

## Art and Urban Space: *Rent*, the East Village, and the Construction of Meaning

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### ART AND URBAN SPACE

Art has an immediate relationship to urban space. From alternative, activist art rooted in the neighborhood to prestige-associated art in museums and galleries, art is spatially defined by its interaction with its setting, and implicated, to varying degrees, in the culture industry. Artists are mobile on the spectrum of spatially-defined prestige and value. From the space of anonymous, non-profit, neighborhood-oriented cultural work to the space of the fame-, profit-, and institution-oriented culture industry, artists can hope to move, and this hope often sustains their labor.

The value and meaning of art is contextually defined by its place in the field of display (neighborhood, alternative space, mainstream museum, gallery, theatre, movie theatre, or DVD, among others). Thus, art is implicated in “the processes of capitalist valorization,” even when presented as an autonomous circuit for “the constitution of communities and collective subjectivities.”<sup>1</sup> Art-making is affective, immaterial labor—that is, “labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, knowledge, or communication”<sup>2</sup>—with its focus on “the creation and manipulation of affects,” and its ultimately intangible products: “a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community.”<sup>3</sup> As the immaterial labor “in its various guises (informational, affective, communica-

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tive, and cultural) tends toward being spread throughout the entire workforce and throughout all laboring tasks as a component, larger or smaller, of all laboring processes,"<sup>4</sup> art is thoroughly embedded in the present capitalist system.

Yet art is nonetheless important as a medium to constitute meaning. With its informational, affective, communicative, and cultural power, art can produce new social meanings, and transform the space in which it is implicated, either joining with capitalist forces, or re-contextualizing those forces from within. As a medium, art changes the cognitive map of space, the neighborhood, and the city.

New York's East Village offers a case in point. A working-class, multi-ethnic neighborhood for 160 years, and one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, the East Village (like SoHo before it) became a hot spot and "a major phenomenon" of the art scene with an influx of artists and commercial galleries representing New York's two-billion-dollar art business in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> The Lower East Side was described in the art press as "a unique blend of poverty, punk rock, drugs, arson, Hell's Angels, winos, prostitutes and dilapidated housing that adds up to an adventurous avant-garde setting of considerable cachet."<sup>6</sup> This shift in the image of the place from a poor and disinvested neighborhood to a thriving, adventurous avant-garde setting resulted in a rise in rents and the displacement of the poor from neighborhood housing, accelerating a New York City government strategy of disinvestment and transfer of property to real-estate developers under way since the fiscal crisis of the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> Art not only shifted the cognitive map of the space but facilitated actual changes in the spatial and demographic features of the district. The East Village thus represents the dynamic relationship between art and urban space, through which both art and space generate, transform, and give meaning to each other.

During this dynamic period, the East Village gave rise to a number of art works that memorialize the place,<sup>8</sup> a representative one of which is *Rent*, Jonathan Larson's Tony Award- and Pulitzer Prize-winning musical (1996). *Rent* portrays and celebrates the Bohemian life and communities of multi-ethnic and multi-sexual people living with and without HIV.<sup>9</sup> Developed over seven years by an obscure East-Village composer who waited on tables to make his living, *Rent* is set in the East Village, "amid poverty, homelessness, spunky gay life, drag queens and punk." The musical opened at the New York Theatre Workshop in the East Village on February 13, 1996 to glowing reviews, and its six-week run was immediately extended through March 31 and sold out.<sup>10</sup> From this 150-seat theatre, it then moved to Broadway, where it

reopened at the 1185-seat Nederlander Theatre on April 29 with a budget of 3.5 million dollars, and booked 10 million dollars in ticket sales in just nine weeks.<sup>11</sup> Larson died on January 25—of an initially misdiagnosed aortic aneurysm—just a few hours after the final dress rehearsal, as the piece was about to start previews, and his death seems to have further spurred enthusiasm for the production. As a Broadway publicist put it, “*Rent* was fascinatingly good, but the fact that the author died when he did made it very unusual. . . . Suddenly it’s the greatest thing since cheesecake.”<sup>12</sup> The author/composer’s triumph and demise resonated remarkably well with the piece itself, which Larson created—as he explained just after the final dress rehearsal in his first and last interview with the *New York Times*—in response to his “friends coping with AIDS, . . . to celebrate the lives of people who have died young.”<sup>13</sup> On April 9, Jonathan Larson was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

From nonprofit theatre company to profit-oriented commercial theatre, from anonymity to fame, from the fringe to the mainstream, from novelty to prestige, from the authentic to the “sell-out,” the value and meanings of *Rent* shifted across the spectrum of cultural production as it moved spatially through the city from downtown to uptown. Memorializing the East Village yet implicated in the culture industry, *Rent* epitomizes the relationship between art and urban space as generative of each other. The ultimate question that the case of *Rent* thus raises is, how does art, as both affective industrial labor and a meaning-making medium, create space to refract and re-contextualize social meanings to generate something new?

#### ART, GENTRIFICATION, AND ACTIVISM: MAPPING THE EAST VILLAGE

Set in the late 1980s, *Rent* pays tribute to the East Village’s artistic heyday by pointing to specific places associated with strong cultural memories. One of the main events in the plot of *Rent* is a performance art show that protests the eviction of homeless people from a vacant lot on 11th Street between Avenues A and B, right next to the building that is home to the two heroes of the musical, the filmmaker Mark and the ex-junkie, HIV-positive songwriter Roger. The location is specifically described at the beginning of the piece by Mark, who films people and events, and narrates the story, throughout the show. Mark explains:

We live in an industrial loft on the corner of 11th Street and Avenue B, the top floor of what was once a music-publishing factory. Old rock-‘n’-roll posters hang

on the walls. They have Roger's picture advertising gigs at CBGB's and the Pyramid Club. We have an illegal wood-burning stove; its exhaust pipe crawls up to a skylight. All of our electrical appliances are plugged into one thick extension cord which snakes its way out a window. Outside, a small tent-city has sprung up in the lot next to our building. Inside, we are freezing because we have no heat.<sup>14</sup>

CBGB & OMFUG, an actual club on the Bowery, was punk rock's main home in the 1970s, a venue for acts including Patti Smith, Television, Blondie, and the Talking Heads.<sup>15</sup> A party after the performance art show in *Rent* is held at The Life Cafe, an actual establishment located on the corner of Avenue B and 10th Street that functioned as a literary and performance hotbed during the downtown arts revival of the 1980s. The Life Cafe is also on the northeast corner of Tompkins Square Park, which has a history as a stage for political action reaching back to Civil War draft riots; the park was the site of free concerts by the Grateful Dead and Jimi Hendrix in the 1960s, the downtown arts revival of the 1980s, and the original drag festival, the Wigstock celebration.<sup>16</sup> The riot on Avenue B that follows the performance art show at the end of first act of *Rent* alludes to the "police riot" against the homeless sparked by resistance to a city-imposed curfew on Tompkins Square Park in 1988.<sup>17</sup> The set of the Broadway production of *Rent*, which effectively captures the architectural feeling of the East Village, is complete with a metal Christmas-tree sculpture, which echoes a Christmas-tree sculpture that stood in the Community Garden at Avenue B and 6th Street.<sup>18</sup>

The Lower East Side, the northern section of which is known as the East Village (a term deriving from real estate parlance), was not only a working-class neighborhood that received waves of immigrants from Europe, the Caribbean, East Asia, and then again from East Europe, but also "the caldron of much socialist, anarchist and other radical politics in New York City," as well as a seedbed for small business. In the late 1970s, however, a sustained incursion of gentrification began after decades of disinvestment and postwar population loss. The multiple names that designate the Lower East Side illustrate the layers of ethnic and cultural communities and past memories that created the neighborhood: the area is "Alphabet City" to progressive culture, "Loisaida" to Spanish-speaking residents, and "the Lower East Side" to East European and Jewish residents. The area was home to many of New York's Beat generation in the 1950s, and to hippies, yippies, and others of the counterculture in the 1960s. Following the virtual bankruptcy of New York in the mid-1970s, reinvestment began in the northern section of the Lower East Side, and a more sustained reinvestment took hold in the neighborhood's residen-

tial real estate with an influx of artists attracted by cheap rents and comparatively large spaces, the demand for which could no longer be met in the already gentrified Greenwich Village and SoHo areas immediately to the west.<sup>19</sup>

By 1982, this influx of artists, along with larger numbers of students and professionals from the fashion, media, publishing, design, architecture, education, theatre, and computer sectors, became a flood. More traditional young professionals, including many from Wall Street, followed. However, cheap rents, proximity to downtown, and the image of a thriving cultural avant-garde—the attractions that promoted gentrification and sustained the vibrant art and cultural scene—were no longer available by 1987, when residential rents were skyrocketing and commercial leases for many of the neighborhood's galleries were rising even faster. Artists and galleries moved to SoHo and later to Chelsea if they had the financial resources, and if not, across the East River to Williamsburg and adjacent Brooklyn neighborhoods.<sup>20</sup> The heyday of art in the East Village that began in 1977 had ended by 1987.<sup>21</sup>

Prior to this period, through planned disinvestment, approximately two million people were forced to move out of the city as a whole. Six hundred thousand were African-American or Hispanic people displaced by fires. With the city government's reduction of the number of fire stations in low-income areas in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the number of suspected cases of arson rose in such neighborhoods as the Bronx, Harlem, the Lower East Side, and Bedford Stuyvesant in Brooklyn. Minimal investigation was conducted. Tuberculosis, drug addiction, AIDS, a decline in the birthrate, and rising crime rates followed. Between 1970 and 1980, 15 percent of the residents of the Lower East Side left the neighborhood due to arson and the abandonment of buildings by landlords. This was the state of the East Village before it began to change at the beginning of the 1980s with reinvestment and the influx of artists, professionals, galleries, clubs, restaurants, and real-estate business in a process of displacement that was termed "renewal" or "revitalization."<sup>22</sup>

An organizer of the activist art collective Political Art Documentation and Distribution (PAD/D), which was founded in 1980 and lasted until 1987, offers a vivid account of the neighborhood prior to gentrification:

In many places the Lower East Side circa 1979 indeed looked like a B-movie version of life amidst the ruins of a nuclear or environmental catastrophe. Overturned cars, their chassis stripped of parts, were strewn along the sides of streets, especially on the alphabet Avenues B, C and most of all, D. Burnt out or demolished properties cut spaces between tenement buildings. These openings became filled with rubble, trashed appliances, syringes and condoms, as well as pigeons

and rats. Often they appeared to be returning to a state of wilderness as weeds and fast-growing ailanthus trees began to sprout from the piles of fallen bricks and mortar. Along some stretches of these avenues there were more square feet of this antediluvian scenery than extant architecture.

Still, residents in this predominantly Latino community could be seen organizing gardens amid the rubble and entering and leaving tenements to go to work, always outside the neighborhood, to shop or to visit social clubs. In the summer Ukrainian men played checkers in Thompkins [sic.] Square, while the women sat together on the opposite side of the park conversing. Black leather and mohawks, remnants from the already fading punk scene, shared sidewalks with kids chilling in open hydrants. There was always the sound of a conga drum, meting out a near 24-hour pulse.<sup>23</sup>

This description makes clear why the real estate industry, and even the city government, called low-income neighborhoods such as Hell's Kitchen and the Lower East Side "untamed territories," and called renters who ventured into the areas "trail blazers" and "urban pioneers."<sup>24</sup> Yet the Lower East Side of this period was home to diverse residents in terms of class, race, and ethnicity. Its politics was liberal and volatile; the neighborhood gave rise to "the most aggressive anti-gentrification and anti-homeless resistance, the most concentrated squatters' movement of the period, as well as a significant part of the AIDS and ACT UP activism responsible for the most imaginative city-wide protests of the decade."<sup>25</sup>

The police riot against the homeless mentioned above occurred at the peak of this "trail blazing" wave of gentrification, ultimately demonstrating the robustness of the neighborhood's activist culture. In January 1988, as a result of disinvestment and warehousing,<sup>26</sup> an estimated 17,800 homeless people were living in Tompkins Square Park. New residents in the neighborhood, restaurant owners, store owners, and real estate agents complained, and on August 6, the city imposed a 1:00 a.m. curfew on the park and surrounding areas to facilitate the eviction of the homeless people. This turned into a riot during which the police provoked a confrontation to justify violently evicting the homeless people, their defenders, local squatters, artists, and onlookers. The incident was filmed by several video artists, which led to the prosecution of 17 police officers, inaugurating the use of video media as a tool for activist struggle.<sup>27</sup> Between 1988 and 1991, an eclectic group occupied the park, keeping the city's struggles over homelessness, gentrification, and inadequate housing in the public eye. In 1991, the city nonetheless closed the park, drove out the homeless without offering alternative housing, and enclosed the park completely in iron fences.<sup>28</sup>

## ART AND ACTIVISM IN THE EAST VILLAGE

Art and activism, or art and the neighborhood, have always had a precarious relationship. Artists were on the vanguard of gentrification, and they either naturalized or challenged the process.<sup>29</sup> The cultural critic Craig Owen describes artists in the East Village as being involved in a search “for lost difference [that] has become the primary activity of the contemporary avant-garde”; this search entails appropriating subcultures as a source of original force and integrity, and seeking and developing “more and more resistant areas of social life for mass-cultural consumption.”<sup>30</sup> Even poverty and suffering are aestheticized. The first museum exhibition of East Village art was mounted by the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania as early as 1983. The exhibition catalogue portrays the area as an exciting bohemian environment in a full-page photograph of a Lower East Side street scene. The photograph juxtaposes a homeless man sitting in a doorway at the lower edge of the frame with a poster pasted to the left on the graffiti-covered wall behind him. The poster, advertising a Holbein exhibition at the Pierpont Morgan Library, features a large reproduction of a Holbein portrait, the figure on which faces the homeless man in the doorway. The composition mingles high art with subculture (graffiti) and “low-life” (the homeless man), constructing an image of rightness and meaningfulness in its portrayal of the unique ambience and exotic, though dangerous, pleasure of this particular art scene. The photograph, entitled “Holbein and the Bum,” exemplifies a degraded, aestheticized documentary style which Martha Rosler has described as “the documentary of the present, the petted darling of the monied, a shiver-provoking, slyly decadent, lip-smacking appreciation of alien vitality or a fragmented vision of psychological alienation in city and town.”<sup>31</sup>

Even socially-engaged art can elicit interpretations that expose a gap between artists and neighborhood communities. A significant example of such art is “The Real Estate Show” organized by COLAB (Collaborative Project). On the last day of 1979, a subgroup from this one-year-old artists’ group entered a city-owned building on Delancey Street that had been deserted for years, and occupied the site to expose “the system of waste and disuse that characterizes the profit system in real estate.”<sup>32</sup> On January 1, 1980, the Committee for the Real Estate Show opened their “squat-gallery” to friends and the public. The show displayed artworks critical of rent-gouging landlords, city-run development agencies, and the “suburbs” with their “3 BR, no rats, no unemployment” exclusivity. On the next day, the city padlocked the building. Then, after receiving bad press incited by the artists, the city offered the

artists a smaller space a few blocks away in which to resume the exhibition. Later the city offered the artists still another storefront to use as an ongoing gallery. The new space, named ABC No Rio, has offered changing exhibitions, musical events, happenings, and occasional art education projects for neighborhood children since 1980.<sup>33</sup>

The artists of COLAB followed the example of the “direct action” strategies of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and they imagined that the community would be encouraged to take similar action to stop the irrational warehousing of useful property. Yet there was nothing irrational about this warehousing, which was part of the city’s long-standing plan, as argued above, to “weaken investment and living conditions” in low income areas so that “re-development could attract real estate developers and upper income residents.”<sup>34</sup> Moreover, people in the neighborhood did not necessarily grasp the point of the show. According to one COLAB member, “. . . a lot of people saw the show, the community people, they thought it was just a group of artists protesting that they could not show their work anywhere.”<sup>35</sup>

Nor were the artists of COLAB unaware of their position on the threshold of complicity with the city government’s gentrification initiative:

We fall into that area of implication because we’ve got the best deal in town. We’ve got a low rent and minimal pressure. And the reason that we’re here is because we’re attractive, because we represent an art organization. Whether or not that’s a save-face for the city, allowing it to say it’s not involved in gross speculation . . . ‘Look we gave the building to ABC No Rio’ . . . it’s really complex and for that reason I don’t want to project an image of purity.<sup>36</sup>

It is noteworthy that the neoliberal discourse of the Reagan and Thatcher years was already emphasizing personal responsibility over the governmental oversight for the well-being of a community. Art was also implicated in such discourse. Instead of some state agency using public funds to re-build a low-income neighborhood, interventions in the 1990s had to be “turned into juried art competitions, activist art projects, or performance art rituals in order to attract public and/or corporate support.” Often, the audience for the message politics of activist art was less “real people, real neighborhood” than “the symbol-analysts in city hall, corporate towers, or not-for-profit suites.”<sup>37</sup>

*Rent* depicts this ambiguity in the relationship between art and the neighborhood, or art and activism, with irony. Although the performance art show at the center of the plot is intended, as the performance artist describes, to “protest the eviction of the homeless (and artists),” the landlord—despite the



parenthetical aside—interprets the performance as the artist’s protest over “[l]osing her performance space.”<sup>38</sup> When Mark disrupts an imminent act of police violence by filming a police officer first poking the sleeping, homeless Blanket Person, and then raising his nightstick to beat her, Blanket Person snaps at Mark:

Blanket Person: (to Mark) Who the fuck do you think you are? / I don’t need no goddamn help / From some bleeding heart cameraman/ My life’s not for you to / Make a name for yourself on! . . . Just trying to use me to kill his guilt / It’s not that kind of movie, honey / Let’s go—this lot is full of / Motherfucking artists / Hey artist / Gotta dollar? / I thought not.<sup>39</sup>

Artists can indeed make a name for themselves on the backs of homeless people. Like the actual video artists who recorded the police riot in Tompkins Square Park, Mark films the riots on Avenue B, and his footage attracts network-TV interest. While video and the mass media are strategically effective tools for activism, they are also tools for self-promotion. For Mark, accepting a job offered by a tabloid television program would be “selling out,” but it is also “nice to dream” of it.<sup>40</sup> The complicity of art in the culture industry is further emphasized in *Rent* by the background of the landlord of the building and lot that is the subject of dispute and protest: he is an ex-artist and ex-roommate of Mark and Roger who married into a wealthy family, and who plans to build “the home of Cyberarts” on the lot. Cyberarts, as he puts it, will be “[a] state-of-the art, digital, virtual interactive studio / . . . You’ll see—the beauty of a studio / That lets us do our work and get paid / With condos on the top / Whose rent keeps open our shop / Just stop her protest / And you’ll have it made / You’ll see—or you’ll pack.”<sup>41</sup>

#### EYES OF THE ARTISTS: MEANING-MAKING AND CRITICISM

Art, in its production and consumption, has an ambiguous relationship to the processes of commoditization. As Pierre Bourdieu describes, the “economy of practices” within the field of art production is based on a reversal of the principles governing ordinary economies in which high profits, honors, and institutional consecration signify value in themselves.<sup>42</sup> The play, in consonance with this “economy of practices,” denies economic interest in favor of aesthetic and artistic autonomy by portraying the act of art-making as ultimately affective. Roger’s song, “One Song Glory,” depicts his wish to write a song that will succeed in a blaze of glory before the virus takes over; the one he finally writes, “Your Eyes”—a love song for his true love, Mimi, who is

also dying of AIDS—miraculously brings Mimi back from death at the end of the play. Mark ultimately turns down the lucrative job offer from the TV program because he has to “finish [his] film.” Simultaneously, the friends realize their respective truths (for Roger, of his love for Mimi; for Mark, of his mission as an artist), and these truths enable them to complete their respective work (for Roger, his song; for Mark, his documentary film about his friends and the neighborhood). At the moment of realization, they sing together, “. . . And when you’re living in America / At the end of the millennium / You’re what you own / So I own not a notion / I escape and ape content / I don’t own emotion – I rent / . . . / We’re dying in America / To come into our own / But when you’re dying in America / At the end of the millennium / You’re not alone / I’m not alone / I’m not alone.”<sup>43</sup> The song juxtaposes art defined by ownership (a rented notion, content, and emotion) to art as the truth of life (coming into one’s own at the moment of dying) and connection (one is not alone), and chooses the latter over the former. This choice is obviously false, as art-making is labor no matter how self-fulfilling it may be, and therefore cannot be removed from the system defined by ownership.

In spite of this celebration of art as being affective self-expression and connection-building, *Rent* disrupts its seamless world of affective value at several turns, revealing that the artist’s vision is somewhat compromised, and that the East Village seems to extend beyond this vision. The homeless Blanket Person—in an unexpected refutation of the point of “Holbein and the Bum”—speaks back. The performance art show, intended to protest the eviction of the homeless, submits to interpretation as a protest over a lost performance space, and then “succeeds” to the point that it stirs up an unintended riot.

In addition, this performance art show reveals the gap between the artist’s singular vision and the entire world it attempts to portray. The show is considered to be “annoyingly tame” (the artist and Elsie the cow jump over the moon to escape the sterile Cyberland) and “out of touch,” compared to the taboo-shattering performance art scene in the East Village of the early and mid-1980s.<sup>44</sup> During this period, Holly Hughes, Tim Miller and John Fleck were exploring the status and viewpoint of gays and lesbians; all later lost their funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, when their work was judged “obscene.” “Feminist porn activist” and adult-film star Annie Sprinkle was inverting and spoofing sexual exploitation by inviting audience members to line up to look at her cervix. Karen Finley was exposing the objectification of and sexual violence against women, cheerfully smearing beaten eggs on her naked body. In response to these and other artists, many

East Village clubs were shut down by city agencies in the mid-1980s on the pretext that the buildings did not meet safety-code regulations.<sup>45</sup> *Rent*'s show within a show is modeled on Laurie Anderson's innovative performance art pieces of the 1970s, and seems to document the East Village activist performance art scene, but somehow falls short of capturing its raw energy and politics.

*Rent* also disrupts its own message of love and connection by revealing (albeit momentarily) the fact that it is aestheticizing AIDS and AIDS activism. Four of the major characters—who form two pairs of lovers, Roger and Mimi, and their gay anarchist friend Collins and transvestite Angel—are HIV positive. Unlike the ending of *La Bohème*, the opera this musical is based on, and contrary to the expectations of the audience, Angel dies while Mimi survives at the conclusion of the story. That Angel rather than Mimi dies is thoroughly conventional: “the one who does die is the drag queen, who, like so many fatally ill people on stage and screen nowadays, is a life force whose role in the grand scheme of things is to instill in others the courage to live.”<sup>46</sup> Yet for all that the musical aestheticizes AIDS and death, the unexpected survival of Mimi provides a mild bathos that exposes the very conventionality of tragic death at the end of a narrative of fatal illnesses, again somehow disrupting the artistic composition.

As for AIDS activism, the musical depicts a support group for people with HIV that is based on gatherings that took place several times a week at the East Village social service agency Friends in Deed. The *Rent* song “Life Support” offers the message, “forget regret, or life is yours to miss,” but the message is sharply challenged by one of the members of the group, who sings, “Excuse me . . . – I’m having a problem with this / This credo – / My T-cells are low – / I regret that news, okay?”<sup>47</sup> This brief eruption unsettles the otherwise smooth conveyance of the philosophy of the musical: “There’s only now / There’s only here / Give in to love / Or live in fear / no other path / No other way / No day but today.”<sup>48</sup> Larson added the character who makes this challenge, naming him Gordon after a friend with HIV, in response to the rage expressed by HIV-positive friends who attended a living-room read-through of the play: “Jonathan’s message was love, love, love, and Gordon and Pam were like, ‘Fuck you, you don’t have AIDS’ . . . ‘You don’t have AIDS, so you can’t just say that at the end of the day all that matters is love.’”<sup>49</sup> As the musical acknowledges in urging action (“Actual reality – act up –fight AIDS”<sup>50</sup>), “Life Support” and Gordon’s eruption demonstrate that the notion that the musical upholds—the primacy of love and connection—though not completely wrong, only partially addresses the range of emotions

and experiences connected with AIDS. Poverty also falls within this range, as the musical shows with a brief scene in which Angel is denied a funeral because Collins cannot pay the undertaker.

*Rent* foregrounds its status as an artistic composition through Mark, who films and documents events throughout the play, and who narrates the story. While the play adheres throughout to its uplifting message of self-expression, connection, and love, it also disrupts that artistic vision, momentarily exposing the complications of money, ownership, the uses and misuses of art, and the capacity of art to aestheticize and conceal both unpleasant facts and the rage associated with death and poverty. These disruptions present an immanent criticism of the very ambiguity of art as at once affective and money-oriented, uplifting and abusive, and expressive and concealing.

These disruptions in the text reveal art's ambiguous relationship to processes of commoditization and create space to change the cognitive map of the East Village and a city fraught with a range of problems (with robust struggles against them) that arise with gentrification and AIDS. Fredric Jameson describes the cognitive map as "a situational representation" on the part of the individual subject of "the ensemble of society's structures as a whole," the totality of which is "properly unrepresentable."<sup>51</sup> Art, as a medium to constitute meaning, enables the individual subject to map her or his relationship to social space. By designating the gaps between the artist's vision of the world and the vaster, unrepresentable realities, *Rent* offers multiple points of identification for the individual viewer that enables her or him to re-configure the cognitive map of social relations and space.

A concrete and far more radical example of artwork functioning as such a medium is provided by the activist group ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), which included such art collectives as Gran Fury, Aids Demo Graphics, and Diva-TV Videos, and whose sophisticated use of image, language, and performance inspired new forms of social activism. With its strong emphasis on cultural activism, ACT UP demonstrated from its founding in 1987 that AIDS is a social crisis aggravated by pathological policies, ideas, and actions, shifting "the objectifying analytic gaze away from so-called 'risk practices' and 'risk groups' and how they threaten the 'general population' to a very different form of causal factors and responsible individuals."<sup>52</sup>

The installation "Let the Record Show. . .," at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1987, shed light on this "different form of causal factors." The installation presented cardboard cutouts of public figures juxtaposed with statements for which each is responsible: "AIDS is God's judgment of a so-

ciety that does not live by His rules” (Jerry Falwell, televangelist); “Everyone detected with AIDS should be tattooed in the upper forearm, to protect common needle users, and on the buttocks to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals” (William F. Buckley, columnist); “The logical outcome of testing is a quarantine of those infected” (Jesse Helms, US Senator); “It is patriotic to have the AIDS test and be negative” (Cory SerVaas, Presidential AIDS Commission); “We used to hate faggots on an emotional basis. Now we have a good reason” (anonymous surgeon); and finally, silence (President Ronald Reagan), a reference to Reagan’s notorious seven-year public silence on the epidemic, during which he took no official measures, and which ended only after 25,644 known deaths, in 1987. Above this tableau was a sign reading SILENCE=DEATH, an equation that supports multiple interpretations. As others have observed, the sign can be understood to refer to the state-level failures to address the epidemic adequately, or to the silence of individuals in denial of their own complicity with the epidemic; the sign may also read as a call to those living with AIDS to announce their status and mobilize in solidarity with others. As a site for producing multiple interpretations, this artwork interrogates and reconstructs meanings and feelings, illuminating the conflicting social dynamics that oppose stigmatizing attitudes and promoting the sense of health care as a human right.<sup>53</sup>

#### MEANINGS OF *RENT*

By emphasizing the affective value of art, *Rent* tends to diminish the fact of art as labor, as well as its commercial aspect. This overvaluation of the creative pleasure of art encourages the artist to choose poverty, or to choose to engage in low-paying labor to support his or her true, if unpaid, vocation, as did Larson himself as a waiter at the Moondance Diner. The artist’s choice of poverty is often understood to authenticate the artist’s devotion to art, but this understanding shifts social and economic relationship to that of individual choice. The shift resonates with neoliberal rhetoric that excuses the government’s devolution of responsibilities and cutbacks in such arenas as health care, public education and social services by emphasizing personal responsibility for well-being and by blaming the poor and the sick for the lack of self-discipline.<sup>54</sup> For example, such stereotypical images as “the welfare queen” driving a Cadillac abounded, images which brutally mask the suffering of poor women and which supplement the notion that the poor are “a burden of society.”<sup>55</sup> *Rent*, with its emphasis on affect and a responsible self who makes individual choices, unwittingly reinforces such neoliberal styles

of discourse.<sup>56</sup>

With its emphasis on self and affect—love, self-expression, and finding one’s true self—*Rent* displaces the socially constructed problems of AIDS with individual questions of selfhood and mutual support. Angel sings, “To-day for you—tomorrow for me.”<sup>57</sup> While ACT UP worked to shift public discourse from suffering individuals in “risk groups” responsible for their own “risk practices” to other social forces that created and aggravated the epidemic, *Rent* returns AIDS to the private sphere of intimacy and affect.

Similarly, in representing the eviction of homeless people from the lot, *Rent* and its performance artist attribute responsibility to a landlord who lost his “ideals” and “principles,” rather than to the socially constructed problems of poverty and the displacement of the poor that accompanies gentrification; problems that the city, along with real estate developers and landlords, exacerbates with such policies as “reduced zoning regulations, real estate taxes, and subsidies for public housing” that are “framed in neoliberal discourses about enhancing competition and choice when they are simply naked attempts to provide fewer impediments for a certain segment of society to accumulate wealth.”<sup>58</sup>

The East Village is mediated and articulated in *Rent* by a vision of the area, discussed above, as a “Bohemia”; an ideal urban space where freedom and self-expression rule in spite of poverty, homelessness, drugs, crime, and police violence, and in disregard of both the problems of structural inequalities and a long history of robust ethnic, activist, gay and lesbian cultures. The musical reduces anarchism to Collins’ subversive programming of “the MIT virtual-reality equipment to self-destruct as it broadcast[s] the words / ‘Actual reality—act up—fight AIDS,’”<sup>59</sup> and reduces both ethnic and gay and lesbian cultures to individual characters of non-majority racial background and sexual orientation. Moreover, this laudable yet uncritical representation of heterogeneity contributes to the creation of the idealized urban space represented in the musical, and resonates oddly with the rhetoric of “liberation,” “renewal,” and “ecstasy” deployed by critics of East Village art in the early 1980s, one of whom summarized the zeitgeist of the scene as a savage and invigorating explosion of repressed energies: “It’s law of the jungle and the fittest survive. . . ultimately quality prevails.”<sup>60</sup>

Larson’s death seems to have encouraged audiences to identify with the artist=ethical subject equation represented both by Larson and those characters of his whose affect does not seem to be tainted by money.<sup>61</sup> Interpretations of the play, though multiple, repeat the message *Rent* delivers of the positive value of affective and authentic self-expression, as opposed to sell-

ing out. Authenticity is what counts in the musical's representation of the East Village, as an idealized space of freedom, energy, and self-fulfillment, as opposed to uptown, where art is too commercialized to be true to the artist's self. The director, casting director, and producers extended this concern for authenticity to casting, their choice and preparation of venue, and even their promotional strategy for the production. In casting, they looked for performers who looked like "the real thing," favoring actors "who [weren't] too Broadway sounding."<sup>62</sup> As a Broadway venue for the production, they chose the Nederlander Theatre, which is located on a then-rundown stretch of Forty-first Street near the Port Authority. They proceeded to paint the exterior of the building, and renovate and re-decorate the interior, to create a downtown look such that "the world of the play [was] carried out into the building at large, not only on the stage."<sup>63</sup> In promoting the musical when it moved to Broadway, they made seats in the first two rows of every show available for twenty dollars, and set the top ticket price at \$67.50. This enabled young people usually excluded by high Broadway prices to see *Rent*, and created lines outside the theatre everyday. The enthusiasm of young fans (sometimes called Squatters or Rent Heads) further authenticated the show and positively affected marketing outcomes.<sup>64</sup>

Critical assessments of the authenticity of the musical, however, have been mixed. The reviewer for the *Village Voice* found *Rent* to be authentic, writing, "[a]s a self-identified representative of the sort of struggling, East Villagedwelling artist the show portrays, I assure my peers and neighbors that *Rent* does not sell us out"<sup>65</sup>; the *New York Times* reviewer disagreed: "I live around the corner from the real thing, and what I see and hear on the streets has an edge that the earnest practitioners of *Rent* can't quite summon."<sup>66</sup> Whereas the *Village Voice* review describes the subject of *Rent* as "the difficulty of living a life devoted to ideals of artistic expression and personal freedom when your friends are dying, cops beat people living on the street, you can't pay the rent, and you're constantly enticed to sell out, like the generation before you did," Robert Brustein criticizes its portrayal of East Village artists as superficial: "Alas, Larson's New Age Bohemians display nothing but their lifestyles. As for their art, it's just a little daunting to note that most of them have no greater ambition than to dominate the rock charts."<sup>67</sup> *American Theatre* joins Brustein, concluding, "While some lauded the grittiness and the authenticity of his musical, it's clear Larson was a severe romantic and shameless sentimentalist."<sup>68</sup> Some of *Rent*'s most ardent early champions began to wonder "whether the show lost some of its purity or charm or social relevance in its transfer to Broadway"; another describes it as "a Broadway musical that

happened to have its debut Off-Broadway.”<sup>69</sup>

*Rent*’s transfer to Broadway implicated it more deeply in money-making, with DreamWorks SKG buying the rights to the original cast album, Miramax and Tribeca buying the film rights, and Bloomingdale’s selling clothes inspired by the East Village artists represented in the musical.<sup>70</sup> Even the value of Larson’s life was affected: state officials imposed fines on the two hospitals that contributed to Larson’s death through misdiagnoses, and the judgment in a pending lawsuit filed by the author’s family was expected to be large, “given the escalating value of his potential earnings as *Rent* grosses accumulate.”<sup>71</sup> *Rent* became “a gigantic money machine”<sup>72</sup> on Broadway, and many have subsequently come to consider its artistic authenticity compromised.

By denying economic interest in accordance with the cultural production’s “economy of practices” and emphasizing responsible selfhood and affect, *Rent* itself participates in a type of neoliberal discourse, one that transfers socially-constructed despair to a series of individual problems. That the producers and the critics mull over the issue of authenticity only illustrates how deeply the commercial value of the musical is embedded in the very “economy of practices” within the field of art production, and the affective value of selfhood, a value which is supposed to oppose commoditization.

Yet this does not foreclose an analytical perspective on its treatment of social problems; for example, some critics mention that the musical ignores the issue of social class. In the rage expressed by a homeless person and a victim of AIDS, and in a performance art piece that yields multiple meanings (including that of its own inadequacy), *Rent* implicitly critiques its own otherwise seamless world of affective value. These ambiguities, these textual gaps open up space for new meanings, meanings that mediate the cognitive mapping of the East Village, the city, and the vaster and ultimately unrepresentable realities on the part of the individual viewer. In addition, affect also presents a potential to open up such space, as the production of affect, according to Hardt, can construct communal subjectivities. While such production is embedded as “a foundation for capitalist accumulation,” it presents “an enormous potential for autonomous circuits of valorization, and perhaps for liberation.”<sup>73</sup>

Frank Rich of the *New York Times* views the *Rent* phenomena as showing “signs of revealing a large, untapped appetite for something better” at “so divisive a time,” and David Román places the musical in the history of AIDS performance for providing “the means for memorializing the dead, mobilizing the living, and sustaining hope and survival.”<sup>74</sup> These responses represent



only two of the multiple meanings that the musical produces, but reveal a glimpse of communal subjectivities formed through the production of affects that the musical celebrates. In 1996, the cast of *Rent* performed at the opening night of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. This performance may represent the co-optation of *Rent* by a more powerful system, but at the same time, the performance itself may have inspired meanings that supercede or contradict the interests of that system, whether it was presented to obscure problems or simply to entertain. Like Mark's film as it moves to television, *Rent* may produce an unexpected and contingent space for critical possibility as it spreads to multiple media and offer immanent possibilities to change, shift, and transform the cognitive map of urban space and social relationship.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Michael Hardt, "Affective Labor," *boundary 2*, vol. 26 (Summer 1999), 89.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 95–96; See also Paolo Virno, *Maruchichûdo no bunpô* [*Grammatica della moltitudine*], trans. Jun Hirose (Tokyo: Getsuyô-sha, 2004), 83–93 for a discussion on "virtuosity" as affective labor.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>5</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, "The Fine Art of Gentrification," *October* vol. 31 (Winter 1984), 91–111.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick, "Slouching Toward Avenue D," *Art in America* vol. 72 (Summer 1984), 135, quoted in Deutsche and Ryan, "The Fine Art of Gentrification," 93.

<sup>7</sup> Deutsche and Ryan, 93; Neil Smith and James DeFilippis, "The Reassertion of Economics: 1990s Gentrification in the Lower East Side," *International Journal of Urban & Regional Research* vol. 23 (December 1999), 638–53; and Sabu Kohso, *Nyûyôku retsuden* [Lives in New York] (Tokyo: Seido-sha, 2006), 68–74.

<sup>8</sup> A range of art work that was generated in the East Village art scene has been documented in such exhibitions as "East Village USA," curated by Dan Cameron for the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, December 9, 2004 through March 19, 2005. See Sarah Valdez, "Tales of Bohemian Glory," *Art in America* vol. 93 (June/July 2005), 92–95.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Tommasini, "The Seven-Year Odyssey That Led to 'Rent,'" *New York Times*, 17 March 1996.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg, "The Producers: How to Turn \$4,000 Into Many Millions: The Story of 'Rent'—An Unlikely Trio Gambled and Won on Broadway; Savvy Marketing Helped—Cheap Seats for Rabid Fans," *Wall Street Journal*, 23 March 1996.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Tommasini, "The Seven-Year Odyssey That Led to 'Rent.'"

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Larson, *Rent/ Book, Music and Lyrics by Jonathan Larson: Text Written by Evelyn McDonnell with Katherine Silberger: Special Photography by Larry Fink and Stewart Ferebee*, ed. Kate Giel (New York: Rob Weisbach Books, 1997), Act I, n.p.

<sup>15</sup> CBGB closed in 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Larson, *Rent*, 141.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 141; Smith and DeFilippis, “The Reassertion of Economics,” 640 and Kohso, *Nyûyôku retsuden*, 72–73.

<sup>18</sup> Larson, *Rent*, 140.

<sup>19</sup> Smith and DeFilippis, “The Reassertion of Economics,” 640, and Kohso, *Nyûyôku retsuden*, 68–77.

<sup>20</sup> Smith and DeFilippis, “The Reassertion of Economics,” 640.

<sup>21</sup> Valdez, “Tales of Bohemian Glory,” 92.

<sup>22</sup> Kohso, *Nyûyôku retsuden*, 69–70 and Deutsche and Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” 94–98.

<sup>23</sup> Gregory Sholette, “Nature as an Icon of Urban Resistance: Artists, Gentrification and New York City’s Lower East Side, 1979–1984,” *Afterimage* vol. 25 (September/October 1997), 17.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>25</sup> Smith and DeFilippis, “The Reassertion of Economics,” 640.

<sup>26</sup> In the 1980s, the City of New York pulled down some 300 buildings, leaving blocks of vacant lots fenced by barbed wire to prevent illegal occupation. This approach is known as “warehousing,” and was used to create artificial housing shortages to benefit landlords, real-estate business, and the city, which gained property for development. See Kohso, *Nyûyôku retsuden*, 88.

<sup>27</sup> Kohso, 73.

<sup>28</sup> Kohso, 73–74 and Smith and DeFilippis, 640.

<sup>29</sup> Deutsche and Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” 91–111.

<sup>30</sup> Craig Owen, “Commentary: The Problem with Puerilism,” *Art in America* vol. 72 (Summer 1984): 162–63, quoted in Sholette, “Nature as an Icon,” 17.

<sup>31</sup> Martha Rosler, “In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography),” *Martha Rosler, 3 Works* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981), 80, quoted in Deutsche and Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” 109. A description of the photograph is also in Deutsche and Ryan.

<sup>32</sup> Excerpted from the “‘Manifesto or Statement of Intent’ Committee for the Real Estate Show, 1980,” quoted in Sholette, “Nature as an Icon,” 18.

<sup>33</sup> Sholette, “Nature as an Icon,” 18 and 20; for a vivid description of history and activist works at ABC No Rio, see Kohso, *Nyûyôku retsuden*, 97–103.

<sup>34</sup> Sholette, “Nature as an Icon,” 18.

<sup>35</sup> Allan Moore and Marc Miller, eds., “The ABC’s of No Rio and Its Times,” *ABC No Rio Dinero: The Story of a Lower East Side Art Gallery* (New York: ABC No Rio, 1985), 57, quoted in Sholette, “Nature as an Icon,” 18.

<sup>36</sup> Deutsche and Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” 104.

<sup>37</sup> Timothy W. Luke, “But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism / Culture in Action: A Public Art Program of Sculpture Chicago,” *Contemporary Sociology* vol. 25 (September 1996), 682.

<sup>38</sup> Larson, *Rent*, Act I, 9 “Voice Mail #2,” and Act I, 11 “You’ll See,” n.p.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., Act I, 17 “X-Mo Bells #2 / Bummer,” n.p.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., Act II, 29 “Happy New Year B,” n.p.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., Act I, 11 “You’ll See,” n.p.

<sup>42</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); see also Jessica Winegar, “Cultural Sovereignty in a Global Art Economy: Egyptian Cultural Policy and the New Western Interest in Art from the Middle East,” *Cultural Anthropology* vol. 21 (May 2006), 174–175.

<sup>43</sup> Larson, *Rent*, Act II, 38 “What Your Own,” n.p.

<sup>44</sup> Francis Davis, “Victim Kitsch,” *Atlantic Monthly* no. 278 (September 1996), 101.

- <sup>45</sup> Larson, *Rent*, 44 and Valdez, "Tales of Bohemian Glory," 93.
- <sup>46</sup> Davis, "Victim Kitsch," 98.
- <sup>47</sup> Larson, *Rent*, Act I, 13 "Life Support," n.p.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, Act I, 15 "Another Day," and Act II, 26 "Seasons of Love," n.p.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, Act I, 23 "La Vie Bohème," n.p.
- <sup>51</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 51.
- <sup>52</sup> Robert Sember and David Gere, "'Let the Record Show. . .': Art Activism and the AIDS Epidemic," *American Journal of Public Health* vol. 96 (June 2006), 968.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 967–969.
- <sup>54</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 76.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 53; and Caitlin Cahill, "'At Risk'? The Fed Up Honeys Re-Present the Gentrification of the Lower East Side," *Women's Studies Quarterly* vol. 34 (Spring 2006), 334–63.
- <sup>56</sup> See Nozomu Shibuya, *Tamashii no rôdô* [Soul's Labor] (Tokyo: Seido-sha, 2003) for a discussion of the mobilization and exploitation of affective labor to sustain and govern society at large.
- <sup>57</sup> Larson, *Rent*, Act I, 10 "Today 4U," n.p.
- <sup>58</sup> Jason Hackworth, *The Neoliberal City: Governance, Ideology, and Development in American Urbanism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 200.
- <sup>59</sup> Larson, *Rent*, Act I, 23 "La Vie Bohème," n.p.
- <sup>60</sup> Deutsche and Ryan, "The Fine Art of Gentrification," 92.
- <sup>61</sup> Larson reportedly had not received any payment for his work on *Rent* prior to the start of previews. A friend did his grocery shopping the week he died, and a check for a large sum arrived on the day he died. Even his death seems to have been caused, to some extent, by poverty. In the week he died, he went to the emergency rooms of two different hospitals for severe chest pains, and was twice misdiagnosed. In the blunt assessment of another East Village artist, "If he had the money, he would have gone to a private doctor. But he didn't, and so he died." See Larson, *Rent*, 49 and Sarah Schulman, *Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Making of Gay America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 61.
- <sup>62</sup> Larson, *Rent*, 34–35.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 58–59.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 133 and Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg, "The Producers."
- <sup>65</sup> Evelyn McDonnell, "Not Just a Fable, a Testament," *Village Voice* 41 (30 April 1996): 27.
- <sup>66</sup> Bernard Holland, "Classical View: Flaws Aside, *Rent* Lives and Breathes," *New York Times*, 17 March 1996.
- <sup>67</sup> Robert Brustein, "The New Bohemians," *New Republic* no. 214 (22 April 1996): 30.
- <sup>68</sup> John Istel, "*Rent* Check," *American Theatre* 13 (July/August 1996): 12–16.
- <sup>69</sup> Francis Davis, "Victim Kitsch," 100.
- <sup>70</sup> "Miramax and Tribeca –the Film Rights to *Rent*," *Variety*, 19–25 August 1996 and Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg, "The Producers."
- <sup>71</sup> Lucette Lagnado, "*Rent* Author's Hospital Care is Criticized," *Wall Street Journal*, 13 December 1996.
- <sup>72</sup> Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg, "The Producers."
- <sup>73</sup> Hardt, "Affective Labor," 100.
- <sup>74</sup> Frank Rich, "East Village Story," *New York Times*, 29 August 1996, quoted in David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 282–83 and Román, 284.