

ART

# Freaks and Geeks: Revisiting the Legendary Club 57 at MOMA

by JENNIFER KRASINSKI

NOVEMBER 9, 2017

**KATY K**  
**PRESENTS**

# TRUCKERS BALL

All Honky Tonk Angels and Truckers Welcome!



**10:30**

friday  
MARCH

**6<sup>th</sup>**

\$3.00

**CLUB 57**  
**ST. MARKS**

In 1978, Stanley Strychacki, who oversaw the basement space at the Holy Cross Parish at 57 St. Marks Place, decided to rent the place to performers and musicians for cheap, anywhere from five to twenty bucks a night. The vibe was friendly, unpretentious. No velvet ropes; no celebrity attitude. Strychacki was a Polish émigré who was also working as the manager for Irving Plaza, another downtown music venue. That's where he met Susan Hannaford and Tom Scully, two graduates of the School of Visual Arts, who — along with performer Ann Magnuson — had put together “New Wave Vaudeville,” a wild alt-variety show. Impressed by what he saw, Strychacki offered them the run of his basement space, and by January 1979, they were turning the now-legendary Club 57 into a playhouse for downtown's avant-garde.


























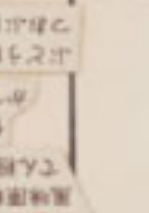


# CLUB 57



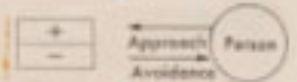
MONSTER MOVIE CLUB

MARCH

"Teenage Terror"

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	
<p>2 More Dumb 7:00 11:30 THE GLASS BOTTOM BOAT a Frank Tashin film! 9:30 CALAMITY JANE</p> 	CLOSED	<p>4 THE BLOB! w/ Steve McQueen to order!</p> 	<p>5 9:00 THE HOW-TO GO-GO SHOW w/ The Cosmopolitans</p> 	<p>6 Bikini Cat Magazine presents Andy Warhol's THE LOVES OF ONDINE</p> 	<p>7 Kim Meyer's BEYOND THE VALLEY OF THE DOLLS 9:00 and 12:00</p> 	<p>8 Music Panic Presents GLITTER ROCK BALLROOM BLITZ guest DJ 1973! N.Y. Dull drag required!</p> 	
<p>9 Rated X! 99 WOMEN 7-9-11 Women in Pants! Included here - without error!</p> 	10	<p>11 THE SPIDER directed by Burt I. Gordon</p> 	<p>12 PRIVATE LECTURE Ladies Only Ladies Auxiliary Gun Club Pot Luck Dinner at 7:00</p> 	<p>13 Super Mad Film ROULETTE BLADES 9:00 11:00 Monica Vitti, Terence Stamp</p> 	<p>14 GARY NUBANA GROUP Presents PING PONG a film-video performance 9:30 11:30</p> 	<p>15 The Only Band in the World ART Present The Only Record in the World 10:00</p> 	
<p>16 7:00-9:00-11:00 THE GIRL CAN'T HELP IT a Frank Tashin film! Jayne M. Add, Fats Domino, Little Richard, Gene Amery, The Platters, Eddie Cochran!</p> 	17	<p>18 GHOST OF DRAGSTRIP HOLLOW directed by Vernon Clarke</p> 	<p>19 NAME THAT NOISE Punk Rock Game Show 9:00 11:00 Lance Loud, M.C.</p> 	<p>20 COMEDY SPECIAL alive! on stage! new hilarity! 9:00</p> 	<p>21 LADY WRESTLING 10:00 Savage Brawling Battle to the Death! (Not for the Tweak!!!)</p> 	<p>22 BONGO 10:00 performance by Bradley Field</p> 	
<p>23 Channel 57 presents TELEVISION-NOSTALGIA! Lost in Space, The Monkees, My Favorite Martian, Capt. SnooDark Showdown, Super Cat, Man from U.N.C.L.E. (plus vintage commercials, cartoons and Swenson dramas) 7-11-1</p> 	24	<p>25 I WAS A TEENAGE WEREWOLF w/ Michael Landon plus BLOOD OF DRACULA w/ Sandra Harrison</p> 	<p>26 LET'S FACE THE MUSIC AND TAP 9:00 Top Billie J. Katsenogian!</p> 	<p>27 CARTOONS YOU WON'T SEE ON T.V. 9:00 An All-New Show!!</p> 	<p>28 57 DRAWINGS by DE ABRAMM EXHIBITION &amp; D.J. 8 p.m. - Free</p> 	<p>29 01</p> 	
<p>30 Fritz Lang's RANCHO NOTORIOUS w/ Marlene Dietrich 6:00-8:00 10:00-12:00 Nicholas Ray's JOHNNY GUITAR w/ Joan Crawford and Sterling Hayden</p> 	31	<p>MONSTER DOORS OPEN AT 9:00</p> 					

call for prices



57 ST. MARK'S PLACE, N.Y.C. 10009  
478-8671

A Club 57 calendar from July 1980, designed by Ann Magnuson

Almost every night, the club was host to parties, performances, movie series, music shows, poetry readings, and any other mutant forms of culture-shocking. Through the door and onto its floor came downtown luminaries such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kathy Acker, Joey Arias, Ethyl Eichelberger, Chris Kraus, Agosto Machado, Tom Murrin, Fred Brathwaite (a/k/a Fab 5 Freddy), Kenny Scharf, Marc Shaiman, Sur Rodney (Sur), John Sex, and David Wojnarowicz. This Fall, MOMA is celebrating the scene and those who made it with 'Club 57: Film, Performance, and Art in the East Village, 1978-1983,' a much-needed exhibition that's as loose and exuberant as the club itself.

The show is more a portrait of a moment in time than a dutiful, dry historicizing of it. In truth, it's a bit of an endearing mess, a little like a teenager's bedroom: The walls are covered almost haphazardly, though expressing total fandom and devotion. Films and film series, slide shows and videos, zines and flyers, photographs and paintings, art and ephemera are all installed throughout the Roy and Niuta Titus Theater Galleries, down in MOMA's basement — though not the airiest, easiest space for a show, it feels apropos to Club 57's subterranean spirit. (How else should this scene hang on hallowed museum walls other than oddly, densely, and even slightly askew?)



Keith Haring, performing at one of Club 57's "Acts of Live Art" nights in 1980

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSEPH  
SZKODZINSKI.

The club's many artists, musicians, performers, and revelers were of the generation that was both post-pop and post-punk. Growing up, they'd feasted on the ditzy glitz of popular culture, and learned preparedness in the event of nuclear attack. These kids were the weirdos, the ones who left their hometowns to seek refuge in the broken cradle of the East Village: Magnuson from West Virginia; Haring from Reading, Pennsylvania; Scharf from Los Angeles. The East Village scene may have been hedonistic, but it wasn't apocalyptic. After all, it embraced the city's depressed economy. Cheap rents enabled artists to create and evolve outside of professionalism's pressure cooker. (No urgent need for an MFA when there're affordable spaces for forging community, opportunity, and audience). If anything united Club 57's otherwise eclectic bunch, it was a desire to twist the mainstream of their childhood inside out, to show "normalcy" as the absurd condition that it was. Parody, satire, or just a simple send-up: These were the means to stick it to power, and hilariously.

For *Made for TV* (1984), film-video artist Tom Rubnitz (1956–1992) collaborated with Magnuson to produce a daffy, dizzying simulation of flipping through television channels, past goofy ads for unappetizing burgers, cans of generic chicken broth, and bacon bits-stuffed baked potatoes. A charismatic, chameleonic comedienne (think: test-tube progeny of Lucille Ball and Cindy Sherman), Magnuson plays a veejay, a televangelist, a soap queen, a lead singer for a metal band, a newscaster, and other characters squeezed from the boob tube. Performer John Sex (née McLaughlin, 1956–1990) wore his hair in a tall pompadour-cum-missile silo, spoofing crooners of yore, singing dance hits like “Hustle With My Muscle” and “Rock Your Body” while wearing flashy, tight suits that might have made Liberace green with envy.





It must be noted that it took not just craft but a lot of work to make the fun happen. Magnuson's monthly event calendars were meticulously hand-collaged together. Every event had a theme — "Amazon School of Modeling"; "Fashion Moda: Rape, Ravage and Roll"; "Debutante on Parade"; "Freudian Slip/Psychotic Underwear Bash"; "Hair Extravaganza" — and seemed to have had its own flyer (some of them silk-screened by Sex, others made by artists Barry Masterson, KENE, Stacey Elkin, Richard McGuire, and more). Movie nights required notes; there were newsletters and zines that needed writing, designing, and circulating. Kenny Scharf's *Cosmic Closet*, a reproduction of the dance room he first installed in the loft he shared with Keith Haring, is a psychedelic accretion of hundreds upon hundreds of Day-Glo-dipped plastic toys glued together to create a colorful cavern. Standing in it feels like being inside the belly of the party beast.



Joey Arias in the Fiorucci window, 1980

PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHEW  
OLSAK

Of course there was also the art, some of it for display, some of it circulated more personally. Photographer Marcus Leatherdale's tender series *Urban Women* was exhibited at Club 57 in 1980, and featured feminine ferocities including Mapplethorpe muse Lisa Lyon as well as two of John Waters's leading ladies, Divine and Cookie Mueller. A pair of portraits (one of himself, one of an unidentified other) on found ad paper from 1982 by artist-drag performer Stephen Tashjian (a/k/a Tabboo!) are rendered in a serious, agitated hand, giving his characters an intense, rather sickly appearance. The sinuous lines of Kitty Brophy's ink drawing *Vacation From My Suicide* (1979) infuse its nude female figure with both an elegance and a darkness. A pencil drawing Keith Haring made on graph paper, "For Kenny," is a sweet testament to his and Scharf's friendship — half of it filled with what looks like small cartoon cock-and-balls.

One of the exhibition's most magical objects is a clear plastic cape made of nothing more than a shower curtain and wire that was worn in performance by the alien-genius singer-performer Klaus Nomi (1944–1983). Something about the costume's unabashed flimsiness speaks to the secret to successful self-styling: Otherworldliness isn't had by money, it's achieved in the mind.



The club closed in 1983, but the parties and performances continued in other equally legendary East Village spots — the Pyramid Club, King Tut’s Wah Wah Hut — until AIDS descended and carried off so many of the artists who’d given the scene its energy: Nomi, Rubnitz, Sex, Haring, to name only a few. “None of us could have predicted we’d experience such soul-sickening sadness while still so young,” writes Magnuson in her poignant essay for the show’s page-turner of a catalog. “All these faded memories begin to emerge with greater clarity, deeper love, and fewer tears.” Club 57’s explosive moment is gone from New York now, and yet here in this exhibition, it appears again like an oasis: beautifully, riotously present.

**‘Club 57: Film, Performance, and Art in the East Village, 1978-1983’**

*The Museum of Modern Art*

*11 West 53rd Street*

*212.708.9400*

*[moma.org](http://moma.org)*

*Through April 1, 2018*

