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Via YouTube, Leading Tours of the City's Art Scene

By JED LIPINSKI

WHEN Loren Munk began furtively filming New York City gallery and museum openings in 2006 — “working undercover,” as he put it — he was regularly kicked out by security guards and threatened with legal action for copyright infringement.

Since then, however, Mr. Munk's camera has become a welcome guest, and using the alias James Kalm, he has uploaded more than 900 videos to his YouTube channels, [the James Kalm Report](#) and [James Kalm Rough Cut](#), which have been viewed nearly two million times in total.

Curators searching for free promotion now invite him to document their shows. Fans of the project range from New York art world insiders to members of the [Papulankutja](#) aboriginal community in the desert of Western Australia.

They are 500 miles from the nearest small town, Anthony Spry, a former art teacher in Papulankutja who introduced his students to the Kalm Report, said in an e-mail from Australia.

“But the videos made them feel as if they were at the center of the New York art scene,” he said.

Which is exactly where Mr. Munk, a 59-year-old painter, has been for the past five years. Several nights a week, he rides his mountain bike to art shows across the city from the 3,800-square-foot loft he shares with his wife in Red Hook, Brooklyn. His videos — recognizable for their unseen narrator's labored breathing, jerky camera work and informed but uncritical commentary — run about 10 minutes and are shot with a tiny Canon Elph digital camera.

“There's the great Chuck Close,” he said while filming a recent [visit to Gavin Brown's Enterprise gallery](#) in Chelsea, before comparing the exhibiting artist's technique to that of the post-painterly abstractionists.

“But he doesn't just go to Chelsea,” said James Panero, an editor at The New Criterion, a

conservative culture journal, [who has written about Mr. Munk](#). “He goes to the most out-of-the-way places and treats them with the same level of importance. I think his videos will one day be in the [Archives of American Art](#).” That is a Smithsonian Institution collection.

For Mr. Munk, what happens outside a gallery is almost as important as what happens inside. His videos typically begin with street scenes: a busker playing “Stairway to Heaven” near the Metropolitan Museum; children dancing in the spray of an open fire hydrant in Bushwick, Brooklyn. “I want to show viewers that art exists on streets like the ones they live on, not in isolated white cubes somewhere,” he said.

“Coverage of the art world is fading from the mainstream press,” Mr. Munk added. “So I’m trying to use alternative media to fill the void.”

Raised in Pocatello, Idaho, Mr. Munk came to New York City in 1979 after a four-year stint in the Army. He attended the Art Students League on the G.I. Bill of Rights and made what he calls neo-Cubist paintings while moonlighting as a street artist: squeezing paint directly from its tubes to tag walls and bridge overpasses with the words “Real Paint.”

In 1981, Mr. Munk was arrested on graffiti charges, which unexpectedly raised his credibility. “Getting arrested was great for my career,” he recalled, noting that the publicity led to sold-out shows for his paintings in New York and group exhibitions in France and Brazil.

But when the art market collapsed in 1989, two years after the stock market crashed, so did Mr. Munk’s career in New York. The recession coincided with the birth of his two sons, now 21 and 24. And though he continued to sell some work through private dealers in Europe, he said, he felt “completely cut off” from the art world by the mid-1990s.

Mr. Munk’s re-immersion began in 2002, when he started writing for The Brooklyn Rail, a monthly arts and culture magazine, working under the pseudonym James Kalm.

Asked why he adopted an alter ego, Mr. Munk said, “In the art world there’s a sense that if you’re not a blue-chip artist by age 45, you’re not worth considering.” Today, he said, it is no secret that James Kalm is Loren Munk (it says so on [his Web site](#)). “But back then, using James Kalm was a way of starting fresh.”

Paradoxically, Mr. Munk’s forays into print and video have heavily influenced his paintings, which in turn have generated renewed interest in Mr. Munk among the art world establishment.

In September, the Lesley Heller Workspace on the Lower East Side held a solo exhibition of his new work: a series of paintings that map the location of notable artists' studios, galleries and hangouts in New York over the last century. In her [review of the show](#) for The New York Times, Roberta Smith wrote, "Mr. Munk gives dizzying visual expression to some of what lures the art-driven to the city: the sense of possibility in the air and of history beneath our feet."

During a visitor's recent trip to his studio, Mr. Munk unveiled a 10-by-15-foot painting titled "Super Map," which diagramed the artistic history of neighborhoods like SoHo, Chelsea and the East Village. The Bushwick section remained incomplete.

"Ten new galleries opened there this fall," he said with a sigh. "It's getting hard to keep up."

Later that afternoon, Mr. Munk pedaled across the Brooklyn Bridge to the [Steven Harvey Fine Arts Project](#) on Forsyth Street. Wearing a Burton backpack and paint-speckled pants, he trained his Elph on charcoal drawings by the painter Bob Thompson, who died in 1966 at age 28, and whom Mr. Munk called "a proto-version of Jean-Michel Basquiat."

Among the guests was Katherine Bradford, a painter whose work is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum. "He deserves a MacArthur grant for what he's doing," she said, adding that Mr. Munk had [filmed a show of hers](#) in 2007. Across the room, Mr. Munk was closely examining a sketch of Nina Simone. "Look at him," Ms. Bradford said. "Bob Thompson's been dead over 40 years, and here's Loren doing him a favor."

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