

# Peeling back the layers.

Does New York's unique character produce equally unique design? David Comberg and Stuart Henley spent three days talking to people working at the heart of the city.



'A place polished with dirt.'

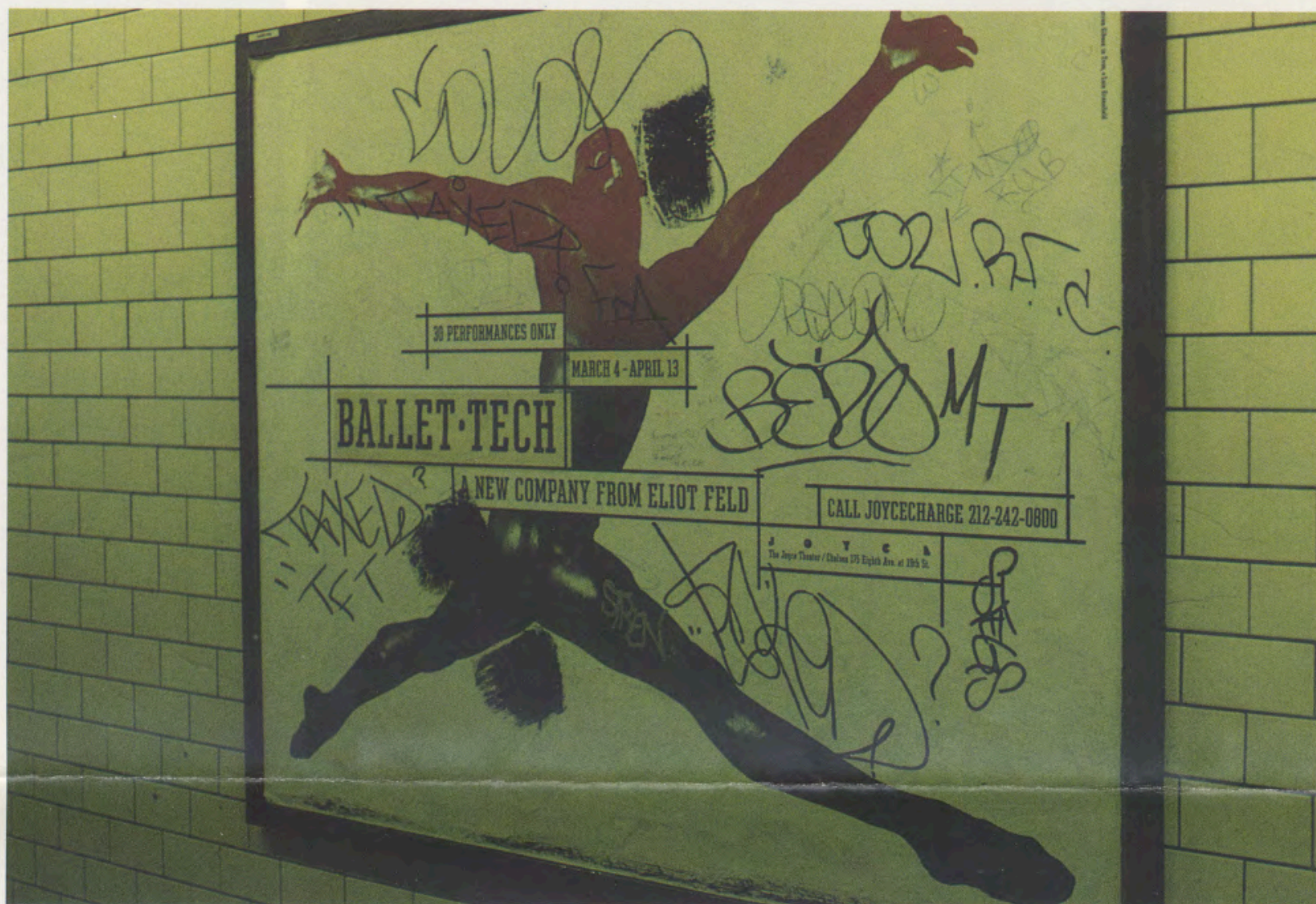
John Berger ('Manhattan', Sense of Sight, 1985)

Dirty, stinking, glamorous, congested, greedy, filthy, tall, crowded, insane, noisy, wealthy, littered, shining, corrupt, slippery, narrow, unfinished, immoral, eye-popping, ear-splitting, chaotic, exotic, endless, and excessive. A circus of image-makers, spin-masters, hucksters and wannabees - home base for the largest advertising agencies, PR offices and broadcast companies. New York. Even if you've never been here you know all about it through legions of makers and recorders of every description. Portrayed in films, books, postcards and Web sites as a shadowy underworld of muggings, arrests and x-rated pleasures. It's a proud city.

Fax to: Paula Scher, Isaac Mizrahi, John Doherty, Drew Hodges, Ellen Lupton, Risa Mickenberg, Keith McNally, Stefan Sagmeister, Tibor Kalman:

'Images of dirt, grit, grime, litter, etc. have been one of the city's biggest exports. In film, advertising, TV and popular music, the city is depicted as rough, crowded and industrial. How much of this is an accurate reflection of the city today and how much is a romantic myth? We'll call you, thanks.'

- 1 | Ballet Tech poster, The Joyce Theater, design by Pentagram
- 2 | Poster for The Public Theater, design by Pentagram
- 3 | Department of Sanitation street sign



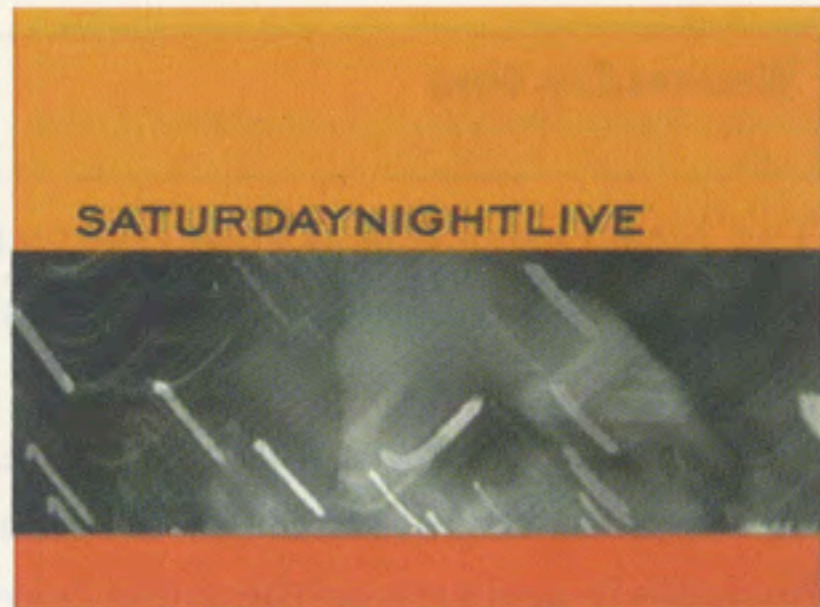
Monday, 11am

Paula Scher, a partner at Pentagram Design, on 26th Street at the intersection of Broadway and Fifth, is caught in an angry telephone call. Someone is rewriting a speech she is to give the next day and she can be overheard expressing her not-so-polite displeasure. One hour later she appears and apologises but is still clearly fuming, and we're glad she's now primed for our meeting.

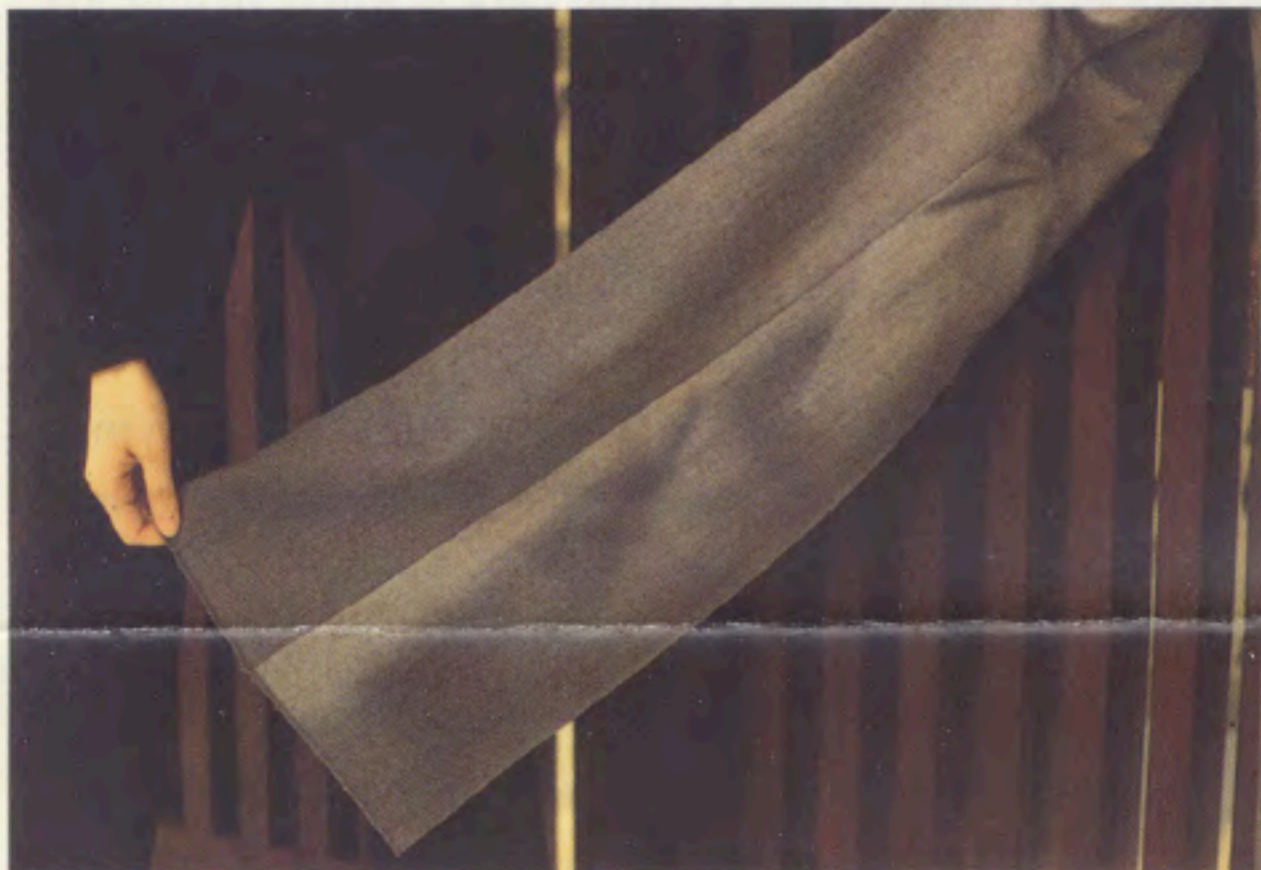
"It's not so much that design in this city is dirty or influenced by dirt, but that it's tough and it needs to be," says Scher. "Dirty is tough. This city is a cacophony of media - all kinds of clashing and crashing images. It's loud and brash, and soft things - clean, quiet, subtle design - doesn't get heard or seen. Rough things are human. Too clean is a bore. NY is the most soulful city on earth, and I have no fear that the big new suburban stores and corporate franchises that are moving into Manhattan will be overpowered by the force of the city. These new controlled environments where you see the seams are weak. 'Fake real' sucks, but if it's done well it doesn't matter. I'm not concerned with synthetic roughness. You can't control design when it's public. I love the streets here and I design for the streets. The posters for The Public Theater are meant to be seen outside - they're loud and noisy, like a horn honking - and I love how people draw over them in the subways. Times Square and the city are changing, getting cleaned up, but it's still big and loud."







- |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 1   4   Two tents for Saturday Night Live                             |
| 4 |   | 5 | 2   Isaac Mizrahi's 'grimey collection', on the runway                |
| 6 | 7 | 8 | 3   Street cleaning   |
|   |   |   | 5   Street litter bin   |
|   |   |   | 6   Behnaz Sarafpour shows the grime on Mizrahi's pants               |
|   |   |   | 7   Poster for The Public Theater                                     |
|   |   |   | 8   Postcard, from Real People Postcards, photograph by Nick Migliore |



**Monday, 2pm**

Isaac Mizrahi's studio is in a renovated factory building on Wooster Street. SoHo today is a mall of fashionable shops and galleries. Not long ago these iron-faced buildings were home to cramped garment manufacturers and artists' lofts. Some are still here.

Amy Spindler, fashion editor for the NY Times, wrote about Mizrahi's fall collection: 'In a way, it was a show about NY itself, full of sepia tones on gray flannel suits, the grime of life that mottles furs...the entire collection had patina, was tarnished, antiqued, nappy or pilled... but instead of looking used, the pieces looked loved.'

"I saw this movie 'U.S. Highball,'" says Mizrahi, "and it was about bums on the street and in the people I saw such beauty, such life. Like in Weegee's photographs of criminals in his book 'Naked City.'" Weegee, a.k.a Arthur Felig, was a freelance news photographer known for his photos of crime and catastrophe. "I have an old copy and the clothing of these people was faded and water-damaged," continues Mizrahi, "and I saw such grace, integrity and dignity in them. There was something about the ageing that I wanted to work with." He lifts a long evening dress from a display rack. "Look at the cut, it's very modern; simple; elegant." Two tones run vertically through the dress, suggesting that it's been left in strong sunlight for months. "A lot of the coats I saw in Weegee's photos were old and worn. We use recycled furs. We found a place in the city that takes in fur coats - they have an enormous resource of this stuff and the coats are dyed and hand-painted to recreate the look of soiling. They're very expensive things, but the look has to be combined in a certain way, after all, nobody wants to really look seedy."

**Monday, 4.30pm**

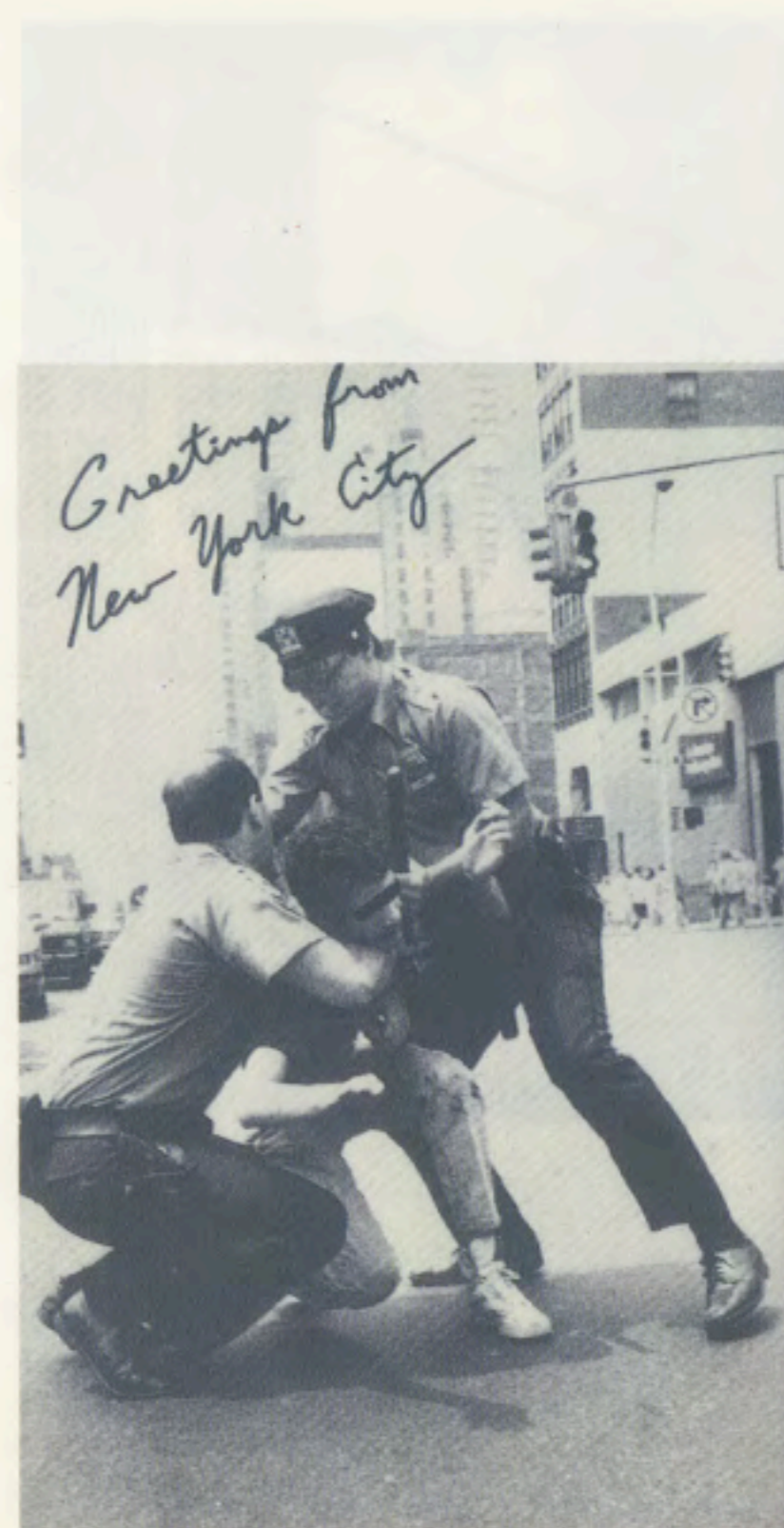
John Doherty, Commissioner of the Department of Sanitation, oversees the city's hygiene from his office on the seventh floor of an unassuming municipal building at the corner of Worth and Lafayette Streets, a few blocks from the Brooklyn Bridge. He has worked his entire career cleaning up New York, starting as a street sweeper and spending thirty-seven years with the department. He now manages around 9,200 employees, is responsible for the cleaning of 6,000 miles of streets, oversees a budget of \$600,000,000 and is a native of Staten Island.

"We get a lot of requests from film and TV producers to come and remove trash from the area where they're working," says Doherty. "But after we remove the real trash they bring in their own props, paint graffiti, throw litter around..."

"We've invested a lot in removing graffiti from our white sanitation trucks. Ninety-seven percent of our trucks are graffiti-free. But one of the local TV news programmes continued to show a photo of a graffiti-covered sanitation truck on their nightly news show. I think they liked that dirty photo, but it wasn't accurate and we got them to change it."

"I once wrote a letter to the producer of a Broadway play because there was a scene where one of the actors threw some garbage on the street. I told them I didn't like it. I'd like to see the day when people are afraid of throwing a cigarette butt on the sidewalk for fear of getting a citation."

"The city was cleaner in the 60's. The cleanest city today? Tokyo. Dirtiest city? Cairo. I'm always looking for dirty streets."





## Tuesday, 10am

Phone call from Drew Hodges at Spot Design, creators of the identity for RENT, a musical about New York Bohemian culture that succeeded in moving from a small theatre in the East Village to Broadway.

“The ‘look’ we designed for RENT is unusual for Broadway,” says Hodges. “It’s very conservative there and almost impossible to do something gritty like this, but the subject was right and we developed it so that it wasn’t too rough. It’s not that New York really looks like this, the grittiness is just a look, but I was just in London to make arrangements for the production there and when I came back I really felt the tension here. Really.”

## Tuesday, 10.30am

Risa Mickenberg is moving out of an old building on Christopher Street. The once notorious waterfront area is now marked by dozens of derelict piers that serve as quiet sunning spots. A former creative director at ‘bad-boy’ New York ad agency Kirshenbaum and Bond, her book ‘Taxi Driver Wisdom’ (Chronicle Books, 1996), is about philosophy.

“First of all, I’m from Connecticut, originally, but I love NY,” says Mickenberg. “Even the ugliest things are beautiful here. If you’re looking for the poetic, and can find beauty in the ugly, then New York is a great place. Dirty, ugly, worn things seems more powerful. Pretty things seem trite. There’s so much humanity here and all the things that go with that: streets and pavement and litter and buildings – layer over layer of humanity. It’s so rich it makes you feel truly alive.”

“I spend a lot of time in cabs and I’ve collected a lot of quotes. I always get into conversations with the drivers – I mean serious, intense conversations – and they’re great conversationalists. They’re intelligent and perceptive and they have names like philosophers: Ahmed, Sahik, Ishrat. For many of them English is a second or third language and they use words in the most unusual ways.”

## Tuesday, 3pm

The Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum on East 91st Street is in an area occupied by some of New York’s wealthiest individuals. A block from the Guggenheim Museum, the Cooper-Hewitt was at one time the sixty-four-room home of the famous millionaire industrialist Andrew Carnegie.

We’re exactly one hour late for our meeting with Ellen Lupton. “New York is one of the few cities where it’s common to see ‘sniped’ posters (for music and fashion, film and art),” says Lupton. “You don’t see those in most cities. They’re put up secretly and illegally, I think, when no one is watching, and pasted over every other day. This is a city where you’re inundated with design – layers and layers. At ‘Mixing Messages’ [Lupton’s 1996 exhibition on the current state of graphic design in the US] we simulated this street sniping with a gallery wall.

“A big part of design today, it seems, is getting away from ‘Quarkland,’ where everything just sits cleanly on the page. Some things need to be crowded and messy.”

## Tuesday, 4.30pm

Restaurateur Keith McNally has recently completed a million dollar renovation of a vacant street-level loft for Balthazar, a restaurant and bakery café at the intersection of Spring and Crosby Street.

“I didn’t want Balthazar to look like a film set. This is not an artificial environment, and I didn’t want it to look like a transplant, something moved here and set up. We worked with bits and pieces; we had no real design or tight plans. We arranged things – mirrors, tables, signs – on the site. Balthazar is designed to look like it was here a hundred years ago – rough and worn – but it’s new. Some fittings and furnishings are recycled, but it’s all new. Matteo Bologna designed the signs and graphics to look old and Victorian-like. He found the typography and ornaments in clip-art books and we had our painters and fabricators simulate the dirt – the ‘age’ – on the signs.”

## Wednesday, 4pm

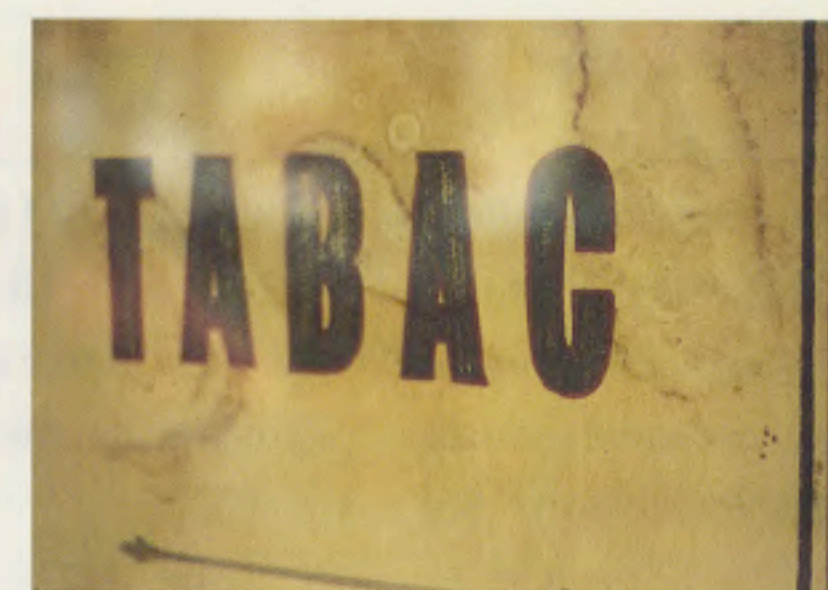
The ‘Meat District,’ near West Fourteenth Street, is busy at night, and almost quiet during the day. Noisy refrigerator trucks arrive from across the Hudson River to unload deep-frozen carcasses, and a few bar and restaurant goers mix with the allied trades that do their special kind of business in and around these low-level warehouses. Sagmeister Inc., is located a few blocks east.

“I came to New York from Austria eleven years ago because it felt ‘real’ here,” says Stefan Sagmeister. “I used to live deep in the East Village and it was a very tough area, a lot of hard drugs and people picking through the garbage. I’d been here in New York for only three days when an old man approached me on the street and started shouting and cursing. I used the incident for work for a New York rock band, using a photograph of an old man’s shadowy, threatening face for the CD cover.

“Two CDs – Lou Reed’s ‘Set the Twilight Reeling’ (Warner) and Pro-Pain (a NY speed metal band) ‘The Truth Hurts’ (Energy Records) – illustrate some of the changes in my design and the city. One has a disturbing black and white photo on the cover and photos inside of crime scenes collected from the Municipal Archives of New York City. I did this in ‘94 but wouldn’t do it again. I think I overestimated the intelligence of the fans and got comments that were very disturbing. I learned as a student in Austria that Central Park is where people are raped and murdered. Now it’s all dog walking and skating. If the news about how good it is here gets out, everybody will want to come.

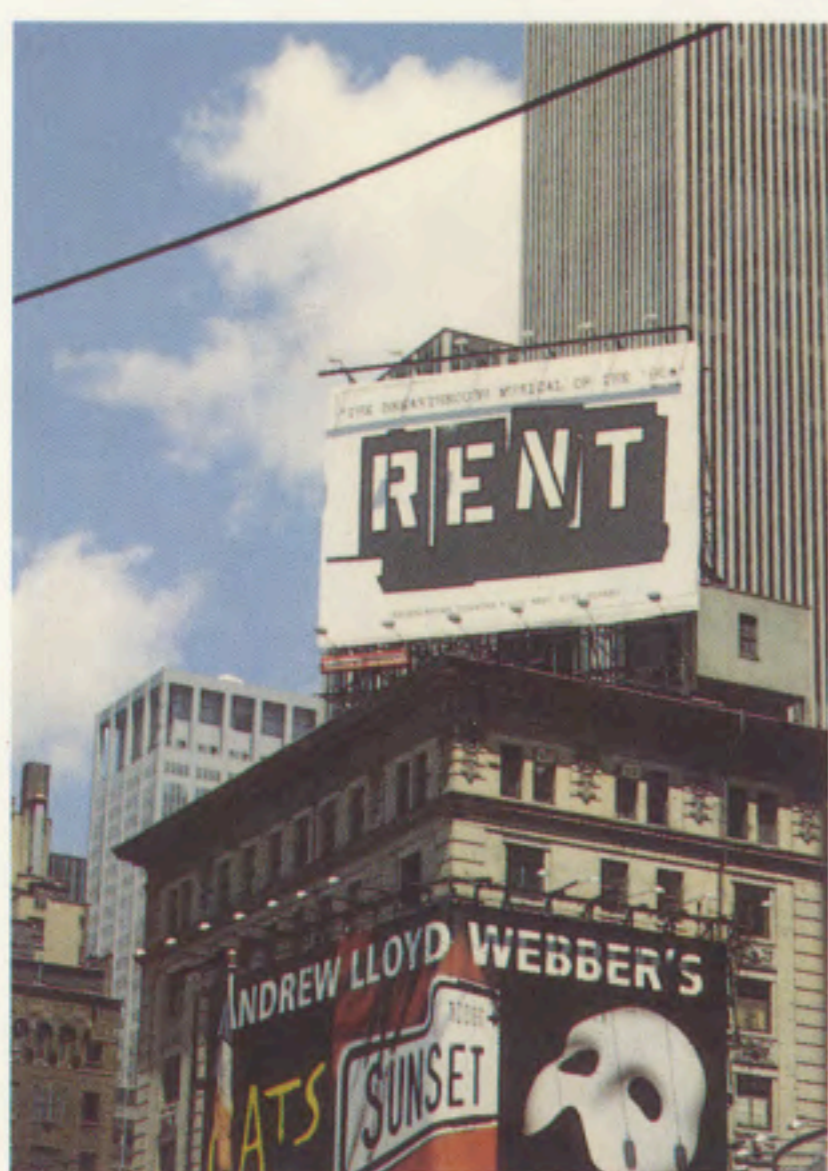
“Lou Reed’s music is not the same tough sound it was years ago and the design is not as gritty. New York is not so dirty. Reed is very New York and on this CD he’s a much happier guy – the lyrics are positive. He’s more positive.

“Selling the city as tough and rough now is just a style, like ‘60’s style’ or ‘Russian Constructivist style’ – it’s ripping off, just bullshit. Designers can be very slow at taking in and reflecting change. It’s a much different city but we’re still presenting it the same way.”



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- 1 | Poster wall in the street
- 2 | Poster wall at ‘Mixing Messages’, with posters by Herbert Hoover, Isaac Mizrahi, Todd Oldham, Paul Sahre, Ebon Heath, Marcus Durant and Jeff Prybolsky. Curated by Ellen Lupton
- 3 | Signage for Balthazar restaurant
- 4 | Billboard for ‘RENT’, design by Spot Design
- 5 | Cover of ‘Taxi Driver Wisdom’
- 6 | Spread from ‘Taxi Driver Wisdom’





Wednesday, 6.30pm

Tibor Kalman, designer, founder of M&Co., former editor of Colors magazine, decides we should not visit him. He says he's busy and we should have a conference call. We're only a few blocks from each other when we talk.

"I think we like these worn and dirty things because they're real," says Kalman. "There are lots of layers in New York, and we add our own layers (as designers, artists, residents) and we move on. Media makes it all more interesting but it's no more dirty (or clean) here in NY than it is in other cities. NY is very competitive and it's constantly being represented in different ways. It's an island and there's competition for space, attention, wealth and power. There's great racial and economic diversity. There are so many streets and streets are very democratic. People love the idea that Donald Trump walks on the same streets with homeless people. And there are great contrasts here that are not in other cities.

"The 42nd Street project with M&Co. was about the democracy of the sidewalk. Our plan for signs and building fronts was that nothing should match and everything should conflict. We wanted it to be naturally competitive - it should look wild and not make sense. The 42nd Street renovation is currently hideous but it will improve over time. It worries me a little, though, that we'll lose our connection with the vernacular as we clean-up everything. I want to find the magnus within things rather than imitate...the image of NY? It's partially about dirt, and about the patina of wear. It's about humanity."

Wednesday, 7.45pm

Back out on the street, at the corner of Broadway and Houston, we hail a cab. Its bright yellow paint has been buffed to a shine by two men standing at the exit of the twenty-four-hour Gentle Touch Car Wash. A constant line of cabs enter dirty and drive back out on the street sparkling clean. Tomorrow this taxi will be back to wash away its dirt - an endless rhythm and routine of the city.

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- 1 | At the car wash
  - 2 | Times Square - rendering in preparation for design guidelines for the redevelopment of 42nd Street
  - 3 | Interior of Balthazar restaurant
  - 4 | CD packaging for 'Pro-Pain', design by Stefan Sagmeister
  - 5 | CD packaging for Lou Reed, design by Stefan Sagmeister
  - 6 | 8 | Virtual dirt - do a keyword search for 'dirty' and 'New York' and this is what you find
  - 7 | Spread from Risa Mickenberg's book, 'Taxi Driver Wisdom'

