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Transgressing AIDS

FROM THE NYC DOWNTOWN SCENE OF THE EARLY EIGHTIES TO THE WEST VIRGINIA OF TODAY, ACTRESS & SINGER ANN MAGNUSON LENDS HER CREATIVE VOICE TO THE PANDEMIC

by Lester Strong

PHOTOS BY AUSTIN YOUNG

Ann Magnuson is a woman of many talents. Perhaps best known for her acting in movies and on television, she is also a performance artist, a writer, a singer/songwriter, and more recently a visual artist. Among her better-known activities: In the late 1970s and early 1980s, she ran Club 57, a free-wheeling neo-Dada cabaret space cum Monster Movie club located in New York City's East Village dedicated to cultural mayhem and riotous fun; from 1989 to 1992, she played Catherine Hughes, the comically hip editor-in-chief of a Chicago magazine, on the ABC TV sitcom *Anything But Love*; and from

2000 through 2008, she wrote a monthly column, "L.A. Woman," for the magazine *Paper*.

Also, as I discovered in a recent interview, she's an individual whose personal and professional lives have been deeply impacted by AIDS. "I was in a twilight zone, for years and years and years, really," she said. "I lost many good friends, and countless numbers of acquaintances to the disease. I lost my brother to AIDS in 1998. Half of me was in major denial, and half in a place where I couldn't stop thinking about it. My life was running on parallel tracks."

Magnuson moved to New York in

1978 from her native West Virginia after college and studies in theater in London at the British and European Studies Group. She began hanging out at the East Village rock palace CBGB, along with other places in the city familiar to her from television. It was a wild and creative time in the East Village. Minimalism was still the dominant cultural movement in the uptown art galleries, but the East Village was giving birth to a new "Downtown" cultural scene combining punk music, graffiti art, and other forms of street culture that was soon to shake the worlds of art, fashion, and music, and not just in New York City.



Arts by Ann

Highlights of Ann Magnuson's Career

- Late 1970s–early 1980s: Managed Club 57 in New York City's East Village
- 1982: First film role in *Vortex*
- 1983: Second film role in *The Hunger* (opposite David Bowie)
- 1985–1992: Lead vocalist with band Bongwater
- 1987: Starred in *Making Mr. Right* (opposite John Malkovich)
- 1989–1992: Played Catherine Hughes, editor-in-chief of a Chicago magazine, on ABC sitcom *Anything But Love*
- 1995: First solo CD *The Luv Show* (Geffen Records/MCA)
- 2000–2008: Wrote column "L.A. Woman" for *Paper* magazine
- 2006: Second solo CD *Pretty Songs & Ugly Stories* (Asphodel Records)
- 2009: Played Miriam Masterson in Brian Pera's film-in-progress *Woman's Story*
- 2010: Appears in commercials for Charleston, West Virginia's Covenant House HIV/AIDS Residential and Resource Program

Ann Magnuson's Web site: www.annmagnuson.com. Become a Fan of Ann Magnuson on Facebook to view her visual art.

Asked during the interview to define the essence of the Downtown scene from her perspective, Magnuson replied, "Freedom. It was just so exhilarating to be out of your parents' house, to be out of America, in a way. Downtown New York in the 1970s and 1980s was its own—its own—I was going to say 'country,' but really it was its own planet. There was total freedom to be anything you wanted to be."

The Downtown scene certainly gave rise to some remarkable writers, visual artists, photographers, filmmakers, musical groups and singers, performance artists, fashion designers, and alternative clubs and cultural spaces. Names that come to mind: writer and artist David Wojnarowicz; photographer Peter Hujar; artist Lynda Benglis; fashion designer Stephen Sprouse; comic strip and comic book author Art Spiegelman; musical group Blondie, with its lead singer Debbie Harry; performance space The Kitchen.

To those names should be added three individuals who became some of Ann Magnuson's closest friends, along with the performance space that became central to her New York life: artists Kenny Scharf [*A&U*, December 2008] and Keith Haring, German-born avant-garde opera singer Klaus Nomi, and Club 57.

To start with her Club life: If Downtown New York was all about freedom, Club 57 was all about having fun. Located in the basement of the Holy Cross Polish National Church on St. Marks Place, it was known for its Monster Movie club on Tuesday nights, run by Tom Scully and Susan Hannaford, and its theme nights the rest of the week, overseen by Magnuson. In a 1999 *Artforum* article, Magnuson described some of those theme parties:

There was Putt-Putt Reggae Night, where we played miniature golf on a course made of refrigerator boxes designed to resemble a Jamaican shantytown; Model World of Glue Night, where New York's hippest built airplane and monster models, burned them, and sniffed the epoxy; and Elvis Memorial Night, where local juvenile delinquents threw beer on the faulty air conditioner,

which burst into flames, sending all the Elvis look-alikes outside to gyrate on the fire truck....

According to Magnuson during the interview for this article: "We had our own rules, prejudices, and codes. We were not establishment Minimalists, and not appreciated by them at all. We were more colorful, more theatrical, and much more into fun. We were really happy to be alive, and didn't care if the old guard hated us—the more they hated us, the better."

Magnuson's friends Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf of course participated in all the fun, with Haring reading his poetry and curating erotic Day-Glo art shows, and Scharf exhibiting his "hand-customized" appliances and New Wave paintings, while never refusing a chance to perform onstage in parodies of and outrageous tributes to mainstream cultural icons. According to Magnuson, Klaus Nomi never performed operatic arias in his signature falsetto voice and out-of-this-world costumes and makeup at Club 57, but he too was a regular there.

It was a nonstop party, and then AIDS arrived.

The disease entered Magnuson's life in the form of friends who were suddenly and mysteriously very sick, then died. "The first person I knew who became sick was a fellow named Henry Post, who worked at *The Soho Weekly News* before moving on to *New York Magazine*," she explained during the interview. "He came to Club 57, and he and I just got along so well. Then I stopped seeing him. He went into seclusion, and then he died. It was so mysterious and sudden. About this time, the concept of 'gay cancer' started floating around. A while later Klaus Nomi became sick, and he died. They weren't calling it 'gay cancer' anymore, but it was still very mysterious.

"I also had a friend named John Reed, a writer originally from Texas who became very involved with the Gay Men's Health Crisis. He was the first person I knew who talked about this as a serious health issue. He would wear a large safety pin on his lapel as a reminder to be safe, and was very adamant about





telling people to practice safe sex. Then I started hearing new words like 'ARC' and 'AIDS.'"

She continued: "Those of us living in the East Village and downtown, involved in the world of CBGB and Club 57, thought for a while that this illness was a West Village phenomenon. But the shock of losing Henry Post and Klaus—for our group that was a wakeup call. There wasn't any hysteria at first, but we realized it was affecting us too."

As the realization sank in, however, the hysteria wasn't long in arising, just as it arose in most segments of American society. "That's when the real fear came in," said Magnuson, "when you started really to realize this was an epidemic—that everybody might die. And then everybody did start to die. It became obvious we were in the middle of a plague, and I assumed I had the disease too. I assumed everybody had it who lived in our particular bohemian milieu."

Adding to the pressure on Magnuson herself, people started to confide in her about being sick, but with one proviso: She was to tell no one. There was such a stigma attached to the disease that few people wanted to go public. Her brother told her he had AIDS too, but he didn't want her to tell their parents. "I knew all these people who were sick," she said, "but was pledged to silence about them, and couldn't tell my parents about my brother. It was traumatizing."

Surprisingly, according to Magnuson, in her circle of friends the fear and anxiety everyone was feeling just "amped up all of our creative activity." As an example, she pointed to artist Keith Haring, who died from AIDS in 1990. "Keith was always prolific," she said. "But when he found out he was HIV-positive, he just started producing nonstop. You didn't know—you could have a year or two left, you could have only a month."

Magnuson's own creative activities certainly amped up. By the early 1980s she had started the all-girl percussive "orchestra" Pulsallama. She left her position as manager of Club 57—"I was doing it every night for several years," she said during the interview. "I just got

so burned out." But by 1982 she was being cast in one movie after another: *Vortex* (1982), *The Hunger* (1983), *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), *Making Mr. Right* (1987), *A Night in the Life of Jimmy Reardon* (1988), among a string of others. As the AIDS crisis moved into high gear during the mid-1980s, she helped found and sang as lead vocalist with the avant-garde band Bongwater, which released a number of albums. She also performed regularly in Downtown New York theaters, galleries, and clubs, and collaborated with performers Eric Bogosian, Kestutis Nakas, and Joey Arias in many shows.

"Most of my performing was at benefits," she said during the interview. "There were so many benefits for people with AIDS who didn't have insurance or who needed money for other reasons. There were benefits for ACT UP, for AIDS marches. As the deaths went from sixty people to 600 to 6,000, it just became a frenzy."

She also wrote a song about AIDS titled "Folk Song," whose main refrain was "Hello death, good-bye Avenue A," released on the 1990 Bongwater CD *The Power of Pussy*. "It ended up being everybody's favorite, and has quite a cult following," she said.

"All my creative activity was about AIDS," she continued. "But there was so much fear and upset, so much secrecy. I was completely freaked out, and numb in a lot of ways. We would all talk about it. We would wonder, 'Is this my last day?' When I finally got tested, and found out I didn't have the virus, my doctor said my reaction was the most ambivalent he had ever experienced. I couldn't celebrate being healthy with so many others sick and dying."

As for Magnuson's acting, she noted: "I just couldn't invest that much in my career. I was kind of in and out of it."

Nevertheless, her career in all areas continued. As already noted, from 1989 to 1992 she was a regular on ABC's sitcom *Anything But Love*, and she has appeared as a guest star on many other TV shows too numerous to list here. After Bongwater broke up in 1992, she released her first solo CD *The Luv Show* (Geffen Records) in 1995, followed by a

second album, *Pretty Songs & Ugly Stories* (Asphodel Records), in 2006. She has also performed onstage in numerous plays, cabaret acts, and solo performance pieces. Currently she has a major role written specifically for her in novelist/director Brian Pera's latest work-in-progress film, *Woman's Story*, playing Miriam Masterson, host of a successful TV show aimed at a female audience who's about to have a life-defining clash with the male producers of her show. And ever true to her concern about AIDS, in 2010 she will be appearing in commercials to be aired in her native West Virginia promoting Charleston's Covenant House HIV/AIDS Residential and Resource Program.

Ann Magnuson is certainly a woman of many talents—and the diversity of her talents has inspired differing responses. *The New York Times* has described her as an "endearing theatrical chameleon who has as many characters at her fingertips as Lily Tomlin does." *Salon* magazine has described her as a "celebrated icon in the more transgressive margins of culture." Brian Pera has written that Magnuson the performer is "multi-faceted... endlessly resourceful, mercurial and somewhat elusive—funny and musical, with pathos."

Not much, however, has been written about Magnuson's role as a compassionate participant in—and survivor of—the AIDS crisis. No doubt it's a role she would rather have avoided. But, like most participants in life-defining events, she had no say in taking it on.

How has the AIDS crisis defined her? Clearly as a person who despite loss and trauma continues to value life, work, and being part of the world, as someone who has learned to transgress AIDS. That, in turn, is a talent everyone can appreciate, whether at the margins of culture or in the mainstream.

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Feather headdress (lead image) by Laura Kranitz. For more information about the work of photographer Austin Young, log on to www.austinyoung.com.
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