

## NY CULTURE

# In Ken Schles's Photos, a Grittier East Village Comes Back Into Focus

Two Books, 'Invisible City' and 'Night Walk,' Accompany Solo Show at Howard Greenberg Gallery



1 of 10

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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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When the photographer Ken Schles lived near Avenue B and 13th Street in the 1980s, the view through his lens was different. An artisanal cocktail bar where mixologists now congregate was an old Jehovah's Witness center, and violence and destitution plagued the streets.

“The neighborhood was a total wreck,” said Mr. Schles, paying a return visit to the East

Village, the site of his career-making early photos. “I didn’t want to walk around the neighborhood with my camera by myself.”

The sites around his old apartment provide the backdrop for “Invisible City,” a photography book from 1988 that has been reissued with a new companion volume, “Night Walk,” by the German art-book imprint Steidl. The books compile photos that Mr. Schles took of his surroundings, both good and bad.

Some of the grainy, black-and-white pictures portray abandoned buildings and rubble in what looks like a war-torn country. Others focus on social life and parties at 1980s neighborhood institutions like Limbo Lounge, 8BC and ABC No Rio.

“He was one of the few who really got it and was able to document those times, those people, those moments in the club scene with the grit and grime,” said Karen Marks, director of Howard Greenberg Gallery, which starting Friday will show Mr. Schles’s photos in a solo exhibition.



‘New York always has stories about what the city used to be,’ photographer Ken Schles said. ‘I think it’s up to all of us to take what we’ve been given and try to see beyond, to make it something new.’ *PHOTO: AGATON STROM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

The photographer himself was philosophical about his position. “I’d studied history and I’d studied art, so I knew what the world could be, and I was trying to figure out what the world had turned into,” Mr. Schles said. “I was searching the world and using the camera as a means.”

On a brisk afternoon last week, the 54-year-old, who now lives in Brooklyn, strolled the streets of his old neighborhood.

“This is where the early galleries used to be,” he said on East 10th Street, where the art dealer Gracie Mansion once set up a storefront space by Tompkins Square Park after staging her first shows in her bathroom at home.

Landmarks that remain from Mr. Schles’s memory include the Strand Book Store, the 24-hour Ukrainian restaurant Veselka and, it turned out, the entryway to his old building.

“My name is still on the buzzer,” he said upon arriving at the location on Avenue B between 13th and 14th Streets, where he moved in 1983. From there, he shot photos that figured into his books.

A worker from a renovated building out back shooed him away from a spot where, decades ago, his camera captured a couple in flagrante delicto in an empty lot.

“He was a local wino, she was a local crackhead,” Mr. Schles said, looking at the image in the book. “It was wild, lawless. Police wouldn’t come to the neighborhood.”

It was also a hotbed of edgy cultural energy.

“It was bombed-out with abandoned cars on the streets, but it was an image of creativity and endless possibility,” said Mark C, whose art-rock band Live Skull features in a trailer video for the “Invisible City” reissue. “You could make noise, spray-paint, take over an abandoned building and make a club to have all-night dance parties. Ken’s pictures remind me of all of that.”

Gerhard Steidl, publisher of the imprint that bears his name, praised the personal aspect of Mr. Schles’s work.

“They are not really ‘art books,’” Mr. Steidl said. “They’re more like diaries. It should be easy to read them, not to make them a luxury object.”

And of Mr. Schles, Mr. Steidl added: “There are photographers who just walk around and press the button, but he is different. He has a sense to find intimate or curious or dangerous situations. He’s walking through the city like a scout, seeing hidden things that are hard to find.”

Mr. Schles said he sees his early photography as part of a lineage beginning with Jacob Riis, who captured 19th-century tenement life in New York, memorably in the book “How the Other Half Lives.”

“New York always has stories about what the city used to be,” said Mr. Schles, who was born and raised in Brooklyn. “I think it’s up to all of us to take what we’ve been given and try to see beyond, to make it something new. That’s what this was for me.”

*“Ken Schles: Invisible City/Night Walk 1983-1989” opens on Friday at Howard Greenberg Gallery, The Fuller Building, 41 E. 57th St., Suite 1406; 212-334-0010; [howardgreenberg.com](http://howardgreenberg.com).*

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