

The New Irascibles

A Photo Session with Timothy Greenfield-Sanders

by Carol Kino

The "Irascibles" History

The original "Irascibles" photograph, the work of photojournalist Nina Leen, was published in *Life* in 1951. The artists pictured were part of the "Irascible Eighteen"—so dubbed because they had protested the Metropolitan Museum's juried show of contemporary painting by writing a letter to *The New York Times*. Apparently, *Life* originally hoped to immortalize the scraggly bohemian crew clutching their paintings on the steps of the Met—a real Salon des Refusés-type scene. But Barnett Newman, who'd organized the original protest, was incensed by the idea. Instead, thirteen of the "Irascibles" posed for Leen in a rented room, wearing business suits. As it turned out, the picture neatly emblemized the macho pomposity of the dawning era.

Greenfield-Sanders appropriated the "New Irascibles" format in 1985. Jean-Michel Basquiat had just been featured in *New York Magazine* and *The New York Times Magazine*, appropriation had become a post-modernist byword, and the East Village scene was beginning to peter out. The public discussion of art no longer focused merely on aesthetics and ideas, but on the marketing muscle behind the artists. Fittingly enough, Greenfield-Sanders chose to photograph not just East Village artists, but also their critics, dealers, and collectors, and there was much fuss on the part of those who weren't included. Meanwhile, Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, and Basquiat refused to participate in the group because they'd already moved on from the East Village galleries to SoHo—the Chelsea of the day.

Flash forward to 2000, the year of the abortive Williamsburg Elsewhere Festival. This event was supposed to change everything by finally bringing the art world's attention to Williamsburg. (Unfortunately the most memorable thing it did was to provoke much internecine rivalry and more hurt feelings.)

Enter longtime dealer Annie Herron—sometimes called the "doyenne" of Williamsburg because she founded its first commercial gallery, Test Site, in 1991. "Things were changing so fast then," Annie says now, "that I thought it would be nice to have some pictures taken before everyone I knew had to move out of the neighborhood. So many of the early people here have gone already."

Herron knew Greenfield-Sanders from her East Village days, when she'd been the director of the East Village space Semaphore East. (Her boss, Barry Blinderman, had been one of the "New Irascibles.") Herron suggested to Greenfield-Sanders that he recreate the "Irascibles" project in Williamsburg, and he went for the idea.

Here's how the two of them figured out the "New New Irascibles" shoot:

This and more online at www.wburg.com.

GALLERIES

Group 1: Pioneers. Galleries founded from the late 1980s through December 1994. The so-called "Golden Age" of Williamsburg.

Group 2: The Middle Years. Galleries founded between January 1995 and December 1999.

Group 3: Present and Future. Galleries founded between January 1, 2000 and summer 2000, as well as galleries that planned to open during the "Elsewhere" event. Because there were so many spaces by this point, only one partner from each gallery was included in the picture.

CRITICS

Annie included pretty much anyone she could think of who had ever written much about Williamsburg. To make sure she wasn't leaving someone out, she consulted with many of the dealers mentioned above, as well as writers and artists. Roberta Smith, a longtime Williamsburg observer, declined—most likely due to conflict-of-interest issues.

ARTISTS

Selecting the Dealers and Critics was a fairly straightforward matter. Choosing the Artists, however, wasn't so easy.

Annie's first requirement was that each artist had to have had a solo show. However, she was aiming to document the scene as a whole, rather than just showcasing stars. She also tried to make sure that a good range of media was represented. But at the same time, she was forced to keep the numbers down, because Greenfield-Sanders couldn't fit a large group into his studio

Group 1: Pioneer Artists. Chosen by the gallerists from the "Pioneers" group—or at least, those who were still around—with help from Annie. The idea was to pick artists who had shown in Williamsburg early on, ideally at more than one space. "This group fell into place very easily," Annie says, "because they were all obvious choices." By the end of 1994, there weren't too many artists who'd had solo shows in Williamsburg, which made the choices even easier.

Group 2: Middle Years Artists. Again, these were chosen by group consensus, with help from Annie and Joe Amrhein of Pierogi. Each Middle-Years gallery was allowed to pick one artist (though a few of them lobbied for two).

Group 3: New and Future Artists. Annie didn't get involved on this one because all the dealers involved are still around. Each of the young galleries was allowed to pick one artist they'd shown; in a few cases, the show was upcoming. (If they'd been allowed to pick more, Annie explains, the resulting group would not have been able to squeeze into Timothy's studio.)

N.B. Those who fell into more than one category were represented in only one picture. For instance, Roxy Paine was included as an artist, rather than as a founder

of Brand Name Damages. Joe Amrhein was photographed as a gallerist, rather than as an artist. A few artists who were selected didn't actually make it to their shoots, including Roxy Paine, David Scher, and Bruce Pearson, and a few dealers changed their minds and sent someone different at the last minute. Also, a person or two turned up on the wrong day—like Licha Jimenez of Jimenez & Albus, who is pictured with the pioneer artists instead of the pioneer galleries, because of a garbled a phone message. (She's also an artist, though, so it all worked out in the end.)

"I wasn't trying to make some definitive statement," Annie says. "The New New Irascibles is just one of the many things that contributes to the history of Williamsburg."

POSING IN WILLIAMSBURG

Under the aegis of Brooklyn art dealer Annie Herron, famed art-world portrait photographer Timothy Greenfield-Sanders is turning his camera on the mushrooming art scene in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Earlier this week, the local artists, critics and dealers that give Brooklyn its new art spice showed up at Greenfield-Sander's East Village studio to take the famous pose of Nina Leen's famous 1950 photograph of the Abstract Expressionists, otherwise known as The Irascibles. Back in the 1980s, Greenfield-Sanders captured members of the then-burgeoning East Village scene in a similar series of pictures. No word yet on where the project might be presented.

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When we arrived at the studio, we were allowed to mill around for a while as Greenfield-Sanders set up the shoot with his two assistants. But after about fifteen minutes, he got down to business. Not only did he position us like the "Irascibles," but he ordered us around tersely by their names. "Chin down, Pollock!" "Sit straighter, Newman!" "Motherwell, move back from Rothko!" (I was Motherwell.) He took a few test Polaroids before switching to his tool of choice, a surprisingly antiquated model which I believe was an 11 x 14 view camera. Even more surprisingly, he took very few exposures—I think it was three in total.

Then it was time for the individual portraits, for which he called us one by one behind a screen. When my turn arrived, he seemed to have a hard time figuring out what I should do with my hands. First, he had me stand like a nun, with one hand clasped over the other. Then he directed me to strike a Thinker-type chin-on-fist pose. Nothing seemed to work—perhaps because I'm horribly un-photogenic.

Finally, he made me fold my arms across my chest—the classic defensive stance. When that turned out to hit the mark he began to take pictures, all the while admonishing me to look tougher. Though I complied meekly, I was secretly appalled. I had always prided myself on being the friendliest, most approachable critic in New York.

Today, what I remember most about the event is how extraordinarily anti-climactic it all seemed. I arrived there expecting that my perspicacity and uniqueness would finally be memorialized, and I left realizing that the most perspicacious person in the

room had been the photographer himself. His efficiency was breathtaking: the whole thing was over in less than an hour. Part of the reason, as I began to realize the more I paid attention to his work, is that he uses the same repertory of poses over and over. On his website (www.greenfield-sanders.com), you can see mine repeated by George Bush, Damien Hirst, and Christopher Walken—to name just a few.

In the 1980s, though, the odd person did manage to break out of the mold—or perhaps the mold was not yet so firmly defined. In 1982, Robert Pincus-Witten was allowed to pull his gloves off with his teeth and Rene Ricard got to strip off his shirt. In 1986, Eric Fischl appeared in profile—another typical Greenfield-Sanders attitude—but he's tossing back his head and clutching dramatically at his receding hairline.

With this in mind, it doesn't seem so surprising that Greenfield-Sanders would choose to cast contemporary artists in a half-century-old mold. (The idea of repeating poses also seems a fairly elegant way to give his opus—which includes more than 700 pictures of artists—some internal coherence.) Nonetheless, it really bugs me to see Williamsburg portrayed as surly and rebellious. By now, half a century on, the idea that creative people will always, ipso facto, be irascible seems a complete cliché. If there is anything we should be rebelling against, that ossified shtick is it. Besides, in Williamsburg's case, it's not even accurate. What draws most people to its art world is its neighborly, cozy air—plus the fact that conversations there tend to revolve around art and ideas, rather than careers.

Of course, I realize that by saying all this, I must sound fairly irascible and surly myself. So perhaps it's best to close by observing that I was also sneakily impressed with the photographer's prowess. I don't know how he did it, but in just a few exposures, Greenfield-Sanders managed to make a fairly decent likeness of the genuinely un-photogenic me. Better yet, my mother really loves it.

Carol Kino is a contributing editor at Art & Auction. She writes about art and contemporary culture for Slate.com, Town & Country, Art in America, and others. Her work has also appeared in The Atlantic Monthly, Modern Painters, The New York Times, and many other publications.