



## FAB 5 FREDDY: DIEGO CORTEZ, R.I.P.

I first met Diego late '79, early '80 and I have to say, Diego was a brilliant visionary. I met him on the set of Glenn O'Brien's *TV Party*, an underground public access cable TV show. I was a part of that crew, one of the cameramen, and I was also a frequent guest on the show where I met and became friends with many of the key downtown scene leaders. Diego was hanging out with his good friend Anya Phillips, and Diego's name and what he was doing had already hit my radar really hard. I had that special issue of *File* magazine—"File Goes to a Party with Diego Cortez," (1977). I think Diego was one of the editors of that issue and there were lots of cool photos of him and so many other major players on the scene. Debbie Harry was on the cover of that issue. One of the first things we discussed was his name, and I asked if he was Spanish or Latin as I'd recently read about Diego Rivera and the Mexican muralists. He told me he loved them as well and took that name because of them but his real name was James Curtis.

Diego was aware and curious about things I was doing culturally like collaborating with Lee Quiñones on our first exhibition, a two-person show at a prestigious gallery in Rome, and introducing these new New Wave friends I was making to this new music scene soon to be called "Hip-Hop" happening in Harlem and the Bronx. Diego was fascinated about all of this and wanted to know more as we quickly became friends. Later, I had my first solo show at the original Fun Gallery. I was the second exhibit that happened at the Fun, following Kenny Scharf's first show. The idea was that all the artists would get to name the gallery when it was their

exhibition. Kenny's was the first exhibit and he called it "Fun" because that was the theme and idea of his work. Being that my show was following Kenny's, and since we were all trying to be a bit different, I was going to switch it up and call it the "Serious Gallery." But Patti Astor had no money to change the stationery and the things that she had created for Kenny's show, so she asked me would it be alright if she kept the name "Fun" for my show, and obviously it remained the name of the gallery, so that was the deal.

The Fun Gallery was my first solo show in New York, and Diego came to the opening, and was very enthusiastic. My dad also came to the opening, and he was fascinated to see these moves I was making: to go from writing my name on the walls and the trains to painting on canvas and having a show in an art gallery. It was a really fun affair.

A little later that year, I got word that there's this huge exhibit coming up called *The Times Square Show*. In fact, it pretty much debuted as a cover story in the *Village Voice*. The headline read, "The First Radical Art Show of the '80s." It was pretty exciting, the way the show was written up. Right away, I thought, "Wow, I gotta see this." Even though I was a young fella, I had done a deep dive into art history, so I knew all about the *Armory Show* in 1913 and Marcel Duchamp and how pivotal that show was in introducing modernism to the art world in America. The way this new show was being written up, it seemed very pivotal in the same way. I thought, "Oh my God, I have to see this show, I'd love to be part of this scene." I had a conversation with Diego and he said, "I know the people that put it together," and the first event was happening later in the week, and he invited me to accompany him.

I went up to Times Square with him where the show was being held in a former massage parlor—actually an old whorehouse. As I walked into the exhibition, art was covering every square inch of the space in a very engaging way, and there were loads of people all over the place, many coming up to Diego and saying hello. A well-attended art event and one of my first. Suddenly, on the wall, I see this poster for a film called *The Deadly Art of Survival*. Now, one of the ideas that I was developing with Lee Quiñones was that we should make a film like one of those underground independent movies, a movie that would show who and what we really are and what we really do. Controlling the narrative. I wanted to showcase all these elements of what we now know of as hip-hop culture—all the stuff that was just beginning to poke its head above ground, so to speak. But the thing is—I'd seen this poster before in Lee's Lower East Side neighborhood. The image on the film poster was a Black man in a park in front of a chain-link fence with blood dripping down his face. Lee told me he knew this guy as a local Kung Fu hero who had a karate school in the neighborhood near Lee's projects. So when I saw

this poster at the *Times Square Show*, I said to Diego, "Man I've seen this poster before, what's up with it?" And Diego says, "Oh that's a film by Charlie Ahearn, he's the twin brother of John Ahearn, one of the people that organized this exhibition." When Diego pointed him out, I realized he did look just exactly like the guy whose face was on the cover of the *Village Voice*. So Diego introduces me to Charlie Ahearn and I basically pitch him the idea for what becomes the movie *Wild Style*. Charlie was aware of Lee's work as he had filmed some of that movie in Lee's neighborhood, and he was enthusiastic and very receptive. A few days later, Charlie and I got together and began pre-production on *Wild Style*, the film that really puts a whole frame around what we know of as hip-hop culture. That's one of my first major situations, and that was thanks to Diego Cortez.

But Diego had a rival sensibility with the Colab crew that put on that *Times Square Show*. As we left the exhibition together, he was already muttering about how he's going to show them how to really do a proper art exhibit showcasing many of these artists, most of whom Diego knew well. That's when Diego started planning the *New York/New Wave* show, which would happen a year later at PS1 in Queens, literally the first major downtown blockbuster art show. Although it wasn't actually in downtown NYC, it was totally that downtown sensibility. Diego featured my work and several other graffiti painters, and of course Jean-Michel Basquiat was prominently featured in that show, and that really helped launch this whole assault in the New York art world. Diego saw it early, got it, and understood it clearly. He was an early champion of everything we were doing.

Now, there's one other thing I want to add to this little story, and Diego didn't let me know this until a couple of months later, and neither did my father. Diego was fascinated about meeting my dad at that Fun Gallery opening. I was still living at home at that time, and not long after was living in my first apartment in the Lower East Side down on Clinton Street. Diego had my parents' number which he used to reach me, so he called up my dad at home in Brooklyn and invited himself over, to come and hang out. He took the A train way out to Bed-Stuy in Brooklyn and went to the house where I grew up and spent an afternoon hanging out with my father, who regaled him with all these stories about growing up in Brooklyn, the jazz scene, and stories about Max Roach, the great jazz drummer who was my godfather and my dad's childhood friend. Bed-Stuy was solidly a Black working/middle-class community then, yet it was depicted in the media as violent and very dangerous, which it wasn't. Gentrification has changed that perception significantly now, but Diego was fearless, unbothered by the hype, and had a blast.

And that's just a little slice of my dear friendship with Diego Cortez—early

champion of what we were doing, of what I was bringing to the table as a visual artist, of hip-hop culture, and the whole idea of this new movement bringing artists of color into the cultural mix. Diego was a champion of all these ideas that I had, that hip-hop culture was connected via energy and spirit to what New Wave and punk were all about—breaking the old rules and making new ones. Diego was there early on, *full on*, a total supporter, who always had a great smile on his face, always had great jokes; we were always laughing, always cracking up. He was always going on about so many topical issues happening in our scene, and in the world, and he hated all the bullshit going on. He hated all the racism, what it was like for artists like myself and Jean-Michel, that we were being treated with so much love and respect in the scene at that time, but then we would walk outside and taxi cabs wouldn't stop for us. There were things that were changing, that were really advanced in our scene, but then the world that we lived in, still live in, still has problems. Diego was not having it, and he was not afraid to just basically speak out.

That's it, Diego Cortez. Love you, miss you, and we will never forget the incredible impact you had on us all. Thank you.

Fred Brathwaite  
August 12, 2021

The full tribute can be read online, with contributions from:

Al Díaz  
Alanna Heiss  
Alba Clemente  
Ann Magnuson  
Betsy Sussler  
Brett de Palma  
Brian Eno  
Brooks Adams  
Curt Hoppe  
David Byrne  
David Salle  
Devendra Banhart  
elin o'Hara slavick  
Francesco Clemente  
Fred Brathwaite  
Jane Rosenblum  
Jordan Galland  
Julian Schnabel  
Kate Simon  
Laurie Anderson  
Linda Yablonsky  
Lisa Philips  
Lisa Rosen  
Liza Béar  
Lonnie Holley  
Luigi Ontani  
Marcia Resnick  
Mario Diacono  
Mary Boone  
Massimo Audiello  
Michael Oblowitz  
Michele Zalopany  
Paola Iglioni  
Paige Powell  
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Patti Blau  
Peter Nadin  
Philip Taaffe  
Phyllis Galembo  
Raymond Foye  
Robin Winters  
Russel Lord  
Saul Levine  
Seth Tillett  
Timothy Duffy