

DOCUMENTING THE ADVENT AND DEMISE OF STUDIO 54

In the context of the module Global Business History, I conducted research on the role of Studio 54, the iconic New York City nightclub in operation from 1977 to 1980, in shaping the artistic culture of the time and in providing fertile ground for radical movements for social change. My aim was to document a fading image of a facet of recent history which gives insights into the driving forces of society at the opportune moment after the invention of the contraceptive pill but before widespread knowledge of the lurking dangers of AIDS. The product of my research will be a case study (to be published on the website of the Global History of Capitalism Project Oxford later this year) used for the teaching of subsequent undergraduates and MBA students.

The opportunity to explore a phenomenon of contemporary history sharpened my apprehension for the challenges of historical research. Comparing scholarly literature on American popular culture during the second half of the 20th century with intimate accounts of witnesses of the time confronted me with the harsh contradictions in perception of historical events. It reinforced my belief that it is more appropriate to think of the discipline as a collection of histories, at times contradictory, at times illuminating at their intersection, rather than one unique and coherent history.

My work was particularly enriched by Alexander Tinti, who operated an experimental theater in New York City and was in frequent contact with icons such as Tom O'Horgan (director of Jesus Christ Superstar on Broadway) and Andy Warhol, as well as HIV/AIDS activist Peter Staley. Rather unsurprisingly, the depth of my research was somewhat limited due to the restricted access to primary sources (unavailable because of travel restrictions during the pandemic). However, I made use of the resources available to me in Costa Rica, where I was trapped due to Covid-19, and in my home town Vienna. I had access to a vast amount of literature on the artistic culture of the time (typified, for example, by Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat), which helped me to understand individual accounts in their broader cultural context.

My understanding of historical research, especially in conjunction with the teaching aspect in Management, has prepared me well for future work in this field. I am grateful for the support of Merton College in this endeavor.