



George Stoll and Charlie Boone, Jones Beach, NY, 1981 © Allen Frame, courtesy Gitterman Gallery and Matte Editions

A Portrait of the New York Art Scene Just Before the Advent of AIDS

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by Miss Rosen

A new book and exhibition revisit downtown New York in 1981 and capture the face of a lost generation just before the pandemic struck.



John West and Charlie Boone, NYC, 1981 © Allen Frame, courtesy Gitterman Gallery and Matte Editions

In the Deep South lies Greenville, Mississippi, a distinctly progressive town set amid a conservative landscape that gave birth to writers, musicians, and artists including photographer Allen Frame. Being LGBTQ was an unspoken fact of life; few like sculptor Leon Koury had the courage to come out. In the early 1970s, while on break from Harvard University and later Imageworks, Frame spent time at Koury's studio, finding a source of connection that kept him from feeling like a complete outsider in a hypermasculine world.

Dying to escape, Frame moved in New York in 1977 just as the Gay Liberation Movement was in full swing. In 1981, he got a place on Perry Street just blocks from the Stonewall Inn, the site of the historic uprising in the fight for LGBTQ rights. At a time when one could easily afford to live, work, and party in New York, Frame took a job cleaning apartments, which left him with plenty of time to revel in the city's burgeoning downtown art scene. Frame hung out in the East Village amid a new crop of artists and photographers including Nan Goldin, David Armstrong, Kenny Scharf, Dan Mahoney, Peter Hujar, and Alvin Baltrop.



Nan Goldin and Allen Frame in the reflection, NYC, 1981 © Allen Frame, courtesy Gitterman Gallery and Matte Editions

At the same time, Frame was making his own body of work, which French critic Gilles Mora and photographer Claude Nori described as “photobiography.” Like Goldin and Armstrong, Frame created a journal of his personal life, one that evokes the warm intimacy of a family photo album. No longer an outsider, Frame was fully immersed among the avant garde but a penchant for mystery and suspense remained in his work, one that becomes all the more poignant in light of the catastrophe that would soon destroy the fragile world he loved.

And the Band Played On

The new exhibition [Allen Frame: NYC 1981](#) and monograph [Fever](#) offer a glimpse of innocence preserved forevermore like the proverbial fly trapped in amber. Frame celebrated his 30th birthday on April 17, 1981 at the home of Peruvian artist Coco Ugaz along with writer Bill Jacobson and publicist John West. On July 3, the [New York Times](#) published its first story about an unknown disease they described as a “rare and often rapidly fatal form of cancer” affecting gay men. In time, Ugaz, West, and Jacobson would die of the disease, now known as AIDS.



Bob Applegarth, George Stoll, Bill Jacobson, Charlie Boone, and Zamba Gomez, Jones Beach, NY, 1981 © Allen Frame, courtesy Gitterman Gallery and Matte Editions



Allen Frame, NYC, 1982 photo by Frank Franca © Frank Franca, courtesy Gitterman Gallery and Matte Editions

“I lost many of the friends that I had. It was very very traumatic,” Frame told [American Suburb X](#). In short time, a generation disappeared, the famous and anonymous alike, living an unfillable void in their wake. Frame’s photographs, which combine the immediacy of the snapshot with the timeless sensibilities of fine art, preserve the face of a lost generation. Here, we see a world filled with possibility and hope, the hallmarks of youth made all the more poignant by the sense that they cannot begin to imagine the terrors the future will hold.

By Miss Rosen

Miss Rosen is a New York-based writer focusing on art, photography, and culture. Her work has been published in books, magazines, including Time, Vogue, Aperture, and Vice, among others.

Allen Frame: NYC 1981, Gitterman Gallery, online exhibition [here](#).

Fever, MATTE Editions, \$40.00. Available [here](#).



Dan Mahoney, in bed, NYC, 1981© Allen Frame, courtesy Gitterman Gallery and Matte Editions



Darrel Ellis, my apartment, NYC, 1981© Allen Frame, courtesy Gitterman Gallery and Matte Editions



Zamba Gomez, Butch Walker, and Charlie Boone, NYC, 1981© Allen Frame, courtesy Gitterman Gallery and Matte Editions