

# Beyond the Street

The 100 Leading Figures  
in Urban Art

*Patrick Nguyen , Stuart Mackenzie (Eds.)*



# Patti Astor.

LOS ANGELES, USA

According to Patti Astor, hers is the story of 'how an innocent girl from Ohio went from being a stop-the-war radical to an underground movie star to owning the most famous art gallery in the world.' A queen of the New York downtown scene, Astor appeared in over a dozen low-budget, independent films.

Her entry into the genre was with Amos Poe's *Unmade Beds* in 1976, in which she acted alongside Eric Mitchell and Blondie's Deborah Harry. Other films included Eric Mitchell's *Underground U.S.A.* and Charlie Ahearn's hip-hop epic, *Wild Style*.

Astor went on to co-found the legendary and trail-blazing FUN Gallery in 1981 with partner Bill Stelling. It was the first art gallery in New York City's East Village and quickly became a pivotal spot for graffiti

artists to show their work. Fab 5 Freddy, Futura 2000, Lee Quinones, Zephyr, Dondi, Lady Pink, Doze Green and many others exhibited there. The gallery also hosted important shows for Kenny Scharf, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. It was a venue where different cultures collided, with downtown artists and hipster beat-boys, rock, movie and rap stars intermingling with both neighbourhood kids and the established art world of museum directors, curators and uptown collectors.

Photo of Astor by Charlie Ahearn, taken at the Second Sugarhill Rap Convention at the Harlem Armory in 1981.

Her arrival there with a downtown Mudd Club posse convinced Ahearn and Fab 5 Freddy to give her the role of Virginia in the film *Wild Style*.





an actress in New York City?  
 as accepted at Barnard College, the wom-  
 s college of Columbia University. There'd  
 ently been a student shutdown of the  
 iversity, so when I arrived in 1968 the  
 mpus was a hotbed of radicalism and I  
 led up in the anti-war movement as a  
 mber of Students for a Democratic Society.  
 ould eventually drop out of school and  
 end the next two and half years in the  
 i-war movement. Afterwards I went to  
 n Francisco, set up a dance act and later  
 red Europe with it. In 1974 I decided it was  
 e to return to New York City and become a  
 r. So I did!



ne with Eric Mitchell in Amos Poe's *Unmade Beds* (1976),  
 or's first film.

When I moved from Greenwich Village over  
 the East Village in 1976, everybody said,  
 goodbye! We'll never see you again because  
 're not coming over there!' It was actually  
 e, like a little village with different commu-  
 ies: Ukrainian, Italian, Puerto Rican, Do-  
 nican. The Avenues—A, B, C and D, where  
 ere are now million-dollar condos—were  
 ngerous, but it was pretty safe where I was.  
 GB's was the local bar and Talking Heads  
 d Blondie were the house bands back then. I  
 came involved in the underground film  
 ene, and from my first movie with Amos Poe  
 1976 up until 1980 or 1981, I starred in 14  
 ependent, low-low-budget features. It was  
 ough this that I met Fab 5 Freddy. At the  
 ne, no one had heard of graffiti art, rap music,  
 eakdancing—nothing. I always say the day I  
 et Fab 5 Freddy was when the FUN Gallery  
 ally started.

ow did you and Fab 5 Freddy actually  
 eet?

at that point the East Village was the place to  
 downtown. Fred saw that all of this was  
 ppening and came down from the South  
 onx with Futura and a couple of other guys  
 see my movie *Underground U.S.A.*, which  
 ayed at the St. Mark's Cinema for six months  
 the midnight cult film. From working on  
 enn O'Brien's *TV Party*, Fred had met Diego  
 ortez—a major art figure. They both came to  
 is weird party a friend of mine was throwing



Astor at her East Village apartment, in front of the mural done for her by Futura.

to celebrate the 100th birthday of the poet  
 Mallarmé. Fred walked up to me and said,  
 'Patti Astor, you're my favourite movie star.'  
 He asked me if I'd autograph a paper cake  
 plate for him and I said, 'Sure. You must be my  
 new best friend!' And he was.

What was New York City like for you back  
 then?

My rent had been \$125 a month, and when I  
 moved to East 3rd Street, across from the  
 men's shelter, it dropped to \$65 a month. I  
 called it the street of the stars. Everybody  
 lived there because it was really cheap—John  
 Lurie, Eric Mitchell, Tina L'Hotsky. There  
 were just so many possibilities at the time. I  
 don't ever remember really worrying about  
 money. From the day the Mudd Club opened  
 until it closed, I never paid for a drink there.  
 We'd be out every night until 4 a.m.—like me,  
 Anya Phillips, Tina decked out in our fifties  
 cocktail dresses. And *everybody* would be out.

Everyone had so much going on: 'I'm doing a  
 film', 'I'm doing this great painting', 'Come  
 over to my studio, you've got to be in my photo  
 shoot', or 'Patti, I've designed a dress for you.'  
 It was endless, and there was this real feeling  
 of adventure. You could say, 'Alright, tomor-  
 row night we're going to have a black-light art  
 show! I'm going to put up paper all over  
 Club 57, everybody will get down there and  
 draw on it, and that will be the show.' And it  
 was fine—people would just do it.

I think that's what the hip-hop community  
 and the downtown, punk rock, new wave  
 scene had in common. There isn't so much  
 difference between opening up the bottom of a  
 street light and hooking up your DJ system to  
 have power for your uptown jam and taking a  
 rented camera to Central Park, diving in the  
 lake and making a jungle movie for \$200. I  
 think that was one of the things that really  
 brought it all together.