

An Interview with Leonard Abrams

Alexander Rubchenko

Leonard Abrams's newspaper the *East Village Eye* precipitately arrived on New York newsstands in May of 1979 against the backdrop of pre-Reagan malaise – the epoch in which the countercultural paradise of independent art and communal activism seemed by many to be sinking into decline. The aftermath of Vietnam was coinciding with Christian fundamentalism, truculent landlords, luscious disco and a furtive revision of the nuclear "Mutually Assured Destruction" concept brought on by fears of possible collision with the Soviet Union.

The East Village Eye touted itself as "a newspaper for new culture" that "promotes the new mutations of Positivist Futurism" and "embracing the future – not to forget our legacy but to fulfill it." In an economically contorted New York City, it was poised to draw up a new style of living.

As editor-in-chief, Leonard Abrams threw the publication's full weight in support of an emerging creative underground. Such figures as Laurie Anderson, Kathy Acker, Sue Coe, the Beastie Boys, Keith Haring, Richard Hell, Rick Prol and David Wojnarowicz were featured as subjects, contributors or both.

After the startling botched Brinks truck holdup in upstate New York, while awaiting the jury's verdict, the ragtag remnants of the Weather Underground and the Black Liberation Army gave an inflammatory interview to the *Eye's* Spencer Rumsey while rebuffing CBS's 60 Minutes and other mainstream media.

Although it was at times an object of censorious shelling from some on the "New" Left for being too wedded to an insouciant Bohemian glamour, throughout its existence the *Eye* continued to cover such socially engaged issues as tenant displacement, poverty and civil rights abuses, and collaborated with the multiuse arts space ABC No Rio and other such pillars of the alternative community. *The Eye* ceased publication in early 1987.

Later that year, Abrams, together with some former *Eye* collaborators, created one of the few truly multiracial nightlife venues, exposing white hipsters and ghetto up-and-comers to world-changing rappers and DJs in the dawn of the Hip-hop era with the makeshift clubs Milky Way and Hotel Amazon. The Hotel Amazon, located at 107 Suffolk Street, was firing on all cylinders in 1988, factoring in an assembled mishmash of crossover punks, West Indian-inspired ragamuffins, DIY firebrands and hip hop enthusiasts.

Never one to leave well enough alone, Abrams injected poet Michael Carter's radical performance series into the mix, presenting Monty Cantsin's freaky paintings done by splattering his own blood, and Joe Coleman's live miceeating geek show, enveloping both glamorous scenesters and hard-core hip hoppers in cultural shock waves.

More recently, Abrams has evinced his abiding interest in marginalized communities with the documentary film *Quilombo Country*, which is set in and around Brazil's Amazon region and focuses on the cultural and political life of relatively isolated villages inhabited by descendants of fugitive and rebel slaves, which are now confronting the modern global marketplace. Since 2006 the film has been screened at numerous film festivals, universities and museums. Abrams plans to return to equatorial Brazil to bring to light some massive popular movements in the recent past that the forces of historical elitism have managed to obscure until now.

Where did you grow up, and what was your upbringing like?

Well, I was born in Brooklyn, but I never lived in Brooklyn until much, much later, as I was taken from the hospital right up to Spring Valley, which is a small town that became semi-suburbanized, about thirty or forty miles from Manhattan. So, my parents had just bought a new house and they moved me right from the hospital to there.

I grew up in Spring Valley until I was nineteen. I started commuting to Fordham at Lincoln Center after high school. Then after a couple of years I moved into the City and I dropped out of school. Spring Valley itself, well, there's not a lot to recommend it, culturally. The best thing about it was that where we were was that there was a goat farm right down the hill so we got a kick out of feeding the goats. And there was a swamp, and we got a kick out of playing in the swamp; catching pollywogs and things like that. There was a little bit of woods around there and that was a lot of fun.

Did you major in Journalism?

Actually I majored in Comparative Literature, which was exclusively European Literature, because the professor, who was the head of the department as well, was extremely Eurocentric. At the time I was interested in everything, so I thought, well, the only way to accomplish everything is through Comparative Literature.

What was your initial initiation to the underground press in the first place?

Actually, I started an underground newspaper when I was in high school. It was called *The Spring Valley Alternative*, and the impetus for that was that, I don't know, I think they changed some policy; they wouldn't let us leave for lunch. And so I started this paper and excoriated everybody. In fact I was very skeptical, even cynical, about politics. In fact I was not a part of the anti-war movement, the Vietnam business. I really had a lot of disdain for the anti-war activists because I said: "Here you are, living in the lap of luxury, and you're trying to tell me that you're against colonialism? I don't believe you." And I didn't. Eventually I changed though. I realized you could be enjoying the fruits of hegemony without being a hegemonist, you know, if you actually made a point of doing something about it. The fact is today, you know, all this

equipment here, such as it is, was all made somewhere else. But I use it.

Ramones member Dee Dee, I guess it was, said that there existed a climate of ossification in New York at the time—the mass exodus, absence of locations for unheard of bands, assumed docility in practicing tedious virtuosity, economical despondency and sexual rigidity. Was a prevalence of despair in the city your predication to create a podium for the generation of the social and cultural malaise?

Who said that?

Dee Dee, from the Ramones.

He said all that? I didn't know he was so brainy.

Well, that's in my words. He enlisted a tangible factor.

Actually, that wasn't the reason. The reason I did it was because I realized that this was the time that people were actually becoming very joyful at the possibility of enjoying all this ruin about them. It was very liberating. You know, once you give up, all things are possible. So everyone was having a great time not thinking about the future, because the future looked like complete disaster. So we all had a great time trying to put it out of our minds. And it was a kind of frenetic energy. I guess people were kind of scared about all these disasters. I think people got scared actually during the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. That kind of put the idea in everybody's head that there really could be some nuclear disaster looming, because there hadn't been a war really involving a major power since Vietnam, and Vietnam was a kind of a very slow process of escalation, whereas the invasion was all at once. But before that it was a kind of malaise in New York, kind of encapsulating the feeling that everything was really going right down the drain. And so, as I said, there was this great feeling that anything was possible. And it was really an intoxication, a euphoria, in New York at the end of the '70s because all this great energy started coming up. That was the impetus.

What was the most flagrant episode you have covered as a magazine? Most remarkable, indelible, intangible event or performance?

Well you know, the paper was really never about events that much...Well, okay, the Times Square show was a very seminal event.

Was it flagrant, was it scandalous?

It was this small building that was empty. It had been a massage parlor or porno store, whatever, but it was one of these places the city had taken over so the artists were able to get the building for free for a month. I'd say it would have been very scandalous if the greater public had paid more attention to it

Collaborative Projects was the group that put it on. Now these people, well I'd say they started probably in the '60s or early '70s, a lot of these artists were getting out of school in the first half

of the '70s, and they had careers that just had been getting underway. And there was a lot of great work. We're talking about people like Tom Otterness, and Kiki Smith, Chris Kohlhofer, and Robin Winters, a lot of good artists. But they also attracted the following generational wave that was coming out at the end of the '70s, like Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Anyway, it was a great show, and it really shook everything up, completely.

But what was really outrageous?

There was blatant sexuality in it. The thing I remember was there was a dildo that had spikes all over it. At that time blatant sexuality, hardcore sexuality, was still a bit shocking. Not like today. But I'd say equally, really, I think some of the most important things that were in the Eye were the "Slum Journal" by Richard Hell, and there was a column by David Wojnarowicz. Both columns were very autobiographical, and really we're talking about a great degree of personal experimentation, of life experimentation, some by choice, as in the case of Richard Hell, but some by circumstance of experience over which he had no control. Wojnarowicz's childhood was very traumatic. And then there were a couple of great stories that we got that politically were very interesting like the Brinks robbers, a revolutionary group that robbed a Brinks truck, who gave us an exclusive interview.

Did you go meet anyone in person?

I didn't personally, no. But truth be told, really what we were doing was more about representative action than it was direct action. At the time, politics had kind of been discredited, and what we were more about was depicting our view of the world than it was to go out and do something directly. It had kind of been done a lot, and we were not really about blowing things up. There was one story, I remember the title, about an anarchist bomber, "Bombing for a Better America." I have nothing against, I mean, there's a place for that, but that was not really what the paper was about. We were more about mental bombing.

What criteria would you stipulate for the East Village Eye magazine writers to fit in?

Well you see we couldn't really stipulate. We just kind of sifted through the things that came in and then found people with the sensibility that I thought, and that other people thought, was appropriate, and encouraged them to write more. I was consciously trying to shape, and to take advantage and find, and compile, a new way of looking at things, and I think I succeeded to a point. Some of the people who wrote were not of that; like in the news departments, mostly. And that was okay because it was news and not something to be interpreted that way. To tell you the truth I was not an advocate of what was called "The New Journalism," which started in the '60s, in which this talky, chatty, very subjective style extended all into the news. I didn't like that, and I tried to keep away from that. But it more had to do with a point of view. It's just a point of view. In retrospect to describe it, I would say "Well, people were throwing out everything that went before, which is not to say that people felt completely differently, like, for example, in the '60s and through most of the '70s, people who considered themselves in opposition to this thing, kind of colonialist, imperialist, capitalist, hegemonist, view of the world, had created a rubric for themselves. This New Left stuff. And in some places today, like in the San Francisco Bay area, you'll find all these people who hew to this dogma. You cannot make a joke with these

people. You can't tell them, for example, that vegetarians should all be thrown into a pit. You know, they are desperate to sort out who's a friend, who's a foe; who's good and who's bad. These people were just stupid. They'd forgotten how to think, and we had to destroy that as much as we could. I remember in the Mudd Club, there was a big graphic, a big nuclear mushroom cloud that said, "Nuke Em Till They Glow." That's why there were a few people who were very happy to see Reagan get in, because **they** really detested this unthinking, **knee-jerk**, this safe, new, Leftism, but they were sorry pretty soon. But all this had to **be** destroyed; all this **non**-thinking that was passing for thinking, where all these people were constricting themselves with all these things they'd decided were bad or good. It all had to be thrown out.

Being a distinguished cultural hand of the East Village bohemia in the **1980s**, would you exude any hope that somebody else will take over your portfolio nowadays?

I don't know, I **mean** I like to think that out there it's being done and I **just** don't see it, you know? Some people in the East Village, or somewhere downtown or wherever, they're going to say, "Oh, this is nothing compared with the things we do today, the fun we have today." I don't know, my parents are probably thinking the same thing. I don't know. But to me, when I look around me, everybody looks like a bunch of wimps, except some kids in the ghetto, who look like a bunch of criminals. But, I don't know, it's so different now. When I was in my early **20's**, it was a lot easier to **be free**. Okay, now you need more money to be free, and many people, they don't seem very free to me even if they have got money. They just seem to be uptight about getting more or a better position. I don't know, it's weird. There are people out there who are doing exactly what they feel, making art and expressing themselves, and they pay a heavy price. And they're probably desperately poor. There are some people who are still doing that. It's harder for them. I know, because, look, when I was doing the Eye there were days when I barely ate, but the rent was cheap. I mean, what I got away with living on is still a lot less than people today. **So** even if I was missing meals I wasn't **really** suffering **that** much. But it's a different head. I don't see this critical mass of **anti-establishmentary** activity. And what you have to do to afford doing so is also different. I mean, when you're paying \$100 a month for rent, there's a lot you can do. Right now my rent is probably almost as equivalently cheap as it was back then. Even though it costs \$10 to buy lunch in a crummy grocery store. It's like, now you could have cheap rent but it would still cost you a fortune to stay alive. I don't know. I mean, look, what's to stop someone **from** making an East Village newspaper today? Not very much. Because you could go to one of these **dumb-ass jobs** or you could get a credit card and max it out, tell them to fuck themselves and go to the printer and print yourself a newspaper. It's not rocket science.

Well, people don't apparently have that sort of whimsicality with the **fabric** of living in the **Village**. It's different with social settings, it's different.

Yeah, whimsical. There was a madcap flavor. I remember there was the Red Grooms exhibit called Ruckus Manhattan, and someone else made an exhibit called **Fuckus** Manhattan. It was just fun and you need that, that's a very creative thing to have. Even though at the time people were very self-conscious. Everyone was so excited about what was going on and everyone was taking pictures of everything. Everyone was documenting as much as everyone was making things. But still, at least someone was doing something.

Did **you** feel in any way that new wave music by the mid-**1980s** became already prevaricated and depleted when you began launching hip hop **DJ's** at the Hotel Amazon?

Well the thing about New York is, and people still say it today, New York radio sucks, with an asterisk. New York white radio sucks, New York black radio is a little better. And the reason is, I guess, the market forces. So there are a lot of places in the country; they may not have as many musicians, but you can hear the shit on the radio, and you couldn't hear it in New York after, well, there were some attempts, there was some radio going on, notably **WPIX**, and that stopped about '81. You could not hear any **good** rock and roll on the radio. But what you could get was good disco funk, the music, the grooves, the beats of which were being used in early hip hop. **Hip-hop** was not on the radio, but still, there was basically **R&B**, disco and funk. Me, I like radio because radio is live. So that's how I got into all that music. I wasn't really into it until 1980.

But you were a **big** enthusiast of New Wave music, right?

Well, in the clubs, like in the **Mudd Club**, Tier 3, later Danceteria, you could get all that music and that was great, too.

Did you report on Malaria—that Berlin-based female group?

Yeah, we **did** report on a lot of good experimental music. Gang of Four, **Einstürzende Neubauten** and a lot of other good stuff. And that continued all through The Eye's existence. And then we started covering **Hip-hop** too. We even covered Latin stuff: Celia **Cruz**, and other Latin artists and movements in music. So Chuck Crook and I started The **Milky Way** club, the name of which Chuck got from, the Melkveg in Amsterdam. We first **did** it on a **rooftop** in the summer, at the Cuando building on 2nd and Houston. It was one of these buildings built to give kids a place to get their healthy exercise in the days when the Lower East Side was teeming with guttersnipes. And on the roof they had this big cage where kids would play basketball, so Chuck said we'll call it "Milky Way," because it was under the stars and it was so beautiful. We got in on this— I'd call it like the Third Wave of hip hop—because first there were the original hip hoppers, I'm not even talking going way back or anything. I'm talking about people that you first started hearing about, like the Funky Four Plus One More, Jimmy Spicer, Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five, The Treacherous Three. These were all early around, '79, '80, '81. Then came '83, '84, you got these other hip hop bands—some called them Soap Opera hip hop because **they** were stories, like **UTFO's** "Roxanne Roxanne." Then things got a little bit more charged. We're talking about '85, '86, '87, you get Public Enemy, you get...

"Niggers With Attitude?"

NWA came a couple of years after, at the end of the '80s. But you get all these bands that are a little more hardedged and a little more charged up. That was when we opened the club and started getting that energy, playing the music and having parties for Rush Productions and other people in the business. And one of our guys, Patrick Moxey, found another school building, a public school that had been taken over by cultural activists in the Lower East Side. It was called Solidaridad Humana, which is now the Clemente **Soto Velez** building an Suffolk and Rivington.

Then Chuck and I went our separate ways, and I opened Hotel Amazon at that location, which was just a fanciful name.

It's still there?

The building, yeah. And that was a big space. And we booked some young bands. We booked Latifah when she was sixteen, we had The Jungle Brothers, De La Soul, Gang Starr, we hosted a Zulu Nation party, and we also played house, soul and dancehall reggae. And they were doing the same thing with reggae. **Instead** of having a full band, they would **just** get these cuts and they would "toast," or rap over that. Which is really where rap came from. The West Indies, Jamaica, it's really where it came from, much of it.

Was your *mindset* of proclaiming yourself a Positive Futurist in the late 1970s correlated to depicting the quilombo communities in your recent documentary?

I don't think so, because really I don't know if I really am or ever was really a futurist. Because the fact is that was attracted me to the Lower East Side as much as anything were the ruins. Because there were so many interesting ruined buildings and closed-up places, old, wrecked places. And when I travel, I usually look for places that have something of the previous, I should say "**Pre-Post-Industrial**," if that's a word, culture. Whether it's an old colonial city or a quilombo, because a quilombo is a place that usually has a lot of traditional culture intact. So the Positive Futurist thing, that was just part of the process at the time. As I mentioned, the thing about destroying this ossified way of thinking that this whole new **Leftism** that replaced the other old American shibboleths.

What would be your assessment about what Andy, Timothy, and Allen would dwell on, culturally speaking now, in the framework of modern numerous austere laws as the *Mosh* Pit Bill, the Rave Act, the Clean-Up Act, the Nuisance Abatement Act and others?

I don't know. I don't know if any of these things would have stopped them. But I think the real question is, what's it doing to us? You know, you can see what the Bush regime has tried to do, and partially succeeded in doing, scaring people, turning people into these **re-colonialized, re-imperialized, corporatized** cattle. As you pointed out, it happened before Bush, and Bloomberg is doing the same thing. As a matter of fact, I just **read** in the paper, if you can believe this, I can barely believe this myself, he wants to take a DNA sample of everybody who is arrested for a felony in New York City. Not everybody who has been convicted, but anybody who has been arrested. These are the kinds of people we need to be eliminating. People like Bloomberg who have the balls to even talk about doing this. These are the people who have to go. On a bright note, though the problem does not begin and end with the Bush administration, we can take some comfort in knowing that it is the most unpopular administration in the recorded history of poll-taking in the United States. So there are a lot of people who can't wait to just get rid of all this kind of stuff. And I hope it happens, but I don't know, because there is such a strong **impetus** for all this control.

So you see the hurdle *mainly* in the *ruling* methods of the government, the administration.

It's the whole process; the whole way of processing people in the aftermath of September 11th. Now the fact of the matter is that today there is no national identity card in the United States. You could walk around with nothing and no one could do a **goddamn** thing. And there are **people** that want to change that, and they have arguable reasons, of terrorism and all that kind of stuff. But if you look back, let's say to medieval times, when most people never went more than fifty miles from their homes, they were under a lot tighter control than we are today. We need certain things to control the antisocial people who want to attack us. But we've already seen how this is abused tremendously. This fear of being attacked by an alien, outside group is being used to exploit the typical person in this society.

So you don't think *Leary* or Warhol would be *muzzled*?

Well, I think Warhol would fit right in. His antiestablishment activity was all on a level in which most people could not even recognize it. Leary, I mean there are so many more drugs illegal today, but there is so much drug-taking going on. I really don't think that *Leary*, in a sense, he's not even relevant in the same way today, because if you want to experiment with drugs, the range of mind-altering drugs available by prescription is far in excess of what was available in the '60s, legally or illegally. I'm pretty sure that if I wanted to go out right now and find some mushrooms or some acid or other **mind-altering** substance, I could probably do it, you know, within a day or two.

But you can't propagate your philosophy as a way of living.

You can say it. The only thing you can't say is "Kill the President." You can get locked up for advocating the violent overthrow of the country. But that's it. Everything else is pretty much up for grabs.

Okay, last question, and it's kind of a long one: In the aftermath of the Cold War, some academic commentators claimed that a **sub-cultural** scene was a duplicity in itself patronized or even bankrolled by the administration to fend off the Communist appeal in the world and now they mustn't pay heed to disaffected youth any longer since this is now not the case. What could stoke a new fermentation of radical culture in a society where a glowing stick at a rave party could legally be deemed drug paraphernalia?

Well first of all, I have to take issue with this "bourgeois indulgence of the superficial rebellion" as certain people have portrayed it. I don't buy it. I think that was completely a construction of people who were...

You mean like breaking chairs at a rock concert?

Well, you see, in this society, in this country, people who did these things, the local policing powers flipped out. They didn't think it was so funny. This is still a rather conservative society. I think that in the larger sense you could say that the peace movement, the free love movement, the psychedelic stuff, were in a very large part **co-opted** by commercial interests. But I think that that was pretty much an organic thing. I don't think anyone really planned that, it just **happened**.

I would like you to elaborate on *what* would be a new spark, an initiation, in movements. *If* you listen to people of certain ages, what would be a repetition?

Okay, I'll try to answer that. People love to get involved in movements.

Not *a* new one since we have the Internet, that's what some people would say.

No. The Internet makes things easier. I mean, I used to do parties, and you would print up cards and you would hand out cards, you mailed cards. You couldn't send a thousand emails, no way. It didn't exist. Now everyone can know about a party like that. There's no comparison. A party, or a movement, or anything. Well, here's the thing you have to realize: In the '60s, you had a whole counterculture. You had a half-million men in the army in Vietnam, just Vietnam. Imagine how many people were processed through Vietnam, in the armed forces, we're talking about millions of people. And then we're talking about millions of all the young people who didn't want to go. So everybody was affected. We're talking about people born in the postwar generation. Baby Boomers There's a huge cohort of people. And you have the sex and you have the drugs and you have the wealth. Very widespread wealth. And then you have *some* thing that nobody wants to do: go *and* get killed when they could be home having a good time. So there was a huge outburst. Then there was this new way of Punk that was an echo of that, much smaller, by the *way*, in this country. And it had to do with despair and there was also cynicism, and boredom, *and* all these things. And in the inner cities there was like, cheap rent, and drugs and violence, lots of things to keep people busy. Now actually there kind of is an echo boom of the Baby Boomer's kids. You've got the kids but it's not the same. There isn't the same level of dislocation. I mean, if there *was* a really bad recession, like the one that's supposedly coming up, if that was really bad, then there could be some huge...outpouring or reaction. But I don't think that's going to happen. Because number one, the economy is much more globalized, and no matter how bad things are here, we will still be able to sell a lot of our *crap* to the Chinese and Indians and to everybody else. Secondly, there is probably going to be a Democrat coming in. So all those people who want to do stuff like that, they will be in the government, so it will be diffused.

So there's a better future for the subculture, and the resurgence of the independent, underground culture.

Well, you see, if the Democrats get in, which I imagine they will, then a lot of that energy will be absorbed by the new ruling regime. So instead of doing something in the street, you might go and get a job.

But what if the economy is dilapidated? There may be far-flung repercussions.

Yeah, but it seems that people need something to react against and I think a lot of that energy will be absorbed into the bureaucracy. Because there are all these creative people; *all* these people who have basically been shut out of the system, who may be absorbed into a new system. So I think maybe, one hopes, there will be more support for all kinds of creative activity. But I don't think they'll be bottled up and bursting out, as is what usually happens with repression. But I don't know, because I'm not in my 20's anymore so I'm not as involved as much in that way

of thinking. Right now I'm more interested in doing my own work. I think if the rent, if the real estate market in New York collapsed, say like Miami is collapsing, then that would be the greatest thing for creative society here, since the '70s. And to tell you the truth, I hope it happens, but I wouldn't be so sure.

There would be more interesting cultural phenomena.

Citibank just lost \$20 billion; that's a lot of money.

Merrill lynch.

Merrill Lynch, all these guys. So you get all these people who are bidding up the price of everything. From real estate to apartments to apples, you know, **pizza**. If they're all getting fired, they may be a little more breathing room for everybody else, if we still have **jobs**. So there's hope.

Changing the subject: You recently finished *Quilombo Country*. You **did** it yourself and it took six years, and was it your initial motivation, your purpose, to bring this story to public **attention** to expose the conditions of strife **and** inequality?

Well, there is no more glaring example of exploitation than the experience of slavery in general, **or** in particular, the African experience in being enslaved and brought to the New World. First of all, in Brazil and in other tropical countries, even much more than in the United States, the mortality of the slaves was tremendous. In many cases these plantations were death camps, there was really no difference between the Nazi labor camps, the Soviet gulag and the African slave experience.

But what made you **go** there, since there are a lot of pockets of poverty here where people live in squalid, appalling conditions. And there is even slavery in this country.

Because it is not about suffering, really. It is about the undoing of that suffering. The resistance, the successful resistance to that system of oppression within the larger structure of that system. People liberated themselves; people struck out against the oppressors and freed themselves within the nominal control of that slaveholding society, And I thought that it was so inspiring that people should know and **see** that these people really exist. And I also was very interested to see what it's like to have a self-sufficient society today in the modern post-industrial world.

But how **did** you know about the resistance from the inception?

I was in Salvador, Bahia [State in Brazil] in 1995, and it was Carnival and they have themes, and they march, they dance to the music and they sing. And one of these groups, which are called blocos, these were teenage girls, they were dressed in these incredible Egyptian-style costumes and they were playing wonderful drums and dancing, and carrying placards about the 300th anniversary of the death of Zumbi [**zumBEE**]. And I found out that Zumbi was the leader of what was really an African nation inside **of** Brazil, called Palmares. And it had 20,000 to 30,000 inhabitants who were people who had freed themselves from the slaveholding plantation system. And I thought, wow, **everybody's** got to know about this. So, that's what made me

want to do the project.

So you made the decision on the spot?

A few years later, when I was actually able to start a film, it was still the most exciting idea that I had. And so I thought, well, if I'm that excited about this then other people will be excited too. And they are. Interestingly enough, most of them are African Americans, in this country. And I have **to** add, some people say to me, "Why did you do this?" And the implication is, why do such an arcane subject? All of the people who said that to me were white. The African Americans, by and large, do not ponder that all. They know why I did it; they know the importance of it.

What mediums do you want to bring it **to**?

It's been in about a dozen film festivals, mostly either African Diaspora film festivals or **ethno-**graphic or Latin American-themed festivals. It **did** get one award so far, at a festival called Black International Cinema Berlin. It won Best Documentary. I've sold it to around 250 institutions, mostly universities and libraries, which is good because that's the market for this type of film. But as far as the material in there, I just want people to see it. Many of the communities are struggling to retain their land and get legal title of their land, and I hope that maybe this will help them a little.

You might instigate an international campaign addressing the problem...

It's more of a sense of documenting the communities for the sake of Brazilian society. There is a Brazilian version and I have shown that in Brazil, and I hope to get it better known in Brazil, and add to the **body** of knowledge about the subject in Brazil. And I also want to mention that not all of these groups descended from escaped slaves, but also from plantations that were abandoned, some due to economic reasons and some due to social upheaval, assassinations, agitations or **forcing-out** of the owners or a combination of these things.

Will there be any follow-ups?

I'm going back to the State of **Maranhão**, and I'm going to do a film that has to do with some black revolutionary figures in 19th century Brazil who were largely ignored by Brazil and the rest of the world. I hope that bringing these people to light will inspire people about **self-liberation**. I think it's very important to show examples of people succeeding in the process of **self-liberation**.

Have you ever been tempted to embrace tribal living in the manner of Paul Gauguin or something like that?

Yes. I have been tempted to do that. As a matter of fact, if it were not for my involvement in things here, I may have already even done that. Even though the people I've been dealing with can't be described as tribal. But I may still disappear into the woods, and you may never hear from me again.

Well, that's a very gloomy scenario.

Not really. You know, I understand there are many places you can go in the Amazon where you can put some fishing nets out into the river and you will find yourself a nice dinner every day. Maybe I'm still hoping to find the bum's paradise out there in the forest somewhere.

Alexander Rubchenko is a painter who has resided on the Lower East Side since he left Moscow nearly 20 years ago, when his provocative artwork and involvement in anarchist causes brought him to New York as a political refugee. His favored themes of chaos, danger, upheaval and uncertainty are finding resonance among contemporary art audiences across the world.

To learn more about the East Village Eye, which will soon become available to researchers as a *fully* searchable digital archive, go to eastvillageeye.com. To learn more about Quilombo Country, go to quilombocountry.com.