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Visual Art Strikes a Chord with L.A. Punk Rocker

Adolfo Guzman-Lopez

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Punk rock singer Exene Cervenka of the band X is showing off a new exhibit of collages in Culver City. It traces her punk rock travels and her emotional trips. KPCC's Adolfo Guzman-Lopez reports.



Adolfo Guzman-Lopez/KPCC

Exene Cervenka was lead singer for punk rock band X. Now she's creating collages inspired by her travels.

Web Resources

- [Exene Cervenka's Web site](#)
- [Cervenka's "A Fifth of Tomorrow" Exhibit \(Western Project Art Gallery\)](#)

Adolfo Guzman-Lopez: In the late 1970s, L.A.'s homegrown punk rock scene was red hot. The band X, fronted by lead singer Exene Cervenka, climbed to the top of the heap with an amped up fusion of rock and roll and lyrical snapshots of L.A.

[Song: "Los Angeles" by X]

Guzman-Lopez: Cervenka and her three band-mates logged thousands of miles touring the country. Those and more recent family trips, she says, reaffirm her fascination with the United States.

Exene Cervenka: I think every state has its own beauty, every town has its own beauty, if you get off the highway, which you can't if you're touring, very often, you find some very amazing roadside attractions still. There's still some folk art, there's still some crazy stuff out there that's not lost yet.

Guzman-Lopez: The band is on hiatus now. For the last decade, Exene Cervenka's spent most of her creative energy creating collages about the size of a sheet of paper. That's where she fuses her interest in found objects, Americana, and evangelical religion. All that turns up in her piece "Man and His Symbols," named after a book by psychologist Carl Jung.

Cervenka: It's got a bunny rabbit in the middle, a unicorn, it's got playing cards, it's got mother, it's got Bible tracks, a lot of bible tracks in my stuff because I still collect those.

Guzman-Lopez: Cervenka says she yearns for the music, architecture, and unspoiled countryside of the 1950s. She calls it the "lost America." A cross-country road trip from Tallahassee brought her to L.A. more than 30 years ago. Her beacon was the city's vibrant music and art scene. She says that's also been lost.

Cervenka: The Venice that I loved, the Doors, the boardwalk, the old buildings and old Hollywood and all that got all torn down, and it got inundated with immigrants and people from all over the United States coming to make their fortune and became a hellish place to live.

Guzman-Lopez: Cervenka lives in Jefferson City, Missouri now. The band X, she says, isn't playing much anymore. But it will reunite soon. Cervenka savors the memory of the live shows and recordings that propelled the band and its

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fans into a well of shared emotions. She says her impulse to create, any way she can, remains strong.

Cervenka: I'm still the same person that sat down with a diary in my little apartment above Beyond Baroque and scrawled the words to "I'm Coming Over," which is probably the best song I ever wrote.

[Song: "I'm Coming Over" by X]

Guzman-Lopez: Cervenka says creativity is about staying fresh and spontaneous, whether you're penning the lyrics for a two-minute punk rock song or creating art from the objects of your life.

Note: Exene Cervenka's exhibit "A Fifth of Tomorrow" is on display at the Western Project art gallery in Culver City through July 14th, 2007.



Exene Cervenka

Interviewed by [Scott Gordon](#) May 1st, 2007

If your band makes smart-assed, impulsive records, endures the marriage and divorce of two key members, spawns a country side project, and still hasn't completely wrecked itself after 30 years, maybe randomness is a safe lifestyle choice. It still more or less works for X frontwoman Exene Cervenka. On top of recording and touring with three other bands—The Knitters, The Original Sinners, and Auntie Christ—she's released spoken-word records, published books of collage art, and worked as an elementary-school teacher and librarian. Cervenka spoke to *The A. V. Club* about the disarray of her career and why she's happy with it.

The A.V. Club: How much stuff do you have on your plate at any given time?

Exene Cervenka: Well, last year was really, really busy. I worked all year, I toured all year, and it was just too much after a while. But then when it came to January, I couldn't believe it, I had no work and it was the first month off that I'd had in so long that I was completely out of my mind. It was like, "What am I doing, what am I doing?" And I was painting and drawing, doing art and stuff, but I have to have a lot going on or I just don't function well. So we've got the three bands and the art-world stuff going on, and books, and writing songs and stuff like that. It's good.

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AVC: You're still writing with mostly the same sense of humor that you had in X. Have you tried to change much about your songs?

EC: I would say nothing has changed. I think that there are varieties of songs that come and go, like families of songs. "Because I Do" is a certain type of song, and "New World" is another type of song, but there's gonna be songs that revolve around a certain type of things at some point. But I don't *want* to change the way I write my songs, I like the way I write my songs, so I keep 'em the same. I'd like to write more country songs, but other than that, I'm pretty good where I am.

AVC: Did most of the humor in X come from you?

EC: Well, John and I wrote the words, so it was both of us, but I definitely had a sense of humor, 'cause it was all very funny at the time. And the sad stuff is funny. You always have to write sad stuff as funny stuff. You can't just write it as sad. Well, when somebody dies, then you get to write it as sad.

AVC: But there are definitely X songs and solo songs where you're pretty serious. Is it hard to balance that?

EC: No. I get very snide... You say about somebody, like, I don't know, when someone has a drinking problem or something, or when someone is too egotistical or something, you just find ways to put them down in the song. 'Til death do we party—that's the idea of *his* commitment. It's mostly about love that you can get really funny about.

AVC: How do your audiences change with different projects?

EC: There's four audiences. The X audience, the Knitters audience, the Original Sinners audience, and the art audience. But you know what? Some people like art and some people like the Knitters, and some people don't like X and they like the Knitters, and some people don't like the Original Sinners and they don't like the art, and some people, the only band they like is the Original Sinners and they're sick of X. I've been really lucky that anybody cares at all. It's been really great.

AVC: How do you collect all the stuff that goes into your mixed-media work?

EC: Oh, I found that stuff before you were born, probably, and I keep finding it. And my sources will remain secret, but normally I just find things on the ground, thrift-store stuff. It's harder now to find stuff, so I'm glad I collected things my whole life, so that I wouldn't have to suddenly start collecting things to make art, 'cause I've been making art for a really, really long time. There's something really great about making collages, which is primarily what I do, because you focus so intensely on what you're doing that it's everything, and when you get that focus, you can find the perfect piece, but at the same time it's almost just like you let go and let it make itself. So you're doing this intense, controlling focus, and you're also at the same time letting that the universe find that orange piece of paper for you. It's very fun.

AVC: It's taken a while for people like you and Henry Rollins to get wider recognition for their non-musical work. Before that happened, was there much of a support base for branching out?

EC: I started doing poetry readings before any of those people. Henry Rollins used to open for me. I started doing performance-art shows and readings in 1975. It wasn't hard at all, because we had a literary tradition in Venice [California], where I was living, that was really supportive. It was poets and stuff like that, it wasn't just people who wanted to be in bands; then when we got in bands, those worlds all mixed, and the whole Southern California thing just turned into this big music and poetry and art thing.

AVC: What kind of people do you surround yourself with now?

EC: Well, most of those people are dead, or gone on some other level. I don't surround myself with anybody, really. I have friends, but I'm kind of an isolationist now. I kind of work on my own.

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AVC: By choice?

EC: Yeah. When I get together with the Knitters or X, it's always really fantastic and fun, and we work on songs and stuff like that. But as far as, do I have runaways knocking on my door at 3 in the morning asking if they can stay there? No, not anymore.

AVC: A lot of people classify X as a punk band, but it never had a strictly punk sound.

EC: So many bands were doing that in the early punk days, and then it became this reactionary, rigid mentality, that punk had to sound a certain way, and that kind of interfered with that process of openness for a while. The only thing I remember is how eclectic punk was in the beginning and how great it was; then that faction came, and I didn't like that.

AVC: Do you still think of yourself as an L.A. figure?

EC: I'm not anymore, and I'm glad about that, because I don't really like L.A. much anymore. It's a hideous city. The weather's nice sometimes. It's just too crowded for me and too claustrophobic and too aggressive and too scary, and too chaotic. Did I say chaotic already? I like the country. I like quiet. We're trying to get to this place, my son and I. We have to confer about how the hell we're going to get off the freeway.

AVC: What are you working on next?

EC: The next [Original Sinners] record's gonna be a psychedelic record. Whatever ideas we come up with that we think are interesting and weird and beautiful and scary, we're gonna put them down and make the words howl around them. I don't know how it's gonna come out yet, but it's in the planning stages. I've never done one, and I love that stuff so much. The Butthole Surfers, they're one of the best ones. Even though it's not psychedelic, I count The Doors in as an influence of that kind of idea. I think things never got psychedelic enough. Acid rock was cool, but it's all blues-based.

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La Boheme: Checking in with Exene Cervenka

by Maw Shein Win and Kathleen Munnelly



Exene at "Tire Beach" in San Francisco, 1978. photo by Ruby Ray.

Musician and poet Exene Cervenka may not consider herself tenacious, but if tenacious means diligent and dedicated, the description certainly fits. Literally and figuratively a bohemian (her ancestors come from Bohemia, now part of the Czech Republic), Cervenka has been writing, playing music, and creating art for more than 25 years.

As one of the founders of influential Southern California band X, vocalist Cervenka, along with then-husband and bass player John Doe, guitarist Billy Zoom, and drummer D.J. Bonebrake created a distinctly American sound: a transcendent melding of fast-driving punk, rockabilly, and elements of country. Cervenka and Doe's lyrics (poetry, really) captured the stark realities and dark alleyways of city life and failed romance. From their groundbreaking debut *Los Angeles* (1980, Slash Records) produced by Doors legend Ray Manzarek, to their last studio album *Hey Zeus!* in 1993, X has earned its chapter in the annals

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of punk rock history. In fact, in June 2002, X was inducted into Guitar Center's celebrated Hollywood RockWalk.

Although they're not working on new material, X still tours regularly, and their live performances are still as electric as ever, bringing back delicious beer-soaked memories of their early shows at the Whisky A Go-Go in Los Angeles or Mabuhay Gardens in San Francisco.

Besides touring with X, Cervenka is also busy recording and performing with her latest band, the Original Sinners. This punk rock supergroup includes members Kim Chi and Mat Young (both ex-Distillers), Sam Soto (from Sluts for Hire) and guitarist Jason Edge. Their self-titled 2002 debut on Nitro records is aptly described as a "riotous stomp of big beat punk delight," and a second album is in the works. In addition to being the frontwoman and songwriter, Cervenka plays guitar for the Original Sinners, as she did in her previous band, Auntie Christ. Cervenka also performs occasionally with the Knitters, a country side project with Doe, Bonebrake, and Dave Alvin of the Blasters. In 1985 they released their sole album, *Poor Little Critter on the Road* on Bloodshot Records, a cult hit so beloved that it inspired a tribute album, *Poor Little Knitters on the Road*, released in 1999. The Knitters' live shows can only be characterized as pure, unadulterated fun.

But it is writing that is ultimately the core of Cervenka's art. Her lyrics and poetry are personal and impassioned, see-sawing between anger and black humor. When asked about her writing process, she observes, "I write and then decide if it can be made into a song. I try to write simple, catchy choruses. With poetry, anything can work." She is also a fan of the chapbook format, and has put out several featuring her trademark hand-drawn illustrated writings. Cervenka often does poetry readings and participated in the first Spitfire Tour in 1998, described on its website as a "free speech tour of musicians, actors, and activists speaking out on global affairs" (www.spitfiretour.org). On that tour she performed with fellow musicians Jello Biafra, Michael Franti, and Krist Novaselic. Some of her recordings can be found on Harvey Kubernik's spoken word series *English as a Second Language* as well as *Two Sisters*, a collaboration with L.A. poet Wanda Coleman. Cervenka has also worked with Lydia Lunch on several projects, including the album *Rude Hieroglyphics* and a book titled *Adulterers Anonymous*. Her most recent collection, *A Beer on Every Page* (2002), contains more of her hand-lettered poems, drawings, and collage.

People in the original punk scene came together as a community. They had to keep it from falling apart. It's a lot of work and it takes a lot of dedication and support for those things to happen.

Recently, she wrote the introduction for *We're Desperate – The Punk Rock Photography of Jim Jacoy, SF/LA 78-80* which features photos of Darby Crash, Flipper, The Screamers, and other original members of the West Coast punk scene. And in 1991, Cervenka collaborated with Pulitzer Prize-nominated photojournalist Kenneth Jarecke on *Just Another War*. Jarecke, who covered the Gulf War for Time magazine, asked Cervenka to write commentary for this collection of his photographs, many of which had been censored by news organizations.

Once intensely political in her lyrics and poetry and an outspoken critic of government action, Cervenka has stepped back from political causes. "I don't consider myself an activist," she

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explains. “I have supported a lot of causes emotionally and financially over the years. I’ve played a lot of benefits. But right now I am disappointed with the tone of the left, so I would rather keep my views and my support to myself.”

Born in Illinois, Cervenka moved to Florida at 15, where she raised her sisters after her mother passed away. In 1976 she moved to Los Angeles with \$80 in her pocket and immersed herself in the poetry scene. She lived above the infamous Beyond Baroque, a poetry haven in Venice, CA, and met John Doe at a workshop there. After an inspired (and impromptu) first foray into songwriting (Cervenka penned “I’m Coming Over” one night at a bar), they decided to form a band; soon after, they met Zoom and Bonebrake and X was born. While the heady, frenetic energy of the nascent punk scene spawned countless exciting bands, X was one band that stood out from the crowd with their original and intelligent lyrics and ace musicianship.

Although they quickly gained a following, X couldn’t crack commercial radio. At that time, “They were still playing Fleetwood Mac and Linda Ronstadt and Motley Crue. The radio was never ever gonna play X.” But if the timidity of commercial radio in the late 70s and early 80s was bad, that’s nothing compared to the contempt Cervenka feels for the current state of mainstream music: “Everything post-MTV is just gonna be superficial garbage. The next ‘revolution’ in music will be porn stars/rap stars/rock stars. It will be way worse than the pop girls that currently grace the covers of *Rolling Stone* and *People*... (People) would rather be entertained by pretty, young half-naked girls. They don’t care what the music sounds like, only what it looks like.”

Perhaps it’s time for another punk movement? Cervenka is dubious. “I wouldn’t know if there is a punk scene now. There probably is for young bands in small towns. Scenes only happen when it’s underground and them against us. People in the original punk scene came together as a community. They had to keep it from falling apart. It’s a lot of work and it takes a lot of dedication and support for those things to happen. It’s not just about a bunch of bands dressing up like the Clash and Black Flag.”

While Cervenka never courted mainstream acceptance, she witnessed her unique style copied by others and the ideals of the punk scene turned into a fashion statement. “The ad agencies will co-opt anything new that comes along and use (it) to sell crap so kids won’t have a chance to find a common underground to join,” she laments. But despite her bleak assessment of contemporary culture, Cervenka is not discouraged. “I don’t care about or listen to ‘alternative’ commercial stations. I am not the kind of artist who gets mainstream acknowledgment. But it was not what I was looking for. The mainstream culture is for teenagers.”

How does an adult artist survive in an adolescent music scene? For Cervenka, the DIY spirit is still alive and kicking. Turning her back on the major labels, she records with small independents like Nitro and sells her CDs and books through her own website (www.exenecervenka.com). She also bonds with her fans by sending out a newsletter: the dispatches from her emails are chatty, inclusive, and supportive of other bands and performers she likes (for instance, underground folkie Phranc and the 7 Shot Screamers from St. Louis). Cervenka notes, “The website and store are mine and in my control. It’s much more personable to me than dealing with distributors and stores. It means a lot to me to be able to make my art and music more directly available to (my fans) instead of (dealing with) those damn corporate chains.” And although her public persona is

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punk rock-tough, her letters have a friendly, folksy tone, and she ends many of them with “Talk to ya’ll soon.”

With three bands touring constantly, her writing, and her website to run, Cervenka’s art is her profession. On a typical weekend in February 2003, she performed with X one night and with the Original Sinners the next. In her newsletter, she described the experience: “The whole weekend was a blast, so much fun... and what a great crowd. The Original Sinners enjoyed every second of it.”

As a musician and a mother (she has a 15-year-old son), Cervenka has “never felt compelled to choose (between) being an artist and a mom.” She adds, “People work forty hours a week and raise kids, why can’t artists?”

One thing she doesn’t have time for is nostalgia: “I don’t really think it’s healthy or relevant to think I had a ‘heyday.’ I don’t live in the past and I don’t refer to myself in the past tense. Every artist likes to believe their best work is ahead of them... I just work. X plays so much and my other bands are busy, so I am still having fun and making a living.”

When she does have some time to herself, Cervenka likes to relax by reading, most recently the works of Alice Munro. She has also been hauling out her Allman Brothers records and listening to lots of “old gospel and old country.”

Can Cervenka imagine doing anything else besides making music and art? “Not really. I like simple small town kind of stuff. But I will always make art of some kind.”

[Oakland Tribune, March 3, 2006](#)

Exene Cervenka finds art in the strangest places By Tom Lanham, CONTRIBUTOR

GRANTED, it's an unusual gripe. But Exene Cervenka is determined to air it anyway.

"It used to be that you could find interesting things on the ground, but you can't anymore," grumbles the legendary member of punk outfits X, Auntie Christ, the Knitters, and her latest surf/ Southwestern offshoot, the Original Sinners. "The trash used to be exclusive to wherever you were. But now it's just McDonald's wrappers, car parking stickers or whatever. There's never anything on the ground anymore that's good."

The singer pauses, runs a bracelet-laden hand through her unruly auburn hair. Correction, she adds. "I found a headless My Little Pony not too long ago, which I totally loved. It was white and it was really filthy and it was on the ground. Which seemed to me like a super-artistic statement -- a My Little Pony who'd lost his head."

Since she first started touring with Los Angeles firebrands X in the late'70s, Cervenka has kept one eye on the stage, one eye on the street for kooky collectibles. Whatever she stumbled across that appealed to her, she'd pick up. Any source was fair game -- thrift stores, flea markets, truck stops.

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"But mostly off the street," she says. Gum, candy and snack wrappers. A white wooden sign stenciled with the word 'God.'... I've gathered a million different things, and I still have'em," Cervenka says. "And then I put it all together and make art out of it."

Cervenka, who just turned 50, used to think of trash collecting as just a hobby. Until last year, that is, when the Santa Monica Museum of Art got wind of her found-art collages (plus mixed-media concepts she'd kept hidden in more than a hundred journals) and commissioned an exhibit dubbed "America the Beautiful."

Anthologized into a book of the same name, her folksy, often dry-witted visions were an unexpected hit, soon being showcased in Miami and New York.

That's how -- in the middle of a tour with the twangy Knitters (backing a sophomore "The Modern Sounds of the Knitters" set) -- Cervenka found herself with an exclusive Manhattan gallery (DCKT) and high-profile representation.

Each piece has an underlying message, adds Cervenka, who's also penned poetry books. One collage titled "Love Your Bad" juxtaposes a Camel candy cigarettes box with an empty package of Sour Neon Worms.

"And it means I love my husband, Jason (Edge, Sinners guitarist), and he smokes," she explains. Another piece, "They Won't Get Us This Time," features girls toy watches and a Hitler Youth medal she found in a flea market for 50 cents.

Why? "I visited a Czech Republic concentration camp, and there was a book from there of kids' art that survived," she says. "And I just thought of those little kids, trapped by the Nazis, with their childhood still being their childhood but with this stamp of death hanging over it. And they were still drawing pictures, so I made 'This Time' as a tribute to those children."

Even though Cervenka's concepts have price tags somewhere between \$2,000 and \$8,000, DCKT is doing brisk business. And the singer is amazed.

Sitting in her dressing room at a sold-out X show in San Francisco last week, she looked down at her vintage oxfords, black dress and fur coat, all thrift-store bargains, and declared her needs to be just as basic.

What makes she and her hubby happy, she says, "is again, just the love of the mundane. We love fireworks, county fairs, flea markets and hanging the wash on the line."

That's why they're leaving Los Angeles for his native Missouri in June, even though the city recently honored X with a certificate of recognition for enduring musical contributions. The L.A. Weekly also gave them a Lifetime Achievement Award, and they were inducted into the city's Guitar Center Rock Walk. (A fair exchange: X dubbed its protean '80 debut "Los Angeles.")

Yes, Cervenka agrees. "There's been some recognition in L.A. But L.A.'s a really bizarre city, though. It got kind of swamped by the rest of the world, by immigrants, by young Hollywood coming there to make it big, it got swamped by the whole Paris Hilton thing."

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Cervenka is certainly one of punk's most literate poets. Mid- interview, her longtime front-partner in X, John Doe, pops in, and the two end up in an animated discussion about the book they're both reading, Natsuo Kirino's "Out," about a Japanese noodle-shop worker who decides to murder her abusive husband.

But she keeps things cowpunk on "Sev7en," the second Original Sinners effort, out next week. The band will be back to San Francisco for a gig at the Red Devil Lounge Wednesday.

There are no politics in growling anthems like "Tavern," "Last Dance," or "Born Yesterday" (plus a cover of the Gun Club's classic "Ghost on the Highway").

And there's a very good reason, Cervenka says. "I'm just not in the same political spectrum that I used to be.... The left got too fascist for me. So I'm more of a Libertarian now, more live and let live."

Besides, Cervenka adds, "The Original Sinners also exist because my husband and I want to have a band together.... This is just another band that has something else going for it besides what the Knitters and X do."

It will, of course, provide more litter-gathering opportunities on the road. Tireless in her pop-art pursuit, Cervenka has begun making the ultimate in Warholian sendups. Having collected cheesy X bootleg T-shirts for three decades, she's now selling silk-screen reproductions of her favorites. Her reasoning is flawless.

"If someone makes a bootleg of X, I can make a bootleg of their bootleg," she's decided. "I mean, you can't go around stealing people's image like that. But I do always buy'em when I find'em, and they're always really bad."

One in particular ranked right up there with that headless pony. She says, "It just had an X on the front, and on the back it said '1995 World Tour!' Even though we were only playing a few shows around California that year. Now that was a real work of art!"