



Planet Talk: LES Cultural Icon Penny Arcade

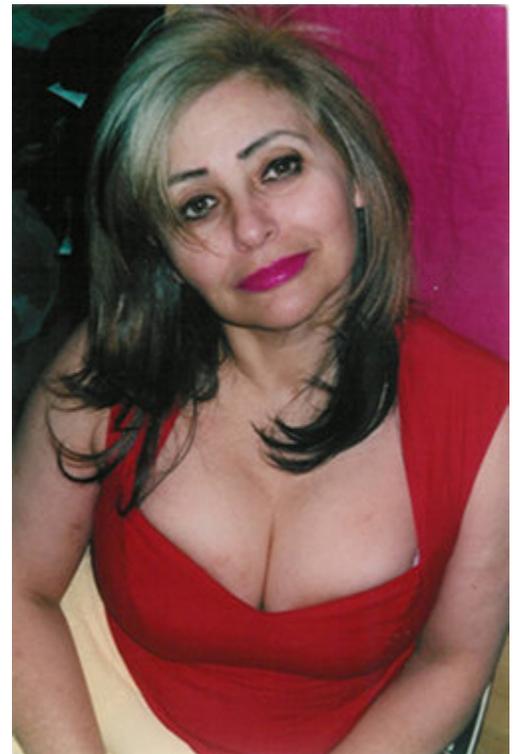
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Steve Ellman, 02/12/2013

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Penny Arcade came by her legendary status the 60s way. Born Susana Ventura, in her teens she ran away from a working class Connecticut home and took shelter among the inspired deviants of the Lower East Side. She hung out and performed with experimental geniuses like Jack Smith and Charles Ludlam (Theatre of The Ridiculous), and with Andy Warhol at his Factory. Later, she turned to writing and performing provocative, streetwise, often hilarious works of her own, most famously the Jesse Helms-era sex-and-censorship show “Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!”

Since 1999, along with filmmaker Steve Zehenter, Penny has co-produced the video-based oral-history documentary project and archive The Lower Eastside Biography Project: Stemming The Tide of Cultural Amnesia. The project shepherds young videographers through a process of creating a biography of a LES luminary – among those completed are Judith Malina, Richard Foreman, and Quintin Crisp. Biographies screen weekly on Time Warner Channel and stream live on Manhattan



Neighborhood Network (details below).

February 13 at 6:30pm, Penny Arcade and Steve Zehenter will present and discuss clips from some of the project's biographies. [See Calendar for more info.](#)

We spoke to Penny by phone on a recent Saturday morning, not long after she had wrapped up a 46-performance London run of her show "Bitch!Dyke!Faghag!Whore!"

You've always been an outsize and unorthodox person. Were you comfortable with that when you were young? Are you more comfortable now?

It was never comfortable. It's not a comfortable position. Not when I was 11 years old and not now. Humans are hardwired to be pack animals, herd animals. We need acceptance. But if you're constantly examining who you are and your place in the world, you do get gradually *more* comfortable with it.

In my show "New York Values" I say, absolutely nothing happens between 20 and 27 and then you're old. Twenty-seven to 39 drags on like summer when you're nine years old – it's never over and *nothing* happens. Thirty-nine to 50 lasts two weeks and *everything* happens. Fifty to 60 lasts four days and even *more* happens.

But if you have a rigorous inquiry into your own life, when you hit 60, you get to start it all over again like you're 20. Only this time raised by you – your own values. You're your own mother, your own father. It's a very exciting period. It's the most integrated period. I'm 62 now and I've never been happier.

You've worked with live performance and now video. How has the emergence of digital technology and the Internet effected your work as a performance artist?

I've been working with Steve Z since around 1991. I was using video before I met him, since 1981 to '82. When I met Steve I started using real-time video, and we've continued using that. Then 12 years ago I wanted to do a show that was cybercast. I've never gotten much funding from arts-supporting bodies that would have allowed me to do more of that.

The arts-funding bodies are incredibly ageist. It's something that's not really talked about. It's the dirty little secret of American arts funding. We live in a world that is obsessed with potential and dismissive of accomplishment. The kind of "emperor's new clothes" of possibility is so drummed up, and it's kind of a hard thing for people who are past their 40s.

A lot of people when they get past 40 buy into this idea that being young is more exciting, that young people have *ideas*. If you're honest, you know you never have any ideas in your 20s. You're looking for an idea. You have fragments of ideas. We know Mozart could play sonatas like a dream when he was four years old and that Balthus was an amazing painter at 14, but for most people that's just not true. You *develop* ability. Whether you're a shoemaker or an artist, everybody is better at what they do when they do it for 20 years than when do it for five.

How easily did you take to digital technology?

I helped set up my website. I Twitter a lot and I Facebook a lot. I know a lot of people my age are uncomfortable with computers and digital technology, but most of us are not. We were about 30

when computers first started to actualize, and I was 40 when I got my first computer.

As you really investigate the Internet, you start to find that for all of its options it also has flaws. For those of us who were pre-Internet, we had to claw our way through history to find out about people and things. We couldn't just Google it. We had to go to libraries and really research, a very exciting process, where you had to immerse yourself. I'm amazed how one-sided and narrow the information age is – if you're lazy, if you're not aggressively smart as a researcher.

Tell us about the Lower East Side Biography Project

I've made a study of highly self-individuated people, which is what the LES Biography Project is about. I've always been fascinated by people who are really unique. Those people are important in society and culture because they pave the way for new ideas.

I came back to the LES when I was 31 and, as we all know, New York used to be considered "a small island off the coast of America." The reason we lived on the LES was to not be "part of America." I love New York. It's still my town. I'm a New Yorker.

So much of the LES Biography Project is about loss and disappearance.

We're living with the erasure of history. Every place is commodified now. Every place is mediated. It's reality. The kind of life we lived on the LES became commodified and sold to the whole country and the whole world. Everybody has a tattoo now, except they all have the same tattoo as everybody else. Because they all want to be different like everybody else. They took the style of the outsider, but not the values. That's the issue.

When the LES started to get gentrified and we were all depressed about it, my ex-husband, Chris Rael, said "Oh. But now there'll be an audience." But the truth is the people who are coming to the LES, they're not coming for the innovative, the original. They'd rather see someone from American Idol.

We're in the world as it is. Many of us who have experienced life before *the spectacle*, before life became a spectacle... Fran Lebowitz said when television started they were afraid it wouldn't be a success because they thought people wouldn't concentrate on a little box, with real life in the room being a distraction from the screen. No one expected that life would go inside the box.

People past their mid-40s are very very lucky because we remember the real world, before everything was a spectacle. People have lost the means of directly interacting with life, with real life. The idea we're being closer to each other because of the Internet, it's such a sales pitch. There's lots of lonely people in lonely rooms logging on their lonely computers. They're not really meeting people.

It's an interesting time to be over 60.

We're living in an ageist period, where the people who are aged were the least ageist people in history. People who were born between, oh, 1932 and 1967 were the least ageist culturally. Because we came of age in the 60s, when many false constructs fell. One of them was age. If somebody was 75 years old and they were cool, they were *cool*. In 1981 the coolest person in America was William Burroughs, who was already in his 70s and wore a suit and tie.

Older people get the victory of seeing how the movie ends, how it all turns out. Because we were

there, witnessed the way life was, when everything was in black-and-white and everything was manual. We have the option of using technology and not being used by it. And we're going to see how it all turns out. Which I think is kind of a victory.

You can see the Lower East Side Biography Project Wednesdays at 11pm EST on Time Warner Channel 34, RCN 82, FIOS 33. New biographies stream live on [Manhattan Neighborhood Network Channel One](#).

[Click here to visit the LES Biography Project website and watch excerpts.](#)

[Click here to visit Penny Arcade's website.](#)

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