

# ENTERTAINMENT

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Toronto artist  
invades NYC  
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TENT CITY < **ENTERTAINMENT**

## Encampment's brief glow dazzles

Last-minute scramble for cash adds to the spirit of Sokoloski's New York project

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VISUAL ARTS COLUMNIST

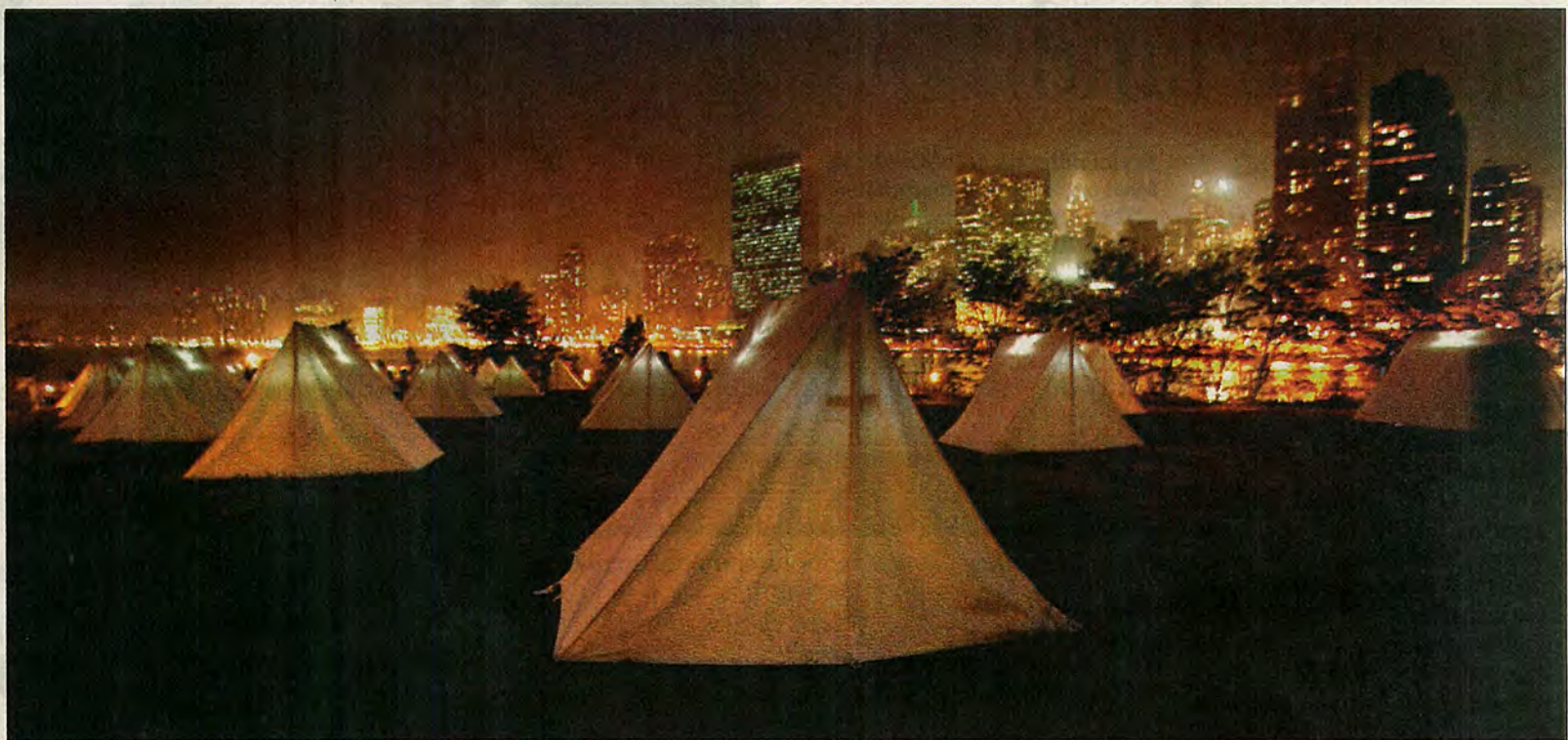
NEW YORK—As hundreds of New Yorkers walked among the some 100 vintage pale white tents on Roosevelt Island last night, every one silhouetted against the brilliant New York skyline, they couldn't have known how close "The Encampment," by Toronto artist Thom Sokoloski, came to being shut down even before it could be put up.

New York is now discovering the most compelling installation in its own backyard since the salmon-coloured fabric of Christo's and Jeanne-Claude's "The Gates" brightened up a wintry Central Park in 2005. They won't have long, though. "The Encampment" comes down after tonight.

But when the first tent went up on the island's Southpoint Friday morning, it looked as forlorn and abandoned as the vine-covered ruins of the nearby 19th-century smallpox hospital that had helped give this wedge-shaped sliver of land its reputation as a place fit only for the unwanted, unstable or worse.

That's pretty much the way the wraith-thin Sokoloski was feeling at the time. Things were behind schedule, it seemed New York media couldn't care less and the sun beat down relentlessly as he tried to keep his cool. This show doesn't have a long run here, after all.

On Tuesday, he even felt he might have to abandon entirely the \$100,000 project until a supporter came up with the needed money in the last minute. Local bureaucracy wasn't particularly helpful, either. The Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation (RIOC) had withdrawn the promise of some \$12,000



DIANE BONDAREFF FOR THE TORONTO STAR

"The Encampment" — 100 civil war-type tents filled with artifacts on the south end of Roosevelt Island — holds its own against the New York skyline.

in funding, after promising its financial support earlier this year.

By yesterday, though, the last of the 99 other Civil War-style dog tents were finally in their not-quite symmetrical militaristic rows. These were the final touches on the scrubby site across the East River

Sokoloski and Jenny-Ann McCowan, his long-time collaborator.

Now Sokoloski had every reason to be cool. "It's a wonderful moment when everyone going by, in boats or planes overhead or driving along the Roosevelt Parkway, first sees the lights in the tents," he says.

**6 It gives you an eerie, macabre feeling.**

JUDI AROND, ROOSEVELT ISLAND RESIDENT

from the United Nations that had been transformed by visiting school kids putting up tents, busloads of hospital patients helping to fill them with artifacts, the arrival of the *New York Times*, *Fox TV* and other media outlets, as well as some well-timed appearances by local politicians.

And it seemed a year's worth of planning that began shortly after Toronto's 2006 Nuit Blanche had finally paid off for the 57-year-old

"What did I do here? I created a model of sociability. I worked with people. I shook their hand."

Each tent housed drawings, poems, old objects or newspaper clippings recalling someone or some incident on the island — once called Blackwell's and Welfare Island — that had been home to prisoners such as anarchist Emma Goldman and Nazi spies as well as asylum and hospital patients. One tent has a rough painting of patients seated

around a dinner table. Another has a child-like model of a room.

Some patients at the nearby Coler-Goldwater Speciality Hospital contributed their own installations for some of the tents. "They see this island as their community," said Ronald Becker, who co-ordinates the hospital's art-therapy classes. "Some of them were very verbal about the project, and the meaning of the island to them."

A soft white light from the tiny electric lanterns filled each tent, casting everything inside in deep shadows. "The way the tents are laid out is a masterpiece," said Judi Arond, a retired nurse living on Roosevelt Island with her husband. "But it gives you an eerie, macabre feeling."

The tents and "The Encampment"'s military design couldn't be lost on United Nations personnel who have the best seats in Manhattan to see it, suggested John McDowell, the installation's resident

composer. "Would they not be reminded of what's going on in Somalia?" he wondered.

After tomorrow, the tents are being sold for anywhere from \$180 to \$250 by David Brunelle, Sokoloski's temporary chief of technical support, to historical re-enactment societies that will use them to help re-stage and re-enact historical military campaigns.

Sokoloski is both quick to pay his debt to Christo and to distinguish "The Encampment" from "The Gates," which cost an estimated \$20 million of Christo's own money.

"In a way, Christo does the same thing, asking people to participate in the construction of his work," said Sokoloski.

"But he doesn't ask them to participate in the content. I do. This way people realize that the artist is not some pompous individual. The artist is an animator." pgoddard@thestar.ca