

# Diaries and masks paint portraits of E.S.L. students

BY RÉGINE LABOSSIÈRE

The Diary Project USA/Kenya/South Africa, an ongoing series of international exhibitions, opened its latest gallery show Sat., June 30 at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery. The exhibition, entitled 'my country,' displayed handmade books and masks by immigrant students, and photograph and video footage of these 18 students, ages 21 to 60. The students, who come from West Africa, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Asia and Europe, and range in age and life experience, come together in The Diary Project under one unifying theme: to learn to read and write English.

The Diary Project was started in 1996 by Mark Scheflen, artistic director of the Visual Arts Program at St. Mark's. Scheflen organized a series of photography, painting and drawing workshops in order to bring together people of varying ages and backgrounds in Kenya and the United States through visual expression as a means of cultural exchange.

"The photo diaries are an art and educational program focusing on photography, video and writing," Scheflen explained. "It's been designed in different ways [since 1996]. This project ['my country'] was focused more on the writing. The visuals are motivating and give it the personal aspect."

Scheflen collaborated with the New York City Board of Education, and The Diary Project used a classroom at P.S. 64 on the Lower East Side. With the help of teacher Carol Beron, Scheflen was able to teach the 18 students the basics of English in order for them to make a diary, a short story based on a theme with corresponding photographs, and masks. The masks — cast from the students' faces — add to each diary's intimacy by enabling strangers to "see" the person who wrote each story. But for some of the students, such as some Muslim women in the class, the masks clashed with their religious beliefs, so they cast their hands in



Villager photo by Sarah Conard

**At last weekend's opening of The Diary Project at St. Mark's Church in the Bowery**

clay instead.

Beron taught the students the English alphabet and sound/symbol relationships. Scheflen taught the students how to use 35-mm cameras and computers. With Beron's help and the aid of the visuals, Scheflen and the students were able to learn from each other.

"I never have a problem communicating because of the visual literacy," Scheflen said. "People can read by seeing the different images and create stories that way."

The stories the students created, as seen at the gallery opening on Saturday, are mostly about their lives: where they are from, why they came to the U.S., how long they've lived here, how they make a living, what they do in their spare time, and what they plan to do with their newfound English skills. Their words are accompanied by photos they took with the cameras given to them for the class, or by their own photos or other ones previously taken in far-off lands. The end result is stories told in either a brand-new language, to some of them, or an improvement upon the slight grasp of English some students already had. As Scheflen describes it, some of the students he and

Beron receive are literally at "stage one." Few of these "stage one" students have been to school prior to the Diary Project, some never having received a formal education outside of prayer school, such as Musa Jalloh from Sierra Leone and Matene Keita from Mali.

"Some of them are literate in their own language. Some of them are not," Scheflen said.

The next step for The Diary Project is St. Petersburg, Russia, where Scheflen will take the diaries and masks and then return to the U.S. with art projects from Russia. The Diary Project will also continue to exchange with Kenya. This exhibit will remain on view at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery at 131 E. 10th St. until July 30. The gallery is open Saturday and Sunday 4-6:30 p.m. For more information, call 674-6377.

"It's amazing," Scheflen said of how effective the program is in teaching the immigrant students English. "There was this Chinese woman who worked in a sweatshop in New York and she learned how to read and write [English through The Diary Project]. She got out of the sweatshop and got a better job."

July 4, 2001

Volume 71, Number 11

# The Villager

West Village, East Village, Chelsea, Soho, Tribeca and Lower East Side