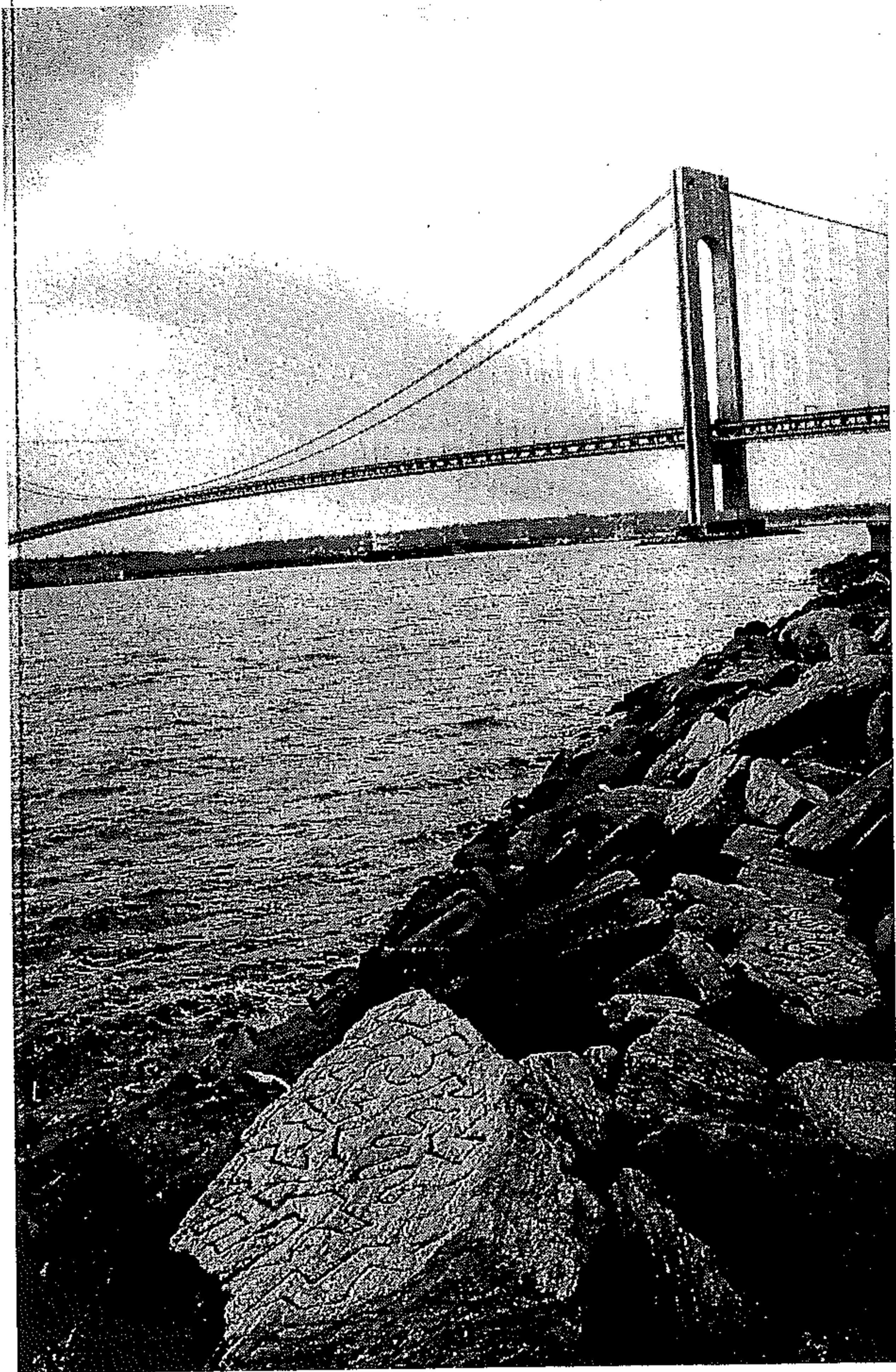


The City

NEW YORK SIDEWALKS

Underfoot, Artist at Work



VERRAZANO-NARROWS BRIDGE, BROOKLYN SIDE

"I was enjoying myself, hanging out at crazy bars," Mr. Hiratsuka said. "I was cheerful, young, Japanese, funky artist." But after a few years, he yearned for a place to rejuvenate. He found it on the rocks under the Verrazano, where he fished and carved designs on the surrounding stone. The carvings are hidden by a concrete retaining wall and are etched deep in the schist that glitters with mica and is kissed by the waters of the Narrows. "The earth is eternal," Mr. Hiratsuka said. "All the living creatures can go away, but the stone will remain."



LIKE the scattered cobblestone streets that endure in a growing sea of asphalt, a few stone sidewalks remain among the city's many concrete ones. In 1982, when Ken Hiratsuka, then 23, arrived on a one-way ticket from Japan to New York, he saw those stone sidewalks as a clean slate awaiting his chisel. "New York is international, New York has no rules," he said in explaining his desire to escape the rigid art training common in Japan.

Mr. Hiratsuka was not entirely right. In sculpturing nearly 40 sidewalks since 1982, he has received many police warnings, and was arrested once, he said, although the judge dismissed the case.

How does Mr. Hiratsuka defend an art that lives in the legal shadows? Given all the graffiti he saw in New York when he arrived, he did not think his carving would be legally suspect. Even now, though, calling himself a "self-appointed carver," he pleads on behalf of his art. "What I am doing is absolutely fine," he said. "What I am doing is very important."

However one reacts to that answer, it is indisputable that his 24 years of carving have left a large, literal mark on the city.

MEERA SUBRAMANIAN



Photographs by Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times



NORTHWEST CORNER, BROADWAY AND PRINCE STREET, SOHO

As people swarmed around him on their way to Victoria's Secret or Dean & DeLuca, Mr. Hiratsuka recalled the area in the early 80's: "The street lamps were shot out, broken, all the graffiti everywhere." He decided the corner needed life, it needed art. He asked no one's permission. Although the sidewalk carving took only about five hours, the process took two years, 1983 and 1984, as Mr. Hiratsuka chiseled away in the dead of night until a police car rolled up and scared him away. "I got chicken, so scared," he said. "I can't go back, can't carve anymore. But two months later, I was ready again."

212 21ST STREET, GREENWOOD HEIGHTS, BROOKLYN

Mr. Hiratsuka made his first New York carving here, in September 1982. He was young and it was all about the spiral, but the chisel slipped. The perfect circle was suddenly heading south instead of west on the sidewalk in front of the building where Mr. Hiratsuka was living. He was troubled by the blunder, but the next day he decided to follow the line and see where it took him. His distinctive style, which High Performance magazine called "Keith Haring meets prehistoric petroglyph," was born. His specialty is one continuous line, at times geometric and sharply angled, at others flowing and figurative. His one rule: The line can never cross itself.