

**CENTER FOR ARTS POLICY**  
COLUMBIA COLLEGE CHICAGO



DEMOCRATIC VISTAS PROFILES

**THE EDUCATION OF UMBERTO CRENCIA**  
by Jon Margolis

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# THE EDUCATION OF UMBERTO CRENCA

by Jon Margolis

**ONE MARCH MORNING**, a jolly (for him) Bert Crenca toodled off in his rickety Dodge Caravan to watch his artwork get censored.

Jolliness is not the customary emotion with which your typical temperamental artist greets being censored. But then, Crenca is not your typical temperamental artist.

Because he's not temperamental? Get real. Artists come no temperamentaler than Umberto Crenca—a.k.a. Guy da Guy da Portagee, as well as the world's greatest flaranute virtuoso and the emperor of a place called AS220. Nor do they come any more scornful of

propriety, or any more devoted to unfettered free expression. Surely the man who had recently proclaimed that under the present circumstances (George Bush, John Ashcroft, and all that) "it is necessary at this time for people, and especially artists, to exercise their freedoms as often and as visibly as possible" would not shrink from battling the forces of repression.

But dedicated though he may be to his muse, to his independence, to troublemaking for its own sake, Bert Crenca is a not-so-typical temperamental artist, being equally dedicated to Rhode Island (especially, but not exclusively, Providence) and to keeping the communal conversation going.

That explains why he didn't erupt in Crencan dudgeon at Nancy Grinnell, the curator of the Newport Art Museum, when she decided that some of his latest works were unsuitable for that institution.

"We're a family-oriented, community-oriented

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*Jon Margolis, the author of The Last Innocent Year: America in 1964 (William Morrow, 1999), was the national political correspondent for the Chicago Tribune. He now lives, writes, teaches and fishes in Vermont.*

museum,” Grinnell later explains, “and we have a number of audiences to please and don’t want to do something that some would find offensive.” In that category, she judged, were some of Crenca’s charcoal drawings and oil paintings of monster-like hermaphroditic creatures, such as a three-eyed creator equipped with both ovaries and testes, holding an egg in each hand.

By no means are these works pornographic. They’re funny. But they are also...let us say...Rabelaisian. Some of these mythical monsters had big penises. Well, actually, not just big. More like grotesquely long. Or they had gargantuan breasts. Or both.

“They’re a little in-your-face,” Grinnell said, “a little disturbing.”

Just as Crenca intended. He calls the works “ruminations on the de-evolution of the human species,” inspired because he “started to see people as inside-out, with the psychology of the human becoming distorted. The figure inside is a little different from the figure outside.”

Then he put all that in slightly blunter, more Crencaish terms: “We’re kind of fucked up.”

Still wanting some Crenca in her show, Grinnell suggested using some earlier works. Perhaps a retrospective?

“He said, ‘No, I want to show my recent work,’” Grinnell recalls, “but he also said, ‘I understand if you feel uncomfortable with some of this.’”

So there he was, that March morning—all five-feet, six-inches, 160-pounds of him, most of it below a bald head, a right ear sporting two earrings, and a long, rectangular, white goatee that bobs up and down as he talks, holding the steering wheel with both hands, each with two rings on its fingers, and one at the end of a forearm covered by a tattoo of a fierce bird about to swoop down on its prey—heading to Io Laboratories in Olneyville, on the west side of Providence. There, in a cavernous ground-floor room filled with computers,

fourteen deemed too raw for Newportian sensibilities, those immense sexual organs would be obscured by the same kind of flickering flibbets that obscured Janet Jackson’s right breast on the post-Super Bowl 2004 newscasts.

But there’s more. Under the deal Crenca and Grinnell worked out, the ‘censored’ pictures would go on display, uncensored, at the nearby Blink Gallery. And the exhibit would open with a panel discussion called, “What is Offensive? Freedom of Expression in Museums and Galleries,” in which Crenca and Grinnell would participate. The two of them turned what could have been a contretemps into a public dialogue.

“I’m trying to have a conversation,” Crenca says. “Any role I can play as an artist to bring people together, I’m going to play it. We paved the way for a whole political discourse to happen.”

Conversation. Discourse. These are two of Crenca’s favorite words. At 53, Bert Crenca—with his goatee, his deliberately outrageous left-of-center politics, his blunt (and not infrequently coarse) language—remains almost a clichéd stereotype of the rebellious *artiste*. But when he chooses, he can speak gently. The clever riposte or the harsh wisecrack may demolish the philistines, but Crenca would rather talk with them. Conversation, he knows, is a necessary instrument for practicing democracy, which, he has figured out, is an art form.

**CRENCA DID NOT** linger long at Io Labs. Crenca does not linger. He had to get back to AS220. Wherever he goes, and he rarely goes far, he’s a homeboy—he always has to get back to AS220, of which he is the founder, the artistic director, the visionary, the glue and the guru. It’s his most enduring work of art.

AS stands for Alternative Space, and 220 was the number on Weybosset Street where it all began more than

## CONVERSATION, HE KNOWS, IS A NECESSARY INSTRUMENT FOR PRACTICING DEMOCRACY, WHICH, HE HAS FIGURED OUT, IS AN ART FORM.

state-of-the-art printers, and boxes full of high-quality copy paper, Ted Peffer and Stuart Linacre were scanning photographs of Crenca’s originals and putting them into digital format. Then...Poof! They do “a sort of mosaic pixelation,” as Peffer put it, over the parts to be censored.

Which means that visitors to the museum would see most of Crenca’s works as he intended them, but in the

twenty years ago, after Bert Crenca got a bad review from Channing Gray, then and now the art critic for the *Providence Journal*:<sup>1</sup>

“Using art as a vehicle for social commentary is a risky proposition at best...the kind of thing that if not handled well can turn into propaganda...Crenca is someone who appears to be deeply concerned about

<sup>1</sup> Then known as the *Journal-Bulletin*

the crises in Poland and Lebanon and the United States' involvement in South America. Unfortunately, his work—flat, poster-like canvases, and abstract convocations of urethane, dead leaves and bones—offers very little insight into these often tragic situations; nor, for that matter, does it unlock any of the emotions associated with them.”

This was tough for Crenca. It was 1982. He was going through an unpleasant divorce. He hadn't had the world's easiest life. There had never been much money at home. His mother, the granddaughter of Portuguese immigrants from the Azores, was in and out of mental hospitals. He hadn't been much of a student. His early years had been shadowed by too much drinking, too

plices concluded, was a headquarters. They didn't call it that. They didn't call it anything, but in August of 1985, with eight hundred dollars and an idea, they rented a loft at 220 Weybosset, hung some of their own works on the walls, and hired a rock band for an opening night bash.

Now it's a million-dollar enterprise, the headquarters of a potent if unofficial conglomerate with a new six million dollar capital campaign. Not your typical conglomerate, to be sure. At this one, the top guy—that's Crenca—earns the same twelve bucks an hour paid to the other nine full-time and twenty-nine part-time employees.

They work in a three-story, 22,000-foot square foot building on Empire Street, just a few blocks from the

## AS220 IS ALSO A MECCA FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO THINK, OR AT LEAST HOPE, THEY MIGHT BE ARTISTS. THEY HANG OUT. THEY HAVE SOME COFFEE, THEY SCHMOOZE. SOME SOON FIGURE OUT THAT THIS ISN'T FOR THEM. SOME CHANGE THEIR LIVES.

many drugs, too much angst. Just about the only thing he had going for him was this sense of himself as an artist. Now here was this...this Waspy critic with a name to match and the respectable if dreary credentials of being the recognized poobah for the hopelessly middle-brow monopoly daily newspaper taking that identity from him, or at least diminishing it.

Crenca wasn't the only one who was mad. He had friends, young artists and musicians from Providence's working-class neighborhoods, or from similar streets in Boston, Lowell, or Fall River who'd come to Providence because it was cheap, and who shared Crenca's antiestablishment outlook. To them, Gray and the newspaper were all part of the bland if not repressive Providence elite. One informal gripe session led to another, and then to an actual meeting, and the result was a document—a manifesto, they called it—urging the creation of an egalitarian arts community in Providence. The *Journal*, to its credit, printed it, and the reaction staggered everyone involved. There was a constituency out there.

So Crenca and his friends, who by now included Susan Clausen, the skilled carpenter who would become his second wife, created the Rhode Island Art Event. They invited every artist in the state to contribute. No censorship. None of this jury business; if you showed up with stuff, your stuff got displayed.

It was a boffo success. There were artists in and around Providence. What they needed, Crenca and his accom-

original home on Weybosset, sharing the block with a saloon, a hash house, and the Perishable Theatre, a separate but cooperating outfit that puts on experimental plays, many of them for children.

Crenca does not dominate at AS220; he fits in. The place has the cluttered, ephemeral air of the office of any nonprofit institution. Two young men and four women tap away at computer screens or talk on the phone seemingly oblivious to the workman on a ladder rejiggering the phone connections above the door. At one desk, another repairman is re-inking a printer platen. His cell phone rings. He picks it up, looks at it, scowls at it, dismisses it. At another, Crenca is giving advice to a young man who wants to start a magazine. “Your first step is to prepare a mission statement,” Crenca tells him, stressing the importance of “brands and markets.”

AS220 is like...well, it may not be quite like anything else at all. It is: an art gallery (five of them, actually); a café-bar-nightspot for jazz, folk, hip-hop, poetry slams, panel discussions, or just sitting; an apartment house where nineteen artists can live for \$265 to \$300 a month (utilities included) or rent studio space for \$165; a school with classes in music, dance, painting, and writing; two photography studios usable by anyone for a modest fee; a silkscreen studio; classrooms; and the offices of *Muzine*, a periodical featuring the poetry of local teens. Not to mention the site of the monthly “Bizarre Bazaar” for local artisans “who do not have the comfort of a retail

outlet” and the chief sponsor of the annual Fools Ball, now in its tenth year of bringing “five days of revelry to the Downtown Arts and Entertainment District.”

It’s also a mecca for young people who think, or at least hope, they might be artists. They hang out. They have some coffee, they schmooze. Some soon figure out that this isn’t for them. Some change their lives.

Like the young woman who was about to take her first plane ride to a gallery show in New Orleans where she would display her silkscreen works, but who was also starting to play music—bass and keyboard—because AS220 “opened me up, kept pulling me back here to see what I could do.”

Or the high school dropout hip-hop performer who is living at AS220 rent-free for three months on the condition that she (a) keep making progress toward her GED; (b) finish the CD she’s working on; and (c) open a bank account. Crenca, childless and perhaps revealing his paternal instincts, bugs her about all three whenever he sees her.

AS220 is, above all, freewheeling. Just consider this partial list of one month’s events: music by “Ntron with ‘vegan electro harsh noise’”; “an open mic showcase for Poets and true Emcees who don’t need a beat to spit hotness”; music by “Miniwatt, lying somewhere between indie punk and new wave”; and a meeting of “Friends of Camilo,” to support housing and tenant activist Camilo Viveiros, who was arrested during demonstrations at the 2000 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia.

**FREEWHEELING IS NOT** without its disadvantages. Neither is the acceptance of any painting, poem or song produced by any Rhode Islander (out-of-staters have to ask). Another term for “unjuried,” when you think about it, could be “mediocre.”

The evening before that trip to Io Labs, for instance, the show at AS220’s café was “Songwriters in the Round: Mary Bue and others.” Ms. Bue, accompanying herself on the keyboard, was rather good. The others? Well, here’s a sample lyric: “there’s magic above/ there’s magic below/ the moon beams the sun/ the sun beams the moon/ I don’t want to say goodbye.”

The tune was of comparable quality.

“I’ve heard some things here that make me absolutely fuckin’ throw up,” says Crenca. “But in the long run you ensure quality by providing opportunity. It will sur-

face and endure.”

Some has. Those who follow the hip-hop underground world say that AS220 alumni Sage Francis and Joey Beats are among its more interesting young performers. Long before it was well known, the band Green Day played at AS220. Cynthia Hopkins, who used her internship at AS220 to write a one-person opera, has won two Obie awards for composing and performing. The well-regarded singer-songwriter Erin McKeown once lived at AS220, as did jazz saxophonist George Garzone, photographer Denny Moers, sculptor Jonathan Bonner, and artist Joe Norman.

In Crenca’s view, the mediocre artists also benefit from AS220’s unjuried policy. They get their shot. Better to give them their chance to fail than to stifle their

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ambitions. AS220 provides unrestricted access, not universal approval.

Even freewheeling has to be managed. Crenca may be artist, musician, and performer. But he is also organizer, grantwriter, fundraiser, dealmaker, and chief executive officer. AS220 does not live on vibes alone. It lives on grants from the Ford, Wallace, and other foundations, from various public funds, from the sale of food and booze, from class fees. Somebody has to coordinate all this. That somebody is Crenca.

That’s why AS220 is his masterpiece. Crenca is a locally popular performer of music and comedy, and he’s a legitimate artist whose paintings hang in a few respectable museums and are sold at mainstream galleries. But neither as a painter nor as a musician is he an artist of the first rank. As an impresario, teacher, inspirer, and organizer, he is. He knows.

“I think I’m a good visual artist,” he says. “I think I’m OK as a musician. But I am a great fucking salesman.”

**TO CONTINUE BEING** a good visual artist and an OK musician, Crenca tries to paint and play every morning in the big old house where he and Susan Clausen live in the North End of Providence. The house

was once owned by a neighborhood club that used the basement as a bocce court. Clausen, who earns her keep both as a carpenter and by teaching art in local schools, has covered up most of the bocce floor so she can use the room as a workshop. She also crafted the small case for his flaranute, a clarinet mouthpiece on a flute's body that he invented several years ago with the help of some duct tape, and which Crenca keeps on a stand inside his studio.

However far he may have strayed from his roots, geographically, Crenca has not gone very far at all. Aside from the standard young-artist's-trip-to-Europe in his twenties and a foundation-financed jaunt to Bali in 2001—"I was treated like a fuckin' prince," he says—he has lived his whole life within a few miles of his present home.

Which is fitting because in many ways Crenca is still the neighborhood kid. Not all his friends are artists. He likes to play softball. He socializes and goes to hockey games with a guy who owns a fishing tackle shop. Walking along Atwells Avenue, once the heart of Italian-American Providence, Crenca points out mobster Raymond Patriarca's old headquarters and runs into people he's known for decades, people with whom he reminisces about a friend's mother who died too young, or about "that bar that used to be Irish, you know, down in the hole."

Blending the roles of rebel artist and regular guy fits Crenca's sociopolitical stance—the passion of the elitist as democrat. Nothing is dearer to him than the conviction—or is it delusion?—that everyone could be an artist.

"Every individual is born creative," he says, and the arts should be "as accessible as possible. We have to value the expressive potential of every single individual, no matter what their situation."

Fittingly, then, Crenca lives not in the lofts among the artists, but in a neighborhood of medium-priced homes. His neighbors are more likely to be teachers, accountants, and tradesmen than painters or sculptors. The North End is just a few miles from North Providence, where Crenca grew up, and not much fancier. It has the air of a faded neighborhood that's beginning to perk up.

**"THIS WAS A** ghost town," Bert Crenca says as he walks along Washington Street one night, showing a visitor the faded old building he wants to buy to expand AS220's activities. He does not quite say that he helped bring it back from the spirit world, but he does point out that for years he and his friends "were fanning the flame" that helped reignite the city's rebirth.

That's the appropriate word, for both Crenca and Providence, which calls itself "Renaissance City," and with some justification. "Rome and Florence made investments in the arts, and they're still making money off it," Crenca likes to say, combining ethnic pride with standard American boosterism. In national politics, Crenca's a dissenter. But when it comes to Providence, he could fit right in at one of those Chamber of Commerce expositions designed to woo businesses to town. It's his town.

"There was nothing here," he says, turning left, which is north, through a plaza of new shops and restaurants. "The river was covered up. The whole city was a disaster."

"Now look at it," says Crenca, pointing to what is unmistakably a river, flowing right through the city's central business district, with walkways along its banks. He has come to an artificially wide spot in the river, a circular basin called Water Place Park, where during each summer's Waterfire festival torches are lit, attracting both residents and tourists by the thousands, a symbol of Providence's renaissance.

None of this just happened. Providence's revitalization, like its decline, was the result of deliberate decisions made by identifiable people, starting with the robber barons who covered up the river a hundred years ago and their allies among Rhode Island's decadent, corrupt plutocracy.

They were overthrown in the 1930s, after tens of thousands of immigrants from French Canada, Ireland and Italy came to work in the textile mills. Among them was one Umberto Crenca, Bert's grandfather. The immigrants produced a sociopolitical shift, transforming a state that had been commercial, Protestant, and Republican into the most industrial, Catholic, and Democratic state in the union. Power passed from the old-line families that got rich from banks and shipping (including the transportation of slaves) to the Irish and Italian neighborhood leaders, labor unions, and the Democratic Party.

Oh, and the Mafiosi leader Raymond Loreda Salvatore Patriarca, who owned several pieces of property and at least as many politicians. It would be an exaggeration to suggest that he ran Providence on his own, accurate to say that he ran it along with a few others.

They did not run it well. Providence in the forties and fifties was the very model of a wide open town. Rough bars that doubled as bookie joints and gambling houses, cheap hotels, and brothels lined the waterfront, already in decline. Then the factories began to move south, where it was easier to convince workers that labor unions were an alien force, and Providence began a

quick descent toward oblivion. Its population, 248,000 after World War II, fell to 179,000 by 1970. By the early 1970s, if Providence was not quite gone, it was largely forgotten.

Which was its lucky break. Ignored by government and business, Providence escaped most of that public-private tax-preferenced urban redevelopment that uglified so many cities starting in the sixties, all those office building-civic center-Hyatt Hotel-parking garage monstrosities that made developers rich and downtowns sterile.

As a result, Providence is a modern miracle—a lovely American city. In all of central Providence, there is but one unsightly skyscraper on the west side of the river. If the city was not a blank sheet in the mid-seventies, it was an undeveloped canvas, one awaiting its artist, or at least its artistic director.

He came in the form of Vincent A. (Buddy) Cianci, who was mayor from 1975 to 1984, again from 1991 to 2002, and might be mayor still were he not an involuntary guest of the federal government at one of its penitentiaries. For two decades, he dominated the city though he was both a scoundrel and a Republican, and while dominating, he transformed. He was brutal; his

artsy squatters, and gotten a few days of favorable headlines in the process. Not Cianci. He legalized what they were doing, got them tax preferences for doing it, and used them to recreate Providence. In this effort, he had many allies, none more enthusiastic, or more important, than Bert Crenca.

“I’d say without hesitation that Providence’s revival rests largely on the backs of the arts and cultural community,” says Bramante, “and Bert was there from the very early stages. AS220 was the first break in Providence re-making itself. It was because of AS220 that artists began to see, ‘Wow, this place is serious.’ It enabled the city to retain a lot of the talent trained here and to attract people from outside.”

Cianci would sometimes show up at AS220, where, of course, he would have to say a few words. Erminio Pinque, the performance artist-puppeteer who once served on AS220’s board, remembers that Cianci, ever compelled to assert his own dominance, would tease Crenca, joking about his goatee or telling the story of how they first met. “Bert would just have to stand there and smile,” Pinque recalls.

Even now, knowing all about Cianci’s predations, Crenca seems to cling to some sense of loyalty to the

## CRENCA IS NOT AVERSE TO RISK, BUT NEITHER IS HE AVERSE TO PLAYING POLITICS, KNOWING THAT IF DEMOCRACY IS AN ART FORM, POLITICS ARE ITS PAINT AND PALETTE.

first conviction was for beating and burning a local businessman. He was corrupt. But as a mayor who changed his city for the better, he ranks with New York’s Fiorello LaGuardia and Chicago’s Richard J. Daley. It is because of Cianci that the river is visible, that Water Place Park exists, that nice shops and restaurants abut it, that Providence is now a tourist attraction instead of a joke.

Though his own aesthetic sensibilities were middle-brow at their loftiest, Cianci was shrewd enough to see that among his city’s resources was its growing gaggle of artists working and living—sometimes illegally—in lofts improvised in some of the old mill buildings.

“He wasn’t a visionary in the sense of having a vision,” says Peter Bramante, the executive director of the Arts and Business Council of Rhode Island, “but he could see what good plans were, and he was the best cheerleader for them, and then best at taking credit for it all.”

Many a mayor would have kicked out the young

former mayor, about whom he once told a weekly newspaper in Massachusetts, “We have a very hip mayor, who understands the value of art and culture, economically, and spiritually.” When talk turned to the book about Cianci, Mike Stanton’s *The Prince of Providence*, Crenca says, “It didn’t capture the flavor. It didn’t capture the excitement.” Those were among Cianci’s contributions. Crenca appreciated them.

Not that Crenca was in Cianci’s pocket. In the late 1990s, a Long Island-based developer wanted to demolish seven old mill buildings in Olneyville to make way for a shopping center anchored by a supermarket. Included on the demolition list was an abandoned wool mill inhabited by young artists.

They and their friends rose in protest, and did not entirely fail. Four buildings were preserved, with some space reserved for artist lofts, and the developers agreed to harmonize the new architecture with the old brick ambience of the neighborhood.

Crenca took no active role in the dispute, but the opposition got office space at AS220, and Rafael Lyon, one of its leaders, says now that Crenca was “totally supportive every step of the way.” Cianci, who supported the development, seems to have known that. At one point, his liaison with the arts community called Crenca to express the mayor’s displeasure. “I told them, ‘artists are noisy,’” Crenca said.

“My agenda is the same,” Crenca says. “I’m not here to pacify the culture. I’m here to stimulate the culture.”

The same agenda, perhaps, but pursued with different tactics under different circumstances.

“I hope I’ve become wiser,” Crenca says, on reflection, “I am concerned about how I have impact, instead of just bitching and moaning. How do I have systemic impact? There’s a transformation. I’ve become slicker.”

## CRENCA'S ONE OF THE PEOPLE THE POWER BROKERS HAVE TO DEAL WITH. NOT BAD FOR A LITTLE GUY FROM THE POOR SIDE OF TOWN WHO ONCE WONDERED WHETHER HE'D EVER BE ABLE TO DO ANYTHING AT ALL.

A casual dismissal, but even his indirect support of the antidevelopment cause was not without its risk. Crenca is not averse to risk, but neither is he averse to playing politics, knowing that if democracy is an art form, politics are its paint and palette. He knows how to work the system. AS220 has a liquor license, for which it might not have been qualified, strictly speaking. But this is Providence. You make a phone call to someone who says, “well, there’s this loophole....” Strictly speaking, the loophole may not apply, but by then it’s a done deal. Strictly speaking, Providence does not always speak strictly. Crenca knows that.

And knows, too, that he himself has become something of a political power in the city. He was on new mayor David Cicilline’s transition team. He is one of the folks invited to the *charettes*, the intensive planning sessions run by Andreas Duany, the Miami-based “new urbanism” guru who has given Providence officials the benefit of his advice. He meets now and then with officials, with bankers, with foundation executives.

Amazing as it would have seemed to anyone in Providence twenty years ago, Crenca has, in spite of himself, become part of the Providence establishment. The *enfant terrible* of yore has transformed himself into a player in the government and commerce of the city. As such, he makes compromises, as he did with Nancy Grinnell on those “in your face” hermaphrodites. The Bert Crenca of the early 1980s would probably have told Grinnell to...well, at least to find some other paintings.

Interestingly, though, it seems impossible to find anyone in Providence who will suggest that Crenca has sold out or turned traitor to his cause. He has managed to join the establishment on his own terms.

An interesting word choice. Few people, and fewer artists, acknowledge becoming slicker. But Crenca appears blessed by a minimum of self-delusion. He’s learned that at some point, persistence becomes obduracy, and, as he puts it, “you’re out of the loop.” He knows he has to stay just inside that loop or he’ll have no impact. He’s learned, in short, that sometimes one important value conflicts with another. That’s not selling out; it’s growing up. Adults have responsibilities, and Crenca believes in rising to his.

No one would claim—certainly Crenca does not—that he and AS220 were the biggest contributors to the expansion of the arts scene in Providence. More people show up at a single performance of a traveling Broadway musical at the Performing Arts Center than at all the AS220 events in a month. There are theaters, galleries, and nightspots that have nothing to do with AS220. But without Crenca, the city’s arts scene, and therefore its overall resuscitation, would not only have been different; it would have been weaker. So if not exactly a power broker, Crenca’s one of the people the power brokers have to deal with. Not bad for a little guy from the poor side of town who once wondered whether he’d ever be able to do anything at all.

**EVEN DRAW PICTURES**, as if drawing pictures was something boys in workingclass North Providence did in the fifties. North Providence was where Italian-American factory workers like Armando Crenca—son of one Umberto, father to another—and his wife Martha, moved in the 1950s for a little more living space, and to get one step removed from the reach of Ray Patriarca. It was a world of three-decker hous-

es, corner groceries, corner taverns, and minimal esteem for artistic endeavor.

But one day Crenca's sixth grade class at St. Lawrence Grammar School was assigned to create a poster. The nun who taught the class walked past Crenca's desk and said to him, "You wouldn't be interested."

You could hardly blame her. Young Bert was a troublemaker, not a model student, and she'd scolded him before. But this was different, not just scolding but public ridicule, just what Crenca did not need. His mother was away again. He was an angry, troubled, child with something to prove. So he stayed up all night, doing fifteen versions before he got the poster right.

It was an act of defiant determination, but one largely forgotten as teenaged Crenca pursued other passions—playing ball, hanging around, getting into fist-fights, drinking, chasing girls, doing drugs. But he finished high school at La Salle Academy in Providence, and enrolled at Rhode Island State College, intending to major in math. He started off majoring in dissipation.

"I didn't go to any classes," he says now. "I was gambling, hanging around in bars. I was into the drug scene mostly, I think, because it was attracting more women. I was confused. I didn't know whether to get into a fight or flash the peace sign. I was reading things like Edgar Cayce. I felt out of place in my own neighborhood. I wanted to talk about the origins of the universe."

When he wasn't dropping acid and taking amphetamines, he was hanging around a coffee house near the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) across the river, "a place that drew in young people who were near the

Crenca remained a young man with few prospects. He was still painting and drawing, almost obsessively, even if he barely knew what he was about.

"In the early seventies I couldn't seem to do two paintings that looked alike," he says. "I wanted to understand it all. I'd be looking at cubism and I couldn't understand it. So I'd try it. Next I'd do impressionism, expressionism. I'd stretch seven canvases and start seven paintings simultaneously."

None of which earned him a penny. Unemployed and about to get married, Crenca needed a job, and when he went to the employment center, he told them he wanted the job to be "arts-related."

They got him a job at a print shop in a bank. The connection with the arts was tenuous, but eventually he became a printing press operator, as well as something of a troublemaker.

"I was doing more art, reading more, and becoming more passionate about some life that I had only a vague idea about, that I knew I wanted but I didn't know how to get there," he says. "I had only vague sense of what I wanted to be. I was reading a lot about the history of art. It created all this tension for me both in my marriage and on my job. I always complained about issues at the bank."

One day in 1977, his boss called him into her office. She did not fire him. Instead, he remembers, she said, "Look, you're not going to change this organization, and I keep hearing about your interest in art. Why don't we pay for a couple of courses for you to go back to college, to study art."

## ONE NIGHT, AFTER THE BOTTLE WAS MORE EMPTY THAN FULL, BILL SAID TO CRENCA, "YOU'RE A PRETTY SMART GUY, BUT YOU'RE IGNORANT."

tipping point," he says. "It exposed me to some more serious things. I thought it was cool, but it turns out it was run by a drug rehab program. They did outreach."

One of the things outreach places do is ask people what interests them. Almost for lack of anything else to say, and with the memory of that poster—one of his rare triumphs—Crenca told them he was an artist. "I had a notion I had talent—a word I now hate and would like to erase from the dictionary," he says. "So I started to paint. And I found it incredibly difficult, really difficult. I had no idea."

The drug rehab worked, but a couple of years later

Study art? What a bizarre notion.

"Never in my life had I considered going to school to study art," Crenca recalls. "Coming from a workingclass background it never occurred to me that this was possible."

Now he began to study—art formally at the college, literature and philosophy informally with a guy named Bill, whose last name Crenca now forgets, but who "was a writer who used to come to my studio in North Providence, where we would talk and kill a bottle of Scotch." One night, after the bottle was more empty than full, Bill said to Crenca, "You're a pretty smart guy,

but you're ignorant."

"What do you mean, ignorant?" Crenca asked him.

"You need to read some books," said Bill, who then introduced Crenca to some folks he'd never heard of—Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Yeats, Camus.

"He guided me through a kind of intellectual journey," says Crenca, who devoured *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and *The Brothers Karamazov* at home and at work on coffee breaks, making notes about the reading even while he was running the printing press. One day, he remembers, he was reading at work and fell into "an absolute tizzy." When his boss was at lunch, he used her phone to call a philosophy professor at the college to say he couldn't control his thoughts, couldn't sleep at night.

## THE CUBIST, IMPRESSIONIST, EXPRESSIONIST EXPERIMENTS HAD BEEN ABANDONED IN FAVOR OF REPRESENTATIONAL ART, OFTEN WITH A POLITICAL MESSAGE.

"He gave me this calming story on the phone, a story about how even Buddha realized that you can't force knowledge."

Maybe not, but it's amazing what persistence will do. Among the things Crenca never tried in his youth was music. In 1980, he met a jazz musician, a drummer who also played the flute. Crenca decided he wanted to learn about music. He and the musician would meet once a week for lessons in flute-playing and musical theory. It was a straight barter deal—lessons for paintings.

It worked. He began to perform, and after a while the performances transcended music. He was a funny guy. He created a character—Guy da Guy (that's the French-Portuguese pronunciation, as in 'Gee' with a hard 'G') da Portagee—based on some folks in his mother's family and his memories of the old neighborhood. Today Crenca is the flutist and drummer for The Panic Band, whose latest CD, "Live at the Ladies Humane Society," presents a sort of folk-punk combination. Clausen is in the band, too; she plays the banjo, the canjo (don't ask), dog toys and a pickle bucket. Bert also plays the flaranute.

In 1981, thirteen years after he had started Rhode Island College, Crenca received a bachelor's degree with a concentration in the fine arts. He had made himself into a good craftsman. The cubist, impressionist, expres-

sionist experiments had been abandoned in favor of representational art, often with a political message. He sold a few of them to friends, and finally got a gallery show.

Not that he made a living from it. He always needed a day job. He went from the bank job to operating a computer for a microfilm producer to washing dishes to working for a cleaning service before he could actually start drawing wages from AS220.

No wonder one of Crenca's mottos is, "Don't fucking tell me you can't dream."

**NOW THERE ARE** two dominant dreams. There is the capital campaign so that AS220 can buy an old building around the corner at the intersection of Mathewson and Washington streets. When Crenca talks about the proposed purchase, he sounds far more like a corporate executive than a rebellious artist.

"We're looking at the impact on the tax rolls," he says, "The plan is to lease the first floor to a private restaurant, and we'd use the rest of the building for AS220."

The other dream is a business, too, one Crenca was hard at work organizing toward the end of the day that started at Io Labs. At 4 o'clock, he drove his Dodge Caravan south through the part of town that is least affluent and least white, the part where immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Cambodia, and Laos have become neighbors of the African-Americans who have been there for years. Crenca was going to talk to his business associates, many of whom were not long out of the pokey.

Four years earlier, Crenca had begun teaching visual arts courses at the Rhode Island Training school, the state's juvenile detention facility. By a year later, he raised enough money to rent a 3,000-square-foot space at 790 Broad Street for more art classes and projects. Now the pupils were not young people who were incarcerated; they were young people who had just gotten out of being incarcerated, along with some neighborhood kids worried that incarceration might be next for them.

Here Crenca has lots of help, much of it from the federal Volunteers In Service to America program. There are sixty VISTA volunteers in all of Providence, said Vince Marzullo, the federal official who runs the program in Rhode Island, and who calls Crenca "a very visionary individual who knows how to put his vision into common play." Eighteen of them are with AS220. That's what you can do when you know how to work the sys-

tem. The VISTA workers teach writing and mural painting classes at the Broad Street facility.

But Crenca was not there to teach. He was there to talk business:

“It’s a question of branding, of marketing,” he told his young associates. “I’m imagining a brand, a little store in Providence. The store will be the anchor, but then we’re going to distribute throughout the world. It’s a message-driven product but it doesn’t have to be blatant. I don’t want you thinking small. I want you to get together and decide on the label. What we don’t have to do is follow this Goth, suburban-youth cultish shit.”

Crenca was talking to his Product Development Team, which ranged in age from 17 to perhaps 23. They are going to create designs to put on posters and T-shirts, which they will then sell at events and to other organizations. The aim is to teach these kids how to draw, promote, and market their designs. And then to make some money, and in the process give slum kids something to take pride in, something to look forward to.

But within certain boundaries. The T-shirts that will be decorated by these designs are union-made in the USA—“We won’t slave for your appearance,” is one of the slogans on display—by workers who earn nine dollars an hour and company-paid health insurance. They’re more expensive than the T-shirt you can buy at the department store, which was probably made in Asia by workers who earn...less. This is to be a corporate-style enterprise that criticizes some corporate behavior, including foreign sweatshops and factory pollution. It’s a business, yes. But like AS220, like democracy, it’s also a work of art.

At least it is to Crenca. In his view, art transcends art; it is both the purpose of life and the essence of democracy, all related to that notion that anybody can be an

artist. Crenca is no fool; he knows that not everyone can paint, sculpt, sing, or play the flaranute. What anyone can do, he insists, is “re-imagine themselves,” effectively transforming their own lives into art.

“Fundamental to art is the idea of composition,” Crenca says. “I look at each human being’s life as a composition. Its parameters are birth and death. In the middle, you’re making choices. Each person is the creator of his own person. I try to increase the power options they have.”

However theoretical—even spiritual—this democratic aesthetic may sound, it is also absolutely political, a resistance to what Crenca sees as efforts to channel the way people act and think. No, Crenca is no simplistic conspiratorialist. He does not see little men in suits inserting thought-control chips into our tooth fillings. He does see “our public education system, our commercial culture and capitalism working very hard to shape our tastes, shape our decision-making in this world: How to look, what you should be buying, the clothes you should be wearing. The role of the artist is to stimulate people. Art becomes a vehicle to help people to understand themselves creatively.”

To Crenca, then, those kids at Broad Street can all be artists. Not just the ones who design the T-shirts, but the ones who design the marketing campaign, the ones who work in the store. Depending on how it’s done, depending on why it’s done, selling can be an art, too. It depends on how you imagine yourself.

Imagining, of course, is something like dreaming, and like the vision of a successful T-shirt business run by troubled young folks, this whole notion of every-man-an-artist could turn out to be an improbable dream.

But you don’t want to tell Bert Crenca he can’t dream. ✨