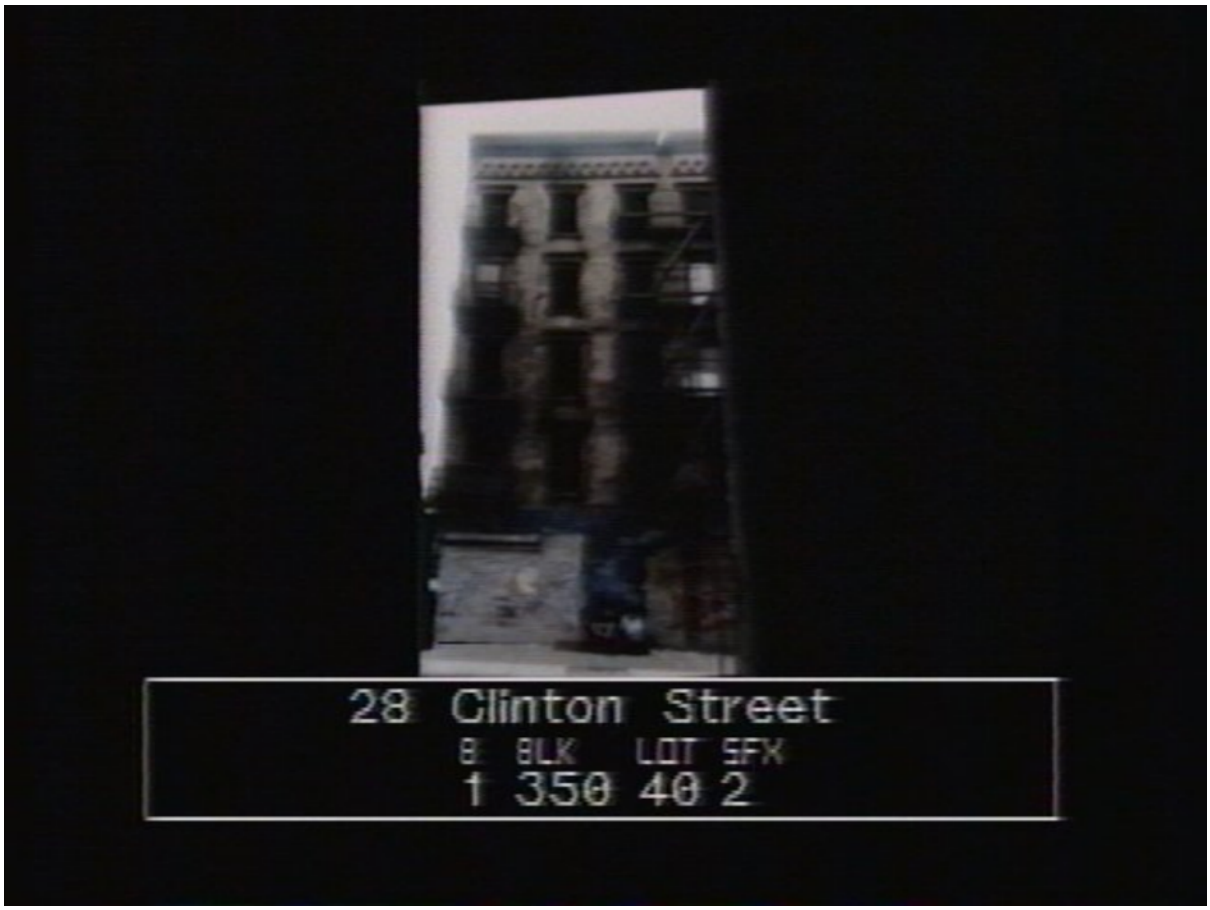


Figure 74: 28 Clinton Street, 1983-1988. Unknown photographer, digital photograph of Laser Video Disk image.

Image identifier: REC0041_1_00350_0040, Department of Finance Tax Photograph Collection, New York City Municipal Archives, New York City, accessed 19 July 2024, https://nycrecords.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO_936bdaa5-a45d-440f-8028-26ee41a1a0ea/.

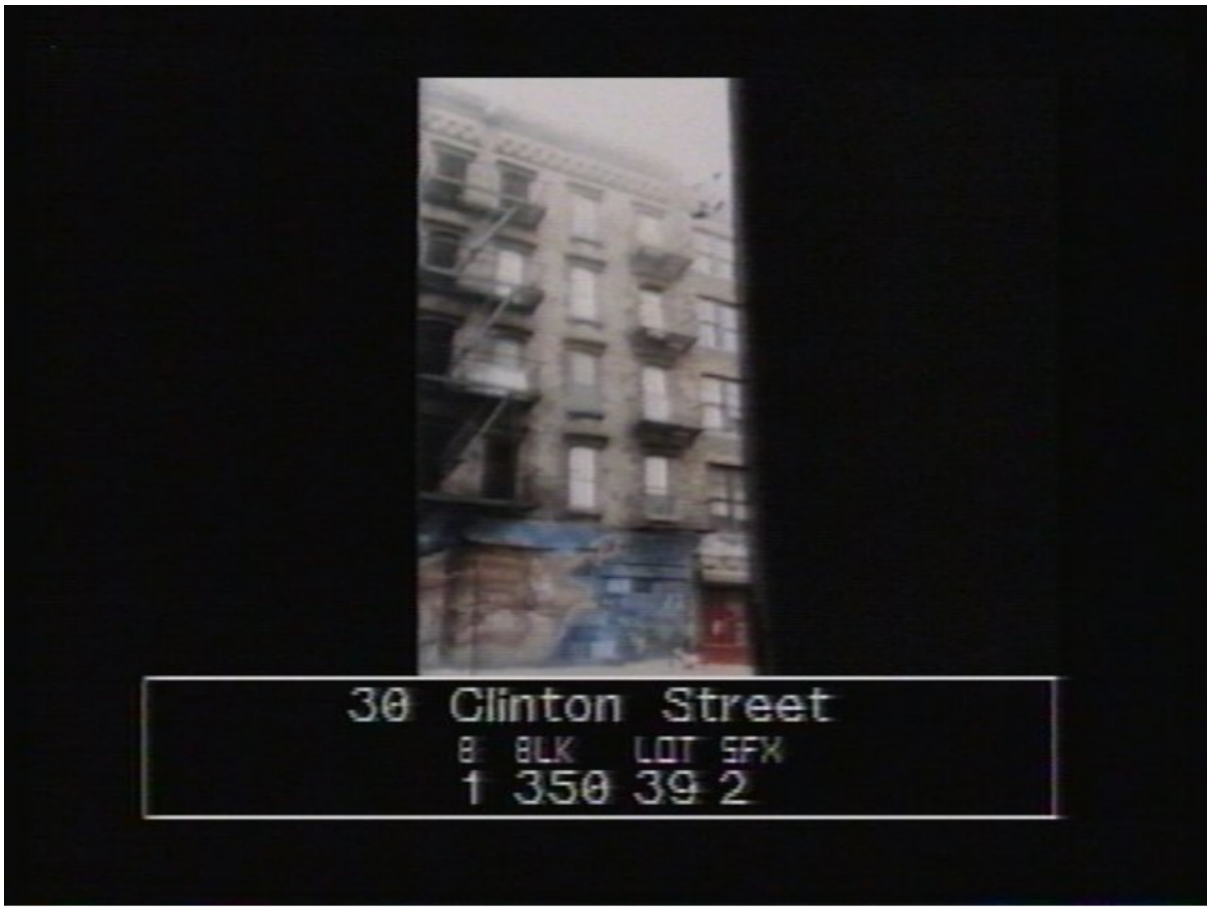


Figure 75: 30 Clinton Street, 1983-1988. Unknown photographer, digital photograph of Laser Video Disk image.

Image identifier: REC0041_1_00350_0039, Department of Finance Tax Photograph Collection, New York City Municipal Archives, New York City, accessed 19 July 2024, https://nycrecords.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO_4c617ac8-7f0c-4dda-863e-f4d94a8c0535/.

Figure 76: 620-622 East Sixth Street, 1983-1988. Unknown photographer.

Department of Finance Tax Photograph Collection, New York City Municipal Archives, New York City, accessed 19 July 2024, http://80s.nyc/#show/40.7240/-73.9809.

Figure 77: 141 East Houston Street, 1983-1988. Unknown photographer.

Department of Finance Tax Photograph Collection, New York City Municipal Archives, New York City. In Michael Lorenzini, 'A Flashback to the 1980s Tax Photographs', *NYC Department of Records & Information Services* (blog), 3 May 2019, https://www.archives.nyc/blog/tag/Tax+Photos.

Figure 78: Maria Domínguez, *Baile Bomba*, 1983, mural (2 of 2). Photograph by Nestor Cortijo. Part of Maria Domínguez's private collection.

Figure 79: Maria Domínguez, *Baile Bomba*, 1983, mural (1 of 2). Photograph by Nestor Cortijo. Part of Maria Domínguez's private collection.

Figure 80: Joe Bataan in La Plaza Cultural, undated (late 1970s). Unknown photographer.

Box 12, Folder 11: Charas Crew "Our Book", 1977-1978, CHARAS/El Bohío Collection, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 1 March 2022.

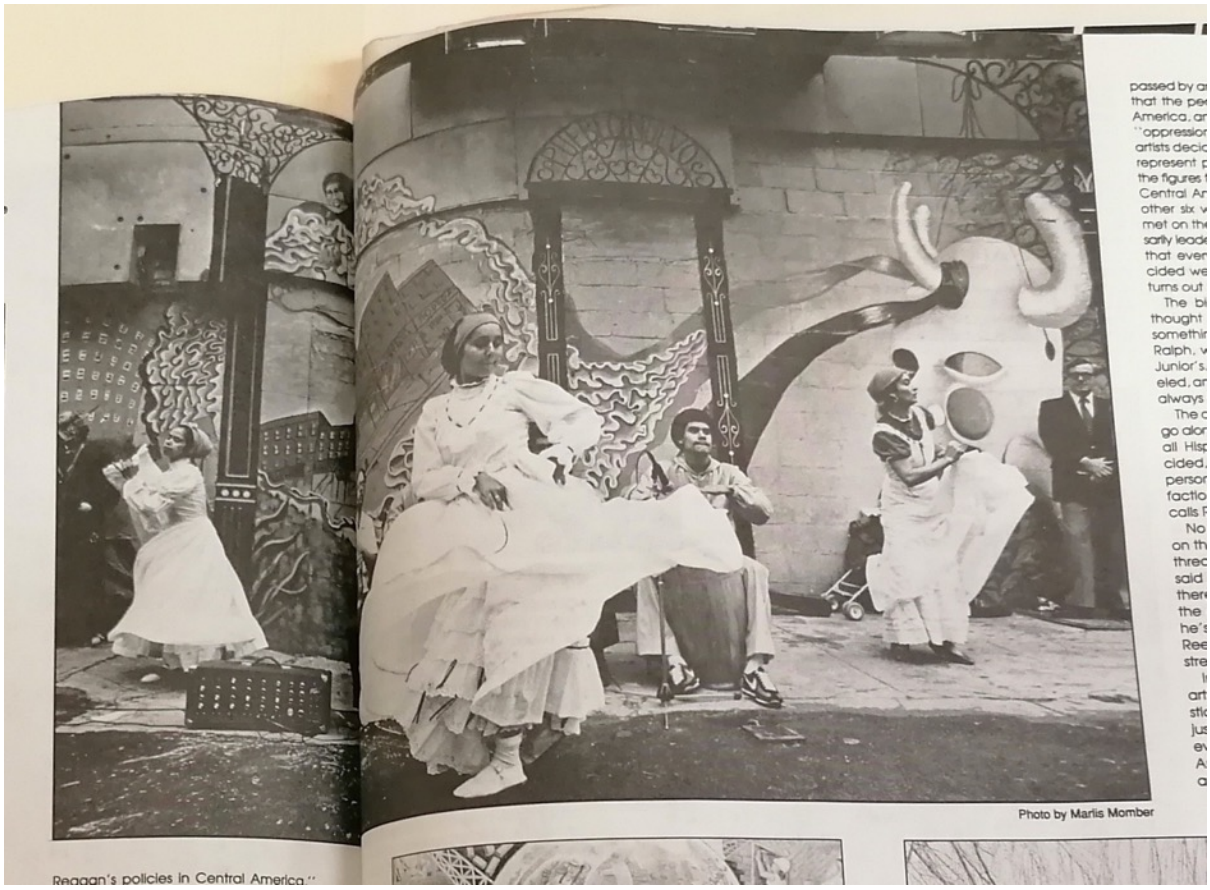


Figure 81: *Bomba* dancing at the inauguration of *Baile Bomba*, 1983. Photograph by Marlis Momber. Detail from Donna Marie Osborne, 'Mural Magic', *Streets: The Magazine of the Lower East Side*, May 1989, 28-29.

Box 9, Folder 4: Journals and Magazines, 1989-2001, CHARAS/El Bohío Collection, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 26 January 2022.

Figure 82: Maria Domínguez carrying Gentrification down Avenue C (1 of 3), 1985. Photograph by Marlis Momber.

Part of Maria Domínguez's private collection.

Figure 83: Maria Domínguez carrying Gentrification down Avenue C (2 of 3), 1985. Photograph by Marlis Momber.

Part of Maria Domínguez's private collection.

Figure 84: Maria Domínguez carrying Gentrification down Avenue C (3 of 3), 1985. Photograph by Marlis Momber.

Part of Maria Domínguez's private collection.

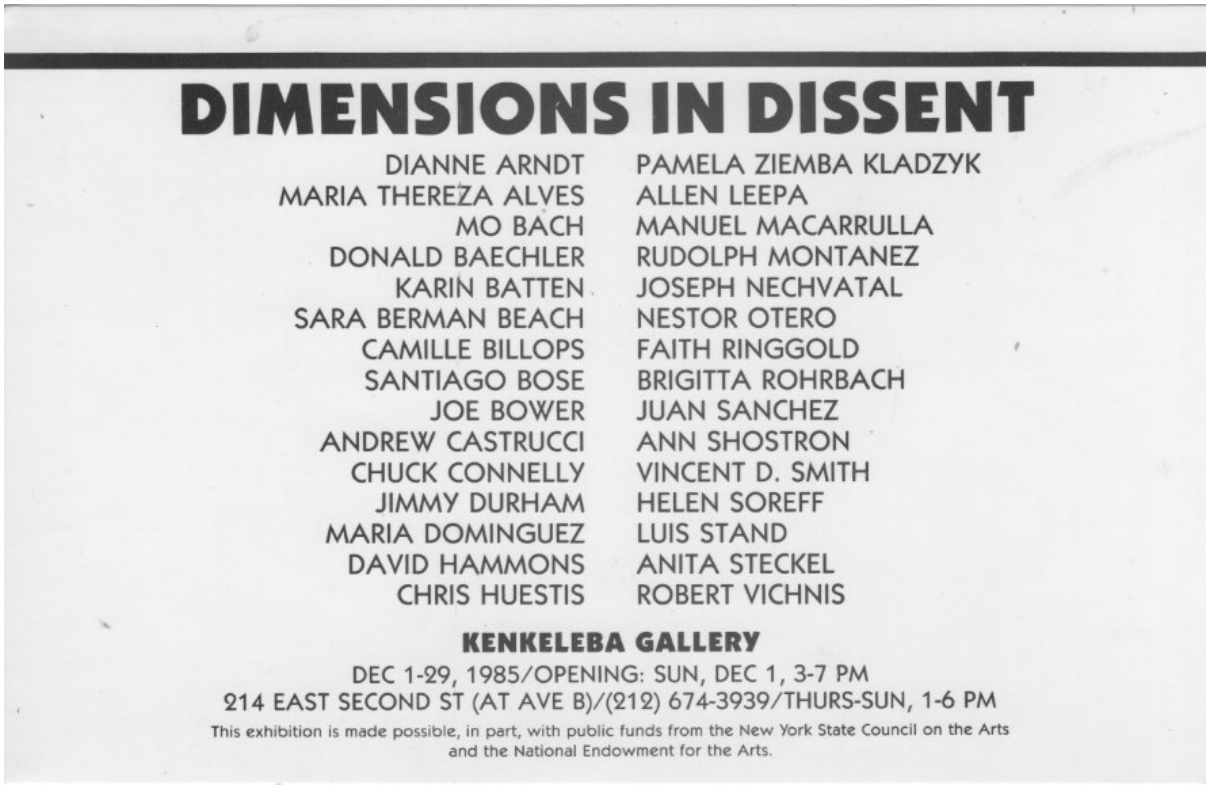
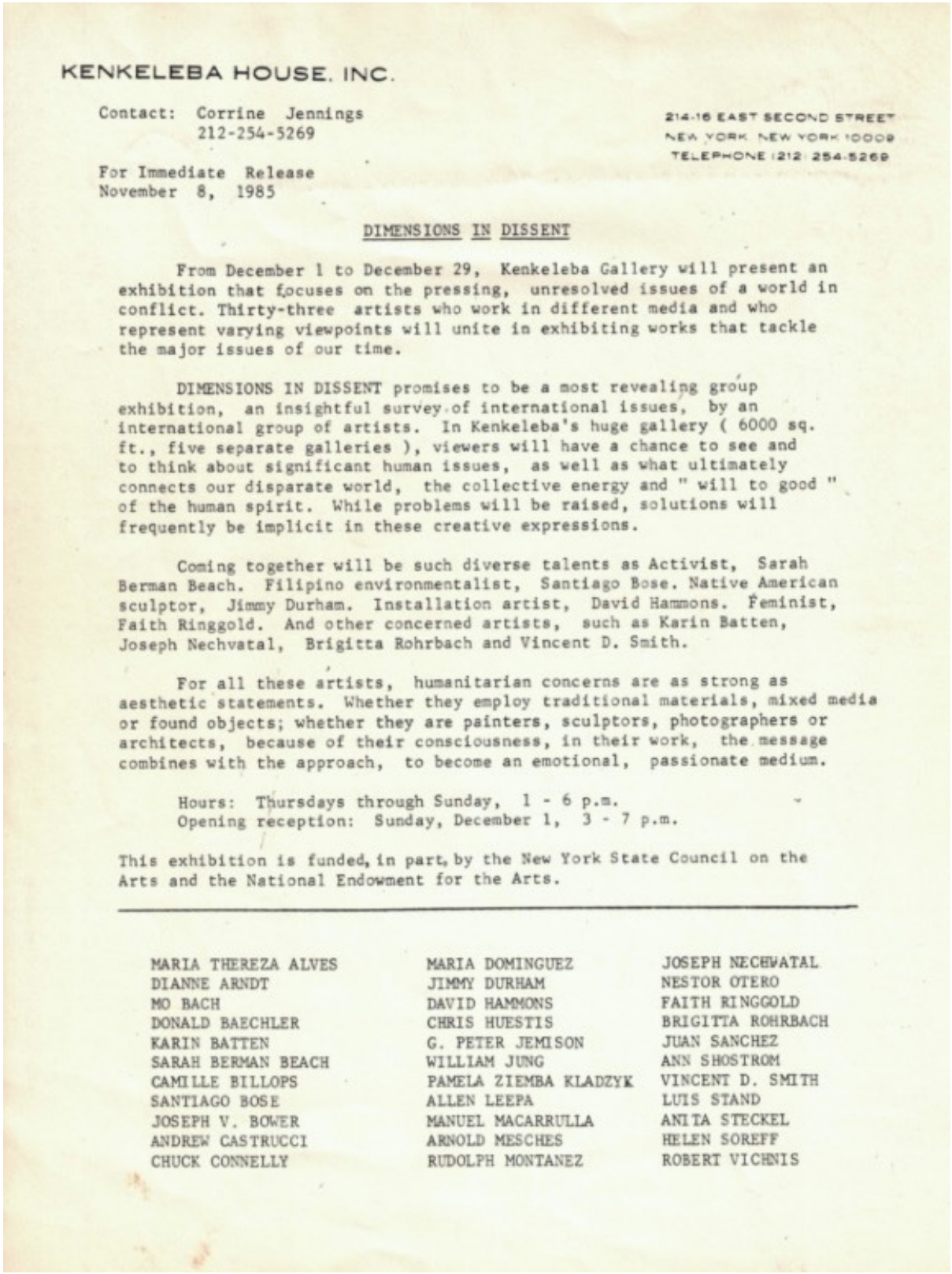


Figure 85: *Dimensions in Dissent* exhibition announcement card, 1985, single-sided. New York, Kenkeleba House Gallery.

Part of Maria Domínguez's private collection.



KENKELEBA HOUSE, INC.

Contact: Corrine Jennings
212-254-5269

214-16 EAST SECOND STREET
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10009
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For Immediate Release
November 8, 1985

DIMENSIONS IN DISSENT

From December 1 to December 29, Kenkeleba Gallery will present an exhibition that focuses on the pressing, unresolved issues of a world in conflict. Thirty-three artists who work in different media and who represent varying viewpoints will unite in exhibiting works that tackle the major issues of our time.

DIMENSIONS IN DISSENT promises to be a most revealing group exhibition, an insightful survey of international issues, by an international group of artists. In Kenkeleba's huge gallery (6000 sq. ft., five separate galleries), viewers will have a chance to see and to think about significant human issues, as well as what ultimately connects our disparate world, the collective energy and " will to good " of the human spirit. While problems will be raised, solutions will frequently be implicit in these creative expressions.

Coming together will be such diverse talents as Activist, Sarah Berman Beach. Filipino environmentalist, Santiago Bose. Native American sculptor, Jimmy Durham. Installation artist, David Hammons. Feminist, Faith Ringgold. And other concerned artists, such as Karin Batten, Joseph Nechvatal, Brigitta Rohrbach and Vincent D. Smith.

For all these artists, humanitarian concerns are as strong as aesthetic statements. Whether they employ traditional materials, mixed media or found objects; whether they are painters, sculptors, photographers or architects, because of their consciousness, in their work, the message combines with the approach, to become an emotional, passionate medium.

Hours: Thursdays through Sunday, 1 - 6 p.m.
Opening reception: Sunday, December 1, 3 - 7 p.m.

This exhibition is funded, in part, by the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.

MARIA THEREZA ALVES
DIANNE ARNDT
MO BACH
DONALD BAECHLER
KARIN BATTEN
SARAH BERMAN BEACH
CAMILLE BILLOPS
SANTIAGO BOSE
JOSEPH V. BOWER
ANDREW CASTRUCCI
CHUCK CONNELLY
MARIA DOMINGUEZ
JIMMY DURHAM
DAVID HAMMONS
CHRIS HUESTIS
G. PETER JEMISON
WILLIAM JUNG
PAMELA ZIEMBA KLADZYK
ALLEN LEEPA
MANUEL MACARRULLA
ARNOLD MESCHES
RUDOLPH MONTANEZ
JOSEPH NECHVATAL
NESTOR OTERO
FAITH RINGGOLD
BRIGITTA ROHRBACH
JUAN SANCHEZ
ANN SHOSTROM
VINCENT D. SMITH
LUIS STAND
ANITA STECKEL
HELEN SOREFF
ROBERT VICHNIS

Figure 86: *Dimensions in Dissent* press release, 1985, single-sided. New York, Kenkeleba House Gallery.

Courtesy of Corinne Jennings and Kenkeleba House Gallery.

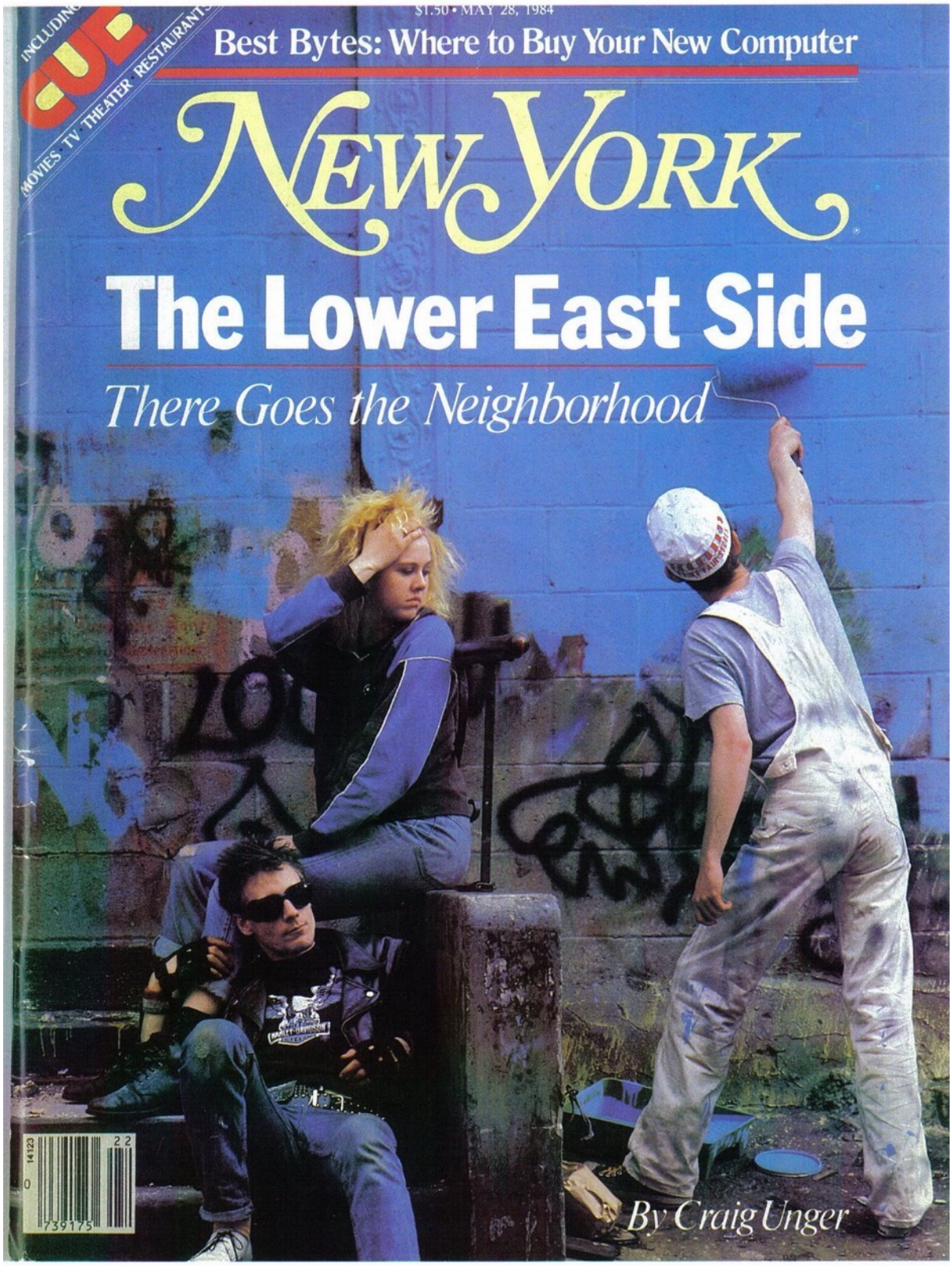
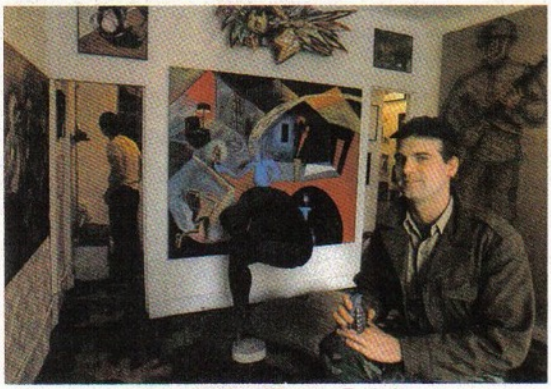


Figure 87: Front cover of *New York*, 28 May 1984. Photograph by Steve McCurry.

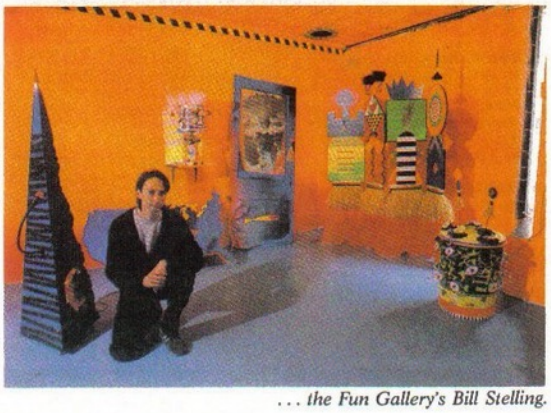
actively trying to sell it. He claims he was trying to get federal funds for a low-income project, but the money never materialized. Meanwhile, the Christodora was becoming a classic speculative property. The taxes and finance costs were minimal. And as the area began to develop, the offers began to go up—from $200,000 to $400,000 to $800,000. By late 1982, several buyers said they might be willing to pay more than $1 million. Robert Weiss, a 29-year-old dye-company executive, investigated, but decided he had not looked into the area enough to risk so much money.

Sam Glasser, one of the pioneering developers in the area, led a group of interested buyers. Earlier that year, he'd renovated a vacant nursing home at 131 Avenue B, just half a block away from the Christodora. Offering 40-foot-long living rooms with unobstructed views of Tompkins Square Park—the largest public square in Manhattan—Glasser put eighteen units on sale at prices of up to $110,000. All were bought up within six weeks, without being advertised. The new owners included a designer, a restaurateur, a journalist, an antiques dealer, a librarian, a bond trader, a carpenter, and an architect—most of them in their early thirties.

Impresarios of the avant-garde: *Gracie Mansion . . .*



. . . Steven Style, of Sensory Evolution . . .



. . . the Fun Gallery's Bill Stelling.

Yet another suitor of the Christodora was a partnership led by Harry Skydell. A 1981 graduate of Yale Law School, Skydell had given up his job in a law firm to pursue real estate. "The first thing that got me interested was when a friend bought a building on Ridge Street, below Houston, renovated it, and rented small loftlike spaces for about $600," says Skydell. "It was on the corner of nowhere." By early 1983, Skydell had paid prices as low as $70,000 for five small buildings in the area around Tompkins Square Park. "That was the first step," says Skydell. "The next was to find a property that would stabilize them, that would make them more valuable."

Relatively speaking, the East Village is a valley in the Manhattan skyline, with few buildings more than four stories high. Against this setting, the Christodora is monumental. "It hits you in the face," says Skydell. "When I first saw the Christodora in 1982, I was driving around with my partner Judah Klausner, taking notes about various properties. There was a moment when it hit me: This is the one to do. I saw this as the cornerstone of all the development in the area."

"It's beautiful inside," says Paul Bridgewater, a colleague of Sam Glasser's. "It's a shambles, of course, but you can see the potential—the high ceilings, the swimming pool, the gym, the stage." From the terraces on top, the building offers

THE LONG VIEW: *The Christodora towers over the area, and, from the top, the vista is spectacular. Of course, if you look down, the sight can be depressing.*

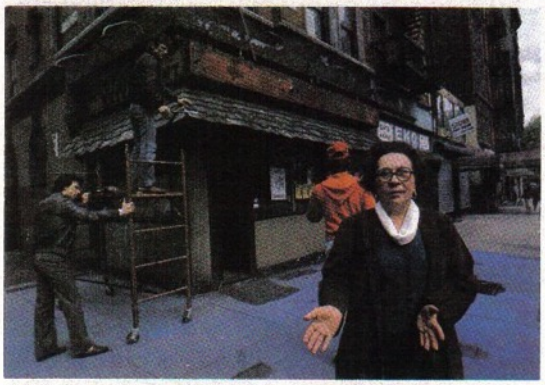
spectacular views. Toward the north, the skyline is dominated by the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, and Rockefeller Center. Toward the east, the East River is visible from 59th Street to the Brooklyn Bridge. The view south, over the financial district, bumps into the World Trade towers, and to the west, you can see across the Hudson.

Of course, if you lean over a terrace and look straight down, the view is far less appealing—and it was particularly bad in 1982. Rubble was everywhere. Junkies were lining up for their scores. And the one big co-op in the area, 131 Avenue B, was so isolated that its iron gates had to be draped with barbed wire. "I figured if these people were willing to pay so much, they must know something I don't," says Jaffee. "But I drove around and I couldn't see the difference."

By Friday, February 4, 1983, the two most serious bidders for the Christodora were Skydell's partnership and Glasser's. Both groups knew Jaffee was leaving for vacation. "At 4 P.M. on Friday, he called and asked us to come in at 9 A.M. on Monday with $100,000," says Paul Bridgewater. "That was after the banks were closed! So we spent the weekend running

Figure 88: Craig Unger, 'The Lower East Side: There Goes the Neighborhood', *New York*, 28 May 1984, 38. Photographs by Steve McCurry.

Food fortunes: *Evelyne's introduced French cuisine . . .*



. . . Maria Pidhorodecky had to close her Orchidia . . .

. . . Avenue A Restaurant brought sushi to the far East Village.

and salade niçoise, it became a favorite of the art-gallery crowd. Last November, Paul Bridgewater lured Evelyne Barthelemy from the kitchen of a local hangout and started Evelyne's, the neighborhood's first elegant French restaurant.

Real-estate prices hit new highs. Many families still lived in large, rent-controlled apartments for as little as $75 a month, but the renovation drive pushed farther east. The rents for redone apartments in bombed-out sections of Avenue B soared—sometimes even topping prices for equivalent space on the Upper East Side. On lower Second Avenue, a 1,200-square-foot two-bedroom apartment was recently put on the market for $2,000 a month. On First Avenue and 1st Street, an 850-square-foot loft rents for $1,200.

"I have people waiting in line to buy co-ops in the East Village, and I have people waiting in line to rent," says broker Rose Edwards, who's with the Walscott Company. "These are people who will not even consider another neighborhood. They think they will get a little better value here. They like the feel, the excitement, the diversity. Some buildings in good locations 'flip' ownership as many as four or five times over a two-year period, with prices going up 500 percent. You can almost taste it when certain buildings get hot."

TO SOME OF THE OLD IMMIGRANTS ON THE LOWER East Side, the heat has been too much to handle. In 1951, Maria Pidhorodecky came to New York from the Ukraine on a journey that stopped for several years in a displaced-persons' camp. In 1957, with savings of $50 and a persuasive goodwill, she took over the Orchidia, an Italian restaurant on Second Avenue.

FUTURE SHOCK: *"Local people will be forced out," says a man who came from Aspen to invest. "They'll be pushed east to the river and given life preservers."*

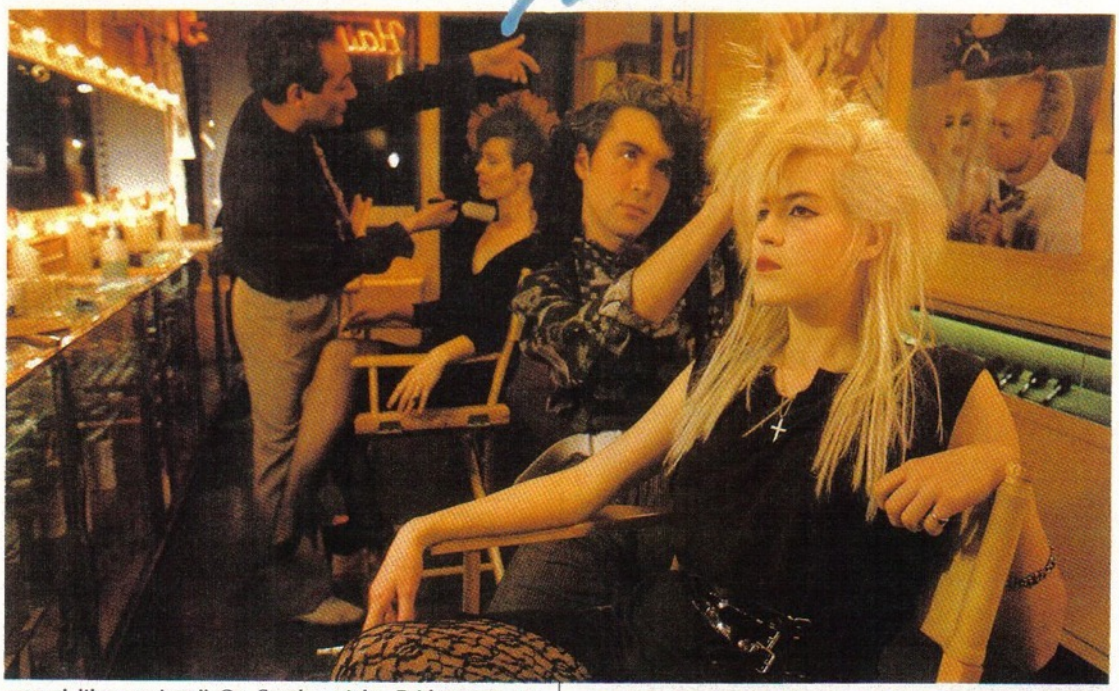
Soon she added some of her own Ukrainian specialties. "Everybody was crazy for my borscht," says Pidhorodecky, 58. "I cooked my beets. I used fresh vegetables."

When the neighborhood first began to change, Pidhorodecky did well. The newcomers liked her red cabbage and pirogen as much as the longtime customers did. But today, after 27 years of running the only Italian-Ukrainian restaurant in town, Maria Pidhorodecky is looking for a new place. The Orchidia closed last month when its landlord, Sidney Weisner, raised the rent on her 700-square-foot space from $950 a month to $5,000—more than 400 percent. "He tells me to raise my prices!" she says. "This is a fourteen-table restaurant. At that rent I would have to charge $50 for a bowl of soup!"

The Orchidia is not alone. Many stores have already been forced out; others face steep increases. "Everyone I know is threatened," says Barbara Shaum, a leather craftswoman on 7th Street and an activist with the Lower East Side Business & Professional Association. "We are under siege. You go into an area and work real hard and get established and then they want to kick you out."

Community groups are lobbying before the City Council for a commercial-rent-control bill. Banners reading "Stop the Helmsley Conspiracy" and "Speculators Keep Out" are draped across the streets. Anti-gentrification rallies—some mocking the invading art galleries—are staged. But none of that's likely to quiet the boom. Tom Pollak, 33, recently arrived from Aspen specifically to buy into the East Village. He has walked every block in the area in search of his first investment. "Ethnic businesses and services will gradually be forced out. Anyone else can be paid to leave," he says. "If you can get rid of rent-controlled tenants, renovate the place, and charge $700 a month, it's worth paying them $10,000 or so just

Figure 89: Craig Unger, 'The Lower East Side: There Goes the Neighborhood', *New York*, 28 May 1984, 40. Photographs by Steve McCurry.



around like maniacs." On Sunday night, Bridgewater got another call from Jaffee. "This time he told us to add on another $15,000 to cover his architects' fees. I must have called twenty people trying to come up with the money."

By Monday, Bridgewater and Glasser had lined up the commitments for the $115,000. But picking up checks took the entire morning. They arrived at Jaffee's Court Street office, in Brooklyn, shortly after noon. Over the next two hours, they found they were unable to meet the developer's terms.

After they left, Jaffee had one more call to make—to Harry Skydell. "He was so persistent," says Jaffee. "He wouldn't let me breathe." Within 45 minutes, Skydell was at Jaffee's office. He left after ten hours of negotiations, taking with him a signed contract for the purchase of the Christodora.

THE CHRISTODORA'S DEVELOPMENT STILL CARried enormous risks. The biggest problem was crime. "The drug scene was completely out of hand when we bought it," says Skydell. "People were afraid to walk around." Banks were hesitant to lend in such a neighborhood—and without large loans, the Christodora's renovation would be impossible. And just because eighteen units in a nearby co-op had sold quickly didn't mean that the Christodora, nearly five times as big, would be as popular. As it turned out, though, Skydell's error, if he made one, was in underestimating the speed with which money moved into the East Village.

By early February this year, the area around the Christodora resembled an armed camp. Operation Pressure Point, a major crackdown by city cops on drug dealing, was under way. The mounted police parked their horse vans in Tompkins Square Park. Desolate intersections were staked out. More than 150 cops, working two shifts a day, covered the area. Big-time dealers were said to have buckled under the pressure by sending their pushers on paid vacations—even chartering flights to the Caribbean for them. Still, more than

The fashion edge: *At Hairpower (top), on St. Marks Place; at Enz's, on St. Marks Place; and on an East Village man in the street.*

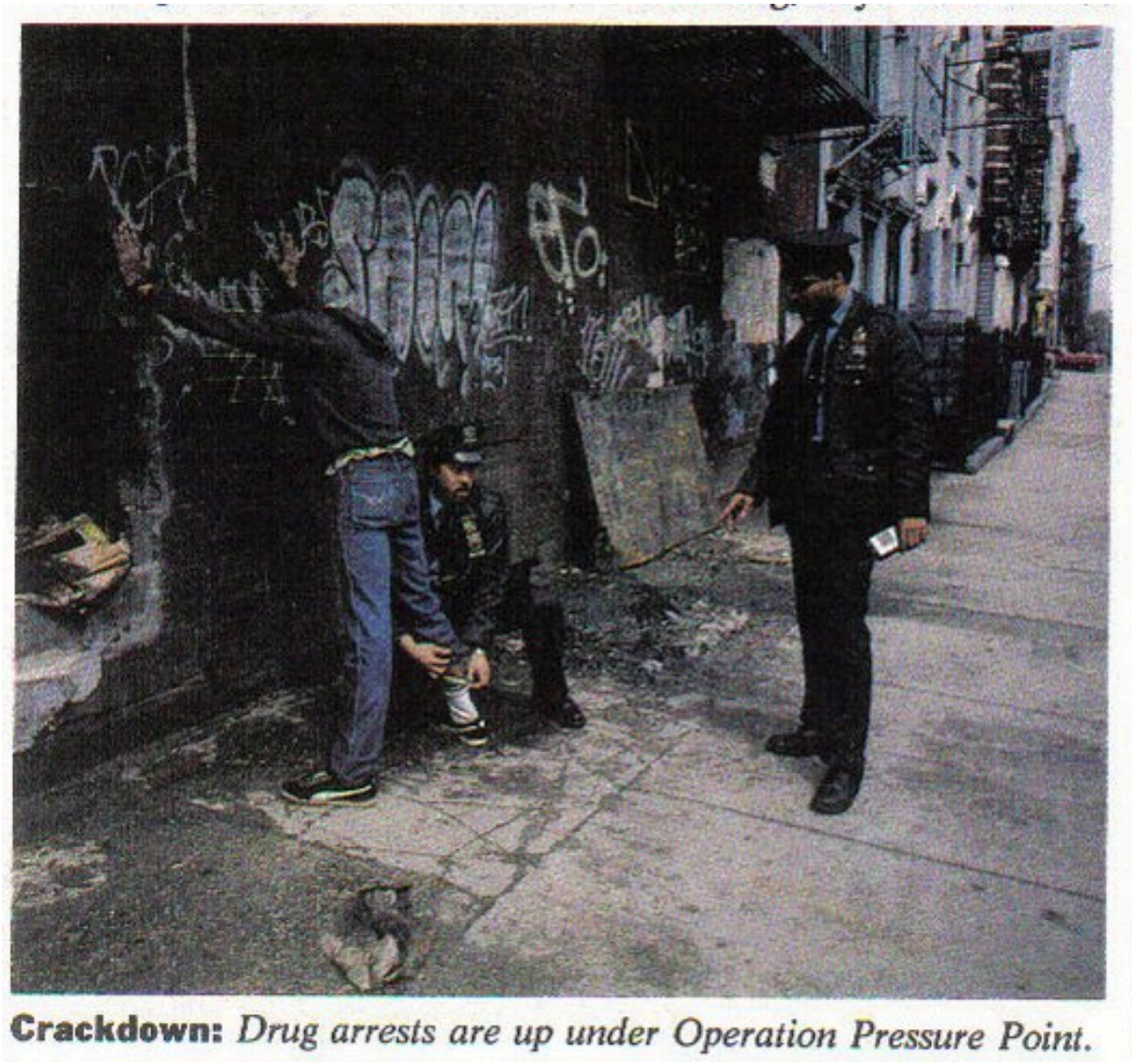
4,000 drug-related arrests were made in the first three months of the operation.

A lot of people wondered where the police had been before. "Those drugs were tolerated for years," says one local man, "but that was before real estate was worth anything here." And some people pointed out that most of the arrests were for junkies, who would be out on the streets in days.

Overall, though, both merchants and local people think the crackdown has been enormously effective in helping to revive the neighborhood. By late winter, families on Avenues C and D could feel safe walking outside with their children.

Even before the crackdown, merchants had been flocking to the Tompkins Square area. In late 1982, Sam Glasser helped a group open the Pharmacy. Serving Sunday brunch

Figure 90: Craig Unger, 'The Lower East Side: There Goes the Neighborhood', *New York*, 28 May 1984, 39. Photographs by Steve McCurry.



Crackdown: *Drug arrests are up under Operation Pressure Point.*

Figure 91: Detail from Craig Unger, 'The Lower East Side: There Goes the Neighborhood', *New York*, 28 May 1984, 36. Photograph by Steve McCurry.

Figure 92: Maria Domínguez carrying Gentrification down Avenue C (2 of 3), 1985. Photograph by Marlis Momber.

Part of Maria Domínguez's private collection.

Figure 93: Maria Domínguez carrying Gentrification down Avenue C (1 of 3), 1985. Photograph by Marlis Momber.

Part of Maria Domínguez's private collection.

Figure 94: Maria Domínguez carrying Gentrification down Avenue C (3 of 3), 1985. Photograph by Marlis Momber.

Part of Maria Domínguez's private collection.

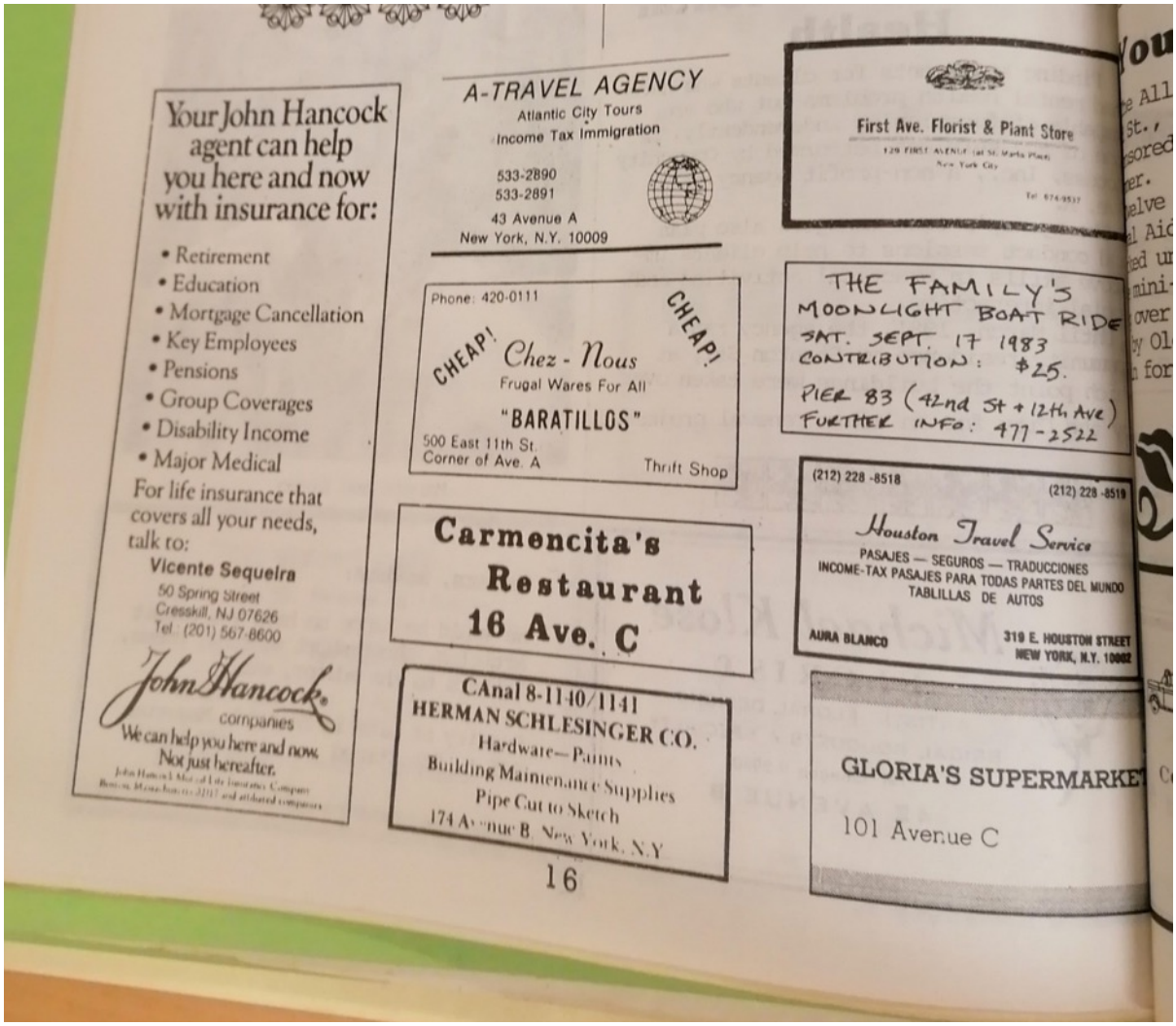


Figure 95: Detail from *The Quality of Life in/Calidad de Vida en Loisaida*, September-October 1983, 16.

Box 1, Folder 6: Volume VI, Numbers 1-6, January – December 1983, Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 9 March 2022.

Figure 96: Paul Meisel, 'Boomtown', 1984 illustrated map. In Craig Unger, 'The Lower East Side: There Goes the Neighborhood', *New York*, 28 May 1984, 36-37.

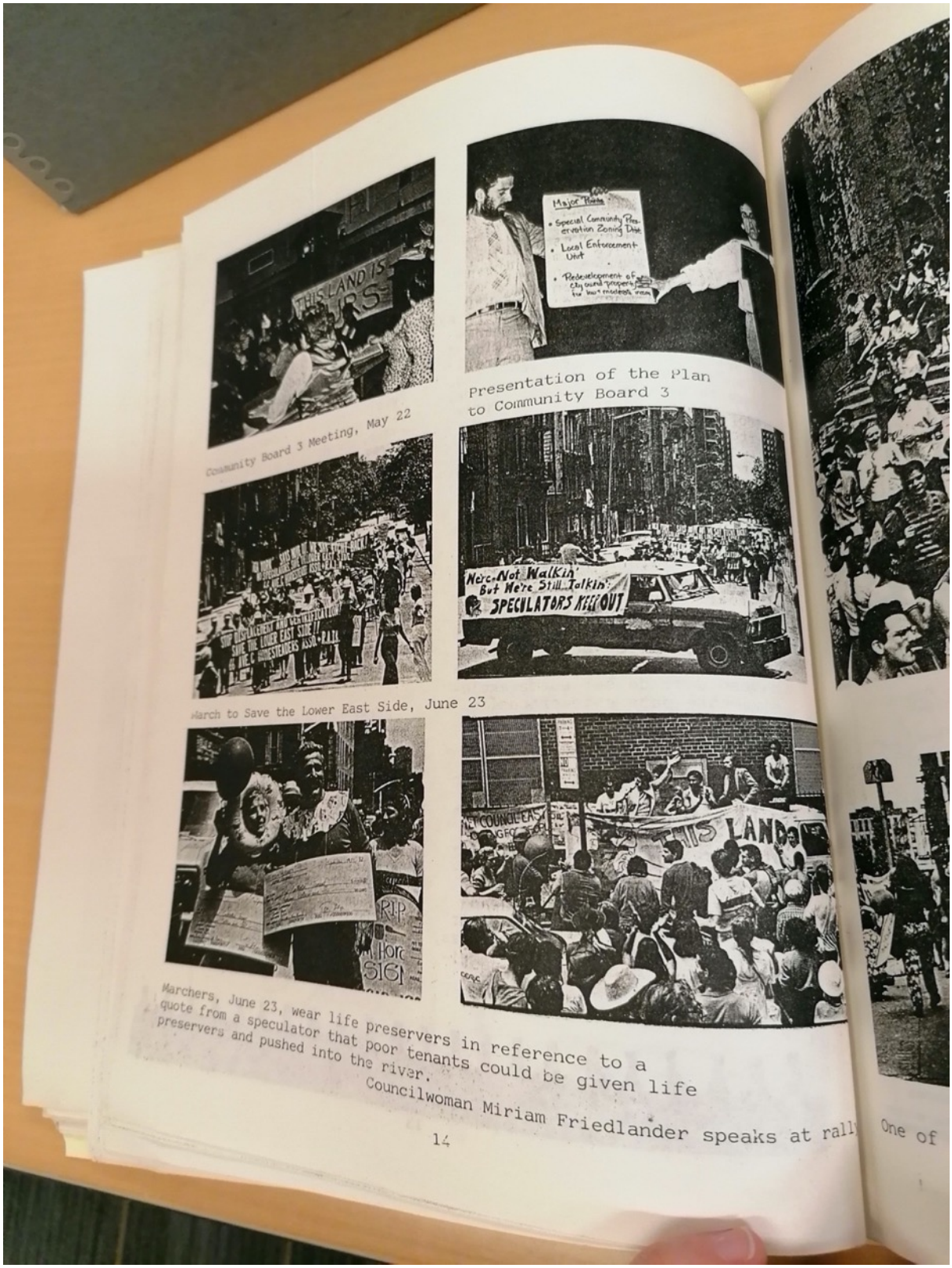
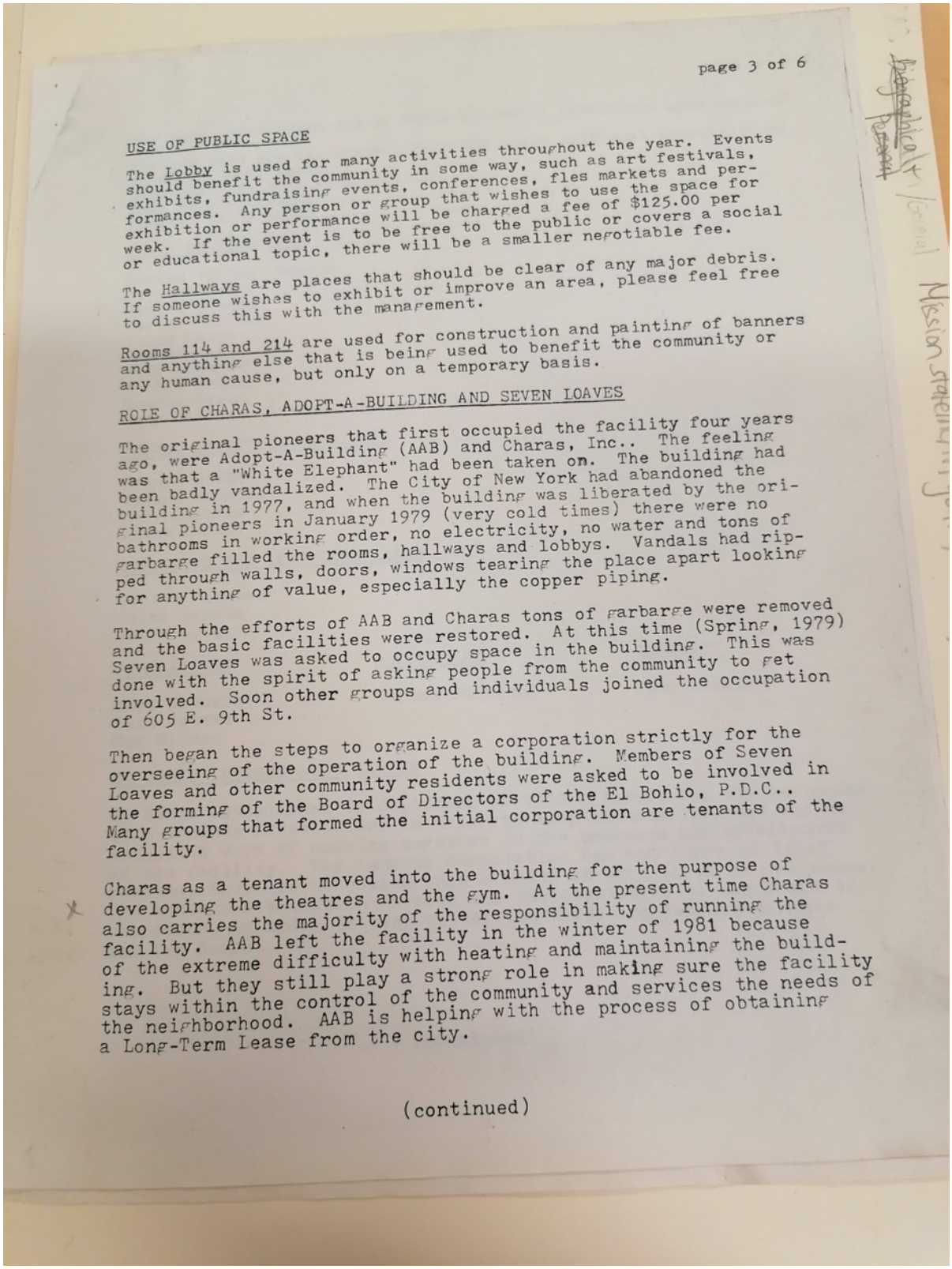


Figure 97: *The Quality of Life in/Calidad de Vida en Loisaida*, July-August 1984, 14. Photographs by Marlis Momber.

Box 1, Folder 7: Volume VII, Numbers 1-6, January – December 1984, Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 9 March 2022.

Figure 98: *Contemporaneos* exhibition announcement card, 1987, single-sided.

Box 9, Folder 8-12: Flyers, postcards, and posters, 1978-2004, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 26 January 2022.



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USE OF PUBLIC SPACE

The Lobby is used for many activities throughout the year. Events should benefit the community in some way, such as art festivals, exhibits, fundraising events, conferences, fles markets and performances. Any person or group that wishes to use the space for exhibition or performance will be charged a fee of $125.00 per week. If the event is to be free to the public or covers a social or educational topic, there will be a smaller negotiable fee.

The Hallways are places that should be clear of any major debris. If someone wishes to exhibit or improve an area, please feel free to discuss this with the management.

Rooms 114 and 214 are used for construction and painting of banners and anything else that is being used to benefit the community or any human cause, but only on a temporary basis.

ROLE OF CHARAS, ADOPT-A-BUILDING AND SEVEN LOAVES

The original pioneers that first occupied the facility four years ago, were Adopt-A-Building (AAB) and Charas, Inc.. The feeling was that a "White Elephant" had been taken on. The building had been badly vandalized. The City of New York had abandoned the building in 1977, and when the building was liberated by the original pioneers in January 1979 (very cold times) there were no bathrooms in working order, no electricity, no water and tons of garbarge filled the rooms, hallways and lobbys. Vandals had ripped through walls, doors, windows tearing the place apart looking for anything of value, especially the copper piping.

Through the efforts of AAB and Charas tons of garbarge were removed and the basic facilities were restored. At this time (Spring, 1979) Seven Loaves was asked to occupy space in the building. This was done with the spirit of asking people from the community to get involved. Soon other groups and individuals joined the occupation of 605 E. 9th St.

Then began the steps to organize a corporation strictly for the overseeing of the operation of the building. Members of Seven Loaves and other community residents were asked to be involved in the forming of the Board of Directors of the El Bohio, P.D.C.. Many groups that formed the initial corporation are tenants of the facility.

Charas as a tenant moved into the building for the purpose of developing the theatres and the gym. At the present time Charas also carries the majority of the responsibility of running the facility. AAB left the facility in the winter of 1981 because of the extreme difficulty with heating and maintaining the building. But they still play a strong role in making sure the facility stays within the control of the community and services the needs of the neighborhood. AAB is helping with the process of obtaining a Long-Term lease from the city.

(continued)

Figure 99: El Bohío Information Sheet (Page 3 of 6), January 1983.

Box 1, Folder 6: CHARAS Mission Statements, Goals, and Other Documents, 1975-2003, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 14 January 2022.

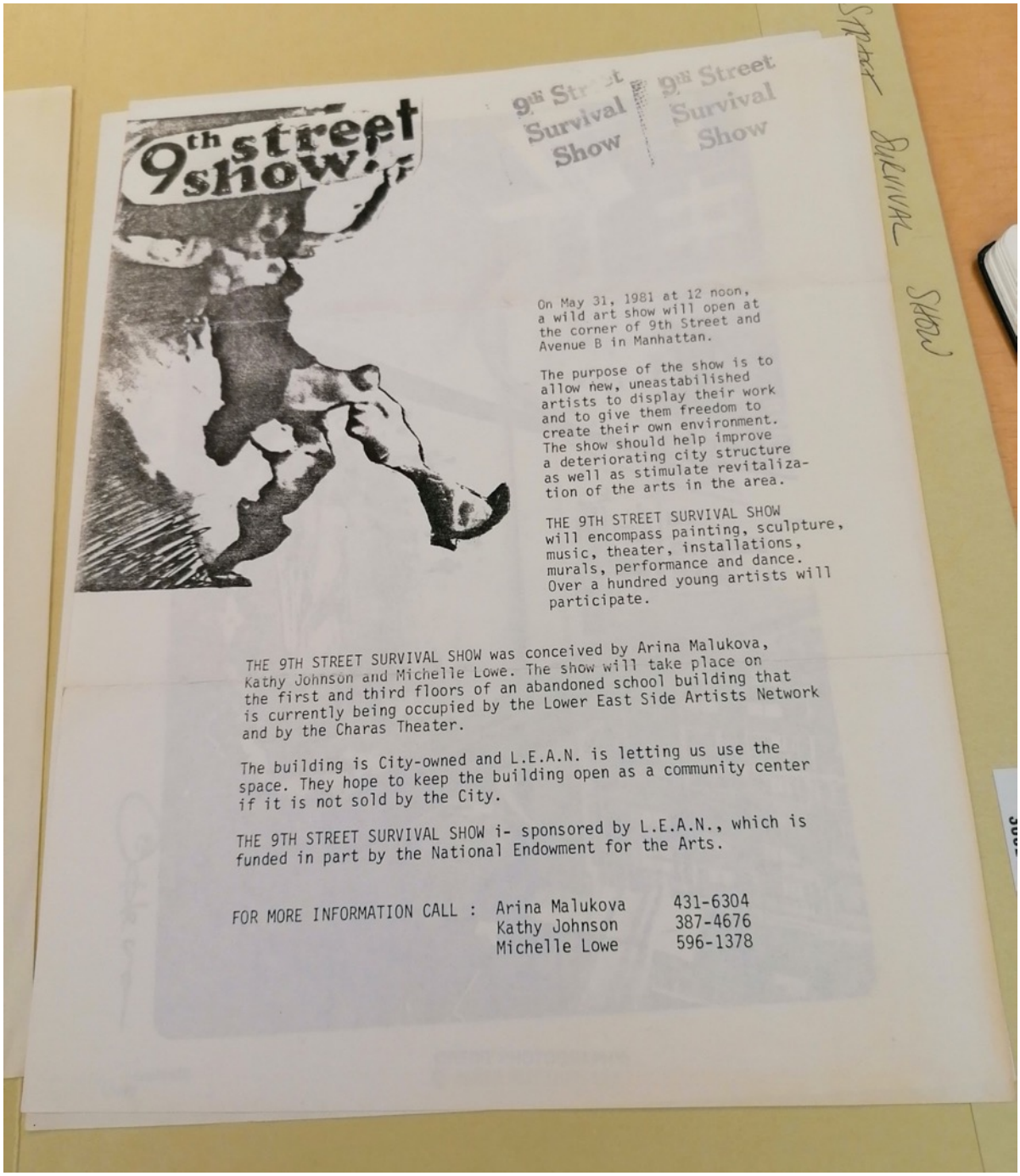


Figure 100: *Ninth Street Survival Show* Press Release, 1981.

Subject file: Galeria en El Bohio (New York, N.Y.): miscellaneous uncataloged material. Museum of Modern Art Library, Museum of Modern Art, New York City. Photograph by the author, 24 March 2022.

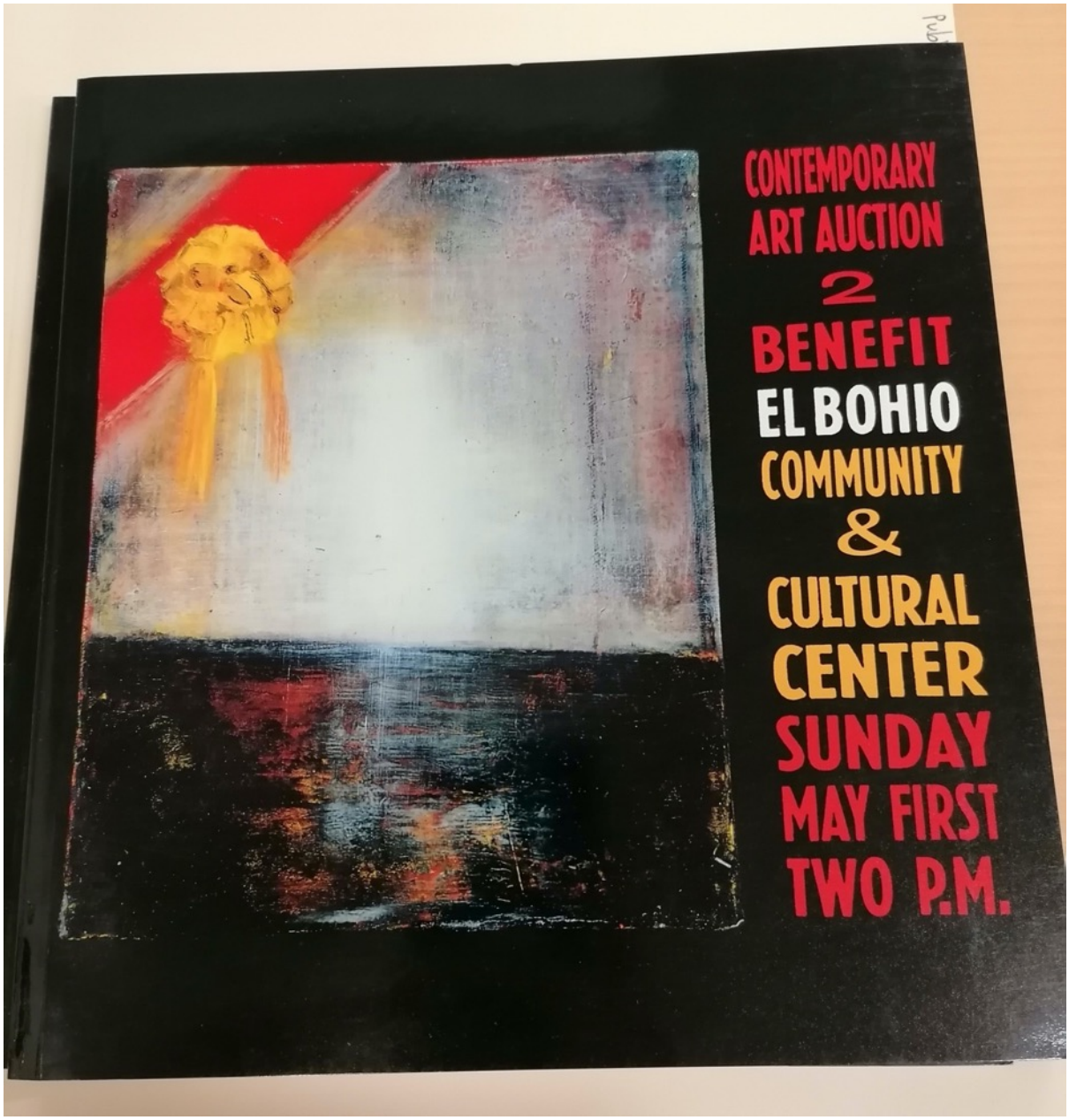
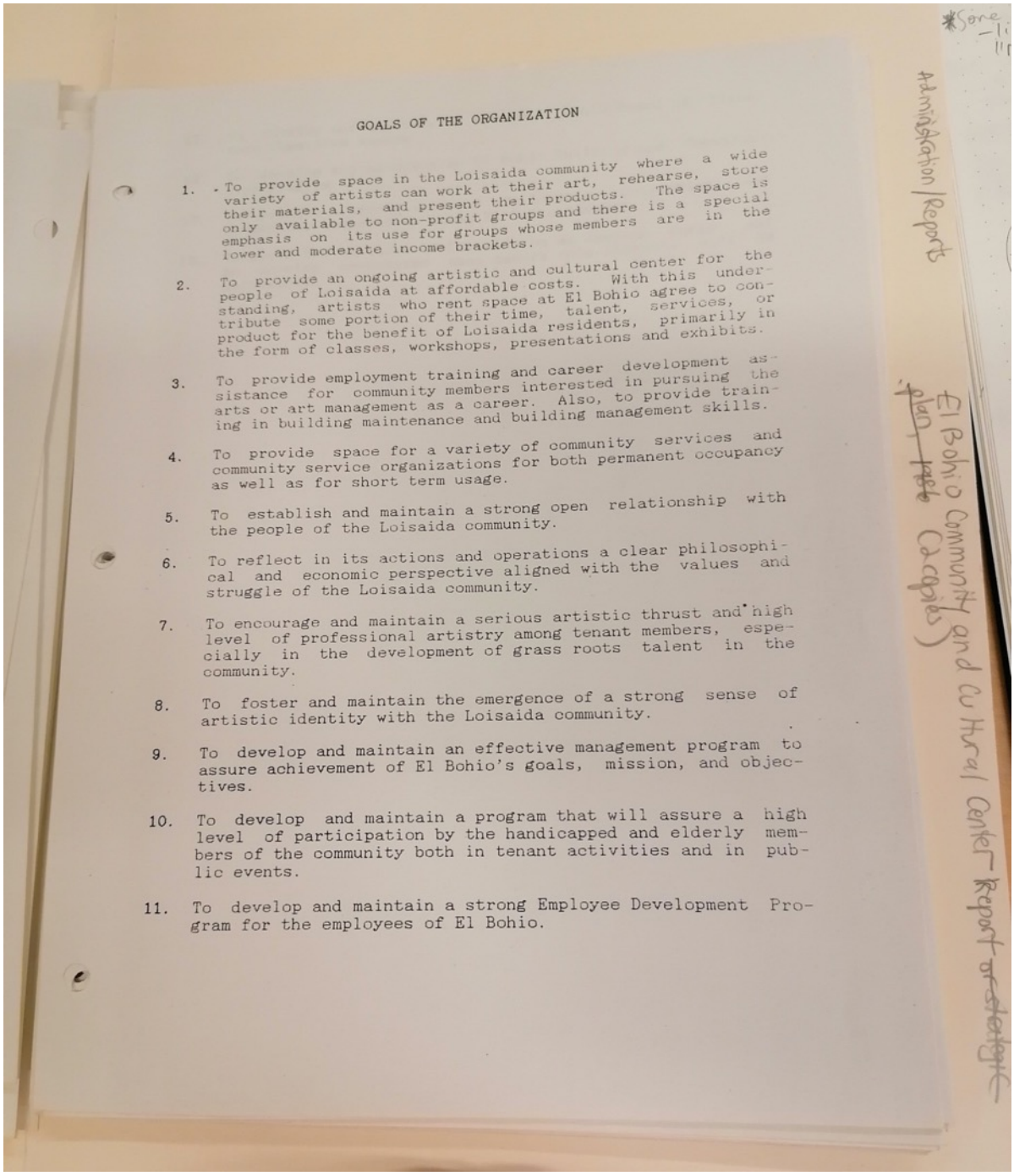


Figure 101: Catalogue for *Contemporary Art Auction 2 Benefit El Bohío Community and Cultural Center*, May 1988 (front cover).

Box 8, Folder 41: Art Exhibition Catalogs: Contemporary Art Auction 2 Benefit El Bohío Community and Cultural Center, May 1988, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 12 January 2022.



GOALS OF THE ORGANIZATION

1. To provide space in the Loisaida community where a wide variety of artists can work at their art, rehearse, store their materials, and present their products. The space is only available to non-profit groups and there is a special emphasis on its use for groups whose members are in the lower and moderate income brackets.

2. To provide an ongoing artistic and cultural center for the people of Loisaida at affordable costs. With this understanding, artists who rent space at El Bohio agree to contribute some portion of their time, talent, services, or product for the benefit of Loisaida residents, primarily in the form of classes, workshops, presentations and exhibits.

3. To provide employment training and career development assistance for community members interested in pursuing the arts or art management as a career. Also, to provide training in building maintenance and building management skills.

4. To provide space for a variety of community services and community service organizations for both permanent occupancy as well as for short term usage.

5. To establish and maintain a strong open relationship with the people of the Loisaida community.

6. To reflect in its actions and operations a clear philosophical and economic perspective aligned with the values and struggle of the Loisaida community.

7. To encourage and maintain a serious artistic thrust and high level of professional artistry among tenant members, especially in the development of grass roots talent in the community.

8. To foster and maintain the emergence of a strong sense of artistic identity with the Loisaida community.

9. To develop and maintain an effective management program to assure achievement of El Bohio's goals, mission, and objectives.

10. To develop and maintain a program that will assure a high level of participation by the handicapped and elderly members of the community both in tenant activities and in public events.

11. To develop and maintain a strong Employee Development Program for the employees of El Bohio.

Figure 102: El Bohío Community and Cultural Center Report (Page 11 of 58), 1986.

Box 1, Folder 9: CHARAS Reports, 1970s-1990s, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 19 January 2022.

Figure 103: *Contemporaneos* exhibition announcement card, 1987, single-sided.

Box 9, Folder 8-12: Flyers, postcards, and posters, 1978-2004, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 26 January 2022.

Figure 104: Chino García, Mario Maffi, and Bimbo Rivas in La Galería en El Bohío, 1987. Photograph by Marlis Momber.

Part of Maria Domínguez's private collection.

Figure 105: Maria Dominguez and exhibition visitors at the opening of *Contemporaneos*, La Galería en El Bohío, 1987. Photograph by Carmelo Diaz.

Part of Maria Domínguez's private collection.

Figure 106: Bimbo Rivas at the opening of *Contemporaneos*, La Galería en El Bohío, 1987. Photograph by Carmelo Diaz.

Part of Maria Domínguez's private collection.

Figure 107: Carmelo Diaz and exhibition visitors at the opening of *Contemporaneos*, La Galería en El Bohío, 1987. Photograph by Maria Domínguez.

Part of Maria Domínguez's private collection.

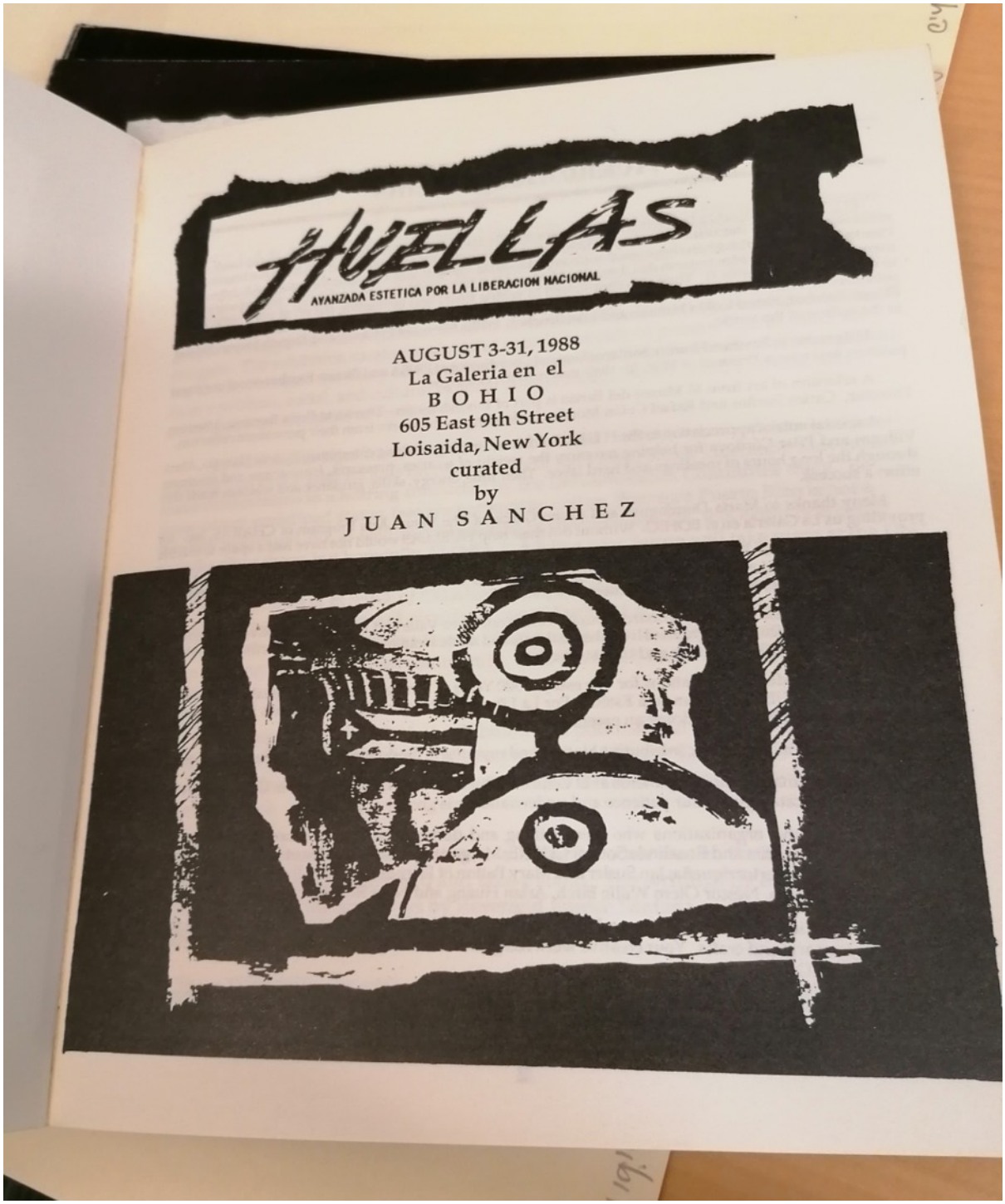


Figure 108: Catalogue for *Huellas: Avanzada Estética Por La Liberación Nacional*, 1988 (inside title page).

Box 8, Folder 44: Art Exhibition Catalogs: Huellas: Avanzada Estética Por La Liberación Nacional, 1988, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 12 January 2022.

Figure 109: Pepón Osorio, *La Bicicleta (The Bicycle)*, 1985, mixed media, 106.7 x 152.4 x 61 cm. New York, El Museo Del Barrio. In Susana Torruella Leval, ed., *Con to'los Hierros: A Retrospective of the Work of Pepón Osorio, May 2 - August 4, 1991,* Exhibition Catalogue (New York: Museo Del Barrio, 1991), 10.

Figure 110: Pepón Osorio, El Chandelier, 1988, functional metal and glass chandelier with plastic toys and figurines, glass crystals, and other objects, 154.6 x 106.7 cm. Washington, D.C., Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed 19 July 2024, https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/el-chandelier-34558.

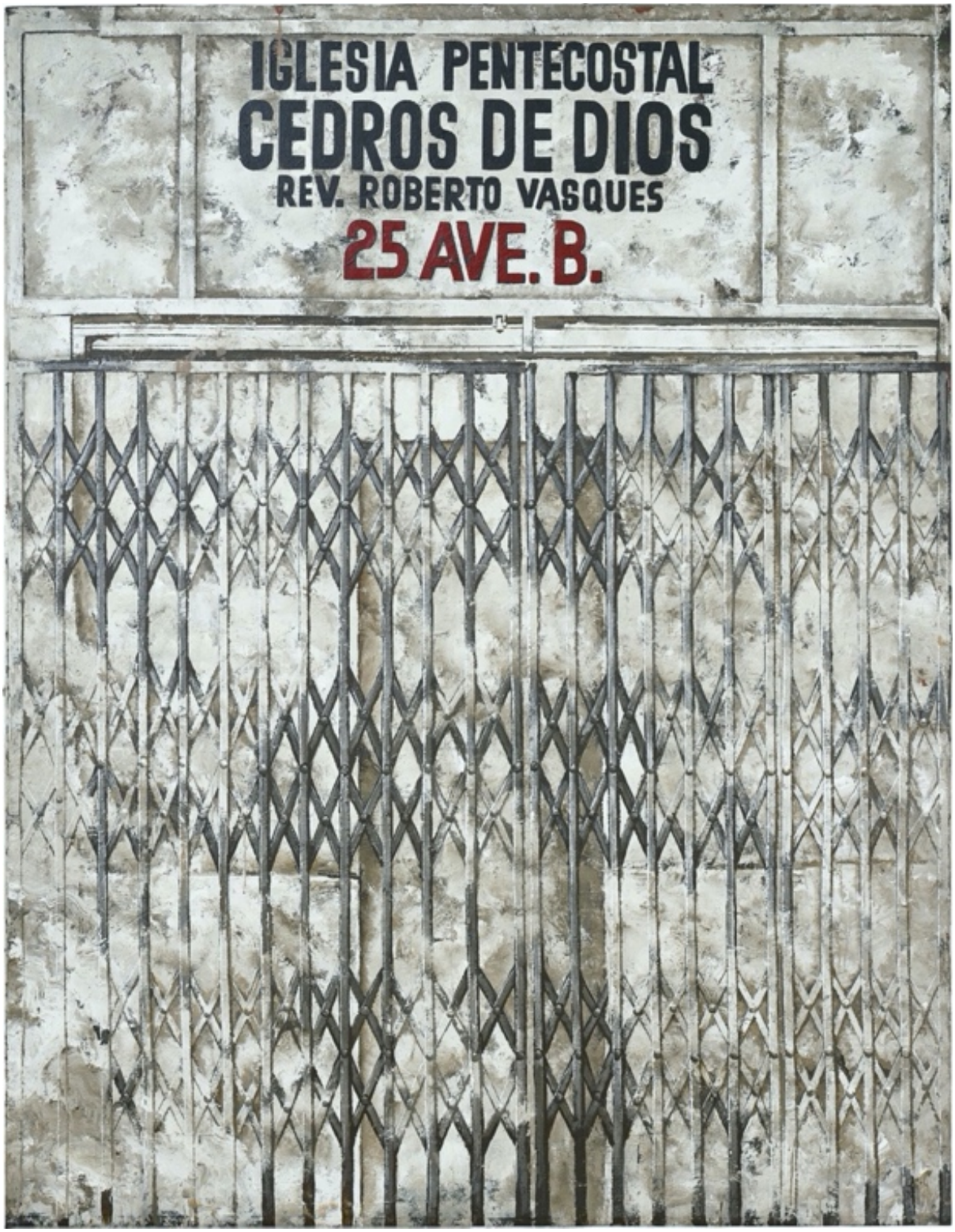


Figure 111: Martin Wong, *Iglesia Pentecostal*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 273 x 211.5cm, private collection. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/bn671xj1361.

Figure 112: Detail of Martin Wong, *Iglesia Pentecostal*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 273 x 211.5 cm, private collection. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/bn671xj1361.

Figure 113: Martin Wong, *Meyer's Hotel*, 1980-1981, acrylic on canvas, 91.4 x 121.9 cm, private collection. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/bv414ny2944.

Figure 114: Harvey Wang, untitled photograph (colourised), undated. Exhibited as part of *The Crime Show* at ABC No Rio, 1982. In Alan W. Moore and Marc H. Miller, 'ABC No Rio Dinero: Exhibitions 1981-82', 98 Bowery: 1969-89, 1 May 2017, https://98bowery.com/return-to-the-bowery/abcnorio-exhibitions-1981.

Figure 115: Ellen Cooper, untitled painting, undated, oil on canvas. Exhibited as part of *The Crime Show* at ABC No Rio, 1982. In Alan W. Moore and Marc H. Miller, 'ABC No Rio Dinero: Exhibitions 1981-82', 98 Bowery: 1969-89, 1 May 2017, https://98bowery.com/return-to-the-bowery/abcnorio-exhibitions-1981.

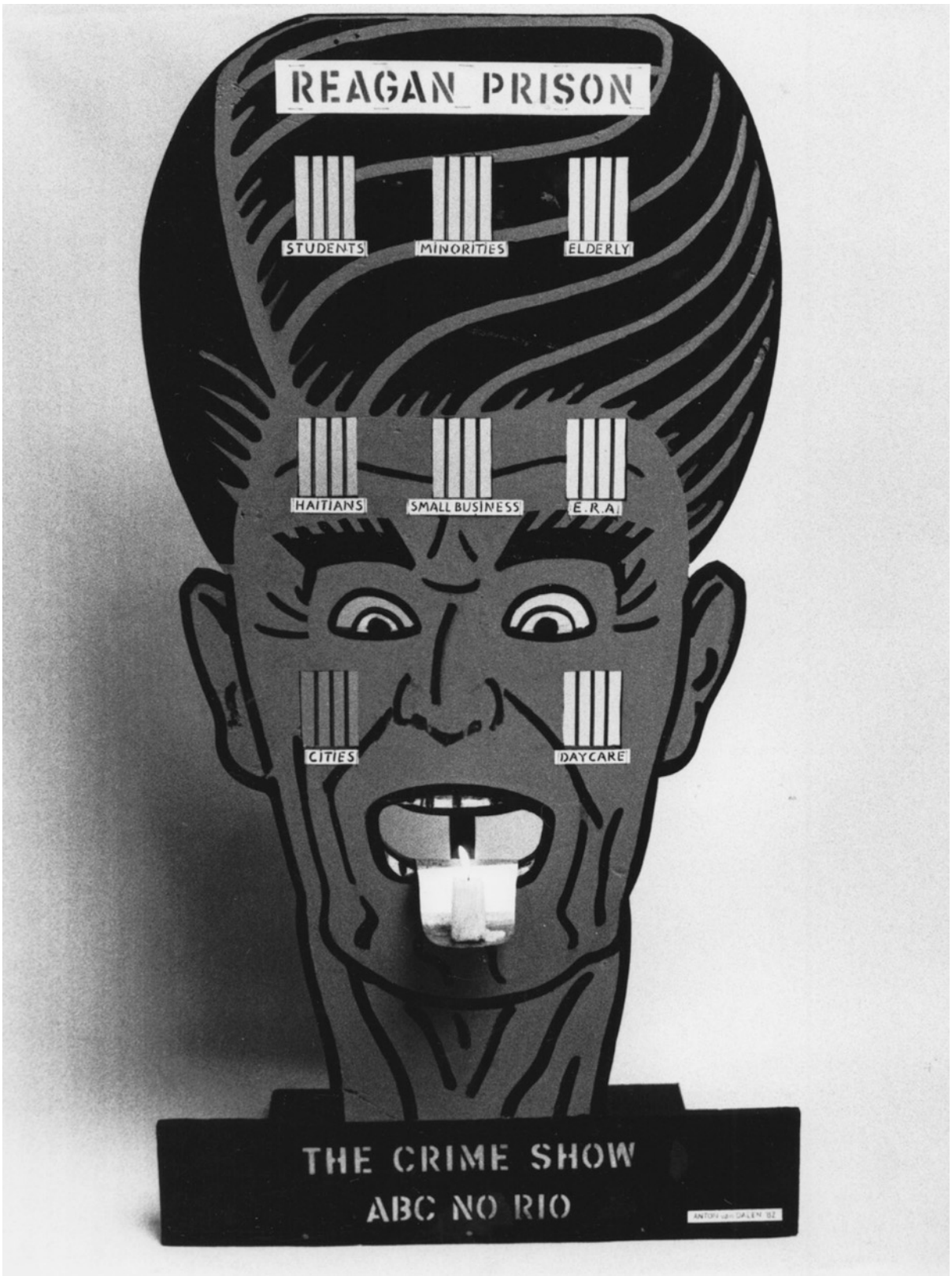


Figure 116: Anton Van Dalen, *Reagan Prison*, undated, construction. Exhibited as part of *The Crime Show* at ABC No Rio, 1982. In Alan W. Moore and Marc H. Miller, 'ABC No Rio Dinero: Exhibitions 1981-82', 98 Bowery: 1969-89, 1 May 2017, https://98bowery.com/return-to-the-bowery/abcnorio-exhibitions-1981.

Figure 117: Martin Wong, *Psychiatrists Testify: Demon Dogs Drive Man to Murder*, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 91.4 x 121.9 cm, Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/hw759sg2604.

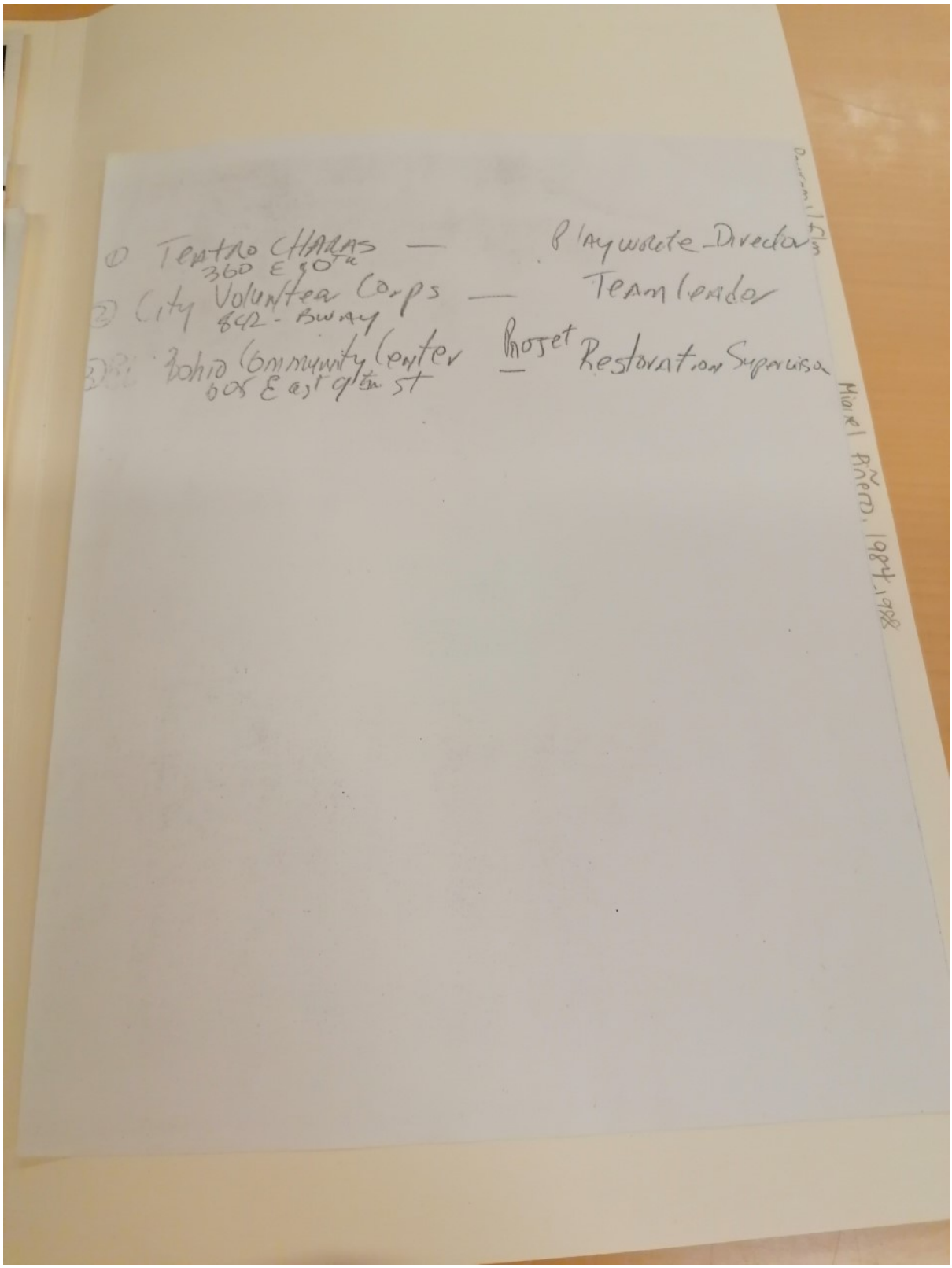


Figure 118: Reverse of a copy of Miguel Piñero's resume, describing the poet and playwright as 'Project Restoration Supervisor' at El Bohío, undated.

Box 7, Folder 11: Piñero, Miguel, 1984-1988, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 26 January 2022.

Figure 119: Martin Wong, *Attorney Street (Handball Court with Autobiographical Poem by Piñero)*, 1982-1984, oil on canvas, 90.2 x 121.9 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, accessed 28 September 2023, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/483000.

Figure 120: Martin Wong, *Stanton Near Forsyth Street,* 1983, acrylic on canvas, 121.9 x 162.6 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York, accessed 28 September 2023, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/151036.

Figure 121: Martin Wong, *Everything Must Go,* 1983, acrylic on canvas, 121.9 x 152.4 cm, Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/gw557pq6173.

Figure 122: Martin Wong, *Portrait of Piñero,* 1982, acrylic on canvas, 228.6 x 55.9 cm, Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/mx184tj0407.

Figure 123: Martin Wong, *For My Pito*, 1983, acrylic on canvas, 35.6 x 45.7 cm, private collection. Photograph by Adam Reich. In Amy Scholder, ed., *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong* (New York: Rizzoli, 1998), 39.

Figure 124: Martin Wong, *War and the Rumors of War*, 1983, acrylic on canvas, 121.9 x 172.7 cm, Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/vg092mx8912.

Figure 125: Martin Wong, *Compulsion*, 1984-1985, acrylic on canvas, 302.3 x 121.9 cm, San Francisco, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/th347st0453.

Figure 126: David Wojnarowicz, *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*, 1978-1979 (printed 2004), gelatin silver print on paper, 24.6 x 32.8 cm, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, accessed 29 September 2023, https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/arthur-rimbaud-new-york-28.

Figure 127: David Wojnarowicz, *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*, 1978-1979 (printed 2004), gelatin silver print on paper, 24.6 x 32.8 cm, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, accessed 29 September 2023, https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/arthur-rimbaud-new-york-28.

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Figure 130: Martin Wong, *Stanton Near Forsyth Street,* 1983, acrylic on canvas, 121.9 x 162.6 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York, accessed 28 September 2023, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/151036.

Figure 131: Martin Wong, *Everything Must Go,* 1983, acrylic on canvas, 121.9 x 152.4 cm, Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/gw557pq6173.

Figure 132: Martin Wong, untitled photographic collage*,* 1983. In Krist Gruijthuijsen and Agustín Pérez Rubio, eds., *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief* (Köln, Germany: Walther König, 2022), 102–3.

Figure 133: Marlis Momber, *216 E. 7th St., 1979*, black and white photograph. 'Now and Then: 216 E. 7th Street', *EV Grieve* (blog), 24 July 2008, https://evgrieve.com/2008/07/now-and-then-216-e-7th-street.html.

Figure 134: Marlis Momber, *View of The Empire State Building from 334 East 4th Street at Avenues C&D*, 1984, colour photograph, "'Viva Loisaida" Tonight with Marlis Momber', *EV Grieve* (blog), 15 November 2010, https://evgrieve.com/2010/11/viva-loisaida-tonight-with-marlis.html.

Figure 135: Vacant lots and abandoned tenement buildings. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, directed by Marlis Momber, 1978, 00:54, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHCLQzHH344.

Figure 136: Constructing a community garden. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 07:00.

Figure 137: Painting a mural in a community garden. Screenshot from *Viva Loisaida*, 23.39.

Figure 138: Martin Wong, *No Es Lo Que Has Pensado,* 1984, acrylic on canvas, 213.4 x 274.3 cm, Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/cg295dc4930.

Figure 139: Martin Wong, Detail of *No Es Lo Que Has Pensado,* 1984, acrylic on canvas, 213.4 x 274.3 cm, Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/cg295dc4930.

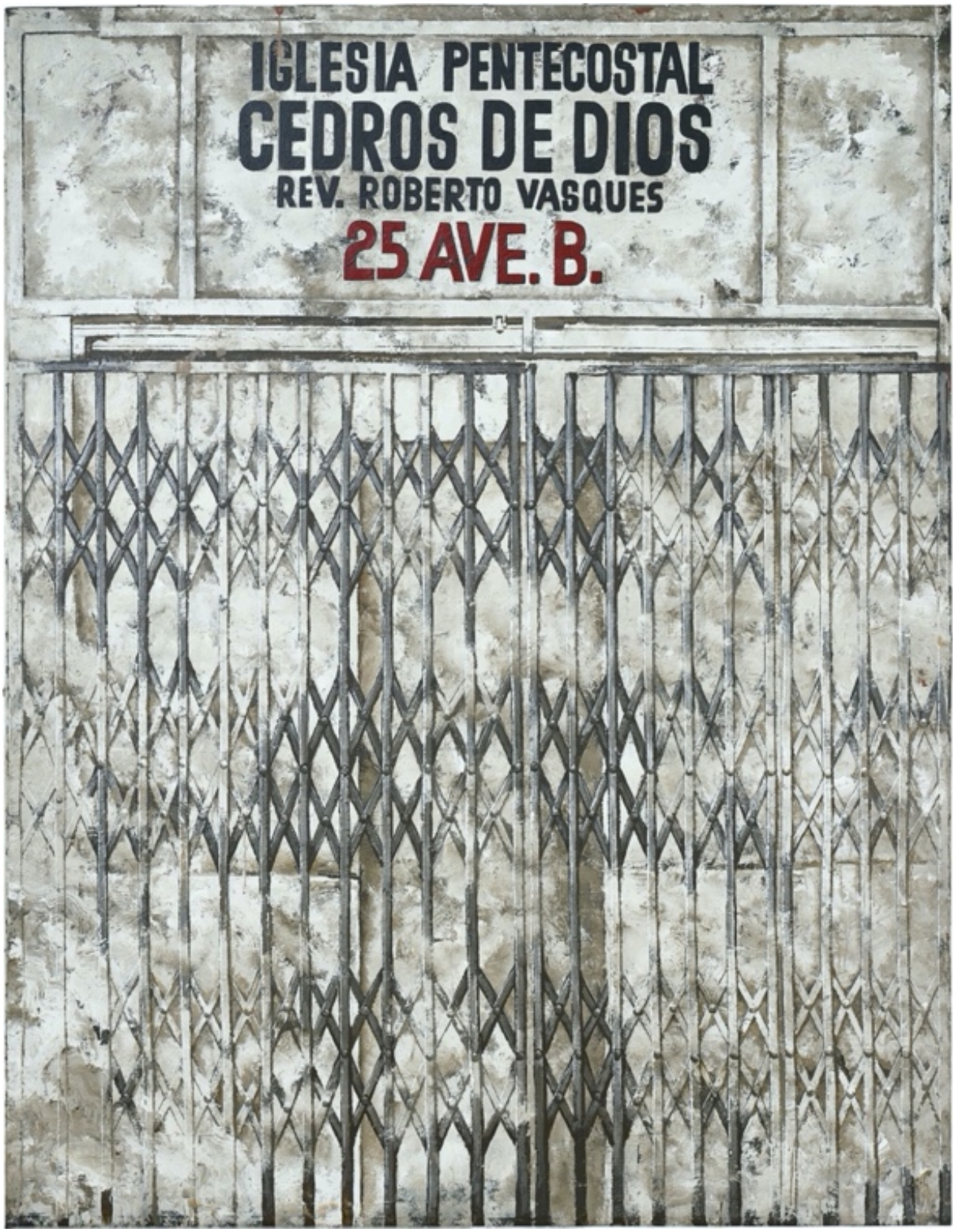


Figure 140: Martin Wong, *Iglesia Pentecostal*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 273 x 211.5cm, private collection. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/bn671xj1361.

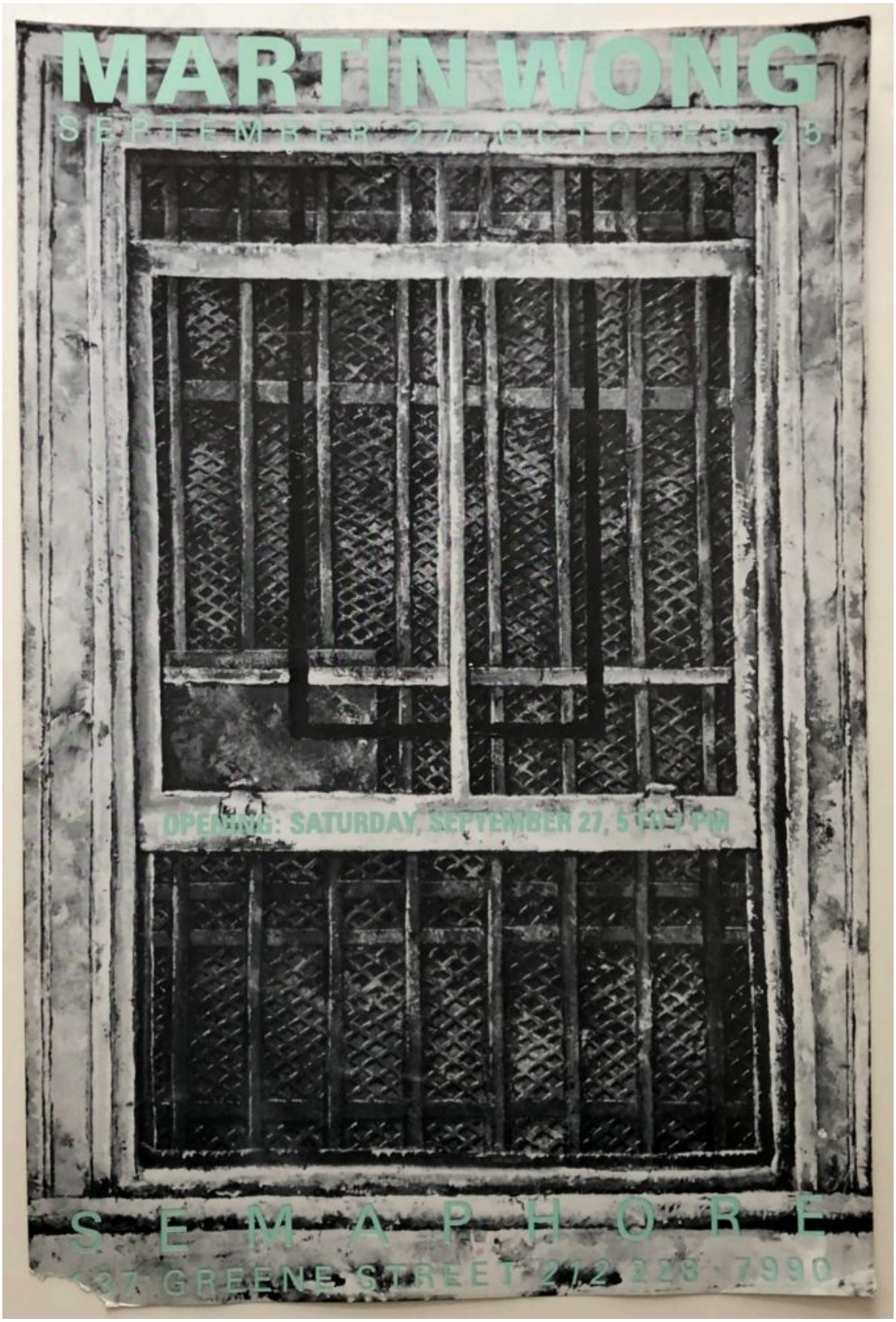


Figure 141: Flyer for Martin Wong, *The Last Picture Show*, at Semaphore Gallery, New York, September to October 1986, 28 x 42 cm. Gallery 98, New York, accessed 28 September 2023, https://gallery98.org/2021/semaphore-gallery-martin-wong-exhibition-poster-1986/.

Figure 142: Martin Wong, *La Iglesia de Dios*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 245.1 x 401.3 cm, Living Collection, Hong Kong. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/sv904pm3590.

Figure 143: Martin Wong, *Untitled (Green Storefront)*, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 203.2 x 304.8 cm, P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/kr334hf5663.

Figure 144: Martin Wong, *Untitled (Green Storefront)*, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 203.2 x 304.8 cm. Digital scan of archival 35mm slide held at P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York, showing how the work was exhibited in *The Last Picture Show*. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/kr334hf5663.

Figure 145: Martin Wong, *Untitled* (*Houston Street)*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 243.8 x 396.2 cm, P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/zz343bz5707.

Figure 146: Martin Wong, *Untitled (Poetry Storefront)*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 243.8 x 289.6 cm, P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/zy538kd0797.

Figure 147: Martin Wong, *Aaron*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 182.9 x 121.9 cm. Digital scan of archival 35mm slide held at P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/kb505ck4307.

Figure 148: Martin Wong, *Untitled (Stanton and Ridge)*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 245.1 x 299.7 cm. Digital scan of archival 35mm slide held at P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/fn608kh6079.

Figure 149: Martin Wong, *Untitled (Stanton Street)*, ca. 1986, acrylic on canvas, 243.8 x 289.6 cm. Digital scan of archival 35mm slide held at P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/xm462ph2916.

Figure 150: Martin Wong, *Untitled (Silver Storefront)*, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 274.3 x 213.3 cm, P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/hv116xk6260.

Figure 151: Installation view of *The Last Picture Show,* Semaphore Gallery, 137 Greene Street, New York, September 27 – October 25, 1986. In Barry Blinderman, 'Martin Wong's Chains of Desire', *Evergreen Review*, S/S 2022, http://evergreenreview.com/read/martin-wongs-chains-of-desire/.

Figure 152: Installation view of *The Last Picture Show,* Semaphore Gallery, 137 Greene Street, New York, September 27 – October 25, 1986. In Krist Gruijthuijsen and Agustín Pérez Rubio, eds., *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief* (Köln, Germany: Walther König, 2022), 154.

Figure 153: Installation view of *The Last Picture Show,* Semaphore Gallery, 137 Greene Street, New York, September 27 – October 25, 1986. In Krist Gruijthuijsen and Agustín Pérez Rubio, eds., *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief* (Köln, Germany: Walther König, 2022), 154.

Figure 154: Tria Giovan, *El Castillo de Jagua on Rivington Street*, 1985, colour photograph. In Tria Giovan, *Loisaida: New York Street Work 1984-1990* (Bologna, Italy: Damiani, 2022), 64.

Figure 155: Tria Giovan, *Norman Cohen's on Stanton Street*, 1990, colour photograph. In Tria Giovan, *Loisaida: New York Street Work 1984-1990* (Bologna, Italy: Damiani, 2022), 77.

Figure 156: Tria Giovan, Schapiro's Entrance on Rivington Street, 1984, colour photograph. In Tria Giovan, *Loisaida: New York Street Work 1984-1990* (Bologna, Italy: Damiani, 2022), 82.

Figure 157: Tria Giovan, *Kimstar Cleaners*, 1986, colour photograph. In Tria Giovan, *Loisaida: New York Street Work 1984-1990* (Bologna, Italy: Damiani, 2022), 81.

Figure 158: Martin Wong, *Untitled (Green Storefront)*, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 203.2 x 304.8 cm. Digital scan of archival 35mm slide held at P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York, showing how the work was exhibited in *The Last Picture Show*. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/kr334hf5663.

Figure 159: Tria Giovan, *Barretto's on Stanton Street*, 1987, colour photograph. In Tria Giovan, *Loisaida: New York Street Work 1984-1990* (Bologna, Italy: Damiani, 2022), 2.

Figure 160: Tria Giovan, *Fifty Cents on Delancey Street*, 1985, colour photograph. In Tria Giovan, *Loisaida: New York Street Work 1984-1990* (Bologna, Italy: Damiani, 2022), 41.

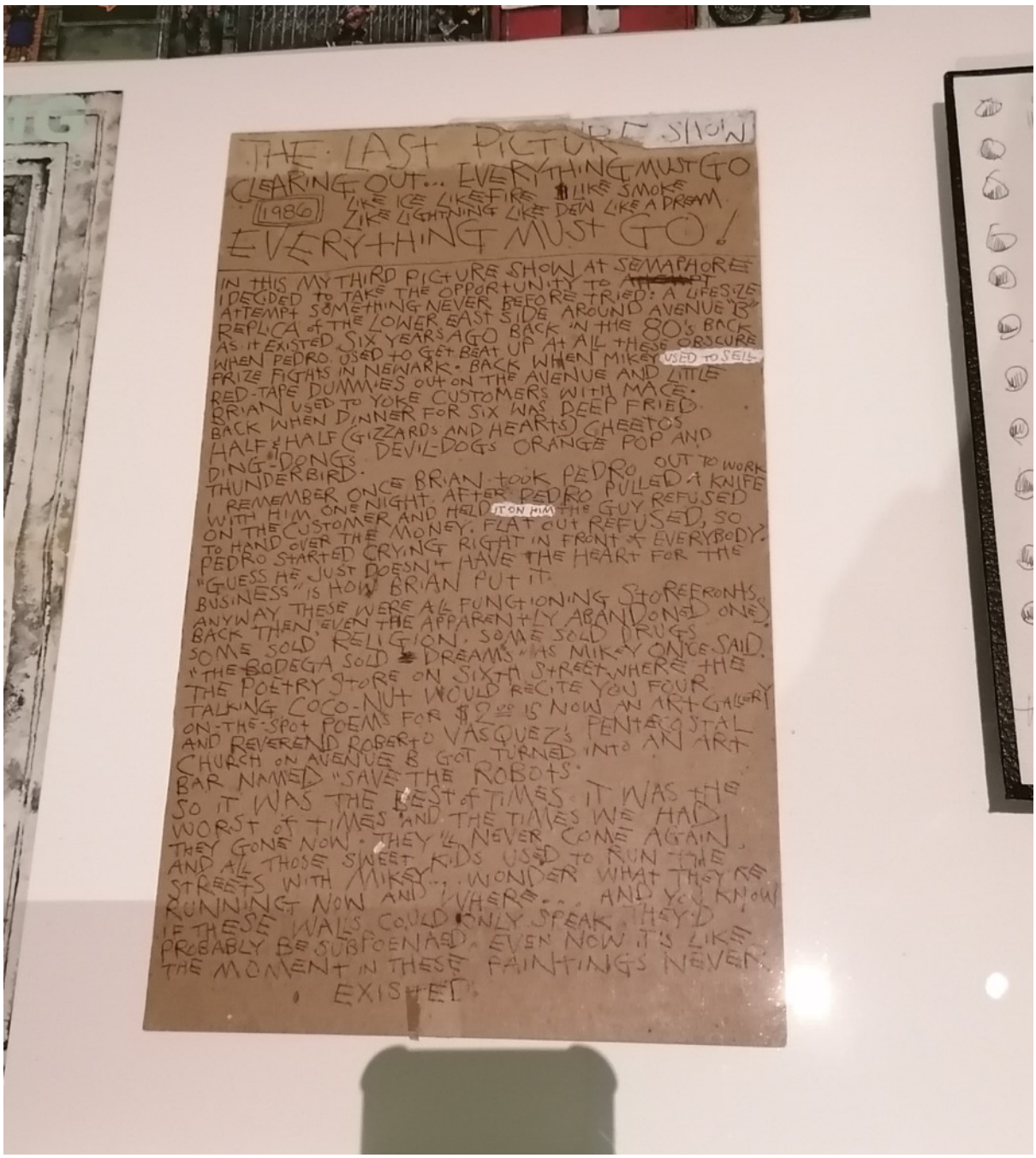


Figure 161: Martin Wong, artist statement for *The Last Picture Show*, 1986. Photograph by the author at *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief*, KW Institute, Berlin, 22 March 2023.

Figure 162: Martin Wong, *Untitled (Stanton and Ridge)*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 245.1 x 299.7 cm. Digital scan of archival 35mm slide held at P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/fn608kh6079.

Figure 163: Richard Hambleton, *Shadowman*, Lower East Side, 1982, mural. Photograph by Hank O'Neal, 1982. 'The Shadow Man', Hank O'Neal, accessed 15 April 2024, https://www.hankoneal.com/index.php/the-shadow-man.

Figure 164: Ray Navarro as Jesus Christ, ACT UP 'Stop the Church' action, 10 December 1989. Screenshot from *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*, directed by Jim Hubbard, 2012, 38:57, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrAzU79PBVM.

Figure 165: Queue outside Save the Robots, May 1984. Photograph by Ben Buchanan. Post on 'SAVE THE ROBOTS', Facebook, 24 March 2009, https://www.facebook.com/groups/STRobots/permalink/10150360264756570/?app=fbl.

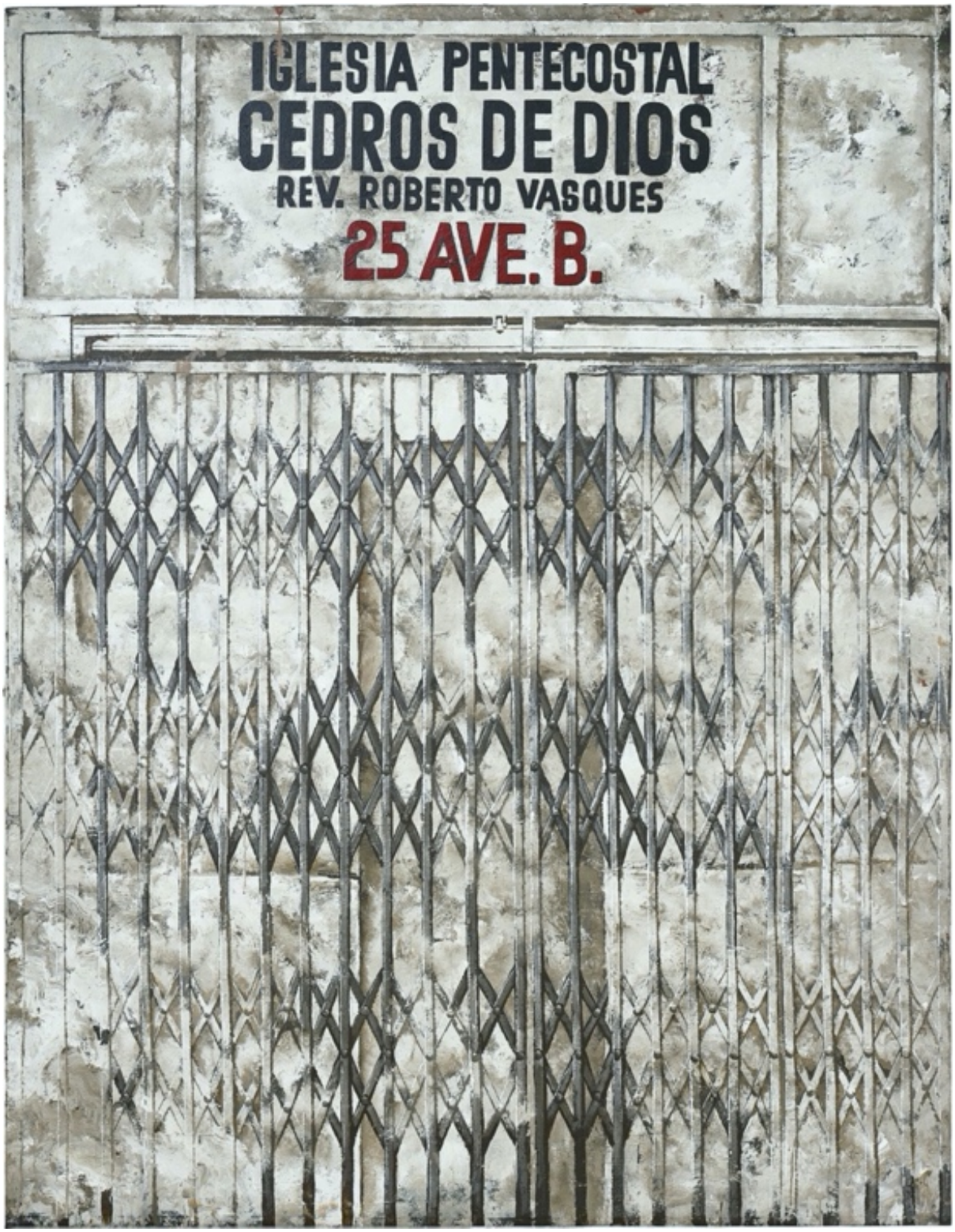


Figure 166: Martin Wong, *Iglesia Pentecostal*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 273 x 211.5cm, private collection. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/bn671xj1361.

Figure 167: Martin Wong, *Cupcake and Paco (Corot)*, 1987-1988, acrylic on canvas, 45.7 x 61 cm. Digital scan of a colour photograph held at P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/zt455jg6054.

Figure 168: Martin Wong, *Time Out for Love*, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 91.44 x 121.9 cm. Digital scan of archival 35mm slide. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/fb868nj1742.

Figure 169: Martin Wong, *Sanja Cake*, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 81.3 x 76.2 cm. Digital scan of a colour transparency held at P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York. Martin Wong Catalogue Raisonné, Stanford University, accessed 28 September 2023, https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/catalog/yp253kx1871.

Figure 170: Installation view of *The Last Picture Show,* Semaphore Gallery, 137 Greene Street, New York, September 27 – October 25, 1986. In Barry Blinderman, 'Martin Wong's Chains of Desire', *Evergreen Review*, S/S 2022, http://evergreenreview.com/read/martin-wongs-chains-of-desire/.

Figure 171: Installation view of *The Last Picture Show,* Semaphore Gallery, 137 Greene Street, New York, September 27 – October 25, 1986. In Krist Gruijthuijsen and Agustín Pérez Rubio, eds., *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief* (Köln, Germany: Walther König, 2022), 154.

Figure 172: Installation view of *The Last Picture Show,* Semaphore Gallery, 137 Greene Street, New York, September 27 – October 25, 1986. In Krist Gruijthuijsen and Agustín Pérez Rubio, eds., *Martin Wong: Malicious Mischief* (Köln, Germany: Walther König, 2022), 154.

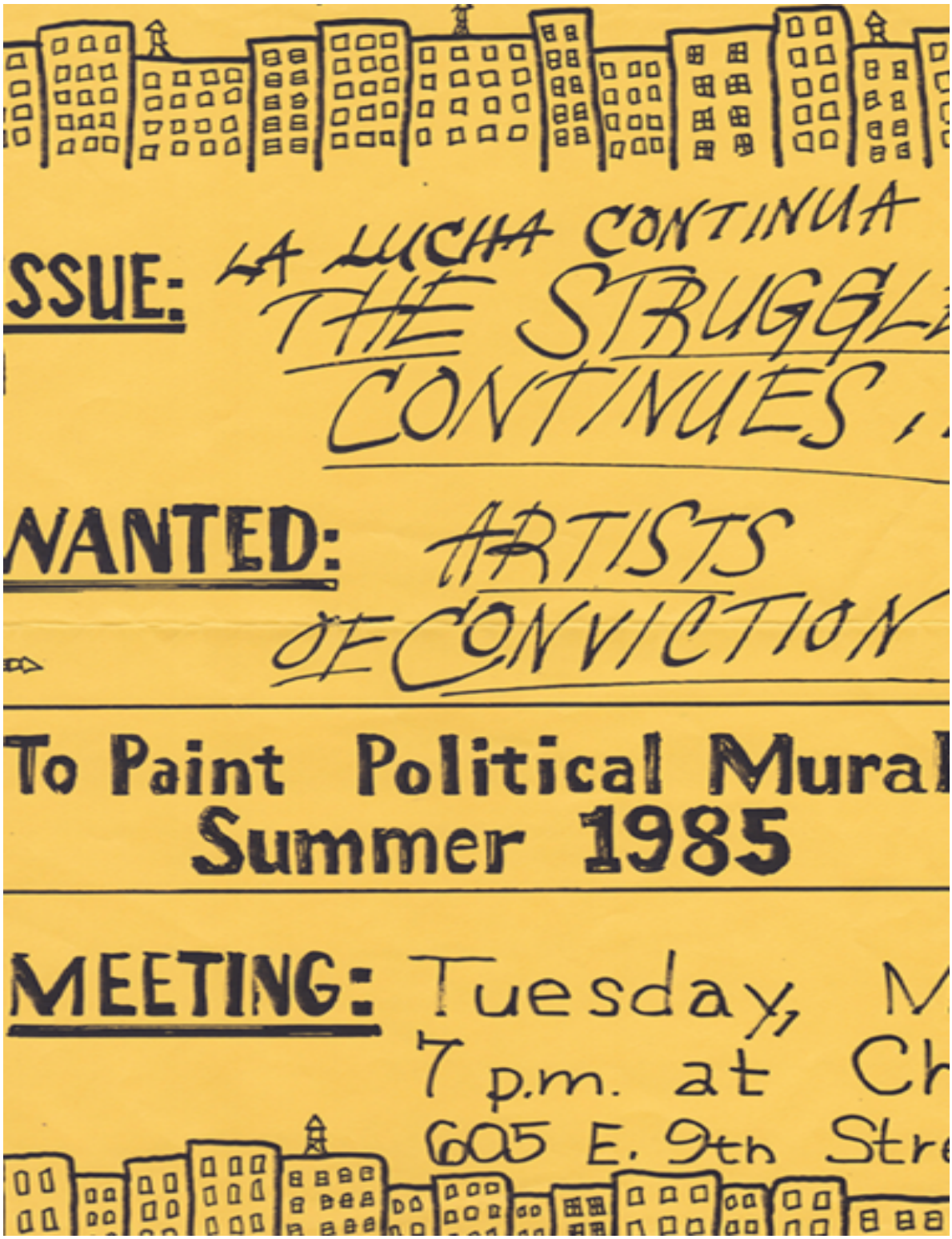


Figure 173: Karin Batten, Flyer for *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues*, 1985, 'La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues: 1985 & 2017', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org.

Figure 174: Abandoned apartment building, Lower East Side. Photograph by Scott McPartland, 1986, Getty Images, accessed 5 September 2022, https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/view-of-a-boarded-up-apartment-building-on-manhattans-lower-news-photo/996983826.

Figure 175: La Plaza Cultural before *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues*. Photograph by Camille Perrottet, 1985, 'La Plaza Cultural', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/la-plaza-cultural.

Figure 176: *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues*, as seen from a building overlooking East Ninth Street. Photograph by Eva Cockcroft, 1985, 'The Murals', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals.

Figure 177: Seth Tobocman, *Young People Stand up to Police*, mural, 1985, 4.27 x 2.13m. Photograph by Camille Perrottet, 1985, 'The Murals', La Lucha Continua, accessed 15 November 2024, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals.

Figure 178: Willie Birch, *Stop Urban Removal*, mural, 1985, 4.27 x 3.66m. Photograph by Camille Perrottet, 1985, 'The Murals', La Lucha Continua, accessed 15 November 2024, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals.

Figure 179: Noel Kunz, *Octopus*, mural, 1985 4.27 x 1.83m. Photograph by Camille Perrottet, 1985, 'The Murals', La Lucha Continua, accessed 15 November 2024, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals.

Figure 180: Dina Bursztyn, *Life Among the Ruins*, mural, 1985, 207 x 192 x 10cm. Photograph by Camille Perrottet, 1985, 'The Murals', La Lucha Continua, accessed 15 November 2024, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals.

Figure 181: Maria Domínguez, *Sueño*, mural, 1985, 3.66 x 4.82m. Photograph by Camille Perrottet, 1985, 'The Murals', La Lucha Continua, accessed 15 November 2024, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals.

Figure 182: Cliff Joseph, *Rise, People, Rise*, mural, 1985, 3.66 x 4.88m. Photograph by Eva Cockcroft, 1985, 'The Murals', La Lucha Continua, accessed 15 November 2024, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals.

Figure 183: Keith Christensen, *Roots of Loisaida*, mural, 1985, 3.66 x 2.99m. Photograph by Camille Perrottet, 1985, 'The Murals', La Lucha Continua, accessed 15 November 2024, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals.

Figure 184: Alan Okada, *Chi Lai-Arriba-Rise Up!*, mural, 1974. Located on Madison Street between Pike Street and Rutgers Street. Photograph by Nick DeWolf, 1975, Flickr, accessed 5 September 2022, https://www.flickr.com/photos/dboo/5264597011/.

Figure 185: Tomie Arai, *Wall of Respect for the Working People of Chinatown*, mural, 1977. Located on Hester Street. Photograph by Leo London, 1981. In Ryan Wong, 'A Brief History of the Art Collectives of NYC's Chinatown', *Hyperallergic*, 7 February 2017, https://hyperallergic.com/330442/a-brief-history-of-the-art-collectives-of-nycs-chinatown/.

Figure 186: Alfredo 'Freddy' Hernandez, *La Plaza Cultural Mural*, mural, 1977. Photograph by Marlis Momber, 1980, 'La Plaza Cultural', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/la-plaza-cultural.

Figure 187: Bronx General Post Office main hall showing Ben and Bernarda Bryson Shahn's *Resources for America* in progress, 1938. Photographer unknown. Evan Bindelglass, 'Inside the Transformation of the Bronx General Post Office, 558 Grand Concourse', *New York YIMBY* (blog), 18 April 2016, https://newyorkyimby.com/2016/04/inside-the-transformation-of-the-bronx-general-post-office-558-grand-concourse.html.

Figure 188: Detail of *Blueprint for Living* by Marion Greenwood, mural, 1940. Located in the lobby of the Red Hook Community Building, Brooklyn. Photographer unknown.

02.002.02323. The New York City Housing Authority Collection, LaGuardia & Wagner Archives, New York.

Figure 189: Alan Okada, *Work, Education and Struggle: Seeds for Progressive Change*, mural, 1975. Located on the corner of Delancey Street and Forsyth Street. Photographer unknown.

From Janet Braun-Reinitz and Jane Weissman, *On the Wall: Four Decades of Community Murals in New York City* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 34.

Figure 190: Dedication of *La Grand Vitesse* by Alexander Calder, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1968. Photographer unknown.

In Brian O'Doherty, *Public Art and the Government: A Progress Report* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 1974), 4.

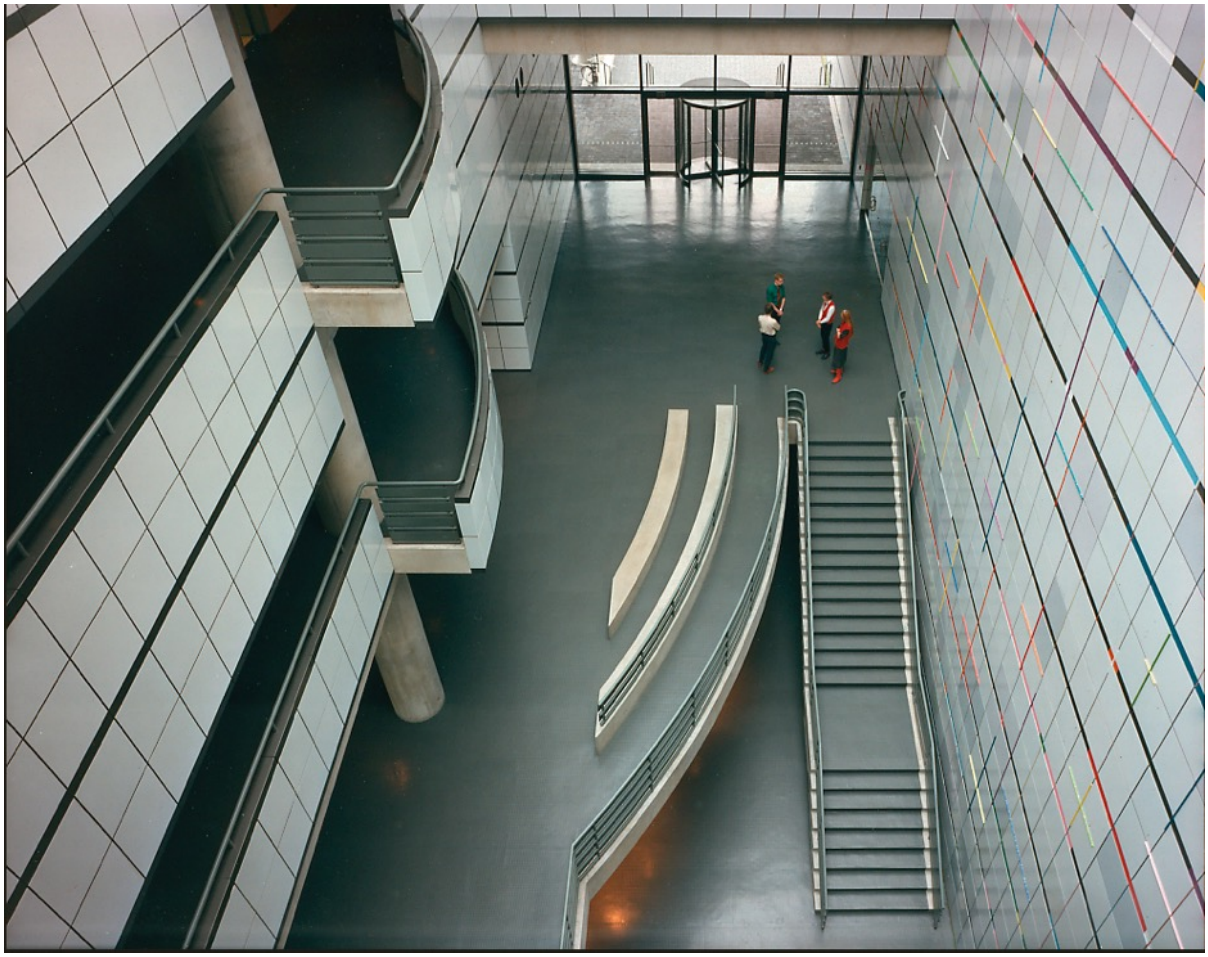
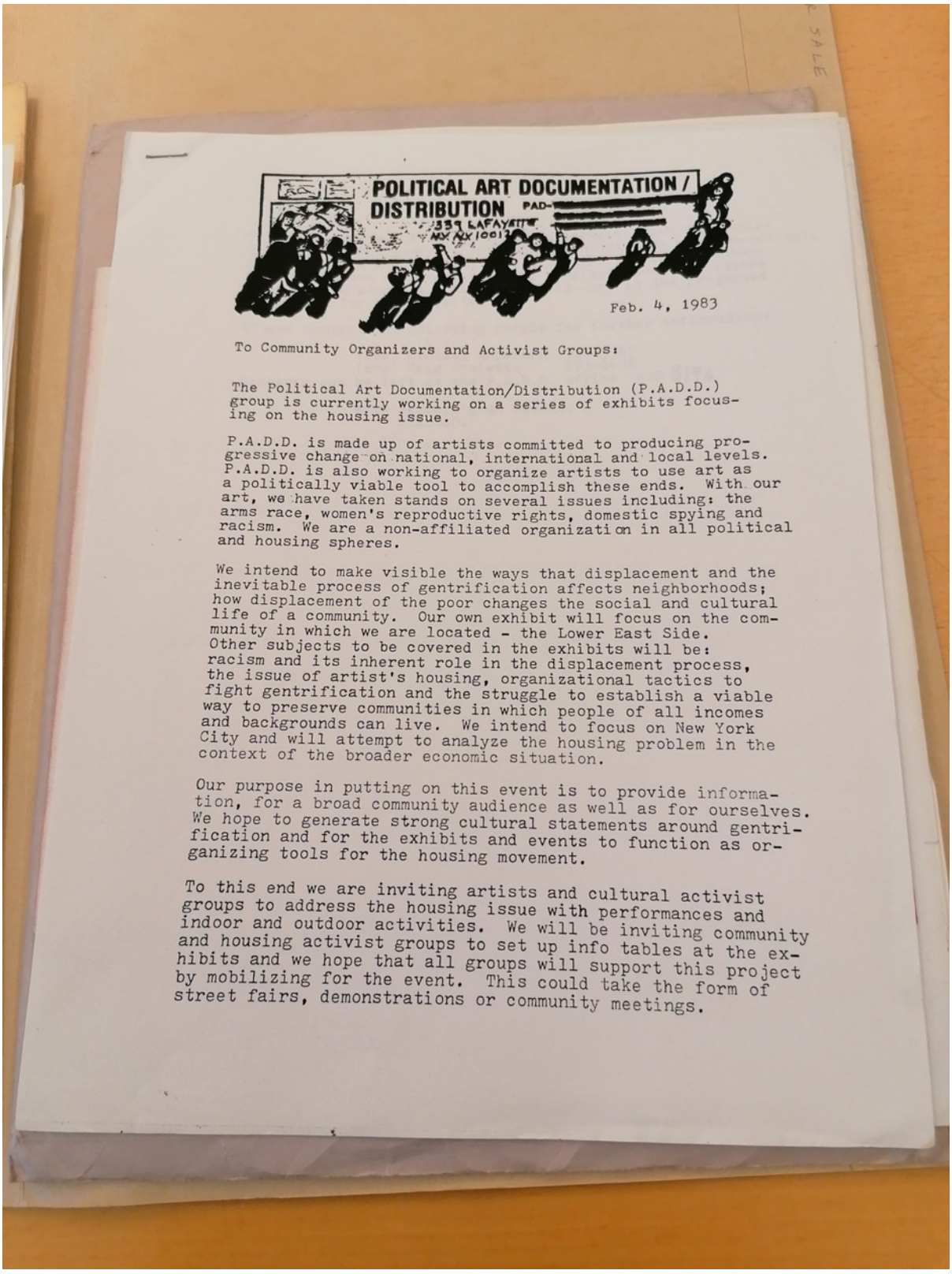


Figure 191: Scott Burton, *Settee, Bench, Balustrade*, 1985. Photograph by Charles Mayer, 1985, MIT List Visual Arts Center, accessed 5 September 2022, https://listart.mit.edu/art-artists/settee-bench-balustrade-1985.



POLITICAL ART DOCUMENTATION / DISTRIBUTION PAD/D

339 LAFAYETTE
NY NY 10012

Feb. 4, 1983

To Community Organizers and Activist Groups:

The Political Art Documentation/Distribution (P.A.D.D.) group is currently working on a series of exhibits focusing on the housing issue.

P.A.D.D. is made up of artists committed to producing progressive change on national, international and local levels. P.A.D.D. is also working to organize artists to use art as a politically viable tool to accomplish these ends. With our art, we have taken stands on several issues including: the arms race, women's reproductive rights, domestic spying and racism. We are a non-affiliated organization in all political and housing spheres.

We intend to make visible the ways that displacement and the inevitable process of gentrification affects neighborhoods; how displacement of the poor changes the social and cultural life of a community. Our own exhibit will focus on the community in which we are located - the Lower East Side. Other subjects to be covered in the exhibits will be: racism and its inherent role in the displacement process, the issue of artist's housing, organizational tactics to fight gentrification and the struggle to establish a viable way to preserve communities in which people of all incomes and backgrounds can live. We intend to focus on New York City and will attempt to analyze the housing problem in the context of the broader economic situation.

Our purpose in putting on this event is to provide information, for a broad community audience as well as for ourselves. We hope to generate strong cultural statements around gentrification and for the exhibits and events to function as organizing tools for the housing movement.

To this end we are inviting artists and cultural activist groups to address the housing issue with performances and indoor and outdoor activities. We will be inviting community and housing activist groups to set up info tables at the exhibits and we hope that all groups will support this project by mobilizing for the event. This could take the form of street fairs, demonstrations or community meetings.

Figure 192: Letter from the *Not for Sale* committee, sent to community organisers and housing activist, 4 February 1983. Page 1 of 2.

Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D) Archive, Museum of Modern Art Archive, New York City. Photograph by the author, 22 March 2022.

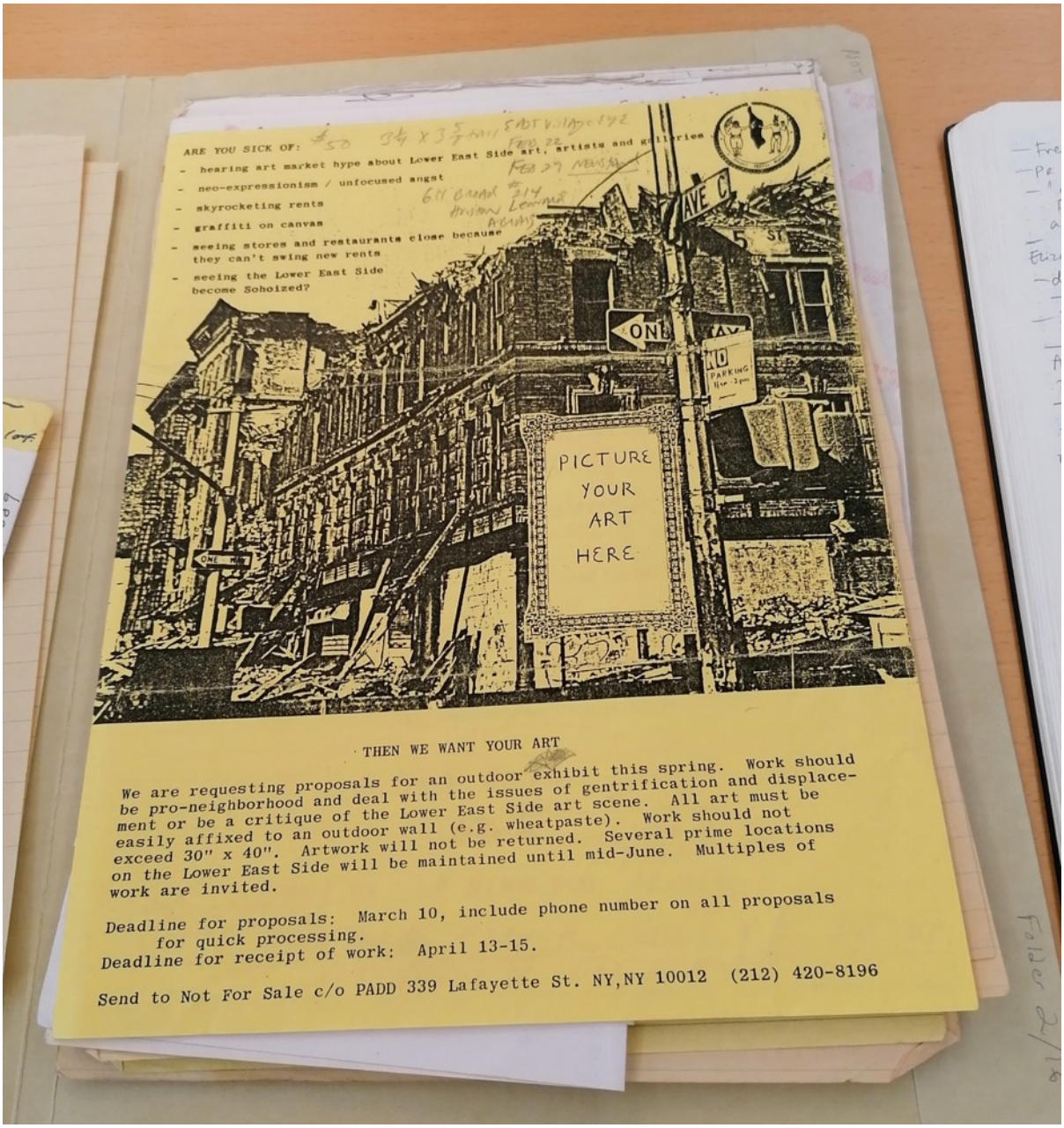


Figure 193: Callout flyer for artists to participate in *Out of Place: Art for the Evicted* (1984).

Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D) Archive, Museum of Modern Art Archive, New York City. Photograph by the author, 23 March 2022.

Figure 194: Poster for *Not for Sale: A Project Against Displacement* (1983).

Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D) Archive, Museum of Modern Art Archive, New York City. Photograph by the author, 22 March 2022.

Figure 195: Installation shot of *Not for Sale: A Project Against Displacement* at El Bohío, 1983. Photographer unknown.

I.1656, Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D) Archive, Museum of Modern Art Archive, New York City, New York City, accessed 12 November 2024, https://research.moma.org/padd-archive.

Figure 196: Installation shot of *Not for Sale: A Project Against Displacement* at El Bohío, 1983. Photographer unknown.

I.1673, Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D) Archive, Museum of Modern Art Archive, New York City, accessed 12 November 2024, https://research.moma.org/padd-archive.

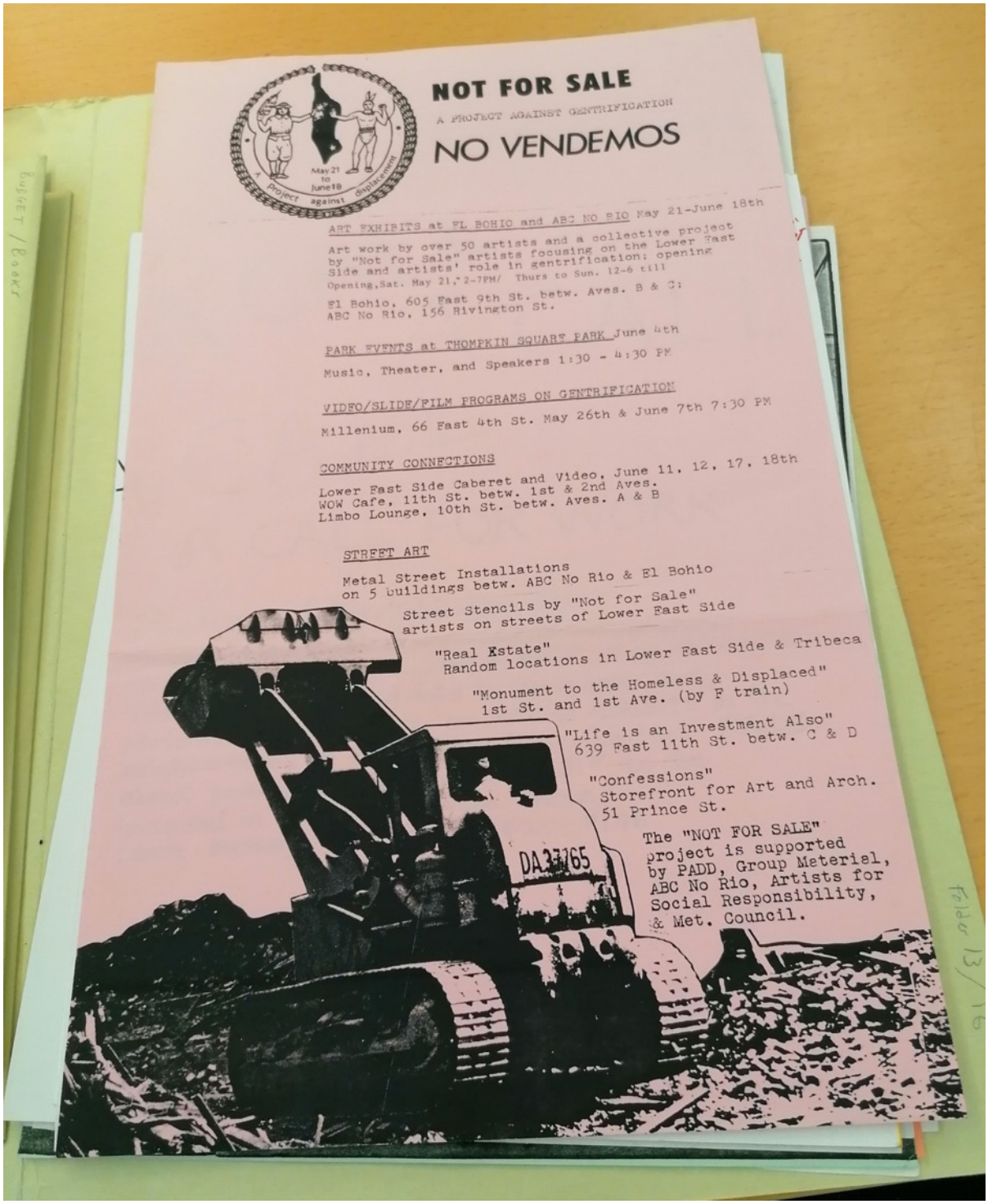


Figure 197: Flyer for *Not for Sale: A Project Against Displacement* (1983), listing the events taking place in addition to the exhibitions.

Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D) Archive, Museum of Modern Art Archive, New York City. Photograph by the author, 23 March 2022.

Figure 198: 'Guggenheim Downtown', part of *Out of Place*, located on the corner of Avenue A and East Tenth Street, 1984. Photograph by Gregory Sholette, 1984, 'The Lower East Side Is Not For Sale', Greg Sholette Seminars, accessed 12 November 2024, https://www.sholetteseminars.com/home/the-lower-east-side-is-not-for-sale-with-greg-sholette/.

Figure 199: 'Guggenheim Downtown', part of *Out of Place*, located on the corner of Avenue A and East Tenth Street, 1984. Photograph by Gregory Sholette, 1984, 'The Lower East Side Is Not For Sale', Greg Sholette Seminars, accessed 12 November 2024, https://www.sholetteseminars.com/home/the-lower-east-side-is-not-for-sale-with-greg-sholette/.

Figure 200: Artmakers Collective, *La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues*, mural, 1985, 9.14 x 12.75m. Photograph by Eva Cockcroft, 1985, 'The Murals', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals.

Figure 201: Robin Michals and Kirstin Reed, *The Last Judgement*, mural, 1985, 5.49 x 6.10m. Photograph by Camille Perrottet, 1985, 'The Murals', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals.

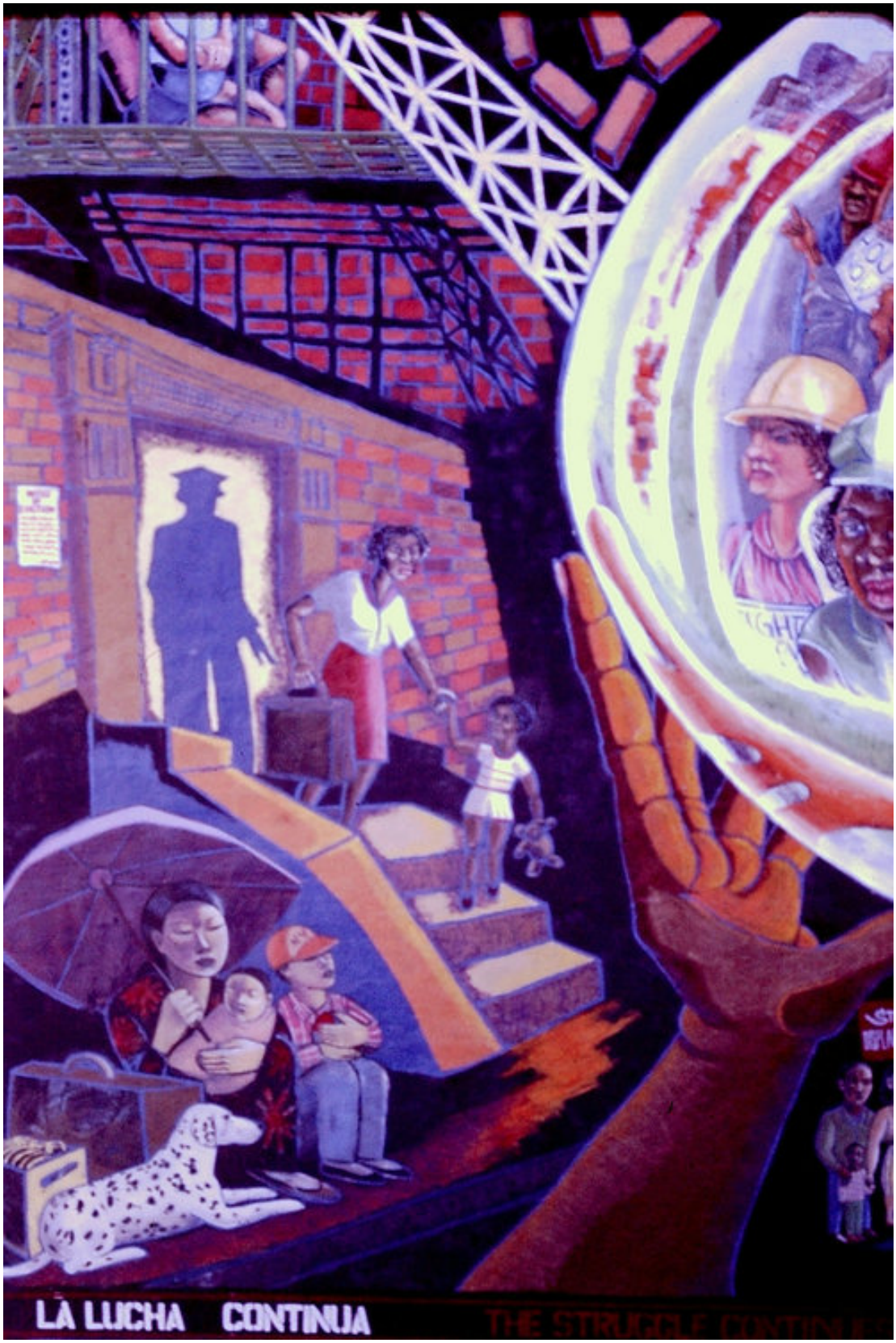


Figure 202: Detail of *La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues*. Photograph by Camille Perrottet, 1985, '1. La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals/la-lucha-continua-the-struggle-continues.

Figure 203: Detail of *La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues*. Photograph by Camille Perrottet, 1985, '1. La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals/la-lucha-continua-the-struggle-continues.

Figure 204: Detail of *La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues*. Photograph by Camille Perrottet, 1985, '1. La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5

September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals/la-lucha-continua-the-struggle-continues.

Figure 205: Muralists at work on *La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues*, 1985. Photograph by Camille Perrottet, 1985, '1. La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals/la-lucha-continua-the-struggle-continues.

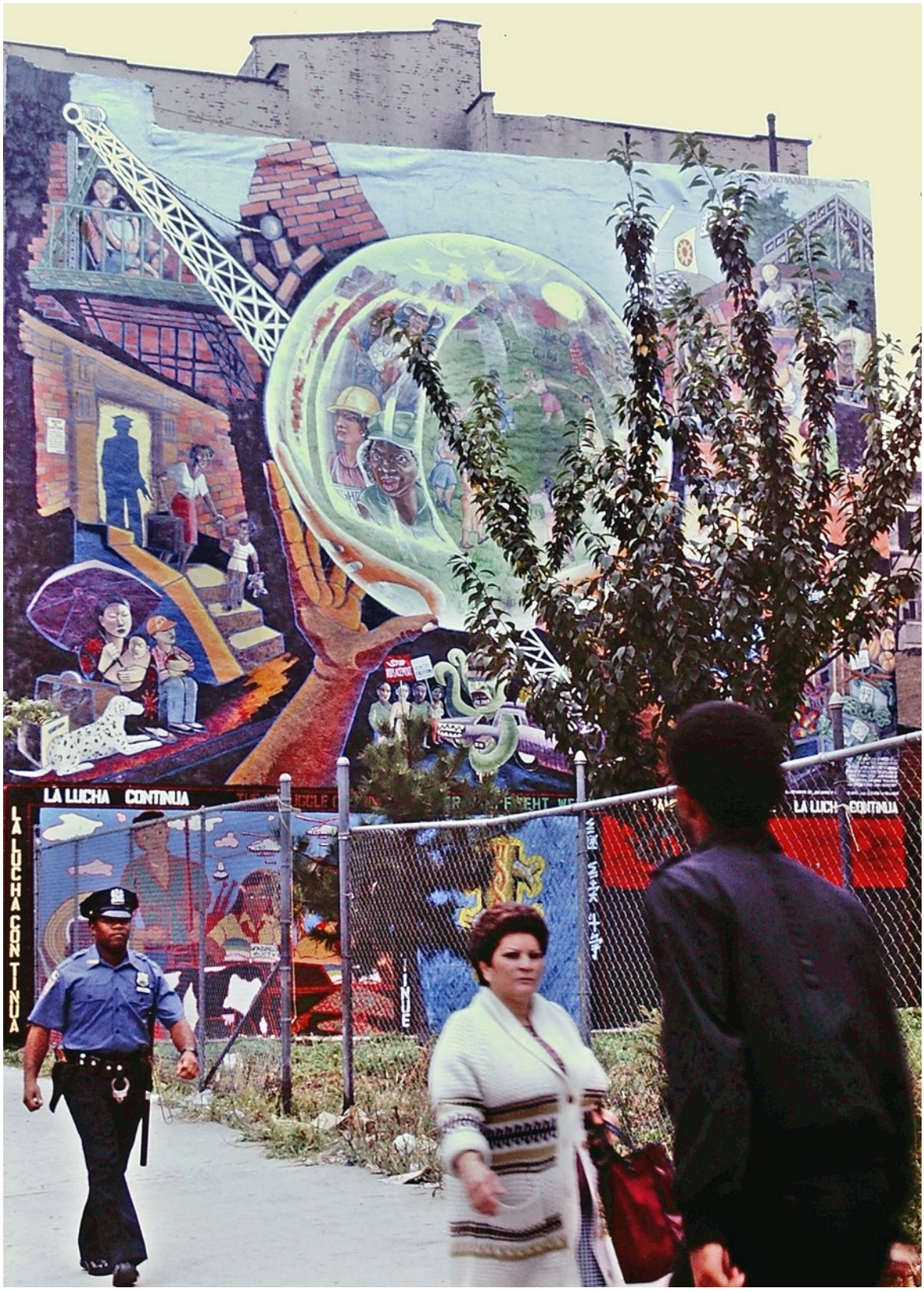


Figure 206: Street view of *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues* from Avenue C. Photograph by Camille Perrottet, 1985, '1. La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals/la-lucha-continua-the-struggle-continues.

Figure 207: *La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues* maquette on a wall. Photograph by Camille Perrottet, 1985, '1. La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals/la-lucha-continua-the-struggle-continues.

Figure 208: Robin Michals at work on *The Last Judgement* on a wall overlooking East Eighth Street, 1985. Photograph by Kristin Reed, 1985, '17. The Last Judgement - Robin Michals and Kristin Reed', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals/2019/03/19/the-last-judgement.

Figure 209: Junior working on a car in the lot adjacent to *The Last Judgement*. Photograph by Kristin Reed, 1985, '17. The Last Judgement - Robin Michals and Kristin Reed', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals/2019/03/19/the-last-judgement.

Figure 210: Men from the neighbourhood looking at *The Last Judgement*. Photograph by Kristin Reed, 1985, '17. The Last Judgement - Robin Michals and Kristin Reed', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals/2019/03/19/the-last-judgement.

Figure 211: Rigoberto Torres and John Ahearn casting at block party, Walton Avenue, Bronx, 1985. Photograph by Ivan Dalla Tana, 1985. In Miss Rosen, 'The People of the South Bronx', *Blind Magazine*, 5 April 2023, https://www.blind-magazine.com/en/news/the-people-of-the-south-bronx/.

Figure 212: Chico, *Tribute to Michael Stewart*, mural, 1985, 3.05 x 7.62m. Photograph by Camille Perrottet, 1985, 'The Murals', La Lucha Continua, accessed 15 November 2024, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals.

Figure 213: Nancy Sullivan, *Not for Sale*, mural, 1985, 3.05 x 7.32m. Photograph by Camille Perrottet, 1985, 'The Murals', La Lucha Continua, accessed 15 November 2024, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals.

Figure 214: View of *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues* as seen from La Plaza Cultural. Photograph by Camille Perrottet, 1985. 'A Political Art Park', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/political-art-park.

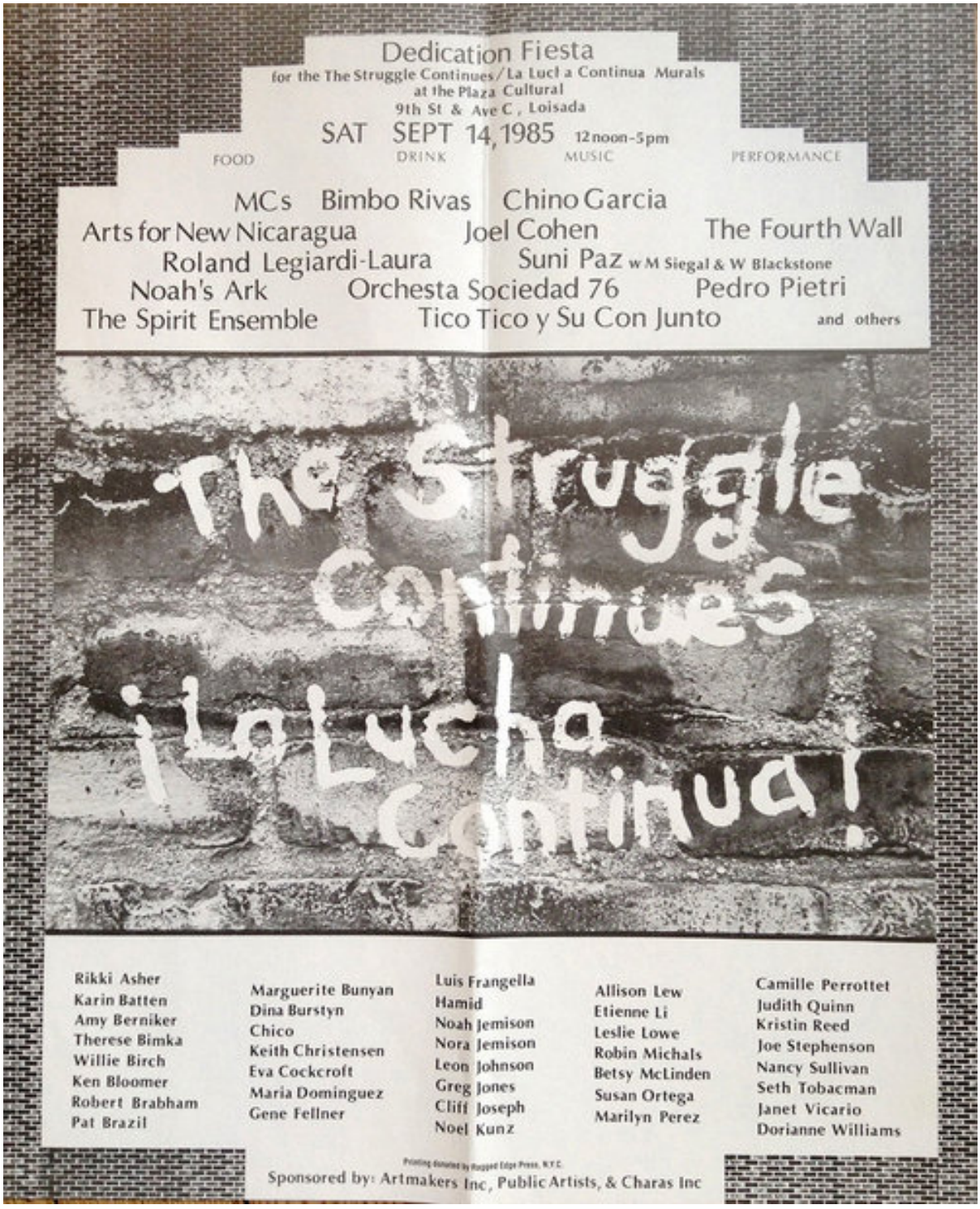


Figure 215: Poster advertising the dedication fiesta for *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues*, 1985, 'The "Dedication Fiesta"', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/dedication2.

Figure 216: Chico working on *Tribute to Michael Stewart*. Screenshot from *La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues*, directed by John Hunt, 1986, 0:28, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spZf7uzz8Pk.

Figure 217: Crowd watching performers at the *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues* dedication fiesta. Screenshot from *La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues*, 6:08.

Figure 218: Artists assembled on stage behind Eva Cockcroft at the *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues* dedication fiesta. Screenshot from *La Lucha Continua The Struggle Continues*, 9:12.

Figure 219: *La Lucha Continua/The Struggle Continues* artists assembled on stage at the dedication fiesta. Photograph by Joe Stephenson, 1985, 'The "Dedication Fiesta"', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/dedication2.

Figure 220: Luis Frangella, untitled mural, 1985, 7.62 x 5.18m. Photograph by Camille Perrottet, 1985, 'The Murals', La Lucha Continua, accessed 5 September 2022, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/themurals.

Figure 221: Mike Bidlo and David Wojnarowicz in front of an untitled mural by Luis Frangella, Pier 34, New York City, 1983. Photograph by Andreas Sterzing, 1983, 'Pier 34 New York (The Ward Line Pier Project)', Andreas Sterzing Photography, accessed 15 November 2024, https://www.sterzing.co.uk/asp/place_1./Pages/Pier_34_New_York.html#44.

YOUTH · ART · HYPE

A Different Bohemia

By Maureen Dowd

ANN MAGNUSON SITS ON a worn couch in her East Village apartment, rummaging in the junkyard of American culture. She talks, with affectionate mockery, about icons and totems and slogans, past and present. Her allusions spill out like the contents of some crazed time capsule — Steve and Eydie, "The Beverly Hillbillies," Patty Hearst, Gidget, Wonder bread, Amway, TV evangelists, Lawrence Welk, Jim Morrison and the Doors, Chicken McNuggets, high-fiber diets, midstate pork princesses, Marshmallow Peeps, Mr. Spock and "Beyond the Valley of the Dolls."

Recently christened "the Funny Girl of the avant-garde" by People magazine, the 26-year-old conjures up these spirits in her satirical skits for downtown clubs such as Area, Danceteria and the Pyramid. Her characters include Mrs. Rambo, who shoots her way through Bloomingdale's to save Nancy Reagan from getting a New Wave makeup job at the Yves St. Laurent counter, and Fallopia, Prince's new protégé, who is really Delores Jean Humpshoeberger, a graduate of the Rose-Marie School of Baton and Tap in Duluth.

In the past, Ann Magnuson, who had a bit part in the movie "Desperately Seeking Susan," would have been described as an aspiring actress and her territory would have been called the bohemian part of town. Now she is a performance artist with a cult following and the area where she lives and works is simply called downtown.

She is at the center of the vivid New York arts community that has captured international attention spinning what has come to be known as "the downtown style." The artists cannibalize high art and the mass culture of the last three decades — television, suburbia, pornography, Saturn

Maureen Dowd is a reporter for The New York Times.

Figure 222: Opening spread of Maureen Dowd, 'Youth - Art - Hype: A Different Bohemia', *The New York Times Magazine*, 17 November 1985, 26-27.

Figure 223: Robin Michals and Kristin Reed, *The Enchanted Garden*, mural, 1986. Photograph by Kristin Reed, 1986, 'La Lucha's Legacy', La Lucha Continua, accessed 16 November 2024, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/legacy.

Figure 224: Maria Domínguez and Eva Cockcroft working on *Views of Loisaida*, 1987. Unknown photographer.

Box 13, Folder 50: Photographs, circa 1970s-2000s, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 1 March 2022.

Figure 225: Eva Cockcroft working on *Views of Loisaida*, 1987. Unknown photographer.

Box 13, Folder 50: Photographs, circa 1970s-2000s, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 1 March 2022.

Figure 226: Mike Alewitz, *Pathfinder Mural*, mural, 1988-1989. Photograph by Eva Cockcroft, 1989, 'La Lucha's Legacy', La Lucha Continua, accessed 16 November 2024, http://www.laluchaartmakers.org/legacy.

Figure 227. Rikki Asher, *For the Women of South Africa, Central America, and the Lower East Side*, mural, 1985, 3.05 x 6.10m. Photograph by the author, 23 January 2022.

Figure 228: La Plaza Cultural, with Rikki Asher's *For the Women of South Africa, Central America, and the Lower East Side* and Amy Berniker, Alison Lew & Ken Bloomer's *Stand Up* visible in the background. Photograph by the author, 8 March 2022.

Conclusion: gentrification's empty victory

Figure 229: Screenshot from *Man With a Video Camera (Fuck Vertov)*, directed by Paul Garrin, 1989, 1:19, https://stiftung-imai.de/en/videos/katalog/medium/0328.

Figure 230: Screenshot from *Man With a Video Camera (Fuck Vertov)*, 1:34.

Figure 231: Screenshot from *Man With a Video Camera (Fuck Vertov)*, 2:45.

Figure 232: Screenshot from *Man With a Video Camera (Fuck Vertov)*, 2:55.

Figure 233: Screenshot from *Man With a Video Camera (Fuck Vertov)*, 3:17.

Figure 234: David Wojnarowicz, *Democracy* (from *Your House is Mine*), 1990, silkscreen print on Mohawk vellum paper, 58.42 x 50.8 cm, Gallery 98, New York, accessed 21 August 2024, https://gallery98.org/2016/democracy-at-work-color-print/.

Figure 235: Juan Sánchez, *¿Donde Esta Mi Casa?* (from *Your House is Mine*), 1990, silkscreen print on Mohawk vellum paper, 58.42 x 50.8 cm., Gallery 98, New York, accessed 21 August 2024, https://gallery98.org/2016/juan-sanchez-mi-casa/.

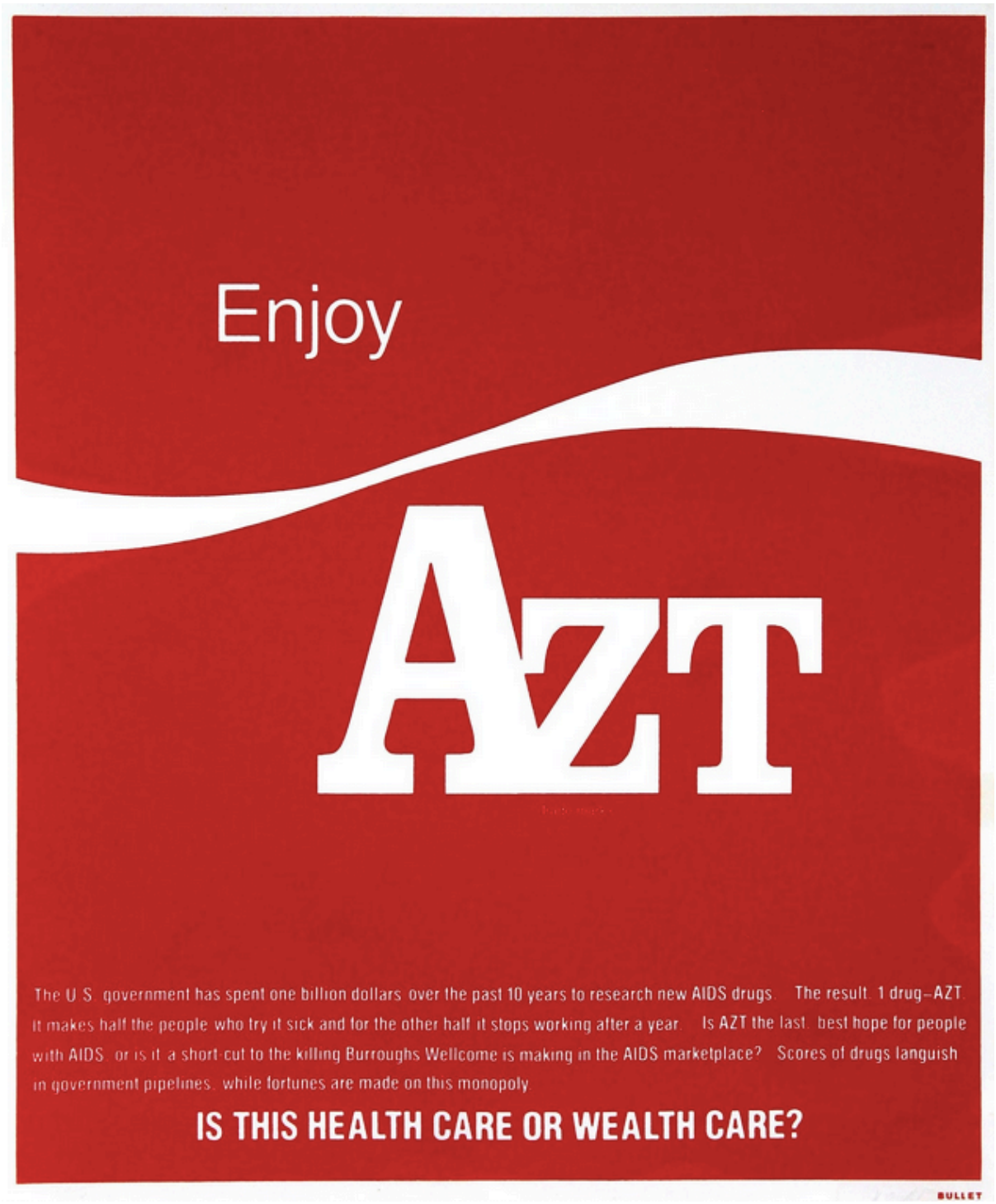


Figure 236: Avram Finkelstein and Vincent Gagliostro, *Enjoy AZT*, (from *Your House is Mine*), 1989, silkscreen print on Mohawk vellum paper, 58.42 x 50.8 cm.

In Avram Finkelstein, 'AIDS, Coca-Cola, and the Tompkins Square Park Riot', *On Curating*, no. 42 (September 2019): 58.

Figure 237: Bullet Space, *Your House is Mine*, wheatpasted on East Eighth Street between Avenues B and C, 1992. Photograph by Andrew Castrucci.

In Avram Finkelstein, 'AIDS, Coca-Cola, and the Tompkins Square Park Riot', *On Curating*, no. 42 (September 2019): 62.

Figure 238: Bullet Space, *Your House is Mine*, 1993, newsprint, 53.34 x 43.18 cm (folded), 28 pages, Gallery 98, New York, accessed 21 August 2024, https://gallery98.org/2016/your-house-is-mine-2/.

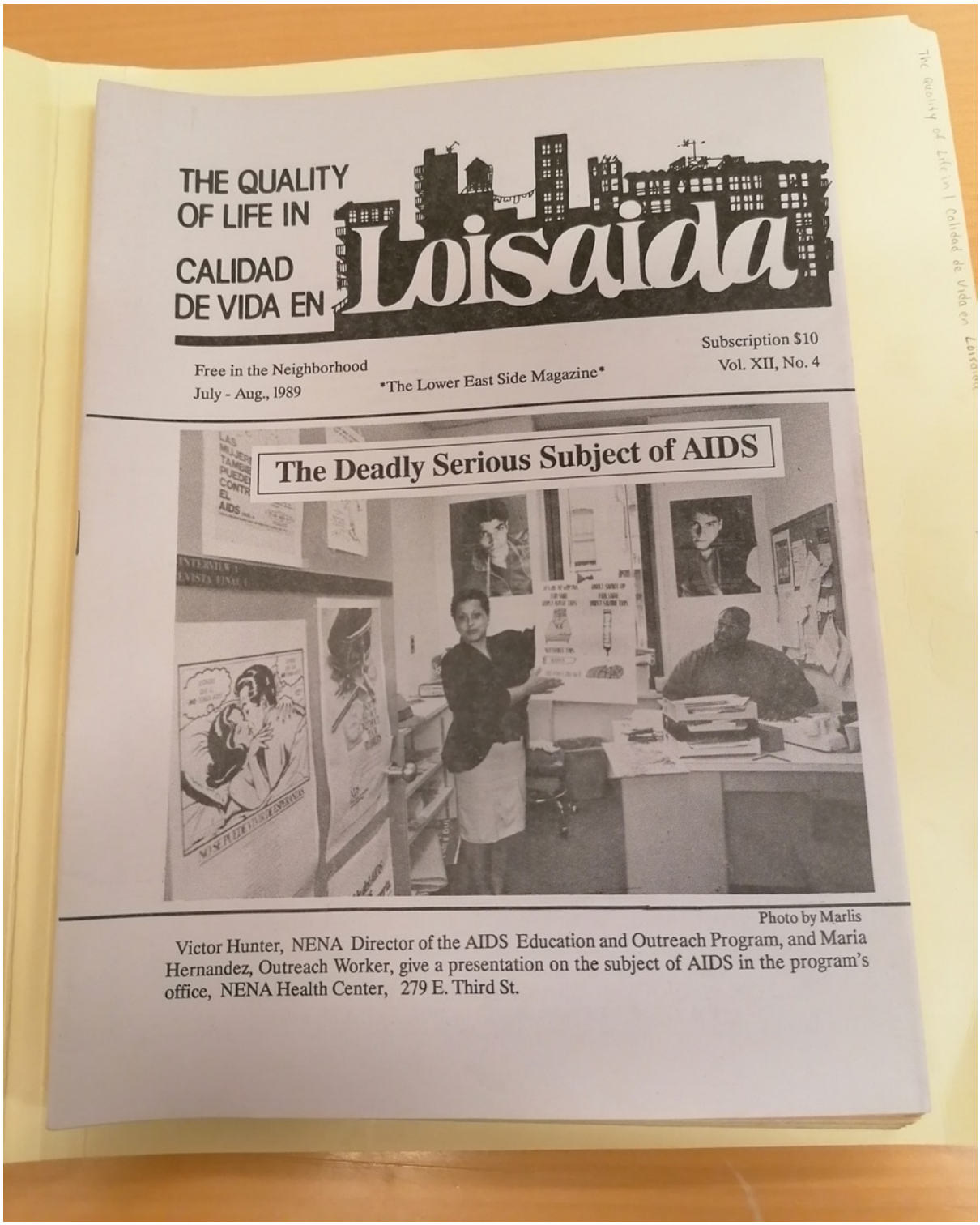


Figure 239: *The Quality of Life in/Calidad de Vida en Loisaida*, July-August 1989, front cover.

Box 2, Folder 6: Volume XII, Number 4-6, July – December 1989, Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 10 March 2022.

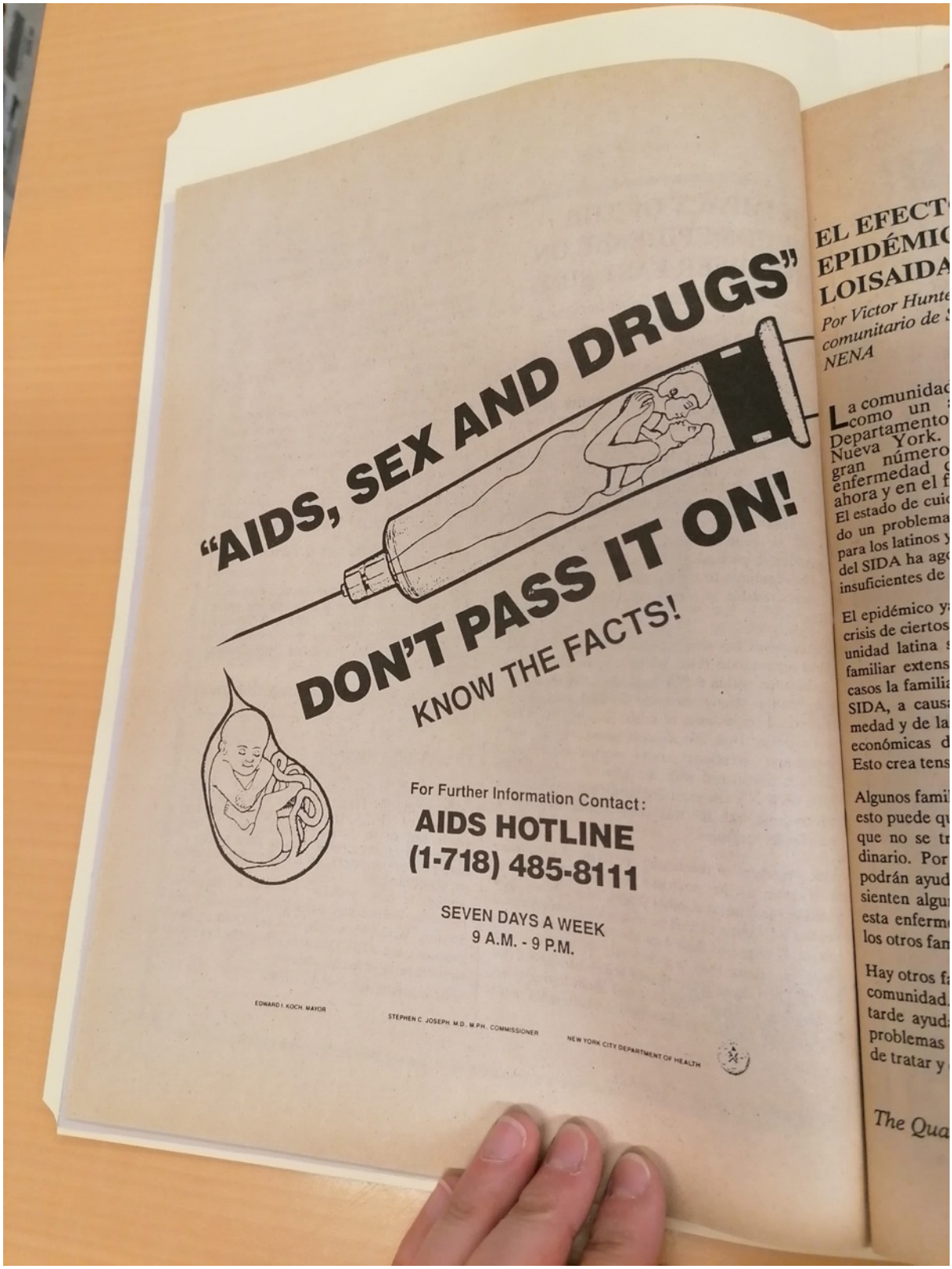
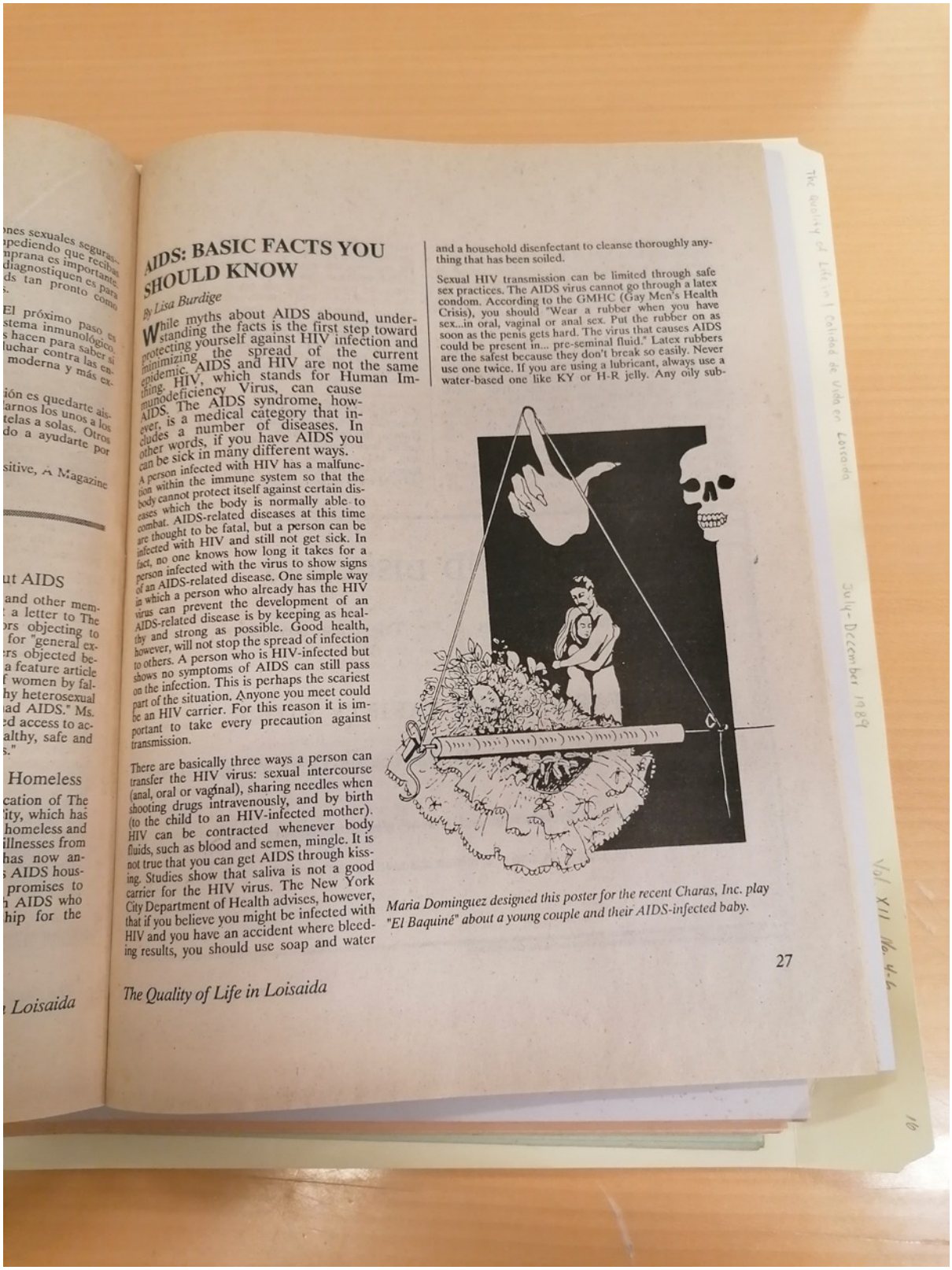


Figure 240: Advertisement for the AIDS Hotline. In *The Quality of Life in/Calidad de Vida en Loisaida*, July-August 1989, 10.

Box 2, Folder 6: Volume XII, Number 4-6, July – December 1989, Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 10 March 2022.



AIDS: BASIC FACTS YOU SHOULD KNOW

By Lisa Burdige

While myths about AIDS abound, understanding the facts is the first step toward protecting yourself against HIV infection and minimizing the spread of the current epidemic. AIDS and HIV are not the same thing. HIV, which stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus, can cause AIDS. The AIDS syndrome, however, is a medical category that includes a number of diseases. In other words, if you have AIDS you can be sick in many different ways.

A person infected with HIV has a malfunction within the immune system so that the body cannot protect itself against certain diseases which the body is normally able to combat. AIDS-related diseases at this time are thought to be fatal, but a person can be infected with HIV and still not get sick. In fact, no one knows how long it takes for a person infected with the virus to show signs of an AIDS-related disease. One simple way in which a person who already has the HIV virus can prevent the development of an AIDS-related disease is by keeping as healthy and strong as possible. Good health, however, will not stop the spread of infection to others. A person who is HIV-infected but shows no symptoms of AIDS can still pass on the infection. This is perhaps the scariest part of the situation. Anyone you meet could be an HIV carrier. For this reason it is important to take every precaution against transmission.

There are basically three ways a person can transfer the HIV virus: sexual intercourse (anal, oral or vaginal), sharing needles when shooting drugs intravenously, and by birth (to the child to an HIV-infected mother). HIV can be contracted whenever body fluids, such as blood and semen, mingle. It is not true that you can get AIDS through kissing. Studies show that saliva is not a good carrier for the HIV virus. The New York City Department of Health advises, however, that if you believe you might be infected with HIV and you have an accident where bleeding results, you should use soap and water and a household disenfectant to cleanse thoroughly anything that has been soiled.

Sexual HIV transmission can be limited through safe sex practices. The AIDS virus cannot go through a latex condom. According to the GMHC (Gay Men's Health Crisis), you should "Wear a rubber when you have sex...in oral, vaginal or anal sex. Put the rubber on as soon as the penis gets hard. The virus that causes AIDS could be present in... pre-seminal fluid." Latex rubbers are the safest because they don't break so easily. Never use one twice. If you are using a lubricant, always use a water-based one like KY or H-R jelly. Any oily sub-

Maria Dominguez designed this poster for the recent Charas, Inc. play "El Baquiné" about a young couple and their AIDS-infected baby.

Figure 241: Maria Domínguez, poster for *El Baquiné*. In *The Quality of Life in/Calidad de Vida en Loisaida*, July -August 1989, 27.

Box 2, Folder 6: Volume XII, Number 4-6, July – December 1989, Quality of Life/La Calidad de Vida in Loisaida Newsletter Collection, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 10 March 2022

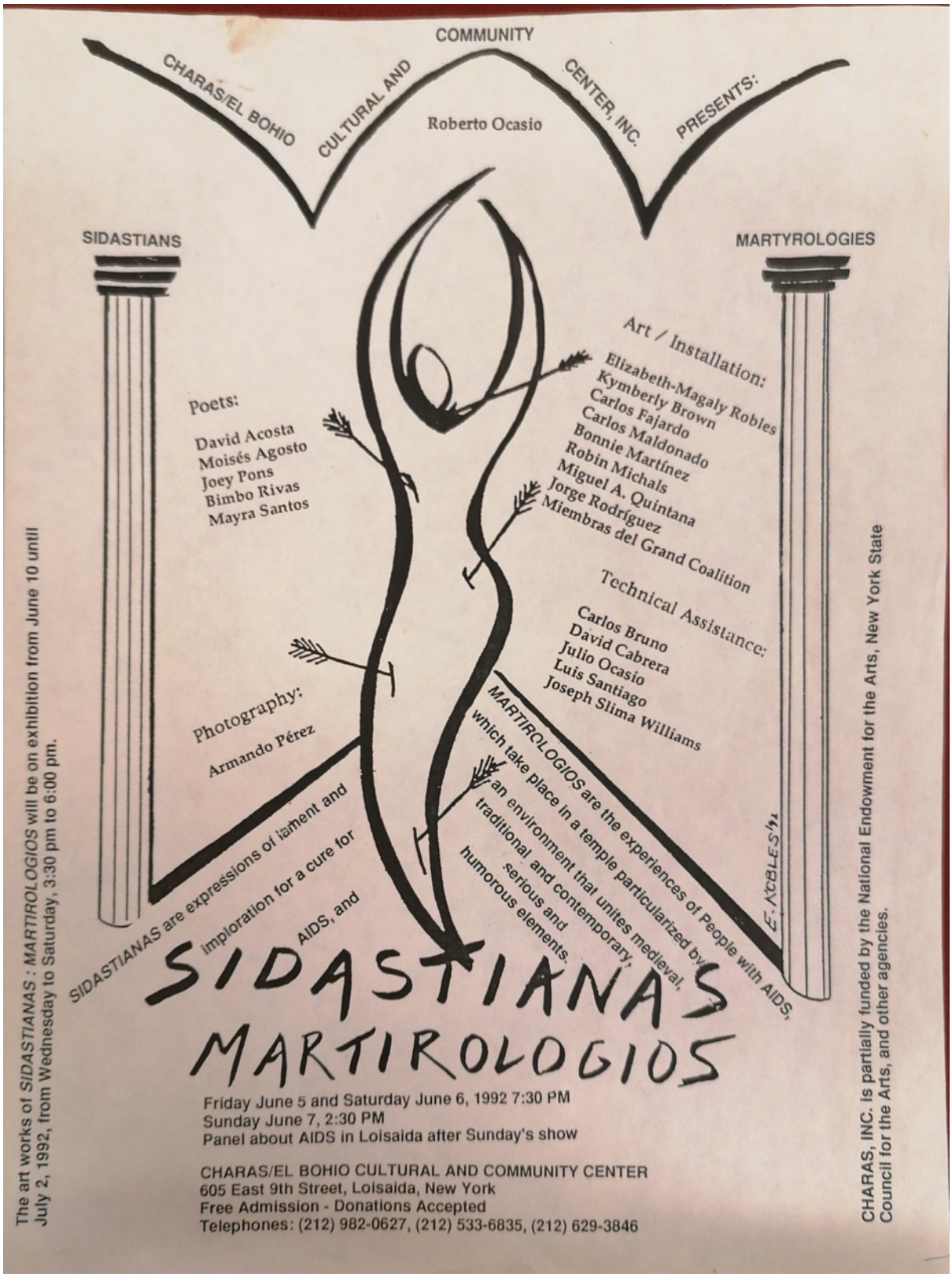


Figure 242: Poster for *Sidastianas Martirologios*, June 1992.

Box 9, Folder 8-12: Flyers, postcards, and posters, 1978-2004, CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records, CENTRO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, New York City. Photograph by the author, 2 February 2022.

Figure 243: Partially finished mural of Carlos 'Chino' García painted onto the exterior wall of El Bohío, overlooking East Tenth Street. Photograph by Bonnie Rosenstock, 2022. In Bonnie Rosenstock, 'The CHARAS Wall Project: An Homage to the Loisaida Community', *The Village Sun*, 21 November 2022, https://thevillagesun.com/the-charas-wall-project-an-homage-to-the-loisaida-community.

Figure 244: Mural of Armando Pérez by Seth Tobocman, painted onto El Bohío's front entrance overlooking East Ninth Street. Photograph by *The Village Sun*, 2023. In Lincoln Anderson, 'Gregg Singer No Longer Controls Old P.S. 64 / CHARAS as "angel investor" Buys Building Loan', *The Village Sun*, 27 December 2023, https://thevillagesun.com/gregg-singer-no-longer-controls-old-p-s-64-charas-as-angel-investor-buys-building-loan.

Figure 245: Mural by Seth Tobocman, painted underneath one of Dina Bursztyn's *Gargoyle to Scare Developers* on the entrance of El Bohío. Photographer unknown, post on 'Charas Community Center Murals', Facebook, 2 April 2023, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php/?story_fbid=596500212502438&id=100064273946434.