

# No Place Like Home

## ARTFORUM

OCTOBER 1991

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*Homelessness exists not because the housing system is not working but because this is the way it works. —Peter Marcuse*

On June 3, 1991, New York City police officers evicted more than fifty homeless residents from Tompkins Square Park and fenced off the entire area. The embattled park was then bulldozed and much of it closed to the public. As I write, Tompkins Square is guarded 24 hours a day by scores of police officers, while the city reconstructs the space to keep the homeless out. Local residents currently refer to the park grounds as "the occupied territories."

Under siege for decades, Tompkins Square has become a symbol of the battle for decent housing and of the plight of the homeless. The response of the media to the worsening situation has generally been disgraceful: while more and more of the disenfranchised have appeared on the streets of New York, the homeless have been portrayed as pathetic victims or as drug-ridden agitators—if they have been represented at all. Few are the voices that will speak up for those who have slipped through the system's many cracks; few are willing to break down the wall of indifference that the media has constructed around these "invisible" people.

Homelessness has, however, become a prominent theme in an art world repoliticized in the wake of the AIDS epidemic, an art world that has, once again, begun to take an interest in what is going on in the streets, outside the elitist confines of the gallery and the museum. The art confronting this subject is quite varied in its approach, ranging from the most traditional "objective" photojournalism to the most unpredictable conceptual installations analyzing the social realities of gentrification.

A close look at several works on the subject of homelessness will allow us to assess the esthetics and the effectiveness of current advocacy art practice. But the world has changed since the period of the Vietnam War, when there was a shared consensus about the imagery available for so-called "political art" and how that imagery would read. The art world may see itself as reembracing such art, but we may wonder exactly what the term means these days. Being a political artist is no longer a guarantee of a progressive or critical viewpoint, and much art calling itself political merely engages the dominant issues of the times, often, unfortunately, to dilute them. Compare, for example, Andres Serrano's *Nomads (Bertha)*, 1990, a large glamorized portrait of a homeless woman, Bertha (no last name), posing in front of a neutral backdrop, to David Hammons' *Roman Homeless*, 1990, a portrait made from cast-off brocade, a shard of wire garbage can, some tennis balls, and a few crystal fragments. Serrano presents a detached, formal portrait, more Bachrach Studios than Edward S. Curtis. Removed from any social context, Bertha is estheticized; she exists outside of history. She is ready to accept the viewer's projections, without conveying a substantive point of view of her own.

Hammons' strategy couldn't be more different—or more oppositional. His materials, like pages stolen from a diary, describe a haphazard life on the streets, where survival is always an issue. While Serrano, in his series of portraits of the homeless, frames them without any explication, Hammons analyzes his sub-

ject by connecting concrete cycles of material waste to human waste. The only personality revealed in *Roman Homeless* belongs to the artist; Hammons becomes his subject. The relationship of photographer to subject seems to be the key question for Serrano.



Curtis Mitchell, installation at Petrosino Park, New York, 1991, mixed media



turned his rudimentary domestic space into a critical commentary on eviction, the legal process that often precipitates homelessness. It is not unusual in this neighborhood to see sofas, chairs, television sets, or bags of clothes abandoned on the sidewalk. An ordinary vision of destitution became a highly evocative tableau, shining the spotlight on a scene that most greedy landlords would prefer remain invisible.

In an interesting coda, Mitchell's piece was mysteriously confiscated from the park within two days of its installation, despite the fact that the furniture was bolted down. The destruction of the work was a testimony to its authority. While no one finally knows who was responsible for the vandalism, it was evidently not the homeless, who were its prime audience, with something concrete to gain from Mitchell's ironic comforts. Which may have been the problem. These days, New York City officials most often use art to empty the parks and to keep people from sleeping in them, goals that have become a virtual design issue in the development of their projects. The use of running water, for instance, is restricted in park installations, because people might be tempted to use it. Mitchell had to strip his couches, making them impossible to sleep on. Yet the fire regulations were apparently not restrictive enough to obliterate all the potential "problems" raised by his work.

Mitchell's work constitutes an on-site provocation. But the most militant (and long-term) esthetic intervention into the condition of homelessness is currently being generated by a group of artists and writers who call themselves Bullet. On January 30, 1986, ten artists/squatters moved into an abandoned city-owned building at 292 East 3rd Street that soon came to be known as Bullet Space. The group's members are continually in flux (not unlike Tim Rollins + K.O.S.), but their project to produce art that directly confronts the ravages of gentrification on the Lower East Side has been consistent.

For the past five years, the squatters in Bullet Space have been fighting with the city for the right to become legal homesteaders in the ruin once owned by the notorious Harry J. Shapolsky, the subject of Hans Haacke's 1971 *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*. In 1986, when the group chose to inhabit the building, it was a total ruin, and the garbage in the backyard was ten feet deep. Two years later, the small yard was transformed into a communal area, and Bullet Space was born.

*Your House Is Mine*, a three-year project by Bullet, organized by Andrew and Paul Castrucci, the only

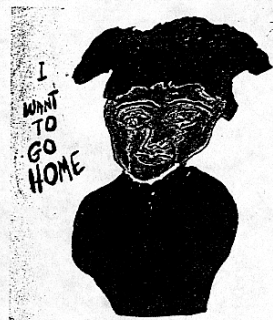
remaining original members of the group, and Nadia Coën, is a remarkable collection of images and writings by about 70 Lower East Side writers and artists that have been silk-screened on poster paper for mass distribution in the streets. The entire collection will also be published as a limited-edition artists' book sometime in the late fall.<sup>1</sup> As I write, the posters going up in the neighborhood have begun to form an organized response to the current housing crisis on the Lower East Side. Done by artists of all ages and degrees of celebrity, they have the same urgency that graffiti had in the late '70s. Work from the front lines in 1991 is, however, more organized, more formal, and less random. These posters describe an ongoing class war against landlords, drugs, and AIDS and an eloquent protest against the lack of a safe environment for children. "Stop Ware-Housing Apartments," one of the most straightforward demands, is plastered all over the Lower East Side, along with more moody and illusory statements. For example, an abstract poster by Andrew Castrucci places a large silver fishhook in a dense sea of black—the point is sharp. The hook raises concerns for the extinction of certain animal species, while the emptiness of the black field speaks to the extinction of us all. Who's on the hook for the homeless?

Bullet, not unlike Hammons, uses art to express the concerns of a broad, generally disenfranchised community that includes the homeless but is not limited to them. The Artist and Homeless Collaborative, founded by Hope Sandrow in 1990, takes a different tack, offering the residents of the Park Avenue Shelter for Homeless Women the opportunity to study, teach—and make art. Working with the education departments of the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum at Philip Morris, and with the support of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, Sandrow has exposed this group of homeless women to art outside the confines of the shelter, and they have proven to be very articulate about what they have seen and how it makes them feel. After visiting the New Museum during "The Decade Show," for example, one resident wrote in their newsletter, *Shelter News*, "I am really sad when I see sex perverted or openly displayed. Some things should be private. . . ." Another woman expressed a less Helmsian view: "The images frighten me yet I can see the beauty in them."

Sandrow also awards grants to artists to create site-specific artwork. Sometime in the fall Ida Applebroog will work with the residents to design a series of windows that will be drawn on windowless walls; the women themselves will determine whether the viewers'

point of view will be from the inside looking out, or the reverse. Several residents have also generated their own artwork in collaboration with Sandrow, which has been shown in several group shows on homelessness (at the Alternative Museum, Art in General, and the Goddard Riverside Community Center, among others). Sandrow's goal, however, is not to turn the homeless into artists, but to use various forms of art to create a productive community within the shelter in the hopes of improving the residents' self-esteem.

Last year the artist duo Carson/Keppel came to the Park Avenue shelter to initiate a project for "A Day Without Art," a massive attempt to get arts organizations all over the country to focus on the AIDS crisis. Sessions were organized by members of the Women's Health Education Project and ACT UP's PWA Hous-



Gerty (Artist and Homeless Collaborative), *I Want to Go Home*, 1990, acrylic on cardboard, 48 x 48".

ing Committee to educate shelter residents about AIDS. Later they were encouraged to talk openly about the epidemic and its personal effect on them. The women's comments were recorded, and, as a group, they worked to produce a text-based poster tracking the link between the virus, women, and homelessness. This poster was put up all over the city.

In times of war and economic recession, certain kinds of art that engage such issues as homelessness become a bit more visible, a bit more fashionable, and even a bit marketable. But the market's effect on this work is inevitably problematic. Conferring a value on art that addresses an economic system that insists on keeping the homeless homeless creates some difficult contradictions. International attention has focused

on the homeless who have acquired an almost legendary status," writes Daniel Canogar in the Spanish art magazine *LAPIZ*. "That makes them an important tourist attraction for anyone visiting New York" (my emphasis).<sup>2</sup> Using photographs taken by Margaret Morton, among others, the author turns portraits of tentative street dwellings into an exegesis on deconstructive architecture.

Morton photographed these fragile constructions in Tompkins Square prior to their destruction by the city. Apart from their status as art, these photographs may be the only historical records of shelters in the park before the war against the homeless began. Nevertheless, the critical celebration of homeless homes as "art" by Canogar is a little like the celebration of technological military advances during the Gulf War. What's to celebrate?

A decade ago, political art was largely geared to an audience outside the official boundaries of the art world. These days the market system finds it easier and easier to assimilate any politically radical impulse. At the 1989 Whitney biennial, for example, viewers entering the museum had to walk past a barricade by Dennis Adams that depicted a homeless man and his possessions. Adams brought his work out of the streets (its usual location) and into the museum to contradict institutional denial of social realities, yet the disjunction between the audience inside the museum and the protagonist of his work is only bridged when Sandrow buses in the homeless to the museum. There's something wrong with this picture. Two years later, Hammons refused to lend his work to the biennial, perhaps recognizing it as a problematic site for enacting a project of social change.

In 1984 Wodiczko projected the image of a huge lock and chain onto the outside wall of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, an homage to the thousands who have been denied access to the "privilege" of paying rent. Beneath the towering lock, the artist wrapped a chain around the museum, as if he had captured the art world. During the '80s, however, the market captured artists, devouring their work; that market is currently spitting out the remains. Hammons is intent on transforming those remains into an art of resistance; others, like Bullet, have resisted the market altogether. The function of art may not be to produce social change, but there are still those artists dedicated to creating a climate where social change becomes a necessity. □

Elizabeth Hess writes for *The Village Voice*, New York.

1. The book is intended to document historically a period of inner-city crisis, and it is, accordingly, more analytic than descriptive in its content.  
2. Daniel Canogar, "Paseaje fin del siglo," *LAPIZ* IX no. 75, February 1991, p. 60.