

**BRIGHT
NIGHTS**

**B R I G H T
N I G H T S**

PHOTOGRAPHS OF ANOTHER NEW YORK

TOD SEELIE

PRESTEL

MUNICH · LONDON · NEW YORK

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INTRODUCTION

JEFF STARK

We love telling stories about New York.

We love it so much, we tell stories that are not even true.

Here is one of those stories: New York has lost its edge.

It's a story we've been telling ourselves for the last 20 years, and it goes like this: New York used to be a thriving pisshole. It was dirty and dangerous and unspeakably cool, just a few years before you or I got here—whenever that was.

But now, the story goes, New York is dead. Bankers and tourists have overtaken Manhattan. The rent is going up in Brooklyn. Artists are choked out and headed for Berlin. CBGB is gone, and there's an Applebee's on 42nd Street.

What was once the city of Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe, of William S. Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, of Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, of Bob Dylan, Jim Jarmusch, Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, and Jean-Michel Basquiat has been reduced to a set piece for morning TV shows and candy-coated romantic comedies.

Safe. Lame.

Tod Seelie's photographs say this story is a lie. Or, maybe, if it's not a lie, it is certainly not the truth—because New York is alive in these pictures. In his photographs, people swim in the East River. They take over the Manhattan Bridge on bikes. They smash cars in the street.

This New York is not simply made of glass condos, or a boring playground for creative professionals. It's a celebration of something else entirely. It's a dense place: complicated, contradictory, confusing...and so, so awesome.

* * *

I started hanging around Seelie and other kids from Pratt Institute in 2001. He was fairly new to photography back then (he'd studied sculpture in school, then switched). Honestly, I don't really remember him that well. It's not that he was forgettable or dull. It's just that he was a modest Midwestern guy from Ohio, surrounded by people with Roman candle eyes.

Wow, were they fun. They threw dance parties in the middle of the street, and late at night they'd strip all of the advertisements out of subway cars and replace them with their own artwork. No one had convinced them that New York was dead. They'd dreamed of the kind of city they wanted to live in, and were in the process of making it themselves.

Who was around at the time? A bunch of people who broke out of their own subcultures, skipping across the edge of the mainstream. Back then, Japanther were becoming a band because Ian Vanek had an idea for a T-shirt. Swoon was just starting to experiment with street art. The band Matt & Kim were there, not playing together yet. There were a dozen more kids in that group too, like Polina the muralist, and Hubert, who became a farmer.

At the time, Seelie was mostly shooting empty landscapes with a side of portraits. But he was also hanging out with all these people, and his camera started to come out when things got good. Sometimes he was asked to document art projects that he was working on with everyone else. Other times, he just shot.

It wasn't obvious at first, but the life he was living started seeping into his pictures. You started to see his friends. You started to see the places they lived and the things they made. And, eventually, you started to see him.

* * *

Most of Seelie's photographs make me ask two questions:

1. What am I looking at?
2. How the hell did he get that photograph?

I usually don't have an answer for the first question, even though, sometimes, it's pretty clear that I'm looking at a picture of two people on homemade tall bikes jousting with PVC pipes. That, of course, still doesn't explain what the fuck I'm seeing.

Seelie's photos take us inside subcultures we might never have known existed. Subcultures are insular and coded by definition. They have razor-thin distinctions that don't make a lot of sense if you're not immersed in them yourself. Though there are other photographers who show us these worlds, Seelie's images make them look like alternate ways to create a life. This is partly because the people in his photos don't look like they're performing for the camera—they are living passionately. He manages to capture their lives in a way that is honest and special, without compromising their integrity.

This trick is pulled off because Seelie belongs to several subcultures himself—many of which are unnamed, all of which appear in this book. As it happens, these subcultures offer real alternatives to the mainstream creative industries of New York (not to mention the uncomfortable police state encouraged by a 20-year reign of two conservative mayors). These groups are supportive, nourishing, and generous. Collaboration is almost a given, and everyone pitches in to help realize projects.

It's the reason why Seelie has the best pictures from Bike Kill, the annual Halloween block party put together by members of the Black Label Bicycle Club. Or why he was on the boat with the Swimming Cities crew, which piloted rafts down the Hudson River and around the Battery of Manhattan. People trust him—not just as a photographer, but also as a person. I'd argue that because he understands his own subcultures, he easily breezes

into others. When he ends up at a basement dance party in Harlem, he captures the chaos and sex in a way that's messy and weird, rather than skanky and simple. He might not be at home, but he's not just a tourist.

* * *

Seelie's photographs connect us to what we think is great about New York, and to what we think was great about New York. But they're not nostalgic. They don't look back. The people in them don't seem like they're copying poses they've seen before. Consequently, the pictures look immediate. Now—in the sense that someone just spilled beer on you, and there's a foot in your face. That kind of now.

In a way, all of the work in this book is of a single subject—New York. However, the photographs are connected in a way that makes sense when you look at how Seelie moves through the city (which, incidentally, is usually on a bicycle).

There are pictures of friends of course. Sometimes, those photographs are about hanging out, making out, or exploring abandoned buildings. There are also images shot on assignment for magazines or websites—mostly bands, but also assorted randomness, like amateur strip contests.

Then, there are the almost incidental photographs, often captured with the point-and-shoot camera in his pocket. These come from living in Brooklyn, being on the street, and knowing where to look: dead rats, cars on fire, double rainbows. For me, they are connected to the work of photographers like Lee Friedlander, who created a sort of romantic aesthetic of American decay, showing what things actually look like rather than what we want to think they look like.

Finally, there are photos that document art projects and events, mostly put on by friends and co-conspirators. Seelie often documents performance artists, weird theater, site-specific installations, and any multitude of sweaty gigs. With his SLR (a common digital camera with a nice lens), he makes these events look better than just about anyone else, from the practiced pros to the amateurs with their endless snapshots.

There is a certain filthy glamor in some of these images, but to be clear, it's not like Seelie's subjects tolerate him because he takes great pictures. Not at all. He's invited because he's good to be around. Because he always washes his own dishes. Because he carries the heavy part up the stairs. And because he always shares his pictures.

That last one is a big deal. Professional photographers regularly keep photos to themselves. Others lurk like voyeurs at a peep show, furtively snapping pictures and disappearing at the end of an event. I've never once wondered what happened to all the photos Seelie shoots; if they're any good, they'll be on one of his websites. I know he's not building a secret stash to unleash into the world in case everybody gets famous.

At times, I think the way he shares photos is a radical act of community. The pictures are there, online or in small galleries, posted in a way that lets us develop a narrative about who we are based on how we appear through his eyes. It's a rare thing.

It's a pleasure to watch Seelie work, in part because his method is so matter-of-fact, so relentless. He doesn't rush into the center and shoot what everyone is looking at; he's not a quick draw. He looks first, and then he marches in for his first set up.

He shoots, checks focus, and then moves on to his next spot. There's craft in his pacing.

This would be less remarkable if everyone around him wasn't in the midst of complete chaos, actually hanging off the rafters, which I've seen at more than one show he's photographed. I've also watched him get kicked in the head in a mosh pit, and circle a swim party in a small boat to get an alternate perspective on the scene, rowing himself with little splashes in between shots—working while everyone else is having fun. Seelie always says that his goal is to make an event look like it *felt* to be there. It turns out that you don't achieve that by accident. It takes work.

* * *

The flipside to Seelie's images of chaotic nightlife are the wide, still landscape shots. These were first created on a medium format camera and became part of an early series called *Of Quiet*. You can still see traces of that work in his New York pictures of abandoned spaces, lit by moonlight or metal halide streetlamps.

Related is his series that I could call *All Alone at the Party*, which are photos of people experiencing a solitary moment amid something far larger and louder than themselves: a sweaty dancefloor, a passing train, a crumbling building. I find them incredibly touching. It's these pictures that connect his work to photographer Nan Goldin, one of his primary influences. Here's Matt from Japanther with a black eye on a couch. There's some guy standing in his underwear, not entirely there. There's a girl, hovering over a crowd, lost.

These images have a way of wiping away subculture and connecting to anyone who's felt the weight of loneliness.

I love looking at pictures of people being young and alive, but they don't mean as much if you never see the melancholy on the flipside of that decadence. Goldin showed us the sadness of intimacy with one other person. Seelie does it in a crowd.

* * *

Most of the photographs in this book were taken in the first decade of the new millennium. While you're looking at them, it can be easy to forget that you're seeing what happened just after September 11, what happened while bankers ripped apart the economy from their perch on Wall Street, what happened while the country supposedly couldn't turn off reality television or look away from social media.

We told ourselves all kinds of stories about this period. It was a bad time.

And yet, you wouldn't know it to look at these photos; the people in them are often having the time of their lives. It's important to remember that what is going on in them is true. A true story. We often think that subculture is just another thing to buy—that you can put a patch on your jacket and call yourself a punk. But, at its best, the subculture you create for yourself and your friends is something more. It can be an active rejection of a poisonous culture, a rejection that is both life affirming and liberating in a city where people tell you that everything worth doing has already been done.

Tod Seelie's pictures remind us that we don't have to live in a boring city, but his critique is even deeper. In a way, the photographs challenge the notion of boredom itself—that modernist disease—and show it banished by the ecstatic joy of living life on the margins of New York City. There are still

surprises here, even in dark times, and they make life worth living. They show us maybe the remedy is not to make more money, but to spend less and live more. They show us you can create art, dance with your friends, set off on a raft, or take over the whole building.

Don't ask for permission. Just do it yourself.

That life is way too awesome not to live it.

Jeff Stark is the editor of Nonsense NYC, a weekly e-mail list about independent arts and culture. He also makes large-scale installations and creates theatrical events in unusual places.



GROTESQUE SEDUCTION

CAROLINA A. MIRANDA

It's the middle of a concert. There is an explosion of drums and guitar and screaming and rhyming in the sardine-can confines of a dilapidated former grocery stand somewhere in the middle of Brooklyn. The atmosphere is equal parts mosh pit and sauna. In the middle of this, there is a woman. She is attired—quite remarkably—in a pair of electric blue leggings and polka dot pumps. And she is floating, ecstatically, on the outstretched palms of a roiling crowd, one heel pointed at the sky, one arm reaching upwards in a gesture of abandon. It is precisely at this moment that Tod Seelie takes his picture.

High Heels Crowd Surf (page 10) is interesting for a number of reasons. For one, there is its color and texture, from the synthetic sheen of the woman's cobalt leggings to the cherry-colored daintiness of her cloth high heels. There is also its depth. Her body points into the picture, away from the viewer, a scrum of hands delivering her to the rear of the room. We can't see her face, nor can we see the faces of most of the crowd. But we can feel them—and practically smell them (most likely somewhere on the continuum between hot armpit and stale beer).

Seelie has been taking pictures of basement rock concerts, bike jousting tournaments, protests, bar fights, illicit tunnel

dinner parties, and even extended bouts of Jell-O wrestling for more than a decade. During this time, a lot of other people have taken pictures, too. Chances are you'll find images of these same events warehoused somewhere online, on music sites and personal blogs. However, when faced with a flood of images from a Japanther concert, it's pretty easy to pick out the ones taken by Seelie. The reverie is apocalyptic. His framing provides glimpses of odd angles and lost moments, leading the viewer's eye to places it wouldn't ordinarily go first. His sense of color and texture can make you practically taste the bloody noses. A lot of photographers can take a picture of someone screaming. Few of them can make it seem as if that person is screaming at you.

Since the invention of the camera, photographers have spent their waking hours chronicling urban subcultures. In the early 1930s, Brassai made deeply cinematic portraits of prostitutes in his adopted city of Paris. In the 1930s and 1940s, Weegee turned his flash on the tenement dwellers and flamboyant mobsters of New York's Lower East Side. Diane Arbus spent the 1950s and 1960s chronicling circus habitués and the dwarves and sword swallowers who headlined Times Square freak shows. Certainly, Seelie draws from these traditions. He expresses a deep connection to the lives of the people he photographs.

Even as he displays a profound empathy toward his subjects, Seelie nonetheless remains an unblinking observer. These are not mannered portraits set in perfectly lit studios, or images that creak under the weight of moody filters and excess saturation. In a Seelie picture, what you see is what you get. A singer wails from a sticky-dank concrete floor (page 175). A man in a pair of tighty-whities displays a pale basketball stomach tattooed with the words *Hug Life* (page 13). There are wild gesticulations, twisted poses, and contorted facial expressions—a kind of punk ballet—of the sort recorded by the late conceptual artist Bruce Conner, who in the 1970s spent a couple of years taking pictures at a San Francisco punk club. In his images, Conner recorded moments of rage, joy, and recklessness. Seelie works in the same vein. In 2012, he attended a vogue dance battle at a Manhattan nightspot. The event produced one of his most remarkable pictures, of a vogue dance battle at the nightclub Escuelita (page 22). In it, a performer in slim jeans and a cropped bright T-shirt bends backward in an acrobatic flip, exposing a length of taut belly and ridges of straining neck muscles. The floor is scuffed and dim; the horizon is lined by a row of blurry legs. It is an erotically charged moment. The dancer gazes right at the lens, lips parted, back arched. But her eyes reveal that she is elsewhere, her mind lost in the mechanics of this extravagant display.