



Fab 5 Freddy and Patti Astor outside Club Negril NYC 1981 © Anita Rosenberg

# JUST FOR FUN

The story of the FUN Gallery is the story of a group of kids from New York City who started as outsiders and went on to achieve global recognition. **Patti Astor's** unconventional approach to running the FUN Gallery is as radical now as it was back in the day. **Cedar Lewisohn** caught up with the underground movie star turned gallerist to find out how a small storefront on East 11th street would go on to become one of the most influential galleries in street art history.

**Cedar Lewisohn** – Let's start with an easy one. How did The FUN Gallery start?

**Patti Astor** – Well, I always say the FUN Gallery started the day I met Fab 5 Freddy. Before the FUN Gallery, I was an underground 'superstar'. I'd made a film called *Underground USA* – sort of a punk-rock version of *Sunset Boulevard*. It actually captures that last moment of the Mudd Club; it was shot there while it was open (we couldn't afford to hire the club when it was closed). It ran as the midnight movie at St. Marks Cinema for about six months, and Fab dragged all these people down to see it. Futura [2000] (who said he fell asleep) and other people from uptown came to see it. Then right after that, he [Fab 5 Freddy] came up to me at this weird downtown party and introduced himself and said, "you're my favourite movie star, can I have your autograph..."

At that time, around 1980, no one had heard of rap music, hip hop, break dancing... and we didn't really take the train that much, so we didn't see that many of the paintings. Fred started taking me around to all these things; at the same time Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf came to the East Village. I came in late '75/ early '76 because it was cheap. My friends were like, "you'll never see us again, because we're not going over there." I met Keith Haring on the street.

**CL** – How did that happen?

**PA** – Keith was just walking around. He had a little tiny camera, and DayGlo glasses that he painted himself. He was taking pictures of everybody he thought was groovy. He just came up to me and asked if he could take my picture. I said sure, why not, that should be fun. We became really good friends after that.

**CL** – So, you met Fab 5 Freddy, and all these artists, then you said, OK, I'm going to open a gallery space?

**PA** – No. What happened was everybody started tagging all over the street, so everything became a big bulletin board. Because the Mudd Club had had this tradition of doing one-night parties, Keith Haring hooked up with [Mudd Club owner] Steve Mass and did an art show called *Beyond Words*. Afrika Bambaataa came down to DJ and Jean-Michel [Basquiat] was in it. Iggy Pop was in it. Alan Vega was in it. Keith was in it. Kenny was in it. Futura was in it. All the major names...

**CL** – I think I've seen the flyer for that show. It was an amazing line up.

**PA** – That was when the whole downtown-met-uptown thing happened, everyone just started doing these one-night things. They were really not about being famous; they were not about sales and making money. They were just to show the art... and have a party.

**CL** – Were they mainly in the Mudd Club?

**PA** – They were in the Mudd Club, Club 57, Fashion Moda...

**CL** – Basquiat was on the scene at that time; was he already hanging out with you guys?

**PA** – I met Jean-Michel [Basquiat] on the steps of the Mudd Club going up to the V.I.P room. I didn't know who he was. I just made some crack about his weird hair-do. Then later on, at Diego Cortez's *New York, New Wave* show, and when I saw his piece in the *Beyond Words* show, I just said, 'this guy's a genius'. You could tell right away. I have no formal art training, but you were just like, wow! Among all these amazing pieces, you know, Keith [Haring] too: there was just this energy that came out. First I just thought he [Basquiat] was some guy at the Mudd Club and I was just trying to flirt with him.



Keith Haring invitation to FUN Gallery opening

**CL** – Oh yeah? How did that go?

**PA** – You're not paying me enough for that – that's for my book! Not too long after this, Becky Johnston, a friend of mine, she goes, "Oh the guy from the Mudd Club wants to meet you – he's got a small space he wants to fix up as an art gallery". I went to meet him at 1 University and he said, "I've got this little studio space on East 11th Street and I was thinking of fixing it up as an art gallery... Do you know any artists?" So we decided to do it just as a one-shot deal. We would become the first gallery in the East Village. There were no galleries there.

**CL** – How did the name come about?

**PA** – We didn't have a name [at first]. My ex-husband, Stephan Cramer, was the first one to say, "Hey, yes, I'll do it." He had 20 coloured pencil drawings – we were so broke that we shrink-wrapped them and stuck them on the wall. They were \$50 each and we sold every single one that afternoon. We were like, 'Hmm, OK... Maybe we have an art gallery'. After that, everybody wanted to do the next show. Since Kenny [Scharf] had customised all my appliances for me, I said, "OK Kenny, you be next".

**CL** – Had Kenny graduated at this point? Because they were at the School of Visual Arts, right?

**PA** – I think by this time they were finishing up, Jean-Michel lived there.

**CL** – Lived where, at The School of Visual Arts?

**PA** – Yeah, that's how Keith and Jean-Michel met. Keith had been seeing all these 'SAMO' tags on the streets and no one knew who it was. Then he let this young black kid into the building one day, and the next day there was all these 'SAMO' tags up in there. They became friends and Keith and Kenny let him stay in their studios and use art supplies and so forth.

**CL** – What kind of shows were happening at the time?

**PA** – It was white walls, white wine and white people. There were these big boxes in Donald Judd exhibitions. Julian Schnabel and David Salle were coming onto the scene, doing these huge, ugly paintings that were just stupid-looking. It was all very closed off, really boring and very elitist. So, Bill and I decided ours is going to be the artists' gallery and they can do whatever they want with the space. Even name the space. So Kenny [Scharf] came up with the name: the FUN Gallery. Feb 5 was the next show. He wanted to call it the Serious Gallery. We said, "You know what, Fred, I would have to change all the stationary". Also, 'FUN Gallery' was so stupid that we just went with it.

**CL** – So let's talk about the music and art crossover at the time. What was happening?

**PA** – When I first came to the East Village, in 1976, punk-rock was *it*. I think of [that] '76 to '78 [period] as CBGB's and punk-rock – the whole DIY thing. But then, Talking Heads and Blondie became famous. Then, we all went and started to do these ridiculous movies: I did 14 movies. *Underground USA* was our most successful, it was 16mm colour. Most of them were Super-8, and we would transfer them to video immediately, and show them at [West Side night club] Dancaetria. It became the thing to have video cameras in the clubs. At the New Cinema we had this huge projector, and we would show them on that. So, what happened was all these bands, like The Contortions and Teenage Jesus and The Jerks, they were all part of the scene. They were all in the movies. Then, all the graffiti guys and Keith and Kenny and everybody else just jumped on board.

**CL** – Jean-Michel Basquiat was in a band called Gray, which was part of the no wave movement. Who else was part of that?

**PA** – The Contortions [led by James Chance], Teenage Jesus and The Jerks [fronted by Lydia Lunch]... Talking Heads got too grown up for us. They actually made records and went on concert tours and things like that.

Basquiat invitation to FUN Gallery opening

**CL** – Was there an ethos to no wave – an ideology?

**PA** – No! [Laughs]

**CL** – It was just the opposite?

**PA** – It was just, pick up your guitar and play; do whatever; the same way that the FUN Gallery was “let’s just do it. ‘Fuck Studio 54’; we couldn’t care less. If there was any ideology, it was just, “We’re going to do whatever the fuck we want to.”

**CL** – What about the video for Blondie’s ‘Rapture’; do you remember how that came about?

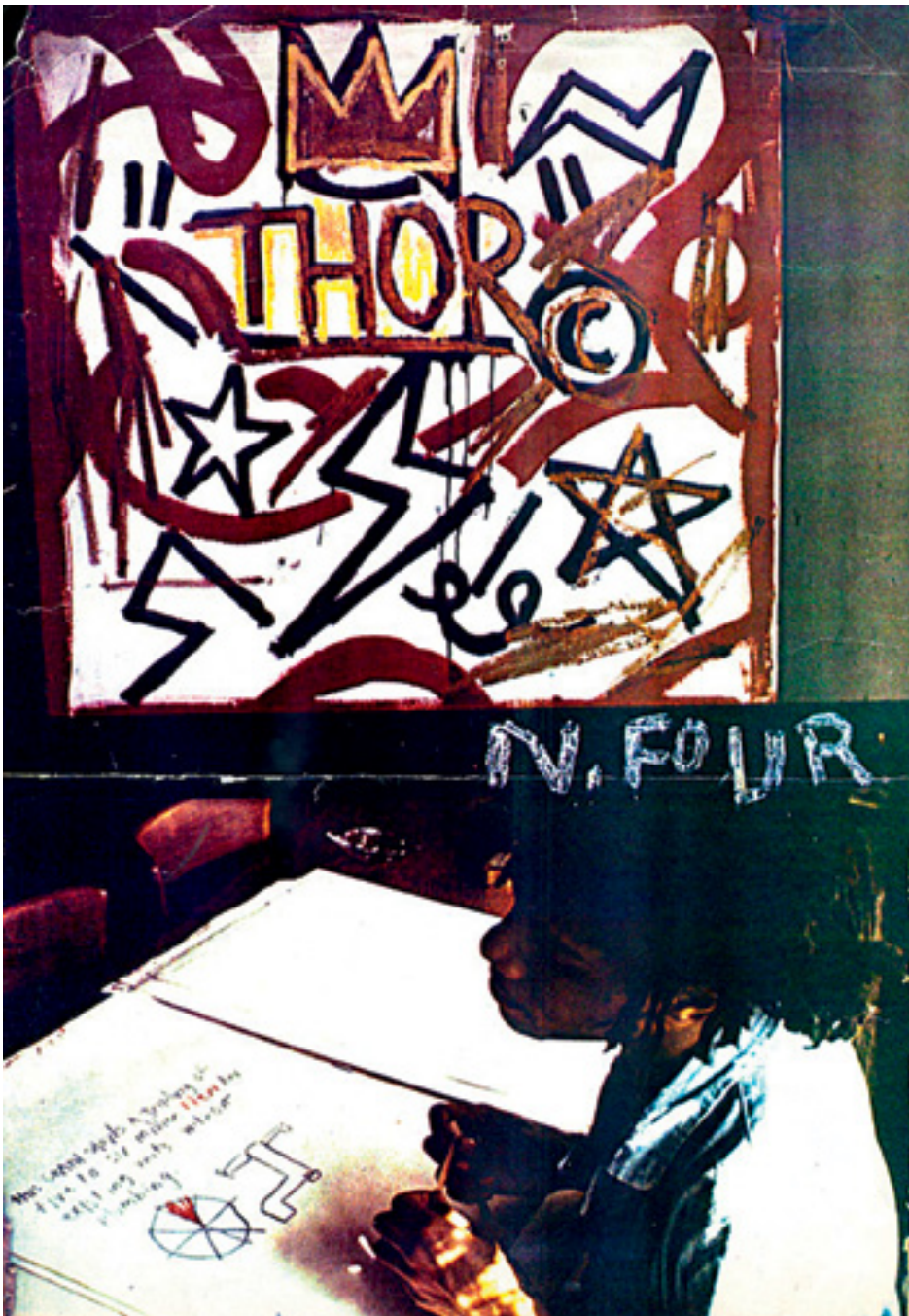
**PA** – That was one of the first really influential things [in the wider dissemination of street art and hip hop]; that and Glenn O’Brien’s [Manhattan cable television] show, *TV Party*. That was where Fab 5 met [Blondie’s] Debbie [Harry] and Chris [Stein]. Fred made it his business to come up from Brooklyn and conquer the world.

**CL** – They are all in the ‘Rapture’ video as well, right?

**PA** – Yeah, LEE [aka graffiti writer Lee Quiñones] and Jean-Michel are in the background. There are a number of people walking around. Again, that was the beginning of the crossover.

**CL** – Which other musicians came to the gallery?

**PA** – Well, after we had our first year at the gallery, and I decided that we needed to move to a bigger one. The limos were now coming to us; there would be a thousand people in the street for this tiny gallery that could hold maybe 75 people. It just took off, like, *boom!* A small club called The Grill opened around the corner. Everybody hung out there. David Byrne from Talking Heads would hang out; LL Cool J played there; Rock Steady danced there. Then the Sex Pistols and The Clash started coming around.



*“Basquiat was in it. Iggy Pop was in it. Alan Vega was in it. Keith was in it. Kenny was in it. Futura was in it. All the major names...”*



**CL** – How did that come about? Was it through Malcolm McLaren?

**PA** – No, I think he was too cool to come to this scruffy little gallery. But I know The Buffalo Girls came down there, and the guys loved them.

**CL** – Futura and The Clash later collaborated. Did that connection come through the gallery?

**PA** – Yeah, it was just a very small scene; it was still a little village. The hip-hop guys were coming down, but we also went uptown to [South Bronx gallery] Fashion Moda. Then, to get the part in [Charlie Ahearn's 1983 hip hop film] *Wild Style* I went up to the Harlem Armory...

**CL** – Are you in *Wild Style*?

**PA** – Yeah, I'm the blond reporter.

**CL** – Oh yeah sorry, it's been a while since I've seen it. That's right (adopts sleazy tone of voice)... Nice one... that's a great role.

**PA** – If I never do anything else in my life, I've got it made just on *Wild Style*. Anyway, The Clash just liked the energy in the scene. People hung out at the FUN Gallery every day. It was a clubhouse. We had a back yard where everybody could do their paintings.

**CL** – Were you selling a lot of art at that time?

**PA** – No [laughs]. We made enough to keep going. When I had the Keith Haring show, which was great, we didn't sell shit, except for one Smurf. All the guys wanted to do something really experimental when they came to the gallery. I lost money on Keith's show. You know



my best seller was Futura. He really kept us going. We didn't know what we were doing.

**CL** – So, how long did it take for the more blue chip galleries like Tony Shafrazi and Sidney Janis to start doing graffiti shows?

**PA** – Tony was always pretty on it. Tony was often the first person to see what I was doing. I was always like, 'Hey, Bill (my partner), these guys are taking the time to stab us in the back. We must have something going here'. I gave LEE his first one-man show, and he was gone... which was fine.

**CL** – He went to Tony Shafrazi?

**PA** – He went to Barbara Gladstone. It was fine, we wished them well. 'We were happy that we were able to give you your start', and LEE and I are very good friends still. I gave Kenny [Scharf] his first one person show.

**CL** – I saw a Martha Cooper photo, where it looks like Keith Haring has drawn over literally everything in the gallery.

**PA** – Yeah that was his show at the gallery.

**CL** – What happened to all the work?

**PA** – The [Keith Haring] foundation has most of them. He and LA2 painted the entire gallery with spray cans; they weren't even using an airbrush. We were, like, so buzzed. It was February '83, that show, so there was snow outside. They even painted the snow. They painted my outfit. Keith made a thousand posters: that's what he's signing [in the photo], that little group of kids that you see around him, it was like that every day.

**CL** – What happened next after you moved the gallery?

**PA** – We moved from East 11th to East 10th street, to a much bigger building. Then we became, like, world famous and we were in *People Magazine*. We still never made any money. I had that great Jean-Michel show – that was November of '82; we sold hardly anything.

**CL** – What's the rest of the story?

**PA** – After our first year in the East Village there were five galleries that opened. The next year, there were, like, 40. Then, people decided there was money to be made and started coming in and renovating tenement spaces, with hundreds of thousands of dollars to make them look like SoHo galleries; it just started to get weird. Then, unfortunately, the AIDS epidemic happened and everyone started getting sick. I mean, I lost two of my artists. One of our artists, who was also a writer, Nicolas Newfarge, died in '83. Then it just became this horrible avalanche. Bill was very affected by it. It kind of took the heart out of him. He also got an offer to go to a 'real' gallery; they could pay him, it was a real job. I said, 'take it'. Then, I had to do the last year by myself, which was hard. Also, the competition with the other people, and I didn't really want to be Mary Boone.

**CL** – Were you still working with Keith Haring or did he have another gallery at that time?

**PA** – He was always with Tony Shafrazi. But he wanted to do the show at the FUN Gallery. I'm going to give you my first quote on this. The Brooklyn Museum was supposed to have *Art in the Streets*, but, then, they went and put the Keith Haring show in there. That's the substitute.

**CL** – I wonder why they did that?

**PA** – It's because they are racist pigs, that's why. The Brooklyn Museum is funded from Brooklyn. They get private donors. This was online when we first found out the whole thing was cancelled. They've got these Italian councilmen, from the city council, who can really screw the Brooklyn Museum up if they really want to. I think they said, they didn't want all this 'trashy' stuff in their museum. And knowing Keith as I do, Keith would want everybody in there with him. He would not have wanted what happened, to have happened.

**CL** – What do you think, more broadly, about the way that graffiti and street art have entered the mainstream fine-art world but without being fully accepted?

**PA** – I think that before Jean-Michel, before Bill and I introduced artists that were not white, upper middle-class men, you never saw a black person in a gallery, much less selling work. It wasn't until Jean-Michel died that he sold any paintings. America is a very racist country. Now, if they can make you money, that's fine and dandy. But when it really comes down to it, I think [the racism] is still there.

**CL** – It seems to me that graffiti and street art have managed to explode around the world without the museums. It's been Nike or MTV and the kids; that's what's helped that movement spread.

**PA** – I think so. Something that's interesting is that the whole hip-hop movement was one of the first to discover the internet and really utilise that.

I want to just go back and make it clear that the reason why the FUN Gallery was successful, and part of our point, was that we did not set out to show graffiti art, we picked the people that we thought were most talented; if they happened to be graffiti artists that was fine. I had gay male artists, and that was a big shocker, for the homeboys. Some of those graffiti art group shows, I was like, "I don't know guys. You do what you want to." When it really got big, people would just go "its graffiti, its graffiti, just get it in here," You know, it's these people's lives, and they would promise them all this stuff and if it didn't work out, then, "See you; bye; tough shit." But I think that, because it is such a vibrant culture and it's open to everyone, that its spread without the establishment, for want of a better word.

**CL** – When did you decide to close the gallery?

**PA** – It was 1981 to 1985. By that time it was ridiculous; SoHo had come to the East Village. I always say that when the St. Marks Cinema turned into a Gap, that was it, I'm done; I've got to get out of here. Like I said, I was not interested in dressing in the little suits and being a yuppie. I wanted to get back to making movies. The whole thing was just gone. It was over. Fred and Futura and LEE had had their first studio, Downtown on Avenue C, when it was Alphabet City and everyone was scoring heroin (not me); they were building million dollar condos there now. I just didn't want to be around that. It just didn't interest me. I was never doing it to make money.

**CL** – That's a rare attitude in the art world...