

Title Room 829
Publication August Woman
Date September 2012



Peepholes are an important feature of the Chelsea Hotel



Room 829

Photographer Julia Calfee lived in the iconic Chelsea Hotel in Manhattan between 2003 and 2008 to document the secret lives that thrived within its hallowed walls. The designated landmark building was sold in 2011 and its fate remains uncertain

AS TOLD TO XU C'I'EN PHOTOS JULIA CALFEE • ALESSANDRO FRIGERIO

This photo is very representative of the Chelsea Hotel. It's slightly bizarre and makes you wonder: what is she doing? I shot this in a lavish apartment on the highest floor of the hotel. A British stripclub owner named Norman lived there and every month he would invite people to his apartment. But to be invited you had to make a contribution. You could tell a story or read one of your latest poems and that was the only way you could attend his salon. It was a tradition, because the Chelsea Hotel was opened at the end of the 19th Century where they had these salons all over Europe that are still ongoing today.

Chelsea Hotel is unique because they made it very accessible to artists and many stayed in the hotel for years, some up to 35 years. Often, they didn't have to pay any rent, because the owner, Stanley Bard, had a kind of third eye. He had a knack for recognising who would become famous before they became famous. Leonard Cohen was one of them, as was Bob Dylan. Stanley Kubrick wrote *2001: A Space Odyssey* when he lived in the hotel. A more recent artist is Christo, and as he said so himself, most of these artists could not have come to live in the US and stayed if it had not been for the Chelsea Hotel. That's how important it was.

I lived on the eighth floor in room 829. It was a corner room; on one side I could see the Empire State Building and on the other, the Hudson River. What I liked about it is that it had a working fireplace and very high ceilings. Thomas Wolfe once lived in it and he wrote a very famous novel called *You Can't Go Home Again*, which I thought was appropriate. The hotel had no restrictions on how you decorated your room. Many residents also took over the hallways with their possessions and it meant that the hotel was covered in art – paintings, photographs, poetry. It was a living museum.

The people who lived in the Chelsea Hotel rarely changed. Because it was a privilege to live there

and no one wanted to leave. Rich people were refused all the time because money alone couldn't get you a room. You still had to get past Stanley and he wanted to fill the hotel with people whom he considered interesting. Rent varied widely and there were no set rules as to how an apartment was priced. Some residents didn't pay any rent, some paid \$400 a month and there were also well-known artists who paid \$12,000 a month for a top-floor six-room apartment. But you didn't need to provide any sort of credit or guarantee. If Stanley said you were in, you were in.

"To Julia – not only a wonderful artist, but a person with a soul"

A note from Stanley Bard, ex-owner of Chelsea Hotel, to Julia Calfee

I lived in the hotel for four years and in the course of living there shot 9,000 photographs. I didn't just walk in and start clicking, because the protection of people's privacy was stronger than anything else. These are very intimate photographs and it required the full support of Stanley.

I can't describe the atmosphere of the hotel as decadent or hedonistic, which some might think, because I saw it from the inside. For example, there was a florist who turned to dealing meth. He eventually got busted by the police. He wasn't a bad person and was probably trying to make ends meet. It's one of the sad stories and it gives you a different perspective on humanity and that's what I was trying to achieve with the photographs.

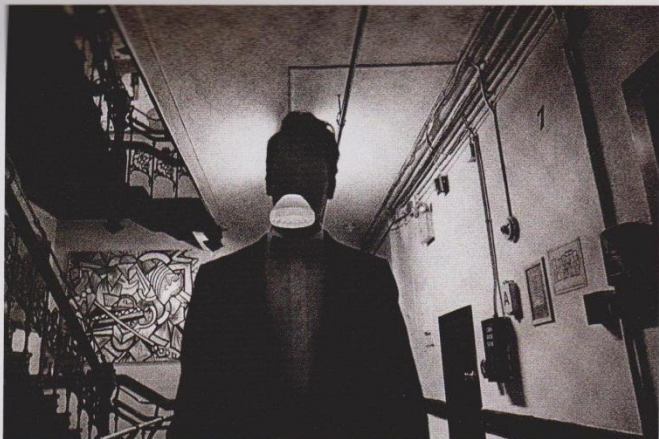
No one knew that the hotel would be sold, because all of us thought that it was a protective shield, and that no one could ever touch us. It was a complete shock when it happened. Many of



the artists had to leave very quickly because they owed back rent and half the artists were lost on the street.

Chelsea Hotel was a nurturing place where artists could be potential creators and eventually full-blown artists. It can't ever be duplicated, as its history can't be duplicated. All my work has an underlying motif, which isn't deliberate and that is, when I came to the Chelsea Hotel I had a feeling that all these people were living on the edge of something and that somehow it would eventually disappear, even though I didn't know how quickly or how strongly so. ☺

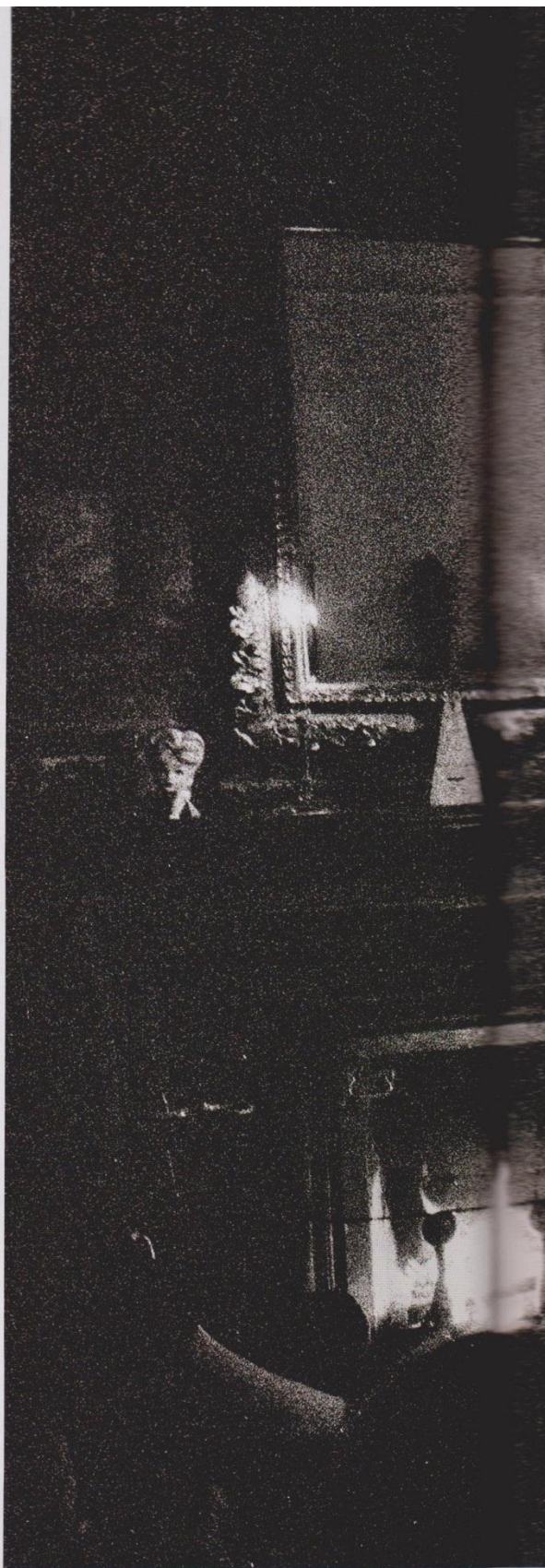
Selected photographs from Julie Calfee's book, *Inside The Chelsea Hotel*, will be exhibited at Art Plural Gallery, 38 Armenian Street, from 12 September to 12 October



Top left: Olivier is an actor. We decided to do this shoot late at night. The atmosphere was spooky and the strange vibes directed and transformed the images into something which neither Olivier nor I would ever have expected

Bottom left: Bobby's owner and *raison d'être* was a 21st Century Dorian Gray. He was brilliant, oversensitive, seductive, poetic, with artistic impulses running through every pore of his body. I was never sure how all this worked for him financially, nor did I really care. After all, this is the Chelsea Hotel

Right: Word has it that the architecture of the Chelsea Hotel, which was far ahead of its time in 1884 when it was built and can still hold its own down to the present day, exudes such a compelling aura as to remorph the characters of the people living within its walls



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