The East Village Scene

Institute of Contemporary Art
University of Pennsylvania

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Janet Kardon

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Claudia De Monte
John Fekner
Luis Frangella
Dan Friedman
Futura 2000
Rodney Alan Greenblat
Richard Hambleton
Keith Haring
E. F. Higgins III
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Rhonda Zwillinger

Acknowledgments

The Institute of Contemporary Art, following its mandate to respond to the "cutting edge" of the newest art issues, presents *The East Village Scene,* which takes as its thesis that the work shown in the art galleries and night clubs in the East Village in New York City is sufficiently notable to be examined in a museum context. Many individuals and agencies helped the exhibition and catalogue come to fruition.

The dealers, many of them artists, in the East Village have my great appreciation for their unique entrepreneurship. Patti Astor, Barry Blinderman, Annie Herron, Gracie Mansion, Dean Savard and Bill Stelling have been especially forthcoming with assistance during my early research and in making loans possible.

This publication is greatly enhanced by the essays of Irving Sandler and Carlo McCormick. Irving Sandler, formerly Director of the Tanager Gallery on East 10th Street, brought his astute historical insight to his review of the artists' galleries and the artistic activities in the area. Carlo McCormick, a pioneering observer, curator, and critic of East Village activities, has sensitively discussed the individual artists' works. Mark Michaelson was responsible for the announcement graphics. Jerome Cloud's exemplary design of the catalogue for the exhibition was created with remarkable expediency. Robert Legault has been our meticulous editor.

ICA's adventurous Advisory Board was supportive of this exhibition from its inception. I am deeply appreciative of their encouragement. On ICA's staff, our Assistant Director, Paula Marincola, has been capably forthcoming with assistance with the multiple and diverse requirements of this project. Elizabeth Fink diligently organized research material and collated the bibliographical and checklist information. Laura Griffith and Karen Wagner assisted in the preparation of catalogue copy and worked on the program of events in conjunction with the exhibition. Jim Juszczyk was our careful and expert shipper. ICA's skillful and devoted Preparators, led by John Taylor, Chief Preparator, were Bill Baumann, Randy Dalton, James Hess, Ron Markee, Max Mason, Ron Rozewski, Gregory Tobias, and Jack Toland.

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We are fortunate to be able to add a celebratory dimension to this project, through the generosity of City Bites Restaurant, which, by hosting a members' dinner in honor of the artists, freed dinner subscription funds to assist with the exhibition. The Best Products Foundation gave us vital support early in the process of organizing the exhibition. We are very thankful to the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, The City of Philadelphia, and the ARCO Foundation for their program support.

The artists have my enduring gratitude. It was a pleasure to work with those I was fortunate to meet, and a privilege to display all of the artists' work in our space.

Janet Kardon
Director
Institute of Contemporary Art

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Street mural in the East Village

The East Village Scene

Janet Kardon

The East Village Scene puts museum walls around art made in approximately ten square city blocks in Manhattan—from Houston Street to 14th Street; from Second Avenue to the East River. Intermittently, for over a century, this economically deprived and ethnically diverse neighborhood and the surrounding Lower East Side have been an artistic center. Irving Sandler, an active participant in East Village activity in the 1950s, reviews this history on page 10.

The newest efflorescence is a quasi-commercial phenomenon generated by the abrupt appearance and proliferation of more than 25 small storefront art galleries. The galleries are interspersed among tenements, burned-out buildings, junk shops, mounds of trash, bricked windows, small grocery and general stores, secondhand clothing shops, and bars. Now restaurants and boutiques—the signs of gentrification—are beginning to appear. In this changing low-rent district, tenants and street people have converted the city's grid into a multifarious and amorphous arena in which the art is making a forceful appearance.

Within three years the galleries have attracted considerable attention in publications ranging from the *Wall Street Journal* to *Artforum* and *The East Village Eye;* there have been a few survey exhibitions in this country and abroad. This is the first museum examination and exhibition catalogue of a selected group of East Village artists' work.

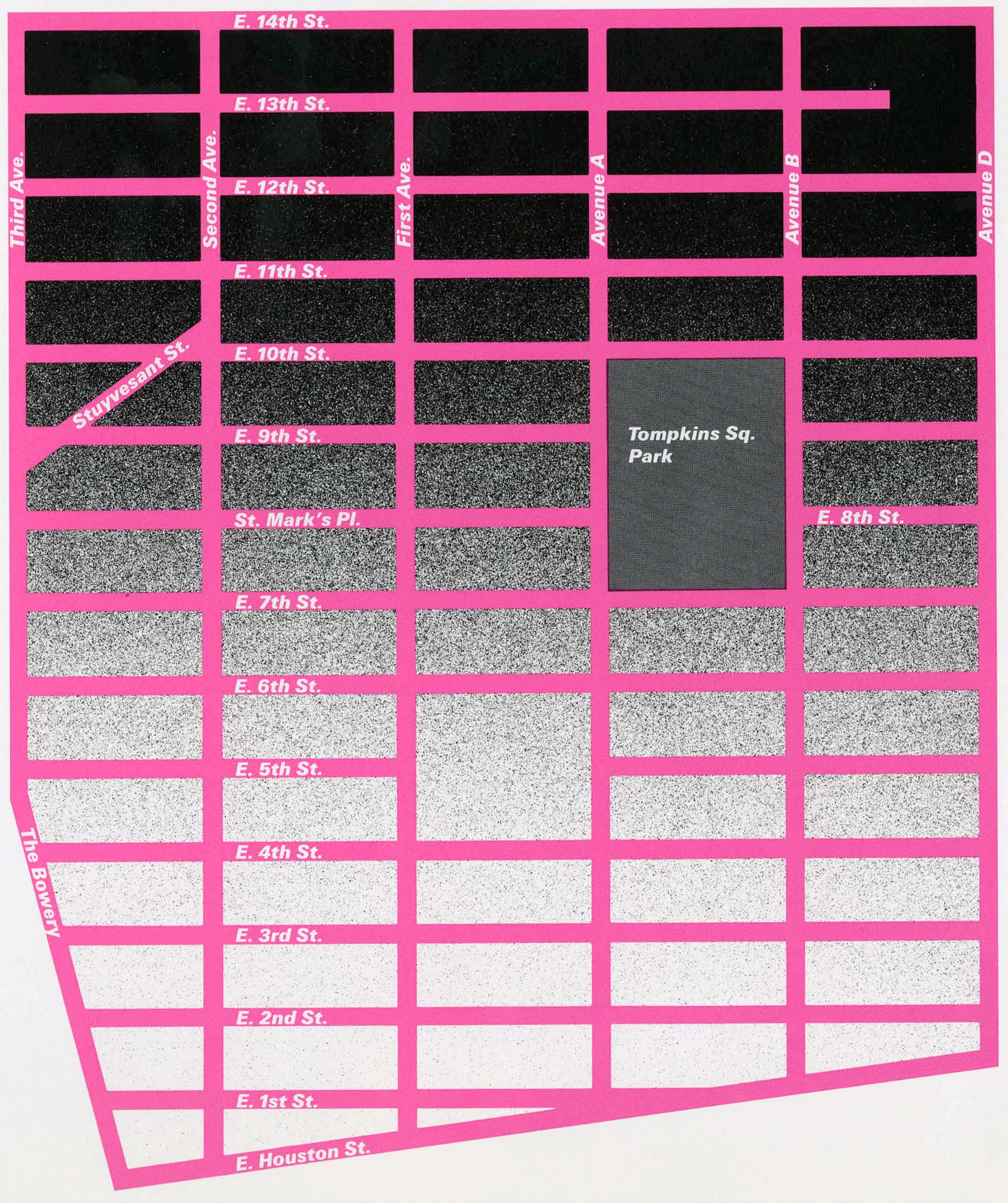
This neighborhood has become the primary testing ground for young artists, replacing the alternative spaces of the seventies as the portal for the young artist entering the larger New York, national, or international art world. While alternative spaces marked the map of the United States, East Village developments recentralize the art in New York City.

Twenty-two artists, whose work was first shown in an East Village gallery or nightclub and whose work appears to this curator to be significant enough to have transcended social and commercial phenomena, are featured in this exhibition. Many of the artists live in the East Village. Some have "moved on," and their work has been shown in Soho and uptown galleries after their East Village debut. A few have achieved international recognition.

It does not appear to this observer that there is an East Village *style* so much as an *attitude* identifiable with the East Village scene. The catalysts for much of the activity have been local nightclubs; they presented rap music, visual artists' performances, and the pioneering art exhibitions. This mingling of musicians and visual artists and the communal spirit thus engendered encouraged a circumvention of the habitual gallery system.

Living in the streets,
Seventh Street and Avenue C,
1979

The East Village attitude, is, indeed, generally characterized by an irreverent stance toward gallery habits. Artists own many of the galleries in the area; hours are adjusted to the neighborhood's night life or to the nine-to-five jobs held by many of these adventurous entrepreneurs. Premises are conducted with an artist's spirited independence. We have then a new gallery system invented to accommodate its own priorities. There is no prevailing esthetic; the pervading attitude of freedom has nurtured diversity rather than a single esthetic style.



Mike Bidlo exhibition at the Limbo Lounge, part of *14 Artists in 14 Days,* 1983, curated by Carlo McCormick

Aside from the clubs, the street origins (most evident in graffiti works) have nurtured an anti-establishment stance and a youthful audience; some of the frequent visitors to the Fun Gallery are pre-pubescent. But beyond the graffiti style, one finds here a sophisticated sense of current issues and trends, unrestrained by any stylistic borders. Carlo McCormick has addressed the individual artists' work on page 20.

To attempt to categorize artists who happen to have shown in the same urban area is perhaps to raise an artificial esthetic umbrella; one can only cite some obvious affinities as temporary guideposts. Graffiti were housebroken by the pioneering Fun Gallery, the first in the area, established in the fall of 1981. Shown there were Fred Brathwaite, Futura 2000, and Keith Haring. The present prevalent neo-expressionist mode is represented here by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keiko Bonk, Luis Frangella, Richard Hambleton, and Stephen Lack. Cheryl Laemmle revisits a funky surrealism. Melodrama underpins the works of Claudia De Monte and Rhonda Zwillinger. The works of John Fekner, Dan Friedman, Peter Nagy, and David Wojnarowicz are informed by modes of communication—from cartography to graphic design and computer and stencil typefaces. The style of the comic strip or illustration is invoked in the works of Rodney Alan Greenblat, Mark Kostabi, and Kenny Scharf. The bricoleur's tactics are ubiquitous; Arch Connelly and Rhonda Zwillinger are drawn to the artifice of theatrical costuming materials: the glitter of fake jewels, pearls, sequins, mirror shards.

Running through much of the work are many varieties of irony, parodies of engagement, and a connoisseurship of kitsch. Stencils and spray paint, tin or trash can lids, or any other material or process not previously considered acceptable are evident. But these hints of similarity are dispersed by the diversity of the individual artists and the work they are producing.

The crosscurrents among the musicians, performers, and artists indicate that we may be witnessing a kind of American *Bateau Lavoir,* eighties-style. It is perhaps too soon to predict which of the artists is our Picasso or Stravinsky, but this is, it seems, the proper moment to consider this work beyond its sociological implications and geographical locus. Time will further process the East Village phenomenon; we look forward to the future critical discourse we hope this exhibition will inspire.

First Street and Second Avenue ▶
(Holbein and the Bum), 1982

HOLBEIN
AND THE
COURT OF
HENRY VIII
PIERPONT
MORGAN
LIBRARY
APRIL 21-
JULY 30
OMPSON TWINS
21 8:30 & 11PM
SAVOY
THOMPSON TWINS
APR. 21 8:30 & 1
SAVOY
HARD
CURRENCY

Tenth Street Then and Now

Irving Sandler

Unaccountably, at different times certain places—Paris's Left Bank, New York's Tenth Street—have an aura of art that attracts painters and sculptors. Tenth Street's appeal extends back in time to 1857, the year in which the Tenth Street Studio Building between Fifth and Sixth Avenues was opened. The idea was James Boorman Johnson's. He recognized that American artists needed comfortable, live-in studios at reasonable rents, and he decided to do something about it. Johnson commissioned Richard Morris Hunt, who designed a three-story brick building containing some twenty-five studios, airy and ample (by standards then)—some, fifteen by twenty feet, others, twenty by thirty feet. The list of tenants reads like a *Who's Who* of American art in the second half of the nineteenth century: John La Farge (from the opening of the Studio until his death in 1910), Winslow Homer (for eight years), Frederick E. Church, William Merritt Chase, Sanford R. Gifford, Martin J. Heade, and Albert Bierstadt, among others.

With so many artists in one building, there was a continual exchange of ideas—some of it more than verbal. Apparently, "at least once, Church painted half of one of Martin J. Heade's canvases in the latter's absence." There was also "a constant coming-and-going of buyers, sight-seers, pupils and arbiters of taste from the press." The Studio Building included a large exhibition space, which, at a time when there were very few galleries, served as a kind of salesroom. It became the setting for openings as well. Indeed, artists' receptions became the center of social life. As Mary Sayre Haverstock wrote, they "were the rage . . . [and] no effort was spared to make them gala affairs." Yet, "the atmosphere was much more like that of an established gentlemen's club."[1]

The Studio was not the only art institution on Tenth Street. From 1858 to 1861, the National Academy of Design, many of whose leading artists lived and worked in the Studio, was situated on the corner of Fourth Avenue; its annual salons were major artistic and social events. Mathew Brady's New Photographic Gallery, a popular attraction at the time, was close by. Chase's studio was the meeting place of a number of other artists' groups: the Society of American Artists, which resisted successfully the hegemony of the Academy; an Art Club, with Walter Shirlaw, James Beckwith, Frederick Dielman, and Augustus St. Gaudens among its members; and later, the Society of American Painters in Pastel, which included John La Farge, John Henry Twachtman, J. Alden Weir, and Edwin Blashfield.[2]

The Tenth Street Studio Building was not demolished until 1956. In that year the Tenth Street artists' cooperative galleries entered into their most active phase, anticipating the international recognition of *The New American Painting,* the name of a show of Abstract Expressionist or New York School painting, organized by the Museum of Modern Art and

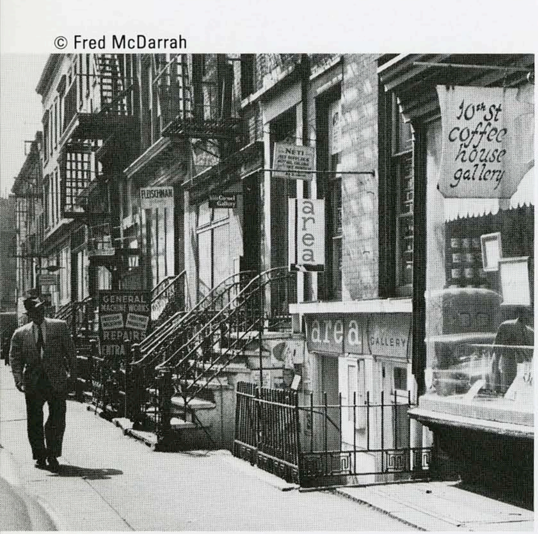
shown in eight European countries, 1958–1959. Fifties artists no longer lived in one building but in a low-rent neighborhood centered on Tenth Street, a few blocks to the east of the old Studio. Indeed, on this street alone in 1956 were the lofts of more than twenty-five painters and sculptors, including Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, Giorgio Cavallon, Esteban Vicente, Milton Resnick, James Rosati, William King, Michael Goldberg, and Gabriel Kohn.[3] Tenth Street was also within walking distance of other focal points of the New York School: the Cedar Street Tavern, on University Place just to the north of Eighth Street, and the Club, a cafe-forum founded by the first generation Abstract Expressionists in 1949 and taken over by the second around 1956. The Club moved from loft to loft, like some floating dice-game, as one wit quipped; for two years or so in the late fifties it was located on the corner of Tenth Street and Fourth Avenue.

Galleries were relative late-comers on Tenth Street. Most were founded by artists of the New York School's second generation[4] who believed that their work merited exhibition but could find no uptown gallery willing to take the risk. It was natural that most—five of the eight cooperatives[5]—should be located between Third and Fourth Avenues, since that was the geographic hub of the avant-garde art world, in the neighborhood where most of the audience, composed primarily of painters and sculptors, lived.

© Fred McDarrah

Final exhibition at the Tanager Gallery, 1962

© Fred McDarrah



Tenth Street between Third and Fourth Avenue, 1959

The first of the Tenth Street cooperatives was the Tanager, which opened in 1952 in a former barbershop on East Fourth Street and in the following year moved to Tenth Street. Among its better-known members during the ten years of its existence were Alex Katz, Philip Pearlstein, William King, and Tom Wesselmann. During the fifties, the Tanager exhibited more than 130 artists, half for the first time in New York, and gave 21 nonmembers their first New York shows, including Alfred Jensen and Gabriel Kohn. The other major galleries, because of the stature of the artists who belonged, were the Brata Gallery, which numbered among its members Al Held, George Sugarman, and Ronald Bladen, and the Reuben Gallery, which was private but whose owners relied heavily on the ideas of artists they exhibited, mostly Environment- and Happening-makers, notably Allan Kaprow, George Brecht, Robert Whitman, Red Grooms, Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, Simone Forti, and related artists George Segal and Lucas Samaras.

It was natural that the Tenth Street galleries, with a few exceptions, should be cooperative, financed, managed and for the most part manned by their members, because sales were not expected and, in fact, were rare. In the three years that I ran the Tanager Gallery,[6] I sold only one work, to a woman who walked up to the desk at which I was writing a review for *Art News.* She announced that she wanted to buy a sculpture, which must have put me in a state of shock. Our conversation went somewhat as follows:

How much is it?
One hundred and twenty-five dollars.
I'll purchase it.
Will you leave a deposit?
No, I will write a check for the entire amount.
Where shall we deliver it?
To the Museum of Modern Art.
What is your name?
Mrs. Mellon.
How do you spell that?

But selling did not matter very much then, for artists made a virtue out of their poverty. What counted most was the approval of other artists. The members of Tenth Street cooperatives conceived of their mission as showing art that they found worthy to their peers; they thought of the galleries as public extensions of the artists' studios. A statement issued by the Tanager Gallery in 1959, written by me on behalf of its members, asserted: "Its shows have reflected the intimate artistic problems that painters and sculptors face and have proved a means of defining, clarifying

View of the Brata Gallery
in the East Village,
circa 1959

© Fred McDarrah

and evaluating them. . . . The Tanager intends to continue as a barometer of the New York art scene. Living wholly in the changeable present, its unique personality lies in its immediacy." Its members believed that they were ideally suited for this role. "A diverse group with irreconcilable artistic differences, they are unreservedly outspoken on behalf of their individual viewpoints, yet they respect one another as artists."[7] It should be stressed that Tenth Street painting was varied—the commonly held notion, first advanced by Clement Greenberg, if memory holds, that most of it was School of de Kooning, was not correct. Yet, with a few exceptions, it was painterly or gestural to some degree, and in this sense there was a common style.

The Tanager statement's seriousness of tone reflected the life-style of fifties artists. Their primary social activity was talking about art in each other's studios, the Cedar Street Tavern, the Club, and even at parties, although there was also drinking and dancing. The artist-run storefront galleries became centers of communal activities, places where artists could always find other artists to converse with, and on the joint Friday night openings of all of the galleries, where they could participate in festivities that resembled big block parties. In public, artists wore suits and ties, aiming to appear anonymous—unlike generations to come. Colorlessness was taken as a sign of seriousness, the manifestation of a self-image of the artist as *creator* rather than as *creative liver,* either in the style of Bohemia or the world of fashion. Artists spurned both worlds.

What caused Tenth Street to decline? Elsewhere, I have written that innovative artists who emerged in the sixties found the scene "hostile and avoided it. More specifically accountable was the success of a significant number of Tenth Street artists generally considered the best—success in that they were asked to join prestigious commercial galleries uptown [and the artists joined willingly]. . . . As the best artists began to exhibit away from Tenth Street, what remained to be seen there was of decreasing interest. Aggravating this situation was the increase of mediocre, derivative, and eclectic work produced by the influx of newcomers who could show their work with greater ease—and did. This glut of inferior art drove away the audience and discouraged lively and ambitious young artists from exhibiting downtown. To state it bluntly, it was no longer *important* to show on Tenth Street—or to be [or even visit] there—and when this occurred, the scene declined."[8] To put it another way, the energy that generated the Tenth Street galleries and, for that matter, the Club, dissipated by 1962. I cannot specify what this energy was, what generated or dissipated it (and no one else has done so, to my satisfaction), but when it was gone, most everybody knew.

Self Image exhibition, 1983, Sharpe Gallery

Artists did not need to found galleries in the sixties. There occurred a tremendous growth of the art market, and many new commercial galleries, such as Richard Bellamy's Green Gallery, and old ones, such as Leo Castelli's, took on avant-garde newcomers. Toward the end of the decade, artists did organize the Art Workers Coalition and other groups to protest the Vietnam War and social and art world "evils," including the art boom. In part, because of the distaste for art-as-a-commodity, artists focused on the conceptual component of their work at the expense of its physicality. There was a concomitant interest in hard-to-market earth, process, site-specific, multi-media, performance, body, and video art. Traditional studio media were widely rejected; in fact, a recurring topic of debate was: Is Painting Dead?

Works of art that were not objects did not appear to be salable and thus to require conventional gallery spaces, particularly commercial ones. But in the early seventies, artists working in new media increasingly sought to exhibit their work and/or its documentation in galleries that would allow them to do pretty much what they wanted to in the space. Moreover, there emerged a new generation of painters and sculptors, more numerous than ever before, that had difficulty finding dealers willing to show its work. At this moment, public agencies, such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts, made sizable sums of money available for the arts. These grants could only be awarded to not-for-profit organizations; in response, so-called alternative spaces for the display of contemporary art arose to meet the needs of artists.[9]

There also emerged a number of artist-run galleries, most of them with a feminist or realist mission, which, because they represented causes, were combative in a way that fifties cooperatives were not.[10]

The alternative space in New York that was most committed to exhibiting a broad range of artists unaffiliated with commercial galleries, and thus for the most part young, was Artists Space, founded in 1973 by Trudie Grace and myself with a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts. In the first three years of its existence, each unaffiliated artist shown there was selected by a relatively well-known artist on a one-to-one basis. Among the dozens of artists who were given their first major display in New York in the seventies were Laurie Anderson, Jonathan Borofsky, Scott Burton, Louisa Chase, Barbara Kruger, Ree Morton, Judy Pfaff, Ellen Phelan, Charles Simonds, David Salle, and John Torreano.[11] Helene Winer became the director of Artists Space in 1976 and changed its orientation somewhat, assuming more of a curatorial role, that is a "more active role in identifying, explicating, and supporting art that is genuinely new, usually unfamiliar and otherwise controversial,"[12] frequently inviting guest curators to organize shows. But the gallery's fundamental mission—benefiting unaffiliated artists—did not change.

Cat's Eyes mural, Sixth Street between First and Second Avenues, 1980

It was widely hoped that alternative spaces might constitute a new art support network, alternative to the commercial one. This did not occur. Much as they tried, their administrators did not succeed in selling much art. To blame were their inexperience in salesmanship and their populist policy of showing an artist only once, or infrequently. Thus, they could not represent the artist as a commercial gallery would have; nor could they inspire the confidence collectors seem to require and dealers seem able to provide because of their knowledge of the art market and their commitment in time, monies spent for rent, staff, advertisement, etc. It is noteworthy that Helene Winer could not sell much of the works of artists she had exhibited at Artists Space until she left and opened a private gallery together with Janelle Reiring. Dealers, such as Holly Solomon, followed the shows at Artists Space closely and invited participating artists to join their stables, and they did.

Since Artists Space and other alternative organizations turned out to serve primarily as conduits to commercial galleries, many of them new, and because of the success of these galleries, it occurred to members of a new generation that emerged around 1980, most of them artists, that they could open private galleries in order to exhibit their own work and that of their friends in whom they believed. A number took the risk with relatively little investment, transforming hole-in-the-wall storefronts in dilapidated tenements in and around East Tenth Street into exhibition spaces. There had already developed a community, composed of a significant number of young artists who, in search of low rents, were attracted to the East Village—an area bounded on three sides by Third Avenue, the East River, and Fourteenth Street, and stretching below Houston Street into the Lower East Side. These artists became friends, visited each other's studios, exchanged ideas and partied together, and frequented the same bars and clubs, such as Club 57 on St. Marks Place, conceived by its denizens as a kind of Club Voltaire, and the Limbo Lounge on Tenth Street, to name two of many.[13] As Rene Ricard remarked: "One doesn't open a gallery to attract artists, one opens a gallery because one has them already. The Fun wasn't started because Patti Astor [an underground film star] wanted to become an art dealer, she knew artists who'd already made themselves noticed and wanted 'to give them their first show.'"[14] In a sense, the East Village galleries evolved from the need of a generation of artists to find public outlets for its energies.

Second Avenue and First Street, 1982

The role of communal life, notably what Edit DeAk once termed "Clubism," must be stressed. As Krystina Kitsis wrote: "The essence of the club has always been the meeting point of image, music and dance in a confined space, dedicated to social cohesion and self-awareness. A sense of euphoria induced through drink, drugs and dance, culminating in an atmosphere and social ambience that shifts between fantasy and reality."[15] The East Village community was based not only on geographic proximity and generational and social ties, but also on shared expectations of what new art should be. This sensibility did not yield a single style but a kind of common denominator of greatly heterogeneous styles—and that variety should be stressed. Nonetheless, much of East Village art is small in scale, because of the size of studios and galleries, and figurative, often alluding to the neighborhood's mean but ethnically diverse street life and its art (graffiti), and/or to Pop Art and mass media imagery. It is also influenced by "bad" art, as it used to be called in the late seventies, including Neo-Expressionism and other variants of New Image or New Wave painting, and more recently Surrealism. It is blatantly eclectic, cannibalistic, frequently quoting

East Village gallery owners (from left to right): Lisa McDonald (Piezo Electric), Pat Hearn, and Gracie Mansion, on the runway at New Math Gallery's Fashion Show, 1984

its sources directly, either in irony, nostalgia, fantasy or futility. If East Village art has any claim to being avant-garde, it is because it has muscled into "high" art such "low" art forms as ghetto-spawned spray-can writing, the trashiest of mass media kitsch, and the crudest of "bad" painting, exacerbating an abrasive tendency in modern art that goes back to the unfinished-looking pictures of Delacroix, Courbet and Manet.

The first East Village gallery, the Fun, was opened by Patti Astor in 1981 on Tenth Street near First Avenue; it was followed within months by 51X, Nature Morte, Civilian Warfare, and Gracie Mansion, and, over the course of the next two years or so, by some three dozen others, perhaps by now even more.[16] Why did Astor and the dealers who followed her lead opt for commercial rather than alternative galleries? One reason was that they would not have been free to show their friends *only,* lest they seem to be diverting public funds from serving the many, which is governmental policy, for the profit of the few. Moreover, as Astor pointed out: "I just wanted a place to show art and didn't want to bother with filling out grant forms"[17]—the interminable administrative chore of not-for-profit institutions.

New commercial galleries in large numbers could only have arisen at a time when painting and sculpture—works of art as salable objects—were valued. And the art world in the seventies had become "canvas-happy," as Edit DeAk put it,[18] as it had not been for over a decade; art became chic again, and sales and prices skyrocketed. This led young artists and their friends to accept as role models rich and fashionable artists, many of the most celebrated in their early thirties, and their counterparts in

The Famous Show, 1982
Gracie Mansion Gallery

the gallery business, such as Mary Boone, Leo Castelli, Paula Cooper, Barbara Gladstone, Miani Johnson, Robert Miller, Janelle Reiring, Holly Solomon, Angela Westwater, and Helene Winer (not in her former role as director of Artists Space but as a co-owner of Metro Pictures). (Ironically, at the same time, East Village dealers were inspired by the "poor" look of ghetto-based alternative spaces, which were both anti-commercial and anti-art world alternative galleries, such as Fashion Moda, founded in 1978; ABC No Rio, 1980; and Group Material, 1981.) Eighties artists seek celebrity—the kind of fame and glamor achieved by rock or movie stars—and the tangible rewards it yields.[19] Even those artists who create political protest art demand that their galleries sell it, and understandably. Rents today are astronomical compared with what they were in the fifties. It costs much more, relatively, to survive as an artist in New York now than it did then. But on the whole, as Rene Ricard summed it up: "Everybody wants to be the next Andy Warhol. . . . Patti uses art to star in."[20]

By now, the East Village galleries are Established with a capital "E." Helene Winer has written:

> *They have been enthusiastically embraced by the full complement of the art world—public and private institutions, journalists, collectors and artists. This is evident in art magazine articles,* The New York Times *coverage, guest exhibitions in established galleries, a map in the ubiquitous* Gallery Guide, *avid coverage in . . .* The East Village Eye *and* New York Beat, *enormous artist-attended openings, and the heavy visitor traffic on Sunday afternoons. This development affirms the perpetual renewal of the artists' community.*[21]

Just Appearances **Exhibition, 1984, New Math Gallery, with gallery owners Mario Fernandez and Nina Seigenfeld**

It also signifies its institutionalization, as Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick remarked: "Last summer [1983], after a year and a half of incubation, press attention and sales began to take off, to the surprise of almost everyone. In effect, the area's artists and dealers became accomplices in an unspoken conspiracy to forge a collective identity and use it as a marketing tool." And it appears that the "private, economic entrepreneurship" of the East Village art scene "suits the Reaganite zeitgeist remarkably well."[22] (Lest what I have written imply that the new galleries have supplanted alternative spaces in New York, they have not. Their number notwithstanding, they are too narrow, drawing too heavily on neighborhood artists who produce salable art. Alternative art will continue to require alternative spaces. Moreover, despite the market-consciousness of East Village galleries, many are not likely to show a profit and thus will turn out to resemble not-for-profit organizations, although they will go bust, of course.)[23]

What of the future of the East Village galleries? Because they developed into "a miniature replica of the contemporary art market," as Craig Owens remarked,[24] they will have to prove themselves commercially, and it appears that several will, becoming a kind of Soho East. If they do not, their best artists will be skimmed by more successful Soho and uptown galleries, and a number have been. Zooming rents are a threat to the existence of the new galleries and of the community of artists, many of whom are already being forced out, and their departure will lead to the dissipation of collective energies. (Ironically, the emergence of the East Village art scene is a major cause of the gentrification or Sohoization of the neighborhood.) The relative success of a few "winners" will probably sour relations with their less recognized friends and further weaken communal spirit. It always has in the past. Be all that as it may, at the moment there are a number of lively artists identified with the East Village, as this show amply illustrates, and that's the bottom line.

♦ See Notes, page 62.

The Periphery of Pluralism

Carlo McCormick

The East Village scene has received, in just about one year's time, a media and market overload of attention that rivals that of any recent movement or artists' community including the early days of Soho, its obvious precedent. The coverage of the East Village has extended nationally, as well as internationally, from the most prestigious art magazines to the most populist press. As a scene, it has been so phenomenal that not many seem concerned with paying much individual attention to its myriad of components. The energy of the community and the general surface resemblance of the aesthetic and commercial ambitions of its tenants have provided justification enough to lump together a variety of vastly different styles under the vague term "East Village Art." Artistic individuality within this geographical generalization has been dismissed with the convenient catch-all art jargon term "eclecticism."

Classifying any set of artists has always been an inherent difficulty of criticism. In the case of the East Village, this exercise borders on the absurd. It is, however, an irresistible temptation to synthesize the area's diversity into a cohesive summary of contemporary art. Lacking the valid focus of some underlying aesthetic continuum, one is forced to fabricate artistic unity (which is so easy to locate in earlier twentieth-century art movements) out of the sociological circumstances of the environment. Thus the characterizations and judgments of the East Village have, so far, been based on the scene rather than the art. The galleries, and more often the dealers, have been the focus of the art world's attention on the area. More has been written on Gracie Mansion, the art dealer and personality, than any East Village artist. More has been written on the youthful energy than any actual artistic products of it.

The hype (as all this media attention must be called) which is surrounding the East Village, is very nearly at an end. The phenomenon which occurred seemingly overnight is, at this point, last year's story. Those who have criticized the art world's interest in the East Village as a sign of trendiness, part of the perennial search for the "next thing," will now see the artists relying on their own merits, and the galleries on the strength of their stables. It is no longer enough to be an East Village gallery; there are now over thirty of them. It is no longer enough to be an East Village artist; there are now hundreds of them. These terms are so diluted that they are meaningless when one comes to measure artistic worth. The honeymoon is over. It is time now for the art world, and specifically this show, to sort through the inconsistencies and acknowledge the important emerging artists the East Village has produced. This exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art reflects the curatorial opinion of Janet Kardon, one view of many of what

Rhonda Zwillinger, *Give Me Liberty or Give Me Romance*, 1983, Gracie Mansion Gallery

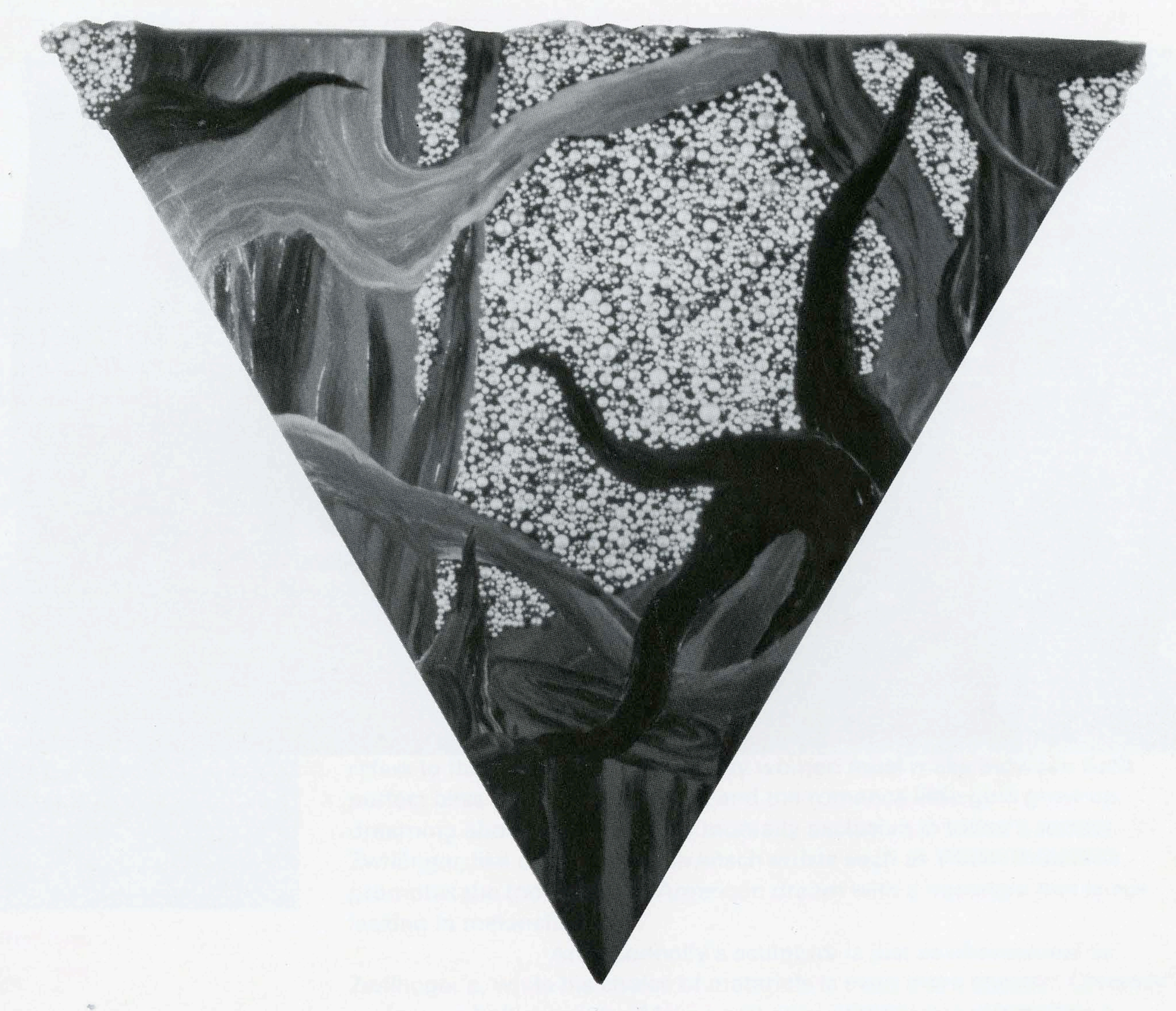
one may expect to see from this multifaceted area. All the artists in this show have been recognized as prominent members of this cultural community. They are all worthy of some individual examination. This essay shall then construct a view of the whole through an understanding of some of its most articulate and accomplished exponents.

To put these twenty-two artists into a context beyond the uniting characteristics of their locale, we must construct for them a set of aesthetic trends. Within the diversity of their eclecticism are common concerns in contemporary figurative painting, many of which are international in scope. The East Village is, after all, located in the capital city of the art world today, and its artists were not raised in its provincial bounds but have come there from across the world. For all the apparent parochialism of the East Village, it is not an isolated group, and its shared styles and subject matter are quite locatable.

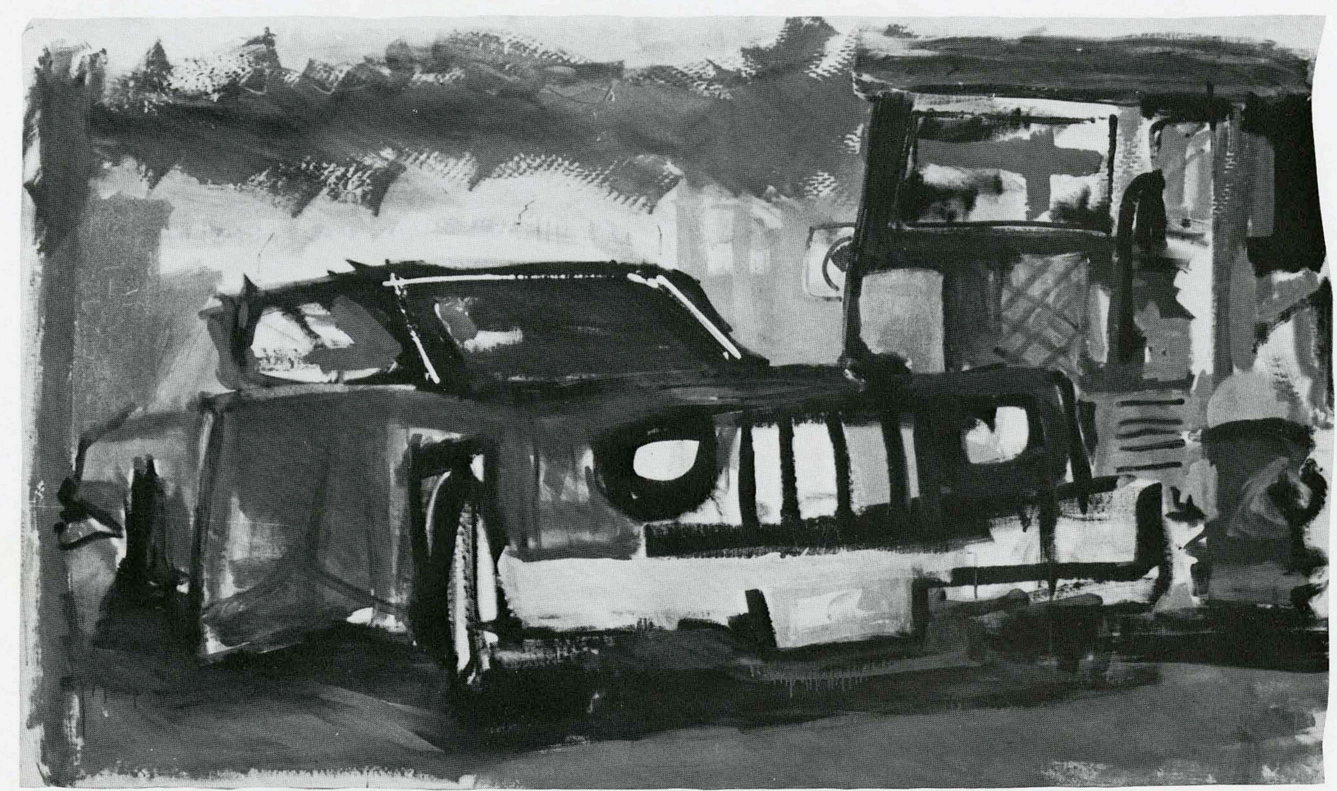
Dan Friedman,
Post Nuclearism: A Special Installation, 1984,
The Red Studio

One of the most apparent recurring themes among this group of artists is a glorification of Americana on its most middle-class levels. The vulgarity of kitsch becomes the vocabulary of a derriere-garde that is a post-modern version of avant-garde offensiveness. Here then, regression is the artistic sublimation which insulates man's inherent provincialism and bourgeois instincts in the face of societal sophistication. From the angry primal scrawls of Jean-Michel Basquiat to the cartoonish escapism of Rodney Alan Greenblat to the overstated femininity of Claudia De Monte, much of East Village art partakes of an acquired naiveté. This intentional retreat to purer and more basic means of expression ranges from a post-pop cartoonish sensibility, as in the works of Fred Brathwaite, Rodney Alan Greenblat, Keith Haring, E. F. Higgins III, Stephen Lack, Kenny Scharf and David Wojnarowicz, to a pseudo-conservative glorification of American values like the home and the land, as in works by Arch Connelly, Claudia De Monte, Dan Friedman, Rodney Alan Greenblat, Cheryl Laemmle and Rhonda Zwillinger.

Kitsch as a stylistic appropriation of tacky design elements is the vocabulary, if not the focus, of the art of Arch Connelly and Rhonda Zwillinger. For both these artists, bad taste is a humorous affectation, an extremely mannered overstatement of beauty that is less involved with sarcasm than it would seem. Their gaudy decorative overkill is not merely a pretense to a rococo sublime vision, but a stylistic archiving of taboo retro-taste. Connelly and Zwillinger, as vastly different as they are from current expressionistic figurative painting, have an affinity with their contemporaries in that they all have reacted against the visual coldness and sterility of certain minimal, conceptual and abstract values in the art of the



Arch Connelly, *Rain Forest,* 1984



Stephen Lack, *Green Car in the East Village*, 1983

seventies; but their passage from the shock of the new to the shock of the old is due to an explicit nostalgia that is as much an appreciation of passé decoration as it is a rejection of the conservative values of contemporary good taste.

Rhonda Zwillinger's "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Romance" is as thoroughly obsessive a creation as she has produced to date. The installation is a vision of interior decor which elevates the home, and its associative values of stability and family, to the level of a mock shrine. Zwillinger takes industrial cast-offs of passé fashion trends, most notably sequins, beads, and bits of mirror, and embeds them in a silicone glue medium as elaborate flourishes framing her furniture and paintings.

Richard Hambleton,
***"Battle of . . . ,"* 1984**

For all the quirky chic of Zwillinger's encrusted objects, they must also be understood in their "junkiness". That is, Zwillinger's inclusion of mass-market leftovers is related to the recurring use of found materials that is symptomatic of young artists' poor finances in the face of the rising costs of art supplies. As pointed as Zwillinger's uses of *l'objet trouvé* may be, the presence of industry rejects in her work is part of a need for readapting societal refuse that has been prevalent in the East Village.

The imagery of Zwillinger's paintings represents the typically false rendition of life that accounts for the common disillusion that comes with the loss of innocence: happy, clean, perfect-looking couples playing tennis or sipping soda, picture postcard views of sunsets with the Statue of Liberty or the Eiffel Tower. "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Romance" refers to the decision contemporary women must make between such perfect bliss or liberty. Freedom, and the romance little girls grow up dreaming about, are somehow mutually exclusive in today's society. Zwillinger, like other American kitsch artists such as Walter Robinson, promotes the too-beautiful American dream with a nostalgia that is not lacking in melancholia.

Arch Connelly's sculpture is just as obsessional as Zwillinger's, while his choice of materials is even more specific. Connelly's surface embellishments of fake pearl encrustations are directed by a particular affectation of interior decor that constitutes his aesthetic. They are not Zwillinger's scavenged materials, they are a careful selection. Pearls are, in Connelly's work, a mannered design of the most extreme decadence. They are fake, plastic and in the worst of taste. Connelly's continual use of them is the type of chic snobbism in reverse that propels the young to constantly dredge up retro clothing in the name of contemporary fashion. What Connelly does with pearls is an act of creativity on a much higher level. The

decadence of Connelly is an overindulgence in his vision of beauty. As contrived as his art is along the excesses of kitsch, the opulence of his sculptures is akin to the splendorous "adornment of the material house of God" (Theophilus) which gave birth to Gothic art. The spiritual uplifting that precious stones provided to those such as Abbé Suger of St. Denis, is a form of purely emotional ecstasy (the soul of the 20th century artist) that is as earthy as it is transcendental.

The pearl-covered objects, as well as the paintings, of Arch Connelly are formed by a geomorphism that, while figurative, reads as a stylized abstract naturalism. The pearl-coated tables remind one of such natural formations as stalactites and tree trunks. These associations accentuate the decadence as they mark the artifice of the creation. Fake pearls become as much an oddity as plastic flowers, and in the context of nature, they are like plastic flowers placed in water. Connelly's pearls become the point of the dichotomy between real and fake as an expression of opulence. Reality falls secondary to representation and decoration. The pictorial effect replaces symbolism as inspiration. Connelly intentionally crosses the unsound border between art and decoration.

Claudia De Monte,
Claudia At Home With Her Religion,
1984, Gracie Mansion Gallery

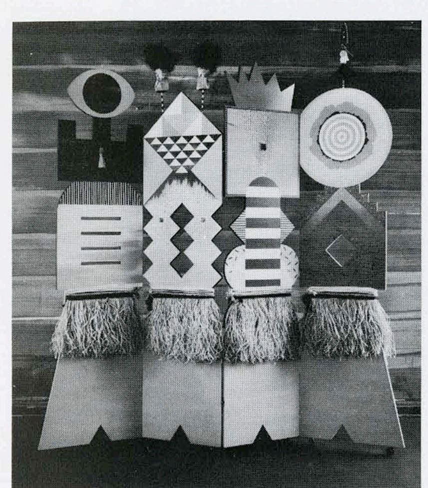
Dan Friedman's installation is a very close bridging between art and decoration. Friedman uses black lights and fluorescent paint, long-outmoded relics of the sixties' psychedelic hallucinatory audio-visual gimmickry. Black-light art installations reemerged as a kind of neo-psychedelic camp aesthetic in the early years of the Fun Gallery and Club 57. Both these artist hangouts were active at the turn of this decade as important high-energy creative playgrounds that proved seminal to an important new generation of artists, and to the East Village as a whole. Their relevance here is not merely for their precedent of Day-Glo paint; their campy pleasure in kitschy Americana has been a thematic and stylistic development in many East Village artists. As such they are worthy of a tangential historical note.

Kenny Scharf and Keith Haring were both active in Club 57 and Fun Gallery. Both produced major black-light installations at Fun that were extensions of the decadent, performance-art cabaret (Voltaire) dadaism of their circle. That is, after Soho artists produced the quintessential performance art of the genre in the seventies, there emerged, in their wake, a generation of Lower East Side artists whose careers began as an intense, social (mostly club-oriented) collection of talents working in a general collaboration of multiple media. The scene spawned Scharf, Haring and Basquiat, whose street art, direct imagery, cartoonishness and early affordability have been models for East Village artists. These early days also

Claudia De Monte, *Claudia At Home With Her Religion*, 1984, Gracie Mansion Gallery, detail

Dan Friedman, *Three Mile Island Lamp*, 1984, painted lamp with mixed media, 30″ x 14″, courtesy Fun Gallery

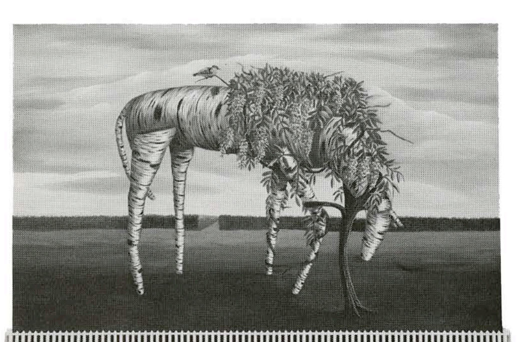
produced filmmakers such as Amos Poe and Eric Mitchell, whose movies starred local celebrities such as Patti Astor (who later opened Fun Gallery) and members of local bands like Blondie, the Ramones, Richard Hell and Patti Smith, who were just then making it out of the downtown club scene (CBGB, Max's Kansas City and the Mudd Club). As well, Club 57 was the hatching ground of performance artists like Ann Magnuson and John Sex (whose pop-vaudevillian antics glorify the most offensive aspects of American culture, from TV evangelists to Muzak to just about every detail of suburban family recreational activities) and bands such as the Fleshtones and Pulsallama (who recreated the teenage sounds and emotions of sixties garage band psychedelic rock and girl-group cuteness respectively).



Dan Friedman, *Primal Screen,* 1984, painted wood plus mixed media, 72″ x 78″, courtesy Fun Gallery

Returning to Friedman's installation, his incorporation of retro styles, most prominently a sixties commercial graphic design sense, becomes clear in the light of Fun Gallery's previous fluorescent art environments. Like many other artists who stylistically recall past design, decor and fashion trends, Friedman's lifting of a previous decade's look is at the service of a contemporary outlook that is as cynical as it is nostalgic. His harkening back to ultra-modern living decor, which today looks as comically outmoded as the futuristic fins on a Firebird, is not just visual, but is ultimately psychological as well. The humor is still a reminiscence, but the remembrance is subject to a cold-war nuclear paranoia. Day-Glo is the radiating cocktail, the glow of the television, the aura of the bomb—the atomic café of entertainment as escapism. Friedman creates a very appealing fantasy, yet never lets one forget the reality that is implicitly being ignored.

Functional art is by no means solely an East Village phenomenon, nor is it necessarily purely American. However, the convergence of art and furnishings and, more significantly, the fundamental ambiguity between high and low art (fine and minor arts) that are prevalent in much East Village art, are no random coincidence. Functionalism, Americana, kitsch and cartoonishness form the locus of an art that is not only deeply rooted in Middle-American values, but is, in this way, an art for the people. As an art for the middle class, it is not founded on any political theories. While affordable on more than an elite level, this populism is directed more by aesthetic and pragmatic than political concerns.



Cheryl Laemmle, *Wisteria MO,* 1983

Claudia De Monte's art embodies much of the Americana, tacky kitsch humor and funky cartoonishness that are largely associated with East Village art. De Monte, like Rhonda Zwillinger, produces her art around contemporary American ideals. It responds fully to the commercialism and materialism of the art market, as well as the stereotypifications of "feminine art." Although they avoid the explicitly satirical, Zwillinger's movie-star clichés of dumb women and macho men and De Monte's frilly superficial girls' art both debunk the very myths they are projecting. De Monte's sculptural wall pieces look like they were made by a cake decorator. They may not be as edible as cake icing, but they are just as poisonously sweet. Declaredly autobiographical, yet as far from the truth as they can be, they portray Claudia in unreal life situations of womanhood. Her past show had her dollish personage performing the dutiful tasks of dusting, vacuum cleaning, washing and other household chores. As her cake decoration style pokes fun at widespread notions of women's art, as if she might also make quilts or flower arrangements, so does her false projection of herself as a housewife declare a disavowal of that role. Her current work, projecting herself as a spike-haired anti-establishment "punk," is a more localized joke on the East Village lifestyle and its "punky" new-wave art. De Monte's feminism is without antagonism or cynicism. Her jokes, the absurd archetypes of societal roles as self-portrait, are objects of humor rather than sexual politics.

Of all the contemporary artists who promote the idea of pure innocence, Rodney Alan Greenblat most wholeheartedly adopts the escapism and nostalgia of the American dream. Greenblat's naiveté is completely unencumbered by any unpleasant notions of reality. His is an art that is so involved in its own fantasy of fun that it isn't even self-conscious about its charm. While so much of contemporary art is involved with pretending some facsimile of innocence, Greenblat manages to regress to a point of sincerity that is absolutely not adult. He invents his own cast of characters to populate his cartoon world. His imagery is unmistakably American. More specifically, Greenblat's world, a vision as seen through the eyes of a child, is the sort of comfortable complacent happy childhood of fun and games and clean houses and neat lawns that is the quintessential suburban family environment. As art reflects the society around it, Greenblat is about the dream of suburbia and the perfect world it was held to be just a decade ago.

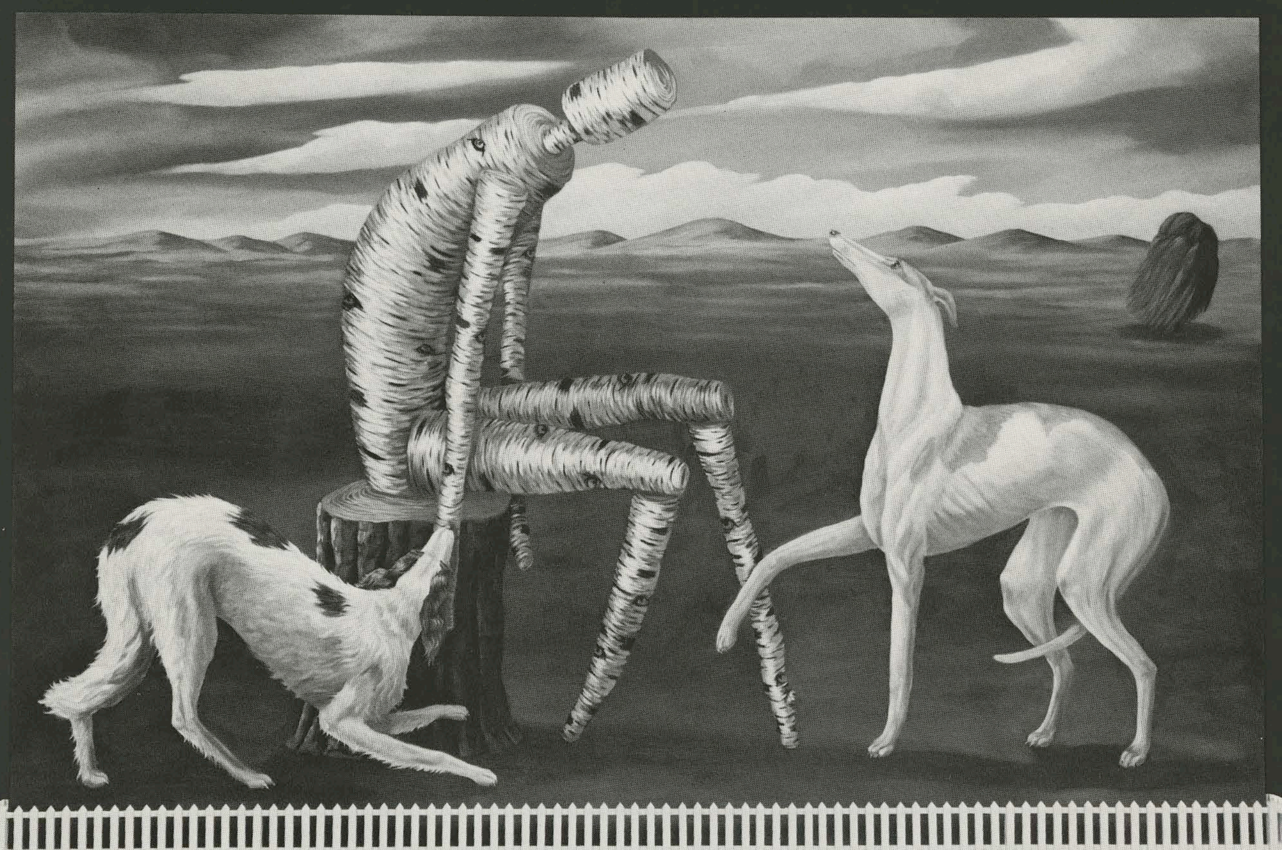
Kenny Scharf, *Jungle Juice*, 1984

Rodney Alan Greenblat exhibition, 1983, Gracie Mansion Gallery

The decades between 1950 and 1980 were the period of upbringing of Greenblat, and of most every other East Village artist. Greenblat's smiling homes are the promise of the good healthy life that inspired the great white flight from the cities to the ticky-tacky boxes of suburbia. In those thirty years as the baby-boom middle classes abandoned the decaying inner cities for the clean air, green lawns, safe neighborhoods and better schools just a commute away from urban employment, a whole mythology of happiness was invented. Greenblat recreates this mythology. He was himself raised in Bethesda, Maryland, an upper-middle-class refuge from troubled Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, but his youth could have been in Long Island or Connecticut or any of the thousands of commuter towns which mushroomed all over the country during this time. Greenblat is now in New York City redesigning this past American dream; a city which in thirty years had three million second- and third-generation immigrants leave it. The East Village is the once slum area which housed all the immigrants as they first came over; the Germans, Jews, Italians, Russians, Poles and Irish who were assimilated and became the middle classes of America. They are now pouring back into this neighborhood, the very one their great-grand-parents settled and their parents fled from. The American dream, truly a formulation by all those who had no better to hope for, now exists as the youthful restoration of the inner city, and in the art of Greenblat. It is nostalgic, and, like all nostalgia, it is life seen through rose-colored glasses. Greenblat not only tells us about the hopes of the suburbs, but a bit about our incessant escapism.

A less explicit American sensibility than Greenblat's and Zwillinger's manifests itself in the work of Cheryl Laemmle. Laemmle's paintings are of that oddly mannered eccentric vision of American art—its greatly unappreciated regionalism. In the international sophistication of New York art, the regional heritage of American art is often overlooked. Greenblat's work is a sort of suburban regionalism; the rebirth of green lawns and clean air of small town U.S.A. as a new Eden. Such is the American dream, the promised land which in two centuries went from Heaven Discovered on Earth to a Paradise Lost. Heaven in the great glory of the land has been, and largely remains, the ideal of man. From the potency of Jeffersonianism to the rise of Utopianism and Romanticism in the soot of post-Industrial Revolution England, American art, from Emerson and Thoreau to Cole and Hicks, exists in the shadows of a nostalgia for its lost wilderness, its past innocence.

Rodney Alan Greenblat,
***Boat,* 1981**



Cheryl Laemmle, *Dear Friends*, 1983

Richard Hambleton, *Pawn*, 1984

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Catharsis*, 1983

Cheryl Laemmle is part of America's inherent identification with the elemental purity of the land that is the tradition of pastoralism. Unlike Hudson River School artists who reveled in the mighty strength of nature untouched by man, Laemmle draws from a view more akin to nineteenth-century English landscape painters, that of a serenity and heavenliness in man's gentle taming of the countryside. Her iconography is taken directly from the farming heartland of America; her paintings are in tune to its relaxed quiet rhythm. Laemmle marks the slow tempo of the passing of time at the speed of a grazing horse or a growing vine. Her insistence on the picturesque, a world of picket fences and animals in the field, is never so real as to actually transport us there. Laemmle's pastoral artifice is more based on aesthetic interpretation and recreation than actual nature. The art may be about the essence of the land, but its view is so mannered that it points to its absence.

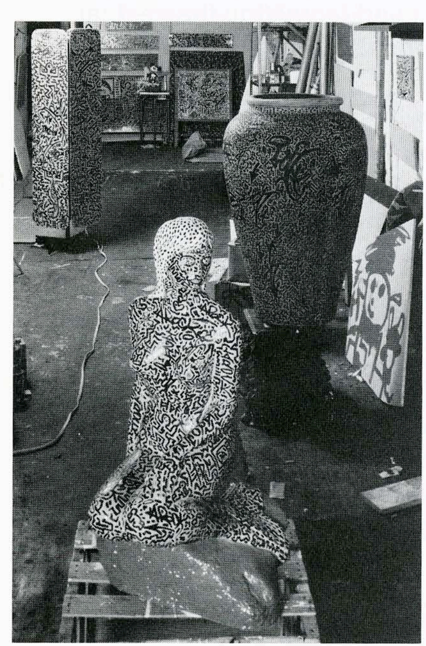
Richard Hambleton reflects on the American character in a way that is less personal than Greenblat and Laemmle. Hambleton takes the icons and clichés of our culture and heroicizes them to a psychological intensity that is larger than life. In his Marlboro Man series, an appropriation of the advertising image and its macho mythology, Hambleton uses a post-pop camp appreciation of mass-cultural propaganda in the service of a dramatic expressionistic painting composition. Hambleton is most concerned with the drama, the tremendous psychological import of each situation. Each painting is like a scene in one grand epic. Hambleton, from his lurking figures on the street to his brave fighting men to his lonely cowboys, paints men. His aggrandized depiction of the stoicism and strength of man appeals most to the American self-image as the adventurous, suffering yet indomitable frontiersman, an image of mankind itself which has been marketed internationally.

Jean-Michel Basquiat,
***Thirty Sixth Figure,* 1983**

The figurative return to Middle American values, from folk-kitsch to the great American dream, is an escapism that is directed by nostalgia. This reinvention of a prettier pseudo-reality is most prevalent in the emphasis towards the cartoonish and naive. The comic-like style found in many emerging artists is a rejection of culture, a substitution of high art with a subcultural vernacular, a regression to the point of infantilistic obliviousness. As a subcultural appropriation, naive painting in the East Village has been an adoption, by young white art school students, of the outlaw ghetto art form: graffiti art. Before subway graffiti and rap music received their mass-market media recognition, graffiti's energy, anti-establishment rebelliousness and risk in the name of temporal fame and self-expression excited many downtown artists. Taking the medium up from the subways to the streets, artists like Kenny Scharf, Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat used the guerilla art tactics of the underground to promote their own ideas and

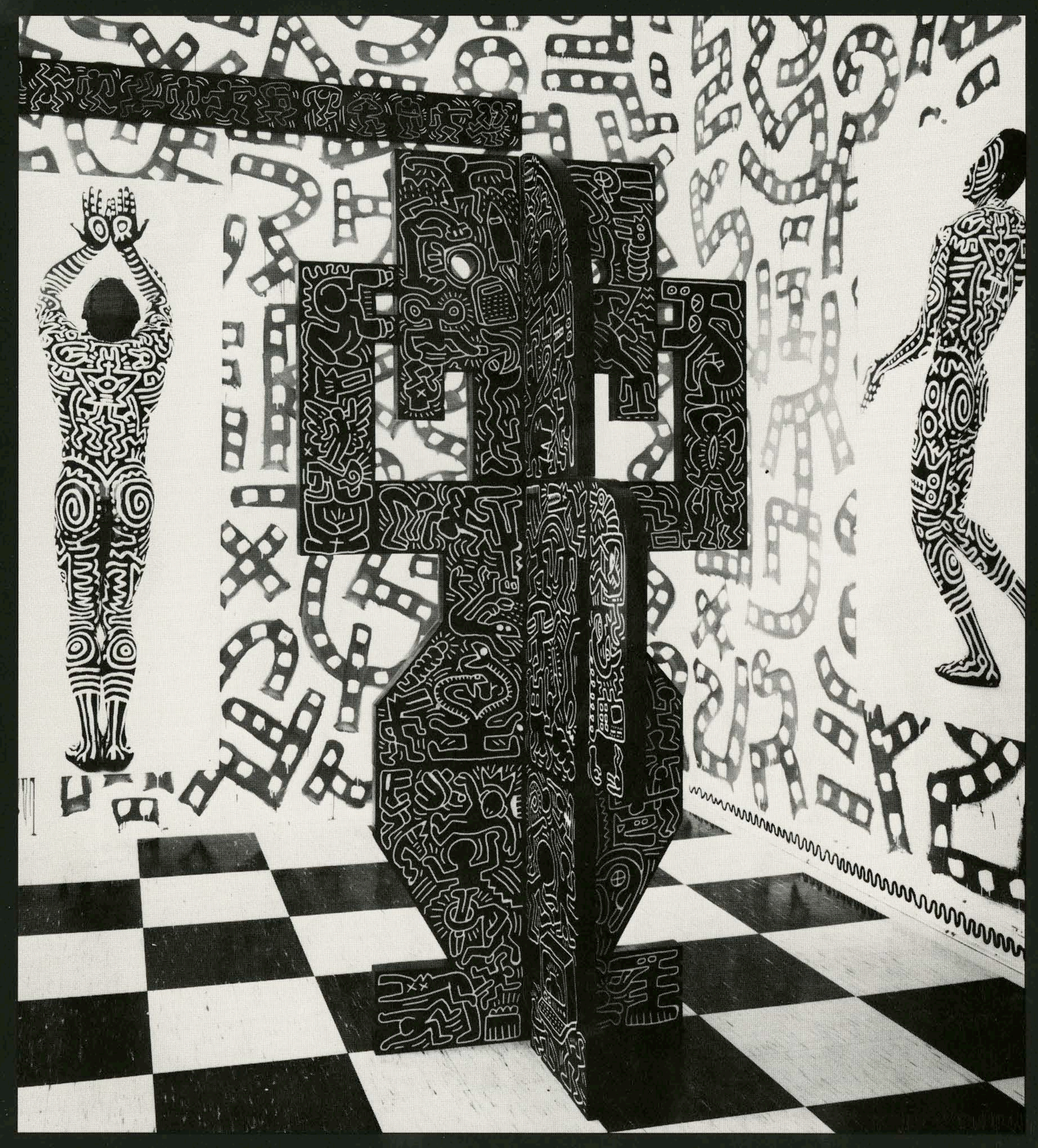
careers. While Charlie Ahearn was making his low budget classic *Wild Style,* downtown artists were showing at Fashion Moda in the South Bronx and Patti Astor was promoting subway masters like Lee Quinones and Futura 2000. The impulse was still primarily to make a mark, but the medium changed from subcultural to acknowledged art.

Kenny Scharf has taken a set of Hanna-Barbera cartoon characters and made them an ironic language that reflects upon the media/learning experiences of childhood today. Scharf's work spins back with the blind nostalgia of one remembering the cartoons of his youth, but the extremity of his recollection, if only by viewing childhood stimuli as an adult, puts into focus the personal impact of the stories we are told and the worlds we create. Scharf uses the chronological extremes of cartoon characters, but both the prehistoric Flintstones and the futuristic Jetsons are thinly disguised parables of contemporary societal and family behavior. Both shows rely on an extreme role-model stereotypification as the basis for their humor and plot. The men (father/husband) resentfully work their nine-to-five jobs to support their family and inane leisure-time activities. The women (mother/wife) clean, cook, raise the children, pamper their post-adolescent husbands and spend money as befits housewives. The children are happy and well-adjusted. The point of escapism is the easy catharsis of Middle America, the normal comfortable life of what good children want to be when they grow up. Scharf is not too concerned with the implications of this structure. They are too obvious, or rather not obvious enough. Instead, there are the simple pleasure of naiveté, the conscious act of regression, the dissimilar mixture of nostalgia and adult knowledge, and the pure camp appeal of childhood heroes.

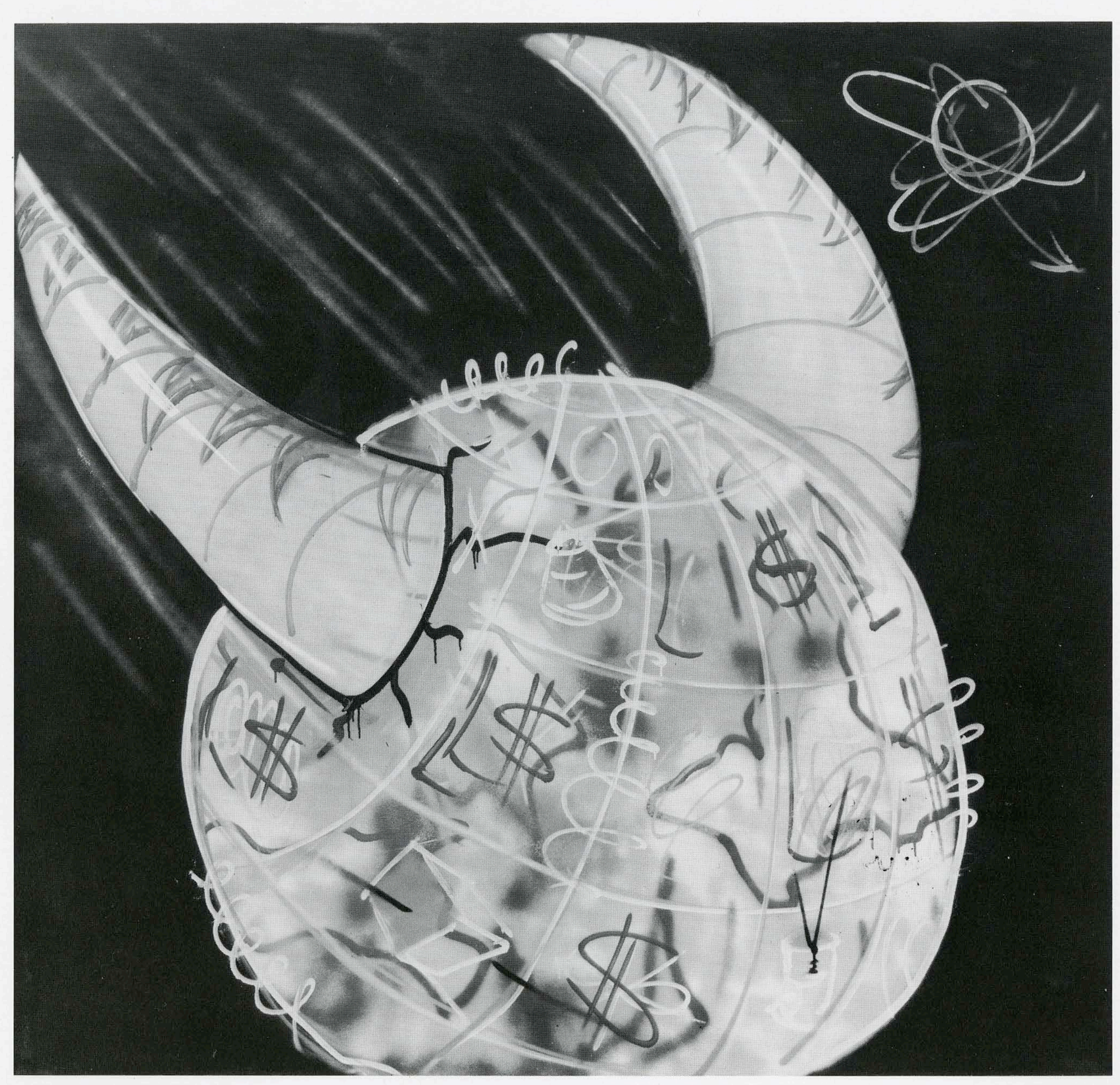


Keith Haring's studio with Untitled (Mermaid), 1982, in foreground

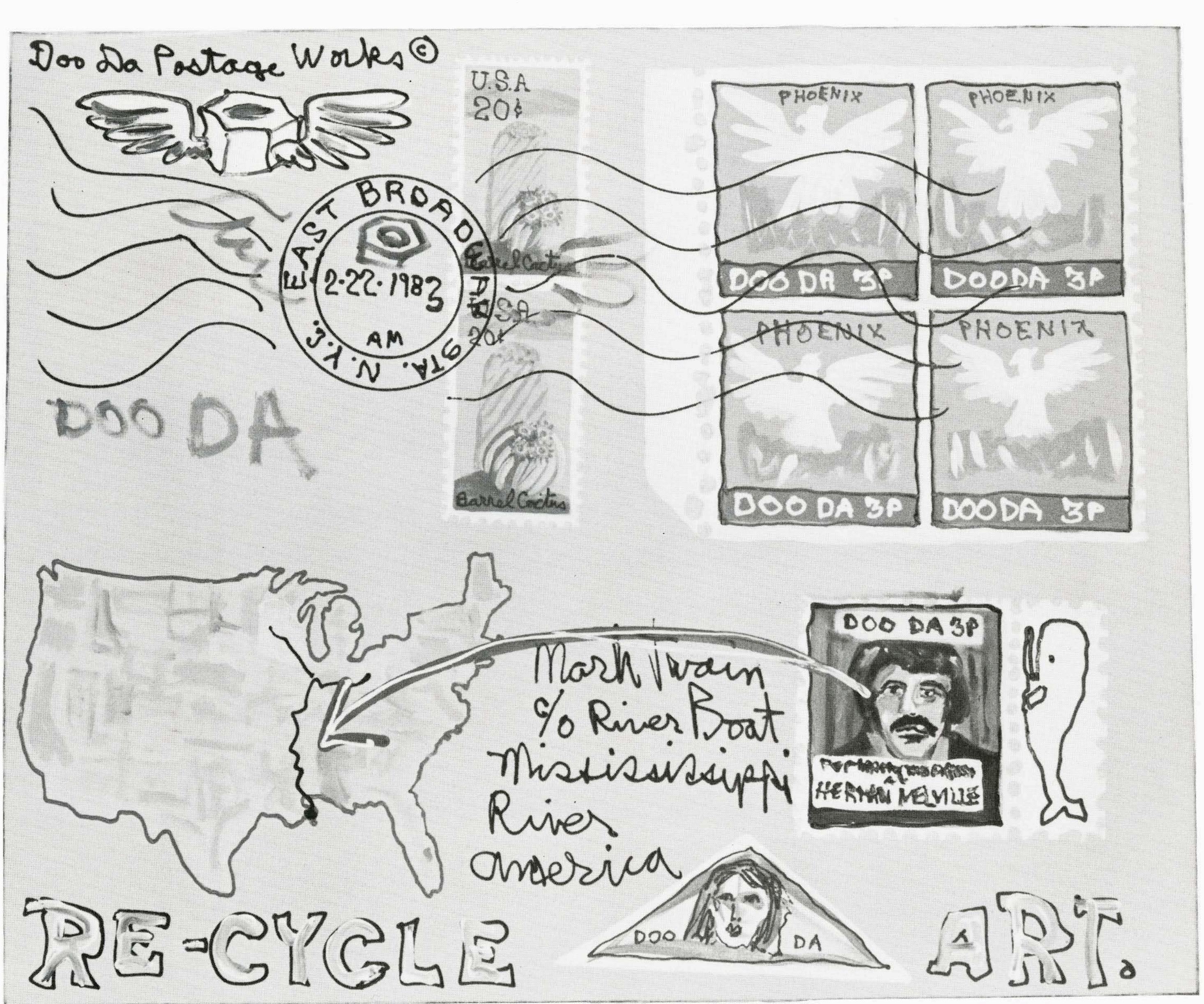
Keith Haring, whose radiant child and other doodlish figures have become something of pop-art icons, has a cartoonish wit and sense for using self-promotional stardom that is uncannily effective. Haring's art is as accessible in its enjoyability as it is in its deliberate proliferation. His images have had such worldwide attention, from T-shirts to unending media coverage to excessive artistic output, that they have become a statement about fame and the great American success story. Haring's very public profile closely recalls the quintessential art-star model, Andy Warhol.



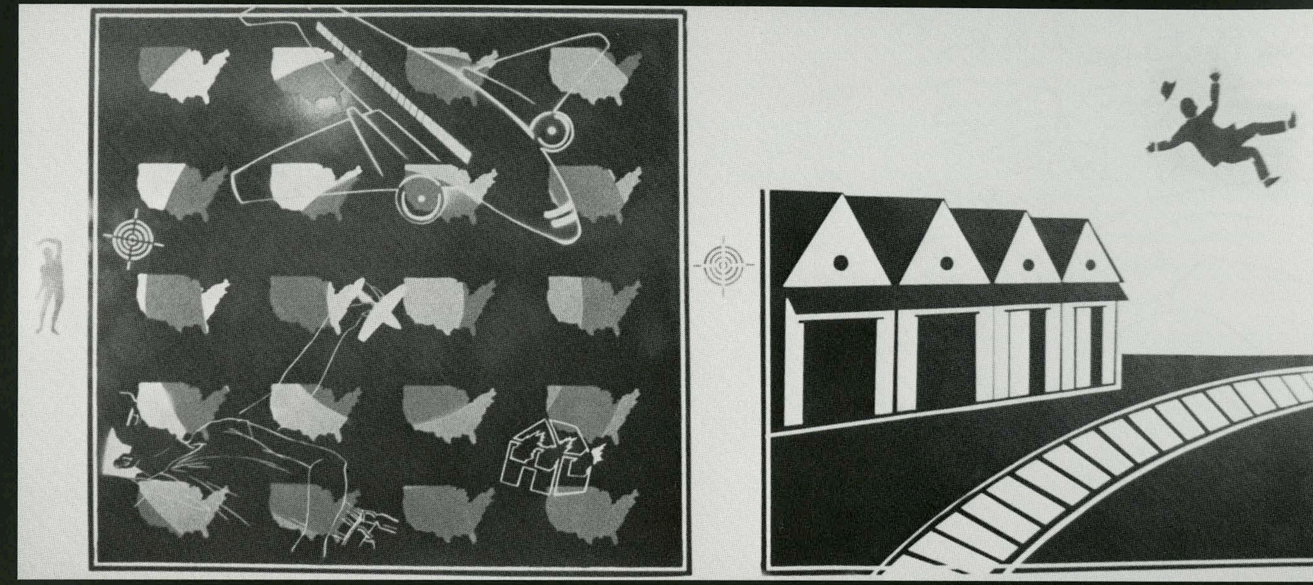
Keith Haring, Untitled (Totem), 1983, in collaboration with Kermit Oswald



Frederick Brathwaite, *Satellite Painting*, 1983



E. F. Higgins III, *Mark Twain c/o River Boat*, 1983



David Wojnarowicz, *Diptych II*, 1982

Jean-Michel Basquiat regresses to an adolescence which is more angry than the whimsical cartoonishness of Scharf and Haring. While much contemporary figurative artistic regression is in the name of childish fun, Basquiat turns to it as a means of freer, more dramatic artistic expression. Basquiat is like some mad child who has just broken his crayons and wants to draw. His rough crude style is the visual surface of the images he throws up to his consciousness. His process of creativity is an automatic writing and so is the art itself. He bears his soul and its anger in an unrelenting stream of consciousness. There is no editing, there is no equivocating, no reason beyond the method. Following the age of artistic reason, Basquiat's primal scrawls are the animal side of a man and artist's soul set free.

Frederick Brathwaite, also known as Fab Five Freddy, has been one of the greatest driving forces and promoters of graffiti art from its first entrance into the art world. Freddy, who gets his tag (name) from "The Fabulous Five," a seminal group of early subway masters that included Lee Quinones, was not a member of that crew, but has been active on the trains and street as well as in the galleries. Brathwaite has always had a certain pop-art sensibility, a true belief that subway art might be the next thing, and a taste for fame. With this drive for a Warholian simulacrum of fame, and a typically camp sense of humor, Freddy did a subway car of Warhol's Campbell's Soup cans. Recently he has taken to painting junk food. Looking at Freddy's paintings of banana splits and milkshakes, one has to ask, where's the beef? There is none. Fab Five Freddy embraces superficiality as its own aesthetic.

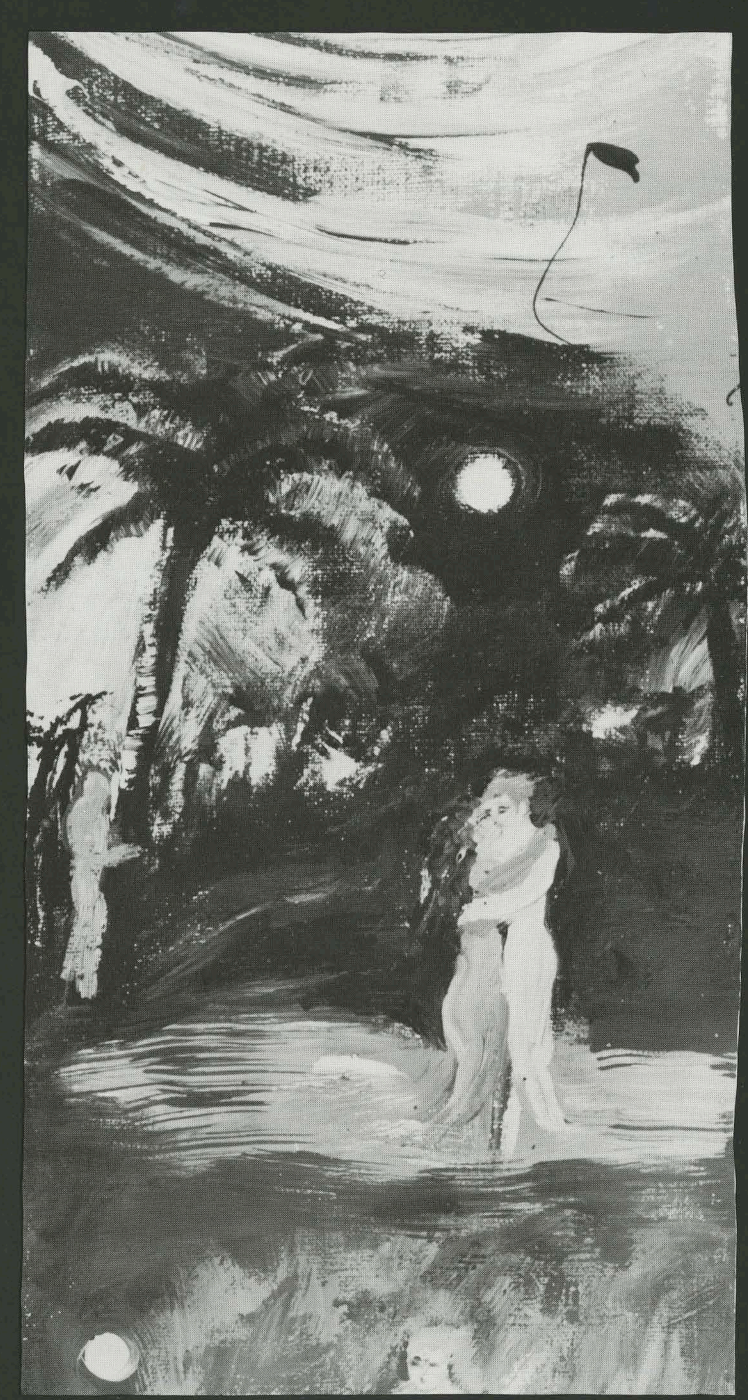
E. F. Higgins's art is created around a set of his personal, rather absurd, fantasies. These excursions from reality are like childhood games that he continues to use in his adult life. The most involved of these playful activities of Higgins's is as a mail artist. Correspondence art is, unfortunately, an underestimated international art movement (or rather, a network of artists) who create and send each other mail as art. From the envelope and its stamp to the contents inside, mail art can be endlessly imaginative. Higgins, a collector of stamps as a child, has turned this early hobby into something of an artistic infatuation. Thus, there is Doo Da Post, his own made-up post office. Doo Da Post issues stamps, collected as the United States government's are, either in sheets or as first-day commemorative issues. The stamps are made by photographing his paintings and printing their reduced image on serrated gum-backed paper. They are either portraits of the artist's friends or episodes in the life of Moon Man and Robot Man, two cartoonish alter egos of the artist.

Stephen Lack also has a strong cartoonish element to his art. But with Lack, as opposed to the others, the sketchiness is not to simulate comics, but is the result of the frenzy behind the creation. There is such an urgency, a feeling of dire emergency, running through Lack's paintings that he just couldn't have the time to spell it all out for you. They are the vision of one who has fallen asleep in front of the news and is dreaming of the media disasters which invade our lives on a daily basis. Lack's powerful violent scenarios attack the brain with the rapidity and horror of television trash and bold-face tabloid headlines. Lack takes the sick aspects of contemporary life and portrays them with such a perverse pleasure in black humor that one can only laugh; laugh at the crashed automobile, laugh at the stabbed young man, laugh at the burning factory, laugh at the horrible world we have made, and enjoy it.

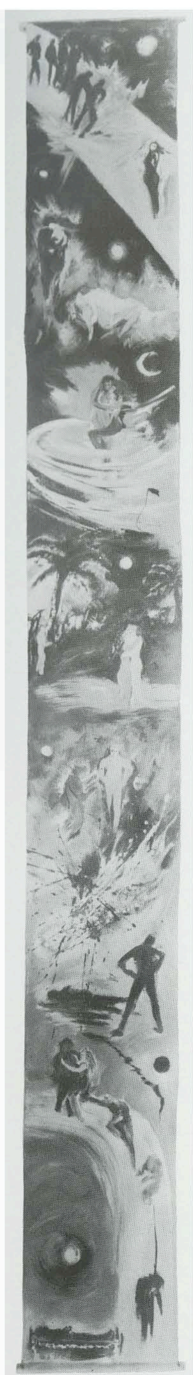
Stephen Lack exemplifies the raw energy and political grief of an important number of artists today. These painters have been affected stylistically and ideologically by the crisis of contemporary history. Locally, there is also the imprint of the slum, with its personal and universal horrors of poverty, urban decay, violence and injustice. While Lack, in pointing to the open sores of society, can make a bad joke of it, others, such as David Wojnarowicz and John Fekner, use them as a point of personal anguish and sociological commentary.

It is necessary, to properly decode the symbols of David Wojnarowicz's political iconography, to read his art as a set of instinctual responses rather than a clearly defined, rationally based stance. The implication of political art is almost always a didactic, pseudo-propagandistic medium of communication. The confusion and sensitivity of Wojnarowicz's art exclude the self-assurance and easy answers of such thinking. Wojnarowicz approaches life, the dilemmas and pains of existence, as a storyteller relating the miseries and strengths of the misbegotten with compassion and faith. A vernacular of the street that is tough and brave, if not a bit exaggerated and wounded, is the language of his narrative tableaus. The outsiders and subcultures of society, such as homosexuals, rebels, convicts and drifters, are the characters in his amoral passion play. Wojnarowicz passes no judgments, he shatters the myths (the glory of the anti-hero) and the misconceptions (the villainy of nonconformity). His interest in the taboo is not for its superficial shock value, but to try and understand, and to engage his intolerant audience in the same pursuit.

John Fekner, *The Factory*, 1984



Keiko Bonk, *Love Tragedy I*, 1984, detail



Keiko Bonk, *Love Tragedy I*, 1984

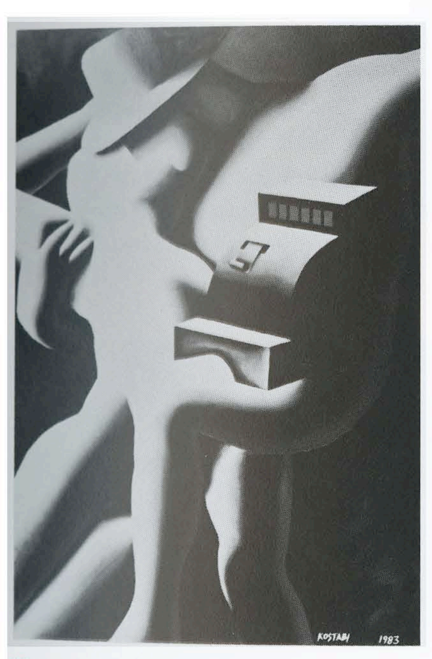
The messages of John Fekner's work are extremely direct. They are comments on the impending obsolescence of society. They are warnings. Fekner has worked extensively on the street, commenting upon the urban decay and media brainwashing of contemporary society. Fekner stencils cryptic, yet potently clear, remarks on the environment such as "THE REMAINS OF INDUSTRY," "SOFT BRAINS WATCH THE SCREENS AND BUY THE JEANS," "FAST FOOD FAST FLING," and "TOXIC JUNKIE." Fekner understands the impact of propaganda and uses its stark formula to point out its insidious pollution of society. Fekner stands against the misuse of power in a world that ravages itself for the small gain of temporary profits. His art is an attack upon the commercial evils of media and industry. For Fekner, words form an art that is a tool of education against the corrupt fabric of society that breeds ignorance and misconceptions as its weapon and only means of continued manipulation.

John Fekner's intense interest in having his art make a statement is not at all the principle which governs most East Village art. While this writer, in this essay and elsewhere, has tried to avoid typifying the East Village as specifically one thing, beyond, say, eclectic, it is not a very politically activated group of artists. Every rule has an exception, and certainly John Fekner is not the only exception to this generalization. But the East Village is greatly a reaction against intellectualization. The superficiality which is often found in much of its art is an attempt at something deeper; what is trite is a step towards avoiding the set path of artistic development. If there is indeed nothing new in the East Village, it is because its basis of individuality does not rely on such measures. Artists seek only to express themselves and will do so completely unconcerned with whether it has been said before, or how it might in fact be articulated in a better way. Art as a language of self-expression need not be avant-garde; it need only be universally understandable. If the results appear simplistic, perhaps they are. The philosophic depth may be lacking, the image may be too easy, but there is nothing too simplistic about emotions. Of course, the sophistication of man today may ultimately find that sincerity is a touch too banal.

With originality no longer a measure of authenticity, style has become a mannerism. Young artists indirectly base their art on the overdose of art around them; their styles are a potpourri of various elements from different artists and times. In the search for a tangible means of expression, art is being recreated along the terms of a "generic genrefication." Artists such as Keiko Bonk, Richard Hambleton, Mark Kostabi, Futura 2000 and Luis Frangella enjoy a gut pleasure in the act of painting as an outpouring of sensations which have become clichés to others.

Mark Kostabi, *Everyone I Meet is My Editor,* 1984

Keiko Bonk's paintings indulge in the melodramatic. Her pure unashamed romanticism expresses spontaneous emotions so lost in their dramatic power that they are too corny to believe, yet too overwhelming to dismiss. Her passionately embracing couples, erupting volcanos, dreamy palm trees and voluptuous elemental powers of the sea, sun and moon, all swirl together in her long sinuous brushstrokes as turgid scenarios in the grand drama of love. There is such a captivating sensual energy to Bonk's paintings that one is psychologically swept up into her naiveté and obvious clichés. Rationally extracting oneself from her overwrought feelings seems a pointless task in the context of an epic universal truth and beauty. The inner turmoil of first love is made explicit in her exploding landscapes. The violence of the natural elements and the (self-) destructive forces of man are made equivalent to the erratic yearnings of the heart. In the cathartic emotional release, sorrow and lust are too obsessive to be satisfied with a conclusion.



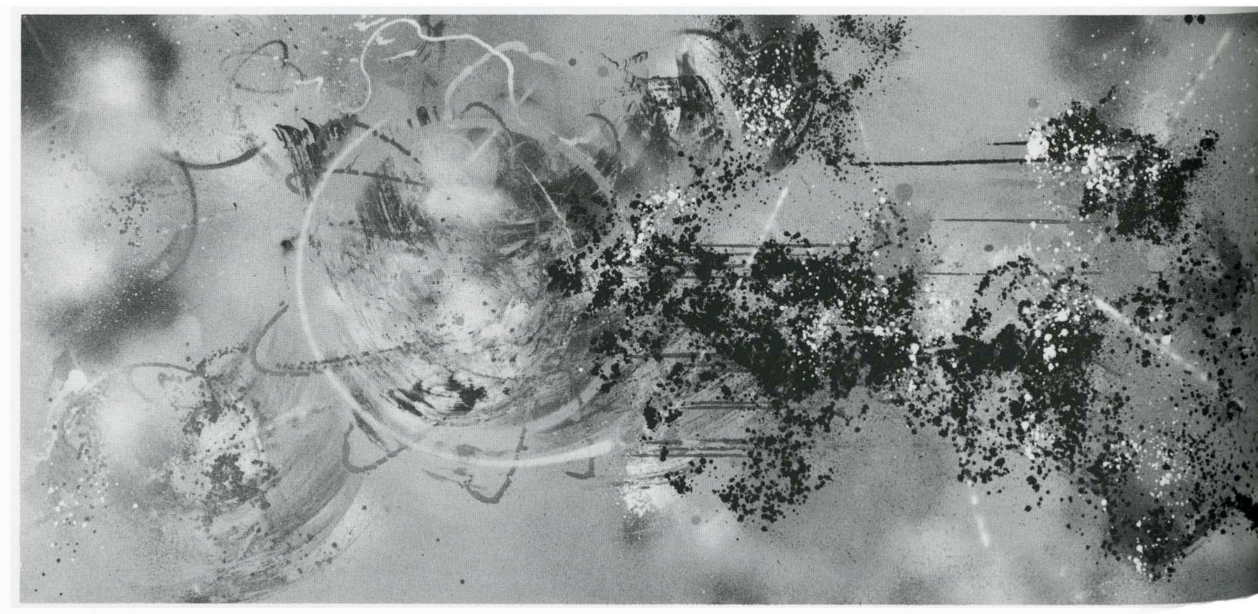
Mark Kostabi,
Cashier's Kiss, 1983

Mark Kostabi is the portrait painter of the Everyman. His anonymous, featureless figures play out parables of human emotions and actions. Kostabi's work contains a sardonic commentary on man's behavior, even in his most highly emotive, sentimental paintings. Kostabi emanates a cruel mocking cynicism that is directed at the art world, artistic sincerity and society in general. His paintings draw one in with their charm and prettiness as a trap, and then make some mean joke on it all. Kostabi's "corrupt" values become a philosophic amorality, the almost indefensible, rational argument of the egoist. It is a somewhat scary thought to see art embody the principles of selfishness and materialism, but Kostabi's deceit is precisely his disarming way of deifying the most unholy sides of human nature.

Futura 2000 is an anomaly in the graffiti art world. His work does not have the characteristics which one would ascribe to graffiti as a whole. Futura is neither figurative nor comic-styled; his paintings are not block-letter or wild-style drawings of his name. Futura is an abstract painter, and a spray-paint virtuoso. His paintings bear a strong derivative resemblance to the work of Wassily Kandinsky, though Futura's decorative motif is a much more instinctual art form than Kandinsky's spiritual and theoretical "Compositions" and "Improvisations." There is something inherent in the qualities of spray paint which makes it the perfect medium for Futura's pure abstraction. The slickness of surface, the delicate pointillism of the diffracted spray, the atmospheric dreaminess of the muted linearity and the luminescence of the color are the special properties of Futura's paintings. If absolute beauty is enough in painting today, Futura has taken us there.

Luis Frangella, as a painter of the human form, ranges from an energized expressionism to a quiet, sculptural classicism. Frangella's work contains both the Apollonian and the Dionysian. His ease in stylistically representing the same subject matter in different ways allows him a broad range of intellectual and emotional expression. Frangella's monumental paintings of male torsos, hands and busts are often extremely sculptural. He bases these paintings not on live models, but on small ceramic pieces of his own making. In transforming the sculpted image to canvas, he exaggerates its pose in space with overdramatic lighting and foreshortening. The end effect is an extreme mannerism of classical motifs. Frangella, as well, often paints this subject matter with a frenzied, expressionistic brushstroke. Rather than an overemphasized classicism, these busts come to resemble powerful free-style compositions of movement, form and psychological intensity.

As Frangella forms his art from the classical ideal and its sculptural manifes-tation, as Kostabi takes the compositional format of famous paintings and stretches them to his high-tech materialist aesthetic, as Hambleton rethinks the art and psychology of Marlboro ads and wild-west paintings, as Laemmle confuses the elements of pastoral painting, each is a part of the course of post-modern eclectic art. Art has moved away from the invention of the new, and is currently redefining and reevaluating the theories and styles of its



Futura 2000, *Edge of a Flat World*, 1983