L'ŒIL DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE

What's new, Albert Scopin ? Interview by Nadine Dinter

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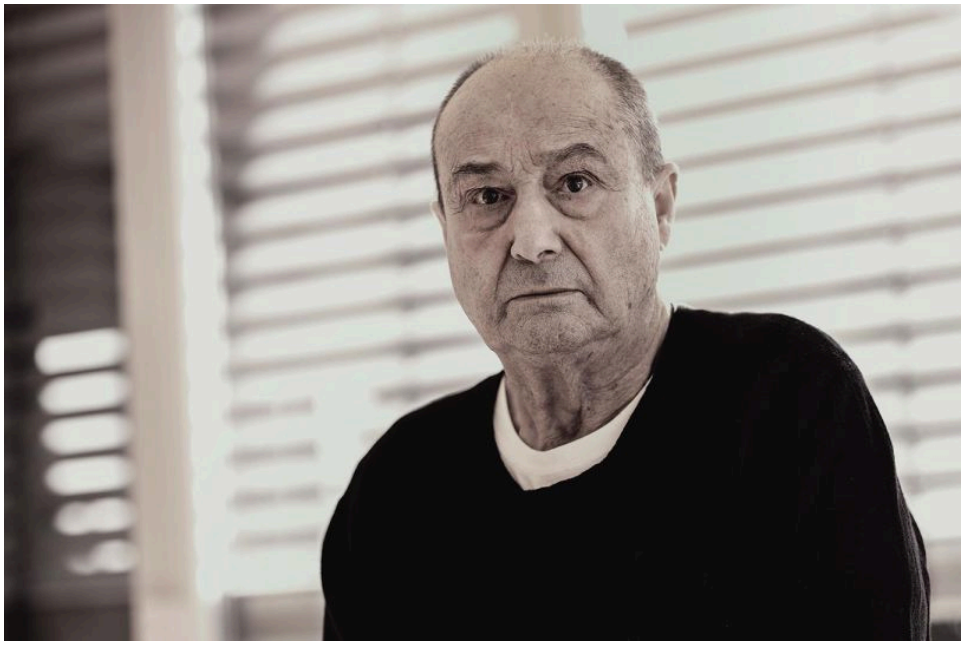
Nadine Dinter May 26, 2026



I learned about the Chelsea Hotel through a friend and was immediately drawn to find out more. Having stayed at the Chelsea Hotel in 2002, and still remembering its outstanding atmosphere, made me want to learn more about how Scopin's images were taken and about his time with Robert Mapplethorpe, Patti Smith & Co. So let us take you on a journey through time — enjoy the read.

Nadine Dinter: If someone asked you to describe the Chelsea Hotel in one word, what would it be?

Albert Scopin: Possibility. The Chelsea was a place where life, art, desire, poverty, freedom, and experiment could all exist side by side. It was not perfect, of course, but it was open. And when a place is truly open, an enormous amount can happen in a very short time.

In 1969, you moved to New York and checked into the Chelsea Hotel. Please tell us a little bit more about your career at this point – what brought you to New York in the first place?

AS: At that time, I was still a very young man from southern Germany, and I had the feeling that my real life had not yet begun. I had studied photography in Munich, but I was disappointed by the teaching there. It all felt too conventional, too old-fashioned. Then I became ill, and strangely enough this illness gave me time to dream. In those dreams, New York appeared very clearly.

Why New York? I cannot explain it rationally. It was the music, the new spirit, the hope for liberation, the sense that something new was beginning there. I made a list of ten photographers I wanted to work for. The last one on the list was Bill King, and by a stroke of luck he took me on as an assistant. That brought me into a very free, unconventional world and gave me my start in New York.

You stayed there for only three years, yet you managed to document the people, their studios, and the entire atmosphere of this iconic place as few photographers before or since have done. What was your approach – blending in, or something else?

AS: Yes, blending in was certainly part of it, but not in a calculated way. I was simply very curious, very open, and genuinely interested in people. At the Chelsea, that was enough. You met people in the elevator, in the corridors, in each other's rooms. Most of them had been living there for months or years, so there was time. Things developed naturally.

What fascinated me most was the connection between a person and the room they had created around themselves. Many of the apartments were like self-portraits. I felt that if I photographed someone in that environment, I could get closer to who they really were. I was never interested in glamour or surface. I wanted to understand the inner life of a person – their thoughts, desires, fears, their energy. Photography, for me, was never just documentation. It was a way of getting closer.

I also tried to make the camera as unobtrusive as possible. I even painted my cameras in bright colors so they would feel less authoritative, less like machines of control. Ideally, I wanted the camera to disappear between me and the person I was photographing.

Among others, you become friends with Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe, at a time when neither was famous yet. How did this come about?

AS: I first met them at a nude photo session in Bill King's studio. They arrived together and immediately struck me as a very unusual pair. Robert was cool, controlled, ironic, very composed. Patti was the opposite – full of raw energy, highly expressive, absolutely alive. During the shoot she released an incredible force. It was as if she could run up the walls.

After that we met again and became friends quite naturally. That was the way things happened then. If you were open, curious, and present, people let you in. Later I photographed both of them in their rooms at the Chelsea annex, and those rooms told me a great deal about who they were. Robert's room was more ordered, more controlled. Patti's was chaotic, but the chaos had its own deep logic. Both spaces were completely authentic.

How did you navigate the social world at the hotel? Were there certain rules, or was the entire place some kind of "safe space"?

AS: There were no rules in the usual sense, and that was precisely the point. The Chelsea was open, but it was not naive. It had its own social structure, its own hierarchy, even its own class divisions. The people in the better apartments upstairs often had more status and more money, while others, like me in the beginning, lived in very modest circumstances.

But despite those differences, there was a remarkable sense of acceptance. I was a complete nobody from a village in southern Germany, yet I was received as I was. That meant a great deal to me. The Chelsea was not a "safe space" in the contemporary sense. It was much more alive, more contradictory, more risky than that. People were careful and careless at the same time. They wanted intensity, encounter, experience. And from that came a tremendous energy.

Apart from Mapplethorpe and Smith, what was your most memorable encounter?

AS: In a broader sense, one of the most important encounters was Bill King. Working with him brought me into the heart of that world. He was difficult, yes, but he gave me freedom, and I learned a great deal from him – not only about photography, but about atmosphere, improvisation, and the strange mixture of discipline and excess that defined those years.

But beyond any one individual, what remains most memorable to me is the atmosphere of radical openness itself. At the Chelsea, you could meet people whose entire value systems, styles of living, and ways of thinking were completely different from your own. That confrontation changed me. It broke something open in me and forced me to rebuild myself from within.

What's your advice for people visiting New York today who are looking for iconic places that capture the spirit of that era?

AS: My advice would be: Do not go looking for the past as if it were still waiting there for you, intact and preserved. That usually leads to disappointment. Places change, cities change, and the magic of a certain moment does not simply remain available forever.

It is better to look for places that are alive now, places where something real is still happening, even if they do not yet carry a legend. The Chelsea I knew was not important because it was already historic. It was important because people were living intensely there, experimenting, failing, searching. If you want to understand the past, do not just look for monuments. Look for living energy.

Your photographs, recently exhibited in Berlin and now collected in your book *Chelsea Hotel*, were lost for many decades. How did that happen, and how did you get them back?

AS: After taking the photographs between 1969 and 1971, I sent them to the newly established ZEITmagazin for publication. Since I had no proper way of storing them safely at the time, we agreed verbally that they would remain in the archive after publication. In those days, many things were arranged simply by word of mouth.

Years later, when I asked for the material back, I was told that nothing could be found. The photographs seemed to have vanished. Even when ZEITmagazin contacted me again in 2010 and searched once more, nothing turned up.

Then, unexpectedly, in 2016 I received a letter from Oliver Ahlers of Galerie Ahlers in Göttingen. He informed me that my photographs, negatives and slides were in his gallery. We later tried to reconstruct what might have happened. Most likely, the material had been stolen from the ZEITmagazin archive sometime in the 1970s, resurfaced briefly elsewhere, then disappeared again before finally ending up on the art market. It was a strange story. I am very grateful to Oliver Ahlers, because he immediately recognized both the artistic value of the work and the unresolved copyright issue. Without that rediscovery, this book would not exist.

Do you miss the days at the Chelsea Hotel?

AS: I would not say that I miss them in a sentimental way. I carry them inside me. They are still part of me. That time was short, intense and deeply formative. It changed the way I understood freedom, art, the body, other people, and also myself.

Of course, such moments do not come back. And perhaps they should not. It is better not to reheat certain kinds of magic. But I remain grateful that I lived through that period. It has never left me.

What are your all-time favorite images from the selection in the book, and why?

AS: That is difficult, because the images mean different things to me. But if I had to choose one direction, I would say that the photographs of Patti Smith in her room are especially important to me. They contain something that interested me very deeply at the time: the connection between a person and the world they create around themselves.

In those images, the room is not just a backdrop. It becomes part of the portrait, part of the person's inner landscape. Patti's room had a real, unvarnished chaos, but everything in it felt true. Those photographs are not only about a young artist before fame; they are about energy, vulnerability, self-invention, and the atmosphere of an entire moment.

For more information, see the artist's website: scopin.info

About the book:
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