

John Strausbaugh

Visions of Wild Utopia

When Clayton Patterson and Elsa Rensaa moved to the Lower East Side from Canada, in 1979, he began to document the neighborhood with photographs, video and audiotape, and collected ephemera. “I didn’t realize it at the time,” he would tell the *New York Times* some thirty years later, “but I was capturing the last of the wild, free, outlaw, utopian, visionary spirit of the Lower East Side.”

He did more than record. He has participated in and affected Lower East Side culture as an artist and a gallery owner, an editor and a publisher, an organizer, a promoter, provocateur, and, over the last few years, a historian and eulogizer. Any one piece of that is best understood in the context of all the others.

Through the 1980s and '90s, Clayton and his cameras were a constant, ubiquitous public presence Downtown (Manhattan below 14th Street, a distinct cultural zone at the time, not just a geographical designation). Something like the works of Jacob Riis and Weegee before him, his shots appear to capture moments of real life as they’re happening, unglamorized and unromanticized. His archive comprises hundreds of thousands of photographs, thousands of hours of video and hundreds of audio interviews, plus a large collection of heroin bags he picked up off the streets, graffiti stickers he peeled off walls, books, articles, posters, postcards, and tattoo art. The photo-portraits present a kind of mosaic of the neighborhood as it was, one face at a time: tenement kids and homeless people, poets and politicians, drug dealers and drag queens, rabbis and santeros, beat cops, graffiti writers, hookers, junkies, punks, anarchists, squatters, mystics and crackpots.

Most of his subjects are gone now, pushed out by the inexorable encroachment of luxury condos, boutiques and restaurants in the 21st century. “It’s not an archive of the rich and cool,” he has said. “These are real people. But until you see the photographs, you won’t even remember they were here.”

In 1988, Clayton began using his cameras not just to document events but to play a part in them, when he and Elsa shot three and a half hours of videotape showing uniformed police officers attacking political

protesters at Tompkins Square Park. Their startling tape was instrumental in having the night classified as a “police riot” and spurring subsequent departmental reforms, as well as helping a number of victims win lawsuits against the city. It was an early, inspirational example of using the newly available video equipment to hold law enforcement accountable—“Little Brother is watching Big Brother,” as Clayton said on Oprah’s show.

After that, there was hardly a cop in the neighborhood who didn’t know and dislike Clayton, while he developed an uncanny knack for showing up with his camera at, it seemed, every drug bust, tenant eviction and political rally. In 1992, a police officer used his baton to knock out a few of Clayton’s teeth for filming a confrontation with squatters at Avenue D and East 4th Street. He was arrested thirteen times over the years “just for taking pictures,” resulting in one misdemeanor conviction.

Begun in 1986, his storefront Clayton Gallery & Outlaw Art Museum, at 161 Essex Street, has exhibited a galaxy of work rarely if ever seen in mainstream commercial galleries, by graffiti artists, tattoo artists, comics illustrators, filmmakers, photographers, rappers and rockers, clothing designers, and a few heroes of the underground, like Herbert Huncke and Taylor Mead.

Another important aspect of Clayton’s work has been to act as what the Germans call a *Kulturträger*, someone who makes the connections that preserve and transmit a culture that might otherwise not be properly recognized or perish altogether. In that capacity he introduced journalists to some of the Lower East Side and Greenwich Village’s most remarkable yet uncelebrated cultural figures. Like the artist Boris Lurie, a concentration-camp survivor and cofounder of the 1960s No!art movement, which savagely critiqued the crass commercialism and elitism of the contemporary art world. And the extraordinary poet, artist and visionary Lionel Ziprin, who was a living link to deep Lower East Side history, from its Orthodox mystics to its psychedelic pioneers. And Robert Delford Brown, who transformed his life into a performance and his

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home on West 13th Street into the First National Church of the Exquisite Panic, Inc. And Baba Raul Canizares, a Cuban Santeria priest; street artist Jim Power, who adorned the East Village with his mosaics; artist and filmmaker Ari Roussimoff; and Steve Bonge, an artist, photographer, actor, car and motorcycle customizer, and Hells Angel. (Clayton, Roussimoff and others organized the Tattoo Society of New York, and Clayton played a key role in tattooing's legalization in the city.)

As the old, outlaw Lower East Side recedes before the new, upscaled one in the 21st century, Clayton has turned from documentarian to historian, organizing and editing massive, indispensable books on the neighborhood's "tragic, glorious, sometimes depressing" history as remembered and explained by people who lived it and shaped it. They include the film *Captured*, on the neighborhood as an incubator for underground film and avant-garde video, and two books: *Resistance*, on its radical political and social history, and the self-explanatory *Jews: A People's History of the Lower East Side*.

"For over a hundred years," Clayton has said, "the Lower East Side was a magic crucible where people were inspired to great art and ideas. The Lower East Side probably changed the history of America five hundred times. Artists and intellectuals were drawn here because they could afford to live and create here. When Lou Reed moved here in the '60s, he rented an apartment on Ludlow Street for something like \$38 a month." Today, studio apartments in "the Ludlow" start at \$3,400 a month. "I don't think there'll be any more Lou Reeds on Ludlow Street. All of the geniuses who were here because of the cheap rents are gone."

Gone, maybe, but for anyone who explores even a corner of Clayton's large body of work, not forgotten.