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About New York

Queens Community and Its Artists Reach Détente

By WILLIAM E. GEIST

Under no circumstances should one step up to the bar at Chick's in Long Island City, among the beer-swilling factory workers, and order an avocado-and-brie on pita bread with a natural papaya juice to wash it down.

They say men have been tossed out the doors of bars in this neighborhood for less, sometimes without the courtesy of opening them first. Meat loaf and a Bud is what one wants.

Such faux pas can be made in the new Long Island City, an old, closely knit factory neighborhood in Queens that is changing rapidly with an influx of newcomers. There are avocado sandwiches in Long Island City now, there is no denying it, and they are just up the street from Chick's at the new Skyline restaurant.

Another restaurant now serves nachos. And quiche is being sold — over the counter, right out in the open.

Now the first art gallery has opened, complete with one of those banners outside that waves in the breeze as semitrailer trucks rumble past on Jackson Avenue. Local people, some of whom have lived in the neighborhood all their lives, pop their heads in to see just what in the world this Studio K is anyway.

Ken Bernstein, the gallery owner, said that many assume — this being Queens and the banner being a large "K" in orange and blue, the Mets team colors — that the gallery is a Dwight Gooden souvenir shop.

Upon learning that Studio K is a gallery, they often ask the question, "Here?" One resident said with resignation: "I guess it was only a matter of time. The artists have been slipping in for a long time."

Another lifelong resident said he knew "it was the beginning of the end" when word spread that Jacqueline Onassis had been spotted having coffee at the Midway Diner after a visit to some studios.

Mr. Bernstein, whose gallery sits between the Spanish-American Mini Mart and Peepels Heating and Air Conditioning, said those who stop to look at the artwork often shake their heads and say things like, "I could do that!" and "Do people really buy this stuff?"

Skip Bennett, a newly arrived artist, likened New York's artistic community to "some form of urban wildlife, always scampering from the floodwaters of rising rents."

"From time to time," he said, "we come to rest, often in the strangest places, places like Long Island City."

"I grew up in Cleveland," said Mr. Bernstein, talking above the roar of trucks and gazing upon a used-car lot across the street. "I love it here. It reminds me of home."

Ann Leggett, an artist in the neighborhood, said, "I like the bleak urban beauty."

"A stranger came up to me at the local diner," she added, "and said: 'What are you, anyway? Italian, Spanish, Greek or artist?' Those seem to be the four ethnic groups in the neighborhood."

The artists said they had moved to Long Island City because large spaces were available at relatively reasonable prices, and because it is just a single subway stop from Manhattan. Eleanor Bernardino, owner of Chick's Bar, commented: "They told us our rents were low. That was news to us!"

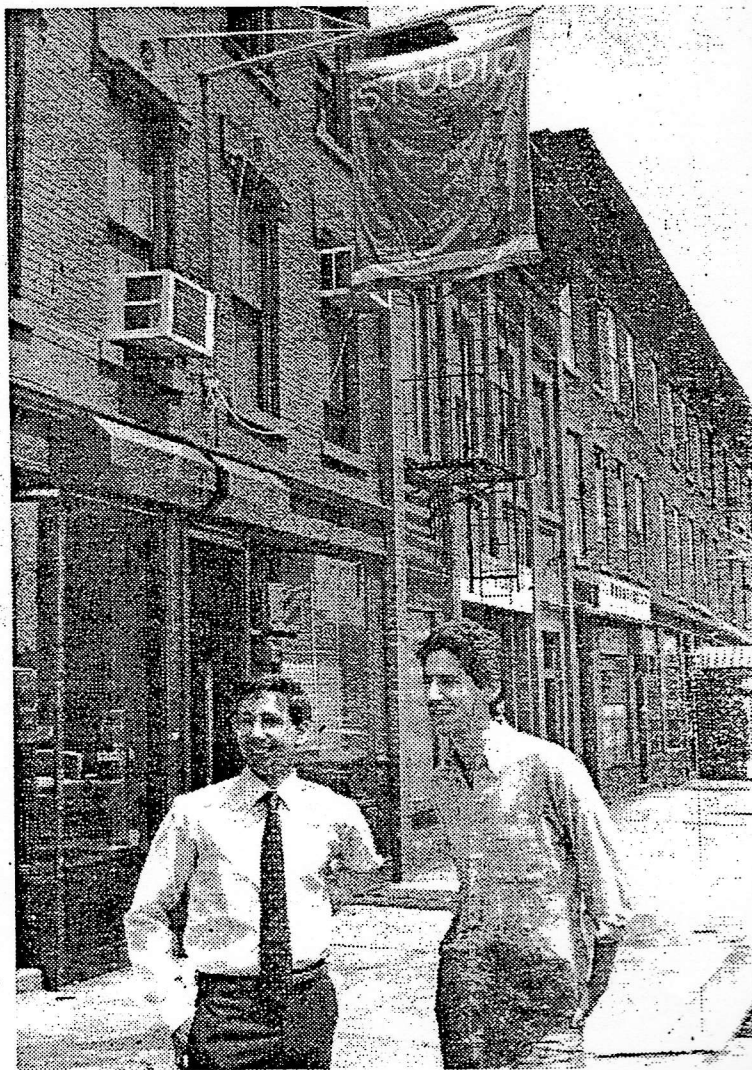
Many of the longstanding residents believe that in due time they will be priced out of Long Island City, just as they were in SoHo and the East Village; part of an all-too-familiar pattern of gentrification following close on the heels of artists. "That's why smart people weren't so damned glad to see the artists," said one local resident. "They're like pilot fish."

Joseph Imparato, a native, has opened a restaurant, Joe Imps, to capitalize on this. Some of the old-timers are disappointed at the prices and the ambiance. "They expected \$1.25 hamburgers," he said, "and the old beer, ball and buyback" — which, translated, means a beer, a shot of whisky, and the house buying every third round.

Many of the artists are beginning to fit in rather well. It is heartwarming to see Jack Nahoun, a man of gruff exterior who manages Van Alst Hardware, screaming at an artist, Tobi Kahn, as if he were a regular customer from one of the factories.

"What's the matter with you?" he yells at Mr. Kahn, who smiles warmly behind the shelves. "How many times do I have to tell you where those things are?" For a long time, Mr. Kahn was treated with the cool indifference Mr. Nahoun accords strangers.

Mr. Kahn said he knows many of the local people now, and has learned much from carpenters and metal-



The New York Times/John Sotomayor

Ken Bernstein, left, owner of the Studio K art gallery in Long Island City outside the studio with Tobi Kahn, a sculptor who has a loft in the area.

workers in the neighborhood that is of value in making his sculptures. Neighbors who have watched Mr. Kahn burn the midnight oil for eight years now give him a wink or a thumbs-up sign when they see him greeting a limousine-full of patrons of the arts.

When Mr. Kahn told Mr. Imparato that he was nervous about a visit from representatives of the Guggenheim Museum, Mr. Imparato said he would tell his mother, who lives around the corner, to say a prayer for him. She did, and the museum purchased one of his works.

In her loft next to a service station, Miss Leggett has paintings she has

done of local scenes and local people including patrons at Chick's Bar. One depicts a man named Gene dancing in the bar with his hat on. "Gene keeps his hat in the freezer," said Miss Leggett, "so it will keep its shape."

"We thought she was a little strange wanting to sketch these people," Mr. Bernardino said. "But after a while the men were yelling, 'Sketch me, sketch me!'"

Speaking about the invasion of the artists, one man at a local bar admitted, "Yeah, we even had one of them over to the house for dinner."

"Did?" said the man next to him. "Yep," said the first. "Worked out pretty good, too."