

The Art World Needs to Rally Behind the #CancelRent Movement to Save Itself—and Everyone Else, Too

Extraordinary measures aren't just just right now. They are necessary.

Ben Davis, April 8, 2020



The Illuminator projects the "Cancel the Rent" message on Saturday, March 28, in Manhattan. Image courtesy the Illuminator.

At the end of last month, just a little less than a week after New York's economy was put on "pause" to combat the cresting coronavirus crisis, the artist group known as the Illuminator staged a guerrilla action in Manhattan, projecting this slogan onto a skyscraper: "Cancel the Rent."

That demand is not some dreamy wish-list item right now. It's a baseline survival necessity. Without serious relief for those thrown out of work and businesses forcibly shuttered, the cascade effects are going to turbocharge the chaos that is already unfolding.

How the people whose livelihoods have been upended are going to make it through this period is not narrowly an "art issue." Every sector of the economy is affected.

But it *is* an art issue, since hundreds of small art spaces that already operated on wisp-thin margins are now teetering on the brink. That's why, for instance, both the New Art Dealers Alliance (NADA) and the Art Dealers Association of America (ADAA) got on board immediately with state senator Michael Gianaris's Senate Bill S8125A, which would cancel commercial and residential rent for 90 days for anyone impacted by the coronavirus crisis.

NADA @newartdealers

NADA is calling on NYC to provide COVID-19 relief for art galleries, artists, and art workers ❤️ Show your support for our community during this challenging time by signing and sharing our petition change.org/p/mayor-bill-d...

COVID-19 Relief for NYC Art Galleries, Artists, and Art Workers

10:37 AM · Mar 20, 2020

23 ⚡ See the latest COVID-19 information on Twitter

Even 90 days is unlikely to be sufficient, but it is a start. Saying that the idea of rent relief is popular right now would be an understatement. "Our own senate website almost crashed yesterday because so many people were logging on to support this bill," Gianaris told New York last week. "It was the most interactions we've ever had on our website for a piece of legislation."

I have in my inbox a chaotic welter of online petitions (business is good, at least, over at Change.org!), all pleading for relief measures of different kinds during this extraordinary shutdown period,

commanding a combined hundreds of thousands of signatures. At least two of these, I note, were started by art workers of various kinds, showing how keenly the arts community's precarious labor force feels the pain. Jodi and Lauren Savitz, whose #RentFreezeNYC petition has close to 18,000 signatures, are documentary filmmakers. Marti Cummings, whose "Suspend Rent & Mortgage in New York During COVID-19" petition has close to 150,000, is a Hell's Kitchen politico and drag performer.

"This crisis is going to bankrupt businesses and people, specifically low-income people who struggle to pay rent as it is in an increasingly high-rent city," Cummings told Gothamist. "This is going to take a long time to recover from, and that's why we need to put these policies in place now." With nightlife venues shuttered, Cummings is resorting to doing drag shows via Facebook Live.

The coronavirus shutdown has plunged the "experience economy" into a cryogenic deep freeze. It's possible that this freeze can merely be a period of brutal hibernation—but only if we keep financial life-support systems on. And that means finding a way to #CancelRent.

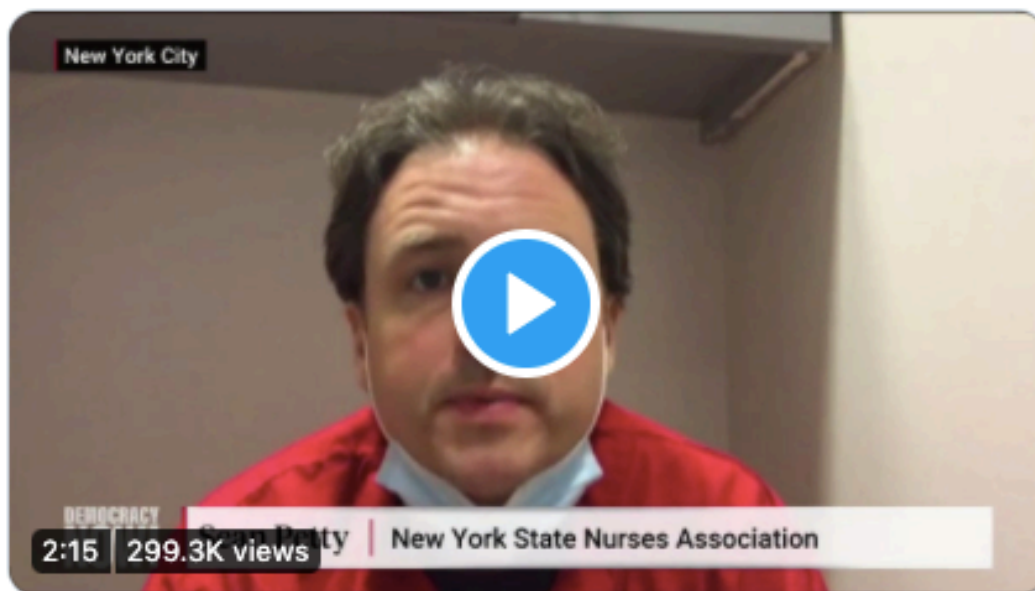
Everyone is swooning over Andrew Cuomo's bared biceps right now, but he was a knave before and he's a knave now, in my book (gotta love the generational warfare of Vogue vs. Teen Vogue on that score). Listen to the nurses who have fought the Cuomo Cutbacks for years and now have to risk their lives facing the medical equivalent of a thousand-year-flood while manning a lifeboat that the Governor has personally poked holes in—then tell me he's your pandemic hero.



Democracy Now! 
@democracynow



Sean Petty of @nynurses says NY Governor Andrew Cuomo is the "single most important person in terms of the drive to close down hospital beds in this state over the last 20 years. ... We are now 20,000 beds behind where we need to be in terms of trying to scale up our capacity."



8:40 AM · Mar 25, 2020



 3.1K

 1.6K people are Tweeting about this

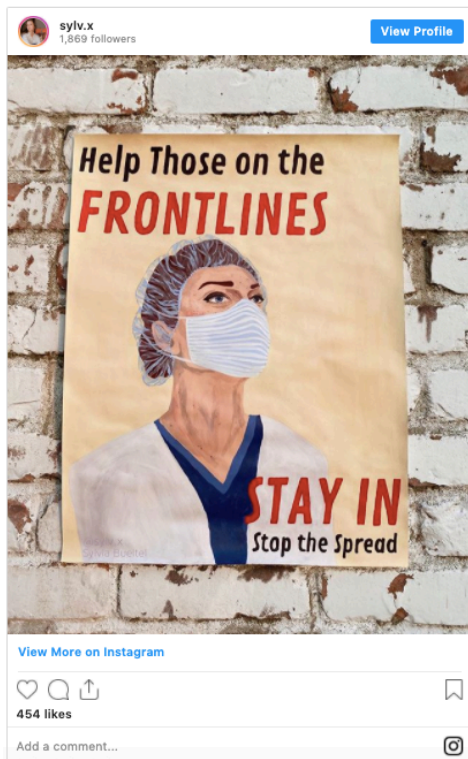
Last week, the state budget was passed without Gianaris's 90-day lifeline on rent. Gianaris is now pleading for Cuomo to act by executive order, but the governor counters that his temporary moratorium on evictions means that he has already done enough—even though it still forces laid-off workers and idled small business owners to spend money on rent over essentials at a time when, because of Cuomo's own (needed) "pause" of the economy, they literally cannot make money.

What are they supposed to pay the rent *with*? What's the plan here?

Cuomo himself stoked the idea that exceptional emergency action was both possible and necessary when he worked with banks to stop mortgage payments for 90 days for affected property owners, calling it “a stress reliever for many families.” Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was perfectly accurate when she weighed in on the issue, saying that relieving homeowners while leaving stricken renters out to dry is a “class and race” issue, because owners tend to be wealthier than renters.

The real estate industry is Cuomo’s biggest donor. Real estate, as the urban geographer Tom Angotti has pointed out, is to New York as oil is to Houston. So I am not surprised that the real estate industry would fight hard to mute any demands for a rent jubilee—but the result could well be mass homelessness, blight, and a downward spiral of declining commercial activity that will make recovery even more anguishing. See how well their property values do then.

Wartime analogies are in vogue just now. We are told we need a mobilization of society on the level of World War II to get through this. War conditions supply the only images our military-obsessed country knows that evoke a sense of collective purpose that justifies sacrifice; normally, hyper-individualistic hedonism and “compensatory consumption” are sold to us as our birthright and sole purpose in life.



Most New Yorkers have risen to the challenge, treating this crisis with urgency and staying home—and thereby possibly crippling their own means of economic survival for the greater good.

But as long as we are deploying war analogies, let’s just point out that during World War II, New York actually did pass a pair of extraordinary laws, the “Emergency Commercial Space Rent Control Law” and the “Emergency Business Space Rent Control Law,” both in 1945. Those laws, somewhat unique in American history, were efforts targeted at mitigating the unbearable pressures that total mobilization for the war

caused, since new construction was halted in NYC and expanded government administration gobbled up space. Hated by the real estate industry, these laws lasted until 1963.

If mobilizing for the “war on COVID-19” is to be more than just a metaphor to justify excruciating levels of human misery, history says that it implies heroic and ingenious solutions to cushion the worst of the collateral damage—including previously unthinkable emergency rent measures. Again, that’s not pie in the sky; it’s the minimum required for survival. Otherwise all the “war” talk is just an empty phrase to cover an awful void of vision.

The plight of art spaces is definitely not more real than the plight of, for example, immigrant restaurants in Queens, but it does by its nature have a little bit more visibility. Maybe art can use that visibility to fight for something that will save itself and also stop the entire fabric around it from being torn to bits. #CancelRent.

<https://news.artnet.com/opinion/the-arts-community-needs-to-rally-behind-cancelrent-movement-to-save-itself-and-everyone-else-1828110>