

# THIS IS AN EVICTION PLAN

(NEW YORK IN THE 1980s)

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I first went to New York City in 1974, to find lawyers and others to attend our first treaty conference. Harry Belafonte hosted a meeting at his apartment about the possibilities of an expanded American Indian Community House in the city, which was to be funded by the federal government.

The government was planning such centers in many major cities, and the word was being spread that much money was available because in the recent census many people had said that they were Native Americans because they were born in the United States. Others, it was claimed, wrote that they were American Indians because their families were from India.

Harry already had strong contacts with AIM and liked to be at the front of things.

I knew no one at the meeting except him, but I met Suzan Shown, who had run a radio program about Indian affairs and was there with artist Frank Harjo; Oren Lyons, who knew the city because he had been a sports illustrator; and a few other people. There was a woman who said she was Cherokee, whose name I've forgotten. She had very thin, long braids and blue eyes (I know there are many Cherokees with blue eyes). She explained to us that Chinese travelers long before Columbus described seeing blue-eyed Indians, and she showed us an eagle feather she kept in a wooden box, explaining that she was the only woman ever given an eagle feather by the Cherokees. (Why she needed to bring it to the meeting was not explained.) There was another woman who said she was a professional opera singer. I never saw either of these two women again and left NYC after a week.

By strange accident I passed by a small gallery owned by Tuscarora artist Lloyd Oxendine and was attracted to it by a horse skull painted blue that was on display. Years later Oxendine became the director of the gallery of the American Indian Community House.

When I returned in 1975 to open the International Indian Treaty Council office, I at first had no contact with any of that crowd, except Harry Belafonte, of course. But I soon met an artist who was married to a lawyer we knew. She was part of a group of artists who met to make an "anti-catalogue" against a bicentennial art show planned by the Whitney Museum of American Art.<sup>1</sup> They had invited Benny Andrews, a black artist just returned from Documenta, and wanted an "Indian" artist. It was a good gang of people and I was glad to be part of it. Their meetings were held in people's lofts, which I had never seen before.

The day of my first loft visit I had spent several hours in Andy Warhol's studio with Russ Means. Warhol was taking photos of him for a portrait. When I got to the loft I told the first person I saw that I'd spent the day at Warhol's studio. He said his name was Joseph Kosuth and that Warhol had done his portrait too.

After the anti-catalogue came out I had no more contact with art stuff in New York, and little with the American Indian Community House, though the director there was a constant friend and a supporter of our work at the United Nations.

Before moving to New York I had not been on the East Coast of the United States at all. Living in Geneva, I knew Paris and London well, so New York did not seem impressive. In those Treaty Council days I traveled constantly to Geneva, Latin America, and various communities in the western United States, was seldom “at home.” Hardly noticed New York.

Maria Thereza Alves, a Brazilian whose parents had moved the family to the United States to escape the dictatorship in Brazil, came to volunteer at the Treaty Council in 1978 because she wanted to learn how Brazilian Indians might form a national organization with international support. In 1979 she presented a paper she had prepared about Brazilian abuses of human rights to the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva. She and I and Ted Means had flown over for its annual meeting.

More than a year later I quit my job because of disagreements with Russ Means, and Maria Thereza left home. When we began living together she knew vaguely that I was an artist and I began to make collage-paintings in my spare time. Since we had no money we both took whatever jobs we could find. Maria Thereza said once that she had always wanted to make art, so we decided that she should go to art school. After a semester or two at Parsons (during which I got many free canvases from their garbage), she enrolled at Cooper Union, which was small and free.

Puerto Rican painter Juan Sánchez was the admissions officer and they became friends. At Maria Thereza’s suggestion Juan put a couple of my pieces in a show he curated in 1982 at the Henry Street Settlement in the Lower East Side (*Beyond Aesthetics: Art of Necessity by Artists of Conscience*).

That was the beginning of a very busy few years for both of us, participating in many group shows, always with other minority artists.

In those days artists who were not white curated group shows in whatever spaces were available in Harlem, the Lower East Side, Brooklyn, and the Bronx, all before gentrification . . . at the time when buildings were being burnt down for insurance scams, with no real thought of commerce. That gave us all freedom to experiment and to try to make pertinent works with a political edge.

It is not that we did not want financial reward, it was just not a criterion for making or showing art. Very much against the current that was running over the city.

It was a time of large disco clubs, expensive restaurants, and celebratory rudeness. I remember too well the strange phenomenon of people waiting in long lines to enter a club to be insulted by bouncers and waiters as though it were a privilege or some sort of initiation rite.

All over the city, apartment buildings were going co-op, and tenants who had the money could buy their apartment. Those without sufficient funds were evicted. The most common legal document for a building intending to go co-op had the heading in bold letters, “This Is an Eviction Plan.”

Close to our place near Columbia University an open garbage Dumpster on the street was filled one morning with the worldly goods of a woman who had been an exotic dancer in the 1950s. There were scrapbooks, which had clippings of the singer Carlos Gardel and Tongolele (the Mexican dancer so famous they named a beer after her), and clothes of all sorts. Three young affluent white people, probably students at the university, were standing in the Dumpster laughing, shouting, and throwing things about. It is from that debris that I found a dance costume made of a pair of underwear covered with red feathers and beads. Sewn onto the back was a coconut-fiber flap, a small skirt, which had more feathers and three tropical bird heads. I made *Pocahontas’ Underwear* (1985) from the front part and another work from the back.

Homeless people were seen more and more, as were flamboyantly dressed young businessmen who delighted in publicly lecturing them.

A kind of meanness was so strong in the air that everyone was infected. As though normally nice people turned hard and could not cooperate. I remember younger artists coming to parties at our place only to leave before entering, seeing no one famous enough to spend time with.

It was during this time that I took the job of running the Foundation for the Community of Artists (FCA). I had been doing construction labor jobs, which were too hard on my back. The FCA was an organization set up by a group of artists to offer services such as insurance, health hazard information, and similar activities—functioning kind of like a union for artists. When I started they had no money at all, so the urgent task was to raise enough to pay me a modest salary, keep the monthly newspaper going, and straighten out the insurance program. After a few months of begging, I had a base safe enough to bring in Paul Chaat Smith, who fixed up many problems quickly.

The work brought me into contact with much of the art scene in NYC. Just a couple of years earlier Maria Thereza and I were constantly encouraged by the funny work inside subway stations by Keith Haring. In the early 1980s he became famous and a generous supporter of the FCA.

Many people were. James Rosenquist, Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre, Claes Oldenburg, and Coosje van Bruggen; no one refused to help. Even so, except for Leon Golub and Nancy Spero, no one in the established art circles really saw any of us minority artists on the Lower East Side. The board of directors of the FCA were a different lot; mostly teachers, they were not successful artists even though they were good. Larry Rosing was the head of the art department at Rutgers University, until he was fired for being too far left. Elliot Barowitz, a great painter who also guided our newspaper and got unknown young writers like Adam Gopnik to contribute to it for free, planned to approach a gallery year after year but had no taste for actually showing his paintings to one.

But quite a few of our bunch who showed together in alternative spaces later made well-known contributions to the art

system: Juan Sánchez, David Hammons, Faith Ringgold, Catalina Parra, Fred Wilson, Ana Mendieta. Never part of any histories of New York City art of the time.

Maria Thereza and I remained very poor, and I relied on a constant variety of excellent garbage from the streets: human bones discarded by Columbia Medical School, a stuffed moose head, an antique handmade American flag, every sort of contraption and printed matter. This rich lode became necessary as art material.

The first criterion for choices of art material has always been for me the cost. Free material is best. Luckily, it is also usually the most interesting, even though my love of any material is practically religious.

Neither of us had wanted to stay in New York, but we had no money to leave. In 1987 we scraped together enough to move, with our stray cat, to Mexico. It was never part of any agenda to relocate to a place conducive to furthering “art careers,” which neither of us had. I had known Cuernavaca in the early 1970s as a center for leftish intellectuality, so we headed there.

Almost impossible changes were taking place from the 1970s to the 1980s in NYC. As an AIM representative I worked closely with the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP) and many organizations pushing for social change.

People working on gay rights issues were numerous and very active. By the time the decade changed, the PSP had practically disappeared. Gay rights were almost a given, however, and fancy club “baths” were springing up everywhere. A few doors away from our place a group of gay black men had bought an empty building and fixed it up for themselves. A good bunch of guys, they all had federal or municipal jobs. By 1987, when we left, the building was empty. AIDS had blown them all away.

AIDS hit like a bomb. For a couple of years it was believed to attack only gay men, which seemed too sinister to credit or deny. The bath clubs closed and everyone who could went home and closed the doors.

Still, NYC is tough. Many artists began to do special projects in solidarity with Latin American situations. That created or strengthened friendships. Maybe it made some better, some pertinent art. For my part, everything I did for specific reasons in those times was not good enough. I still do not know why, but I just could not make good work that way.

Maybe it was a question of too much planning in ways exterior to my private feelings. But at the same time I could make interesting work at someone’s request. Corrine Jennings and Joe Overstreet asked me to be part of a self-portrait show at Kenkeleba Gallery. I said I did not do self-portraits and then made one the same afternoon. What I mean is, I have no idea what’s going on.

#### Notes

1. Artists Meeting for Cultural Change (AMCC) was a loose coalition created in reaction to the Whitney Museum’s presentation of *American Art: An Exhibition of the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller III*. The AMCC’s publication *An Anti-Catalog* included Durham’s 1976 essay “Mr. Catlin and Mr. Rockefeller Tame the Wilderness.” —Ed.