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New York

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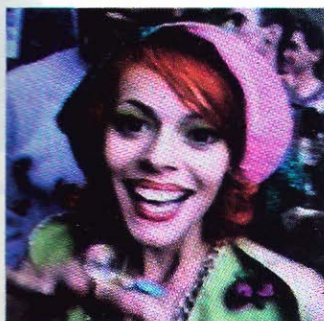
Nelson Sullivan's videos capture downtown nightlife at its '80s peak

By John Sanchez

When someone makes as many home movies as Nelson Sullivan, he'd better have an incredible home, and Sullivan did: New York's booming downtown club and art scene of the 1980s. Between 1982 and his death in 1989, Sullivan shot more than 1,500 hours of tape, bringing the camera along for a handheld ride through then-everyday occurrences—mobbed openings for such graffiti-art stars as Kenny Scharf and Keith Haring, riots in Tompkins Square Park and absurdly glamorous parties thrown by up-and-comers Leigh Bowery and Michael Alig. With little money and a crew of one, Sullivan assembled the most complete record of the first four years of Wigstock, captured early work by storied performers including John Sex and Karen Finley, and immortalized nights at long-gone clubs like Area and the World. Although he was not the best-known player on the scene, he captured its frenzied, joyous spirit, succeeding where many others failed. *Desperately Seeking Susan* and *200 Cigarettes* were pretty caricatures, but Sullivan's mammoth archive is as close as we can get to a not-so-distant past that's becoming harder and harder to recognize. This week, the tapes get their first-ever New York gallery exposure with "Nelson Sullivan: Downtown '82-'89" at Gavin Brown's enterprise.

Like many of his cohorts and subjects, Sullivan did not outlive the '80s—he died suddenly of a heart attack at age 41 on July 4, 1989—so he was never able to assemble the footage into a cable program as he had planned. Although a look at this bygone era could have easily engulfed the viewer in feelings of loss, Sullivan's seamless, on-the-fly camera work fully

captures the joy of the period. His fish-eye lens and flawlessly smooth camera movements create a lo-fi cinematography that brings his scene to life—first-time viewers often say they feel like they're at a party, not watching one.



LIVING ON VIDEO Clockwise from top left: Lahoma Van Zant at Red Zone; deelite's Lady Miss Kier at Wigstock; Sullivan turning the camera on himself.

"Nelson's videos are beautiful art, and they simulate time travel," says Dick Richards, Nelson's childhood friend, who curated "Downtown" with *Index* magazine's Steve Lafreniere. "He had figured out how to look on the surface of the lens rather than through the viewfinder to compose the shot and somehow incor-

porated that with a natural physical grace that produced such sleek views."

Sullivan had been in search of sleek views since the 1950s, when he was Richards's next-door neighbor in Kershaw, North Carolina, a small town where, Richards remembers, visitors were greeted with road signs that read THE KU KLUX KLAN WELCOMES YOU. "We were both clocked as sissies early on, which didn't make for a pleasant school experience," he says. Both Sullivan and Richards, who hosts and produces Atlanta cable TV's *The American Music Show*, latched onto visions of big-city glamour. "Nelson and I had both read *Auntie Mame* by the time we were ten," Richards says, "and television was full of exciting images of places like New York."

After graduating from college,

wasn't able to do with the pen, however, he pursued with the emerging technology of video. Sullivan's tapes cover the odd amalgamation of personalities that made up the downtown of his era, but some core characters—RuPaul, Michael Musto, Larry Tee, a go-go boy named Trade, Lady Bunny and especially Lahoma Van Zant—lend their lives as story lines that anchor the spectacular images.

Larry Tee says that on a scene where everyone had a gimmick, the camera was the soft-spoken, normal-looking Sullivan's method of setting himself apart. "This was his way of being a part of the cool people. It gave him access to the dressing rooms and everything—because all those freaks loved a camera."

In 1989, Sullivan quit his music-store day job to finally devote himself to editing the images he'd spent seven years collecting. Within days, he was dead. On the last evening of his life, he walked out on a Hudson River pier with his aging dog Blackout and taped the sunset, remembering a dead friend and observing Blackout's fading vitality. Sullivan's young age and the suddenness of his death led to speculation that it might not have been due to natural causes, but Richards points out that a lack of health insurance had long kept Sullivan from seeing a doctor, and that one of his grandfathers had also died of a sudden heart attack at 41.

Nelson's final walk on the pier makes a downbeat conclusion for the show, but overall his body of work is a testament to hope and to New York's undying appeal to outcasts and freaks from across the country and around the world. Talking on tape with Van Zant, Sullivan explained what he loved most about the city that he made his home: "New York is the ultimate in freedom... This is one of the few places in the world where you can really be free and not have to care what other people think about you." Democratic in giving everyone his or her turn in front of the lens, Sullivan's tapes find success in the lives of everyone who appears on the screen—no matter what else wound up happening, they all, at least, made it to New York.

"Nelson Sullivan: Downtown '82-'89" plays at Gavin Brown's Enterprise Fri 2-Feb 23. See It's Here, It's Queer.