



Photo by Anthony Zito

Lower East Side artist Carlucci Bencivenga, now deceased, seated beside his portrait, painted by friend Anthony Zito

When a light on the Lower East Side blinks out

By Abby Luby

People talk about Carlucci Bencivenga as if he were still living.

The infamous and prolific Lower East Side artist had the tantalizing charisma of a celebrity and the warmth of a caring friend. For fifteen years Bencivenga was the creative guardian angel of the neighborhood, the guy who pulled artists together, befriended and looked out for them, organized performances, shows, and protests.

His was a driving energy that couldn't be stopped: Once he had an idea he would relentlessly pursue it, racing towards completion, forgetting to eat or sleep, fighting off colds and respiratory ailments common for graffiti artists working the aerosol. His graffiti tag was ELF ONE and he brandished spray cans and wide markers like fine instruments of calligraphy with quickly executed, fluid round swirls organically placed on canvas, walls, doors, trucks, and subway cars. In a seamless flow between art and life, his paintings, sculpture, films, music and performances were his gregarious, outward expressions that found audiences both on stage and off. When he walked down the street it was akin to performance art — he was often dressed flamboyantly, sporting an old lampshade on his head, heavily jeweled, wearing dark sunglasses, packing his cell phone and magic markers in his oversized boots. His latest piece of magic was a random surprise shake of flash powder.

Emerging from his Stanton Street Studio, a space that has been described as a living amorphous artwork, Bencivenga always had his radar out for anything or anyone new in the neighborhood. From giving out-of-towners studio tours to banging on rocks and sticks in his performance group Infinity SS, Bencivenga had a finger in many artistic pies. His work became popular and at 38 he was at the peak of his art career.

Tragically, on September 2, 2007, friends found Bencivenga dead in his studio.

According to the medical examiner the cause of death was from an accidental overdose of methadone, causing “acute methadone intoxication.”

The shock of his death and its cause still reverberates throughout the neighborhood. Friends say they never saw Bencivenga use drugs, although the Lower East Side is a known confluence of art and drugs. “Shock is an understatement. It just doesn't make sense to me,” says Craig Klein, Bencivenga's close friend of eight years. “As far as methadone — it's amazing and surreal to me that somebody like him was done in like that.”

Steve Ellis, another close friend who lived across the street from Bencivenga says he was baffled. “It's surprising. Nobody ever considered Carlucci an addict. He was into the fun drugs at times but never in excessive amounts. He wasn't the guy you worried about — he never blacked out or acted foolish or crazy. Carl ebbed and flowed through life and tried something that didn't agree with him. It was a terrible accident.”

That methadone pills are more accessible on the street is a growing phenomena, says Joe Krasnansky, Chief Program Officer of the Lower East Side Service Center that includes methadone treatments among their multi-prevention services.

“There is a very dramatic increase in the use of methadone because it's now used for pain management,” Krasnansky explains. “A patient taking methadone for pain might end up with a large quantity of methadone and that's how it's getting distributed. Over the last six years statistics are shockingly high for people abusing prescribed opiates. They are

out there experimenting with illicit substances and don't have the tolerance for opiates. They take more than they should, overdose and die. It's a tragic situation."

Krasnansky says if a person experimenting with methadone was unhealthy they could easily go into respiratory depression, which is fatal.

Bencivenga's girlfriend Maggie Monaco notes that Bencivenga was often unhealthy and vulnerable to colds and respiratory problems. "He would go for days without eating or sleeping, but that was one of his manic personality traits. A lot of artists think of their health only after they think about their art."

Monaco vehemently disputes the importance of how Bencivenga died. "It was shocking, but it doesn't matter to me," she says. "It doesn't change how I feel about him and it's the least interesting thing about his life."

At Bencivenga's funeral, friends and family, not surprisingly, came equipped with Sharpies and markers to personally inscribe his coffin. A woman known as Philly/Kondor 8, who collaborated for years with Bencivenga in Infinity SS, recalls that it would have been what Bencivenga wanted.

"Everyone wrote graffiti on Carlucci's casket including his parents," she says. "His brother even placed a fat magic marker in his [Bencivenga's] hand. As he was buried, a huge Blimp, a major part of his iconography, floated over the graveyard. It was a moving tribute and every kind of person you can imagine was there. It was a tribute to his death and his life."

In her "Ode to Carlucci," Bencivenga's mother, Theresa Bencivenga, said that her son was a difficult child. "Difficult in the sense that he defied conventionality," her eulogy reads. "He loathed the prospect of being ordinary since it was alien to the complexity of his physiology...Carlucci, the ultimate magician, teacher and apt student, always brought out the greater good in everyone. How fortunate for anyone who was part of his world."

Inspiring others to create art was paramount to Bencivenga. In a lecture he gave to Ellis' art class at the School of Visual Arts, also Bencivenga's alma mater, he said that art was a lifestyle, not something that you "do."

"He talked about the process of making art and told the students to 'make it your life, that's what has to be done,'" recalls Ellis. "He wasn't always out there pushing for pay for his art. Carl's routine was to create day in and day out."

Monaco says Bencivenga convinced her to get her masters in art education so she could teach; Bencivenga himself taught special education art in the Bronx at one time.

"He convinced me to go back to school," she recalls. "He was really happy that I was doing that." Monaco also recalls his enthusiasm for giving tours of Lower East Side artists studios and galleries, a program he helped create as part of the Business

Improvement District's Every Last Sunday of Lower East Side Artist Studios. "Carl would lead a tour group of people to about 15 galleries. I went with him on one of the hottest days in July and there were some women in their 70's from the Red Hats Society. Carl really drew them in — they were mesmerized! We were worried they might pass out when they climbed the steps to Carl's studio, but they hauled up there and were fine."

The Bencivenga studio has been described by his friends and collaborators as organized chaos, a space that oozed creativity for anyone who walked in. Often cacophonous with simultaneous streams of opera crossing with heavy metal or sounds from TV and radio, it was an environment meant to spark creativity. Bencivenga often tossed found objects at friends and demanded they create something on the spot.

"There were masks, costumes and painting on the walls — kind of like cave painting," says Ellis. "You couldn't step anywhere without finding some outrageous eye candy. I used to think 'Wow, this is a gutsy, raw urban artist living on the edge.'" According to Philly/Kondor 8, Carlucci's name is still on the door.

Fellow artist Anthony Zito says Bencivenga's art was 'Dada-esque.' "It was graffiti, punk rock and Dada. He fused found objects, sculpture, painting, collage and used degenerated Xeroxes and a lot of appropriated images. It was intense, energetic." Every time Bencivenga did a show, Zito recalls, there was a feeling of coming together reminiscent of the more wilder, old Judson Church days of performance art in the 1980s and '90s. "Everybody was a part of it and he encouraged us to come and act crazy, kind of like the old school insanity; nothing had to make sense."

He was known as the 'connector' in the neighborhood, introducing artists to each other, steering for collaborations — mustering for creative energy to sustain the arts community. Artist James Curtright met Bencivenga in 2004 when he first moved into the neighborhood. "Carlucci introduced me to everyone and showed me everything I needed to know about the neighborhood," says Curtright. "I was really impressed with how many people he actually knew, the places he would go. I don't see how one person could be that involved in so many different things."

Bencivenga railed against the impending Lower East Side gentrification, knowing that a new restaurant or bakery meant rents hikes that would price artists out, making the art scene history. He met new businesses head on when they moved in. Klein remembers when the only store on Stanton Street was a hair-braiding salon, until a bakery opened up. "Carl walked into the new bakery and said 'Hey I'm Carl and I'm on this block.' From then on we would get free scones."

Klein said he would joke with Bencivenga about his philosophy of 'passive violence.' "He was type of guy that didn't ever need to be aggressive. All he had to do was speak in the tone that he spoke. People listened and you didn't always know why. He would go in [a new business], look a stranger in the eye and say 'I've lived on this block for 15 years and this is what I do for this neighborhood.' Sometimes he would wait as much as five minutes for a response."

In the last year of his life friends say that Bencivenga's art was growing in popularity and it was starting to sell. Last summer he had his first solo show in seven years at the Gallery Bar, a peak event that further energized the inexhaustible artist.

When Klien moved to Washington D.C., he would hear from Bencivenga almost every day. "We would speak frequently. I would get ten to twelve text messages from him about where he was going. It was as though I never left the neighborhood. Even up to the night he passed away he was telling me they were going to Nurse Bettie and even though I was in Washington, his message said 'Be there.' "

One of the last times Ellis saw Bencivenga was a few days before his death, when he was speaking at the Canal Chapter Residency Project. "He was on a panel with art dealers and art critics and he was really fantastic," remembers Ellis. "He was the most interesting of the group — with his linear and clear thinking, he really shined that night. He was on a roll."

Since Bencivenga's untimely death, the art community has had posthumous art shows and memorials, many are trying to raise funds for a book about the luminary artist. A new show is opening January 10 at the Essex Gallery (27 Essex St.) titled "Infinity SS vs. Gentrifron: The Monumental Battle Against Gentrification." Bencivenga's name is listed along with the other artists and performers as "Carlucci."

"He can't just die and quit the band," says Ellis.

Zito says Bencivenga's absence has created a deep void in the neighborhood. "It's a huge loss to the arts community when someone who is a ringleader falls out. It's becoming a little more bleak as far as the color the neighborhood used to have."