

Francis Bacon and The Colony Room

Richard Calvocoressi
in conversation with
Neal Slavin

The Colony Room was a private drinking club on Dean Street in London's Soho, founded in 1948 by Muriel Belcher. Feared and revered in equal measure by her clientele, the lesbian Belcher's foulmouthed, camp wit was legendary. The club's earliest and most celebrated member was Francis Bacon, but other regulars included the painters Lucian Freud, Michael Andrews, and Frank Auerbach, and the jazz singer George Melly. The writer Daniel Farson, another member, explained the club's attractions for Bacon.

"The name of the Colony Room had suggested something grand, but this was belied by the dustbins below and the filthy, ill-lit stairs. The club proved to be little more than a small and shabby room with a battered upright piano and a telephone and a lavatory at the back, but Miss Belcher was grandeur personified. Chin tilted upwards, cigarette in raised hand, she gave an impression of haughtiness, an eagle surveying the carrion of her membership.... Why did Francis go there so often? 'Because it's different from anywhere else. She has a tremendous ability to create an atmosphere of ease. After all, that's what we all want, isn't it? A place to go where one feels free and easy.'"¹

When she died in 1979, Belcher was succeeded by her former barman and business partner, Ian Board. On Board's death in 1994 the club was run by his barman, Michael Wojas. Faced with having to find money to renew the lease, Wojas decided to close the club in 2008, amid fierce opposition from its members.

On September 1, 1983, the American photographer Neal Slavin photographed the habitués of the Colony Room in their cramped watering hole as part of his project to document groups of various kinds, which was published in his large-format book *Britons* (1986). In addition to Bacon, Board, Wojas, and a framed photograph of Muriel Belcher keeping a watchful eye, the company immortalized that day consisted of the actor Tom Baker, of *Doctor Who* fame; the interior decorator and fashion designer Thea Porter; John McEwen, art critic of *The Spectator* magazine; Michael Clark, a young artist friend of Bacon's; the club's pianist, Mike Mackenzie, who played also at the Savoy hotel; Bacon's boyfriend John Edwards; Tony Panter, a banker; Jeffrey Bernard, whose dissipated Soho life was later dramatized in Keith Waterhouse's play *Jeffrey Bernard is Unwell*; his brother Bruce Bernard, author of illuminating books on photography and the subject of memorable portraits by Bacon and Freud; an unidentified man; an unidentified woman; and the bare legs of Kate Bernard, Jeffrey's daughter. As McEwen recalled, "It was still the summer holidays so Ian Board scraped together one or two regulars and irregulars who were around as a support cast to Bacon." McEwen also confirmed that Bacon's "well-known toast: 'Champagne for my real friends, real pain for my sham friends,' was a frequent refrain."²

Bacon was a prodigious drinker who nevertheless had a reputation for being up and ready for work by 6 am. This was not the case with Jeffrey Bernard. The Bernard brothers were friends and drinking companions of Bacon's. From 1975 the rarely sober Jeffrey wrote a weekly column for *The Spectator* entitled "Low Life." Whenever he was too hungover to deliver

his copy, the magazine would print a brief euphemistic apology: "Jeffrey Bernard is unwell." This was later used by Keith Waterhouse for the title of his play, which opened in London in 1989 with Peter O'Toole as Bernard. (O'Toole, another notorious drinker, was also a member of the Colony.) Bruce Bernard, though often melancholy through drink, led a more structured life as a picture editor, writer, and photographer.

While in New York last November for the installation of the *Francis Bacon: Late Paintings* exhibition, I discussed the shoot with Neal Slavin over lunch. I was curious to know how his photograph of the Colony Room drinkers had originally come about. The idea for the book, he told me, came from his friend Colin Ford, the Keeper of Film and Photography at the National Portrait Gallery in London, who soon afterward became the first director of the National Media Museum in Bradford, Yorkshire.

NEAL SLAVIN I wanted every photograph in the book, or in the series, to be an event. There was a camera that came out a few years before, which I had worked with, it was a Polaroid 20-by-24-inch camera, and I decided that would make the most interesting images. So we called Polaroid, and they were enthusiastic about it, because they were a client of mine. They provided all of the equipment. That was the beginning of it. The camera weighed 225 pounds, and I would have to stand on my tippy-toes to look in the back. It produced a Polaroid picture with incredible clarity and detail, 20-by-24 inches. We worked for two years on the book.

RICHARD CALVOCORESSI Who was going to publish it?

NS We didn't have a publisher, although, after seeing the first two finished Polaroids, Tom



Francis Bacon and his friends in the Colony Room, London, September 1, 1983. Left to right: Michael Wojas (barman and later successor to Ian Board), Tom Baker (Dr. Who), Mike Mackenzie (club pianist), Bacon, Bruce Bernard, unidentified woman, Thea Porter (dress designer, at Bacon's feet), Ian Board (proprietor and for many years Muriel Belcher's barman), Michael Clark, John Edwards, Tony Panter, Jeffrey Bernard (seated), John McEwen, and unidentified man © Neal Slavin



Bacon's well-known toast: 'Champagne for my real friends, real pain for my sham friends' was a frequent refrain.

John McEwen

Rosenthal at Andre Deutsch enthusiastically agreed to take it on.

RC How did you draw up the list of subjects?

NS We approached the *Sunday Times* and offered for them to reproduce the pictures if they would do the research. And the art director at the time, Michael Rand, jumped on it, so they put a full-time researcher on the project, Mary Dunkin, and she was incredible.³

RC So for the Colony Room picture, it was the researcher's idea to include a group of artists, actors, and journalists?

NS She literally said, "Let's do the Colony Room." She knew everybody in the picture. There were four of us who would go out every day, and make one picture, drive to our next location, do another picture, drive to our next—this happened every day for three weeks, with one day off. We'd stop and edit the pictures for a week, then I would return to New York and then come back three or four weeks later after she did the next round of research. And then we'd start up again.

RC You traveled all over Britain?

NS Yes, all over the UK—Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland.

RC And one day you all assembled at the Colony Room.

NS Yes, and I remember there was a very narrow hallway. We had to take the camera apart, to drag it up the stairs. Once we had it upstairs, we put it back together again, took the pictures, took it apart, and brought it down the stairs, and put it on the van. So we would take about twelve exposures, more or less, put them up on a wall, wait eighty seconds, and then we would peel them, just like old Polaroids, and there would be this unbelievable image. It's a little bit like print-making. When you peel it, you can actually see

lines in the emulsion that look almost engraved. The resolution and sharpness were absolutely amazing.

RC Did all the characters in the photograph, in the group, have a look and make comments?

NS Yes, absolutely. The presence of the camera was very important. You couldn't ignore it. I wanted their involvement.

RC So had they all assembled before you arrived? Were they all there drinking, or did you meet them beforehand?

NS They all arrived while we were setting up. It takes about three hours to prepare the camera and lighting. Then the picture takes half an hour. I started with a test shot of John Edwards on his own. When Bacon saw it, he said he must have it because he wanted to do a painting based on it.

RC How long would the gap in time be between one picture and the next?

NS The way the camera worked was that there were these pods which held the chemical developer in a rack on the top of the camera. For such an expensive camera, its technology was incredibly primitive. You pull down the negative matrix in the back of the camera with a string, which dropped the chemical developer pod in between the matrix and the paper, put it through a series of rollers, and glue it together. You then cut it with a razor blade, tape it up to the wall, wait eighty seconds, and peel it away to reveal a picture.

RC You had them pinned up—

NS Yes, we had them pinned up. And they were astonished to see the result right then and there.

RC Did you get the feeling that Bacon was the center of the group? Very often he would be buying drinks for everyone.

NS He was, and you can actually see it in the image. Not so much because he's recognizable,

but because there is a proclivity to lean in his direction. No one was looking at him directly, but he was really the center. My preference is to allow the sitters to arrange themselves.

RC So the photos were published in the *Sunday Times* first before they became a book?

NS They published it twice. Halfway through the project, they did one article that was four or five pages. Then, when we were finished, they published another segment that was also about five pages.

RC And then the book came out a year later?

NS The second *Sunday Times* piece came out in 1986, in time for the book. And there were two exhibitions, one at ICP in New York and another at the National Media Museum in Bradford. Colin wanted this work to be the inaugural exhibition, but we had no way of finishing in time. So he opened with something else, and I believe it was the second exhibition, right after the museum opened. And then John Russell wrote a piece for the *New York Times*.

RC He knew Bacon well. He'd written a book on Bacon.

NS He did indeed, yes. Every one of the forty-eight pictures in my book has a story. It was amazing. There's one picture of a Seventh Day Adventist Choir. They wrote four songs for us, the photographers, and we photographed them singing the four songs.

¹ Daniel Farson, *Soho in the Fifties*, with introduction by George Melly (London: Michael Joseph, 1987), p. 40.

² E-mail message to the author, July 20, 2015.

³ Michael Rand was art director of the *Sunday Times Magazine* (the UK's first color supplement) from 1963–93. Mary Dunkin became a photographer whose work is in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery in London. She died in 2008. While working on the *Sunday Times Magazine*, she may have gotten to know Bruce Bernard (who had been its picture editor from 1972–80) and about his friendship with Bacon.