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Ladies' Auxiliary of the Lower East Side: Post-punk feminist art and New York's Club 57

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the feminist art that emerged from New York City's short-lived, post-punk venue Club 57 (1978–83), where music mixed with visual art, experimental film, performance and politics. A hub of New York's 'downtown scene', Club 57 exemplified ways in which artists' increasingly promiscuous experiments across media led them to abandon galleries and museums in favour of nightclubs, discos and bars. This tendency dovetailed with the practices of an emergent generation of feminist artists eager to both break out of the sexist art world and engage with popular culture and audiences. A look at the work of Club 57's manager Ann Magnuson, the performances and collectives she organized there and at other downtown clubs and other significant women whose work Club 57 supported provides a snapshot of the feminist artists in post-punk New York City, many of whose art and activism continue into the present.

KEYWORDS
Club 57
Ann Magnuson
Vivienne Dick
Pulsallama
DISBAND
feminist art
post-punk

In a 1981 *Artforum* analysis of the moment's art world, New York-based artist Douglas Davis identified a phenomenon he dubbed 'post-performance', emerging not from art or theatre scenes, but bars and clubs that had grown to embrace such work in the wake of punk's unself-conscious, cross-disciplinary, do-it-yourself de-skilling culture in the late 1970s. Contrary to a gallery-based performance art that had by then established itself in the museum and collecting worlds – such as the work of John Cage, Vito Acconci and Chris Burden – Davis approvingly wrote of an ascendant generation of artists who not only took experimental performance for granted in their practices, but felt it perfectly at home on dancefloors and in discos:

> reach[ing] out to embrace small, clearly identifiable audiences – via cable television, National Public Radio, record albums, videodiscs, clubs like the Ritz, the Mudd Club, the late Hurrah's.
>
> (Davis 1981: 38)

Davis argues that this turn towards such venues came from the shifting role and growing significance of the audience – both their pleasure and their participation – to these kinds of performers, whose work revelled in and often required not so much the attention as the ambiance of a party scene as fuel and foil. Whereas earlier performance artists were still haunted by critic Michael Fried's famous 1967 admonition that 'art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre', Davis found that when artists confidently embrace the intelligence, humour and sensuality of the post-punk 'New Wave', 'art can eat theatre alive, and still survive. It can hang alone in a room […] or dance around a nightclub floor' (Davis 1981: 31–39).

While Davis himself does not draw attention to it, I am most interested in the fact that, in his analysis, he holds up not just many women artists, but specifically feminist artists as exemplars of this 'post-performance' sensibility: musician Laurie Anderson, conceptualist Eleanor Antin and new-media artist Lynn Hershman are among those name-checked, and lyrics from Anderson, Blondie and the Waitresses are quoted – the latter (wittingly or unwittingly) conflated with the Los Angeles feminist street-theatre troupe of the same name, who are included in the article's illustrations. Artist Martha Wilson – co-founder of the all-woman DISBAND, whose work Davis also singles out in the article – more recently summarized the zeitgeist: 'we were fed up by the insularity of the art world itself'. Her bandmate Ilona Granet added: 'if you were interested in influencing culture, pop culture certainly seemed a more sensible approach' (Feldman 2012: n.pag). In light of this, I would like to investigate the feminist appeal of these spaces and approaches by women artists who emerged from New York City's 'downtown scene' in the late 1970s, with a focus on the short-lived venue Club 57 (1978–83), where music mixed with visual art and feminist politics in the post-punk era (Figure 1). While photograph and video documentation of this work is limited – often by design, as the events and performances were meant to be participatory – what exists, paired with the design and ephemera created around the work, allows us to piece together one corner of a vibrant community of women artists in post-punk New York, many of whose art and activism continue into the present.

New York's downtown artists ran parallel to and often crossed streams with the more established uptown and SoHo gallery artists of various 1960s movements, where visual artists like Yoko Ono and Mayo Thompson wrote, performed and recorded music as part of their practice, which opened the door for a generation of musical groups in the 1970s (many of them art students) like Talking Heads and Devo, who famously treated their bands as performance art at gigs in clubs like CBGBs and Max's Kansas City. Indeed, in his book *From Montmartre to the Mudd Club*, scholar Bernard Gendron has compellingly argued that rock music fully infiltrated the avant-garde in

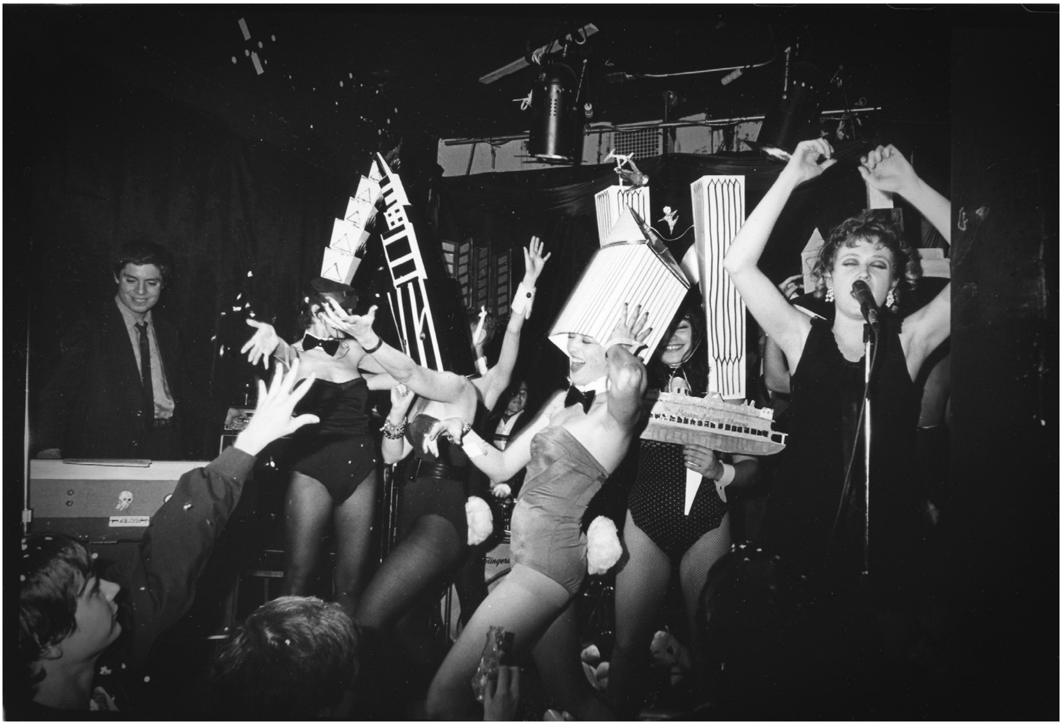

Figure 1: Harvey Wang (1980), Ann Magnuson performs at Mudd Club, September. Courtesy of the artist.

the 1970s, crossing the era's art/music and high/low divides after decades of 'aggressive struggles on the part of popular culture for cultural empowerment' (2002: 12). While classical- and jazz-based forms stubbornly maintained or returned to elitist folds, Gendron notes that soul, funk and of course rock forms broke free to move more fluidly across high-, low- and middle-brow spaces in ways that evolved and have continued to this day. To Gendron's history of this moment, I propose that these struggles often sprang from the era's civil-rights, feminist and gay-rights movements, which by the late 1970s sought new ways to reach broader audiences and critique the myopia or elitism of their earlier iterations and had begun splintering and seeping into new expressions in everyday life.

This was particularly evident in the 'No Wave' culture emerging at the moment that Davis was writing about artists' self-imposed exile to bars, clubs and music halls: New York City venues like Club 57 as well as Mudd Club and Tier 3, and galleries like Artists Space, Fun and Gracie Mansion all hosted exhibitions, concerts and DJ sets – often simultaneously. From the start, queer artists, artists of colour and women were integral to these scenes – indeed, each one of the DIY venues named above was founded or run by women – many of whom either openly embraced or took for granted the feminist activism that helped fuel the egalitarian spirit of these new creative cliques at their infancy. As Club 57 artist Ann Magnuson recently reflected upon this moment: 'In spite of women's lib, the gender dynamic at the time (especially uptown) was very much an oppressive *Mad Men* man's world, where women were still expected to kowtow to male authority figures'. In the downtown scene, however, 'there were so many young women – and young men – itching to get out from under that' (Magnuson 2017: 155). Indeed, this sensibility was identified as one of the scene's defining traits in a 1982 *Arts Magazine* article by the queer artist, critic and downtown scenester Nicolas Moufarrege, who noted the mockery and 'abrogation of masculine and feminine stereotype models' in their clubs and galleries (1982: 80–81).

Influential visual artists to come out of this moment, like Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger, reflected an academically learned feminist theory in artwork shown in the dedicated art galleries of SoHo like White Columns and Mary Boone. But, significantly – and little-known, even to those familiar with their work – both these artists also crossed over into this downtown 'post-performance' scene. Sherman, for example, co-wrote and was among the performers in artist Robert Longo's 1976 musical performance 'THINGS I will regret/TEMPTATION to exit', at Artist's Space.[1] And Kruger briefly joined DISBAND, to which she contributed lyrics of precisely the deadpan, slightly accusatory quality of the texts in her soon-to-be-iconic visual art:

> You don't have to talk about your politics
> You don't have to talk about the movies you see
> About the dance you do
> I don't need a clue
> Because it's all in your fashions.
>
> (DISBAND 1979: n.pag.)

DISBAND's Martha Wilson reflected on the straightforward impetus behind a lot of these projects:

> Everyone was in bands. But they all knew how to play instruments, and I didn't. So, I called up my girlfriends who didn't know how to play instruments either. And we started an all-girl conceptual art punk band.
>
> (Miller 2015: n.pag.)

Today, Wilson is renowned for the feminist conceptual art she began producing in the early 1970s, such as the *Posturing* series in which she documents her performance of a spectrum of different character studies to draw attention to the 'drag' of gender.[2] She founded DISBAND in 1978, two years after starting the NYC art space Franklin Furnace – in the downtown Tribeca (or 'Triangle below Canal Street') neighbourhood – which was dedicated to staging exhibitions and performance art, as well as showing and archiving artists' books.[3] DISBAND's core members were Wilson and fellow artists Granet, Donna Henes and Diane Torr, and writer Ingrid Sischy (Figure 2), and its earliest incarnations also occasionally included artists Kruger, Barbara Ess and Daile Kaplan.[4]

DISBAND's songs were performed mostly acapella, with elaborate and often comical choreography, occasionally with minimalist percussive accompaniment from props and costumes (including, memorably, a bra with cups made of hotel call bells). Lyrics might be playful or serious but revolved around political messages: songs like 'Every Day, Same Old Way' and 'Every Girl' share a mantra-like repetition of lyrics drawn from schoolyard chants and clapping games, whose words are meant to draw attention to the seemingly eternal cycles of women's oppression and demands, from childhood to old age.[5] Wilson's recollection of some of DISBAND's gigs and audiences reflects

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[1] For details regarding this obscure performance, see credits in the programme from 'THINGS I will regret/TEMPTATION to exit', 1976, Artists Space Archive: 1973–2009, Fales Library and Special Collections, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University.

[2] Wilson's performances in this vein have continued into the present and expanded into works where she revisits these staged photos of her youthful self in re-stagings with herself today, in elaborate and often comical meditations on feminist ageing.

[3] Franklin Furnace continues today as a non-profit archive and grant fund for performance artists, housed on the campus of the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. See http://franklinfurnace.org/index.php.

[4] Of DISBAND's various members, Ess would go on to form another all-woman band, Y-Pants, as well as play with the now-legendary, late guitarist Glenn Branca in the Static. Kaplan connected with another renowned guitarist Rhys Chatham, as part of The Gynecologists.

[5] DISBAND did not release any recordings of their music until 2009, when the publisher Primary Information released a limited run of it on CD. Discs can still be purchased from, and several videos of their performances viewed at Primary Information's website: http://www.primaryinformation.org/product/disband-3/.

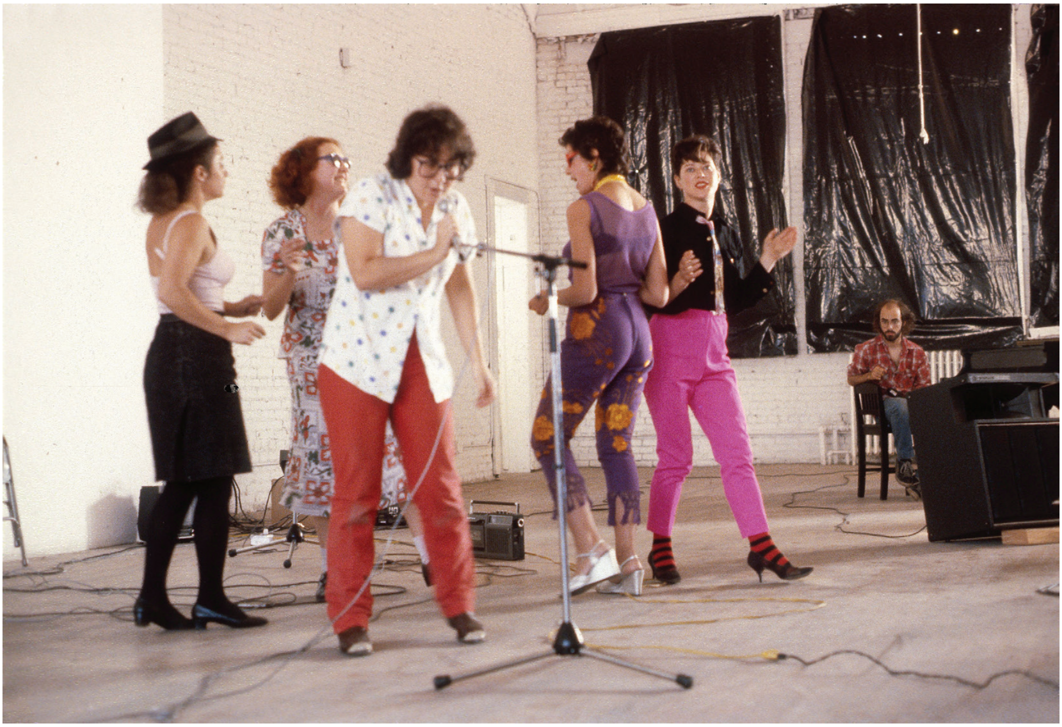

Figure 2: Sarah Jenkins (1979), DISBAND (left to right: Ilona Granet, Martha Wilson, Ingrid Sischy, Donna Henes, Diane Torr) performing at P.S.1. Photograph courtesy of DISBAND.

the breadth of the New York circuit groups like these played, ranging from nightclubs to museums:

> Tier 3 was friendly because it was attended by our friends. The Mudd Club was hostile because everyone was performing their own 'cool' – throwing cigarettes at us while we were onstage. P.S.1 was warm and welcoming of our weirdness. The Feminist Art Institute was fiercely feminist but questioning of our unorthodox props and 'songs'.
>
> (Wilson 2019: n.pag.)

Wilson's recollection of the overlapping creative communities of New York City in this era reflects both the fluidity of the downtown cultural scene and the number and accessibility of performance spaces at a moment when the city was teetering on bankruptcy and, as such, was inexpensive and open to suggestion. New York was in the throes of an economic crisis that began reverberating around the globe in the mid-1970s, exacerbated in Manhattan by middle-class flight to the suburbs. The situation led to cheap rents and abandoned spaces to squat in the city, especially in Lower Manhattan neighbourhoods below 14th Street to the East and South of the more established bohemian enclaves of Greenwich Village and SoHo.[6] In his account of how downtown New York coalesced into a culture of what he called *Art after Midnight* (in a book of the same name), writer Steven Hager additionally noted that the election of conservative Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980 had,

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[6] For an excellent, recent study of this moment in New York history, see Kim Phillips-Fein (2017).

> provoked an outbreak of doomsday fever [for artists] across the country. For those who felt the world situation was getting increasingly hopeless, throwing a party seemed like an appropriate response.
>
> (1986: 1)

Living cheek-by-jowl – and, as musician Judy Nylon recently put it, 'out of each others' pockets' (Boch 2017: 163) – creatives could both live and stage their 'parties' in abandoned warehouses, storefronts and social clubs, with art materials, costumes and props often literally picked from the bins of New York's garbage-strewn streets. The environment served as what performance scholar Lewis Church dubbed a 'countercultural interzone' that saw 'post-punk polymaths […] embracing multiple forms of artistic production in a concurrent and undifferentiated manner' (2019: 23, 25). Inspired by the twentieth century's original 'club kids' of the Dada movement who found each other in a similarly fraught era – draft-dodging during the First World War at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich – New York's downtown scene in the late 1970s was similarly a polyglot culture of creative autodidacts, and art school alums and dropouts: many, from the area's respected music, fine art and film programmes at institutions like New York University, Cooper Union, Hunter College, Pratt Institute, School of the Visual Arts, Columbia University and The New School.

Club 57's origins were in the appropriately Dada-inspired 1978 'New Wave Vaudeville' show that recent transplant and theatre graduate Ann Magnuson directed at the ballroom-turned Polish community centre, Irving Plaza. Manager and first-generation Polish immigrant Stanley Strychacki was amazed at the rag-tag revue's success: 'the punks were better behaved than anyone in America. We just didn't understand them' (Hager 1986: 27–28). Impressed by their moxie, Strychacki offered Magnuson a space he had founded in the basement of the Holy Cross Polish National Church at 57 St. Mark's Place in the East Village to continue organizing events. Meantime, in a Tribeca building owned by painter Ross Bleckner – who lived upstairs – eccentric entrepreneur Steve Mass was pulling together Mudd Club with the help of artists Anya Phillips and Diego Cortez. Both were organized as after-hours cabarets and hosted underground bands, performance art, film screenings, art exhibitions, fashion shows and literary readings. In-house DJs like Dany Johnson at 57 and Anita Sarko at Mudd kept the vibe jumping with famously eclectic playlists that ranged from R&B hits by Aretha Franklin to the Leeds post-punk-funk feminists Delta 5 and locals like the Bush Tetras.[7] Both venues also depended on a constantly revolving door of events to bring in bodies and both quickly came to rely on women's efforts to make them happen.

Magnuson took over the bulk of the scheduling at Club 57, and into the mid-1980s also organized events and performed at Mudd and the Pyramid Club, as well as Danceteria and Peppermint Lounge – the latter two commercially minded spinoffs of the former two, both financed by nightclub impresario Rudolf Piper. The practicality of these spaces to emerging artists made immediate sense to young women who lacked the education, clout or funds required to research and apply for institutional exhibitions and grants, especially for the kind of as-of-yet undefined crossover work they were making. Rather than going hat-in-hand to art spaces that did not understand their aggressive, often humorous and music-backed or -based performance, artists like Lydia Lunch, Karen Finley, Johanna Went and Julia Heyward learned the booking skills of the entertainment industry and played the clubs. So, too, did downtown feminist filmmakers like Vivienne Dick and Beth B. and

[7] Among the many delights of Tim Lawrence's magnificent chronicle of this moment in NYC nightlife history, *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor: 1980–83* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016) are playlists spun during this era by Johnson and Sarko, among others.

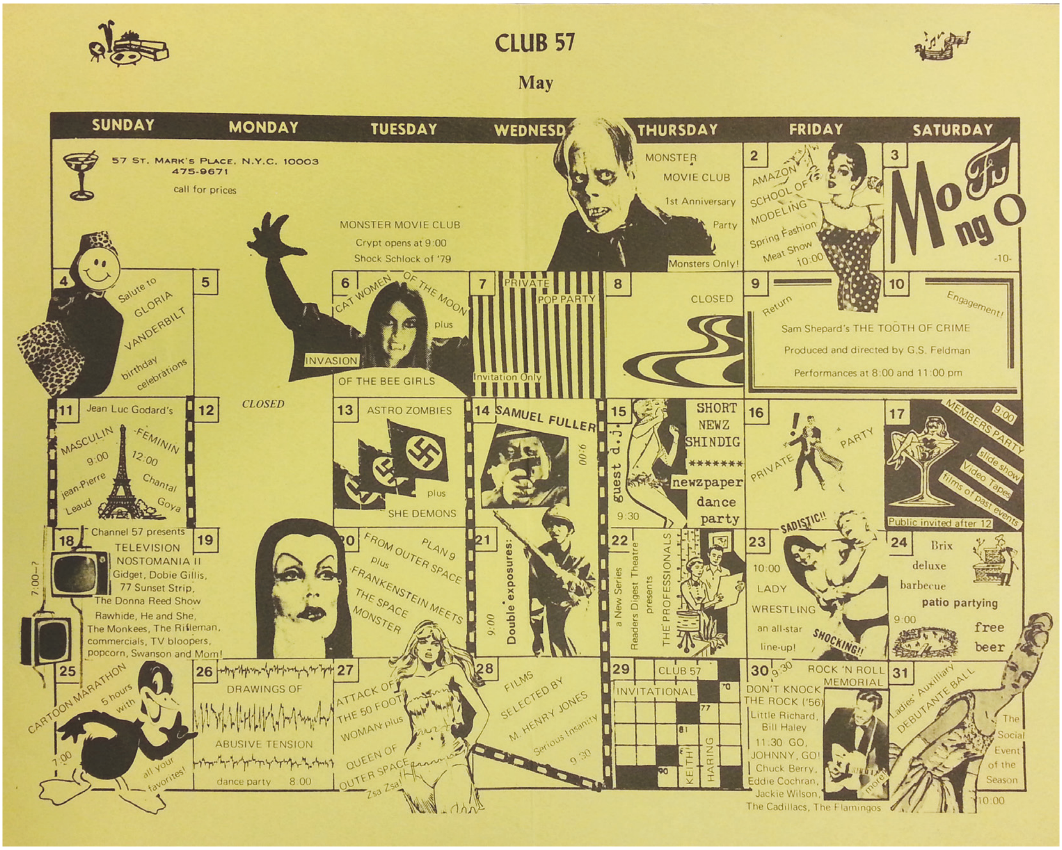
CLUB 57
May
SUNDAY
MONDAY
TUESDAY
WEDNESDAY
THURSDAY
FRIDAY
SATURDAY
57 St. Mark's Place, N.Y.C. 10003
475-9671
call for prices
MONSTER MOVIE CLUB
Crypt opens at 9:00
Shock Schlock of '79
MONSTER
MOVIE CLUB
1st Anniversary
Party
Monsters Only!
2
AMAZON SCHOOL OF MODELING
Spring Fashion
Meat Show
10:00
3
Mo Fu ngO
-10-
4
Salute to GLORIA VANDERBILT birthday celebrations
5
6
CAT WOMEN OF THE MOON
plus
INVASION OF THE BEE GIRLS
7
PRIVATE POP PARTY
Invitation Only
8
CLOSED
9
Return
10
Engagement!
Sam Shepard's THE TOOTH OF CRIME
Produced and directed by G.S. Feldman
Performances at 8:00 and 11:00 pm
11
Jean Luc Godard's
MASCULIN
FEMININ
9:00
12:00
Jean-Pierre Leaud
Chantal Goya
12
CLOSED
13
ASTRO ZOMBIES
plus
SHE DEMONS
14
SAMUEL FULLER
9:00
15
guest d.j.
9:30
SHORT NEWZ SHINDIG
****
newzpaper dance party
16
PRIVATE
PARTY
17
MEMBERS PARTY
9:00
slide show
Video Tapes
films of past events
Public invited after 12
18
Channel 57 presents
TELEVISION NOSTOMANIA II
Gidget, Dobie Gillis, 77 Sunset Strip, The Donna Reed Show
Rawhide, He and She, The Monkees, The Rifleman, commercials, TV bloopers, popcorn, Swanson and Mom!
7:00-?
19
20
FROM OUTER SPACE
PLAN 9
plus
FRANKENSTEIN MEETS THE SPACE MONSTER
21
Double exposures:
9:00
22
a New Series
Readers Digest Theatre
presents
THE PROFESSIONALS
23
SADISTIC!!
10:00
LADY WRESTLING
an all-star line-up!
SHOCKING!!
24
Brix
deluxe
barbecue
patio partying
9:00
free
beer
25
CARTOON MARATHON
5 hours
with
all your favorites!
7:00
26
DRAWINGS OF
ABUSIVE TENSION
dance party 8:00
27
ATTACK OF THE 50 FOOT WOMAN plus
QUEEN OF OUTER SPACE
Zsa Zsa!
28
FILMS
SELECTED BY
M. HENRY JONES
Serious Insanity
9:30
29
CLUB 57
INVITATIONAL
'70
77
81
90
KEITH
HARING
30
9:30
ROCK 'N ROLL MEMORIAL
DON'T KNOCK THE ROCK ('56)
Little Richard, Bill Haley
11:30 GO, JOHNNY, GO!
Chuck Berry, Eddie Cochran, Jackie Wilson, The Cadillacs, The Flamingos
more!
31
Ladies' Auxiliary DEBUTANTE BALL
The Social Event of the Season
10:00

Figure 3: Ann Magnuson (1980), Club 57 events calendar, *May. Copyright Ann Magnuson, courtesy of the artist.*

photographer Nan Goldin bypass cinemas and galleries, showing their films and slide shows at 57 and Mudd. At Danceteria, Rudolf Piper invited feminist video artists Emily Armstrong and Pat Ivers to design and curate the club's 'Video Lounge' on the reputation of their years of documenting the punk and post-punk bands who performed on the city's stages, which they broadcast as part of their public-access television show *Nightclubbing* on Manhattan cable's Channel 10. Besides live-broadcasting Danceteria's performances into the Video Lounge, Armstrong and Ivers also recorded them, which further added to their unique archive of music and performance-art history.[8] As Magnuson recently lamented, matter-of-factly:

> The amount of money you needed to spend on materials for grants – it was easier to call Rudolf […] easier to get booked in, and immediate money. We were usually paid in cash, and under-the-table […] [the clubs] had lots of cash they needed to launder.
>
> (Magnuson 2018)

Filmmaker Vivienne Dick concurred, putting it even more succinctly: whereas the galleries, museums and cinemas had layers of gatekeepers, 'we didn't have to fight really, really hard' to show the work in clubs (Dick 2017). And these women had ideas to spare.

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8. While a theft at Danceteria led to the loss of several of that club's documented performances, Armstrong and Ivers' *GoNightclubbing* archive has been acquired and digitized by the Fales Library and Special Collections, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University. Since 2000, the pair has been screening selections from their archive at institutions and events around the globe.

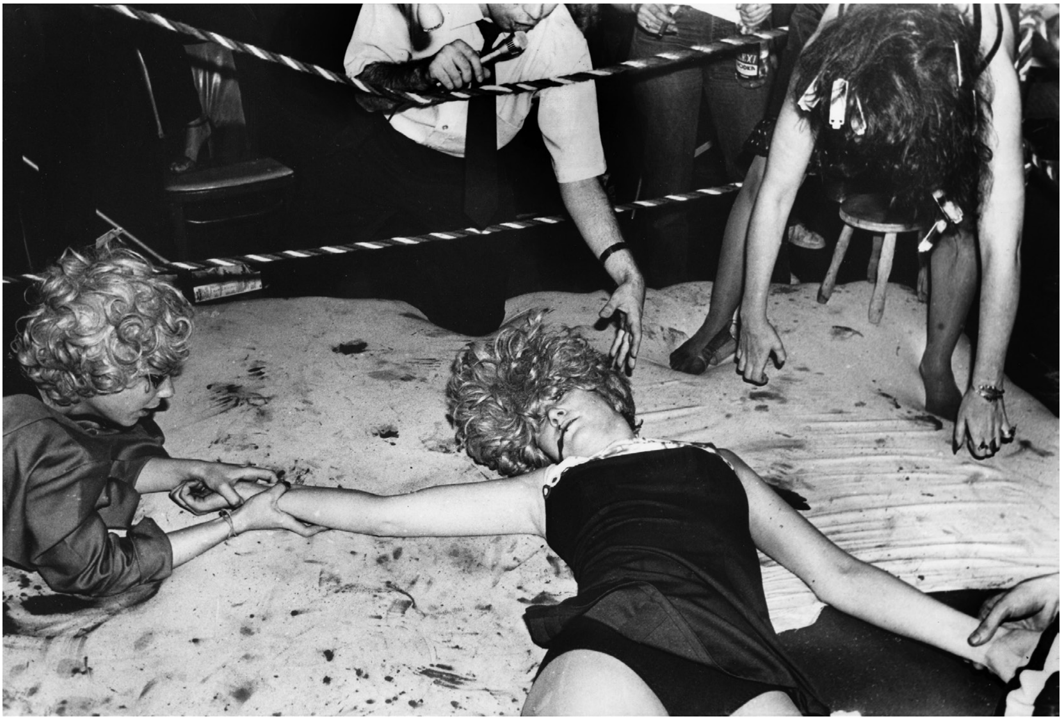

Figure 4: Harvey Wang (1980), Lady Wrestling Night at Club 57*. Courtesy of the artist.*

A look at the cut-and-paste monthly events calendars Magnuson created and distributed to promote Club 57 are evidence of the abundant energy and creativity that drove the downtown scene (Figure 3): six to seven nights a week, she was overseeing a combination of regularly scheduled events organized by club 'members' – like 'Monster Movie Club' screenings, 'Dada Disco' and 'Acts of Live Art' – as well as wildly varied, theme-based events rooted in the kitsch, retro-favoured inspiration for which the club became renowned. Magnuson's theme nights pulled together performers and audiences into happenings where the line between the two was generally blurred. As she put it in an *East Village Eye* interview in 1983: 'I would create a set, a soundtrack, and a framework for people to come in and be their own characters' (Heiberg 1983: 9). There was a clear feminist undercurrent to most of Magnuson's theme nights, as she and her girlfriends were usually the featured players in absurdist recreations and take-downs of their reflections in pop culture. The 'Live Lady Wrestling' events drew on the prurient appeal of women's wrestling, which the performers mocked with over-the-top caricatures that stressed cartoonish costumes, characters and violence rather than sex: comedian Tessie Chua wrestled in a full-sized insect costume as The Cockroach Woman; the Bush Tetras' frontwoman, Cleveland Art Institute dropout Cynthia Sley, 'slays *everybody* with not 1, not 2, but *3* managers' (including fellow bandmate Dee Pop); entrepreneurial sisters Tish and Snooky Bellomo of the nearby St. Mark's boutique (and future punk hair-dye empire) Manic Panic raged as sadistic nuns or bored housewives in robes and curlers; and videos and photos of Magnuson in the ring show fright wigs, ripped hosiery and fake blood employed to hilarious effect (Figure 4). Night at the Opry found regulars dressed in theatrical country-and-western ensembles – many, original creations by 57 habitué and fashion designer 'Katy K.' Kattleman (whom Hager referred to as 'a New Wave Dolly Parton' [1986: 81]) – performing numbers in imitation of the hillbilly glamour girls of the Nashville institution, The Grand Ole Opry broadcast.

The *Playboy Bunny Club Party* – which she restaged later at Mudd Club – featured Magnuson as the frontwoman for lounge act Barbie and the Heftones, whose 'cocktail magic' songs set the stage for 'the talk of the town – the beautiful 57 Bunnies' (Magliozzi and Cavoulacos 2017: 167).[9] Apparently, the idea for this event had been hatched while Magnuson was studying theatre in London and on a lark had (unsuccessfully) auditioned for a job at the city's Playboy Club with fellow American (future '57 Bunny' and singer in Disturbed Furniture) Alexa Hunter. On the one hand, Magnuson recognized how her generation had internalized the 'Playboy Bunny' ideal growing up as young women in its shadow; on the other, like so much pop culture satirized at 57, she wanted to exorcize it from her psyche. Magnuson had recently read Linda Lovelace's 1980 autobiography *Ordeal* and was disgusted by her account of Hefner who – then as now – was so often credited with 'liberating' American sexuality, yet had allegedly tried to coerce an unconsenting Lovelace into bestiality: 'This is what misogyny is', Magnuson realized of this charming icon of the sexual revolution (Magnuson 2018).[10] The performances were modelled after the louche jazz combos that featured in Hugh Hefner's TV variety shows *Playboy's Penthouse* and *Playboy After Dark*, in which 'bunnies' and 'playmates' circulated among the musicians and (generally b-list) celebrity guests. The '57 Bunnies' version, however, found increasingly inebriated lounge singer Magnuson's cool slipping as the evening went on, while the 'bunnies' similarly devolved into increasingly absurd behaviour and costumes. In one document of the evening by photographer Harvey Wang (Figure 1), the bunnies parade across the stage (breaking character and laughing uproariously) in ridiculous headdresses that simultaneously imitate downtown New York landmarks, and the famously ridiculous 1931 photo of NYC architects dressed up as their own buildings (at the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects Ball [Figure 5]), while Magnuson as 'Barbie' at the mic wails with abandon. In retrospect, Magnuson reads these actions as not merely parodic and cathartic, but 'shamanic' and – taking advantage of a Jungian/Hefnerian *double entendre* – a way to 'take on the pelt of the animal' to gain power over it in performance (Magnuson 2020).

The club also frequently sponsored 'Women's Only' theme events for socializing and fundraising benefits, including those organized by the lesbian feminist Women's One World (W.O.W.) theatre troupe, whose members included DISBAND member Diane Torr as well as now-renowned performance art pioneers such as Carmelita Tropicana and Holly Hughes. In their efforts to accrue funds to purchase their own theatre in the East Village, the W.O.W. collective organized their own theme nights in the vein of those 57 was known for, such as a 'Freudian Slip Psychotic Underwear Bash' (with a lingerie contest) and a Second World War-themed 'Party to End All Wars'.[11] W.O.W. often also teased out the queer subtexts of many Club 57 themes, as was evidenced in their events like the 'Surgical Drag Ball' and the Debutante-themed 'Coming Out Ball' that played on the double meaning of this seemingly proper cotillion term, advertised in flyers that utilized the same Dada-inspired, cut-and-paste graphics for which Club 57 was known (Figure 6). Considering both the queer and feminist members on whom the club's

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[9] All quotes for these events derived from the amazing 'Club 57 Chronology' index compiled from the club's calendars, flyers and press releases for the Museum of Modern Art's catalogue for *Club 57: Film, Performance, and Art in the East Village, 1978–1983* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2017): 160–77.

[10] Magnuson also mentions *Ordeal* and how Lovelace's traumatic relationship with Hefner moved her in Tony Heisberg, 'Ann Magnuson', *East Village Eye* (August 1983): 8–9.

[11] For a brief history of the theatre, see Solomon (1996: 42–51).

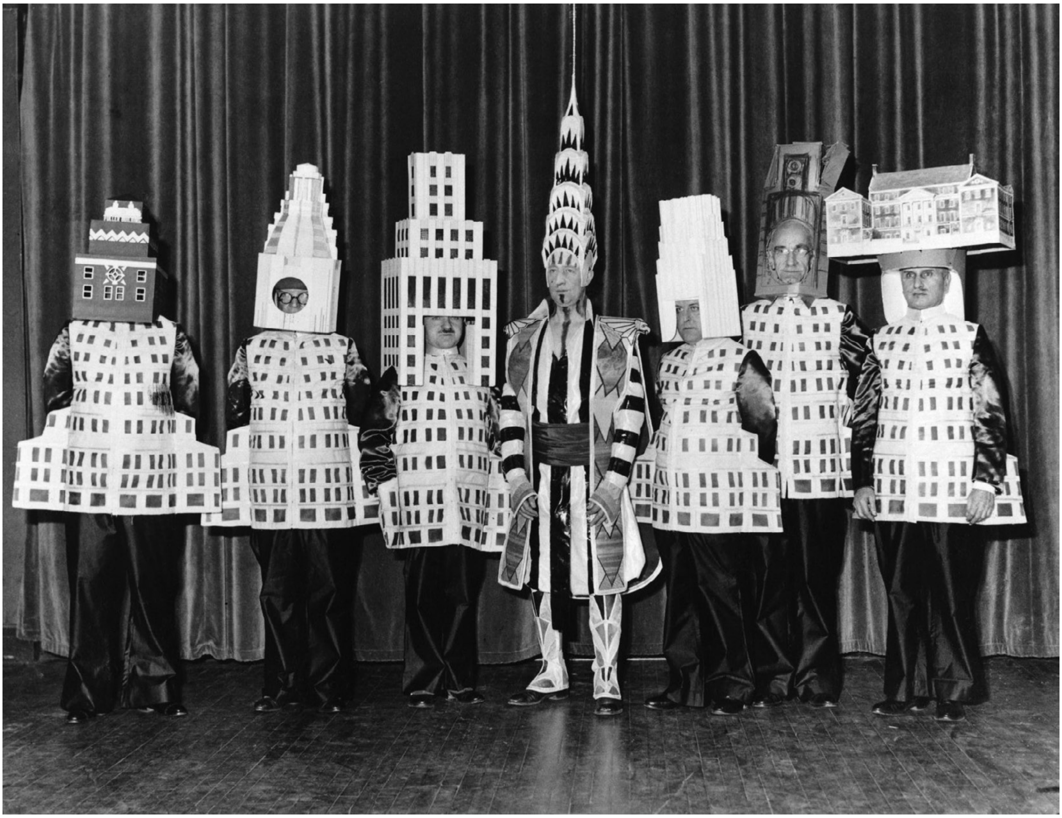

Figure 5: The Society of Beaux-Arts Architects (1931), grand ball at the Hotel Astor in New York City, 13 January.

foundations had been built, these sister organizations shared many political and aesthetic affinities.

Such affinities themselves occasionally inspired and spun off into other projects that found their way into 57, such as the club's premiere of Vivienne Dick's 1978 short film *Guérillère Talks* (1978). Today, the film is often held up as exemplary of the downtown scene's No Wave filmmaking style: lo-fi, deadpan and starring renowned denizens of the art and music scene essentially playing themselves, most recognizable today in the films of Dick's contemporaries Jim Jarmusch, Beth and Scott B., and James Nares. But, as the title of *Guérillère Talks* suggests, Dick's film was born of a particularly feminist origin: Monique Wittig's 1969 novel *Les Guérillères*, whose tribe of man-killing women had inspired Dick and a group of like-minded friends to form an all-women salon of the same name.[12] Their conversations would inspire Dick to create the film – in an appropriately *guerilla* style – which strung together unedited, 3½-minute-long Super-8 portraits of individual women from this circle in sometimes-mundane, sometimes-stylized set-ups of each woman's choosing, in and around their own downtown studios and living spaces. The director herself opens the film, playing pinball with her back to the camera; Bush Tetras guitarist Pat Place reads aloud from letters in bed into a full-sized microphone taped to her arm and plays with a plastic water gun within a sparse, cramped

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[12] Vivienne Dick recalled the group's make-up and activities in an e-mail interview with the author (13 June 2019). *Guérillère* Claire Pajaczkowska also describes their salon in an interview with the *East Village Eye* (Thanksgiving 1979: 19).

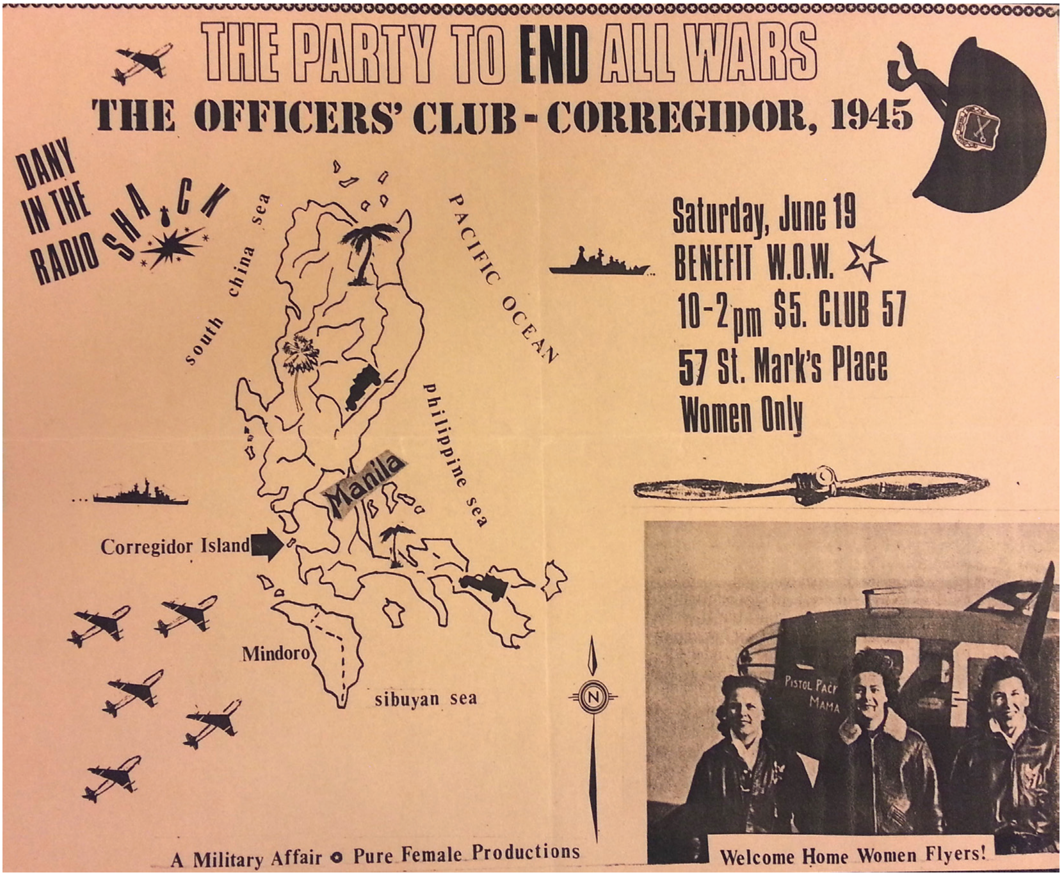
THE PARTY TO END ALL WARS
THE OFFICERS' CLUB - CORREGIDOR, 1945
DANY IN THE RADIO SHACK
Saturday, June 19
BENEFIT W.O.W.
10-2pm $5. CLUB 57
57 St. Mark's Place
Women Only
south china sea
PACIFIC OCEAN
philippine sea
Manila
Corregidor Island
Mindoro
sibuyan sea
N
PISTOL PACKIN MAMA
A Military Affair • Pure Female Productions
Welcome Home Women Flyers!

Figure 6: Flyer for W.O.W. 'Party to End All Wars' event, c.1982. Fales Archive.

apartment; photographer Beate Nilsen rants stream-of-consciousness about her creative fantasies; percussionist Ikue Mori leaps around a rooftop with a camera, quietly muttering in Japanese; musician Adele Bertei plays guitar with Ut's Nina Canal, lights sparklers and watches TV from a dark loft apartment (Figure 7); a very young Lydia Lunch delivers a monologue in the guise of a sad kid lamenting the lack of playgrounds from a bombed-out lot, leaning on a fire escape; and the film concludes with Mudd Club co-founder Anya Phillips smoking languidly to the sounds of 1960s garage pop, in 'warpaint' make-up and what appears to be a spandex ensemble of the type she designed for fellow scenesters like Debbie Harry and writer Terence Sellers. The resulting collage of downtown-scene womanhood captures then-recent Irish transplant Dick's astonishment at the unique feminist community she had stumbled into in New York City:

> I'd never seen anything like it. They were very androgynous, and to see women who looked like that and have that kind of energy […] they were completely self-sufficient [and] weren't running around looking for husbands.
>
> (Dick 2017: n.pag.)

Figure 7: Adele Bertei and Nina Canal in Vivienne Dick's Guérillère Talks, *1978.*

And, unlike the male-dominated and 'heavy' experimental film scenes at East Village institutions like Millennium Film Workshop or Anthology Film Archives, Club 57 was willing to show feminist films that 'took film making lightly; it was fun' (MacDonald 1982: 84–85).

So prominent and tight-knit were the various feminist circles at Club 57 that Magnuson corralled them into a women's-only club-within-the-club, The Ladies' Auxiliary of the Lower East Side, which organized slumber parties (with 'Go-Go Boys' that included artists Kenny Scharf and John Sex), a team on Lady Wrestling nights and special exhibitions of members' artwork. Entertainment included hash brownies, rounds of board games and pillow fights (Figure 8), and direct-sales pitches by unwitting Mary Kay Cosmetics salespeople brought in to their meetings, whose 'minutes' survive as hilariously formal documents in Magnuson's archive, written in a prim secretarial style. The Ladies' Auxiliary also sponsored faux-proper galas like the Stay-Free Mini Prom (a riff on the menstrual napkins Stayfree Mini-Pads, whose cringeworthy, earnest ads in the 1970s were precisely the sort spoofed in the club's performances) and a Debutante Ball.[13] The women's delight in simultaneously sending up and embracing these coming-of-age clichés of American adolescence was evident in photos of the events' staged 'date photos' and 'debuts', where they pose in dazzling vintage formalwear, roaring with laughter and embracing.

Magnuson called the group 'a punk rock version of Junior League, where we took all of these '50s and early '60s concepts of what femininity was, and womanhood, and turned it inside out' (*Red Bull Music Academy Daily* 2017), poking fun at those lingering '*Mad-Men* man's world' attitudes of the era's neoconservatism – which cloaked its squareness in the Reagan era with the slick, *Dress for Success* veneer that Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho* would so scathingly summarize a decade later. However, Magnuson's recollections suggest that there was also a kind of sweetness, and even nostalgia to these events that often seemed slightly compensatory 'for all of us who skipped our prom, because […] we were not the jocks and the cheerleaders' (*Red Bull Music Academy Daily* 2017). Chinese-born photographer Tseng Kwong Chi, who exhibited and documented the scene at Club 57, also saw the duality in these events Magnuson organized:

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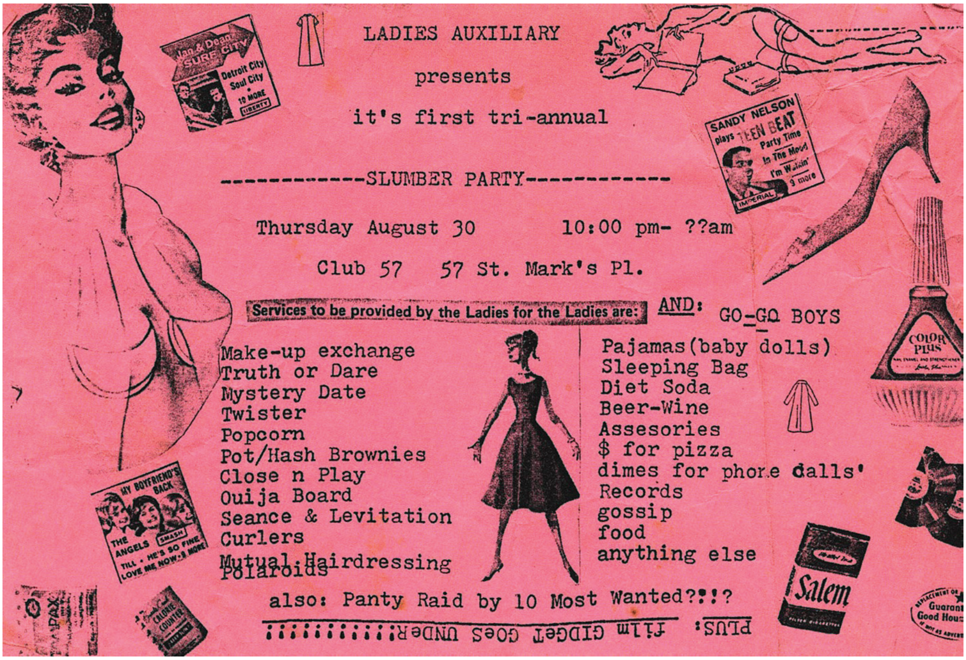
[13] The Ladies' Auxiliary 'minutes' in Ann Magnuson's archives document these events in the hilariously prim language of the 'ladies' auxiliaries' the group spoofed. Steven Hager also recounts many of these events in *Art after Midnight: The East Village* (1986: 70).

> I got the impression every time Ann did a performance it was like a purge for her. She seemed to be pouring out all these things from her childhood. In the early days it was like they were spilling their guts […] an organic transformation of people into living theater. They were expanding their boundaries, altering and pushing them around by creating fantasy environments. They were also the dearest, sweetest, most decent people I'd ever met. It was almost like they were good Americans in the classic sense.
>
> (Hager 1986: 81–82)

When the Ladies' Auxiliary was pressed into service by Magnuson as a bacchanalian percussion act for her April 1981 *Rites of Spring* event, the group evolved into the fully fledged band Pulsallama – which ranged between six and thirteen members at any given performance. 'It was really an anti-band, a parody of groups like Bow Wow Wow', says Magnuson. 'We'd take mushrooms, run around screaming like banshees, and beat on pots and pans' (Hager 1986: 120). (Or, as summarized more comically by Cynthia Sley: thirteen women 'fighting over a cowbell' [Strychacki 2012: 62].) Besides Magnuson, Ladies' Auxiliary regulars Dany Johnson and Katy K., Jean Caffeine, Kim Davis, Staceyjoy Elkin, Diana Lillig, Lori Montana, April Palmieri, Charlotte Slivka, Judy Streng, Min Thometz, and Andé Whyland, and Wendy Wild were at


LADIES AUXILIARY

presents

it's first tri-annual

------------SLUMBER PARTY------------

Thursday August 30 10:00 pm- ??am

Club 57 57 St. Mark's Pl.

Services to be provided by the Ladies for the Ladies are: AND: GO-GO BOYS

Make-up exchange
Truth or Dare
Mystery Date
Twister
Popcorn
Pot/Hash Brownies
Close n Play
Ouija Board
Seance & Levitation
Curlers
Mutual Hairdressing
Polaroids

Pajamas(baby dolls)
Sleeping Bag
Diet Soda
Beer-Wine
Assesories
$ for pizza
dimes for phone calls'
Records
gossip
food
anything else

also: Panty Raid by 10 Most Wanted?!!?

PLUS: film GIDGET GOES UNDER!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Figure 8: Ann Magnuson, flyer for Ladies Auxiliary Slumber Party, *August 1979. Copyright Ann Magnuson, courtesy of the artist.*

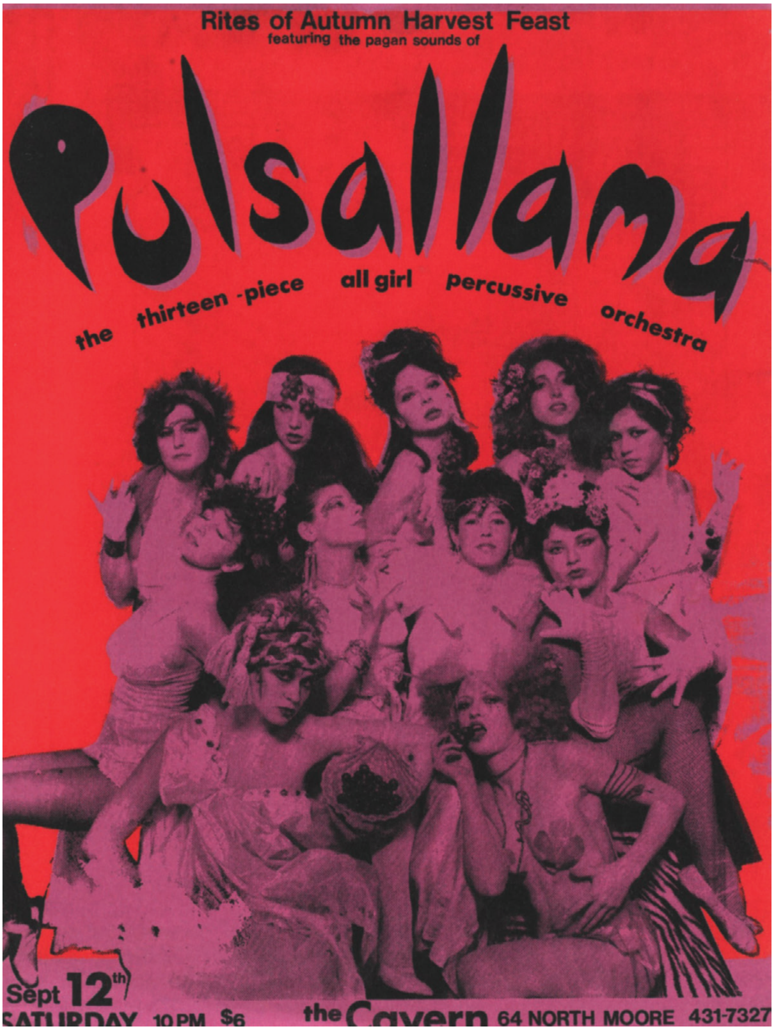

Rites of Autumn Harvest Feast
featuring the pagan sounds of
Pulsallama
the thirteen-piece all girl percussive orchestra
Sept 12th
SATURDAY 10 PM $6
the Cavern 64 NORTH MOORE 431-7327

Figure 9: Poster for Pulsallama performance, 1981.

various times part of group. Posters designed to promote the bands' earliest performances show the original group in 'goddess' gear – dripping with plastic flowers and grape bunches – reflective of the its initial, faux-Diaghilev purpose (Figure 9). Within months, the group had whittled down to a core seven members who replaced the sparkly togas for their more typical, Ladies' Auxiliary-style vintage prom dresses and began their own trajectory as a singles band, recording girl-centric novelties like 'Pulsallama On the Rag' and 'The Devil Lives in My Husband's Body'. In the music video for the latter, band members all play versions of the suburban mid-century feminine stereotypes – harried housewives, mod neighbours, witchy glamour girls, snotty teens – that originated in Club 57's theme nights, all responding to said 'husband's' demonic possession. Like the Ladies' Auxiliary performances, the song and video turn inside-out the patriarchal, *Father Knows Best* ideal of their childhoods by both lampooning the post-war father figure as evil and turning the lens on the much more interesting and varied women who existed in the margins of that culture. While their recordings for London's Y Records never came close to charting, at their apex, the group opened for the Clash on their 1982 tour in support of the *Combat Rock* album – where, like many of that band's choices of women musicians and musicians of colour as openers, they were widely reported to have been booed off the stage.[14]

Clash fans were not the only ones sceptical of either the varied skill-sets or overt feminist messaging of these 'post-performance' projects. Returning to Wilson's account of DISBAND's adventures on the circuit, it is notable that she remembers that 'the Feminist Art Institute was fiercely feminist but questioning of our unorthodox props and "songs"' (Wilson 2019). In this detail, Wilson addresses yet another dimension of the downtown scene's appeal to young feminists: the fact of their 'doing feminism' differently than their predecessors, which often led to friction with other feminist artists. This wave of what artist and writer Mira Schor has called feminism's 'Generation 2.5' – born after 1945, but before 1960 – was old enough to have grown up with second-wave feminism and embrace its politics but was young enough to critique its shortcomings in ways that cleared the path for feminism's third wave, which crested towards the end of the millennium (Schor 2009). DISBAND's girlish, playground-chant songs and pointedly puerile props (which sometimes dovetailed in ditties like 'Look at My Dick') no doubt rubbed the older guard at the Feminist Art Institute the wrong way.

Yet, as Vivienne Dick recalls, while many punks looked askance at feminism as an old-guard, hippie hangover, and many feminists were suspicious of punk's S&M looks and androgyny, 'the women I knew definitely were feminist. No problem at all' (Dick 2019). Dick credits her friend and fellow *Guérillère*, filmmaker and scholar Claire Pajaczkowska with connecting their group to New York's Heresies Collective, whose membership and long-running journal set the bar for America's feminist-art discourse. Founders included renowned artists and writers to emerge from the Women's Liberation Movement, such as Miriam Schapiro, Harmony Hammond, Joyce Kozloff and Lucy Lippard. But *Guérillère* Nan Goldin, whose autobiographical, photographic slide show *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*[15] was one of the first visual art projects from the downtown scene to break into the uptown art world, recalled their efforts to tap into the established feminist-art scene as fraught. The early 1980s were the height of the so-called feminist 'Sex Wars', which often pitted groups like Women against Pornography against the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce in their different perspectives on women's sexualized performances and imagery, and at its start, *Heresies* tended to toe an anti-porn line.[16] Recalling a typical conflict, Goldin said:

> Me and my roommate used to wear a lot of leather; I know some of the feminists I met through Vivienne Dick, and who published that magazine *Heresies*, disapproved of that. But there were others who saw that the way we dressed was actually a feminist act, because it was flaunting our sexuality but saying that it didn't belong to men – claiming it as our own.
>
> (Holert 2003: 233)

One could say they similarly 'claimed' the club scene when more established feminist groups and venues did not understand their work – an experience that clearly gave many of these women the confidence to carry on their activist

[14] After their break-up, several would go on to form the punk-polka band Das Furlines. More recently, these singles and several other, unreleased recordings have been compiled into an eponymous full-length album by Modern Harmonic records: http://www.modernharmonic.com/pulsallama-pulsallama-pink-vinyl-lp.aspx.

[15] *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* was itself a kind of multi-media rock performance, accompanied by a mixtape of pop songs, which debuted at Mudd Club (during, of all things, Frank Zappa's birthday party).

[16] I summarize this moment in the context of the art world's intergenerational feminist tensions in Chapters 7 and 8 of my book *Pin-up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (2006).

sensibilities into the myriad platforms and projects they have continued in the decades since. For example, Magnuson, whose club friends Tseng, Moufarrege, Klaus Nomi, Keith Haring and David Wojnarowicz were among the community's first high-profile victims of the AIDS crisis, and whose brother Bobby would also die from the disease, shifted the activist sensibility of her performances accordingly. In the mid-1980s, she put together 'The 5700 Club' and 'the Moral Majority singers' for performances that mocked the hostility and hypocrisy of the decade's Christian Right towards the epidemic, a theme she continued in her 1987 mass-audience breakthrough, the Showtime comedy special *Vandemonium* – anticipating the relevance of cable and streaming television as a site of creative protest art in the twenty-first century. Vivienne Dick continues to create experimental films, but training her feminist lens on the gender dynamics of climate change in films like *Augenblick* (2017) and *Red Moon Rising* (2015). Club 57 DJ and Pulsallama percussionist Dany Johnson co-founded New York's *Fogo Azul*, an all-woman drum line that performs at Women's March, Pride and Anti-Trump rallies around the globe. And, as Goldin's profile as a photographer rose in the 1980s, she too confronted the AIDS crisis in her work as both an artist and a curator. But, most recently, she has directed her attention to the pharmaceutical industry: specifically, and from her position as a recently rehabilitated OxyContin addict, in high-profile, public performances that draw attention to the art-world philanthropy of the Sackler family, which has both bought them the goodwill of a generation of institutions, and muted the role of Purdue Pharma in the unethical promotion of the drug that led to the current opioid crisis in the United States. Her activism has directly affected ongoing institutional debates that have led not only to the removal of the Sackler name from museums around the world but also broader conversations about ethics in arts funding.[17]

Feminist art in the club scenes of the punk era deserves historicizing – and not just because of how punk their ongoing activism often is. In our enthusiasm for an emergent, popular feminism in America that reaches *Beyoncéan* heights, we owe it to these predecessors not only to re-establish them as pioneers in the broader 'post-performance' culture that they helped shape but (returning to Douglas Davis) to also recognize the paths they cleared for feminism 'to dance across a nightclub floor' today.

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[17] For a recent feature on and interview with Goldin regarding this new body of work and activist focus, see Thorpe (2019).

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