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FEUD

Dueling Downtowns

It may have escaped the notice of the Pentagon, but a battle is raging in the East Village: the battle over how the neighborhood's creative legacy should be recorded in the annals of art history. And more particularly, who should record it.

The subject has become relevant because of the New Museum of Contemporary Art's show about the 1980's, "East Village USA." Organized by Dan Cameron for the museum's temporary home in Chelsea, it is the first major exhibition examining this collaborative scene that arose from a bohemian ghetto, marked by urban decay and AIDS.

Stars were born and with fame, of course, came strife, making the neighborhood sometimes seem like an outpost of the Balkans. Why should this retrospective be any less contentious?

Rick Prol, a key figure of the East Village scene, feared that the show would offer a sanitized view of the decade's creative ferment. So he organized a counter-survey with Jan Lynn Sokota at the much smaller B-Side Gallery on East Sixth Street. They call it the "East Village ASU Group Show" in a deliberate attempt to confuse. And to steal some of the larger show's thunder, it opened with a party on Dec. 7, the night before the New Museum's opening party.

Mr. Prol, it turns out, was not only an opponent of the New Museum's show, he was also one of its featured artists. The night after their party, Mr. Prol and Ms. Sokota attended the opening at the New Museum, expecting to see Mr. Prol's color lithograph "S.O.S." displayed. It had been taken down that very day, however, at the press preview.

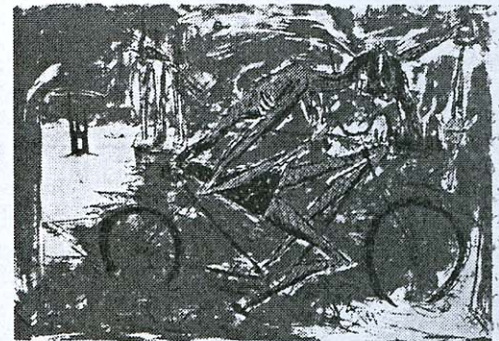
"In the end, we were given three explanations," Ms. Sokota said. "First, the piece had been coming off the wall, so they took it down for its safety. Second, the piece had not been properly consigned by Stefan Eins, the lender of the work. Third, there had been some kind of controversy surrounding the piece at the press viewing."

Though "S.O.S." was eventually mounted in the darkened video pit, Mr. Prol drew his own dramatic conclusions. "He played a game," Mr. Prol said of Mr. Cameron. "If I hadn't gone for the opening, they may have never put it back up. Are they trying to provoke me?" If so, they seem to have succeeded. "The dynamic of the David and Goliath syndrome remains," he said. "Me against the institutions, their politics and their agendas."

Mr. Cameron, for his part, said he was just trying to make the best show he could. "My conscience is absolutely clean," he said before the opening in anticipation of controversy.

That's not likely to put the matter to rest.

Mr. Prol's friends have since rallied to his defense, championing his contribution to that era and demanding justice. Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, whose photographs documenting the East Village scene are on view in the New Museum exhibition, took a more philosophical view. "Curators have a right to place what they want in their own show," he said, "but artists also have a right to fight it."



"S.O.S." by Rick Prol.

LISA PAUL STREITFELD