

47 Hall Street
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I was born here in New York, and like many other New Yorkers I lack imagination: the idea of living somewhere else has never occurred to me. Indeed, to live in New York is to have lived everywhere.

Glenn Ligon,
Housing in New York: A Brief History, 1960-2007

Both my father and Glenn Ligon grew up in the South Bronx in the '60s and '70s. Ligon was born there, my father moved there from Panama when he was 12. They are both black, and both ended up breaking into what were, at the time, white creative industries (American fine art and architecture, respectively). In Ligon's essay I see a lot of what my dad also went through: a network of neighborhoods, schools and people that lead two young black men into careers that had existential meaning for them and allowed them to fulfill their potential, but at the expense of leaving the neighborhood, people and culture that they were born into.

My experience has been different. I've been an outsider as well, being colored, but in different ways. These men grew up around people like them, and had to exit into a world of white people in order to follow their passions. I grew up in white neighborhoods, and am half white myself, but have spent my time since putting together as diverse a group of friends as possible, at least partially as a reaction to growing up white, without looking white. My father exited the black world to enter the white one; I exited the white world to enter the multicultural one.

Race is, from my perspective, the main thread that ties Ligon's stories of his various apartments together. Ligon and my father both lived in the South Bronx early enough to see it as a reasonable working-class neighborhood, and a few years later when it deteriorated into the place it still carries the reputation of. My father told me about coming home from college, and seeing young, handsome black and Hispanic men that he'd grown up with strung out on heroin, which quickly took over and transformed the area. The Bronx is "tough" for the reasons they left it.

I was born in late 1989, with my first year of life being the all-time high in New York City's murder rate. I can't imagine what my parents thought at the time, but it seems no one predicted the massive change that would occur over my lifetime. Ligon and my father witnessed a downward slope into crime and degradation; over my life I've experienced the exact opposite. New York has, every year since my birth, become safer and more expensive. Housing was the defining issue of Ligon's life, but for a young artist it is only a part of the story. The game of trying to paint in New York now is not only about where to live, but where to work, and how to do both simultaneously.

Columbia University

I got my first studio in college, for senior thesis. All thesis students are given a studio, and at Columbia there ended up being only about 15 Visual Arts majors, almost all of them double majors (usually a mix of art and a “practical” degree). My studio was about 200 square feet, had windows, and had a separate woodshop in the building. I bought a chair from a woman on 66th street from craigslist, and a few weeks later bought a bookcase and desk combo from Ikea. I don’t know what happened to the chair, but I still have the desk and bookcase in my studio today.

At the end of the first semester, we were all supposed to rotate studios. I convinced the girl who I was supposed to switch studios with that it would be too much hassle for us both to move all of our things, but really I just didn’t like the view from her window.

After graduating, I moved all of my things into my parents’ storage locker, and started figuring out what my next step would be.

Grand St. and Morgan Ave.

Immediately after finishing school I reached out to Arlen, one of my former teachers, about finding a pay-per-day woodshop. I was living in my parents’ apartment, and making drawings that I mounted on wood panels. The plan was to make panels one day each month, and draw at home. He told me that his studio was a woodshop, and that he would give me access to it for \$150/month.

His studio was in a creaky warehouse building surrounded by auto shops. I had the keys to his individual studio, but had to hope that someone would come in and out of the building, as my keycard to the outer door didn’t work. The studio itself was amazing: 15 foot high ceilings, with large plexiglass doors separating the 1000 sq foot space in half – part woodshop, part painting studio. I would come and go as I pleased, and leave my rent in an envelope in the mini-fridge at the start of each month.

Eventually, I stopped going as frequently. The studio was far from where my life was centered, and between work and my social life, I started losing motivation. After a few months, I called Arlen and said I wouldn’t be renting the space anymore. He took it well and there were no hard feelings. Around this time, he was mugged very badly in the neighborhood. The next I heard, he had moved studios to Clinton Hill, since the rent was getting too unaffordable in Bushwick. Two years later he got a teaching position in a different state, and moved out of New York.

69th and Central Park West

One night, my dad called me and told me he'd found me a studio, and that it was free. Nizam, a gay French-Lebanese ex-pat friend of his, owned a brownstone on the Upper West Side, which they were in the process of renovating. The top floor, formerly an artist studio, was now being used as junk storage. Nizam said I could use it if I wanted, as long as I cleaned it out. I agreed, and got to work. I cleaned through some of the junk upstairs, eventually clearing a space out to work. At this point, I had begun working more, and had become accustomed to working in a studio at night, after my various day gigs. Because this studio was someone's house, rather than an industrial building, I felt strange about coming and going at night, and found myself using the studio as infrequently as I had been using Arlen's.

80th and Broadway

My professors from school looked out for me when I graduated. One hired me as an assistant for the summer, and when that ended I got a call from another one. He put me in touch with his father-in-law, Paul, a painter in his mid-80s who was having trouble walking. He was looking for an assistant to do all the physical things he could no longer do, and hired me to come in a few times a week.

Paul spent his summers in Cape Cod, which meant I was out of work for the summer. Maybe to make up for this, he let me use his studio as my own while he was away. The only caveat was that I would have to share the studio with his archivist, Keaton, who had previously had full run of the place in past years. Keaton didn't want me to bring people by, and wanted the place to herself at night. I told her we'd have to be flexible about that, but it ended up working out, since I had nothing better to do during the day than go to the studio, but had more desirable things to do at night. The studio was how I imagine Rothko's looked. Six rooms: a kitchen, three storage rooms, and two main rooms for painting; my room had beautiful light flowing down from 15-foot high ceiling skylights, Keaton's overlooked the famous Upper West Side institution Zabar's.

I moved my chapsaw and sanding equipment to the poorly ventilated space. I was still making panels, as well as frames for the finished drawings, and became obsessed with perfecting the finishes on them. For the summer, the studio resembled a woodshop more than a painting studio; I don't think I made one complete artwork in the space. Generally I stayed out of Keaton's space, but occasionally I peaked in. Keaton had a rack of clothes in front of a rack where Paul kept the paintings he was working on; I think she was living there.

23rd between 5th and 6th Ave.

Almost everything in New York used to be something else. Well, not the Empire State Building. That was made famous in two movies, King Kong in 1933 and Andy Warhol's Empire in 1964. Fay Wray and a giant ape were the stars of the first film; the building itself was Warhol's stay. In New York, art has always left traces behind, but like everything else in the city, those traces vanish a little more with every passing day, until they are completely erased.

Bob Nickas, *Traces of Soho Past*

October was coming, and Paul would be moving back into his studio soon. Andre Page, a local pro skateboarder, ran an office space on 23rd Street, on the 6th floor of the Marc Ecko building. As a child and teenager, I'd spent years practicing karate in a two-floor loft directly across the street. The space Dre ran had formerly been occupied by Zoo York, a legendary New York board brand that had been acquired by Ecko. A friend of mine interned at Zoo York, and occasionally I would hang out at the office, where I met Dre. After Zoo York was bought again by another conglomerate, they moved offices, leaving Dre with free reign of the space, which he in turn rented out to artists and other aspiring friends of his. I texted Dre one day asking if there were any free spaces, and he told me to come by. When I did, he showed me an empty office (except for a couch), and asked if I could pay \$500/month. At the time I was unemployed and couldn't afford it, so we settled on \$250. He gave me a key, showed me the keycode to the main door, and went back to work. I laid down on the couch for a bit and took in the space.

I soon moved my supplies in and started to work. Since it was an office building, there were certain peculiar rules. For instance, unless you made it to the building by 6:30pm, you would have to knock on the door and hope that the guard would let you in. The same went for the weekends, but once you got to know the guards they would always let you in. I think they liked the flow of skaters and artists, as opposed to the usual clientele of web content aggregators and online writers.

I got to know the people that used the other spaces on the floor. There was the team of three web designers, one of whom skated with Dre. There was Anton, a Russian immigrant in his 50s who painted large pop paintings of weapons. There was Brendan, a skater my age who had recently moved from Florida, and was living at the office. There was Kosta, who stored and shipped Quartersnacks merchandise from the office. And of course there was Dre, who while skating and being a father figure to everyone around him, also made abstract paintings in his office.

Dre called me one day and told me Victor, one of the web designers, also painted, and that we'd be sharing the studio now. I knew he had hooked me up by only charging me what I could afford, so I accepted it. We would coordinate our schedules, but it was never much of a problem, since I almost always worked into the night, and Victor preferred the day. We were both in a transitional time – I was painting geometric abstractions, he was painting camo patterns. Three years later, I would be painting political photorealism, while Victor's work would be addressing technological isolation.

80th and Broadway

Things were good. I started to get more jobs, and began to save money. I was still juggling work for Resika with other jobs, which was becoming increasingly difficult. Paul left again for the summer, and this time left the entire studio to me. I still don't know whether he found out Keaton had been living there, but he did tell me that Blair, his wife, wasn't fond of her. I moved my things uptown, and primarily used the room that had formerly been Keaton's.

I'd grown tired of making deadend geometric abstractions, and decided to paint a portrait. With the ample space Paul had given me, I put together a 66" x 66" canvas, and started making a photorealistic painting of a friend of mine, based on photos of him I shot in the studio. One day I got a call from Paul, asking if I was at the studio. I was, but it wasn't my job to be. He was in the city for the weekend, and was coming by to see the space. He came, and saw what I was working on. "I don't think it's your style," I said, to which he replied, "no, it's not," but in a way we both understood. We were from very different generations and interests, and that was okay.

Heat and air conditioning have been consistent in each studio I've been in since Columbia, in that there hasn't been any. You sweat in the summer, and layer up in the winter. That summer I spent most of my time shirtless, with two fans running constantly on either side of me.

I was still living with my parents in Midtown, but primarily worked for a painter near the Brooklyn Navy Yard. After work I would take the train uptown, get some dinner, and paint in the studio til 11pm or so. Citibike came to New York that summer, so I would walk 20 blocks down to the nearest Citibike station, and bike home from there. I grew fond of the routine.

47 Hall Street

October came, and Paul was moving back to Manhattan to get back to real life, which meant I needed to find a new space. As luck would have it, a painter I knew from college, Guy, had just gotten accepted to a six-month residency and was subletting his studio. Even more fortuitously, the studio was located two blocks from my main day job near the Brooklyn Navy Yard, in a large industrial complex at 47 Hall Street. I still lived with my parents, but now was working steadily enough for painters that I had a steady income, and had saved up a few thousand dollars.

Guy agreed to rent the studio to me, and I wrote him a check and made plans to move. A few days later, he called me, saying a friend of his also wanted to rent the studio. My heart sank, thinking I'd lost the space. Instead, he asked if I'd be willing to split the space with him.

I learned that two artists had rented the floor years earlier, and built out studios. They named the space Sweatshop Studios. The studios were very nice, and completely private. There was a communal wood and metal shop, with proper ventilation, as well as a kiln. It felt like my first time having a real studio, even though it was the sixth space I'd occupied.

We divided utilities equally as a floor, which meant that in the summer and winter, when heat or air conditioning become necessities, the utilities would spike drastically. I generally layered up and used one space heater that I kept close to my feet. Once, I came in and Mark was in a t-shirt, running three space heaters at once. I realized that I was trying too hard to keep the utilities down, at the expense of my own ability to work. After three months, Mark bailed. He'd found a permanent studio, and moved out, leaving the whole space to me, but also doubling my studio rent. I decided it was okay, I liked the autonomy.

After six months and one open studios event, Guy was moving back to his studio. I started making calls, and eventually found an open space on a different floor on the west side of 47 Hall Street. It was my easiest move yet, just across the loading dock. The new space was smaller and cheaper, but for the first time would be only mine, indefinitely. It got great light, and best of all the floor had heat, although I wouldn't stay long enough to experience it. After six months, I would be back to the east side of the building, with a newfound appreciation for the professionalism of my studio neighbors there. While Sweatshop had been a collection of visual artists, usually MFA-educated, the west side was a hodgepodge of types - artists, creatives, entrepreneurs, randoms and weirdos. The studios had all been built out by the two artists that ran the floor, but unlike at Sweatshop, here the exterior "walls" were compiled out of random crate sides and scraps of wood. The interiors, however, were properly spackled white walls, with preexisting wood floors and large industrial windows.

Next door to me was a rag-tag bike shop. Within a few months, they started renting out a second room, and a few months later would move to an even larger space down the hall. They split their time between fixing bikes and delivering racks of beer around Brooklyn. At night they would smoke weed in the shop and hang out. Once I overheard one of them talking about how he used to be extremely overweight, and biking saved his life; now they were able to make a living off that passion.

Mira, one of the two artists running the floor, had also rented and converted the floor above. It was the former headquarters of Jimmy Jazz, a clothing chain. Unlike our floor, this floor still had the look of a corporate office, complete with large glass doors to greet you when you got off the elevator. During my time there, Mira rented and converted another floor in the building, and, with a partner, she was also starting to rent floors in other buildings in the area. Mira told me that there was an apartment on the roof of 47 Hall Street, owned by the landlord's son. She wanted to rent that as well, to live there, but they wouldn't let her.

Across the hall from me was a black man in his 40s named Noah. He was balding, missing his front teeth, and had a thick beard. Noah sold records out of his space, and had stories for days. I would stay in the studio til 2 in the morning sometimes, and Noah always stayed later than me. I think he lived there. I would see Noah around in the area, selling records on the street, and sometimes I would buy one. Sometimes he would give me one for free. On the floor, all of the walls didn't touch the ceiling, so that the central heat could come into the individual studios. What this also meant was that sound leaked in and out of all the studios, which didn't deter Noah from blasting records whenever he was around. Sometimes it was hard to tune out, but his taste in music was great, and he told me if it was ever too loud I could knock on his door and he'd lower the volume. I never did. One night, I heard yelling between Noah and an unknown voice in the hallway, but I ignored it. The next day, Noah told me how his neighbor hated the noise, and confronted him while Noah, I don't know why, was naked.

People from my past came in and out of my life while I was there, especially since the floor was so public. I put my name on the door, and occasionally would get knocks on my door. Anthony, a friend of my karate days that I hadn't seen in ten years, worked for a video artist down the hall. The former editor of my high school fine arts magazine was now using a room down the hall as a photo studio. I helped my friend Lorenzo, both a fellow painter and skater, get a studio on the floor when I moved back to Sweatshop.

Lorenzo and I had moved to an apartment in Flatbush, my first apartment. Now that I would be paying rent, I decided I needed to find a cheaper studio, and soon a space opened back up at Sweatshop Studios. It felt good to be back. Julie, who held the lease to the space, had partitioned it into two spaces, one for her and one for me. The previous subletter had found an apartment near Astor Place, and decided the commute to the studio would be too inconvenient for her to stay in the space. I would take over her space permanently, and Julie, who was living and teaching at RISD, would found Laura, a sculptor, to sublet her half. She worked during the day, and I worked at night; for a year and a half, we almost never overlapped.

Like at other spaces, you feel the seasons at Hall Street. I would take the b44 bus to the intersection of Park and Rogers, a strongly Hasidic enclave of Brooklyn, and walk ten minutes to my job. After an eight-hour shift painting, I would walk two more blocks to Hall Street, to work on my own work until eleven or midnight, and then walk back to Park and Nostrand, across the street from the projects Jay-Z made famous, to catch the bus home. In January and February, those late-night walks and waits for the bus were some of the coldest moments I've experienced. Come summer, they were pleasant; up until Franklin Ave., it felt like you were the only person in the world.

That summer, I got a three-month printmaking residency, and spent the hot months working on etchings in an air-conditioned space. Come fall, I moved into a new apartment, back in Manhattan, a block away from the East Broadway train station. Not only was I already a regular in the area, but it meant that I was now one subway stop (plus a short bus ride) away from my studio. After making through another winter in the space, spring came, and then the summer heat. For the first time since graduating college, for the most part I didn't want to put up with the hot days and nights in my studio, and spent most of the summer making watercolors in my apartment. At the start of that summer, I came to the studio and her half was empty. Julie was moving back, and Laura was gone. The next week, Julie's half was full of boxes, multiple bicycles, and random detritus. Her half became more storage locker than studio.



One Chase Manhattan Plaza

Now I'm on to a new space. I was recently given a studio in the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's annual Workspace program, where unused office space in downtown Manhattan is converted into artist studios for a 9-month program. Nearly 1/3 of New York real estate is unoccupied, but for various reasons cannot be used to house an increasingly squeezed population. LMCC works to find these spaces and make deals with the landlords to give this opportunity to artists.

This year's program takes place in the heart of Manhattan's Financial District, on the 24th floor of 28 Liberty Street, formerly known as One Chase Manhattan Plaza, the global headquarters of JP Morgan Chase Bank. The Financial District has a relatively short history as a neighborhood, really starting with the 1960s construction of the World Trade Center.

Positioned at the confluence of several transportation routes, an entire district known as "Radio Row" would be claimed through eminent domain and demolished to make way for the new center of commerce₁.

One Chase Manhattan Plaza has its own history within this gentrification cycle. Predating the World Trade Center, this plaza was one of the first towers of its type in the area, and was meant to "revitalize" the area by making it more desirable for large firms. Along with the World Trade Center, the modern Financial District was created by this International Style giant:

This 60-story skyscraper resulted from the forward-looking vision of David Rockefeller, who was willing to construct the first International Style building in Lower Manhattan. At the time of its completion, the tower's rectilinear shape stood in stark contrast to the 19th-century spires of downtown, and its expansive plaza provided much-needed open space in the area. The Chase Tower unarguably served as a high point of urban transformation during the 1960s₂.

The building was recently bought by a Chinese investment firm, and is now being upgraded for still unknown uses, most likely higher-end retail and higher-end office spaces than what is currently there:

In 1964, SOM's One Chase Manhattan Plaza revitalized the urban landscape of Lower Manhattan with the introduction of the first International Style building in the area. In The New York Times, architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable wrote that "it carries the double promise of corporate efficiency and a more enduring value: significant civic beauty."



Fifty years later, this iconic tower and plaza—which received landmark designation in 2009—are under new ownership and ready to play a role in Lower Manhattan’s second renaissance. As the Financial District evolves into a 24-hour mixed-use neighborhood, SOM is returning to the project—now renamed 28 Liberty—to adaptively reuse over 200,000 square feet of former banking area below the plaza for retail, as well as reposition the tower for new office tenancy₂.

The plaza at One Chase Manhattan Plaza houses an enormous Jean Debuffet sculpture. Despite the arguable wreckage Chase Bank has caused over the last fifty years, their image, on the ground level, is a large open plaza with beautiful free art for anybody who wants to experience it. Art has power for institutions; it is an aesthetically-pleasing facade for darker insides, and ultimately this is the same purpose we serve on the 24th floor. We are good PR for industries that need all the good karma they can get. But a free studio space, especially in downtown Manhattan, is a rare commodity in New York, and that’s the bottom line.

Artists, to me, occupy a strange position. The spaces we occupy are converted from their original use in creative ways, but in doing so we pave the way for uncreative uses of those spaces, a cycle that frequently ends with us being evicted. Our creativity often comes at the cost of lower class residents, such as in neighborhoods like Bushwick, yet many artists I know refuse to acknowledge their role in the gentrification cycle. Martha Rosler describes the paradox best:

The search among artists, creative, and so forth, for a way of life that does not pave over older neighborhoods but infiltrates them with coffee shops, hipster bars, and clothing shops catering to their tastes is a sad echo of the tourist paradigm centering on the indigenous authenticity of the place they have colonized. The authenticity of these urban neighborhoods, with their largely working-class populations, is characterized not by bars and bodegas so much as by what the press calls grit, signifying the lack of bourgeois polish, and a kind of remainder of incommensurable nature in the midst of the city’s unnatural state. The arrival in numbers of artists, hipsters, and those who follow – no surprise here – brings about the eradication of this initial appeal. And, as detailed in Loft Living, the artists and hipsters are in due course driven out by wealthier folk, who move into the luxury conversions of abundant vacant lofts or new high-end construction in the evacuated manufacturing zones. Unfortunately, many artists who see themselves evicted in this process fail to see, or persist in ignoring, the role that artists have played in occupying these formerly alien precincts₃.



Then again, what choice do we have but to keep it moving? The next neighborhood up, so to speak, is the South Bronx. I've been seeing Craigslist postings for studios in Port Morris, just off the 6 train for about three years, and the prices are barely over \$1/sq foot. Eric Mack recently moved his studio to the area, as have a few others. I've thought about it. Recently I biked from my apartment in Chinatown to Hunts Point, to see where "Hookers at the Point" took place for myself. On the way, I biked thru Port Morris. There is a small strip, a couple of blocks wide, of industrial warehouse buildings, with the same fittings of an Industry City or a Hall Street. Bordering one side of the strip is the Bruckner Expressway, just as Hall Street borders the BQE. Surrounding two of the other sides are NYCHA housing projects, just as 544 Park is across from Marcy. On the final side of this 6-block strip is 136th street, a major street like Washington Ave. In a few years, I may be walking to the train here on cold winter nights, bundled up in a North Face, thinking of where to relocate my studio next.

As I consider the energy of the present cultural scene, I'm also struck by a sense of urgency – even a sense of melancholy. After all, history shows that these moments don't last very long – I wish I could convince everyone to appreciate that fact, and make the most of what's going on right now.

Peter Halley
A Utopian Moment

Footnotes

- 1: CLOG: World Trade Center (<http://www.clog-online.com/shop/clog-world-trade-center>)
- 2: SOM projects website (http://www.som.com/projects/one_chase_manhattan_plaza;
http://www.som.com/projects/28_liberty_formerly_one_chase_manhattan_plaza)
- 3: Martha Rosler, *Culture Class*, page 127 (<http://www.e-flux.com/books/66671/culture-class>)

Images

- Pages 1 and 9: The view from the roof of 47 Hall Street (35mm photos: Esteban Jefferson)
Pages 10-11: Harold Hunter skating One Chase Manhattan Plaza in 1998 (video: Zoo York Mixtape)