



Dear Mom,
Derek Coté

Recently, I was asked to vacate my Richmond, Virginia, studio to make way for higher paying tenants in the name of progress and commercial development.

photo: Derek Coté

All this means is pack up, find another sub-standard commercial space, unpack, get situated, and then make art again. This is certainly not the first time I have undergone this process, it is just the first time it has happened to me outside of Brooklyn. I have lost a handful of studios over the years to hungry landlords and I understand the need to turn a buck on one's investment. I also understand (but do not agree with) the exploitative theory of using artists as cheap labor in an effort to get things done on the cheap while a certificate of occupancy is being sought.

"No need for a lease. Just fix up the place and you can stay."

Don't ask, don't tell, and certainly don't disclose anything about your arrangement with anyone wearing a badge.

This brings me to Matzo Gate, the story about the horde of artists evicted from 475 Kent Avenue in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. In case you have not heard, on Sunday, January 20th at 7:30 p.m., the building was issued a Vacate Order by the Fire Department and tenants were given until 1:30 a.m. to collect what belongings they deemed as valuable and leave; all this on one of the coldest nights of the year. The Fire Department claimed they had found a potentially explosive grain silo and a wood-burning stove in the 10-year-old Matzo factory, located in the basement of 475 Kent Avenue, during an earlier inspection, and further claimed that the residents were at risk. Without a moment figure out where they would go for the night, or the following weeks for that matter, the residents of 475 were ushered into the streets like refugees. I used to live ten blocks away at corner of Kent and Metropolitan Avenues when I first moved to Brooklyn in 1998, and

remember passing 475 Kent on numerous occasions. I recall this building specifically because of the feelings of envy for their updated and seemingly weather proof windows, a luxury I had dreamt of many a night as I lay in my drafty loft under my electric blanket. How lucky the residents of 475 were to be living in this creative community with sprawling views of the East River. I imagined 475 being warm and habitable, free of the debris and trash my roommates and I had inherited with in our newly acquired loft, a former fur coat factory directly above an operating sweat shop. I imagined a life so much sweeter in a building free of the hum and drone of industrial sewing machines working day and night.

Williamsburg had a drastically different landscape in those days; it had very few trees and even less grass. Luxury lofts and condos had not yet homogenized the neighborhood, some of the best bars still served a local population by slinging beer and wine in plastic cups, the L train was not filled with suits at six o'clock, and though the waste transfer station was a nuisance, it was still better than having high rise condos blocking our view and access to the East River waterfront. The only park in the area would be virtually unrecognizable as such to most visitors, and still we sought refuge there. Things were good and that was the problem. Things were so good that people were losing their studios, and sometimes their homes, to developers who quadrupled their rent in an effort to get rid of their loyal tenants and make way for luxury dry walled boxes. At that time my cohorts and I were paying something like \$ 1,000 a month for 3,000 square feet of space, and still squeaking by. Who could afford a luxury loft? Today rents are too high to support up-and-coming galleries and most galleries have made the move to Chelsea. So much for the cultural incubator.

The Richmond neighborhood where my last studio was shared some of these characteristics. I shared the corner with three other artists, a hair salon, a few run-down apartments and one remodeled apartment complex. I-195 is one block away and there is a pedestrian bridge linking my neighborhood from a "less desirable" neighborhood on the other side of the freeway. The shrubs that once obscured the bridge from view had been razed to help prevent drug activity from taking place on the bridge, and just before I moved into the studio, my landlord had the pay phone on the corner removed in an effort to cull drug activity on the lot. The Police, who frequently stopped by my studio to ask how I was doing, often referred to my neighborhood as "The Honeycomb" and assured me that I had nothing to worry about, a dead body hadn't been found around there in years, though hearing gunshots at night wasn't entirely unusual. How comforting. I wonder if the girls opening the flower shop there when I leave know about any of this. All of these things have not stopped people from buying and remodeling homes in the neighborhood, nor has it stopped the opening of a swanky new restaurant on the next corner.

I guess the point of all this is that artists have a way of ignoring the obvious and having the vision to see what is real and potentially valuable regardless of where they choose to live. The funny thing is that we do not achieve this deliberately. It is not our goal as artists to raise the property value and appeal of a place only to be kicked out in the middle of the freezing night by the people who want to exploit what has been created. If we knew we had this power we would certainly charge some sort of fee for our services. Why can't the people who want to profit from these neighborhoods do the pioneering themselves? I suppose that there is not a magic number of eating and shopping establishments needed to transform the economic and cultural worth of a place. Retail therapy does not cure. Hell, it rarely relieves pain, and in most cases renders a place worse off than it originally was. If this is the sort of creativity that business can come up with then perhaps developers and politicians should take a new approach and follow the lead of artists. That being said, maybe there is a value that can be placed on culture and creativity. Rather than exploiting artists and treating them like third-rate citizens, perhaps artists should be rewarded and given a stake in their accomplishments. After all, if the artists leave, who is going to be responsible for bringing diversity and flavor to the neighborhood?