

Writing to America Luis J. Rodríguez

In Hard Times, Turn to Art



As a teenager, I was a graffiti artist who spray-painted gang-related messages on walls and fences of homes and businesses. This was forty years ago. It was as wrong then as it is now. But in those years, people got ahold of vandals like me and offered us a viable option—learn to paint and, with permission, create beautiful positive-message murals. At seventeen, I painted eight publicly funded murals, most of them with thirteen street kids. I never vandalized another wall again.

Other artists, particularly in the large Mexican community of East LA, created public art that till this day stands the test of time. More than a few are now exhibited in galleries around the world—among them John Alcaraz, Gronk, Judy Baca, Alma Lopez, Eloy Torres, Chaz Bojorquez, Paul Botello, and Yreina Cervantez.

However, during the last thirty years or so, many murals have been destroyed—in Los Angeles, as part of graffiti abatement policies—or forced to waste away. Few are being restored or preserved. And many young aerosol artists today are often arrested and/or fined instead of helped to reach high-

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er levels of craft and community acceptance.

LA was once the mural capital of the world. Now it's known as the gang capital of the world. I'm convinced there's a connection: Full arts programming and opportunities are a key way to address youth estrangement and even gang violence.

With President Obama at the helm, it's time for a real arts policy, even a



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Secretary of the Arts, to make sure our artists, musicians, writers, dancers, and performers don't end up in prisons or forgotten. We need to ensure that young people are given innumerable ways to contribute to bettering our communities, particularly from their own gifts and capacities.

Recently, I interviewed three young people who benefited from the nonprofit HeArt Project's work in LA-area continuation high schools—the schools of last resort. The HeArt Project, founded seventeen years ago

by Cynthia Campoy Brophy, provides arts programming for the most disadvantaged students. I'm honored to be on her board, witnessing how the arts can transform the most neglected lives.

I spoke with Jasmine Marisol Diaz, eighteen, Ryan D. Flores, seventeen, and Kevin Yoshiya Sasahara, seventeen. Latina, African American and Japanese American. All were troubled youth in Mid-City and South Central schools.

"What I learned from being with the HeArt Project," Ryan explained, "is that even if you're multitalented, don't stop there, keep going. Don't stop anywhere. Don't ever stop. And don't just do one thing. Do as much as you can. Every few months there's a new artist teaching you a new art form. That's telling you right there, don't just do one thing. Once you get older, you can know how to do everything, to have your own show in a gallery. You can have a piece of every art form that these people have taught you."

"At first, I wasn't seeing myself within art," Jasmine said. "I was a very apathetic adolescent. I didn't really understand what the HeArt Project was—it was more about not doing class work. But then I did the fashion residency and really enjoyed it. The HeArt Project took my work somewhere. It gave art meaning."

"I used to think there was only one path and I always thought I knew what my life was going to be," Kevin added. "With the HeArt Project, I began to understand there are going to be many paths. Some I'll take,

some I won't take. It's up to me which one is the right one for me, and which isn't. The HeArt Project really wants you to succeed—unlike some teachers who don't give a damn if you pass or not. It's about a better future, but also about being better people."

"Everybody needs a spark to get them going," Ryan interjected. "Once that fuse is lit, who knows when that fuse will get to the dynamite."

"We can program ourselves away from our existence," Jasmine pointed out. "Like we should do the 'norm,' like this is the way it has to be. That's when you should say, 'No, this is the way I want it to be.' For example, I always loved drawing and painting, but many people told me, 'You're going to starve with that.' My parents said I did some decent drawings, but I couldn't live off that—I needed to be realistic. Like if I was only born to work, to survive. I want to do more. And the HeArt Project helped me see how I can paint and make a living off this, as well."

These words from these young people demonstrate the power of creativity, imagination, and arts education to shape not just an artist, but also a whole and healthy person.

I know these are hard times. In fact, government agencies, schools, foundations, and other institutions tend to turn away from the arts when the economy hardens, as if such funding were a frivolous expenditure. But this is precisely when we need more art projects, workshops, and festivals.

With a new President and an energized American populace, the arts can breathe life again in every neighborhood, barrio, ghetto, reservation, and hamlet. The imaginative spirit is the magic that can remake the country, regenerate a new economy, and establish a culture reflective of the best of our children, youth, adults, and elders.

I give the last word to Ryan: "When we create art, we collect ourselves and understand ourselves. I want to be myself and do my thing. But with art I also want to touch people. It's community." ♦

