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New York Beat: Collaborative Video and Filmmaking in The Lower East Side and the South Bronx from 1977-1984

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NEW YORK BEAT: COLLABORATIVE VIDEO AND FILMMAKING IN THE LOWER EAST SIDE AND THE SOUTH BRONX FROM 1977-1984

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Abstract

This thesis examines the media, artists and creative practices that emerged in the New York City downtown art scene in the Lower East Side and the uptown hip-hop scene in the South Bronx during the late 1970's and early 1980's. I focus on independent public access television, video and under-researched 'No Wave' filmmakers Charlie Ahearn, Glenn O'Brien, Edo Bertoglio and others. I discuss how these disenfranchised, low-budget artists sought not to collapse their differences, but to explore the points of connection that engendered a form of artistic hybridity that negated both homogeneity and order. I argue that the narratives, aesthetics and techniques of this group of artists represent a unique cultural milestone in the history of radical American art, music and film.

Keywords: No Wave Cinema; Lower East Side; South Bronx; Public Access Television; Hip Hop; Graffiti Writing; Charlie Ahearn; Amos Poe; Glenn O'Brien; Jean-Michel Basquiat; *Wild Style*; *Downtown 81*; *TV Party*; Co-Lab

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

New York in the late 1970s and early 1980s was in the midst of a period of tremendous cultural, political, and social change where artists from the downtown art scene and the uptown hip-hop scene working across a variety of media collided and cross-fertilized. Styles that were previously thought of as separate now merged in the form of hybrid works of art that conveyed a new sense of collectivism. From New York's Lower East Side (LES) and the South Bronx came a significant series of videos and films that demonstrated a successful harmony of performance and music as well as an aesthetic treatment of genre. The videos *All Color News* (1978)/*Potato Wolf* (1980) and *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party* (1978), and the films *Downtown 81* (1981) and *Wild Style* (1982) were part of a distinct and groundbreaking movement in the history of video and film.

In my thesis I explore the intersection of these diverse creative scenes, seeking not to collapse their differences but instead to explore the points of connection that engendered such artistic hybridity. I examine the disenfranchised, no-budget artists who were brought together by a clash of elements that included geography, time, aesthetics and politics. Driven by a need to experience and create something that negated homogeneity and order, these artists created an important body of videos and films. By examining the techniques and narratives of these videos and films, I will identify emergent processes through which cultural power was created, maintained, and distributed. Though it is significant that viewers of these works are offered insight into the lives of the artists themselves, more importantly these videos and films demonstrate the artistic and political power of a collective artistic community.

Although this multimedia art and performance did dialogue with contemporary political and social issues and practices, I would argue that part of the conditions of existence for this community depended on the artists checking their ideologies at the door.[1] What I see as distinctive about this movement was its attempt to cut through divisions and rediscover some primal basis of connection, even if that unity was as simple as sharing the same sonic and visual sensations and occupying the same space. With this in mind I would argue that the videos and films produced by this audacious group of artists has deeply influenced the aesthetic style and DIY approach to the mediated images in the video and films created thus far in the new millennium. The narratives, aesthetics and techniques projected in the films by this group of New York artists represent a significant claim to radicalism in the history of American art, music and film.

The ultimate goal of my thesis is to sketch out a brief history of the under-researched video and filmmaking projects of the LES[2] and the South Bronx in New York. My interest in this topic comes from my experience as a D.J. and artist and my scholarly research on the intersection of dance and music and moving images. In addition to my academic background and bachelor's degree in film and video from Ontario College of Art and Design, a variety of cultural experiences have fuelled my interest in the Downtown film and video movement and "no wave" artists. I have worked for nearly 20 years as both a D.J. and an artist influenced by and focusing on the artistic output of late 1970s and early 1980s New York. Taking into account that my familiarity on this subject comes from both academic and life experiences, this thesis attempts to trace both a

[1] Gay, straight, bi-sexual, black, Latin American and white performers and artists came together in a brief union where art superseded social and economic boundaries.
[2] Throughout this thesis, the abbreviation LES is used for the Lower East Side.

popular account of the movement and also synthesize a vast number of historical and theoretical texts and sources.

The two historical sources I find most useful for placing the 'No Wave Cinema' movement and its artistic hybridity are Clayton Patterson's *Resistance: A Radical Social and Political History of the Lower East Side* and *Captured: A Film/Video History of the Lower East Side*. As described in the first chapter of this thesis, Patterson personally documented the LES from its beginnings using both video and text. In these books he presents a seminal collection of interviews and essays derived from direct interviews with people who worked and lived in the LES community. His goal is to account for the historical intersection of politics and film in this geographical region and community. In my cultural analysis of the video series *All Color News/Potato Wolf* and *TV Party*, *Art Gangs: Protest and Counterculture in New York City* in chapter two of the thesis, I turn to the work of Alan W. Moore as an integral source. Moore was a member of Collaborative Projects (Colab) and in his book he discusses his experiences with that New York art and video collective. In this chapter I also refer to journalist Leah Churner's documentation of the oral history of public access television in Manhattan and for my theoretical analysis I draw upon the social criticism of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge. As technology for producing sound movies became accessible, New York artists with super-8 film cameras and cheap and portable video recorders saw video as the perfect medium to communicate more personal narratives that were not represented in mainstream film. This was supported by changes to public television broadcasting that facilitated an outlet for artistic expression. In the first chapter of the thesis, I draw upon Negt and Kluge's theory

of emancipatory communication to analyze the history of the early video-graphers of New York.

Within the experimental music and club culture environments of the LES, a collaborative structure of video and filmmaking developed which rejected the avant-garde and structural film styles that came before. Alongside the punk & No Wave scenes of the LES, the equally theatrical hip hop expressions of MC'ing, DJ'ing, breakdancing and graffiti were developing in the South Bronx. These cultural forms emerged in a post-industrialized urban America as an attempt "to negotiate the experiences of marginalization"[3] and oppression within the economic and cultural imperatives of the artists. The development of hip hop artists in the South Bronx in relationship to the cultural politics of the late 1970s and early 1980s was not unlike the relationship between the artists of the LES who were embedded in and emerged from broad social and cultural milieus. In this context, my thesis is also indebted to Paula J. Massood's concept of 'ghetto space' and her discussion of urban spaces and marginalized communities. Massood's concept of 'ghetto space' builds the framework for my analysis of an independent film *Downtown 81,* a pseudo-documentary[4] directed by Edo Bertoglio and written and produced by Glenn O'Brien. I am concerned with the Lower East Side of Manhattan as a unique character in the film and I will argue that it is defined as a discrete space in relation to other distinctive portions of the city of New York.

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[3] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 21

[4] In this thesis I draw upon Del Jacob's definition of the pseudo-documentary to refer to the genre as "a unique cinematic form combining elements of fiction and non-fiction film." (188) As discussed in chapter three, *Downtown 81* also includes a "fantasy" moment in the film's final moments. In *Wild Style*, as well, there is a brief moment in the film's conclusion that features the diegetic sound of thunder and a flash of animation (from the film's title sequence). The individual episodes of the cable access programing examined in this thesis are often fantasy interpretations of news events. See Del Jacobs, *Interrogating the Image: Movies and the World of Film and Television* (New York: University Press of America, 2009).

In her book *Black City Cinema*, Massood argues that the central trope in movies of the blaxploitation era of the 1970s is movement and confinement. Massood argues that movement and mobility do not articulate the utopia of leaving the ghetto but rather signal radical change and the hope of transforming the ghetto space. As well as focusing on the blaxploitation genre, she also examines the spatiotemporal representations of cities in the black cinema hood films of the early 1990's. Massood establishes that both the blaxploitation films of the 1970's and the hood films of the 1990's used techniques that suggest "both temporal immediacy and documentary verisimilitude."[5] She suggests that, "images of the city in these films reveal it as both a utopia - as space promising freedom and economic mobility - and dystopia - the ghetto's economic impoverishment and segregation. In this manner, the city as a signifying space has performed a dual function, both real and imaginary."[6] In chapter three of this thesis, I argue that *Downtown 81* is historically situated politically and socially between Gerald Ford's deindustrialization and the beginning of the post-Fordism of Reagan's neoconservative ideals.[7] In many ways *Downtown 81* is fixed between the blaxploitation films of the early 1970s and the hood films of the early 1990's. Massood's theoretical analysis is even more relevant if we consider that African-American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat played the lead character Jean in the film. As a Black leading character, Jean is a symbol of continued progress by

[5] Paula J. Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 146.
[6] Paula J Massood, "Mapping The Hood: The Genealogy of City Space in 'Boyz N the Hood' and 'Menace II Society,'" *Cinema Journal* 35 no.2 (1996): 88.
[7] The politics of abandonment tied New York of the late 1960's, 70, and 80's to the Los Angeles of 1992. Says Jeff Chang: "To combat their defense-bloated deficits, Republicans had introduced a strategy of devolution, shift much of the burden of health, education, and social services from federal government back to the states and cities". During the Reagan and Bush administrations, "federal spending on subsidized housing had been slashed by 82 percent, job training, and employment by 63 percent, and community service and development programs by 40 percent". Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 372 -379.

the artistic collective of the LES towards establishing an ethnically and culturally diverse scene. As a painter from the LES who was actively engaged in the burgeoning art of graffiti, Basquiat also represents a cross germination across artistic boundaries. Had *Downtown 81* been released in 1981, it would have arguably been the first film to feature multiple elements of hip-hop culture. In my discussion of *Downtown 81* I also draw upon Trey Ellis' articles *The New Black Aesthetic* and *Responses to NBA Critiques*. The work of Ellis is particularly useful in examining Basquiat's identity with respect to the role of Jean, who acts as key facilitator to various creative scenes in both the LES and The South Bronx. *How Racism Takes Place* by George Lipsitz proposes the theory of a 'Black spatial imaginary'. I use this theory to examine how Basquiat conveyed a historical sense of displacement through his portrayal of Jean. In *Downtown 81,* Jean is on a quest to secure a place to be able to work on art and he uses the city and environment around him as territory to establish a rooted collectivism. This is a theme that is also central to the film I analyze in the fourth chapter, *Wild Style.* If we heed the artist voices of Bertoglio and O'Brien's *Downtown 81* and Charlie Ahearn's *Wild Style*, NYC is more than an artistic backdrop, canvas, vantage point, milieu or landscape; it emerges as a dynamic lived space for new mobile identities.

Film studies scholar Vera Dika in her recent account of the No-Wave films of Amos Poe, the B's and others in her study *The Moving (Pictures) Generation: The Cinematic Impulse in Downtown New York Art and Film* has used the term "backdrop" to describe the No-Wave longing for NYC as a stimulating "place for the flow of ideas" and mediums. Although Dika in her prologue is interested in hybrid media[8], she does not

[8] In the prologue, she briefly touches on shows and performances at the Kitchen for example that could offer a "mix of, say, music, performance, sculpture, or film in a single presentation" Vera Dika, *The Moving*

address much of the history accounted for in this thesis. Dika writes that she is "not presenting a survey of all the art and film practices in the downtown location beginning in the late 1970s. These practices were many and varied, and the similarity in general location and era does not necessarily bestow homogeneity on the works produced. My work is not even inclusive of all the filmmaking that emerged during this period. Instead, my concern is for a particular type of cinema-inspired practice, one that cuts across mediums, neighborhoods, and boundaries of high and mass culture"[9].

A seminal NYC film of 1983 that cuts across mediums and neighborhoods is Charlie Ahearn's *Wild Style*, arguably the first narrative film to portray hip hop culture. In my analysis of the film in this thesis, I draw upon Nancy McDonald's book *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity, and Identity in London and New York*, which discusses the conflict between illegal and legal graffiti writers and the New York authorities. I also reference the book *Wild Style*, the primary text on the film written by its director Charlie Ahearn as well as the book *Yes, Yes, Y'All* written by Charlie Ahearn and Jim Fricke. I also draw upon *Spray Can Art* by Harry Chalfant and James Prigoff, and *Subway Art* by Harry Chalfant and Martha Cooper, which describe graffiti in the streets and subways as a liberated public form of art. Alongside *History of American Graffiti* by Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelon, these texts will shed new light on how the film portrays the emergence of a new art form.

Shot on location in the South Bronx without financial, technical or government support, Ahearn produced one of the most influential films to capture the birth of graffiti art and hip hop culture. The largely improvised script supported claims of authenticity

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*Pictures Generation: The Cinematic Impulse in Downtown New York Art and Film, (*London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), xviii.

[9] Dika, *The Moving Pictures*, xix.

laid by the creators and the artists in the film. *Wild Style* depicts the story of teenagers in the South Bronx as they participate in the emergent and innovative elements of hip hop including MC'ing, DJ'ing, breakdancing and graffiti. Ahearn knew from the beginning that the film would start with the character of ZORO painting in the train yards and would end with a massive neighbourhood party – a prescient narrative considering the rise of hip hop culture from the early work of graffiti writers to the vibrant multi-faceted culture of artists, DJ's, MC's and b-boys. Casting Lee Quinones as the lead character of ZORO was significant for a number of reasons. As the single most influential "wildstyle" artist at the time he was also a heralded figure for successfully crossing over from the New York subway art movement into the contemporary art world. Much of the plot of the film loosely draws on Quinones' personal conflict between his community values in hip hop culture and his identity as an artist as a whole. Much like the character of Raymond, Quinones was torn between remaining an outlaw artist of the streets true to the culture and the lure of status and financial success afforded by the fine art world.

In the above-mentioned study *The Moving (Pictures) Generation: The Cinematic Impulse in Downtown New York Art and Film*, Dika documents directors who were drawn to the creative scene of 1970s and 1980s New York, but who had specifically emigrated from various parts of the world and other regions of the United States. Focusing on that convergence, her book, I would argue neglects a large portion of artists who were originally from New York (like Quinones) and thus also neglects to discuss the influence of black and Latino artists on the creative communities in the LES. I would argue that this omission also fails to recognize the influence of such artists on the primary creative catalyst to said community – the music scene. Instead Dika discusses the work of

filmmakers such as Amos Poe and Eric Mitchell, artists that I only reference in passing. In her chapter entitled "Community," Dika does not address the black and Latino community members of the No Wave movement, but focuses on New York films that paid homage to cinema of 1960's such as Godard's *Breathless* (1960), Andy Warhol's *Vinyl* (1965) and the work of Italian directors Michelangelo Antonioni and Pier Pasolini. In Dika's own words, "one had to wonder what was to be gained by revisiting already deconstructed works."[10]

Although I try to account for the scholarly writing on the video and filmmaking artists of the LES and the South Bronx in this thesis, there is virtually no scholarly writing that seeks to establish a connection between the artistic communities that created the videos and the films of these geographical sites. This gap demonstrates the need for continued explorations into the history and legacy of these significant visual communities. I believe the narratives of these videos and films discussed in this thesis have never been addressed together in the same critical context. I hope to reveal a number of aesthetic and conceptual similarities that cannot simply be attributed to synchronicity or chance, but rather were produced by the shared historical experiences of the circumstances that bore them. It is only by considering these films and videos within the larger context of aesthetic, historical, social and economic concerns that we can begin to understand and appreciate the influence and the cultural significance of these works.

[10] Ibid., 72.

Chapter One: Placing No-Wave Cinema: A Social History of te Lower East Side and South Bronx from the 1960's to the Early 1980's

As late as the 1950's, New York City was considered the world's largest industrial center. The West Village in Manhattan had a working waterfront (New York's ports were easily the largest, employing over two-hundred thousand people) and there were many sewing rooms and small-scale manufacturing lots centered in and around SoHo, Tribeca, and the Lower East Side (LES)[11] or Alphabet City, then known as the East Village. The LES was a bustling neighborhood where over two thousand small businesses were owned and operated mostly by local residents with a mixed, lower-income population comprised by a majority of Puerto Ricans and Slavs followed closely by Jews, African –Americans and Albanians. According to Yuri Kapralov the quality of life in the LES during this time "wasn't so bad. There was practically no crime and no abandoned or burned-out buildings. There were about fifteen hundred people living on each block."[12] However by the middle to late 1960's the US started to undergo a period of de-industrialization and no single city lost more jobs during this period than New York where over 600,000 manufacturing jobs disappeared. By 1975, the city lost an additional 500,000: "as many companies left the city because it was literally burning and falling to the ground."[13]

[11] The Lower East Side in Manhattan borders 14th St to the North, the East River to the East, the Brooklyn Bridge to the South, and to the Bowery to the West. See also Benjamin Schwarz' "Gentrification and Its Discontents: Manhattan was never what we think it was." *The Atlantic* (June 2010), available online at http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/06/gentrification-and-its-discontents/308092/?lang=en_us&output=json.

[12] Yuri Kapralov, "Christodora: The Flight of a Sea Animal", *Resistance: A Radical Social and Political History of the Lower East Side*, Ed. Clayton Patterson, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 99.

[13] Joe Flood, "Homelessness and the Lower East Side", *Resistance: A Radical Social and Political History of the Lower East Side*, Ed. Clayton Patterson, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 57.

By the end of the 1960's, real estate owners living as far away as Florida and California soon followed suit. Collecting rents from poorer and poorer tenants they frequently allowed their buildings to deteriorate, "accumulating back tax liabilities, as well as building violations imposed by city inspectors"[14], eventually abandoning their properties which were then repossessed by the city of New York. Because reports of landlord abandonment are not kept, "the trend went largely unnoticed by those not confronted by the specter of boarded up and crumbling buildings in their own neighborhoods. By 1970 though, the estimated 100, 000 abandoned housing units in the city could no longer be ignored."[15] Many abandoned buildings were then taken into Real Estate Management by the city which were then stripped of building materials of value and left to deteriorate to the point that inhabiting these spaces became unbearable and people were being forced to leave. This was a federal plan referred to as 'spatial deconcentration' whereby the authorities had hoped to get rid of poor inner city minorities and then "real-estate speculators could move in and acquire properties for little money to renovate for future exploitation**"**.[16]

Combined with the abandonment trend, a fire epidemic during the 1970's destroyed fifty-seven percent of the housing stock in the LES and resulted in a sixty-percent decline in its population. The loss of housing was also balanced by the "white flight" phenomenon: "the spread of fires—and the spikes in crime, drug abuse, and disease that followed—chased 1.3 million white New Yorkers from the city in just ten

[14] Joe Flood, "Homelessness and the Lower East Side", 55.
[15] Ibid, 55.
[16] Fly, "Squatting on the Lower East Side", *Resistance: A Radical Social and Political History of the Lower East Side*, Ed. Clayton Patterson, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 213.

years."[17] The city as a whole had been denied a federal bail-out to prevent itself from filing for bankruptcy and so with the help from a corporate friendly administration "New York emerged as a global city in finance, banking, insurance, and real estate."[18] Growth in corporate service positions however "was outmatched by the disappearance of semi-skilled" and industrial jobs—positions held predominately by black, Hispanic, and lower-class whites—which created a condition "that drove parts of the city's poor and minority labor force into an expanding formal and informal low-wage service economy**."**[19]

Black communities in the South Bronx were hit hardest by job loss. As a result of unemployment and the unavailability of low-cost housing, the South Bronx became the emblem of irreversible decay. The urban redevelopment projects of Robert Moses from the 1930's to the 1970's involved the massive relocation of African-American and Hispanic residents from all parts of New York into the South Bronx, "once home to an enormous Jewish" population that departed "almost en masse."[20] Jeff Chang in *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* remarks: "Moses himself imagined a capstone befitting his career. In 1973, in retirement, at the age of eighty-four he declared, 'You must concede that this Bronx slum and others in Brooklyn and Manhattan are unrepairable. They are beyond rebuilding, tinkering, and restoring. They must be leveled to the ground.'"[21]

Rather than providing upkeep on dilapidated buildings, landlords preferred to set fire to community housing projects and collect the insurance: parts of the South Bronx lost eighty percent of their housing and population. The South Bronx was "losing almost

[17] Joe Flood, "Homelessness and the Lower East Side", 56.
[18] Christopher Mele, "Making Art and Policing Streets", *Resistance: A Radical Social and Political History of the Lower East Side*, Ed. Clayton Patterson, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 41.
[19] Mele, "Making Art and Policing Streets", 41.
[20] Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti*, (New York: Harper Design, 2010), 90.
[21] Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 18.

ten blocks of buildings a year" and as a result of the city's attempt at budget restructuring which involved "massive layoffs of the city's police officers" and the closing of "fire stations in neighborhoods with declining populations"[22] few of these arson fires were stopped in time. Left with few financial and social resources, up to thirty percent of black and Hispanic households in the South Bronx between the years of 1978 and continuing up until 1986 were living below the poverty line in overcrowded and under maintained spaces that were more susceptible to unscrupulous slumlords, criminal gangs, and drug peddlers.

Amidst this landscape of abandoned and burned out buildings, empty lots and thriving drug dens, the Lower East Side since the early 1960's and the South Bronx in the late 1970's witnessed the emergence of new art forms, alternative identities, and a new social awareness in these marginalized and oppressed communities whose former local support institutions had been destroyed along with large sectors of its constructed environment. The LES in particular had historically been a hotbed of high-energy politics populated by a diverse group of liberated, idealized, creative, and local residents and newly arrived immigrants. In the early 1960's, a number of entrepreneurial, working class, and non-academic artists with backgrounds mostly in experimental theatre and performance joined the residents of the LES. A self-sustaining career in art did not exist, there was as yet no national or international market for radical and experimental art and "consequently, the audience for these works was made up of fellow artists, painters, photographers, poets, writers" filmmakers, and musicians "to whom creative expression

[22] Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti*, (New York: Harper Design, 2010), 90.

is manna."[23] It was a period in the history of New York of intense intellectual and artistic cross-fertilization, when high ideals bolstered and informed low art: a period in which innovation and experimentation were valued more than material gain and in which "ideas in themselves are currency".[24] The results sought were intellectual, spiritual, and creatively stimulating and the inspiration was to break through the boundaries and restraints imposed by "institutions, which regulated the distribution and dissemination of modern art works and the critical evaluation of such works."[25]

These postmodern artists of the 1960's were characterized firstly by "a temporal imagination" displaying "a powerful sense of the future…of rupture and discontinuity" and "of crisis and generational conflict."[26] Secondly, this early phase of postmodernism "included an iconoclastic attack on institution art," particularly to the ways in which art is produced, marketed, distributed, consumed, and in which ways "art's role in society is perceived and defined."[27] Lastly, many of the advocates of postmodernism were enthusiastic for new media, sharing the technological optimism of the 1920's avant-garde: "What photography and film had been to Vertov and Brecht in that period, television, video, and the computer were for the prophets of a technological aesthetic in the 1960's."[28] This was seen as an attempt to validate popular culture, challenging the canon of modernist or traditional high art.

By the mid to late 1970's, when a growing interest in art practices of the past seemed to be a strong undercurrent in the culture, the term postmodernism "gained a

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[23] Penny Arcade, "Tell All the Scum of Bagdad the Legacy of Jack Smith", *Captured: A Film/Video History of the Lower East Side,* Ed. Clayton Patterson, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 16.
[24] Arcade, "Tell All the Scum of Bagdad the Legacy of Jack Smith", 15.
[25] Ibid, 17.
[26] Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern", *New German Critique* 33 (1984), 20.
[27] Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern", 20.
[28] Ibid, 22.

much wider currency" encompassing literature, art, and architecture, but also dance, theater, film, and music. However, the cultural developments of the 1970's were sufficiently different from the cultural milieu of the 1960's and certain characteristics of the preceding decade had been radically transformed. What was new in the 1970's was the "emergence of a culture of eclecticism."[29] The postmodernist situation of the late 1970's can be characterized by a dissemination of artistic practices which raid and plunder the ideas and vocabulary of the modernist foundation, as theorist Andreas Huyssen writes "supplementing it with randomly chosen images and motifs from pre-modern and non-modern cultures as well as from contemporary mass culture."[30]

The artist of the late 1970's also appropriated existing cultural models of high art institutions and business structures only to use these models to disrupt the hegemony of business and modern art. As well, the earlier optimism about technology, media, and popular culture "had given away to more sober and critical assessment"[31], as the artists became "profoundly aware of the failure of modernist revolutions."[32] For instance, the Vietnam War had taught this generation to see the links between the military and industrial complex and its influence in political circles and the failed presidencies of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter "dispelled any vestiges of belief in the great men of American government."[33]

By this time, one of the most vital forms of art making in the LES centered around No Wave music (also referred to as Post Punk), a highly theatrical performance

[29] Ibid, 11-16.
[30] Ibid, 25.
[31] Ibid, 11.
[32] Robert Siegle, *Suburban Ambush: Downtown Writing and the Fiction of Insurgency* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 4.
[33] Marvin J Taylor, "Playing the Field", *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene 1974-1984,* Ed. Marvin J. Taylor, (UK: Princeton University Press, 2006), 22.

based approach to music. Producer and writer Glenn O'Brien comments that No Wave musicians "experimented with the way instruments could be played, while making sounds which expanded the range of sounds traditionally associated with New Wave."[34] Groups such as The Contortions, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, Mars, DNA and The Lounge Lizards wanted a style that rejected all the accepted notions and rules of musicality, defined by a radicalism not as a return to roots, but as a deracination, acting as if they had no ancestors at all. This diverse group of artists known collectively as the Downtown[35] scene congregated in the LES to forge radically creative networks based on a do-it-yourself resourcefulness in order to generate new, interdisciplinary forms of art that melded aesthetics and community.

As Marvin J. Taylor writes, downtown artists worked to break out of the framework of the established art world and resist traditional art forms, thus "exposing them as nothing more than cultural constructs."[36] Downtown artists engaged in transgressive, albeit appropriated work such as graffiti, Xerox, performative, and musical art. They did so in outside makeshift galleries, theatres and local clubs that undermined the traditions of painting, performance, and music – spaces that existed outside the customary "structures of artistic media and the culture that had grown around them."[37] This art scene that emerged in the Lower East Side in the late 1970's was centered around diverse forms of artistic expression known for being accessible and interchangeable. In

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[34] Glenn O'Brien, "Style Makes the Band", *ArtForum*. Oct. 1999. <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_2_38/ai_57475781/>

[35] In *The Downtown Book*, Marvin J. Taylor states that the term Downtown was first applied to artists who lived below 14th Street in the LES in the late 1950s. He makes specific reference to the work of composer John Cage who lived there: "The term Downtown differentiated Cage's meta-musical work from compositions by the more traditional composers residing 'Uptown' at Columbia." Marvin J Taylor, "Playing the Field", *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene 1974-1984,* Ed. Marvin J. Taylor, (UK: Princeton University Press, 2006), 18.

[36] Taylor, *The Downtown Book*, 23.

[37] Ibid.

the book *New York Noise* Sal Principato, lead member of the band Liquid Liquid, attempts to explain the seamless connection between the various disciplines: "Why the convergence? I guess…nobody wanted to be pigeon-holed, nobody wanted to be restricted. Most people felt a certain amorphic passion for the arts in all its forms all at the same time."[38]

Meanwhile in the South Bronx, graffiti, MC-ing, b-boying and DJ-ing became prime expressions of a new youth's sub-culture that combined elements of speech and song with dance and display, forged with an alternative street fashion and language, established within local neighborhood crews and posses. The term hip-hop is a label that cultural critic Tricia Rose says "was given to describe the collective whole of the four connected but distinct elements"[39] that have both their own history and terminology instrumental to tracing hip-hop's development.[40] While the three elements of b-boying, DJ-ing, and MC-ing rely heavily on a sonic connection, the most visual element of this emerging youth culture was graffiti writing.

According to Fred Brathwaite aka Fab Five Freddy, graffiti declared, "an all-out assault on everything that a young kid would want to put his or her name on."[41] Graffiti artists re-imagined logos and images borrowed from the cinema, television's advertisements, "kid reference material" such as "comic books, cartoons, toys, candy

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[38] *New York Noise* (London: Soul Jazz Publishing, 2007), 161.
[39] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 1994), 27.
[40] The physical manifestation of hip-hop is breakdancing, or commonly known in its short form as breakin' and b-boying, a street dance practised in hallways and on concrete courts and parks. DJ's on multiple turntables playing popular funk, soul, disco, and electro records provided the soundtrack, often repeating the middle portion of the song or the "breakbeat" where the isolated drum patterns would be extended by "cutting" back and forth between two copies of the same track, hence the term "breakin'." Fixing the crowd's attention with authority and confidence, MC's or rappers would perform spoken and chanted rhyming lyrics in time, over an instrumental beat or break which has its roots in West African work songs and spirituals of the slavery trade in the southern regions of the United States and the Caribbean.
[41] Charlie Ahearn, *Wild Style: The Sampler*, (Brooklyn, NY: Powerhouse, 2007), 27.

wrappers," and "cereal boxes"[42]to paint complex personalized and stylistically vibrant signatures simply known as pieces, primarily on the walls of abandoned buildings and the inside and outer facades of subway trains. While the greatest form of inspiration came from one another and older graffiti artists before them, Gastman and Neelon note that "one thing was clear: Young graffiti writers were not getting their inspiration from the city's museums or art institutions."[43] Growing up in places like the South Bronx, the entry fees to institutions like art museums and galleries were not affordable for young kids who were as graffiti artists Crash describes "poor enough that we would share sneakers … so growing up in that environment, museums are, like the last thing you think of."[44]

No other single factor influenced the artistic practice in the South Bronx and the LES than the emergence of new technologies fueling the artist's imaginations to make art productive in the transformation of everyday life. While graffiti artists were using markers and spray cans as paintbrushes to paint on metal, mobile canvases, breakdancers were transporting portable dance floors into empty parking lots and basketball courts, DJ's manipulated new mixer and turntable technology, and MC's used handheld microphones for braggadocios rhymes and encouraging lines of collective participation. Meanwhile, the rapid development of cheap, simple moving image technology lured the artists of the LES to experiment in film and video work. Kodak had introduced a sync sound Super-8 camera that became widely available on the consumer market, breaking down the barriers of cost and technical skill imposed by 16mm cameras and cumbersome

[42] Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelson, *The History of American Graffiti*, (New York: Harper Design, 2010), 23.
[43] Gastman and Neelson, *The History of American Graffiti*, 23.
[44] Ibid, 23.

synchronized sound systems and as early as 1968 the Sony Corporation introduced the first portable video camera and recording unit known simply as the 'portapak'.

Closely linked to the local No Wave bands, the filmmakers of No Wave cinema also known as New Cinema flourished in the LES between the years of 1976 and 1984. Armed with cheap Super-8 and video cameras, the musicians and filmmakers of the No Wave "launched an incestuous, collaborative, creatively promiscuous movement,"[45] stripping their media of all ornament, commerce and convention, paralleling the music's energy iconography and aggressive DIY aesthetic. The participants of No Wave cinema who were mostly Americans and transplanted Europeans, arriving in New York with backgrounds in music, art history, and performance, viewed film as a perfect medium to tell stories that were not present in mainstream cinema, perhaps because it was a personal cinema made by a small group of persons who were free to investigate "a wide range of ideas, subject matter, and forms."[46] They blended aspects of the documentary and narrative, rejecting the "increasingly academic formalism"[47] that had characterized the 1960's and 1970's film avant-garde[48] and the gallery-art of video: representing a partial return to the rawer values of underground filmmaking of the 1960's and the ground-breaking work of New American Film Group.

Realizing that most underground films would never be screened in commercial theatres, a community of underground filmmakers including Taylor Mead, Ron Rice, Robert Downey, Jack Smith, Ken Jacobs, Also Tambelli, and Emil de Antonio were

[45] Grey Daisies. "No Wave Cinema." <http://mubi.com/lists/no-wave-cinema>
[46] Harris Smith. "No New Cinema: Punk and No Wave Underground Film 1976-1984." <http://web.archive.org/web/20071008064931/http://www.remodernist.com/NoNewCinema.html>
[47] Jim Hoberman. "No Wavelength: The Para-Punk Underground." *Village Voice*, May 1979. <http://www.luxonline.org.uk/articles/no_wavelength%281%29.html>
[48] By the mid 1970's, avant-garde film and video making were focused primarily on non-figurative movements of conceptual art, minimalism and structural film centered around the activities of the Anthology Film Archives.

called together by Jonas Mekas who recognized a need for mutual support and to form a film distribution network. Proclaiming a commitment to low budget independently produced films, their manifesto proclaimed an allegiance to art "but not at the expense for life. We don't want false, polished, slick films, - we prefer them rough and unpolished, but alive; we don't want rosy films – we want them the color of blood."[49] Aesthetically, the filmmakers rejected big production values, classical narratives "and all forms of Hollywood professionalism," producing a number of varied films that included documentaries, film diaries, beat films, erotic films, gay/camp films, animation and satirical comedies "varying in length from very short to very long and employing 16mm or special projection requirements that precluded many of them enjoying a wide audience."[50]

Of the filmmakers mentioned above, it was Jack Smith, the director of the groundbreaking underground classic *Flaming Creatures* (1963) who proved to be a major catalyst in New York's downtown art scene as well as a major influence on the No Wave filmmakers. Smith devoted his entire life to what he dubbed "the politics of art" and struggled endlessly against a curatorial class that sought to act as middlemen between him and the general public: "I don't make my work for a specialized audience," Smith stated, "I make my work for everyone on earth."[51] As it was later with the No Wave filmmakers, capitalist rules and markets did not create or drive their original creativity. The mainstream film industry was not interested in their type of filmmaking and likewise

[49] Sandra Koponen, "The 60's: Notes on the Underground," *Captured: A Film/Video History of the Lower East Side,* ed. Clayton Patterson, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 114.
[50] Koponen, "The 60's: Notes on the Underground," 114.
[51] Poynton, Jerome, "Baroque on the Lower East Side: Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* and Telephone Messages from Ed Marshall", *Captured: A Film/Video History of the Lower East Side,* Ed. Clayton Patterson, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 18.

the No Wave filmmakers were not interested in mainstream Hollywood, which did not speak to life in the LES.

The films of No Wave cinema can be considered transgressive in the way they erode mainstream Hollywood's division of reality and fantasy, which attempts to hide the relationship between the process of representation and a seemingly reflected reality.[52] No Wave films attempted to combat the mainstream production of reality with a counter-reality, revealing their relationship between film production and the finished product and in fact drawing attention to their artifice. The physical location of the LES took the place of commercial theatres and because they could exhibit films uncensored in a supportive environment, they often created their own spaces for presenting their work in various bars, lofts, store-fronts and nightclubs**.** For instance, a faction of Colab members helped co-sponsor shows at ABC No Rio at 156 Rivington St. in the Lower East Side, Fashion Moda in the South Bronx, The New Cinema on St. Marks Place in the East Village, and the Mudd Club[53] on White Street in Tribeca.

Author Tim Lawrence cautions against the attribution of "absolute agency" to the LES and Hip-Hop artists who "proceeded to make radical" film and video, because they were only able to make art in the Lower East Side and the South Bronx "as result of light

[52] The particular films and programs of my focus should not be confused with the actual "Cinema of Transgression", which also had its roots in the Lower East Side, but didn't emerge until around 1984. Almost all of the films by notable members Richard Kern, Nick Zedd, and Lydia Lunch were brutally confrontational gutter films that trafficked in extreme sex and violence. While some of these films have political aspirations, their ideological stance is unclear. For example, an excerpt from the "Cinema of Transgression Manifesto" written by Nick Zedd states "There will be blood, shame, pain and ecstasy, the likes of which no one has yet imagined. None shall emerge unscathed. Since there is no afterlife, the only hell is the hell of praying, obeying laws, and debasing yourself before authority figures, the only heaven is the heaven of sin…" Nick Zedd, "Cinema of Transgression Manifesto", *UBUWEB*, accessed February 12, 2012. http://www.ubu.com/film/transgression.html.

[53] For a full overview of the artists and media involved with this exhibition space, see the collection of posters for Mudd Club film screening and graffiti shows in the Amos Poe papers at NYU Bobst Library: "*Amos Poe* Papers 1966-2005. MSS 203," Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, Bobst Library. The Anthology Film Archives in NYC also has original posters for the filmmakers Eric Mitchell, Beth and Scott B and Amos Poe.

industry having moved out."[54] The neighborhood's semi-derelict conditions and geographical locations "encouraged artists to develop an alternative practice that distanced them from the more comfortable conditions and rituals of midtown and uptown art."[55] Cheap rents allowed the LES crowd to work odd jobs sporadically and concentrate on making art. As Lawrence continues to suggest, the space of the Lower East Side and the South Bronx combined with the cultural producers who lived there and the technologies used "amounted to a collective aggregation of components that could act both materially and expressively. Like all assemblages, the network did not evolve outside of the interactions of its components, and to varying degrees these interactions had material effects on the development of the network."[56]

[54] Tim Lawrence, "Connecting with the Cosmic: Arthur Russell, Rhizomatic Musicianship, and the Downtown Music Scene, 1973-92," *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 3 (2007): 8.
[55] Lawerence, "Connecting with the Cosmic," 8.
[56] Ibid., 9.

Chapter Two. Public Access Television: Strategies of "Emancipatory Communication" in *AllColorNews, Potato Wolf,* and *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party*

Many diverse artist organizations that formed and dissolved in the Lower East Side and the South Bronx in the early 1960's and well into the 1980's were linked by overlapping memberships, avowed a political and oppositional intention, idealized collective action and used art to advocate social change. One of the most successful of these artists' groups was the Collaborative Projects Inc. or Colab as it came to be known informally. As Alan Moore and Marc Miller write in their edited volume *ABC No Rio Dinero: The Story of a Lower East Side Art Gallery*, a core membership of around fifty artists[57] working in all mediums and disciplines, diverse in aesthetics, beliefs, race and gender (black, Hispanic, and white, men and women), Colab functioned as an openly democratic social forum with an assured "commitment to the principle of collaboration, the cross-fertilization of ideas sharing in a group philosophy: a mix of art-world pragmatism dominated by left-wing politics and a new punk-style irreverence" (Figure 1).[58] Between the years 1978 and 1989, Colab produced a number of exhibitions, film screenings, cable television series, magazines, and artists' stores[59] with funding coming

[57] Many familiar names in the art world were part of Colab: Charlie and John Ahearn, Beth B., Liza Bear, Scot Billingsley, Diego Cortez, Jane Dickson, Stefan Eins, Colen Fitzgibbon, Bobby G, Jenny Holzer, Becky Howland, Joe Lewis, Michael McClard, Eric Mitchell, Alan Moore, James Nares, Joseph Nechvatal, Tom Otterness, Judy Rifka, Walter Robinson, Christy Rupp, Kiki Smith, Anton van Dalen, Tom Warren, and Robin Winters, to name just a few.

[58] Alan Moore and Marc Miller, "The ABCs of ABC and Its Times." *ABCNoRio*. Available at: http://www.abcnorio.org/about/history/abc_of_abc.html

[59] Colab established two exhibition venues and workshop project spaces called ABC NO RIO and Fashion Moda and is recognized in most art surveys for its sponsorship of the infamous exhibitions *The Real Estate Show, The Times Square Show* and *The NewYork/New Wave Show.* Colab also published the *X Motion Picture Magazine*, an eclectic jumble "of images and texts, many concerned with movies and filmmaking." Alan W. Moore, *Art Gangs: Protest and Counterculture in New York City*, (New York: Autonomedia, 2011), 89.

from the National Endowment for the Arts and later from the New York State Council on the Arts.

COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS Inc., NYC:

Charlie Ahearn
John Ahearn
Liza Bear
Cara Brownell
Andrea Callard
Ellen Cooper
Mitch Corber
Jody Culkin
Anton Van Dahlen
Debbie Davis
Jane Dickson
Peter Fend
Colen Fitzgibbon
Stefan Eins
Bobby G
Matthew Geller
Mike Glier
Ilona Granet
Peter Grass
Marnie Greenholz
Julie Harrison
Jenny Holzer
Becky Howland
Lisa Kahane
Christof Kohlhofer
Fred Krughoff
Justen Ladda
Gregory Lehmann
Michael McClard
Dick Miller
Terry Mohre
Joseph Nechvatal
Paulette Nenner
Tom Otterness
Carol Parkinson
Cara Perlman
Brian Piersol
Verge Piersol
Judy Rifka
Ulli Rimkus
Walter Robinson
Judy Ross
Christy Rupp
George Shustowicz
Terry Slotkin
Bebe Smith
Kiki Smith
Seton Smith
Harry Spitz
Wolfgang Staehle
Mindy Stevenson
Betsy Sussler
Jim Sutcliffe
Steven Torton
Sophie VDT
Sally White
Robin Winters

Fig 1. *List of artists from Colab Moore College of Art catalogue, 1983*

For the artists of Colab, film[60] and video-making, the most common activities of the group between 1977 and 1981, were considered an artistic activity that actively engaged with the world around them, as well as a model situation requiring collective work. A few of the core members including John Ahearn and his twin brother Charlie, The B's (Beth Horowitz and Scott Billingsley), Tom Otterness, and Alan Moore formed the All Color News group to produce a feature news program also called *AllColorNews* for the newly accessible public access television at ETC, a low cost studio situated on 23rd St. in Manhattan and the following year some of the lesser-known members of Colab produced a long running series called *Potato Wolf* that ran from 1979 through to 1986. The short news segments they made for both series covered events affecting artists and non- artists alike, addressing such diverse subjects as homelessness, subway overcrowding, the sanitary conditions of restaurants in Chinatown, inaccessibility to proper health care and the effects of unemployment in African-American neighborhoods.

While the artists of Colab were busy with *AllColorNews* and *Potato Wolf,* another group of artists from the LES was also producing a cable access show at ETC studios called *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party.* While not formally organized as Colab, this ragtag bunch of artists led by writer Glenn O'Brien attempted to create the vibe of a sophisticated cocktail party "but which could also be a political party."[61] *TV Party*

[60] As stated earlier, in 1978, one of Colab's first group projects was the New Cinema housed in a former Polish social club on St. Marks's Place and East 8th Ave exhibiting some of the first works produced by the No Wave Cinema movement.

[61] Glenn O'Brien's idea of socialism "meant going out every night, and that social action started with socializing. I think we were trying to inject a sort of tribal element into things. That's what happens when you smoke reefers and read Marshall McLuhan. I was also reading a lot of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis, not to mention Milton Berle and Henny Youngman. I thought we could do subliminal politics as absurdist comedy. I actually did believe in anarchy, as the peaceful society that comes after "the withering away of the state". I thought withering away the state sounded like fun, so we made fun of the state every chance we got." *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party: The Documentary*, directed by Danny Vinik, (Brinkfilms: 2006), DVD.

however wasn't based on the stiff format of the *Tonight Show* (the desk and sofa set up) as much as it was based on Hugh Hefner's two shows *Playboy's Penthouse* (1960) and *Playboy After Dark* (1969), which were set up as sophisticated cocktail parties with "groovy" guests like Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, and comedian Lenny Bruce and, like Hefner's show, didn't distinguish the audience from the performers. For the creators of *TV Party,* anyone who was good enough to be in the audience was good enough to be on the show – "a movable feast of characters...everyone feeding off each other...that's how we felt about TV Party, if you can find it, you can come."[62]

Public Access Television allowed the members of *All Color News/Potato Wolf* and *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party* to engage in both offensive and optimistic strategies for the emancipation of media from the control of broadcast television. As David Scholle states in his essay "Access Through Activism," the dominant media in the United States was "privately owned, profit driven, corporately structured and operate within the parameters of dominant political and economic arrangements that support a truncated representative democracy and a quasi-regulated free-market, predominantly consumerist in orientation" and was programmed as a "one-way model of communication, where feedback is registered as consumer need."[63] Additionally, social theorists Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge consider the television industry as a consciousness industry mainly concerned with providing entertainment that works to block the experiences of real life and refuse a two-way line of communication and "diverting the viewer's attention onto a

[62] *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party: Premier Episode, December 18, 1978*, directed by Amos Poe, (Brinkfilms, 2005), DVD.
[63] David Scholle, "Access Through Activism: Extending the Ideas of Negt and Kluge to American Alternative Practices", *Social Theory and Practice* 21, 1 (1995): 22.

sphere that is removed from society. Since real life is left untouched, entertainment becomes the dominant mode of the viewer."[64]

Considering the televisions industry's refusal to engage and develop a public sphere that is based on the social experiences of the public, the task to counter and disrupt this process has been taken up by certain "art movements, counter cultural groups and localized community structures",[65] engaging in a form of alternative media such as guerilla television and public access movements. The independent productions led by Colab and Glenn O'Brien operated "outside of the political and economic mainstream," challenging "mainstream television's hierarchal structures" and supporting "access to the means of communication".[66] Colab devoted their programming to public and community events that received little or no coverage in public news. As David E. Little writes, "many Colab-produced videos, like *X-Motion Picture Magazine*, suggested that community problems were part of a larger system deeper and more complex than mere local politics." Little also argues that these videos from All color News "possess an activist motivation for social change".[67] The *TV Party* crew although less overtly political, utilizing comedy and satire, were no less committed to promoting the social and performative aspects of the Lower East Side, providing an entertaining platform for emerging artists through live interviews, performances, and screenings.

Despite their differences, both groups "were deeply committed to the investigation of communications systems and to the potential of new technology to

[64] Scholle, "Access Through Activism", 27.
[65] Ibid., 27.
[66] Ibid., 22.
[67] David E. Little, "Colab Takes a Piece, History Takes It Back: Collectivity and New York Alternative Spaces", *Art Journal* 66 (2007): 60-74, 72-73.

encourage collectivity"[68] developing what Negt calls "emancipatory communication": a form of communication that aims to create "the objective conditions under which the human being can become more of a subject and can build more autonomous and more comprehensive relationships to reality."[69] Emancipatory communication may be loosely described as the way in which an individual or a collective may become more actively and independently associated with the mediated images s/he/they consume. David Scholle suggests the position taken by Negt owes much to Bertolt Brecht's theories about radio, which critiqued "the one-way functioning of dominant media, while maintaining that the form of media technology does not determine the form of its use. Thus Brecht sees the potential of radio to be transformed from a mechanism of distribution into one of communication."[70]

Furthermore, since broadcast television aims for merely entertainment, like Hollywood, it maintains the appearance of immediacy and completeness by concealing the means of production and out of the "immediate finished products, television attempts to represent or reflect the entire world" and "constructs the illusion of completeness by excluding anything that impinges on its façade of wholeness".[71] The technical limitations of early video and television equipment did not deter the cast and crew of *TV Party* and likewise the members of Colab, but was incorporated into a style of real time video that was praised for being "honest" in presenting an unreconstructed reality that opposed the conventional television reality. Glenn O'Brien referred to their show as a form of punk

[68] Ibid,. 73.
[69] Oscar Negt, "Mass Media: Tools of Domination or Instruments of Emancipatation? Aspects of the Frankfurt School's Communication Analysis", Edited by K. Woodward, *The Myths of Information: Technology and Postindustrial Culture*, (Madison, Wisconsin: Coda Press, 1980), 67.
[70] David Scholle, "Access Through Activism: Extending the Ideas of Negt and Kluge to American Alternative Practices", *Social Theory and Practice* 21, 1 (1995): 23.
[71] David Scholle, "Access Through Activism", 27.

TV and this could equally apply to *All Color News*: “We were anti-technique, anti-format, anti-establishment, and anti-anti-establishment. We liked to break all the rules of good broadcasting. Sometimes we would sit around and say, "Well, what should we do now?" Sometimes we sat there and did nothing. Sometimes we would sit perfectly still like a tape on pause, but it was live.”[72]

The statements and discernible aim of both the producers of *TV Party* and members of Colab represent the form of guerrilla television theorized by Michael Shamberg. The contributions of Michael Shamberg, one of the founders of the group RainDance who coined the term “Guerrilla Television”, were significant to the growth of cable access television. Shamberg’s “Guerrilla Television” doctrine spelled out an approach to social change through communications technology, particular through participation in cable television, all made possible by the introduction of new financially accessible technology. Despite its strategies and tactics similar to warfare, Shamberg argued, guerrilla television was non-violent. Shamberg encouraged “ordinary people to communicate a diversity of opinions to their communities” with assistance of new video technology and cable television. Shamberg wrote, “The inherent potential of information technology can restore democracy in America if people will become skilled with information tools.”[73]

In 1968 the Sony Corporation introduced the first portable video camera and recording unit known simply as the portapak. Weighing only about twenty pounds and costing less than a thousand dollars, a person could record sound and picture without the assistance of a sound person or camera operator, no lab work was required to develop

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[72] *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party: The Documentary*, directed by Danny Vinik, (Brinkfilms: 2006), DVD.
[73] As quoted in Ralph Engelman, “Origins of Public Access Cable Television”, *Journalism Monographs* 123 (Oct 1990): 26-27.

film or synchronize picture and sound, and recordings could be rewound and viewed instantaneously. Earlier television cameras were large and immobile and remote television news footage photographed on 16mm film had to be transferred to video for playback, a costly and time-consuming process that was only made possible by well-funded and established production companies. By making the use of videotape a more accessible and flexible medium than the standard 16mm film camera, the portapack offered a new generation of amateur journalists, documentarians, anarchists and filmmakers a means to challenge the authority of network television and "to replace television's banal entertainment...with the counterculture's values and a fresh new televisual reality."[74]

With the advent of the Sony portapak, New York City, in particular the Lower East Side became a major hub of early radical and heavily politicized video activity. RainDance (an ironic reference to the Rand Corporation) was one of the first radical media activist groups to conceive of the LES as an oppositional space. Founded by Frank Gillette, Howard Gutstadt, David Cort, Ken Marsh, and Michael Shamberg, RainDance emerged with the intention to form an alternative media think tank providing a "theoretical basis for implementing communication tools in the project for social change".[75] In the summer of 1968, Gillette spent his time experimenting with the new Sony portapack producing a number of "street tapes": documentaries of street life on St. Mark's Place in New York's East Village in which Gillette would interview a number of local "drug tripping hippies, sexually liberated young women, erstwhile revolutionaries,

[74] Deirdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.
[75] Davidson Gigliotti, "A Brief History of RainDance", *Radical Software,* accessed April 20, 2011. http://www.radicalsoftware.org/e/history.html

cross-country wanderers, bums, winos, and other characters that provided great spontaneous material found literally on one's doorstep."[76] Recognizing that video could also involve a two-way participation between filmmaker and subject, these activists saw video's potential to offer a variety of viewpoints "rather than the official, objective one promoted"[77] by the nightly news anchor on the major network stations.

From 1970 to 1974, RainDance published a video newsletter called *Radical Software* containing editorials "noting the relationship between power and control of information, the importance of freeing television from corporate control" and "the state of cable television in America".[78] A special issue entitled *Guerrilla Television* called for social change through the appropriation of new communication technologies that would restore the "media-ecological balance between commercial and public uses of television".[79] Along with portable video, founder Michael Shamberg suggested that perhaps cable television could also provide a "two-way lifeline of information"[80] permitting a more participatory and decentralized form of television, provide local video pioneers with a much larger audience than an installation or screening, grant the ordinary citizen an outlet to express multiple perspectives, and ultimately serve as a cultural tool that would bring all groups of people together. As Deidre Boyle claims, the authors of *Guerrilla Television* believed that "no alternative cultural vision could succeed without its own alternative structure."[81] They recognized that cable television had the

[76] Deirdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8.
[77] Boyle, *Subject to Change*, 8.
[78] Davidson Gigliotti, "A Brief History of RainDance", *Radical Software*, accessed April 20, 2011. http://www.radicalsoftware.org/e/history.html
[79] Deirdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 30.
[80] Boyle, *Subject to Change*, 30.
[81] Ibid., 33.

"revolutionary potential" to offer the alternative visions to work and coexist outside the restrictions of broadcast television and "also pointed out the logical conclusion of cable's infinitely expandable cornucopia of channels: one day, every American would have his or her own TV show."[82]

In 1970, Manhattan became the first metropolitan area to sign a franchise agreement with two cable companies named Sterling Information Services and the TelePrompTer Corporation with the intended purpose of wiring the island to improve the color reception of the network stations. TelePrompTer was responsible for wiring the top half of Manhattan from 86th St. and above while Sterling, later renamed Manhattan Cable, would wire 86th St. and below.[83] An agreement was made whereby each company would reserve two channels for the direct participation of the public intended for use by community, educational, social, and government agencies, known collectively as public access or cable access Channels. This new form of non-commercial, decentralized, and accessible community television along with the introduction of portable video technology would allow ordinary citizens to use television as a tool of empowerment and a direct means of communication that would foster a more democratic culture by permitting broad participation in the most pervasive mass medium of contemporary culture.

Public access became the rallying cry not only for video activists but also for First Amendment scholars who were concerned that the nation's marketplace of ideas was under threat by trends that leaned towards vertical integration and monopoly in broadcasting. At the time, both the United States Supreme Court and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) had laws in place which determined that citizens

[82] Leah Churner, "Out of the Vast Wasteland", *MovingImageSource*, accessed Feb 15, 2011, http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/out-of-the-vast-wasteland-20090618
[83] Churner, "Out of the Vast Wasteland".

without broadcasting licenses possessed no First Amendment right of access to the airwaves. This forced public access supporters to look beyond broadcast television to realize the democratic aspirations that cable television provided where "other than a ban on advertising, patrons would enjoy full First Amendment protection, with no restrictions on content".[84] One year later, in July of 1971, public access programming began for the eighty thousand subscribers to cable television in Manhattan (Figure 2).

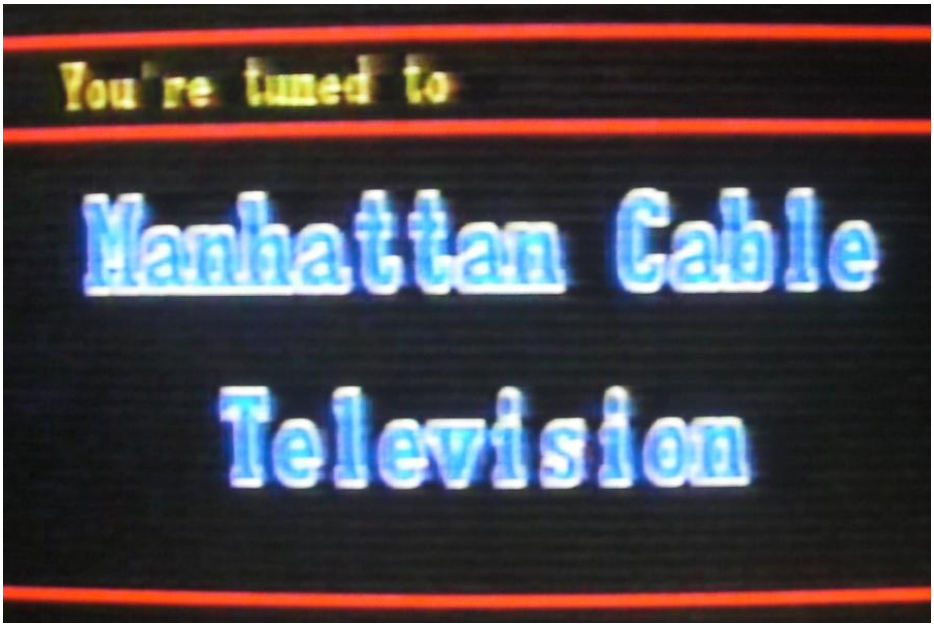

Fig 2. *You're tuned to Manhattan Cable Television*

Over the course of the next decade, time slots on public access were hotly contested and a new, unpaid "subculture of independent, no budget producers emerged" whose only common trait was that they were all creative, possessed incredibly thick skins "and a high threshold for frustration."[85] Public access attracted a number of "hams,

[84] Ibid,.
[85] Leah Churner, "Un-TV", *MovingImageSource*, accessed March 9, 2011, http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/un-tv-20110210

showboats, and fourth-wall breakers"[86] staging controversial programs like *The Robin Byrd Show* (1977) (featured guests would perform live strip teases and engage in onscreen sex play) as well as the downright bizarre—*The Vole Show* (1977) produced by William Houser was a party with puppets in which "a typical segment might involve Styrofoam containers flying at the host's head, puppets upending a card table, and a reading from Hitler's recently excavated diary."[87] However, a number of critically acknowledged shows (considered critical by those who actually watched them) programmed by artist collectives would engage public access television as a means to provide a critical investigation that covered public and "local community events with a political agenda."[88] As we read in Colab's National Endowment for the Arts grant application (written in 1977), the All Color News Group sought to cover "events affecting people who are not artists, as well as the art community.[89]

AllColorNews, a one hour news show that ran for twelve weeks on Manhattan Cable Channel D and the first cable access television project produced by Colab, debuted in May of 1977 (Figure 3). A single artist featuring other participatory members performing in a series of short improvised sketches produced each of the individual, pre-recorded segments. These sculptors, performers, and amateur filmmakers fused a documentary in the context of European film, and experimental film aesthetic using mostly 16mm film, 8mm film, and then transferred to ¾ inch videotape for broadcast. Visually, the style reflects the looser techniques of European art films utilizing location

[86] Churner, "Un-TV".
[87] Leah Churner, "The Poor Soul of Television", *MovingImageSource*, accessed Feb 15, 2011., http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/the-poor-soul-of-television-20090625. One should note, however, that Hitler's diaries were forged. See Robert Harris. *Selling Hitler. The Extraordinary Story of the Con Job of the Century -- The Faking of the Hitler "Diaries"*. New York: Pantheon, 1986.
[88] Little, "Colab Takes a Piece," 72.
[89] "Colab's National Endowment for the Arts Grant Application" [1977], as quoted in Ibid, 71.

shooting with available lighting appearing somewhat awkward, casual and very amateurish. As David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson write in *Film Art* filming on location in areas such as small apartments, subways, small offices, and on busy streets "would ordinarily make it difficult to obtain a variety of camera angles and movements."[90] But by taking advantage of new portable equipment, artists were able to film while hand-holding the camera.

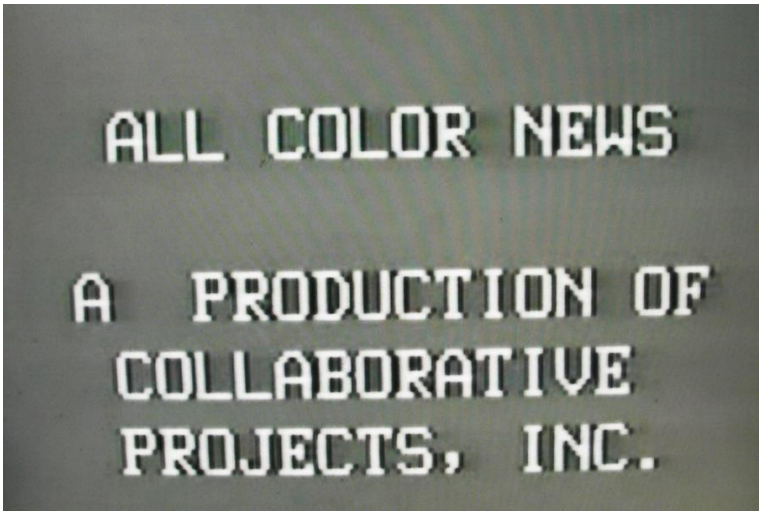

Fig 3. *Opening title for AllColorNews* (1978)

What Bordwell and Thompson in the context of Godard have described as an "avoidance of the rules of smooth sound and picture"[91] steers *AllColorNews* away from the glamorous portrayals seen on broadcast television. The stylistic imperfections can be linked to the actual filming process in hectic New York City and create one could call a pseudo-documentary roughness. The discontinuity editing and low-budget imperfections are also consistent with other *cinema verité* techniques, like the public's mysterious glances into the camera and the jolts in picture and sound, creating a self-conscious

[90] David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* 8th edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 2007), 399.
[91] Ibid, 401.

narration that make the viewer aware of its stylistic choices. There are also no title cards or credit sequences indicating what the program is and which director filmed what segment, reinforcing the group's commitment to anonymous collaboration. Regarding the soundtrack, almost all the non-diegetic music, vocals, and sound effects, with the exception of an interview, were recorded in post-production with cheap four-track tape recorders. In making the director's hand more apparent, the individual segments present themselves as a deliberately unpolished revision of tradition.

The first segment that begins the *AllColorNews* sampler, one of the remaining examples of this cable show available to the public, John Ahearn and Tom Ottreness' piece *Subways* immediately begins with a medium close-up shot of police officer standing guard in one of New York's many graffiti-covered subway cars. Distant voices are heard shouting loudly "We want protection!" as the film cuts to a high angle shot of disgruntled passengers cramming into cars during rush hour, the sounds of a buzz saw mimicking their desperate attempts to cut through the increasingly crowded train. As a man leans over to speak into another passenger's ear, a bugle's loud call precedes the announcement that "This is the All Color News Show!" Passengers sit in silence staring at each other as the voiceover pleads with them to "Communicate, Talk To Each Other!" A succession of shots featuring the homeless begins with an accordion player as he approaches the camera in a close-up and ends with a long take of an older black man leaving the train at its last stop, crossing the empty tracks, no doubt looking for more shelter. An angry young voice, substituting for the powerless, begs the audience to "Please give us money. Support us. We'll play for you. Wake up!" (Figure 4)

Fig 4. *No place to sleep, but on the train: Subways, AllColorNews*
(John Ahearn and Tom Ottreness, 1978)

At four minutes and thirty seconds long, Beth and Scott B's segment *NYPD Arson and Explosion Squad VS. FALN* juxtaposes an interview with Inspector Robert J. Howe, commanding officer of the Arson and Explosion Squad of the NYPD, with a collective statement by the Puerto Rican nationalist movement, which had set off bombs in New York in retaliation for the CIA's involvement in Puerto Rican affairs (Figure 5). The inspector is filmed from his doorway sitting at his desk as the camera zooms in slowly to a medium close-up while the statements of the national movement is heard over a close-up of the FALN (Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional, in English: "Armed Forces of National Liberation") paper manifesto detailing the reasons for the bombing and demands for the release of political prisoners. In this short film Beth and Scott B. attempt to illustrate the idea that control is violence:

> We were using this arson and explosive inspector to try to show the contradictions of a structure that gives someone that kind of power. All the aspects of society are interlocked and part of the same thing. In New York, all these activities and forces exist side by side. The man's job is dependent upon a continuation of terrorism. Without terrorism the commanding officer of the Arson Explosive Squad would not have a job. The dependency is very interesting. As a series of

interdependencies, without terrorism he wouldn't exist: but without money terrorism wouldn't exist. And without the control of the government, terrorists wouldn't exist. We're interested in the hypocrisy that exists and why it exists, and whether it's conscious or not, and whether it's profitable to certain people.[92]

Fig 5. *Inspector Robert J. Howe: NYPD Arson and Explosion Squad VS. FALN, AllColorNews* (Beth and Scott B. 1978)

The issue of terrorism, in particular international terrorism was the subject of another group-funded project by Colab called *X Motion Picture Magazine* (Figures 6,7,8). While the first two issues were concerned with the French New Wave filmmakers and themes of S&M, torture chambers and renegade street gangs, the third and final issue numbered Vol.2 Issues 4,5,6 appearing in late 1978, featured several articles and images referencing the activities and trials of European terrorist organizations, particularly the German Baader-Meinhof group, also known as the RAF (Red Army Faction).[93] Inside

[92] Scott MacDonald, "Interview with Beth and Scott B.", *October* 24 (1983): 5-6.
[93] Alan Moore notes: " The measures European states took against those armed groups which had targeted corporate executives, particularly in Germany, revealed a frightening face of democratic society. These armed groups were discussed by European intellectuals and referenced by artists – Joseph Beuys had publicly offered to conduct Baader and Meinhof on a tour of Documenta in his 1972 installation at the German art fair, and Alexander Kluge produced the multi-author film *Germany in Autumn* in 1977-78."

this issue, simply titled *X Magazine* members Diego Cortez and Anya Phillips report on the trial of certain RAF members that was held in Germany and Cortez interviews a man who claims to be a Baader-Meinhof member. David E. Little suggests this issue represents "Colab members' deep mistrust for how media outlets, from mainstream television and magazines, covered events and individuals associated with the underground and political opposition. In coordination with the police, the media was perceived as just another means of enforcing and maintaining the oppression of the marginalized."[94]

Fig 6. *X Motion Picture Magazine, Double Issue, Vol. 2, Issues 2 & 3, February 1978*

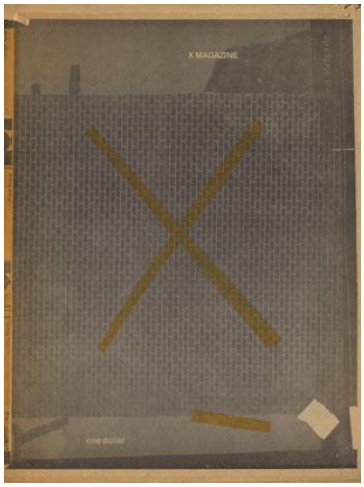

Fig 7. *X Magazine, Vol. 2, Issues 4,5,6, May 1978*

Fig 8. *Anya Phillips and Diego Cortez, 'OFFICIAL' / 'UICIDE'/ 'TERRORIST' / 'PROTEST' (Anya's courtroom drawing, testimony of Irmgard Moller, Stammheim, Germany), X Magazine, Vol. 2, Issues 4,5,6, May 1978*

Alan W. Moore, *Art Gangs: Protest and Counterculture in New York City*, (New York: Autonomedia, 2011), 89.

[94] David E. Little, "Colab Takes a Piece, History Takes It Back: Collectivity and New York Alternative Spaces", *Art Journal* 66 (2007): 68.

Returning to *AllColorNews*, Virge Piersol and Allan Moore's *Bombing of JP Morgan* instantly disorients the viewer with inverted and circling images of Wall Street banks and pristine tall buildings, finally settling on a long pan up the front of the Rockefeller Building. A hand then enters the frame dropping photographs of burned-out farm buildings while the camera frantically zooms in and out. A female news reporter describes the aftermath of a recent bombing explosion in New York's financial sector and at the same time a male voice asks viewer's to call in if they were witnesses to this event or to any personal experiences regarding arson: "Were you there? Do You Remember? Do you have information? Fires? Call. Is it Wall Street?" It is uncertain, however, if the long shots of fire trucks careening down the streets of Manhattan that follows is the ending of Piersol and Moore's film or the beginning Charlie Ahearn's segment *Bums Under The Brooklyn Bridge* since both portions concern themselves with themes of arson (Figure 9).

Fig 9. *Fires? Call: Bombing of JP Morgan, AllColorNews* (Virge Piersol and Allan Moore, 1978)

Ahearn in this episode assumes the role of public investigator interviewing two homeless men about the recent murder and subsequent burning of one of their companions. This sequence begins with a time-lapse compilation of fire trucks racing to unknown destinations, sirens wailing over the soundtrack and stops to focus on signs that individually read "Stop" and "Arson". Ahearn then recounts the NYPD's late response to a pulled fire alarm at the corner of Dover and Pearl St., the somewhat indifferent investigation that revealed the cause of death, and the failure to identify the body and find the guilty perpetrator: "the case is still open for investigation." Ahearn finally takes the viewer inside a movie theatre projection booth where two older men, one white, one black, discu**ss** the loss of their friend in a blaze, frequently pausing to look straight into the camera. As their conversation continues over the soundtrack, the audience is then transported to the charred and smoking site where the homeless man's body was found. Finally, Ahearn brings his camera into the dark and cramped offices of the NYPD's thirteenth precinct. Here one could say that the distrust of the media presented in Colab's *X-Motion Picture Magazine* issue on international terrorism is replaced with a "more local" distrust of the NYPD police. As David E. Little points out, the approach taken in the pages of the magazine appears "overstylized, disingenuous and simplistic"[95], whereas the approach to news gathering in the episodes of *AllColorNews* not only "critiqued the means through which the media not only ignored the "current social structures" but also "possess an activist motivation for social change."[96]

In another *AllColorNews* episode entitled *Rats In Chinatown,* Charlie interviews his twin brother John about his late night, clandestine activities in Lower Manhattan's

[95] David E. Little, "Colab Takes a Piece, 70.
[96] Ibid., 73.

Chinatown area at the Canal St. meat market. John was concerned that rats were running up and down the machinery and serving trays in a Chinese butcher shop that supplies meat to a number of restaurants in the area. He decides to investigate himself and confirms his suspicions by recording the rodent's nocturnal activities. John then tells Charlie that he presented this footage to the Health Department who later dispatched an inspector to the scene where he indeed found a number of rat droppings and promptly issued a summons for further investigation. John's mobile camera records a number of people shopping at various fruit stalls and restaurants in the daytime and then at night zooms into the interior of the butcher shop capturing rats and mice climbing across meat trays and scrambling around the floors.

The second Colab cable access television show *Potato Wolf,* also featured online as a compilation, differs slightly from *AllColorNews* with the inclusion of short, situational sketch-dramas. For instance, Ulli Rimkus' *Anybody's Show* takes place in the television station's studio designed to look a hospital emergency area (Figure 10). A close up of Liz X dressed as nurse with a faceless mask (looking not unlike the mask worn by Michael Myers in the *Hallowe'en* movie series) pans back to reveal her place behind a receptionist's desk receiving patient played by Chris Kohlhoffer who is complaining of stomach troubles and a lack of chairs to sit on. The nurse refuses the man any further treatment until he pays a rather large medical bill, in cash and not in monthly installments, which amounts to the impossible sum of $17,000 despite the fact that he may die soon. A somewhat nauseating experience to watch as the cameras zoom in and out on the characters from multiple camera angles with intense frequency, *Anybody's Show* is perhaps meant to invoke the same medical conditions as Kohlhoffer's character.

In one of the most interesting segments by Bobby G simply titled *July 4, 1980,* the comments by a number of unemployed young black youths at Community BD. 12 in Queens, New York do not reflect the celebratory and patriotic displays typical of this country's national holiday (Figure 11). Bobby allows one young man in dark sunglasses to air his grievances regarding the treatment of the impoverished Black community in his neighborhood: "People from other countries, not even citizens, they come over here, Carter should let them fight in the war...a lot of brothers and sisters ain't got nothing going for them, but if they got some new jobs for these kids on welfare...can't put food on the table...white kids get hooked up a fast job...its seems like it ain't working for us." What makes this segment so interesting, apart from the young man's incomplete sentence structure, is the director's decision to delay and echo the commentary from the interviewees.[97] As David Scholle points out, Negt and Kluge imagined "the possibility of a proletarian public sphere that is grounded in the context of living, in the collective social practice of everyday life"[98], but the present media systems of their time did not sustain this kind of experience. By continuously repeating and overlapping the voices of the young black men at Community BD. 12, Bobby G reconfigures the voice of just a few to express the concerns of the entire collective of unemployed and disadvantaged black men across the city.

[97] One could say that this technique is Brechtian in the sense that it theatrically interrupts, fragments and disrupts/ deconstructs language. Brecht believed that the audience should be aware of textual construction. See Marc Silberman, "Politics of Representation: Brecht and the Media," *Theatre Journal* 39 (1987): 448-460.

[98] David Scholle, "Access Through Activism: Extending the Ideas of Negt and Kluge to American Alternative Practices", *Social Theory and Practice* 21, 1 (1995): 26.

Fig10. *$17, 000 in cash please*: *Anybody's Show, Potato Wolf* (Ulli Rimkus, 1980)

Fig 11. *It ain't working for us*: *July 4, 1980, Potato Wolf* (Bobby G, 1980)

While the members of Colab had an overt political agenda and engaged in a highly provocative critique of media, another informal group of video activists from the Lower East Side were engaging in a more humorous, spontaneous interaction with public access. In 1978 freelance writer Glen O'Brien was contributing articles for Andy Warhol's *Interview Magazine, High Times*, and a number of art and foreign music magazines. The day after appearing on Coco Crystal's Public Cable access show *If I Can't Dance You Can Keep Your Revolution* featuring bohemian characters smoking pot on air and talking about anarchy, O' Brien was stopped in the subway by strangers who had recognized him on the show the night before. Amazed that people were actually watching public access television, he went over to Manhattan Cable and signed up for a time slot where you could either pre-record a show or do it live from E.T.C. Studios. Operated by Jim Chladek, this tiny studio on East 23rd Street was opened around 1973 specifically to produce live shows because there was nowhere else to do it. Renting the office next to the cable company, he ran a cable across the alleyway from 110 East 23rd street to 120 East 20th Street and for about sixty dollars you could use his black and white studio for about an hour, broadcast live, and for another twenty he would make a

recorded tape of your broadcast. The studio was a very informal affair, modestly equipped with three cameras and numerous microphones of which at least half were broken. The basic idea was to go in, pay your money, improvise a show live without a script and the rest was: "anything goes."[99]

On December 18, 1978, the premiere episode of *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party* debuted in grainy black and white on Channel B with an introduction by Glenn O'Brien that stated TV Party was "a show that's a cocktail party but which could also be a political party," in front of a set adorned with posters of socialist leaders like Lenin and Mao (Figures 12, 13). From the outset, O'Brien's slogan establishes the show's casual format while at the same time establishes a political facet. The crew was comprised of a number of close friends of O' Brien that included Chris Stein, the guitarist of Blondie, Edo Bertoglio, a photographer, and legendary No Wave director Amos Poe. O'Brien designated himself as a Johnny Carson type who "as a variety show host had a real knack for presenting the goings on of the emerging arts scene in New York,"[100] while Chris would take on the role of a hipper Ed McMahon type as co-host, Edo, the cameraman, and Amos as the director of chaos from the control booth (Figures 14, 15). None of the TV Party crew actually knew how to operate the studio's equipment which consisted of a couple of cameras on tripods, and cheap radio shack microphones. The quality of the show was bad to say the least, broadcasting inaudible sound, screeching feedback, out of focus camera work and close up shots of people's shoes or ears. O'Brien considered the show a form of punk TV using any means necessary to distance themselves from the gloss and polish of television that was broadcasted on the major network stations, stating

[99] *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party: The Documentary*, directed by Danny Vinik, (Brinkfilms, 2006), DVD.
[100] *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party: The Documentary*.

"we were anti-technique, anti-format, anti-establishment...we liked to break all the rules of good broadcasting."[101]

Fig 12. *A show that's a cocktail party, but could be a political party: Glenn O'Brien's TV Party: Premier Episode* (Amos Poe, 1978)

Fig 13. *Subliminal politics as absurdist comedy: Glenn O'Brien's TV Party: Premier Episode* (Amos Poe, 1978)

Fig 14. *Director of chaos Amos Poe: Glenn O'Brien's TV Party: Premier Episode* (Amos Poe, 1978)

Fig 15. *Chris Stein, a hipper Ed McMahon: Glenn O'Brien's TV Party: Premier Episode* (Amos Poe, 1978)

During the show's four-year run, a number of rotating co-hosts, assistant camera people, and studio operators featured the who's who of the downtown New York underground music, graffiti, fashion, and film scenes including Fab Five Freddy

[101] Ibid.

(outspoken advocate of the rising graffiti and rapping scene) and Debbie Harry (lead singer of Blondie). Often running the character generator typing improvised poetry across the screen was a young Jean-Michel Basquiat (Figure 16). The long list of recurring guests included actor and jazz musician John Lurie, musical director Robert Aaron, Robert Fripp, fashion model Lisa Rosen, photographer Kate Simon, David Byrne of The Talking Heads, Saturday Night Live cast member Charles Rocket, avant-garde singer Klaus Nomi, and the most frequent visitor Fred Schneider, lead singer of the B-52's. No talk show of course is complete without an accompanying orchestra. O'Brien enlisted violinist and one-man band Walter "Doc" Steding as the leader of the TV Party Orchestra along with drummer Lenny Ferrari who invented a drum kit which consisted of a music stand, small cymbals and a copy of the *New Yorker Magazine* because E.T.C. wouldn't allow real drums in the studio.

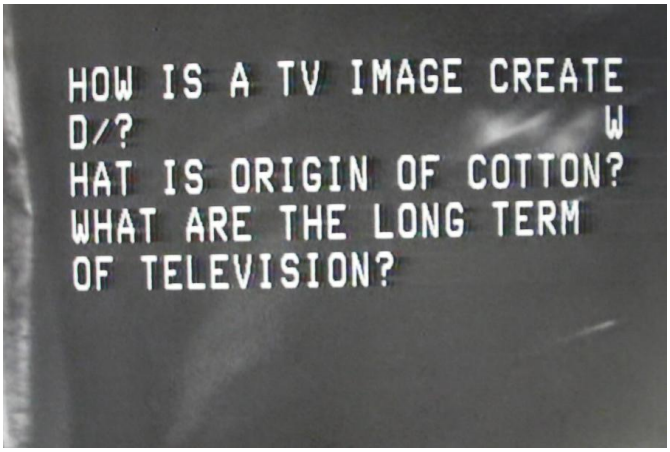

Fig 16. *Basquiat's improvised poetry:* "*What are the long-term* [effects] *of television**?"***
Glenn O'Brien's TV Party: The Documentary (Danny Vinik, 2006)

Each show was broken into segments that included a live musical performance, a philosophical discussion, an interview with a number of scenesters, and concluded with the most memorable and often hilarious call-in segment with New York residents. This portion of the show was not only used to gauge the number of people who were watching—public access didn't have an audience measuring system like broadcast TV did with the Nielsen Ratings—but also to engage with the people who were watching. In the world of television, the simple conceit of combining live TV with phones, something that was unique to Public Access, "transformed the medium into something new: talk radio with a picture."[102]

While some callers, usually female, were constructive, exclaiming how much they enjoyed the show or inquired about the live performances, most responses were outright abusive, racist, or misogynist. On one particular show that featured guest host Nile Rogers, a famous "black" disco producer, a caller proclaimed that "You're giving us forty-five minutes of sludge," another aimed his disapproval at Roger's mother suggesting to him that she "takes it up the ass you fuckin' black cocksucker," while a randy caller asked Debbie Harry on another show if she could take her top off, leaving the cast and crew disappointed but not dismayed (Figure 17). It was important for them to maintain this two-way conversation that only public access allowed. On the same show that featured Nile Rogers, regular co-host Chris Stein reminds the home audience that this the only show of its kind whereby the viewer can call up, comment and hang up, and he even encourages the people of New York that "with just a little money you can get your

[102] Leah Churner, "The Poor Soul of Television", *MovingImageSource*, accessed Feb 15, 2011. http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/the-poor-soul-of-television-20090625

own show together, on cable TV. You can do and say anything, get your own show."[103](Figure 18)

Fig 17. "*Forty-five minutes of sludge": Glenn O'Brien's TV Party: The Documentary* (Danny Vinik, 2006

Fig 18. "*Get your own show": Glenn O'Brien's TV Party: The Documentary* (Danny Vinik, 2006)

The cable access programs of Colab and the TV Party reflect many of the same direct political interventions and activities that preoccupied the members of the activist media collectives like Rain Dance a decade before. They were all devoted to providing an outlet for those who were often marginalized in the Lower East Side communities and surrounding buroughs, the programming of local news stories that got little or no coverage on the broadcast networks, and a critical investigation of deteriorating social conditions in New York. In *AllColorNews* twin brothers John and Charlie Ahearn point out the impersonal nature of citizens in a city made up of millions of people who neither communicate with each other, nor acknowledge the poor and homeless, despite their close proximity. While Wall Street's profits skyrocket alongside their buildings, Virge Piersol and Allan Moore remind viewers that once habitable public housing was literally burning to the ground in many lower class residential areas. Meanwhile in *Potato Wolf*,

[103] *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party: The Sublimely Intolerable Show*, directed by Amos Poe, (Brinkfilm, 2007). DVD

Ulli Rimkus' sketch presents a glimpse of how difficult it must have been for ailing patients to receive prompt and proper medical treatment without necessary health coverage who often confront faceless and indifferent hospital staff. And finally, Bobby G's aural manipulations allow not one but multiple voices of young urban black men who are burdened with the ramifications of rampant unemployment to be heard.

Glenn O'Brien's TV Party also became an outlet that involved people seizing television and using it in a democratic fashion, albeit disguised as absurdist comedy. As the second wave of the TV generation that followed the first wave of pioneering video collectives in the late 1960's a decade before, this group of artists believed that there was an unseen political element at work in a country that was ruled by television. Politics for the TV Party wasn't as Glenn O'Brien stated the "United States Senate" but rather operated through the dominant ideological forces' use of television "to control the population".[104] The notion of free speech didn't mean anything in an age of mass communication that was dominated by commercial, authoritarian, and centralized forms of media. However, public access could provide for the lower classes, the disenfranchised, and the marginalized as an attempt at "leveling the playing field...and that's what this show is all about," a small portal into "another reality that could be established on television that would bring a new cultural viewpoint."[105]

The founding members of Rain Dance predicted in the 1971 issue of *Radical Software* entitled *Revolutionary Software: Towards a Counter-Technology* that renegades from bourgeois society using technology might play a key role in the creation of a new social order. The authors of Guerrilla Television went on to solidify this predilection by

[104] *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party: The Documentary*, directed by Danny Vinik, (Brinkfilms, 2006), DVD.
[105] *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party: The Documentary*.

stating that these renegades might bring about this social order by "working outside the context of broadcast TV," with the "potential to become a grassroots network of indigenous activity."[106] However, the processes of Colab and the TV Party differed from the advocates of Guerrilla Television in two ways. Firstly they did not present the aspects of daily life in New York as grounded in an objective, account of the final truth and secondly as David Sholle remarks, alternative media like Guerilla Television did very little to transform the public sphere when it just documented "alternative viewpoints" or exposed "unjust conditions"[107] by simply putting portable video equipment in the hands of the public. He continues, "Guerilla TV and many of the media arts centres repeat the errors of the radical movements of the 1960': they attempt to set up a craft-based production of media. However, these activist movements, composed primarily of intellectuals, could not impose such an experience upon the public without at the same time replicating the exclusionary mechanisms of the classic bourgeois public sphere."[108]

Although the engagement of broader politics in *AllColorNews* and *Potato Wolf* were presented by amateurish filming techniques and choppy narratives edited with fast cuts from one scene and segment to another eliminating "any sense of temporal continuity and draw attention to the process of constructing narrative,"[109] the segments in these videos allow the viewer to create and understand their own meanings and responses with regards to the topics, subjects, and situations presented. In *Glenn O'Brien's TV*

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[106] Deirdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 32.
[107] David Scholle, "Access Through Activism: Extending the Ideas of Negt and Kluge to American Alternative Practices", *Social Theory and Practice* 21, 1 (1995): 28.
[108] For Negt and Kluge, the bourgeois public sphere, although claims general good will, still serves as a mechanism of exclusion, particularly certain social groups, women, vital social issues, and conditions of production. Scholle, "Access Through Activism", 28.
[109] David E. Little, "Colab Takes a Piece, History Takes It Back: Collectivity and New York Alternative Spaces", *Art Journal* 66 (2007): 73.

Party, the interchangeable cast members and crew engaged in the direct address with members of the studio audience at home and established a two-way communication with subscription viewers via telephone. They also successfully revealed the means of production by breaking the fourth wall, often filming the studio booth, the other cameras, and the studio audience (Figures 19, 20).

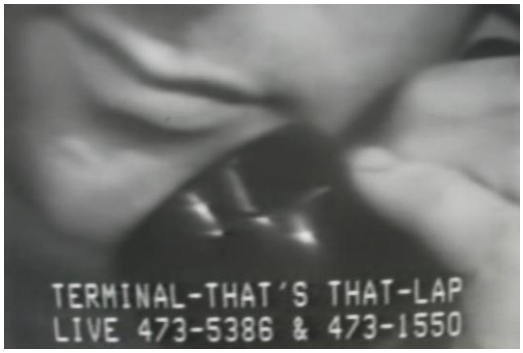

Fig 19. *Talking to a Caller: That's That-Lap: AllColorNews* (1978)

Fig 20. *Filming you, filming me: Glenn O'Brien's TV Party: The Documentary* (Danny Vinik, 2006)

According to Deidre Boyle, some critics of public access faulted the use of video "for being frequently infantile," but they also praised it for "carrying an immediacy rarely seen in establishment television".[110] Critic John J. Connor has pointed out that live cable access was a throwback to the earliest days of live television that constantly teetered "on the edge of chaos" but produced " a special energy of its own, a tension that is rarely duplicated on taped products."[111] Colab and The TV Party had taken a primitive and amateurish genre and expanded it into something both "provocative and contemporary".[112]

[110] Deirdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 27.
[111] Leah Churner, "The Poor Soul of Television", *MovingImageSource*, accessed Feb 15, 2011. http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/the-poor-soul-of-television-20090625
[112] Leah Churner, "Un-TV: Public access cable television in Manhattan: an oral history", *MovingImageSource*, accessed March 9, 2011.

It seems that making television for the artists of Colab and The TVParty was more natural and intoxicating than simply just watching it. While their individual stories differed, a consistent and daring effort by both collectives to create a new kind of television was met with a difficult and sometimes antagonistic response, but more often spectacular success, considering they often lost money trying to do so. For both Colab and The TV Party, the use of video and public access television served as alternative public spheres, attractive and alternate platforms that were initially "undefined", yet "open to interpretation, and without the cover of any prevailing theory."[113]

http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/un-tv-20110210

[113] Deirdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 32.

Chapter Three. The Lower East Side as a Dystopian and Utopian Space in Edo Bertoglio's *Downtown 81*

After *AllColorNews* ended, Colab continued production on *Potato Wolf* well into the mid 1980's while *TV Party* moved to Channel J to broadcast in color, and even managed to broadcast the show on a local cable station in Los Angeles. Before their activities in cable access television were completed, however, members of both groups would move into the realm of feature length film production and the first group to do so was the *TV Party* crew. Clothing designer Elio Fiorucci whose fashion store was located on 59th St. was also a lover of the downtown LES scene and one day said to Glenn O'Brien "You know it's so interesting, what's going on here. You kids should make a movie about it."[114] O'Brien's friend Maripol was the creative director at the store and it was through her contacts that O'Brien was able to get financing from the Italian designer to make a film about the Downtown scene in New York.

Originally shot as *New York Beat* over a six-week period in December of 1980 and January 1981, the pseudo-biographical film *Downtown 81* was directed by *TV Party* cameraman Edo Bertoglio and was set to feature a number of LES bands alongside other creative artists and scenesters. The idea of the film in writer Glenn O'Brien's words "was to put all the most interesting bands and people in the film and show what life was like for the Downtown crowd."[115] Influenced by classical texts from Homer and James Joyce, O'Brien quickly wrote a script about a day in the life of a young artist: "It was a walking around story, because we had to connect a lot of people, especially the musicians we

[114] Glenn O'Brien, *New York Beat: Jean-Michel Basquiat in Downtown 81*, (Tokyo: Petit Grand Publishing, 2001), 8.
[115] O'Brien, *New York Beat,* 8.

wanted in."[116] The film follows the central figure Jean around the Lower East Side of Manhattan beginning with his release from hospital and ends with a car ride under and around the elevated West Side Highway as dawn approaches. At many points throughout the film, Jean's story is cross-cut with or stopped altogether in favour of performances involving leading figures of the Lower East Side post-punk, new wave, hip-hop, disco, poetry, and fashion scene. No Wave groups Tuxedomoon, DNA, The Plastics, Kid Creole and the Coconuts, James White and the Blacks, and Walter Steding rehearse or perform live in recording studios and popular late-night spots like the Rock Club and the Mudd Club. Maripol stages a fashion show of her metallic disco ball dresses and Debbie Harry, lead singer of Blondie, makes an appearance near the end as a fairy princess.

O'Brien, however, still needed a 'star' that would connect a lot of the people involved in the Downtown scene. Director Edo Bertoglio suggested Danny Rosen who was a sometimes member in the jazz outfit the Lounge Lizards, but O'Brien suggested that Jean-Michel Basquiat play the lead because of his role as key facilitator in the three-way connection that formed between the No Wave scene, the nascent Hip-Hop culture of the South Bronx, and the LES art scene. Jean-Michel was by this time already famous as the "more visible half of SAMO, the most visible and revolutionary graffiti presence on the walls of New York".[117]

A few years after the film**'s** completion, in an interview with Tamra Davis, Basquiat expressed the sentiment that if he were not making art he might like to direct movies "in which black people are portrayed as being people. You know, not all

[116] Ibid., 8.
[117] Ibid., 8.

negative, or thieves, drug dealers, the whole bit. Just real, real stories."[118] Although Jean-Michel Basquiat would never have the opportunity to direct a film, the decision to accept O'Brien's offer facilitated Basquiat's desire to bring true black characters to the forefront of cinema, a desire which reflected the objectives of filmmakers of both the blaxploitation and hood film eras of black cinema. The character of Jean is similar to many roles portrayed throughout black cinema where the protagonist was situated as a loner or black folk hero in a ghetto space. In his lead role as Jean in *Downtown 81,* Jean-Michel Basquiat portrayed a film character not unlike himself. The character's displays of public art and encounters with members of the Downtown scene parallel the non-fictional accounts of Basquiat's life in the Lower East Side; Jean's interaction with the established art world, his romantic relationships, and his sudden acquisition of wealth in the film eerily foreshadow some of the capricious and often dubious aspects of Basquiat's personal life in the years that followed the completion of *Downtown 81*.[119] Race, class, and the urban space that nurtured Basquiat's creative development distinctly shaped his life path.

Though *Downtown 81* is not considered to be representative of black cinema, there are many similarities to the blaxploitation movies of the 1970s, beginning with the relevance of the historical time frame of the film. Films of the blaxploitation genre were cultivated in the post urban migration decade of the 1970s, a time of continued

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[118] Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art,* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 341.

[119] Principle photography for the film started in December of 1980 and finished six weeks later in January of 1981. During the editing of *Downtown 81* the financial backers of the film went bankrupt and post-production was subsequently put on hold. Parts of the film were scattered around Europe and presumably lost. Missing segments of the film were located in 1998, post-production resumed in 1999 and the film was finished in 2000. The film was completed under the supervision of the art director Maripol (now credited as the film's producer), writer Glenn O'Brien, and editor Pamela French. Executive producer for the film was Michael Zilkha, whose Ze Records label originally released recordings by several of the bands featured in the film. The film was renamed *Downtown 81* and finally received a theatrical release in 2000, premiering at the Cannes Film Festival.

neighborhood segregation due to industrial downsizing. The films were shot in neighborhoods in cities such as South Central Los Angeles and Harlem, which were depicted as notoriously damaged, dangerous and dark; cities that might possibly be perceived to be backdrops of American ghetto life. By the year 1981, the Lower East Side was the face of decay for Downtown New York and was perceived to stand as a self-contained space in the process of decline. In *Downtown 81* it acts as a distinct presence in the film that was defined as a discrete space in relation to other distinctive portions of the city of New York. The deterioration is painted as apparent but not actually remote from the financial and cultural centers of Manhattan, depicting a city with empty, diminished, ghetto-like spaces.

In her book *Black City Cinema,* Paula J. Massood points out that blaxploitation and hood films as "verite explorations of the city offered their audiences undeniable voyeuristic (fetishistic and narcissistic) pleasure" and act as both "anthropological documents" for those who may be unfamiliar with the ghetto space or as "sources of identification"[120] for those who were familiar. Additionally, these tours of ghetto spaces were used as devices where a search "was often the catalyst for a moving montage through the streets of the city, like Baudelaire's flaneur walking the arcades of Paris."[121]

Melvin Van Peeble's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) chronicles the urgent flight of the central figure Sweetback through the streets, alleyways, rail yards, and industrial terrain of South Central Los Angeles. In the film, the city of Los Angeles is depicted as an area of decaying buildings, empty lots, and industrial waste. In this black ghetto environment, Sweetback is situated as a loner and folk hero. In Gordon Park Jr.'s

[120] Paula J. Massood. *Black City Cinema: African-American Urban Experiences in Film (*Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 85.
[121] Massood, *Black City Cinema*, 85.

Superfly (1972) the viewer follows cocaine dealer Priest, also a loner as he attempts to break free of the drug business. Harlem visually unfolds as a city that "contains all of the characteristics of the ghetto space" where "its buildings are decayed, burned out, or abandoned; trash covers the side-walks and gutters; and the majority of the storefronts are boarded up."[122]

In *Downtown 81*, Jean searches through the streets of the LES for an enigmatic woman named Beatrice. The frenetic camera techniques of the film, identifiable urban locations, popular music soundtrack, and references to urban culture announce similarities to the blaxploitation and hood films. Stylistically however, *Downtown 81* resembles Italian neo-realism and the direct cinema of the French New Wave. The exterior and interior scenes of the film were shot on location in the LES often with available lighting, a hand-held camera, and non-professional actors.

The film begins when Jean checks out of a hospital to journey along the Upper East Side and down Fifth Avenue where he encounters two art monuments—the Guggenheim and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. As he traverses 42nd Street, the ground level mobile camera catches glimpses of the grind houses, pornography shops, and greasy spoons of the city (Figure 21). A low angle shot reveals the Rockefeller Center shooting up into the open sky as Jean steps into the frame to play a saxophone. After picking up a bite to eat, the camera positions Jean in a long shot, painting one of his SAMO sayings on a wall in front of the 14th Street Plant - one the few LES landmarks. Leaving his apartment with painting in hand, Jean's journey continues along Avenue D where massive housing projects mark the eastern border of the LES. He runs into a female acquaintance on the outskirts of Tompkins Park and eventually makes his way

[122] Ibid., 102.

towards some of the less recognizable interiors of the Downtown. Inquiring about his stolen band equipment, Jean meets up with a music journalist inside Blank Tape Studios where several bands of the Downtown music scene are performing and rehearsing.

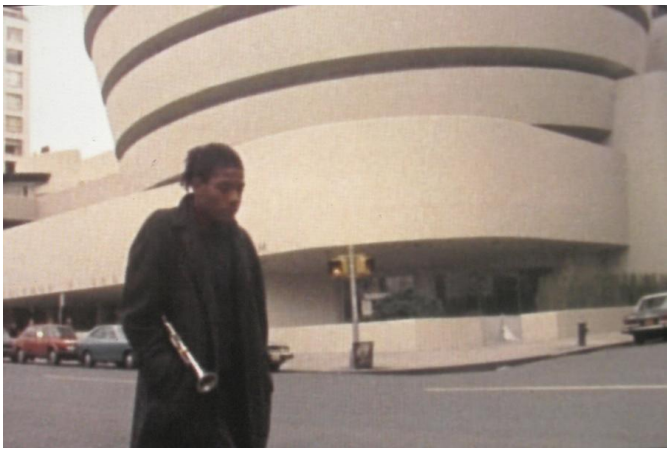

Fig 21. *Jean in front of the Guggenheim on 42nd Street: Downtown 81*
(Edo Bertoglio, 1981)

Musical scores for both *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and *Superfly* were performed by some of the most popular R&B and soul artists of the decades. In *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* the then-unknown group Earth, Wind, & Fire play the film's non-diegetic score written by Van Peebles. In *Superfly* Curtis Mayfield not only performs the title song, but wrote and produced all the songs on the soundtrack. Massood argues that in Blaxploitation films: "music adds a key element to the city's auralscape and emerges as an important characteristic of the cinematic ghetto"[123]. In *Downtown 81* music is a recurring motif that leads and directs the film. An eclectic mix of post-punk, disco, new wave, and reggae hits from the day drift in and out over the soundtrack. As already stated, many times throughout the film Jean's story is cross-cut or stopped

[123] Ibid., 102.

altogether with performances by leading figures of the LES post-punk, new wave, hip-hop, disco, poetry, and fashion scene. For instance, Jean bribes a limo driver with a joint to drive him up to the front of The Rock Club where inside we see Kid Creole and the Coconuts playing a mix of uptight grooves with big brass arrangements, in front of scantily clad backing singers (Figure 22). In the next scene, Jean tracks down Beatrice at The Peppermint Club where James White and the Blacks are shown performing a concoction of funk grooves and squealing blasts of free-jazz discordance (Figure 23). In the final act of the film, Jean finds solace inside the Mudd Club where musician Walter Steding performs 'New Day' in an elevator, which moves up and down as he plays.

Fig 22. *Kid Creole and the Coconuts: Downtown 81* (Edo Bertoglio, 1981)

Fig 23. *James White and the Blacks: Downtown 81* (Edo Bertoglio, 1981)

Massood argues that the key tropes in movies of the blaxploitation era of the 1970s are movement and confinement**.** She stresses that movement and mobility did not indicate a departure from the ghetto, but rather signal a radical change and a transformation of the ghetto space. As well as focusing on the blaxploitation genre, Massood also examines the spatiotemporal representations of cities in the black cinema

hood films of the early 1990s. She suggests that "images of the city in these films reveal it as both a utopia- as space promising freedom and economic mobility- and dystopia- the ghetto's economic impoverishment and segregation. In this manner, the city as a signifying space has performed a dual function, both real and imaginary."[124] According to Massood, both the blaxploitation films of the 1970s and the hood films of the 1990s used techniques like location shooting, sync-sound, grainy film stock, and hand-held camera that suggest "temporal immediacy" and "documentary verisimilitude."[125]

The intimacies with which exterior and interior scenes are shot in *Downtown 81* similarly provide the film with a personal dimension and distinctive documentary feel. The portrayal of the LES in the film as a dystopian space is derived from the decay and relative emptiness of the area. One defining moment in establishing this space occurs just after Jean has been kicked out of his apartment. Avenue D consists of burned out and abandoned apartment buildings separated by empty, garbage-strewn lots. Garbage cans and cardboard boxes block the sidewalks, and the streets are cluttered with abandoned cars and groups of people milling around with no apparent destination. We see a depiction of a city partially in ruins where entire blocks have been reduced to rubble with only a few dilapidated social projects still standing. Jean's subjective perspective is heard over the soundtrack: "It looked like a war-zone, like we dropped the bomb on ourselves." (Figure 24)

The LES is also depicted as a place where crime flourishes openly. A man in a fedora hat and trench coat offers Jean a smorgasbord of illicit substances, a man in a cowboy hat appears to be beating someone up, and another drug dealer appears from

[124] Paula J Massood, "Mapping The Hood: The Genealogy of City Space in "Boyz N the Hood" and "Menace II Society"", *Cinema Journal* 35 no.2 (1996): 88.
[125] Massood, *Black City Cinema,* 146.

screen left offering Jean weed. To his right, a prostitute in heavy makeup and leather jacket asks, "Hey Joe, wanna go out?" Finally arriving at the rehearsal space for his band, Jean witnesses two men in the process of loading the band**'s** equipment into the back of a van. He attempts to take their picture, but the thief in the driver's seat knocks Jean's camera to the ground and drives over it. Just then, a little old lady emerges from her front stoop and reminds Jean: "you have to remain on your toes in this town."

In her discussion of the hood films *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) and *Menace II Society* (1993), Massood focuses on the power relations inherent in space and geography where the LAPD force is a controlling, oppressive, and recurring presence that "marks the boundaries of the hood." According to Massood: "As with Foucault's panopticon, this method of control, dispersed over the urban landscape, works to keep the community in its place through the awareness and internalization of surveillance and perceived community."[126] The internalization of institutional boundaries is part of the very existence of the characters of these films and serves to "illustrate how imaginary or invisible boundaries can become internalized and made real through outside measures of control."[127]

Massood's dystopic concept of "surveillance" as applied to the hood films in the 1990's can also be found in *Downtown 81* when Jean walks down a narrow street flanked on either side by tall apartment complexes. The streets in this more affluent part of the city are still empty, but appear more hospitable and habitable. The camera pans high up to a fourth floor balcony and reveals a man leaning out of his apartment window yelling to Jean: "Hey you! You wrote on my van, man! I'm gonna get you punk!" The viewpoint

[126] Paula J Massood, "Mapping The Hood: The Genealogy of City Space in "Boyz N the Hood" and "Menace II Society"", *Cinema Journal* 35 no.2 (1996): 91.
[127] Massood, "Mapping The Hood", 93.

of this angry man is conveyed through a low angle shot where Jean appears very small in the frame in contrast to the previous closer shots, which allow for an intimate relationship with the protagonist. This type of high angle view might be associated with the "surveillance" of the city, with a guard's eye on a prison tower or with the distillation of that view by a panoptical device. The film presents us with a normative viewer - in this case a white man- engaging the LES from an angle that is designed to aggregate and objectify Jean as an African-American[128] as well as the space he inhabits (Figure 25).

Fig 24. "*It looked like a war-zone, like we dropped the bomb on ourselves": Downtown 81* (Edo Bertoglio, 1981)

Fig 25. *High-angle shot depicting surveillance in the city: Downtown 81* (Edo Bertoglio, 1981)

Overall the LES possesses few buildings with the sweep and height of The Rockefeller Center or the Empire State Building and the visual focus on its lower physical scale contributes to the perception of the LES as an insular ghetto environment.

[128] From the first surfacing of TAKI 183 in the *New York Times* in 1971, graffiti moved from being a neighborhood teenage curiosity to a municipal issue with national political implications: "In 1976, as the city hurtled toward bankruptcy, it found $20 million to establish "the buff", a chemical washing of graffitied trains. That same year, the Transit Authority established a for-man Anti-Graffiti Squad, which quickly issued a misleading 'Profile of a Common Offender': Sex- Male. Race-Black, Puerto Rican, other. Age – Variable. Dress – Carries package or paper bag, long coat in cold weather. Occupation – Student (lower social economic background)." In the film Jean is a black man, wearing a long coat, carrying a package; his painting. Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop,* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 135.

In fact, the overall geography of the film frequently includes restrictive spaces that seem to keep people in or out. For example the Guggenheim, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Rockefeller Center, the 14th Street Plant, and the Empire Building State Building are not only vital, visual markers that define the limits of the neighborhood, but indicate insularity as well (Figure 26). Likewise, the West Side Highway that appears in the final shots of the film serve to block Jean's final flight from the LES and out of New York City.

Fig 26. *Low-Angle Shot, Rockefeller Center: Downtown 81* (Edo Bertoglio, 1981)

Whereas the spaces in the films of the blaxploitation and hood film eras are depicted as dystopian ghetto spaces - areas that have margins where movement is localized and the central characters operate only inside that space - for the character of Jean in *Downtown 81*, mobility instead means changing the ghetto space or transforming it from within. This idea was an essential component to the creative output of the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. Privileging interaction over authorship, Jean-Michel Basquiat one could argue did not work as an autonomous individual, but served as a catalyst or an active collaborator, inspiring other creative practitioners of art in the Downtown scene. In

many ways Basquiat along with other key figures in the Downtown scene like Glenn O'Brien and Fab Five Freddy[129], played a key role as facilitator in the three-way connection that formed between the No Wave scene, the nascent hip-hop culture in the South Bronx[130], and the Downtown art scene.

In his essay "The New Black Aesthetic", Troy Ellis coined the term "cultural mulatto" to refer to a black artist who can easily navigate the white world of cultural production. He compares the "cultural mulatto" to the genetic mulatto, a black person of mixed parentage who can often get along "with his white grandparents."[131] Educated in a post-Civil Rights era, these artists were either raised or educated in middle class, predominately white communities and were the first generation of middle class integration: "For the first time in our History, we are producing a critical mass of college graduates who are children of college graduates themselves. Like most artistic booms, these cultural mulattos are part of a post-bourgeois movement driven by a second generation of middle class."[132]

Jean-Michel Basquiat was raised and educated in a middle class household and attended a number of private schools during his childhood. Within Ellis' framework he could be considered a "cultural mulatto."[133] Hoban proposes that Basquiat "like many

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[129]Fab Five was beginning to open doors for hip-hop. Legendary Hip-Hop DJ Grandmaster Flash says "Fab was like one of the town criers. He would come into the hood where whites wouldn't come and then go downtown to where whites would, and say, 'Listen there's some music these cats is playing man, it's hot shit. You gotta book these guys.' So I got my first taste of playing for an audience that wasn't typically Black." Chang, *Can't Stop, 150.*

[130] "The first wave of Downtowners…white art rebels, Black post-jazzers- were enthralled. They were the earliest adopters, the ones who placed themselves closest to the fire, and they would be central in bringing hip-hop to the world." Ibid., 141.

[131] Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic", *Callalao* 12 no.1 (1989): 235.

[132] Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic", 237.

[133] Basquait was born on December 22, 1960 to a Puerto-Rican mother and Haitian born father on December 22, 1960 in Park Slope, a comfortable residential section of Brooklyn, New York. His mother Matilde taught him English, Spanish and French, and by the time he was five she escorted Basquiat on trips to visit the Brooklyn Museum, The Museum of Modern Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. His

middle-class blacks who came of age during the Civil Rights movement", were "stuck in the crack between two worlds."[134] By the middle of the 1970s, the disintegration of the Civil Rights movement had all but closed down the avenue of political involvement because it had become unclear what an activist in politics might achieve. Instead of divorcing himself from the concerns of black politics, Basquiat made public artworks that engaged black aesthetics as well as historical and cultural discourses.

In his book *How Racism Takes Place*, George Lipsitz argues that the "strong desire to move freely across space formed an important part of the Black spatial imaginary" and most African-American artists "who do not control physical places often construct discursive spaces as sites of agency, affiliation, and imagination."[135] Many artists in the Downtown scene felt that they were denied access to the traditional cultural and economic institutions, and performance spaces. Instead they inhabited abandoned lofts, showed their work in makeshift galleries and storefronts, played music in dive bars, and even engaged in live performances in outdoor venues and in the streets. In *Downtown 81*, institutional boundaries like the Guggenheim, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Rockefeller Center, the 14th Street Plant, and the Empire Building State Building were representations of a white spatial imaginary that supported exclusivity. Although *Downtown 81* presents the LES as a dystopian physical space, it is also depicted as an imaginary, utopian space. For the character of Jean, the streets are depicted as

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father Gerard, a jazz aficionado, exposed young Jean-Michel to his prize collection of records and his grandfather Juan, a bandleader of a small Latino musical group, encouraged Basquiat to sit in on practice sessions.

[134] Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art,* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 27.

[135] George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place, (*Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 60-66.

affirmative, enterprising performances, spaces "where a counter warrant against the white spatial imaginary can be found."[136]

On the wall in front of the 14th Street Plant, Jean paints the words 'ORIGIN OF COTTON'. This is an especially meaningful phrase that illustrates the realities of Basquiat's racial history and condition, and contains multiple autobiographical references to graffiti, racism, and space. Cultural historian George Lipsitz describes the history of the United States as a "history of successive and cumulative racial projects."[137] He states that the plantation and the ghetto "have been the most visible and obvious manifestations of white supremacist uses of space."[138] By making reference to cotton in *Downtown 81*, one of the main crops harvested by black slaves on plantations in the Deep South, Jean is using Deep South imagery to create a perceptible rural impression in an urban context. Although graffiti originated in the predominately black and urban ghetto environments of New York, graffiti is also relevant to a ghetto that extends beyond the city limits of the present and into the past: the plantation. It is therefore possible to interpret the phrase 'ORIGIN OF COTTON' as a black reclamation of the South and its shared culture (Figure 27).[139]

In 1978, Basquiat began his career as an artist alongside partner and high school friend Al Diaz. He began by spray painting a number of slogans, taglines, poems, and symbols all over the Lower East Side, turning walls into outdoor canvasses, and signing them with the tag SAMO© (Same ol' Shit)[140]. Basquiat and Diaz strategically tagged a

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[136] Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place,* 61.
[137] Ibid., 41.
[138] Ibid., 52.
[139] Basquiat also uses this probing language that involves both space and race ("Origin of Cotton") in his improvised poetry that flashes across the screen in *TV* Party (see Figure 16 of this thesis).
[140] Basquait and Diaz painted sayings such as "SAMO AS AN END TO VINYL PUNKERY", "SAMO AS AN ANTI-ART FORM", "SAMO AS AN ALTERNATIVE 2 PLACING ART WITH THE RADICAL

number of predominant points throughout SoHo as well as the gallery neighborhood where influential people in the art world might notice. Many of their tags seemed to mock the incestuous New York art world that favored avant-garde, conceptual and minimalist art. When asked about the SAMO time period, Basquiat said he was interested "in attacking the gallery circuit at that time. The art world was mostly Minimal when I came up. I thought it alienated people from art. It seemed very college."[141] As Phoebe Hoban claims, although Basquiat was not a "true graffiti artist" in the traditional sense - he didn't rise through the ranks "earning the right to leave his tag on certain turf"[142] nor did he draw on subways –his work as SAMO may still be viewed as rebellion against ruling class ownership of the city, its spaces, and its marketplaces.

Fig 27. *The history of successive and cumulative racial projects: Downtown 81* (Edo Bertoglio, 1981)

It is through Jean's interactions with women in the film that both dystopian and utopian elements converge. Jean meets three white women – an art dealer Vanda, a super-model named Beatrice, and a fairy princess played by Deborah Harry who grants Jean

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CHIC SECT ON DADDY'S FUNDS," and "RIDING AROUND IN DADDY'S LIMOUSINE WITH TRUST FUND MONEY".

[141] Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art,* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 41.

[142] Ibid.

one wish in the prophetic and surrealist ending to the film (Figure 28). Such personal moments for Jean serve as a foreboding foreshadowing of some of the convoluted aspects of Basquiat's life in the years after principal photography on the film completed. In the context of Basquiat's relationship to the cultural institutions of white America, his interpersonal relationships, actions, and reactions with white women were problematic.

Fig 28. *Jean and Beatrice: Downtown 81* (Edo Bertoglio, 1981)

Attempting to sell a painting so he can pay back-rent, Jean goes to the apartment of a rich middle-aged Italian patroness named Vanda. While caressing his arm in a flirtatious manner she calls Jean's painting "strong" and "savage", implying that Jean is also "strong" and "black" (Figure 29). These comments are similar to the accusations and labels applied to Basquiat and his artwork. In an article in *The New Republic*, author Robert Hughes suggests: "Graffiti was in fashion in the early 80's, and collectors were ready for a wild child, a curiosity, and an urban, noble savage. Basquiat played the role to

a hilt."[143] However, Basquiat resented this label stating: "They have this image of me as a wild man, a wild, monkey man, whatever they thought."[144]

Fig 29. "*So strong, so savage": Downtown 81* (Edo Bertoglio, 1981)

The period following the completion of the film would prove to be pivotal for the artist. In a very short period, the anonymous SAMO gained an identity as "the exotic painter Jean-Michel Basquiat."[145] While he was alive, Basquiat was variously viewed as a genius, an opportunist, an untrained primitive, and an idiot savant. Based on his blackness he was once called the exotic and exploited mascot of a mostly white, downtown art world. Despite his meteoric rise and sudden fortune, an art market that fetishized and hyperbolized him as the first, great, black American painter used him. Anna Nosei, an art dealer who helped make Basquiat known in the early part of his career stated: "He was treated as an inferior, as a pet by the New York art culture, instead of as a serious artist."[146]

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[143] Robert Hughes, "Requiem For a Featherweight: The Sad Story of an Artist's Success", *The New Republic,* Nov. 21, 1988.
[144] Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art,* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 41.
[145] Hoban, *Basquiat*, 80.
[146] Michael Wines, "Jean Michel Basquiat: Hazards of Sudden Success and Fame", *New York Times* (Aug. 27, 1988), 9.

In its final moments, *Downtown 81,* however, alludes to Jean's access to a world of privilege. After leaving the Mudd Club he walks into a dark alley and encounters an older homeless woman who calls him over. She claims that she is a fairy princess who is under a spell and if Jean would give her a kiss, she would grant him any wish he chose in return for his kindness (Figure 30). Jean does oblige and in a flash of smoke she is magically transformed into a younger woman played by Debbie Harry in Tinkerbell garb. After a long embrace, she disappears and in place of her body she leaves the object of Jean's wish: a suitcase full of money. With the money Jean buys a Cadillac and speeds away at dawn. It is uncertain where Jean is driving to, but it is assumed he endeavors to leave the LES.

Figure 30. "*Your wish is my command": Downtown 81* (Edo Bertoglio, 1981)

What appears to be liberation at the end of the film, however, is revealed to simply be a joyride. It becomes apparent that Jean is merely encircling the same area the viewer has seen in the film. This conclusion conveys a feeling of containment as the viewer realizes that Jean's escape route feeds into itself. In the final shots of the film, the

World Trade Center is seen in the background while Jean drives the car back into the LES (Figure 31). In *Street and Studio*, Glenn O'Brien describes the film as "a comic take on Joyce's *Ulysses* (1914-21) which is the journey of one person in one day from morning until night."[147] While O'Brien's description might be true of most of the film, the ending, one could argue, appears to more closely resemble the journey of *Faust* – Faust is granted magical powers for a term of years, however, by the end of the term the devil claims Faust's soul. In an interview with *Art News* in 1983, Basquiat says of his success: "I felt much more happy about all this in the beginning, when I was coming from the extreme situation of not having any money at all. I had the feeling that I was doing it for people other than just me. Maybe I'm selling my soul to the devil or something."[148] This statement suggests that Basquiat himself seemed to feel the hint of a Faustian bargain.

Fig 31. "*Maybe I'm selling my soul to the devil or something": Downtown 81*
(Edo Bertoglio, 1981)

[147] Catherine Hug and Thomas Miefgang, *Street and Studio: From Basquiat to Seripop (*London: Corner House, 2010), 305.
[148] Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art,* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 141.

Almost overnight the anonymous SAMO was transformed by an admiring public into "the exotic painter Jean-Michel Basquiat"[149], and the once homeless street artist was well on his way to becoming an international star. As already stated, while he was alive, Basquiat was variously viewed as a genius, an opportunist, an untrained primitive, and an idiot savant. Based on his blackness he became the exploited mascot of a mostly white, downtown art world. It was in fact the the period following the completion of the film that would prove to be pivotal for the artist.

By 1983 African-American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat was at the apex of his career. He was included in a number of well-received art shows across New York City side by side with future luminaries such as Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, and Robert Mapplethorpe. Basquiat's work drew rave reviews in international contemporary art magazines such as *Art in America*[150] and *Artforum*[151], and in June of 1982 twenty-one year old Basquiat was the youngest of the 176 artists included in *Documenta*[152] *7* in Kassel, West Germany. That same year he had solo and group shows in Italy, Switzerland, and Los Angeles. In March of 1983, Basquiat was the youngest artist included in the Whitney Biennial Exhibition, and by late November of that year he began work on a number of collaborative paintings with his hero and eventual mentor Andy Warhol.

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[149] Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art,* 80.

[150] *Art In America* describes itself as "The World's premier Art Magazine" and is widely read by art dealers, collectors, historians and art professionals with a concentration on contemporary art in New York City. Over the last 100 years the magazine has received praise for its extensive coverage and criticism of painting, photography and sculpture.

[151] In his long and dramatic article "The Radiant Child" published in the December 1981 issue of *Artforum*, critic Rene Richard scripts the star's formal introduction to the art world.

[152] *Documenta* is an exhibition of modern and contemporary art that takes place every five years. The exhibition features numerous artists considered to have had a profound influence on modern art.

Although the film *Downtown 81* is not generally acknowledged to be representative of black cinema, it is productive to examine how the lead role Jean navigates through LES space when considering the lineage of black cinematic characters. The complexities of the character of Jean in *Downtown 81* presents Basquiat as an audacious, creative, adventurous figure who contributed to the transformation of New York City's Lower East Side (LES). Unfortunately *Downtown 81*, at the time the biggest budgeted and most ambitious underground film about New York would not reach the public sphere until nineteen years later. However 1981 would prove to be a big year for the filmmakers of the Lower East Side. That same year, Charlie Ahearn began production on another film that also presented a complicated yet significant narrative on class, race and the relationship to ghetto space.

Chapter Four: A Mobile Canvas: Moving between Art and Commerce, Hip Hop and Graffiti in Charlie Ahearn's *Wild Style*

A key moment occurs in *Downtown 81* shortly after the character Jean leaves his apartment with a painting tucked under his arm in search for a potential buyer so he can pay his rent. Jean passes two of the nascent hip-hop scenes' legendary graffiti artists Fred Brathwaite, aka "Fab Five Freddy", and Lee Quinones painting a mural on the side of a Latino social club on East 5th St. while Cool Kyle, one of hip-hop's first generation MC's performs inside (Figures 32, 33). Had the film been released as intended, it would have been the first feature-length motion picture narrative to portray the South Bronx hip-hop scene on film. The inclusion of this scene was no doubt suggested by Fab Five Freddy, a proud supporter and facilitator of the hip-hop scenes in the South Bronx and the LES: "I had been making moves in the downtown area of Manhattan for a couple of years, hooking up with people who had a like sensibility to what I was trying to do. I saw a connection with the people that were doing punk rock and the pop artists, and that led me to hook up with Glenn O'Brien."[153]

Fig 32. *The first hip-hop scene?: Downtown 81* (Edo Bertoglio, 1981)

Fig 33. *Rappin' with Cool Kyle: Downtown 81* (Edo Bertoglio, 1981)

[153] Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade.* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), 283.

The inclusion of this scene in *Downtown 81* was also due in part to another important and influential project put on by Colab called the Times Square Show in the summer before principal production of *Downtown 81* began. It was at this installation and performance event where members of both Colab and *TV Party* would meet and cross-fertilize. Two of the filmmakers who worked on *All Color News*, John Ahearn and Tom Otterness made an arrangement with a landlord on West 41st Street, just off Times Square to rent an old pornography theatre that would be transformed into a large scale exhibition space where over a hundred different artists displayed their works, including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Fab Five Freddy, and Lee Quinones. Alan Moore, a long-time member of Colab recounts that the "Times Square Show marked the apogee of Colab's influence in the New York art world. The densely packed exhibition was popularly accessible, and had a strong effect on art critics. Some observers read the exhibit as a sign of the times, as embodying post-modernism, or an alternative to post-minimalism."[154] Richard Goldstein's *Village Voice* review called the Times Square Show "the first radical art show of the 1980's"[155], noting that of nearly 100 artists in the show, 12 were Latin or Black, "a diversity unheard of outside specially sanctioned third world events." Jeffery Deitch, an investment banker who helped arrange funding for the exhibition noted that "racial interchange was the show's major breakthrough,"[156] as black artists present their work on their own terms (Figure 34).

[154] Alan W. Moore, *Art Gangs: Protest and Counterculture in New York City,* (New York: Autonomedia, 2011), 102.
[155] Richard Goldstein, "The First Radical Art Show of the 80's", *Village Voice* (June 16:1980), 1.
[156] Moore, *Art Gangs,*105.

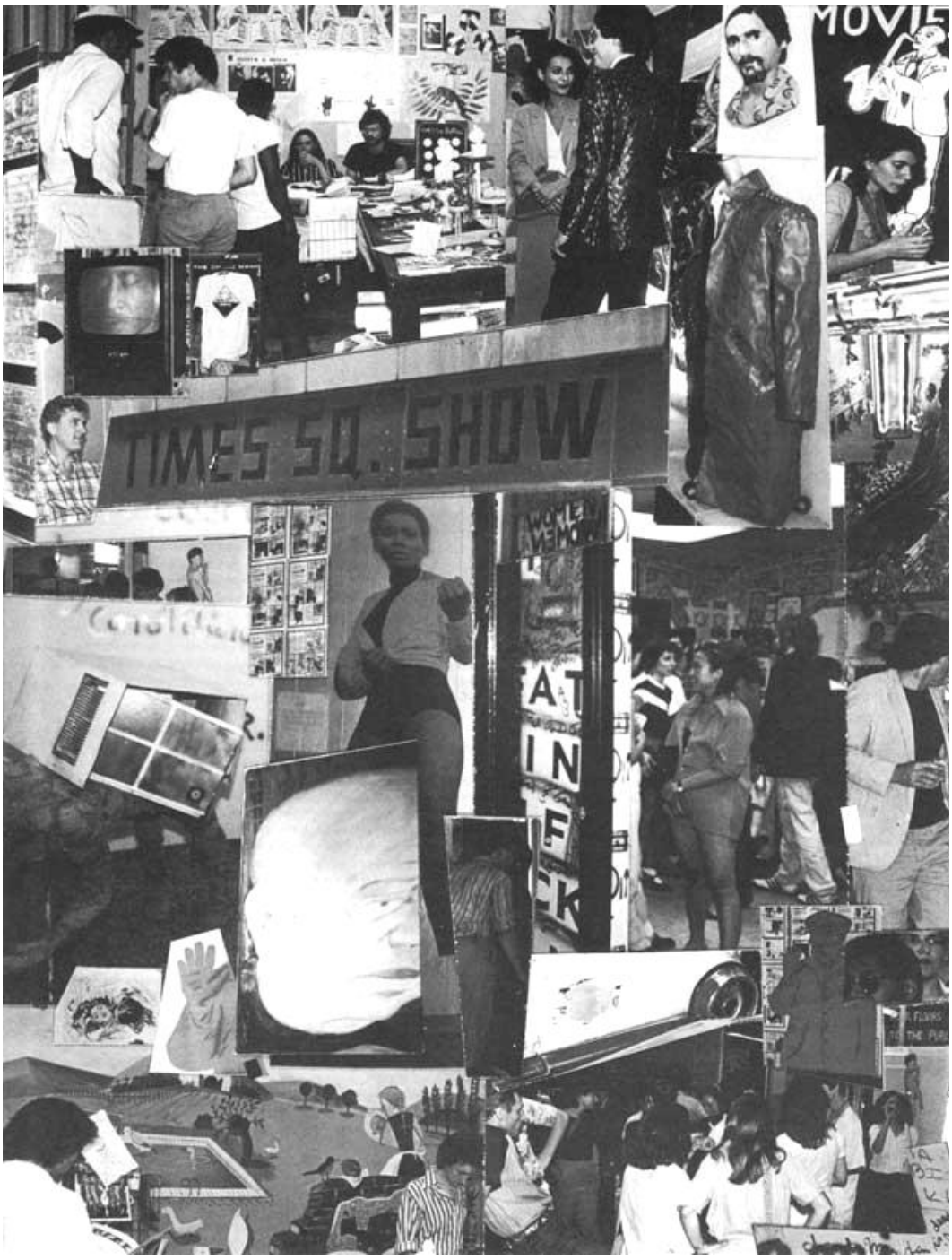

Fig 34. *Views of the Time Square Show (organized by Colab), 1980. Photo collage by Terise Slotkin (1980)*

At the time, Freddy and Lee Quinones[157], believing they were part of a new wave of great art, were concerned with people of color, like themselves, establishing a foothold in the fine art world. They thought that by showcasing graffiti in a movie, they could present it as real culture. The director Charlie Ahearn was present at the show debuting his independently financed martial arts film *The Deadly Art of Survival* made between 1978 and 1979 when Freddy approached Ahearn about making the movie *Wild Style* (1982), one of the first pseudo-biographical films that played an important role in what Jesse Stewart considers the "construction of hip-hop identities...which helped to solidify the bonds between the constituent elements"[158] of this underground sonic, visual and kinesthetic youth culture. Enthusiasm superseded the lack of experience in writing or directing a movie for Freddy and Lee, especially one with little financial assistance. None of this seemed to matter to the trio when Freddy suggested to Ahearn and Quinones, "Let's make a movie...wait, how do we make a movie...we'll make it up as we go along."[159]

Wild Style was also the final and perhaps most popular collaborative project between both Colab and the *TV Party* crew. Glenn O'Brien even considers *Downtown 81* and *Wild Style* as twin films "portraying what was happening in New York during that crazy time. You could call *Wild Style* 'Uptown 81.' We were showing two sides of the same explosion."[160] Along with Glenn O'Brien who makes a small cameo playing a self -

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[157] According to Henry Chalfant and James Prigoff, Lee Quinones was no longer satisfied with just painting on trains that for many years he had just by sheer numbers and scale had overwhelmed the competition and "begun to transform his neighbourhood in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge into one of the city's most spectacular exhibits of public art" painting unforgettable murals on walls and handball courts. Henry Chalfant and James Prigoff, *Spraycan Art,* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1987), 7.
[158] Jesse Stewart, "Real to Reel: Filmic Constructions of Hip Hop Cultures and Hip Hop Identities", *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 26 (2009): 49.
[159] *Wild Style*, directed by Charlie Ahearn, (Rhino, 1982), DVD.
[160] Charlie Ahearn, *Wild Style: The Sampler* (Brooklyn NY: Powerhouse, 2007), 133.

involved and extremely arrogant art dealer who ironically was one of the first journalists to publicly endorse graffiti, Chris Stein from Blondie co-produced and composed the soundtrack to the film, bringing along *TV Party* band member Lenny Ferrari to play drums, while Tom Otterness and Ulli Rickmas, two directors from *AllColorNews* and *Potato Wolf* worked as set designers. Freddy who was already an outspoken vocal representative of graffiti in New York, serving as the important liaison between Ahearn and several of the artists, breakdancers,[161] rappers, art dealers, and downtown scenesters who appear as fictionalized versions of themselves in the film, was cast as the hip-hop promoter PHADE.

Whereas women contributed minimally behind the scenes in the *AllColorNews*, *Potato Wolf* or *TV Party* cable access shows or were portrayed as colorful muses and alluring sirens in *Downtown 81*, in *Wild Style* women take center stage, appearing in roles that portray them as influential facilitators and participants. Patti Astor[162], the reporter Virginia who travels to the South Bronx, discovers the graffiti scene and brings it to the established art world, would soon co-found the legendary FUN Gallery in early 1981 with partner Bill Sterling, a gallery which specialized in showing the work of graffiti artists. Sandra 'LADY PINK' Fabara, a well-known female graffiti artist, considered one of the few who were capable of competing with the scenes' dominant male counterparts,

[161] For a brief history of breakin' video documentaries see Mary Fogarty's MA thesis '*What Ever Happened to Breakdancing?': Transnational B-boy/b-girl Networks, Underground Video Magazines and Imagined Affinities* (MA Thesis, Brock University, 2007) and her "Breaking expectations: Imagined affinities in mediated youth cultures," *Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* (2012) Volume 26, Issue 3: 449-462.

[162] "The Queen of Downtown" Patti Astor met the "King of Uptown" Fab Five Freddy who later introduced her to a number of the graffiti scene's prominent artists at one of the midnight showings of Eric Mitchell's *Underground U.S.A.*(1980) in which she played the lead role. Almost the entire Downtown art world showed up at one of the landmark BBQ events at her tenement apartment at which legendary writer FUTURA 2000 painted a large mural on the outside wall. Following this event, her friend Bill Sterling suggested that she run a gallery that would feature prominent graffiti artists (many of whom make appearances in Wild Style like ZEPHYR, LADY PINK, DONDI, and LEE QUINONES) in a small space on 10th ST. between Second and Third Avenues.

was cast as the love interest Rose aka LADYBUG and girlfriend of the lead character Raymond aka ZORO played by Lee Quinones. The two were rumored to be an actual couple at the time of filming, a situation Ahearn remarks "was far too incredible to ignore and soon took centre stage in the movie as the stormy teen romance".[163]

Raymond and Rose's troubled romantic relationship is revealed to the audience as the film begins. At night in the subway train yards of the South Bronx, Raymond dressed all in black, a doo-rag covering his head like his alter ego ZORO, rappels down a wall painted with a colorful mural spelling 'GRAFFITI' in bold orange and yellow colors and cautiously maneuvers his way through the shadows in a close up, only his eyes visible to the viewer (Figure 35). A dream sequence featuring Raymond and Rose tagging a wall interrupts the action for a brief moment establishing this minor narrative that will resurface later in the film. Suddenly the animated title sequence literally explodes on to the screen comprised of thousands of individual drawings.

Fig 35. *'ZORO', the lone rebel: Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

[163] Charlie Ahearn, *Wild Style: The Sampler* (Brooklyn NY: Powerhouse, 2007), 74.

Wild Style's opening credit sequence is quite different from the typical animated opening credits in mainstream cinema (Figures 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41). The colorful words and drawings dance across the screen in perpetual motion, pulsating with movement in unison to the DJ's scratches heard over a minimal hip-hop instrumental. A kaleidoscope of stars expanding from background into the camera first highlights the four main protagonists Lee, Sandra, Patti, and Freddy**,** then highlights the names of the secondary real life/character MC's Busy Bee, Double Trouble, Fantastic Freaks, Coldcrush Brothers and breakdancers the Rock Steady Crew, Pop-O-Matics, and Electric Force over the banners with the words 'Rap' and 'Break'. Graffiti writer ZEPHYR, who also plays a supporting role as Raymond's friend recalls the often laborious process of creating the title sequence by hand:

> I did all the drawings for the Wild Style animation sequence on paper; no cells (clear acetate pages) were used…with the assistance of Revolt and a lovely woman named Becky High, we cranked out the sequence, which required over 1,000 final drawings – 12 per second for 90 seconds of running time. *Wild Style* is quintessential guerrilla/shoestring/bumrush the spot/"by any means necessary" filmmaking. And while the creation of the animation sequences may have been less spontaneous than some of the other aspects of the film's production, it was equally unconventional, eccentric, and simply bizarre.[164]

The names of the film's production crew bounce and vibrate over a silhouette of the Manhattan skyline as police sirens are heard wailing over the soundtrack. Suddenly a cartoon police car with sirens flashing cuts below the skyline from right to left followed by a subway train crowded with silhouettes of young members of the hip-hop community. Finally the words directed, produced, and written by Charlie Ahearn flash across the screen, lightning striking the corner of the titles while the sounds of a thunderstorm crashes over the soundtrack. Not only does this title sequence emulate the

[164] Ahearn, *Wild Style: The Sampler*, 156.

kinesthetic aspects of hip-hop culture through animated symbols of the urban environment**,** it also foreshadows the major themes and events of the movie: we see the painting of the mural in the final sequence, the skyline of Manhattan, and the presence of authorities.

Fig 36. *The unhappy couple: Title sequence, Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

Fig 37. *Rap: Title sequence, Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

Figure 38. *Break: Title sequence, Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

Fig 38. *Music by the TV Party: Title sequence, Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn. 1982)

Fig 40. *The director explodes on the scene: Title sequence, Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

Fig 41. *Foreshadowing the final 'star' sequence: Title sequence, Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

The film then quickly cuts to a close-up of Raymond spray painting a drawing on the side of a train, the camera focusing on his hands shaking cans and changing paint can tips from fat to thin. As the camera pans back we see he has finished a piece of the fictional character of ZORO, Raymond's alter ego. He looks right off screen to where two undercover train police emerge in hot pursuit of the young vigilante. The camera pans across the screen following Raymond running at full speed across the train yards,

the transit cops closing in fast behind. Raymond, however, successfully evades his potential captors and decides to call it a night (Figures 42, 43, 44).

In the next sequence the camera pans up scanning the exterior of an apartment complex where we see Raymond quietly sneaking through a bedroom window via a fire escape. Inside, his brother Hector dressed in brown military garb is lying on a bed pointing a small pistol at the window assuming that someone is trying to break into the apartment. Raymond is surprised to find his brother who has just returned from boot camp. In the ensuing medium shot of the two brothers facing each other in a stand-off on either side of the frame we see the full extent to which Raymond has covered his brother's bedroom walls with graffiti pieces (Figure 45). With reference to the paintings Hector exclaims "This is fucking garbage...people are sick of this shit...stop fucking around and be a man...there ain't nothing here for you." In this sequence Hector takes on the role of the paternalistic figure in what may well be a home without a father, further complicating and reinforcing the film's themes of entering prohibited spaces and confrontations between authority and youthful creativity. Likewise by choosing to emphasize the powerful presence of graffiti in this interior space the film "underscores the unstable and permeable border between the inside and outside, between legal and illegal spaces, and most dramatically, between the function of home and street."[165]

The antagonistic relationship between graffiti writers and by extension members of the hip-hop community with figures of authority is already established with the introduction of Raymond and his nocturnal activities. By 1981 the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) had dispatched a number of undercover flat-foots known as the Vandal

[165] Kimberly Bercov Monteyne, "The Sound of the South Bronx: Youth Culture, Genre, and Performance in Charlie Ahearn's Wild Style", *Youth Culture in Global Cinema,* edited by Timothy Shary and Alexandra Siebel. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 94.

Squad to apprehend and imprison graffiti writers in the subway train yards, an operation that the film seems to highlight as a continuation of the America's invasion of South Asia a decade before. The battle between graffiti writers and the authorities is an account that Nancy Macdonald in her book *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity, and Identity in London and New York* describes as "drenched in militaristic tone, imagery", and a language "centered around a fight for power and control of the subway system."[166]

Re-appropriating metaphors of war and violence, graffiti writers used a specialized vocabulary like 'bombing' a train, which means to paint a prolific image or mark with **i**nk the side of subway car, to **'**hit' or tag any surface with paint or ink, or 'killing'[167] which means to hit or bomb any surface excessively. This language portrays writers as "outlaws and the police and MTA as their enemy", an identity which suggests "they want and enjoy."[168] As a subversive act, guerrilla tactics like 'bombing', 'hitting', and 'killing' trains and buildings, tactics used to control a network of communications, can be considered an "artistic expression with a revolutionary purpose."[169] By 1973, the MTA made an orchestrated system-wide effort with then mayor John Lindsay to deter 'bombings' mainly by painting a horizontal blue line across subway cars. As New York City was approaching bankruptcy, the authorities' failure to keep their trains free of graffiti only served as evidence of this subculture's growing power.

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[166] Nancy Macdonald, *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth Masculinity and Identity in London and New York* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 109.
[167] Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper, *Subway Art* (New York: Henry Holt and Company Inc., 1984), 27. Chalfant and Cooper explain the meaning of a number of other terms such as 'Getting Up'- successfully hitting a train, 'Lay-up'- a siding where trains are parked overnight and on weekends, 'Piece' – a painting, short for masterpiece, 'Tag' – a writer's signature, 'Throw-up'- a name painted quickly with one layer of spray paint and an outline, and 'Top-to-bottom' – a piece which extends from the top of the car to the bottom.
[168] Nancy Macdonald, *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth Masculinity and Identity in London and New York* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 109.
[169] Macdonald, *The Graffiti Subculture,* 160.

Hip-hop and by extension graffiti, are most certainly American-made cultures and the young ethnic groups who were socially and economically at the margins who created these new art forms were as hip-hop historian Sasha Jenkins suggests "pretty much under the impression that they weren't really Americans. Ain't no picket fences in the South Bronx."[170] For many of these youth, like graffiti writers, post Vietnam, Watergate, and the assassinations of inspiring leaders such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. meant a lack of leadership in the local communities. The country as a whole had very little to be proud of: instead revolutionary leftist organizations like "The Weather Underground, the young Lords, and the Black Panthers"[171] became their heroes. Writer Jim Fricke and Director Charlie Ahearn also point to hip-hop culture's roots in the gang – dominated street culture of the late 1960's and early 1970's that pervaded in black and Latino neighborhoods throughout the five boroughs define many of its features "particularly territorialism and the tradition of battling. Gang members 'tagged' their territories to identify them and tagged rival territories to provoke those rivals. At the same time, battle dancers were refined as an alternative to violence."[172]

Life at the margins already suggests political opposition and as sociologist Richard Lachman suggests, the members of the hip-hop community since its early origins, negotiated its power to exist in a dominant society "by drawing on the particular experiences and customs of their communities, ethnic groups and age cohorts."[173] Graffiti artists like LSD OM feel that many writers were painting because they were

[170] Charlie Ahearn, *Wild Style: The Sampler* (Brooklyn NY: Powerhouse, 2007), 199.
[171] Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti* (New York: Harper Design, 2010), 86.
[172] Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade.* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), 3.
[173] Richard Lachman, "Graffiti as Career and Ideology." *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988): 232.

angry that their voices were not being heard, upset that the government was dictating their behavior and therefore used writing as a way of saying "Don't make a decision without consulting us. Look at this wall and all these lives here…all of these names you see are people with lives and meaning."[174]

Returning to Ahearn's *Wild Style*, a quick edit transports us to the middle of what appears to be the following afternoon and more importantly one of the first visual tours of the South Bronx (Figure 46). In a similar fashion to *Downtown 81,* the film presents a montage[175] of the outdoors where much of the film's action takes place following the central figure of Raymond as he walks along the streets past rubble strewn lots and graffiti covered murals on abandoned or burned out buildings and various residents of the neighborhood. Unlike *Downtown 81,* however, we also get a few high angle shots. In a number of long shots, subway trains pass by covered from top to bottom with graffiti murals and in one brief shot we actually see Raymond's painting of ZORO from the night before (Figure 47). Unlike the use of hand held or mobile cameras in *Downtown 81*, Ahearn uses static and fixed shots but aggressively zooms and pans the camera and even includes a POV shot from the interior of a moving subway car looking down at the streets below.

[174] Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti* (New York: Harper Design, 2010), 23.

[175] Montage for the Downtown artists was a cut and paste, handmade, do it yourself approach which mirrored the punk music scene's gritty aesthetic. Charlie Ahearn even mention that the storyboard for *Wild Style* was "made up of colour Xeroxes." *Wild Style,* directed by Charlie Ahearn (1982; Rhino, 2011), DVD.

Fig 42. *Preparing for battle: Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

Fig 43. *ZORO makes his mark: Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

Fig 44. *The MTA is foiled again: Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

Fig 45. '*This is Fuckin' garbage': Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

Fig 46. *The war zone as seen from the IRT: Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

Fig 47. *ZORO in the public sphere: Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

Cut to an instrumental hip-hop track that is similar to the title sequence music, the montage includes a number of local youths showing off their recent tags and paintings in sketchbooks in an underground clubhouse spot also watching their work and those of other graffiti artists on subway trains that pass outside the window (Figure 48). Writers' designs became more complex over time especially the writing of those who had adopted the 'wildstyle', a complicated form of graffiti that "incorporates interwoven and overlapping letters and shapes." These shapes "may include arrows, spikes, and other decorative elements" and the overall effect is "very hard to read by people who are unfamiliar with it."[176] Before painting on trains or murals, writers would work out these intricate designs ahead of time in blackbooks, the writer's term for sketchbooks that also functioned as a way to exchange ideas and preserve artwork and styles. A blackbook full of drawings from the best writer also served as a status symbol and it was common for writers to ask one another to draw in another's blackbook, "particularly on meeting someone established".[177]

Fig 48. *Writers sharing and comparing: Wild Style*
(Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

[176] "Wildstyle", Entry on Wikipedia, available online at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wildstyle
[177] Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti* (New York: Harper Design, 2010), 98.

After the brief tour of the neighborhood, the camera focuses its attention on Raymond and ZEPHYR as they pause to view trains passing by. For graffiti writers locations like the infamous 'Writer's Bench' or 'Writer's Corner'[178] at the 149th Street Grand Concourse Station on the IRT were important places graffiti writers would meet to exchange ideas and show work but most importantly it was location where they could see their work and others pass by in plain sight. In the 70's and 80's the subway system acted as a network system for graffiti writers passing throughout the five boroughs and the larger New York area with individual train lines that had individual "character, audience, advantages and disadvantages."[179] Particular trains on the IRT lines, like the favored 2, 4, and 5 traveled great distances above ground from the middle of the Bronx, through Manhattan, into Brooklyn, a journey that takes four hours and could all be seen passing by the 'Writer's Bench' allowing writer's to "follow their work, keep an eye on progress, and most importantly, determine where it is going to go in the first place."[180] The facades of the train cars in effect doubled as large, mobile canvases for an art form that relied heavily on size and constant movement for maximum visual impact and for the dissemination of this public performance that enabled writers who desire fame to extend their audience.

Graffiti crews often met and worked in abandoned spaces simply because, unlike their counterparts downtown, they couldn't afford to rent studios or attend expensive art

[178] PISTOL, one of the first graffiti artists on the scene, first credited with a 3-D piece recalls: "we had this thing called the Writer's Corner, which I helped to originate. That was a place where you could go after school or during school, where we would watch our work go by and compare notes and see who was doing what." Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade.* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), 13.
[179] Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelson, *The History of American Graffiti*, (New York: Harper Design, 2010) 89.
[180] Nancy Macdonald, *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth Masculinity and Identity in London and New York* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 83.

schools and institutions. Likewise the poor youth in the community who couldn't afford to go to popular nightclubs and discos and the MC and DJ crews who provided the entertainment that didn't own clubs, convened at school dances, social clubs, community centers, and illegal outdoor block parties with electricity provided by the closest street lamp. These activities helped to form a specific hip-hop identity that has its roots in local experience and privileged attachment to local groups described as "new kinds of families forged with intercultural bonds that, like the formation of gangs, provide insulation and support in a complex and unyielding environment and may serve as the basis for new social movements."[181]

One other largely overlooked social accomplishment graffiti achieved that makes it independent from the other elements of hip-hop was as Fab Five Freddy explains that "white, Puerto-Rican, and black" people from all of five New York's boroughs came together despite the claim that "people of these races didn't normally hang out together."[182] While rapping, DJ'ing and breakdancing have their roots in black and Latino indigenous forms of American music, what binds writers together "is the history of graffiti and the process of doing it"[183] no matter their class, race, ethnicity, religion or age. An active writer in the early 1970's, LIL SOUL sums up the contribution of graffiti in tearing down racial barriers: "You just didn't see that in New York City until graffiti hit the scene. Once we smelled that ink, we were just writers. The world could take a great lesson in conquering racism by giving everybody a can of spray paint!"[184]

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[181] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 1994), 34.
[182] *Wild Style,* directed by Charlie Ahearn,(1982; Rhino, 2011), DVD.
[183] Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti* (New York: Harper Design, 2010), 29.
[184] Gastman and Neelson, *The History of American Graffiti*, 29.

In *Wild Style*, graffiti is also seen as a way to form new collectivities and fight capitalist control. Thus, Raymond and ZEPHYR's conversation turns to an argument when ZEPHYR who informs Raymond that a journalist from Downtown (Manhattan) will be visiting the South Bronx to get the scoop on the emerging graffiti scene in the South Bronx and interview the members of the Union Crew because a number of museums might be interested in their canvas works. Raymond is horrified by the notion that the spirit of graffiti can be expressed in the gallery setting explaining to his friend that "Graffiti ain't canvas, graffiti is on the trains and on the walls...being a graffiti writer is taking the chances and shit...taking the risk, taking all the arguments from the transit, from the police and your mom, friends...you gotta go out and paint and be called an outlaw."[185]

This division that exists in the graffiti subculture "centers around how the subculture should present itself to the outside world"[186], with the illegal writers on one side who believe the subculture should be kept in the streets, "where it was originally born and developed"[187], not in art galleries where it loses its essence in that enclosed space as legal writers would have it. Graffiti in its original illegal location is art that cannot be packaged, sold, or bought making it in effect, inaccessible to outsiders, and resistant to manipulation. Illegal work is promoted as the 'real' form of graffiti, its "strongest tool of defiance"[188] and writers like Raymond are considered loyal supporters

[185] Raymond initially asks: "What work? Them doing graffiti on a canvas? So now they are making graffiti on canvas?"
[186] Nancy Macdonald, *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth Masculinity and Identity in London and New York* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 163.
[187] Macdonald, *The Graffiti Subculture*, 166.
[188] Ibid., 172.

of its roots, upholding "subculture's life-force, its whole reason for being".[189] Legal writers, or 'sell-outs' meanwhile are seen as traitors or fakes who have exchanged their real personas for one that seeks financial reward and the interest of outsiders directly opposing the principles of illegal unpaid writers who instead do it for the love of it.

Raymond, the film's loner and rebel is invested in the "outlaw" spirit of graffiti writing described above, and sees it as a lively art form like rapping, DJ-ing and breakdancing where its active members gained notoriety and status from their spontaneity of expression. MC's tested out their new rhymes center stage, the DJ's exhibiting innovative turntable techniques just behind, while breakdancers executed popping, locking, and floor moves against opposing crews, in front of scrutinizing crowds, in heated contests where there could only be one declared winner. Before multi-million dollar contracts were awarded to rappers and graffiti artists' images were sold on coffee mugs, before breakdancers pantomimed on late-night variety shows, and DJ's played to thousands of crowds on corporate sponsored world tours, hip-hop's impromptu performances were art forms that could not be collected, but rather must be witnessed.

The next day in *Wild Style* marks a transition in the cultural transmission of and marketing of graffiti in the film. The attractive young white woman Virginia played by Patti Astor is filmed driving her somewhat beat up car across a bridge into the South Bronx, her car stereo blasting Blondie's "Pretty Baby". It is in only in Virginia's car that the soundtrack shifts from the hip-hop sounds of the South Bronx to the Punk/New Wave/No Wave sounds of the Lower East Side. These are symbolic references to the Lower East Side's interest in and influence on the hip-hop culture of the South Bronx i.e.: downtown comes uptown (Figure 49).

[189] Ibid., 167.

In an interview with Rose and the Union Crew who are painting a mural,[190] Virginia asks a number of questions pertaining to their initial involvement in the scene and if their work in galleries will mean "the end of graffiti in the subways." Rose makes it clear that there will never be an end to subway graffiti and states that the murals they paint are an attempt to liven up things in their community, a community that was dubbed the world's most famous ghetto (Figure 50). On the film's commentary, Freddy claims the ghetto was made up "seven square blocks of rubble" yet "the kids in the movie...all of them that lived in this scene" were "beautifying their surroundings...making what they had left that was theirs."[191]

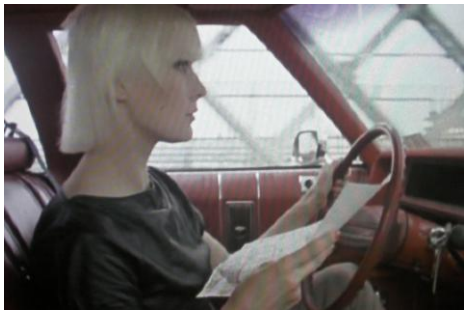

Fig 49. *Downtown goes Uptown: Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

Figure 50. *Rose aka LADYBUG and the Union Crew: Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

By nightfall PHADE escorts Virginia to the train yards to meet an unimpressed Raymond who is once again concerned about anyone revealing the true origins of his alter ego, ZORO. The trio makes their way to a nightclub club so Virginia can also observe rappers, DJ's, and breakers in action. On the way out, PHADE meets a promoter

[190] Graffiti writers often did many pieces on walls, a good place to improve a writer's skill particularly during moments when the authorities were making an aggressive presence on the train lines.
[191] *Wild Style,* directed by Charlie Ahearn (1982; Rhino, 2011), DVD.

played by Joe Lewis[192], who asks for PHADE's assistance in coordinating a live hip-hop show at an abandoned amphitheatre in the Lower East Side (Figure 51). After a slight altercation with some local thugs who attempt a mugging, Virginia drives PHADE and Raymond to a party in Manhattan where she intends to introduce the graffiti duo to a number of art dealers, museum curators and "some very important people" who will make Raymond "into a millionaire". An establishing shot of the Manhattan skyline – tall populated buildings, constant flow of traffic and busy nightlife – provides a striking visual contrast to the blighted environment from which the trio had come from (Figure 53). Blondie is playing in Virginia's car again, but this time the song "Rapture" plays over soundtrack featuring a rap by Deborah Harry with references to Fab Five Freddy and DJ Grandmaster Flash. Although "Rapture" was not the first song featuring rapping to be commercially successful, it was the first video ever to feature rapping broadcast on MTV i.e.: uptown comes downtown.

[192] Although Joe Lewis was not a member of Colab or TV Party, he was the co-founder of art space in the South Bronx called Fashion Moda along with Colab member Stefan Eins (Figure 52). In the fall 0f 1978, this gallery served as the bridge that joined the downtown art scene with the cultural trends in the South Bronx and other outer boroughs. According to Alan Moore this gallery "began exhibiting graffiti painting informally almost from its inception. A large exhibition specifically devoted to the form was mounted in October of 1980. A cultural merger – crossover in the terms of mass culture – was implied by the exhibition of examples of a principle component of hip-hop culture in an art space run by connected downtown Manhattan artists.**"?** Alan W. Moore, *Art Gangs: Protest and Counterculture in New York City* (New York: Autonomedia, 2011), 99.

Fig 51. *The Holy Trinity of graffiti promotion (Fab 5 Freddy, Joe Lewis, Patti Astor): Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

Fig 52. *Exterior of Fashion/Moda with mural by Crash, 1982. Photo by Lisa Kahane*

The party that Raymond, Virginia, and PHADE arrive at took place in art patron Niva Kislac's actual apartment; her walls covered with minimalist and pop art paintings by Frank Stella and Roy Lichtenstein. Ahearn included this scene based on the idea that graffiti artists would be entering a new yard, the yard of the art collector, but explains; "for someone like Lee, this is treacherous territory".[193] While many art collectors pursued a deeper understanding of graffiti "the 1980's also brought many collectors who were little more than art investors buying on speculation or well to do trend-hoppers".[194] Lee Quinones had a number of disheartening experiences with rich collectors and on occasion Craig Castleman recalls "the shy, reclusive Lee, was handed a box of spray paint and told to paint something, then and there, in front of the guests, with an implicit or else."[195]

Raymond's introduction to Niva recalls the seduction of Basquiat's character Jean by the older female art dealer in *Downtown 81*. Niva lures Raymond into her bedroom,

[193] *Wild Style,* directed by Charlie Ahearn (1982; Rhino, 2011), DVD.
[194] Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelson, *The History of American Graffiti* (New York: Harper Design, 2010), 127.
[195] Gastman and Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti*, 127.

lies down on her bed, motioning Raymond to join her, and offers him a cash payment of two hundred dollars for a canvas painting replica of the Manhattan skyline. Raymond is not only seduced by the prospect of cash and possibly sex, but also for the first time, a privileged position above his lower class roots (Figure 54). Before he enters Niva's room he looks out the high-rise window several stories above ground level and says, "I'm standing here watching the world at my feet. I feel like God. I would like to make a painting of this."

Fig 53. *Uptown goes Downtown: Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

Fig 54. *Would you like me to seduce you? Art meets commerce: Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

By the early 1980's, the mainstream and predominately white downtown gallery and museum scene, spurred on by a booming art market that made superstars out of urban writers like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, had become very interested in the buzz surrounding the nascent Graffiti scene. While many of these celebrities were making a lot of money from their paintings, hanging out with rock stars at fancy clubs and parties, they were never "serious players on the train lines"[196] and there was a sense of worry about where all this success would lead. Another legendary graffiti artist HAZE, who later went on to design a number of iconic Hip-Hop album covers found himself

[196] Ibid., 125.

along with a number of other young writers exposed to sudden media coverage and fame. As he described it, he was suddenly "in the middle of this playing field, in the middle of a big arena, and we realized there's a big game going on. But what's the game? What's the goal?"[197]

While writers can continue to do illegal work in their early teens, once they leave home as young adults**,** making money out of graffiti, Cey Adams explains, not only seems a logical step forward but when faced with the financial demands of 'real' life, commercial legal work is a way to turn a hobby into something that will pay the rent and put food on the table: "These are kids from the Bronx; most people were dirt poor. It was a way of earning some money while doin' what you do…. the idea of getting paid was just unheard of…. So coming downtown and fusing with the whole rock world, the white downtown club scene, was really interesting."[198] This, however, moves writers "out of the boundaries of the subculture"[199] where writers, no longer painting for themselves or their peers are now beholden to a new audience that is buying their work. Some writers like Lee Quinones were able to go 'legal' in the 1980's and at the same time, keep his place within the subculture. In a classic case of art imitating life, during the course of making the film, Lee was bombing trains late into the night and the next day would be setting up a show with Freddy at the White Columns Gallery.

While working the room at the art gallery party in the film, making connections and introducing himself to various "important people", PHADE is lambasted by a gallery owner played by Glenn O'Brien who complains that he "spent fifty thousand dollars last

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[197] Ibid., 132.
[198] Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade.* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), 316.
[199] Nancy Macdonald, *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth Masculinity and Identity in London and NewYork*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 90.

year removing graffiti from the facade of the gallery" and is seemingly unimpressed by what he considers an attack on public and private property. The anger that graffiti provoked among many of New York's citizens was in no doubt instigated by Ed Koch, the mayor from 1978 to 1989, who spent over 20 million dollars on continuing war against graffiti. Koch officially stated that "he thought it was disgusting, and disgusting on the part of those who supported it. You know you cannot excuse this on the basis that people used it as way to demonstrate their talent and become famous. While they were doing that, they were costing us millions of dollars…Sure, New York City is the greatest canvas in the world! But it doesn't belong to you- it belongs to the people!"[200]

This was indicative of the way the city's leaders viewed lower class ethnic citizens, despite the fact that politicians like Koch and former mayor John Lindsay, along with unscrupulous real estate developers, were responsible for many of the neglected surroundings that young writers were born into. Not only were a number of Black and Latino families isolated in neighborhood slums and wastelands, but since the mid-1960's "New York's public schools were under great pressure to cut programming"[201] favoring math and science and urged to cut programs for arts and sports. The city was also under pressure to cut spending, reducing its police, fire and sanitation services in impoverished areas. Writing in *Public Interest* magazine in a discussion of graffiti, crime, and public perception, Sociologist Nathan Grazer deduced that in people's minds "even without doing any research, they were associating the notion of crime and other notions of the city not being managed well – garbage etc. – with the writing of graffiti".[202]

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[200] Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti* (New York: Harper Design, 2010), 23.
[201] Gastman and Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti*, 24.
[202] Ibid., 108.

This view of graffiti also frustrated Ahearn's attempts at securing funding for the film. After applying for funding from PBS for the film, he received a letter that expressed the public broadcasting's extreme distaste for graffiti. As Ahearn stated in an interview, "the US of A was not so interested in it, especially all the funding services that are normally available to documentary filmmakers . . .. I got a letter [from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting] with exclamation marks saying 'So, the *mess* on the subway is art!'"[203]

Many conservatives may have been threatened by Graffiti because it not only represented a visual symbol of resistance to social and economic oppression, but also a resistance of any attempt at commodification. Graffiti in the streets and subways, put up whether people liked it or not, was in a way a liberated public form of art that Chalfant and Cooper admirably acknowledge ignores "the normal channels of art within the system, which is often closed"[204] to graffiti writers anyway. London based writer 3D suggests that what the public also fails to acknowledge is their own powerlessness to have any say about the aesthetics of their surroundings: "in the city you don't get any say in what they build. I live here so I should have as much say as anyone else, and that's why I go out and paint."[205] Graffiti is not a rebellious act of defiance trying to attack the middle class. In fact writers are very aware of the general public's ignorance of the paintings they see and the more the public opposes this art form the more this subculture

[203]Harlan Jacobson. "Charles Ahearn Interviewed by Harlan Jacobson." *Film Comment* 1983, 64. As Jacobson and others have also noted, the film received funding from private investors and two international TV sources: England's Channel 4 and German ZDF. As Aaron Sachs notes, in his application for PBS funding Ahearn referred to the film as an "art movie that would play to a ghetto audience" (Ahearn, as quoted in Sachs, 252). Aaron Sachs, *The hip-hopsploitation film cycle: representing, articulating, and appropriating hip-hop culture* PhD. Diss. University of Iowa, 2009.
[204] Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper, *Subway Art* (New York: Henry Holt and Company Inc., 1984), 10.
[205] Nancy Macdonald, *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth Masculinity and Identity in London and New York* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 158.

attains a sense of power because the more it is "flaunted in the face of the public"[206] the more it remains out of their reach.

Up until this point in the film, the musical interludes have only showcased three of the four elements that make up hip-hop culture: graffiti, rapping and breakdancing. In the final montage of the film, the art of DJ'ing is finally presented to the viewer by none other than Grandmaster Flash, one of hip-hop's founding fathers, credited with developing and mastering the Quick Mix Theory which includes the techniques of cutting, back spinning, phasing, and scratching. In this final collage, Flash showcases his skills on a three turntable system set up in his kitchen, outside the Rocksteady Crew are practicing their routines for the upcoming hip-hop jam on a large piece of linoleum, while Raymond attempts to complete the mural that will serve as the backdrop for the amphitheatre show (Figures 55, 56, 57, 58). For the creators of this movie, scenes like this are the main reason they wanted to make the film. Freddy exclaims on the commentary for the DVD that the amalgamation of Raymond painting, the Rock Steady Crew breakdancing, and Flash "cutting" records is the ultimate visual presentation of Hip-Hop, proclaiming, "that these things were art, these things were culture, this was real, this is IT! THIS IS HIP-HOP!"[207]

[206] Macdonald, *The Graffiti Subculture,*158.
[207] *Wild Style,* directed by Charlie Ahearn (1982; Rhino, 2011), DVD.

Fig 55. "*Fab Five Freddie told me everybody's fly , DJ's spinning I said my, my, Flash is fast, Flash is cool": Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

Figure 56. *Breakdancers and the mobile dance floor: Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

Fig 57. "*This is it, this is his hip-hop!": Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

Figure 58. *Raymond is a star: Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

This sequence not only examines how social forces shape rapping, DJ-ing, breakdancing, and graffiti but also brings to light "how significantly technology and economics contribute" to their developments under the combined term of hip-hop and "the energy with which it is suffused".[208] Graffiti artists aided by the advance of cheap and often stolen, portable spray can technology use an urban transit system as semi-permanent, yet highly visible and perpetually mobile art installation. Breakdancers rummaging through heaps of garbage left in the streets, appropriating discarded

[208] Jeff Chang, *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2006), 93.

cardboard and linoleum to use as makeshift dance floors, created the backspin, windmill, glide, and head spin, defying the ground and by extension the neighborhood and the city "by spinning on it, their backs, on their heads, on garbage."[209]

Meanwhile MC's were using microphones to deliver rhymes and stories about and from the streets and DJ's were cutting and pasting together new and familiar musical compositions on highly durable turntables and mixers, working out new techniques developed by Grandmaster Flash:

> I was able to understand how you diagnosed circuits, how you use a signal generator or ohmmeter, you know? I had somewhat of an electronic knowledge of how things work. I had to create what I called a "peek-a-boo" system. It allowed me to pre-hear the music in my ear before I push it out to the people. And what it involved was switch attached to an external two-three-watt amplifier on the outside of the mixer, just enough to drive the headphones…. and I was able to pre-hear and take these five-second drum breaks and kind of segue them together.[210]

Positioned with very little resources, these artists additionally found ways in which to publicly express themselves not only by appropriating but also modifying technologies in an attempt to convert public spaces by "jimmying open lampposts to steal electricity to run sound systems, thus literally reclaiming power from a city that denied it… taking over the New York transit system and engaging the same city that had cut school funding for arts programs in a 250 million subterranean war over art, ownership and access."[211]

Following another *Wild Style* montage sequence, a frustrated Raymond wanders off to the East River and complains to Rose that he's "trying to paint this figure in the middle and it's not even coming out right...I already got the hands on the side like the

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[209] Chang, *Total Chaos*, 353.
[210] Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade.* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), 59.
[211] Ibid., 93.

hands of doom... representing the city and the environment around this artist...what I'm trying to draw is the artist in the middle...he's painting all by himself in his own world...he don't care about nobody around him." Rose figures out that Raymond is talking about himself, reveals that she has known his secret identity as ZORO all along, and objects to his decision to include himself in the drawing telling him "You're only worried about ZORO... concentrate on what the whole thing is about...the jam, rappers are going to be coming down, they're going to be the stars of this thing not you." (Figure 59)

Fig 59. *Writer's block: Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

Rose's criticism encourages Raymond to re-imagine the mural: he fills in the centre of the stage band shell with a giant painting of a three- dimensional star. This might be as Sharon Sherman suggests "the message of the film. There is a chance to become a star despite the depressing poverty of the South Bronx."[212] When you start off as a young MC, DJ, breaker or writer you are more or less an unknown amateur, but you spend your teenage years working your way up to being someone who gains respect and

[212] Sharon R Sherman, "Bombin', Breakin', and Gettin' Down: The Folk and Popular Culture of Hip-Hop", *Western Folklore*, 43 (1984): 292.

a strong sense of self worth in subcultures that are "fully set up to support"[213] these goals. But inspired by Rose, this new, electrified culture imagined in the mural is not tied to one artist or individual, it is a collective star. The culture of hip-hop and the subcultures within it in turn inwards and position themselves "as a world apart, a society distinct from the one which houses it", resisting external criticism as members "bond together" as an alternative public sphere, or "private and elite society."[214]

The anticipated big hip-hop jam that concludes the film includes a number of live performances by the who's who of South Bronx' rap crews The Fantastic Freaks, Double Trouble, Busy Bee, and Rammellzee, supported by coordinated dance routines by the Rock Steady Crew. In front of a packed crowd of over five thousand Black and Hispanic kids who have made the trip to the Lower East Side amphitheatre, a content Raymond, hands in the air, smiling and laughing, looks down from the building's roof at this joyful celebration of all things hip-hop (Figure 60). The amphitheatre, a rotting abandoned shell, once the original home for Joseph Papp's *Shakespeare in the Park* has been invigorated by a new culture from the South Bronx, the painted lightning that strikes down from the hands of doom a "magnetic force bringing all these different sources and forces, ethnicities and genders together in one huge explosion."[215] Lee says the origins of the mural came from the "Silent Thunderism concept where you could see the lightning but you couldn't hear the thunder", a fitting representation of the growing voice of a new sub-

[213] Nancy Macdonald, *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth Masculinity and Identity in London and New York* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 66.
[214] Macdonald, *The Graffiti Subculture*, 157.
[215] Charlie Ahearn, *Wild Style: The Sampler (*Brooklyn NY: Powerhouse, 2007), 144.

culture that made aggressive public displays of counter-presence as it mobilized a group of previously disillusioned, alienated, and isolated voices.[216]

The early MC's, DJ's, breakers, and graffiti writers that gave birth to the culture known as hip-hop were left with complete control of their own development, advancing their own skills, in their own way, gaining full responsibility of their own achievements. For many in this culture establishing new names and personas allows them "control over their own identity" that represents a freedom from the limitations of being identified as either black, white, brown, rich or poor and instead, how well you rap, mix records, dance, and write "determines exactly who you are and where you stand."[217]

[216] Aaron Sachs in his dissertation *The hip-hopsploitation film cycle: representing, articulating, and appropriating hip-hop culture* in a comparison writes that one common feature of *Wild Style* and other hip-hop films like *Style Wars* is its interest in "group empowerment" (53, n. 8). Sach's dissertation attempts to define the hip-hopsploitation genre and film cycle as distinct from, but loosely related to the blacksploitation genre. In particular, he notes that both genres are based on an independently-funded prototype. Similar to the blacksploitation genre, which as Sachs and others have described, gives a new voice to an oppressed black community, one might argue that hip hop films such as *Wild Style* privilege a narrative wherein marginalized community members such as Black and Latino youth gain a voice and empowerment through creative use of media (hip hop, breakin, graffiti, film, etc.). For a more detailed engagement with the blacksploitation genre as a model for the rethinking black subjectivity and space in an urban environment in *Downtown 81*, please see the previous chapter.

[217] Ahearn, *Wild Style*, 192.

Fig 60. *Everyone is a star: Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

However, in these final moments, the film still leaves a number of unanswered questions, much like the ending of *Downtown 81*. We are uncertain whether Raymond will continue 'bombing' trains as the underground hero ZORO or pursue a career as a gallery artist. The final scenes with Rose and at the amphitheater concert seem to suggest the latter despite the filmmaker's intentions. As mentioned earlier, Rose knew about his alter ego all along and although it was unlikely that she would reveal his secret identity to others, it is no doubt hinted at that others in the community knew this as well considering it was Raymond who was commissioned for the large mural. More revealing is Raymond's position in the final sequence atop the amphitheatre, which recalls the moment in Niva's apartment when Raymond, godlike, surveys the city below him. Perhaps Raymond's mural painting (although it still pays homage to the collective hybridity of the artists gathered below) is an unconscious reflection of his newly found

position outside of the public, urban space and into the private world of the gallery setting (Figure 61).

Fig 61. *Viewing the audience from the Amphitheater: Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982)

The link between art and economy was well in place by the early 1980s when the national media began to speak of the various artistic cultural forms emanating from the South Bronx. Though references to urban decay remained in the music and art of the area, the general attitude towards the hip-hop scene shifted from fear and repulsion to curiosity and desire. Subsequently, graffiti artists began producing works according to a perceived supply and demand. Where the initial goal of artists was to produce collaborative works for one's peers with the possibility of inclusion at a gallery or museum, the new objective was quite simply to sell art. Graffiti artists moved from spray painted subway cars to the canvases of galleries and "from being ignored to being shuttled from opening to opening, only to be unceremoniously dropped as soon as interest died."[218]

[218] Leonard Emmerling, *Jean-Michel Basquiat 1960-1988: The Explosive Force of the Streets*, (New York: Taschen, 2011), 12.

Regardless of how one reads the finale, *Wild Style* is less about one individual's story—it remains a vital artifact of a particular time and space characterized by the cross-fertilized energies of media in motion. As cultural critic Carlos McCormick puts it, *Wild Style* is "the only real narrative cinematic testament to the energies, inspirations, and ingenuities of New York's cultural underground"[219] of the late 1970's and early 1980's. He continues:

> Charlie Ahearn brought such different elements of New York's urban polyglot to the same table and allowed, ever so briefly, the most amazing situation – in which the seemingly incompatible phenomena of hip-hop, punk rock, and the downtown underground art scene found some unlikely commonality. That's not a script or some gratuitous plot twist, that's a fact. It was the most rare of cross-pollinations that made everyone stronger, nourished adventure, and diversified experience. The old school bloom is now gone, but we're all still inhaling the fumes of this fertile foment and savoring the succulent sedulousness of its manifold mutant fruit.[220]

With this comment "we're still inhaling the fumes", McCormick gestures toward the profound influence of hip hop on popular culture around the world over the last thirty years. As I have sought to describe in this chapter, this film provides the most important point of departure for this radiating movement. From the moment *Wild Style* opened at the Embassy Theatre in Times Square on 47th St. and Broadway, in November of 1983, the line ran around the block several weekends in a row forcing the theatre to put the movie on double screens. The movie played for eleven weeks and according to Ahearn "broke all house records for attendance and was the second largest gross in New York City (next to *Terms of Endearment*)."[221] Screenings followed not only across the U.S. but also in Japan, Germany, Spain, Italy, Denmark, Korea and the British West Indies.

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[219] Charlie Ahearn, *Wild Style: The Sampler (*Brooklyn NY: Powerhouse, 2007), 205.
[220] Ahearn, *Wild Style: The Sampler*, 205.
[221] Ibid., 177.

Lady Pink recalls a moment when walking down a street in Basel, Switzerland: "I was followed by teenagers whispering my name. They told me *Wild Style* played Saturdays at midnight like the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and they went to see it every weekend. The kids knew the dialogue and copied the dancing exactly. This was in some little town in Europe."[222] Although the sound and feel of hip-hop has been transformed three or four times since the release of *Wild Style*, on almost every continent impoverished young people everywhere have had some sort of interaction with hip-hop culture, sharing one thing in common: performing in a ghetto space.

[222] Ibid., 188.

Conclusion

Jean/Basquiat's tense relationship between urban performance and the lure of the art gallery in *Downtown 81* resembles the predicament of Raymond/Quinones' in *Wild Style,* but this is not the only trait they share in common. If *Wild Style* seeks to challenge contemporary media visions of the South Bronx, *Downtown 81* seeks to do the same for the Lower East Side. Both films challenge the assumption that graffiti writers are destructive teenage vandals and instead portray them as teenagers validating emergent new subcultures through the appropriation, penetration, and transformation of real urban spaces. While both films focus on the activities of a lone figure who engages in the re-imaging of the city space through direct physical actions, they simultaneously foreground "the interventions of the inner city community as they work toward defining and re-shaping the potential parameters of their environment."[223]

In many ways the individual segments and episodes of the public access television shows share similar themes with the stories of Jean and Raymond. While the potential co-option of youth culture in *Downtown 81* and *Wild Style* is largely dealt with through an exploration of the tense relationship between the gallery and the street, *All Color News/Potato Wolf* and *TV Party* used television and video production as means to question the dominant ideologies of National Broadcasting Television that determined what was newsworthy. Additionally, all these films embody a particular semi-documentary filmmaking mode that foregrounds public and personal spatial interventions. They make visible the effects of inner-city decay and poverty while also

[223] Kimberly Monteyne, *Hip Hop on Film: Performance Culture, Urban Space, and Genre Transformation in the 1980's* (PhD Diss., New York University, 2009), 60.

"highlighting the various creative responses to post industrial inner city devastation."[224] In most Hollywood narratives of the time period, the effects of poverty, unemployment, abandonment, homelessness, and arson, are revealed or expressed in condensed form, but the conditions that produced the effects remain hidden to the viewer, as do the positive and negative images of everyday life in the inner city.

The documentary-like approach of these film and television productions present urban spaces as sights of performance, reconfiguring the space of the inner city through various modes of creative expression. Both the performers in these narratives and its audience are from and for the Lower East Side and the South Bronx and just as "nearly all the neighborhood characters are shown to be talented at some aspect of performance, so are all members of the community shown to provide an audience for collective performance."[225] The flattening out of the distance between the stars of the film and the supporting actors and spectators further supports this: urban space and the everyday encounters of life in the LES and the South Bronx are in many ways the stars of these narratives.

Music is an important part of this everyday communal performance in all these narratives; almost all the performers, directors, producers, and writers involved in theses productions are motivated in one way or another to showcase post punk, disco and hip-hop recordings or live performances. For example, many integrated musical sequences entirely leave out the main characters in *Downtown 81* and *Wild Style.* In *Glenn O'Brien's TV Party* entire episodes such as the *The Heavy Metal Show* are dedicated to

[224] Monteyne, *Hip Hop on Film*, 62.
[225] Kimberly Bercov Monteyne, "The Sound of the South Bronx: Youth Culture, Genre, and Performance in Charlie Ahearn's Wild Style," *Youth Culture in Global Cinema*, ed: Timothy Shary and Alexandra Siebel. (University of Texas Press, Austin: 2007), 93.

live musical performances while discordant post punk and No Wave dominate the soundtrack in *All Color News* and *Potato Wolf.* Most importantly all the music either pre-recorded or recorded live on the soundtracks is performed on location by Lower East Side and South Bronx artists, unlike the orchestral scores composed by a single auteur composer or popular songs used in mainstream cinema.

It is often difficult and pointless to strive to identify who first came up with the breakthroughs in video, film, or graffiti in the LES and South Bronx. Ideas mostly emerged through anonymous processes of creativity that was and still is collective rather than auteur-driven. More often, it will be a small creative group that is tightly loyal, almost communistic, and typically clustered around a central artist-figure ie: Glenn O'Brien, Fab Five Freddy, and Patti Astor. Another common characteristic of such creative collaborative groups are art communities that start off based around an independent gallery or store front such as ABC No Rio in the LES and Fashion Moda in the South Bronx (both Colab projects).

Throughout this thesis I have argued that there was a liberating charge, a subversive buzz, to the bringing together of styles with the emergence of new hybrid artworks that also gave birth to a new artistic collective. Culture is always messy, evading our attempts at definition. The aspects of the late 1970's and early 1980's post-punk, no-wave, hip-hop popular culture performances and subcultures I have highlighted throughout this thesis bring together artists, media and movements that often evade film studies historiography, but are of vital importance today to how one understands these scenes' claims to radicalism.

A number of recent documentaries like *Blank City* (2010), *Once Upon a Time in New York – The Birth of Hip Hop, Disco and Punk* (2011), and *Downtown Calling* (2009) have emerged to shed light on this exciting time and have allowed new audiences to familiarize themselves with this important period in artistic history. In 2002, Charlie Ahearn celebrated the 20th anniversary of *Wild Style's* release with a live concert, again at the Amphitheater by the East River featuring practically all the artists that performed in the movie.

Perhaps most important to reimagining this innovative era of artistic collaboration and the wave of filmmaking that swept through the Downtown of NYC in the late 70s and early 80s is the documentary *Blank City* by Celine Danhier. Although this documentary is an extremely valuable and intimate account of the filmmaking practices, artists and communities (it also contains valuable footage of audiences who are going to the theaters to view *Wild Style* in the 1980s), several statements made during interviews with artists give the impression that the movement was only a fascinating "moment" or experiment that did not have any lasting legacy or impact. The cultural theorist Harris Smith has also written that the subversive buzz of the 'No Wave' movement didn't last. He has claimed "that what started in the Lower East Side's punk underground soon reached the American popular culture mainstream. Independent film companies were bought up by major Hollywood studios, and increasingly independent films began to resemble miniature versions of their bigger budgeted counterparts, rather than as an outlet for new voices and visions."[226] Smith writes that "In New York, the film community became increasingly fragmented. Today, there is little unity among young filmmakers in

[226] Smith, Harris. "No New Cinema: Punk and No Wave Underground Film 1976-1984." http://web.archive.org/web/20071008064931/http://www.remodernist.com/NoNewCinema.html.

New York City. The rising cost of filmmaking, competitiveness of the post-indie world of film, the discontinuation of super-8 sound film by Kodak and the lack of a unifying scene to unite people have resulted in an increasing focus on the work of the individual, as opposed to a community of filmmakers working together."[227] In addition, one must note that some artists affiliated with the scene (not discussed in this thesis) such as Catherine Bigelow and Jim Jarmusch have in the last few decades met with considerable commercial success. Bigelow just won an Oscar for her American war movie *The Hurt Locker* (2008). She also directed a surf caper called *Point Break* (1991) and the sci-fi flick *Strange Days* (1995).

The picture that Smith paints of an experimental/underground and collaborative art form "going mainstream" is certainly compelling and reflects by and large the commercial realities of indie film and video production in the post-No Wave era. Yet perhaps it isn't entirely accurate to view the No Wave as a fleeting moment in American cultural history. Alan W. Moore and Clayton Paterson document that new filmmakers and artistic collectives such as Group Material emerged in the 80s that did innovative work in the pseudo-documentary vein that re-examined space, race and social and political issues. [228] One could also argue that the aesthetics of the No-Wave's alternative cable-access programming such as *TV Party* has influenced *MTV* and *Much Music* (Canada's version of MTV). The collaborative nature of cultural productions such as *TV Party* that privileged a transparent "open studio", "breaking the fourth wall" in order to facilitate an active dialogue with the audience, producers (crew, directors, interviewers

[227] Ibid.
[228] See Moore, *Art Gangs: Protest and Counterculture in New York* City and Paterson Ed. *Captured: A Film/Video History of the Lower East Side.*

and other technical staff), and local and international "celebrities" I would suggest also survived in the next several decades in the alternative format of *Much Music*, which adopted a similar format to *TV Party*, encouraging audiences to talk to crew members and participate in interviews. Group Material in the 80s also continued Colab art projects, injecting art into the public sphere as they took over abandoned buildings to stage shows, similar to what Colab staged with the Times Square show. You Tube, as the cable access hosts of the 70s state in an interview with Leah Churner, might also be viewed as "public access gone ballistic."[229] In Churner's 2011 article, she cites many cable access hosts who argue that You Tube has grown out of public access, inspiring the masses to pick up a camera and create. As Scott Lewis, producer of *The Scott & Gary Show* (1983-1989) sums up:

> I think public access laid the groundwork for YouTube. People who grew up watching public access have a different visual acceptance level, an expanded media vocabulary. It doesn't matter if the shots were not perfect or in focus. Subjects were all over the place. Shows were created by people who looked like you just saw them on the subway. YouTube has inspired people to create, to grab a camera, so it is the natural extension of public access, except now you can show your work almost instantly and reach millions.[230]

Yet in conclusion, one must sadly note that in the two preceding decades after the No Wave, US hip hop completed caved into capitalist desire and is now only sheer

[229] Churner, "Un-TV: Public access cable television in Manhattan: an oral history", *MovingImageSource*, accessed March 9, 2011.
[230] Churner, "Un-TV".

spectacle, a gateway to the celebration of consumer culture. US hip hop lost its collaborative edge and lost the battle that is represented in *Wild Style* between art and commerce. Films like *Breakin' I* and *Breakin' II*: *Electric Boogaloo* and *Beat Street* that tried to capitalize on the success of *Wild Style* already censor the subversive edge of the gritty urban environment of their No Wave hip hop predecessor.

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2011 **Movement,** Collaborative multi-media installation, The Arts Project, London ON

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