

The Sidewalk Grapevine That Was Yesterday's Twitter

Wheat-pasted posters and fliers stuck with viewers and confounded the authorities.

By COLIN MOYNIHAN

Fliers and posters were the social media of the pre-Internet era on the Lower East Side, covering walls and other surfaces with general announcements, political communiques and personal manifestoes.

Affixed with sticky wheat paste and nearly impossible to scrape away, they were a scourge to some, but to others they were a code that could be used to trace the neighborhood's rich political discourse.

Along with their equally tenacious cousin, spray-painted stencils, they provided commentary and promoted events effectively if illegally. The effort it took to produce the messages resulted in a longevity that 140-character tweets or dashed-off blog posts often lack. Many were created by people who were not only political activists but graphic and fine artists.

Now, reproductions of more than 100 of those images are on display in a storefront museum on Avenue C, artifacts of a rebellious time when that neighborhood was the setting for contentious battles over development and homelessness, police conduct and control of its central public space, Tompkins Square Park, in the East Village.

The show, "Taking It to the Streets! The Art & Design of Posters and Flyers on the Lower East Side in the '80s & '90s," is a project by ABC No Rio, a cultural center that is continuing programming while building a new headquarters on Rivington Street. The exhibition includes works by artists like Sue Coe, Eva Cockcroft and Eric Drooker and will run through June 20 at the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space.

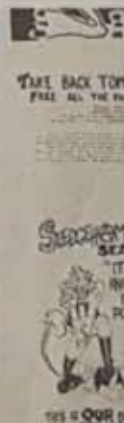
"We wanted to recreate that street corner where all of these fliers and stencils could be seen," an organizer of the exhibition, Seth Tobocman, said recently at the museum.

No Rio's director, Steven Englander, said the show was inspired by questions about how Donald J. Trump's potential effect as president might be compared to Ronald Reagan's. Mr. Tobocman, co-editor of a long running political comic book called *World War 3 Illustrated*, added that one aim of the exhibition was to explore links between contemporary protest movements and past political activism on the Lower East Side that focused on local and national issues.

Many fliers in the show are specific to the neighborhood. Some refer to a clash in 1988 between police officers and protesters as the officers tried to enforce a curfew at Tompkins Square Park. A group called *Revolt Against Gentrification Erasing Our Neighborhood*, or *RAGE ON*, advertised a "gentrification tour" with a picture of the Christodora House, a luxury building on Avenue B that was a target of protest and vandalism. A flier titled "Loisaida Intifada," using a nickname for the neighborhood, showed a figure throwing a flaming bottle and declared: "Take our homes, we'll take



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JULIETA CERNANTES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Above, a view of the "Taking It to the Streets!" exhibition. Left, Eric Drooker's "Tenant Groups Have Been Working."

Providing commentary and promoting events on the Lower East Side.

the streets."

There are also fliers addressing issues that resonated beyond the neighborhood even as they were posted there. Three tell the story of Michael Stewart: He was arrested in connection with subway graffiti in 1983 and died after being brought to a hospital by transit police, bruised and hogtied. A poster by Mr. Tobocman described the fatal shooting by the police in 1984 of a Eleanor Bumpurs, from the Bronx. Others referred to campaigns against automobile use, nuclear power and United States covert ac-

tions in Latin America.

Although fliers of all sorts appeared throughout New York City, the blocks below 14th Street provided particularly fertile ground for political postings, perhaps owing to the area's tradition of dissent. Certain stretches along St. Marks Place and Avenue A were plastered with messages spreading word of protests, drawing attention to causes or simply making polemical arguments. Those who wheat-pasted frequently there included housing advocates opposing evictions, squatters making the case for

taking over abandoned buildings and an anarchic noise band, the Missing Foundation, that warned of dire consequences if city officials closed Tompkins Square Park.

Posting fliers on items like bus shelters and telephone poles violates New York City laws, and the authorities sometimes sought repeat offenders. One of the most prolific, responsible for jumbo-size posters with tiny print assailing imperialism and racism and spray-painted messages saying "AIDS is Germ Warfare by U.S. Government," was arrested in 1986 by undercover officers after a monthlong police investigation. Mr. Tobocman said that man, William Depperman, declined to take part in the show.

Leaving the museum, Mr. Tobocman walked down Avenue C. Few wheat-pasted fliers could be seen. But dozens of stickers, including some that appeared to make political statements, were attached to lamp posts and mailboxes. Mr. Tobocman suggested that stickers had eclipsed fliers in popularity partly because they could be put up much more quickly and inconspicuously.

"There's always a need to reach people outside the existing channels," he said, after pausing to gaze at several stickers, including one bearing a likeness of Malcolm X. "The street is the most common area we have."