

FLASH ART ITALY

The East Village Mentality
By Mark Kostabi

I first learned about the East Village in 1983, about a year after moving to New York from California, from another young, ambitious artist, Rick Prol. We met at a big, festive Keith Haring opening in the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in SoHo. In the 80s, camaraderie and open artistic discourse were in the air, typically mingling with wild parties, and intoxicating ambition. Later that night I visited Rick's studio, crowded with large, bruised paintings, heavily influenced by Max Beckmann. Rick told me about the young artist he admired most, called Basquiat and then said: "Let's go to the East Village." A few months later we found ourselves exhibiting in dozens of group shows together, in tiny storefront galleries, along with Richard Hambleton, David Wojnarowicz, Mike Bidlo, Ellen Berkenblit and all the other usual suspects. We all really would rather have showed in big, powerful SoHo galleries like Mary Boone, Leo Castelli, Metro Pictures, Paula Cooper, Tony Shafrazi or Annina Nosei, but their doors seemed closed to us and they seemed too busy promoting Schnabel, Salle, Longo, Sherman, Haring, Basquiat, Chia, Cucchi, Clemente, Keifer, Dokoupil, Dahn, Kounellis, Baselitz, Scharf, Haring and Basquiat. So we created our own scene, with galleries called Civilian Warfare, Gracie Mansion, Piezo Electric, Limbo Lounge, and Chronocide. I actually lived in Hell's Kitchen, outside the East Village, like many other "East Village artists," but I'd go down there every night, to openings, the Red Bar and rooftop parties where people like Willoughby Sharp would dramatically and generously introduce everyone to everyone. The East Village was a state of mind. Warhol showed up frequently. Limousines often idled near crumbling buildings filled with drug addicts. The galleries were like Day-Glo flowers sprouting up in a ravaged war zone, emanating happiness and hope. Soon the sprouting galleries became a wild jungle of creativity, exploding with love, sex, money, fame, parties and egos. The art supply stores couldn't keep up with the demand for paint. We were flown around the world to be in East Village group shows: Rome, Amsterdam, Barcelona, Philadelphia. Many of us were quickly scooped up by SoHo galleries. And just as quickly as the East Village scene blossomed, it wilted and died, around the time of Andy Warhol's shocking death in 1987. The same tastemaker collectors who bought our Neo-Surrealism, Neo-Expressionism and Day-Glo assemblages were quick to switch to the cooler Neo-Geo aesthetic of Jeff Koons and Peter Halley, who were the last artists to emerge from the East Village. These same collectors are now buying Takashi Murakami and John Currin. Collectors often stay fashionable longer than artists. Unless artists can figure out how to survive the fickle art market. The secret is to run your own business – which was the philosophy that started the East Village. I now have 24 assistants and a big studio in SoHo and Rome. But I still feel like an East Village artist. I still believe in "do it yourself."

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