

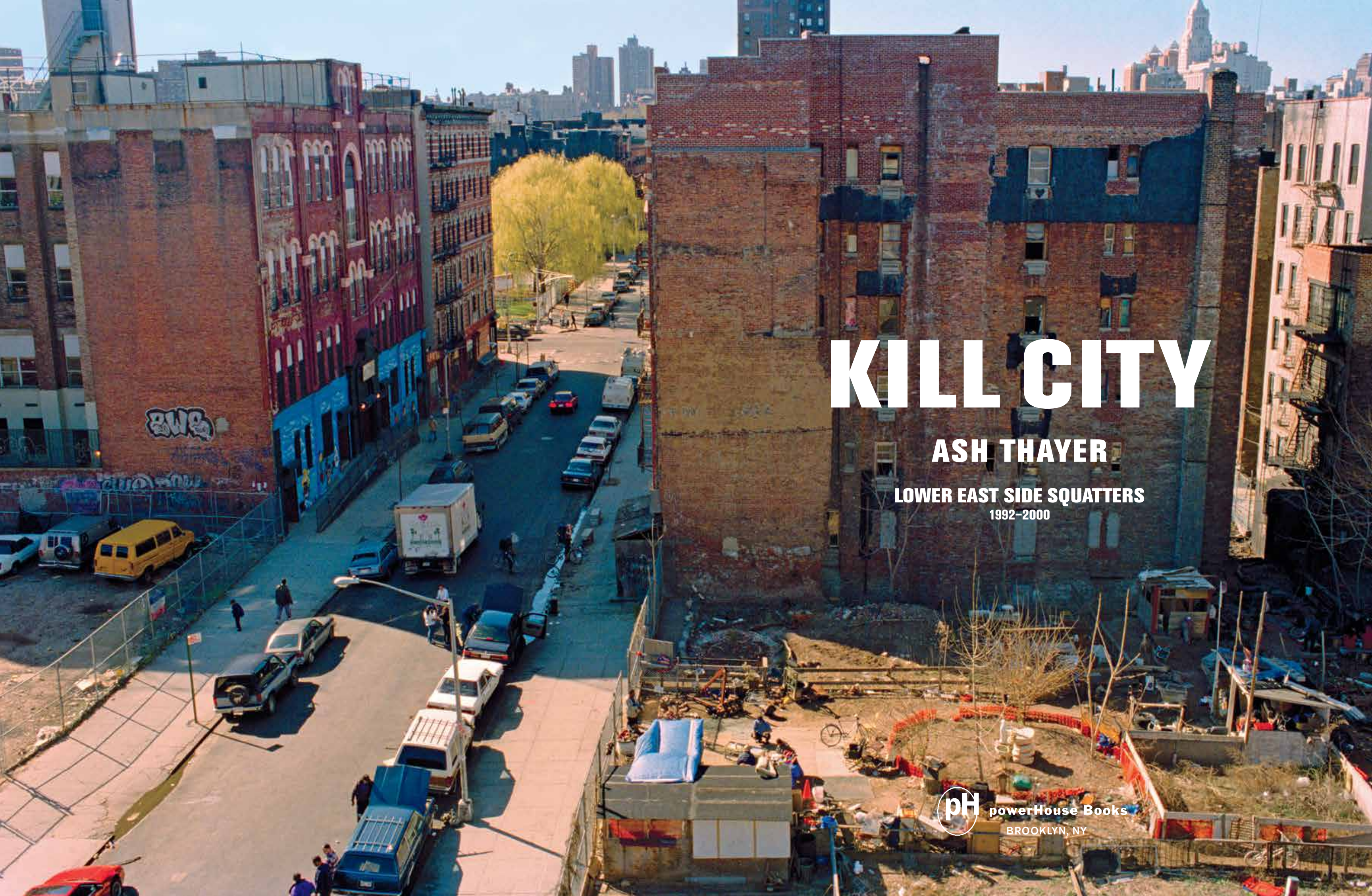
**LOWER EAST SIDE
SQUATTERS**
1992-2000
ASH THAYER

KILL CITY



KILL CITY

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LOWER EAST SIDE SQUATTERS
1992-2000

 powerHouse Books
BROOKLYN, NY

I would like to dedicate this book to all the squatters that I had the honor of passing time with:

The punks, crusties, train-hoppers, anarchists, derelicts, rejects, radicals, runways, musicians, drifters, homeless, drunks, junkies, yogis, Polish, Spanish, Germans, Norwegians, Colombians, Puerto Ricans, Argentineans, Jews, Africans, African-Americans, Mexicans, Canadians, and the plain ol' lily-white Americans. This book is for all of you.

I also dedicate this book to Michael Shenker, Dave, J.p., Jaime, Bradley, Sammy, Soi, Micah, and Danny, who were a part of this movement, who have since passed away. You are remembered and profoundly missed. Rest in peace, dear friends.

PROLOGUE

by Ash Thayer

I humbly invite you to take a stroll through my life in the squatter community of the Lower East Side in the 1990s. Take note: I can only be a guide to my New York. The photographs in this book reflect the people who made up my particular tribe and the sanctuary I found with them. The LES was a very different neighborhood during the 90s than it is now. And it was a different universe then, compared to what it was like back in the 70s or 80s, as Frank Morales—who has generously contributed the introduction to this book—and other locals can attest.

In the 1970s, a massive downturn famously brought New York City close to bankruptcy. Landlords failed to pay property taxes and abandoned their buildings, even some still occupied by tenants. Some owners took further measures and burned buildings for insurance payouts. Empty lots quickly turned into homeless encampments and drug use and crime rates soared.

The waiting list for low-income housing at the time was at least ten years, and the shelters overflowed. New York winters put the homeless sleeping on the street—an estimated 30,000 at the time—at risk of death from hypothermia while at the same time, hundreds of buildings throughout the city sat vacant.

Between 1980 and 1986 New York City took part in a federal homesteading program started by Jimmy Carter to help residents rehabilitate landlord-abandoned buildings and acquire the titles. When the program was ended in the Reagan era, on a federal and local level, the need for housing was still growing. Housing activists decided to persevere, especially as City Hall seemed apathetic to the housing crisis at hand. Over two dozen barely habitable abandoned buildings on the Lower East Side were occupied by people who hoped to acquire title once they brought them up to code. For some buildings it was a race against the clock, but by the mid 90s, these squatters often stopped evictions in court using the law of adverse possession.

So how does a middle class Memphis girl like me end up in this fringe community?

In grade school I was a target for abuse by a trio of evil-Disney-dimpled-redneck-princesses. I was a sensitive, pale, freckled ginger and easy to pick on. These girls had the right label of expensive clothes; I did not. They got attention from boys; I did not. I was a smart kid, and a competitive gymnast until I was 14, but depression and self-loathing from their ceaseless tormenting sabotaged me. I became a target for

other bullies, including boys, and I was too ashamed to tell my parents anything. I was sure that would only make things worse.

In eighth grade a new girl arrived and I finally had a best friend. Together, we dared to hang out with older kids who saw our reject status as a badge of honor. They could get booze, dealt drugs, and would help sneak us into clubs. I was a good student during the day and a rager at night. I ended up leaving my parents' house before I graduated, opting to move in with a bunch of punk rock girls. I shared a room and a single bed and learned about DIY (do-it-your-fucking-self) culture, anarchism, atheism, straight edge, and hard core. I was listening to Bad Brains, Minor Threat, Bikini Kill, John Zorn, Crass, Fugazi, Cro-Mags, Patti Smith, the Specials, Hole, the Clash, Black Flag, Sex Pistols, the Slits, Dead Kennedys, Joan Jett, Motorhead, Die Kreuzen, the Damned, and Misfits. Also, our local Memphis bands: Man With Gun Lives Here, Taint Skins, Cop Out, FMD, and Pistol Whipped.

The punk girls didn't give two shits about looking sexy, wearing respectable clothes, or fawning over guys. We dyed our hair crazy colors, and cut or shaved it in disheveled and nonsensical ways. If there was any sense of competition, it was about who could say fuck you the loudest with their appearance. Fuck me? Well, fuck you first! God, it felt so good to stop trying to fit in. The punk community taught me that I could take the pain and rage I felt and do something productive with it, involving social activism, music, and artistic expression.

In 1992, I moved to New York City to attend The School of Visual Arts. I found a railroad apartment on the Upper East Side with a rotating group of other teens, but we couldn't afford rent after just a few months. I had a partial scholarship and was living on student loans. I moved to Brooklyn briefly, but after being booted from there I truly had no place to go. On the verge of dropping out of school because I couldn't afford tuition and rent, I shared my situation with a young local punk guy, Brett, who I'd met in Tompkins Square Park and at punk shows. He offered me a place to stay in his building, which he referred to as a squat. I had never heard the term before, but once I found out what it meant, I was in!

This was See Skwat. The building was dark inside, electricity was minimal, and it had no running water. Officially, it was unfit for habitation. It was owned by the city, and had been left unused and decaying for over 15 years. Some makeshift apartments were missing floors, walls, and ceilings. Residents had replaced the stairs between several floors. People could find almost all the materials necessary to rebuild their apartments in the garbage: studs, drywall, flooring, and insulation. What they couldn't find they paid for themselves with money they earned at the same kinds of part time jobs that I found during this time: I waitressed, was a bicycle messenger, a hired hand at an all female moving company, and even did some general construction work. Living at See Skwat, I got to know squatters at the other buildings throughout the Lower East

Side. We worked on our buildings during the day and partied at night. There were group construction projects, community room potlucks, and notorious concerts in the basement. We participated in community activities and board meetings, as well as demonstrations and protests for fair housing regulations for all New York City residents. When we couldn't afford to buy food we would dumpster dive and emerge with barely expired produce, bags of stale bagels, anything we could get our hands on. You just had to not give a shit when regular people gave you strange looks. If you were young, white, not covered in piss-stained clothes or drooling on yourself, and observed digging in the garbage, it really seemed to disturb passers-by.

After bouncing in and out of another apartment, I moved into Fifth Street Squat and started taking more pictures of the people around me. I found the environment fascinating and the people beautiful and intriguing. I had no interest in the typical art school subjects and I sure didn't want to shoot fashion, advertising, or anything I thought would support corporate America.

In my last year of school I moved into Serenity House. The apartment had some running water, electricity, and even a phone. There were more families in this building including four little girls, all about three to four years old.

During my time around the squats there were several devastating evictions: Glasshouse, the five buildings that made up Thirteenth Street Squat, Fifth Street Squat, and Dos Blockos. We all, as a community, and with support from some of our neighbors, fought like hell to keep them. I had a front row seat from which to observe the ways the media selectively covered our stories and events, leaving out crucial information and falsifying our history.

In 2000, the majority of the eleven remaining squats, (including See Skwat) started a process with City Hall, converting them into limited equity co-ops. Although the court's decision and how it was carried out was complicated and nuanced, it was widely seen as a victory for the squatters. However, the era of squatting on the Lower East Side as we had known it was forever changed.

To say that my time squatting in New York was formative is an understatement. Although it was, at times, a wild scene and full of imperfect people, including myself, it taught me so many valuable skills: construction, community organizing, and above all independence. My ability to trust my instincts and stay true to my beliefs, regardless of what others might think, was strengthened. Together, my fellow squatters and I crafted a life out of New York City's throwaways.

I'll end by saying thank you, with all of my heart, to each of you who were a part of my life at this time. Thank you for affirming that being different is a blessing, not a curse, and that fighting for change is a worthwhile pursuit, no matter who gets upset by it. This is how I saw you—as rugged, beautiful warriors, as agents for change. This book is for you, with love. May it inspire many generations to come.

INTRODUCTION

by Reverend Frank Morales

Coming from totally outside the realm of everyone else's experience at the time, the Lower East Side squatters burst upon the scene in 1984, a year of peak Reaganism. Stretching from Thirteenth Street (535, 537, 539, 541, and 544) down to Bullet Space on Third, and Umbrella House on Second, squatters seized (between 1985 and 1990) some 30 buildings east of Avenue B on NYC's Lower East Side. Unprecedented and undisciplined, combative and cooperative, and above all dedicated to practical action, we squatters made great fun out of urban barn-raising and filling up dead spaces with the creative energy of the Life Force—a veritable rolling away of the stone from the tenement tombs, cold monuments of the war against the poor, the war of profits over people.

In 1979 I was finishing up my stint at Saint Ann's Episcopal Church in the South Bronx as their associate priest. I was living in the rectory, on the grounds of the church, and it was time to move. But I loved the neighborhood, the people, and history, and had no thought to leave, to abandon the South Bronx, home of the Young Lords, hip-hop, graffiti, and a location which, at the time, was an infamous global symbol of urban poverty in America.

The first buildings that we squatted in the South Bronx were ostensibly "city owned," that is, owned by the NYC Office of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD). That meant that after having contributed to the depopulating of areas like the South Bronx and Harlem, they ("the City") were now pretending to "preserve and develop" housing for those in need. But in fact, they were warehousing (according to their own statistics) some 100,000 vacant units throughout the five boroughs, keeping the neighborhood and those in need locked out. Recall, this was the period of emerging mass homelessness and the rise of the so-called "shelter system"—really a form of low-intensity detention and surveillance of the poor.

I'd grown up on the Lower East Side in the Jacob Riis Projects on Avenue D and maybe that's the reason I identified, and still do, with the struggle of poor and regular people for a decent home, even if they have to (and they do) seize one! I squatted back then in the South Bronx because I needed a place to live; didn't have sufficient funds to afford to rent an apartment. Yes, that's true. But also I did so because deep down I believe that we have to make a direct statement about the moral requirement to house homeless people, and to do so by doing it—together with homeless people housing ourselves.

Rents soared along Avenue B and C, despite the fact that hundreds of vacant buildings stood all about. The speculators were stepping over one another in their mad

scramble to buy up everything in sight. It was in this context that we began to occupy, with autonomous groups on the move, including the folks associated with David Boyle on Thirteenth Street, such that by 1990 or so we had collectively occupied and secured some 30 buildings from Fourteenth Street to Houston.

I assisted and lived in our original squatter “mother ship,” 327 East Eighth Street. Opened up by Scott and Julie, Steve, Cathy and Robin, Kelly, Alan, and Christy, we had hootenannies lead by Michelle Shocked, Ginsberg came by for the occasional reading. Later I lived at 292 East Third, which was to become Bullet Space, liberating that edifice along with co-conspirators Tenesh, the Castrucci brothers, Josh Whalen, and others. But my heart still belonged at Eighth Street, so back I went, moving down the street to 319, originally opened by Mike Shenker and Natasha in 1984. It was home to Jorge Brandon (El Coco que Habla) beloved elder of Nuyorican Poets (where Bimbo Rivas would come each morning with café con leche y pan con mantequilla for him), Rex and Rosemary, Jim the Mosaic Man. Later, after May 1989, when we were forcibly evicted from there (see *The Battle of 319* by Seth Tobocman), I moved to the Sunshine Squat on Sixth Street with Fox and Doreen and others, where after a spell I gave my place over to the edgy Pete Missing. Later, into the 90s, I lived at Dos Blockos for a while, finally relocating to 377 East Tenth Street in 2002—The Tenth Door—where I still reside.

My friend Rolando Politi from Bullet Space said to me once that what he recalls most fondly from the early days was the inspired optimism and idealism of we LES squatters; the sort of relentless spirit and drive that can move mountains, move lots of debris, break down cinder block walls and fight off the police. Ash shined a light upon the faces of these LES squatters, particularly those of the early and mid 90s in and around the Fifth Street Squat. The faces of the likes of Michael Shenker, peering out the window of Glass House with that ridiculously large sombrero!

What was it like in those early squatter years in the LES? Well, it was beautiful and devastating at the same, intense time. For a while it was gratifying to build homes and community together, and to successfully defend our places to work and celebrate and party! It was also, especially in the first two or three years, exceedingly cold in the winter, subject to recurring police attacks in the wee hours of the morning, and occasionally, necessary to fend off acquisitive drug dealers intent on muscling in on our work, not to mention politicians slandering us at every opportunity they could.

All in all, our residential neighbors were generally cool in that most people, if given the options of letting a rat infested building sit empty, with the roof half gone, and with a potential for bad shit to happen etc., versus folks getting in there and on their own dime, in their own time, with their own sweat, fixing the space up—well, most people (say 7 out of 10) will support you. So most of the neighbors and neighborhood were supportive, often integrating with squatters, though not so the politicians or the “official left,” regardless of what “party” they came from or how “progressive” they were said to be, or what color or gender they were.

For the most part we governed ourselves in an autonomous way, meaning that each building set it’s own rules: how much you should donate to the common money pot, how much time you devoted to collective work days, etc. The three basic rules (violation of which could get you thrown out) that seemed to govern the groups in those days were simple: no stealing from your neighbor, no violence against your neighbor, and no drug dealing from the building. Now, of course there were times when we had to break out the bats and defend ourselves against violence prone drug dealers and thugs who wanted to co-opt our basements or apartments for their needs; but generally speaking I would say that when any grassroots group is capable of drawing out large number of neighbors (which we were) to press a point, they would be successful. That was the case with us. Our Eviction Watch network, (phone tree—remember no cells then) did the job of rapidly deploying our troops when the need arose, which in those days was regularly.

Over the years people have asked me to express my feelings about the young, punk “crusties” who were part of our scene and who are so wonderfully featured in Ash’s book. Oftentimes the people asking me these questions would be looking for me (as a lifelong resident of Loisaída, with a Latino surname—my dad was Puerto Rican) to slam these kids. Well, guess what: for me the courage amidst some real despair that some of them were carrying, the witness they made to the struggle for housing for all, picketing in front of homeless shelters in support of the sisters and brothers inside, the formation and dissemination of a resistance politics from “rock against racism,” to “squat or rot,” and “gentrification is genocide” is and has always earned my respect. Their dedication to the cause and willingness to suffer for it is a counter to the distorted image proffered by the mainstream and bourgeois press that seek to suppress the genuine “punk” critique and power that was the popular zeitgeist of the time. As for racial stereotypes, ever since my time in the South Bronx I have been firm in my belief, based on experience, that community people will judge you not on the basis of how you look but on what you do and how you do it.

Finally, I must say that looking at these photos is especially moving. But aside from that, seeing Ash’s images brings me back to that era of weeks of dirt in your fingernails, shivering down to the winter bone, feeling at times like a relic of some bygone time when people actually cared. It makes you wonder how we all managed to rise to the occasion and do what we did. So all praise to the squatters of Fifth Street! May they land their witness and live forever. A great thanks to Ash Thayer and her keen eye in bringing these images to us, to teach and to recall, to inspire and admire—but mostly to prove that when people, even (or especially) young people come together in cooperation and dedication to hard work, that there is nothing they can’t accomplish. I hope that Ash Thayer’s beautiful book gets the wide and generous audience that it deserves.

Squat the World!

"The idealists and visionaries, foolish enough to throw caution to the winds and express their ardor and faith in some supreme deed, have advanced mankind and have enriched the world."

—EMMA GOLDMAN

KILL CITY







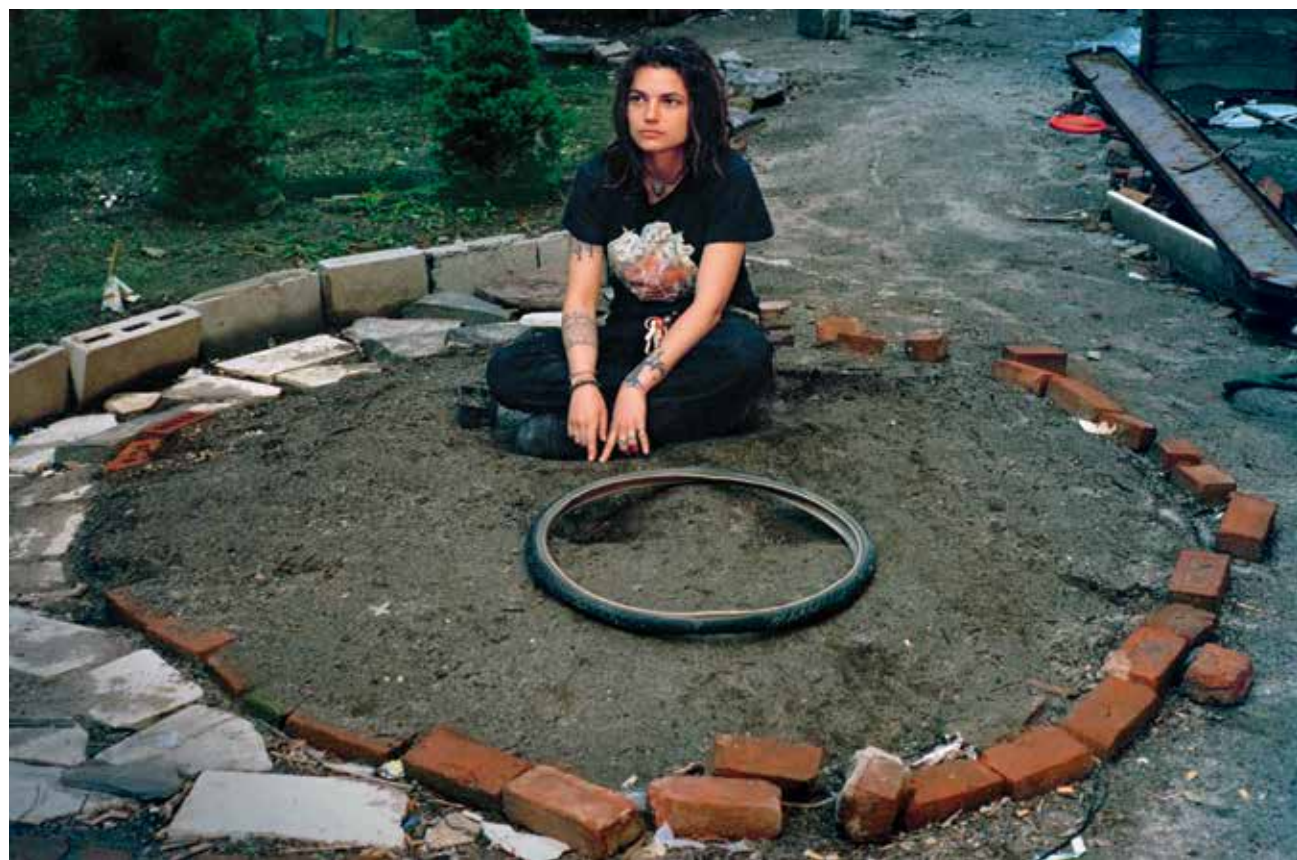




Residents of Fifth Street Squat Playing Four Square, Fifth Street Squat, 1995

Vertical Street View of Fifth Street Squat, 1995

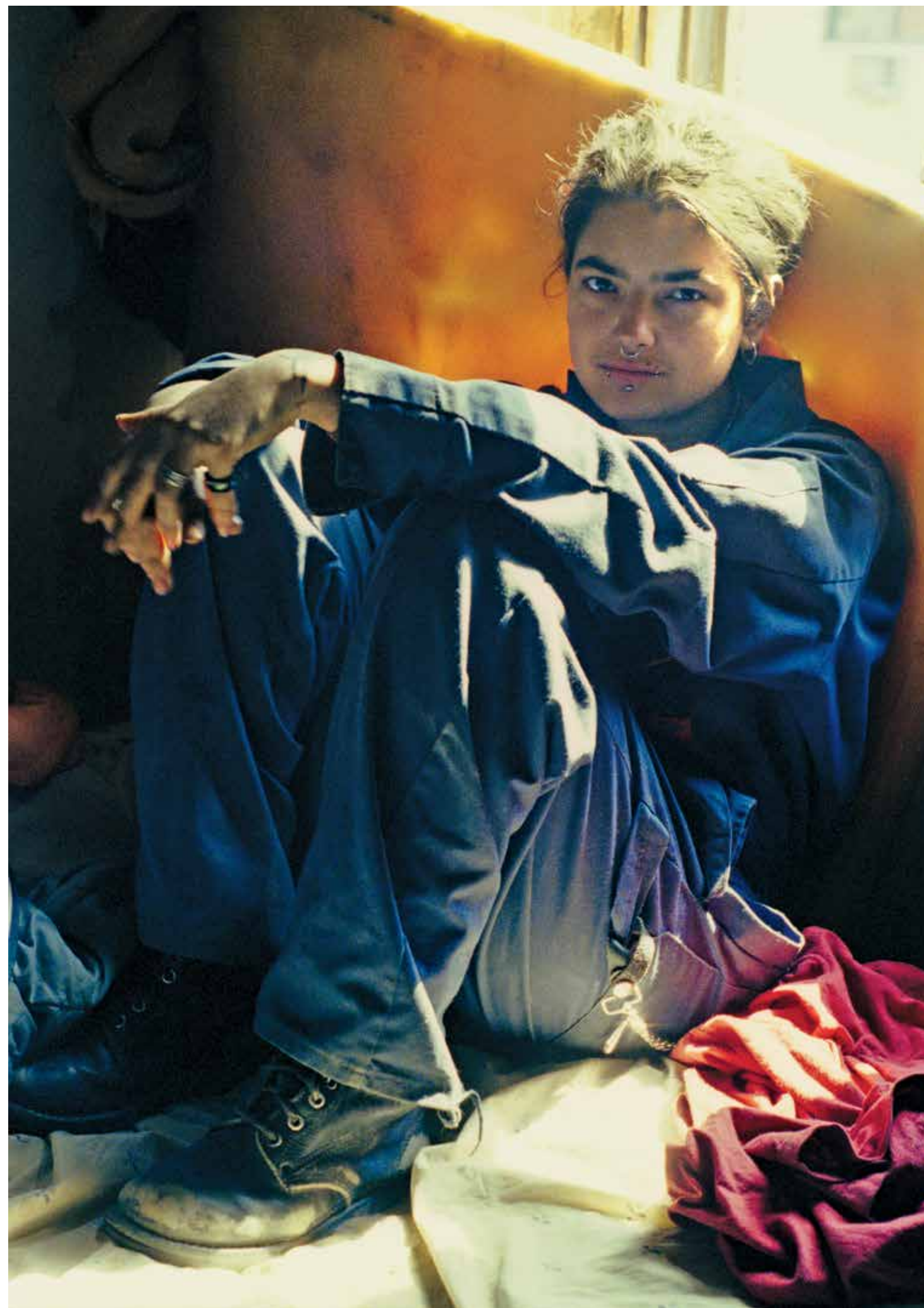




Jen in the Fifth Street Squat Garden, 1994

Jen (on Bed), Fifth Street Squat, 1995

I loved the androgynous look that women rocked in the late 80s and 90s. There was an unspoken agreement with other women in the scene to dissent from mainstream culture's definitions of what was beautiful or feminine. Our character and actions defined us, not how we looked. This was Jen. She was strong and beautiful, with no makeup, wearing a concert t-shirt, or a work uniform and boots.



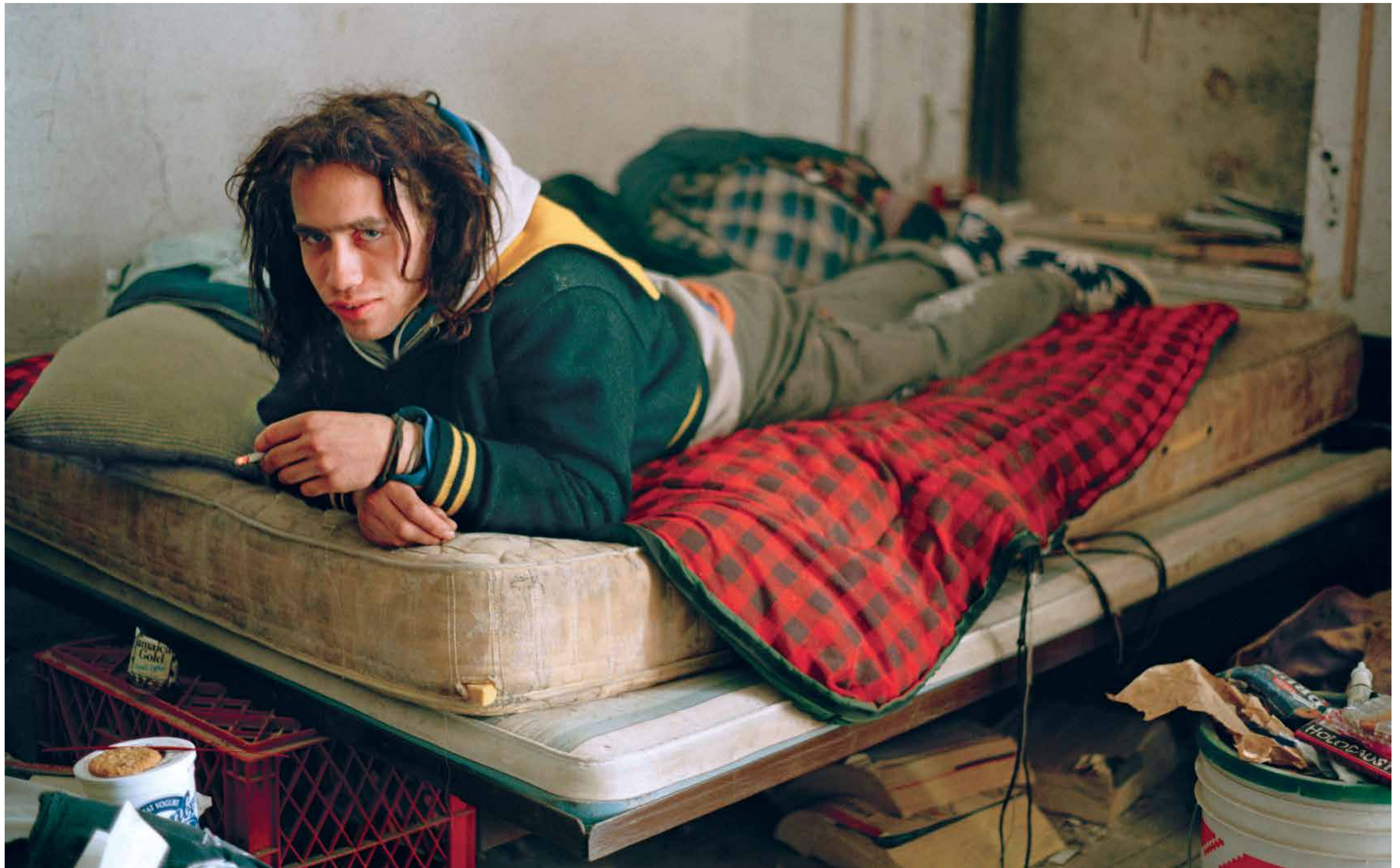


Meggin on
Fire Escape,
Fifth Street
Squat, 1995









Georgie from Germany, Fifth Street Squat, 1994



Scottie and Pezent Shayne with Train, See Skwat, 1997

Dos Blockos Apartment, 1997

FOLLOWING April's Room, See Skwat, 1996





God grant me the
Serenity
to accept
the things
I cannot change,
Courage to change
the things I can,
and Wisdom
to know the difference.



Rebecca and Dog by Window,
Fifth Street Squat, 1996

FOLLOWING Child's Room,
Serenity House, 1997

Sqwert, Serenity House, 1997











Portrait in Band
Shell, 1997

Roger in Window with Dogs, Fifth Street Squat, 1997

So many things were happening around the eviction of 541 and 545 East Thirteenth Street Squats. It was a time of intense organizing and planning, hoping eviction could be delayed, but realizing the inevitable—it was happening. Rubble and scraps of metal were being collected from Fifth Street Squat and See Skwat to be used for barricades, both within the buildings and outside. As the evening progressed to night, residents started to move out. There was constant movement of activity from both Fifth Street Squat and See Skwat, transporting in supplies. We barricaded our own buildings as most of our residents were at Thirteenth Street, helping to block the street with overturned cars and heaps of debris, furniture, whatever we could get our hands on. The two buildings' front doors were welded shut and at this point all entrances were sealed. As dawn came, so did the helicopters. The energy turned frantic.

Brett and myself decided it would be better to fight from inside the buildings rather than the outside since hundreds of police started to charge and push their way through the barricades. We scaled up the side of 545 and made our way in through an open window on the second floor.

We just wanted to hold on a little longer. Our buildings protected us and now it was our time to try to save them, or say goodbye fighting alongside till the end.

Everyone was sealed up in the apartments already, so it was eerie and dark. We joined Pezent Shayne (from See Skwat) on the first floor who was reinforcing the door. All three of us worked frantically. We could hear chanting from protesters outside, then nothing but the sound of grinders trying to get through the door which was laden with numerous levels of metal, wood, and cement. We could hear the police swearing as blade after blade kept breaking—we were hitting the saws with hammers when they came through. Hues of orange and red radiating light were flying through the dark hallway. We knew they were about to break through the last barricade, so we ran up the stairs trying to hide. We got to the second floor landing when we heard a voice emanating somewhere from the third floor.

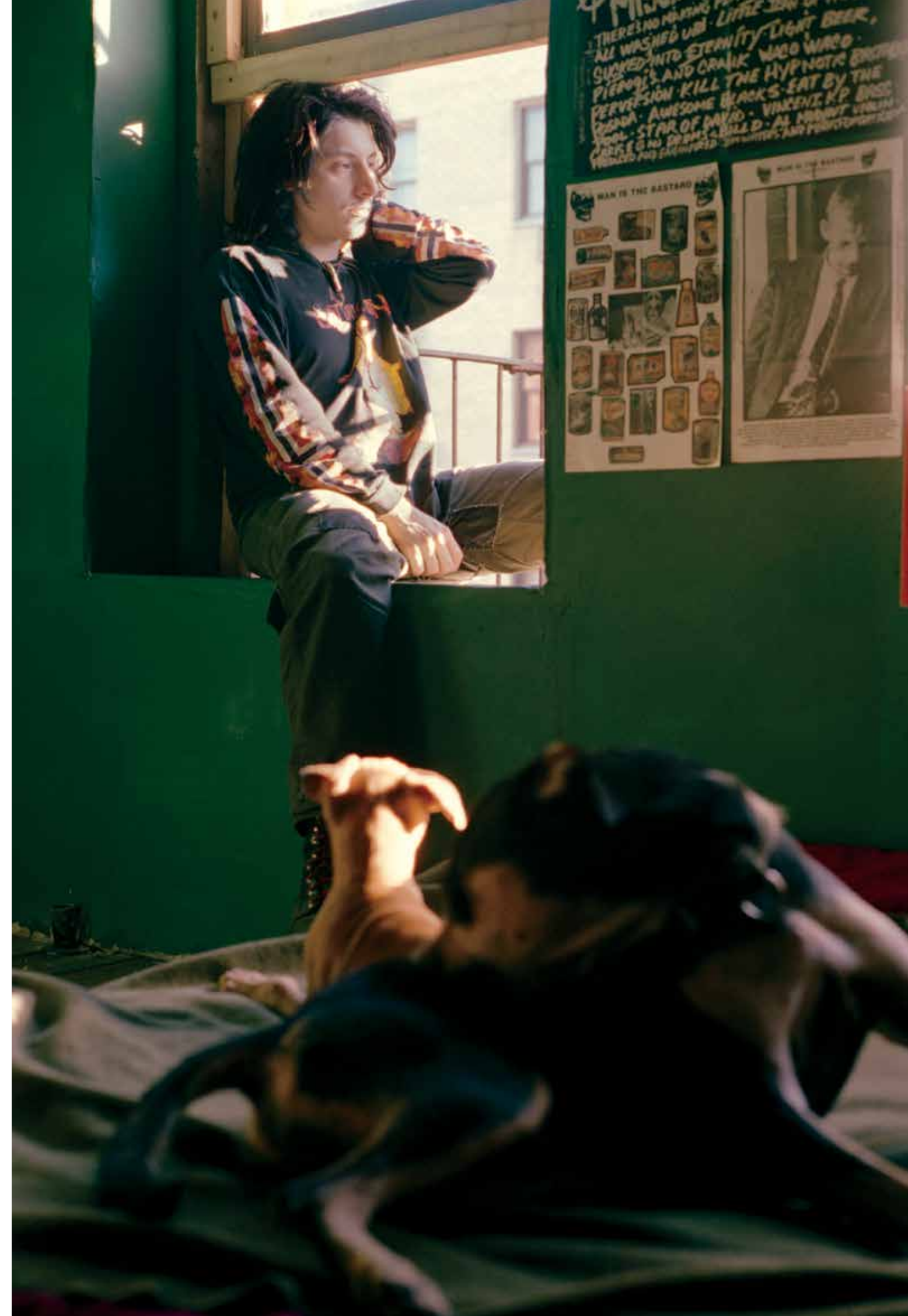
"Up here!" A friend lowered a ladder from a hole in the hallway ceiling, which we climbed, then quickly re-covered the hole. The apartment was empty except for a small television showing a special live news report of the eviction. We literally watched live coverage on the news of what was happening to us!

A deep silence fell on the building.

Then the sounds of police forcing their way into the apartments, and the squatters yelling and screaming within, being dragged out by force from their homes.

Then silence again. It seemed like since there was no doorway, they had no idea we were still in there. Eventually SWAT teams and their dogs found us, the last holdouts of 545 East Thirteenth Street.

—Roger Varela, 537–539 East Fifth Street Squat





Ordering Pizza, See Skwat, 1997







Serenity Apartment, 1995

Cheeze, Thirteenth Street Squat, 1994

FOLLOWING Joey Looking at a Map, See Skwat, 1997





MISSING
FOUNDATION
1933
WE WILL NOT

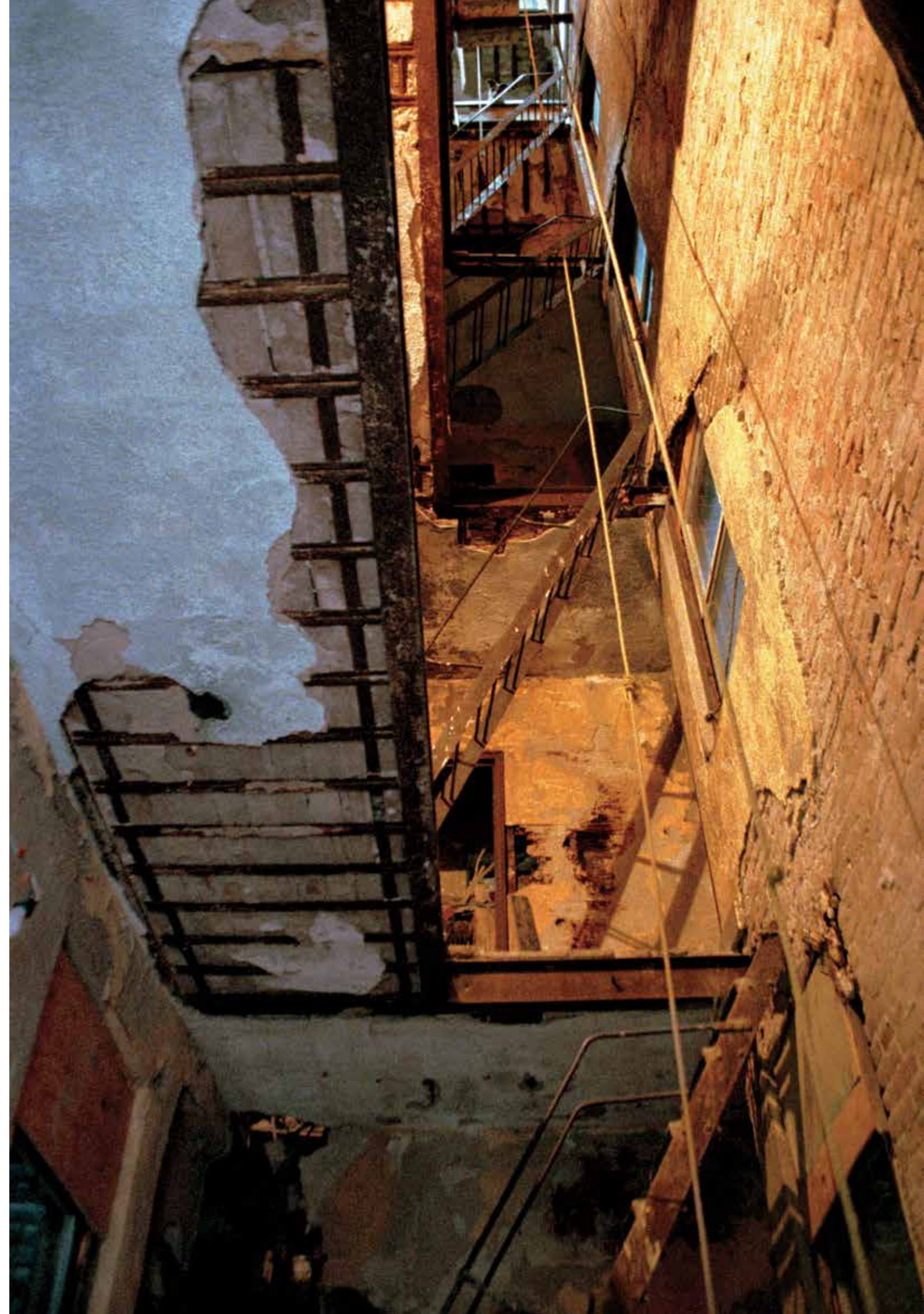
Homeless



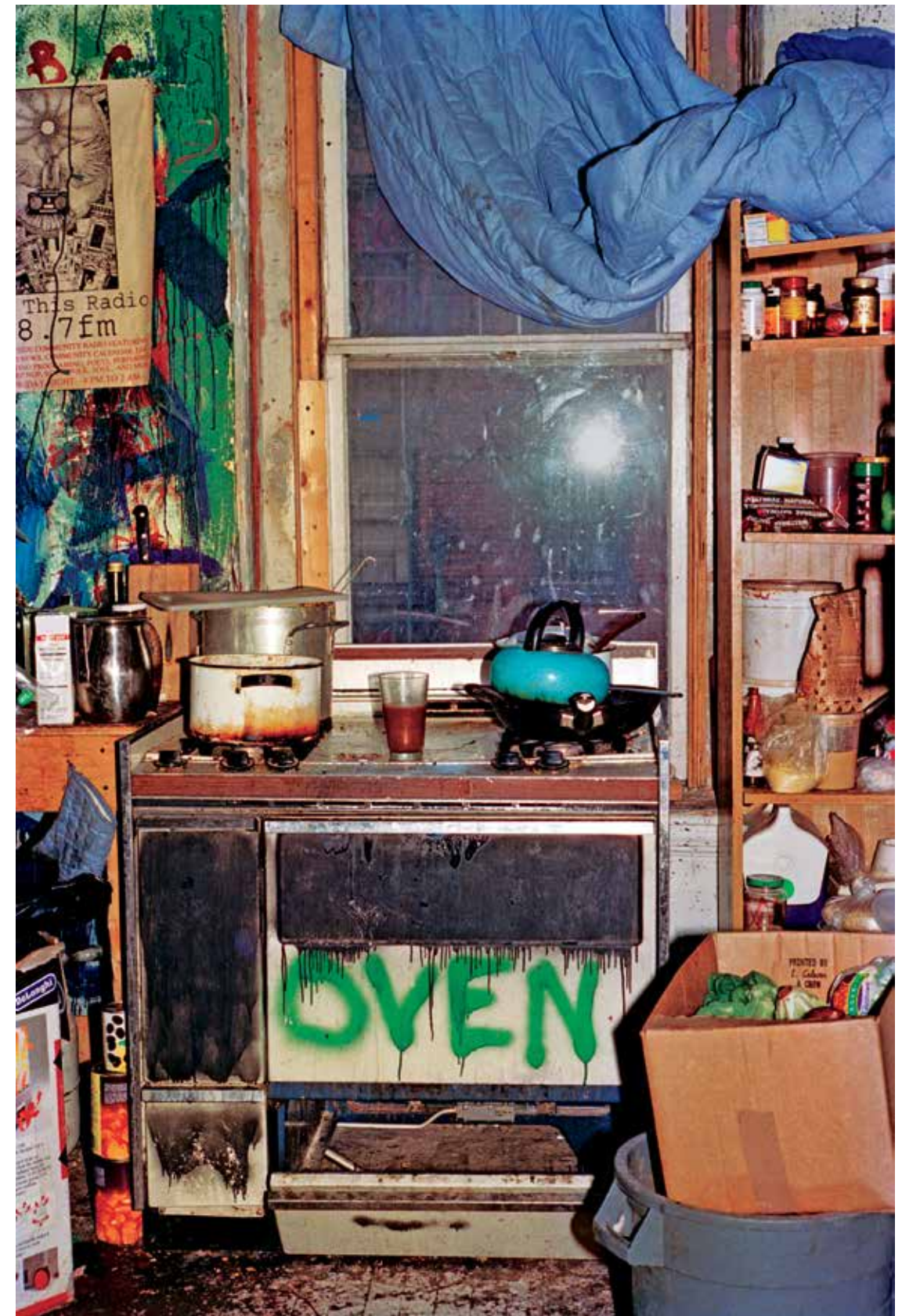
Ryan in Loft Bed, Fifth Street Squat, 1996

Fifth Street Stairwell, Before Stairs, 1994

FOLLOWING Star Wars Mural in Fifth Street Squat
Community Room by Adam, 1995







Oven, Kurt's room, Fifth Street Squat, 1996

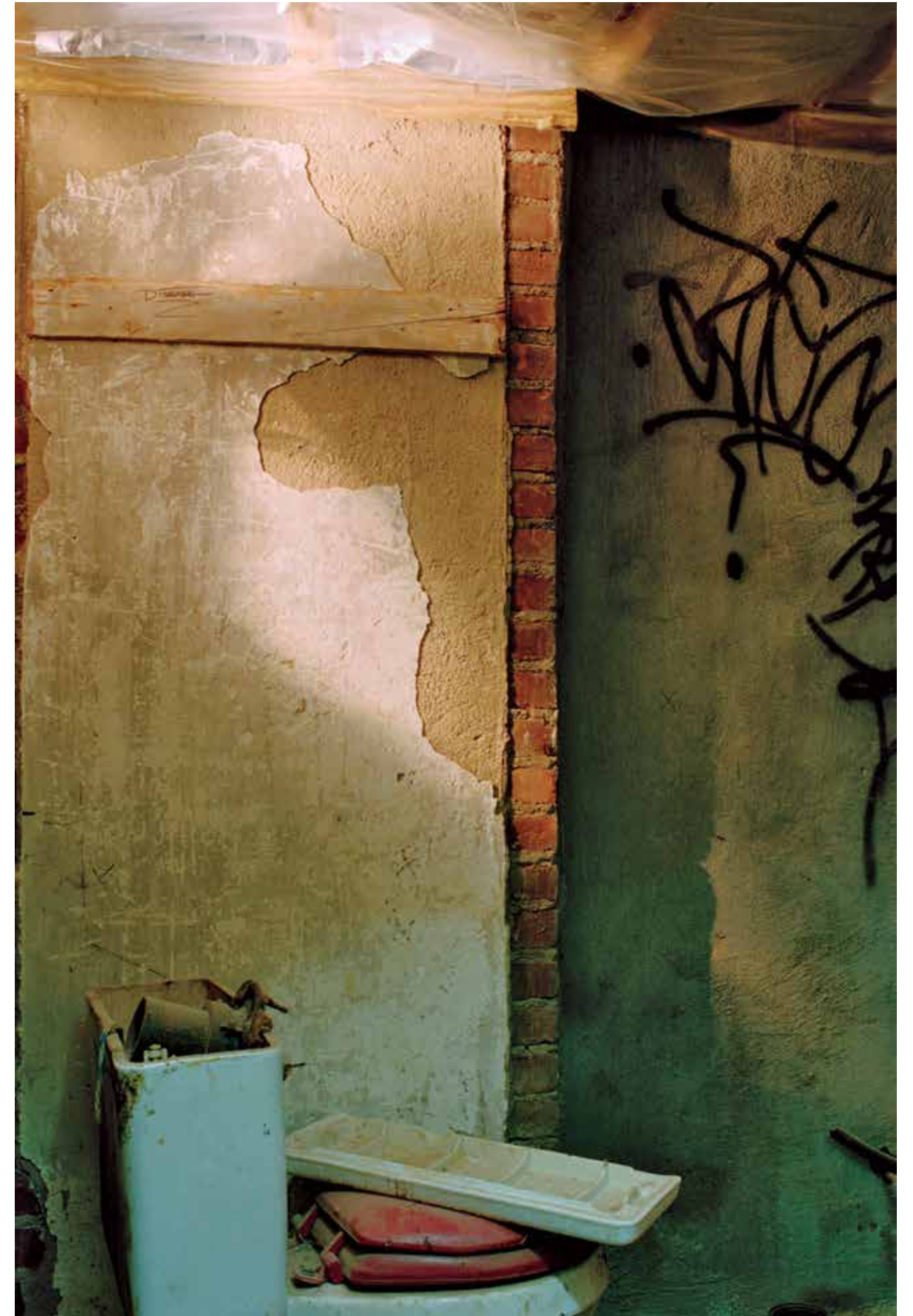
Mannequin, Painting, and Kittens in Kurt's room, Fifth Street Squat, 1996



Exterior of Roger's Apartment (In Progress), 1994

Bathroom in Serenity House, 1998

FOLLOWING Mr. Potato Head Still Life, Fifth Street Squat, 1994







Toilet and Bicycle, Fifth Street Squat, 1995

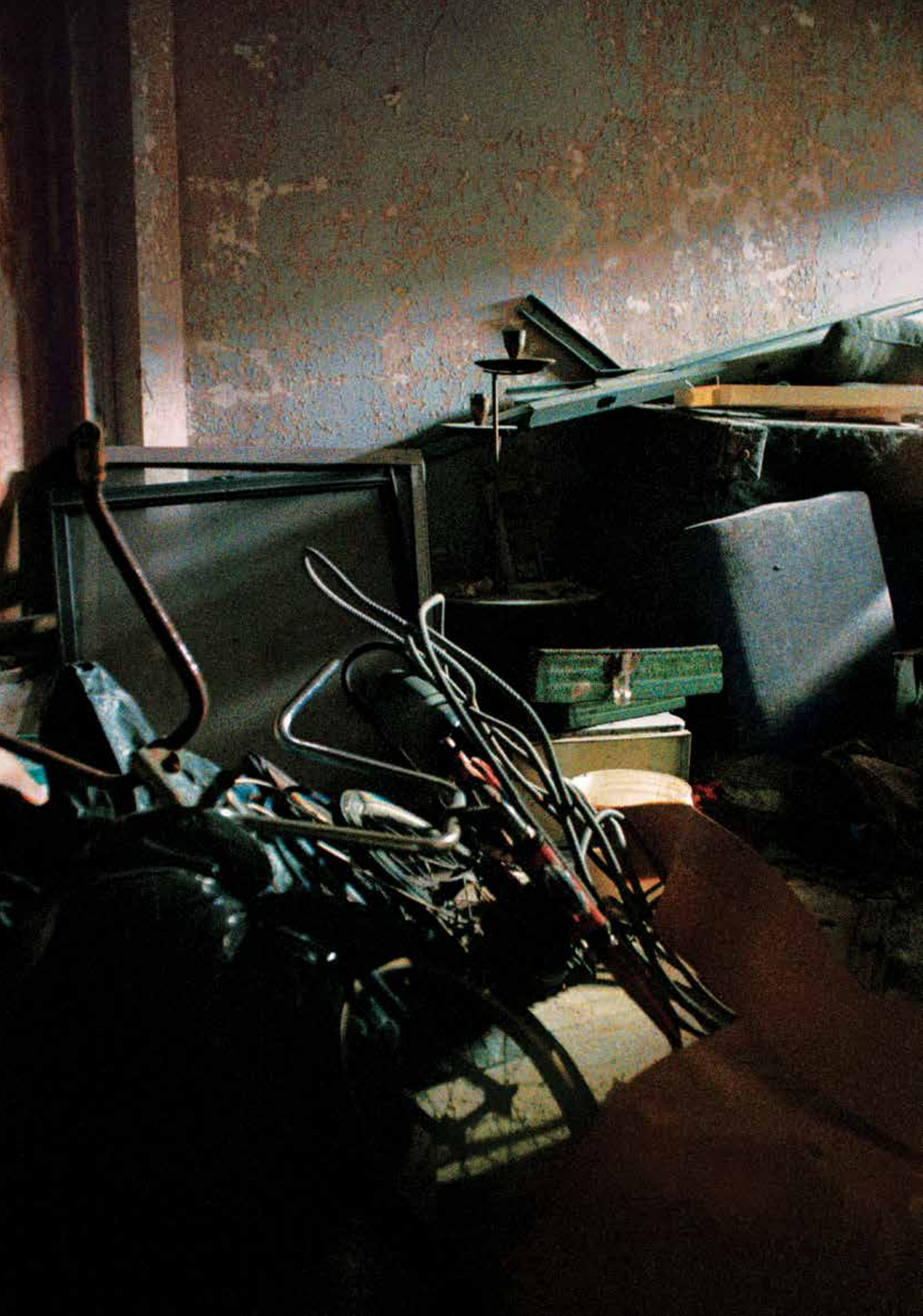
Third Floor Bathroom, Fifth Street Squat, 1993



Before any type of plumbing or toilet arrangements were created, bottles were often a last resort, especially during the cold winters. The spray paint message is a quote from the Situationist International, graffiti by the first wave of residents in the 80s.





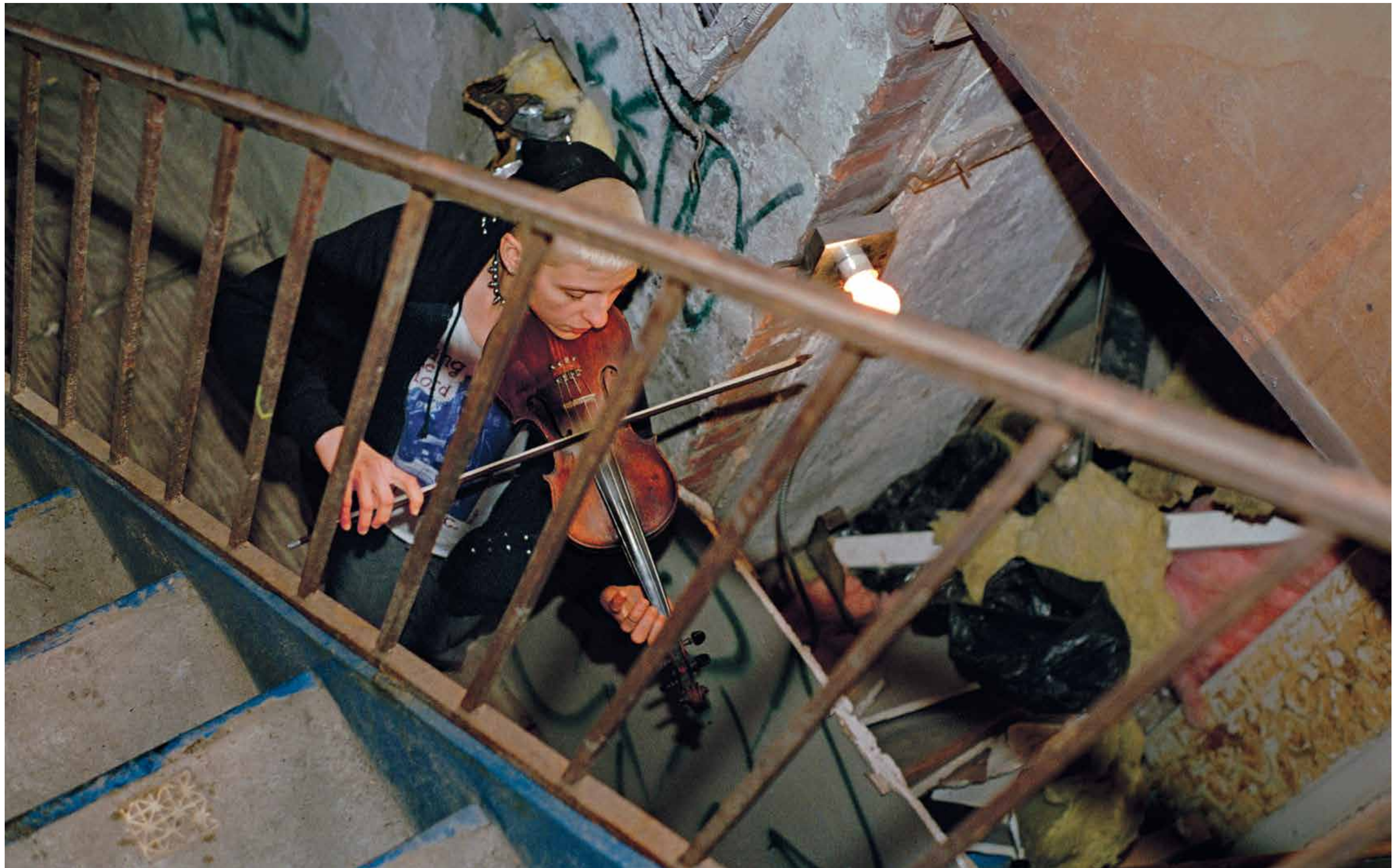


Storage and Green Box, Fifth Street Squat, 1993

Bed and Broom, Fifth Street Squat, 1995







Maria and Violin in Serenity House Stairwell, 1997



Famous and Fly Working on Window I, Seventh Street Squat, 1994
Famous and Fly Working on Window II, Seventh Street Squat, 1994
Ryan Cutting a Window Guard, Dos Blockos, 1996
Toby on a Demolition Day, Fifth Street Squat, 1994

Most squatters would work the equivalent of full-time jobs on building their apartments, and preparing them for winter survival. Women and men worked side by side, equally. We would have group "work days" for the building residents, when we had big projects like repairing the roof, installing stairs and floor foundations, and running electricity.

Famous Jackhammering a New Window, Seventh Street Squat, 1994



Installing I-Beam Support I, Fifth Street Squat, 1995
 Installing I-Beam Support II, Fifth Street Squat, 1995
 Cement Work for First Floor Landing, Fifth Street Squat, 1995

Jill Cutting Window Slats, Fifth Street Squat, 1995
 Heidi Working on Apartment Ceiling, Fifth Street Squat, 1995
 K.D. with Circular Saw, Fifth Street Squat, 1995
 Carrie Taking a Break From Working on the Window, Fifth Street Squat, 1995



Roger and Kurt Making Window Frames, Fifth Street Squat, 1995

Famous, Pregnant and Building Windows, Seventh Street Squat, 1994



Rick and Matt Working on New Garden in the Lot next to Serenity House, 1997

I came to New York in 1992, following my ex-girlfriend who told me that if I wanted to be part of our newborn daughter's life I'd relocate to the East Coast. I'd been couch surfing trying to get into Serenity building for about a year, and had even rented a closet on Twelfth Street for \$600 a month, when my friend Brian from Bouncing Souls told me he was going on tour. He didn't feel good about warehousing the space and he knew I had family and had been waiting and working on the building, so he said I could have his apartment. That was something extraordinary about the squatter community; the selflessness of some people really touched me.

That first night I stayed in my new room it was cold as fuck, and there was no real window, so the wind howled through, whistling eerie jug band melodies out of the half-full piss bottles stacked in the corner.

Fully clothed and bundled up in several blankets, I managed to fall asleep eventually. In the wee hours I awoke to the sound of scrabbling and something pulling at the edge of my lip. Opening my eyes I was horrified to be looking straight into the whiskery face of a giant, brown New York City sewer rat. Its sharp little claws were holding my lips open and its tiny pink tongue was furiously lapping up a droplet of drool emerging from the corner of my mouth.

Screaming my head off, I ran from the room and beat down my neighbor's door in a panic. "This is definitely not the fucking life for me!" I was done. My neighbor laughed hearing my story, and calming me down, learned me on the ten things I had to do to keep rats outta my room—like stuffing Brillo pads full of Ajax and shredded glass into all the cracks for them to eat.

It was a rough first winter. We had eight blizzards that year, and it was also my first year as a bike messenger. One night I came home from work to find a junkie frozen to death on my street in an abandoned car, all curled up on his back like a dead spider. Somehow the bad conditions lit a fire under me, and that year I hooked up electricity and plumbing in my apartment, installed a toilet (!), got double paned windows, and even built a loft for my daughter when she moved in.

Some people are shocked that I raised my daughter in a squat, but Alice had a great childhood. At one point we had four 4-year-old-girls in the building. They would play all day in our garden next door where we hung out, and all the parents would take turns watching out for them. At times it was communal living at it's best.

Then Mayor Giuliani started evicting all the squats, the city took our garden away, and built a huge, fortress-like police station right across the street. The neighborhood lost some of its character and was changing quickly by the time I got full custody of my daughter and moved back to California.

When I visited the old neighborhood in 2013, I didn't see any junkies. Plenty of new buildings and happy joggers instead. It's not the same, but I still love the LES and the people in the squats who have stayed on and persevered.

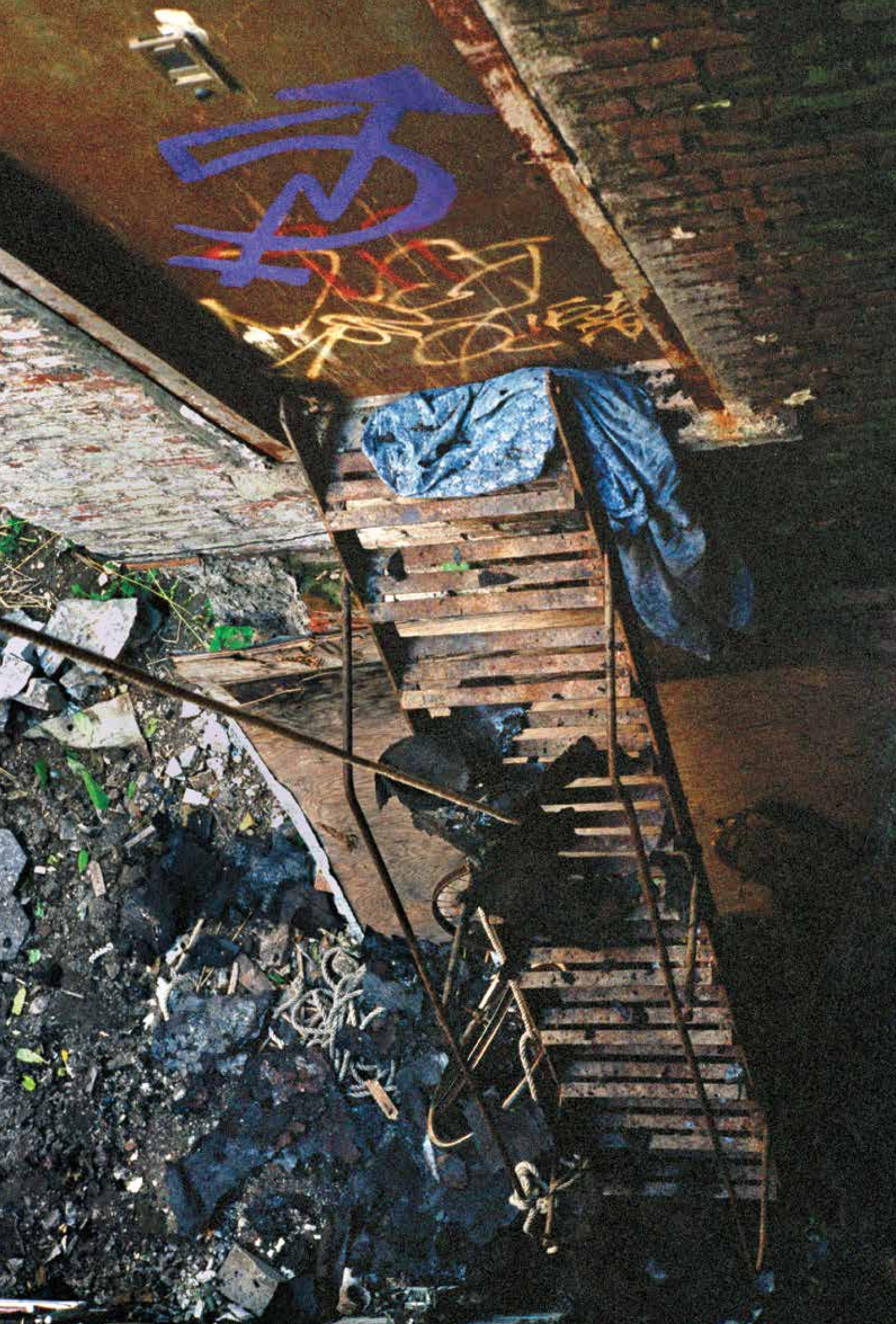
—Rick, Serenity

FOLLOWING Fifth Street Squat Lot, 1994

This lot was filled with four to eight feet of garbage, with narrow paths leading through it to the back of the building, when Roger, Calli, and Aro first moved in. Roger said you could see the piles of trash swaying and rustling with hundreds of rats. One of the first projects they started was removing all of the trash, which is the point at which this photo was taken. Later, fresh soil was laid and a garden was designed. It was green and lovely up until the eviction.







Ghetto, 1994

Residents are applying primer, in preparation for painting the building front at Fifth Street Squat.

Men at Work, Fifth Street Squat, 1995

Street View of Dos Blockos, 1996

Flag for the New Garden, Serenity House Lot, 1996

Side Door, Fifth Street Squat, 1994

FOLLOWING Rubble and Garbage Removal from Serenity House Lot, 1996





Michael Shenker at Thirteenth Street Squat Eviction, 1995

Barricade Being Built at Thirteenth Street Squat Eviction, 1995

The second of a two-part eviction took place at dawn, in the middle of a rainstorm, with several hundred riot police and a tank-like armored vehicle. The media was kept several blocks away for "their safety."

CB3 Meeting, Protesting the Planned Thirteenth Street Squat Eviction, 1995

Community Support Against Thirteenth Street Squat Eviction, 1996

Action at LESCHD Against Thirteenth Street Squat Eviction, 1996

Police Occupation of Thirteenth Street Squat, 1996

Street Rally and Protest Against Thirteenth Street Squat Eviction, 1996

When you lived in a squat, it was your job to protect it. We looked out for the sister squats in the neighborhood, or any squat that asked for help. Thirteenth Street Squat took up five buildings on Thirteenth Street between Avenue A and B. When it came under threat of eviction, we would regularly attend and participate in community board meetings. We would arrange protests and marches to educate the neighbors on what was happening. We would stand watch all day and all night in shifts, rain or shine, when necessary.



Eviction Watch Meeting I and II, Umbrella House, 1996

We would have regular eviction watch meetings to stay up to date on the status of our buildings and create strategies where necessary.

Michael Shenker at the Re-occupation of Glasshouse Squat, 1996

Glasshouse Squat, located on Avenue D and Tenth Street, was evicted on February 1, 1994. After the remaining three buildings of Thirteenth Street Squat were evicted, a group of squatters unsealed and reoccupied the Glasshouse building in protest. When the city evicted Glasshouse Squat in 1994, it claimed it was going to create housing for people living with AIDS, but two full years later, it had done nothing. The man in the sombrero is Michael Shenker, who was a beloved and tireless activist.



Street Protest Against Evictions, Tompkins Square Park, 1996

Police Arresting Protesters, 1996

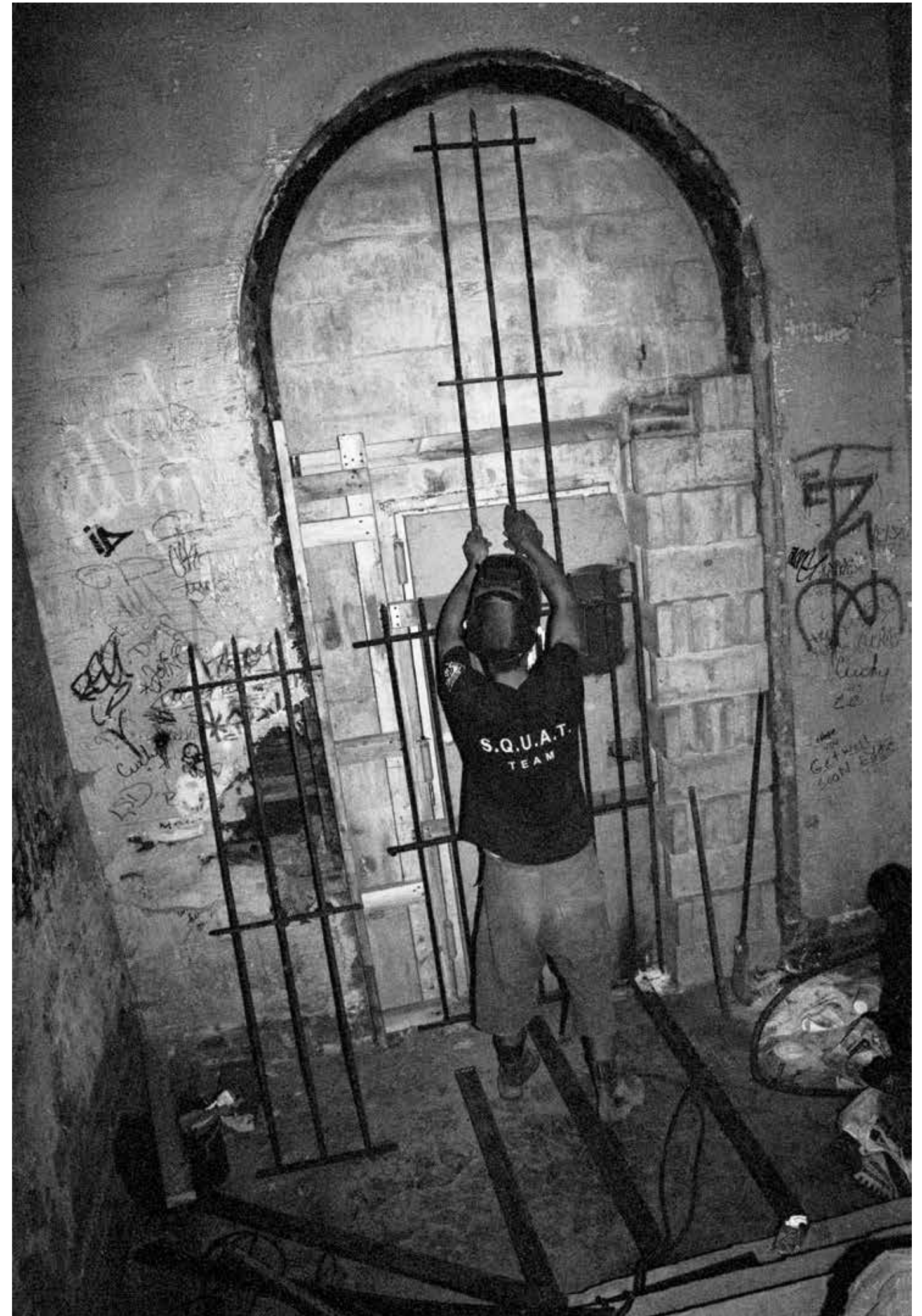
Police Shutting Down Streets Against Protest March, 1996

Police were constantly sent out to shut down protests and marches. Arrests were the norm.

114 Welding a Barricade, Fifth Street Squat, 1996

We were on constant guard against a surprise eviction attempt. The city had all sorts of techniques for getting into buildings, and using a battering ram was one of them. We would blackout our windows, so as not to draw attention to our occupancy, and we were ready to barricade windows and doors at a moment's notice. One indication that the city might be planning an eviction was to place a large industrial dumpster in front of the building, which would be used to trash squatters' possessions. On this particular occasion, when a dumpster was placed in front of Fifth Street Squat, we stayed up all night welding a metal barricade to secure the door.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, for us, there was no eviction attempt and we had to use the back door and ladder for days until we could remove our badass barricade.





Crane Taking Down Fifth Street Squat, 1997
 Fifth Street Squat Eviction I, 1997
 Fifth Street Squat Eviction II, 1997
 Fifth Street Squat Eviction III, 1997

I took many of the photos in this book at Fifth Street Squat. In February of 1997 a fire broke out there on the second floor. Everyone was forced to leave the building and the city seized the opportunity to seal it. The residents went downtown with their lawyer and got a court order stating that they had to be allowed to get their belongings out of the buildings. Giuliani ignored it and started demolition. I took these photos in the days following the fire as we all stood behind police barricades watching the building get taken down to the ground. Later the residents sued the city for ignoring the court order and got almost \$200,000 to cover their lost belongings. It was the first time squatters won a case against the city.

FOLLOWING Girl Reading in
 Doorway of Serenity House, 1997





Taz Rolling a Smoke, Fifth Street Squat, 1994

I've always been a traveler, a nomad, a lost girl . . .

I was seeking to find purpose, community, and wanted to learn to be strong enough and capable enough to lead with a proud honorable mastery of survival in my own life. There is respect for the purpose of being self-sufficient and utilizing all resources and creating something that would be a contribution of a revolutionary thumbprint. This is a great opportunity to show a perspective of a lifestyle and culture of its own which is pure, raw, humbling, and honorable.

This is some kind of gateway to how squatting began, as my life. I'm a kid disappearing for days to weeks at a time at 13. Eventually weeks turned into months, which landed me to this conversation. Starting in PA where I'm from, went up and down the East Coast then to the West Coast to LA and SF.

Later I would migrate to the LES, Manhattan, and NYC. Otherwise known as my only trusted home of certainty. Welcome to See Skwat, my first safe, comfortable shell of bricks on Ninth and C in the LES in 1991. I started out on the fifth floor, later fourth, then third which was my favorite. The first few months I was there, there was no roof, no sheetrocked walls, no floors, no toilets, no water, no electric, no heat unless a wood burning stove existed. Over the course of years and years the puzzle pieces are slowly put together. The salvaged golden garbage and recyclables became the literal foundation of our home.

There was nothing but a shell, however it was completely perfect to me.

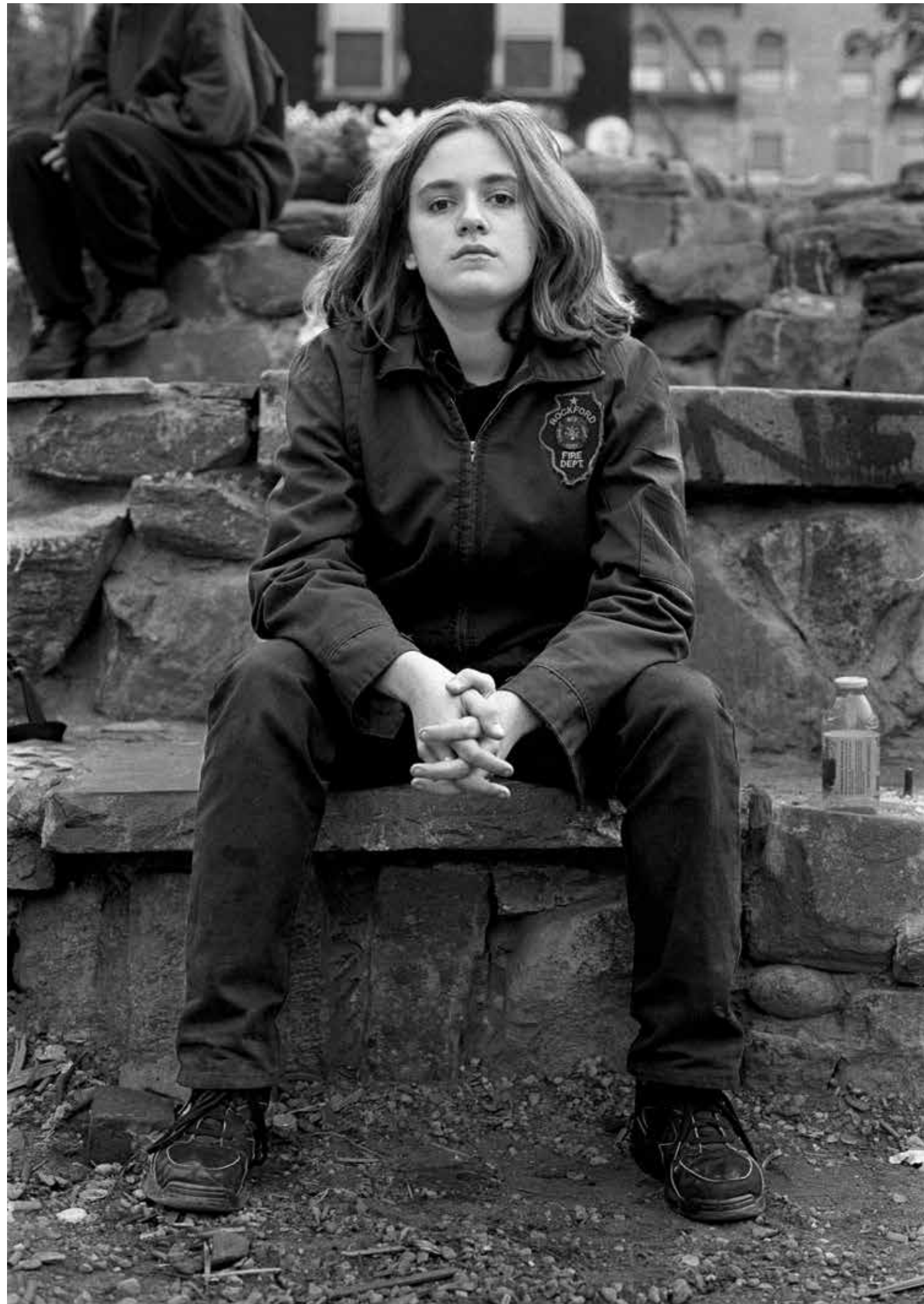
We used the magic key down on the corner to open the fire hydrants and carried two five-gallon buckets at a time up the hellish stairs, up to our rooms. Every once in a while we'd be able to have electricity for short periods of time if we were able to go into the manhole and connect the electric with a van over the manhole while we were watching out for the cops. When we did have electricity, we used hot plates and toaster ovens unless somebody might have a stove which was a rarity. We still used refrigerators even though they didn't always work. It kept the rats away. Maybe. We had house cats which helped keep the rodents away. Lizzy was my favorite, she disappeared or was killed, as was always the case.

The best part of my life was working on that building, it taught me skills, selflessness, trust, community, and pride. Garbage day was the early morning workout of the week. Tons of endless rubble and mesh covered in lead paint and probably asbestos with five or six of us struggling to make it go smooth as the garbage men just impressively stared.

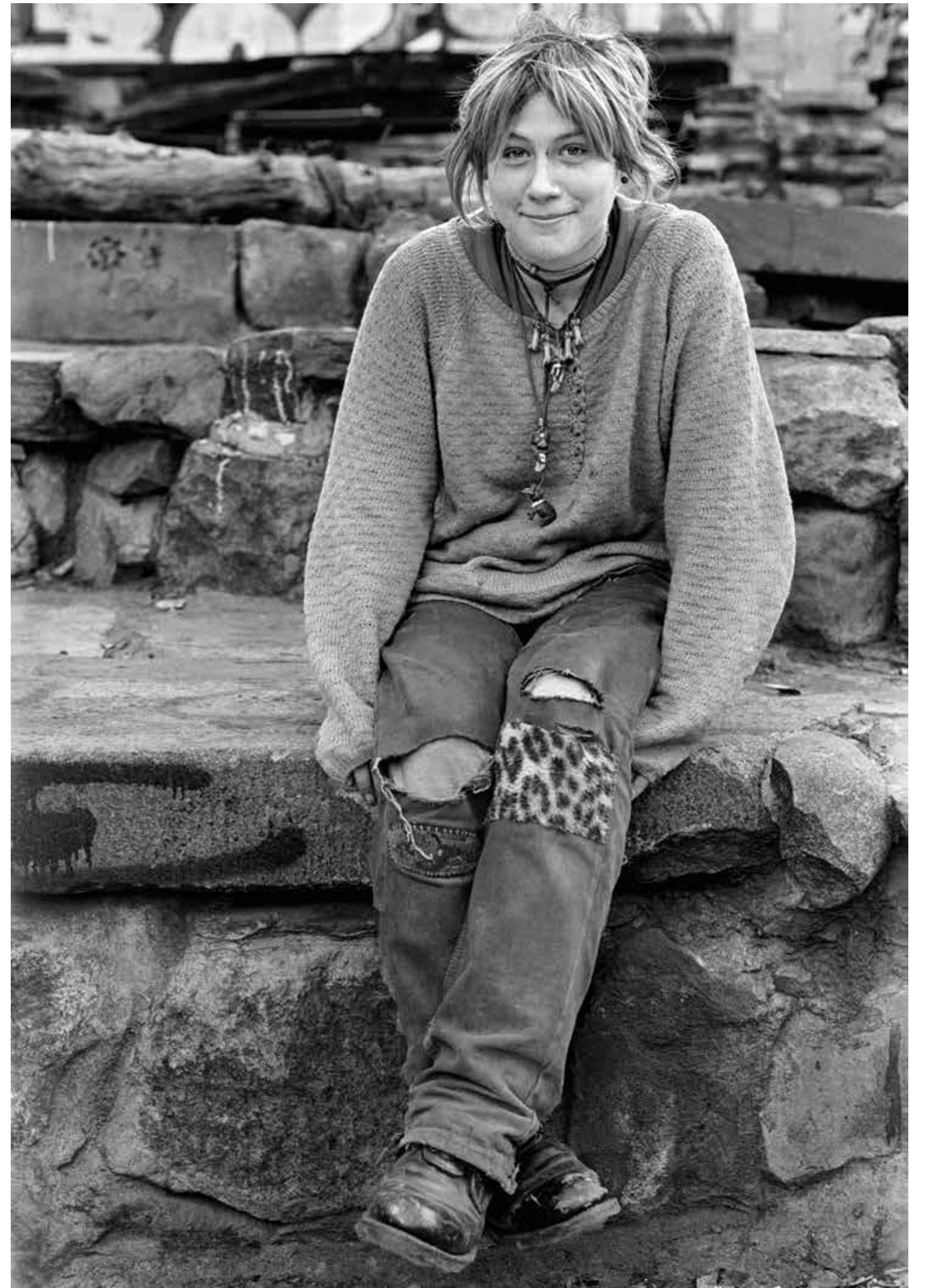
Life's reward was being there and taking nothing for granted. The accomplishments are endless. I was, and still am, 100% in love with the loyalty that bled out of every single one of us. Our squatting community consisted of truth, trust, skills, resourcefulness, survivalists, selflessness, compassion, knowledge, tolerance, expression, and commitment. Although I have moved from the LES, I am forever in connection, through the family bonded individuals that are in my heart. I will eternally support the efforts and struggles of a lifestyle that is more respected by me than any other. We are individuals that stand together. Together the bond completely unbreakable.

—TAZ, See Skwat

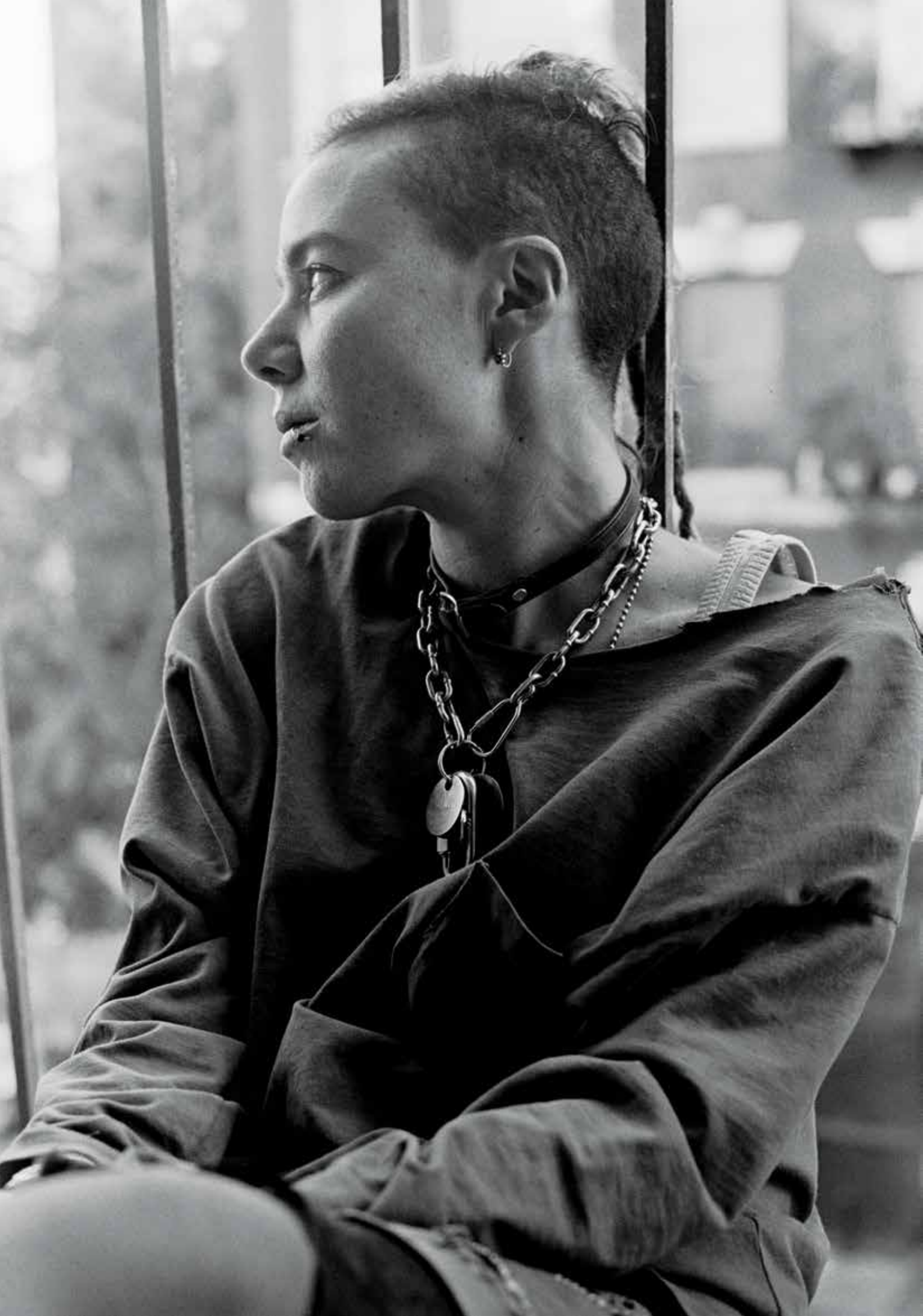




Daniela at La Plaza, 1992



Girl at La Plaza, 1992



Fly Building Walls, Seventh Street Squat, 1994

I met Fly at the beginning of my squatting days. She was, and still is, one of the most incredible artists and activists that I've met. When Fly moved into Seventh Street Squat, the space she was granted had previously been demolished by fire. It had no floors, windows, walls, heat, electricity, or water. This image exhibits the large amount of progress she had made. Since then, the apartment had been completely finished and is her home to this day.

Fly on Her Fire Escape, Seventh Street Squat, 1995



J.p., Winter, Fifth Street Squat, 1994

J.p., Summer, Fifth Street Squat, 1995

There is a story that J.p. used to tell. He was around ten or twelve years old and he had just run away from home. He made his way from his hometown, Madison, Wisconsin, to the Lower East Side, Tompkins Square Park in New York City. He had been sitting in the park for a few hours when he heard the motor of his mom's car. Mary Toulon had driven two thousand miles to find her son.

Mary and Vernon Toulon had two boys, Jean Paul and Jamie Toulon. Vernon drank and Mary worked three jobs. The boys were often left to their own devices. In 1989 the brothers formed Old Skull, one of the youngest punk bands to have ever existed. After the band broke up in the early 1990s, still quite young, both brothers became part of the New York City Squat scene.

The Lower East Side of New York City took J.p. in. Partly due to his young age, and partly due to his own charisma, he was looked out for by the other squatters and eventually settled into his own room at See Skwat. His and Jamie's mother, Mary, would soon be hit by a train on her way to work one morning. It would forever alter both boys. A few years after that, Vernon Toulon, their father, would be found alone in an attic. The cause of death would never be found.

Both J.p. and Jamie are no longer with us. The family history and the family tragedy are felt by many. The two boys gave the world to those that knew them. J.p. is survived by our beautiful son Aiden, who is now six years old.

—Michelle Kaufmann





Equa with Dogs, Ninth Street Garden, 1997



Laura and Dog in Empty Lot on Ninth Street, 1997



K.D. on Fire Escape, Fifth Street Squat, 1995

We spent a lot of our free time hanging out on the fire escapes, on the stoops or in front of our buildings, in the gardens and empty lots, at Tompkins Square Park, or riding bikes around the neighborhood.

Jill, Sunset, Fire Escape, Fifth Street Squat, 1995





Jimmy and His Geodesic Dome Roof Structure, Fifth Street Squat, 1996

Serenity House Garden, 1998



Kurt on Fire Escape, Fifth Street Squat, 1995

When I first showed up at Fifth Street, the center of the building was nothing more than a gaping hole where there were supposed to be stairs. A series of old, rusty fire escape ladders scavenged from somewhere leaned against the walls in the empty space from one landing to the next, all the way to the 6th floor. It was precarious, especially in the dim light, and even worse after drinking. I don't know why I don't remember anyone falling.

I'd never built a flight of stairs. None of us had. I think it was my dumb confidence that got the ball rolling. "We can do this, easy." I wasn't a building member yet. I needed to prove myself.

A few days later Scott and Patrick picked up some twenty-foot metal stringers and brought them back to the building, each weighing some hundred pounds. They were squared off, but needed to be cut at an angle to fit. We measured and measured, afraid to commit. No one wanted to be the one to make the wrong cut, and I felt eyes on me. It was like a test that I knew I couldn't fail—it had somehow been my idea. So I grabbed the circular saw with the metal grinder blade and made the cut.

When we hoisted it into place, it fit perfectly and I breathed a sigh of relief while acting like I knew it could only be perfect. I then quickly cut the second one to match, and we were on our way. Pretty soon we had a series of mosaic cement treads and cut-up police barricades to finish the flight of stairs to the 2nd floor. I earned my key, and an apartment on the second floor. The next flight of stairs was easier.

—Kurt, 537-539 East Fifth Street Squat



Summer on the Fire Escape, Dos Blockos, 1997



Carrie Getting Water, Fifth Street Squat, 1994

In buildings with no running water, we relied on water from the hydrants for drinking, cleaning, cooking, and bathing.

Bronwyn and Tommy, See Skwat, 1993







Aro and Rebecca with Bicycle, Fifth Street Squat, 1996

I dragged Roger with me when I left Rochester. We were planning to hitchhike or whatever around the states, but only made it to my hometown of Queens. We found a building under the Queensborough Bridge next to Queensbridge Park and the projects, but it proved extremely difficult to squat. We got so much flack from the cops around there (wrong color), and we were so far removed from anybody we knew downtown, we decided to scrap it.

We had made a few peeps' acquaintance from See Skwat and decided to search around and open a building of our own, not wanting to move into the other squats in the area. So Roger, Calli, and I jumped the barbed wire fence at Fifth Street Squat, and made our way through four feet of garbage in the lot to the back of the buildings. We were originally looking to use the building next door, 535 East Fifth Street, but that was the easiest way in. The only flashlight we had was a combination alarm/radio. The three of us were sneaking around back there, I'm clinging a story above the ground to 535 peering in the open window with the light/alarm/radio when the fucking alarm starts blaring away! I couldn't shut the thing off so I dropped it to the ground and they slammed on it until it shut up. The building was shit, totally collapsed, the whole center of the building, really.

I climbed down but before we could leave we see this drunk old man wheeling his bike around the corner of the building. We froze and he couldn't see us. He whips his dick out and starts pissing. He was facing us and finally sees us standing there and jerks himself a little more sober. He puts it away and we approach each other cautiously. First thing he says is something like, "You're lucky the other guy isn't here, he would have attacked you." We met Jimmy again the next evening at the building and also met the "other guy." He was a very psychotic crackhead schizophrenic type dude. The building was overwhelming Jimmy, and there is safety in numbers against crackheads, we needed a building . . . we moved in shortly afterward.

—Aro, 537-539 East Fifth Street Squat





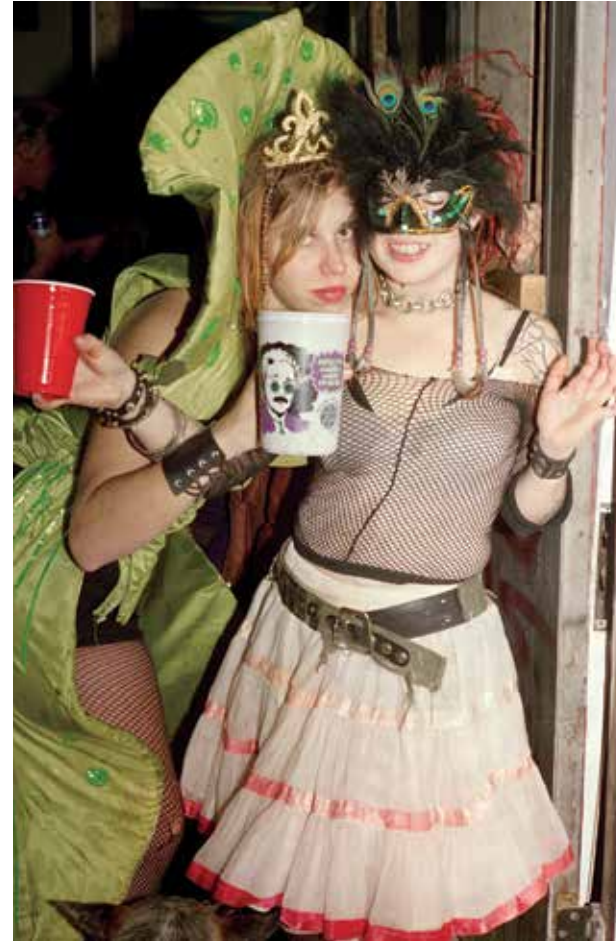
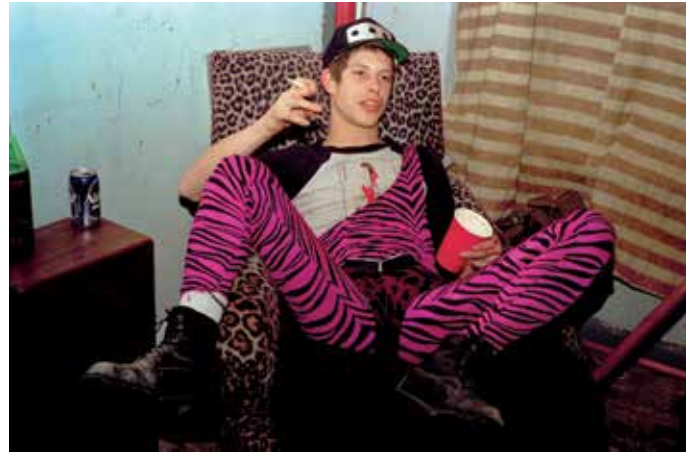




Ryan and Friend Outside of See Skwat, 1998

Amy Eating Watermelon, Bullet Space, 1997





Rebecca Dancing on New Stairs in Fifth Street Squat, 1996

- The Joker, Cocktail Party, 1996
- Martine and Eden, Cocktail Party, 1996
- Neil Diamond, Cocktail Party, 1996
- Girl Trio Dancing, Cocktail Party, 1996

The parties we had were wild and creative. They were often taken into the streets, and frequently ended in metal jams (groups of us banging on metal in empty lots) and beer elf-ing (drawing and writing on whoever passed out first).

FOLLOWING The Dregs at ABC No Rio, 1998

No Rio is a squat and collectively run center for art and activism on the Lower East Side.



Beer Olympics I, Williamsburg, 1994

The Beer Olympics was a two-day punk music festival held at an abandoned warehouse on the waterfront in Williamsburg.

FOLLOWING Joey, Beer Olympics, 1994

Micah, Beer Olympics, 1994







NG

THIS IS A
MUNITY PARK
NO DRUGS

ONE WAY
SYSTEM

BLITZ



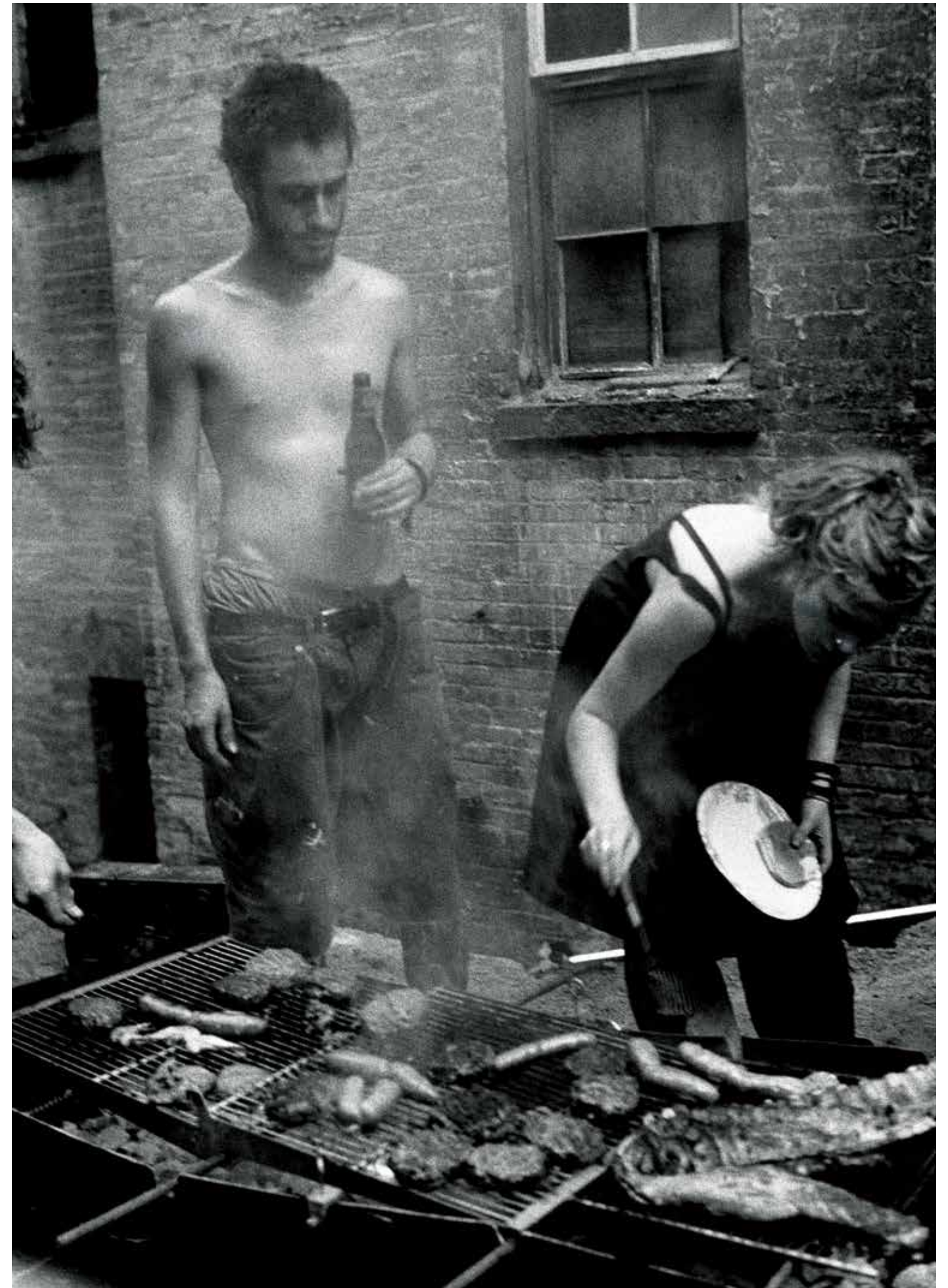
Aro and Jen, Fifth Street Block Party, 1996

Dave and Meggin, Fifth Street Block Party, 1996

These last images were taken at a block party we threw for our neighborhood. We had a huge grill, games, and we played in the fire hydrant water all day. These images embody the purpose of the squatter movement. We had cleaned up part of the neighborhood and made homes from the city's refuse. We celebrated that victory with our community of friends, fellow squatters, and neighbors.

PREVIOUS Post Beer Olympics on Ninth Street, 1994

FOLLOWING Fifth Street Block Party, Street View with Hydrant, 1996









DANA HOEY IN CONVERSATION WITH ASH THAYER

DANA HOEY: The first thing I thought of when looking through the book was how perfect the photographic style was for the images. You shot in what I would call a non-fiction or direct style, even though in the 90s there was an eruption of fictional photographic narrative depicting various aspects of the female experience. Since you were involved in this squatter life, I expect you were not conscious of this art photography moment, is that accurate? Or were you tuned into the art world already?

ASH THAYER: In 1992–93, I was tuned into the art world, yes. I wasn't thinking too much about where I would fit in, since a lot of it was new to me and I had no idea what kind of artist I was, or what I would become. I was drawn to artists who seemed both fearless and sensitive. I didn't impose judgment on the approach as long as it suited the project. The first female photographers that I was drawn to: Diane Arbus, Lisette Model, Carrie Mae Weems, Dorothea Lange, Helen Levitt, Nan Goldin, and Cindy Sherman. Later came Catherine Opie, Collier Schorr, and Roni Horn.

I really hit the ground running shooting in the squats because it was a fully immersive experience. One minute I was about to drop out of school and leave NYC, and the next moment I was living in See Skwat, which was quite surreal at the time. I was in survival mode, but in this incredibly fun, dangerous, bizarre, radical environment. I didn't have the time or resources to dream up and set up an alternate reality because I was living in the middle of one!

DH: One of the great things about these pictures is precisely that—they make no argument for themselves. Pictures in the Jeff Wall tradition made an argument about truth versus fiction. Contemporary abstraction, for example, makes an argument that photography IS its tools (to simplify both). How did you think about making these photographs? Was there also a different sense of argument, as in, "These people deserve to be seen properly"? Did you make them for your friends? For yourself? For others?

Me and Dave, Scott, Patrick, and Slevitch, Fifth Street Squat, 1995

We were celebrating our first day with electricity in the building. With the first usable extension cord, we had just made coffee by boiling water on a hotplate, using a sock full of coffee beans that we beat into grounds. It was the best coffee ever. Brothers for life!

PREVIOUS Fifth Street Block Party, Toby, Jaime, and Missy, 1996

AT: Residents needed to have a visual record of the work that they did on the buildings. This was before cell/camera phones. Most of the environments were dark, requiring good manual skills with the camera or a tripod. My third year in college my mentor and friend, Raghubir Singh, finally gave me one of his personal flashes to use because I couldn't afford one.

Two basic realities of living in this environment: one, you had to build your room or apartment as quickly as possible, especially if winter was coming, and two, you never knew, on a daily basis, if the cops would come and attempt a surprise eviction. City Hall did not always follow the law, and in the past, people would hire thugs to set fires to squats to empty them.

So, there was a heightened sense of urgency and secrecy, and the feeling that you were "getting away" with something very positive. Outsiders were not welcome unless they could be attested for. It was a privilege to have my camera out and about and I did not take it for granted. I believed very strongly in what we were doing and I felt that I was living and breathing my ideals, and my camera was the best way to express my experience of it all. I was more interested in political theory than art theory at the time, though, to be honest.

So, every day we were working and planning away, with eyes on the street, attempting to lay low and go relatively unnoticed. It was so exciting to be a part of it, sneaking around, building awesome shit! The neighbors who didn't know us yet were shocked to see a bunch of ragtag kids hauling thirty-plus slabs of sheetrock into an "uninhabited" building, or hauling massive amounts of water and plumbing and electric supplies.

DH: I love what you wrote about 90s style for women, in the photographs about Jen (I remember her from around the neighborhood). Now that time has passed it is also clearer to me that these young women were not about promoting themselves as overtly sexual beings; they were not selling themselves in that way (though they certainly were sexy at times). The great photograph of Famous working in her bra while pregnant seems much more about her lack of shame and hard work! Do you think your female friends' style was consciously feminist?

AT: Short answer, yes, consciously feminist. We

shopped at thrift stores and the new things we bought were utilitarian, for the work we were doing, or for warmth.

It is surprising how much of "femininity" is socially constructed: body language, vocal tone, dress, how we interact with our own gender as opposed to another. Many people go through life never questioning it, just going along with what the women around them do, sometimes feeling trapped but too afraid or passive to do anything about it. I think we were attempting to strip down the artifice to see what was underneath and then building from there. We were working towards an authentic self, not a put-on one.

One can argue that you cannot ever fully escape social construction, but we were trying our damndest. I wore black Carhartt jeans that I sewed the legs into a tighter fit, and military cargo pants, both bought in the guys' section of the army surplus store.

DH: How would you say the communal aspect of the space functioned? Were decisions made on consensus basis? Did the traditional bugaboo of the charismatic male leader occasionally arise? Or were young women as able as they look in the pictures to be full citizens of the group?

AT: Overall, I would say it was egalitarian, and all views were heard out. Considering how easy it was to steal from each other once you earned a key to the building, I'd say we functioned on a very high level of integrity. People shared the little they had, so it was easier to just ask for what you needed. You didn't want to be caught stealing because you would get your ass kicked, and then kicked out.

Male dominance came up, but was not a given, or run of the mill, and could be shut down if necessary by the rest of the group. There were often more men than women in these buildings, but I think that was partially due to the rough living conditions and all of the construction work that was required in the beginning. It only appealed to a certain type of hearty, adventurous, and motivated spirit that wasn't obsessed with cleanliness. But yes, women were absolutely equal citizens, or watch out!

DH: You've got celestial light in many of the pictures—kids are backlit in their rooms, highlights are perfectly exposed

to kind of glow out of the frame. Its clear you want to elevate your friends with light. I imagine, young people being young people, that there were many opportunities to take sex and drug pictures in the way that other photographers have. Was this a conscious choice? Were you protecting your friends at the time that you shot? Or edited? Or did you just not have an interest in those kinds of photographs?

AT: Well, I could not take pictures very well if I was drinking. I have several rolls of pure motion blur from attempting it! Yes, there were opportunities, but not as much as some might like to think. There were quite a lot of long-term, monogamous relationships in this scene. Overall, people were intentional within their intimate relationships. It was the opposite of "frat house" behavior. I didn't have a compelling reason to photograph my friends disrobed, or engaged in sexual activities. There were people in the neighborhood who would attempt to get people in our scene to model nude or become sexually involved with them for money. For example, there was this one man who would pay people to walk on him while he was lying down on the pavement with a piece of carpet on top of him! Many of us had been exploited or abused in our past so, yes, on some level it was a protective gesture. I was also interested in showing vulnerability and intimacy in less overt ways, and I didn't want to just go for what viewers seemed to expect in this kind of self-governed, youth environment: sex, drugs, rock-n-roll, wild kids getting their kicks in every way possible. There was so much more happening here. There was an aspect of safety in this community that allowed us to be playful, silly, and sometimes innocent. Hardened kids being transparent and productive—this seemed more interesting to me.

DH: It's funny, old buildings are often the first subject that beginning photographers are drawn to. Photography captures detail and no building has more detail than a ruined one. Same thing with wrinkles and details of skin such as tattoos—these are all highly photographically appealing subjects—you work the camera well all the time, but most shockingly and beautifully in the photo of April (with the linear face tattoo) in her room. Did you have an era of abandoned building photographs before these? In other words, were there pictures you made before this that were about learning what the camera does well (like detail)? Or did it all just spring forth from your love for

your friends? Either way, I pity everyone else—you cannot fake the love for your friends at this time with their beautiful, idealistic hearts.

AT: Thank you! The first photos I started taking in high school were of my friends in the Memphis River City Hard Core scene. I shot portraits from the beginning and the various shenanigans we were up to. I had no immediate interest in old buildings or the texture of decay, but when the squats themselves became a place of refuge they took on personal meaning. The images of the buildings are portraits, too. We knew every inch of them, every strength and weakness, every secret nook and cranny. We raised them up as they sheltered and protected us. We devoted ourselves to protecting them and everyone inside.

DH: Can you also talk about what role art played? The community room with Star Wars mural photograph kills me—so much style in those chairs.

AT: Art making was a part of life that everyone participated in, from music, performance, street art, visual art, spoken word, you name it. We put on exhibitions and held performance based shows in different squats, including ABC No Rio. It was an integral part of life and not just for the "professionals." One of my favorite things was participating in spontaneous "metal jams," where we would literally grab objects, mostly metal, and just jam out, banging out rhythms. There were no restrictions on fun and we were only limited by our imaginations. While completing the edit for this book, I learned something about the Star Wars mural, which we all adored. It was finally completed by its artist, Adam, just one day before its home, Fifth Street Squat, was evicted. It still chills me to think of it.

Kill City: Lower East Side Squatters 1992–2000

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Edited by Ash Thayer, Stacy Wakefield, Craig Cohen, and Will Luckman

Designed by Stacy Wakefield

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