

# Kenny Scharf's East Village, 38 Years Later

By Brett Sokol

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“I think I can still get us up on the roof,” Kenny Scharf enthusiastically offered, pointing to a nearby building. We had already spent nearly three hours that afternoon bounding around his old East Village stomping grounds, searching for the murals he'd painted decades ago after becoming one of the New York art world's biggest stars.

I was writing a story on a new Museum of Modern Art exhibition centering on work by the artists — Mr. Scharf, Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat chief among them — who turned a bar called Club 57 into the nightly headquarters of the early '80s East Village art scene. As these artists' media profiles — and attendant market prices — have risen in recent years (posthumously, in the cases of Mr. Haring and Mr. Basquiat), my mission was to say something fresh about a scene that continues to see no shortage of ink spilled over it.

One solution: Focus on the setting. Return with Mr. Scharf to familiar terrain, and not simply for an easy bit of now-versus-then real estate appreciation. Now 59, he showed little sign of slowing down, and the photographer Andrew White and I did our best to keep up. I frantically scribbled notes, walking and asking questions, while Mr. White lugged a huge duffel bag of camera equipment, taking bursts of shots as Mr. Scharf raced on and off the subway, in and out of traffic, finally landing at the onetime location of Club 57.

Mr. Scharf felt that a shot from atop that nearby roof would be perfect. Never mind that he didn't know anyone who currently lived in the building.

“I didn't know anyone who lived there back in 1979, either,” he added with a shrug. We'd just slip in and go up. Mr. White raised a bemused eyebrow my way: *What was The New York Times's policy on breaking and entering?*

Establishing a specific time and place is essential to understanding not only the Club 57 milieu, but virtually every significant art movement. Art is rarely created in a vacuum. This was especially true for the Club 57 crowd, living in a neighborhood where a part-time gig could still cover expenses. There was plenty of time left for socializing; many Club 57-goers spent more time there than in their actual apartments.



So many of those artists are no longer here to speak for themselves, lost most often to AIDS or a heroin epidemic that cut through the East Village like a double-bladed scythe. Many of the survivors remain understandably shellshocked. Yet putting these painful memories front and center is essential to getting the story right, to explaining why certain '80s artists are now part of the historical canon and others struggle to be remembered at all. Sheer talent doesn't always win out.

“If you're 20 years old and you're on a certain career trajectory,” explained Mr. Scharf, “and then you become a heroin addict for 10 years, even if you get off heroin, you can't get back on that trajectory. There's a whole bunch of new 20-year-olds there now. That's the art world. That's life.”

I asked him how on earth, back in 1979, he'd ended up on the roof of a building he'd never even set foot inside. What resulted was a tale that began with Mr. Scharf calling the A.S.P.C.A. to make a salacious accusation regarding his downstairs neighbor's German shepherds, and ended with said neighbor waiting for Mr. Scharf in their shared lobby with a butcher knife. At that point, Mr. Scharf learned to come and go by entering the building next door, going up to its roof, hopping across to his own building's roof and then shimmying down its fire escape into his apartment.

This went on for months. I asked Mr. Scharf why he didn't just move? He looked back at me oddly. “The rent was cheap,” he said matter-of-factly.

Which may be the afternoon's ultimate takeaway. Want to see better art made today? Make rents less expensive (minus the knife-wielding psycho), or try looking in places cheap enough that artists there don't need full-time jobs to pay their bills. That's no longer true of the East Village, but an afternoon with Mr. Scharf was a potent reminder of what used to be.

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