



From left: Penny, from the cover of her CD *Bad Reputation* (1999); with her husband Chris Rael, founder of the rock band *Church of Betty*.

A Life Based on True Stories

Blair Schulman

Wide-eyed and full of piss and vinegar, Penny Arcade is reaching a summit position as a performance artist. She commands a respect that few can claim. Her scathing monologues, while articulate and perceptive, also claw right to the bone, reaching the marrow of truth. While this brutal honesty may sting, it never burns.

Slowly, when she first takes the stage at her current series of shows, *New York Values*, one is unsure where she might go, especially if you've never seen one of her performances. A petite, attractive woman with long black hair arrives stage left holding a tiny violin. The theme to *New York, New York* starts to play and everyone laughs — she is going to mine the lighter vein — then a truism appears: "People came to New York to re-invent themselves, and allow the city to change them. Now, people don't think they need to be changed ... all they really want is to be successful." Blammo! You can hear the frustration in her voice — whether the disappointment is due to her own keen perception of this or the disdain of having to exist with it, one can see how saddened this makes her. One almost longs to give her a hug, but don't be fooled, under those Betty Page bangs Sonny Liston lies in wait.

"Let's have an intermission!" Miss Arcade literally stops the show, turns up the lights to include her audience — always a packed house — and the music of *Your Love is Taking Me Higher* comes on. "We can dance, why not?" And she does, the Jon Benet Memorial Dancers joining her. Sometimes she'll turn out ALL the lights in the theatre so she and her audience are as one. It is a touching moment that lingers and gives the audience a real connection with her; she is the originator of true ensemble theatre.

For more than two hours, she discourses on the tidal forces that have changed the face of New York City's culture: writers, painters, photographers, poets, musicians, junkies, whores, and weirdos who once dictated art and music are overwhelmed by New York University students parading as writers, painters, photographers, poets, musicians, junkies, whores, and weirdos, obscuring the intended definition of what it means to be "hip." The misfit who escapes to New York City suddenly finds himself sharing the sidewalk with the very people he sought to escape.

When asked about the current state of the world of performance art and the impact it will have on our culture, she readily admits that the landscape of academic art is empty. "I hear people ... at universities brag about how edgy the art and performance created and exhibited on campus is, while the truth is when academia is (doing the) funding ... it is hardly going to be avant-garde since college authorities are about maintaining the status quo."

Penny mourns the loss of singularity in New York City and elsewhere. Our culture has been on a collision course with marketing niches. A perfect reference is that the entire Motown catalogue has been demonized by Proctor & Gamble. While "art CAN be product, product can NEVER be art." This is a process that has been under construction for a long time. The young people, she tells us, are the result of this huge economic shift. Young graduates start a production company, a theatre company, or their own band with endless performing and touring. The pyramid scheme of being compensated and mentoring has been broken. Penny has seen many young people no longer look at art as a potential lifelong trajec-

tory as it has been for her, but rather as something one did when they were young.

Penny has been performing as an artist for over 36 years and started when she was a 17-year-old runaway from industrial Connecticut who found salvation in New York City at the height of the 1960s cultural explosion. Born Susana Ventura, she chose the name Penny Arcade "when I was coming down from LSD. I used to say very earnestly that I was saving Susana Ventura for when I was doing something good. But it took so long, I got stuck." A street kid, she got her education on the corner — fortunately the corners of the East Village were populated with leaders of the avant-garde. She debuted in John Vaccaro's explosive *Playhouse of the Ridiculous*. What can now be called "queer" theatre, *Playhouse* was a starting point for rock, glam, and glitter, and political theatre that had an influence on everything from Charles Ludlam to Bowie to *Hair* to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. She says of the experience, "If I spent my teenage years tearing down the fourth wall with the *Playhouse of the Ridiculous*, doesn't it make sense that I would grow up to tear down the other three walls in theatre with my own adult work?"

Watching Penny's performance in the early days was Andy Warhol. He recognized her ideas as artistically valid and supported what she developed as a performance artist later on. When Penny was 18, he asked protégé Jackie Curtis to bring Penny to him. Penny experienced Warhol like the Eastern European Catholics she had grown up with. She saw from the first that he was a person who desperately wanted to reinvent himself. Morose and retiring, Warhol surrounded himself with blustering egomaniacs that vamped for him while he appeared amused and docile, but always taking notes. Shy and self-contained about her own ambitions, Andy didn't drag her into his mire of self-destruction; instead, he often singled Penny out as her performance and presence spoke for itself. She was involved in many of his projects, most notably as a Factory Superstar in the 1971 Warhol/Morrissey film, *Women in Revolt* featuring Jackie Curtis and Candy Darling.

While Warhol absorbed talented people until they were white in the face, Penny was still wet behind the ears when she met the late artist and filmmaker Jack Smith in 1967. They spent an inordinate amount of time together; Penny did not realize he was the "famous" Jack Smith, a man of considerable genius. Known to the haute monde, but incapable of self-promotion, his work influenced many who did become famous, including John Waters, Robert Wilson, and Andy Warhol, to whom he gave the idea of using non-actors in his films and incorporating mistakes. Smith was the original Do-It-Yourself artist, searching the streets for props, sets, and costumes.

In his manifesto, *The Perfect Appositeness of Maria Montez*, Smith explains that the B-movie actress became his muse because she could not act. She believed in her own beauty, infusing her dreadful filmography with what Smith saw as "imaginative life and truth." The exoticism of this very work came from his own daily obsessions, one of which was dealing with landlordism, "the central social evil of our time."

After touring Europe with *Playhouse*, and living in Europe and later Maine for several years, in 1981 Penny returned to New York and to her relationship with Smith. She found that Smith, along with Jackie Curtis and other downtown luminaries from the 1960s, felt bitter, believing they had been left behind while people who copied their style and ideas had prospered. Loyal and filled with deep appreciation



From left: with Quentin Crisp before his death in 1999; with Jackie Curtis and Patti Smith as an Andy Warhol Factory Superstar in 1971.

for Smith's individuality, she understood his bitterness having watched his development up close. Penny didn't have the false art star worship, but a deeply ingrained and respectful attitude toward him. She was unlike the art school graduates who glommed onto his coat tails with the idea of superseding him. All seeing, he refused to treat them as peers, as collaborators. Penny never tried for that; she went along making her own work and earned his respect as an artist in her own right.

The friendship took a bizarre turn when Jack Smith died intestate in 1989. Arcade worked hard to save his work from destruction and tried for two years to turn his heavily decorated apartment into a museum. Eventually, frustrated by the art world's disinterest in saving and restoring Smith's work, she turned to Village Voice film critic J. Hoberman, who as a respected art world figure would lend greater credibility to the task of getting Smith the recognition he deserved. In 1997, just before the opening of Smith's retrospective at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, the duo formed an entity to preserve Smith's art, *The Plaster Foundation*, named after the Greene Street loft where the artist once lived and staged many shows.

Although the work has been under their care for years, a New York Surrogate Court Judge dismissed the Archive's motion to dismiss the claim that the work belongs to Smith's sister, a 70 year-old Texas woman named Mary Sue Slater, who until recently had no contact whatsoever with her notorious brother. The epilogue remains to be written.

Influenced by Smith's commitment to a core idea, Penny travels her own road, creating work with political humanism and erotic dance that champions freedom of speech and expression, presenting a pro-sex platform that sets out to prove "whether we are gay, straight, bi, transgendered, or asexual, as human beings, we are more alike than we are different."

Her autobiographical solo trilogy, *Based on a True Story* (1989), *Invitation to the Beginning of the End of the World* (1990), and *La Miseria* (1991) was later expanded to *Love, Sex, and Sanity* (1995) and the breakthrough *Bad Reputation* (1999).

An examination of the true failure of feminism, *Bad Reputation*, Penny shows her audience how women betray women with hypocrisy: "Even among feminists there is no room for individuality," she says. "If you don't tote the party line, you are excluded."

Bad Reputation shows the commodification of the "Bad Girl" by the art and entertainment industries while real bad girls are excluded. Calling herself the inveterate fag-hag, her life was saved by gay men as a teenager, and she makes their presence known in her shows. Choreographed by her long time collaborator, Lee Raines, Penny acknowledges the support of gay men towards girls who are branded "bad." Not to leave the first view alone, Penny also busts these very men on their chauvinistic attitude about their perceived view of the superiority of male sexuality.

Before *Bad*, there was *Bitch! Dyke! Fag! Hag! Whore!*, which also displayed her trademark style — hard line, edgy reality with mad laughter in an arena of open, non-manipulative sexuality. Her first sex and censorship show, *B/D/I/F/W!*, was also the first performance art or theatre that presented erotic dancers, burlesque, and stripping as a powerful feminist art form. Originally, it was presented in 1990 as a solo fellowship audit during the Helms-National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) censorship crisis. Penny used only women dancers and was stunned, in fact, when the art world was horrified and women's groups and certain lesbian groups went on rampages in the cities where she toured, tearing down the posters and screaming, "This show offends women!" without ever having seen the show!

The invective without the experience recalls something Penny once heard: Camille Paglia says Eve Ensler of *The Vagina Monologues* is the new Andrea Dworkin — without the overalls — for Ensler's

similar lumping together of a circular idea that Sex = Violence. "Andrea Dworkin, Catherine McKinnon [pro-censorship feminists], and the far right are obsessed with sex. I am not," says Penny.

When *B/D/I/F/W!* returned to the stage by popular demand in 1992, Penny included male dancers as well to be true to how she really felt — she could not exclude men. She had to represent reality although she feared being left out of the loop by the media who were taking their cue from the growing Ladyfest society. In 2001, Penny crossed the Atlantic to play Glasgow, Scotland, the first European city to host Ladyfest — a series of pro-woman shows encompassing art, theatre, and music — after its sweep across the United States. She returned with a different perspective on the whole *Riot Grrrl* ideal; calling it a failure as it was being born from a trend that was predicated on a synthesis of ideas that had come before, rather than a true inclusive movement. It still retained its "popularity contest" feel that excluded women who considered themselves outsider feminists, who did not speak for all, thereby reducing it to a dictum of you're either with us or against us — the status quo once again rising up. Or as Penny entitles the entire movement, "Third Wave Feminism Falls Flat On Its White Middle-Class Ass."

Penny is likely to find and forge friendships in the most unexpected places. Enter the late Edwardian raconteur and author of *The Naked Civil Servant*, Mr. Quentin Crisp; although this pairing wasn't unlikely at all. Having met during one of Penny's shows at the off-Broadway theater, La Mama, Crisp made it his business to watch all her performances and record them in his weekly diary for *New York Native* magazine during the early 1990s. Naming Ms. Arcade "soul mate" and "anima figure," their friendship became professional as Penny took a series of their interviews to the stage. The result of this pairing is *The Last Will and Testament of Quentin Crisp*, which is expected to come out on DVD in the next year. At a photo shoot a few years before his death in 1999, Crisp said, "Most people would be embarrassed if publicly claimed by me to be a soul mate, but Miss Arcade is impervious to embarrassment."

Currently, a work in progress is *Denial of Death*, a conceptual piece she has been working on since 1988. It starts out as survivor's guilt from the avalanche years of the AIDS epidemic when pivotal figures in her life disappeared not only from AIDS but also illness, suicide, and death "... when I finally opened my eyes again in 1989, the entire world had changed. The people who shared my frame of reference and vocabulary were gone. Poof! As if it had never been." While caring for Jack Smith in 1989, they discussed his denial of death and hers; she could never face that yet another person in her life was going to die. This later brewed into a 16-year concept that came to include aging, both hers and also that of her mother. Knowing there was a time limit to the results Penny had wished for her mother — a nice, simple woman who believed the height of fame was Whoopi Goldberg in the center square on *Hollywood Squares*, she had no concept of the impact her own daughter was having on our culture — it seemed ironic that Penny's mother would win their lifelong argument by dying. Penny's show includes regret, the death of dreams, and her sub-specialties — death, self-destruction, and regeneration. "I don't know the form this piece will take on when I am ready to spew it out, it may be a video piece."

When asked what the next level for her would be, Penny says she simply wants to enjoy her life with her husband, Chris Rael, who is equally talented as a singer, composer, producer, and founder of the New York East-West rock band, *Church of Betty*. "I would like to understand my own life better and that will come through writing and teaching." At the top of her game as a performer, she has entered a mentoring stage. With "the disappearance of the multi-generational art scene there is no other way for me to make a difference, and I do want to give back to other people all that was given me when I was younger." Crossing the sea of mediocrity, Penny Arcade is the terra firma — a dinosaur with conviction. One can only wish more roamed the Earth.