

David Dalton

Toyo Tsuchiya's Photos of the Wildlife at No Se No

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Toyo Tsuchiya is an artist and photographer who was born in Japan, but has lived and worked in New York in the summer of 1983, a couple of galoots I knew—"Cowboy" Ray Kelly, the coolest cowhand from the Rio Grande, and hip-talkin', sly-walkin' Jack Smead—took over the lease of a storefront on Rivington Street intending it to be a hipster playhouse. It had been a former drug den run by a pair of Dominican coke dealers who eventually got sent up the river. But not before they'd given the joint its immortal name, No Se No; roughly, "We don't know nuttin'." They had decorated the walls in lush, tropical, wraparound dayglo Tijuana murals. It was a masterpiece of Loisaida kitsch, but this did not quite satisfy the over-weening vision of the aforementioned gents, so they decided to repaint it in neo-El Paso hallucinatory.

The concept of No Se No was pure accidental genius: anybody—and I mean anybody—could perform there at least once. So you knew right then and there that *99 Nights* at No Se No was going to be a meta-historical event. They nailed 4x8 foot sheets of plywood onto the bar and made it into an instant stage, where anybody who wanted to could get up and do whatever the hell they wanted to. If Cowboy or Jack didn't like it, they would hit the fuse box and everything went black. They were brutal critics. The news spread quickly about an after-hours club with beer for a buck, and a great free jukebox stocked with the most dynamite sounds by the "The Hound" (Jim Marshall).

You were floating along in the company of punks, drug cowboys, a hooker who stays despite realizing she ain't gonna find any (paying) customers in there, a neighborhood character who has wandered in from another set (nobody apparently had informed him that the universe was now under new management), some guy singing about Twizzlers and diamonds, and a Polish giantess playing the electric cello (the whole superhuman crew from *Desolation Row* would eventually show up). It was like Les Deux Magots in Paris in the 20s, or a speakeasy in St. Louis in the 30s, but really better than any of them because we were young and high and had our own idea of what fun was.

It was a club straight out of William S. Burroughs' Interzone. You have just to look at Toyo Tsuchiya's photos to see what went on. In a review of Toyo's photographs at the Asian American Arts Centre in 1999, Holland Cotter wrote of No Se No in *The New York Times*: "Nothing remotely like this scene, with its macho, improvised, beer-drinking brain energy, exists in today's placid Manhattan art world." But that's part of the problem in getting anyone to describe what went down there. Just about everybody at No Se No was either drunk, stoned, dusted, or just brain-jangled, and is not exactly reliable as cultural historian.

Do Japanese hipsters have extraterrestrial antennae for culture-morphing events? How else would photographer Toyo Tsuchiya have found himself present at the opening night of *99 Nights* at No Se No? Who the hell knew what this folly of two drugstore cowboys was going to turn into? That first night, if memory serves, offered a kinky taste of what was to come. A seminude "Alphabet" Arleen Schloss was being pulled back and forth across the top of the bar, covered with baby powder while reciting the alphabet backwards—or was she speaking in tongues?

No Se No's policy was all free, always free. Artists contributed by creating instant programs, the neighbors came in and did funny things.

There was Dragan Ilic, a Yugoslavian artist, draped in power tools, who hammered pencils into the bar. Why? Sculpture, babe. Krzysztof Zarebski's performance was very erotic (in a Polish ontological way, naturally). Among other things, there was a frozen penis as a Nobel Prize. He worked with his wife, Krystina

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Jachimowicz, the two of them acting all this out on the counter. There was Israeli performance artist, Uri Katzenstein, who made sounds from every conceivable thing that cannot speak for itself, including a dried salted fish from Chinatown. Lots of drumming went on inside (by the likes of Lexington and Peter Kotzrofski) and out on the street. You know why, don't you? To keep God awake: the Devil is out there on Rivington Street leaping with dark joy and setting off cherry bombs. Bruno Esposito did spectacular performances out on the street, hanging from water pipes under "Cowboy" Kelly's rainbow sculptures.

Every club has its resident pain in the ass. In this case, that would be Ed Higgins III, standing on the counter drawing inconclusions on the wall, doing tricks with mousetraps, making a honeydew melon into a bowling ball.

A sign read: Phoebe Légère Game Show. And there she was. . .Phoebe, a stylish mock porno blonde in a cowboy hat. She'd been involved in more genres that can fit in this paragraph. She was fucking famous—for 15 minutes, at least. You can look her up. On a particular night she made a large drawing of a man with a big erect penis, while walking on the bar, titillating, interacting with the audience. As glittery and tinsely as she looked, she was a real trouper. One night she was playing her signature accordion and her period wasn't gonna interfere with her act. She just kept playing her squeeze box, letting the blood run down her legs.

Diana Moonmade was a topless dancer and martial artist dressed in ninja leather with a bikini bottom. She climbed the chain-link fence of the abandoned schoolyard next door, hanging upside down while playing sax in boxing gloves with mystic letters on her teeth.

Dead movie stars came back to life. Nancy Girl was a Monroe look-alike dressed in the iconic white dress she wore blowing up over the subway grate in *The Seven Year Itch*. . .but this was a tough-talkin' 80s broad who had serious 'tude.

Performance art is too tame a word for the feral cabaret at No Se No, featuring uninhibited erotic acts of quirky genius. The tableaux swung between wacky full-tilt self-indulgence to kozmik buzz—performed with the intensity of a pre-Christian reverence for rain. Didn't much matter which. It was all glory or goofy.

My favorite performance there was when my wife Coco, and Warhol superstar Jackie Curtis performed the one-act play James Dean wrote for his audition at the The Actors Studio, *Ripping Off Layers to Find Roots*—a work of inspired cappuccino Existentialism.

No Se No was the local bar on Desolation Row. Getting there was a trip in itself. You had to lurk through your own private Saigon of trash-piled empty lots, chain-link fences, burnt-out buildings, hookers, junkies, drug dealers and cannibalized cars. Every night was a party, basically, with the added jolt of quirky performance art and random unpredictability. From seven o'clock at night to six in the morning the madness carried on. Fourteen hours of lunacy, and then everybody still standing would retire to Brownies for breakfast.

Picture 5 a.m. on a steamy hot night, 95° so only the black lights are on. Mikey (P. Michel Kean) gets up to read his poetry, but he's so nervous he drops his pants. Nobody notices, not even him. He recites for another 20 minutes, then goes to sit at the bar—no shirt, no pants, but the place is pitch black, so. . . It's late 1984 and by now people are coming from the tri-state area to check out this wild and crazy joint. On this particular night, there's a couple from New Jersey sitting at the bar. Mikey pulls up a stool between

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them. They're sitting cracking jokes, getting along famously. Finally, the couple gets up to leave, they're saying goodbye and suddenly realize they've been sitting next to a stark naked guy at the bar for an hour and a half.

Another pre-dawn surprise: Round 4:30 in the morning, a Latino giant bangs at the door, the biggest, meanest-looking motherfucker from East L.A. you've ever seen. Jack yells, "We're closed!" But this cat ain't going away. He just keeps on hammering on the door. Well, now Jack picks up a baseball bat from behind the bar. He's gearing up for a Jack and Goliath showdown on Rivington Street when someone says, "Hey, man, that's David Hidalgo from Los Lobos." And fuck me if it wasn't. Idling outside on the street are four stretch limos full of guys from the band and Mexican girls in colorful plastic dresses and ribbons. They march in with their instruments and end up playing there for an entire day.

Did I mention Montmerency, the whiskey-drinking rooster who lived on the bar? He *loved* whiskey and to accommodate him they'd put out a shot glass. He'd keep sipping until he passed out. Local Spanish guys coming in from the street, seeing what they thought was a dead chicken on the bar, didn't know what the hell was going on. . .figured it had something to do with voodoo. But eventually the rooster would revive, jump up and let out a big old cock-a-doodle-doo, scaring the shit out of everybody.

As opposed to 80s mainstream avant-garde clubs, No Se No was so underground it didn't even come up for air, and after 33 years it's finally getting its props. There's even a book about it, *Rivington School: 80s New York Underground*, and they're selling it in Walmart, believe it or not.

No Se No lasted a lot longer than 99 nights. I mean who was counting? But in 1984 it came to an abrupt end. A social club in Brooklyn had burned down and 90 people had died, so the city set up a task force to eliminate after-hours bars and close their doors. Whoever was at No Se No the night the cops showed up ended in the pokey. But you can't muzzle an untamed heart, and the wild rumpus continued as an art gallery and sculpture garden.

As Holland Cotter said, Toyo's photographs felt "like reports of life on another, hipper planet, of which little trace would remain were it not for his persistent and attentive recording eye." Carlo McCormick, No Se No's wry bartender, ascribes Toyo's incredible photos to a talent for invisibility. An extraterrestrial? Invisible? Whatever. At No Se No, Toyo Tsuchiya felt perfectly at home, as he always is—in the future.