

A Portable Life on the Lower East Side

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I guess, like many literary editors, I got into the publishing business with the idea of becoming a writer, thinking that putting together a magazine would somehow grant me easy access to the world of commercial publishing. At the time I came up with the idea of publishing *The Portable Lower East Side*, I pretty much knew that my own writing (and that of many of my favorite writers) would never be published in larger circulation magazines, such as *The New Yorker*, not because the writing was not great (at least mine was not) but mostly because it was not uptown, upper-class, mainstream culture. When I started publishing *The Portable Lower East Side*, downtown was a literary liability.

The Lower East Side was, as is well known, home to waves of immigrants from all over the world who from the start were excluded from the mainstream culture and economy of the city. Exclusion, however, gave rise to alternative cultures. The ghettos of New York City have long been the most culturally rich and diverse places in NYC, and the Lower East Side, one of the most densely populated urban centers on the planet for over a century, was in the 1970s and 80s,

my youthful years, one of the world's great culture producers.

I chose the Lower East Side as the focus of the magazine for both personal and political reasons. The neighborhood was home to my father's uncle's candy store on Delancey St. (a front for Jewish mobsters), home to my parents when they first got married (Ave. B and 2nd St.), home to my father when my parents got divorced (Tompkins Square Park West), and home to me when I first left home (Ridge Street between Houston and Stanton St.).

I got the idea of "portable" from Penguin's series of writers and also for the smallish size, but the name fit perfectly for what would become a life of illegal sublets all over downtown (Little India, East Chinatown, Little Spain) where I lived while publishing the magazine. "Portable" also referred to the gentrification of the neighborhood and the displacement of working-class, non-white communities to the outer boroughs, which convinced me to open up the scope of the magazine to areas that had become more culturally diverse than Manhattan.



The Lower East Side was where I started to write, what I wrote about, and where I first started publishing my work. Most writing about the Lower East Side being published when I began my magazine, and long before that, as well, was written by white people from uptown, out-of-towners from the continental USA, or those who had moved from suburbia to the big, bad city, especially those with credentials from high-powered writing programs and residencies, and had connections to commercial magazines and publishers. Locals, on the other hand, especially immigrants or children of immigrants, were not invited.

Other, hipper literary magazines that were around at the same time in the neighborhood featured gothic and exotic tales of the horrors of city life. This kind of writing borrowed from the classical structure of the adventures of a tourist in hell, in which the



protagonist, from “good” society, sinks into the depths of debauchery and vice, usually within the poorer sections of a city, then returns to the light to tell their moral tale (often with a book deal from a commercial publisher). Within NYC, the white, middle-class protagonists of these novels and movies tended to wind up in the ghettos and immigrant neighborhoods, such as the Lower East Side, where they would be tempted and perverted by prostitutes, gays, drug dealers and criminals. The fact that Manhattan is divided into uptown and downtown (with the Upper East Side being the wealthiest and whitest and the Lower East Side the poorest and most ethnically diverse), has led many a writer to employ a heaven and hell structure in their novels, with all the moral baggage that creates. In the 1980s, yuppie realism became a huge market success, while white writers from suburbia who had moved to

downtown (especially the East Village) were sold as punks and hipsters who lived in the ‘concrete jungle’ and survived to write about it.

Within NYC, however, there were and are dozens of self-contained, local communities, each large enough to provide a public for its own culture. These publics, whether they be Haitian, Hasidim, or Harlem drag queens) have their own magazines, radio programs, and dance halls, and therefore are not dependent upon mainstream, white, upper-class media for their existence. Way before the term multicultural was coined, *The Portable Lower East Side* was publishing writers, artists and photographers from communities not included in the mainstream culture of the city, translating works of writers never before published in English, and revealing just how international NYC really was.

The term “international” in mainstream NYC culture usually meant European. The truly international New Yorkers, such as Asians and Latin Americans of longstanding, were seen as belonging to minority rather than international culture. There was a cultural Monroe Doctrine that welcomed foreign writers and artists as part of “America’s backyard,” while refusing to recognize those on our “front stoop.” Puerto Ricans in NYC, for example, were never published as foreigners or internationals, but they also were never gringo enough to be considered American writers.

To counter this publishing trend, I began a series of international issues focusing on specific, local cultures. The first issue of this series was *Eastern Europe* (1986) and included writers and artists from the old country and those living in NYC, especially Polish and Hungarians. The second issue was *Latin Americans in New York City* (1988) which, instead of featuring the magical realist writers from South America promoted in Europe and the USA commercial publishing world, included writing (much of it published bilingually) from the most vital Latino communities in NYC, especially Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and Colombians. I then began a series of guest-edited issues (*New Asia*, *New Africa* and *Queer City*) for which I brought in editors from these communities and gave them free reign to choose the work they saw fit.

From the beginning, *The Portable Lower East Side* mixed short stories, poems, essays, photographs and artwork from the most diverse cultures within the context of NYC. By focusing on the city from as many different perspectives and genres as possible, by publishing theme issues (*Songs of the City*, *Crimes of*

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the City, Live Sex Acts, Chemical City and *Sampling the City*), and by including work by non-professional writers who were personally and politically involved in what they represented, whether it be sex, drugs or crime. This included porn stars, punk, rap and Salsa musicians, political dissidents, AIDS activists, transsexuals, junkies and cop killers. If this is considered "outsider" writing, then it is "outsider" writing from an insider's perspective.

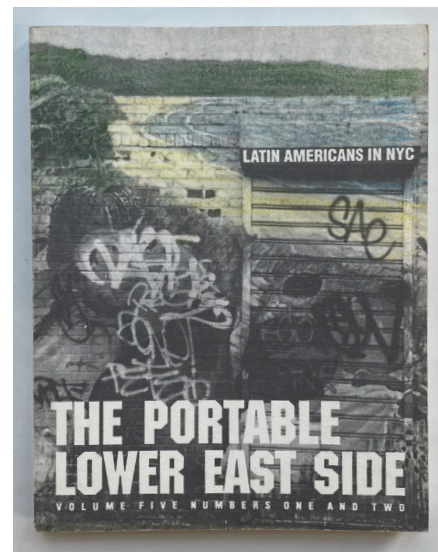
The first issues of *The Portable Lower East Side* I filled with writing and photographs by myself (at times under my name and at times under the pseudonym Sam Izdat, a not so subtle nod to samizdat publishing in Russia and Eastern Europe), my mother, a few close friends, and with a lithograph by my father. I also published the work of the professors at the creative writing program at CCNY (where I studied for three semesters, the easiest way to get a master), including Grace Paley (and her writer husband Robert Nichols), Mark Mirsky and Frederic Tuten, all who lived in and wrote about the Lower East Side.

Having grown up in Westbeth, a low-income artist housing on the riverfront of Greenwich Village, it was easy for me to get other residents to submit work. This included Ed Sanders, the editor of the early 60s mimeographed, hand-typed mag *Fuck You* (I published his epic poem "The Yiddish Speaking Socialists of the Lower East Side"), Leonard Freed and his B&W photos he took when he rode around at night in a police patrol car in Manhattan in the 70s, Evelyn Hoffer and portraits of city folk, and Han's Haacke's groundbreaking research and photographic study of real estate on the Lower East Side and in Harlem in 1971, titled "Shapolsky et al, Manhattan Real Estate Holdings," which I updated with info and photos and published as a centerfold.

With past issues in hand, I felt increasingly emboldened to ask writers and photographers I didn't know to contribute. The Manhattan White Pages had everyone's info, phone number and address, while downtown city streets were the perfect place to bump into local creatives. Unlike the hip literary scene which was focused on young stars, I met and published the writing of old-timers such as Allen Gins-

berg, Herbert Huncke, Harry Smith and Robert Frank, who generously allowed me to published an image of his of the Manhattan Bridge on the cover of the 1989 issue, as well as several images inside, at a time when he had published his work in very few other magazines. I also met and published the work of my favorite author, Hubert Selby, author of *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. I befriended Willie Colon, one of the earliest Salsa musicians, who wrote a piece about growing up in the Bronx called "The Rhythms", and published writing from other musicians, such as Henry Fiol, Chico O'Farrill, Le Shaun, Jessica Hagedorn, Thurston Moore, Marc Ribot, and Richard Hell. Writing by geographers, art critics, sociologists, and political artists, provided a context about the culture and gentrification wars that were going on at the time in the neighborhood.

From the beginning, photography was a very important element of the magazine. I got permission to publish historic photos of downtown by Weegee, Jacob Riis, Bernice Abbot from the New York Public Library and other photo archives, and included known and unknown local contemporary photographers alongside these historical images. Besides Leonard Freed and Evelyn Hoffer, Robert Frank, Nan Goldin, Dawoud Bey, Annie Sprinkle, Anna Mendieta and many others. Artwork from David Wojnarowicz, Marie Annick-Brown, Hans Haacke, Joe Coleman, among others.



The first few issues featured ads of local businesses, including Shapiro's Kosher Wines, Yonah Shimmel's Kosher bakery, Russ & Daughters, El Castillo del Jaguar (a Dominican diner), Christine, Veselka and Teresa's (three Polish restaurants in the East Village), DeRoberti's Italian Pastry Shop, St. Mark's Cinema, St. Mark's Bookstore and the East Side Bookstore and Neither/Nor (mostly magazines and music), and Taller Latinoamericano, a Latin American cultural center and Spanish school. Each ad included a photograph I took of the facades of the business on one side of the page and their business card, logo or information on the other side. The ads not only helped defray the costs of buying the paper the magazine was printed on, but the images of the facades of these local businesses were part of the images taken by local contemporary and past-century photographers published within the issue. I also included ads for *Granta*, *October*, and *Semiotext(e)* magazines, with whom my magazine shared certain intellectual affinities though not their academic language or uptown elitism.

I started the magazine when I was only 24, knew nothing about magazines or publishing, and had to figure it out myself. I bought paper from a warehouse on Houston St., aged parchment for first two issues, white parchment for third, as a throwback to earlier times. I typed up the first issues on an electric typewriter, photocopied page by page late at night at an office where my girlfriend worked, held collating and stapling parties with family and friends to put it all together. I was not yet aware of samizdat (books or magazines circulated by hand and retyped illegally in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe) but all DIY publishing shares similar technique.

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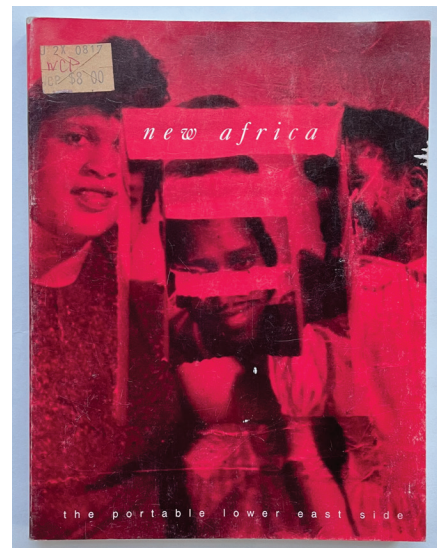
I met Kim Spurlock at the party I threw for the second issue, and he offered to help design and print the magazine (for free!!), something which upped the quality and esthetics of the magazines enormously. Kim designed the logo of *The Portable* (the outline of a suitcase with a tenement building complete with a water tower and smokestacks) inside, and he also designed the covers and insides of the next few issues, which became even smaller and more 'portable.' I would go stay with him in his house in New Jersey for a couple of days and we would sneak into the

print shop where he was working at night and print up whole issues (I supplied the paper and inks).

I started applying for and getting grants, which helped pay for real printing and allowed me to pay a minimal fee to contributors and/or guest editors. Getting grants pushed me to be more professional, and the magazine began to be distributed (by DAP and others) to bookstores all over the USA.

One requirement to apply for grants was to have an editorial board. I invited John Oakes (the publisher of Four Walls Eight Windows), Susan Willmarth (in charge of magazines at the St. Mark's Bookstore), the writer Lynne Tillman, the academic Tricia Rose, editor Don Kennison, David Unger (the director of CCNY's Latin America department), Gregory Kolvakos (a translator and director of NYSCA's literature, under the pseudonym Rod Lauren), Ira Silverberg (a literary agent and editor of High Risk), the Puerto Rican poet Marithelma Costa, the sex worker Veronica Vera, and other friends and associates, with get together where I would pump them for ideas while plying them with food and drink.

Besides the theme issues that I edited (*Songs of the City*, *Latin Americans in NYC*, *Crimes of the City*, *Chemical City*, *Live Sex Acts*, and *Sampling the City*), I chose guest editors for the *New Asia*, *New Africa* and *Queer City* issues, which expanded the scope of the magazine and brought in writers and artists who I never knew, from worlds within the city that I had little experience with.



Publishing parties were an essential element of the magazine. We held a party at the Gas Station on Ave. B for the Latin Americans in NYC issue, at my house for the New Asia issue, at the Frankie Dynell (a contributor to the Sampling the City issue) and Chichi

"The issues on sale at Printed Matter represent one of the largest collections of the magazine anywhere in the world, reunited for the first time in downtown New York City, almost 40 years after being published!"

Valenti's Clit Club in the Meat Packing District; and at ABC No Rio with an all-female samba band.

When I first started, I thought the magazine would be my platform to promote my own work in the literary world. What I didn't know was that the rhythm of editing, phone calls, hustling, meeting friends of friends, other editors and publishers, checking out the latest in magazines and books at St. Mark's and other bookstores and libraries, bugging contributors to send their stuff, applying for and then accounting for grants, trying to meet deadlines, editing and translating and typing up other people's prose, distributing books in person or sending them out from my local post office to subscribers or distributors, being the opposite of what you need to sit still and write. To this day, it's a lot easier for me to get other people's books (as a translator and promoter or just as a promoter) published than my own.

The compensation of not having the time or inclination to write was meeting many of the greatest writers and artists of the time, many still unrecognized, and getting a much deeper and broader and personal understanding of the city and of culture and creation. To design, do cover art, translate from French (Haitian) and later Spanish, take photos, do historical research, go through photo archives, interview people and edit all of which helped me acquire skills that I use now professionally, all connected to literature and the arts but more as a cultural worker than as an artist.

The Portable Lower East Side was created as a cultural and art magazine of downtown New York City, a global center of art and literary production for over a hundred years. In the 1980s, however, with the economy

booming, Wall Street expanding, global corporations flooding the market with consumer culture, and yuppies and tourists taking over the city streets, rents rose and the quality of life in the city plummeted. To avoid the horror of seeing my old neighborhoods destroyed by development, I moved a bit further south, that is, all the way down to Mexico City, where rents were cheap and the culture was still local. I got married, had kids, and started a whole new life (and a new magazine) there.

My mother, who had lived for the past 50 years in Westbeth, the building I grew up in in Greenwich Village, passed away a couple of months ago. I returned to the city, after years of absence, to clear out her apartment. Not only had my mother saved copies of my earliest photographs, stories and publications, she had also stored several boxes of issues from *The Portable Lower East Side* in her closets and bookshelves. Without anywhere to store them, and not wanting to throw them away in the building's trash compactor, I wheeled several boxes of past issues in my mother's creaky laundry cart over to Printed Matter. Although not a complete collection of the 14 issues of *The Portable Lower East Side*, the issues on sale for a limited time at Printed Matter represent one of the largest collections of the magazine anywhere in the world, reunited for the first time in downtown New York City, almost 40 years after being published. For a publication that it nowhere to be found in the digital world, and with very limited copies in the physical world, this is as close to a reunion as possible, a once-in-a-lifetime event that, even without parties and celebrations to accompany it, feels like a very sweet *Adiós*.

