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June 19, 2001

The Smithsonian Gathers a Few of New York's Unsung Artists

By N. R. KLEINFELD

With eight million people to pick from, Nancy Groce winnowed it down to 200. She lined up Andrew Rosenwach to handle the water tower. She picked out Steve Ross to make the bagels. She wanted a bus driver, and she figured, how can you go wrong with Tony Palombella? He works the 96th Street crosstown route, loves to joke around, tell stories. She got Bio and friends for the artwork.

Nancy Groce is pint-size. She is affable. She is tired. For more than three years, she has been rooting through New York City in pursuit of its fundamentals.

The Smithsonian Institution has chosen New York as the primary focus of its 35th Smithsonian Folklife Festival, and it has been Ms. Groce's consuming job to figure out how to take the city to Washington. The event runs at the National Mall in Washington from June 27 to July 1, and again from July 4 to July 8. (There will also be exhibitions on Bermuda and master craftspeople of the building arts, but they were not Ms. Groce's problem.)

Ms. Groce has been a curator at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage since late 1997, when she was hired after proposing New York for the festival. She has a good feel for New York, having been born and raised in Brooklyn. Manhattan is now her home, though she does heavy-duty commuting to Washington.

How do you sum up New York and all its high-octane buzz, its sweaty discomforts, its neurotic braggadocio? Hard stuff. Early on, Ms. Groce made a decision. She did not want to herald the old chestnuts that tourists always see — the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, Times Square. She did not want Donald J. Trump talking about the city. ("He's in the media all the time. The family making neon signs isn't.") She wanted to reflect contemporary, everyday New York through the



James Estrin/The New York Times
Members of Tats Cru, who have given up graffiti to become muralists, will be part of the 35th Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

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James Estrin/The New York Times
Tony Palombella, above, a joking bus driver, will be among those bringing New York to Washington next week.



unsung.



James Estrin/The New York Times

Mary Constantini, who makes mannequins.

To help out, Ms. Groce hired something like 50 academics and other experts. Innumerable people were interviewed. Hundreds of hours of tapes were amassed. "A hundred years from now," she said, "if you want to know how to make bagels in Brooklyn or neon signs, there will be something on tape."

The festival will touch on the odd and the ordinary. There will be music (salsa, Bulgarian Gypsy, rap), the Broadway theater (a wig maker, a prop maker, a rehearsal of "Guys and Dolls"), the fashion business (shop windows will be built and professors and students from the Fashion Institute of Technology will arrange them), the neighborhoods (a panel of Brooklynites will discuss Brooklyn).

Visual clues were essential. There was no way to replicate the skyline (though some sheet metal workers will talk about building the skyline), but how about a water tank? Ms. Groce recruited Andrew Rosenwach, the fourth-generation president of the Rosenwach Tank Company, a Long Island City-based company that is one of the last water tank builders in the city, to have his workmen assemble what he considers the "flag of New York City."

"I always notice them," Ms. Groce said. "But when I mention them to tourists, they say, 'What water towers?'"

The water tank for the festival will have openings carved out of it so people can wander through and presumably feel what it is like to be water inside a New York water tank. It will be built in the company's Greenpoint, Brooklyn, factory and trucked to Washington in pieces.

Ms. Groce believed that there was no separating New York from its mass transit, so the Metropolitan Transportation Authority agreed to send a subway car, one of the Redbirds from the No. 7 line. The line, a favorite of John Rocker, runs between Times Square and Flushing and is being promoted at the festival as something vaguely like the Appalachian Trail or the Transcontinental Railroad.

There will be a Checker cab, even though it has been two years since anyone could hail a Checker cab in New York City, and a city bus is being driven down by someone from the bus's garage. Tony Palombella will show up separately to talk about bus driving. He will go to Washington on the train.

Mr. Palombella, 18 years behind the wheel, has become familiar among bus riders because he tells jokes and stories while he drives. He admits that occasionally he gets someone like the irritable guy the other day who barked: "This is not a comedy club. This is a bus. Drive the bus."

Mr. Palombella went on, "I'm a little nervous about the festival, because they want me to cook, too. They want me to do some of my mother's recipes. My mother made homemade pasta every Saturday and Sunday. I'm thinking of doing rice and cheese and spaghetti with anchovies."

A gypsy robe and the gypsy robe keeper will be part of the Broadway exhibit. Whenever a musical opens on Broadway, the chorus member, or "gypsy," with the most credits from the last musical to open presents a robe to the members of the new musical's cast. It is meant to bring good luck. The cast then decorates a section of the garment before it is passed along.

Steve Ross, who owns Coney Island Bialys and Bagels, will demonstrate how to make bagels and bialys by hand. (Machines have largely replaced hands for bagel making.) The shop has been feeding bagels and bialys to New Yorkers for more than 60 years. Now Mr. Ross is on the Internet and fields orders from throughout the country, mainly from transplanted New Yorkers who cannot find bialys in South Dakota or Alaska.

In a tent devoted to Wall Street, a futures ring and a trading floor will be erected. Traders will explain their business and rituals (like hazing new traders by cutting off their neckties and putting talcum powder in their shoes). Visitors will be invited to try their hand trading pizza slices.

On and on.

In undertakings this ambitious, some fudging was inevitable. For instance, as part of a display on the fashion industry, a mannequin maker will sculpture a mannequin. Someone from New York was all set to go, but he was bashful, got cold feet and backed out. Mary Constantini, who does mannequins for the Daffy's chain, among others, was recommended. But she works out of a studio in Union City, N.J., just across the Hudson. "All her mannequins are in New York," Ms. Groce said. "So we gave her dispensation."

Not everything in the festival is what you think of as a flourishing part of New York. Some selections are more expiring cultural facets. Yiddish radio? Joe Franklin? Then there is the man who is one of the last to engrave stock certificates by hand (and though he is from the Bronx, he now works out of Pennsylvania). A speech coach, Sam Chwat, will talk about the "Noo Yawk" accent, even though most New Yorkers now talk like everyone else.

There will be an exhibition on New York games. Video games might make more sense, or an outfielder from the Yankees. Instead, there will be stickball, double Dutch, skelly and stoop ball. A stoop and a sidewalk are being built on the Mall. Each day, there will be a stickball competition. "It evokes New York," Ms. Groce said. "There's still stickball being played in the South Bronx, East Harlem and in Queens. I know. I went to a championship stickball competition on 113th Street in Harlem last summer."

Certain areas might not seem to be the first choice of New York civic boosters. For instance, four members of Tats Cru, a six-person graffiti organization based in the South Bronx, will express themselves with a mural on a wall erected for the purpose.

Tats Cru, however, is a mature group, done with evading the law. The three founders, who are known as Bio, Nicer and BG183, started together 20 years ago. They are now in their mid-30's and are incorporated. They began by decorating subway cars, but have forsaken trains in favor of legally painting murals commissioned by merchants and organizations. They charge \$18 to \$30 a square foot. They are well-enough known that they get jobs in places like Florida, Minnesota, Canada, Europe. Twice a month they teach classes to aspiring graffiti writers.

Just to be safe, Ms. Groce said, the subway car on display is being placed far from the wall for Tats Cru. Bio laughed when he heard this. He had not been told there was going to be a subway car. But he was sure that Tats Cru would behave. "Nah, we won't touch it," he said.

Other shadier aspects of New York culture will be left unrepresented. There were suggestions that a three- card monte dealer be included. Ms. Groce passed. "And there won't be any pickpockets," she said, "or at least ones that we brought down."

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