

PARTY ON THE BALCONY
Parties in the Chelsea Hotel have been notorious since 1884, when the original building was finished. This particular party was on the fifth floor in the apartment of a great art collector and publisher. From the balcony of his apartment, one could see not only the hotel signboard, but also 23rd Street, the Empire State Building, and most importantly, beyond."

art

THE WAY WE WERE

Jack Kerouac called it home in the '50s. So did Bob Dylan in the '60s and Madonna in the '80s. When New York's famous Chelsea Hotel shut its doors last year, photographer Julia Calfee became the last and only artist to document its residents and historic rooms. She walks Patricia Lee through *Inside The Chelsea Hotel*, her exhibition at Art Plural Gallery this month.

Old and crumbling, the 19th-century red brick block on West 23rd Street looks unremarkable. Yet, as much as bricks and mortar make a building, inhabitants, and in the case of Chelsea Hotel, some of the most colourful and greatest artists in history, were what really brought its walls to life.

Homeless and penniless, Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe sought shelter in room 204 during their adolescent days. Sid Vicious infamously stabbed his girlfriend to death in a drugged stupor in room 100. Edie Sedgwick set room 442 on fire while gluing on her false eyelashes before a night out. And Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin are among the songwriters who penned and played some of their most memorable hits in its lobby.

American photographer Julia Calfee stumbled into her most personal project to date by destiny. "I did not choose the Chelsea Hotel; it chose me," she says. "I was in New York for book signings and needed reasonably priced accommodation. I had no real idea of the importance of Chelsea Hotel, that it welcomed artists who had nowhere else to go by offering them free rooms. I know of no other place where you did not have to pay rent for months or even years, and still have people to talk to and encourage you. I mean, that's why people like Bob Dylan became Bob Dylan. I had no intention of living there, but I was drawn in because the situation was so out of the ordinary. I felt it needed to be documented in some serious way."

Former owner and hotel manager Stanley Bard gave Calfee complete artistic reign. She lived in the hotel from 2003 to 2008, taking over 10,000 images of its residents and infamous hallways lined with artworks (unable to make up the rent, many residents, including Robert Mapplethorpe, paid with personal works). "The most important thing about the images is that the people were not posing for me. They were simply going on with their lives and I happened to be there at the time. For them, I was just another artist living there."

Even more legendary than the stories of its notable residents is the hotel's ability to inspire creativity. "Most of the time, nothing really works well, but when the juices run dry, this is the place where artists can come and through some mysterious manner, have their powers of writing, music or painting rekindled."

For Calfee, the intimate atmosphere and close-knit artistic community flamed her work. "We all lived very close to one another and it was not necessary to pretend. You didn't need to profess to be happy, or say everything was going well, if in fact, things were not. It really opened up my work and made it very non-judgemental about other people. That was the most significant change. It was also the first and only time in my life that I was in a working context 24 hours every day. There was no shutting my door and saying that the day was over. Often, my phone would ring late at night and someone would say: 'Why don't you come over to my room to chat and do some shooting?' And I felt it was my responsibility to go."

In 2007, the board of directors ousted Bard as hotel manager and Chelsea Hotel was sold to real estate developer Joseph Chetrit for US\$80 million (about S\$101 million) in 2011. The passion is evident in Calfee's voice as she relates how events unfolded. "Stanley was accused of mismanagement and had to leave within 48 hours. All the residents who owed money had to pay up immediately or be thrown out. There were even security guards with guns. It happened in an unbelievably short time and we never thought it possible. It would have been impossible for some of these great artists to become who they are if there wasn't a Chelsea Hotel. They will keep the facade because it's a landmark, but it can never be recreated because Stanley, his father, his grandfather and his son are not there. Like many great institutions, it was held up by one or two people who believed in what they were doing, and acted based on a code of values that was not purely materialistic."

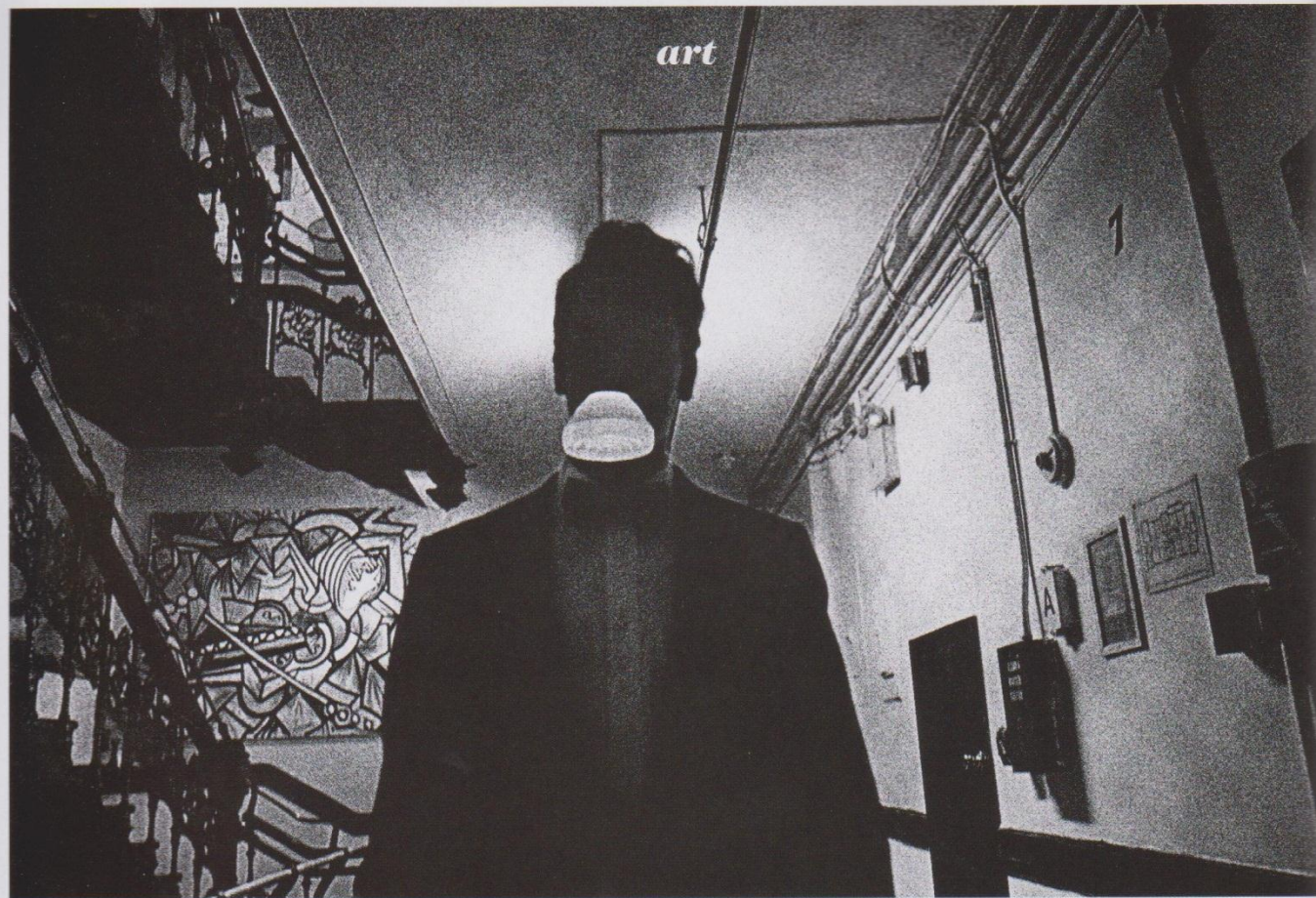


Julia Calfee

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PHOTOS: JULIA CALFEE





A LONG NIGHT ON THE FIRST FLOOR (OPPOSITE, TOP)

"After midnight, the atmosphere in the halls transformed, bringing back the joyful ghosts and miseries of past years. It was almost as if there was a seventh dimension that floated down from the roof through the staircase to the lobby. The night I was taking these photographs of Olivier, the mood was particularly poignant. Olivier was a brilliant actor on the brink of big success. But the brink is still the brink, and this image captures all the aspirations of life to come, mixed with the doubts and insecurities of ever really seeing and living these dreams."

PHOTO SHOOT IN CHELSEA HOTEL (OPPOSITE, BELOW)

"Photo shoots, one of the important money-making activities of Chelsea Hotel, were something residents had to put up with. Almost every day, I came across these extensive productions, with models and stylists, assistants and lights. I'd apologise for my presence and try to crawl discreetly around the cameras on the way to my own apartment. Occasionally, there were food banquets for the crews in the halls and I'd be invited to finish the leftovers."

PARANOIA (RIGHT)

"Living in Chelsea Hotel was like being in an interior world with both positive and negative sides. We all rejoiced together in happy times. Equally, and particularly during the long dark months of winter in New York, there were times when the world seemed black, and even in the Chelsea Hotel, there were no friendships left. These were the months when the epidemics of fear, doubt and insecurities were rampant."

TENDER IS THE NIGHT (BELOW)

"From 1884 until the end of World War I, Chelsea Hotel was the place to be for the chic set in New York. There were palm trees in the lobby, exclusive cigar rooms, ladies' parlours and traditional English high teas. Eventually, the opera house across the street moved uptown and World War II drew many of the debonair, cigar-smoking men into the battlefields, but something of the old-world elegance still remained in some of the residents who lived there and in their lifestyle."

