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"I Am Contemporary!": The Life and Times of Penny Arcade.

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"I AM CONTEMPORARY!": THE LIFE AND TIMES OF PENNY ARCADE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
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in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Theatre

by
Matthew S. Ames
B. A., Acadia University, 1985
M. A., University of Maine, 1990
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Penny Arcade and Susana Ventura, who always do something special.
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The author would like to thank all my kind friends and family who have offered everything from a sofa for the night to proofreading skills to moral support in the three years since this project began, including my sister Allison, Joey G., Timothy Joseph, Vlad Radley, Jimmy the Weasel, Spoh, Kenny, Josh, Jeremy, Lorre, Mo Fitzmaurice, Mark Leavitt, Interplanet Janet, and most importantly, Lisa McNulty, and my parents Robert Ames and Aynne Brown Ames. I also am particularly indebted to John Vaccaro, Bobby Beers, and Michael Warren Powell, as well as Dr. Les Wade of Louisiana State University, without whose guidance, patience, and empathy this work would not have been possible. Rack 'em up, Wade.
PREFACE

When I moved to New York City in 1992, it was my intention to focus my dissertation on the work of four or five different performance artists, including perhaps Spalding Gray, Karen Finley, and Annie Sprinkle. Short on money and living in a tiny Lower East Side sublet, my best friend and I picked a provocatively titled and cheaply priced show, *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore! The Penny Arcade Sex and Censorship Show*, for our entertainment one evening. By the time the show was over, I had inklings of an idea to include Arcade, whom I really knew very little about, in the dissertation project. I was struck by the experience of Arcade in performance, which I found endearing, courageous, and provocative. I sensed that the artist whose work I had just seen was so compelling that I could justify, indeed enjoy, committing a chapter of my doctoral work to her. My friend and I spoke with "Penny" after the show; she gave me her home phone number (she actually lived just around the corner from me), and I called her a few days later.

My initial conversations with Penny Arcade, whose real name is Susana Ventura, concerned identity, the difference between her off-stage (Susana Ventura) and her onstage (Penny Arcade) personae. At that time, it was my intention to explore this matter of identity and its paradoxes in the works of several artists, including Ventura. The more I met with Ventura, however, the more intrigued I became with her colorful career, personal history, and what I perceived as her unique position in the American post-war counter-culture. I began to feel that a single chapter would not adequately address
the breadth of Ventura's experience. I suppose it truly sealed the deal when I learned Ventura had spent the better part of the seventies in Maine, my home state. Indeed, while I was finishing high school and preparing for college, Ventura was running a community theater/arts facility less than two hours drive from my hometown. This coincidence (and the knowledge that I would easily be able to unearth background information on Ventura) was too strong to ignore. The happenstance of our Maine connection, combined with her history as a Warhol girl and the vibrant nature of her current work, convinced me to devote the entire dissertation to Ventura.

It has been my good fortune to spend innumerable hours with Ventura at her Lower East Side apartment, not only discussing points relevant to the dissertation, but developing a relationship that has extended beyond the professional. Susana Ventura has become a valued friend. Although in the past three years Ventura has actually spent very little time in New York (she has been touring, performing in international festivals as far away as Australia, Scotland, and Vienna), she has made herself available for a considerable number of interviews and discussions, and these meetings have unquestionably provided the backbone of the study. Indeed, some of my most enjoyable moments while working on this project have come when discussions between Ventura and myself have strayed markedly from the topic at hand, and into the personal present. Beyond her professional vision and stylistic technique, Susana Ventura is a kind, thoughtful, and good-hearted person, and her company continues to be a pleasure to experience.
In the initial discussions Ventura and I had regarding her duelling personae, it dawned on me that the dissertation should straightaway establish for the reader one basic premise: before one can truly understand the phenomenology of a Ventura performance (or the meaning of its text), one must understand that there is no significant difference between the voice of Susana Ventura and the articulations of her invented onstage persona, Penny Arcade. Ventura's entire career has manifested something of a double-life, in which Arcade works as a vehicle of both social and self examination. An examination of Ventura's work and personal history demands the assumption that the experiences related by Arcade to an audience have an autobiographical basis in the events of Ventura's life. Moreover, the philosophy, ethics, and social vision put forward by Arcade in performance are unquestionably that of Ventura. While the final chapter of the study will address the matter of "real" versus "invented" personae, the coincidence of Ventura and Arcade must be established before we explore the form and function of this artist's work. In short, the difference between the two personae is ultimately negligible. What Arcade says on stage is what Ventura, outside the performance idiom, believes.

Perhaps I should also note that Ventura is a performance artist, meaning she is part of a particular group of performers working in a specific way. The parameters of performance art as a definable form are amorphous, and performance art's incarnations can encompass a variety of theatrical styles, media, and messages. This study will argue that Ventura's work falls within
these guidelines. In doing so, the dissertation will use some of the more
cogent definitions of the performance art form, including those presented by
RoseLee Goldberg, Richard Kostelanetz, and Sally Banes. The study will as
well invoke writings in publications that cover performance art: *High
Performance, ReSearch, Dance, ARTNews, Parachute, Art Forum*, and the
*Village Voice*, for example. Aligning Ventura's work in the context of
performance art is important not because it clarifies the exact nature of the
work (a more specific examination is required *precisely because* the label
"performance art" is so unclear) but because the singular aspect of the
performance art idiom (that all its critics identify) is its counter-cultural,
anti-mainstream ethos. The counter-cultural drive is the very basis of
Ventura's work, and the performance art form in which she works
immediately establishes this feature.

I proceeded with work on the study first by slowly establishing my own
parameters, what I would and would not ultimately include in the
dissertation. These guidelines presented themselves over time as I talked
with Ventura, reviewed videotapes of her performances, interviewed her
peers from various points in her life, read reviews of her work, and attended
her performances. I gleaned the stacks of New York University's Bobst
Library for most of my information on U. S. post-war social movements. I
there also gained access to *Village Voice* back issues. University of Maine's
Fogler Library actually provided me most of my information on performance
art, and Colby College Library's periodicals section was a primary source for
information regarding Ventura's life in Maine in the seventies. As my material coalesced, I began to establish the basis of each chapter of the study. I attempted to organize the work according to the decades of Ventura's life. In each chapter, I worked to establish the social background of the period, to highlight the counter-culture performance scene of the time, and to analyze specifically the place and purpose of Ventura's work against this backdrop. The study is an attempt, ultimately, to establish Ventura as a unique voice in counter-culture performance of the post-war era.

The dissertation argues the uniqueness of Ventura's position in the American counter-culture. Her decades-long focus on the creation of community and inclusion as the goals of performance and her effort to use performance as a transformative act make her the epitome of the counter-culture artist "contemporary" with her times. There is of course a great deal written about Warhol and his followers, but very little substantive literature exists regarding John Vaccaro's Play-House of the Ridiculous (Ventura's first theater company), the theater work of Ventura's great mentor and early performance artist Jack Smith, the experimental theater scene in Spain in the early seventies of which Ventura was a part, or the small scale festivals and theater organizations of the seventies, like those in which Ventura participated. In addition to the ways in which her art can serve as a mirror to post-war social movements, a study of Ventura's career comes as a welcome addition to the ongoing critical discussion of social dynamics in American culture. Ventura's art speaks to the experience of the "other" in U. S. society.
It alerts us to the place and power of avant-garde performance. In sum, Ventura is contemporary, and now I'm going to prove it.
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ABSTRACT

"I Am Contemporary!": *The Life and Times of Penny Arcade* explores the career of performance artist Susana Ventura, a.k.a. Penny Arcade, and establishes her position in the American post-war avant-garde and counter-culture performance scene. The document is chronological, examining first Ventura's fifties childhood, moving toward her rebellious sixties, through her introspective seventies, and eventually into a performance career in the New York avant-garde scene of the eighties and nineties. Each main chapter explores three elements of these time periods, first establishing the social background, then moving to an overview of counter-cultural performance, and finally examining Ventura's work within that time frame.

Susana Ventura, born in New Britain, CT in 1950, has been part of some of the most important avant-garde companies and movements of the post-war era, including Warhol's Factory and John Vaccaro's Play-House of the Ridiculous. Her work includes Warhol's film *Women in Revolt*, *Heaven Grand in Amber Orbit* with the Play-House, *The Maine Festival* with regional New England performers Tim Sample and Marshall Dodge, and a substantial body of solo efforts. These solo works include *While You Were Out*, *Bid for the Big Time*, her newest work *Sex, Love and Sanity*, and her emblematic piece, *Bitch! Dyke! Fag Hag! Whore!*, which ran for a year in New York and has been performed at festivals on three continents.

The study argues each of the aforementioned pieces, as well as most of Ventura's other work, falls within accepted definitions of performance art by using monologic character work, dance, video, live and recorded music, and
direct address as primary elements. The study recognizes Ventura's recurring themes as sexuality, censorship, politics, the AIDS crisis, and the position of the "other" in American society, finally arguing her aesthetic is uniquely centered in post-war American counter-culture. The study makes its case by examining videotapes and texts of Ventura's work, interviews with her counter-culture peers, and reviews and criticism. The document emphasizes Ventura's effort to establish a political place for the voice of the "other," and her continuing emphasis on notions of transformation, inclusion, and human commonality in her creative endeavors.
Chapter One

Introduction: Susana Ventura As Counter-Culture "Other"

In 1966, when the sixteen year-old runaway Susana Ventura woke up in an acquaintance's Greenwich Village studio apartment, she turned to her friend and declared: "Jamie, I have some great news. I've just changed my name to Penny Arcade." While born of a very pragmatic concern--Ventura hoped to amuse her friend and thereby be offered an egg for breakfast--this apparently frivolous moment indicates something important about Ventura's life-long, aggressively avant-garde artistic concerns. As one examines Ventura's origins and rise as a performer, one notes Ventura's ongoing effort to define an American "other" and establish a counter-culture identity capable of altering the social structures of the nation through radical artistic vision and expression.

Susana Ventura/Penny Arcade's work now spans several decades and includes a variety of forms, idioms, and performance styles. Her stage pieces have ranged from monologic work, to epic fantasy, to rock and roll. Since her teenage adventures on New York City's Lower East Side in the late sixties, Ventura's artistic explorations have embraced the experimental and have thus placed her firmly in the midst of the American counter-culture. This study will offer an examination of Susana Ventura's life and analysis of her multi-faceted theatrics; it will also suggest how Susana Ventura's career may exemplify key features of the American avant-garde since the fifties. Sometimes by chance, other times by design, Ventura's artistic journey has
followed many of the social shifts of U. S. post-war history. Engendered by a radical sensibility and keen awareness of mainstream conventions and ideology, Susana Ventura's work can indeed tell us a great deal about the American counter-culture community as well as American society at large (and its dynamics of inclusion and exclusion).

Susana Ventura was born July 15, 1950 in New Britain, Connecticut. The imaginative seed of Ventura's theatrical and performative invention extends back to these childhood days in working class New Britain, when she created personae and existences to shield her from a difficult homelife. In her late teens, her performative career took a more concrete form when she became a member of John Vaccaro's avant-garde theater company, the Play-House of the Ridiculous. Appearing under her new moniker "Penny Arcade," Ventura performed in a number of Play-House projects, including The Moke-Eater (1967), Cock Strong (1968), Son of Cock Strong (1969), and Night Club (1970). Between 1967 and 1971, she also made films with Andy Warhol's Factory; several of these went unreleased though Women in Revolt premiered in 1972. After becoming disillusioned with the world of Warhol and the turmoil of the Play-House, she parlayed a 1971 Play-House excursion to Amsterdam into a three-year stay on a Spanish island (with fellow renegade, urban escapee artists). Within this community of artistic drop-outs, she created a tremendously physical, multicultural, and emotionally expressive work, which forecasted her mature efforts yet to come. After a romance led her to another rural environment, the Maine woods, she worked with local, amateur
dramatic groups and arts festivals. She also ran a small, community-owned, multi-venue performance space, which scheduled movies and a wide array of performance offerings: rock music, dance, folk singing, and theater among them. Returning to New York at the beginning of the eighties, she began to create the original work for which her performative persona, Penny Arcade, is most well-known, including such pieces as While You Were Out, an evening of character monologues, Bringing It All Back Home, character work and music, A Quiet Night With Sid and Nancy, an environmental piece based on the life of ill-fated punk rocker Nancy Spungen, Invitation to The Beginning of the End of the World (a cabaret evening with an apocalyptic theme based on the Play-House of the Ridiculous' 1970 work Night Club), and her most commercially successful piece, Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore! The Penny Arcade Sex and Censorship Show. BDFW has been performed throughout the world since 1990, includes her best monologic work, and represents the epitome of her career-long effort to establish a voice for America's "others." In Ventura's artistic journey she has performed her own work in Boston, Tampa, Providence, Miami Beach, Calgary, London, Edinburgh, Sydney, and Berlin, as well as many other cities and towns across the globe. She has been featured at festivals all over the world and has performed in most of the popular New York avant-garde venues, including LaMaMa, The Kitchen, Dixon Place, P. S. 122, the Pyramid, and the Village Gate. She opened a new show at P. S. 122 in November of 1995 entitled Sex, Love, and Sanity and is currently working on a collaboration with her long-
time associate, Quentin Crisp. Susana Ventura is generally regarded by the avant-garde performance set as passionate, endearing, hard-working, and brilliant, and she now exists in the same iconographic class of downtown diva only two or three other women can truly claim (for example, her close friend from the sixties, Patti Smith).

Susana Ventura has always been an artist uniquely tied to her times. Indeed, she boldly declares in a recent show that she is "contemporary," an assertion that claims a continued "hipness" and relevance for her work. No doubt, in the mid-sixties, to change one's name and live in poverty in New York's Greenwich Village positioned one on the cutting edge of the burgeoning counter-culture movement. However, with a marginal viewpoint that extends beyond the radical chic of the sixties, Ventura's work has always observed American culture (and Americana) with insight and illumination. The icons of movies, TV, religion, and politics, along with our country's deep-seated cultural mythos, provide the raw material of Ventura's work and even inspired her childhood creative efforts. Ventura's questioning of the nation's cultural imagery and its implicit principles or definitions of "belonging" are at the crux of her art and inform her entire oeuvre. For Ventura, "hipness" is "an element of the heart," not the shallow matter of physical surface or style of fashion, and being hip thus makes one sensitive to others, attentive to the needs of the moment, and scornful of those standards and values that regiment American society according to hierarchies of race, class, gender, etc.
The majority of Ventura's peers have faded from view. Some became linked to a particular, modish idiom and thus destined to obscurity. Others lost themselves and their art to a self-conscious drive for cultural relevance or commercial success. A few, like Andy Warhol's "Superstar" divas, were simply unable to maintain their public illusion of glamour and were devoured by their own lifestyle. Ventura's courage and artistic vision, however, have allowed her to continue in her art; she has explored a wide array of subject matter and has tested various ways of communicating with her audience. Ventura has remained "hip" and "contemporary." Always a critic of American culture and an advocate for social change, she has challenged much of our nation's rhetoric and along with it the system of commercial production which governs American theater. Ventura has remarked: "What I do constantly in all my shows is expose the illusion of the theater."9 This comment alerts one to the formal experimentation of her performance pieces. It also suggests that her works aim to create a new sort of audience relationship. Indeed this study will argue that a defining feature of Ventura's career has been the artist's desire to create between herself as avant-gardist and her audience a new kind of community. As evidence, Ventura remarks:

More and more what I feel like is the audience just comes to be with me. I know that there's a real feeling of solidarity with me and the audience that's not based on the usual manipulative structure, which is "I'm glamorous and you're here to see me because your life's boring".10
For Ventura, the reality of the artist and that of the audience are integrated into a unique performance experience, one that provides a new order of relation, one that may counteract the fixed and often oppressive structures of American society at large.

The notion of separateness (existing as an "other") and the ensuing desire to find an alternative community have permeated Ventura's outlook since her childhood in the 1950s, a decade dominated by the imagery of conformism. She was born to working-class parents who had been reared in the peasant society of southern Italy. During Ventura's youth, her father was largely absent, frequently in and out of mental institutions. Ventura, two brothers and a sister were raised by her hard-working mother. Her grandparents also assisted in Ventura's upbringing, though they seemed to fear the precocious Susana's vivid imagination, spirited nature, and opinionated outbursts. A first-generation American in the white-bread America of the fifties, Susana found that her home life, rooted in the nearly pagan beliefs of a family who had lived for generations in an isolated society—a culture even viewed by other Italians as dubious, eccentric and uncivilized—diverged markedly from the world of her schoolmates. As Penny Arcade, the Ventura alter ego, tells her analyst in *La Miseria*, "I went to kindergarten, it was modern America. I came home, I opened the door, I skipped six centuries." In short, even in her earliest experience, Ventura understood the mentality of difference. She neither belonged to the reality of the young American schoolgirl nor did she envision herself as a true
Italian. Ventura found herself betwixt and between, struggling to understand her identity in the class-conscious, race conscious America of the fifties. A highly intelligent and imaginative child, Ventura often resorted to her fantasy life and invented new personae who were more connected to the American experience. Susana's childhood was thus spent creating whole histories, keeping her many separate, often larcenous "lives" secret. She constantly invented versions of herself out of a personal creative urge and, importantly, a prevailing need for social inclusion—her need to feel truly Americanized.

In 1966, after years of covertly living out various fantasy lives and suppressing the "otherness" in her nature, Susana decided to leave a home life that had become increasingly stifling. At fifteen, she had been placed in a Catholic nun-operated reform school. Her stay there had been prompted not by the "breaking and entering" that had become a regular part of her secret life, but a court ruling that cited Ventura's likelihood of "Falling in the Hands of Vice." In BDFW, Penny Arcade explains this point: "This meant I hadn't done anything yet, but I probably would." Upon her return from the reformatory, Susana's superstitious, paganistic family constantly reminded her of her evil tendencies, the supposed legacy of her mentally ill father's "bad blood." In addition to this familial badgering, Ventura suffered the effects of social stigma. In the early sixties, if a young girl had "gone away" for any significant period of time and then suddenly reappeared, as Susana had done, it was assumed that she had been pregnant. Ventura's social
ostracization compounded the problem of her domestic disharmony. For Ventura, the feeling of dislocation was at this point relentless and unmanageable. In face of these rising pressures, Susana took flight. She found her refuge in a new home, the streets of New York, and assumed a new persona, Penny Arcade.

From 1966 to 1971, Ventura found herself at the epicenter of avant-garde activity and there enjoyed a temporary sense of community with other downtown New York, counter-culture artists. Though this proved a fertile time in her imaginative and creative life, Ventura continued to sense her "otherness" and was pressed by an ongoing urge toward self-definition. Indeed, this counter-culture was ultimately rejected by Ventura for its emptiness. Ventura for instance renounced the "concept" conscious Warhol clique and its emphasis on "what you looked like, not who you were."13 Her fictional self, Penny Arcade, however, remained and became an important and useful cultural persona for the artist, informing her subsequent work in experimental theater and film.

Throughout Ventura's career, the artist has pursued a double-life in which her alter ego has functioned both as a tool of personal self-management and social critique. First displayed in the sixties, "Penny Arcade" placed Ventura firmly within a tumultuous, divided society. This fictional self allowed Ventura to explore in a timely way notions of community and inclusion, concepts particularly relevant to a society in upheaval. Penny Arcade, however, has remained a potent artistic constant since that time. Through
the seventies, eighties, and into the nineties, Penny Arcade has addressed problems of American culture and its prejudices. Writing specifically about the American eighties milieu, Walter Karp observes:

We sleep like patients 'etherized upon a table,' while Power, which never sleeps, lays siege to the liberties of the people, to the power of the people, to every source of popular strength - before we awaken and return, for return we shall some day, some year, some decade.14

Ventura's social vision accords with Karp's appraisal, and her art calls for a radical rebirth, the creation of a new audience-performer relation which transforms both individuals and the culture at large.

If any one element characterizes Ventura's work and the development of Penny Arcade, it is Ventura's preoccupation with "otherness" and its social consequences. Over and again, Ventura focuses not only on the otherness of her own childhood and past, but on the pasts and milieux of those considered "outsiders" in American society. Her art in essence articulates the stories of "others." BDFW, for example, might as well be titled "Lives on the Fringe."

The piece exemplifies Ventura's recurring desire to define, delineate, examine, and accept American society's many outsiders. This focus in her solo work is not new. Examining cultures and marginal realities has always been an aspect of Ventura's efforts. Much of Ventura's character work, drawn from both interviews and personal experience, speaks to the world of the disenfranchised. Ruthie the Duck Lady (a New Orleans street person), the abrasive Andrea "Whips" Feldman, drag Queen Margot Howard Howard, Blonde Dee (the "A-Head" from the Lower East Side), and Charlene (the call
girl from New Orleans) populate Ventura's performance world and give
testament to life on the edges of American culture. The character Aunt Lucy,
based on Ventura's own blood relative, rails out the window of her Soho
apartment at a world that has cruelly disregarded her existence. As
mentioned in a 1993 interview, Ventura's goal as an artist is "to let people to
whom no one will listen have a voice,"\textsuperscript{15} and Ventura's voice has thus drawn
most powerfully from not only her own disenfranchisement, but the
disconnection and dysfunction of those around her, in her past, present, and
probably her future.

The thematic questions raised in Ventura's output have moreover been
accentuated by theoretical issues of the moment; for example, given the
performance/entertainment landscape of the 1990s, and its fascination with
the apparently artless, the reenacted, and the hyperreal, how can a
performative life be differentiated from a real one? The aesthetic
investigation of Susana Ventura's current efforts is both timely and activist
oriented. She questions the role of the counter-culture artist today and
challenges us to rethink our vision of culture and community.

In addition to analyses of Ventura's texts and performance pieces, this
study will use sociological evidence, personal interviews, and cultural
histories to illuminate Susana Ventura's artistic journey. The work will
argue that Susana Ventura's emergence in a significant way represents and
exemplifies the experience of the post-war, dissenting American artist. The
study draws significantly from avant-garde oriented publications like the
Village Voice, The East Village Other, and High Performance (particularly the writings of J. Hoberman and C. Carr), mainstream review work by Mel Gussow and Stephen Holden of the New York Times, and critical studies/interviews from The Drama Review, Performing Arts Journal, ARTnews, Art Forum, Dance, Theater, and TheaterWeek. Book-length treatments of avant-garde performance include Richard Kostelanetz' The Theater of Mixed Means,16 RoseLee Goldberg's Performance Art: Futurism to the Present,17 and Sally Banes' Greenwich Village 1963.18 Authors consulted regarding general American social movements since the fifties include David Reisman (on the fifties), Frederic Jameson and David Farber (on the sixties), Charles Reich (on the seventies), and Joel Kreiger (on the Reagan years). Betty Freidan, Kate Millett, and Susan Brownmiller represent authors concerned with women's issues in American society. For post-war performance theory, the work of Richard Schechner and Victor Turner is unavoidable. Jack Smith's essays, Jonas Mekas' Movie Journal, Charles Ludlam's plays and writings (and Steven Samuels' biography) as well as the aforementioned scholarly journals, provide criticism and commentary on "Ridiculous" theory. Lynda Hart, Julie Phelan, Jeannie Forte, and Moira Roth provide key studies of women in post-war performance. Additional information about Ventura's career, particularly in the seventies, can be gleaned from articles in the Waterville (ME) Morning Sentinel and the Maine Sunday Telegram.

Ms. Ventura's position as a prominent member of the post-war, non-traditional, multi-media performance scene grants merit to an examination
of her career, for Susana Ventura's work illuminates in a powerful and effective way the phenomenon of the post-war counter-culture and America's perpetual need for a social "other." This work will argue that Ventura is "contemporary"; her non-commercial avant-garde concepts of culture and performance art challenge traditional boundaries of art and reality and make her a solid example of the counter-culture artist (and citizen) searching for a new order of community and inclusion. Outside of how Susana Ventura's art serves as a testament of the times, a study of Ventura's career recommends itself as a contribution to the ongoing debate over art's place in society, a debate particularly important in America today, where the role of the avant-garde artist is both endangered by the political climate and presented with new opportunities made possible by technological advance.
Notes For Chapter One

1 Susana Ventura, personal interview, 12 December 1993.


3 Susana Ventura, Bringing It All Back Home LaMaMa, New York, April 1988.

4 Susana Ventura, A Quiet Night With Sid and Nancy produced by En Garde Arts, The Chelsea Hotel, New York, January, 1989. The second week of the show's run was cancelled because of fire violations.

5 Susana Ventura, Invitation to the Beginning of the End of the World LaMaMa, New York, November, 1990.

6 Susana Ventura, Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore! The Penny Arcade Sex and Censorship Show. The first versions of BDFW were produced from July to September of 1990 at P. S. 122, but I saw the show there in fall of 1992. BDFW subsequently moved to the Village Gate and, as noted, has since been performed all over the world.

7 Susana Ventura, Invitation.

8 Susana Ventura, personal interview, 16 June 1995.

9 Susana Ventura, personal interview, 7 December 1994.


12 Ventura, BDFW.

13 Ventura, Invitation.


Chapter Two

In the Sit-Com Shadow: Susana and the 1950s

American performance artist Susana Ventura first drew public attention in the New York counter-culture theater of the sixties. Though the sensibility of that decade would forever mark her work, before one discusses Ventura the artist, whose career began with the invention of Penny Arcade in 1966, one must understand something of Ventura herself and the world into which she was born. Very much a child of the fifties, Ventura reacted strongly to the America of these years and felt much ambivalence toward fifties culture and the way it shaped her identity (an identity she would eventually desert and reinvent, leaving only Barthesian "traces" of her "original" self).

The American 1950s are typically characterized as a staid and conservative time, during which the white middle-class established itself and its version of the family as the norm of American life. In his complex and compelling study of the decade, God's Country: America in the Fifties, J. Ronald Oakley explains and accounts for this commonly held image of the era, a time for which many Americans hold so much nostalgia. Oakley divides the fifties into three basic periods: the paranoiac first phase of 1950-1952, the comparatively "good" years under Eisenhower, and the problematic end of the decade, delineated by JFK's inauguration in 1961. Breaking the decade into these three eras quickly negates any all-encompassing notion of the decade as a continuous period of manageable "simplicity."
According to Oakley, the decade featured the entrenchment of a stereotypical domestic pattern. In this household, the father was the breadwinner; the nurturing mother had the full-time "occupation" of homemaking. This configuration, dubbed the "nuclear family," was reinforced as the cornerstone of American life, and its influence still holds tremendous cultural power. Michael Gordon characterizes the nuclear family as a post-war invention and notes its difference from the pre-war traditional unit, the extended family, which typically included "husband, wife, dependent offspring, and married sons and their spouses and offspring." Though the post-war nuclear family was of recent vintage, operating in contrast to long established domestic patterns, America in the fifties held up this familial structure as a primary cultural goal.

The media were the great supporter of the nuclear family model. The situation comedy and the advertising that sponsored it nightly throughout the fifties sold Americans this version of homelife and inculcated the country in the value of homogeneity, conformity, and sameness. Oakley, who notes "the absence of the extended family;" in the decade writes:

... television taught many subtle lessons: that blacks existed only as manual laborers, domestic servants like Jack Benny's Rochester ... that men held the real jobs while women were scheming or scatterbrained housewives like Lucy ... that guns and other weapons settled disputes between adults; and that Americans were screaming, greedy idiots like the contestants on daytime game shows ... television taught the nation's impoverished black minority that there was a wonderful world of white, middle-class consumer comforts and conveniences largely denied to the black community ... Television taught all of these things, and at the same time encouraged a homogeneity of interests, tastes, opinions, and consumption all across the country.
Historian James Gilbert argues that the cumulative impact of forces in fifties culture led to "a growing sameness of American society." He continues:

Widespread belief in the homogeneity of American culture emerged from many factors: the mass media; enlarged federal government participation in the economy; the bureaucratization of American business; political and social conservatism; and McCarthyism. And it seemed most rampant in the conformist life-style of the suburbs.\(^5\)

Given the cultural emphasis on uniformity during these years, it is not surprising that the fifties were also dominated by an overwhelming feeling of paranoia. Against the backdrop of the nuclear family, symbol of the safe and known, the era vented its fears of the unknown and the uncontrollable in numerous science fiction films, including *The Fly*, *Them*, and *Godzilla*. Though mutants and aliens spawned by radioactivity appear laughable in retrospect, the potential for chaos, for mass destruction, was indeed very real in the new atomic age. During the Cold War, Communism and the Soviet Union thus appeared as the great enemy, a genuine threat to the national well-being and the American Way. Indeed, so pervasive was the fear of an unseen or undefeatable enemy, we persecuted and criminalized our own, specifically during the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) hearings in the early part of the decade. In these years, it seemed as though anyone might be the "other," the foreign, the enemy. Suspicion in fact became institutionalized. Robert Griffith writes of the creation of "the 'national security bureaucracy,' that constellation of agencies that originated or expanded with the Cold War: the FBI, the CIA, the NSA, the military intelligence branches . . . ."\(^6\) Much of the country's paranoia was aimed, of
course, at the Eastern bloc, but any expression of difference, even in the man
or woman next door, drew suspicion. Post-war America feared challenges,
real and imagined, to the nation's freedom and prosperity, and that included
voices to the left of America's narrowing political center. As Griffith points
out:

One of the most important consequences of the new anti-communism,
of course, was the purge of thousands of government employees,
educators, labor leaders, journalists, scientists, writers, and
entertainers and . . . the intimidation of thousands more.7

In her 1988 work La Miseria, Ventura alludes to the tension and politics of
the era. The piece presents two child actors (playing the young Susana
Ventura and her brother) who discuss Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, and "the
scary Russians and their bomb." The two tell of "keepin' Khruschev from
killing everyone by pushing him in the oven when he comes in the house."8
Though rendered in comic terms, this exchange reveals something
significant in Susana Ventura's formative, pre-pubescent existence, and it is
clear that Ventura did not escape the "atmosphere of fear and suspicion"9
that colored American cultural life in the Cold War years.

Also during this time, post-war culture ascribed an increased importance
to "things," as the consumption of goods became a chief signifier of status
and belonging. According to the consumer mindset, the possession and
control of these goods could somehow serve as an emotional shield, offering
the assurances of place, position, and power. Status in American society has
perhaps always been defined by what a person does or does not have, but
access to material goods altered drastically after WW II, as production facilities that had been in place for the American war machine were now converted to the production of domestic goods. The rise of the suburbs, uniform-designed communities outside the urban centers, emphasized the slightest deviation from the materialistic norm. "Keeping up with the Jones" became the order of the day; consumerism and conformity were inseparable. As one historian observed:

To please others, to conform to superficial niceties, to be congenial and easy to get along with - that is, to be shallow - these were the demands of a society whose principal activity had turned from work as production to work as the manipulation of people.\textsuperscript{10}

Of course, the fifties are not remembered as an idyllic time for all Americans. Post-war prosperity eluded most African-Americans, who continued to experience desegregation and discriminatory practices. The average American woman still wanted the economic power, access to education, and social status afforded to the male populous. In 1955, for example, the median income for women was only 64% that of men. Nor were women legally protected against sexual discrimination until 1963. Moreover, paid domestic workers, most of whom were and are women, did not receive minimum wage protection until 1974 (whereas most workers have been protected since 1938).\textsuperscript{11} As Oakley reminds us, females in American society were treated "like Blacks, as an inferior minority group . . . and treated almost as a separate caste."\textsuperscript{12} This often unacknowledged feature of fifties culture, which devalued diversity and difference, had strong impact on the young
Susana Ventura, for Ventura early on recognized the privileges (and penalties) attending one's social identity. As an opinionated, imaginative young girl who did not fulfill cultural expectation, Ventura became aware of an essential "other"-ness on nearly every level of her existence: sexual, social, intellectual, and emotional.

Ventura spent her formative years in a strict, patriarchal, Italian Catholic family, under the watchful eye of parochial school zealots and authority figures whose idea of women's place in society had less in common with the American 1950s than with the Mediterranean 1500s. As her two later works La Miseria and Based on a True Story in particular would outline, Ventura has from her early childhood been fascinated with the phenomenon of estrangement, of being separated from one's cultural communities. The youthful Ventura's awareness of difference was heightened by the discrepancy between the post-nuke reality of TV and the reality she experienced in her homelife. In the Ventura household, no suburban nuclear unit, grandparents, uncles, and aunts substituted for an absent father and functioned as a modified version of an 'extended family.' Ventura's perception of her family's failure in Americanization is evident in La Miseria when the little brother character inquires: "Why can't Ma for once cook American food? And why can't sh. shop at the A&P like everybody else?" Later in the piece, the youngest of three "Susana" characters asks her confessor priest, "will you hypnotize my mother so she'll be more American?" In both La Miseria and Based On A True Story, Ventura tells of
watching Dick Clark on American Bandstand in the afternoons; and when the
daily 'milk break' would come during the broadcast, Ventura would eat
"focaccia and watered-down wine instead of milk and cookies." Ventura
recalls: "After a while I started to notice there weren't too many kids who
looked like me on the TV. I realized I wasn't the All-American girl. I was the
'other' American girl." In her pubescent teens, Ventura recognized another level of her
otherness. Midway through high school, Ventura was sent to a nun-operated
reform institution for reasons outlined in the previous chapter. In Marion
Hall reformatory, Ventura met Mother Mark, an androgynous nun who,
according to Ventura, "looked like a beautiful boy who looked like a beautiful
girl who looked like a beautiful boy." Wearing dark sunglasses and P.F.
Flyers, Mother Mark served not only as a beacon for Ventura's burgeoning
sexuality ("there we all were, in the hormonal pool, swimming madly toward
Mother Mark") and a nonconformist role model, she also assigned Ventura
the task of writing a school play. In retrospect Ventura would admit: "I guess
you could say I owe my whole career to Mother Mark." This nun was the
first authority figure to support Ventura's creativity and to value the
imagination as an enhancement to social well-being. At this point, however,
Ventura's sexual orientation and creative sensibility solidified her feeling of
difference and exacerbated her want of community. Indeed, she was
returned home, separated from Mother Mark because of the growing sexual
undertone of their friendship.
In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, sociologist Erving Goffman writes: "Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate manner." Conversely, those who do not possess such "social characteristics" can expect to be shunned and treated on some level as deviant. In her early development, Ventura, possessed of a facile imagination, impressive intellect, and a personal presence that belied her youth, was haunted by an apprehension that she was somehow an outsider, one at odds with the codes and strictures of a conformist fifties culture. Duelling environments, her home life and her school/public life, caused tensions for Ventura that were aggravated by her own expectations of freedom, individuality, and personal pursuit. Ventura would have no comfortable niche in U. S. mainstream society, and the dawning of this awareness in the youth engendered a distrust of America's overbearing culture of conformity and as a result sparked an activist mode of social consciousness.

The life of the New England, lower-class, Italian Catholic family, particularly as found in the male-dominated Ventura household (although her father was largely absent, her brothers enforced the traditions of the Italian, mountain peasant life and preserved a fierce patriarchy) offered a tomorrow of which Susana wanted no part. What would come to be known as the "generation gap," this breach between the desires of the Baby Boomers and the values of their parents, manifested itself in vivid fashion in the
Ventura household. Like millions of other youth of the period, Ventura did not accede to the world of the status quo and a suburban utopia that had been promulgated (on nearly every level) in popular culture. For Ventura, the "right kind" of familial life was unattainable. In Ventura's childhood society, wealth and status were not bestowed upon bisexual, intellectual, young, working-class, Italian Catholic girls. In *Greenwich Village 1963*, Sally Banes argues that the fifties in U. S. history embraced the "myth of the Puritan model of community—small-scale, egalitarian, and tightly bound by common threads of religion, work, and family." This very dichotomy between Ventura's reality and the mythical American dreamlife proved the anvil on which the young Ventura's personality was hammered.

The perceived consensus of the Eisenhower years (and its emphasis on uniformity) led to detachment and disenfranchisement for many of society's youth, who could not marry the American ideals they had been taught with the reality of their lives. Note the particularly tawdry example of child actress Lauren Chapin, who played "Kitten" Anderson on that most renowned (and conservative) of situation comedies, *Father Knows Best*, a series described in the following terms:

> Early television's most perfect family was the Anderson's of *Father Knows Best* . . . [which] mirrored post-war America. As if to signal the end of the depression and the war era and the beginning of a hopeful and secure age . . . the series explored the troubles and triumphs of an American middle-class family, presided over by a wise and kindly father played by Robert Young. The town and characters were as typical and idealized as a Norman Rockwell cover . . . "23
Though Chapin played the role of the all-American teen, she in her off-screen life had become by her early twenties a suicidal drug addict and prostitute (ironically, she now lends her expertise to an evangelistic effort to control violence and sex on television). While Ventura did not labor under the public scrutiny experienced by Chapin, she in her own way negotiated the imposition of stereotypes and conformist attitudes that so many of the baby-boomers found stifling and oppressive.

Given the repressed sensibility of the fifties, it is illuminating to discuss how Susana Ventura channeled her first creative urges, for performance early on became for Ventura both a coping mechanism and a mode of self-expression. Indeed, many of the most compelling moments in her mature work draw from the world of her childhood and its tensions. In discussing the oppressive atmosphere of her home life, Ventura would relate: "Between the ages of one and six, no one ever spoke to me except to give me a direct order." As a result, Ventura turned inward and reticent. This situation also served as a prod to the youth's creativity, as Ventura turned increasingly to her "fantasy world."

Many of the imaginative forays of Ventura's youth have been transformed into performative material. These anecdotes reflect a unique creativity and formidable invention in these early years. They also point to concerns that would preoccupy her later artistic exploration. For example, Ventura's "play" exhibits an early fascination with pop culture. When she was nine years old, instead of contributing to the church collection plate, Ventura would use her
quarter to purchase tabloid magazines, so she could "read about thalidomide babies and Elizabeth Taylor." On her way to school, Ventura often imagined she was going to a movie studio. In Based On A True Story, Ventura declares: "I pretended they had written a special part for me on Bonanza. I was little Joe's younger sister." Reflecting her fascination with theatrical spaces, she invented "The Black Shack" and transformed an abandoned neighborhood structure into a clubhouse for her friends. Her altruistic bent was evidenced in her "Help Your Neighbor Club," which, according to Ventura, "never really did much besides collect fireflies in a jar." Bitch!Dyke!Faghag!Whore! relates a curious episode which presaged Ventura's sexual politics. Ventura describes herself and another young neighborhood girl, "who grew up to be a radical lesbian feminist living on 'Womyn's Land,' ... tying up girls in the basement and spanking them. Boys were only good for their pee, which we needed to cook."

Ventura's most powerful invention from this period of juvenalia and, in retrospect, probably the most significant in terms of her adult efforts, was the creation of Lesley Andrews. Lesley, based primarily on the Shirley Temple films her mother so admired, emerged as the first, essentially separate persona Ventura created. From the ages of ten through twelve, in a series of ritualistic adventures funded largely by breaking and entering ("I saw crime as creativity"), Ventura would board a bus after her day at elementary school and make her way from working-class New Britain, CT. to Hartford, forty miles away. Once there, "Lesley," fully costumed in the
clothes, hat and purse befitting a cinematic American sweetheart, would treat herself to tea at upscale restaurants or window shop at high-priced department stores. The creation (and deployment) of this alter-ego was Ventura's first significant expression of her active imaginative life, one that would portend her later stage work. In this attempt to incorporate this other life, this more distinctly "American" life, Ventura was actually taking the first steps in the exploration and negotiation of matters that would permeate her entire oeuvre: inclusion, exclusion, and what it means to be an "other."

Ventura states in one recent work, "My mother says 'We didn't have [imagination] in Italy. We didn't need it!'" Clearly Ventura's creative urge was not encouraged by her family. Indeed, Ventura's sense of alienation from the clan would profoundly mark her sensibility. While almost all bright young children engage in fantasy play, Susana faced uncommon risks (and retribution) in the pursuit of her imaginary worlds and selves. Her mother, her abrasive and disciplining grandmother ("My grandfather emigrated in 1921, my grandmother not until 1950. What does that tell you?"), along with assorted brothers and uncles are depicted in several of Ventura's pieces, and the familial environment is shown as particularly intolerant of performative practices. In Based On A True Story, two elderly actresses--representing Ventura's mother and grandmother--call actress Jennifer Belle, playing "Young Penny," a "putana" when she comes home with her fingernails painted and informs them she wants to be an actress. In La Miseria, the grandmother again calls the Susana-character a whore, this
time because she is wearing a cocktail dress. Later in the piece, an adult version of Ventura (played by herself) argues with her brother about the usefulness and suitability of her performance career. A discussion of Laverne and Shirley deteriorates into an argument between Ventura and her brother John, who apparently believes that even the pedestrian complications of Laverne and Shirley are too high-brow for the Venturas. The Brother screams: "You're middle-class! You're middle-class!" He continues: "Art, Sue, is for rich people! And you're not rich!" 

According to Ventura's mother only physical labor qualified as "work," and within the extended family, artistic endeavor was equivalent to misbehavior. However, in face of what was apparently a dismal childhood experience, Ventura conveys a philosophical and often light-hearted attitude as she reflects upon these years in her adult works. Although characters from her family are sometimes depicted in a less than flattering light, the artist rarely points a finger in blame or uses childhood experience to explain away any of her own shortcomings. Indeed, Ventura now views those unnerving years as a child in New Britain as a source of strength. She has noted her early environment as "a little isolated," but, importantly, she recognizes its impact on her creative life. As Ventura notes: "it really left a lot of room for my imagination." Ventura remains cognizant of the link between her childhood experience and her adult present, and she understands that the transgression and imaginative exploration she
continues to focus on in her mature work had their gestation in this early part of her life.

A review of Ventura's origins and early experience reveal Ventura as something of a "rebellious" child. If being a rebel involves breaking from the societal norms and exploring one's own sense of individuality, then Ventura surely warrants the label. However, one would gain only a partial understanding of Ventura's career without recognizing that her transgressions did not just exhibit an impulse toward self-reliance, but a profound desire for community, another community, whose expectations were more acceptable to her outlook. It was not that she did not want to belong; it was simply that she perceived no place for herself in the highly stratified American culture of the fifties.

The pursuit of a diverse, indeed, utopian community has always been a cornerstone of Ventura's personal, social, and artistic ethic. Yet a paradox emerges when we consider American individualism and community. The long-lived notion of the self-reliant, frontier-breaking American is arguably antithetical to social cohesion, as a society is defined by the interdependence of its members, not their singularity. This observation directly relates to the homogenized vision of the social world of the American fifties and Ventura's personal and social discomfort within that world. The order of Father Knows Best perhaps never truly existed. Suburbia was supposed to make for a better life, but in many respects it stifled "community" with its "unrealistic fantasies of self-sufficiency." The development of the
faux community, the suburb, heightened rather than resolved the American
citizen's need for interdependence. The idea of the individual conflicting
with the society is an integral part not only of the American psyche since its
revolutionary beginnings, but of the idea of an avant-garde in general and
its inherent goal of transformation, of affecting change through social
criticism.

In her search for what Banes calls an "alternative commonwealth," Ventura resisted the imposition of the status quo and found alliance with the
disenfranchised, whom, like Ventura, had the greatest possible potential for rebellion. Ventura's cultural, sexual, and familial alienation indeed prepared her for entry into a burgeoning counter-culture community that would become her emotional home. As she remarks in *Bitch!Dyke!Fag Hag!Whore!*, "I always wanted to have that myth of community," and one finds that Ventura's iconoclastic performance aims to shatter fixed notions of social cohesion in order to recoup or even reinvent new configurations of communal relations.

A noteworthy constellation of avant-garde outcasts and intellectuals began to arise in the latter part of the 1950s, and this movement, which would blossom, transform, and emerge as a dynamic cultural force by 1966, when Ventura actually became a bona fide member of the counter-culture, presented Ventura with an alternative social vision and a new sense of community. One of the primary forces of the fifties avant-garde was the Beats, who according to one scholar:
. . . denounced the middle-class ethic of consumer America - the dedication to hard work, success, materialism, patriotism, suburbanism, consumerism, conformity, and organized religion. To them American society was hopelessly corrupt and hypocritical, far beyond peaceful reform or even revolutionary change.36

Widespread notoriety came to the Beatniks when a poem written by one of their "members," Allen Ginsberg, stood trial for obscenity in 1956 (William S. Burroughs, another "Beat" writer, would have his novel Naked Lunch tried in much the same way after its U.S. publication in 1962).37 The controversy surrounding Ginsberg's Howl and Other Poems drew the Beats into the national spotlight. The notoriety of the movement skyrocketed with the 1957 publication of Jack Kerouac's On The Road. In 1959 Life magazine published "a long, carefully researched, and comprehensive piece . . . which described the Beat Generation as a 'cult of the Pariah' and said that its real significance lay in the fact that it was the only rebellion around."38 Certainly no group of artists of the period were more strident social critics than the Beats. In the estimation of Bruce Cook, "The Beats were different from what they saw around them and what they felt smothering them. They knew they were, and they spent a good deal of their time and energy protesting their right to be different."39

While Ventura was too young to appreciate the Beats' efforts at social protest in the fifties, the ground the Beats helped to break would be fertile by the time she escaped to New York. Others, who were old enough, latched on to the Beats' notions of independence and communal possibility. One writer described her first contact with the Beats' ethos of protest this way:
The state, at that time, seemed to me to be the epitome of hypocrisy and sterile living . . . Living seemed largely a question of minding your P's and Q's, something I was not particularly adept at . . . Then chance, or fate, or serendipity dropped Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* into my hands . . . I was undone, a changed person . . . The novel liberated me as it did many others of my generation. There was that instantaneous recognition of self.\(^{40}\)

Indeed, the Beats forged an important sociological link between the white middle-class and the disenfranchised America, the vastly varied "other" America of which Ventura was a part. Though largely male and Caucasian, the Beat writers gave expression to a rebellious American voice, one that would later be heard most clearly in the sixties. Gilbert observes this aspect of the fifties avant-garde and notes its role in the political coalitions that emerged in the following decade:

> [The Beat writers] nourished their poetry and prose with sympathy for America's underclasses: the poor, exploited, and down-and-out. Mixing drugs, music, and Eastern religion; celebrating outsiders and the affinity for the black experience; aiming at self-liberation, the Beats laid the foundation for the counterculture of the late 1960s.\(^{41}\)

As an important movement, the Beats may be viewed as a bridge, a link between the 1950s status quo and the counter-culture movement that would reach its zenith between 1968 and 1970. One critic describes them as "the progenitors of the hippies, yippies, and other youthful members of the counterculture of the sixties."\(^{42}\) However, Sally Banes argues:

> It seems clear that another step beyond the Beats had to be taken to make "outsider" culture comfortable for massive youth participation: avant-garde art had to be made accessible, and avant-garde artists had to participate in, not withdraw from, all of popular culture.\(^{43}\)

If Banes is correct, perhaps that final "step" may have been the promise of JFK's election.
(Ventura's association with Play-House of the Ridiculous ties her directly to the Beat culture. John Vaccaro, Artistic Director of the Play-House of the Ridiculous, the first real theater company with which Ventura would work, and Play-House company member Elsene Sorrentino, for whom Ventura would serve as a dresser before becoming a performing member of the company, met while working with the American Poets Theater, which did primarily plays of the Beat poets.)

The community, then, that the young Ventura would soon embrace, the community of the avant-garde artist and citizen, had its roots of resurgence in the Beats and their like-minded peers working in other art forms—the Living Theater, dancer Merce Cunningham and musician John Cage, for example. During these years Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg, in lofts, cafes, and galleries throughout New York, were holding "Happenings" (the progenitors of "performance art"). Commercial artist Andy Warhol and peer Roy Lichtenstein were also debunking ideas of what art could be, worrying less about art than speed, efficiency and, ultimately, disposability, redefining craftsmanship to include modes of mass production, a first small step in making the avant-garde a commodity for the public.

Cultural and aesthetic traditions are handed down by what Peter Berger calls "the powerful hand of the past." The psyche and thus the work of avant-garde artists are largely informed by their sense of belonging in their own culture; yet to be avant-garde is to be outside the mainstream, and, in essence, to be outside the mainstream is to challenge its conventions. Avant-
gardists, whatever their idiom, thus challenge, pursue and produce. Avant-garde art necessarily and unavoidably extends critical and editorial commentary upon the nature of the wider culture. In sum, to be avant-garde is to press for change. In Avant-Garde Theatre 1892-1992, Christopher Innes addresses this matter and writes:

Avant-garde art is still characterized by a radical political posture. Envisioning a revolutionary future, it has been equally hostile to artistic tradition, sometimes including its immediate predecessors, as to contemporary civilization. Indeed, on the surface the avant-garde as a whole seems united primarily in terms of what they are against: the rejection of social institutions and established artistic conventions, or antagonism towards the public [as representative of the existing order].

Examination of Ventura's childhood against the background of 1950s culture and the artist's involvement in a rising counter-culture begs numerous difficult questions about community and group inclusion. Susana's early experiences also raise the prickly issue—is it possible to redefine cultural mores through artistic endeavor? This question may be relevant to an artist of any era, but given the conformist nature of the American 1950s the issue became particularly pertinent, especially to a young, artistically inclined child wishing to break the confines of her social strata.

Indeed, following her escape from New Britain, what in large part attracted Ventura to the Beat-inspired counter-culture of New York was the avant-garde's challenge to conventional art/reality definitions and the movement's belief that art could in fact have concrete effect on the world of daily events. Ventura comments in a forlorn and dreamlike moment in RDFW, "There used to [in the sixties] be something called socially redeeming art."
For Ventura, art is intended to engender or incite action. "I want a result and I want it tonight," says Ventura in BDW. "I want a transformation. And not just for you guys, for me, too!"  

The desire for social transformation seems to epitomize late fifties, pre-JFK America. As one sixties era activist expressed it, "Everything was ready; we [young American leftists and liberals] were geared up, although we weren't quite sure for what." The inevitable conflict between sitcom illusion of the American fifties and the harsher reality of day-to-day living reached an unavoidable point of crisis.

The development of an avant-garde in large part came as a response to the imposed stasis of fifties culture, at a time characterized by the "organization man," a term coined by William H. Whyte, Jr. in his seminal social analysis of the period. Whyte's writing corroborates the work of David Reisman and the decade's valorization of the "other-directed" individual, who, according to Reisman, "has no clear core of self to escape from; no clear line between production and consumption, between adjusting to the group and serving private interests; between work and play." Taboos were plentiful in the American fifties. They existed in the home, where a working wife might be considered socially unacceptable. At work, defying the company line might be seen as inappropriate. In society at large, having a friend of another race or even sex might be frowned upon. Any variation from the world of Kitten Anderson and her kin could be considered abnormal.
The macrocosmic social force that dominated the decade was felt by Susana on a personal level. A vision of an oppressive future, a socially and emotionally limited America, was the backdrop for Ventura's childhood. For Ventura, this dismal picture included the "suffering, marginalized womanhood" she fervently wished to avoid, and this feature of America in the 1950s quite simply pushed Ventura toward the world of the avant-garde artist.
Notes For Chapter Two


3 Oakley 115.

4 Oakley 109.


7 Griffith xix.


9 Oakley 56.

10 Gilbert 117.


12 Oakley 292.

13 Susana Ventura, *Based On A True Story* LaMaMa, November 1990.

14 Ventura, *La Miseria*.

15 Ventura, *Based On A True Story* and *La Miseria*.

16 Ventura, *Based On A True Story*.

17 This particular line appears in some variation in *La Miseria* and *Based On A True Story*.

18 Ventura, *Based On A True Story*.

19 Ventura, *Based On A True Story*. 
20 Ventura, *Based On A True Story*.


23 Gilbert 64.


25 Ventura, *La Miseria*.

26 Ventura, *La Miseria*.

27 Ventura, *Based On A True Story*.

28 Susana Ventura, personal interview, 14 March 1993.


31 Ventura, *La Miseria*. Obviously, Ventura intends this remark as a joke, but it nonetheless reflects how conscious the young Ventura was of the restrictions placed on her from all sides.

32 Ventura, *La Miseria*.

33 Ventura, *La Miseria*.


35 Banes 38.

36 Oakley 399.

37 See the Grove Press, New York 1966 'Black Cat' paperback version of Burrough's book as a starting point for more information on legal action against the work.

38 Bruce Cook, *The Beat Generation: The Tumultuous '50s Movement and Its Impact on Today* (New York: William Morrow, 1971) 91. This quotation is
actually taken from the new 1994 Quill edition, which includes a new preface and afterword.

39 Cook 23.


41 Gilbert 253-4.

42 Gilbert 402.

43 Banes 7.


45 Berger 84.


47 Ventura, BDFW.

48 Ventura, BDFW.


50 William H. Whyte, Jr. The Organization Man (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., Inc. 1957)


52 Ventura, personal interview, 6 October 1994.
Chapter Three

Like Kids in the Attic: Penny Arcade and the Culture of Play

American cultural periods are rarely considered actually to begin and or end with the advent of a new decade. Sixties culture could arguably be dated anywhere from the end of the Korean conflict, to the arrival of the Beatles in the U. S., to the Democratic convention riots of 1968. As George Lipsitz wrote:

Decades are always artificial constructs . . . [some say] the decade that began . . . at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina in February, 1960 ended in hopelessness and resignation . . . in Altamont, California in 1969 when Hell's Angels beat to death a black spectator while the Rolling Stones performed on stage . . . An optimist might start the decade with the election of President John F. Kennedy and conclude it with the landing of Americans on the moon in July 1969. A critic of American foreign policy might point to the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 and the My Lai massacre . . .

However, as American presidents clearly serve as emblems for the period in which they serve (whether they should or not), the early sixties may be defined by the persona of JFK, the youngest candidate ever elected. I would in fact mark the disillusionment and social upheaval forever equated with the sixties as "beginning" with the death of Kennedy in 1963. Frederic Jameson corroborates this view when he writes:

The assassination of President Kennedy played a significant role in delegitimizing the state itself and in discrediting the parliamentary process . . . More significantly, the legacy of the Kennedy regime to the development of a 60s politics may well have been the rhetoric of youth and of the 'generation gap' which he exploited, but which outlived him and dialectically offered itself as an expressive form through which the political discontent of American students and young people could articulate itself.

1963 proved a political watershed for reasons other than JFK's death. This year witnessed "the nuclear test ban treaty, the historic civil rights march
on Washington . . . the increase of American advisers (in Vietnam) twentyfold and (JFK's proposition of sweeping civil rights legislation),"3 as well as the assassination of NAACP representative Medger Evers and the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon.4 The era's attempts at legislative change would set the tone for an altruistic and optimistic national outlook, one which was profoundly darkened by the JFK assassination. As Peter Collier recalls the moment: "As the news flashed from Dallas, I realized there had been a seismic shift. In an instant, the political landscape had changed."5

Also at this time, the growing avant-garde scene, initiated by the Beat generation and the rise of Pop Art, exploded and became a significant force, influencing not only a select group of artists and their followers, but the general populous as well. After JFK's death, the post World War II America was abruptly faced with the needs, social, political, and artistic, of its own offspring, of a frontierless American youth that had begun to deconstruct the cookie-cutter dream of the fifties' American ideal. Disenchanted and disengaged, large numbers of this group found the avant-garde particularly viable, expressive of their restless condition and iconoclastic orientation.

With American society rupturing on almost every conceivable level, what Susana Ventura did between the ages of 16 and 21 (between 1966 and 1971), gained her no widespread cultural attention. However, her journey in a telling way reflected the mood and dynamism of the times. When Susana Ventura created the persona Penny Arcade, Ventura effectively entered the "sixties." Her life among the drag queens, self-proclaimed avant-gardists,
and fringe poets and players of the New York counter-culture was one of drastic transformation, and in her personal triumphs and travails we discern the backdrop of an American culture in crisis.

Only recently have we as a society come to view the sixties as a closed book, relegating it to the symbolic world of nostalgia, national monuments, Hollywood films, and prime-time network TV series (ABC's China Beach, CBS's short-lived Tour of Duty). However, the mythology of the sixties we now accept holds the period as anarchic, divisive, and vaguely pagan, leading many to vilify the time, viewing it as a sociological "black sheep" best forgotten. No doubt these years challenge the perception of America as infallible, and while some regard this tempestuous time in derogatory terms, these years promoted change, reevaluation of ideals, and rethinking of the state's very function.

Marked by the dynamic of flux that was reorganizing America culture at large, Ventura's life in the period from 1966 to 1971 may be viewed as a traditional rite of passage. She has indeed described her life during these years as a sort of "limbo."6 This idea of displacement and statuslessness is a key component in any "rite of passage," that is the process an individual undergoes in moving from one cultural or personal identity to another. Notably formulated by Arnold van Gennep in the early part of the century,7 a rite of passage involves three components: separation, margin,8 and re-aggregation. This construct can be applied to Ventura's personal journey, as her stark separation from society as a child and teenager in milltown New
Britain represents the first stage of her passage. Her "limbo" period, a state which involves a process of reinvention, is evident in her life as Penny Arcade, the young New York avant-gardist. Ventura emerges from this liminal period a perhaps improved and certainly altered version of her original self. As we will see in the following chapter, she is then reincorporated, in a post-sixties America, as Susana Ventura.

The sixties may in many respects be viewed as a time of liminality for the entire United States. The culture shifted from an era of tremendous economic growth, productivity, and a status quo of uniformity to a period of ideological division and social strife. The reevaluation of cultural belief proved unavoidable as "alternative" points of view came to the fore. Both Kennedy and Johnson attempted to label their administrations as agents of significant change. JFK's "New Frontiers" spoke specifically to the American mythos of individuality and growth. LBJ's "Great Society" set a vision of social justice and equitable distribution at the forefront of American politics. According to Gilbert, "[Kennedy and Johnson] aroused, but ultimately could not control, a wave of political idealism that flowed into the civil rights movement, into groups opposing the war on Vietnam, and finally, into opposition to liberalism itself."⁹ It was this "loss of control" that established the late sixties as an era of liminality, a time in which the sub-group of liberal citizens under the age of thirty "separated" from the cultural idiom of the late fifties. As national consensus disintegrated, citizens experienced the ennui of being betwixt and between as the culture strove to find a new identity.
The primary participants in this divisive drama of the 1960s were the figures/symbols of our society who had in many cases been relegated to a liminal state. These included not only the soldiers in Southeast Asia (who were so clearly experiencing van Gennep's second stage), but also the "disenfranchised" inside the U. S., who included anyone but white, English-speaking males. Though the WASP still personified the "American voice," other voices had begun to be heard. The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the women's Liberation movement, The Black Panthers faction of the civil rights movement, and the homosexual and lesbian minorities, and of course, the encompassing anti-war movement, had all begun clamoring for fundamental change in American society. This is the backdrop of Ventura's rite of passage, who was ready to explore and assert her own personal alternative voice.

Ventura began her period of "separation" with a literal departure when, at the age of sixteen, she left her home for the streets of Manhattan. This exodus did not, however, denote a clean and simple break from her former world, nor did life for her become markedly easier. Indeed, Ventura's life was in many ways more difficult. Ventura had gained personal freedoms by leaving her mother's house, but she was essentially without cash or survival skills. Early in her adventure as a sixteen-year old, New York street kid, Ventura was taken in by "the A-set, the amphetamine junkies." Her experiences were consequently rather colorful, including grisly, unwanted sexual encounters, a great deal of drugs, and very little money. In State of
Grace, she describes several incidents of rape and sexual assault in her early (relatively naive) years in New York. This work relates how, after she and a friend had undergone a violent attack in an East Village apartment, Ventura experienced a sudden flash of illumination, one that starkly revealed the liminal, limbo-like world of New York and its opposition to everything she had known before. The dislocation Ventura felt is clear in her character's admission: "All I could think of as it was happening was how would my mother feel if I was found murdered in a New York slum?"

According to Peter Berger, one's entry to society (even from birth) involves one's location in certain sectors. Berger writes:

This location predetermines and predefines almost everything we do, from language to etiquette, from religious beliefs to the probability that we will commit suicide. Our wishes are not taken into consideration in this matter of social location, and our intellectual resistance to what society prescribes or proscribes avails very little at best and frequently nothing.

For Ventura, any notion of predetermined social location was anathema. She once declared: "Because of my family background I was handed a fully formed character I had not invented ... I resented not being able to develop my own persona." Ventura thus established her own social place by shedding that most basic of social marks, the name we are given when we are born. The creation of Penny was the spur of the moment response of a particularly facile mind; it was also a profound gesture of assertion.

Ventura's confidence in her own individuality and ability to self-determine, evidenced by her departure from New Britain, was growing, and Penny's
creation shows the imagination, sharpness of mind, and flexibility of spirit that is the constant of Ventura's life.

The literal creation of Penny Arcade took place about a year after Ventura's arrival in the New York City. She explains:

I was walking down East 9th Street, coming down off LSD. I saw this paperback book in the street, picked it up and took it back to my friend's apartment where I was staying. The heroine's name was Penny Kincaid. I was staying with my friend Jamie Andrews in his studio, sleeping on his drawing table. He had taken me in, I now think to protect me, but then I believed that he kept me around primarily for my entertainment value. In the mornings, Jamie would get up to go to work and sort of groan, because I was still there. I knew he wasn't going to throw me out, but each morning I felt I had to come up with something to justify my being there, and this one particular morning, after he groaned, I said 'Good morning, Jamie. I've just changed my name to Penny Arcade' which I guess was this subconscious version of Penny Kincaid. He said 'That's fabulous!' and offered me an egg, which was always a great victory and probably my only meal of the day.

Penny's creation paradoxically opened and closed emotional and creative doors for Ventura and in effect served to conclude her "separation" period; this placed Ventura firmly in the second stage of her sixties rite of passage: "liminality." Ventura had been essentially stripped, oddly by her own hand, of her previous position in the society, and at that point her personal life changed from one of flight to qualified stasis. She adopted a new community, a "family" that would allow her the freedom to express, without reservation, her creative urge. "Susana" thus became the emblem of a life temporarily shelved, and "Penny" began with a clean slate.

Ventura has remarked that these years were a time "when everyone was taking names. Jamie's was Jamie DeCarlo Lots, which was this real estate ad that ran in New York in those days," and indeed, Susana Ventura arrived in
New York when the mainstream itself was in question and a new kind of post-Beat, politically driven avant-garde had taken hold. This newly discovered freedom was particularly significant for Ventura after growing up in a home (and society) which did not allow her to "speak." At the age of sixteen, Ventura found that restrictions on her identity no longer applied in the Lower East Side of New York. Indeed, New York's Greenwich Village in the 1960s clearly existed as a liminal zone, where, as perhaps is still the case in New Orleans or Las Vegas, specific kinds of behavior are permitted that are not allowed elsewhere in the country. In this period, Susana Ventura experienced many of the elements central to the liminal state, as defined by Turner, that is: "[a] blend... of lowliness and sacredness," an "absence of marked sexual polarity," and a "limbo of statuslessness." 19 Certainly, living on the street or in ramshackle tenements among gender-bending amphetamine addicts and no-name squatters, Ventura in these days knew the extremes of liminality.

In writing of the conflagration of social and cultural changes that would jolt American society, Sally Banes notes the Greenwich Village art scene as a "paradigm" for the nation's wider social "transformation." 20 During these years transgression paradoxically became the norm for much of 1960s American society. The primary impulses of sixties' art, motives which continue to drive Ventura's work in the mid-1990s, include two basic aims--first, to break social barriers and the status quo; and second, to induce the formation of a new communal structure. Theater artists like Grotowski, the
Becks, the young Sam Shepard, and Jack Smith were working to break down the walls between performer and audience and return a degree of ritualistic authenticity to the theater experience. Smith in particular would strike a chord with Ventura, helping to shape both her aesthetic and social visions.

An eccentric filmmaker and theater artist most renowned for his 1962-63 film *Flaming Creatures*, Smith had a "profound influence on the development of the Ridiculous approach to art" and created "highly influential performance pieces . . . Smith's refusal to separate his persona from his art presaged the gallery-based 'performance artists' of the mid-1970's." Indeed, his long-time supporter and friend, the avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas, wrote of Smith as "one of the last and uncompromising great artists our generation had produced." John Vaccaro and Charles Ludlam, the great masters of the Ridiculous style, have also publicly expressed a deep respect for Smith's vision. Vaccaro appeared in some of Smith's early sixties films, and Smith would be credited with costume design for the Vaccaro company's first full-length show, Ron Tavel's *Lady Godiva*. Smith's films include *Normal Fantasy*, apparently also known as *Normal Love* (1964), and *No President?* (1969). His amorphous theater pieces include *The Human Wreckage Review* (1964), *Capitalism of Atlantis* (1965), *I Was A Mekas Collaborator* (1978) and the pivotal precursor to performance art, "The Plaster Foundation of Atlantis (which is what he called his Manhattan loft)" performances. Performed at midnight sporadically from 1970-1972, Smith's Plaster Foundation pieces took arcane, often whimsical
names, such as Withdrawal From Orchid Lagoon, Economic and Religious Spectacle of Jingola, etc. According to Mekas, "these pieces were located in what Robert Rauschenberg once called 'the gap between art and life' . . . a cross between a rehearsal and a private ritual." Mekas provides an excellent account of one of these evenings:

Jack was there, on the set, lit with spotlights, picking up things, and placing them down again. In his hand he held the pages of the script. A phonograph was playing a Latin tune. It seemed that we walked in just when he was about to make his decisions about the evening . . . The set was a huge arrangement of, I have no other word for it, human wreckage: cans, bottles, containers, signs, bits and parts of things, a toilet with a doll sticking out, dirty underwear on the line, a huge red sign that said ALL DAY $2 . . . there were feathers, two or three old, dried out Christmas trees, an assortment of paper boxes . . . the entire caving-in of middle-class capitalist culture . . . and it was sad and miserable. . . One slowly began to perceive that this was not just a set for some kind of theater piece that was coming up . . . this arrangement was already the content and essence of the whole thing.

The intensely personal performance that Smith purveyed, where the line between theatrical invention and daily life is vaguely drawn and in constant flux, would have a significant effect on Ventura. Indeed, she is now the curator of Smith's personal effects (Smith, born in 1932, died of AIDS in 1981). She keeps his ashes in her Lower East Side apartment in a miniature, ornate, temple-like structure adorned with tiny lobsters and emblems of Lost Atlantis, a favorite source for the imagery and themes in Smith's work.

While all avant-garde forms of the late 1960s owe much to the ethos of the Beats, perhaps the best example of iconoclastic, sixties counter-cultural performance is the work of the Living Theater. Julian Beck and Judith Malina's company began its work in the late forties, but problems ranging
from fire code violations and tax problems to overt censorship forced them into an "artistic exile" in 1964. By the high sixties, however, the company had returned to the U. S., with great fanfare. Whereas the political bent of their work had not previously found a large and like-minded audience, there now existed an established counter-culture that embraced their socially charged pieces. The Living Theater's *Paradise Lost* (1968) must be counted among the most important avant-garde works of the late sixties. *Paradise Lost* was a prime example of the Living Theater's (non-traditional) confrontational style, an approach termed the "Rite of Guerilla Theater." The piece was ritualistic, not overtly narrative in nature, and involved a number of activities or performative beats which enacted rather than portrayed events. According to Innes, audience members "were approached as if they represented the oppressive forces of society (187)." Existing myths were transformed into ritualistic acts which often demanded audience participation. As Judith Malina writes: "[when] actors stepped off the stage and engaged audiences [sic] in participant roles, we broke a tradition and created a new tradition." Indeed, the aspects of PL--nudity, exposure to danger, freedom, etc.--embodied the basic tenets of most of the significant avant-garde performance of the period, including work by Chaikin's Open Theater, Schechner's Performance Group, and the less aggressive and politically charged Play-House of the Ridiculous.

Shepard's 1967 play *La Turista* features a character making a hasty escape, cartoon style, through the back wall of the theater; this action serves as an
emblematic expression of the counter-cultural performance impulse—the attempt to break down traditional theatrical borders. At this time, American society at large was attempting to dissolve barriers in order to establish a vastly different norm. According to Philip Slater, there were two significant social impulses in the sixties:

The first was a strong attitudinal shift among part of the population—the affirmation of a set of values diametrically opposed to those of the main part of society. The second was the emergence of alternative institutions—communes and work collectives, organizations among the oppressed, and so on—trying to provide services and fill needs without buying into the competitive assumptions of the society as a whole.29

This effort to create significant alternative institutions also informed theatrical practice. Indeed, in the period from 1966-1971, the idea of an "alternative community" became nearly synonymous with the counter-culture "underground." There was an "underground" version of practically every art form, from the theater to journalism (in the "Gonzo" style of Hunter Thompson) to comic books (in the work of R. Crumb and Spain). Indeed, the explosion in so-called "performance art" that dominated the seventies' and early eighties' experimental stages probably truly began here. This was a period of redefinition, a time for the relaxation of conventional standards.

For Susana Ventura, her newfound counter-culture society was not just a permissive one; its conditions were peculiarly conducive to her development as a person and artist. A "code of liminality" was in effect in this society, and the possibilities for transformation were myriad.

Certainly there was no group more populated by "misfits" and "cultural others" than the theater ensemble Ventura would join soon after she arrived

The Play-House began right here in this room. It was with six of us who used to hang out. Y'know, this place was like a salon and people used to come here all the time, and one day someone gave me a couple of plays to do and it had parts for six people. And so the six of us, having nothing to do that summer, decided we would do the plays. I didn't like the plays too much, they weren't plays, they were scenarios, originally for movies. I just adapted them to the stage without doing any rewriting. We just worked on them organically. The name "Ridiculous" came out of that particular venture.

The Play-House was peopled by the likes of playwright Ron Tavel; actresses Mary Woronov and Blackeyed Susan; future Warhol divas, drag queens Holly Woodlawn and the aforementioned Jackie Curtis; and Charles Ludlam, who would branch off to start the Ridiculous Theater which still today produces in New York under the direction of Everett Quinton. In the mosaic of sixties-era turmoil, the drag-show, cabaret, Baudelairian, baroque-art style of Vaccaro's company was able to find a foothold, albeit a brief one. According to Ventura,
"[Among the avant-garde theater world], the Play-House of the Ridiculous was like the Rolling Stones to everybody else's Beatles."\(^{32}\) When Susana arrived in New York, the company still included such culturally misanthropic figures as Woodlawn, Curtis, and Ventura's newfound housemate and protector, Jamie Andrews. Critic and author Stefan Brecht called this outfit, which would become the first artistic home of the new "Penny Arcade," a "pariah in-group."\(^{33}\)

Initially run by Vaccaro and Tavel, who would also put in his time as a member of the Factory, writing scenes for Warhol's films, the company operated out of small galleries, theaters, and even Vaccaro's loft in the eastern part of New York's Greenwich Village (from about 1965 to 1967). Later, after Tavel's departure with Ludlam, Vaccaro ran the Play-House on his own, primarily out of LaMaMa's "club" space or the Gotham Art Theater at 455 West 43rd Street.

The Ridiculous style, which maintains a current foothold in the New York theater scene through the continuing work of Ludlam's company, is difficult to describe. Although Bonnie Marranca noted that "[The Ridiculous] never had a manifesto or any official theories," she outlines the basic elements of the form in her work *Theatre of the Ridiculous*:

[The Ridiculous is] an anarchic undermining of political, sexual, psychological, and cultural categories, frequently in dramatic structures that parody classical literary forms or re-function American popular entertainments, and always allude to themselves as 'performances.' A highly self-conscious style, the Ridiculous tends towards camp, kitsch, transvestism, the grotesque, flamboyant visuals, and literary dandyism. It is comedy beyond the absurd because it is less intellectual, more earthy, primal, liberated. Not tragi-comedy but
metaphysical burlesque, the Ridiculous offers a new version of the 'clown.' It's dependency on the icons, artifacts, and entertainments of mass culture in America - the 'stars,' old movies, popular songs, television and advertising - makes the Ridiculous a truly indigenous American approach to making theatre.

While Marranca's appraisal captures key features of the Ridiculous style, Ronald Argelander observes a further dimension. For Argelander, the Ridiculous style is:

An intimate way of working . . . based on a shared creative sensibility most like the activity of play - the kind of play children share in creating backyard fantasy drama. It is a sensibility that takes plots, dialog, and characters from movies, comics, and other familiar or personal sources; that considers role creation as everything except 'playing oneself' - it is disguise, sexual role switching, artifice, caricature, stereotype; in which acting is broad and expressive but not 'good' or 'bad.'

Ludlam, who later insisted he "had to invent the whole genre" himself, simply described Ridiculous theatrical philosophy as "theater without the stink of art." Vaccaro is more specific about the nature of his company and their work:

[There was a] passion that existed with the Play-House of the Ridiculous. Mine was a theater of energy . . . What we lacked in talent, we made up for in enthusiasm. They were an explosion of emotion, an explosion of spontaneous image . . . They weren't actors, they were performers . . . Usually in theater they would talk about not upstaging anyone. I encouraged it. That's the individuality! . . . our style was very Grand Opera, all about gesture. We indicated all over the place. We were like kids' in their grandfather's attic.

In all these dissections of the Ridiculous idiom, however, one cannot mistake the centrality of play, experimentation, and exploration, as well as an effort to embrace artifice, to make theatre about theatrical production, devoid of pretension. Vaccaro further states:

Our playwrights . . . write sort of a groundwork . . . they write a, let's speak in jazz terms, they write a melody line, and we improvise on it . . . [we are] really having a ball on stage. We are playing, it's a fun
house, that's exactly what we are . . . they do most of the inventing themselves.38

This way of working is indicative of a liminal mentality, of a cultural idiom which cares little for conventions of social behavior and is thus freed from society's notions of appropriateness. It is a world of the "other" which operates by its own set of social rules, a realm ideal for Ventura's efforts at self-invention.

Ventura preferred (and was drawn to) the richly textured style and improvisational ensemble methods of the Play-House over the aggressively political and agenda-heavy work of the Living Theater or the Performance Group. Jackie Curtis and Jamie Andrews had asked Ventura to participate in Play-House performances, but an "invitation" from Vaccaro himself was what transformed Ventura from costume assistant to performer. Ventura recalls, "He pushed me out on the stage and said: 'Do something FABULOUS!'"39

Ventura's first piece with the Play-House was 1967's The Moke-Eater. This work has a simple scenario: Frank Dudley plays Jack, an American Everyman traveler whose car has broken down in some strange and unknowable place. In his effort to locate someone in the town who can fix his car, Jack encounters a cluster of truly Bacchanalian, barely human creatures. The company members he meets are raggedly costumed in feather headdresses, union suits, flowing scarves, pillbox hats, dismantled boas, false noses, skull caps, and Tarzan-like loinskins and furs. The actors' make-up is a mish-mash of Native American, Kabuki, Noh, sixties psychedelia, African and circus clown traditions (primarily facial, but sometimes applied to the arms, legs, or
torso). A tremendous clattering of grunts, squeals, groans—Artaudian noises of every sort—and the occasional audible word exudes from the huddling minions. These creatures are led by a character played by Sierra Bandit, an Amazon of a woman whose dominatrix-like onstage presence is reinforced by her black clothes and thigh-high boots. Bandit leads her pack of pseudo-humans through a number of episodic beats, perpetrating physical and psychological violence against the poor wanderer. The creatures poke, punch, pick at, and even pee on the unassuming Jack. He is stripped of his clothes, denied food, forced to recite an old Amos 'n' Andy routine, ordered by Bandit to "For God's sake man, . . . think for [yourself]!" and eventually eviscerated and force-fed his own liver. Vaccaro remarks:

> Every act of violence perpetrated against Jack was perpetrated against the audience. We got them all to sign a release if they were going to stay. We were very cruel to them. The piece was inspired by the violence I saw going on all around in America.

Ventura's first Play-House acting role was not a formidable one. Late in The Moke-Eater, Bandit and her minions demand entertainment for themselves and Jack, evidently as a kind of final celebration before they kill him. The acts include a young man doing a few turns while dressed in a dance belt and leotard, a woman on crutches attempting acrobatics and falling down, and Ventura, clothed in fishnet stockings and garter, a black leotard, heels, and elbow-length gloves, dancing and rolling around on the floor. Ventura's black hair is violently teased, and she is in rudimentary clown make-up. Her breasts spill outward from her bodice, and she feigns
both shock and an attempt to restrain them. Her "act" has the appearance of uncaring ineptitude, an utterly artless clown routine.

The Moke-Eater, however, proved merely the beginning of Ventura's experiences with Vaccaro's Play-House, and her years with the company fueled the imagination that had once created the Black Shack and Lesley Andrews in New Britain. Vaccaro remarks: "She was a very energetic and vibrant person . . . She was this girl with big tits, this girl who bounced . . . She got into the spirit and thrust of it and went to the outer limits of herself."43 In short, the Play-House existed as a liminal zone where Ventura, still a mere teenager, could develop her creative impulse. The Play-House not only gave her practical experience in the artforms she still explores, it served as an arena in which she could investigate aspects of her own identity. She describes the Play-House as "the vortex of the street scene, the drug scene . . . Jack Smith . . . everything that was going on at that time. Individuality was highly valued within the group."44

Though the Play-House of the Ridiculous dissolved after only a few years of production, its effect on Ventura's theatrical vision was immense. The group's work and process particularly affected Ventura's understanding of how a performance piece can be created, and indeed the performative style of Penny Arcade as it exists today had its beginnings in the communal, ensemble efforts of the Play-House. The Play-House shares a confrontational style practiced by Malina and Beck's Living Theater, Schechner's Performance Group, and the early work of the Wooster Group: in the
performance of all these ensembles, "found" or pre-existing materials were re-interpreted or "deconstructed" as a means of creating a visceral, vital piece of theater. The Ridiculous style also used myth, ritual and iconography, material usually more uniquely American in flavor than the stories and rites that resonated in the Living Theater or in Schechner's company. Vaccaro explains: "The company began to understand we were [all] on a similar frequency. We were all into 1930s movies, especially the madness of [B-movie icon] Maria Montez." Vaccaro's collaborative vision was not only what separated the Play-House from Susana's Warhol endeavors (which we will discuss briefly elsewhere), but what she would carry with her as a basic precept of her art later in her career. From a strictly structural standpoint, in contrast to the Warhol work Ventura was doing, the Play-House maintained two fundamentals in each production: a strong communal vision and a loosely organized script. The Play-House's performances were initially scripted by Tavel, but the chaos director John Vaccaro attempted to present on stage often devalued the spoken word. Moreover, the artifice of the performative was taken to extraordinary lengths in costume, make-up, sound, and language. This was a kind of found theater, a theater that typically involved a paganistic, semi-ritualized Bacchanalian chorus made of eccentric individuals and characters. It was sometimes obscene, and often played out, Moliere-style, the inner workings of company politics and relationships on the stage. The actors were very much "making it up" as they went along, and this kind of searching and letting-come-what-may technique gave an
immediacy and vitality to the work. Vaccaro drew on the traditions of commedia dell'arte ("It is sort of like commedia dell'arte, I guess"\(^46\)) and Kabuki and mixed these with American performance styles, including rock and roll ("I turned everything into a musical"\(^47\)) and Hollywood melodrama. The result was a low-brow version of the Brechtian epic. Above all else, however, a Play-House performance was fun, and tried not to take itself too seriously.

In 1969, Holly Woodlawn and Susana Ventura performed in a Play-House production of *Heaven Grand in Amber Orbit* at the theatre on Forty-third Street. This piece, which was written by Curtis, involved a circus freakshow. Woodlawn, who was originally cast as 'Princess Ninga Flinga Dung,' was eventually relegated (after a run-in with a vehement Vaccaro) to the role of "Cuckoo the Bird Girl," who, Holly recounts:

> ...was featured in the chorus as a Moon Reindeer girl... I had glitter everywhere—in my hair, my ears, my nose. And I'd wear a black mink bikini with different shades of chiffon shreds hanging from it, along with red glittered lipstick, green glittered eye shadow, and green glittered antlers on top of my head.\(^48\)

*Heaven Grand*, like *The Moke-Eater*, exemplified the style of performance Ventura was learning under the tutelage of Vaccaro and Jack Smith. Zany creatures, Artaudian sound effects, as well as a mise-en-scene based in confusion, multiple plotlines and frenetic activity, comprised the world of a Play-House work. In the following selection from *The Life of Lady Godiva*, an early Ron Tavel text for the Play-House, the distinctive style of the Play-House is further clarified:

*Curtain, dark stage. Silence. Then a strong spotlight illuminates a very long chaise lounge somewhat left of center. A small end table*
about 2 1/2 feet high near the chaise, with a bottle of soda pop, a glass, an ashtray, a pack of long cigarettes on it, a Tiffany lamp suspended from above. Unless otherwise specified, the decor and costumes should be in Art Nouveau style. MOTHER SUPERVIVA is discovered sitting in the direct center of the chaise; she is sitting up very stiff and proper, severe. SUPERVIVA is played by a male actor. SUPERVIVA is dressed in an English fin de siecle type nun's habit, with brimming hood, white bib, and blue gown.

SUPERVIVA: You will discover that from this point on, every line is better than the next.

(A very long pause. SUPERVIVA extracts a cigarette from the pack on the table, lights it in a long cigarette holder, and stretches herself out full length on the chaise lounge.)

SUPERVIVA: Nudity is the quintessence of essence, though it is sickreligious to say so... (Long pause.) Nudity is the most natural prerogative of the innovational spirit.

(The spotlight weakens on SUPERVIVA smoking luxuriantly and flicking ashes and at this point the overture starts. It should be Art Nouveau music; if original music is not available, the end of Liszt's "Les Preludes" should be used. A strong spot lights upstage center. A sheer curtain with peacock feather and tendril designs is hanging there, and through it we can see a white wooden horse. The horse's body is very long, more than twice the length it should be. TOM is seated far up near the horse's neck, while LADY GODIVA is planted on the horse's rump. TOM is dressed with cap and jacket like a taxi driver. He has a coin changer strapped around his waist and dangling over his crotch. There is a steering wheel coming up from the base of the horse's neck, a rear view mirror coming out of its head, and a brake coming up from its side; gas pedal also on the flank. TOM has both his hands on the steering wheel. GODIVA, a buxom beauty, is dressed in a Gibson Girl gown with lace-collar coming up to her chin; Gibson Girl hairdo. Both sit for a tableau vivant until the overture finishes. Then they both speak with an exaggerated British accent).49

By appropriating camp, drag show cabaret, religious reference, fairy tale mythos, and contemporary language and anachronisms, Tavel and the Play-House created a sweeping somewhere else-world of possibility, a unique theatrical vision.

Also crucial to the Play-House approach was the importance of ensemble. The theatrical chaos was not to be dominated by any one figure in the company (with the possible exception of Vaccaro himself). Personal career
goals were subverted to Vaccaro's vision. Aberrations from this norm were met with disdain from Vaccaro, who sometimes proclaimed: "There are no STARS in the PLAY-HOUSE!" This attitude of communal effort is directly antithetical to Warhol's "instant Superstar" system, where, simply by Warhol announcing it as fact, Candy Darling or Woodlawn or Curtis or any number of other Factory products became "Superstars." Indeed, the volatile Vaccaro eventually barred both Woodlawn and Curtis from the Play-House because he believed their involvement with Warhol had diminished their ability to work within the Play-House's ensemble format.

Ventura would appear in a number of other Play-House pieces, including Cock Strong, Son of Cock Strong, and Night Club. She was however never a featured actress with the company (although Play-House pieces were communal, they were peppered with short performance "arias" which would highlight, albeit briefly, a particular performer). Vaccaro often implied that Ventura's performative presence and creativity were needed to enliven the choral sequences of the companies' work.

The Play-House experience was a pivotal part of the liminal, 1966-1971 period in Ventura's life. Indeed, a revival of the 1970 Play-House piece Night Club is what eventually drew her back to the New York performance scene in 1981. Being in the chaotic, free-for-all of creative energy that was the Play-House affected the developing identity and performative style of Susana Ventura in ways she carries with her into rehearsal and performance even today. In addition to 1990's Invitation to the Beginning of the End of the
World, which, as an "homage to Night Club," specifically mimics the forms of Play-House productions, all of Ventura's major work contains elements of Ridiculous theory and form. In La Miseria, for example, saints costumed in an irreverent and spectacular fashion (including a version of the patron saint of lost objects, St. Anthony, who has dozens of shoes tied to his robe) come to life and sing "We Ain't Got No Summer Clothes." In BDFW, transitions from sequence to sequence are loosely, if at all, masked, in an openly theatrical method that echoes the Play-House's customary lack of artifice. As well, intermission is replaced by a long dance break in which male and female exotic dancers join the crowd in a brief and wholesome bacchanal. The solo work True Stories also features transparent transitions: we see Ventura dressing for her next character monologue with little more than a few chords of music to cover the transformation. In Based On A True Story, Ventura uses another Play-House trick: pulling from American pop culture iconography to create characters and situations that carry with them specific cultural references. Based On A True Story uses American film noir traditions as the backdrop for the story of Ventura's battle with her two identities. In all Ventura's pieces, little or no attempt is made to disguise the inherent theatricality of the performance; and she avoids any traditional sense of realistic theatrical depiction. Nor is the need for career professionals given much weight (Penny Arcade admits, "Anybody can be in one of my shows!"52). Direct address acknowledging the theatrical world of the piece, as in the cited selection from Lady Godiva, where Superviva (who
was played by Vaccaro) converses with the crowd about the upcoming show, is a part of every Ventura production. Lavish and campy costumes, a mix of realistic, commedia, and presentational narrative styles, and an underlying structure built on American, religious, and fairy-tale mythic figures defines the commonality between Ventura's early work as a Play-House member and her own work of the present. So, too, is there a common goal of first breaking down and then reforming community. Both the Play-House and Ventura endeavor to use cultural idioms to establish a commonality between audience and performer, to diminish the importance of aesthetic distance and abolish the notion of performer being somehow superior/different from members of the crowd. This effort to highlight the universality of human experience and close the gap between performer and audience continues to dominate Ventura's work. In *True Stories*, she explains her artistic vision in simple terms: "There's nothing like breaking through the fourth wall. It's so relaxing."53

Ventura's community, the downtown Manhattan, avant-garde performance scene, during these years also specifically included Warhol and the various artists, models, dilettantes, and hangers-on that made up his entourage. Nightly ritual arrivals at the back room in the infamous club/restaurant "Max's Kansas City" on Park Avenue and Seventeenth Street with Holly Woodlawn or Candy Darling became a part of Ventura's routine (Max's was close to Warhol's first Factory facility, and owner Mickey Ruskin was an art collector). Glenn O'Brien, a former editor of Warhol's *Interview*
magazine, recently said: "In those days, the back room was the superstar freakshow section." Ventura counted among her close friends and associates Patti Smith, Ondine (who, in addition to being a Factory member, was featured with Mary Woronov in Night Club), Lou Reed, Paul Morrissey, and Ultra Violet. From 1967 to the early seventies, to be associated not only with the chaotic and troubled Play-House of the Ridiculous, but with the Warhol clique, was to exist at the very heart of American avant-garde. The blank slate that was Warhol's public persona, which he had somehow invented for himself, carried with it a sense of superiority and occult ingroup. According to Ventura, she and her co-horts were literally the "in-crowd": "We were conscious of the fact that we were 'what's happening'." Ventura's fellow Warhol veteran Ultra Violet (a.k.a. Isabel Dufresne) would later write of this mystique of the Warhol crowd, a dynamism Clifford Geertz would call cultural "charisma," of being at the center of things. Ultra Violet elaborates on Warhol:

The Warhol world was a microcosm of the chaotic American macrocosm. Warhol was the black hole in space, the vortex that engulfed all, the still epicenter of the psychological storm. He wound the key to the motor of the merry-go-round, as the kids on the outside spun faster and faster, and, no longer able to hold on, flew off into space.

There was, however, and continues to be a significant paradox in the work of Warhol and its relationship to society. While Warhol was by the later part of the sixties the embodiment of the American idealized avant-garde, to be avant-garde perhaps requires a degree of impoverishment. Ventura recalls: "[Andy] came from a poverty stricken, immigrant working class background,
too. We understood some things about each other. He became obsessed with the wealthy and elite, however, and I did not."\textsuperscript{58} By 1969, when Penny appeared for Warhol in \textit{Women in Revolt} (which did not open in theaters until 1972), Warhol had truly established himself as a cultural commodity. Merchandising had become his great gift. He knew what to say and do (and whom to say and do it to) in order to make money. Commenting on this, Jack Smith would declare: "they [Americans] just threw money at Warhol because he conformed exactly to what Americans want."\textsuperscript{59} Warhol, while simultaneously defining the avant-garde, had personally become its opposite. He was the avant-garde as a safe and categorized commodity. American consumers continue to be nearly as obsessed with the Warhol Factory/Superstar years as they are with Elvis or the Kennedy assassination. There are, at present, biographies or accounts of the period about or authored by Factory members or associates Ultra Violet, Edie Sedgwick, Nico, Holly Woodlawn, Bob Colacello (ex-editor of \textit{Interview}), Paul Morrissey (Warhol's business manager and film director), Fred Hughes (Warhol's assistant), John Giorno (evening party acquaintance of Warhol's), Viva, and Lou Reed, just to name a few. Certainly part of this obsession stems from the image, the idea of the Factory and its minions, that it somehow existed in this exciting, glamorous, liminal culture without stratified rules and regulations. Nonetheless, a whispering sense of disconnection haunted Ventura. "Other"-ness had followed her even to the very center of the American artistic counter-culture community. Ventura would later confess: "I didn't even feel
at home in the Warhol scene, although I was certainly accepted there. [Ironically], this is what Andy and I had in common, that sense of otherness."\(^{60}\)

Perhaps the commodification of the counter-culture idiom ultimately accounts for why Ventura took flight from the New York avant-garde as it became the flipside of the milltown community she had left behind. In Van Gennep's model of a rite of passage, the liminal experience is followed by the individual, in an improved version, reaggregating into the society. Ventura saw no future for her artistic self, no possibility, if you will, for "improvement" in the Warhol scene, because her work there contained no transformative aspect. The seemingly anarchic elements of the Warhol Factory lifestyle eventually became as much a dead end for Ventura (for many of its members literally so) as had been her New Britain life. Susana's interests, artistic and personal, were not those of most of the other members of the Warhol clique. Her eventual decision not to pursue career advancement with Warhol, who as late as the eighties was offering her photograph opportunities, stems from her personal need to evolve. Ventura recently stated: "I didn't feel I could work and develop . . . It [working with Warhol] wasn't about accomplishment. There was no requirement for transformation."\(^{61}\)

The Warhol clique's disinterest in the transformative feature of aesthetic endeavor must have been intensely frustrating to Ventura, because the notion that art transforms—not only the artist but the viewer, altering the
social relation and thereby initiating the possibility of change—continues to be a major goal of her performative efforts. Ventura argues:

To be a member of the Factory at that time was to be on call to go to all of Andy's social functions, which were usually really dull, but we would go because there would be free food and drink . . . not because I shared Andy's obsession with social status.62

Ventura's growing problem with the work she was doing with the Warholians, whom, again, then stood as a kind of neutered avant-garde, inevitably resulted from a clash of perspective and values. Ventura adds:

People always get mad at me when I talk about Andy and those times because I always say it was really boring. They want it to have been exciting, but it wasn't. Working with the Play-House was chaotic ensemble theater. Making movies with Andy was just chaotic. No one was ever in charge. Whoever had the biggest ego or was on the most speed that day was the star of the film.63

Although Warholian notions of "art," by any standard, were non-traditional, Ventura was interested in making art that she believed to be of quality, that had more behind its theory and message than merely the avant-gardist label. For Ventura, "sensationalism and content cannot coexist."64 Her work with Warhol was limited to a few films, most notably Women in Revolt, and happening-like theatrical events. Her association with the Factory essentially ended in 1971, even though a very different version of a Warhol clique would still exist upon her return to New York in 1981.

Ventura's commitment to the voice of the other and her social vision of a new community, a new American idiom of universality, had been subverted in the world of Warhol and the New York avant-garde, which had either catered to the mainstream, as Warhol eventually did, or become overtly politicized and
aggressive, like the Becks. For Ventura's vision of art and community to come to fruition, she needed to divest herself of the limitations of the New York avant-garde scene.

Frederic Jameson has located the zenith of the sixties in 1968 or 1969, the point after which the idealism that dominated the period steadily diminished. American society as a whole experienced a number of deflating events, including the escalation of our involvement in Southeast Asia, assassinations of leading political and civil rights figures, and the Kent State killings. Certainly the Democratic convention riots of 1968 serve as a pivotal point in the sixties consciousness, the exuberance of protest meeting with the brutality of a degenerating American system of authority.

The avant-garde theater scene suffered a similar unraveling and loss of vitality. Theater historian Oscar Brockett describes the post-1968 theater scene as a brave new world, the culmination of a decade's worth of attacks on the normative aspects of American society and its art:

Although protests against obedience to authority, unquestioning patriotism, and accepted codes of behavior and dress had been questioned increasingly since the late 1950s, the introduction of nudity and obscenity seemed to accelerate those trends . . . it was a heady time, since innovation seemed unending and liberating. After 1968, theatrical practices altered rapidly and substantially.

While Brockett writes of the possibilities of change in theatrical structure after 1968, much of the significant work in altering forms, traditions, and expectations for theatrical practice had already taken place, and the promise of these innovations was never fulfilled. After Hair and Oh, Calcutta! brought nudity to the Broadway stage in 1968 and 1969 respectively, the forms and
structures created by the sixties avant-garde theater scene became more commonplace, and, eventually, mainstream. As the avant-garde became codified and commodified, it lost its vitality and importance, more so with each derivation.

The events that precipitated Penny Arcade's exit from the New York performance scene were, as the invention of Penny had been, coincidental and cumulative, symptomatic of the general cultural malaise that saturated Ventura's life on and off stage. The perceived lack of any transformative quality to the work she was doing, particularly with Warhol, began to affect her valuation of her art and the art she was likely to produce within this milieu. She states: "For me, it was my life. I performed out of my life. I didn't understand there was something to be gotten." Though this point may seem strange in 1990s American culture, Ventura had little notion that her efforts with the Play-House, and particularly with Warhol, were marketable and that the commodification of the avant-garde had already begun. Ventura did not realize that she could, like many Factory veterans, build a financially successful career solely on her association with Warhol. Ventura only knew that her work had begun to seem lifeless and misdirected. Ventura was a working-class, eighteen-year old primarily interested (perhaps idealistically) in developing her skills as a performer and artist, not in getting her name in the papers.

In 1971, Ventura was asked to travel with Warhol's play Pork, which was scheduled to tour in England. She was also committed to the Play-House's
production of *Heaven Grand in Amber Orbit* that was set to travel to Amsterdam. Because she believed the Play-House project to be of superior artistic merit, she turned down Warhol's invitation and went to Holland—heretofore the most significant career decision the young artist had made. One may surmise what would have happened to Ventura had she chosen to be in *Pork*, but it is sensible to assume, had the Warhol affiliation continued, that Penny Arcade might by now have become one of many cult-circuit performers, writers, photographers and artists best known for having been a Warholite. Many members of the Factory/Superstar clique would continue to make their livings off their association with Andy, often at the expense of their creativity, sometimes at the expense of their lives. The young Ventura was unusually instinctive about the fate she might face as another Warhol "discovery." Indeed, the decision to end her working relationship with Warhol was undoubtedly artistically (if not financially) astute, as Billy Name, Edie Sedgwick, Jane Forth, Ondine and Ultra Violet, as well as many other of Ventura's Warhol peers, have perpetually pursued riffs on the same, long-passed sixties counter-culturism refrain, while Penny Arcade performs her own work at theaters and festivals throughout America and the world.

The year 1971 would, however, mark the death of Vaccaro's company. Ludlam had left the group in 1967 after Vaccaro fired him from a production of the Ludlam-scripted *Queens of the Universe*. Tavel, too, had already moved on, and both Woodlawn and Curtis had been permanently banished by the volatile Vaccaro. The trip to Amsterdam became the last of many a
divisive straw for the Play-House, and the fervor and ebullience that had
driven the company in the past dissipated. "There was an insurrection
against me," says Vaccaro, "I don't really know why." The company
dissolved, and Ventura, still with little understanding of or interest in her
burgeoning "career," declined to return to New York. In the fall of 1971,
after eight months in Amsterdam, Ventura made her way south to the
Mediterranean coast of Spain, where she would continue to develop her
performative style. She there enjoyed a community that included expatriates
from all over the world, among them Michael Warren Powell, an actor from
the American Theater Project (whose members would eventually evolve into
Circle Repertory) and English scholar and writer Robert Graves.

Ultimately, Ventura believed it was her work that would determine who
she was, not attention from the press, silkscreens of her face in the
Metropolitan Museum, or "fifteen minutes" on television. The urgency that
had pervaded the runaway, teen-age Ventura's life in New York had subsided.
Years working with and living among counter-culture "others" (and seeing
the avant-garde's commodification) had again left her clamoring for a new
community. Her search for identity, which had exhibited blazing immediacy
when she moved to New York, altered, becoming less intense but no less
important. The learning process inaugurated by her arrival in Greenwich
Village had taken a new turn, and became a simpler, perhaps even
contemplative search, what she would later describe as her "journey of self-
discovery."
In 1969, early *Village Voice* critic and sometime theater practitioner Michael Smith anticipated the denouement of the unusually symbiotic relationship between avant-garde theater and American culture in the late sixties. Smith wrote: "If it is to survive, the theater, like the society of which it is a part, requires change as extreme and unpredictable as revolution." Unfortunately, there was no additional revolution. By the time Smith wrote these words, the upheaval, social and performative, of the sixties had played out its most volatile incarnation. Now was the time for America to sort out what the previous period of liminality had meant. For Ventura, she personally needed "a place where there was no society at all, no 'scene' at all."
Notes For Chapter Three


4 These last two are included as part of a "partial chronology" of the sixties compiled by Jameson, Cornell West, and Anders Stephanson for Sayres' collection, pages 210-215. The chronology runs from 1957 to 1975, so perhaps we can assume the three settled on this eighteen-year period as representing the era.

5 Peter Collier and David Horowitz, Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts About the Sixties (New York: Summit Books, 1989) 255.


8 Turner calls this the "liminal" phase, a limbo-like state similar to how Ventura describes her experience from 1966-71. In The Ritual Process, Turner writes: "Attributes of liminality are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial ..." (95)


10 There is so much book-length literature on each of these movements I could not possibly cover it all, but the definitive work on the largest protest organization in the country, the SDS, is apparently Kirkpatrick Sale's SDS (New York: Random House, 1973). As regards the Black Panthers, Huey P. Newton's speeches from 1967-71, which includes the Black Panther Party's 10-point program of 1967, are collected in To Die For The People ed., Franz Schumann (New York: Random House, 1972). I also cannot resist recommending Julius Lester's flagrantly titled Look Out, Whitey! Black


13 Ventura, State of Grace.


15 Ventura, personal interview, 6 October 1992.

16 Ventura had met Andrews on one of her teenage illicit jaunts to Provincetown. Like many of Susana's friends from this period, he later died of AIDS.

17 Ventura, personal interview, 12 May 1993.

18 Ventura, personal interview, 6 October 1994.

19 Turner, Ritual Process 103-4.

20 Banes 6.

21 Flaming Creatures, heralded by experimental filmmakers for its bizarre mise-en-scene, was described by then Show magazine and future Village Voice film critic Andrew Sarris as "a stupefying orgy in drag conducted with the ersatz elegance of an old Maria Montez movie. About 40 percent of the film is either fuzzy or over-exposed, and the camera sometimes wobbles as if the cameraman were in the throes of delirium tremens ("Underground Movies," November, 1964: 46)."


24 Jonas Mekas, Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema 1959-1971 (New York: Macmillan, 1972) 397. The book is made up of Mekas' collected diary entries, some recorded, some written, some previously published, and some dialogues with other artists, and it is a great read. The entry the quotation is from is titled "Jack Smith, or the end of Civilization," dated July 23, 1970.
25 Hoberman 6, 9.

26 Mekas 389, 390, 391.


30 Probably Ron Tavel, playwright of *Lady Godiva* and several early Play-House pieces.

31 John Vaccaro, *The Moke-Eater: A Documentary* dir. Ken Bernard, 1967. The Bernard documentary is a glorified home movie. In addition to two or three interviews with Vaccaro, it includes rehearsals for and a performance of *The Moke-Eater* in Vaccaro's loft. The video version I viewed belongs to Vaccaro, and I don't think there are any others.

32 Ventura, *Invitation*.


34 Marranca, *Theater of the Ridiculous 6*.


39 Ventura, personal interview, 12 May, 1993. This version of her adoption into the performing company was essentially verified by Vaccaro when he said, in our October, 1995 interview. "Yeah, that sound's right. I used to do that a lot."


42 Play-House pieces tend toward the episodic, moving the narrative of
the evening along in short sequences that, strung together, create a
feeling of epic. As well, the "bad act" is a recurring theme.


44 Ventura, personal interview, 12 May 1993.


48 Holly Woodlawn and Jeff Copeland, A Low Life In High Heels: The

49 Ron Tavel, Gorilla Queen, excerpted in Marranca, Theater of the
Ridiculous, 15-17.

50 Ventura told me this, but Vaccaro claims he had a sign in his loft
that said "There is no 'I' in the Play-House."


52 Ventura, La Miseria.

53 Ventura, True Stories.

54 Glenn O'Brien, quoted in Lance Loud, Kristian Hoffman, and Suzan


56 Clifford Geertz, "Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the
121-146.

57 Ultra Violet, Famous for Fifteen Minutes: My Years With Andy


59 Jack Smith, Historical Treasures (Madras and New York: Hanuman
Books, 1988) 123.

60 Ventura, personal interview, 6 October 1994.


65 Jameson 205.


67 Ventura, telephone interview, 30 May 1993.

68 How Warhol utilized the people in and around the Factory clique is a topic of much contention. Although there are still those ex-Warholians that recognize, rightfully or not, they got either their big break or at least their "fifteen minutes" via Warhol, he is considered by many of his ex-associates to have been a bad influence, unsupportive at best, brutally manipulative at worst. As ex-Ridiculous Theatrical Company member and long-time Ventura pal Bobby Beers put it: "[Warhol] encouraged everyone's most destructive tendencies" (Personal interview, 23 October 1995). It could also be argued he commodified those tendencies, ultimately creating an avaricious avant-garde empire from the shortcomings of his associates.

69 Ludlam 15. Vaccaro verifies this version of the rift: "Charles was not being an actor and I fired him from his own play ... a lot of the people who had worked with me went with him ...." (Personal interview, 25 October, 1995). Vaccaro proceeded with his production of Conquest, and Ludlam's newly-formed company produced the play simultaneously under another name.


71 Ventura, personal interview, 21 May 1994.


Chapter Four

"We'd Do These Performances in Grange Halls and Everybody Would Come!": Ventura's Seventies' Search for Individual Utopia

The ennui and resurfacing need for change that Ventura was feeling at the end of 1971 paralleled the general mood of the country in its post-sixties aftermath. The communal optimism that propelled the counter-culture deteriorated at this point, and its various factions splintered. Public demonstrations associated with the anti-war, women's, and civil rights movements became fewer and smaller. The war in Southeast Asia was winding down. Soldiers and P.O.W.s began to come home. The draft came to an end.

Lyndon Johnson's administration had passed the greatest number of civil rights bills in American history, including "measures aimed at crushing the barriers of racial separation in public accommodations, education, and housing; extending equal employment opportunity, and expanding the right to vote." The inroads made for social change comprise the "accomplishments" of the sixties. However, by 1971, the effects of these changes brought a different sort of angst to the new decade. The sixties were over; the galvanizing issues of the decade receded, and many Americans felt somehow at a loss.

There was an irony here, however. While significant advances had been made regarding the rights of marginalized Americans, the social battles of the sixties had not resulted in tangible victory for the counter-culture.
Women could still expect to make less money for the same work as a man; indeed, one source cites the average working American woman's 1971 median income as 59.9% of her male counterpart, less than it had been in 1956 (when it was 63.3%). African-Americans could still expect racism to be a fact in their lives. Particularly odd was the reality many soldiers experienced in returning from Vietnam. Perhaps these veteran's sense of separation from American society as well as anything indicates the feeling of "where are we now?" that permeated the nation at this time. These times spurned a new search for meaning, a reassessment of the debatable social victories of the sixties, and a new understanding of American identity in the post-liminal world of the seventies. The country experienced a sense of loss, a feeling of social depletion and darkness, and, as Christopher Lasch explains in *The Culture of Narcissism*, "The pretense of revolutionary solidarity having evaporated, as the zonked-out lovefest of the 'Woodstock Nation' deteriorated into the murderous chaos of Altamont, the underlying cynicism surface[d] more clearly than ever."4

In the sixties, the American love for technology began to prove problematic. The scientific wizardry of the fifties and sixties prompted an inevitable reconsideration of the United States' agrarian heritage. As the country entered the seventies, conspicuous consumption became passe and many grew suspicious of the ever-advancing technologies that promised "the good life." Many saw the power of atomic energy as a scientific panacea; however Americans had to some degree been awakened to the dangers and
social shortcomings of rapid technological advance and reliance on its
gadgetry. As one social scientist wrote:

Economic growth and technical achievement, the greatest triumphs of
our epoch of history, have shown themselves to be inadequate sources
for collective contentment and hope. Material advance . . . has proved
unable to satisfy the human spirit.\textsuperscript{5}

It was at this time that the notion of "limitations" began to dominate the
cultural ethos of Americans. The seventies marked the first era since the
Great Depression that Americans had to worry about maintaining their
"standard of living." New economic realities caused a rethinking of society's
reliance on technology and its possibilities. Rufus E. Miles, Jr. writes of how
this period was affected by feelings of finitude, feelings foreign and
discomfiting to the Baby Boomers:

\ldots never before has humankind pressed against such intractable
limits. And never before have people been able to see that they are
straining the resources of the earth and the capacities of their
psyches and nervous systems to such a degree that they cannot long
continue on their present course.\textsuperscript{6}

In general terms, American culture responded to this problem by an
invocation to the local and simple. The early seventies proved anti-
technological, and people were less inclined to revolution or large scale-
movements. Counter-culturism got quieter, less euphoric and less optimistic.
Richard J. Barnet, in \textit{The Lean Years: Politics in the Age of Scarcity},\textsuperscript{7}
directly ties economics to cultural outlook and underscores the "politics of
austerity" that came to dominate America in the seventies. The impact of the
world economic crisis of 1973-1974 upon the United States cannot be
underestimated. Barnet explains: "From nowhere, so it seemed, faraway
people, whose traditional role was to be conquered, bought, or ignored,
acquired the power to produce panic in the industrial world."\(^8\) Importantly, this time of shortage and deprivation triggered what Barnet terms "a psychology of scarcity," a mentality unimaginable in previous times of post-war prosperity.

Barnet argues that the resource squeeze of the seventies was based in "five critical resource systems—energy, nonfuel minerals, food, water, and human skill."\(^9\) Add to this list the notion of the self as a limited resource (a matter clearly recognized by Ventura), and we can see how a paranoia of deprivation would so powerfully affect a culture accustomed to "plenty" if not "excess." With the advent of a "post-petroleum" economy, our uniquely American optimism was forced to defer to the growing realities of limitation on every level. According to Barnet, "Scientists had promised to break the bonds of human finitude, to open the secrets of the cell, and to unveil the mystery of the planets. Instead of the boundless horizons they had promised, limits popped up everywhere."\(^10\)

During the seventies, Americans were presented with rising inflation, record unemployment, and the "Energy Crisis." The populous was for the first time told outright that things would not get better unless "sacrifices" were made. The country had to rethink its meaning of standard of living. Nixon's resignation in 1973 had symbolically left the nation a rudderless ship, and citizens were beset by feelings of a sense of moral and financial bankruptcy. Gas lines and inflation rates replaced protest marches and demonstrations as the focus of the news media. In short, the culture of
consumption shifted to a culture of the Spartan. Arthur Stein notes the collective American befuddlement in the early seventies, and the country's consequent culture of malaise:

The rapid changes and social upheavals of the Vietnam years were disorienting to many lives. For example, some of those directly involved in anti-war activity had to restabilize their personal lives in the aftermath of the conflict. Looking for new directions, some turned to the 'human potential' movement, others began to explore various spiritually oriented traditions while yet others channeled their energies into projects for social and political change in their own communities.11

It could be argued that Americans are historically obsessed with frontiers, psychological, financial, and physical. In the seventies, many turned to and confronted an internal frontier. With limitation around every corner, the dominant issue for many urbanites concerned what they could immediately control, which, ultimately, was only their own lives.

What Stein coined "voluntary simplicity" was the order of the day for virtually all Americans. For the counter-culturist, in particular, the yippies, hippies, and others once involved in the reordering of American institutions, the impetus toward transformation turned toward their own lives. A focus on locality and inwardness defined the psychology of the seventies. As Slater writes:

The most important split in the new culture is that which divides outward political change from internal, psychological transformation. The first requires confrontation, revolutionary action, and radical commitment to changing the structure of modern industrial society. The second involves a renunciation of that society in favor of the cultivation of inner experience, psychic balance or enlightenment. Heightening sensory receptivity, committing oneself to the here-and-now, and attuning oneself to the physical environment are also sought, since in the old culture immediate experience is overlooked or grayed out by the preoccupation with utility and mastery.12
The exodus of the youthful and mobile from urban centers to, if I may use a term from my own childhood in rural Maine, the "boonies," exemplifies the seventies desire for a return to simplicity. Such transplants focused their restless and exploratory nature on interior borders and frontiers. The sixties had resulted in a transformation in American society, though the effect was as much micro as macrocosmic. Facing the angst-ridden question--"now what?"--as they entered the new decade, many undertook retreat and sought change within the arena of the self.

Renouncing the volatile urban centers of capitalistic enterprise, along with the vacuous suburbs, many Americans moved back, literally and figuratively, to their agrarian roots. This trend exemplified a return to the basic values of American identity: simplicity, survival and a sense of frontier. At the beginning of the seventies, an interest in the natural world came to the fore as society became more aware of the finite limits to natural resources. The environmental movement (whose origins go back to Rachel Carson's early sixties work Silent Spring13) served the psycho-cultural need for simplification and proved a focus for the residue of sixties activist energies. Michael Harrington observes: "the pollution crusade may turn out to be a genteel rest home for affluent idealists exhausted by their failures to end either poverty or war in Vietnam."14 Rufus Miles offers a kinder appraisal:

To understand what is happening to our society, we must turn to our poets, dissenters, and counter-culturists. Around the edges of our social maelstrom are thousands, perhaps millions of people, many of them young, who seek desperately for some meaning to life that has
eluded them. This is not a lunatic fringe . . . They are earnest and responsible searchers for new life-styles, for fulfillment of their longing for a shared sense of community with their fellow men and women . . .15

Sometimes still armed with the financial backing of their families, these post-sixties activists made their way to the rural areas of the U. S. to start farms and construct or renovate makeshift homes, often without running water, electricity, or centralized heating. Young adults and families were attempting to return to an agrarian lifestyle, a move only implicitly political, which may nonetheless be read as an indictment against the American status quo. This phenomenon, however, represented a dissipated, individualized culture of change. Though evident in occasional co-ops and revitalized Grange Halls, the impetus of this movement evidenced none of the urgent, goal-oriented, agenda-laden activism of the sixties. These trust-fund agrarians made the move to the outer reaches of Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine, the mountains of California, the outlying areas of the great Northwest, and other anti-urban locales in hopes of establishing an equilibrium in their lives. Stein writes:

It is significant that many of those who started to experiment with voluntary simplicity in the early 1970s did not do so as part of a social change movement. They were acting primarily on their own to bring their lives into a more harmonious balance with the rest of the world. Here lies a source of hope, for many of those moving toward simpler living come from the white majority community in America, which sets the pace for the country's consumption patterns and basically controls its economic and political structures.16

Stein breaks this new outlook down into "at least seven fundamental ideas or affirmative values" that "characterize the alternatives movement at its
best." Stein's seven platform planks of the seventies' counter-culture philosophy include:

1. A willingness, and a desire, to become more self-reliant and less dependent on the "system"

2. An inclusiveness rather than an exclusiveness in dealing with people and ideas, and a commitment to the pursuit of social justice

3. A movement toward human-scaled institutions and new, more cooperative forms of community

4. An emphasis on quality of life, including care for the natural environment and all life forms

5. Reference to a principled ethos or set of values as a guide for daily living

6. A quest for greater self-understanding, to become more centered

7. A movement toward voluntarily simplifying one's life-style and applying the principle of nonviolence to one's social philosophy.17

Popular sociologists and historians have dubbed the seventies the "Me Decade," but it is perhaps more sensible to qualify this nickname. Artists, like most others in the culture, focused on the individual during this time, but this focus on self was not necessarily a selfishness. The actions (or the art) of the self had replaced the communal act in the forefront of the American consciousness, but that did not mean that these actions were unswervingly self-serving, just simplified and personalized. Stein argues this point when he writes:

[While] critics . . . charged that the 'consciousness movement' has given birth to a generation of narcissistic individuals . . . Rather than self-obsession, emphasis is placed on self-reliance and taking more responsibility for one's own life and actions.18

In short, the seventies brought the focus of the counter-culture back to the individual, to the local, to the rural. Different kinds of economic systems
(communes, co-ops, rationing) were explored, in defiance of mass production and consumption, and the urge toward social revolution, heated in the sixties, cooled and aimed itself toward the rehabilitation of the self.

The social shift toward interior borders had a profound effect on art and culture. In the seventies, "counterculture" became "alternative," a less aggressive and impassioned way of defining a quest for change. As one historian reminds us, "Developing alternatives to existing institutions and values was emphasized rather than merely being against those which one did not like."

With the radical energy of the sixties spent, the counter-culture dissipated. Ventura's community of "others," now without a common rallying point (the enemy of the establishment), scattered to various parts of the country and the globe to reflect and reevaluate.

In the early part of the seventies, mainstream popular entertainment got comedic mileage out of the seventies ethos of displacement, alienation, and self-absorption. Gilligan's Island, Green Acres, and the Beverly Hillbillies, for example, all reflected the angst of the time. A bizarre nostalgia for the Eisenhower fifties came to dominate Broadway, movies, and television, as Grease!, Happy Days and Laverne and Shirley entertained American audiences. The exodus of artists out of the major urban areas had a trickle down effect as Broadway and Off-Broadway began to rely on plays and playwrights that had had their first exposure in burgeoning "regional" theaters, like Actors Theatre of Louisville, Connecticut's Long Wharf, the Guthrie in Minneapolis, and Magic Theater in San Francisco. Hugh Leonard,
Paul Zindel, Marsha Norman, Israel Horovitz and David Rabe were a few of the seventies-era playwrights who relied on regional companies for the initial production of their works. Even avant-garde icon Sam Shepard had his Pulitzer prize winning *Buried Child* premier at the Magic. This production phenomenon was observed by Stanley Richards, who wrote:

The most noticeable trend of the seventies was a reversal of sorts. When the regional theater movement began... companies operating outside New York City habitually scoured the Broadway scene for material to fill their seasons. [In the seventies] those theaters became so acclaimed for their own productions of new plays that Broadway managements carefully scrutinized their work for dramatic properties to fill their own New York seasons.20

Avant-garde performance suffered a dissolution as well. Overt radicalism had lost its place as a driving force in counter-culture efforts. The Living Theatre, for example, had played out its most vital incarnation. As Innes points out, "With *Paradise Now* the limits of this line in the Living Theatre's development were reached."21 The Performance Group continued to work as a company and experiment with the dynamics of the audience/performer relationship until Schechner dissolved the last vestiges of the company in 1980. Some members, including Spalding Gray and Elizabeth LeCompte, left to form the Wooster Group, but the works that would serve as the Performance Group's landmarks were well behind them by the middle of the decade. Joseph Chaikin's Open Theater, too, folded for good (in 1974). The crisis of identity haunting mainstream culture also faced the avant-garde. Artist Eleanor Johnson, cofounder of the seventies feminist theater company
Emmatroupe, recalls the state of experimental performance in the early part of the seventies:

The turmoil in the United States and the apparent vitality of theater in New York City drew me back [from England] . . . Little did I know that I was too late--by 1970, only the embers of a vision with half-truth seemed alive and it took several years for me to realize that the fires had gone, and emptiness, despair, and absorption with self remained.

Johnson and others lamented the loss of the galvanizing radicalism of the sixties, but with it gone, political/artistic battles had to be fought on an individual basis. With many of the strongest voices of the avant-garde having become viable commercial properties (or simply having lost the fervor of their creative drive), other modes of performance and communication were demanded.

Replacing the communal, epic, ritualistic works of the sixties experimental companies was a new art form, or an old form with a new label: performance art. While it is difficult to establish an all-encompassing definition of performance art, called "the most protean of art forms," critic and theorist Richard Kostelanetz in the late sixties attempted a description of this avant-garde form. Alluding primarily to the "happenings" and the work of Kaprow, Cage, and Oldenburg, Kostelanetz's *Theater of Mixed Means* delineated this new genre into four basic types. He highlighted the eclectic use of dance, music, text, sculpture, film, and television and their "nonsynchronous" juxtapositions. Kostelanetz differentiated between this theater and the works of the Becks and Grotowski because the latter "use professional actors who play roles" and "adapt the scripts of others." Usually rooted in individual
vision, performance art is cheaper than traditional theater. It typically has smaller casts, often a single performer. Most performance art can be done in "out-of-the-way lofts, churches, private clubs and renovated spaces," like the downtown venues that have sustained their popularity in New York since the late fifties (Within these liberal definitions, Vaccaro's Play-House of the Ridiculous could even be called a "Performance Art company").

Much of this kind of performance also involves what Banes calls "the effervescent body" In this mode, the body is superior to the voice or the text for communicating the ideas of the artist. Performance art would differ, however, from modern dance because it may in fact involve no dance as we understand it at all, even though the body is the primary tool of communication. The uses of the body or things of the body, typically associated with the comic, might serve as the central dramatic or allegorical tool for the artist, a point where "ritual, acting, dancing, and singing" combine. For example, at the end of State of Grace, when Ventura eats several raw eggs and then vomits onto a tarpaulin, the act resonates as a symbol for the physical and sexual abuses described in the narrative of the work. The act of vomiting communicates the idea of physical suffering without the use of language or text-based emotions. This act can and should not really be understood as "acting." In Kostelanetz's view, the vomiting sequence, which communicates on a visceral, ritualistic, human level, would simply be one of the "tasks to be performed." Nearly two decades after
Theatre of Mixed Means, The Drama Review was still comparing performance art to the sixties' "happenings":

[There is] a new and significant artistic movement in theatre . . . taking place in that part of New York's Lower East Side known as the East Village. Certainly there are many similarities with the Happenings . . . [Performance art] exists in an ambiance of small alternative art galleries and has stylistic similarities with the work exhibited in them. Like the Happenings, it is "home-made" theatre, done on a limited budget . . . it is presented only once or a few times . . . it tends to be done for very small audiences from the peer group . . . some of it might offend or bewilder other spectators.29

Seventies avant-gardism was dominated by this "marriage of Conceptual art and Happenings"30 ("the new theatre never became a literary theatre"31) as counter-culture art became an individual pursuit. At the core of this artistic exploration one understands the importance of rediscovering myths, roots, and personkind's relationship to the natural world. Artists of the sixties had specific villains to attack, namely the institutions of the American post-war corporate state. Seventies performance focused on a reestablishment of relationship with the community through a re-examination of self.

Amid the dislocation and despondency prevalent in the seventies, Susana Ventura attempted to locate and anchor herself. She would retreat, as part of her personal search, into small social and artistic collectives in order to redefine and unify not only her vision of self, but her vision of society. Eventually, her long look inward, manifested in her effort to live a simpler life out of the public eye, would lead her back outward, back to urban life in the eighties..
Susana Ventura would express her personal ennui by removing herself altogether from the counter-culture community she had adopted. From 1966 to 1971, Ventura had explored the notion of identity, redefining and reformatting her own personal and performative personae. In 1971, when the Play-House of the Ridiculous tumbled apart, Susana Ventura found herself at yet another crossroads in her young life. Still alienated from a family who could not understand what she was doing ("To my mother, that I was an actress wasn't real. What I was doing was not visible outside the world I was in"32), she faced the question of whether or not she should return to New York and continue to pursue a career there, or move on to other possibilities and pursuits. Again, Ventura was to some degree blissfully unaware of the commercial potential of her association with the Warhol clique.33 On another level, she consciously wished to avoid the parasitic nature of a career in the shadow of another, an art by association, if you will. Vaccaro expressed an interest in reestablishing the Play-House in New York with Ventura and one or two others at its core, but Ventura quickly decided further association with Vaccaro and his troubled company was not for her. Somehow, the urban universe she had been so anxious to embrace only a few years before had lost its appeal. The working class Ventura had developed a disdain for the vacuous world and lifestyle of the downtown art set. She manifested her disinterest by declining the invitation to appear in the London production of Warhol's play, Pork. Ventura recalls:
I remember running into Andy and Jane Forth in New York before I went to Amsterdam. This was just after there had been a big article in Life about Andy and about Jane. And I just got this feeling in talking to them that this was not for me. I had ideas about what I wanted to do and to make, and I don't think that had anything to do with what Andy wanted for me. Certainly I was nothing like Jane Forth, who came from money and, to me at least, didn't seem to have any ideas.

In a prescient way, Ventura sensed the dissolution of the American avant-garde. Indeed, the sense of unraveling that flashed in front of Ventura at her chance meeting with Warhol and his latest "poor little rich girl" reflected the oncoming "malaise" that would generally afflict American in the seventies. She adds:

My generation was celebrated for our youth. It was our greatest talent, our finest virtue, our best commodity. We traded it, exploited it. The country extolled it, rolled in it. It was our vast resource. Who ever thought we could run out of it . . . but apparently ours is the generation that's running out of everything. Air, water, trees . . . Certain species of animals and men.

After deciding not to return to NYC in 1971, Ventura spent a few months in Amsterdam. She describes her experience in this way:

When I was in Amsterdam there were all these artists but they weren't involved with any kind of scene around becoming a famous artist, they were just making art. I found that incredibly, really appealing, like that was what I was looking for.

Ventura soon left Holland, eventually settled among American 1950s emigres ("painters and artists in their fifties, sixties, and seventies") on the Spanish island of Formentera. It is without doubt ironic that she there found herself in a peasant culture vaguely resembling the southern Italian heritage her family had brought to New Britain, CT.

In rural Spain, the improvisational, informal, physically expressive but emotionally rooted performance style Ventura had explored as a member of
Play-House of the Ridiculous was nurtured and expanded. The work she did in these few years could be seen on one level as an embryonic version of the mature work to come. In these endeavors, Ventura retained the sense of contact and community with her fellow artists that had been a strong point of the Play-House. Multiculturalism, which had been a given in Vaccaro's ensembles, was a day to day part of her Spanish experience, and one sees that this stage of her performative life drew from a humanistic, inclusive social vision. These root elements of the Play-House sensibility Ventura took to Formentera and the nearby island of Ibiza, where she would work with El Tribu (The Tribe) and the Grupo Foklordica storytelling festival. Ventura's memory is sketchy regarding her Spanish period, but of El Tribu she recalls:

There was an Argentinian director, I don't even remember his name. I don't even know how I ended up there. They were having this rehearsal and somebody asked me to go and I went over there and hooked up with them . . . I worked with them for about four months. It was people from all over, about thirty people . . . we worked on improvisational theater movement pieces . . . .

In this period, Ventura associated with dozens of other emigres in Ibiza and the surrounding area. Michael Warren Powell, who had been an actor with the American Theater Project (eventually to evolve into Circle Repertory), appearing in Lanford Wilson's plays Home Free! and The Madness Of Lady Bright, was one of those disenchanted artists who made their way to Ibiza. Powell, who eventually became head of New York's Circle Rep Lab, admits to a great deal of drug use while in Ibiza ("My drug of choice was hashish . . . Drug dealers would go on vacation in Ibiza, so the best drugs in the world were always free"), but he still has vivid memories of the time:
I got disillusioned with commercial theater . . . [In 1969 I got to Ibiza] and I got my house, and I started meeting people. . . It turned out there were a lot of us artistic dropouts . . . There was an incredible population there of people who were involved with the arts, but who were intentionally outside the mainstream.41

A group of a few actors began to gather at Powell's house and exchange knowledge about acting exercises, work habits, and their own artistic experiences. For Powell, however, El Tribu was the highlight. He recalls:

El Tribu was about 20 to 25 people. We started improvising around a theme, a birth, life and death theme, a very broad scenario . . . childhood, adulthood, parenting, old age, that kind of broad palette. It was about cooperation. It was an ensemble of twenty truly beautiful young people in the prime of health and physical perfection doing acrobatics and truly amazing physicality . . . A lot of the work was based on trust exercises . . . it was like watching a circus that had an emotional life as well, very tender, emotional, moving moments. The audience went on a journey. [The performance] was very clear. There was a purity that was totally accessible.42

The work process of El Tribu’s movement centered pieces was peculiarly similar to Vaccaro’s mode of operation at the Play-House, and Ventura had no trouble adapting to El Tribu’s methods. Echoing Vaccaro’s comments about Ventura’s talents, Powell comments: “[Ventura] was always an extraordinary actress and extraordinarily adventurous and trusting, trusting her instincts to take her out on the edge.”43 Apart from its manner of working, the other great similarity between El Tribu and the Play-House work involved the personalities that made up the company. The membership of El Tribu crossed cultural, gender, sexual, and even class lines, much like the Play-House ensembles. Vaccaro confirms this point:

[The Play-House] was international. When I did Cock Strong in Europe I had a black girl playing the lead opposite a white guy with no thought to black and white. They were just fabulous performers. I did Midsummer as an opera with two white girls and two black guys as the lovers because they had the best voices. I didn’t say ‘I’m casting you in
a black part' or a 'white part', I said 'I'm casting you in a role.' I never gave it a thought.44

With El Tribu Ventura experienced similar diversity. The group included artistic refugees from all over the world who had decided to make their home in Ibiza, Formentera, and the other islands of the Spanish Mediterranean coast. Powell remembers:

There was this Scottish actress who had dropped out. There was a French actor down the road who had started his own company. There was an Argentinian director, eventually replaced, I think I'm remembering this right, by an Australian . . . there were Chinese, Spaniards . . . at times it seemed like everyone was speaking their own language.45 The American influence was not pre-dominant . . . it was a true sharing of all our sensibilities.46

El Tribu was not a commercial enterprise and thus accorded with Ventura's renunciation of materialism. Her disregard for monetary gain was strong enough to stem any desire to appear in Pork in 1971 or to return to New York after the Play-House's collapse. The artistic community of Ibiza may have been the best possible place for Ventura, a place she described as:

This really rich performance scene that happened almost every night. It was around music, dancing . . . [artistic expression] was really integrated into the life. . . There was nothing commercial in it, these people would just get together.47

In his recollection of this experience, Powell adds: "It was art for the sake of art, and also one's lifestyle became one's art."48 Powell's comment draws attention to that blur between onstage persona and life that Jack Smith had early on inculcated in the young mind of Ventura.

El Tribu 's work was seen by producers from the nearby resort city of Majorca, and the company went there to perform. The shows were successful, and potential backers from Barcelona, the "Broadway" of Spain,
wanted to bring the company's work to their city. The company claimed a need to return to Ibiza for more rehearsal, but the Barcelona performances never materialized. Powell describes how commercial possibility brought about El Tribu's demise:

We went back to Ibiza to rehearse [for the Barcelona shows] but nobody would show up. Rehearsal would be called for Monday at eight and nobody would come, so rehearsal would be called for Thursday at noon and nobody would come . . . That's how theater companies crumbled in Ibiza. They would arrive at this point of expertise and fascination, but the minute someone said 'Okay, let's open to the public' it became about something else, it became commercialized.49

During her Spanish experience, Ventura was also creating performance pieces with a rock and roll band, a practice she would continue well into the late eighties. Possessed of a pleasant singing voice, Ventura exhibited her witticism in amending songs to fit her own needs (for example, her rendition of Muddy Water's hit "Mannish Boy" became "Mensch-ish Boy" and was performed with Ventura dressed as an Hassid). Ventura at this time began to follow through on the ideas about performance and music she had discussed with friend Patti Smith, former lover and collaborator of Sam Shepard, whose "rock and Rimbaud" style would bring her commercial success in the seventies.

After nearly three years exploring a variety of idioms and forms of artistic expression in the non-commercial, inclusive community of others that was Ibiza in the early seventies, Ventura fell in love and decide to move. Ventura does not discuss this romance as freely as she does most aspects of her personal history. Her friend Bobby Beers explains why: "she gave it all
up and fell in love with a Russian sculptor and moved to Maine . . . the guy killed himself and she took it very hard. I didn't see her for years." In an interview with a local reporter years later, Ventura admits the relationship is what brought her to Maine: "How did I end up in Canaan? . . . I met and fell in love with a man who owned land up here." In 1974, after a brief stop back in New York ("I didn't like being there . . . It was that simple. I didn't want to be there"), Susana Ventura followed up her European exile by relocating in Canaan, a little town in western Maine.

In both rural Spain and the small-town life of New England, Penny Arcade was no more or less useful a cultural commodity than Susana Ventura. Certainly in Maine, her "otherness" was based on her foreign or "transplant" (a rural Maine moniker for non-native citizens of the state) status. Literal and figurative doors that had opened for Penny (and not for Susana) in the bowels of New York City did not even exist in Ventura's new, rural home. With no immediate need for Penny at this point, Ventura reverted and re-established Susana as her primary persona on and off stage. Ventura comments:

I abandoned Penny Arcade in 1971 . . . [in the seventies] I very rarely told anyone about Penny Arcade. It would leak out once in a while, especially on the island in Spain because there was this whole romantic question of people's past, there were a lot of people hiding out . . . but I didn't have any interest in Penny Arcade at all.

This version of Susana differed from the one that had left the United States with the Play-House in 1971. New York had allowed Ventura to begin a journey of exploration; at sixteen, Ventura's main desire was to escape her
milltown life. By the early seventies, Ventura had developed more complicated, long-term goals. While her highly improvisory work with the Play-House and Warhol exhibited an eclectic, anarchic sense of immediacy, the seventies brought Ventura calm and patience. These years represent a reflective, organized time in which Ventura could discard the multiple distractions of life as a New York avant-gardist. This calm allowed her to mature, to create a new sense of self grounded not in the made-up world of Penny Arcade but the vibrant life of her own art. Ventura recounts:

The most important thing was that I left New York in 1971 with an actual idea that I wanted to live an artistic life. I was really clear on that. I didn't see going to Hollywood and being a movie actress as living an artistic life . . . I just didn't think at all about industry. I wasn't at all on my mind.54

The 1971-1980 period in Ventura's performative history is defined by three important elements: (1) the development of a newfound calm, maturity, and focus in her life and work; (2) a new sense of community, personal politics, and social vision; and (3) a greater emphasis on her art's lack of artifice (what Marranca calls a "producedness, or seams-showing quality of a work"55). These aspects of her seventies work constitute a refocus of attention upon the local and the specific and have continued in Ventura's performances up to the present.

While living in Maine, Ventura solidified her notions of performance. Her commitment to community, first evident in her childhood "Help Your Neighbor Club" and later expanded by her work with the Play-House matured
during this time, and she became fascinated with the interplay of performer and audience and its potential for community-building.

The significance of one's relationship to the community, either the literal community or the community of artists (Ventura made and makes no such distinction), is prevalent in her seventies efforts. Ventura began in an interesting way to draw characters and ideas for her solo efforts from the people she knew or encountered. This manner of developing material aligns her with a continuing tradition of artists who directly recreate or amorphize personae from their offstage lives (note the work, for example, of artists as recent as John Leguizamo, Danny Hoch, and Claudia Shear). It also unites her with female artists—Carolee Schneeman, Yvonne Rainer, Laurie Anderson, Linda Montano, and later Holly Hughes, Karen Finley, and Annie Sprinkle—who were exploring the solo performance form. Ventura was, in Maine, attempting to live the life of the folk storyteller/artist. She relates: "I very much felt that I was part of a long tradition of artists that had gone on forever... and would keep going on forever."56

Maine carries with it its own strange border-state mentality and reputation for an eccentric and independent "Yankee" nature. Maineres have elected two Independent governors, one in the seventies and one in 1994, and have voted in large numbers for both Jerry Brown and Ross Perot in recent presidential elections. Maine is, however, a cold and rugged place whose major urban centers approach only a population of forty or fifty thousand. To this day, Maine has only a handful of regularly producing semi-
professional theaters and only one Equity company. Without question, Ventura's low-brow community theater and rock-and-roll experimental work was antithetical to the work she had done in New York. It was clear she was never going to get rich or famous working in the wilds of Maine. On the other hand, Ventura had always firmly believed in the universality of both her material and her message, and thus she has never ruled out any place, time, or community as an invitation for performance. For Ventura, to perform in Pittsfield, Maine at the local high school is as important as performing anywhere in the world.

Ventura's performative life in Maine centered around the Gravel Pit Theater company in West Athens, with whom she wrote and performed what she called "conceptual pieces." Ventura gives a brief description of this outfit:

[Gravel Pit] was started by this husband and wife New York jew couple named Feldman. As close as I can figure out, in the late sixties there was this big exodus . . . I don't even remember how I met these people, maybe going to [a nearby town] to do the laundry. There were also a lot of Kent State refugees. It was this very strange fusion of New York artists, poets, filmmakers, actors, and playwrights, then all of these weird midwestern visual artists. It was a non-commercial life where art was an everyday part of the life. People were making things in their houses and writing things and getting together and performing. Any community member could use the Grange Hall. The theater we did was largely scripts that were written by members of the steering committee. There were musicals and plays that were very political and very whacked . . . really kind of mad.57

The similarities between Ventura's life in Canaan and in Spain are obvious. In both, Ventura lived a non-commercial, artistic life. She received no income from the Gravel Pit. Although a shoestring budget and subsistence living were nothing new to Ventura after years as a street kid on
the Lower East Side (and among the Spanish peasant culture), a little income is required to survive a Maine winter. In 1977, Ventura got work through a job creation program called CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) and began running the Pittsfield Community Theater. The town of Pittsfield had advertised for "a person who is aggressive, imaginative, a self-starter and can maintain fiscal accountability"; the job offered a "weekly salary of $180," and Ventura applied. She recounts this experience with much self-irony:

I needed a job, I needed money. I went to the employment office and I hadn't done anything else on the list. I was probably the only one who applied. I gave Andy Warhol and Ellen Stewart as my references. I became a part of probably the only corporate culture I could ever fit into: the rural Maine corporate culture. I was a department head for the town of Pittsfield. Ventura was confirmed for her new position in November, and the following month Pittsfield Community Theater's opening night featured two local bands.

While operating the Pittsfield Community Theater, which functioned as a multi-use arts facility, Ventura presented concerts, including the Paul Winter Consort ("a multi-cultural jazz ensemble") and Tim Sample and the Dubious Brothers ("he offers music that is not quite pop, not quite folk, but underlined in rock 'n' roll and humor that is wacky, that is intimate"), poetry festivals, theater, and various other kinds of public performance.

The bulk of PCT's programming under Ventura, however, involved first run films, including the only Maine showing of Bob Dylan's three hour, fifty-three minute Reynaldo and Clara, starring Dylan and Joan Baez. Some
of the other films she booked into the PCT were *Corvette Summer*, *Annie Hall*, *The Late Show*, and *Smokey and the Bandit*. While booking Hollywood movies may not seem a significant contribution to the culture of the community, this was before the advent of the VCR, and for many in Pittsfield and the immediate area, the nearest movie theaters were in Waterville and Augusta, anywhere from thirty minutes to two hours away. As well, Ventura attempted in booking films as in all things to provide for the needs of the community. In her first week on the job, she helped a high school teacher line up Zefferelli's *Romeo and Juliet* for her English class. Indeed, Ann McGowan, who reported on Pittsfield for the *Waterville Morning Sentinel*, remembers Ventura as "a real spark plug" who "fit in well into the community." 

Ventura also continued her connection with the Gravel Pit and brought some of their work to PCT. She remembers:

The first play I brought to Pittsfield in January of 1978 was a rock and roll opera written by the Gravel Pit called *Nuns With Guns*. It was a wild west story of Irish nuns who foil a bank robbery then actually end up getting hanged, and I was the hung nun.

During these years, Ventura became friends with Marshall Dodge and Tim Sample, both of whom would perform at the PCT. Dodge, who died in a biking accident in the early eighties, and Sample created *Bert and I*, a locally successful comedy series based on two old-time "Yankee" Mainers. As well, the two humorists were at the center of the Maine Festival, a distinctly sixties-esque celebration involving everything from State Fair-style
agricultural shows to mime troupes. Founded by Dodge in 1977 and held on a small college campus in southern Maine, the Festival's make-up has changed little from its inception, emphasizing diversity and inclusion in its choice of participants and its definition of "art." An advertisement for the 1980 version of the event read:

The Maine Festival 1980 is... Fun, Music, Dance, Great Food and Drink, Arts, Entertainment, Delight, Juggling, Diversion, Relaxation, Amusement, Celebration, Enjoyment, Merriment, Comedy, Woodworking, Poetry, Pottery, Photography, Theater, Puppets, Music, Singing, Crafts, and Mime. The Maine Festival is all this and more, but mostly it is a celebration of the creative spirit in Maine... and a great way to celebrate summer!67

The Maine Festival also had specific goals with which Ventura could clearly identify. First was the Festival's effort at inclusion, to consider a vast array of creative endeavors and to acknowledge more Mainers as artists in the community. Indeed, the conception of art here was too broad for some: "The festival has been so successful in promoting a broader definition of art that the Maine Commission of the Arts and Humanities has cited this as one of its reasons for refusing to fund it."68 Second, the Festival was concerned with the relationship of artist and audience. "We exist for artists... we bring the audience and artist together," said Anne-Marie Tardiff, Chairwoman of the 1981 Festival.69 Third, the Festival maintained an informal, improvisory flavor; the first festival scheduled an "Improvisation Day" for its Sunday closing. As one local reporter observed: "The Festival is also for the artists [and has] a strong emphasis on improvisation."70 The first festival program noted, "spontaneous events will take place throughout the three days."71 One
organizer discerned "a spirit of happy exhilaration and improvisation throughout the grounds [as] an aim of the festival."  

Ventura became involved with the Festival when Dodge, who according to Ventura "was very philosophical and always said he and I 'sucked from the same tit'" asked her to curate the music portion of the event in 1978.

Ventura comments: "I brought bar bands in. I brought in rock and roll to balance the acoustic, folky Appalachian thing they had going on there."  
Sample influenced Ventura because the material of his performance, like Jack Smith's, was inseparable from his personal life. Of her remembrances of Sample, Ventura states: "He was the first person I ever met who did stand-up comedy. His doing stand-up had a real impact on me. I really loved it because he just talked about his life."  

From 1979 to her return to New York in 1981, Ventura also served as a kind of road manager for a local bar band called the Peter Galway Revue, a band that would make several appearances on the Maine Festival bill. The significance of Ventura's efforts with the Galway group was twofold: first, it gave Ventura practical experience she could later apply to producing and touring her own work; second, it gave her opportunities to experiment with audience psychology. She recalls:

I would go, and I would dance . . . I thought of myself as a kind of bridge between the band and the audience. I was doing little performances, throwing myself around the room, and then the audience would feel like it was alright for them to dance."
The work she was doing at PCT, as part of the Maine Festival, and even on the road with the Galway Revue echoed back to the styles of her mentor Jack Smith and the Play-House. These artistic outlets, combined together, contributed importantly to Ventura's maturing sense of her art, her self, and her vision of community.

Perhaps from an historian's point of view neither the Pittsfield Community Theater nor the Maine Festival count as significant elements of the seventies' performative scene; still, many artists, like those Ventura had worked with in Spain, were intentionally chose obscurity, driven by a purity of vision and an interest in the art-making process. This period was important for Ventura because in these smaller communities she was not haunted by the specters of commercialism, fame, and drugs. She was not tempted by an overwhelming nightlife, populated by those hardened to public scrutiny. Indeed, Ventura recognized the benefit of her isolation: "Most artists stop developing at the point where they make it . . . it's human nature. If I had [stayed in New York] and gotten the attention, I would have stagnated." As well, she found herself surrounded by artists and performers who lived lives of integrity. Ventura's existence proved simple yet satisfying, and she developed her art without concern for finances. As one artist (who relocated to the state from a more urban area in the early seventies) declared: "Maine provides a chance to get established and perfect my skills without getting into a fifty-year debt situation." Another artist, who had come to Maine "straight from a New York City loft existence,"
reported that her Maine experience, "essentially one of isolation," gave her "confidence and inner power." Many of Ventura's peers, however, gave up the "alternative" life style after a few difficult New England winters. Indeed, such urban refugees perhaps exhibited a prideful short-sightedness. Many counter-culturists who escaped to the hinterlands discovered that subsistence farming and seasonal work was not financially sufficient. Some may have found it too difficult to truly integrate into their new communities. One artist confessed: "It was a lot of work just to survive." The stubborn Ventura, however, held out for several years--"to prove everybody wrong for one thing"--and became a viable part of the normally closed community of native Mainers. Ventura recalls the hospitality of her small-town acquaintances and asserts: "I was never seen as this weirdo who was running the community theater." As the seventies progressed, Ventura's social vision of inclusion became more concrete in her work and life. One particular group of "others," however, began to dominate her material: women. Susana had grown up with a strong maternal figure ("My mother worked outside the home both before and after she married. After my father's illness she was our sole provider"). Nonetheless, her childhood had been male-dominated. Not only was she an American, but her religion and southern Italian ancestry loomed as dominating, patriarchal forces in her life. Though the victories of the sixties women's movement did not consciously play themselves out in her
work, certainly Ventura could not avoid the politics of female representation.

As Jeanie Forte writes:

All women's performances are derived from the relationship of women to the dominant system of representation, situating them within a feminist critique . . . While women performance artists speak their personal lived experience, and explore the most intimate aspects of their individual lives, those explorations relate directly to the common category of their woman-ness . . . thus the woman performance artist cannot help but assert an image that is categorically related to all women.85

The nature and production context of her work aligned Ventura not only with the aforementioned female solo performers, but with the spate of feminist collectives (like the Women's Experimental Theater, Emmatroupe, and New Cycle Theater), which would come into being later in the decade. These groups, however, had a particular agenda behind their work: to allow the stories of women to be told. This effort consciously set the voice of the female theater artist in opposition to the white male status quo. While the approach is not inconsonant with Ventura's social vision, her work has never been as purposefully political.

Ventura may have shared the ideology advanced by feminist collectives, but her methods were different. Her views on the woman's place in theater (and society) was and is delivered by example. Indeed, on a personal and artistic level, Ventura continues to battle with those who believe, for instance, that her use of female erotic dancers in BDFW degrades women. Others argue that her work does not sufficiently defy cultural stereotypes regarding women or gays or religion. I would argue, however, as Ventura eloquently does in BDFW, that Ventura's work affects the role of women
through action, by its very existence. She does not so much strive for the articulation of cultural walls and stereotypes; she simply breaks them. By telling not only her own story but those of others, by producing her work herself, by maintaining an insistence on standards regarding her own work and the work, Ventura recommends herself as a role model for female artists. She is one speaker of the collective voice of the other. Without resorting to feminist diatribe, Ventura tells of particular stories:

I'm about forcing [the audience] to look at someone, to listen to someone, that they ordinarily would go out of their way to avoid . . . I want to give a voice to people whom no one would listen to, even in their own families . . . I'm not a polemicist, I'm a performer, I'm an artist . . . I had an argument with this girl who was writing about BDFW for High Performance. She wanted to call her article "Creeping Toward Feminism," and I said "Hey, this is not Feminism 101 here . . . I've been doing this for twenty years!".86

Indeed, like most pointedly political art, seventies feminist theater had a short half-life. Although WET, Emmatroupe, and others broke ground that was later cultivated by the artists of the W.O.W. Cafe, Split Britches, and Bloolips, the urgency of their work was not sustained, primarily due to their view that somehow a theater based on the idea of a female voice would appeal to all women, a concept that is no more or less ridiculous than the idea that all other theater would appeal to and speak for all men. As Lynda Hart writes in her introduction to Acting Out: Feminist Performances:

Collective authorship was an extremely important concept in early feminist companies of the 1970s and 1980s. As the Utopian fervor of such collectives gave way to the realization that they were, to some extent, based on a vision of feminist homogeneity that could not fully account for the divisions and productive conflicts between and among feminists, the 'idea' of a collective suffered fragmentations . . . .87
While these communal companies folded, Ventura flourished. One may argue that her survival has issued from her unique focus on the universal "other" voice and the search for an all-encompassing community.

Ventura was aware of the politics emerging in her own work and has noted that her rural life in Maine marked the first time she "really became political." This seems an odd notion for an artist whose development is so clearly tied to the sixties, when virtually every act, intentionally performative or otherwise, was considered political. This point however reveals something about the nature of the times we call the seventies. In these years, large-scale movements receded. Demonstrative acts, like burning a draft card or brassiere, or marching on Washington seemed passe. Political and performative acts became viewed as specific, individual, conscious choices. This movement created a paradox: it prioritized the individual act, yet carried with it the sense of service to community. As Stein reminds us, "An emphasis on personal growth can often be combined with social and political involvement." 

The universality of Ventura's work, which we will examine more closely in the next chapter, is reflected in her effort to be "inclusive" in her own life. Her ability to speak for the "other" comes from knowing the experience of the "other," and her seventies' adventure as an exile--in foreign countries and the rural Northeast--served to sharpen Ventura's ability to bring to life the stories of "others" on stage. Just as she had been in her own home as a child, Ventura in these experiences (and in these strange social worlds)
labored with her intellect and personal integrity to gain for herself a voice.

She later declared:

First and foremost I am part of an oral storytelling tradition, and that is a very important part of any peasant culture. I began to have an understanding that people whom you wouldn't expect could enjoy the work of someone like me because I was dealing with fundamental emotion. I wanted to mediate through emotion. That is something I think is extremely important to my work that was developed at that time.90

Ultimately, any political aspect of Ventura's seventies work can only assume a secondary status. First and foremost, her goal was to keep working, to explore what did or did not interest her as an artist, and to investigate further her notion of community commitment. What would carry over the most when she returned to her New York City career in 1981 was the idea that art for everyone, that performance could act as a model for a society of inclusion. Her utilization of gender, race and class dynamics onstage, as well as her informal relationship with the audience, harkened back to the utopianism that had dissolved at the end of the sixties. Aspects of the Theater of the Ridiculous, which Marranca labels a uniquely American form, appealed on many fronts, to the downtown art scene, the Spanish peasant, and the boonies-dwelling Mainer. Without the deterrents and distractions of life in NYC, Ventura was able to focus her creative impulses. She chose the personal and the immediate, to study individuals, "others," who had stories, whether they knew it or not, for the so-called general populous. By observing and recreating those people, the stories were allowed to unfold for any audience willing to see them.
Ventura's life in Spain and then in Pittsfield was indicative of the life many artists of the period were leading. The seventies for Americans was a time of reevaluation. Many asked what did it mean to be American? What did it mean to be an artist in this culture? After the sixties, such questions proved difficult. As Barnet once wrote:

"Motion is a basic American need growing out of the national character. We are a nation of go-getters, comers, movers, shakers, ever contemptuous of the "stick-in-the-mud" and always ready to respond to political slogans like John F. Kennedy's promise "to get the country moving again.""

The essential question of the seventies was this: where should the country next move? For Ventura and many of her counter-culture peers, this question was answered by life style choices, that is, a return to simplicity, connection and a desire for individual transformation.
Notes For Chapter Four

1 Much of this could be accredited to the demise of the SDS, the only social protest organization whose membership crossed all lines of race, gender, and particular interest. Indeed, the increasingly vocal factions within SDS, from the Weathermen to the Black Panthers to women's libbers, were probably the reason for its spiritual dissolution after the 1968 Democratic Convention and its formal breakup in 1969. In addition to Kirkpatrick Sale's book, see Irwin and Debi Unger's Turning Point: 1968 (New York: Scribner, 1988), especially the chapter entitled "The Left Could Not Hold" for more on SDS' collapse.


8 Barnet 16.

9 Barnet 17.

10 Barnet 15.


13 Rachel Carson, Silent Spring (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1962)

15 Miles 233.

16 Stein 124-5.

17 Stein 3.

18 Stein 8.

19 Stein 9-10.


25 Kostelanetz 25.


30 Mifflin 78.

31 Marranca, *Images* ix.


33 It seems important to note that, although she was a veteran of at least four years of experimental, off-off-Broadway theater, Ventura was only about 21 when the Play-House was in Amsterdam.
34 *Life* vol. 69, #1, 4 July 1970, 54. It's a stretch to call it an interview.

35 Ventura, personal interview, 12 May 1993.


37 Ventura, personal interview, 16 June 1995.

38 Ventura, personal interview, 16 June 1995.


41 Powell, personal interview, 23 October 1995.

42 Powell, personal interview, 23 October 1995.

43 Powell, personal interview, 23 October 1995.

44 John Vaccaro, personal interview, 26 October 1995.

45 Ventura often performed in Catalan, a dialect of Spanish she learned in childhood.

46 Powell, personal interview, 23 October 1995.


49 Powell, personal interview, 23 October 1995.

50 Bobby Beers, personal interview, 10 October 1995.


52 Ventura, personal interview, 16 June 1995.


54 Ventura, personal interview, 16 June 1995.

55 Marranca, *Images* xii.
56 Ventura, personal interview, 16 June 1995.


61 Ann McGowan, "It Will be Another 'First' . . ."


63 The source for this information is advertisements run in the Waterville Morning Sentinel over the period of Ventura's tenure at PCT.

64 Ann McGowan, "It Will Be Another 'First' . . .".


67 The Maine Festival, advertisement, Maine Times 18 July 1980: 44.


73 Ventura, personal interview, 14 December 1994.

74 Ventura, personal interview, 14 December 1994.

75 Ventura, telephone interview, 12 May 1995.
76 Ventura, personal interview, 16 June 1995.

77 Ventura, personal interview, 12 May 1993.


79 Martin 5.


83 Ventura, personal interview, 16 June 1995.

84 Ventura, personal notes to the author, 2 November 1994.


86 Ventura, personal interview, 27 September 1994 and BDFW.


89 Stein 9.

90 Ventura, personal interview, 16 June 1995.

91 Barnet 20.
Chapter Five

The "Reality Gap" of the Eighties and the Political Penny

By the end of the seventies, Susana Ventura had made the decision that she
had learned all she could from Maine's rural lifestyle and subsequently
relocated once again. She returned to New York, hoping to find a counter-culture community in which she might rebuild and retry her creative
efforts. Others who had taken up the back-to-nature exodus began to
abandon it as well. Sam Shepard, for example, who had lived on a farm
outside San Francisco and had worked with a small-scale operation in the
Magic Theater, in the late seventies and early eighties became a staple of the
American theater scene and even a star in the Hollywood filmmaking
Powell accounts for his return in the following:

The moment was just over [in Ibiza]. A real commercialism had set in there . . . There were a lot of tourists and condominiums popping up all
over the place. I was ready to come back to the commercial theater
believing I was strong enough to hold my own.¹

For many artists, the time for reflection and exploration had ended. The time
for a re-incorporation of sorts had arrived, and American "others" began to
lay claim to their place in the newly developing, post-seventies culture.

The economic and social issues that had driven Susana Ventura and her
peers into the outbacks of the American geographic and social landscape in
the early 1970s had taken a significant turn by 1980. Ronald Reagan's
election to the presidency of the United States marked the beginning of a
new era for Americans, including expatriated or self-exiled artists. In fact, the 1980s were often paralleled with the fifties. Reagan was elected on the assumption that his administration would recover post-war notions of the American Dream and bring prosperity once more to the general populous. His appeal however derived in chief from decidedly retroactive ideas of America's economic and military position on the world stage. As Joel Kreiger writes:

Reagan's appeal was formidable among those who could still imagine themselves part of the mainstream, beneficiaries of a renewed United States which could be 'great again' or at least a little bolder and wealthier and confident of the future.²

The Reagan administration set out to revivify American culture. His domestic policies were based in a charismatic rhetoric, which held that America was "number one" in everything. His agenda--labelled "Reaganomics"--saw taxes cut without decreases in federal spending. Reagan created a pro-business atmosphere, that is regulations in the areas of environmental protection were loosened; support for corporations was strengthened (note federal assistance for Chrysler); and labor came under increased duress (exemplified by the firing of air traffic controllers in 1981).

Reagan's notion of American might moreover manifested itself in a new jingoism. In Reckoning With Reagan: America and Its President in the 1980s, Michael Schaller devotes an entire chapter to the "New Cold War" and Reagan's ability to locate enemies and threats in every hemisphere.³ Schaller argues that Reagan's administration, echoing McCarthy's claims of a
Red Menace, inflated threats from the Sandinistas, Libya, Granada, Panama, and, of course, the Soviet Union, Reagan's lifetime object of obsession. The United States trumped up crises in Japan, in Panama, in Haiti, in Cuba, in Nicaragua—wherever it could to U. S. advantage name an obstacle to American "interests" or the American "way." The image of strength that the "Great Communicator" Ronald Reagan projected revised, and to some degree erased, the deeper inadequacy Americans felt as a result of our military incompetence in southeast Asia during the sixties and the country's continued decline in national might, military and otherwise. In short, the chimera of potency Reagan conjured touched a nerve of anxiety in American culture and activated images of a fifties America.

One notes, however, a not-so-subtle difference between the fifties and the eighties. While America was formerly perceived as a kind of saviour after the Axis defeat, and a uniquely endowed superpower after the bombing of Japan, in the eighties, America drew worldwide disdain. Public opinion, if you will, swung decidedly against Americans and their ongoing national policy of military and political bullying. America became, from a foreign viewpoint, the home of the oppressor. The negative perception many world citizens had of Americans may too some degree have been justified. If the fifties had been the era of constructive productivity, then the eighties was the era of greedy, grab-it-and-run deal-making, and a shift to a "service," not a manufacture, oriented economy. Cold War era rhetoric replaced the
discomfiting truth-telling of the political seventies. The country was
dominated by what Kreiger calls "a politics of imperial nostalgia."\(^4\)

America of the eighties, however, despite the sentimental wishes of a vast
segment of the population, was not the same country presided over by Dwight
Eisenhower. Multiculturalism, which seemed to be fighting the same battles
as the Civil Rights movement of the sixties, collided with attempts to restore
anglo-centric, "traditional" values, values that distorted classically American
notions of freedom, family, and opportunity and contributed to a culture of
exclusion. American righteousness had no single, galvanizing "other" to
villify as it had during and after WWII. Neither the German war machine
nor the Cold War Russian state could be targeted as the supreme threat. Nor
could the Arab states, on whom America now focused much of its collective
concern, really justify American self-centered jingoism. America, in the
view of the wider world, was arguably behaving like a paranoid bully,
demonizing nations and cultures unnecessarily, overreacting to perceived
threats. As Schaller puts it, "As with [Reagan's] domestic program, a yawning
gap existed between the rhetoric and reality of foreign policy."\(^5\)

Reagan established the gap Schaller describes by calling on symbols and
myths that were inarguably American, those that every "good" American
would wish to preserve or reinvest with cultural power. Kreiger writes:

Reagan's ability to appropriate the flag gives him a political resource
of considerable value. . . . a plea for American renewal becomes a
celebration of the most privileged themes of America--the free
market, military pre-eminence, the sanctity of the family. Thus,
Reagan captures the ideological high ground, and leaves to all others
the nondescript valleys of special pleading.\(^6\)
The "other," then, became all those who disagreed with the Reagan ideology or vision of America. We note a shift of focus from foreign demons to internal ones, that is, the socially different, and the idea of a threatening "other" was all too successfully brought back home.

Unfortunately for the American counter-culture artist (perhaps because Reagan had himself once been an actor, indeed, began his political life as president of an actor's union), the mood of the Reagan era turned decisively against the arts and artists, literally and legislatively. The 1980s were to be the darkest age for the artist since the time of McCarthy. With fear of the USSR dissipating due to perestroika, and no substitute foil to demonize on the world stage, America once again, as it had in the fifties, looked inward for villains. The definition of counter-culturist thus expanded, and the tolerance for dissenting voices shriveled. There were plenty of Americans who objected to Reaganite notions of the American Way, and they, like their fifties' HUAC-grilled counterparts, were marginalized, criminalized, demonized, and decried throughout the eighties. As Ventura notes in Bitch!Dyke!Faghag!Whore!, describing the culture of the 1980s and the Reagan/Bush mythos, "the world is getting to be a straighter and straighter and straighter place."7

It was this "reality gap" culture that Ventura confronted when she returned to New York in 1981. Susana Ventura also returned to a much altered New York performance scene, one vastly different from that she had left ten years previous.8 Ventura's personal and artistic exploration had
reached something of a plateau during her Maine years, and therefore to reach the next step in her performative evolution, she realized that she must again incorporate herself into the avant-garde regardless of its new configuration.

The event that precipitated Ventura’s relocation, that would lead to the reappearance of Penny Arcade, was a production by Ken Bernard and John Vaccaro, the same creative team that had run the Play-House in the late sixties. *Night Club*, which had been mounted by the Play-House in 1970, was to be revived at LaMaMa in October, 1981, and Ventura was invited to participate, first by Ellen Stewart of LaMaMa and then by Vaccaro himself. Ventura had appeared in the 1970 version of *Night Club*, but disagreements with Vaccaro led to her departure from the 1981 mounting before it opened. She notes her exit from the latter production of *Night Club*, however, as “the beginning of me writing my own work.” It should be noted that in 1990, Ventura would produce *Invitation to the Beginning of the End of the World*, her “homage” to *Night Club* and the downtown performance scene of the late sixties. *Invitation* may then be regarded as a nod to some of the forgotten avant-garde work of the period. While Ludlam’s Ridiculous Theater Company enjoyed success in Sheridan Square, Jack Smith and the efforts of the Play-House remained largely unknown, with perhaps only Smith’s seminal film *Flaming Creatures* as a remaining icon of the Ridiculous idiom in its earliest baroque versions. As Ventura would remark years later
in *BDFW*, "If the world was just, Jack Smith would be famous and everyone would be wondering who Andy Warhol was..."\textsuperscript{12}

**Night Club** may have been the excuse for her return to NYC, but Ventura's first solo work, the beginning of efforts that would establish Penny Arcade as a significant performance entity in New York, appeared in February of 1985 with the Poetry Project. With this group Ventura began doing biographical riffs—pieces that existed primarily as improvisations—on persons she had met or known, like the infamous Andrea "Whips" Feldman, who had called herself Mrs. Warhol and jumped out a New York apartment window, and Ruthie the Duck Lady, a well-known homeless woman who lives in the French Quarter of New Orleans.\textsuperscript{13}

Many of the intimate performance venues that had existed during Ventura's first New York stint, like Cafe Cino, Cafe Wha? and the Judson Church were no longer operating (although Judson is now seeing a new life as a performance space). In addition to old standbys that had survived, like LaMaMa, Theater for A New City, and the American Place Theater, Ventura began playing at new, smaller venues, including the aforementioned The Kitchen, P.S. 122, Franklin Furnace, Dixon Place, Dance Theater Workshop, and clubs like The Knitting Factory, Danceteria and the Pyramid. These spaces had been popularized by artists like Eric Bogosian, Carolee Schneeman, Diamanda Galas, Laurie Anderson, and dozens of other avant-gardists as viable performance spaces while Ventura was *in absentia*.

Though Ventura performed primarily in New York in the eighties, there
were experimental spaces popping up all over, like The Women's Building and Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) on the west coast, and the Walker Art Center, "one of the few museums in the country committed to performance,"\textsuperscript{14} in Minneapolis. "[As] part of the creative hubbub of the early 1980s," wrote Robert Sandla, "alternative spaces sprang up faster than fast-food joints."\textsuperscript{15} Jennifer Dunning addresses the importance of these secondary, often rudimentary stages directly:

It was in these theaters that artists like Whoopi Goldberg, Bill Irwin, Eric Bogosian, Paul Zaloom and Mark Morris did early performances. These spaces - indispensable incubators of new dance, music, and performance art . . . have played an important part in establishing and maintaining New York City's reputation as a cultural center.\textsuperscript{16}

There was a clear need for the dissenting, avant-garde voice in the eighties. While the rhetoric of nostalgia dominated American mainstream consciousness, avant-gardists returned to their traditional role of social critics. What had been in the seventies a localized, personal effort at self-exploration and expression, the avant-garde impulse in the eighties became broader in focus. The counter-culture community turned its efforts outward and championed its vital argument against the conformity of American cultural traditions. Ventura and other counter-culturists in essence attempted to invest mainstream America with the values of community and simplicity that they had explored in the seventies. While the seventies had not been some sort of agrarian utopia without significant social problems, it was a time when Americans were uniquely concerned with themselves, their
place in the world, and thus they were able to bring a degree of critical scrutiny to the country's present state and its future.

Eighties counter-culturists would find it difficult to communicate their vision of a flawed American society to the mainstream culture, however. The seventies was a comparatively humanistic period, but it had been dominated by the reality of limited resources. It is no wonder, then, that Americans were so enthralled with Reagan and his notion of a bountiful, recharged, regal America. The trouble was, the parallels between the eighties and the fifties had no basis in reality. In the seventies, American productivity had trouble keeping pace with the growth of other major industrialized nations, a fact Reagan's "We're Number One!" rhetoric belied. As reported in Kreiger:

> From 1973 to 1980 the average annual productivity increase dropped to 1.7 percent . . . German productivity increased at an annual rate of 4.8 percent, French productivity by 4.9 percent . . . and Japan's productivity improved by an annual rate of 7.2 percent.17

As well, in the first part of the eighties, the United States adopted "monetarism, a policy package which quite knowingly reduces inflation by inducing recession [and raising unemployment]."18 The eighties Reaganite version of the American dream, a throwback to the fifties and the post-war production machine mythos, was decidedly hollow, unsubstantiated by the facts of America's place in the world economy. Paul Krugman writes:

"Inflation declined after 1980 and unemployment remained relatively low after its 1982 peak, but the real income of typical families stagnated, and
many more people were in poverty . . . “19 Such statistical realities hardly jibe with Reaganite notions of American wealth and power.

Mainstream American society nonetheless made its commitment to Reagan's idea of a bountiful, conservative, and mighty America. The "straightening" of American culture in the eighties was reflected in the public's intolerance of ideas or voices that challenged the myth. Arguments about the usefulness and importance of art are as old as society itself. There have always been efforts to censor; there have always been debates over funding and its sources. Jesse Helms and his cohorts in the U. S. legislature, who continue to fight the very existence of America's paltry National Endowment for the Arts, were hardly the first to question the usefulness of art in society.

The eighties, however, saw the appearance of an additional profound enemy of the arts--a biological antagonist. Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), whose first documented appearance in this country was in 1980,20 probably did more to damage the arts than any righteousness-spouting congressman could ever manage. Because a significant percentage of the artistic community has historically overlapped with the male homosexual population, which was the first and hardest hit by this illness in the US, the arts industry has been uniquely affected. Liberace, Rock Hudson, Freddie Mercury, Peter Allen, Michael Bennett, Tony Perkins, Ray Sharkey, Halston, Perry Ellis, Brad Davis, Rudolf Nureyev and Robert Mapplethorpe represent a mere fraction of the well-known arts figures who have
succumbed to AIDS since its introduction into the United States. The direct impact to the arts is ultimately unmeasurable, but there can be no doubt that losing so many of their own compounded a particular siege mentality under which American artists of the eighties continued to labor.

Susana Ventura's art and life have been profoundly affected by the AIDS crisis. In her own words, she was "largely raised by drag queens," and has lost "over two hundred friends," peers, artistic partners, and acquaintances to the AIDS virus. She took some hard hits," says Ludlam actor Bobby Beers, who himself has the disease. "We all did . . . I'm one of the last gay men who worked with Charles who is alive." John Vaccaro reports that twenty-six members of the Play-House have died of AIDS: "The only reason I'm not dead is I was like a priest in those days I was so celibate." Ventura's work is haunted by the notion of a spreading plague America has failed to halt. 

BDFW, La Miseria, Invitation, and Based On A True Story all directly address the AIDS issue. True Stories and State of Grace touch on the lives of several high-risk groups, including prostitutes, intravenous drug users, gay males, and those without health care insurance. Halfway through BDFW, Ventura dons a red sequined dress as an "homage to B-movie queen Maria Montez, without whom Pop Art would not exist," and to the men who raised her. She recounts a number of her experiences as a part of the gay subculture, of being "a faghag when a faghag was a glorious thing." The monologue is chronological, quickly recounting events from her rebellion against the men who were her surrogate parents ("I don't want to watch Funny Lady
again!" to her move to Spain ("I went from millions of fags and drag queens to a couple of goat ladies and a few fishermen") to the present.

Ventura's mood darkens noticeably when the recounting of her relationship with gay culture reaches the early eighties:

I fell in love with a lot of those gay men, and a lot of those gay men fell in love with me... In 1980, all of a sudden all my friend's started dropping dead... I became expert at getting SSI, at getting Medicaid for people, at getting the phone and the TV turned on and fighting with the nurses for the Patient's Bill of Rights. And talking to families who didn't know that their sons were gay and that they were in a coma... I go all over the country and I do this monologue. A lot of the time there are this many people in the room, and none of them know anyone who has died of AIDS. None of them have ever taken care of anybody with AIDS. None of them have even known anybody with AIDS. And I don't even hate you that much anymore. Because pretty soon everybody in the country is going to know somebody with AIDS.

At the end of the monologue, Ventura lets the dress slide from her body to the floor. While a pained and haunting blues song plays, one of the male dancers featured in BDFW puts on the dress, parades for a moment, then slips proudly but forlornly out a backlit doorway at the rear of the stage. A similar image occurs in Based On A True Story when, after a rousing rendition of "Runaround Sue" with a chorus of gay men, Ventura and a frail, ghastly figure, arm in arm, slip quietly out a rear exit and into a blue light. In Invitation, Ventura states her case quite plainly: "Most of my depression come from living the last ten years in the middle of the AIDS crisis... It's a horrible indictment of our generation that we let this go on... I mean, we stopped the Vietnam War."29

Certainly the theatrical counter-culture of which Ventura is a part has been specifically affected by the AIDS virus. In addition to those Play-House
Ventura's spiritual mentor Jack Smith, Ludlam himself, Ron Vawter of the Wooster Group, performance artists Ethyl Eichelberger and John Sex, all these and hundreds more from the New York avant-garde performance scene have died of complications from the syndrome. AIDS, which has been gutting her "community" for fifteen years, serves as an undeniable backdrop to Ventura's recent work. Moreover, her bitterness about the lack of attention paid to victims and prevention through education finds its way, in varying degrees, into all her material. If, as noted elsewhere in this study, Ventura's primary goal as an artist has been to let those without a voice be heard, she has made every effort to give this set of "others," those whose lives have been changed forever by AIDS, a chance to speak. In letting the stories of those affected by AIDS be told, she challenges the Reagan Reality and highlights the difference between the lives of "normal" Americans and the society's marginalized sub-cultures. Further, these stories speak to Ventura's social vision, a vision that began in the sixties, developed in the seventies, and became aggressive and politicized in her eighties work: a vision of an inclusive society, a society where otherness and difference are embraced.

Indeed, as a conceptual element, a "community of others" began in the eighties to be truly the conscious focus of Ventura's work. Although she was not immune to the dark side of the period, her pieces are ultimately optimistic, tending to convey the universalities of the human condition. From work as diverse as the individual-specific monologues of Ruthie the
Duck Lady and Charlene, the ex-New Orleans hooker, to more meandering and personal pieces like *La Miseria* and *Invitation*, Ventura's art has as its underlying theme the commonalities of human existence. While the surface of these pieces and the nature of the performer herself necessitate a feminine/ist point of view, the particulars of the female experience are only one layer of an Arcade performance. The meat of the matter is rooted in how personal experience often belies cultural myth. Ventura addresses the significant difference, the "gap," between the fallacies and presumptions of our culture and the reality evident in the lives of the culture's individuals. As an artist, she invokes the voice of her community, the avant-garde world, the society of dissent, the chorus of "other."

The street person known as Ruthie the Duck Lady, for example, is by any measure a marginal member of contemporary American society. In an eighties society that believed in antiquated ideas of home and family, the homeless Ruthie exists as a non-conformist other. Paradoxically, however, she is also representative of some larger American sense of individuality and self-sufficiency. "I live over there!" she says, and vaguely gestures to an offstage somewhere the audience suspects to be little more than an alleyway. The audience may wish, however, to believe her when she calls a sidestreet cul-de-sac "home" because, as eighties Americans, they do not wish to acknowledge the world of the other. To assume Ruthie is happy and comfortable in her home, there by personal choice, divests the audience of responsibility. The audience's need to deny the existence of others exceeds
the weight of the facts of Ruthie's day-to-day experience. In essence, the "reality gap" dominates the relationship between the performer and audience and the performed. To be placed within a specific societal structure of values defines the American status quo of the eighties. Ruthie, no matter how charming she is, dangerously belies the illusory eighties myth of "family values" and conformity.

The "Ruthie the Duck Lady" piece has two major elements. The first is the presence of the bedraggled Ruthie herself, vaguely reminiscent of Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner's "Trudy" from *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe.* The second is Ventura's recorded voice, posing questions and conversing with Ruthie, presumably much like Ventura did when she met the infamous lady of the Quarter. While Ventura's questions are kind and only mildly probing (perhaps her most invasive request is to see the duck itself), this way of framing the piece, making it work as a dialogue, serves to make us more conscious of our own gaze, of how we establish social position for Ruthie and her life. By setting her own identity outside of the visible action but still within the piece, Ventura creates interest in the entity on stage, not the performer creating the entity. The crux of the performative experience is thus not the "making" of Ruthie, but Ruthie herself. This allows Ventura to humanize and make concrete the "other" she is presenting. Again, Ventura uses the other to challenge mainstream views of reality. Ruthie is designed to help the audience expand its notions of what is acceptable and "normal" social behavior and
incorporate Ruthie into their experience. Ventura does so by allowing her own voice, her own persona, to speak for the audience, to ask the questions the audience would long to ask if presented with Ruthie or the "other" Ruthie represents. This is a brilliant technical tactic for involving the audience in the performance. It also diminishes the importance of text by solidifying the illusion of the present and ignoring notions of traditional narrative and illusionistic acting method.

The form of "Ruthie the Duck Lady" brings another significant issue, apart from the attempt to introduce the voice of the other, into Ventura's work, one that would be important to the eighties and its avant-garde in general: the notion of reality in a performative context. Ruthie is given a level of reality, indeed, exists in a different way than say, the aforementioned "Trudy." "Trudy" exists as part of a tour-de-force evening of performance in which the focus of the piece must necessarily and ultimately be the skill and technical proficiency of the performer herself. Ruthie exists in a limbo that lies between autobiographical performance and the playing of "characters," a notion of form and artifice that harkens back to Ventura's years with the Play-House. Although Ventura claims in BDFW "all my work is non-fiction,"32 this seems a rather narrow view of the power of her own creative hand. Ruthie perhaps inhabits the same theoretical space that is occupied by families re-enacting on an episode of Rescue 911 the time their son got his big toe stuck in the pool drain and almost drowned. The dramatization is neither real nor overtly fictional. The reenactment serves to blur the line
between fiction and fact and highlights reality as a fluid and debatable concept. Just as "Ruthie the Duck Lady," the Rescue 911 reenactment presents a version of truth and reality and causes an audience to question the veracity or origin of that version. This goal in Ventura's work comes directly from her performative beginnings with the Play-House, and translates the improvisational, "Happening"-like Baroque style of Play-House performance to the hyperreality milieu of the eighties.

The eighties, in fact, seems to evidence a general turning away from traditional drama. Much work of this time strains to appear "real" and non-theatrical, forcing the audience to witness rather than simply observe. The facts of ordinary events became entertainment. Jack Smith, who constantly worked toward blurring the line between everyday life and art, anticipated this trend in the late 1970s when he wrote this manifesto for the future of art into the text for I Was A Mekas Collaborator:

> Let art continue to be entertaining, escapist, stunning, glamorous and NATURALISTIC -- but let it also be loaded with information worked into the vapid plots of, for instance, movies. Each one would be more or less a complete exposition of one subject or another. Thus you would have Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh busily making yogurt; Humphrey Bogart struggling to introduce a basic civil law course into public schools.33

Perhaps the desire to explore the ordinary as entertainment came about because Americans were not all that gullible after all. Americans wanted to believe the message of the Reagan/Bush years, but it was hard for many to swallow the idea that things were great when their daily lives told them differently. For most people, the answer to the infamous 1980s campaign query, "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" was and would
remain "no." In fact, the seventies and eighties marked the worst period in this century for American productivity, and the median American worker saw "no increase in real take-home pay since the first inauguration of Richard Nixon . . . In the 1980s, the poor got poorer while the rich got richer." Nevertheless, the American mainstream didn't seem quite ready to acknowledge the truth of their economic situation in 1984 or 1988. The nation still wanted to believe in its own strength and position on the world scene, as if the misguided perception of strength could somehow redress evidence of actual cultural frailty. This myopia certainly extended to the increasing budget deficit. Kreiger writes:

Whether or not deficits actually drive up inflation, Reagan uses the fear of inflation - the way Thatcher used immigration - to drive a wedge between us and them . . . We are the solid citizens, Americans who are concerned about the deficit and the threat it represents to our nation's international competitiveness. They are profligate spenders, . . . who defend unnecessary high-cost programs . . . They, too, are the welfare cheats and the not 'truly needy' who should no longer be coddled. . . Reagan's own deficit building provides him with the practical logic with which to champion his de-integrative appeals.35

In the 1970s America was eventually able to identify and address its domestic enemies: inflation and unemployment. Ford and Carter talked about them, but could not allay them. In the eighties, Washington's rhetoric conflicted with the actual events of most American's lives. America was suffering from a reality gap and wanted desperately to hang on to a reality that no longer existed, a reality of economic and technological supremacy, which proved extremely difficult to release.
The cultural need for the real was reflected in dozens of popular entertainments (like Rescue 911). America inundated itself with "reality." Real policemen, real lawyers and judges, and real doctors and patients replaced many of the fictionalized versions of the same on American television. Hill Street Blues became America's Most Wanted. St. Elsewhere became Emergency Response. Situation comedy gave ground in broadcast time to programs featuring artless videotape of cats falling off fences, men being struck in the genitals, women getting stuck head first in the dishwasher. The reality boom even translated to pornography, where a craze for "amateur" videos, presumably of people "just like you" found their niche in the market, so much so that X-Rated film companies had to begin filming movies AS IF THEY WERE REAL. As a viewing public, the country wanted to bring the world of the fantastic or the extreme closer to home. Truth became commodified. Indeed, varying versions of the truth were marketed, a trend which may have recently reached its zenith with the three film versions of the Amy Fisher story that aired within a few weeks of each other, two on the same night, each based on the point of view of a specific individual involved with the case. The "rights" to a perception of reality were and are for sale.

A Quiet Night With Sid and Nancy\textsuperscript{36} is a particularly strong example of the "reality" issue in Ventura's work. In January of 1989, Ventura and English actor Steven Wastell, in association with Anne Hamburger's En Garde Arts, took this "reality" issue to another area. While Quiet Night did not mark any great advance in the nature of theatrical form, indeed, En Garde Arts alone
had been doing this kind of "environmental" art for years, it did exemplify
this bizarre eighties trend toward creating specific realities in performance.

**Quiet Night** took place/was staged in the Chelsea Hotel in New York where
former Sex Pistol Sid Vicious had, a decade previous, murdered his girlfriend
Nancy Spungen. Audience members for the evening of performance, which
also included pieces by Squat Theater and David van Tieghem, lined up to sit
in a room with Ventura and Wastell and observe a typical day for the drug-
addicted, slovenly, socially provocative and finally doomed punk rockers.

**Quiet Night** differed from Ventura's previous work in a number of ways.
First, she was playing a somewhat recognizable public figure. The subject of
Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen's desperate relationship had already been the
material of a major film by director Alex Cox (and here, as with any biopic,
we could discuss our "reality as P.O.V." question again), and certainly En
Garde Arts and Ventura were playing on the infamous reputation of these two
figures to draw an audience. In terms of how the character was created,
however, this was no Ruthie, Charlotte, or younger version of Ventura's self
as in the forthcoming **La Miseria**. Ventura had not personally interviewed or
observed Nancy Spungen. Spungen's "career" as Vicious' manager in New
York ran its course before Ventura returned in 1981. As such, Ventura
approached this piece much as a more traditional, representationalist,
Strasberg-style actress might.

Second, much of the impact of this particular performance endeavor was
related to the environment of the performance space itself. The Chelsea
Hotel holds certain significations for a New York audience that are unlikely to be created on a stage. The Chelsea is considered a downtown icon, with a history of famous and infamous guests. It serves as a kind of Ritz-Carlton for the avant-garde set. A few years previous to Quiet Night, writer Robert Monroe described the Chelsea as "a landmark of the literati ... an internationally famous grand dame [similar to] the Left Bank Hotels in Paris." Another writer called it a "belovedly seedy fount of artistic fire." We are dealing here again with notions of levels of reality. The effort to make Sid and Nancy as "real" as possible extended beyond the traditional manner of stage representation because this was not a stage. The setting does not dominate the proceedings, perhaps, but it lent an undeniably resonant background to them. The claustrophobia of one-room, New York living combined with the narrow, oddly focused lifestyle of the drug-addicted, creating an oppressive, rat-in-a-maze sort of sensation for the audience. This effect was highlighted and put into sharp relief by the site of the performed acts themselves.

Ventura, who had hired Wastell, allowed him to live in the performance space, the hotel room itself, for some time before the show. Ventura tells how she prepared the hotel room for the performance:

I had given Steve Wastell the room for two weeks with the stipulation that he not clean it ... [New York Times reviewer] Mel Gussow wrote in his review that the condition of the room left serious doubts about the housekeeping standards of the Chelsea Hotel. Which I thought was really interesting because even Mel Gussow didn't realize that was something we did. In fact, he said the piece had 'a frightening verisimilitude'.

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As well, the dark, unexplored or explained end of Spungen's life (Vicious died soon after being bailed out of jail, and the case against him regarding the stabbing death of Spungen never went to trial) gave a haunting level of mysterious doom to the performance. "Site-specific" may be the applicable catch phrase, but this is plainly another version, as Gussow so rightly noted, of reality recreation.

Last, and perhaps most significant for the future of Ventura's work, Quiet Night marked her first effort to define a specific, repeated text for a performance. Quiet Night was not a solo effort. The existence of Wastell and two other actors (playing a magazine interviewer and a pizza boy) necessitated a set script for their scenes, but, in classic Play-House style, Ventura did not limit herself to a particular text. She recalled: "I only had time to write their parts, however. Mine was still improvised. You know, improvised based on the story that I knew."40

Quiet Night was separated into three sections. The first Ventura derived from an existing interview Spungen had done with a rock journalist, and Ventura used it to clarify her belief that Spungen had been more than a groupie or hanger-on, had indeed been invested not only in Vicious' career, but his survival. Ventura notes: "She was like a midwife between him and the world."41 The second part of the piece simulated a phone call from Spungen to her mother. This monologue was outlined and improvised by Ventura and highlighted Ventura's particular connection with Spungen.
The monologue was based on who I would have been if I had run away in 1976 instead of ten years earlier. What [Nancy] and the seventeen year old version of me had in common was a nihilism that was based in the condition of the planet rather than some aesthetic idea.42

In the telephone sequence, Ventura/Spungen repeatedly attempted to solicit money from her mother whom Ventura believes continued to hold out hope for reformation and redemption for Nancy. In a painful and grueling moment, Nancy/Susana tells her mother "hope is a killer." In the final sequence, Ventura attempted to undercut the notion that Spungen had been maliciously wounded by Vicious by playing out the murder as a grave and dire game gone awry. Ventura adds: "Judging from my own mental state at that age, I could drive people to violence . . . I think what happened was they had this pact to die, and Sid didn't want to do it."43

There is another level of reality important for Quiet Night. In this piece, Ventura's variable identity and how that identity works as a symbol comes directly into play. "Susana Ventura" as Nancy Spungen simply did not have the symbolic power, and hence, perhaps sadly, the commercial draw, of "Penny Arcade" as Spungen. Penny Arcade, as a survivor of a lifestyle similar to the one that killed Vicious and Spungen (as well as many of Ventura's own peers), carried a particular kind of accepted authenticity, verisimilitude, and "real"-ness for the recreation and exploration of Nancy as an individual. The full brunt of Ventura's experience as the Penny Arcade of the Warhol circle and the late sixties' downtown art scene, which serves as ancestor to the Punk idiom of the seventies, was brought to bear on the reality of the Spungen persona. We are dealing, again, with unconscious
perception. We as audience perceive Penny Arcade to know more about, and thus be more qualified to recreate, the life of a socially marginal figure like Spungen than another actress. By bringing her own invented persona, Penny Arcade, and all its iconographic resonance to the performance, Ventura brought instant legitimacy to her version of Spungen. Just as Reagan would serve in the eighties as a kind of cipher for a symbolic, mythic America, in *Quiet Night*, Arcade served as an icon of the avant-garde. Thus the accumulation of deeper, symbolic resonances of space, persona, and material combined to create a signified "reality" for *Quiet Night* that was both undercut and supported, depending on the specific audience member's expectations, by the actual physical presence of the actors existing as Sid and Nancy. The specific and pointed use of Penny as a legitimizing element for a performance is atypical of a Ventura performance, and, in the case of *Quiet Night*, is overt because Ventura was creating a particular theatrical experience for En Garde Arts. The blurring of the real, of the line between invented and organic, however, is necessarily an element of every Ventura piece performed in the Penny Arcade persona.

With *Quiet Night*, the politics and social vision of Ventura's evolving style truly began to emerge. The Ventura "style" now invariably includes the use of improvisation, the breaking down of the fourth wall, a degree of subjectivity, and a reordering of the real in its dichotomy with the created. At the core of these technical elements of a Ventura work has always been the voice of the "other."
The improvisational aspects of *Quiet Night* were tied to a plot and text that existed primarily in the mind of Ventura herself and her knowledge of the persona she was creating. This work method, this way of making a reality, Ventura learned at the Play-House. On a particular evening of *Quiet Night*, for example, when "Nancy" found a side door unexpectedly locked, Ventura attempted to open the door by kicking it from its hinges. Both actors would mingle with the largely unknowing audience as they waited in the lobby of the hotel and elsewhere for the "performance" to begin. The interaction between the audience members and the actors, particularly the infamously talkative and grating "Nancy," was primarily an improvisational dialogue.

Ventura describes the banter between audience and characters:

> The opening night there was a woman on line who had like this necklace and I was being Nancy, and I walked up to her and I said in my Nancy voice 'Oh, that's a really nice piece.' And I was wearing like a lock with a chain and she said 'Well yours is really tacky . . .' And she was about fifty years old, right? And I went, 'you're fucking jealous because you're fucking old! Sid! Sid! You see this fucking bitch she's being real fucking mean!' And I did this whole number and everybody was flipping out. After the show, I thanked her for being a really good sport.44

The improvised dialogue in *Quiet Night* is a variation on the Ventura theme of specific, direct address, the establishment of a concise present, and the breaking down of fourth-wall barriers, literal and figurative. Because it is basically non-aggressive and apolitical, this work falls more in line with Play-House methods than other sixties-rooted environmental companies like the Living Theater. The politics of the piece was buried in the iconography of Arcade herself and the voice of the other. Ventura's only overt agenda
included a reasoned portrayal of Spungen. The difference between overt politicization and her own work is not lost on Ventura. As she explains:

To me there's a difference between being a political artist and having work that's really political. To me, with political artists, the first issue coming into their mind is how are we going to communicate this political reality to the public? My work comes from my subconscious, and that is highly, highly, highly, subjective.

Indeed, Ventura attempts to subvert her own politics, even in a work where the environment is essential to the nature of the piece, and to focus on human, individual connection and the relationship of character to audience. Thus, in terms of form and performative reality, Quiet Night is a unique Ventura work only in its non-theatrical, iconographic location.

Traditional idioms are similarly broken down when Ventura works within an established performance space. As early as her first "character" pieces (including Ruthie, Aunt Lucy, Dame Margot, Andrea Whips), a clearly visible "stage manager" would help Ventura change from one costume to another directly in front of the audience. Even today she uses "covering" music or lights, but she rarely makes a concerted effort at maintaining a traditional sense of theatrical illusion. Ventura cares little about the spit-and-polish end of theater, about creating an illusory reality. Indeed, more than simply ignoring traditional tenets of theatrical form, she has taken the ideas of Jack Smith and the Play-House and established them as features of her own performance style. Certainly, the visibility the technique is a vital part of an Arcade performance. Ventura has used this device of "drawing back the curtain" throughout her career, thus dispelling the criticism that her
slipshod transitions and lack of traditional theatrical contextualization are indicative of a poorly devised structure. More to the point, she does this on purpose.

In her most recent work, like *True Stories* and *Based On A True Story*, Ventura still maintains thinly-veiled dressing procedures and, indeed, often makes rather a show of her "transformation" process. Perhaps this tendency reflects a sixties attitude in Ventura: in the Play-House, performance was about play, about acknowledging artifice, about the communal effect of creation. In the Warhol clique, transformation was about self-aggrandizement and personal ego. Warhol's world anticipated no future and carried with it a vision of social decay and pessimism. This dark and random reality is reflected in the harsh, grainy black-and-white examinations of Edie Sedgwick--*Poor Little Rich Girl* and *Beauty #2* (1965)--and the meandering improvisations of Taylor Meade and Ultra Violet in *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968). Jack Smith and Vaccaro held that the real and invented were inseparable and indeterminate. They saw the future as one of promise and inclusion. Ventura's eighties performative focus was clearly rooted in the Play-House's world of possibility, and its belief that life can be improved and transformed through play, through experimenting with the diffusion of barriers, cultural and performative. Blurring the line between the real (the performer) and the invented (the performed) works for Ventura as a means of communicating multiple realities. By doing away with the constrictions of traditional theatrical form, she calls attention to the illusion of social
difference. Creating a different definition of normalcy onstage, through form and content, reflects Ventura's social vision of a world where difference is embraced and lionized. Thus, in performance, Ventura worries very little about accepted modes of "transition" from one set piece to the next. She "dives" into the audience in an attempt to eliminate the borders between the audience and performer and to heighten the crowd's awareness of artifice. She speaks directly to technical staff from the stage, calling attention to the aspects of the production with which they are working. In BDFW, she succinctly critiques the "lie" of "traditional" theater: "Don't you hate when you go to a show and sit in the dark and somebody tells you what they think for two hours?"46

Apart from the topicality of current events, Ventura's work in the eighties prominently features that most mysterious of elements, herself as invented persona (already noted as a peripheral but significant element of Quiet Night). The persona of Penny first existed as a tool, to help transform a young working class runaway to a darling of the downtown set. In 1981, the persona was again useful as a means of reintegrating Ventura with the performance scene that had emerged in her absence. She remembers: "When I came back, everything had realigned itself . . . There was a whole other scene that had sprouted up in the seventies that I wasn't part of."47 Persona and identity are crucial to the aesthetic success of the Ruthie the Duck Lady piece, for example, where Ruthie is divested of the Penny persona as much as possible (by the use of the unseen, anonymous voiceover which
calls attention to the world of Ruthie, not the hand of the artist). In the case of Nancy Spungen, Penny Arcade gives Ventura "qualifications" to play the role. As regards the Girl in La Miseria, a younger version of Ventura herself (played by another actress), our interest is piqued as to the reasons and explanations for this girl's transformation to Arcade later in life. If present-day Ventura were merely Ventura, would we have as much interest in the life of the Girl? Knowing what she became is an important subtext to the "reality" of the La Miseria story, which is based on Ventura's own childhood and family life.

The Penny Arcade persona has always carried with it specific cultural identifications. The young girl who knew dressing up like Shirley Temple was as good as being Shirley Temple to the people who worked in exclusive restaurants and department stores grew up to understand the importance of icon and symbol in performance (for example, the Catholic school uniform--symbolizing the repressive, codified elements of her society--serves as an iconographic foil to the dissenting voice of La Miseria's lead character). Largely by chance, in 1967 Ventura picked a name for her new persona which has nostalgic, small-town, Rockwellian resonances. The penny arcade, a throwback to another era, now exists only in memory, replaced by the video parlor, the home video system, and virtual reality programming. Indeed, Ventura's Penny Arcade persona functions as a cultural icon, embracing the traditional Rockwellian Americana of children at play and the counter-culture identity of the Warholian self-named "Superstars." Penny
Arcade and the voice of the alternative other existing in the same body suggests the possibility of an American culture of inclusion. Penny Arcade creates a new political place. Here, the dissenting voice exists as an honored tradition, a given of the American melting pot, harkening to Thomas Paine, free speech, basic freedoms, civil disobedience (as a cornerstone of American culture), and, most importantly, the value of difference.

Ventura addressed Penny Arcade specifically to the cultural symbolism that was part of the eighties political rhetoric. Identity politics thus became a key issue for Ventura in these years, and the American socio-political scene served as backdrop to her work. Like Reagan, she used her knowledge of cultural iconography to convey a message, to combat the Reaganite notions of exclusion and regression. Just as Play-House productions called upon American symbols to give resonance to its work, Ventura's eighties pieces are constantly infused with carefully juxtaposed American imagery. In BDFW, for example, videotape of Wooster Group member Ron Vawter (as Lenny Bruce) expounding on the legal definitions of pornography is played as Ventura strips. She ends up nude and draped in an American flag. The power of this image is then undercut, intentionally, by Ventura's intellectual and incisive discussion of why and how America's various versions of censorship exist. Indeed, the potential prurience and eroticism of the nude body is defused. Her dialogue of ideas serves to demystify, just as her onstage dressing undercuts theatrical artifice elsewhere in the piece, the very symbol Ventura has set up for her audience. She debunks notions of right
and wrong, of public discourse, and of the sanctity of American values as outlined by Reagan Republicans. She concludes the moment with "So, I guess, by now, you've probably forgotten I have no clothes on," and we have.

Without an aggressive stance, Ventura's "transformative aesthetics" serve a social and political aim. Her transformations of persona, onstage and in her personal life, play out a desire for self-determination with which any audience member can identify. This is the opposite of Broadway's mass appeal, which focuses on the cultural need for sameness, conformity, and empty ritual that harkens back to the very fifties' era of which Ventura is a product. As an unmistakable throughline, dissension--and an effort to transform--runs from Ventura's childhood to her eighties work.

Ventura's art strives for a real vision of the world, one that deconstructs societal notions of inclusion and exclusion, of mainstream and other. She attempts to establish a position outside traditional views of normalcy, beyond the conventional "real" or "true." Ventura's stage reality is the reality of day-to-day existence ("There is no way for me to separate what goes on in my everyday life and what I do on stage"), and the jumbled, low-rent structure of her work, which gives no honor to the lie of traditional theatrical illusion, defines that reality. In the eighties, this point of view, firmly placed her among the counter-culture and its dissenting voice. She offered an alternative to the fantasy world of Reaganite rhetoric. By reestablishing the Penny persona in these years, Ventura becomes a rallying point for the
disenfranchised. Espousing a politics of the real, she pronounced the
counter-culture as just as American as the mainstream. While an illusory
vision served as Reagan's America, the America of the real served as
Ventura's. Through Penny Arcade, Susana Ventura propounded a specific
vision, a vision of an inclusive, embracing America, an alternative to the
politics of negation and the unreal that dominated the Reagan/Bush era.
Notes For Chapter Five


4 Kreiger 155.

5 Schaller 122.

6 Kreiger 155.


8 As a born-and-bred Mainer who now resides in Manhattan, I can say it would be difficult to get much further apart on the performative spectrum than the downtown New York avant-garde scene and the Pittsfield, Maine Community Theater.


10 Vaccaro claimed in a personal interview (26 October 1995) "she didn't understand what we were trying to do."


12 Ventura, BDFW.

13 Ventura did not begin truly organizing and editing specific texts for performance until 1989 and 1990 with True Stories, the first versions of BDFW at P. S. 122, and Invitation, performed in November of 1990 at LaMaMa.


17 Kreiger 131.

18 Kreiger 174.


21 Ventura, *BDFW*.


23 Vaccaro, telephone interview, 23 October 1995.

24 Ventura, *BDFW*.

25 Ventura, *BDFW*.

26 Ventura, *BDFW*.

27 Ventura, *BDFW*.

28 Ventura, *BDFW*.


30 Like all of Ventura's character-based monologic work, Ruthie continues to appear in performance evenings with varying titles. The version of Ruthie used for this study, however, was presented as part of *Bid For The Big Time*, recorded at The Ballroom in New York in August of 1988. Ruthie might also have been performed for 1985's Collaborations Project, 1986's *Invisible On the Street* for University of the Streets, and is sometimes included as part of *True Stories*.


32 Ventura, *BDFW*.


34 Krugman 2, 17, 19.

35 Kreiger 167.


38 Rebecca Schneider, "Penny Arcade, David van Tieghem and Tina Dudek; Ann Carlson: At The Chelsea," High Performance #46 vol. 12 #2: 60-61.


46 Ventura, BDFW.

47 Bell 26.

48 Ventura, BDFW.

49 Bell 27.
Chapter Six

"Love Is the Most Political Act You Can Make": Bitch! Dyke! Fag Hag! Whore! Defines the Multicultural Nineties

It is impossible to examine Ventura's continuing development as an artist/advocate for the American "other" in the 1990s without discussing the politically divisive issue of multiculturalism. With its origins in the debate over educational curricula—"initially formulated as the positing of an expanded canon"—multiculturalism demands a reassessment of social issues of the sixties. While it holds potential for an ethos of inclusion, multiculturalism has proven equally likely to deepen divisions in the American cultural mosaic. Multiculturalism's strength lies in its desire to honor and respect the traditions and affirmations of "difference": in this respect it exhibits a quality of mercy not incongruous with the social vision that has guided Ventura's work for a quarter century. The movement's weakness lies in the tendency of its counter-culture polemicists, using "difference" and "other" as rhetorical tools, to define, divide, and further separate American "others" from the mainstream and, perhaps more importantly, from each other. Indeed, those who would use multiculturalism as a political weapon jeopardize the coalition of "others" that artists like Ventura have over the years attempted to build. It is, apparently, a very short distance from multicultural respect to ethnic separation and exclusion.

One sees clear commonalities between the goals of the multiculturalism movement and the American counter-culture. As the Chicago Cultural
Studies Group wrote in 1990: "Multiculturalism gets its purchase because it seeks to challenge established norms, and to link together identity struggles with a common rhetoric of difference and resistance."² Highlighting this anti-establishment motif, Werner Sollors points out "it is a widespread practice to define ethnicity as otherness."³ The subject here is the territory of other, a matter central to avant-garde consciousness, and multiculturalism must share that territory Ventura has been mining since childhood.

Multiculturalism in its inception purported to be all-inclusive in its outlook. Its advocates aimed for a more permissive society, one based on the fact that "our freedom and equality as citizens [refers] only to our common characteristics-our universal needs, regardless of our particular identities."⁴ Some multiculturalists, however, argue that those "needs" may include "a secure cultural context."⁵ With that in mind, various American ethnic groups, most notably African-Americans, have suggested that what is taught in American schools is "Euro-centric," based primarily on the experiences and point of view of Caucasian Americans of European descent. In short order, multiculturalism became less about honoring the experiences, point-of-view, and cultures of Americans who were not of European descent and more about, as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. writes, "a reaction against Anglo- or Eurocentrism" that might "pass over into an ethnocentrism of its own."

Schlesinger adds, "the very word, instead of referring as it should to all cultures, has come to refer only to non-western, non-white cultures."⁶ As Daryl Chin notes: "Now, when 'multiculturalism' is invoked, the meaning is
specified in terms of 'people of color'; in multicultural terms, European
culture has been collapsed into one Eurocentric culture, a lack of distinction
belied by current events . . . . "7

While "it may be absurd," as Sollors reminds us, "to except white Anglo-
Saxon Protestant Americans from the category of ethnicity,"8 it is certainly
not an uncommon practice. If ethnicity, in America, means other, and other
means counter-culture, and counter-culture means avant-garde, where is the
territory of compromise? Where is the line to be drawn which demarcates
the other? Is the goal of the multiculturalism movement to replace "Euro"-
centrism with an "everything else"-centrism? There is an implied good and
bad here, a sacred/profane dichotomy, with "the sacred side of the antithesis
increasingly becoming the ethnic one."9 The failings of multiculturalism
are obvious when you consider that Ventura, who has based her artistic
career on an effort to bridge the gap between "other" and mainstream, would,
as a Caucasian of European descent, be excluded from discussions of
pluralism, as Schlesinger fears. In this scenario, the effect of the
multiculturalism movement subverts its original intent—it favors one
identity over another:

Within the recent discourse on multiculturalism, there remains the
tacit elaboration of policies of exclusion and suppression. But these
policies, enshrouded in what is now being termed 'political
correctness,' have enforced a continual alienation . . . . There has been
a cacophony of disparate voices, not just screaming for attention, but
screaming definitions which limit and cause further exclusion.10

The fragmentation within the ranks of "other" brought on by
multiculturalism/PC ideals perhaps part explains why a quick examination of
the early 1990s performance scene reveals serious blows to the voice of the avant-garde. Because American "others" have proven unable to unite in their efforts to combat their own continuing disenfranchisement, their art has suffered. Franklin Furnace, "where artists like Laurie Anderson, Eric Bogosian, Karen Finley, and Paul Zaloom were seen early in their careers," was shut down "in May, 1990, the night that Ms. Finley's *Woman's Life Isn't Worth Much* was to be performed . . . after the New York City Fire Department received an anonymous complaint about an 'illegal social club' at 112 Franklin Street." In 1991, P. S. 122 closed its doors for the summer for financial reasons. As Jennifer Dunning writes: "P. S. 122 and spaces like it, already struggling to survive . . . now face not only the diminution of private support but the effects of proposed cuts of 44 percent in the city's arts allocation and 56% in the state's budget." These years also saw the infamous "defunding" of "The NEA Four (performance artists Tim Miller, Holly Hughes, John Fleck and the aforementioned Ms. Finley)," whose National Endowment for the Arts grant requests were refused due to the explicit nature of their solo work, a high-profile case of mainstream politics suppressing the voice of the other. In August of 1991, JoAnne Akalaitis, a director with experimental theater collective Mabou Mines, was hired to replace the deceased Joseph Papp as head of the New York Shakespeare Festival's Public Theater. Presumably this personnel move aimed to bring a more aggressively "other" vision to the Public. Nonetheless, Akalaitis was fired in March of 1993. Moreover, the Public, which has
exercised "non-traditional" casting decisions and given voice to new playwrights for over thirty years, "had seen its budget cut by more than one-third ... and the staff cut in half, from 120 to 60" in the three years from 1990 to Akalaitis' firing in 1993. Also in 1993, Circle in the Square, a "spiritual part of off-Broadway," announced it was cancelling its first production of the year due to a 1.5 million dollar debt. In 1994, the NEA did fund performance artist Ron Athey, a gay, HIV-Positive performer who depicts events from his sadomasochistic and drug-addicted life-style in his stage show Four Scenes From A Harsh Life. The grant apparently amounted to little more than $150, but, like Andres Serrano's Piss Christ and Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photography, Athey's work became a lever for congress' recent effort to cut $11.9 million from the NEA's budget, a sum "drawn principally from the organization's theater, visual arts, and commissioning programs." Indeed, problems with the National Endowment became so pronounced in the late eighties and early nineties that American Theater magazine established a regular column headed "Government."

However, the early 1990s performance scene saw some "other" success stories, too. A number of formidable new artists emerged, particularly in the arena of performance art, which essentially remains the domain of the "other." Blue Man Group's Tubes, which features three men in blue make-up and skull caps drumming on PVC pipe, throwing marshmallows at each other, and using (in the style of a Kostelanetz Theater of Mixed Means) a number of advanced technologies for performance, opened in the fall of 1991 and is still
running at the Astor Place Theater more than four years later. Anna Deveare Smith's *Fires in The Mirror*, in which Deveare Smith portrays characters based on individuals she interviewed after race riots in a New York neighborhood, enjoyed success all over the country, including runs in New York at the Public and on Broadway; the piece was subsequently filmed for television. In 1992, Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company, now under the direction of Everett Quinton, celebrated its 25th anniversary. Claudia Shear's *Blown Sideways Through Life*, a piece about the many jobs Shear had worked (including that of a phone sex worker), Spalding Gray's *Gray's Anatomy*, which concerned Gray's battle with a mysterious illness that endangered his eyesight, John Leguizamo's ethnically charged character evening *Mambo Mouth*, and Danny Hoch's *Some People*, a collection of personae recreated from the artist's highly ethnicized neighborhood, all enjoyed extensive off-Broadway runs followed by television broadcast versions. David Drake's gay-themed *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* played for several months at the Perry Street Theater in Greenwich Village.

In 1993, The Tiny Mythic Theater Company and the Home for Contemporary Art even opened, in the Tribeca section of Lower Manhattan, a new, P. S. 122-like facility for experimental performance called HERE.

The voice of the other also made significant forays into the mainstream (Broadway) theater world in the early 1990s. Tony Kushner's lengthy, two-part *Angels in America*, which deals with the issues of AIDS, homosexuality, religion, and the role of women in American society, ran for over a year on
Broadway. It has since played in a number of other American cities. *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, Terrence McNally's 1994 gay-themed work, moved from Manhattan Theater Club to a Broadway house in 1995. Both pieces won Broadway's highest accolade, the Tony award, for Best Play; Kushner's work won a Pulitzer Prize. Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey*, another gay-themed work, followed its substantial off-Broadway run with a Hollywood film version starring television personality Patrick Stewart. Akalaitis' replacement at the Public, George C. Wolfe, an African-American has voiced his intention to work toward the representation of other voices. For some observers, the appointment of Wolfe, who had been the head of the Public's "Festival of New Voices" series, represented a compromise, a mediation of sorts between the "other" and the mainstream. As one supporter pointed out, "he has roots in both the uptown and downtown communities."

Ventura may also be counted as one of the counter-cultural voice's nineties success stories. In addition to *Quiet Night, True Stories, Based On A True Story, Invitation to the End of the World, La Miseria, State of Grace and Bitch!Dyke!Faghag!Whore!,* all of which have been discussed already, her late eighties-early nineties works include *While You Were Out, Invisible on the Street, Bringing It All Back Home, Bid For The Big Time,* and *Operating Under the Influence.* She has also conducted dozens of readings, workshop evenings, and public appearances. Each of her efforts has explored different kinds of performance, different means of presentation, and different media, such as videotape or live action camera. Some pieces have included live or
recorded music. Some involved other actors or dancers. In several, Ventura herself has sung. In others, costumes did much to delineate character, whereas in still others they played little or no role whatever. Some have followed an established text, others have been more fluid. All of her work, from the single character, sometimes improvisational pieces, like Bid for the Big Time, to the semi-autobiographical but fantastic narrative of La Miseria, to the highly confessional Leap of Faith, which consists of Ventura sitting on a stool and talking about the one great love of her adult life, varies in format, material, technical requirements, and basic structure. Other works, like the still evolving State of Grace, which recalls the sexual abuses of Ventura's early life as a runaway in New York and recounts her reaction to the trial of several male St. John's University athletes accused of sexual assault, have never passed the "workshop/reading" stage but still include other performers and a modicum of technical structure. Ventura has put into practice in the avant-garde venues of New York the theorems and work methods she had developed during her theoretical and personal searching in the seventies. Ventura's 1985-1995 work is textured, evocative, and tremendously varied. Indeed, while it is difficult to select the most significant single work of Ventura's 1980s-early nineties corpus, due to its varied and complex nature, her crowning achievement, the one piece that continues to make Ventura and Arcade a part of the multicultural landscape of the 1990s, is Bitch!Dyke!Faghag!Whore!. 
BDFW exemplifies multicultural art's best case scenario. Indeed, much of the reason Ventura's Arcade persona has taken on a mythological, benevolent-goddess status in the downtown avant-garde scene stems from the inclusive nature of her recent work; BDFW may be viewed as the end result of 25 years of labor, Ventura's masterpiece, which as well as any work of the period gives voice to the American "other." It is her survival; it is her encyclopaedic knowledge of the players of the downtown scene; it is her personal grace with people, particularly other artists; it is even the hunger of younger artists to drape themselves in the nostalgia of the avant-garde and the iconography of Penny's "Warhol" years; but it is finally the work itself that binds these elements and elevates Ventura's position in the performance community.

While multiculturalism has been criticized for splintering America into ethnic factions, each clamoring for "what is theirs," BDFW manages to coalesce the American others into a unified voice fighting the common enemy of exclusion. BDFW advances a modified, streamlined, easy to follow version of sixties utopianism. BDFW's popularity with audiences on three continents and in half a dozen nations should be enough to verify its "universality," but perhaps it must be noted that the show includes, at varying times, African-Americans, male homosexuals, lesbians, bisexuals, Asian-Americans, Hispanics, HIV-positive actors, and Ventura's own broken English-speaking Italian mother (on videotape). Its cast ranges in age from early twenties to the senior Ventura's seventies. Granted, most of these
performers are used primarily as dancers, but, as Ventura once did with a band and with her assistant/stage manager, the performers are without question integrated into the life of the piece. In 1993 and 1994, when the most polished New York versions of BDFW appeared, it would have been difficult to find a production anywhere in the city that featured a more diverse group of onstage personalities. Confirming this point, Stephen Holden of the New York Times observed that the cast members had "been chosen for their ethnic and sexual diversity."

Ventura has since taken these personalities to festival performances in Edinburgh, Sydney, Vienna and elsewhere.

The wide-spread appeal of BDFW is proven by the demographics of its audience. Ventura explains:

I turn on the lights sometimes and tell the audience look around, look who's in this room. Everybody's in this room; there are fags, there are dykes, there are straight people, there are old people, there are blacks, there are Asians, there are Muslims, we're all in here and we're all having this experience together. While we're very different from each other, we're just overwhelmingly similar.

At the risk of generalizing, the average Broadway audience is overwhelmingly white and middle-class. Passing by the Eugene O'Neill Theatre on 49th Street just before the house opens, and seeing the ticket line for the Tommy Tune-produced revival of Grease! that has been running there for two years, quickly reveals the limited demographic of the Broadway audience. The same holds true for New York's "downtown" venues, with the exception of those that often preach to the converted, those who perceive themselves as "alternative" or "avant-garde." Ventura, paraphrasing her old
mentor Jack Smith, loosely calls these downtown aficionados "the same old five art cripples who go to everything." The diversity of a BDFW crowd must be seen as a testament to the nature of Ventura's material, which closes the "reality gap" of the eighties and Ventura's career-long effort to understand, process, and communicate the disenfranchised voice in a performance that does not alienate or polemicize. "There is a myth about the shrinking audience," Ventura tells a packed P. S. 122 house during 1991's State of Grace; "It's bullshit . . . people just want to see theater that addresses their interests and ideas." Ventura recognizes both the theatrical and the social value of speaking to the growing ranks of the "other" in America, as a BDFW audience, on any given evening, will be filled with a complicated and compelling cross-section of Americans. Ventura declares: "I feel that my work is so subjective that it becomes universal. Apparently. Because widely diverging groups and types of people tell me that it speaks for them."

Ventura uses identity, her own and that of the disenfranchised, as a vehicle for exploring position in society, for dispelling myths of minority, cultural limits, and difference. Ventura debunks and defuses cultural paranoia by example, by the straightforward presentation of non-traditional lives and through non-traditional means (anti-illusory theater).

As the culmination of Ventura's work thus far, BDFW serves as the best example of Ventura's eclectic style; it also best illustrates Ventura's own particular take on the relationship between art, society and the "other." To Ventura, a society that controls and marginalizes specific voices (and
entities) is a misguided one. She seeks a community outside the rhetorical versions of America so frequently purveyed in public discourse. Ventura comments:

The only thing that I originally espoused with BDFW was to take back the country; this is a country by the people for the people. We're in the middle of a tennis match between the right and the left, and we need to take our own stand.31

BDFW begins with a direct address from Ventura, typically a preparatory introduction to the piece and its history. This sometimes evolves into discussion (Ventura once told one well-meaning heckler, "Would you like me to write you a part so I know when you're going to talk?") about recent or pressing cultural or personal events. This opening succeeds in immediately establishing a commonality between the audience and the performers (In early versions of the piece an "audience member [dancer Callie Ryan]" would be "coerced" into participating as the dancers "warmed up" the crowd before Ventura's first address; this served to minimize the distancing aspects of the audience gaze32).

In a simple fashion, Ventura begins the first set "piece" of BDFW, a massage parlor "Phone Lady" doing her job, with no theatrical formality whatsoever. Ventura drops her dialogue with the audience without fanfare and begins the first lines of the Phone Lady monologue. This piece immediately establishes BDFW's focus on the real versus the rhetorical. Whatever myths or fantastic notions an audience may bring to the idea of a sex emporium are immediately defused by the Phone Lady. The voice of the
mysterious other, the sex worker, is placed within the frame of a mainstream
day-to-day work routine. As Phone Lady attempts to maintain control of the
workplace by admonishing her fellow employees about clothing ("Elizabeth .
. . Elizabeth . . . Is that the outfit you wore into the building?") , tardiness
("And another thing, you have been late every day . . . ") and methods of
payment ("You just spent fifteen minutes of that client's half hour haggling
over a tip. We don't do that here"), the gap between fact and fantasy is made
clear. The reality of Phone Lady's working life, in stark contrast to cultural
iconography of the sex worker, is startlingly similar to the working day of
many Americans. Phone Lady exists in fact, in reality, in much the same
cultural cul de sac as a secretary or a janitor. Phone Lady further instructs
Elizabeth, "This is a very conservative business, Elizabeth. This is the sex
business." This sentiment turns the cultural myth about the decadent life of
the sex worker on its head. Phone Lady's experience will later in the
evening be echoed by another character, Charlene, a New Orleans call girl.

The Phone Lady piece is followed by a brief segue involving the erotic
dancers featured in BDFW. These performers dance slowly--intergender and
interrace--with each other. Though only a brief transitional moment, this
sequences illuminates how two men, two women, of differing races, dancing
in romantic fashion is, in reality, not very shocking. In this simple moment,
Ventura draws attention to emotion, eroticism, and the common need for
physical contact. After the interlude, a short videotape (less than twenty
minutes into the evening, Ventura has already used monologic performance,
dance, recorded music, amplified sound, and videotape) of Ventura's legs dangling from a piano bench segues to Ventura in the character of "The Girl," another persona specifically representative of Ventura as a child. Unlike *La Miseria* or *Based On A True Story*, where Ventura speaks directly of her childhood experiences, *BDFW* uses The Girl as a slightly distanced version of Ventura's childhood self. The Girl importantly focuses on the chasm between reality and perception as well, pointing out, for example, the unnaturally formed foot of the Barbie doll, the 1950s child's model of femininity. "Not like this, like this," notes the Girl, grotesquely arcing her instep to imitate Playboy Bunny/Barbie iconography.

In early versions of *BDFW*, including the performance reviewed by *New York Times* critic Holden, The Girl was immediately followed by the erotic dance act of Shelly Calcott, a professional Ventura met while performing in Tampa, Florida. Due to the expense of bringing Calcott to New York each week, the piece was cut from *BDFW* half way through its year-long run at New York's now defunct Village Gate. Calcott's work nonetheless contributed to Ventura's message concerning social myths and sexuality in art and performance. Calcott, who was able to suspend herself, upside-down, from a vertical pole using only the muscles of her outer thigh and waist, was recognized by the audience not for the sexuality of her anatomy, but the sensuality of her skill and the authenticity of her athleticism. In this sequence, Ventura again makes one attentive to the chasm between the
reality of Calcott, the professional, and the fetishized version of the erotic
dancer. Ventura comments:

When I decided to use the erotic dancers in  
I was very much fed up. Almost every show that went on downtown had girls in  
bustiers and garters. It was this post-Madonna thing in the downtown  
arts scene and there was no content - it was very politically correct.  
So there were these go-go dancers, but they weren't real go-go  
dancers. It was the accoutrements: garters, bras, and go-go dancers  
who weren't real go-go dancers and I said, 'All right, I'm going to use  
real go-go dancers.' And I set about trying to find real go-go  
dancers, and at that time I only used girls. I told them I wanted them to  
wear costumes. I didn't want to exploit them, because the downtown art  
scene is just as prurient as any other scene, and I wanted to show their  
dancing. I wanted to show their ability to be erotic as a feminine art  
form.53

The Shelly Calcott sequence also highlighted another matter that Ventura  
addressed later in the piece. Ventura explains:

You and I both know that five minutes into any conversation with a  
friend who didn't see the show you're going to be saying 'and then  
there was this girl who slid down a pole upside-down without using  
her hands and with her legs fully spread!' Don't you think it's a little  
odd that we got twelve reviews and not one of them mentioned it?  
Doesn't that scare you? I mean if they can't even write about a  
performance, what are they not telling us about what's going on  
economically or politically?

Ventura is using avant-garde performance methods to establish a version of  
"other" that casts a wider net. By focusing on human commonality,  
mediating through the universal of emotion, she creates a new political and  
social position invested with all the Geertzian "charisma" of the mainstream.  
By redefining other-ness, she expands the American community; with an eye  
toward inclusion, she rhetorically "muscles" existing standards of political  
place.

The remainder of  follows the same thematic line: using the voice of  
the other, in various media and forms, to illuminate the eighties/early
nineties "reality gap" in American culture. Charlene from New Orleans discusses the real lives of hookers. She declares:

Prostitutes are a conservative group of women. We're conservative emotionally, we're conservative politically, we're conservative sexually. You think prostitutes are out there having sex in our spare time? We're busy! We're trying to get that MBA, that MFA, that apartment house in Queens.34

Ventura equates the movement toward political correctness to occurrences in Nazi Germany.35 The aforementioned red sequined dress sequence follows, as does a fourth-wall breaking dance number. Also included are the nude-but-for-the-flag section, and two similarly-themed monologues, one about the theater business, another about a sex worker who discusses the difference between European and American ideas about the sex industry.

In addition to a sort of ambient, live video used in and around the audience, BDFW employs video in several set sequences. Taylor Meade, a downtown icon in his own right, who was affiliated with The Factory and the Warhol/Morrissey films much more than Ventura, appears in one video clip as a priest drooling his way through The Girl's confession. Another involves Ron Vawter's long tirade as Lenny Bruce, where Bruce argues that censorship primarily punishes "untalented" artists. The recurring and perhaps most powerful video presents an interchange between Ventura and her sister and mother, "the Marlon Brando of mothers," at her mother's house. During one of the clips, the elder Ventura describes corporal punishment as "a style" of child rearing. When queried as to what she thinks of her daughter's career as a performer, she says, "if you like, good luck!"

These moments, combined with the swaying steadicam work that peppers the
show with images of dancers, Ventura, and the crowd themselves, clearly recognizes the show as one belonging in a technological era, fully grounded in the performance art idiom.

By using video, set character pieces, direct address, and dance, Ventura brings BDFW within the mixed media definitions of performance art. Ventura had been incorporating these elements in her work throughout the sixties and seventies, and indeed, BDFW is the logical evolution of Ventura’s art. What makes the piece unique to the eighties and early nineties, however, is its subject matter. Certainly, sex is not a new subject in the annals of any kind of performative activity, but we must once again return to the issue of "reality gap." The sexual realities of the whorehouse receptionist, Charlene, and The Girl do not accord with public perception, that is, the points of view of those who set public policy in the political arena. BDFW breaks illusions not only about those who work in the sex industry but those who function as consumers of these goods. The show does not pander, however, to the opposite stereotype; it does not invoke the "hooker with a heart of gold" syndrome. Nor are the set monologue pieces intended to be particularly titillating. The show portrays real people, working at real jobs, and the details of their life are realities to which most of us are rarely exposed. The monologues of BDFW perform that most useful of theatrical purposes: they educate.

The material of BDFW and the manner of its presentation combine to close the "reality gap" that existed within the eighties idiom. The "gap"
specifically relates to conservative concepts of the downfall of American society, the collapse of the family unit, the corruption of youth by sex and violence, all together what Schaller politely calls "the New Right's concern with restoring moral order." Ventura's work defies the conservative voice and challenges it to prove that sex and "alternative" lifestyles have in fact unraveled the fabric of society. BDFW reminds us that sex in most of its human variations is merely an act; it can be either loveless, a vocation, or a beautiful meeting of the souls. Sex is not an ideology. Censorship, intolerance, conservatism in its bleakest, nearly fascist forms—BDFW highlights these as the enemies of contemporary American culture. Even so, although Holden writes of BDFW's "defiant political agenda," political agitation is not at the heart of the piece. Even Ventura's direct addresses, although endearing in their warmth and exciting in their volatility (often her heated discussions with audience members nearly take the evening permanently out of the performative), are not the center of the experience. It is the particular details of the lives Ventura presents, including her own, that give the work its broad appeal. By demystifying and making real the lives that proponents of censorship encourage us to fear, she debunks the "danger" employed to justify acts of censorship, artistic, public, and personal. This is the fundamental battle of the counter-culture artist. Ventura's "other" voice has helped close the cultural gap between the real and the phony, the substantive and the hollow. Through the rhetoric of performance, she has created a forum of "public recognition," an un-
othering of the American counter-culture and in so doing accomplishes the aim for which multiculturalism always strives.
Notes For Chapter Six


5 Guttman 5.


7 Chin 3.

8 Sollors 25.

9 Sollors 33.

10 Chin 4, 13.


13 The Four, who had previously been awarded NEA funds, eventually sued for the grant money and won.


Quinton and his company have been feuding with the landlords of their One Sheridan Square space in the western section of Greenwich Village for one or two years now, and its most recent production was presented at a different space. The tenancy issue is apparently not yet resolved.

I suppose it would be difficult to argue Gray is much of an avant-gardist anymore, not only due to what I presume is his financial success but to the nature of his monologic work and his mainstream film acting career. As a founding and viable member of Wooster Group until the mid-80s, however, and an actor in Schechner's Performance Group before that, his place in the history of the avant-garde is secure.

It should probably be noted that it is now late 1995, and the doors are still open at both LaMaMa and P. S. 122.


Weber 1.

Susana Ventura, Bid For the Big Time The Ballroom, New York, August and September 1988.

Susana Ventura, Operating Under the Influence LaMaMa, New York, November 1988.


Stephen Holden, "Celebrating Sexual Diversity With the Dancers," rev. of The Penny Arcade Sex and Censorship Show (sic), 28 July 1992: C12. This is a highly suspect notion. One or two of the cast at the performance Holden reviews here were professional erotic dancers. The other four or five were artist/performer friends of Ventura, and, after two and a half decades in the avant-garde, she has a pretty diverse group of friends. The number and ethnic/sexual make-up of the dancers in the show changes in any given week depending on who is available and where Ventura is performing. She will usually hire one or two local dancers when touring, and the 1994 touring version of BDFW typically had six, four women and two men. Early versions of the show were done with just two female dancers.


Bell 26. I should note that, as a witness to half a dozen separate performances of BDFW at different venues over the period of a year, I can attest to the diversity of its audience first hand.
31 Bell 27.

32 When I first saw BDFW in September of 1992, a disguised Ryan was in line in for tickets, in order to maintain her 'audience member' identity until the show began, in front of me. We engaged in conversation, but I fear I can no longer recall what we discussed.

33 Bell 27.


35 John Vaccaro refers to the movement as "P. U."


37 Holden C12.
Chapter Seven

Epilogue:

Citizen Susana and Performer Penny

Throughout this work, I have attempted to delineate parallels between major counter-cultural movements and eras in American society and the life of one artist/entity, Susana Ventura. Perhaps it is appropriate here, then, to conclude with some ideas about what may constitute Ventura's performative future. It is now late 1995, and Penny Arcade has proven her financial and artistic viability in, among other places, Australia, Canada, Austria, Switzerland, and the British Isles. Ironically, her home base in New York City, The Village Gate, has joined the comedy clubs and small venues throughout New York that have closed their doors in the early nineties. Many of the major Broadway houses stand empty, with only one new show, an adaptation of the Gloria Swanson film classic \textit{Sunset Boulevard}, having opened last season. Tony Kushner's \textit{Angels in America}, which dominated the entertainment media for months and is certainly the most renowned "new" work of the last few years, closed in December of 1994 with a loss of several million dollars. Typically Broadway house-bound shows like Neil Simon's latest work and Tom Stoppard's \textit{Arcadia} have, primarily for financial reasons, booked off-Broadway houses for their run, causing lesser known writers with "modest hits" to be "driven out" of these venues (thus precluding the possibility for longer runs). The attack on the NEA that began in the late eighties has been perpetuated and strengthened, with considerable cuts in or
elimination of the organization still a possibility. In these lean times, perhaps the economics of theatrical performance, in a society that provides very little funding for artists, have finally reached an undeniable breaking point where significant change is unavoidable. In 1993, the New York Times reported that 23 theaters had been forced to close since 1985.²

Politically, the move in the 1980s toward a new liberalism rooted in a multicultural, international view, what Lawrence Fuchs calls a "voluntary pluralism" as old as the nation itself,³ is jeopardized by the ideological climate of the mid-nineties. The position of the "other" is once again called into question. The elections of November '94 saw a marked swing to the right and a considerable reduction in numbers for the not even two-year old Democratic administration. The implications of this Republican landslide have already manifested themselves in protectionist measures against immigrants in California, the "Contract with America" and its conservative agenda, and changes in the Affirmative Action and welfare programs. Indeed, 1994 may have marked the death-knell of the "multicultural" agenda or any effort to mainstream the "other" in American politics. The argument over the strengths and weaknesses of the "melting pot" and the national effort toward multicultural recognition may be over, replaced by a throwback not to the denial-ridden fifties, but to the divisive sixties. This conservative backlash presents difficult dilemmas for the performance industry. The reversal of advances in inclusive trans-racial and -gender
casting, as well as decreases in the perceived market value of "minority" projects, may be forthcoming.

The mid-1990s also represent a moment of crisis for performance because performance is facing, as it periodically does, new options and opportunities in style and modes of expression. The advent of CD-ROM, the internet, and varying versions of "cyber-space" has established a new and complicated performative terrain. Technological advance affects the means of production, not only of goods but of entertainment and performance itself. On a basic level, the rise of virtual and interactive reality constitutes a contemporary attempt to bridge the gap between audience, performer and what is performed. Indeed, these technologies may change the very definition of performance as new tools have again created opportunities (and problems) for artists. In face of new financial constraints based in the shrinking value of the American dollar, the rising cost of Broadway production, and additional cuts to meagre federal and corporate funding, these technologies may help establish a new arena of counter-culture for the nineties. At any rate, this performative terrain offers a clean slate, with notions of "mainstream" and "other" still to be determined.

When Jean Baudrillard was still writing from a primarily Marxist point of view, he introduced his notion of the "simulacrum" and described a society that can no longer differentiate its originals from its reproductions.\(^4\) Baudrillard's insight has practical application in regards to where performance may be headed in a technological future that allows one to
duplicate a three-dimensional image of an artist at the touch of a button.

Such a prospect raises questions for an artist like Ventura, who uses an off and on stage persona and has created another "reality" in which she exists as an altered version of her own being. What further elements of Penny in and out of the performative arena may be created? It is our business to continue to ask, now and in the future, who will function as the counter-culture other in search of community? Who will be absorbed by the mainstream culture?

The question of Penny and Susana as dual personalities inhabiting the same body surfaced as early as 1981. By the 1990s, however, the difference between Susana and Penny had become a substantive issue, given direct attention in her work Based On A True Story. The "character" Ventura tells her analyst:

I don't want to use the name Penny Arcade anymore . . . It doesn't have anything left to do with my life. Everyone I was involved with is either dead from AIDS or just dead. That name was a mood. It was supposed to be a joke. It's part of a life that doesn't exist anymore.

Based On A True Story's primary plot mechanism revolves around Young Penny, played by Jennifer Belle, who hires a detective to find the adult version of herself, played by Ventura. In the work, Ventura searches for a way to preserve both her early childhood existence as Susana and the adult persona of Penny Arcade, a dilemma that, at the end of 1995, remains an unresolved performative and personal issue. In Based On A True Story, Ventura also plays with the matters that recur in her work--what is the difference between real life and cultural fantasy, the maintenance of the
dissenting voice, and the discovery of community. These have been the
ongoing questions of Ventura/Arcade's life work.

Where I believe Baudrillard's idea of erasure through reproduction,
intriguing though it may be, falls short, is in one of the basic exigencies of
the human condition; that is, the inability to escape the literal past. The past,
one's ancestry, the very physical form that a human being inhabits is not an
arguable point. One can never fully divest oneself of the social, cultural, and
emotional baggage attending one's birth. Susana Ventura's decision to re-
name herself Penny Arcade does not imply a god-like ability to abolish her
personal history, her "original referent," if you will, in the literal sense.
Indeed, the preservation of the Ventura persona is important to her. She
notes:

I always thought I was saving Susana Ventura for when I did
something really good. I didn't want to waste Susana Ventura. I
thought, it's a beautiful name, it means adventure! . . . Of course, what I
found out is that you can never really get away from the past.5

On the other hand, however, just as society operates according to a set of
conventions and common rules, a persona is to some degree a function of
personal choice, ethic, and behavior. To behave as Penny Arcade is not to
literally be Penny Arcade, at least not immediately; but how can it be argued
that, if I choose to call myself Mr. Jones, answer my phone as Mr. Jones,
dress, act, and function as Mr. Jones, I am not Mr. Jones? Given that the
individual in question is not pathologically disturbed, can we deny that the
invention of a specific cultural persona is an individual freedom,
particularly if the culture, as it is in America, privileges the value of personal sovereignty? More simply, if Susana Ventura declares she is Penny Arcade, who are we to disagree? Ventura argues this point: "You could go out and tell everyone your name is Bo, and you could develop relationships that are very complex because they are responding to you, not your name." Identity and social place, persona and politics: these represent the obsessions of Ventura's work.

The crisis regarding Susana's future has less to do with the nature of Arcade's established performance content, form, and persona than it does Ventura's personal need to maintain the original referent Baudrillardians might claim that Penny has eclipsed. The degree to which Ventura herself believes in the erasure of her "original" persona is the most important qualifier here. From something as simple as her mailing address, to the fact that her current lover has only known her as Penny, it remains that Susana Ventura has lived primarily as Penny Arcade for nearly twenty of her forty-four years, including the last fourteen. She explains: "I'm really not quite sure what the next thing is going to be . . . Right now, I'm ready to go all the way with Penny Arcade." Indeed, in 1995, Ventura altered her physical form and the exterior of her onstage presence to call pointedly upon the resonances of the Penny Arcade imagery. The five foot tall, normally Reubenesque Ventura has consciously reduced her weight to slightly more than one hundred pounds. She now wears her hair in long pigtails in performance, creating a physical image of innocence and frailty, of a
Rockwell girl scout sipping an ice cream soda. As she puts it: "I'm playing with the idea of who I am again. I just want to see where it will go if I start really working with [the Penny Arcade] image."\(^8\)

Perhaps utilitarianism may be the best measure of when and where Penny and Susana will exist in the future. She has become a significant voice in the community of other, but it is as Penny, not Susana. She reminds us: "It wasn't expedient for me to stop being Penny Arcade publicly at any point, because there are people who have seen my work since I was seventeen years old, and Penny Arcade is not a name that is easily forgotten."\(^9\) Her career, her social life, all aspects of her public persona and most of her private one (with the notable exception of her family relationships) are based on her existence as Penny Arcade. As Ventura states: "Over the past there years, there are fewer and fewer and fewer people who know me as Susana Ventura . . . I think I'm stuck with Penny. She belongs to other people. She's a public persona."\(^10\)

Ventura/Arcade's voice has, in fact, become a significant and recognized part of the early nineties counter-culture. As the eighties progressed into the early nineties, Ventura's Arcade became more and more a cultural icon, a commodity, in its/her own right, primarily based on the strength of Ventura's personality. Ventura seems to possess those intangible elements that make some people leaders, and through no pointed effort of her own, the downtown performance crowd, particularly its younger female members, have adopted Arcade as one of their figureheads. Ventura's outspoken
nature, long career (again, most of her Warhol and Play-House peers have
either died or long since given up performance), and high profile in the
avant-garde scene have made her a "Downtown Diva" of the era, a role with
which she is not completely uncomfortable. Penny Arcade's presence and
name are invoked at readings, avant-garde performances, charity events,
and street and park festivals throughout the city, usually as an immediate
means of legitimizing the performance, benefit, or socio-political gathering
that is taking place. At 1994's "Fierce Pussy Fest" in the East Village's
Tompkins Square Park, for example, a celebration of feminine sexuality that
featured performance artist Annie Sprinkle, the absent Penny, who at the
time was performing in England, was resoundingly lauded and recognized by
the all-female, twenty-ish band Thrust for being "here in spirit."11 To have
Penny on your side or on your bill is to be cool, kind, and political. No doubt
the "Penny Arcade" persona is now being recognized as an important symbol
and entity amongst the counter-culture "others" of the nineties. Arcade has
performed in dozens of venues all over the country and the world ("I now
have a global sense of artistic community"12), and now the cultural
commodity of Penny Arcade, the performer, has more immediate use than
Susana Ventura, the citizen. Ventura comments: "People are very busy with
what I look like right now and the perceived success that Penny Arcade is
having in Europe and elsewhere."13

It is never too late, however, to revitalize the Ventura persona and make it
dominant on a daily basis. Indeed, resurrecting Susana might ultimately be
no more difficult than was the initial creation of Penny. The performative entity might change, however. Would giving up or temporarily shelving the created persona affect the artistic endeavors of the individual? In other words, could Susana Ventura do what Penny Arcade has done? Re-establishing Ventura as the dominant performative entity might have a profound effect, erasing the invented "simulacrum" Ventura has created. Perhaps this move might return Ventura to her "original," but it would perhaps be an original without art. The "original" Ventura persona was culturally, not personally, determined and did not serve the culture's need for the performative. How would the "new" Ventura differ, if at all? As well, to return to the Ventura persona on and off-stage might actually damage the actor-audience relationship she has developed. It might induce the audience to view Penny Arcade as an artificial construct, to conclude that the faith and investment they had in Penny was, to some degree, misguided. While the audience has come to believe in the verisimilitude of Arcade, what does it know about Ventura? What performative relationship have we had with her? This is perhaps an unlikely and extreme version of how Arcade's growing audience would react, but there is no doubt that Penny Arcade currently carries more performative and cultural weight than Susana. It is also certain that we live in an America that is still obsessed with the artless "real" and the cold, hard "fact." Reality TV, talk shows, virtual reality programming and games: these dominate the current, post-personal computer era. As Ventura alerts us: "Our society being what it is, it's never
going to take the real thing it's going to take what looks like the real thing, the flavor of the real thing. You know, two percent juice . . . "14 The problem for Susana now, then, is how to maintain a version of Ventura for her private life without giving up Arcade in the public realm, that is, how can she balance the various realities of her existence in order to maintain both life and art?

Ventura's newest work, *Sex, Love, and Sanity: The Deviant Loser Heartbreak Show*15 is currently running as part of P. S. 122's "Franklin Furnace in Exile" series. *Sex, Love, and Sanity* utilizes all the established Ventura techniques and themes. It addresses not only the ongoing issues of Ventura's work but her immediate and personal world as well. "There is no show!" she exhorts, as we watch her finishing her final notes to technical crew, simultaneously running off a copy of the script on a computer printer just off stage for an actor inserted into the production earlier in the day. The requisite male and female dancers limber up and chat with each other, contributing to the frantic search for Ventura's misplaced costume. Once the piece begins, there are video clips (including a brief one of Jack Smith), recorded music, singing, erotic dancing, set monologic pieces (including a slightly updated version of the "Ritta Redd" monologue from *La Miseria* and *Invitation*, again performed by actress Libby Miller), direct address, drag performance, and the articulation of deeply personal and political themes: AIDS, the role of the artist, the commonalities of human behavior. While the basis of the piece seems to stem from Ventura's confusion and sorrow
regarding the dissolution of recent romantic relationships ("This a show about suffering!"), *Sex, Love, and Sanity* advances Ventura's exploration of others, place, and the relationship with her audience. The defining moment of the piece perhaps comes early on when Ventura tells the audience, in a repeated melancholic refrain, "all I really want is to see you and be with you."\(^{16}\) This refrain resonates with Ventura's long-standing effort to dissolve the barriers between performer and audience and between performer and performed, establishing a new, inclusive, communal territory of other.

Artists and activists may need to fortify themselves for considerable difficulty if the United States continues to deny the weakening not only of its own interior borders, but those of the entire world. The fall of communism, the end of the Cold War, has worsened our cultural myopia, a myopia that allows us only to long for our past and attempt to preserve our present, not acknowledge our future. As Susana once again faces a moment of redefinition, a time when she must either choose to play out the present or change for the future, so, too, does the culture. Susana Ventura cannot go back, as artist or individual, nor can she expect to preserve the status quo without considerable sacrifice (i.e. her "original" identity). Perhaps this, too, is true of us as a nation.

Although her critics would disagree, I would argue that Ventura's art as a performer has never been about a specific political or social agenda, but a personal one. The universal appeal of her work, indicated by the wide
demographic of her audience at home and abroad suggests a certain humanistic, inclusive nature in her outlook. Her focus encircles all individuals marginalized by mainstream societal norms. It is too early to tell if a strong counter-culture community will develop in the Democratic President/Republican congress situation of the nineties, or what role Ventura/Arcade might play in the establishment of a new dissenting voice. Let there be no doubt, however, that the resilience, intellect, passion, and creative drive of this visionary performer will evolve, survive and contribute to the forms and trends of the American avant-garde for years to come.
Notes For Chapter Seven


7 Susana Ventura, telephone interview, 8 December 1994.

8 Ventura, personal interview, 16 June 1995.

9 Bell 28.

10 Ventura, personal interview, 16 June 1995.


12 Ventura, telephone interview, 30 May 1995.


14 Ventura, personal interview, 16 June 1995.


16 Ventura, Sex, Love, and Sanity.
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---, Personal interview, 6 March, 1993.

---, Personal interview, 13 May, 1993.

---, Personal interview, 12 December, 1993.

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Candidate: Matthew S. Ames

Major Field: Theatre

Title of Dissertation: "I Am Contemporary!": The Life and Times of Penny Arcade

Approved:

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Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

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