

MARTOS GALLERY

# BEDFORD + BOWERY

BACK IN THE DAY

## 'Downtown Was My Heaven': Generations of Performers Revisit Club 57

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*L-R: Holly Hughes, Moe Angelos, Martha Wilson, Carmelita Tropicana (photo: Cassidy Dawn Graves)*

Last Thursday, the theater at MoMA went back to the 20th century when **Performing Difference: Gender in the 1980s Downtown Scene**, a day of panel discussions presented in conjunction with the exhibit **"Club 57: Film, Performance, and Art in the East Village, 1978-1983."**, took over one of the museum's spacious screening rooms.

The day consisted of a look at the feminist lesbian performance art, visual art, and drag scenes, and the current queer artists continuing the legacy of the amorphous world known as “downtown.” The title “Performing Difference” was fitting, as curator Ron Magliozzi explained at the *Club 57* exhibition’s **opening party**: “We saw that all the films, even the gore films, and the sleaze films, they’re all about gender. ... They’re all about body modification and identity and changing identity.”

## Money

A sign of “making it” as a performer can be getting paid for your work. But money and performing didn’t intersect much for performers like panelists Holly Hughes, Moe Angelos, Carmelita Tropicana, and Martha Wilson, who frequented East Village spaces like Wow Café Theater, Pyramid Club, and Club 57. Due to their edgy, often sexual material, Hughes said Wow Café was one of the only “feminist spaces” that welcomed them, as feminism at the time was largely filled with “anti-sex, **anti-porn** feminists” who would likely balk at a thought of a lesbian “erotic night” or Hughes’s campy Sapphic play *The Well of Horniness*.

“I worked for years before I ever got paid, or even got a drink ticket,” Hughes said. “Which I don’t recommend!” At this stage in their career, the women of Wow do get paid, but like most artists, still have to spend exhausting amounts of time applying for grants.

Drag told a slightly different story. At the “Gender Play” panel, Pyramid Club co-founder Brian Butterick noted that once the venue was written up in the *New York Times*, they started making “a lot of money,” which allowed them to begin other queer performance initiatives like the drag festival Wigstock. It would be hard to ignore the gendered element here, as men doing drag and related performance were able to find some financial success in downtown’s heyday, while the lesbian performance artists of Wow Café largely did not.

## Inclusivity

Panelists did not shy away from discussing “political correctness.” While this topic could result in a bitter monologue about the youth being too sensitive, what actually transpired was more nuanced, covering cultural norms then and now.

When Five Lesbian Brothers member Moe Angelos showed an image of a performance she did at one of Peggy Shaw’s shows, she noted what was then “performing butch” would now be “performing transmasculinity.” Back then, she said, “We didn’t have AFAB, AMAB, cis, genderqueer.” However, the terms they did have included “butch, femme, fag, dyke, and even tranny.”

“I was special because I was a woman of color,” stated Carmelita Tropicana, who presented in her charismatic stage persona. She noted that though the scene had diversity of gender and sexuality, it was largely white, and attributed this to the “segregation” present in the city at the time. Even when she mentioned a time Wow Café had more people of color, she was merely referring to a time she put on a play about a Cuban revolution and asked her fellow performers to play Latinas. Nowadays, Hughes said, the venue is “majority minority and trans-inclusive.”

## Drag

Drag is entering the mainstream with the success of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, which has spurred discussions of what types of bodies and identities are **allowed to partake**. But it’s been around for far longer than that, and a photo of RuPaul outside Pyramid Club served as a reminder.

Club 57 was “for people sick of West Village gay culture,” said Butterick, who performs drag as Hattie Hathaway and is a current board member of Howl! Arts, a nonprofit focused on preserving East Village underground culture. “What we were doing was everything for everybody. Unlike gay male culture in the moment, we didn’t hate women.”

“Drag queens ran the Pyramid,” said performer Jack Waters, a former co-director of ABC No Rio with Peter Cramer. Rather than always attempting overt “female impersonation” like some of the other Manhattan drag scenes, downtown’s “deconstructionist drag” and gender performance was more fluid. Panelist Sur Rodney (Sur) said drag to him was an attempt to “feel different and be different,” and he didn’t realize “feminized men would be seen as women.” Others, like artist Rafael Sánchez, simply did drag “because it feels good.”

## **Documentation**

One of the differences between the panels focused on performance in the 1980s and performance today was that the performers from the 1980s largely talked about their work, while the contemporary performers began by showing videos. Montreal-based performer Jordan Arseneault showed a video of him lip-syncing a monologue from the 1982 sci-fi cult film *Liquid Sky*, Erin Markey showed a clip of a song from her latest show *Boner Killer*, and Reina Gossett screened an excerpt of her latest short film *Atlantic Is a Sea of Bones*, featuring performer Egyptt LaBejia.

This illuminated the different role documentation has played in live performance; Moe Angelos described downtown performances as “not built to last,” valuing quantity over polished quality, while today’s performers are encouraged to document everything.

## **Conclusions**

The final audience Q+A had one stipulation. With their questions, people also had to name at least one venue that wasn’t yet mentioned that day, and at least one person they wish was present. Talkbacks can be dreary or even painful at times, and *Performing Difference* was not free from some of those moments, but this final request and the nostalgia it inspired from both audience members (which included downtown icons Kembra Pfahler and John Kelly) and panelists made it feel more alive.

While the past was remarked upon, a slideshow of venue floor plans drawn from memory was shown. In addition to classic long-gone spaces like Club 57 and Danceteria, newer DIY relics like Glasslands, Death By Audio, and Galapagos also made appearances.

“Downtown isn’t a geographical location,” one audience member said, which feels ever truer now as more underground, DIY, and/or queer spaces are faced with closures and unsustainable rent increases. “It really is up to us to build our own downtown,” said curator and “Downtown Today” moderator Travis Chamberlain, a statement that really has always been true, and will continue to be true for years to come.