

The Buzzy Blurry Blackout Weekend of 2003

By Mark Bloch

NEW YORK CITY- AUGUST 22- Pedro Pescador (Spanish for Pete Fisher) was on his way here from Phoenix, Arizona. He wanted to take a cab from the airport but I recommended instead that he try a special direct bus to 42nd and Lexington and then a subway downtown. When he arrived at La Guardia airport Thursday afternoon there was an abundance of electricity. But by the time he had arrived at Grand Central Station an hour later there was not. Lights were out. No subways. Pedro knew something was amiss when he saw people sitting on cardboard boxes outside of the midtown high rises. He walked the 40 blocks downtown. I walked him to his hotel room on the Lower East Side. It was dark and creepy and I waited downstairs while he walked to the 5th floor room guided by the owner and his flashlight.

Jennifer Robinson, also known as Norma Jean, was on her way here from Columbus, Ohio in a car. She made it through eastern Ohio, Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains and New Jersey all the way to the Garden State's side of the Holland Tunnel by 4:10 pm and then was the very next car--yes the very next car--to enter the tunnel when the lights went out. Fortunately, she was able to pass through the dark tunnel under the Hudson River and arrived at her dark hotel in Tribeca a couple hours later.

Queen Jean Kusina Kwizzine and her Royal Princess Margaret, who also drove from Ohio, arrived on the well-lit island of Manhattan around 3pm. One of them switched on the air conditioner at the friend's apartment where they stayed and everything went dark. Later that night, perhaps as penance, they stood at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge, near Ray Johnson's old apartment on Dover Street, handing out Dixie cups of water to the hot, tired and grateful pedestrians.

Reed Alternus was in Maine and called Thursday evening and spoke to my wife. He thought long and hard about coming and instead sent his regards.

Reid Wood is also from Ohio. He could not get on his plane. My wife took a message on a piece of paper I still have here. "Reid Wood. Flight cancelled." But he was not deterred. He returned home and left instead the next day, Friday, from Akron-Canton Airport. He did not know at the time that his plane was leaving

from a spot that was in very close proximity to the origin of this disaster. He arrived in Manhattan at about 4pm, 24 hours after the debacle had begun. I told him he had arrived in plenty of time to skidaddle over to Bill Wilson's apartment in Chelsea where the festivities were just beginning.

But back to the previous day for my part of the story. At 10 after 4 on Thursday afternoon I was running late for an appointment. The temperature was in the 90s. I was then on my way to the 2nd Avenue subway for my 4:30 appointment. I was thinking when I got back I would meet Pedro at his hotel room and we would hastily go to Marilyn Rosenberg's art opening in Chelsea, then dash back to this neighborhood where we would rendezvous with Jennifer to see Hugh Hopper and Elton Dean, some favorite British musicians of mine, at the Bowery Poetry Club. But it was not to be.

But back to the moment of truth. I walked down the stairs, late for my appointment, and then headed out of my building, just in time to do a double take as the lights in my building vestibule flickered behind me. Odd I thought. I made it all the way to the subway ten minutes away not noticing anything amiss. But when I arrived my awareness began, people were coming out, sweating and harried. The stairway tunnel was dark. "It's closed," a woman told me. "They are telling everyone to leave the subway. No subway."

Everything was suddenly reminiscent of 9/11. I bought more batteries with the little cash I had on hand. I shared information I'd heard on the radio with people in the stores. Canada was affected. So were Detroit and Cleveland. My wife and son came home, thank goodness, as I turned our home into a fortress, collecting drinking water, tools, baseball bats and everything else a family might need.

And so on and so on. Such were the opening salvos of the big Buz Blurr weekend. The New York Arkansas Correspondance School Clash Reunion was underway with a quiet fizzle and assorted horn honks

Artist Russel Butler, alias Buz Blurr of Gurdon, Arkansas, the Breakman of Time Stoppages, has a show now of his beautiful artist stamp stencil portraits: "mugshots from the hobo jungle, mail art congresses, New York Correspondance School Meetings, and other asunder gatherings learned from Polaroid Experiments" at the International Curatorial Space in Chelsea. The reason all these people were converging on New York was to celebrate this momentous event and to have some fun.

Festivities were officially scheduled to start the next day, Friday, August 15, 2003 at 4pm with a visit to Bill Wilson's house, home of his terrific Ray Johnson archive. Ed Plunkett, living now in Wisconsin, and who coined the term New York Correspondance School, was unexpectedly and miraculously in attendance. So was John Walter, who made the recent Ray Johnson film *How To Draw a Bunny*. East Village Surrealists Valery and Ruth Oisteanu were also there and they also attended Buz's opening that followed nearby.

Yes, from 6:30 to 9:30 PM at the International Curatorial Space, 504 West 22 St., 2nd floor, Buz's art opening did occur, although the show was hardly an opening, it had been viewable, lit by attractive track lighting, for a couple of weeks but Buz had waited until this particular weekend because this was when we were all available to attend. Nevertheless, Buz walked people through the show, when necessary accompanied by an industrial strength flashlight. Much of his family, some of whom live in New York, was also in attendance at the gallery and everyone, including myself, now present, seemed to be weathering the unusual circumstances quite well.

The traditional Correspondance Dinner at Katz's Restaurant, at Houston and Ludlow Streets from 9:30 PM to Midnight became instead a small gathering at a fairly trendy restaurant at the corner of 14th and 9th Avenue in the Meat District where the lights had recently been turned on. Lights were popping up all over Manhattan by this time. It had started earlier that day but unbeknownst to us the last of the blackout ended at 9:03pm

The following morning, power fully restored, there was also supposed to have been a Used Bookstore Walking Tour & Word Eating Contest, which I am told was reduced to a 15-minute visit to the Strand Bookstore. The Misguided Museum Tour became an out-of-towners-only trip to Whitney. They day began with breakfast in the shadow of the Empire State Building because it was impossible to ascend as hoped. Such was the fragile ebb and flow of event planning this weekend.

Later that day, the weekend's festivities were concluded at a Mail Art Archeological Dig, as scheduled, at Joel The Sticker Dude's cavernous printing shop Ragged Edge Press. Joel Cohen gave us an animated tour of sticky treasures including stamp sheets, rubberstamps, memo pads, and of course,

stickers, as well as a demonstration of rubber stamp making and an detailed explanation of offset printing. I later left the rest of the group in time for them to eat at the Dojo restaurant in Noho area where I am told they remained late into the night telling stories and swapping heinous justifications for their mail activities then ducked into the Mercer Street Bookstore to repent.

Earlier that night I had made a picture of a fictitious Manhattan Skyline with the word "Nothing" floating above it, because the Blackout had threatened to turn the weekend into a Ray Johnson style non-event. And it had, indeed, disrupted things. But despite the severe change in schedule, Buz's show went on as planned, albeit with a slight lack of juice, but certainly never derailed. Far from it. We had all been toughened by the experience. Yet also simultaneously weakened.

That's when I decided, instead, to draw the skyline "Nothing" to commemorate the unpredictability of the weekend and rechristen. I gratefully made the graphic then copied it at the copy shop where the clerk told me the machines were running a little dark. I could barely read anything but the word Nothing. The skyline was almost indecipherable and I didn't care. It was as appropriate as viewing videos seemed inappropriate, I thought. I then took the subway downtown to Ragged Edge Press on Lower Broadway and especially enjoyed the well-lit streets which were so scary two nights before, just as I had enjoyed my hot shower that day and yes, even the stoplights that made me wait to cross the street.

New York City was back to normal now as I entered this final event of the festivities but in the days that followed, when people told their Blackout of '03 stories, mine also included the tales of my artist friends that came to visit.

l to r: Mark Block, Joel Cohen, Buz Blurr, Jean Kusina, Reed Wood, Jennifer Robinson, Peter Fischer

