



The Kitsch Company, *The Young Ladies of Avignon or the Whores of Avignon*, El Nueve Bar (background by Armando Cris- teteo), 1989, Arkheia Documentation Center, UNAM Museum of Contemporary Art Collection.

Zazil Collins\*

## All Roads Lead to El Nueve

The night is silence and noise; waking and dreams, chaos and ghetto, the place to build new imaginaries, collectivize ideas, build civic conscience. The night is public square, network, pact, confidence. Anonymity and truce, fear and curfew, for totalitarianism. To inhabit the night is to gain the civic, public space: to exercise freedom in the midst of despotism. When fear breaks down, one gains the street. When there is no night, our notebooks are left blank. Today, the night is nostalgia.

Since the forced shuttering of night spots due to the Covid pandemic—known locally as the *antropausa*, or hot-spots-on-hold—Mexico City residents miss a series of cultural venues/bars like El Bósforo, 316 Centro, El Foro Alicia, Bucareli 69, La Cañita, La Bota (Casa Vecina), Barba

Azul, and La Botica, among many others. Like the night, these locales have transformed certain notions of the communal, based on encounters in nocturnal, musical, literary, and visual happenings among artists and audiences. Among memorable precursors of those places, we also recall others: El Virreyes, La Quiñonera, El Mestizo, Fxion, El Galaxy, Foro Ideal, Bar Milán, El Hábito, El Hijo del Cuervo, and much earlier, iconic epicenters like Rockotitlán-Rockstock and El Nueve.

La Disco Bar 9, as some people refer to El Nueve, was practically the first club to host some of the underground bands that would be foundational in the history of rock in Mexico: Casino Shanghai (probably one of the first groups to incorporate poetry), Size (one of the first punk groups), Maldita Vecindad, Santa Sabina, and Las Insólitas Imágenes de Aurora, to name the most emblematic, which used to perform every Thursday. At the club, which opened Tuesday

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to Saturday from 8 p.m. to 2 a.m., protest songs and their codes coexisted with the “enlightened” upper and middle classes, and even institutional outsiders, looking for an atmosphere of creative freedom amidst their struggle to build a civil society out of diverse artistic expressions.

It was not always like that. In its beginnings, El Nueve was limited to the “closeted” political elite, including people in show business, and the upper and middle classes, forming a kind of ghetto with membership-based restricted access, giving the club an air of entrenched social and political conservatism, with which Henri Donnadieu—one of the founders— never fully agreed. In response, as conditions changed, a more Trotskyist—or at least anti-Stalinist— mentality gradually infiltrated El Nueve, incorporating culture in the club as part of a revolution intertwined with the battle against AIDS and in favor of the rights of Mexico’s gay community. In the words of filmmaker Angeles Martínez, who is producing a documentary on El Nueve, to be published in mid-2021, “Its freedom and uninhibited spirit endure, and that is its legacy.”<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, in the wake of the devastation left by the 1985 earthquake, and the ensuing economic vicissitudes and power struggles, little by little the place started to expand its interests and attract a different clientele, offering more affordable prices and loosening controls on access. A combination of glamour, eccentricity, and the mystery of an only vaguely remembered past was the perfect ingredient for the mythification of characters and spaces. This, added to the prevailing social and political climate, made El Nueve a reference point for the nightlife of modern Mexico City, a sanctuary from persecution and repression, even among people in the political elite and entertainment, directly linked to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and former elite members of police forces friendly with city mayor Hank González.

However, those times were distinguished by *forgetting the being*, both historical oblivion (that of PRI dictatorship censorship and of the media, which to this day continue



Photographer unknown

Jaime La Vite as Divine at El Nueve Disco Bar (background Henri Donnadieu), ca. 1983, Arkheia Documentation Center, UNAM Museum of Contemporary Art.

to conceal their official records), and forgetfulness triggered by traumas: the trauma of 1968, of course, which marked the collective memory of several generations, followed by the traumas of 1971, the HIV pandemic, the 1985 earthquake, and the 1988 electoral fraud.

El Nueve operated from 1974 to 1989, 15 years in which, in the words of the journalist Guillermo Osorno—whom I had the good fortune to assist researching his book *Tengo que Morir Todas las Noches* (I Have to Die Every Night) (Debate, 2014)—: “The adventures of Henri Donnadieu and the bar El Nueve are like the flip side of the official story.” In those years, Mexico City forged its cosmopolitan spirit, whose human origin lay in *collective* action. Starting in the mid-1970s, in contrast with the institutional persecution that drove political groups to avoid meetings, elite social circles started to pursue *la fiesta*, an intrepid act, to be sure, but one they could afford, with capital and contacts.

Excesses and fancies came and went until a group known as The Untouchables founded El Nueve on the premises of a former restaurant named Le Neuf. Accounts of the event recall that the controversial actress Irma “The Tigress” Serrano and another mythical character, the queen of transvestites, “La Xóchitl,” immortalized by a cameo in the film *María of My Heart* (1979), written by Gabriel García Márquez and directed by Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, presided over the grand opening. Subsequently, the bar’s daily routine was broken down into cocktails, theme nights, homages, and even an Oscar awards ceremony. Singer and dancer Lola Flores put in an appearance there, as did María Félix, Pita Amor, Isela Vega (the first Latina Playmate), Carlos Monsiváis, La Chiquitibum, Carmen Salinas... and as the word spread, the club was overrun by countless members of Mexico’s political, cultural, and showbusiness communities. Each deserves his or her own biography,

including the music groups that made their home at El Nueve, and visual artists like Mathias Goeritz or Juan José Gurrola, who, invited by Diego Matthai, painted temporary murals on its walls month after month.

El Nueve innovated in many areas, went through several stages of renewal, and at the same time found ways to adapt to the city’s evolution, which was no small task. As a result, it consolidated *la fiesta* in the culture: the cherry on top, including its own theatrical company, the Kitsch Company, and a film club. The anecdotal history makes it appear that all roads lead to El Nueve, largely due to the management of Henri Donnadieu. He can still be seen from time to time on the streets of the Roma Neighborhood and naturally in the Pink Zone, and even occasionally in series like *The House of Flowers* (Netflix, 2020), hosting El 6, a nod, of course, to El Nueve. Also, the Chopo Museum keeps on its premises a personal collection of Henri Don-

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Membership card, courtesy of the author.



Juan Carlos Juarena

*The Union of Terror*, performance at El Nueve, 1989.

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nadieu, which includes his management of El Nueve and his career as a producer in Mexican theater.

In addition to creating El Nueve in the Pink Zone and its branch in Acapulco, visited by public figures like Grace Jones, for example, Henri was also involved in creating El Metal. This legendary 1980s discotheque opened for only a couple of days and was an attempt to compete with top New York nightclubs; one remaining part of its origins, a piece by artist Diego Matthai, is displayed at the National Autonomous University of Mexico University Cultural Center. Time passed and Donnadiu took over management of the bar Amour, on the ground floor of Casa Roma, a public house project that at night operated as a night club in principle for locals, which, like El Nueve, was founded on the former premises of a French restaurant at 76 Orizaba Street, near the corner of Colima Street.

Casa Roma operated for a short time, between 2009 and mid-2011, as a confluence of desires, good intentions, and experiments by a group of young partners, starting with the search for a locale for what became a nomadic record store called Discos Camaleón. Coincidence brought together the owner of the house, Cesar Regino; Raúl Santoscoy of Discos Camaleón; and a duo of French artists, Ruy and Inigo Villamil (director of the Bahidorá Festival). Even Quentin Tarantino was present for one of its eccentric nights. The project evaporated just when the Roma Neighborhood began a period of gentrification that pushed out many of its original inhabitants.

Finally, Henri's dream of getting back to doing what he enjoys and does best materialized on June 21, 2018, when El 9 reopened in the Pink Zone, with new premises at 58 Amberes Street, with Arianne Pellicer and Carlos Robledo of Casino Shanghai cutting the red ribbon.

That day I went convinced that Donnadiu would still have the same magic touch as he had in the past, when El 9 was at 156 Londres Street, three decades before, but the Pink Zone has changed. It changed in the 1980s after the earthquake, and between then and now, when propri-

etors pay protection money to criminal gangs. The audiences have also changed: most attendees know nothing of the history of the original El Nueve. And the new El 9 has not managed to take off and attract the cultural circles that gather in different parts of the city, unlike the 1970s and 1980s. Given the multiplicity of gathering places, groups, and currents, today it is hard to mention a single bar or venue that has anything like the impact El Nueve achieved. Also lost in the mists of the past is the repression that prevented assembly and democratic partying. Today we live under the dictatorship of disappointment. In the words of Angeles Martínez, Mexico City “needs poems that help us continue to experience it and to love it,” an affirmation that informs the spirit of her forthcoming documentary, which “will be narrated by one living man and another who is dead, with a narrative and esthetic conceit based on a deck of cards (custom designed), with portraits of the leading characters that will allow me to nimbly tell my story visually with the aid of archival material (recordings, photographs, press clippings) and animations that will make it possible to explain issues for which no visual record exists.”<sup>2</sup>

In the aftermath of the *antropausa* that began in 2020, the night will be redefined. Rates of violent crime in Mexico have risen exponentially and the army has authority to patrol the streets, if so ordered, under a legal framework unprecedented in Mexico, which in many areas will undoubtedly alter the nightlife of a citizenry seeking to defend its freedoms.

A city's democratic thermometer is based on how it lives its nights: legality, safety, mobility, and cultural offerings and strategies; we need to ensure that those experiences remain public. We have embarked on a new era, with an opportunity to redesign and inhabit nocturnal spaces, from parliaments representing all the city's communities, business owners, and residents. It would be historic to see new legislation on spaces abandoned since 1985 and that could be donated to the cultural community to be refurbished and administered as open spaces. This is what one would expect of a cultural capital like Mexico City. ■■■

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Email to the author, July 29, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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