

KENNY SCHARF IN ABSENCE OF MYTH



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FOREWORD

MY NO-NONSENSE, BY-THE-BOOK DAD had a favorite saying: "Ann, sometimes we have to do things we don't want to do." Dad said it a lot, he said it sternly, and I know why. He survived the Great Depression and World War II. Everyone his age had to do a lot of things they didn't want to do. I heard that phrase so often that not only did I do a lot of things I didn't want to do, I did quite a few things I shouldn't have. I also began to repeat the phrase to others. Sternly.

One of those occasions was during a phone conversation with Kenny Scharf. It was the early '80s, Ronald Reagan had recently become president, and we were absolutely convinced that a nuclear war with Russia was inevitable. Never had living for the moment meant so much so much of the time.

Kenny and I were sitting in our respective East Village hovels, each decorated in cool, mid-century modern cast-offs that we either found dirt-cheap in thrift stores or, more often, in the trash.

The word *retro* had only recently been added to everyday parlance and was often used pejoratively, at least among the older art snobs residing in SoHo. Those of us in the Wild West of the East Village seized any opportunity to annoy those art world elites. Being goofy was a sure fire way to do it. Being retro *and* goofy, even more so. I liked to say, "It's not retro; it's just better!" Kenny agreed.

I forget now what I had called Kenny about, but I know we both spoke on Princess telephones (which weren't even considered vintage yet, since they were still being sold by the phone company). Maybe I was calling to ask him to design a new wave-style logo for Club 57. (Which he did, and it was gloriously retro ... but *better*!) Or maybe it was to see how things were shaping up for the "Salute to NASA" theme night he was hosting at the club. Or maybe it was one of those late-night calls at one or two in the morning that you knew you could make because all of us were committed night owls by that point—even the ones who still had classes to attend in the morning (very few) or those with real nine-to-five jobs (even fewer).

The reason for such late-night calls was usually the same: Television.

"Oh my God! Are you watching Channel 9 right now?"

Everyone who was anyone in our In Crowd watched Channel 9, especially late at night, which was when the station's decidedly retro programming occurred. I remember calling Kenny to make sure he was watching *Riot on the Sunset Strip*. He was. We sat talking on the phone for the duration of the 1967 low-budget counterculture exploitation film, providing running commentary as Establishment-hating hippies ran amok during the 1966 Sunset Strip curfew riots. We were lamentably too young to be hippies, but now we were old enough to be out on our own and wreak havoc in our own ways, often calling it Art.

Maybe the phone call had to do with a video or a performance Kenny and I were doing together? Maybe it was to coordinate rehearsals for my show where Kenny was playing the Devil in a three-piece suit? Or to figure out what to wear in his apocalyptic video *The Spark! End!*? Or, more likely, to pin him down on travel plans to Italy, where we went in 1982 to participate in the Festa Della Donna, a communist women's festival held in Bologna. (Oh, what an escapade that was!)

I know it was something that required Kenny to focus his oft-divided attention, as he was an exploding atom bomb of constant activity: painting; making videos; taking classes at SVA; tagging subway cars with Keith Haring and the hip-hop graffiti kids; hitting the new clubs and gallery openings; seeing a

friend's band, performance piece, or art show—all while juggling love and lust affairs simultaneously. Kenny was not alone. We were all manic pinballs colliding with one another in the Downtown machine, yet Kenny seemed to be doing it harder, faster, and with oodles of his signature FUN!

Little wonder, then, that Kenny was a hard guy to pin down. In a moment of frustration, my inner Capricorn control freak took over, and I suddenly became my Dad. Before I was even aware of what I was saying, I heard my father's stern, overloud voice come out of my mouth.

"KENNY, SOMETIMES WE HAVE TO DO THINGS WE DON'T WANT TO DO!"

To which Kenny innocently and quite nonchalantly replied, "Why?"

There was a long pause. I was dumbstruck. My mind went blank. WHY? Who asks WHY? Because ... because ... because we HAVE TO!



Above: Ann Magnuson poses with Kenny Scharf's *Ultima Suprema Delux Car*, 1984



"Why?" Kenny was laughing now. Again, I was at a loss for words but began to giggle a little. Why? Why, indeed! That was the question I was never allowed to ask, or even consider asking! But Kenny, forever a gleeful Peter Pan, the free-wheeling glam-rock hippie artist who would've been turning over cars on the Sunset Strip given half the chance (although he would've painted them with psychedelic faces first), dared to ask it. Because Kenny was the embodiment of Bowie's "Wild Eyed Boy from Freecloud," a Boogaloo dude who could out go-go us all and was never one to tow the line or take orders from The Man.

That's because Kenny Scharf does not do *anything* he does not *want* to do!

Even when he took on very serious adult responsibilities—getting married, having children, managing the ups and downs of an international art career—he did it all because he *wanted* to.

But there was something he *did* have to do that he absolutely did not want to do. Which was the same thing we all had to: bury our friends. None of us wanted to, but we *had* to witness a plague in our time, *had* to watch as our fellow life-lovers were stricken with AIDS, suffered horribly, and then died in the bloom of youth.

Drugs also took their toll. It seems at least half of the people we shared our twenties with died decades before they should have. Maybe the Soviet missiles never arrived, but a war occurred nonetheless.

Those of us who survived are slowly emerging from our collective PTSD and have begun to embrace the extreme privilege of growing old. Like our parents, we too have stories to tell. Kenny has a few more than most.

It's time to tell them.

—Ann Magnuson