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# Jim and Julie

BY STEVE ZEITLIN

“The electric lights on city lampposts come on at night and go off during the day: thus they mark and regulate night and day,” writes folklorist Eric Miller. “The red-yellow-green traffic lights likewise regulate traffic, telling one to go or to wait.... Jim Power’s mosaic work on lampposts features hundreds of colors! What messages might this send? Certainly not just stop or go! Perhaps it might signal one to pause and wonder, consider, meditate, admire the beauty of it, relax, and think, ‘I have arrived in the East Village’”<sup>1</sup>

Sixty-nine-year-old, Irish-born Jim Power grew up in Queens, served in Vietnam, and arrived in the East Village of Manhattan in 1981. Inspired by his work as a stonemason, he got his start doing concrete and stone decorations on planters and on the bases of lampposts. “But people kept telling me, ‘go up, go up,’” Jim said. He began embedding tiles into the concrete and slowly developed his unique style of cutting plates and tiles and fitting them together like a jigsaw puzzle to fully cover the poles.

His idea was to create a mosaic trail with the theme “Around the Village in 80 Light Poles.” Jim’s mosaic work is made up of a wide variety of materials: tiles, crockery, colored glass, mirrors, and seashells—some purchased, some donated, some found. New Yorkers can catch their glittering reflections in the shards of mirror and glass. There is abstract design, figurative representations, and a good deal of lettering. For almost 30 years, Jim was often homeless, working outdoors in wind and cold or blazing heat, with an open hat for contributions.

In 2004, City Lore awarded Jim a People’s Hall of Fame Award for beautifying the City with distinctive, artful mosaics. The ceremony took place at the Museum of the City of New York, with Jim insisting that he could not come unless he could bring his dog Jesse. Jim tells the story of how a fancy car service picked him up and

took him to the Museum where he proudly accepted the large, bronze subway token for New York’s longest lasting guerilla art. Then, after all the fanfare, the car took him right back to Astor Place where he slept outside with Jesse beside one of his poles.

For the next decade, Jim continued to work, but in 2015, distressing news swept through the East Village. New York City

had decided to renovate Astor Place—the plaza at the north end of Bowery where Cooper Union is located—precisely the spot where eight of Jim’s most iconic poles were located. The famous sculpture called “The Cube” needed to be taken down and refurbished. In addition, all the light poles needed to be summarily taken down, because the City decided that an entirely new



Mosaic pole leaving Sixth Street Community Center, July 20, 2016. All photos by Julie Powell.



Mosaic pole being installed at Astor Place, June 21, 2016.



New 3.5-foot top added to Historic Directional Pole.



Jim with the article from the East Villager about his Astor Place Project and his poles being deemed Historic Artifacts. July 6, 2016.

and I met Jim in Clayton's studio. We had a good talk about how restoring the poles as artworks rather than decorated lamp-posts would cement Jim's legacy. While we were there, he willingly signed a document giving the City permission to restore his poles—Clayton photographed the historic moment.

Once we left, Jim continued to protest strongly. He claimed his poles to be a more significant landmark than the Great Wall of China—and, in fact, he threatened to sell the poles to China. After working for small contributions for so many years, Jim heard on the news that Mayor de Blasio had announced \$26 million for the arts in 2016. He began demanding \$1 million per pole.

To William, Bob, Clayton, and me, there seemed no way that Jim could move forward with a modest city contract to restore the poles. The years of living on the street had taken its toll on Jim, who had such severe hip problems that he could not walk and travelled only on a motorized scooter.

We made a plan to have a different mosaic artist restore the poles and have Jim supervise. Clayton and I visited Jim in

lighting system was called for, with new, taller, black lampposts, instead of the now old-fashioned gray ones.

The future of Jim's poles looked ominous, but there was a sliver of hope. William Kelly, the director of the Village Alliance who loved mosaic art and Jim's work, was overseeing the restoration. He was convinced the poles could be saved.

Jim wouldn't hear of it. He was beside himself with anger. On August 13, 2014, *DNAinfo* reported, "Jim 'Mosaic Man' Power began tearing down his multicolored mosaics from lampposts around Astor Place Wednesday as a preemptive strike against the city, which had planned to remove the art, he said." Riding his red scooter, chisel in hand, he savagely chipped away at the pole that had Bloomberg's name in orange tiles.

Out of despair and frustration, William Kelly called me and Clayton Patterson, a photographer and denizen of the East Village who had been photographing and helping Jim since 1985, and poet Bob Holman, proprietor of the Bowery Poetry

Club and a longstanding friend and fan of Jim's. An intervention was required—and on February 26, 2015, Bob, Clayton



Jim in East Village, November 11, 2015.



Jim Power and Bob Holman from the Bowery Poetry Club, September 26, 2016.

the Common Ground apartment for the formerly homeless on Pitt Street. In his crammed apartment, Jim seemed to agree to the plan.

Enter Julie Powell. She arrived in the East Village in 1983, and watched Jim's poles slowly evolve. She recalls passing by poles that were in progress, noticing as they were chiseled off by the cops, and continually reconstructed by Jim. She had studied art and photography at the University of Buffalo and Parsons, "and I know for myself," she said, "that I secretly always wanted to do mosaics—I even have a box of beautiful broken dishes that I was saving. I think I dreamed of making a mosaic table." Julie was deeply scarred by September 11th—her husband of 20 years committed suicide soon afterwards, and Julie, like Jim, suffers from PTSD, she from September 11th, Jim from Vietnam.

We met Julie in Jim's apartment the day we visited. Looking back on the event, Julie said she could see in Jim's eyes that having someone else refurbish the poles was utterly unacceptable to him. It was, in retrospect, a singularly bad idea.

Julie worked for Home Depot on 59th Street at the time. As an employee, she heard about a company program for veterans. "Even in his Common Ground building on Pitt Street," Julie said, "Jim was living like a homeless person. His desk was his overturned scooter box. I needed to organize and clean his space before Home Depot could actually come in and make his space liveable for him and Jesse. They took everything out and then gave him a new bed, new workbench, bins to store tiles. They separated his work space from his living space. Now that he had a bed, he started sleeping better, getting more linear in his thought process, and better able to take care of his dog Jesse."

Suddenly, it seemed possible that Jim could restore the poles with Julie as his trusted assistant and intermediary. The Village Alliance raised funds from the City with City Lore as a fiscal sponsor, and a

Generosity crowd-funding campaign was planned. The lampposts were taken down from Astor Place and stored by the Department of Transportation, ready to be restored as art poles rather than lighting equipment. All Jim and Julie needed was a space to work. City Lore called several community gardens to ask if they would take on Jim and give him space to refurbish the poles, but they all had their reasons for turning us down.

"At that point last May," Julie continued, "I had started going to his apartment where I would bring him food. It was on a Sunday, and I was walking down 6th Street. A super from the block was washing his car with his hose, and I saw a gate open to a side yard. I remember it like a bastion of hope—a saving grace." It turned out to be the 6th Street Community Center, and they took on Jim and Julie. The Community Center is headquartered in a



Mosaic Man working on June 28, 2016.



Astor Alive Festival. Jim Power and kids, with his September 11th planter.

lovingly restored former synagogue, located between Avenues B and C on the Lower East Side. Led by Howard Brandstein, the Center embraced the unusual project and allowed Jim and Julie to use the small side yard for work on the poles.

Jim himself was a hobbled man. “He couldn’t walk because his hip issues caused his legs to constantly cross. It was difficult for him bend to his knees,” Julie said, “and it was difficult to see him navigate to the process of restoring the poles. I don’t know where we found the strength and mental fortitude to do this. But we started this major collaboration, working pole by pole. And we enjoyed it. Some of the time, we were laughing like little kids and singing along to classic rock on the radio.” The two developed a crazy chemistry. Working dawn to dusk, Jim described the process as “madness and mayhem. We pressed the pedal right through the floor. We were sucking gasoline.”

“Neighborhood children would come by,” Julie said, “and we would let them put a tile in place, which made them so proud.

And, as the poles progressed I watched Jim grow stronger—I saw him actually walking a few steps without the walker. And I took him to the VA. In his own mind, Jim thought he only had a few years to live, but he was now told by the doctors that he was strong and healthy. They were willing to put him in line for the double hip operation he needs.”

Today, the poles, which prior to the renovation were often only partially finished, are complete and standing proudly not as tiled lampposts but as totems: the Directional Pole, which marks the directions to the adjoining neighborhoods; the Astor Pole, which tells the history of Astor Place and the nearby Public Theater; the Fire Pole, honoring the firemen and first responders of September 11; the Police Pole, with its new addition honoring the 9th Precinct and the fallen officers; the President’s Pole, honoring Presidents who spoke at the Great Hall at Cooper Union, including Lincoln; and the Art Pole, honoring artists from the East Village. Funds are still being raised for the last pole, honoring longstanding businesses in the neighborhood (see <https://www.generosity.com/community-fundraising/jim-power-the-mosaic-trail>). “Julie is now the other side of the coin,” Jim said. “She elevated the art, no question—and there’s no telling what we can do in the future—and I’m talking about the next 1,000 years not the last ones.”

Jim’s—and now Julie’s work too—stand as a permanent legacy at Astor Place. The work is celebratory, exalting the individual’s urge to give of oneself for free, as Jim has done for most of the past 35 years. Jim’s work is part of a tradition of customizing mass culture in the urban environment. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes, “Cities and mass culture...offer a new frontier for exploring the indomitable will to make meaning, create value, and develop connoisseurship under the most exhilarating, as well as the most devastating conditions.”<sup>2</sup> My mosaics, Jim said, take “the anxiety out of people’s days when they see them. It’s not just long miles of lonely streets. It’s your home.”



Close up of the President Pole, which honors leaders who spoke at the Great Hall at The Cooper Union, July 27, 2016.

Bob, Clayton, William, and I were reminded of how a little tender loving care can turn lives around and make them whole—and how an angel earns her wings. ▼

## Notes

1. Reaven, Marci, and Steve Zeitlin, eds. 2006. *Hidden New York: A Guide to Places that Matter*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, p. 234.
2. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1983. “The Future of Folklore Studies in America: The Urban Frontier.” *Folklore Forum* 16 (2), p. 222.

Steve Zeitlin is the founding director of City Lore in New York City. Steve Zeitlin’s latest book is *The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness*. Photo by Martha Cooper.



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