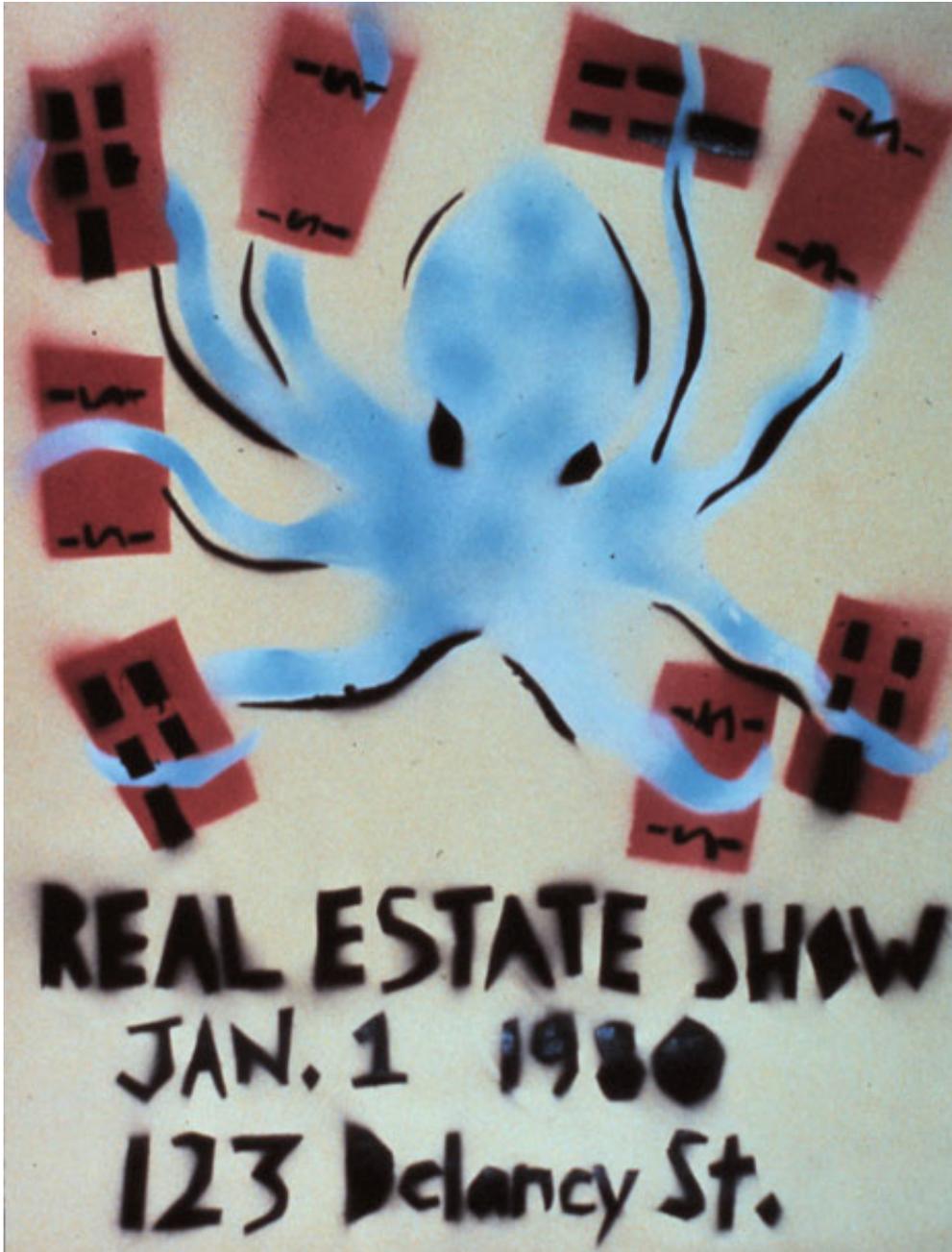


Excavating Real Estate

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Alan W. Moore with the artists of the Real Estate Show



The Real Estate Show, opened New Year's Eve January 31, 1979, was an unpermitted art show in an empty building on Delancey Street owned by the City of New York. Almost immediately the show was discovered, and the building locked up again. Later the art was removed by city workers. We artists protested, holding a press conference on the street. We were invited to a conference with a director of the city Housing, Preservation and Development department, and offered another storefront to carry on our activities.

We chose 156 Rivington Street, a few blocks from the Delancey Street site. We called it ABC No Rio, after a degraded sign visible across the street. Eventually, the artists running ABC took over the entirety of this delapidated, trouble-plagued city-owned building. After 30 years of occupancy and management, they were given title in 2006. At this writing, funded plans are underway for construction of a new building on the site.

We have known for a long while that what makes this show significant was not its content, but its circumstances and its outcome - the establishment of the long-running cultural center ABC No Rio. ABC No Rio is different from most cultural centers in that it is explicitly dedicated to the "culture of resistance." It is a place that embraces both autonomous political activism and creative experiment. This dedication follows from the founding act of the center, which was a politically framed occupation. This text is about how the Real Estate Show was conceived, planned and executed.

The immediate antecedent circumstances of the Real Estate Show - the projects of the artists' organization Colab (1978-1989), have recently received some attention. ((Exhibition catalogue, Shawna Cooper and Karli Wurzelbacher, eds., Times Square Show Revisited: Accounts of the Landmark 1980 Exhibition (Hunter College, CUNY, 2012), and the more complete website, at: <http://www.timessquashowrevisited.com>; Max Schumann, "A Show about Colab (and Related Activities)," 2011, at Printed Matter, NYC, for which a catalogue is planned.

)) Even as these historical operations began, the Occupy movement of 2011 brought the question of occupation for political purposes into mainstream view.

First, I need to explain what happened. My own remembrances of those few days of the actual show and its closure have been largely obscured by the intervening years - work in the neighborhood at ABC No Rio and after, and by many recapitulations [2] for diverse audiences. For this essay I asked my compatriot artists to recollect with me, in an attempt to reconstruct some of the organizing that went into making this show. Their recollections are scattered throughout this text. [3]

Lehmann Weichselbaum's period text, written for the first issue of the new monthly East Village Eye, gives a basic account of what happened. [4] Weichselbaum was a reporter on housing issues for community newspapers, and he tells how the building was entered on the New Year's weekend of 1979, cleaned up and the show installed. A preview was held New Year's Eve, and a public opening New Year's Day. [5] The next day, January 2nd, the city locked up the show. There then began a series of conversations with city officials, mainly attended by me, Becky Howland and Robert Goldman (aka Bobby G).

January 8th the Committee for the Real Estate Show - (basically several of the artists in the show) - called a press conference on the street in front of the building. This was attended by reporters for the New York Times, Soho Weekly News, East Village Eye, and Village Voice. On January 11th the city removed the art show, which they then held "hostage" - as Becky Howland's sign posted on the building's side door declared.

During our talks with the city, Bobby G took the more aggressive tone with the officials, and Becky was coolly reasonable. These conferences invariably began with a phone call early in the morning of the day the meeting was to be scheduled, waking us up. I remember very little of these. Mainly, I remember that during the first face-to-face talk after our sidewalk press conference, we entered the offices of the NYC Housing, Preservation & Development agency carrying a page five New York Times article about our project. [6] Joseph Beuys had attended our press conference, accompanied by his art dealer Ronald Feldman, and a small entourage. Beuys was in town for events connected with his retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum. During the press conference, the "reigning field marshal of the fine art of radical politics" [7] had signed

our petition and urged us to reoccupy the building. A couple of people tried it, but were quickly grabbed by police and put back onto the street. Later that day, Becky climbed up to the second story ledge, and pasted a giant octopus on the front of the building. John Halpern, who had staged another short-lived occupation with friends in a vacant lot on Spring Street also painted on the building.

After a while the city agreed to let us recover the artwork they had seized. Joseph Nechvatal went to the warehouse and picked them up. He also photographed the artworks destroyed in the removal process. The city gave us a list of in rem properties which they owned, from which we were to choose a new permanent location. In the meantime, we were relocated to a tiny storefront alongside the Williamsburg Bridge.

The building we had entered, and which we could not continue to use was at 125 Delancey Street near the Williamsburg Bridge which joins the Lower East Side to Brooklyn. It was a pale blue stuccoed storefront with plate glass windows close to an underground subway entrance. It was the kind of well-trafficked boulevard space artists are rarely allowed to exhibit in, much less to use autonomously. We were first relocated to a tiny storefront tucked alongside the bridge, at 172 Delancey. In this almost entirely Puerto Rican and Dominican neighborhood, we were visited by some residents who later became involved with our project. We toured many city-owned buildings, and at last we settled on 156 Rivington Street, some three blocks from the original Real Estate Show site as a permanent location. We called the place "ABC No Rio" after a deteriorated sign visible across the street ("abogado notario," a former Spanish-speaking legal services office). Becky was given a letter of "permission to use" as an artist's studio with related activities - no lease.

Finally, this is why the Real Estate Show has mattered - less for itself, but because the most important outcome of the show was the establishment and continuation of ABC No Rio as an artist-run exhibiting institution. The current administration is in full possession of the premises, achieved at the end of a long bitter battle between Lower East Side squatters and different city administrations. [8] At this writing, ABC No Rio has finished a successful capital campaign, and is in the midst of a construction process to replace the worn-out building.

That's the basic story. Now let's back up and ask, How did this whole thing happen?

The Real Estate Show was conceived as one in a series of shows organized by the artists' group Colab. Thus it was a part of an unusual movement of self-organization among artists in New York City which had been active for two years with a certain amount of public notice.

Colab began in 1977 as a kind of informal meeting, open to all. Friends of friends came around, and the talk among some 40-odd people rolled along as an exciting open-ended conversation among artists. A decision was made to formalize the group and apply for grant money. This was relatively available to artists' groups at the time, from the state (New York State Council on the Arts, NYSCA), and the federal government (National Endowment for the Arts, NEA). This was the funding that had supported the growth of the non-profit network of exhibiting institutions called alternative spaces. [9] Colab deliberately set out to capture some of that funding for a group of artists intent upon working without the overhead of a permanent space with professional managers.

Very rapidly the group acquired a resume. Some in the group published the modest X Motion Picture Magazine in 1977, then the project was collectivized in 1978 for two more issues. A benefit concert of No Wave musicians raised the cash to print it. [10] Also in 1977, a film and video program was taken to the newly accessible public access cable

television station, called "All Color News." This was followed by other television series, "Nightwatch" (1978-1979) and "Red Curtain" (1978) programmed by filmmakers, and the more eclectic and longer-lived Potato Wolf live television series (1978-84). In 1978, Colab had received funding from the NEA. The group bought an expensive 3/4" video editing system. After preparing "quickie" feature films with this equipment, Eric Mitchell and friends opened the New Cinema screening room in a storefront on heavily trafficked St. Marks Place in 1979. [11]

Concurrent with this intensive media production, a series of exhibitions were held in the personal loft spaces rented by some Colab artist. Most of these were open to all artists who wished to exhibit. [12] All were rough-edged and formally innovative, and several had a strongly political flavor.

In 1978, Stefan Eins, an Austrian sculptor who had hosted artists' exhibitions for years in his Soho storefront studio, relocated to the South Bronx and opened another storefront he called Fashion Moda. Eins was soon joined by Joe Lewis, who became co-director. Eins had exhibited a number of the Colab artists in his 3 Mercer Street studio in Soho during the mid-1970s, and some of them came to work at Fashion Moda.

This extraordinary burst of self-organized activity among a very diverse group of artists reflected a degree of collectivity uncharacteristic of the New York artworld, although it continued the spirit of collective work that had animated Soho in the late 1960s and early 1970s. [13]

Artists had lived there illegally for years in lofts intended for manufacturing purposes. They organized and lobbied the city for legal tenancy. When their situations were finally legalized, real estate values in Soho took off. By the late 1970s, larger lofts were approaching the million dollar range.

The Real Estate Show was opened January 1st, and ABC No Rio in February. Only a few months later, in June of 1980, Colab produced the Times Square Show, an epochal event which made the cover of the Village Voice and garnered feature articles in the Art in America and Artforum. The show drew work and artists from both Fashion Moda and ABC No Rio. A recent text hints at the impact of the show, and the formal aesthetic that animated Colab projects: "A diverse collective of artists invade a former massage parlor in the most notorious neighborhood in New York City. Within its grimy, crumbling walls, hundreds of paintings, sculptures, Xeroxes, drawings, graffiti, and performances rub up against each other, losing individual definition to the point where it becomes difficult to tell where one piece begins and another ends." [14]

The most politically inflected of the early Colab exhibitions took place at the studio of Coleen Fitzgibbon, one of the founding members of the group, in her storefront at 5 Bleecker Street near the Bowery. These included the Income & Wealth Show (January-February, 1979) and the Manifesto Show (co-organized with Jenny Holzer in May 1979). Coleen worked closely with Robin Winters; they performed together as X & Y. Most of the other early Colab shows mostly took place at Winters' studio loft on Broadway.

In a recent reflection on the Colab experience, Coleen wrote: "It was the best of times and the worst of times...idealism swallowing a bitter pill in a culture of extreme loss and excess. What possible chance of survival does a non-hierarchical socialistic artist group have in the land of Lobster Landlordism, a pyramidal corporate feudal thinknot where all is profit and none is in control?" [15]

Coleen had also studied the Trilateral Commission plans for the neighborhood. This high level group, commissioned by the Rockefeller Foundation, wrote an influential report

recommending the total destruction of the barrio, and the replacement of the old tenement buildings by high rise Corbusier-style edifices. The way to achieve this destruction, it seems, was by allowing "market forces" to do it. These forces included "redlining," a system whereby banks denied loans to anyone trying to start businesses or improve properties in the zone. In fact nearly all the banks had closed their offices in both the Lower East Side and East Village (east of Avenue A); they did not reopen until sometime after 2001. The progressive legal achievement of rent control, while it benefitted tenants, made buildings less profitable than other investments. A great many landlords - absentee investors or corporations - deliberately destroyed their buildings through arson fires in order to recoup insurance money. These burned buildings would then sit empty until the weather destroyed their structures and they had to be pulled down.

It is common for young artists in New York to work as assistants for other artists, and Coleen had worked for Gordon Matta-Clark. I knew Matta-Clark as an important artist in the Soho scene, and I had written about his work in Artforum during my first years in New York. (He didn't like my formalist review.) Gordon Matta-Clark had already made extensive use of the strategy of entering vacant, abandoned, apparently owner-less properties for purposes of making art. These were distributed throughout New York City in the 1970s, as they are today in many cities of the U.S. east coast and midwest. Working with the abandoned spaces of the contemporary city, Matta-Clark made art by cutting out or through parts of these buildings, creating new shapes and spaces. (His work survives today almost entirely in photographs.) Although he had worked in abandoned tenements in the South Bronx years before Fashion Moda was established, Matta-Clark was most interested in the abandoned piers on the west side of Manhattan. These piers, which serviced the great passenger ocean liners in the past, were visible from the also derelict west side highway. Matta-Clark made a spectacular artwork in one of these called Day's End (1975), entering a pier without permission and carving great chunks out of the walls to let in the daylight. Before his untimely death in 1978, Matta-Clark planned to work on the Lower East Side to establish an ecology center. [16]

Coleen also worked with Jack Smith, the extravagantly eccentric underground filmmaker who lived on the Lower East Side. (Her reference above to "Lobster Landlordism" is a phrase of Smith's.) She made a short film in 1976 called "LES" showing the devastated landscape of abandonment in the Lower East Side, including views of the West Side Highway and the abandoned piers. The narrator, Robin Winters, read a text about a fictional "island of Manhattma," whose inhabitants worshiped a god of money and material goods, "John Doe."

Peter Fend, another member of the Colab group also worked for Matta-Clark. Fend participated in the Real Estate Show in 1979-80, and presented a plan to replace the Con Ed power company monopoly with a community-generated project of sea algae composting generating methane gas. It was one of the first "mega-proposals" Fend has made throughout his career. This proposal was utopian, of course, but doubtless inspired by other utopian ventures in the Lower East Side.

In thinking about the project of an occupation, I discussed it first with Coleen and Robin. They both said they wanted nothing to do with it. For them, it was a dangerous idea. I was disappointed, since I felt we had all worked together to build a radical political context for Colab projects.

In the end, both artists did participate. As the Real Estate Show was being installed, both Coleen and Robin suddenly appeared and put up their artworks in the windows of the 125 Delancey Street building. We had covered the storefront windows with "Glass Wax," a

glass cleaning product that produces an opaque white film on a window which is later wiped off together with the dirt. The covering obscured our activities as we installed the exhibition within the space. Robin and Coleen scraped out squares within the field of Glass Wax to paste their artworks onto the window. They didn't talk to anyone, although the show installation was a busy social scene. They just came in, put up their work, and left.

Why did they participate in such a peremptory, asocial manner, playing the role of guerrilleros carrying out some kind of raid?

The commando style of X & Y's participation in the Real Estate Show was consistent with a strain of infatuation with criminality in Colab circles during the 1970s, particularly terrorism. This engagement, part-lumpen, part-political, formed an intoxicating corrupted mix of performative aesthetics. This bizarre practice combined post-realist documentary filmmaking, post-structural theory, opportunism, and social conscience.

The "All Color News" cable television program Colab members worked on in 1978 included a number of features on political and social violence, most notably Beth and Scott B's interview with the chief of the New York City Police department's arson and explosives squad. [17] He spoke to them about the January 1975 bombing of the Fraunces Tavern restaurant and museum in the financial district claimed by the FALN (Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional), which continued "unsolved," i.e., with no arrests. Virge Piersol made a small feature on the 1920 Wall Street bombing. [18]

Like many in our circle, I was fascinated with the recent radical actions of the German and Italian armed ultra-left groups, the Red Army Faction and Red Brigades. But I probably knew more about the global context. I was reading Open Road, a Canadian anarchist magazine, which chronicled North American direct actions. As a freelance typesetter, I worked for the independent socialist weekly Guardian, continuously processing news of socialist countries and international left resistance movements. Another of my employers, Myrna Zimmerman, shared an office with filmmaker Emile De Antonio, who had recently produced Underground (1976), a filmic record of a discussion with members of the Weather Underground revolutionary group. Myrna listened continuously to the Pacifica station WBAI, so I absorbed a continual diet of left news and information, almost none of which was reported in mainstream media. Myrna's office was essential to the production of two issues of X Magazine, since I was able to set the type and make the photostats there. At the time, graphic production was expensive.

The German and Italian armed ultra-left groups, the Red Army Faction and Red Brigades, were called "terrorist" in the U.S. media despite that these groups did not do indiscriminate bombings of civilians. [19] They targeted corporate and political leaders and the police protecting them. When "terrorism" was discussed in the U.S. media, there was never any account of why the RAF and Brigade Rossi were doing what they were doing, of what in fact were their aims, political contexts, or demands. I undertook a research on this, assisted by Robert Cooney, an Australian anarchist artist. (Robert also showed a series of political posters at 5 Bleecker Street.) We found almost no information available in English. We did discover that the Nazis in Germany had used the label "terrorist" to characterize their socialist and communist enemies, following many of the same media strategies we were seeing in the U.S. press. Finally, we exhibited the research materials at 5 Bleecker Street as the "Terrorist News Annual." Coleen and Michael McClard and I entered the Guardian offices at night to film in their extensive collection of news photographs, selecting images from 20 years of terrorist bombings of civilians to make a film I showed with the same title. I intended to produce a publication, but the technical process I employed did not work. The ostensible magazine production turned into a kind of static film show. Using some of this material, I made the cover of X

Magazine #3, which (does not) show a picture of kidnapped Italian prime minister Aldo Moro almost entirely covered by a brick wall. The spine of the issue showed various U.S. experts on terrorism with their comments. The magazine included an artistic reportage on the trial of RAF member Holger Meins and altered Lufthansa advertisements by Diego Cortez.

Colab artists' interest in crime and ultraleft direct action was fortified by theoretical currents unleashed in New York during the later 1970s by post-structural continental theorists and leading avant-garde artists, [20] in a flood of new ideas which may be said to have begun with the epochal "Schizo-Culture" conference at Columbia University in 1975, organized by Sylvere Lotringer and the Semiotext(e) magazine group. (I attended the session with Michel Foucault, although he spoke in French; thereafter I read his works and others by conference attendees Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari as they appeared in translation.) From then on, the New York artworld began a kind of intense, albeit ragged engagement with post-structuralist theory.

Michael Goddard writes of the effects of the "Schizo Culture" conference in 1975, that it fell into the "ecology" of New York, "transplanting theory from the French academy into the fertile soil of New York political and artistic milieus at a moment when the latter were in a maximum degree of disarray as a variety of radical aesthetic and political projects ranging from happenings to armed guerrilla struggle were falling apart without any new paradigm to replace them, while at the same time shocking revelations about the level of state and secret services involvement in the surveillance and even elimination of those involved in radical politics had recently emerged in the form of the Cointelpro files." The conference, mixing radicals and French-speaking academics Michel Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari with Ti-Grace Atkinson and R.D. Laing, was chaotic in academic terms, but, Goddard continues, it was "the sign of the intimate 'disjunctive synthesis' of theory with political and aesthetic practices enacted by [the journal] Semiotext(e)." [21]

A more specifically cultural event produced by Lotringer occurred in 1978, the "Nova Convention" celebrating the work of William Burroughs. Much of his fiction works by skating through strong associations between art, crime, police corruption, and government conspiracies. Kathy Acker, a writer who published in X Magazine and socialized in Colab circles in 1977 and '78, participated in this, as well as Laurie Anderson.

Some of the artists involved in Colab's X Magazine - Diego Cortez and Michael Oblowitz - participated directly in the Semiotext(e) publishing initiative. They were not inclined to talk about this work, however; they were guarded and exclusive. [22]

Diego coined the term "eso-terrorism." (It appears in a set of collages he published in the Colab-sponsored Spanner magazine.) Soon after, he quit Colab in a public fit of pique. He was the first; other founding members soon followed during successive meetings marked by rancorous quarrelling. [23] Cortez went into music management. He worked with the punk-free-jazz band Contortions, together with Anya Phillips, who had traveled to Germany and watched the Holger Meins trial with him. For him, this world was far more exciting than Colab.

Coleen Fitzgibbon and Jenny Holzer's "Manifesto Show" in 1979 was important for setting the stage for Colab artists' engagement with politics. While there was no dominant point of view - it was, after all, a more or less open group show - more documentary and political visual culture than art work was displayed. Much of it had to do with the recent radical activists in the U.S., like the Black Panthers. Artists and viewers of the show discussed this material. I recall talking to Coleen about the idea for a real estate show based in an occupation at her studio space in 5 Bleecker Street during the "Manifesto

Show.” She felt that Colab shouldn't be doing anything illegal during this period when the state was becoming more aggressive in investigating artists.

She said Peter Fend had already been questioned by the FBI. She also talked about the Trilateral Commission's plans for New York City, a great conspiracy of the elites to control urban development. It all sounded a bit paranoid to me. Maybe it was my California experience, that during my student activist days - and I was quite peripheral to the real inner circles of organizers then - a number of my friends had been investigated, and at least one arrested on bomb charges. The whole thing was pretty comical. The provocateur was pretty transparent, and in the end they arrested a campus radio personality who had nothing to do with any political activity. My impression of this kind of police attention was that it was most often bumbling and misdirected. We were artists, and we were doing nothing wrong.

Ulli Rimkus, then president of Colab and the partner of German artist Christof Kohlhöfer, took the same line with me, disapproving of the planned show and claiming it was irresponsible. Colab had only recently received state funding, and Ulli feared an illegal action would jeopardize that budding relationship. She and Christof both lived on Ludlow Street, which was some six or seven blocks from Delancey Street. (While I had an apartment on Houston Street, our core cadre - Becky and me together with Ann and Peter, were neighbors in a basement in Tribeca, far downtown, and Bobby lived in Brooklyn.) Christof told me stories of taking photographs during demonstrations in Germany which turned violent. Once, he said, he watched as the police slammed a door on a friend's hand, severing part of his finger. Clearly the German experience with police was different than mine.

I don't remember getting any answer from Robin Winters as to why he did not want to participate in the show. Since 1976, we lived across the hall from one another at 73 East Houston Street. But by 1979, neither of us was spending much time there.

When the Real Estate Show opened, it was accompanied by a classic manifesto, explaining the action in political and artistic terms. But this was not written with the original Colab group. During 1979, I was spending most of my time downtown, with Becky Howland in her place on Franklin Street in the Tribeca neighborhood, not far north of City Hall and Wall Street. Becky had become involved with Colab when she rented studio space from the sculptor John Ahearn. John by then was working fulltime at Fashion Moda in the South Bronx, and had chosen to leave his Tribeca place and move uptown. Two sculptors, Ann Messner and Peter Moennig, took over the other half of John's basement, and we two couples spent a lot of time together. Ann and Becky had both done “uncommissioned” public sculptures in Tribeca, installing their works without permission and observing reactions. Ann also made films of her performance works, like blowing up a very large balloon in a crowded subway car, and stealing shirt after shirt from a crowded department store in Germany by putting them on.

Becky wrote, “Ann and I were friends. We were sculptors and neighbors. I lived on Franklin Street, and she lived on West Broadway near Warren Street. We talked on the phone a lot and encouraged each other's escapades, many of which were guerilla public sculptures. I liked working on the traffic islands in my neighborhood, and tied up the grass into arches on one, and made a portrait - [a small-scale cement model] - of the gas station on another. Ann re-did the crosswalks on [Wall Street at the corner of Cedar Street]. I was getting my scuba diving certification, and Ann decided to make a film with me walking in my full scuba gear through a subway car.... We were so excited about transgression - it was really exhilarating, but, of course, it was nerve-wracking too.”

The Real Estate Show became possible because of interlocking dyadic relationships. “In 1979 Ann and I both got new boyfriends,” Becky continues. “She hooked up with Peter Moennig around the same time I hooked up with Alan Moore, which was February 14, 1979. We introduced Peter and Alan, and then we the four of us were all just talking, talking, talking all the time. In April, Ann, Peter, and I all participated in a group exhibition at 75 Warren Street called 'A Salute to Creative Youth.' [Not a Colab show.] A lot of the discussions we had centered around my cave - my basement loft on Franklin Street, and what Alan called the Tribeca Pub Crawl - the artists' bars Magoo's, Puffy's, Barnabus Rex, and McGovern's. Also at Alan's tiny second floor apartment, which was close to the Soho crossroads of Broadway and Houston. Joseph Nechvatal lived almost in my backyard, on North Moore Street.

“Through [John], I met his twin brother Charlie [Ahearn, a filmmaker, who would later make the hip hop classic Wild Style], and then [sculptor] Christy Rupp. I think Christy had been evicted from one of the most infamous loft slumlord buildings, at 39 Walker Street. She began seeing Leonard Abrams, who [had] started an underground newspaper, the East Village Eye.” (The first issue of the Eye included the above-mentioned article on the Real Estate Show.) “So that is how the core group was formed, through proximity and friendship: Alan and I, Ann and Peter, Joseph Nechvatal, and then Christy and Leonard. And maybe Peter Fend.... My recollection is that Alan had the idea to do a show about Real Estate, but initially it didn't get very far with the Colab group. But then he found the building - the place to do it - and he sold us on the idea - me and Ann and Peter. It wasn't a hard sell, even when we realized that the building was owned by the city, and we were stymied by what ever red tape would be needed to get permission.... [T]he whole artists' loft movement had been founded on illegal occupations - that is, artists would rent commercial space and then start living there, illegally moving in. Everyone was afraid of getting evicted for living in a commercial space, but everyone did it....

“The core group approached Colab for funding. One rule of Colab was: there had to be two Colab members involved in the project - in addition to the project being open to others - [in order] to get funding, which we did receive. Something like \$300. We also got a similar amount from Artists' Space. The Downtown artists were the driving force behind the show.”

The Tribeca district south of Canal Street where we were living was basically an extension of Soho, and full of artists. By the late 1970s it was gentrifying rapidly. [23] I don't think any of us were in touch with the academics researching artists in the city, or gentrification, nor the activists who were resisting it. Rather we were aware of what was going on in our neighborhoods. We could no longer find rental space we could afford. Suddenly, it seemed, everything had dried up - living space, studio space, loft space - all of it was becoming unaffordable. Blatantly exploitative deals were becoming more common - “you can have this place if you fix it up, and agree to leave after a year.” The productive power of artists - their abilities to convert former commercial space and factory floors into livable “lofts” - was being directly exploited as a short-run strategy by owners. Artists were being evicted. The situation was becoming intolerable. In this sense, the Real Estate Show was a cry of pain.

We found a natural constituency among artists facing eviction or homelessness. Joseph Nechvatal had recently been evicted, and was squatting in Tribeca. His story seemed emblematic of what was happening to artists in Tribeca who were being rolled out of the district by gentrification. In 1979, Joseph was living in an abandoned methadone clinic far to the west on Canal Street. He had come to the space after a few bounces, first from a storefront on North Moore Street where the Colab artists' TV series Potato Wolf had produced a night of video screenings and music, then from a loft on Walker Street. He wrote, “I had been subletting a loft on Walker Street from a painter.... This artist and her

husband told me that they had had it with New York City and that they were moving permanently to the country to bring up their baby. After one year they changed their mind and kicked me out. I had nowhere to live so the kind Bob Bielecki (sound engineer to La Monte Young) helped me out." (Joseph had worked as an archivist for La Monte Young via the Dia Art Foundation. He was fired for using the photocopy machine to make art, to our way of thinking an indisputably noble cause.) "Bielecki let me stay in Laurie Anderson's loft at 530 Canal Street while she was away on tour in Europe. Something happened with her, and one night while I was asleep Laurie comes home to find me there. Bielecki took me and my sleeping bag downstairs to the recently vacated methadone center."

Joseph lived there for some months. While he was there, he installed a show of his drawings called "Private Parts." We held an organizing meeting for the Real Estate Show amidst his artworks. Before, we had been talking about our ideas and plans in the Tribeca bars, a thriving late night scene which drew artists from all over Lower Manhattan. Bobby G recalls talking to me in a bar about doing a show in an abandoned building. "That's all you said about it. You didn't say what the theme of the show was, or anything. Only that it was going to be in an abandoned building."

When he came to the meeting at the methadone clinic, he learned the details. Bobby was impressed by the manifesto we had written and distributed at the meeting. "It gave me a strong impetus to participate in this project, because I believed in what it said. I thought this was art-making on a high and serious level." Bobby was also impressed by a painting we found in the clinic and later put into the Real Estate Show. It depicted two gang members facing one another, one black and one Latino - "the Latin Jesters and the Bro Rebels. That to me was a statement about working collaboratively."

After that meeting, we had a core group of participants committed to the action. We turned our attention to producing materials for the show, including a classic manifesto. I made a short film, a "commercial" for the forthcoming show, featuring a shot of the building, using as soundtrack the Rodgers and Hart tune "I'll Take Manhattan" (1925), and showed it at a loft film screening. A crowd of artists, maybe 50 of them, saw this film. "It's very fancy on old Delancey Street, you know/ The subway charms us so, when balmy breezes blow to and fro." The song was perfect, because we were planning to "take" the building on Delancey Street, right next to the subway station. Our constituency of filmmakers who had participated or seen All Color News, Potato Wolf and other film projects of Colab thus became aware of the project. We knew that the word would spread through our networks. There were also some flyers and posters put out at art galleries, and pasted up on the streets beforehand, but not many. We didn't want the cops to be waiting for us!

December 7th, 1979, then still remembered as Pearl Harbor Day, Becky, Ann and I participated in a live-cable TV show organized by David Levine and Christof Kohlhöfer. (The videotape has been destroyed.) "We staged a takeover of the TV station," Becky writes. "I painted a woman in a chador, with a flap hiding a gun underneath, and drew posters of Uncle Sam, the recently deposed Shan of Iran, and the Ayatollah Khomeini. Ann and I dressed up in chadors - with fake guns - and charged into the station for the takeover." During this time, the U.S. embassy in Tehran was being occupied by students who had taken it in November. The staff was being held hostage, and documents revealing the U.S. role in Iran were being released in a steady stream.

Entry to the building at 125 Delancey Street was done in stages. First we scoped out the building, driving by in sculptor Scott Pfaffman's step van. Then a bunch of us set out at the appointed hour, carrying a borrowed fire department bolt cutter inside a guitar case.

With his great strength, Peter Moennig finally succeeded in breaking the lock. That was the first part. Joseph Nechvatal recalls being hoisted over the locked gate by me and Peter so that he could open it from the inside. Then we put our own lock on the door, and left. A week later - New Year's Eve, 1979 - we returned to install the exhibition and have the opening party.

The power was on, so we had light. We first put an opaque window cleaner over the plate glass so it was less clear what we were up to. It should look like we were simply changing the window display in a normally functioning store. Fred Krughoff, an artist working as a contractor in construction came with us to the install. Fred realized that the building's gas and electricals systems were working, so he turned on the space heater, a blessing on that bitterly cold night. We cleaned up debris in the space, making it ready to install artwork.

After the show was installed, we held a "pre-opening" reception. This turned out to be the only period of time when the show was open. Numerous neighborhood people wandered in to look, and some chatted with the artists. A bunch of children came rushing in. They ended up playing in a pile of cardboard we had pushed together in the back, singing and posing for the video cameras carried by Mitch Corber (black and white) and Matthew Geller (color).

During the installation, it wasn't clear who was going to show up with work. We had warned everyone participating that there was a good chance their work would be seized by the city, maybe even destroyed. Even so, the show had some good finished pieces in it as well as fast wall paintings and posters.

The works as I recall them, in no particular order, included Jane Dickson's renderings of schematic room interiors painted in white on black plastic trash bags; Cara Perlman's painting on paper of a lamp glowing on a table in a burned-out apartment; Christof Kohlhöfer's painting of a black man being arrested by a white cop in Miami during the recent riots; and Gregory Lehmann's commercial color prints from real estate advertisements with sardonic comments grease-pencilled onto them. Mike Glier painted a crude wall mural with a sexual theme. He also propped up sticks of wood he had found with words painted on them, like "wisdom," "power," "riches," etc. Edit DeAk, an art writer, tacked up photostats of a medieval manuscript of the Book of the Apocalypse. Ann Messner put up blank city eviction notices coupled with photographs she had taken of homeless men living on the street in the area. Warren Tanner, co-director of the Organization of Independent Artists, brought along an impromptu collage of texts relating to real estate. Scott Pfaffman brought a kind of roof-shaped sculpture comprised of many years worth of old Alabama license plates. His friend Richard Mock brought a print of a donkey fucking the Empire State building.

Becky cut the stencils for her large Real Estate Show poster, showing an octopus grasping a bunch of buildings. She spray-painted a bunch of them on the spot to post on the street, as an invitation to the show. Coleen Fitzgibbon - "Y" - and Robin Winters - "X" - as mentioned above, put their work in the windows. Coleen put up photostats from her archive films. Robin put up an ink on paper drawing of a landlord with the caption "Pay or Get Out," and another quick chalk on canvas, of an anguished stick figure, captioned "Broke." Some artists brought stacks of printed flyers - Peter Moennig's "Plan to Turn N.Y. into a Bunker City," Coleen Fitzgibbon's "Landlord Extortion," and Robin Winters' "Landlords Do Not Provide Adequate Services," copied from an anonymous jeremiad against landlords we had seen posted on the street. Christy Rupp made a small copper house-shaped terrarium containing two live mice which had bedded in a copy of her Wall Street area lease. They chewed it up in order to "soften their habitat." She also

had drawings, including one of a woman freezing to death in her city-owned apartment. Mitch Corber videotaped the artists at work and children at play with his 1/2" Sony Portapak.

We had warned artists to be prepared to lose their work. Still, there were two larger works in the show. Bobby G mounted a pile of cigarette packs painstakingly collected over weeks, with a statement declaring that instead of being wasted in this way, the money Lower East Siders spent on cigarettes could go towards community renewal. Peter Fend showed large photostat and type collages spelling out his plan for delivering cheap methane from seaweed to the Lower East Side - "No Con Ed." He also showed images of some of the architectural plans that had been proposed for the Lower East Side, both the realistic and the utopian. At the opening of the Real Estate Show, we met a neighbor who lived down the block. She was organizing to resist eviction of the large city-owned apartment building where she lived. We agreed to support the tenants' struggle, and immediately exhibited information about it.

Peter Fend wrote a letter to the architectural magazine Skyline, stating: "Artists organizing the Real Estate Show want the community as a group to be aware of what has happened to them and what has been planned by others for them. They want the community to see visions of their future, to have a say in what actually occurs, to help each other in realizing a future far better than what only certain bureaucracies have been able to build in recent years." [24]

Becky writes, "We had a great New Year's Eve party. When it wound down, Alan and I eventually made our way over to an empty lot on Spring Street. John Halpern and his crew for some reason had dug a big pit in the ground, and we kept rolling down the sides and laughing our heads off. New Year's Eve was on a Monday night, so the whole week was sort of a workers holiday. However, the party was over when we returned to Delancey Street on January 2nd, to find that our lock had been removed, and a new one installed in its place."

The city had reclaimed their property, and our art show was locked away inside the place. We called up the city - and the press - and complained. That evening we went on cable access television for the regularly scheduled Potato Wolf show, and made the half hour into a "Real Estate Show show," talking about the situation, and showing video from the opening. Becky hand-lettered large signs in English and Spanish, explaining what had happened., and we pasted them on the side of the building. We also posted on walls throughout the neighborhood and in Soho, complaining about the city closing our show.

"We decided to hold a press conference in front of the building on Tuesday January 8," Becky continues, "and made flyers 'Art Held Hostage' to invite people. Naturally, Alan and I were late; as usual we could not get out of bed. However, a couple of great coincidences occurred. When we arrived, the assistant city commissioners from HPD (New York City's Housing, Preservation, and Development department), who were in charge of this little blue building, were already there. They sat in their car in front of the building. Then who popped out of their car but Denny Kelly. I had met her the year before - she was an artist working as a waitress in a cafe on Duane Street, where I had worked on the construction crew. But now she was working as the assistant to the assistant commissioner. So - there was Denny Kelly, who said, 'Hello Becky, what are you doing here?!'"

Christy Rupp had done the publicity for the conference, which was attended by reporters for the New York Times, New York Post, Soho Weekly News, East Village Eye, and Village Voice. "And then we were further in luck," Becky continued, "when Joseph Beuys arrived. He was in town, giving a talk at Cooper Union. Peter Moennig, who'd studied with him in

Düsseldorf, invited him to our press conference, and he showed up, with his art dealer Ronald Feldman. A reporter and photographer from the New York Times came too, and they ran a story with a photograph on the front page of the Metro section.”

Cara Brownell came to the press conference with a Sony Portapak. Joe Lewis carried a microphone, and interviewed people on the street, including some of the city officials who showed up.

The video no longer exists. But Joe Lewis told me, “I talked to Beuys through a translator.... He was very stoic. He didn't really say much. He kind of nodded his head.... said, 'I like what you're doing here,' or something like that.” Joe also clearly recalled a meeting the night before the press conference, “where we were going to get canned goods and water and stuff to stay, because the police were gonna come, we were gonna lock ourselves into the place.... They were trying to build a strategy the night before the police were gonna come.... Maybe 10, 15 cops showed up.... The second the police got there to close it down, everybody split.” (While I don't remember any of this, I'll confess that I am a chicken at heart.)

“After the press conference,” Becky recalls, we went to a bar and had lunch. “Then we returned to the site of the building. I'd always intended to make a mural on the building, but with all of the activities to organize the show, and the flyers and posters, it ended up being the last part to be done.... I remember surveying the front of the building rather glumly when we returned. Since we no longer had access to the building, I thought that I could not get up to the second floor to wheat-paste [the mural] to front of the building. But I think it was Peter who suggested that I climb up! He gave me a leg up the building, so I scrambled up to the ledge, and then Harry Spitz came up too. And he helped me to wheat-paste this 11 foot long Octopus Mural to the top story of the building. It was really windy, so it was comical - the limbs whipping around - and also fraught with the adrenaline from the morning's events. But for me as an artist, and a fairly shy one - this was a great moment - to be encouraged and appreciated by my fellow artists - and to see this piece in place on the building as I'd imagined it. (It stayed there for about six months [before]... becoming unglued, so I went back and retrieved it.) Then John Halpern climbed up and painted in big letters - The Real Estate Show.”

“What happened next,” Becky writes, “was astonishing! The combination of unprecedented publicity and personalities persuaded the city to agree to meet with us and discuss a solution. The city had removed our artwork from the building on January 11, and we wanted it back. 'Art held Hostage!' We also wanted to continue our show - to create a temporary citizen's center. Denny Kelly facilitated much of the logistics for our discussion. The city absolutely would not give us the Real Estate Show building on Delancey Street because number one, we'd broken into it, and number two, they said it was ear-marked for other things. [For decades after, the building sat empty, forever unused, until it was finally demolished in the early 2000s.] However, they gave us a list of buildings and spaces to choose from. That winter was brutally cold and all the locations were abandoned, with no heat - there were icicles hanging from the ceilings! For the month of February, we took a temporary location at a storefront at 172 Delancey Street, closer to the entrance to the Williamsburg Bridge than our original location, and did a show, film screenings, and performances there. Then we found the space at 156 Rivington Street - a storefront with a back courtyard that was filled with rubble, ailanthus trees, and tremendous potential, and moved to that location in March 1980. It was amazing, but, at the same time we thought: 'Of course, this is the way things ought to work out!'”

Becky's sense of a sure happy ending based on reasonable people reasoning together was supported by her unexpected personal connection with Denny Kelly - who ultimately

produced and signed the “permission to use” letter. Bobby G's perspective on the negotiations with the city was very different. For him, the process began on the street the day of the press conference. We talked, and I told him that the videotape Joe Lewis and Cara Brownell had made has disappeared.

“I was standing there with them,” he replied. “During the whole time of this press conference, or 'grand re-opening of the Real Estate Show,' there was a city car parked right in front with the engine running and the windows up and the heat on because it was about 25 degrees that day. And Joe Lewis coaxed the people out of the car. I remember this exchange. The guy was short with black hair and a moustache. His name was Manny Mirabal, and he's not the Columbia professor who wrote the biography of Malcolm X! So Joe is conducting the interview. And he puts the microphone into Manny Mirabal's face and he says, 'What's your name?' And Manny responds, 'What's your name?' And Joe says, 'Joe Lewis.'

“And Manny Mirabal thought he was putting him on. He didn't believe him. It was absurd.... Mirabal said... 'It just so happens that we're going to be working late tonight. It doesn't have to do with this, or with you guys. But we're going to be working late, and when you're finished here, why don't you come downtown and talk to us about this and see what happens.'

“He invited us into this negotiation, because I always thought they were really intimidated sitting in their heated car watching these newspaper reporters, and photographers, and Joseph Beuys. They wanted to be able to tell their bosses the next morning when this stuff came out in the papers that they were on top of it. That's why they wanted us to come there late that night.... They knew that the next morning it was going to be trouble. It was really the artists' power of the media and the press that engaged the city.”

We went to the negotiations at the HPD offices on Maiden Lane. “That's where the Federal Reserve Bank of New York is,” said Bobby. “ I remember going up into this well-appointed conference room with Joe - and Joe and Cara's video was really instrumental in this negotiation. The first thing that came up was that the people from HPD said, 'No video.' And we said, 'What do you mean no video? This is our art project. The video is essential to it. And in fact, because you interceded in it, you're in it now. And now it's because of you guys that this has become a social sculpture. The video is really essential, and we don't turn it off lightly.'

“Before I got involved with this I had been working [as a CETA program artist] for the Summer Youth Employment Program in Jamaica, Queens, with these heavy duty political organizers from the black community, organizers in South Jamaica Houses, which is the biggest housing project in Queens. And I knew a lot of their rhetoric, and how they thought, and the way they saw things. And I felt really comfortable talking to these people in the city.”

When the HPD people demanded that Joe and Cara turn off the video, “I immediately thought, wow, now we're in a real negotiation. They're making a demand, and we have to respond. We can either accept their demand or deny their demand. And then we kind of had a private little conference among ourselves. I remember suggesting that if we accept this demand to turn off the video, which is really detrimental to the project, what are they going to offer in return. And that's actually when they offered an alternative space. They made a demand, and we had to decide right away how to respond. They were nervous. One of the reasons they were so uptight was that the Real Estate Show was right smack dab on the edge of the Seward Park Development Project where they had razed all the buildings and done nothing since 1964. There was just an article in the New

York Times about how they have a plan to redevelop the Seward Park area 50 years later. You didn't know that, did you?" Bobby asked me. "It was exposing exactly what you claimed, their misuses and mismanagement of real property on the Lower East Side. So many people got evicted out of there back in the '60s... They were embarrassed about their inaction.

"It was so serendipitous, because first of all the heat and lights were working in that building. But you didn't know that. The idea was brilliant from the beginning, but the way it unfolded was just luck. Really it was because the city intervened, that's what made it kind of big. Otherwise it would have been what you conceived of, three weeks and it would have been over."

The Real Estate Show was the outcome of a rare conjunction of artists' self-organizing, artistic ideation, determined innovation, publicity seeking, radical political ideology, and performative action. It was dependent upon a unique set of historical circumstances - the exploitation of artists in broad schemes of revaluation and repurposing of urban districts; the dissolution of radical organization and disintegration of the promises of change by the '60s and '70s social movements, and the emergence of the neoliberal ideology and get-ahead ethos that would mark the Reagan era. It was a period of aesthetic uncertainty and experiment after a decade of unsettling of the forms of art. At the same time, an emergent infrastructure of demi-institutions was consolidating to service the new forms of art, and the surge in young artists who had come to New York City to practice them. Finally, we saw the sudden appearance at our side of a famous European artist who insisted upon some intrinsic relation between art and politics, some duty, obligation, or metaphysic that combined them.

The show was also undertaken at a key moment in Colab's history, when the artists who had started the group were divided and disenchanted, and new artists were interested in becoming involved in the self-organized network, and the social and political intentions that seemed to ground it. For Colab, the Real Estate Show marked the end of the old and the beginning of the new. An infatuation with the political had resulted in an art exhibition - an aesthetic event - conceived as direct action politics.

Within months, artists who had worked at Fashion Moda in the South Bronx, and at ABC No Rio on the Lower East Side combined with many others in Colab produced the Times Square Show. For all the fame of that exhibition, I feel that this show cannot be seen apart from the artistic initiatives launched by privileged young artists within New York City's poor districts which came together in the historically working class entertainment district in the city center. That combination turned out to be a potent pill of cultural change.

For me, the conception of the Real Estate Show was really only to do this action, carefully planned and tactically successful. It was a car-crash art show, like a cinema stunt - the show crashes into the space and is suddenly there. But it was a "smash hit" in a way we did not at all anticipate. We had no plans for what came out of it, except to respond to events as they unfolded, fast and furious. The combination of responses among our troika - me, Becky Howland and Robert Goldman - formed the palette of organizational temper for ABC No Rio during its first years. We continued to organize activities at the space as we had the Real Estate Show, through regular open consensual meetings.

Over the years, the example of the initial action - an occupation by a collective of artists - would resonate with the later cadres of cultural activists who worked at ABC No Rio, and with our friends in Europe.

The Real Estate Show was different in kind from all other Colab projects. It was an action

first, and a show second. The organization of both the action and the show was fully collective every step of the way, with different people playing key significant roles at each step of the process. It was a classic transgressive action - a provocation and a response, playing out together in an intricate dance toward an indeterminate result.

In preparing this text, I queried the artists in the show. Many came back with carefully considered historical reflections, some of which has been integrated into the narrative above.

Stefan Eins, founder and director of Fashion Moda, attended the opening of the Real Estate Show with William Scott and John Ahearn. (Scott later worked on the Absurdities Show at ABC No Rio.) Stefan said of the show, "I thought it was in conjunction with the Colab and Fashion Moda stuff. It came from this same approach, that we took matters in our own hands and exhibited and then made history. Instead of the galleries making all the decisions, there are other options available to artists."

Walter Robinson, an arts writer and painter who was then closely involved with Colab, wrote: "My memory of the time is largely one of being carried along by apparently mundane events, and then being astonished at their reception as historical. Was my thinking an example of cynical reason? The idea of breaking into a city-owned building? Impossible for a square like me, a protestant from Oklahoma, so kudos to the brave neurotics who dared cut the locks and face down the police.... The upshot of it all -- the press, the visit by Joseph Beuys, the birth of No Rio -- was, like I said, astonishing, but is an indelible demonstration of the way that a group of artists can in fact take charge of the meaning of their own production."

"The Real Estate Show was more important as an action than it was as an exhibition," wrote Mike Glier, "and the bolt cutter that snipped the lock on the door to 123 Delancey Street was the agent of that action and, as such, the most compelling object in the exhibition. Bolt cutters transform modest motion into extreme force. As a contributor to the exhibition, I was one of many artists who placed a hand, figuratively speaking, on the long handle of the cutter, adding my bit of pressure to the collective force of the artists involved. A small hub of colleagues, the Committee for the Real Estate Show, served to focus this collective energy more powerfully than was usual in Colab Projects by organizing an art show around an act of civil disobedience, the cutting of the lock on 123 Delancey Street. Snipping the lock was scary and thrilling for me, an artist for whom dialog was and has remained the preferred form of cultural engagement. With the snip of the lock, all the talk about wealth, property, fairness and the role of creative people in developing communities was transformed into action. With the snip of the lock, our youthful feelings about authority, autonomy, and agency were shaped into principles. It was the moment when I realized that dialog has its limits, particularly between parties whose power is unequal. The snip of the lock was a declaration that the context for discussion sometimes needs to be reset with an act that is outside the norm....

"The act of the Real Estate show was in retrospect a positive one, with a good outcome and it lives large in my memory for the ensuing debate, never resolved, about the use of force as a catalyst for social justice."

Joseph Nechvatal had a deeply theoretical point of view on the group Colab: "What I early on detected in Colab and ABC No Rio was that art could be expressed in complex rich ways that were non-linear but, nevertheless, which displayed long-term tendencies and organizational patterns.... While the pre-Colab art system isolated physical objects from their surrounding, the attraction of Colab chaos was founded on the realization that the

art system is connected to power, subject to flows of money, matter and energy which move constantly through them. Inversely, the dynamic imbalance of ABC No Rio resulted from chaotic energy that manifested a creative process that generated richly organized patterns that teetered on the complex stable and the complex unstable.

“It is neither surprising nor coincidental that a paradigmatic epistemological change in art at large would follow these developments. I can even say that culture experienced a bifurcation as a result of Collaborative Projects style activity, and the artists of Colab all represented their own particular bifurcation within the cultural field.

“In critical studies and in an array of philosophical discourses, chaotic approaches to order and composition have been addressing the rhizomatic-decentralized modes of distribution that I first experienced in Collaborative Projects. When New York art began a Colab influenced examination of its heterogeneous system, it initiated a true break with modernism.”

Ann Messner, part of the core group that “cracked” the building on Delancey Street, wrote: “Perhaps resulting from a shared 1960s' adolescence, there was within Colab a collective disregard for institutional structures and traditional modes of practice. Out of the cultural malaise caused by Vietnam, the tragic assassinations of quixotic public figures, the images of kids being hosed and in the case of Kent State gunned down, the indiscriminate blazing of the inner city already in desperate need of repair, very little that remained standing seemed at all respectable. Just as with the neglected neighborhoods, particularly in New York where we chose to live, reality had fallen apart exposing distressing hypocrisy. And not surprisingly our relationship as artists to culture took on the form of refusal and deconstruction.

“The Real Estate Show was a hedge; a provocative stance deployed to expose the city's nefarious relationship to not only the urgent concerns of an impoverished community but also to the creative desires of a vibrant counterculture movement. Our action: the occupation of 123 Delancey Street and the mounting of the exhibition 'The Real Estate Show' proved a test of opposing wills. In retrospect the bravado of multiple break-ins, as evidenced in the photographic documentation, appears awkwardly humorous (oversized bolt cutters in a guitar case) but at the time the direct and forceful dealings with the city, although remaining non-violent, were not at all pleasant. If it were not for the brief attendance of Joseph Beuys in support of our action there may have been more severe consequences (his Guggenheim Retrospective had landed him front page notoriety in the tabloids and as such his presence seemed to intimidate the city officials). As it was a stalemate ensued, ultimately ending in our favor with the granting of a temporary space at another location, as the city struggled with embarrassing damage control in the press.”

“The RES provided a window into what was possible,” Christy Rupp wrote. “I had been interested in polling people about their opinions of urban wildlife, and struck by how negative the response was from adults and positive or at least curious from kids. I got to thinking why not let kids teach their parents about safe ways to keep mice, rats and roaches out, by learning about animal behavior. (This was the motivation for the first Animals Living in Cities exhibit at Fashion Moda summer of 1979.) So all of a sudden we had a living laboratory, in our fishbowl on Delancey Street, that welcomed all sorts of feedback about this and any number of other housing related questions. It got shut down so fast, but the seed was planted and its energy was not going away. Beyond the demand for attention to the city's hoarding of housing stock, letting it fall apart under the weight of neglect, it was a moment to say, hey, people live in these hulks, they are living systems. Maybe they're unsafe or abandoned, but they are alive. We had access to the housing crisis as a lab for solutions, because we could see it more holistically as a

collective question, than as individuals.”

Jon Keller, who perhaps alone of all the artists had a background in community organizing, wrote of the show. “Agitate and Educate. An Occupation of unused space for an angry and provocative and visual show by young people who hadn't become established, few ties that bind as yet. An earlier Occupy to shake up the bars of the cage that surrounds us....

“I moved to 10th St between B & C during those years and watched as Real Estate came in and changed the name from Loisaída to Alphabet Town conscious of the fact that as a white face over here, I helped pave the way for the gentrifiers to move in and push the working class and lumpen out. It's been 40 years since the Real Estate Show took place, this enormous blocks-wide parking lot, truly a Separation Wall between the middle class largely Jewish and otherwise white, below Grand St and the Brown people, Spanish speaking largely, above Delancey St. I guess now that there are more white people down near Delancey St the powers that be feel comfortable about developing those empty lots surrounding what was the Real Estate Show. It's actually a pretty big project with housing, recreation areas, stores. ABC No Rio given to mollify us after the Real Estate Show helped also to make the area attractive to white (and other) hipsters, in turn attractive to Real Estate. Artists as Missionaries paving the way for colonial occupation.”

Joe Lewis said he “always thought No Rio was a pretty good outcome for that kind of confrontational relationship between artists who had a social perspective, and the city and community. I saw it as a win.” Joe thought the situation could have been “catastrophic had the people really been more politicized. I grew up - you know I was in a guerrilla street theater with the Young Lords Party. I wasn't in the Young Lords Party, but the company we were working with were. I knew people who were in prison for real political activity.... I didn't see any of us folks as really being so political.” For the artists involved in the Real Estate Show and at Fashion Moda, Joe “didn't know if it was just to try to position themselves as a way to release themselves from their roots, their own personal roots, or was it just something at the time that made sense.”

Like Joe Lewis, Peter Mönning had misgivings about the political and aesthetic coherence of the Real Estate Show artists. “It was an individualistic approach,” he said. “There was acceptance, but there was no debate about these things. I was interested that metaphors turn into action. Now that we have action, I say, 'Well, think about the aesthetic. Deliver an aesthetic that starts out with Gordon Matta-Clark and his metaphors towards what we are doing now.' So I felt a little bit like this nerd, looking back, our positions shift, right? But it's a good time [now]. There are lots of kids who have a similar thinking.”

Thinking about the Real Estate Show now means thinking about occupation, which has once again become a focal tactic in the 2011 wave of global rebellions. The rise of the Occupy movement has put a sharp new emphasis on the question of occupation. Some recent theoretical discussion may help to interrogate the Real Estate Show action. At the time we did it, it seemed that the action had no precedent among artists. Not so in politics. The tactic of occupation as a means of drawing attention to a political cause was widely known, beginning with the famous “sit-ins” by African-Americans and their white compatriots at lunch counters in the segregated American South and locally in the occupation of buildings at Columbia University in 1968.

Europeans may have been aware of the recent Italian tactic of occupying to create a social center, which began in force in the mid-1970s. [25] These social centers included extensive cultural components, but they were founded by political activists with political

intentions. Peter Mönning spoke of ABC No Rio as a “Freiraum,” or free space, a locution that comes from German anarchists. The practice of squatting - generally to create “house projects,” where people could live and work collectively - did not begin in earnest in Germany until the 1980s, and then mainly in Berlin. Puerto Ricans in New York City organized by the Young Lords Party had occupied buildings with political intention. Joe Lewis knew of their work, and probably talked about it with us. But we were not in contact with these groups. They were nationalist, usually Marxist-Leninist, and remained separate from Anglos and the downtown artworld.

But beyond the historical precedents for the tactic in radical politics, what could occupation by artists mean in 1979? I think that it may be a variant of Nicholas Mirzoeff's concept of the “right to look,” [26] we were asserting our “right to be seen” as artists, the right to be seen to exist, and for our work to be seen. This is, finally, the rationale for graffiti art, which was widely discussed, and its practices emulated, among artists in New York in the 1970s. “Writers” of graffiti have long claimed “art is not a crime.” For them, many coming from poor ghetto communities, the idea that the right of the artist to be seen, and the right of the artists' community to see relates to the service that graffiti art performs. Enlivening the public environment counts for more than the mere right of the property owner to maintain publicly visible walls empty of any kind of marks or signs. While it is not a right, it can be argued that it is a superior social good. Making street art comes from a strong desire, a felt necessity; it is rebellious, a desire under restraint as an ever-tightening gyre of prohibitions binds public behavior worldwide.

Our show was not street art. It was an attempt by artists to exercise their public function, to interact with a community, to make an environment to talk to people about matters that concerned them. This strongly felt necessity of public discourse led us to open up a place, publically owned and unused, where this could happen.

The key feeling I have long held onto from the Real Estate Show experience was the incredible air of freedom we breathed as we began to install the show. [27] We were experiencing, as J. Martin Pedersen writes in his essay on the philosophy of property, “the process of revolution - of stepping into our power-to, right here and now - [which] is not simply a matter of organising our social relations, but to organise our social relations with regards to things.” [28] As Mirzoeff wrote in October of 2011, “Occupy theory is what you do as you occupy.” It arises directly out of praxis, as people come together to “explore new ways of experiencing the general will.” [29]

In his text on property and commoning, Pederson tries to open up an analytic that includes both common and private property in order to understand the free software movement. He calls the notion that all property is private “economistic” - it is understood in a way that detaches it from any further moral, political and social discussion. Indeed in daily speech, “It's private” stops the conversation; it's a speed bump in social relations - “Sorry, that's private.” (Even so, in our moment, privately owned social networking platforms are repaving the landscape of social relations by specifically removing personal privacies of all kinds.)

We are in a new period of capitalist universalism, Pedersen states. Still: “All attempts in the history of theorizing about property to provide a univocal explication of the concept of ownership, applicable within all societies and to all resources, have failed.” Particular notions of property can undergo change at any moment in time. Pedersen recounts the historically violent emergence of capitalism in the 17th century, the story of the enclosures by aristocrats of common lands, and the popular resistance to them led by Diggers, Levelers, and other “commoners.” The word, as a verb, is explicated by historian Peter Linebaugh: “Commoners first think not of title deeds, but human deeds.... Second, commoning is embedded in a labor process; it inheres in a particular praxis....

Common rights are entered into by labor. Third, commoning is collective. Fourth, being independent of the state, commoning is independent also of the temporality of the law and state." [30]

All these actions, of which the Real Estate Show forms one link in a long chain, have a purpose. "The purpose," according to Pedersen, "is to locate the collective right of commoning - collective action based on shared values, particularly the principles of cooperation and self-organisation - as a counter-point to the kind of individual, private property rights that characterise capitalist democracy." Clearly, how we organize an action is the key to convincingly and collectively asserting a right to "common" - or to occupy.

Like free software, we were committed to "commons-based peer production." [31] The question with ABC No Rio became how to run an "alternative space" that was really open source - or as we thought of it then, open door. That was to be something like what was slowly emerging during the decade of the 1970s, primarily through the work of the Institute for Art & Urban Resources, Creative Time and other public art commissioning agencies who were using vacant properties and land. Their projects, while they were public were not in common; they were entirely administrated.

Our show extended the anti-curatorial ideology expressed within the Colab group to its maximum extent. One of our principle competitors in the official realm was Alanna Heiss, one of the curators who were building contemporary art institutions committed to new art in different ways than the existing modernist formations. Alanna Heiss had close ties within the city government, and had been allowed to use many vacant properties for all sorts of art-related purposes. Rhetoric within the Colab group contested the role of curators and administrators within the artworld. Why should she alone decide which artists get to do something in a vacant city-owned building?

First Fashion Moda and then the Real Estate Show and ABC No Rio were moves outside the realm of conventional art exhibition. It was a "no" to the art gallery as a space - be it private or public - which was bounded and controlled by administrators, curators, and dealers. Our reclaimed space would be controlled only by artists, and those who worked and interacted with them - by users only. Today, the situation is a good deal more "conventional," as massive corporate subsidies, often by socially questionable companies, sustain contemporary art institutions, and the private market is highly speculative. As Occupy activist Noah Fischer recently put it, "real, essential culture needs distance from this power and influence in order to grow and thrive." [32]

What is real? Presence - being there, in the place. As the Reverend Daniel Berrigan said as he demonstrated in Zucotti Park near Wall Street on June 8, 2012, "We are here to restore the reality of real estate." [32]



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NOTES

1 - Exhibition catalogue, Shawna Cooper and Karli Wurzelbacher, eds., Times Square Show Revisited: Accounts of the Landmark 1980 Exhibition (Hunter College, CUNY, 2012), and the more complete website, at: <http://www.timessquashowrevisited.com>; Max Schumann, "A Show about Colab (and Related Activities)," 2011, at Printed Matter, NYC, for which a catalogue is planned.

2 - I have published on the Real Estate Show in Moore and Marc Miller, eds., *ABC No Rio: Story of a Lower East Side Art Gallery* (Collaborative Projects, NY, 1985), parts of which book are online at 98bowery.com; also in Moore, *Art Gangs: Protest and Counter Culture in New York City* (Autonomedia, NY, 2011). I have given a number of talks on the subject. My writings from this time were lost during an illegal eviction from my studio in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in 1987.

3 - Artists who responded to the 2012 call include Rebecca Howland, Ann Messner, Joseph Nechvatal, Mike Glier, Jon Keller, Scott Pfaffman, and Stefan Eins. I interviewed Peter Mönning, Robert Goldman (aka Bobby G), and Joe Lewis.

4 - Lehmann Weichselbaum, "Real Estate Show," *East Village Eye*, February 1980; reprinted in Moore & Miller, op. cit. More of these texts are posted online at the history section of ABC No Rio's website.

5 - Mitch Corber's documentary 1/2" video reel, "Pre-Real Estate Show 79-80 (1979)" (30 min.; 1979), is online at: https://archive.org/details/XFR_2013-08-14_2B_07.

6 - Josh Barbanel, "Artists Ejected in Occupation of a Storefront," *New York Times*, January 9, 1980; posted at http://www.abcnorio.org/about/history/times_80.html.

7 - Gerald Marzorati, "The Artful Dodger," *Soho Weekly News*, January 10, 1980.

8 - See Clayton Patterson, Joe Flood, Alan Moore, Howard Seligman, editors, *Resistance: A Social and Political History of the Lower East Side* (Seven Stories Press, NY, 2007), and the graphic novel by Seth Tobocman, *War in the Neighborhood* (Autonomedia, NY, 1999) for more on this long struggle. There is also much online, notably by Chris Flash and The Shadow, Bill Brown aka Not Bored, the MoRUS Museum of Reclaimed Urban Spaces, etc..

9 - Julie Ault, ed., *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Staniszewski, eds., *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces, 1960-2010* (MIT Press, 2013). see also Art Spaces Archives Project at www.as-ap.org/.

10 - See "X-Magazine Benefit," a film by Coleen Fitzgibbon and Alan W. Moore (11 min.; 1978/2009), posted , at: <http://vimeo.com/28997394>.

11 - Some of this work was distributed by Colab's MWF Video Club from 1986-2000. Some of that was transferred to digital media, and posted online after the July 2013 "XFR STN" project exhibition at the New Museum; see: <https://archive.org/details/xfrstn>.

12 - These included the Batman Show (November 1977, curated by Diego Cortez in Robin Winters' studio at 591 Broadway), the Doctors & Dentists Show (January-February 1979, open, at 591) concurrent with Income & Wealth Show (Coleen Fitzgibbon's studio at 5 Bleeker), the Dog Show (May, 1979 at 591 Broadway), the Manifesto Show (May 1979 at 5 Bleeker), "Exhibit A" at 93 Grand St (curated by Michael McClard and Liza Bear) that same year.

13 - Artists' collective work was presaged by the Art Workers Coalition some ten years earlier, and continued to be actively discussed by the Artists Meeting for Cultural Change in the mid-1970s. See Moore, *Art Gangs*, op. cit.

14 - Samuel Anderson, "Inherent Vice: Contagion and the Archive in The Times Square Show," *E-misférica* 6.1 (New York University, n.d. 2009?) at <http://hemi.nyu.edu/hemi/en/e-misferica-61/s-anderson>. Walter Robinson called this Colab

style of installation the “milieu show.”

15 - Email to the author from Coleen Fitzgibbon, February 10, 2012.

16 - Gordon Matta-Clark was also planning to do a project on the Lower East Side, where ABC No Rio was established. He planned to work with the community group CHARAS to open an ecology center. Matta-Clark had been inspired by a visit to an abandoned factory occupied as a social center by young radicals in Milan. Although he received the money from a grant, Gordon died before he could begin this project. The CHARAS group later took over an abandoned school near a community garden they had established. “El Bohio” (the hut) was established in 1979, the same year as the Real Estate Show occupation. (A.W. Moore, “Real Green Jobs Lie in the Past” in Common Room and Kim Förster, eds., Arts for Living: Public Architecture and Architectural Education, Common Books, NYC and Brussel, 2013.) See Libertad Guerra’s text on CHARAS in this booklet.

17 - Scott and Beth B later used this documentary work as the basis for a featurette fiction film, G-Man. See Jack Sargeant, Deathtripping: The Cinema of Transgression (1995).

18 - Mike Davis, Buda's Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb (2006).

19 - I was disturbed by the misapplication of what I took to be a precise term, “terrorism” denoting the murder of civilians for political purposes, carried out during this period by groups like the French OAS, the Irish IRA, the Palestinian PLO, the Italian rightists in the “strategy of tension,” and others. The denomination was extended by rightist governments against their left-wing opponents throughout Latin America during the period of the dictators. By now, the word “terrorist” as used by governments and much of mainstream media is nearly meaningless. Still, like pornography, people know it when they see it.

20 - Yvonne Rainer's feature film Journeys from Berlin/1971 (1980) explores the German context for the RAF actions. Rainer was a longtime teacher at the Whitney Independent Study Program, where many of the original Colab members studied.

21 - “Memories of a Semiotext(e) reader,” posted at Michaelgoddard.wordpress.com on April 2, 2011. While this line of theorizing - particularly that of Guatarri and Deleuze - was closely connected to left politics, this relation was not so clear at the time. Current left thought in the U.S. then was rather bleak and unpromising. Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle, available in translation from the Detroit anarchist publishers Black & Red, to me seemed dark, densely Marxist, minoritarian and anti-art in a way that offered no direction. Other Situationist texts, more tactical and humorous, had not yet been translated.

22 - Only Duncan Smith, a gay academic, seemed interested in sharing his thoughts with artists curious about the new theories. He was an avid Lacanian, and published in X Magazine. Smith was an early victim of AIDS.

FNquarrel - These heated arguments had usually to do with various activities undertaken by one or another of which another disapproved. I recall that these had mainly to do with artworld opportunities which had been obtained in the name of the group, but pursued by individuals. To exhume them, see Andrea Callard Papers, Series I: Collaborative Projects, Inc. (Colab), Fales Library and Special Collections, Bobst Library, New York University.

23 - See A.W. Moore with Debra Wacks, “Being There: The Tribeca Neighborhood of

Franklin Furnace” The Drama Review (special issue on Franklin Furnace), Spring 2005, vol. 49, no. 1.

24 - Moore and Miller, op. cit., p. 59. I don't know if this letter was published by Skyline.

25 - In 1979 the European squatting movement was still young. (There is as yet no English language history.) An example of the Italian center is discussed in Andrea Membretti, “Centro Sociale Leoncavallo: The Social Construction of a Public Space of Proximity,” 09/2003 at http://www.republicart.net/disc/realpublicspaces/membretti01_en.htm. The five House Magic zines contain other stories from the squatting movements. See also the anthology of Nanni Balestini, Primo Moroni, eds., *La Horda de oro 1968-1977 : la gran ola revolucionaria y creativa, política y existencial* (Traficantes de Sueños, 2006).

26 - Nicholas Mirzoeff, “The Right to Look,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Spring 2011), pp. 473-496; see also <http://nicholasmirzoeff.com/RTL/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/RTL-from-CI.pdf>. The dense prologue to this article contains useful connections to the Real Estate Show action: Mirzoeff's “visuality” is not only the field of human regard, it is imbricated with the Carlylean notion of power, heroic authority which has the ability to see and determine the course of history. That's the nobility; the rest of us, masses, commoners, are “mobility.” Thus seeing, and with it all technologies of vision (e.g., photography), has a clear relation to power. To see is the prerogative of power, and can be denied to the “mobility.” You don't need to see; you don't need to know. Mirzoeff: “I am not attributing agency to visuality but, as is now commonplace, treating it as a discursive practice for rendering and regulating the real that has material effects.” For him, then, the “right to look...spontaneously invents new forms” in order to evade the separations enforced by the visualities of authority. “It wants to separate right from law, as being a prior moment of formation, whether in the judicial process or the Lacanian law of the gaze” (Mirzoeff, p. 476). “It is the performative claim of a right to look where none technically exists that puts a countervisuality into play” (p. 478). Artists are all about looking.

27 - Curiously, I no longer feel that. I have been in so many “free spaces” and social centers in the last several years I have come to realize what should have been obvious from the start - these spaces are linked, and all together they constitute a new world of action with its own rules and regulations. The thrill of opening a new space almost immediately gives way to the hard work of running it.

28 - J. Martin Pedersen, “Property, Commoning and the Politics of Free Software,” *The Commoner*, no. 14 - Winter 2010, p. 18; online at <http://www.commoner.org.uk/N14/jmp-essay-full-the-commoner.pdf>.

29 - Nicholas Mirzoeff, “Occupy Theory” at <http://occupytheory.org/read/occupy-theory.html>; the “general will” quote comes from Mirzoeff's “Occupy” blog, post “Jan. 3 [2012] Occupy Cultural Studies”; he is quoting Nick Couldry and Natalie Fenton, “Occupy: Rediscovering the General Will,” on the Social Science Research Council website.

30 - Pedersen cites this to Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (2008), p. 45.

31 - For this term, Pedersen cites Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (2006).

32 - “Occupy a Museum Near You! Noah Fischer in conversation with Joanna Warsza and Florian Malzacher,” website of the Berlin Biennale 2012,

<http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/comments/occupy-a-museum-near-you-20371>; first published in Camera Austria International No 117, 2012 (Graz/Berlin); www.camera-austria.at.

33 - The Reverend Daniel Berrigan appeared at Zucotti Park in New York City on the “Democracy Now” webcast news program, June 8, 2012.