

CLAYTON PATTERSON

INTERVIEW AND INTRODUCTION BY KATHY GRAYSON
PORTRAIT BY KATHY LO

CLAYTON PATTERSON IS STRANGE ENOUGH IN APPEARANCE THAT, DESPITE HOW HARD IT IS TO STAND OUT TODAY IN NEW YORK CITY, YOU KNOW JUST BY LOOKING AT HIM THAT HE IS AN OUTSIDER WEIRDO WITH AN INTERESTING HISTORY.

Wearing a long, grey beard, a denim vest and one of his signature embroidered caps, he can be spotted around town or on the block of his Essex Street loft and gallery. He has lived on the Lower East Side of Manhattan with Elsa Rensaa, his partner and collaborator, since 1979. During this time he not only watched the area become a very different place, he also documented the dramatic transition on film and video.

Burned out cars smoldering in front of crumbling tenements on Ludlow Street, homeless shantytowns filling Tompkins Square Park: Clayton's images are unfamiliar to a new generation of New York City youth who can't fathom the transformation that their neighborhood has undergone in the last 30 years. The photographs of punks and junkies, squatters and gangs, tattooing and experimental art all betray his intimacy and involvement with the community in which he has lived. His amazing photos of early drag queen culture, gleaned from his special dressing room access at the Pyramid Club, will soon be one of the only remnants of radical underground gay culture in New York as it is slowly pushed out of the city.

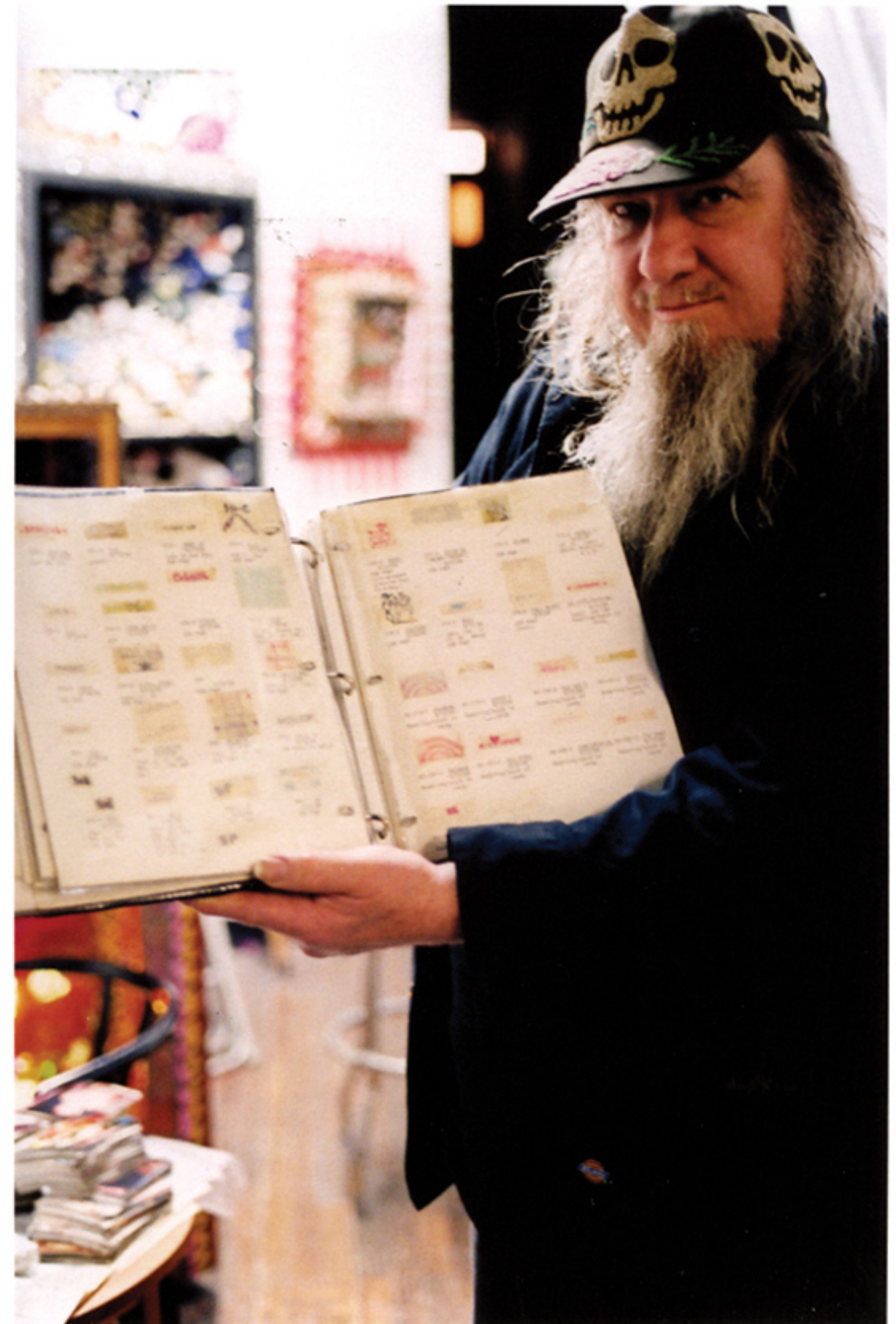
Besides capturing the look and feel of a diverse community of people, Clayton also recorded riots and police brutality, and has endured years of legal battles with people who do not want these images shown. His videos were instrumental in bringing down a bevy of corrupt police officers over the years, and his footage of the Tompkins Square Park riots landed him on *Oprah* to discuss the growing restrictions on civil liberties during the late '80s.

If you think that the current New York downtown culture is amnesiac, think again. Two young members of the downtown scene have recently made a movie about the old Lower East

Side and the man who captured it, Clayton Patterson. Ben Solomon and Dan Levin, who are by all means a vibrant part of now, devoted over a year of work to sharing a vivid look at then. This is not the "then" of the commercial and advertising worlds, the "then" of savvy branding using sanitized styles of the early '80s, or of the successful bands that imitate their sound. There is a straightforward and eye-opening look at the then that has been trampled on and buried under the new condominiums sprouting up.

I saw *Captured* a few months ago in an unheated abandoned building, sitting on cold, graffiti-covered metal scaffolding, smoking cigarettes and drinking beers. A guy to my right started doing key bumps halfway through, and by the end of the movie there were 100 or so wasted weirdoes assembled in the derelict shack... Come again? Yes, very briefly there existed the exact kind of outlaw space that the old LES was known for, courtesy of a new generation's lead downtown derelict, Aaron Bondaroff, who had recently annexed and destroyed a renegade space called the Wreck Center, hosting events like this screening of *Captured*, a movie that exhumes just the type of old New York energy that the current generation of downtown creatives are trying to resurrect.

As the years pass, Clayton's immense archive will only become increasingly valuable as New York becomes more and more safely homogenized. At Clayton's house on Essex Street, while I rifle through boxes of photographs, he describes the factors that go into creating such a vibrant and interdisciplinary—and tough—moment in the history of New York: factors he does not think are likely to come again.



Gross, what is that?

There were all these different characters on the Lower East Side who I would document, and this picture is of Arthur Johnson dissecting a rat. He thought that the government was out to poison him, so he would feed his food to his rats first to see if they would die. The rats would always get these tumors and he would do autopsies on them. He had his whole bedroom tin foiled so that the CIA couldn't get through with their "rays."

Are all of these boxes I'm surrounded by full of photos?

Most of them. I probably have close to a million photographs in all kinds of areas and some of this stuff is wild and truly exciting. Hidden treasures that I have documentation of. You know, it's the outside edge that defines society in a way. It tells you how far the society will go. So lets say, in the '50s, the whole outside of society might have worn blue jeans with rivets and a black leather jacket, while now it's like that picture you're holding of Roger cutting off his fingers and toes. That's how far it's moved.

It seems you documented a lot of extreme body art and tattooing before it became mainstream.

I helped it become mainstream. I was the president of the New York Tattoo Society for over a decade. Many people that came to that society were people who had never been involved in tattoos before and through it they became world class. Sean Vasquez, Paul Booth, that whole early '90s wave of young people all belonged to the New York Tattoo Society.

Do you think that movement was one example of reaching the limit to which you can push the boundaries of self-presentation?

No, absolutely not. Look at Lucky Rich: He tattooed all of himself black and now he's going over all of it with white. I fought for legalizing tattooing in New York City, me and another guy—under Giuliani, I might add—and won. From that we started the New York City Tattoo Convention. Once a year at Roseland Ballroom. Yes, tattooing has now been gentrified like the Lower East Side has been gentrified. So the edge has gone off tattoos too. All this stuff your mother told you not to do.

What about your documentation of the underground music scene on the LES?

I mean, that hardcore scene in '87, that was as hot a scene as it could get. When you are in a room and everything reaches the highest decibel of energy, creativity, rhythm... everything is as one and when it reaches that note, this sense of harmony, that's perfection. Some of those shows at CB's reached that level, and they're unacknowledged—except I have videotapes of them! So that is an important thing. It reached that level and people who weren't there to touch it or taste it, they don't get it. They only get the memories that come out years later when people suddenly say, "Oh, that was so fantastic." Like how people talk now about Max's Kansas City.

Was it a lot of work going through your archive with Ben and Dan to make this movie?

The amazing thing about them was that all the other people who have wanted to make books or movies about my archive have gotten lost and confused because there is so much material. Ben and Dan are the first ones to be able to come in with a clear concept and turn it into an organized and coherent movie. Obviously, big parts of the archive were left out, but I think they made a brilliant and very well done movie.

What do you think was their main objective as they searched your archive? Were they interested in comparing what you captured in the '80s and '90s to what is happening on the Lower East Side now?

They are New York kids and they grew up here; now they're watching their whole world disappear before their eyes. It's shocking to them, as it is to me, and the fact that I have documented this transition period, when a lot of what they were interested in as kids is disappearing... I think there was a connection in that way.

Were they familiar with a lot of the photos you were showing them?

Even though they are under 30, they have really been around. They've done the clubs, music scenes, different hip scenes. In terms of what's happening in youth culture in the world and in New York, a lot of it happens on the Lower East side first, so these guys have seen it. They are familiar with parts of this history—maybe not the specific, but definitely the general.

What are some of the factors that created that unique environment in the late '70s and early '80s on the Lower East Side?

Cheap rent, no contest. Actually there were a lot of things. I made a book called The Radical Political and Social History of the Lower East Side. It's an anthology of photography, writing and interviews, and it covers all different sorts of views, from a police chief's to a bum's. Basically, when there were these racial inner city riots in the '60s, the government came to a decision that it had to break up the immigrant groups in the poor areas because they were going to destroy America. So it created the idea of "special de-concentration": emptying the cities of all these inner city people. Eventually, in the '70s, the government adapted this plan to something called "planned shrinkage," which took place in the ghettos and a lot of downtown. What they did was shrink the services in those areas—like the police and the fire departments—even though there are all kinds of crime and fires happening. That allowed the neighborhoods to just burn away like old forests, and clear themselves out. By 1979 all of the inner city had been burnt to a crisp and there were innumerable abandoned buildings. During the rebuilding of downtown in the '80s, one of the early influences was the money that came from across the street in Chinatown and Canal Street.

The Chinese bought the Lower East Side?

There were a couple of factors: Little Italy began to change into Chinatown, so you could see the rents increasing on the Bowery and into the Village and on the Lower East Side, because all of a sudden there was this influx of money. The buildings started to get bought up and renovated. A huge portion of the buildings from Essex to Rivington are run by the Chinese still—the building next door to here, the one on the corner, all kinds of buildings down here. Then, the little art gallery scene that was around in the early '80s left because it actually became cheaper to rent in SoHo than down here. That's why PPOW and most of those other galleries migrated over to there. Colin De Land went from Vox Populi to American Fine Arts, where it used to be on 6th Street between A and B. And then by the time you start getting into the mid-'80s, it's still really grimy and there are a lot of buildings being squatted, but you could see the change.

Who was mayor then?

Ed Koch. And you know Koch was really corrupt too. You had this entrenched Democratic government that had become stagnated, corrupt and lethargic, and not very visionary at all. So by Koch's third term, although downtown was rebuilding in terms of this Chinese money, there were drugs like crazy, everywhere, drug mania going on. This was a drug neighborhood, one of the biggest in the world. There was serious corruption.

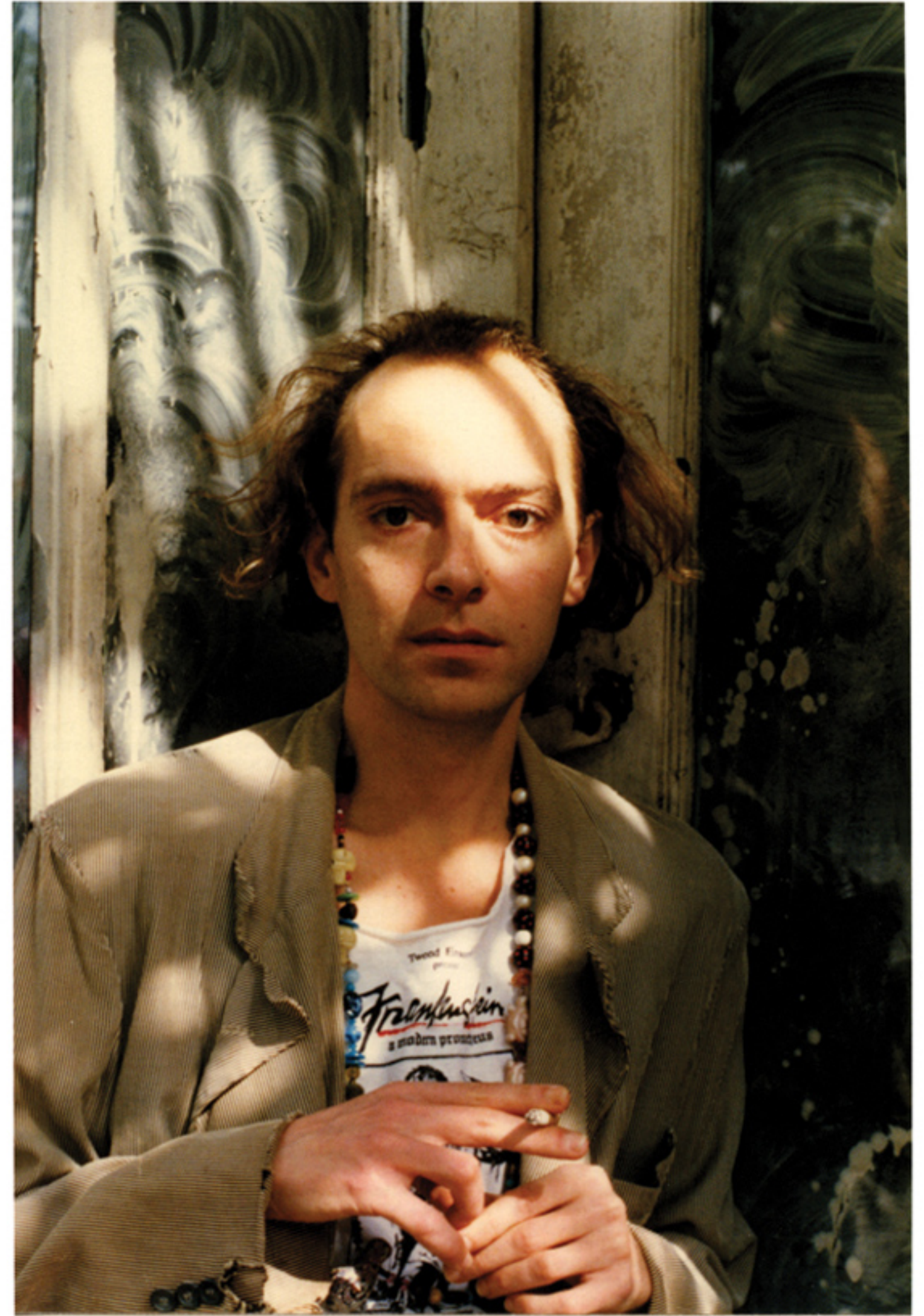
Continued on page 156



Undercover cop with gun found during drug bust



Richard Kern and Audrey Rose



Edgar Oliver



Koch was hilarious in Captured. Just unabashedly talking about how his government didn't care about poor people and that he was "on vacation somewhere" when the Tompkins Square Park riots took place.

It was nuts by 1988 when I made this videotape of what became known as the Tompkins Square Park Police Riot. That riot showed that the police on that particular night were anarchists. After the night was over, the city was in upheaval, anarchy everywhere, drugs everywhere, the whole moral and social fabric was in decline, descending into this abyss. It was followed by many years of conflict between the police and the community and then there started to come this desire for real change.

Was that achieved?

Well, by this time you get to Dinkins. Dinkins was the most effective mayor because he did two things: He realized that the police needed to be better organized, especially after seeing the riot tape and how out of control they were. So he turned the police force into a paramilitary operation, which was a huge shift in the philosophy and values of the police up until then. It meant you had this strong command structure where everyone followed orders, listened up, formed a line—all the sort of things that you are supposed to do in a military society. And then Dinkins formed the Mollen Commission, which prosecuted dirty cops. You had the "Morgue Boys," the "Dirty Thirty," the whole 9th Precinct and all these different rings of cops. But once the police were organized, they had control of the city. Once you start controlling the streets, you can do whatever you want in terms of gentrification. [Looking at a picture] This is part of the casitas and a guy sweeping it up.

What's a casitas?

The little summerhouses people would build in empty lots.

I've never seen things like this.

There used to be a lot of them. All the empty lots on the LES would have these houses in them.

Built by the owners out of found materials?

Yes. This photo is of Dinkinsville. This was the cops coming around four in the morning to clear everybody out, so the guys just burned their own place down.

Can you tell me more about that?

This is 8th Street between B and C, and they took over this lot and made a shantytown. This was after everyone was kicked out of Tompkins Square. They called it Dinkinsville because mayor Dinkins was in office. You know how in the '30s there was something called a Hooverville?

For Herbert Hoover?

Yeah. So this was at four in the morning and the cops were going to come, so rather than letting the cops throw all their possessions into a big garbage truck, they just burned everything. Burned the whole thing down. [Looking at a picture] This was next to a squat on 9th Street near Ave. A. There was this guy who had a store where Jimmy Spencer used to live and someone burned it up while he was inside.

What's this photo?

That's on 13th Street in the early '80s. When the police were coming in to evict the squatters there, they had to bring in a couple hundred cops and a tank... and eventually there were overturned cars. That was one of the last squat conflicts.

So after the crackdown on corrupt police...

After organizing the police, going paramilitary and cleaning out the rogue cops, they then set about turning this area into an "entertainment zone."



A what?

I remember first hearing that phrase when I got banned from the precinct council for asking too many questions. That was under Captain Cooper.

Bleh.

Yeah, someone within the government actually had that phrase as the concept for the Lower East Side. The police began working to clear everyone off the streets here except for drunken yuppies because they are the intended "entertainment zone" crowd.

It looks like a war zone in some of these photos. Do you think a lot of young people today are aware of what the Lower East Side used to look like?

I mean, they walk around here with air in their heads, mentally somewhere else with their headphones or iPhone. Back then, if you were walking around here and lost your instincts for one split second, bingo!

So how do you view the state of cultural activity on the Lower East Side now?

If you don't have the money or the connections, you don't have the possibility of surviving here. Everything is so expensive and unless you have finances to keep your machine running, it's hard. A lot of contemporary artistic culture was and still is connected to cheap rent!

So where would an artist live now if not the LES?

If I were a kid today I would go to China. I think the main place is China. It doesn't have all the tuggery of Russia. The Chinese seem to adapt to capitalism really well and things seem to be starting over there.

In terms of my recent curatorial projects, I've found that many of the artists I'm interested in are coming from 3rd-tier cities like Providence or Philadelphia or Milwaukee. Places where you can still live cheaply in an abandoned building with your friends, and then come to New York or through New York to promote your work.

This city is becoming a marketplace and that's all. The possibility of artists hanging out together to get something started here is over. A place like CB's had to be shitty to get started. All those bands were not the greatest in the beginning; the thing was that they could go there to practice and to build up a fan base. And you eventually get better, you get your chops, you get used to playing with an audience, get bigger and badder and better, and off you go!

What do you think of the young New York scene such as it is, even though the numbers might be thinned?

I think it's very exciting, it's just so hard. I mean, the turnover is so great. Look at how short-lived some of these places are that got their buzz going. Like ALIFE: They had their whole thing started, recognized and going on Orchard Street, and now after a few years the part of the block they're on is being torn down! They became successful, but they lost a big part of their image by losing a big part of their block. How damaging was it to them? I don't know. It's hard to know that. You have businesses like A-Ron's that change in management or get bought out; the economics of keeping the scene going is so stiff. Look at all of the art movements connected to cheap rent. Jackson Pollock, Charlie Parker, Keith Haring... the list is endless, endless! The whole story of the American dream—"I came to New York with \$20 in my pocket and I survived and made millions," or "I survived and became a famous artist"—what, you think you can still do that now?

Continued on page 161



Attorney Street Boys, 1985



Dr. Al "The Chemist" Miller heroin altar



6 a.m. fire at Dinkinsville, a homeless camp on E. 8th Street between Avenues B and C

It seems that Captured has some optimism to it about the future of downtown.

Hey look, I'm still here. I guess there are two things for me. One is that I have a huge archive and a lot of artwork and I can spend time now looking back and putting all the things into place. The second thing is that I've been lucky to have met all these young people who are truly exciting and interesting and inspired and unique, and that has been very vital too. If I think of some of the people I've shown here [in my gallery space on Christie Street] like Dash [Snow] and Nico and Kunle and Felipe and Joe Semz, these are interesting and exciting people. Lucien is an exciting restaurant, ALIFE is a great shop. When they moved here, I started taking photos at their events and connecting through them to others. I had one of my hats in a Deitch show.

I loved that show. A zine from it inspired my first curatorial project.

Yeah, look at that group, at least five of them have been in the Whitney Biennial. That's a pretty highly charged set of ingredients if you think about it, and that's a pretty wild art scene. But I can see the struggle of trying to maintain in all of that. In a lot of ways, the world is much more dangerous now even though there is less danger in the streets. But there are a lot of drugs.

Like there was in the art world back then also, right?

That was part of why I kind of dropped out of that whole SoHo world. Drugs, real heavy drugs. Also, if you weren't gay then you were really a guy guy—like, a bravado money guy like Schnabel or something. That in your hand is a photo of Gracie Mansion. Those people in the picture always ran around with the money crowd. And if you're going to go to Odeon to drink champagne, you must be able to spend the cash to hang out with them. Mr. Chow's for lunch and all of that. High-end or gay. A split based on two worlds that I wasn't connected with.

I hate to say it about now, but... I won't say it. So were you involved in the East Village gallery scene instead?

No, never really. You know, Houston Street is a big dividing line down here. Even though I knew a lot of the East Village scene, it didn't mesh with me; it was almost like another country down there. The East Village was more fun, wild, crazy. The expressionist version of Paradise Garage. Speaking of, one of the other big ingredients in the old LES was the club world. In the club world you had Danceteria, you had the Pyramid Club, you had the Palladium, the Cat Club and Limelight. Peter Kwaloff, the drag queen, got me into the Pyramid Club, and then I photographed the dressing rooms there for a couple of years every Sunday. Through that I met the security there, who were in the hardcore scene, so I got to know that scene. It kind of went like that, where you had all these different little pockets and you could go from one group to the other. It made it a sort of creative crucible because you had dancers, performers, slam poets, drag queens, Hell's Angels, and every kind of rock and roll imaginable, from glam rock to metal to hardcore, punk, grunge, ska... on and on like that. These multiple pieces created this big complex diamond that you could absorb different parts of. For documenting it was great! You could go from Karen Black to GG Allin! What people today can't understand is the social energetic buzz to all of it. In a ghetto like this, you had a diverse immigrant population, and so you had all these remnants of different cultures, even just in cuisine: Jewish food, Polish food, Russian food, Chinese food and all these inexpensive restaurants to sell it. And in all these ethnic groups you had alcoves of art and culture.—Ukrainian eggs, for example—windows into other countries' art. You got a lot of inspiration from that and you couldn't get it anywhere else. Side by side were ultra-Orthodox Jews and women from Bangladesh with their faces covered, all kinds of Chinese... Then it became more expensive to live here.

Continued on page 164



Homeless take over Avenue A, 1990



13th Street squat eviction, 1996

How long have you had this building?

We bought it in '83 and had exhibitions here since '86. People have no idea how dangerous it used to be down here. The first night we lived here, I saw someone get shot when I was just looking out the window.

So in this neighborhood you identified with people that tended to be public artists or community artists or just weirdos? Like that mosaic man from Captured?

Yeah, but also look at Kembra Pfahler: She had been pretty much unknown in the art world for years, not from lack of talent but because crossovers for stuff like that weren't happening back then. Or take that whole drag queen scene that happened at the Pyramid Club, it was really a phenomenal art forum. And that is as yet undiscovered! The most famous two to come out of that scene, Ru Paul and Lady Bunny, honed careers and polished one image, but some of those people like Peter Kwaloff, who would change his whole look and act every single week, were far more creative!

Why were they overlooked?

That kind of creativity is just too abundant for the art world to get involved in, because dealers have to see it, specialize in it and then explain it to somebody else. And if it's changing and transforming all the time, you can't get your hands on it. I think I photographed a lot of things that were truly great, things that are only beginning to be understood now.

Do you think that as time goes on, people will discover...

This place will be like King Tut's tomb!

It seems like you have seen and documented many different subcultural moments. Is there any one defining activity now? What groups do you see now? Is there a defining sensibility or is it just a mess?

Especially after 911, and breaking into this new millennium, there is this confusion of style. Now at a rock show, everything has lost its edge of individuality. Look at Mercury Lounge when there is some big rock show going on and the difference between the yuppie and the wild outsider artist is a very minimal. The colors are muted and similar, the hair is similar, one has a certain hat, one has a \$400 T-shirt and one a dirty, ripped T-shirt—they look the same. Before, there used to be distinct differences: There'd be a punk, there'd be a skinhead, there'd be a grunge, a Goth, a club kid, whatever. There would be extremely individuated personalities, and now it's becoming homogenized. So I think people now are looking to break away, they are looking to be refreshed and excited by something stimulating, and I think by looking to the underground it brings up that edge, that stimulation. There is a point where you feel too safe, safe and safe. You get on the airplane, everyone has to be safe. Everywhere you go you have to be extra, extra safe. I think there is that need for people now psychologically to feel unsafe.

Do you worry about people romanticizing this? It seems you cover both the fun and exotic, and the very dark and dangerous side of things.

Well, it was all of that in a way. There is no question that it was life and death in a lot of cases. It really was that marginal. And there really were a lot of creeps around killing people, or worse. But what I'm documenting are things that are one way or another connected to creativity.

Criminal creativity as well?

Let's say "the positive side."



Taking down 5th Street squat, 1997