“Culture, see, is the Gun…”

Pablo “Yoruba” Guzman

***Pasado y Presente: Art After the Young Lords*** commemorates the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Young Lords Organization in New York. Inspired by the community activism of the Young Lords Organization in Chicago (1968), The New York chapter of the Young Lords launched their first action during summer of 1969 by cleaning up the trash-ridden streets of East Harlem. When their demand that the NYC Sanitation Department provide the group with brooms and send trucks to pick up trash on regular basis was denied, the Young Lords and local residents piled garbage on Third Avenue and set it on fire, dramatizing the urgent need for basic human services that were absent in East Harlem and other communities of color in New York. The “Garbage Offensive” of 1969 was the first of many occupations of streets and public facilities in East Harlem, the South Bronx and the Lower East Side that brought the New York Chapter of the Young Lords Organization to international attention and popular acclaim.

What made the Young Lords way of mobilizing so successful in the past and why do the Young Lords continue to inspire us today? Social movements generate a repertoire of strategies, tactics, expressions, behaviors, and material objects to create cohesion among participants and disseminate their ideas to the wider public. Social theorist, TV Reed calls this matrix of actions and objects “movement culture” and observes that the most impactful movement cultures utilize the arts to alter or transgress dominant cultural codes.[[1]](#endnote-1) The Young Lords deployed their collective talents to portray Puerto Rican culture as resilient and reframe Puerto Rican youth culture in New York—pejoratively associated with delinquency and gangsterism—as comprised of organized troops of socially conscious young adults who were unafraid to defy authority in defense of Puerto Rican and other oppressed communities. As Pablo Guzman put it: “The fact that our people, when put against the wall, have managed to kick ass for centuries—that is good, that is part of our culture, right. That’s why we say that the most cultural thing we can do is pick up the gun to defend ourselves. Culture, see, is the gun—as long as we understand that it is not the gun that should control us but the (Young Lords) Party should control the gun.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

The Young Lords’ prominence in our collective imagination of the 1970s is due in large part to their transgressive, yet visually compelling movement culture. As documentary photographs by in this show by Maximo Colon and Luis Carle demonstrate, the Young Lords attracted some of the brightest and best-looking young adults in the city. They were an army of beautiful rebels who could disarm their critics by flashing smiles as they marched down the city’s streets. Dressed in purple berets, leather jackets, dark clothing, combat boots, and buttons emblazoned with a rifle superimposed on the Puerto Rican flag, the Young Lords paramilitary dress code inverted mainstream stereotypes of Puerto Ricans as a docile, insular people. Flaunting their affiliation with the Black Panthers and other radical leftist organizations of color, the Young Lords could also be seen wearing Afros, braids, dashikis, and Panther pins. Their sartorial affirmation of their African and Native American (Indio) ancestries challenged the Puerto Rican community’s internalized shame of being mixed-race people and projected a more complex, heterogeneous understanding of Puerto Rican/Latinx identity that younger generations have since embraced. Female members of the Young Lords rejected the second-class status that women were accorded in society. They fought for and won leadership positions and made gender equality a priority of the Young Lords platform. The Young Lords were also early advocates for the LGBT community, Sylvia Rivera, the founding member of the Gay Liberation Front (1969) was allied with Young Lords members on the Lower East Side.

The Young Lords ability to look good while doing “bad” deeds brought them notoriety in the barrios and broadcast studios across the nation. The cross-disciplinary talent pool in the Young Lord’s central committee factored into their ability to continuously draw attention and sympathy to their causes. Comprised of first-generation college-educated Black and Puerto Rican men and women from working-class households, the Young Lord’s leadership circle—which included Juan Gonzalez, Felipe Luciano, Pablo Yoruba Guzman, Denise Oliver, Hiram Maristany, and Iris Morales—brimmed with creative aptitudes. Gonzalez, YLO Minister of Education, acquired his media-savvy during the Columbia student protests of 1968. Luciano, was a former member of the Last Poets, a Black Power performance poetry troupe. Luciano and Guzman, Ministers of Information, were the group’s charismatic spokesmen. Oliver, YLO Revolutionary Artist and Minister of Economic Development, designed many early posters and illustrations that appeared in *Palante,* the Young Lord’s bilingual newspaper. Hiram Maristany, was the Young Lords in-house photographer. The Young Lords also recognized the seminal Nuyorican poet and playwright, Pedro Pietri, as their poet laureate.

Taller Boricua, the first Puerto Rican artist collective in New York, worked across the street from the Young Lords offices; their posters publicizing protests and cultural events in East Harlem during the 1970s to the present capture the enduring arts-based movement culture that the Young Lords set ablaze. AgitArte, a poster collective based in Puerto Rico and Valor y Cambio, a project to introduce community currency in Puerto Rico are contemporary examples of artist-led activism on the island that re-articulates the Young Lords demand for: “community control over our institutions and land.”

Spanning different generations, nationalities, and ethnicities, the artists displayed in ***Pasado y Presente***represent a small percentage of a global arts community that is connected to the Young Lords by what we might think of as a purple thread of passion for art in the service of social justice and vanguard aesthetics. Works by Coronado Studio, Sophia Dawson, Marcos Dimas, Hautey Ramos Fermín, Yasmin Hernandez, Miguel Luciano, Shellyne Rodriguez, Adrian Viajero Román, Juan Sanchez, Nitza Tufiño, and Rafael Tufiño, show us that the Young Lords’ movement culture leads down a path where art and politics intersect; activists, artists, and the people intermingle; culture is recovered and reconstituted; and Pedro Pietri’s manifestoes are committed to memory:

To be free means to be proud of yourself!

To be proud of yourself means to be creative!

To defend your dreams means to have courage!

To make your dreams come true in your lifetime!

And once your dreams come true, you will never

Have to worry about dying as long as you live![[3]](#endnote-3)

***Pasado y Presente: Art After the Young Lords*** is collaboration between Loisaida, Inc and the Nathan Cummings Foundation.

Statement written by: Yasmin Ramirez, PhD, co-curator

1. T. V. Reed, “Reflections,” in *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Right Movement to the Streets of Seattle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 297. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Pablo “Yoruba” Guzman, “Before People Called Me a Spic, They Called Me a Nigger,” in *Palante*, 77. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Pedro Pietri, excerpt from “El Puerto Rican Embassy MANIFESTO” (1994), reproduced in *El Passport* (1994) and designed by Adal. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)