

# The City as Muse



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### URBAN TACTICS; The City as Muse

By ERIKA KINETZ

New York can be a notoriously difficult place to create works of art. E.B. White, whose 1949 book "Here Is New York" is one of the most eloquent tributes to the city, famously made a special trip by train from his home in North Brooklin, Me., to research the work, and after a few sweaty days at the Algonquin Hotel, went right back home to write.

History, of course, is littered with exceptions, among them Michael Gordon, David Lang and Julia Wolfe, the artistic directors and composers of Bang on a Can. And in a multimedia event called "The New Yorkers," which involves collaboration with a dozen other New York artists and will be performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, they, like E.B. White, take as their subject the city itself.

The gifts of loneliness and privacy are harder to come by now than they were in E.B. White's day, but the city does bestow occasional largess on those who pay attention. "I've used car horns," said Mr. Lang, a composer. "A car comes by and plays something, and I say, 'Might as well.'"

Three of the participants in "The New Yorkers" are the comic book artist Ben Katchor, the filmmaker Bill Morrison and Mr. Morrison's wife, the artist Laurie Olinder. In field trips around the city, they explained how their views of New York might change ours.

Waiting on the Corner of Broadway and the In-Between

IN a city not known for its pauses, Ben Katchor likes to stand still.

His predilection is not easily satisfied in a city with few public benches and little psychic tolerance for men who stand alone on street corners. The solution, Mr. Katchor has found, is to arrive early. "Then you can rationalize waiting," he said.

A week ago yesterday, Mr. Katchor waited around one of his favorite places, the theater district, just before the shows on Broadway let out. Such in-between moments are of no small significance to Mr. Katchor. One of the comic strips he drew for "The New Yorkers" is about the pause between two pieces of music. Julius Knipl, RealEstate Photographer, the subject of three of Mr. Katchor's books, meets many of his adventures en route from one place to another.

"It has happened, over my life, to wait outside lots of theaters," said Mr. Katchor, who is 51 and lives on the Upper West Side. "It is the only time you see the effect of theater on people. When you are in the theater, you are watching the stage. People really come out inspired, glowing. There is usually a real physical effect you can see. I don't know. Maybe they're just hot."

When Mr. Katchor comes to Broadway, it is usually to wait for someone else. The last show he actually saw was Neil Simon's 2001 comedy, "45 Seconds From Broadway," and that was not entirely voluntary; he was on assignment. But he likes the bars and buskers and frankfurter salesmen who feed off Broadway, all of them washed in a chill, exciting light.

"It's not daylight, and it's not streetlight," Mr. Katchor said. "It's reflected light. Marquee light."

"I always feel I am getting a show equally as good, out here waiting," he added. "They are just watching some silly Broadway show. Out here there is real drama. Men hustling to make a living. Men waiting for their wives."

At 10:09 p.m., the doors of the Golden Theater opened with a rush of applause. Chauffeurs snapped to attention. A man shouted "'Avenue Q' CD's! T-shirts! Baseball caps!" at the clotting crowd. But no one seemed to be talking about the show. "They don't look too excited," Mr. Katchor said.

He pressed onward, to 46th Street, which by 10:17 had become an archipelago of stretch limousines. The sidewalk in front of the Lunt-Fontanne Theater, where "Beauty and the Beast" is playing, was empty. Then the doors opened. "The end of a show is strange," Mr. Katchor said. "If it's good, the illusion ends, and there is a letdown. Out here, you avoid that by not going in."

Flatbush Avenue as Narrative Thread, 'Through the City to Nature'

BILL Morrison and his wife, Laurie Olinder, contributed three short films to "The New Yorkers," one of which, "City Walk," depicts a 12-mile drive down the entire length of Flatbush Avenue, from Jacob Riis Park on Beach Channel Island, then over the Manhattan Bridge into Chinatown.

"Flatbush is a direct route through the city to nature," said Mr. Morrison, who is best

known for his 2002 film "Decasia," a 70-minute collage of gorgeous, decomposing film stock. "When you get out to the end, it is all light. It is sort of like a dissolution of the city."

At 6:35 p.m. last Sunday, Mr. Morrison and Ms. Olinder climbed into their 1994 navy blue Saturn and did "City Walk" in reverse, driving from their studio in the East Village out to the Atlantic Ocean.

In "City Walk," Mr. Morrison strips the city of its modernity, turning red and blue signs black and white, and blowing out many identifying details. The result is a timeless sort of street: a round woman in a striped dress who could be alive or dead; a boat that could have streamed by 50 years ago. People pass through the film, but they aren't the point:

"They are cogs in a whirling landscape," Mr. Morrison said.

Instead, the film focuses on speed and scale and what it feels like to move through the city. "You look at a thing and squint," said Ms. Olinder, who is a painter. "You can see the structure of things more clearly."

"City Walk" is like squinting at the city. So is driving a car down Flatbush Avenue.

Last Sunday, Mr. Morrison drove and Ms. Olinder sat in the back seat, watching the clutter of Chinatown abruptly give way to the Manhattan Bridge. It was dark by the time they reached Prospect Park. Then the shops started coming thick and close: Barber Boyz II, Holy Nails, Farmer in the Deli, Lord's Photocakes.

Soon, the streets flattened into a loose suburban landscape, smeared with a three-story concrete parking garage, a large Old Navy, gas stations and a field of tennis courts. The sky got bigger. The houses sprouted wooden shingles.

On a narrow lane lined with shrubs, there was a thick smell of seaweed. Half the stars in the sky seemed to be planes. The waves crashed through a line of old wooden pilings that stretched into the sea like a line of rotten teeth. "Hey, Laurie, check it out," Mr. Morrison said as a fat harvest moon broke through the clouds.

Just after 8 p.m., a police car pulled up.

"We just came out here to watch the moonrise," Mr. Morrison said to the officer. "We were about to take off."

"You're going the opposite way of traffic," the officer replied. Then he rolled down his window and added, "You know, if you go to the parking lot at Jacob Riis Park, you can see it better."

CAPTION: Photos: Bill Morrison and Laurie Olinder have filmed Flatbush Avenue as a timeless sort of street. People pass through, but they aren't the point. (Photo by Lucian Read for The New York Times)