

Chapter Five – Man, You Have Weird Neighbors

In 1975 John Lennon rang his friend and Westbeth resident Bob Gruen and asked if he could drop in for a coffee, after a long night of bar crawling with Harry Nilsson. Bob had recently moved into a unit facing the Hudson River, but one that was hard to find because it necessitated riding the elevators at the entrance to the third floor, traversing the length of the building along the Bethune Street interior hallway, then taking a different bank of elevators to the cul de sac hallway where Bob was living. Knowing this labyrinth of Westbeth was not easy to navigate, he advised Lennon to ring from the front desk upon arrival and Bob would fetch him, but instead Lennon took off on his own in pursuit of the right apartment. Bob waited for nearly an hour when Lennon breezed into the apartment and his first words were “Man, you have some weird neighbors.” Bob recounted Lennon’s comments “Well, I couldn’t find your apartment so I was ringing doorbells trying to find your place.” Bob said upon being greeted by Lennon standing in their doorway on a Sunday afternoon, “everybody opened the door and was like, oh, let me read you my poem! Let me show you this sculpture I made. Oh, I just wrote a song. Oh, let me show you my paintings.” This random encounter with Westbeth artists led Lennon to conclude there were some odd ducks among Westbeth’s residents, which rings true even today (Gruen 2018).

Artists have a reputation of being free spirits, and not bound by many conventions of society – but in Westbeth some residents pushed this boundary and were not just eccentric, but truly odd or sometimes deeply troubled souls. Some artists embraced or flaunted their eccentricity, such as dancer Edith Stephan who proudly dyed her hair carrot orange and wore a swath of sparkly, teal-colored eye shadow at age 98, or actress Pawnee Sills who always dressed entirely in red including a red turban, and whose apartment furnishings were all red as well. Poet Edward Field

is fond of his reputation as one of the “last Bohemians,” and his friend Tobias Schneebaum reveled in his reputation as an alleged cannibal, stemming from anthropological field research with a remote village. Mixed-media artist Barton Lidice Beneš’ took pride in his apartment that was full to the brim with curated ephemera – from a life-sized stuffed giraffe, to a Chinese opium-smoking bed, to valuable African masks collected from around the world. His apartment was one giant art installation, and is now re-installed in a museum.

The Hoarders

Many of the visual artists have vast collections of “stuff” saved with the intent to use it in artwork eventually, but in some cases these collections of items go beyond just clutter and truly they are hoarders. Bob Gruen’s neighbor in an adjacent apartment refused to throw out his daily newspaper for decades, and at one point Bob realized that the floor to ceiling stack of dry newsprint that his neighbor had stacked along the length of their shared wall presented a huge fire risk and could jeopardize the film prints and negatives that Bob had produced in his career as a photographer. Eventually the building intervened and forced the neighbor to clear out the accumulated paper, which reduced the fire risk, but soon Bob realized that the dense wall of paper had an unexpected benefit of sound insulation between their units.

When illustrator Milda Vizbar died, the executor of her estate discovered an apartment full of junk, with narrow paths cleared to permit her to navigate from the door to bed to bathroom. As volunteers carefully cleared out her possessions they discovered financial records leading to hundreds of thousands of dollars, a deed for another apartment in uptown Manhattan (that proved equally full of hoarded stuff), hundred-dollar bills ferreted away, and expensive garments still

with price tags attached that had never been worn. During her lifetime no one had a clue that she had amassed substantial wealth, or that her apartment was a packrat's nest.

Christina Maile has filmed many of the Westbeth residents over the years, and she recalls filming famed feminist artist Anita Steckel. She recalls Steckel's apartment was jammed full of her old photos, canvases both finished and in progress, drawings, and "bookcases filled with catalogs and magazine articles about her or her work...clothing piled up so densely that she could barely open her apartment door - anyone who entered had to sort of shimmy inside and out. The kitchen was a closet, the stove a shelf, and the sink was full of the kind of odds and ends she thought might come in handy one of these days. Paints, brushes, pencils, papers, were strewn all over, you could read the layers of her apartment like an archaeological dig - uncovering her life strata by strata, canvas by canvas, paper by paper, photo by photo, her body adored, hidden, immortalized like the gold Athena in the Parthenon of her paintings." Like other residents Steckel's hoarding was in part an effort to hold on to any evidence of past success or glory (C. Maile 2017).

Many of the early residents have passed away and left apartments full of possessions, and even in the cases where they leave descendants, there are often mountains of personal detritus that no one wants and gets left behind in the apartment. For many years volunteers have gathered up the rejected possessions and held a biannual flea market to get rid of the surplus items and raise money for the building beautification fund. My own family's mismatched chairs and china, books, and boots ended up in the flea market after their passing. Residents also shop at the flea market, and the walls of their apartments display original artwork from many of the building's deceased residents whose final works ended up in the flea market. The ability to purchase

original artwork at a modest price makes the flea market a draw for hundreds of people from well beyond the neighborhood.

The in-house cleanup team and flea market are a fairly recent innovation, as a response to the case of the most notorious hoarder in Westbeth's history, photographer Harry Shunk. Other residents recognized Shunk as the stealthy figure who would haunt the basement trash and recycling area, and would remove items from the trash and attempt to hide them as he scurried out of the room, pressing himself against the walls as he moved around the space. His odd behavior earned him the derogatory nickname of "the ferret", and although it seemed like everyone knew of him, few actually knew who he was. Earlier in his life he was an accomplished photographer who specialized in photographing other artists, and after his death it was discovered that he had thousands of slides and negatives of nearly every significant visual artist of the previous half century. Shunk had collaborated with dozens of artists, but was especially linked with Christo, famous for wrapping huge things, including buildings, in colorful fabric in his art installations. But for most of the time Shunk lived in Westbeth, he was a deeply troubled secretive person who never admitted anyone into his apartment.

Over the years Shunk accumulated so much junk that he had boxes and boxes piled to the ceiling. Sadly, his accumulated junk eventually collapsed on him, pinning him down and making it impossible for him to escape, and his body was only found when the scent of decomposition made it clear that he had died. At the time of his death in 2006, Shunk had no will and no family, so his estate fell to the Public Administrator of New York County. An initial review of his possessions showed that he had priceless original works of art including many by Andy Warhol, and the most valuable pieces were removed and sold at auction for more than two million dollars (Bennett 2012; Leland 2012).

After the initial rescue of the valuable art work, building manager Steve Neil hired a company to clear out the remaining debris from Shunk's apartment. Lead by Darryl Kelly, they filled several dumpsters with Shunk's junk, and Kelly recalls the apartment was so full that items were piled to within inches of the ceiling, and he had to send his skinniest employee in first to begin creating a pathway for their work (Leland 2012). As Kelly noticed several people retrieving items from the dumpster, he also retrieved items that might be considered "art works" as well as photographic negatives and slides. Kelly stowed these items in his apartment for many years, apparently until his wife was fed up and demanded that he get rid of the "junk". Kelly sent a cellphone photo of art work to Matthew Russas of the Westbeth office staff to inquire whether it was significant. Matthew then summoned Jack Dowling, the Westbeth Gallery Director, and showed him a blurry photo that Jack immediately recognized as one of Warhol's Marilyn Monroe prints.

Russas arranged for Darryl Kelly to bring the items back to Westbeth to be examined. Jack recounted the discovery of the importance of Kelly's trove.

Darryl Kelly and a helper brought a heap of mixed material to the Westbeth Community room. I began riffling through what was piled on a large table helter-skelter, pulling out things like dime store framed prints and other cheap articles when my eye was caught by what I knew was a Christo mock-up for an installation in a Western U.S. valley. As I picked through more things it became clear that the major part of this heap of art and artifacts were important. Letters, photos, boxes of slides, prints, paintings, lithographs and other art works, along with another Christo mock-up.

I told Darryl to please just stay and do nothing. I then ran to the Liechtenstein Foundation down the street. It was about 4:45pm. I knocked and Registrar Natasha Sigmund opened the door. She was obviously ready to leave for the day. I persuaded her to come to the

Community Room and take a look. She graciously did and after looking over the collection she asked if we could keep everything there overnight so that Jack Cowart, the Executive Director could see it. She expected him in the morning. Darryl immediately became suspicious and concerned about leaving the “goods” in the room. I convinced him that they would be safe, as did Matthew. We assured him that the building had watchmen who toured the premises all night long. He reluctantly agreed and said he would come back in the morning.

The following morning, Jack Cowart came and spent a good deal of time going over everything piece by piece. Darryl, Matthew, Darryl’s handyman and I more or less stood back. Cowart made no comment, he just examined everything with care. When he seemed satisfied he asked Darryl if he would agree to bring everything across the street to the foundation’s space. He stated that he felt that it should be documented, photographed and examined in more detail. Darryl was leery about this turn of events...the material, the value of which he had no clue...being moved out of his hands. He had no idea who was Roy Lichtenstein was nor what was the foundation. I talked with him to ease him off any mistrust and assured him that he would be dealing with a very respectable and well-known organization. With the help of staff from the Foundation, we carried everything across the street. Sometime later I saw in the New York Times the article with photos of Darryl, his wife and the other handyman at the auction where many of the pieces sold at a very decent price (Dowling 2019).

Jack Dowling was very frustrated with the whole process of the dissolution of Harry Shunk’s estate, most especially with the building management who had no idea who Shunk was or the potential value of his collective works. As Jack noted, all they would have to have done was a

quick internet search to learn that Shunk was an important figure in the art world through the late 1950s. Neil and Russas claimed to have no idea what happened to the Shunk estate, but evidence to the contrary suggests they were intimately involved in the estate's dissolution. Ultimately 200,000 of Shunk's slides were ultimately placed in five major museums around the world and Westbeth received nothing from any of these transactions. This was especially galling to Jack, as in a film about the dissolution of the Shunk estate, *Harry's Gift*, there are scenes of dressed up Darryl Kelly and his wife at the auction of the items Kelly had salvaged (Isles 2015). Despite protestations to the contrary, clearly Neil and Russas knew what was to become of the remaining valuable items from Harry Shunk's trove, and did nothing to ensure that some of the value would accrue to Westbeth. Other residents were less charitable, and suspected that Neil and Russas personally profited from the transactions and concealed this from their employer, the Westbeth corporation.

Beyond Eccentric

In any community of several hundred people, there will be a few who suffer from mental illnesses. In a community of several hundred artists, there is perhaps an even greater likelihood that there will be people who are mentally ill. In the early years of Westbeth's existence, when the neighborhood was rough and dangerous, the residents had to contend with homeless people who would attempt to gain entry into the building, and then find a secluded corner in the basement and become squatters. Jack Dowling recalls the residents formed tenant patrol teams to secure the safety of the building and evict squatters, and many women carried whistles to blow if they felt they were in danger (Dowling 2018, 2020). Doris Mare has lived with her artist husband Emil in Westbeth since its inception, and she spent many years working in a local psychiatric

clinic. This placed her in an awkward situation as she would recognize clients who were being treated at the clinic as Westbeth neighbors, and because she wished to maintain their anonymity she intentionally remained disengaged from community events to avoid awkward conversations until long after she retired (Mare 2018).

A few residents' mental illness resulted in behaviors that were not merely erratic, but threatening. Pat Lasch lives in one of the hallways that is only accessible from one direction, and in order to access her apartment she had to pass the door of a neighbor who was very disturbed. Her neighbor threatened residents along their shared corridor, wielding hammers and kitchen knives and threatening to hurt them. As the management was unable to alter her behavior, she was eventually evicted for the sake of the community, and Pat had to testify at a court hearing about witnessing her threatening behavior. One notoriously unstable long-term resident has intimidated neighbors with his behavior. Barry is thought to be schizophrenic and would terrorize his neighbors by pounding on their shared walls, screaming, and being abusive. His behavior led both Barton Beneš and Lucille Rhodes to switch units in the building as he frightened them (Rhodes 2019). As the population of the building aged and more elderly residents began to exhibit dementia and other erratic behavior, Westbeth added a social worker to the staff, who is able to help prevent vulnerable elderly people from being taken advantage of or harmed.

Westdeath

The most distressing examples of behavior associated with mental illness are the suicides that have taken place in the community. For many years Westbeth was the tallest building in the

West Village, and it became known to troubled souls around the city as a place for committing suicide by jumping from the roof. In spring 1971 two suicides by jumping occurred at Westbeth, one from a stranger who found her way to the rooftop, and the other resident photographer Shelley Broaday. A few years later painter Philipp Weichberger jumped as well, and former Westbeth resident Ana Mendieta fell to her death in a nearby apartment high-rise that she occupied with her husband and artist Carl Andre. In several of these cases, alcohol played a role in the mental anguish of the person who died. Weichberger's children recall their father's compulsive drinking. Neighbors recall raucous, alcohol fueled fights between Mendieta and Andre, and they doubt the story of Mendieta's suicide and believe Andre pushed his wife to her death (Bosworth 1984; Bruner 2011; Davidson 2017; Lasch 2017).

During the 1970s, many people in the building saw suicides, either by witnessing the act, or seeing the body on the pavement outside the building. Jack Davidson recalls having dinner with friends in his apartment when a body flew past the window, and he remains haunted by this image. Davidson's wife worked in the psychiatric unit at Mt. Sinai Hospital and he occasionally temped there as well, and he commented that when a very mentally troubled person was suddenly calm and seemed to be getting better, it was often because they had made a plan for their suicide and saw a way out of their torment (Davidson 2017). Irving Vincent recalled a late night knock on the door and being greeted by police, inquiring whether everyone in his family was safe and accounted for. The body of a woman had been discovered just below the 10th floor windows where the family slept, and he was asked to identify the deceased woman, who he recognized as the mother of his twins' playmate (Vincent 2023).

Some of the people who grew up at Westbeth have macabre memories of witnessing dead bodies and of feared that their parents may follow suit, as their peers' parents died. The images of a

mangled body that fell 13 stories and was lacerated during the fall by the large lanterns on the exterior of the building remain vivid in the memories of children who grew up in Westbeth. The suicides and the reputation of the building as a magnet for those who wished to jump led the younger generation to dub the building Westdeath or Deathbeth (Prete and Sonnenberg 1995; Bottoms-Newby 2020; J.a.E.M. Maile 2019). Some of the adults in the building, including my aunt Shami, formed groups and invited the teenagers to talk about their feelings and fears, in hopes of diminishing the trauma they experienced from witnessing suicides.

The most famous of Westbeth's tragic suicides is that of famed photographer Diane Arbus, although she chose a more private method to end her life. Arbus is famous for both her photographs that challenged and discomforted the viewer, and for her unconventional sex life, even for the 1960s. She came from a wealthy family and had been raised among the elites of New York City, but she eschewed the trappings of her wealthy, but staid family and intentionally flaunted their expectations. She married young to an established photographer, and they separated in 1960, and for the next decade she supported herself as a freelance photographer shooting for commercials and the fashion industry. In her spare time, she chose to spend time on the fringes of society, and reveled in taking photographs of people she termed "freaks", including those who exhibited themselves in carnivals, people with profound developmental disabilities, nudists, burlesque performers, drag queens, and especially twins and triplets. Her photos were not the traditional say-cheese smiling faces, but rather capture looks that are haunted, threatening, and grim. Nadia Dajani recalls when her mother was approached by Arbus to photograph her twin brothers Tarik and Geeby. As Arbus introduced herself the twins rolled by, "my mother said it was like right on cue...my brothers, the little terrorists, are behind her then go rolling by, like setting each other on fire, like a jackhammer and a Tasmanian devil ball" upon

which Arbus thanked them and left. The lively Dajani twins didn't have the somber, stoic, creepy appearance of the faces in her art photos (Bosworth 1984; Dajani 2020).

Arbus gained increasing notoriety during the 1960s for her photographs and for her unbridled sexuality. She had “sex with as many people as possible, partially to test herself, partially *to see what it was like*” and her sexual encounters were more about a nihilistic exploration of others without emotional consequences, and yet these sexual adventures masked a deep and chronic depression that had followed her for years (Bosworth 1984). She moved to Westbeth in January 1970 at the same time as her friend and visual artist Mary Frank. For a time she was happier and more stable, living in this community of kindred spirits, although she was worried about her financial stability. A few months after her arrival at Westbeth she learned that her work had been accepted for the Venice Biennale scheduled for summer 1972. This was a major success, as this show was one of the most prestigious in the world, and had never before accepted the work of a photographer. Yet despite the growing acclaim for her work, she remained deeply self-critical and insecure. Her friends recounted in retrospect that there were signs that she was wrapping up her life and contemplating suicide, but they only recognized these omens through the lens of the rear-view mirror. A few days after sharing dinner with her famous brother, US Poet Laureate Howard Nemerov, Arbus laid down in her bathtub and took her life by swallowing drugs and slashing her wrists. Ironically, the Westbeth's founders' expectations that residence in this vibrant community would result in a fluorescence and fame for the artists in essence came true for Arbus, as her work received positive global attention soon after her tragic death, including at the 1972 Vienna Biennale.

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