

INSIDE AREA

The Wizardry of New York's Hottest Club • By Jesse Kornbluth

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Area owners (from left)
Chris Goode, Shawn Hausman,
Eric Goode, and Darius Azari.



INSIDE

AREA

By

Jesse Kornbluth

ON THE DANCE FLOOR, THE THEME IS SCIENCE FICTION.

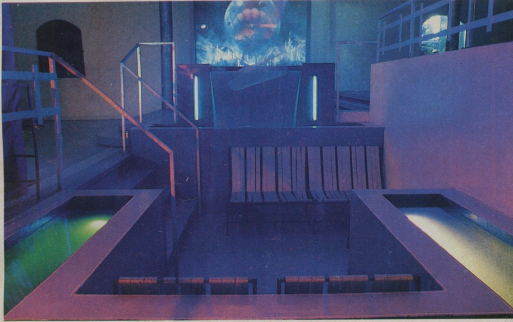
AT NINE ON SUNDAY MORNING, AN HOUR WHEN MOST DANCE-hall owners are unconscious, the four owners of Area are just going to work. They wear jeans, engineer boots, sweatshirts, and, in one case, a green-and-yellow cap with a little buckle in front. Not stylish stuff, but well suited to late January's most urgent task—today, for the thirteenth time in Area's sixteen-month existence, the club's proprietors are going to destroy it and then, in a four-day marathon they call a "change," build it anew.

Darius Azari, Christopher and Eric Goode, and Shawn Hausman begin their assault with hammers and crowbars. The flaming cross, the central artifact of December's Faith theme, is wrenched from the swimming pool. Into the dumpster go the Mexican-church façade, the giant Buddha, the Egyptian tomb. By noon, with more helpers on the scene, the hundred-foot entranceway is stripped bare, and discarded icons litter the dance floor.

With a \$60,000 budget—twice what a change usually costs—and 40 experienced employees willing to work around the clock, it should be possible to install Area's next theme, Science Fiction, well before 11 p.m. on Wednesday, when the club reopens. What, after all, needs to be done? Set the sci-fi constructions in the club's eight display cases. Convert the entranceway into an intergalactic intestinal tract. Paint. Cover the swimming pool, and build a lunar landscape. Arrange the projectors. Move the lights. And open.

An impossible task. For although Area is arguably the most ambitious and inventive dance club around—no other disco attempts more than seasonal redecoration—the thirteenth change might as well be the first. The club's design studio is quite small, its storage space nonexistent. As a result, the new displays must be built in the club during the day, broken down and hidden at night, then pulled out for assembly during a change. And that rarely happens smoothly. The owners are famous for violent arguments about aesthetics, and their decisions about the next

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THE SILVER LOUNGE CONTAINS THE BAR, WHERE WORLDS COLLIDE.

theme tend to get made weeks after they're supposed to.

So at 3 P.M. on Wednesday, two of the seven giant stalagmites that are to dominate the dance floor are still only skeletons. Shawn Hausman's pet project—a plastic space homunculus that is supposed to oversee the room on a track powered by a garage-door motor—can't be made to run properly. Five of the eight display windows are still empty. All the ladders are in use, and desperate workers are overturning garbage cans and standing on them. This deprives other workers of containers for papier-mâché, so they grab champagne buckets. Upstairs, Chris Goode leans out a window to hang a rocket sign and succeeds only in blowing a fuse. The lights, computer, and telephones crash as one.

"I can't take much more of this," someone says.

He is wrong.

Now the workers, many of them functioning on an hour's sleep, are slowing down. At this pace, they might be preparing a gym for next month's high-school prom, or, perhaps, an amateur show: "Andy Hardy Builds a Disco." The most varied and discriminating dance-club clientele on the planet will, tonight, surely be disappointed.

At eleven, Darius Azari shoulders a video camera and memorializes chaos: workers flailing with decorative details, Chris Goode on a ladder readying the lights, bartenders struggling to prepare the just-painted lounges. Usually, Darius turns on some music at this hour, everyone drinks beer, and satisfaction reigns. Tonight, there's no time for private celebration.

At 11:45, Eric Goode turns to his sister Jennifer.

"You going?"

"Yes."

"Let's go together. Now."

Johnny Dymell, in black tights and a chain-mail shirt, saunters to the D.J. booth to start the music. Eric and Jennifer depart. The club opens.

Eric Goode is the most widely known of the owners, but no one



DENZENS OF THE DEEP.

would note his absence; minutes after the first guests stroll in, oohing and aahing, the club is filled. Or, rather, three clubs are filled. The first is the one on the dance floor, where young Wall Streeters in pin-striped suits and young women in taffeta dresses forget their portfolios together. They're joined by college kids dancing alone, a middle-aged couple or two, a sprinkling of blacks. But few bohemians are here—the music's too industrial for that. Indeed, it is shockingly retro, bass-heavy disco—the sort of sound you find in second-rate night-spots around the world and are not expecting to find here. But dancing isn't what Area's really about. The second club—the downtown Elaine's—is the silver bar, set far enough away from the dance floor to blunt the disco beat. Under the glass bar is a

long, perforated sheet of steel, with straight pins filling the perforations. You can stick your hand under these pins and make a wave pattern by pushing them up—or, if it's your taste, draw a little blood. This décor-danger motif is repeated on the back wall, where lemon sharks glide through an aquarium.

The silver bar is where worlds collide. Andy Warhol might be brushing up against Malcolm Forbes, Keith Haring and Jean Michel Basquiat against David Byrne or Giorgio Armani, Scavullo and Joan Rivers against Phoebe Cates or Henry Geldzahler. And if no one's mixing, Stephen Saban, the Boswell of the night, will push them together, later to remind them what happened in his column in *Details*.

The third club is the cavernous ladies' room. The owners always saw this as a hangout, but they never imagined that men would outnumber women here. While women preen before the mirrors, others mill around, waiting for an invitation to share a stall for a bit of substance abuse or even some friendly sex. These longings are more desired than experienced, and so the ladies' room becomes, in effect, an Easter parade for voyeurs.

Nevertheless, this is pretty hot stuff when compared with other clubs. Studio 54 is now a moon shadow of itself. Its strenuous pecking order has given way to promotional parties and a sushi bar. Xenon, once the favored watering hole of the Europeans, is closed; Club A hasn't quite taken its place. Limglight is a money machine that admits anyone with \$15. Danceteria, for all its efforts to feature different themes on different floors, caters mostly to kids. Kamikaze is nondescript. The Fun House and the Roxy are mostly for serious dancers. And if you put the crowd at Visage under bright lights, you wouldn't find Area's mix of names and faces.

Which leaves downtown as the last best hope of night crawlers. Those with an appreciation of the Lower East Side art scene, a heightened sense of irony, and a

Photograph, top: Langdon Clay.



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rea's regulars, who follow the scene as if it were the stock market, know it's the place to be when a theme is introduced.



A PERFORMANCE PIECE (LEFT) AND THE HUNDRED-FOOT ENTRANCEWAY.

laissez-faire attitude about promptness will find much to amuse them at the Chandalier, the Limbo lounge, and 8 BC. MTV addicts can watch videos on lots of screens at Private Eyes. In *Bright Lights, Big City*, Jay McInerney made Heartbreak into a legend, but its ladies' room is not like its counterpart in his novel, nor is the crowd as lively as his 1983-era cynics made it. (McInerney recently had a book party thrown for him at Area.) For live rock, there's still the Ritz and Irving Plaza.

To most of America and even to most New Yorkers, these distinctions are unimportant and incomprehensible. But for night people, who follow this scene as if it were the stock market, they are crucial. They know that Area is the only club to entwine the disparate strands of New York nightlife—arty displays, famous and anonymous patrons, the faintest whiff of decadence, and the occasional live band. So at 1 A.M. on the night a new theme is introduced, it is the place to be.

It's exactly 1 A.M. when Darius Azari grins. "Too bad nobody came," he says, and follows Chris Goode and Shawn Hausman into the night.

That the owners of Area would punt on the evening of a hard-won triumph is no surprise to those who know them. They don't drink or take drugs, don't dance or listen to rock music, don't recognize celebrities, don't even like to go out.

How is it, then, that they've built the former Pony Express stables on Hudson Street in TriBeCa into an international draw grossing more than \$3 million a year? And how—without money of their own or big-time backers—have they done it at the improbable ages of 25, 26, 27, and 28?

THE CHAIN OF EVENTS THAT LED TO AREA began in 1970, when Frederick Goode left the Thatcher School in Ojai, California, to start his own school. He moved his wife and five children to San Rafael and, with a friend, founded the School of Arts and Sciences, where students did their academic work in the morning

and experimented in the arts all afternoon. In 1973, Shawn Hausman, the seventeen-year-old son of film producer Michael Hausman and actress Diane Varsi, enrolled and met Eric Goode, the headmaster's sixteen-year-old son. Shawn liked making surrealist movies. Eric aped sixties pop-art constructions. Neither had much use for school. They became instant friends. Goode's second son, fifteen-year-old Chris, was at the Athenian School in Danville, California, where he got very good grades and won the lead in the school play. That he was something of a prankster—he once transformed an old Volkswagen bus into a spaceship and drove it

through the cafeteria—only added to his stature. Darius Azari, the fifteen-year-old son of a Persian physicist, was also attending Athenian, though not as happily as Chris. He was, however, having quite a nice affair with a teacher. Late one night, as he slipped back into the dorm, he noticed Chris's door open and his light on. Darius looked in. Chris had visitors; Eric and Shawn. Both wore silver cowboy outfits. "I was intrigued," Darius recalls. "I walked in."

This affinity group was soon getting along better than the Goode nuclear family. With her sisters, Mrs. Goode had inherited a ranch in Sonoma. And with them, she'd got hooked by the self-help gurus then befogging San Francisco; soon, these eccentrics were using the ranch as a rural outpost. Adults running naked across the landscape was not what Frederick Goode meant by progressive education. He moved to Seattle, his wife remained in Sonoma, and in the fall of 1975, when the other children dispersed to live in the woods or attend school, Eric chose to stay on for a few months in the Goodes' eight-bedroom house in San Rafael.

That December, Eric decided "to impress some girlfriend" by giving a party. If the theme was predictable—boredom in suburbia—the approach was not. He and Shawn gave each room its own party motif, and instead of Santa Claus coming out of the living-room fireplace, they had a naked boy emerge followed by live chickens. A hundred costumed kids cheered, and December Dog, as Eric called it, was a great success.

Eric and Shawn decided to expand. In the spring of 1976, they spent two weeks preparing for a slumber party at the Sonoma ranch. They set up beds and tents in the fields, built a maze of tires, filled bathtubs with liquor. Chris and Darius trucked Athenian students 80 miles for Spring Puppy, which was also a hit.

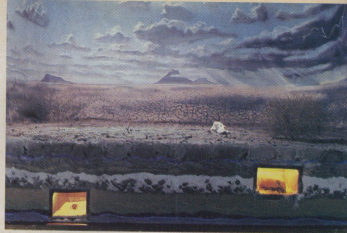
That summer, the four spent a month in Sonoma preparing Dog Gone. They got 100 outdoor posters, which they pasted on jerry-built billboards that had been jammed together to form a tunnel leading to the swimming pool. They poured bushels of apples into the pool and strung giant red weather balloons on overhead cables. Then, because they were now beyond the high-school scene, they invited hundreds of the hippest people they knew in San Francisco.

Only twenty showed up.

THREE YEARS PASSED. CHRIS CAME TO NYU TO study acting and film. Eric enrolled at Parsons School of Design. Shawn tried the California College of Arts and Crafts and San Francisco State before coming to New York to do film-production work. Darius signed up for premed at USC. On the surface, the four boys appeared to be settling down. In fact, they were seething—at the limits of school, their employers' narrow imaginations, and, most of all, at the futility of working on enterprises they didn't control.

For Chris—whose boyish good looks and easy manner give people the impression that he's the most stable of this group—

Running their first club, the four friends hung fresh bones near a cow's head, put eels in tanks under the bar, and alternated films on joggers with bestiality movies.



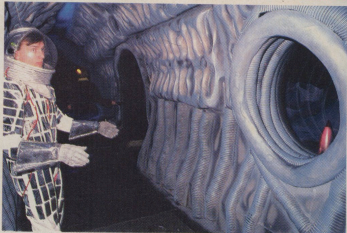
ELEMENTS



NIGHT



HALLOWEEN



SCIENCE FICTION



OBELISKS



RETROSPECTIVE



WAR



WAR



CONFINEMENT

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the pressure was most unrelieved, NYU acting classes reminded him of the est weekends his mother had forced on him. And the jobs that paid his tuition—the 6 a.m.-to-1 p.m. shift at a Penn Station bank, an apprenticeship to a volatile fashion photographer, and production work on feature films—only intensified his loathing for low-paying subservience. To keep himself sane, he switched into the NYU film department and took photographs of men in pink suits holding pink drinks.

Eric was also having a hard time. Studio 54 was then cresting, and he and Shawn went there every weekend. "I spent more time making my costumes than I did on school projects," Eric says. "Shawn would leave Studio at 6 a.m. to work on Hair, and I'd go off to Parsons, but I knew school wasn't right." In his second semester, he went home and enrolled at San Francisco's Academy of Art.

During this final fling with formal education, Eric decided to throw the biggest "dog" of them all. He rented a Quonset hut in San Francisco for \$100, chose Sex, Fear, and Cars as his theme, and enlisted 25 volunteers to execute it. "Everything we did involved synthetics," he recalls. "The guests came in disposable clothes, got fingerprinted, had their pictures taken by a camera with no film in it, and entered the hut through a dark tunnel." Shawn flew out for this event, saw 300 people partying madly, and agreed with Eric's assessment—"this was their dream made real, this was clubland."

With their enthusiasm revived, the group reassembled in New York. Eric and Shawn moved into a \$400-a-month loft on Walker Street, where they were joined by Darius, who'd left college to take elementary-school-class photographs in Brooklyn. For décor, they displayed their motorcycles and appropriated abandoned sets from the movies they worked on. For money, they redesigned a floor at the Mudd Club, drove limousines, and, as often as they could, worked on movies. And inevitably, they gave another of their parties.

The invitation—a scrap of paper with tiny print, and a magnifying glass—suggested that this was more than a loft party. The event itself left no doubt: There were slides, films, a D.J., and 400 guests. "After that, it was hard to be excited about movies," Eric says. "If you're not the director or an actor, it's like any other job."

If all Eric now wanted was to open a club, he had allies in Darius and Shawn. "My family always entertained," Darius explains, "and in Iran, a party's not just a party. It's something you plan and manipulate." The only holdout was Chris, and

circumstances would soon encourage him to throw his lot in with his brother and their friends.

As teenagers, Chris and Eric had discovered that their grandfather had left a second legacy at the Sonoma ranch—a collection of guns, coins, and rugs. In a few years, they'd sold off many of these items to support themselves. In the summer of 1980, with money tight, Darius, Chris, and Jill Burkhart (then Chris's girlfriend, now his wife) got a truck and drove off to Pennsylvania in search of similar treasure. It wasn't long before they were stopped by police and put in jail.

Darius, who grows a Nixonian beard by noon, was dubbed Mafia Man by other prisoners. Chris, who doesn't need to shave, became Womanhead. The first day in jail, he made the mistake of beating a convicted bank robber at chess. "After that," Chris says, "it was all over for Womanhead."

Within a few days, says Chris, "we pled guilty to trespassing—not even a misdemeanor—and went home."

BY THE SPRING OF 1981, THE FRIENDS WERE ready to try a place of their own. They found a fourth-floor walk-up at 516 West 25th Street and got to work. In a display case, they set two live rabbits in a nest of fake fur. They brought 40 fresh bones from the meat markets and hung them from the ceiling near a cow's head they'd had encased in plastic. Eels swam in tanks under the bar. The projectors alternated films of joggers with bestiality movies.

"We did a lot of stuff I regret," Eric now says. To draw a crowd, the foursome mailed thousands of black-and-yellow capsules with a note directing the recipients to add hot water and stir. Those who did saw a small plastic rectangle float to the surface, advising them of the club's existence. On opening night, 1,000 people showed up, each with \$5 in hand.

Because the club was operating outside the law, the four friends planned to open it two nights a week for just a month. An off-duty policeman from the Bronx dropped in one night, causing Chris to run downstairs and stash money in trash cans as he fled. But having survived that scare, the owners decided to remain open for a grand total of thirteen nights.

One morning near the end of that run, the exhausted quartet stuffed the previous night's take in a box, staggered to their truck, and began driving a load of garbage to New Jersey. The truck was rickety, and the door fell open. Money flew into the

street, followed by four disheveled young men. It was a funny farewell to 25th Street—and a telling metaphor for what was to come.

IN THE SPRING OF 1982, ERIC, Shawn, Chris, and Darius spent their days bicycling around the city, stopping at every building that looked as if it might have a vacancy. Only two seemed promising: the General Tire building and the building at 157 Hudson Street, three blocks south of Canal. Because this building was adorned by two sculpted dog heads, it was the clear favorite.

With 12,500 square feet, it was also closer to their fantasy. "We wanted a long entranceway, a separate lounge, and a big flex space," Eric says. "But then we wanted to twist those norms with display cases that held water in the bar, glass floors with people underneath, huge and elegant bathrooms, and transparent toilets."

The stumbling block was money. To get it, they again decided to twist the norm. "We knew that if we made a regular portfolio, it would be treated like every other one," Darius explains. "So we wanted to make the weirdest proposal anyone ever got. Our idea was to put the whole idea of the club in one place—and to show how much effort we'd commit to the smallest thing."

The smallest thing turned out to be an artifact. They made six of them. The work took a month. The Box, as they call it, was a black cube with an embossed logo and leather snaps. It had one button, which, when pushed, activated a cassette. This tape advised the listener that the box held four envelopes containing a conceptual description of the club, a financial plan (which turned out to be so accurate it was only 10 percent below their actual construction costs), letters of recommendation, and some sanitized biographies of the four friends.

Many people saw these boxes. Not one invested.

A friend knew a furrier's son who'd come to 25th Street and liked it. The furrier's son put up a small, five-figure chunk, the four owners pooled their modest savings, and in November, demolition began. The owners worked through the winter in this unheated cavern. By spring, they were ready to build. All they had to do was raise more money. With difficulty, they did this, and their fifteen-person crew—plus the third Goode brother, Greg, the club's contractor—went on working.

A name was their next problem. They wanted something ambiguous, free-floating, cryptic, something that didn't suggest a club. They did, however, want to play off the one important fact about the place: that it would change. The space was just raw material, a staging ground, a generic environment—an area. Electing officers was much easier. They just drew cards. Chris lost and was named president. It was not a title the other partners took seriously—from the beginning, they agreed that everyone would be in on every decision. (Because *someone* needed to be an expert in finance, Chris had taken a few accounting and business-law classes at NYU.)

The pill had worked once, so they sent out 5,000 invitations in capsules for their September opening. Typically, they were less than prepared for it. Hours before Area opened, water poured through the ceiling. Paint was still being sloshed on the walls. No one knew how to use the cash registers. Bouncers



FRANCESCO SCAVULLO WITH GRACE JONES.



ANDY WARHOL AND JEAN MICHEL BASQUIAT.

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mbraiced immediately, Area could afford to ban photographers, ignore celebrities, and limit its hype to odd-ball invitations.

had been hired, but no one had ordered ropes and stands. At midnight, with workers still building the displays, the owners looked outside.

There, waiting patiently, was the most interesting mob they'd ever seen. "The pill worked," Chris says.

AREA WAS SUCH AN INSTANT SUCCESS THAT, for a while, the owners could run the club exactly as they liked. So for the first six months, they avoided the private parties that are the bread and butter of most clubs. (These events, organized by professional party promoters, are, in the main, held in the hours before the club opens to the public. The club offers free admission to the "guests." In exchange, it gets a lively bar