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Remembering the Chelsea: Albert Scopin's Lost Photography

Pristine marble squares guide my path down a thin corridor. The fixed smiles and vacant gazes of underpaid bellboys frame my vision. Above them, art that references Mexican Muralism and French Cubism is carefully hung. I'm confronted with a large mail cubby system with hundreds of keys placed inside them. I can't help appreciating the performance of it all. In a time where key fobs are much more common and, at that, more affordable, giving guests a physical key is a statement in and of itself. My steps slow as I approach the front desk. I've hardly stopped before the receptionist exclaims, "Welcome to the Hotel Chelsea."

I took it upon myself to visit the Hotel Chelsea after viewing the newly released book, *Scopin: Chelsea Hotel*, featuring long-lost photographs that Albert Scopin took while living at the Hotel Chelsea from 1969 to 1971. After moving from Germany at age 25, Scopin worked under photographers Richard Avedon and Bill King in New York City. During this time, he lived at the Hotel Chelsea, located at 222 W 23rd Street in Manhattan. There, he photographed artists in residence from Patti Smith to Robert Mapplethorpe. The photos in the recently published book were sent to Zeit Magazine in the early 1970s. The negatives were stolen shortly after this time and resurfaced in Olivier Ahler's collection nearly 46 years later.

Featuring 118 never before seen photos taken on a Kodak Instamatic and Pentax, Scopin's new book captures the unique cohort of artists living at Hotel Chelsea in the early 1970s. In an interview, Scopin described the inhabitants of the Hotel Chelsea as "curious, interested, and open." The photographer was immersed in a pre-AIDS sexual revelation, where the lines between art, sex, and identity blurred. The Hotel Chelsea was the nucleus for this creative community. It functioned as a haven for artists like Scopin who lived on the bottom

floor in what he described as “a darkroom with a tap.” Above him lived Andy Warhol, Jackson Pollock, Patti Smith, and various other prolific artists developing their craft.

While perusing this book, I felt as though I was viewing a fantasy. Despite growing up in the West Village, only ten blocks from the Hotel Chelsea, the world depicted in these photographs was alien to me. Masterpieces now sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars were depicted strewn across bedroom floors. Scopin’s subjects were oblivious to their own unique circumstances and the genius of their environment. How was food kept on tables? Why did all rules of right and wrong seem to subvert themselves within the walls of the Hotel Chelsea? Naturally, I went there for answers. But I was met with a world that felt disappointingly familiar.

The walls of the Hotel Chelsea on April 26th, 2026 held no Scopin fantasy. The art pieces I had hoped might be strewn across the floors were instead hung up on the walls surrounding the lobby. The bright clothing and messy buns of artists were replaced with Wall Street businessmen in suits. And the rules of capitalism still very much applied with a sign indicating the hefty \$500 a night price tag.

In his interview, Scopin acknowledged these changes. When asked if he ever saw Patti Smith again, he admitted that they reconnected at a concert years after his time at the Hotel Chelsea, but the magic of the time was over. “Things like that don’t come back...It’s best not to warm them up again.” When asked more generally if he speaks to anyone from his time at the Hotel Chelsea, he responded, “It’s strange – not one, although they were such intense contacts at the time and I still have vivid memories of them. But many of those guys are dead, and others scattered to the four winds...” He continued by stating that “the Chelsea was a moment: short, sharp and full of profligate plenty.” After reconsidering Scopin’s work through the lens of this

fleeting world, I began to identify the ways in which his formal photography devices reinforce the temporality of his subjects' circumstances.

By capturing the frantic movement of his subjects, Scopin establishes the scene of the Hotel Chelsea as one prone to change. In one of Scopin's photographs, two men walk outside of the Hotel Chelsea, backlit by the Hotel's iconic light-up sign. Scopin uses a long exposure technique that blurs the subjects. While they are depicted standing on the right bottom corner of the frame, their impending movement towards the upper left of the frame is indicated by two blurred lines of light that slash through the picture.

Similarly, in a photo of model Chaney Devaureaux on the roof of the Hotel, Scopin suggests action by capturing Devaureux in-between two poses. The model is photographed wearing designer Charles James' famous clover dress, now kept at the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Devaureux's head leans to the right as her hands move to the left in a contraposto that mimics an Italian Renaissance sculpture. The twisting of her body gives movement to the Clover Dress and suggests her imminent spin to the right. By capturing Devaureux in this transitional pose, Scopin points towards her future position and in doing so reflects on the instability of his subjects. For readers of the book, this reinforces the sense that the world captured in these images is fleeting.

Furthermore, Scopin's treatment of color visually separates his world from the muted visual palette associated with the contemporary urban landscape. Scopin captures German director Rosa von Praunheim, officially known as Holger Mischwitzky adorned in a vivid pink jumpsuit on the roof of the Chelsea. Praunheim's loud outfit, floral scarf, and blue headpiece are made brighter by his positioning behind a dark green Manhattan city scape. The contrast between

foreground and background in this image makes the colors of Praunheim's clothing appear fantastically vivid.

In another photo, Scopin captures an anonymous visitor at the front desk of the Hotel Chelsea. The man's cold silver jacket set against the stark white walls of the Hotel Chelsea make his bright red scarf appear to nearly leap off the page. Viewing these images and then visiting the Hotel Chelsea, Scopin's dream-like world of light and color stands in stark contrast to the muted color palette of the Hotel today. This makes it seem as though the fairytale world depicted in these photos has since perished.

Despite the now more legible distinctions between the present and the world of the Hotel Chelsea, Scopin's subjects are strikingly unaware of the precarity of their existence. In most of the photos, ironically excluding the cover photo of Patti Smith, Scopin's subjects look away from the camera, laughing, lost in thought, or conversing with other artists. While a direct, front-facing portrait might invite a sense of connection with the viewer or indicate the subject's self-conscious presentation, the candid photos suggest that the subjects do not perform for the camera. Instead, they move through life without the knowledge that the photos taken of them might be the only public evidence of their existence 50 years later. Their unawareness of the camera symbolically gestures towards their oblivion to their own fragility. Soon to be ravaged by the AIDS crisis of the late 1970s, they all had to reckon with their mortality not long after these photos were taken.

While I have no doubt that Scopin's photographs capture a very real aspect of New York in the early 1970's, it's worth considering how this book contributes to a naive romanticizing of the past. In one photo, Scopin captures a cohort of naked men that congregate in Washington

Square Park on June 28th 1970. The event would come to be known as Christopher Street Liberation Day. Scopin shoots two shirtless men embracing on the park grass as others laugh and lounge around them. The caption underscores the uplifting nature of the photos, stating, “The demo was so huge, so colourful, so cheerful, so full of joy of life.”

At a time when Roe V Wade has been overturned, transgender people face restrictions on bathroom use, and gay marriage is being legally contested, it's easy to look at photos of Christopher Street Liberation Day and believe the world was better than today. And yet, we must then ask ourselves if it really was. During Scopin's time at the Hotel Chelsea, same-sex activity was a criminal offense under sodomy laws, cross-dressing was illegal under masquerade laws, and public nudity was punishable under state indecent exposure laws. Thus, it's clear that Scopin's series tells only one piece of a nuanced and sometimes dark history.

Scopin's choice to capture frantic movements represent his subject's temporal state; his use of high contrast and vivid colors separate his world from mine; and his decision to shoot subjects looking away symbolically references their oblivion to the horrors of disease and capitalism soon to ravage their world. From the privileged stance of the contemporary viewer, there is a haunting feeling imbued in these photographs of beauty. I wish to scream out to Scopin's subjects, to turn their heads, stop their movement, and tell them to relish in their fantasy. Simultaneously, I long to relish in it with them. I both envy their naivety and pity it. Thus, I am aware that this book does more than document the past; it reveals the power of the present in reconstructing history.