

KINZ, TILLOU + FEIGEN
The New York Times
August 8, 1999

Lens on the Lower East Side

By Colin Moynihan

It was a warm spring night, and Clayton Patterson was drinking a beer in his storefront office and art gallery on Essex Street when the telephone rang. Mr. Patterson picked up the receiver and listened for a moment before calling to Elsa Rensaa, who lives with him in a loft above the storefront, between East Houston and Stanton Streets. The couple hurried outside, bringing a still camera and a video camera. They jogged around the corner and halted opposite a six-story brick tenement at 143 Ludlow Street. The caller had tipped off Mr. Patterson that a drug bust was about to take place there.

Two men standing in the building doorway were wearing shields on lanyards around their necks, but pedestrians walked past with barely a glance. Minutes later, some half-dozen uniformed New York Police Department officers converged on the block.

As plainclothes officers led a man and a woman from the building in handcuffs, Mr. Patterson photographed and Ms. Rensaa filmed the scene.

"This is what a drug bust is like," Mr. Patterson said. "You see them on TV blasting down the front door with their guns drawn, but really it's a very well-planned, choreographed event." He crossed Ludlow Street to speak to a small group of residents to whom the bust had seemed a straightforward occurrence.

But as he often does, Mr. Patterson perceived more than readily met the eye. He pointed out that 143 Ludlow Street was owned by Alvin Weiss, also known as Mark Glass, who was convicted in January of trying to hire a neighborhood thug to administer a fatal overdose of heroin to a tenant of a building he owned on Clinton Street. According to Mr. Patterson, 143 Ludlow had been a known drug spot for years. "After you've been in the neighborhood for a while, patterns begin to emerge," he said as he and Ms. Rensaa headed home. "There's a history to almost everything that goes on down here."

For the last 16 years, Clayton Patterson, 50, has documented life in the East Village and the Lower East Side, creating an archive that aims to define the history of the area. Since 1983, he estimates, he has shot 4,000 hours of 8-millimeter and half-inch film and taken 750,000 color photographs of people and events there.

His video footage has been broadcast on CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS and PBS, and his photographs have been published in The New York Times and New York Newsday, as well as several local weekly newspapers.

Because of his documentation of events like the Tompkins Square melee of 1988, during which he filmed a videotape credited by many as the most complete record of the conflict, Mr. Patterson has become a controversial figure. He has been arrested, and he has filed lawsuits against the police. Some public officials say they admire his activism; others denounce him as a gadfly and provocateur. Mr. Patterson's achievement as a documentarian is often ignored in these debates.

"He isn't exploiting the neighborhood," said Janet Abu-Lughod, a sociology professor at the New School University and an author of "From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side," (Blackwell) "For him, documenting the area is like a religion."

Despite the vastness of Mr. Patterson's archive, relatively few people know about it. "He's probably got the most complete library in existence documenting the East Village and Lower East Side, but only a minute percentage has ever been seen," said a freelance photographer, John Penley, whose pictures have appeared in the city's three daily newspapers and many other publications, and who has recorded many of the same events as Mr. Patterson. "He's out on the streets constantly, and because he knows so many people he gets great access in the neighborhood."

The archive is especially valuable because the areas Mr. Patterson has documented have changed drastically over the last decade. "In the future, as people begin to study the times and places he documented, Clayton's photographs and film will have great historical value," Mr. Penley said. "People may not realize it yet, but how many people recognized the significance of Jacob Riis's photographs when he was taking them?"

Some 45,000 of Mr. Patterson's photographs are stored in a tall green filing cabinet next to his office door. The rest are in large cardboard boxes in the long, cluttered loft space upstairs.

The loft is also the repository of collections of neighborhood flotsam he has assembled. There are postcards and fliers advertising art exhibits, rock-and-roll shows and theatrical performances; notebooks whose pages have been marked by graffiti artists, and other notebooks whose pages are filled with the signatures of people who have visited him, including the late beat poet Herbert Huncke, and the punk rocker G. G. Allin, the leader of the band Murder Junkies, who promised to commit suicide on stage and died of a heroin overdose after a 1995 performance.

Mr. Patterson also has a collection of small glassine and plastic bags that at one time contained heroin. Orderly rows of those bags are arranged in several black albums of the sort commonly used to display snapshots. Below each is written the location where it was found by Mr. Patterson or Ms. Rensaa and the date.

The envelopes bear names and icons used by dealers to identify the drug inside: Blue Moon, Body Bag, Double Diamond, DOA, Dom Perignon and China Cat. The last, sold on a corner of Clinton and Rivington Streets in late summer 1994, was blamed by the police for 14 deaths by overdose.

"These dope bags may seem macabre," Mr. Patterson said one afternoon as he stood in the loft surrounded by boxes and large wooden sculptures. "But they also reveal something about what went on in this neighborhood."

Clashing With the Police And a Motorcycle Gang

Many people whom Mr. Patterson has documented have been ordinary citizens engaged in lawful pursuits. For example, in his storefront window is a large wooden board on which he displays photographs of neighborhood children posing in front of his door.

But much of his work depicts people in less prosaic settings: cops making arrests, junkies shooting up, drag queens performing in after-hours clubs and card games in illegal high-stakes gambling dens. He has filmed fires, protests, civil disturbances and collapsed buildings.

To do so, he has stood on the sidewalk for hours holding a plastic sheet above his head as protection from the rain, entered buildings occupied by squatters and crossed police lines. He says he has been roughed up by police officers and threatened by members of the motorcycle gang Satan's Sinners, who thought, wrongly, that he was photographing them for the police.

Some scenes Mr. Patterson has documented unfolded unexpectedly. One evening five years ago, he said, he looked out his window and saw a man being chased by a crowd along Essex Street. After grabbing his camera, Mr. Patterson caught up with the group at Stanton and Ludlow Streets, just in time to witness the man shot by a pursuer. Mr. Patterson said he called 911, then drove the man to Bellevue Hospital where he had time to snap one picture in the emergency room just before the victim was wheeled into surgery.

Neighborhood opinion about Mr. Patterson is divided. Community Board 3's district manager, Martha Danziger, describes him as a competent and professional video technician and praises his involvement in local political causes, like the unsuccessful fight to save the Pitt Street fire station pumper truck.

Councilwoman Margarita Lopez says she has often differed with Mr. Patterson but adds that some of his work, like his documentation of police brutality and his courtroom testimony on behalf of brutality victims, has been valuable to the community.

"You can question his intensity and disagree with his point of view," she said, "but you cannot question his ethics or his morality."

Others, though, are critical of Mr. Patterson's detachment while photographing grisly scenes. In 1997, John Hagan, 63, was beaten and left for dead on East Houston Street by Pedro Diaz, 16. Mr. Patterson filmed the beating -- the tape was subpoenaed -- but told the police that he could not identify the assailant. Mr. Hagan died from his injuries and Mr. Diaz later confessed to the murder.

Mr. Hagan's sister, Patricia Hagan, railed against Mr. Patterson's conduct. "I always knew him as a rabble-rouser who goes against what is decent," she said, "but I never thought he would stand by and let a crime like that take place, then go unpunished. He is a voyeur in search of publicity."

Designer of Caps, Fan of Tattoos

Clayton Patterson grew up and went to art school in Alberta, Canada. In 1971, he met Elsa Rensaa in Calgary, and the following year they moved east so Mr. Patterson could attend Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. He taught high school and college in Canada before moving to Manhattan in 1979. For a few years they lived on Broome Street. Mr. Patterson held a succession of jobs, including one as a printmaker in TriBeCa and another as a building manager on the Bowery. In 1983, the couple bought the building on Essex Street where they now live. From 1986 to 1993, Mr. Patterson and Ms. Rensaa designed and embroidered colorful baseball caps, which were bought by celebrities like Mick Jagger, Jack Nicholson and the painter David Hockney. In 1985, Mr. Patterson helped found the New York Tattoo Society and, along with a tattoo parlor owner, Wes Wood, won the fight to legalize tattooing in the city.

For the last two years he has managed the annual New York City Tattoo Convention. In 1995 he organized a show that toured Germany and Austria for three years and included tattoo artists, fire-eaters, sword swallows and contortionists.

A Hub for Rabbis And Anarchists

Mr. Patterson, who usually dresses in black and wears a baseball cap that he designed and bears the images of four skulls around its crown, is among the most recognized neighborhood residents. His storefront is a hub where many locals, from Hasidic rabbis to skinhead anarchists, often drop in to chew over neighborhood issues, seek advice or just see who else might be there. His wide and ever-growing circle of acquaintances often ends up being photographed by Mr. Patterson and getting to know one another.

For instance, in 1988 Mr. Patterson met the Rev. Patrick Moloney, a Melkite Catholic priest who later served almost four years in prison after he was convicted of conspiracy and hiding \$2 million from a

Brink's robbery in Rochester. Father Moloney introduced Mr. Patterson to Baba Raul Cannizzari, a Cuban practitioner of Santeria. Later, Mr. Patterson introduced Father Moloney and Mr. Cannizzari to John Strausbaugh, now the editor of The New York Press, who wrote about both men.

Mr. Patterson has photographed some people several times over the years. In his archive are three shots of one man taken over more than a decade. The first shows a boy of about 12. The second is of the same person, now a man in his 20's, taken at his wedding. The final photograph, taken about two years later, shows the same man being arrested for assault one night on Essex Street. His hands are cuffed behind his back and he is being pushed into a police cruiser by two officers. The man's eyes are wide and his mouth is open, as if shouting. The transformation captured by the triptych is viscerally chilling.

'Very Expert At Provoking People.'

While photographing or filming, Mr. Patterson has been arrested about a dozen times, but only one charge against him has not been dropped. In 1989, he was convicted of obstructing governmental administration after a police officer testified that he had assaulted him with a video camera during the arrest of a young man who had been throwing eggs on Avenue A. To this day, Mr. Patterson insists he was innocent. Later that year Ms. Rensaa began accompanying him on some photo sorties.

During a July 1993 fire, Mr. Patterson was arrested on East Fourth Street between Avenues C and D on charges of obstructing firefighting operations and resisting arrest. During the arrest, two of his teeth were knocked out and he suffered a concussion and a deep gash on the back of his head. The charges were eventually dismissed for lack of evidence, but Mr. Patterson said the incident had a chilling effect on his documentary effort because he felt as if his work was beginning to be more of a burden than he had expected.

That October, he filed a civil lawsuit against the city, the New York City Housing Authority and three police officers, claiming that he had been falsely arrested and that city and Housing Authority officers had used excessive force in his arrest.

The city's lawyer on the case, Kate Karakassis, disputes that claim. Mr. Patterson, she said in an interview, is "very expert at provoking people."

"He approaches the police and challenges their authority and gets under people's skin," she said. "But there's no agenda to get him that I saw. He perceives that the police are after him because of his important work, but really he runs around and acts as an obstruction and an irritant."

Mr. Patterson insists, though, that Ninth Precinct officers have it in for him, and he traces this perceived enmity to the Tompkins Square Park uprising in August 1988.

On the night of Aug. 6, Mr. Patterson was filming in the park when the police clashed with park users, some of whom were protesting a midnight curfew. For three and one-half hours, Mr. Patterson, trying to be inconspicuous while carrying a video camera near his hip, weaved through the rampaging throng, dodging officers and thrown objects.

The next day, after watching the tape, he called a Channel 11 television reporter, Eric Shawn, who in turn contacted the Manhattan District Attorney's office. At first, Mr. Patterson defied the District Attorney's subpoena, refusing to surrender the original tape on the ground that it was his artistic property. He offered a copy instead. He was cited for contempt of court and went on a 10-day hunger strike in the Bronx House of Detention before a judge ruled in his favor.

A copy of the tape was used as evidence in the indictment of police officers on charges that included assault and misconduct. All were acquitted, but the Ninth Precinct captain, Gerald McNamara, was reassigned.

A spokesman for the District Attorney's office, Wayne Brison, said recently that an assistant district attorney who had subpoenaed the tape, Carol Stokinger, had described it as "very useful in the investigation and the trial." Police officials declined to comment about Mr. Patterson.

Mr. Patterson also figured in another highly publicized episode in the East Village, the 1989 murder and dismemberment of a Swiss dance student, Monika Beele, by Daniel Rakowitz, a short-order cook and pot dealer known for carrying a live rooster around neighborhood streets. In 1991 Mr. Rakowitz was acquitted by reason of insanity and has been held ever since at Kirby Forensic Psychiatric Center on Wards Island.

Occasionally Mr. Rakowitz leaves messages on Mr. Patterson's answering machine, which the photographer preserves. Mr. Patterson and Ms. Rensaa visit Mr. Rakowitz three or four times a year. "At this point we're the only people he knows who can easily visit him," Mr. Patterson said. "He's done some terrible things, but he's a human being too, and we're not about to forget that we know him."

Feeling Like an Outsider In the 80's Art World

What drives him to take so many photographs and shoot so much footage? It is not a question Mr. Patterson addresses casually. "I felt like an outsider in the art world of the 80's," he said one recent evening, explaining that he did not have the connections in the art world that he thought were critical to gain recognition as a painter or a sculptor. "But I also felt that I understood the value of things that would never be appreciated by the mainstream culture."

He turned to documentation, he said, as a way to indulge his fascination with people on the fringe of society and to stake out an arcane area of expertise that had largely gone unnoticed.

It was not long, he said, before he became concerned with recording moments that define the boundaries of authority and question its abuse. "I'm interested in power struggles and conflict," Mr. Patterson said. "And I want to be able to preserve the actual, true moment of an event." People often remember events differently, he said, and one of the best ways to determine what actually did occur in a chaotic situation is to look at photographs or film.

"A lot of people are not treated fairly by the system," he said, "and part of what I do is an attempt to create a balance. If people are wronged, it's tougher to brush aside their objections when a record exists."

He insists that anyone with a camera and time to spend on the streets can do what he does. He also says he hopes to publish books of his photography someday and to interest a university in housing his archive. "I'd like to be appreciated as an artist," he said. "I'd like my work to be understood, and I'd like people to realize what I've gone through."

One June night, Mr. Patterson gave a party in his storefront to celebrate the closing of a six-week exhibition of paintings by Baba Raul Cannizzari and Genesis P-Orridge, the former leader of the band Throbbing Gristle and a documentarian whose archives, which contained photographs and film footage of such figures as the writer William S. Burroughs, were seized by Scotland Yard in 1992. While a dozen or so people sipped wine and chatted, Mr. Cannizzari stood and, accompanied by a young man beating a drum, sang what he called a "Cuban trance song."

Afterward Mr. Patterson walked out to Essex Street and lit a cigarette. He said that earlier that day the jury in the civil case stemming from his arrest in 1993 on charges of obstructing firefighters had ruled against him. He was dispirited. A moment later, a woman walked up and asked him to review some legal documents involving a restraining order she was seeking against a police officer who, she said, had harassed her. Mr. Patterson promised to look at the papers. As the woman walked away he said, "I don't know if I'm the best one to give her advice about that."

He mentioned that he occasionally considered moving back to Canada, then quickly dismissed the notion with a wave of his hand. "There's no way I'm giving up," he said. He took a drag from his cigarette, then stamped it out on the sidewalk. "You fight your battles as best you can. Then you live to fight another day. And you hope your day eventually arrives."

Several hours after the reception, Mr. Patterson called a reporter at home. "More action in the neighborhood," he announced. He said that he had gotten word that a local man had assaulted another man on Ludlow Street and that just as he showed up at the scene so did several police officers. Although the hour was late, Mr. Patterson's account of the scene was animated.

"After that court decision it felt good to get right back to work again," he said. "Plus, I got some pretty interesting pictures."

**Correction: August 15, 1999, Sunday An article last Sunday about Clayton Patterson, the Lower East Side photographer, misspelled two surnames. The Swiss dance student murdered in 1989 was Monika Beerle, not Beele. The Cuban practitioner of Santeria was Raul Canizares, not Cannizzari.*