

R E A L L I F E Magazine

March 1980 \$1.00



REAL LIFE Magazine

Number 3, March 1980

Editor: Thomas Lawson

Associate Editor: Susan Morgan

Design and Layout: Debby De Staffan

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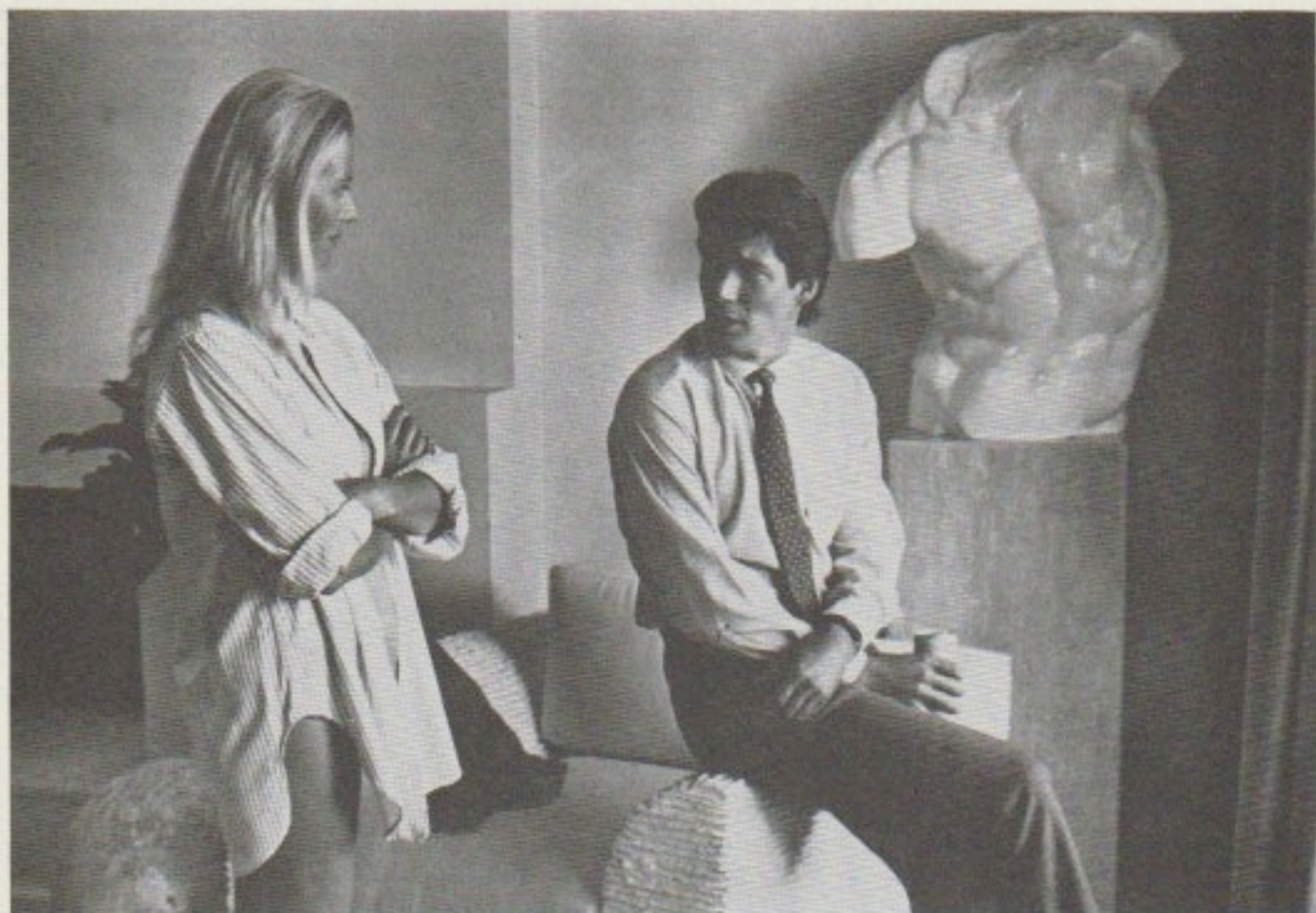
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REAL LIFE Magazine is published quarterly.

This issue is supported, in part, by the New York State Council on the Arts, and Pictures Production.

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GOING PLACES

by Thomas Lawson

Paul Schrader's *American Gigolo* is a glamorously beautiful film which has come under attack mostly because its hero is a male prostitute who shows no remorse. Making petty criminals attractive has long been a staple of Hollywood, but sub-genres like *film noir* have always been treated as lightweight by mainstream critics who prefer the tendentious morality of films like *Unmarried Woman* and *Coming Home*. However it is probably this second class status which appeals to directors who have a subversive interest in injecting anti-capitalist sentiments into movies which will be screened to a mass audience, for if they appear to be unworthy of serious attention nobody of importance in the movie world is likely to cry wolf.

Those critics who dismiss *American Gigolo* as a thin melodrama concerning the uninteresting fates of characters who seem enthralling only because they have been given a veneer of glamour miss the point entirely. The important thing about this movie is that veneer, for it is a movie about glamour. It is a movie which depicts a world in which glamorous appearance, as such, seems desirable, something worth selling out for.

Schrader's attention to the sex appeal of the latest commodity is apparent from the very first. Consider the opening sequence: close up shots of a brand new Mercedes sports car, jump cut in time to the excitingly static disco music of Giorgio Moroder. The shiny black car, driven by a well groomed young man in dark glasses, is speeding through Southern California along US 1. The relentless beat gives the scene importance; suggests destiny. This is no hick riding along in his automobile. This is a young man on the move, going places. A young man with a future. Or that is what it appears. We are already cued in by the music, we know that he is going nowhere, because disco goes nowhere, it only seems to.

Julian (Richard Gere) is successful so long as he looks well behaved and well dressed. This investment in decorum allows him the further protection of seeming to be well connected socially. When he miscalculates, and offends against the truth of his image, he becomes a failure, and is immediately discarded by those who once favoured him. And from the very first spoken scene we know that Julian is heading for failure for he misunderstands the nature of his success, attributing it to some unique quality of his own, his own worth as a lover. As we are introduced to him he is demanding too much of his pimp (Nina Van Pallandt), claiming to be irreplaceable, and so expecting a greater degree of autonomy. As a result she is in a position to refuse him help later in the movie when he finds himself framed on a murder charge, for he has outlived his usefulness to her. He is successful so long as he remains a characterless, if charming, cipher. As soon as he asserts some idea of his own individuality he becomes worthless.

He is framed because of another, related miscalculation. His image, and this is established swiftly, is that of a discreet, charmingly youthful escort for older women of substance. He is someone who can offer conversation, give good advice at an art auction, be a good companion to the theatre or a political luncheon. Not simply a good fuck. It is essential that although his sexual agility is understood, it should not be paraded, and certainly should remain straightforward and safe. But in his desire for independence and ever greater profits he accepts a commission from a sleazy pimp to work for a sado-masochistic couple. Several days later the woman

is found dead, and Julian is easily made to look responsible. For despite his careful attention to the mirror, there is a fatal lack in his understanding of his own presentation. He does not know that he can have no alibi, for in claiming to have been with a client he breaks one of the most fundamental rules of his trade, and is quickly disowned by the client, and disbelieved by his pimp and the police alike.

The movie's romantic hook concerns another miscalculation, basically similar, and equally likely to ruin Julian's future as a successful young man. He allows himself the luxury of real feeling, and while this saves him from the frame-up, it effectively finishes his career. In a way that was once thought only appropriate to attractive young women of uncertain talent, he sacrifices his prospects for love, trading one part of the American dream for another.

It is the lonely wife of a successful politician, introduced to the story as a potential client for Julian, who shatters the glass of illusions, and claims the gigolo as himself, offers to value him uniquely. Julian senses the danger to his lifestyle, and puts up something of a struggle. But faced by the graver threat of life imprisonment he accepts the ambivalently valued protection of love. The movie's irony being that the woman he falls for is played by Lauren Hutton who, in her career as a model, has become an iconic image of the very look of success which Julian lives for.

The pivotal scene in the movie takes place in Julian's apartment. This is his refuge from the world; he boasts that he never brings clients here. This is the real Julian. But in its showroom sense of elegance—the built-in kitchen with curving countertop, the bedroom tastefully hidden behind screens, the bed itself with its designer sheets, the well-filled bookcase, the indeterminate artwork, the scattering of American antique pottery, above all the blue-grey tonality of walls and floor covering, given drama by the slatted light coming through Venetian blinds (a bow to those earlier masterpieces devoted to the celebration of commodity fetishism, the films of von Stroheim?)—bespeaks a whorishness more pervasive than shag carpeting, white naugahyde and red lighting could ever have suggested. It is the whorishness of someone totally sold on the look of success. Someone who, even when relaxing, finds his being in the pages of a fashion magazine.

As the scene opens Julian is preparing to go out. He is playing disco music on his stereo, moving in time as he decides what to wear, opening and shutting closets and drawers. His wardrobe is packed with clothes; near identical suits, shirts and ties by Giorgio Armani. He picks out five or six combinations, deliberates, with snappy acumen, and finally chooses the right look, casual but neat. He has just attained perfection when the phone rings, announcing an unexpected visitor. And of course it's Lauren Hutton, desperate for love. She is embarrassingly abrupt, heedless of convention (she can afford to be, she is rich and unhappy). She does not need the elegant foreplay of the professional, she is ready. Giving in to her advances Julian becomes vulnerable. Not simply because her politically powerful husband can destroy him socially, and so end his viability as a high class whore; nor because in failing to fulfill his business duties, and for something as unprofitable as love, he becomes dispensable to his owners, the pimps; but because

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their response was good, and I rewrote the play again and had it typed up and showed it to some people.

Do you find there's much difference working with verbal dialogue rather than painting and its vocabulary?

There's no difference really, the only difference is involving conversation. It has freed me in some way. I still draw. I do commissioned portraits. It's an outgrowth of the first portraits of my friends. They're commissioned portraits and that's my livelihood, it supports my writing. The minute I made the jump, the need to make art lessened because I was now thinking about other things. I didn't have to express myself in art. What I express of myself in the commissioned portraits is my ability to observe and draw. There's an extrinsic function beyond the art of it, because it helps support me, and the subject matter comes to me.

One of the most common, most irritating confrontations that you have is with someone whose role in this society is to have an interest in art, a person who fulfills that interest by purchasing it. You're standing in front of your most recent work and they make no comment about the work they're looking at, and they turn to you and say, "What's your new work like?" I finally have an answer for that. I say, "It's you, if you choose so." My new subject matter is those who can afford to acquire a work of art. This solves the problem of not abandoning fifteen years of working. Now what my interest is, is my writing; that accommodates my personal life, the people I see, who I talk to, the conversations I have. It's like, for years I've lived in two dimensions, now I live in the third. My activities outside my occupation now contribute to my new occupation.

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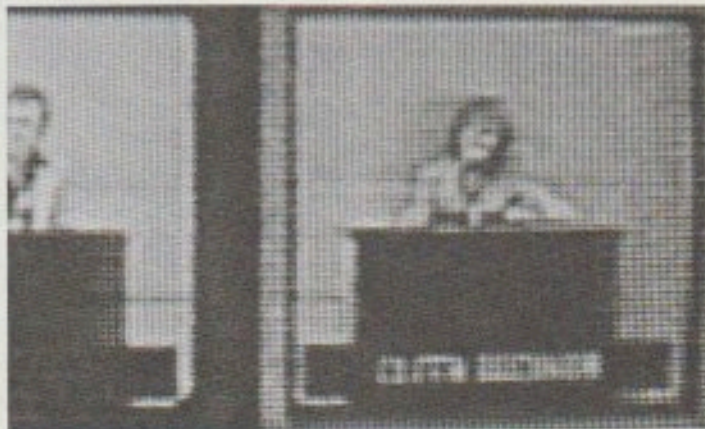
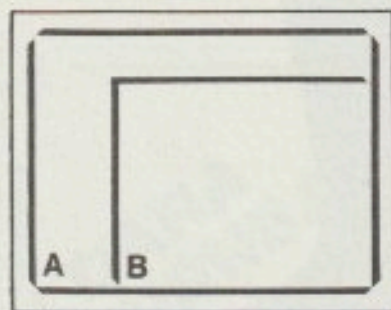
behind his successful facade there may be little of substance. That Schrader intended his movie to be a parable about success in a consumer society is clear enough. It is a film about movement, about the myth of social mobility. Julian thinks he is going somewhere because he has a new Mercedes. He has bought the illusion so carefully fostered by the makers of accessories. He imagines that he is going for broke, but settles for cosmetics.

We are talking about a situation in which the winners are those who look good, can obviously spend money, and have access to favour, to money, and to power. Performance is secondary. The accoutrements are more than the substance, for substantial achievement is clumsy, often ugly, never easy to exchange for something more instantly gratifying. And anyway it is not democratic; the demand for excellence dismisses too many people, denies too many their personal ambitions to be recognised as special.

Julian has no direct sense of himself, only a distanced image in the mirror. He is nothing but a representation of an idea. A master of pretence, he hides behind clichés. But in the end he has nothing to hide, for he has nothing. He always manages to look as if he were in a fashion magazine, even when looking 'terrible'. And that is because that is his essence, a picture of success and health. And because he is only a representation, and not a success in any real sense, he poses no real threat to order, despite his position as an outlaw, for his well-being depends on maintaining a status quo which will adequately reflect and appreciate his illusions.

Julian's hopeless position as a castrated outlaw, an outsider supposedly at odds with the values of society, but in fact totally seduced by them, finds an uncomfortable echo closer to home than the chic Beverly Hills interiors of *American Gigoilo* suggest. For Julian is an artist of sorts, a performer who relies on his skill and on the tolerance and patronage of

the wealthy, a class which often despises him, though happy to use him. To succeed he must distance himself, present an acceptable image. His position is quite ambiguous. His disguise must be perfect, any discrepancy and he is finished. But because it necessarily is a disguise, he could maintain his outlaw identity, operate undercover. But despite his profession, Julian is no outlaw, he really wants to be what he pretends to. He is reduced to a sullen uncooperative silence when deprived of it. Schrader's metaphor is only too apt; Julian is by no means an isolated case, he is not the only young American on the move, going places.



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FASHION 時髦 MODA МОДА



Assyrian cylinder seal of Ninth Century, B.C.

John Swaim, a twelve year old boy on a farm at Coldwater, Kansas, says a little man approached him while he was on a tractor. "He was dark, wore shiny clothing, and had two cylinders on his back." *The Wichita Evening Eagle* says, "The small man had pricked ears."

—Harold T. Wilkins: *Flying Saucers Uncensored*

Stefan Eins, Joe Lewis and William Scott interviewed by Thomas Lawson. January, 1980

TL. Let's backtrack a bit to start off. Stefan, your first space was at 3 Mercer Street. What was the idea behind that? When was it?

SE. I started 3 Mercer originally because I thought it was a good spot to sell my low income multiples, close to the Canal Street shopping area and also in SoHo. And then other people got interested in doing different things in the same space. That was back in 1972/73.

TL. So you were actually there quite a long time. What made you decide to stop, to look for somewhere else?

SE. It kind of lost focus for me. I felt I had to go somewhere else to get a focus, a perspective on what I wanted to do.

TL. What brought you to the South Bronx?

SE. I think it is important to include as many people as possible, preferably from very different sub-cultural levels. The South Bronx had a special attraction because it has a bad reputation in Manhattan, so I thought it might be a good spot to do it in.

WS. The downtown stereotype.

SE. I know now that it's different from what I thought it was. But it is important to say that Fashion Moda is not a South Bronx institution. It just happens to have its first manifestation in the South Bronx.

JL. That is a very important point. We're international. It just happens to be here, but we want to deal on an international scale. We might not have institutions abroad, but we want to have functions.

SE. Well, before we go any further I can read you part of our application to NEA. It's a little bureaucratic, but it explains our intentions. It says, "Fashion Moda is a museum of science invention, technology, art and fantasy. Above all Fashion Moda is focused on the unknown and the unexplained. Science fiction, cross-cultural connections at all educational levels." That kind of gives a different dimension on what we want to do here.

There are also projects which have nothing to do with the space *per se*. There is the Institute for Appropriate Techno-

logy, which has its own curator, Jamal Meckial. And then Joe discovered this jazz photographer, Ray Ross, who has documented the New York jazz scene for the last twenty-odd years. And that's being developed into a travelling exhibition. There's so many possibilities. I'd like to continue my researches on alien intelligences, and that doesn't necessarily have to do with a South Bronx museum space. But I wonder what Joe thinks about it. He has been running Fashion Moda with me for the past year.

JL. I have a rather different opinion of the South Bronx, a different perspective. I agree with Stefan that at this point it is important for most artists to get totally away from what they know. Not particularly for anything to do with their art. Just for their existence on earth.

I came to the South Bronx initially because I got a studio space from the Berg Corporation which is one of the largest minority owned chemical corporations in America. So while Stefan was getting this whole thing together, I was getting that together too. I also saw the need for something to reflect the attitudes, the aesthetic, political, and moral values of the downtown scene in a so-called depressed area. I say so-called depressed because culturally this is a very rich place for aesthetic ideas—music, art, fashion. And the two really juxtaposed to each other fulfilled a need that I had in particular, which is to kind of balance out the class related education I got coming out of the streets and the one I got going to college, and putting them together and saying, "Well, where do you go from here?" And this seems the place to develop that.

And also something that Stefan said at the New Museum discussion on, what was it? Elitism and Populism? He said that for art to be relevant now and in the future that it is going to have to be directed towards Third World people, because the Third World itself is getting to a point where it is going to be using those kinds of modern art ideas.

TL. What I like is the ambiguity of the situation here. A place where local people can come, make art if they want to, or just sit around, talking and getting warm, a place like a public library; but also a chic gallery space, perceived as being radical and avant-garde, especially now that you've had some coverage in *Art in America* and *Artforum*.

SE. Yes, it is ambiguous. The first thing I have to say is that I of course welcome being written about. But the second thing is that all this coverage I get in those white elitist magazines doesn't really get the whole gist of what's hap-

pening here, of what Fashion Moda is about. It feeds back to SoHo, it's all so intellectualized. I mean, Carrie Rickey's *Artforum* thing, for instance, is to the point, but it takes such a long time, it's so convoluted, it's so intellectualized. She could have said it so much more directly, I thought. And all this pain some of these writers have to go through to make themselves understand. It just doesn't get all of what is really happening. I'm getting my first write-up, hopefully, in this local Spanish newspaper thing, in Spanish. I can't wait to see what he's going to write about it. That's probably going to be from a certain point of view too, but it's definitely not an *Art in America* kind of thing. He might even write about the white man coming up here and taking all the grant monies away from the local people.

JL. Also in the article by Mike Robinson in *Art in America* one of the last statements was that the ride is perfectly safe, you know, and that seems to be a major concern of people coming up here. Whereas crime is no worse than anywhere else in the city. In fact probably less so, because this is a very strong community. I mean we're in the financial district up here—all the banks are here, all the big stores. This place is jumping.

TL. Yes, it really is. That's another interesting thing about Fashion Moda, it's a lively store on a street lined with other lively stores, not some kind of refuge hidden away from the crowds, in a back street or up a stair. More people seem to be trying, and succeeding, to get space from the City—temporary leases on vacant buildings. What is your situation here?

SE. Not that, this belongs to a private landlord. I fixed it up.

TL. Did it have these great windows in it?

SE. No, that was the one big thing wrong with it, the whole front was ripped out. A major investment for us was putting in that new front. And then cleaning out the rubble, sanding the floor, painting the walls.

WS. Yes, it used to look like tanks had been on maneuver in here.

SE. That's something I want to say. The City Department of Cultural Affairs got some block grant money from some federal agency, \$400,000, for arts organizations, art projects and also for facilities improvement. And Fashion Moda put in an application for facilities improvement and we did not get funded. And we fixed this whole place up to a useable condition. And we also heard that most of the projects got funded.

But Fashion Moda did not get funded.

TL. Were you given any reason for that decision?

SE. No, we did not get a reason. We haven't even officially heard yet. They told us, but haven't written. We also appealed to Henry Geldzahler, in December, and we haven't had any kind of reply.

TL. We've talked a lot about the space, and your intentions for the space, now let's talk about the work you show here. Right now you have the South Bronx Show. What is that?

SE. The South Bronx Show. Well, it successfully presents South Bronx artists and Manhattan artists, South Bronx projects and Manhattan projects, together. Relating originally unrelated or hardly even relatable artistic directions or histories or traditions. Or non-traditions, I mean some of these South Bronx artists have hardly any traditions to deal with or to come from.

TL. Did you go to the artists, or did they come to you?

SE. Both. There are some South Bronx artists whom I met and whom I invited—the sign-painter, Fidel; the scribblings. That guy gave me a whole stack of scribblings last year and then he took them away from me, almost violently, at least in an emotionally violent way. And then he came back half a year later and I started collecting scribblings again. They are very interesting. Another successful piece is the rose, it's taken off a Harlem street graffiti. It's a ten foot rose just painted, spray painted on a brick wall. I saw it and loved it. It's one of four different images by the same artist, but I just did this one here. I redid it. I took a photograph and tried to go as closely as possible, not exact. It's pretty much accurate. And then of course, I think that among the most interesting things in the South Bronx Show are the Satanist sisters' blood paintings.

JL. One thing that I'd like to say about the South Bronx Show is, that if you look around at the kind of art that is in this area, or for that matter in most regional or rural areas—and the Bronx is a pretty rural community even though it is in the city, it's almost like being in the farmland, you know, with the people's ideas about what's right and what's wrong, what's cool and what isn't—that it shows the incredible diversity of ideas that go on up here. Even by people who in most cases don't know that much about what's going on outside of this community.

SE. Because they have no funnelling or channelling mechanisms, like viable

people writing about them, or a place where they can show it, a place that collects it. What would Picasso be if he hadn't been in so many collections and museums, and hadn't been written about? He just wouldn't exist. So shows like this are pretty enterprising, to make all these various cross-connections. I also would like to point out that I selected these Hispanic statues from a manufacturer around here. And a lot of people from downtown who have seen them already, including Joe I think, think it's the most horrible stuff to show. But I think they are really good, really good.

JL. I think that where these statues are good is not their presence, their aesthetic presence, but the meanings behind each one of these pieces, because they're involved, they're symbols for religious, quasi-religious things that happen, you know, black magical types of stuff. I think that's what makes them interesting, that these objects tend to hold some kind of spirit in them. It's folk art in that sense.

SE. Yes, it's folk art, of course it is.

JL. But folk art isn't taken seriously in a metropolitan area.

TL. Well not if it's made in the metropolitan area. It's taken seriously if it's made in a rural area, if its origins are sufficiently exotic.

SE. Yes, if it's made in Africa somewhere, exactly. That's an area that adventurous aesthetics have been in the last hundred years, discovering all those things. But this is a niche that hasn't been discovered yet. And we're discovering it now.

TL. The last time I was here you were saying that this show is going to keep changing. Does that mean you're just hoping other people will bring work in, by way of response to the work already here, or do you have it more firmly planned out?

SE. Well last year we had changing shows and this show will probably go down gradually. We have to take part of it down for this California artist who will be doing something in March. But we'll leave part of it up. John Ahearn's face castings have been around a long while now.

TL. Is he still working on these?

SE. He would like to do something on a building front above a store, somewhere on Third Avenue, and we're trying to raise some money for it so he can get paid for it. He's done all this for nothing so far.

JL. He also wants to change the idea somewhat, start casting whole families,

not just individual heads. That's what he's really interested in doing now.

SE. That's what he says, I don't know, whatever. So we'll try and continue this, but not faces for in here, castings for here, but for an outdoor piece on a wall. And the way he talks about it, it should really be very exciting.

TL. Yes, his work seems to have been the most successful transfer of ideas from downtown so that they make sense up here.

SE. Well there are also the inventions. David Weill's machines which were also in the New Museum.

JL. And Peter Moennig has a conveyor belt and shoe-shine machine. That went over very well also.

SE. That'll all be part of the South Bronx Show too, of course.

TL. Peter Moennig was one of the people involved with the Real Estate Show, which was a kind of agit-prop action which owes quite a bit to Fashion Moda. The idea of going into a neighborhood to make an aesthetic statement which might also have a wider reaching political content. Although in the end the Real Estate Show seemed much more tied down to a single idea, about landlords and real estate development. William, you were involved, to some extent, with the action down there. Was it successful?

WS. Certainly good for the community, that's for sure.

TL. Yes, but there seems to have been quite a strong group already protesting city development plans for the area, and protesting fairly effectively. No group of artists, particularly one like this which remains deliberately unorganized, is likely to have the stamina to stay in the fight long enough to see any results.

WS. It's inspirational. You remember Valley Forge? They came rag, tag and bobtail. I went down to that building on Delancey on New Year's. It wasn't that bad. It was a good opening.

JL. I was there the day the police locked them out and something I thought then was, that previously when artists got involved in politics, like the Dada people or the Russians, they were willing to lay their necks on the line, really. Even Beuys got his face punched talking some stuff at some rally someplace. That's the kind of involvement artists have to get to if they want to have political impact. Even if they're only there for a short time, that will change something. That will ignite something else, because then people will realize that these people are serious. And if they're

there for a week or a year, it doesn't make that much difference. The thing is that they are for real. And that, I think, is what the whole Delancey thing was lacking.

You know, I said to Alan [Moore], I said, "Alan, what about this show, what about the art?" And he said, "Well, it's not about art, it's about real estate."

SE. That's what he said?

JL. Yes. And what he had hoped was that the art would be an informational tool to develop the ideas about real estate, waste, and use in the city. And especially in that building, which hadn't been used for a year, and was in a prime location, with thousands of people a day going past that corner. But a lot of the people who saw the show, the community people, they thought it was just a group of artists protesting that they could not show their work anywhere. It's alright to do political art, but it has to go beyond that, has to go beyond its own media. And it also has to be put in such a manner that people understand it.

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