

11 Hopped-Up Art World Anecdotes*

by Emma Allen, *artinfo.com*, September 20, 2010

When her rejected 1973 review of the night Bob Marley led in for Bruce Springsteen at Max's was finally published, in an art book, it was a rare chance for two of O'Grady careers---rock critic and conceptual artist---to meet, as in this *artinfo.com* piece.

From the "Max's Kansas City Book," 11 Hopped-Up Art World Anecdotes

Photo: courtesy Anton Perich and Steven Kasher Gallery, NYC
Anton Perich's "Girl Standing in Front of Max's" is one of the many period photographs in Steven Kasher's "Max's Kansas City: Art, Glamour, Rock and Roll."

NEW YORK— "Max's Kansas City was the exact place where Pop art and pop life came together in New York in the sixties," said Andy Warhol, who would know, and who in 1968 even moved his Factory downtown to be closer to the raucous Park Avenue South hangout. And while a Korean deli now fills the address that once housed the debauched after-hours shenanigans of artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Carolee Schneemann, celebrities like Cary Grant and Mel Brooks, and musicians like Iggy Pop and Debbie Harry, the Max's legacy continues to thrill.

Which is perhaps why this month two galleries are offering shows centered on the Max's myth, one at Steven Kasher Gallery (through October 9) featuring work by the clubhouse's patrons John Chamberlain, Forrest Myers, Larry Zox, and Neil Williams, and another at Loretta Howard Gallery showcasing work by better-known Max's devotees like James Rosenquist, Vito Acconci, Brigid Berlin, Dan Flavin, Lawrence Weiner, and Frank

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Stella.

While today we may have one-off art-world gatherings that recall the bygone downtown vibe, we wax nostalgic about Max's Kansas City because we don't really have an equivalent. The book accompanying the show at Steven Kasher, published by Abrams Image, will only serve to rub in this deficiency — although hearing about some of the sordid, drug-fueled mayhem that went down there takes away some of the myth's appeal.

Titled "Max's Kansas City: Art, Glamour, Rock and Roll," the catalogue includes a number of texts — including a 1974 interview between the owner, Mickey Ruskin, and Ramones manager Danny Fields — but the main attraction is its wealth of photographs and odd blurbs documenting three decades of the art world.

Steven Watson writes in one essay that "deciding who came in was owner Mickey Ruskin's way of 'curating' people." The pieces of photographic ephemera and scribbled memories, only some of which are collected in this book, amount to the late Ruskin's grand exhibition. In honor of this achievement, ARTINFO perused Kasher's book to cull 11 things you didn't know about Max's. And boy, are they Grade-A juicy.

1. Some of the more boisterous events at Max's include the time when Andrea "Whipps" Feldman crooned "Everything's Coming Up Roses" while she "performed sex with a Coke bottle," and the occasion on which Jim Morrison peed in a partially full bottle of wine and gave it to waitress, convincing her that it was a nearly untouched bottle of fine vintage. She took it home.
2. Warhol's bill for September of 1969, addressed to "Andy Warhol, The Factory, 33 Union Sq.," shows that the artist owed \$774.73 for the month, minus \$200 "for Marilyn Monroe."
3. Max's always had on hand a bowl of prescription amphetamine pills to help the waitresses get through their shifts. While the heavy drinkers stuck to the front room, the back room — which was "bathed in the glow of red light from a Dan Flavin sculpture" — were also fueled by speed. "It was hell on the waitresses,"

Walton explains. "Speed didn't induce eating, so the tips were lousy, and the games and performances were sometimes out of control. Being assigned to wait tables in the back room was like being sent to Siberia." On one particularly unruly occasion, Brigid Berlin jabbed herself with a speed needle and yelled, "I'm up!," earning the nickname Brigid Polk, as in "poke." (Other sources note that her nickname also derived from her habit of unexpectedly "poking" others with her ever-present syringe.)

4. "The first or second waitress that I ever hired," Ruskin told Fields, "was this little girl, and one day she brought her boyfriend and said, 'Mickey, can you cash this check from the Gaslight for him, he can't cash it anywhere. This is my boyfriend, his name is Bob Dylan, and he's going to be a great singer someday.'"

5. The mysterious name comes from poet Joel Oppenheimer, who supposedly associated steaks with Kansas City. He apparently was in the habit of going on to explain his mysterious choice by saying, "If you're looking for an M name and want a restauranty kind of thing, 'Max's' comes to mind."

6. Lou Reed recalls that when Tiny Malace, editor of the Lavender Movie Review, tried to commit suicide, Mickey and some of his regulars visited her in the hospital to ask her to pay her bill, out of fear that she might ever try again.

7. Some of Max's artist-themed drinks are: The "Patti Smith" (\$20), composed of Champagne and Stout, with the tagline, "Its been making poets horny for years"; the "Ramones" (\$2.50), "Your favorite local beer, molested by a straight shot of whiskey"; and "Blondie" (\$2.50), "A silky smooth bombshell, with Galliano, Cacao, and a good head." New patrons had to be sure not to order "Just Water" — that would result in a bill for \$2.50 and a glass filled with gin, cointreau, and 7-Up.

8. Regulars at Max's had a nickname for patron Andy Warhol, oft-mocked for his seeming shallowness: Wendy Airhole.

9. Frosty Myers's enigmatic light beam installation, which is on view at Steven Kasher, is finally explained in a way that almost makes sense: "The beam started in Myers's studio, shot out from

his window and into the night, and bounced off a mirror that sent it down Park Avenue and then to another mirror that sent it through the plate glass window of Max's. The beam hit a small mirror glued to a jukebox, the speaker making the beam vibrate in random patterns determined by the music, and then zoomed just over the heads of the customers, assuming visible form in the smoke-filled room." In the book, there's even a diagram.

10. In 1973, Bob Marley and the Wailers opened in the upstairs concert space for a little-known singer named Bruce Springsteen, and a Village Voice rock critic named Lorraine O'Grady — today known as a seminal conceptual artist, though she did not begin making art until 1980 — was in attendance. In her review of the Boss-to-be and his E Street Band, which Voice editors held from publication because they considered Springsteen too insignificant, O'Grady heralded the singer as "the real thing... [a]n authentic talent with a rushing stream-of-consciousness imagery backed by a solid rock-and-roll, rhythm-and-blues beat... [whose] lyrics that are among the beautiful and complex in rock today." (In the piece, which is included in the book, she also noted that Springsteen "looked like he hadn't slept in weeks.") That same year, the New York Dolls "made their first platform-heeled stomp across Max's stage," in the words of Kaye.

11. Max's was for the artists of the 60s and 70s what Cedar Tavern was to testosterone-driven Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline; to "cooked" poets John Ashbery, as opposed to the "raw" of Allen Ginsberg's coterie; and to the feuding critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. As Watson puts it, the evolution of New York artist hangouts of the period could be broken down into this equation:

Polly's = bohemian ideology

The San Remo = hipster nonconformist lifestyle

The Cedar Tavern = macho artist buddy hangout

Max's Kansas City = sixties aristocracy + hipster/hippie

bohemian ideology + downtown visibility + fashion + art

+ music

Ah yes, now we understand.