

Shelter BY TONI SCHLESINGER

Remember when

THERE WAS GARBAGE ON THE STREET AND PEOPLE WERE LYING ON THE GROUND

Linus Coraggio on the Upper West Side



Photograph by Brian Kennedy

LOCATION Upper West Side
RENT \$1,120.67 [rent controlled]
SQUARE FEET 1,550 [Eight rooms in pre-war elevator building]
OCCUPANT Linus Coraggio [artist]

With the Plymouth Valiant on top. We had a forge there. I taught welding.

Was welding all the rage? It's important in making medieval weapons. There are two kinds of people—those who weld and those who don't. The rent at Gas Station went from \$600 to \$5,000.

It was an art gallery by day and, by night, God knows. It was also a pot drop for AIDS patients. Now it's a condo building.

Where do you weld now? Outside a tire store in Bushwick.

Aren't you cold? The welding keeps you warm mentally. I can start fires if I need to.

Do you see yourself moving to Bushwick? I had this offer to buy a lot for 28,000 bucks. I thought of putting a trailer there.

Wouldn't it be lonely in the trailer? Well, I live alone.

Always? Yes, in this apartment. Bushwick is still the Wild West. I saw a middle-aged woman fire a revolver in the air.

Did the sheriff come? Let's look at your scrapbooks, titled "Life of Linus." I have different categories. Here's my first sculpture, 10 bicycles welded together.

All these shots of you holding hoses. That's an art welder. Here's another gentrification piece, *Landlord Crucified on His Own Tenement*.

So much art and writing is about gentrification. The moment of change—a dramatic subject for narrative. Who are all these people lying on the ground? This was a performance piece at Pizza a Go Go. Each model represented a different country that had a nuclear bomb. At the end there was an explosion. Here's an article from *The East Village Eye*...

The East Village Eye. Long gone.

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How much steel is in here? Less than a ton.

How long have you lived here? Since 1969. I've been on the block since 1967. My parents lived here. They got divorced. My mother stayed. She moved out in '87.

Where is your father? In Santa Barbara. He's 92. He's Henry Brant, the composer. He won a Pulitzer in 2002.

Inspiration for us all! You said there are only five rent-controlled apartments left of the more than 30 units. The building's being sold this month to make condos. People are being given buyout offers—\$20,000 plus the opportunity to move into a smaller apartment downstairs and two years' free rent. A neighbor said, "Why would I want to move to a smaller apartment?" They told her, you get a new kitchen.

You might as well go right to a nursing home. This is sort of the main gallery room. I made these chairs. I don't pay for metal. I find it, refashion it. This is my gentrification piece from 1984, *East Village in Decline*.

Blinking red lights inside falling-down black steel tenements. It's meant to be read from left to right—near decay to absolute decay.

Downtown New York's getting to be just about consumers, not creators—people who ingest all day long. Your piece captures the nesty darkness of the Village of long ago. The way the garbage would pile up in front of the buildings.

Sigh. If your father's name is Brant, why is yours Coraggio? I told you on the phone. You want me to explain that again?

It works better for the column. It's my middle name. It means *courage*. My father thought I'd need that. I used to have a studio at Gas Station, from '86 to '95, at Avenue B and 2nd.