

Andrew Weiner

Unconsumed: For Clayton Patterson

“We are not intended after all to be consumed.”

—Lionel Ziprin, *Sentential Metaphrastic*

Clayton Patterson loaned me some of his books recently. Two were oral histories of the Lower East Side, the first (*Resistance*) dealing with radical activism and the second (*Captured*) with underground media. The third (*Front Door Book*) collects some of the countless photographs that Clayton has shot of LES residents posing by the door to his studio at 161 Essex Street; the book is easy to summarize but its impact transcends description, and I'd be happy if you stopped reading this essay right now and took the rest of your day to pore over it.

I've been spending as much time with these books as I can, and my sense is that they only begin to indicate the extent of the contributions that Clayton has made since moving to New York almost forty years ago. These include street tapes, snapshots, hats, conversations, agitprop provocations, tattoos, sculptural assemblages, research, community mobilization, photomontage, something like conceptual art, and a whole range of archival and historical activities. It speaks to Clayton's achievement that there isn't really any one person he could be properly compared to, even though the names that come to mind are eminent ones, many of whom he's known and worked with.

It's similarly hard to know how to categorize his output, given the way it traverses art and activism and documentary and performance and life and and and. No matter what we call this work—and it might be that one of its lessons is that such distinctions are infinitely less important than the *fact* of the work itself—I think what Clayton has done (and is still doing) is singular, irreplaceable, generous, and deserving of all the thoughtful consideration we can give it.

While I was looking through *Front Door Book* yesterday a three-by-five photograph fell out of it. The photo looks like it could have been taken at any time in the last thirty years. It depicts a young Dominican man working in a bodega. He's been taking boxes of cereal down so he can clean the shelves. It's clear from his unguarded expression and faintly emerging smile that he knows

and trusts the photographer. I e-mailed Clayton to ask about the picture and he wrote back five minutes later: it was Miguel in the early '90s, when he would have been about 15, in the bodega, the one next to Arlene's Grocery, where he worked until it was sold a couple of years ago. It matters that Clayton took the time to recognize this kid back then as someone worth knowing and acknowledging and photographing—there's a democratic ethics in that gesture that could easily be overlooked. It also matters that he continues to remember Miguel—this speaks to Clayton's status as something like a living archive of the LES.

Clayton is of course well-known for the video footage he shot of the Tompkins Square Park police riot in August 1988, in which members of the NYPD brutalized protesters of a curfew targeting the occupation of the park. The tape was a watershed moment in the development of citizen journalism, anticipating not only the 1991 Rodney King video but also the more recent, global uptake of cell-phone documentary as a tool of popular protest. It led to successful legal actions against the NYPD; it also captured a pivotal moment in the militarization of urban policing, a pernicious and often deeply racist phenomenon whose widespread implementation has only recently begun to be resisted, as in last year's uprisings in and around Ferguson, Missouri.

Yet however significant the riot tape was, and indeed still is, it stands as only one of the many archival projects and actions that Clayton has carried out. Some of these concern the history of similarly eclectic, even heterodox practices as a kind of indigenous activity on the Lower East Side. One prominent figure in this genealogy is Harry Smith, whose activities as a self-styled anthropologist led him to collect Seminole textiles, Ukrainian easter eggs (*pysanky*), gourds, string figures, and the paper planes he found on the streets of Manhattan. It was Smith's collection of out-of-print 78s that became the basis for his *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952), which had an immeasurable impact on the revival of folk in the '60s and the subsequent development of huge swaths of pop and rock.

Andrew Weiner

Unconsumed: For Clayton Patterson

Continued

Another important LES archivist was Lionel Ziprin, a poet, numerologist, mystic, part-time comic-book author, and lifelong student of Kabbalah. Together with Smith, Ziprin set out to document the soundscape of the local Jewish diaspora, recording untold hours of Orthodox liturgical chanting, Yiddish storytelling, and Arabic song. Yet another, whom Clayton credits with teaching him how to take advantage of the video camera, was Nelson Sullivan, a South Carolina transplant turned downtown scenester who spent his nights shuttling between openings, nightclub acts, drag balls, and illicit parties, taping everything he could.

Drawing on these precedents, Clayton has committed himself to recording the intensely diverse assortment of characters and events that exists throughout his neighborhood. There are tapes of Ziprin reading his work, poems with titles like “Math Glass” and “What This Abacus Was”; tapes of the Dinkinsville encampment in Tompkins Square Park, whose residents were attacked in the 1988 police riot; tapes of local street artists like the Mosaic Man; tapes of hardcore shows and tapes of drag performances; tapes of buskers, parades, and street gangs; tapes of shock performers like Steven Oddo and G.G. Allin; tapes of interviews with filmmakers ranging from Emile de Antonio to Nick Zedd.

This body of work is intimately connected to the storied underground film and video culture of the Lower East Side, a subject that Clayton has carefully documented in *Captured*. It is impossible to imagine a history of the U.S. experimental and avant-garde film scene that didn't include the many filmmakers who lived and worked in the neighborhood, gathering into various networks around local institutions like Anthology Film Archives. Some favored an outré outsider aesthetic of camp, trash, or excess; others devoted themselves to the quasi-modernist pursuit of austere formalism and rigorous self-reflexivity.

The mid-'60s innovations that came to be known as expanded cinema had strong links to the LES: the artist Aldo Tambellini and the collective USCO staged screenings in the neighborhood, and the DOM on St. Mark's Place hosted the Exploding Plastic Inevitable, an immersive spectacle that paired Warhol's films with

the drone-rock of the Velvet Underground. Later in the '60s, LES residents with links to post-minimalist art and media theory would come together to experiment with the portable video cameras that had just hit the consumer market. The results ranged from hybrid sculptural installations that were promoted as “video art” to the scrappier, more activist projects known as “guerrilla television”; important figures in this field included the Commediation group (Les Levine, Ira Schneider, Frank Gillette), the Videofreex, and People's Video Theater.

Such practices often transgressed, negated, or simply ignored the conventional distinctions between art and other spheres of society. While they were centered around audiovisual media, they formed part of a broader spectrum of practices that aimed to radically transform the prevailing social, economic, political, and cultural order of the post-war U.S. Some aimed to dismantle the ostensibly autonomous or elite institutions of modern art from within, as in the case of *The Event of the Screw*, a 1962 protest that Aldo Tambellini staged at MoMA together with a local Puerto Rican singing group called the Belltones. Others sought to contest the exclusionary tendencies of the mainstream media by forming underground newspapers like the *East Village Other* or literary journals like *UMBRA*, an African-American poetry magazine that published Ishmael Reed and Calvin Hernton. Still others sought to effect revolution by instituting alternative economies, as in the case of the Diggers' Free Store, or by using performance to transcend the boundaries dividing art and life, the premise upon which the Living Theater was founded.

Moving to the LES in the immediate aftermath of the 1960s, Clayton belonged to a generation of like-minded radicals who applied the lessons and innovations of this history to the distinct situation that the neighborhood faced in subsequent eras under the threat of defunding, gentrification, increased homelessness, the so-called War on Drugs, and AIDS. Using techniques ranging from squats and occupations to guerrilla video and anarchist street theater, these activists contested the oppressive effects of the emergent socioeconomic order that we now call neoliberalism. Grasping the institutional linkages between real-estate speculation,

Continued

Andrew Weiner

Unconsumed: For Clayton Patterson

Continued

structural racism, and police bias, they used whatever means they could to block the gears of the machine that they saw poised to take over their neighborhood. In Clayton's case, these included his teeth (many of which were knocked out in a police assault), his time (much of which was dedicated to representing himself in legal cases contesting evictions and NYPD brutality), and his art (which occasionally took the form of elaborate collages submitted as amicus curiae briefs in his court appearances).

It is hard not to view the photos in *Front Door Book* without thinking of this ongoing transformation, which has made Manhattan into a luxury good for the global 1%, steadily replacing the tenements of the Lower East Side with designer condos and boutique hotels. How many of the teenagers pictured then can now manage to live or even work in the place where they grew up? How many lost friends to drug-related violence that was shunted away from more-affluent parts of the city? Yet no matter how sobering and necessary such questions may be, they do not dominate the experience of reading the *Front Door Book*. Instead, one comes away with a profound respect for the encounter between the photographer and the people pictured, in which a common space and time are established, negotiated, shared, and recorded. Clayton has referred to this project as “the people's photography,” a phrase that deftly captures this quality of mutuality and commonality.

So if Clayton can be thought of as a living archive of the LES, I think it is this sort of archive: one that extends the everyday into decades, one that belongs to those it depicts, one that opens art and life to each other and to whoever walks past the front door. The life in this archive is invaluable but not precious; it is bruised, tattooed, no stranger to risk, not afraid to speak back to the judge. This life sustains itself across generations through sharing stories, secrets, last cigarettes, and joint acts of defiance. Ultimately, this archive is not an institution or a collection of objects or even a set of ideas; rather, it is a gesture of radical generosity, a gift to the future, a photograph you find in a book someone loans you.