



**Judith F. Baca paints Dust Bowl refugees coming to California in the 1930s at “The Great Wall of Los Angeles” mural in 1979. Photo © Douglas Kirkland, 1980.**

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Like Liz Lerman, **Judith**

**Francisca Baca** was trained in a conventional artistic path, diverging from it as life challenges impelled. As she explained in the spring 2001 online dialogue:

*I stepped out of the university [in the 1960s] unprepared to make art that had a relationship to the people or the communities out of which I had come. I was born in Watts and raised in Pacoima; two [Los Angeles] neighborhoods infamous for racial conflict and race riots between African Americans and Chicanos (Americans of Mexican descent, my own culture).*

Today, Judy serves as Artistic Director of the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) in Venice, California, which she cofounded in 1976. She has also been Professor of Fine Arts for the University of California since 1980, and since 1996 has held two concurrent academic appointments at the University of California at Los Angeles, as a senior member of UCLA's Cesar Chavez Center and as Professor of Art for the World Arts and Cultures department.

Her essay describes an organic process by which SPARC has become the vehicle for collaborative works of art she described in our online dialogue as “sites of public memory”:

*Through the graffiti on the street produced by young gang members, I learned that the sidewalks and walls were methods of communication that could be used to organize groups in the barrios [Latino neighborhoods] and ghettos of Los Angeles. This led me to the use of public walls/spaces for large-scale organizing projects in which I worked with the people of the neighborhood to envision monumental paintings, parks, metrorail [public transit] stations, billboards, installations that spoke to their shared concerns and imaginings. These works become symbols of a struggle of peoples against borders, cultural differences, and territories defined by racial and class segregation.*

Unlike other art forms, such as live performance, which are intrinsically ephemeral and experiential, public art projects have two dimensions: the deeply transformative process of engaging as a direct participant in the creation of a work; and the stimulus provided for others as the work becomes a “site of public memory,” a permanent feature of community. This essay embodies the perpetual trajectory of community cultural development—accelerating in the age of globalization—as work that enables voices to be heard from the local to the global, using everything at hand, from the simplest forms to the most sophisticated high-tech tools.

# Birth of a Movement

by Judith F. Baca



Perhaps it was the abundance of concrete, or the year-round painting season or the city full of Mexican workers that made Los Angeles the place where murals began to be a predominant art form. Or perhaps it was because an entire population—the majority of the city—had been “disappeared” in textbooks, in the media, in cultural markers of place, and needed to find a way to reclaim a city of Mexican and indigenous roots.

In 1932 a mural was painted on Olvera Street, the birthplace of Los Angeles, by the great maestro David Alfaro Siqueiros, the Mexican muralist/painter. Siqueiros was the last of *Los Tres Grandes* (The Three Great Muralists), who after the 1910 Revolution in Mexico began a cultural revolution that taught the precepts of the revolution and the history of Mexico through murals. Siqueiros, the most revolutionary of the three in materials usage, social intent and content, worked for a period of time in Los Angeles. His 80-foot-long mural “America Tropical” spoke to the exploitation of the Mexican worker. Commissioned by the city fathers for a Bavarian beer garden (owned by a Nazi), the mural was intended to depict a kitschy Mexican village scene for the benefit of tourists. Instead, Siqueiros made the central image of the mural a crucified figure.

With increasing demand for low-wage immigrant labor and massive migrations of Mexican and Central American workers to Los Angeles over the last 10 or 15 years, this image is even more relevant today than in the '30s. The mural was partially whitewashed shortly after its completion and then fully painted over within its first year on public view, beginning a legacy of



The censored Los Angeles mural "America Tropical" (1932) by David Alfaro Siqueiros, one of the leading Mexican muralists of the 20th century, is now being restored by the Getty Conservation Institute.

ensorship that still haunts Los Angeles. In the 1970s, 40 years after it was painted over, the image began to re-emerge from the whitewash. We saw this as a symbol, an *aparicion* (religious apparition) coinciding with the growth of Los Angeles's Mexican population and strength of the Chicano movement. ("Chicano" is a politicized term for "Mexican-Americans.")

Siqueiros prophesied that someday every street corner of Los Angeles would have a mural, brought about by the freeing of the artist from the tyranny of laborious frescos. Siqueiros predicted that a form of muralism would exist somewhere between the moving picture and photography. He did not know of computers, but I would like to think he would have embraced the role they are now playing in mural production at Cesar Chavez Digital Mural Lab of the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), which I cofounded in 1976, a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating and preserving public art.

Murals in Los Angeles were the first artistic medium to support and then shape a movement toward identity and justice that reached a mass population. This artistic occupation of public space forged a strong visual presence of a people who at that time (late '60s, early '70s) lacked representation in public life, with neither voice in elections nor elected representatives. No person of Latino descent served on the city council or on the school board, despite the fact that in actual numbers we were fast becoming the majority of the population. Parallel to and perhaps growing from this new visual strength, many citizens of emerging Latino communities organized, with very little money and freely given labor, toward the mutual goal of improving the conditions of their communities. While many of the early Chicano muralists were of the first generation in their communities to earn advanced degrees, a racially



Whitewashed view from the street of "American Tropical."

unsophisticated society tied the Chicano artist to the conditions of the barrios regardless of their educational status. SPARC was born of the spirit of this movement, taking its name from the notion that it takes only a spark to start a prairie fire. The organization has been intent on nurturing this healthy fire within the city as a whole for 25 years.

As the fire of muralism progressed, distinctions began to emerge. Apart from its initial purpose of creating a capacity for the imagery of the people to occupy public space, Los Angeles murals spoke to the cultural demands of previously under-represented peoples. Some works became cultural-affirmation images, asserting only that we exist as distinct cultures; others addressed the hard task of articulating and advocating for resolution of issues affecting the places where our people lived and worked.

This new social power was not limited to immigrant labor nor indigenous people, but spread to the multiplicity of Los Angeles populations. African-American, Thai, Chinese, Jewish and women's murals began to appear on the streets of Los Angeles. Before long, community murals began to attract media attention and documentation. Murals began to tackle larger issues of police brutality, border crossings, drug addiction, gang warfare and other difficulties of a life of poverty and exclusion. Early in the movement, space was freely available and uncontested. If you had the paint and the time, the wall and the message were yours.

In this environment the movement flourished. In the early '70s a visitor could drive from site to site and could have seen Carlos Almaraz, David Botello, Willie Herron and myself all painting simultaneously on the streets of Los Angeles.

As the movement progressed, common themes emerged, variations on those themes developed and our stories began to crystallize. We consciously avoided Western European aesthetics, instead privileging Chicano popular culture, religious iconography, Mexican calendars, tattoos, street writing, whatever could better and more accurately portray our direct life experience. We did not even look closely at Mexico City, an influence far removed from the Diaspora of the Southwest. In this way, we were able to create a unique and specific art form that spoke to our own lived experience in the barrios and inner cities of Los Angeles. This movement spread to the rural communities of the Southwest and developed concurrently, though distinctly, on the East Coast.

In 1970, I began working for the Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks, teaching art in Boyle Heights, a neighborhood with the highest number of gangs in the United States. Similar to the neighborhood I grew up in (Pacoima), Boyle Heights had cultural markers—graffiti—with roll calls written on the walls that told you who lived there, what the neighborhood was called and who was from there. But this stylized iconography often triggered destructive conflict, part of the contesting of public space by rival gang

members. I began working with gang members from different neighborhoods to establish networks between them to promote peaceful solutions to such conflicts. Redirecting gang members' inclinations toward public expression via my own artistic training as a painter, we began painting murals as a way to create constructive cultural markers.

Our first mural, entitled "Mi Abuelita" ("My Grandmother"), was painted in Hollenbeck Park's three-sided band shell, where the Feria de los Niños (Children's Fair) occurred annually. This work recognized the primary position of the matriarch in Mexican families as a reflection of our indigenous roots. It also marked the first step in the development of a unique collective process that employs art to mediate between rival gang members competing for public space and public identity. Through this work we formulated a group incorporating four rival neighborhoods within the same team, named Las Vistas Nuevas (The New View).

This group, composed of 20 young people 16 to 21 years old, was made up of youth with whom I had developed relationships at several different parks as an arts teacher in the Department of Recreation and Parks' Eastside parks. My teaching assignment had been to move daily from park to park to teach small children's and senior citizens' art classes. To do so I would walk a gauntlet of young men who used the parks as a place to hang out and play dominoes with their homeboys. Over a period of time the shouts of "Hey, art lady!" became friendly exchanges, sharing drawings and tattoo designs of the most talented among them. Soon the young men became collaborators as well as students.

While I could move between the parks, my new friends could not travel even a mile to a neighboring park for fear of reprisals by rival neighborhood gangs. The climate of the time was shaped by the civil rights movement, with events such as the Chicano Moratorium March in East Los Angeles on August 29, 1970. This historical march, catalyzed by organizing of the Brown Berets group, occurred because Chicanos opposed the Vietnam War on the grounds that Chicanos suffered the highest number of casualties in the war proportionate to their number in the population. The Chicanos urged nonviolence on all who participated in this event and agreed to this condition despite their anger toward the war, knowing that senseless hatred would ruin everything—most importantly, their chances of being recognized. Despite this, Ruben Salazar, a reporter for the Los Angeles Times sympathetic to Chicano civil rights activities, was killed by a police tear-gas canister shot blindly into the Silver Dollar Café, where police thought organizers were gathering. Much work was created subsequently around the events of August 29. Manuel Cruz, an early organizer of youth and ex-member of the Macy Street neighborhood, in his mural in the Ramona Gardens low-income housing project of primarily Chicano families, asserted that "Raza killing Raza" (Chicanos or Latinos killing each other) was contributing to their own oppression.

**A monumental grandmother image occupies center stage in “Mi Abuelita,” painted in Hollenbeck Park band shell, the site of the Feria de los Niños, where children dance in her outstretched arms. This mural celebrates the importance of the elders in traditional Mexican families and was painted by “Las Vistas Nuevas,” a group of 20 youth from four neighborhoods in conflict in East Los Angeles, organized by Judy Baca in the 1970s.**



While painting “Mi Abuelita” in Hollenbeck Park, the Las Vistas Nuevas group developed a system of lookouts placed in the parks to protect us from those who did not support our efforts to work across defined territories and neighborhoods. The lookouts were to whistle if someone threatened harm to the group. Our plan was that we were to quickly exit the scaffolding of our painting to enter the bandshell’s stage doors and wait for an all-clear signal before returning to work.

One day a whistle sounded as we were painting, signaling the approach of plainclothes police officers. The police had been unfriendly to my efforts to bring known gang members into public sites. They said they would arrest my team members if I continued to assemble them in public view. I kept painting and told the 20 others to do the same, thinking that I would try to convince the officers that we should be allowed to continue our work undisturbed. A man’s voice called to me from below the scaffolding where I perched. When I heard “Judy Baca?” I expected to see a police officer, but instead came face to face with the general manager of the Department of Recreation and Parks, Sy Greben. He had recently taken that job after having served as the Director of the Peace Corps for President John F. Kennedy’s administration. He asked, “Are you being paid to do this work?” Since Mr. Greben was the highest-ranking person in the department, I was afraid to answer for fear that, not having official status as city employees, our painting of park walls would be halted. “No,” I said politely, “I am an art teacher in your parks working on my own time.”

Mr. Greben understood the power and importance of what he witnessed that day in the cooperative spirit of the young painters. He began a course of



action that led to the first City of Los Angeles citywide mural program, making me director of a burgeoning murals program in the predominantly Mexican Eastside of Los Angeles. Freed from my more conventional teaching by the general manager, I began to work full-time with the youth of East Los Angeles at various sites. Three years later, I initiated a proposal to the Los Angeles City Council that became the first citywide mural program. More than 400 mural productions were supported through the Citywide Murals Program under the Department of Recreation and Parks before the program was disbanded. Scaffolding, paints, youth apprentices and stipends were distributed by the small staff of Eastside youth from previous mural crews whom I hired to run the program, supporting hundreds of mural sites in every community of the city.

Within the first year of the Citywide Murals Program, censorship problems arose as communities began to identify issues affecting their lives. Because the program was under the auspices of a city department, local officials tried to exert influence on works that were created within their districts, threatening to withhold funds for the entire citywide program under their purview. One council member, realizing the popularity of the murals, asked to have his own portrait painted on a highly visible public street to help insure his re-election. Controversies continued to arise, of course, and interestingly, the themes that provoked outrage from officials and conservative elements of our city remain controversial today.

Police brutality is perhaps the number-one issue that cannot be painted about freely on a public street in Los Angeles, today as 25 years ago. The irony is that Los Angeles's issues of police brutality have had resounding effects across the United States and the world, with the notorious beatings of Rodney King and a Mexican immigrant woman in Riverside. The devastating 1992 Los Angeles riots were precipitated by the acquittal of police officers responsible for the beating of Rodney King. Today our city is threatened with bankruptcy because of the high-profile Rampart Division police scandal, precipitated by an officer's confession and the resultant indictment of other officers. As a result, a process is underway to acquit and pay damages out of tax dollars to what will prove to be hundreds of so-called gang members unjustly convicted by police via planted evidence and other police crimes. Nevertheless, images on Los Angeles streets that criticize police practices draw instant censorship and guarantee the physical presence of police officers at any mural site where painters attempt to depict such an image.

Additional controversies have arisen over the image of armed men of color, such as gang members (a controversial image even without guns). The image of Huey P. Newton of the Black Panthers in a paramilitary uniform is perhaps the second most controversial depiction in the history of SPARC mural productions.

It was for this reason that the “Friends of the Citywide Mural Program,” a group of supporters including attorneys called to defend the often besieged program, decided to form a nonprofit corporation called the Social and Public Art Resource Center, now celebrating its 25th anniversary. In collaboration with members of the city council who felt that freedom of speech was essential for the expanding mural movement, they encouraged the founding of SPARC as an arts organization that could carry out mural programs in such a way as to animate public discourse and free expression of the diverse communities of the city without direct official intervention.

### **THE GREAT WALL OF LOS ANGELES MODEL**

SPARC’s first project was “The Great Wall of Los Angeles,” a mural. Having worked on murals across the 75-mile expanse of the city through the Citywide Mural Program, I was called to a local site not far from my hometown in Pacoima. The site was a concrete flood-control channel built by the Army Corps of Engineers. Once an arroyo (a dirt ravine cut by river water), the Tujunga Wash flood-control channel was an ugly concrete dividing line within the community with a belt of arid dirt running along either side. The Wash is in Studio City, a few miles north of Hollywood in the San Fernando Valley.

The Army Corps of Engineers first began concreting river bottoms in the Los Angeles basin because of the problem of seasonal flooding associated with the Los Angeles River. This decision to concrete the Los Angeles River would affect the people of the city for generations to come in subsequent planning and development decisions and spiritual discord associated with the land. The concreted rivers divided the land and left ugly eyesores, carrying the water too swiftly to the ocean, bearing pollution from city streets, affecting Santa Monica Bay and depriving the aquifer of water replenishment through normal ground seepage. In a sense the concreting of the river represented the hardening of the arteries of the land. If the river overflowing its banks regularly destroyed opportunities for the real-estate expansion that fast became the chief commodity of the fledgling city of the 1920s, then the river would simply have to be tamed. These first decisions about the river made it easier to displace historic indigenous and Mexican communities in the name of city development.

This development campaign ended in the '70s, when an aesthetic planning division was formed to evaluate how the land surrounding the channels could be better-used and aesthetically improved. I worked with the Army Corps of Engineers’ Aesthetic Planning Division to develop a plan for a stretch of the channel running more than a mile alongside two schools and through a neighborhood. A park was proposed for viewing access to the channel walls. I saw an opportunity for a seemingly endless wall, 13 1/2 feet tall and below ground level.

**"The Great Wall of Los Angeles," begun in 1976 with 400 participating youth, is the world's longest mural at 13' x 2,740'. Located in the San Fernando Valley flood-control channel, built in the 1930s, it depicts a multi-cultural history of California from prehistory through the 1950s. The Great Wall is currently being restored and extended via Internet participation, with support from the Rockefeller Foundation's PACT program.**



The uniqueness of the site provided a safe haven to assemble youth from different neighborhoods of Los Angeles without fear of reprisals from warring gangs, as drive-by shootings, commonplace in Los Angeles, were virtually impossible in the Wash; and the endless wall provided a natural site for a narrative work. Fresh from organizing in the disparate communities of Los Angeles, I was hopeful about a site that necessitated a large team from many places. Unclaimed by any one gang, it was an excellent place to bring youth of varied ethnic backgrounds from all over the city to work on an alternate view of the history of the United States which included people of color who had been left out of American history books.

The concrete river invaded my dreams, its significance becoming clearer to me as the correlation between the scars on a human body and those on the land took shape in my mind. Fernando, a charismatic leader from the original Las Vistas Nuevas team, was brutally stabbed in his own neighborhood's local store the summer of the painting of "Mi Abuelita." He suffered 13 wounds to his torso and one to his face. We were devastated by the attack, but Fernando recovered and returned for the dedication ceremony, continuing his work against violence through the murals for many years until he was killed in his neighborhood park in the 1980s, 12 years after he had abandoned "the life." I asked him after he had healed how he was doing with the psychological scars left by such an attack and he responded, "The worst thing is that every time I remove my shirt my body is a map of violence." It was for this reason that I proposed and designed a series of tattooed images to cover and transform the scars on his body.



Standing at the river on that first day, dreaming of what it could become, I saw the concrete as a scar where the river once ran and our work in the channel producing the narrative mural, as a tattoo on the scar. The defining metaphor of what came to be known as “The Great Wall of Los Angeles” (after a film of the same name by Donna Deitch, film director and cofounder of SPARC) became “a tattoo on the scar where the river once ran.”

The “Great Wall of Los Angeles” production began with 80 youth recruited through the juvenile-justice system and paid by a program to employ economically disadvantaged young people. When completed, this project had employed over 400 youth along with 40 historians, 40 artists, hundreds of historical witnesses and thousands of residents involved in the production of a half-mile narrative mural. The work became a monument to interracial harmony as methods were developed to work across the differences of race and class. As a result, relationships were formed that are now 25 years old.

Today, the basic tenets of the early mural movement still hold true. SPARC is dedicated to ensuring the maintenance of a tradition that finds expression through the hands of well-established artists and of young people with spray cans. The beginnings of muralism in Los Angeles are rooted in the need for public space and public expression. In a city where neighborhoods were uprooted through corporatization (as with the Chavez Ravine sports stadium), or the construction of freeways through low-income barrios or ghettos, or the destruction of rivers, the need to create sites of public memory became increasingly important.

From successful mural productions, methodologies were gleaned that laid the foundation for subsequent SPARC projects. During its production, one of the youth assistants suggested making “The Great Wall” global. “We should take what we learned working with different nationalities here in Los Angeles to the world,” the 16-year-old said. In 1987, we began work that still continues on “The World Wall,” a portable installation of murals by artists from countries around the world offering expressions of world peace.

Through the “World Wall” project, artists were asked to articulate a particular moment, an apex of change for their countries that best described the time in which they live and which could benefit people of other countries and realities. The concept of “from the neighborhood to the global” motivated the development of “The World Wall,” a traveling installation mural equal in length to one 350-foot segment of “The Great Wall,” which could be assembled indoors or outside in a 100-foot diameter circle as an arena for ritual and dialogue. “The World Wall: A Vision of the Future Without Fear” premiered in the summer of 1990 in Joensuu, Finland, where our Finnish collaborators (Sirka Lisa Lonka and Aero Matinlauri Juha Saaski) added a work called “Alternative Dialogues.” That same summer, Alexi Begov of Moscow produced a work during the fall of the Communist Party in the then-Soviet Union called “Waiting for the End of the 20th Century.” In 1999, an Israeli/Palestinian collaboration was added: “Inheritance Compromise” by Adi Yukutieli (Israeli Jew), Akmed Bweerat (Israeli Arab) and Suliman Mansour (Palestinian). Each work has represented years of intense dialogue between the artist-collaborators and work with the children of their home villages. The newest addition in 2001—“Tlazolteotl: The Creative Force of the UnWoven” by Martha Ramirez Oropeza and Patricia Quijano Ferrer—represents the changing role of Mexican urban/indigenous women and Mexico’s relation to the Mexican-American border. These works, combined with the four completed by my teams in Los Angeles, create a giant arena for dialogue while encompassing the viewer in a healing circle. The murals function as a visual primer for societal transformation toward balance and peace. This project continues to move internationally adding work as it travels. Works are in planning stages from the First Nation people of Canada, the Australian Bushwomen and prisoners of Brazil.

In 1988, the concept of “The Great Wall” was taken to a citywide level in Los Angeles with the Neighborhood Pride: Great Walls Unlimited program, which has so far sponsored more than 104 murals by artists from different parts of the city reflecting the issues of diverse groups in their own neighborhoods.

Most recently, SPARC has been experimenting with digital mural-making techniques in the SPARC/Cesar Chavez Digital Mural Lab, created in 1996. This new collaboration between SPARC and the University of California, Los Angeles, is experimenting with new methods of producing permanent



**“World Wall: A Vision of the Future Without Fear” is shown here in Moscow’s Gorky Park in 1990.**

**Begun in 1986, a new 10’ x 30’ panel is added by a native artist from each country to which the Wall travels, each exploring the material and spiritual transformation of a society toward peace. The Wall has been displayed at the Smithsonian and other U.S. locations, and in Finland and Russia. A new panel was unveiled by an Israeli-Palestinian team at California State University Monterey Bay in April, 1998, and one by the Mexican team was added in 2001.**

murals via computer technologies. Research in the lab is yielding new substrates for murals, methods of expanding community dialogue via the Internet and murals that can be replicated if censored or destroyed. Also, during the summer of 2001, SPARC collaborated with the Human Relations Commission’s Shoulder to Shoulder program to develop a project that would bring together youth from different ethnic and class backgrounds from around the city of Los Angeles to discuss issues of race, violence, class and reconciliation. Applying processes developed in mediation between rival neighborhoods in East Los Angeles and “The Great Wall,” SPARC created an interdisciplinary arts curriculum that facilitates dialogue between youth about these issues.

In the meantime, SPARC is continuing to invent ways to create new public monuments that reflect marginalized people, such as urban immigrant domestic workers, *campesinos* (farmworkers) in the fields of California and others. While the methodology of the work is consistent from project to project, the outcome always changes. Our approach to art allows for truly democratic processes and critical reflection to facilitate different artistic visions for and about our society.

Of critical importance to our work at SPARC is the distinction between private and public space. Shared public space has steadily eroded throughout urban America within the last 10 to 15 years. In the city of Los Angeles, where SPARC does most of its work, many urban parks have become occupied territories. A park will be described as controlled by gangs such as “Barrio Nuevo” or “Third Street,” or the park may be identified with one race such as “the Mexican park” or “the Black park.” As defined territories, parks can become among the most dangerous places in our city. Recognition of these



A few of the images from “Witnesses to the History of Los Angeles” commemorate people disappeared from history in the building of the city, displayed at the California Plaza Amphitheatre, with “Toyporina, Gabrielino Nation” in the foreground. These 1996 digital works were produced by the UCLA/SPARC Cesar Chavez Digital Mural Lab, working in collaboration with Cornerstone Theatre, and are housed at the Social and Public Art Resource Center.

relationships of power at a local level is common among residents of all nationalities in our city of nations. If public parks are not accessible to the diversity of all people, then what spaces are? Where can people meet and share the sense that they are citizens of a common land?

In neighborhoods of wealth, people have sometimes taken over public thoroughfares, limiting their use by the outside public. The phenomenon of gated neighborhoods is increasingly common, just as gated cities have grown up around the desire for security from crime and a sense of comfort at not having to deal with those different from oneself.

Under such conditions, where does civic life occur? In the court rooms? In the schools? In the parks? Where do we find places of respite, open places to meet that speak to a shared sensibility about what it means to be a citizen of our city, of our state and country?

The contentiousness of public space has been acted out in the arts in very interesting ways. Legislation to control the production of art in public spaces has multiplied, while rampant proliferation of signage and advertising images has been left unchecked, creating increasing urban blight. Today, for example, it is not possible in many neighborhoods to paint something on the exterior of one’s own home without first gaining permission from a municipal authority. While our First Amendment rights guarantee freedom of expression, content cannot be the basis for banning an image. Nevertheless, municipal authorities regularly engage in discussions of content, violating the rights of artists and restricting images they deem offensive or those that tell stories they do not want told. Artists usually lose unless they have the resources to seek legal counsel,

increasingly a luxury item to most artists, as pro bono legal services have eroded substantially in recent years. As a result, so-called public meetings are held without challenge by the public on critical issues that erode civil liberties.

Many artists, writers and others have challenged local statutes by painting buildings in forbidden colors. In San Antonio, Texas, for example, writer Sandra Cisneros painted her house in a historic district a bright purple with red trim. She was called to appear before the local historic preservation committee and told to change the colors because they clashed with the Victorian feel of the neighborhood. The commission wanted her to paint her home Pilgrim gray. The irony is that San Antonio (not that far from the U.S.–Mexican border) is Mexican in character, yet historical preservationists there look toward England for inspiration. The United States has enshrined belief in the European notions of gray and white as colors that embody the spirit of ancient Greece and democracy. This is historically inaccurate, as we now know the buildings of ancient Greece and Rome were painted in bright colors and encrusted with jewels. The idea that using gray and white will maintain visual tranquility—a blandness—suggests an association between color and class.

In the 1980s, brightly painted murals on Los Angeles's Harbor Freeway commemorating the 1984 Olympics were criticized for being too bright, and subsequently "too violent." A Los Angeles Times art critic even called for them to be painted over or vandalized by the public. Bright colors have become synonymous with excess, sensuality, the other.

Cafés often extend their tables to the edge of public sidewalks in growing competition for public space. Interestingly enough, homeowners and business owners can be sued for accidents that occur on a sidewalk in front of their property, even though the sidewalk is owned by the city. This clearly indicates the mixed message of public passage.

Unlike European cities, where plazas and promenades exist for communal conviviality, few spaces exist in U.S. cities that allow for meeting those different from ourselves. The growing phenomena of gated cities and sidewalks that roll up at night, of pedestrian walkways owned by corporations so that employees' feet need not touch the real streets—these have created an absence of meeting places.

Nowhere is the struggle for public space more pronounced than in the war against graffiti artists. More clearly than any other, the phenomenon of graffiti art, now a worldwide movement, plays out the power relations involved in public-space usage.

Any discussion of public space requires us to think about the fact that today in California we have some 150,000 homeless people who conduct entire lives that normally are private in public spaces. They sleep in public spaces,



they wash in public spaces, they carry out all the life activities that normally would be hidden behind doors in public spaces.

The competition for public space is so extreme that private and public have merged. In many areas of our inner city we've seen front stoops turned into makeshift shops where an elderly woman will sell brooms or a man will sell car parts.

If you ask groups of students in university classes across Los Angeles to define public space, naming a public space in our city, they will most inevitably name a shopping mall: the Galleria, the Beverly Center, the Third Street Promenade. Yet these are corporate spaces where all activities are orchestrated and controlled, and certain people are excluded from participation by virtue of not having (enough) money to purchase goods.

In a recent event near SPARC in Venice Beach, California, the wavering line between public and private became very apparent to those who chose to see it. A hip-hop concert was being held in a picnic pavilion on the beach. Some graffiti artists started to spray-paint images and words on the cement. Police tried to remove the artists, following them deeper into the crowd of dancing young people. In the ensuing confusion—police pursuing graffiti taggers into a throng of hip-hop revelers—the riot squad was called, a fairly frequent occurrence since the 1992 Los Angeles uprising. The police proceeded to sweep the beach, clearing it of thousands of people, whether they were associated with the concert or not. In the process, they asked a young man making a call in a phone booth to hang up and leave the area. The man refused and the cops beat him. A local news crew captured the beating on tape and showed it on the five o'clock news.

By chance, a group of Irish mural artists visiting the area saw the footage and were horrified by what they interpreted as police brutality. They contacted SPARC and expressed interest in creating a mural at the beach showing images of the beating seen on television. We responded by informing them that a mural criticizing the Los Angeles Police Department was not possible, suggesting instead that they paint the mural on canvas and take it to the beach as a temporary expression of their current frustration and helplessness. After finalizing a plan to create a mural using chalk applied directly to the sidewalk as a way to avoid further conflict with the police, the artists called a press conference for the next day. After much negotiation with the police—who immediately appeared as they began making a large and beautifully rendered image of the police beating—they had been assured by the LAPD that they would not disturb the project until it was completed and documented by the media. However when they returned for their scheduled press conference, the mural had been washed away. It turned out the police had hired a homeless man to wash the sidewalk clean.



"Are We Both Americans?" is the question posed on the "Shoulder to Shoulder" banners, hundreds of which were placed on Los Angeles streets to promote dialogue among the city's diverse youth. Images and text were drawn from a series of summer workshops at SPARC involving 14-year-olds of diverse race and class backgrounds in one-to-one exchange. The young people's own words are superimposed on their drawings and portraits.



On the same beach (the Venice Boardwalk is the number-one tourist spot in Los Angeles, with millions of visitors every year), a graffiti artist painted the silhouette of a nude woman in a cartoonlike image. The image was not sexualized, as details of her body parts were avoided by the pose chosen and the stylized imagery. It was in fact quite an innocent image. The police censored the artwork, destroying it for being sexually inappropriate. The irony is that a few feet away, sexually explicit photos of greased, nude beach beauties, male and female, are on sale on T-shirts, posters and postcards; however, these images were in private space—for sale in a shop—as opposed to public space. Such commercial images are not censored by public authorities, while the images created by the graffiti artists were and are now subject to censorship and are often destroyed by public authorities.

#### **AESTHETICS IN COMMUNITY PARTICIPATORY WORK**

Is art work that is participatory and public antithetical to aesthetic practice? Perhaps there is no issue that has consistently plagued community cultural development work and contributed to its secondary status as fine-art work more than the issue of judging its aesthetics. It has long been held that the artist's personal interpretation of a particular moment in time, of an event or experience, is unique. The question we ask ourselves early in the process of creating community-based art is this: is it possible for us as artists to fully integrate the voices of the people that live in the spaces in which our work is being done? The critical element is understanding the process.

Community-based art is not simply one's individual notion of the creation of a masterpiece, but public work that is greatly influenced by the people for whom the work is made. The creation of public art requires a unique sensitivity, the

artist's opening to interpretations that are sometimes distant from his or her own. In a sense, a method of compassionate listening is required, followed by a gestation period wherein the artist must take in the often disparate collective vision, then make it the artist's own by establishing central images stemming from the group experience. In no way does this process diminish the capability to create great public art. Sometimes the process connects instantaneously with the artist, or the artist is able to capture a strong image or idea that later has great resonance within the community.

For example, I am not a farmworker, but when I walked the fields of Central California with farmworkers with whom I was working, following close behind a plowing tractor, I was able to feel a sensation and later articulate through the mural medium a way of life of strong physical toil and struggle. Like many, I was until that moment willfully ignorant of the actual expenditure of human energy and activity required to feed the world's population. When I say energy, I mean the countless hours of stooping and bending, cutting and picking fruit and vegetables by hand in miles-long agricultural concerns. By listening to the people who share that experience on a daily basis, I was able to expand my vision to access or integrate their experience, rendering the resulting artwork more authentic, I hope, and certainly more accurate in terms of giving expression to this reality.

When I worked in the Central Valley of California, I invited farmworkers into my studio in Guadalupe, beginning with a simple exchange of images by the taking of Polaroid pictures. Bolstered by people's enthusiasm—many of them Filipino contract-employees who arrived at the studio following a 10-hour workday—I soon found myself examining a myriad of personal data in the form of family photo albums and other intimate documentation, including, oddly enough, the archives of the local police department. It wasn't long before I'd created the region's first-ever archive of the history of their area. Meanwhile the Filipino workers who stayed late were adamant in teaching me the correct way of stooping and cutting vegetables, how to grip the band of the hoe without causing undue back injury. Not only did this exchange greatly improve my vision of their working methods, it added insight, previously unknown or again only naively grasped, into a people for whom this work is commonplace. In an interesting side note to this exchange, I learned of the higher risk of kidney infections and disorders among farmworkers, who do not like to stop to relieve themselves for fear of becoming misaligned with the movement of the tractor, possibly upsetting the necessary brisk pace of work. Through dialogue with the workers, I discovered this psychology firsthand.

Creating community-based art by the process of accumulating a sensibility and history, one must understand the process of paint application more deeply, critically and sequentially than in other forms of art making. The artist must understand the process of applying paint in such a way that it then becomes

accessible to any person who may be applying it. This requirement led me to better teaching skills and a greater articulation of how (and why) to arrive at the end product. I was by then able to explain my vision and ideas to others more succinctly and in turn to understand them better myself.

As time went on, I began to see more of the nuance in community-based work, such as the varying capacities of the young hands participating in creating the work, what is intended and what the work can mean to each hand, to each person contributing talents. I began to see the process much as an orchestral composition, how such a composition is achieved and enjoyed in its entirety only when all contributing “voices” meld into one virtuoso effort. The oboe pursuing the clarinet is akin to the hand following hand, hands applying image, color, creating meaning, creating a mural. By moving people through this process, I helped enhance the quality of their work and watched as their work matured, evolving from one end of the project to the other. Hands that were amateur at best became—through a deeper understanding of place, senses, capability and process—more deft, creating a much higher quality of work.

### **CLOSING THOUGHTS**

During the writing of this essay, the tragedy of September 11 occurred. Like most people the world over, I was devastated, heartbroken and in shock. Now, 13 days later, as I worry over the fate of the world, I find my thoughts vacillating from one extreme to another. Either I’m having nightmare visions of a nuclear holocaust, or I’m imagining a world that has learned from this great loss the value of life, the value of peace and the great importance we all must place on cooperating and making compromises to achieve these goals.

Working all these years with people in conflict across race, religion, class, other barriers and defined territorial boundaries, I’ve learned that the only way to stop violence is for both sides to have the courage not to retaliate. This is easier said than done, of course, but it’s the only way. I’ve seen how one gang member can hurt or offend a member of an opposing gang and how this results in retaliation, provoking further retaliation and so on and on. One fight can start a gang war that lasts for years, far beyond the time anyone even remembers what started the conflict.

Let’s hope the gangster mentality doesn’t determine the future of the human race. There are a million historical examples of how violence begets violence. But I’ve seen right here at SPARC how hardened gang members are able to call history-making truces. Collaborations for creative work in the arts has the power to harmonize opposing forces: I’ve seen it firsthand. We at SPARC will continue to use “The World Wall,” “The Great Wall,” Neighborhood Pride, Shoulder to Shoulder and everything in our power to help us see that hatred of others and self-hatred are illnesses that can be cured when community and imagination are bridged together.