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# Introduction

Marshall Berman

In the 1970s and '80s, New York's ruins were its greatest spectacles. It gradually emerged how they had come to be. All around the town, landlords of old buildings were having more trouble than ever with tenants who were ever more unemployed.

As many old, shabby buildings began to crumble, they were being redlined by banks—*redlined*, a crucial word in the 1970s—so that landlords on the wrong side of the line, as most were, couldn't get bank loans to fix their buildings up. As a result, buildings deteriorated faster, and landlords lost hope. Many came to feel that their buildings were worth more dead than alive. The result was a tremendous, protracted boom in arson, with many people—especially kids and old people—killed in the crossfire. All through the 1970s it happened simultaneously in dozens of neighborhoods. But the biggest firestorm was in the South Bronx, not far from where I grew up. At the start of the 1980s, I was finishing a book on what it means to be modern. But I came to feel I couldn't finish till I had gone back to where I'd started. So I went back—the house I grew up in was still there and still lived in, but the whole block across the street had burned and crumbled into ruins, and then had started to sink into the swamp that the whole neighborhood was built on. I spent many lonely afternoons wandering through the Bronx's ruins. What was I looking for? I picked up a broken speaker and a broken slab of marble; they kept me company for thirty years, on the window sill just a few feet away from where I wrote, till just a couple of years ago. I met fellow wanderers (and camera crews) from countries that not so long ago had had formidable ruins of their own—Germany, Japan, Poland, the USSR—along with brilliant American photographers and filmmakers as obsessed as myself; over thirty years I've seen their work and felt proud that I knew them when. I met a German art critic who told me that when her friends came to visit, they were totally indifferent to the grand structures she loved, but they implored her: "Where is the South Bronx? Take me to the burning buildings! I want a lover from the ruins." (The German painter Anselm Kiefer has created a great array . . . enormous

landscapes of ruin, inspired by World War II but also—and this is their genius—remarkable facsimiles of the desolated Bronx. Another remarkably Bronx-like landscape was created in the 2002 film *The Pianist* by Roman Polanski (a European, an American, and a Jew—a survivor of the Holocaust and a man whose life has been wrecked several times): his vision of the ruins of Warsaw at the end of World War II. It is as if the Bronx, in its depths of disintegration, came to symbolize the twentieth-century world.)



It was hard to believe the enormity of these ruins. They went on and on, block after block, mile after mile, year after year. Some blocks seemed almost intact, with live people—but then look around the corner, and there was no corner. It was uncanny! The fire years created a whole new vocabulary and iconography. As witnesses of 9/11 know, urban fires make great visuals. There were years of tabloid headlines, magazine covers, documentary films (in many languages) with titles like *The Bronx Is Burning!* A new urban picturesque emerged out of horizons lit by lurid flames, montages of buildings in different stages of disintegration, shards of beds, tables, t.v. sets, fragments of clothes (especially children's clothes), the rubble and debris of people's lives. For several years the *Times* carried a box that contained addresses of buildings destroyed the previous day or night. (I and many people I knew always turned to the Building Box first, even before the box scores: would our own old homes be there?) Sometimes these images helped generate empathy and solidarity: these shattered fragments of people's lives could have been *ours*. Sometimes they were used to support one of the great media clichés of the 1970s: that the poor people of New York were . . . inflicting this destruction on themselves. Many elected officials insisted that the victims of the fires were also their perpetrators; hence they deserved no sympathy or emergency aid. A typical metaphor: the victims of fires were "fouling their own nests." During the 1977 World Series, the camera in the Goodyear Blimp showed a night panorama of Yankee Stadium and, maybe half a mile away, an anonymous building on fire. Head announcer Howard Cosell started shouting, "What's wrong with those people? Why are they doing this to themselves?" Cosell, who grew up in poverty in the Bronx and Newark, should have known better. But his tirade hardened into a "Blame the Victim" cliché. The saddest part was that so many victims—including many of my students and their parents—blamed themselves. (A typical '70s shot on the local news featured a family standing in front of the smoking building, clutching their last few possessions. Only yesterday this burned ruin was their home. The children are in tears. The man of the family, in anguish, appeals into the camera: "What did we do wrong?"

# Subterranean Vaudeville

Jim Knipfel

It took decades to finally establish all the unspoken, subtle rules of N.Y.C. subway etiquette. The trains have been around for a century now and carry an average of 4.5 million people every day—it takes awhile for all those people to come to an agreement on anything, let alone the proper rules of behavior when they're all crowded together during the evening rush. Because of this, it can take newcomers to the system years to finally internalize everything they need to know when they pass through the turnstiles.

Here are the rules.

Whenever possible, maintain as much distance as possible between yourself and other commuters. Keep your voice down. Don't make eye contact with anyone. Mind your own damn business. If there's an empty seat on an otherwise packed train, it's probably empty for a very good reason. Hell, it took a month after moving to New York before I learned that it wasn't appropriate to use the heads and arms of other commuters for support on a moving train.

The consequences for not following the rules can be alarming. Once on a morning commute, I was surrounded and very nearly given the bum's rush by a group of perfectly normal citizens because (I learned that morning) I *hadn't* followed the rules.

At various times over the years, the city has tried to legislate subway etiquette—threatening hefty fines if you put your feet on the seats, took up an extra seat with a bag, or drank from an open container—but none of it really took. The people governed themselves. And that's part of what made the New York subways such a unique and self-contained world, quite independent from the world that existed aboveground.

All that changed in the days following the bombings on London's underground in July 2005. After that, the rules, the etiquette, the strange and brutal innocence of the subways vanished, as the World Above invaded the tunnels and platforms.



Prior to that, things were lively. There was in theory a police presence on the subways, but you didn't see them very often. Behavior that would in no way seem appropriate above ground was given free reign in the tunnels, so long as you paid attention to the other rules and no one got hurt. Or at least not hurt very badly.

I ride the trains nearly every day, have for years, and have never grown sick of it. On the platforms and in the cars, I have witnessed nearly every kind of insanity you can imagine, from the simply peculiar to the genuinely frightening. On one of my very first hour-long trips down to Coney Island, I watched as a gentle, gaudy, 300-pound transvestite who'd covered his entire face with lipstick tore the pages out of a *TV Guide* one by one before stuffing them into his purse. I've also watched a monstrous, shrieking lunatic swing a baseball bat at passengers as the train rolled merrily along.

I've vomited on myself twice while riding the subway, and learned that there's no better way to get a seat, no matter how crowded the train is. I've seen rats the size of dogs waddling down the tracks without a care. I've witnessed strangers beaten by gang members for no reason other than that they were there, and have been beaten by gang members myself for the same reason.

I've shared personal secrets with strangers I knew I would never see again, and dodged people I knew I'd be seeing later in the day. Once, I watched a well-dressed man completely undress on an R train during the morning rush. Nobody seemed really sure why he was doing this, but nobody said a word about it . . .

# Going Downtown (*On an Uptown Train*)

Paul Kopasz

“Going downtown (rather than uptown)” as Rashied Ali (John Coltrane’s last drummer and a regular on the Lispenard Street scene) and Jaco used to always say. We had a roommate later, a fairly well-known guitarist with a quite famous group, who hung around all the time. He carried two different vials on him at all times and had 3-inch-long fingernails on each of his pinky fingers. He either went uptown or downtown. Each day, all day, until dinnertime he used his left pinky nail to scoop and sniff cocaine—heading uptown. After about 7:00 P.M. or so he would switch to snorting heroin from his right pinky nail. “The boy has been going downtown a little too much lately,” was the consensus. I wasn’t headed downtown just yet, but it wouldn’t be long.

I was riding the subway nonstop to fill orders for small quantities of grass and hashish from these old places, orders that would, at the end of the day, yield enough profit for me to have my own grass, dinner—pizza or falafel—and some Häagen Dazs. The temp jobs had become both unbearable and intrusive upon my lifestyle. With a free couch to live on, why bother emptying trash cans at Bloomingdale’s?

When times got tight and customers cheated me, I would be forced to go out and try to find something to steal. I still had customers up at the Belleclaire, including a guy who worked at a fancy restaurant who gave me free lunches and brought the pot money to me at the end of each meal as if it were my change. It was on one of those visits to the Belleclaire that the desk clerk handed me a letter they had been holding for me for some time. It was from my patron saint of sorts—Bill Burroughs—and it included a recipe for a hash-based lozenge he had discovered in Morocco. I was re-energized in my commitment to the life of the chemical bohemian and righteous fuck-up.

The best-laid plans do oft go astray, though, and it should be obvious that mine were not particularly well laid. Instead of keeping a shitty part-time job and dealing on my low level, I was (I thought) rescued from this grind by the lucky opportunity afforded me to steal an ounce of cocaine from two hookers, old

clients of mine in the Belleclaire. This endeared me deeply (and hopefully permanently) to those musicians down on Canal. I got away with the theft and made some new clients (I was going to say “friends”, but I came to my senses) and a growing new habit. It wasn’t the coke that was the immediate problem; it was the infrequent bag of heroin I occasionally employed to come down. Two years of confusion later, I was in the squats and sporting a pretty good habit.



\*

Loisaida—the Spanish slang term for the Lower East Side when it was still a significant barrio—in 1989 was like the fucking Wild West. The drug trade seemed to be controlled by the Puerto Ricans, but there were plenty of black gangs pushing product and there were plenty of gunfights over on Avenue D, mostly involving interloping Jamaican posses.

I was commonly robbed in Alphabet City, and in spite of the low prices and near-round-the-clock availability, buying heroin there was daunting prospect indeed. Various gangs each had brand names for their junk, and their logos were rubber-stamped on the small glassine envelopes: Big Shot, Fatal Beauty, Untouchables (with a tiny picture of Robert De Niro), Century 21, Bad Boy, Grade A, Illusion, Mambo). The chop shop across the street had its own brand called Batman. There were knives everywhere and there were guys walking around with facial scars everywhere. Below Delancey Street it was even scarier, harder to score without getting robbed or beaten up if you were white. I don’t know how dangerous it was otherwise as I had no junkie friends.

I started buying dime bags and at first I could make one of them last nearly three days—I could precisely measure out my life by calibrating time in units of \$10 heroin purchases. I could make projections of things like hours of labor, trips to the corner, and days between robberies. Later on, it took five . . .



# From Wise Guys to Woo-Girls

John Strausbaugh

Uptown and downtown coexisted with and balanced each other. Downtown gave Manhattan much of the funky-spooky charm that set it apart from all other cities in the world. Uptowners brought their expendable income downtown with them and spread it around. It worked out for both sides.

By 2005, that cultural divide and balance had been obliterated, as the uptowners moved below 23rd Street en masse and drove everyone else out. The terms *uptown* and *downtown* exist mostly as geographic markers now, since little of downtown culture, and few of the people who generated it, are surviving the onslaught.

Locals still argue about when the change started. Some date the Beginning of the End to the opening of the first downtown Starbucks; others prefer to cite the shocking day an Olive Garden opened in Chelsea. But most would choose the day Mayor Rudy Giuliani took office in 1994. The island was certainly ready for some cleaning up and image-polishing at the time. But in his zeal to make all of Manhattan amenable to the quality classes, Manhattan's Savonarola demonstrated a downright pathological aversion to anything remotely funky about the borough's culture. Selecting midtown as the initial showcase for his "quality of life" campaign, Giuliani brokered the breathtakingly quick transformation of Times Square from scummy sin-pit to Disneyfied tourist trap, and in so doing set an agenda for the island's wholesale redevelopment. His successor, billionaire bluenose Michael Bloomberg, did not deviate from this course. Both afforded developers the widest latitude in a madly inflationary real-estate boom, rendering Manhattan's residential market beyond the reach of all but the wealthy or at least the well-salaried.

"I think that the city lived with a kind of unspoken compromise from the New Deal until the 1990s that balanced out many interests," says William Bryk, who writes about local history for the *New York Sun*. "Then the rich realized they really could buy the politicians and, under the cover of civil rights litigation, abolished the Board of Estimate. Land use decisions no



longer passed through the Board, which consisted of eight politicians who cut endless deals with one another and sometimes did the right thing. Nor do they pass through the City Council, which might be a good idea, too. Instead, they pass through the Mayor's office, which makes him a very powerful man indeed.

"Ed Koch talked like a Republican sometimes, but governed like a New Dealer. Rudy, on the other hand, really believed in the virtue of the markets, without realizing that the spiritual cannot be quantified in a way that the markets will acknowledge. Certainly he despised the oddballs and ass-pains. But without their presence—and high rents easily remove them, since they usually don't have the social skills to make a decent living—Manhattan indeed becomes Cleveland on the Hudson. Then there's no particular reason to be here, because it's just like everywhere else."

The SoHo art zone went almost overnight. SoHo had been an industrial wasteland when it was colonized by artists and dealers in the mid-'70s, taking advantage of some unique collaborations with an unusually sensitive city government at the time. It remained Manhattan's prime art zone for twenty years, a model copied in many other cities and countries. In the late 1990s, SoHo was suddenly transformed into an upscale open-air shopping mall. In a rush, the artists and galleries fled the soaring prices and milling crowds, some relocating to the new, much less convenient art zone of far west Chelsea. The change was so sudden and total there was a *Twilight Zone* surrealism to it, as though . . .

# My Life in Graffiti

Joseph Anastasio

I remember exploring all the tunnels near Brooklyn Bridge just a few years ago. One night I was down there with Maria, a fellow photographer and a woman who just plain ain't afraid to get down and dirty. We were wandering around down there for a few hours and getting ready to leave. We were waiting for a train to leave the J-train platform so that there wouldn't be any M.T.A. personnel staring at us once we climbed up and out of this hole, but the train just wouldn't leave—and when it finally was about to, we heard work bums walking down the tunnel right toward us. The gig was up and it was time to go—we started running alongside the J train as it headed northbound towards Canal Street. We kept pace with it somehow, arriving at Canal just as the train pulled out continuing northbound. We jumped on the platform and ran out of the station just as some extremely loud buzzer went off on the tracks. Some guy was by the token booth saying, “What’s that alarm sound?” We got out onto the street and we ran, finally stopping a few blocks away in a parking lot, where I proceeded to cough up some of the steel dust we kicked up for a good five minutes. You just can't pay for an adventure like that.

\*



The train keeps moving, now going past the abandoned Worth Street station.

I remember not that long ago going to Worth Street. I remember running down the tracks to photograph this station late one weekday night. We were originally going to go to 18th Street, but the track-workers were out and about. I remember how we had to hide from passing subways on the platform, and how I found a old set of block letters from Rebel.



Rebel remembers that spot well, too. “We came out of that tunnel filthy,” he said. “I had soot in my ears from that place. We ran out at like 3:00 A.M. and thought the station we were coming out onto was empty, but there was a guy right there at the end, and when I stepped onto the platform I was right there in his face. He stepped back and almost had a fucking heart attack—his eyes were like dinner plates!” Every real graffiti artist who’s ever rocked a can has dozens of memories like these. They are the best urban stories you’ll ever hear.

## Fulton Street

I remember the war on graffiti. I remember when they singled out people like the brothers SaneSmith and tried to vilify them as best they could. The battle continues today, only more so. Even toy kids these days are getting their names in the paper when they get caught for catching just a few tags around town. To the powers that be, graffiti are a sign not of art but of trouble, of crime and a loss of control over the mindless herd of citizens. It is a precursor to more crime. The broken-windows school of Gestapo-style law enforcement. Graffiti are ugly and destructive, and for some writers, that’s just the point.

“I came out of retirement because I lived in a nice neighborhood and soon found I couldn't pay the rent,” proclaims FE One, a man that used to tag the trains back when they were hot in the '80s. “I’m just trying to bring the . . .

# From Blackout to Blintzes (and Beyond)

Robert Sietsema

The modern visitor to Chinatown will find the '70s version—like an antique pearl in the middle of a three-bite oyster—quaint and almost laughable. Now the sprawling neighborhood extends from Church Street in Tribeca to Montgomery Street on the Lower East Side, and northward beyond Delancey Street, at the doorstep of the modern East Village. Altogether, Manhattan's Chinatown is twenty times larger than it was in 1977, and substantial new Chinatowns have materialized in Flushing, Sunset Park, and Homecrest. Clearly, there has been a massive increase in Chinese immigration.

The helium inflating this balloon was the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Prior to its passage, Chinese migration had been limited by a xenophobic quota system dating to 1924 that vastly favored Europeans over Asians, and men over families, in an attempt to perpetuate the racial balance of early twentieth-century America. The punitive 1924 act followed sporadic anti-Chinese riots that had occurred on the West Coast since the 1880s. The effect of the quotas had been to limit Chinese immigration mainly to men, who sent money home to China and who were separated from their families for decades on end. But, even after passage of the 1965 act, it was to take more than a decade for the effects to be felt as the new flood of immigrants arrived, established communities, flourished, and eventually moved to the suburbs or to middle-class communities within the city.

Tourists with cameras around their necks still wander the original five streets, which in certain corners remain eerily the same as they were a century ago. Nam Wah Tea Parlor still exists in something like its 1920 state on crooked Doyers Street. But the balance of the expanded neighborhood, now centered on Grand Street from Mott to Essex, is not aimed at tourists anymore, and the non-Asian dining-and-curio dollar certainly constitutes a much smaller part of the overall economy. Along this route are markets that display their wares in well-organized tiers. One type specializes in cheap fresh seafood, usually by the whole fish—and sometimes the whole fish is still flopping. There are turtles (a Fujianese passion) and live crabs (a Sino-Malaysian favorite) trying to hoist



themselves out of their cardboard boxes or engaging in impromptu claw duels atop a heap of fellow crustaceans, a spectacle that draws a crowd. Another sort of stall sells green leafy vegetable, melons of every sort and size, and alien vegetables—like tomatoes—that Chinatown restaurants have only just begun to experiment with. Meat markets specialize in diverse small birds and pig offal, in addition to cuts of steak and pork that would look good even to an Upper Eastsider. Chinese

shoppers take a break from work or commute from the 'burbs to buy fresh lichee nuts, barbecued duck, and pea shoots a startling shade of green. Young Asians throng tea parlors that sell bubble tea, the latest craze from Taiwan. Chinatown of today more closely resembles China itself than the Chinatowns of yore, though the range and quality of stuff for sale would put the old country to shame.

Nowadays, the range of cuisines available in area Chinatowns astonishes. Reflecting immigration from nearly every corner of China—much of it via Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Taiwan—the cooking styles include Sichuan, Hunan, Mandarin, Uighur, Guilin, Chiu Chou, Fujianese, Hakka, Shanghai, and a Hong Kong version of Cantonese that one-ups the old style. There are now nearly a dozen restaurants in Chinatown specializing in Shanghai fare alone, with its gravy-squirting soup dumplings and braised pork shoulders prettily ringed with baby bok choy. We also have food of the Chinese diaspora in Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia. Increasingly, Cantonese restaurants like Danny Ng, located at 36 Pell within the original five streets, are patronized not by Occidental diners but by assimilated Chinese from the suburbs who want to show their children and grandchildren what Chinese restaurant food was like when they were young. Our nostalgia has become their nostalgia as well.

The same period witnessed the constriction and, finally, the modern expansion of Little Italy, which was under real-estate pressure from Chinatown the entire time. In the late 1970s, only three restaurants remained along Mulberry Street, plus John Gotti's social club and a couple of tawdry shops that peddled curios . . .

