

MEMORIALIZATION AND PRESENCE

CAPTURING THE LEGACIES OF THE YOUNG LORDS IN NEW YORK

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iPresente! The Young Lords in New York, July–December 2015,
The Bronx Museum of the Arts, El Museo del Barrio, and the Loisaida Center,
New York City.

How does one capture the legacy of a short-lived, decades-old political movement that nevertheless resonates in the present? A movement whose major political positions or goals seem to have been either superseded or derailed in some fundamental way, and yet whose attitude, style, spirit, and force continue to speak directly to many of us, haunting or even summoning us?¹ How does one capture such a legacy as

1 I am not proposing that the Young Lords' activism was not successful. Quite the contrary: despite not achieving their stated utopian goals (the liberation and independence of Puerto Rico, self-determination for all Latinos and people of what was then known as the Third World, socialism and community control), the Lords succeeded in important ways, from founding a lead-paint testing program that resulted in the banning of lead paint from buildings in New York, to establishing the first in-patient drug and rehabilitation program for the working poor in the city and orchestrating the takeover that culminated in the construction of a new Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx. As the scholar Darrel Enck-Wanzer argues, their achievement "should not be measured by . . . instrumentalist standard[s]." They also "constituted . . . a fundamental political consciousness [among residents] in El Barrio that offered [them] a social imaginary through which an active political life could be led." Darrel Enck-Wanzer, "Introduction: Toward Understanding the Young Lords," in *The Young Lords: A Reader*, ed. Darrel Enck-Wanzer (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 4. As Frances Negrón-Muntaner has also argued,

more than a collection of objects, a passive dusty archive of fragments that need to be preserved for the future historian of obsolete utopian projects?

These questions—which are at once curatorial, aesthetic, and ethico-political—were recently addressed by a three-venue exhibition on the legacies of the Young Lords, a New York–based Puerto Rican revolutionary organization that modeled itself after both the Black Panthers and decolonial resistance movements in the Third World.² The show, ¡Presente! The Young Lords in New York, opened concurrently, in July 2015, at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, El Museo del Barrio, and the Loisaida Center in New York City. As narrated by one of the show’s organizers, the historian Johanna Fernández, ¡Presente! was sparked by a question from a Latino teenager at a public discussion at a Bronx Museum about the black civil rights movement. Were there any Latinos involved in the civil rights movement?, he asked.³ To respond to such historical amnesia, Fernández and her collaborators decided it was necessary to return to the history of the Young Lords.

The project, which was five years in the making, eventually expanded to encompass the many kinds of cultural activism both produced and inspired by the Lords, and to include spaces in East Harlem and on the Lower East Side, the other two principal sites of the Young Lords’ activism.⁴ Each of these three very different venues set out to convey, in its own way, not merely the historical trace of the Lords but

such effects helped enable the formation of new, more modern Puerto Rican/Latino political subjectivities: “The Look of Sovereignty: Style and Politics in the Young Lords,” *Centro Journal* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2015).

2 The Young Lords spanned in its various incarnations (the Young Lords Organization, the Young Lords Party, and the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization) the brief period from 1969 to 1976. For a history and analysis of the Young Lords movement, see Young Lords Party and Michael Abramson, *Palante: Young Lords Party* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1971); Miguel Melendez, *We Took the Streets: Fighting for Latino Rights with the Young Lords* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2003); Darrel Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords: A Reader* and (as Darrel Wanzer-Serrano) *The New York Young Lords and the Struggle for Liberation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015); Johanna Fernández, *Radicals in the 60s: A History of the Young Lords Party, 1969–1974* (Dissertation, Columbia University, 2004); and Iris Morales, *¡Palante, Siempre Palante! The Young Lords* (Documentary Film, Latino Education Network Service, 1996) and *Through the Eyes of Rebel Women: The Young Lords 1969–1976* (New York: Red Sugarcane Press, 2016).

3 “¡Presente! The Influence and Legacy of the Young Lords in New York,” in the exhibition catalog *¡Presente! The Young Lords in New York* (New York: Bronx Museum of the Arts, July–December 2015), 20.

4 Much of the information on the development of this curatorial project was obtained from a personal interview with Yasmin Ramírez conducted on August 20, 2016.

the sense of transformative presence that they were—and indeed still are—able to evoke among Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in New York. This aim was evident in the shows’ allusive title: the expression *¡Presente!*, which can mean “Here!,” “Right now!,” or “Count me in!,” has overtones that are specific to these communities. To say *¡Presente!* is not only to answer a call, but to become visible and, as Fernández explains, to respond to an urgent ethical or political demand to reveal oneself and represent a cause.⁵ Such demands resonated strongly for the Lords, who were mostly first- and second-generation immigrant youth raised in the dilapidated, defunded barrios of a city undergoing the post-Fordist transition from a manufacturing economy to a service- and finance-oriented one.

The implied call and response of the show’s title also alludes to the Young Lords’ provocative and performative brand of militant politics, which often depended on modes of street theater.⁶ Their site-specific interventions—termed “offensives,” a deft appropriation of the militaristic language of anti-imperialist popular movements—were calibrated to encourage barrio youth to come out of the shadows as immigrant subjects of color and effectively to decolonize their minds.⁷ The journalist Juan Gonzalez, a founding member of the Young Lords, has persuasively argued that transformation was possible if young people not only recognized the social conditions under which they lived and labored, but especially the power that they had to alter their surroundings and themselves.⁸ Inspired by the principles that Ernesto “Che” Guevara had laid out in his widely read essay, “Man and Socialism in Cuba,” these barrio revolutionaries were determined not only to overhaul society, but to transform themselves.⁹ Through the deployment of cultural expressions in their rallies and events—as

5 “*¡Presente!* Influence and Legacy,” 19.

6 Described by Ed Morales in his beautifully crafted article, “Eddie Figueroa and the Nuyorican Imaginary: Places in the Puerto Rican Heart,” in his blog, Ed Morales: A Blog about the Global Archipelago: <http://edmorales.net/eddie-figueroa-and-the-puerto-rican-imaginary/>.

7 Darrel Enck-Wanzer “Decolonizing Imaginaries: Rethinking ‘the People’ in the Young Lords’ Church Offensive,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 1 (February 2012): 1–23.

8 As historian and curator Johanna Fernández explains, in her essay “*¡Presente!* The Influence and Legacy of the Young Lords in New York”: “Speaking on the [Young Lords’ *Palante*] radio show on WBAI, Young Lord Juan Gonzalez described the role of a vanguard organization: ‘Our people don’t realize the power they have . . . our job has to be, constantly, to show that power.’” “*¡Presente!* Influence and Legacy,” 14.

9 Interview by Iris Morales in her film, *¡Palante, Siempre Palante!*.

well as in their newspaper *Palante*, which printed graphic art alongside materials from poetry readings and musical and dance performances—the Young Lords sought to reimagine indigenous cultural practices. They did so not to recover and preserve some original identitarian essence that had ostensibly been lost during emigration, but rather to detach themselves from colonized imaginaries in order to address the demands of their here and now. By doing so, they effectively developed new and dynamic senses of community and self in a process the New York artist Juan Sánchez has wittily termed “*Ricanstruction*.”¹⁰

Through this particular sense of presentness, the Young Lords spoke to something more complex than a set of ideological positions or “points.” Instead of specific political achievements, they represented what Michel Foucault called an epistemological break. For members of New York’s Latino communities, there is a “before the Young Lords” and an “after the Young Lords.” As the critic Negrón-Muntaner has proposed, with their focus on present-oriented local practices and on the constructed status of their bodies and selves, the Young Lords were the first diasporic Puerto Ricans or Nuyoricans to become *presentes* by presenting themselves as autonomous political subjects and agents. This reorientation helped them move beyond what might be called, following Nietzsche, a cultural politics of *ressentiment* to a politics that derived its force and power from self-determination and self-expression, despite its apparent reliance on an other-oriented, anti-imperialist discourse.¹¹

This activation of a new, self-authorizing force is visible in many of the black-and-white photographs in the three exhibitions, which often project what Negrón-Muntaner has called a “sovereign” look. This attitude is evident in work by Michael Abramson, who collaborated with the Young Lords in their promotional photo-essay book *Palante: Young Lords Party*, as well as in photographs by Fred W. McDarrah, Máximo Colón, and the Lords member and in-house photographer Hiram Maristany. True enough, whether marching at a demonstration, addressing the press at a rally, selling their *Palante* newspaper, serving breakfast to neighborhood children, or just hanging out and answering calls at their local office, the Young Lords cut a strikingly attractive,

10 Juan Sánchez, artist statement, in *Collection Remixed* (New York: Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2005), 76. The term was originally used by Ray Barretto in his 1979 salsa album *Rican/struction*.

11 Negrón-Muntaner, “Look of Sovereignty,” 9.

multiethnic figure at a time when such an aesthetic—initiated by the Black Panthers, whose style the Lords emulated—had not yet been publicly acknowledged, let alone commodified.¹² However, what is most haunting and seductive about such images is not the Lords’ good looks, nor their decidedly strategic style, but rather what that style signified or indexed: a new “sovereign body,” as Negrón-Muntaner has called it, that appeared to be self-possessed and whose power seemed to emanate only from itself, while calling out to others to be present (*jpresente!*) and to transform themselves.¹³

What would it mean to reconsider, let alone recapture, this sense of presence under current, markedly different conditions? How might this be done without reducing or domesticating its counter-hegemonic, open-ended call to transform life through art? How might one reanimate the Lords’ self-determined presence without fetishizing it or turning their archive into “a fashion statement,” as some have warned?¹⁴ How could one “seize a hold of [this archive]” not as a reified object but as a call, interpellation, or incitement that “flashes in a moment of danger,” as the sociologist Agustín Laó-Montes, invoking Walter Benjamin, advocated years ago, at a time when subaltern Latino practices like the Young Lords’ already seemed at risk of being assimilated into a general multicultural academic discourse?¹⁵

Certainly these are crucially important questions for any space exhibiting practices that mix, as the Lords did, the forms of neo-avant-garde art with the ideas, attitudes, and objectives of new social movements. Yet the challenge becomes even more pointed when the institution in question is part of the same movement and historical moment as the activists and artists whose work it sets out to document. This was the case with El Museo del Barrio, which was founded in 1969—the same year as the Young Lords—by the artist and educator Raphael Montañez Ortiz, whose ritualistic destruction of art objects in public space had much in common with the performative practices

12 Negrón-Muntaner, “Look of Sovereignty,” 10–11.

13 Negrón-Muntaner, “Look of Sovereignty,” 7ff.

14 Madonna Hernandez, “The Young Lords in New York Exhibit: A Timely and Provocative Look at a Political Movement,” *Africa Is a Country*, posted September 25, 2015, <http://africasacountry.com/2015/09/the-young-lords-in-new-york-exhibit-a-timely-and-provocative-look-at-a-political-movement/>.

15 “Resources of Hope: Imagining the Young Lords and the Politics of Memory,” *Centro Journal* 7, no. 1 (1995): 34–49. Laó-Montes references here Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 253–64.

of the Young Lords.¹⁶ This was also true of the Loisaida Center, whose activist practices in the late 1970s were inspired by the cultural activism of the Young Lord Eddie Figueroa, founder of the legendary New Rican Village Cultural Arts Center in the East Village.¹⁷ Even the Bronx Museum of the Arts, which was not founded by radical community activists sympathetic to or inspired by the Lords, was nevertheless part of the same moment in which activist organizations such as the Art Workers' Coalition pressured the Metropolitan Museum to decentralize its resources, resulting in the Bronx Museum's inaugural exhibition of art from the Met collection at the Bronx County Court House in 1970.¹⁸

Bearing in mind questions like those above, this essay seeks to examine how these three different venues positioned themselves vis-à-vis this history of cultural activism in which both the venues themselves and their subject matter were implicated, albeit in different ways. While all three venues paid homage to the cultural activism of the Lords, which engaged communities to transform space through art, one can argue that they did so in significantly different ways. Playing to the strength of its Puerto Rican print collection (especially from artists associated with El Taller Boricua, a left-leaning collective of Nuyorican artists founded in 1969), El Museo del Barrio assumed a certain distance from which to express its historical solidarity with the Young Lords and their goals. The Bronx Museum of the Arts attempted to reproduce the sense of presentness and militancy promoted by the Lords, particularly by their women leaders. The Loisaida Center, a community center rather than a museum, sought to engage its audiences in reviving the spirit of the Lords by connecting archive material to the struggles of LGBT people in Loisaida or the Lower

16 On Montañez Ortiz's "destructive" aesthetics, see Rocío Aranda-Alvarado, "Unmaking: The Work of Raphael Montañez Ortiz," in *Unmaking: The Work of Raphael Montañez Ortiz* (Jersey City, NJ: Jersey City Museum, 2007), 5–14.

17 On the influence of the Young Lords, and in particular of Eddie Figueroa, on activism at Loisaida, see Libertad O. Guerra and Wilson Valentín-Escobar, "¡Presente! The Young Lords in New York at the Loisaida Center," *¡Presente!* catalog, 69–77; and Marina Roseman, "The New Rican Village: Artists in Control of the Image-Making Machinery," *Latin American Music Review* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 132–67.

18 On the pressure exerted on the Met by the Art Workers' Coalition to decentralize its resources, see Yasmin Ramírez, "The Young Lords Way," *¡Presente!* catalog, 47–48. On decentralization of the Met's resources as making possible the opening of the Bronx Museum, see Grace Glueck, "Bronx Museum of Art Makes Debut," *New York Times*, May 13, 1971.

East Side. In critically surveying these three approaches, this essay means to explore the cultural, art-historical, and political stakes of exhibitions like ¡Presente!, in which different conceptions of legacy come into contact.

R/ICANSTRUCTING A LEGACY:

EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO

The Young Lords Organization was founded in Tompkins Square Park in the East Village on July 26, 1969, a day that, significantly, coincided with the 10th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution. However, East Harlem—known locally as El Barrio—was the center of the group’s most iconic interventions, such as the Garbage Offensive of 1969 and the takeovers of the First Spanish Methodist Church in 1969 and 1970. The neighborhood was also home both to the left-leaning Puerto Rican artists’ workshop, El Taller Boricua, which made many prints the Lords used to promote their activism, and to a progressive educational reform movement that led to the founding of El Museo del Barrio in 1969.

In its contribution to ¡Presente!, El Museo del Barrio referenced this important history by foregrounding the connections between its own history and related trajectories of the Young Lords, along with other local activists and artists. The show opened with a mixed-media print by the well-known Nuyorican artist Juan Sánchez entitled *Once We Were Warriors* (2000), a work that Sánchez described as a call for the “Ricanstruction” of “our path toward self-determination and freedom.”¹⁹ The print is organized around a newspaper clipping of a black and white photo by Michael Abramson featuring three of the Lords’ best-known leaders: Juan Gonzalez, Iris Morales, and Pablo Yoruba Guzman. From that image the motif of an inverted, purple, Young-Lord-inflected palm tree (such trees historically being a symbol of Puerto Rican identity) seems to transform into a root. This leads the viewer’s eye to a kind of archaeological site where colorful, free-floating African- and Taino-inspired petroglyphs enigmatically stare back from the picture. By means of a transversal cut in time, the artist manages to link two different historical moments in space: the image of the Young Lords as warriors marching, reminiscent of Korda’s photos of Cuban *guerrilleros*, and the cultural resistance of the Taino and African ancestors of contemporary Puerto Ricans, suggestively inscribed in their

19 Collection Remixed, 76.

enigmatic petroglyphs. Yet while this articulation suggests a line of resistance extending from the Lords back to their indigenous and African ancestors, the tone of the piece seems elegiac, calling on Puerto Ricans to return to a lapsed tradition that appears to be in need of reactivation or *Ricanstuction*.

Juan Sánchez. *Once We Were Warriors*, 2000. Lithography, photo lithography, paper pulp, stenciling, chine-collé, and hand-coloring, 34½ x 60 in. Image courtesy of Juan Sánchez, Guariken Arts, Inc..



Reinforcing this ambivalence, Sánchez's piece opened onto a room of vitrines housing personal effects of the Young Lords displayed as memorabilia: purple berets, buttons emblazoned with a rifle rising over the map of Puerto Rico, pocket-sized books on the Young Lords' ideology. Photos shot by the Lords' in-house photographer Hiram Maristany displayed group members in their daily activities, conducting their "offensives"; a wall was covered by a collage of *Palante* newspapers juxtaposed with photos showing papers being distributed and read. Anchoring the recuperative, documentary, and elegiac feel of the room was a multimedia depiction of the second takeover of the First Spanish Methodist Church, where the Lords held a wake for their comrade Julio Roldán (after being arrested and falsely charged by New York police, Roldán died in custody at the notorious city jail nicknamed The Tombs). Stark black-and-white photos by Abramson captured the solemnity and military precision of the Lords' funeral procession through the streets of El Barrio, as well as the moving ceremony in what had been renamed the People's Church, during which they paid their last respects to Roldán before an open casket flanked by armed honor guards. This potent mix of politics and emotion was intensified by references in a range of media: clips from the Third World Newsreel's documentary *El pueblo se levanta* (1971), activists' comments on the takeover of the church, and a testimonial quote from Miguel "Mickey" Melendez's memoir *We Took the Streets*. A video clip of the great Nuyorican poet Pedro Pietri reading from his sardonically decolonial poem *Puerto Rican Obituary* (1969) further heightened this memorializing effect. As in Pietri's text, death seemed to become a master sign for the Puerto Rican condition of colonial invisibility and subordination, implicitly inciting righteous indignation and self-defense.

This solemn tone was broken only by a witty commissioned work by Shellyne Rodríguez, entitled *Calling on the Spirit of the Garbage Offensive* (2015), a sculpture assembled from discarded objects, including a charred broom and a long copper chain with an ebony fist, reminiscent of *manitas de azabache* (the ebony fists traditionally placed on the wrists of Puerto Rican babies to ward off the evil eye). Rodríguez's piece recycled these objects, turning the bristles of the charred broom into ferocious ceramic teeth, and the ebony fist into a sign of Black Power. It was as if these humble objects had come back from their death as refuse to affirm a self-authorizing spirit of rebellion.

In a separate room, divorced from the drama of the Young Lords' memorial, the exhibition displayed some of its extensive collection of prints; these included works by artists from El Taller Boricua, such as Marcos Dimas, and by some of Puerto Rico's most distinguished graphic artists of that era, such as Antonio Martorell and Carlos Irizarry. Along another wall, posters from the Puerto Rican independence struggle were arrayed. The display of prints from El Taller Boricua—notably Dimas's *En el espíritu de Betances* (1971), which celebrates the leader of the Puerto Rican War of Independence of 1868—was thus linked to a larger progressive Puerto Rican arts movement advocating community access to cultural resources in New York, equity for artists of color, and meaningful decolonial arts education for barrio students.

The involvement of El Museo del Barrio in this history was relatively muted, in that it was referenced only tangentially in one of three wall texts citing its founder, the artist and educator Raphael Montañez Ortiz. Problematically, neither the actions of Montañez Ortiz nor his crucially relevant decolonizing aesthetics of destruction were documented. This is not to say that the El Museo exhibition did not express solidarity with the Young Lords' objectives or activist goals. Quite the contrary: prominently positioned in the print display was a lithograph by El Museo employee Domingo García recalling the legendary 1977 takeover of the Statue of Liberty by Puerto Rican prisoners' rights activists, many of whom were former members of the Lords, which was also fashioned into a season's greeting card from El Museo. As the curator Rocío Aranda-Alvarado explained, "[this] gesture of using the image of an 'occupied' Statue of Liberty indicates the significance of the original political gesture as well as the institution's identification



Shellyne Rodriguez. *Calling on the Spirit of the Garbage Offensive*, 2015. Ceramic, charred wood, and copper, 67 × 24 × 30 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

with [it].”²⁰ This said, a more pointed exploration of El Museo’s central role in this history would have strengthened the show, creating an opportunity to reflect on the institution’s own beginnings, in which art and politics blurred and mixed in powerful ways.²¹

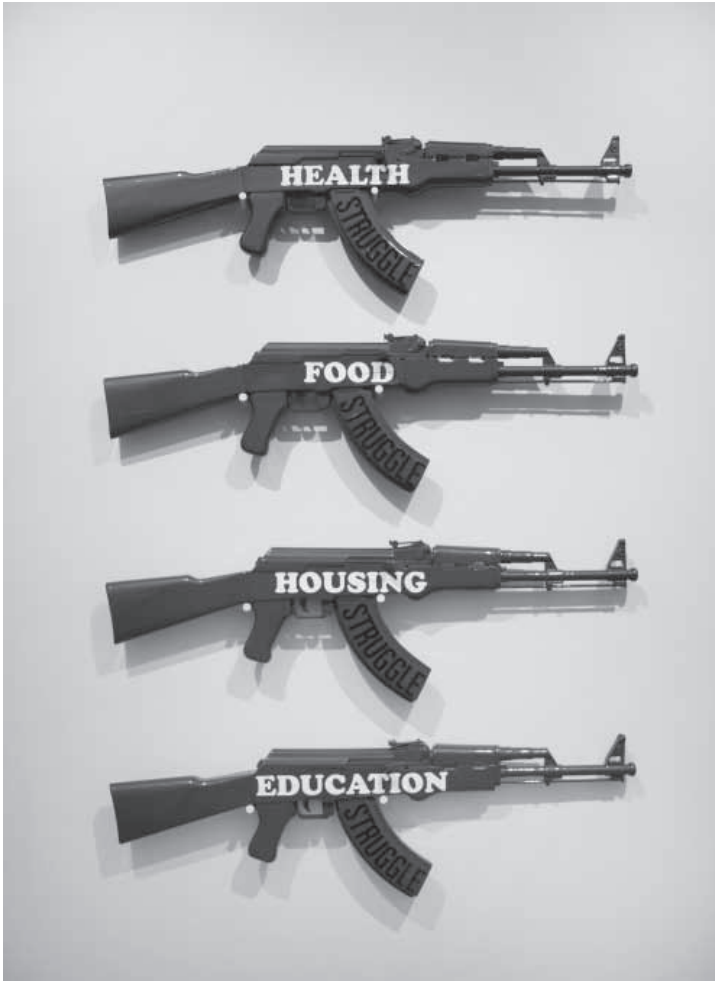
Interestingly, the exhibition closed with an ambiguously self-reflexive work by the contemporary Puerto Rican artist Miguel Luciano. In a commissioned piece entitled *Health, Food, Housing, Education*, Luciano designed and produced four wood, enamel, and vinyl reproductions of AK47s, like the ones that appear in the Young Lords’ logo over the map of Puerto Rico, and painted them in purple, inscribing them in white with the words *health, food, housing, and education*. Literalizing Pablo Yoruba Guzman’s dictum “Culture . . . is a gun,” Luciano conflated the objectives of the Young Lords’ 13-point program with the means to achieve them.²² On the one hand, Luciano’s piece would seem to clearly affirm the foundational links between politics and culture, and between cultural or social goals and the means to achieve them. On the other hand, its dramatic gesture toward the overtly political prints in the show establishes a self-reflexive dynamic that leads the viewer to focus more on the pieces’ design than on their political function or meaning. Such tension speaks to a broader commentary on the contradictory status of aesthetics in what the artist has called our “colonial consumerist culture”: Can style effectively become another form of politics, as the Lords asserted, or does it rather function within a simulacral, self-referential world of signs in which signifiers are divorced from political meanings and susceptible to commodification?²³ Ultimately, the El Museo show oscillated between these two contradictory yet mutually entangled options: the call to militant “*Ricanstruction*,” on the one hand, and a more distanced, wary, and self-referential stance regarding the neutralizing, commodifying powers of art institutions and the art market, on the other.

20 Rocío Aranda-Alvarado, “¡Presente! The Young Lords Legacy and the Collection of El Museo del Barrio,” *¡Presente!* catalog, 63.

21 Aranda-Alvarado’s insightful commentary on Montañez Ortiz’s “destructive” aesthetics for the show that she curated at the Jersey City Museum, “Unmaking: The Work of Raphael Montañez Ortiz,” would have made an enlightening contribution to the understanding of the artistic-political milieu out of which both El Museo and the Young Lords emerged.

22 In Young Lords Party and Michael Abramson, *Palante: Young Lords Party*, 83.

23 See Luciano’s comment in Ramírez, “The Young Lords Way,” 50.



Miguel Luciano. *Health, Food, Housing, Education*, 2015. Wood, enamel, and vinyl, each 10 × 34 × 3 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

AN EVOLVING ARCHIVE: THE BRONX MUSEUM OF THE ARTS

While El Museo del Barrio's show focused on reactivating the warrior tradition represented by the Young Lords, the Bronx Museum of the Arts' exhibition concentrated instead on the development of female leadership in the group. Women's contributions were especially decisive in one of the Lords' most successful and influential offensives, the 1970 takeover of Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx after the death of a Puerto Rican woman from a botched abortion. The exhibition opened with a massive 66 × 90 in. collage-painting by contemporary artist Sophia Dawson. The piece, which is titled *Palante*—the colloquial Puerto Rican Spanish contraction of *para adelante* ("forward"), which became the principal slogan of the Young Lords—shows a female Lord marching. Commissioned by the museum, Dawson's painting centers around a black-and-white photograph by Abramson of a 1971 Lords march demanding the release of their fellow member Carlos Feliciano from jail. In the source photo a marching female figure in a shiny faux-leather coat and a Young Lords beret commands center stage



Sophia Dawson. *Palante*, 2015. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 66 × 90 in.
Image courtesy of the artist.

as two rows of male and female Lords march alongside her, artfully balancing the personal and the collective. In a visual riff on the concept of *¡presente!*, the woman, who is in the extreme foreground and seems about to come out of the frame, marches toward the viewer, inciting him or her to act.

In *Palante*, the tripartite composition of the original

photo is translated into the three colors of the Puerto Rican flag, suggesting that the marching woman and the two rows of figures flanking her, which are more blurred and uniform than in the original, constitute a collective unity in their difference, one that is representative of the Puerto Rican community or nation. What is most compelling in Dawson's reworking, however, is the way the protagonist seems to stand out against that more blurred and uniform collective background. Her figure reads as a radiating, individualized presence; she is self-possessed and self-authorized, a potent visual instantiation of the Lords' central ethos of collective self-determination.

However, this apparent unity is troubled by underlying tensions in the painting's temporality. Although Dawson's piece is titled *Palante* or "forward"—a clear gesture toward the future-oriented temporal alignment of the Lords' thinking, which was consistent with the utopian futurism that was a prevalent trope in decolonial leftist movements—what is effectively privileged in her painting is not the future but the present, a state of always evolving, of always being on the edge. This subtle but pivotal displacement from the Lords' ubiquitous slogan *palante* to this notion of presence (indicated by the exhibition's title *¡Presente!*) was further elaborated in a section of the show entitled "The Revolution within the Revolution," which focused on women's leadership in shaping the Young Lords' ideology and activism.²⁴ Revising a phrase originally used by Fidel Castro in a 1966 speech about the need

24 In my interview with Yasmin Ramírez on August 20, 2016, she confirmed the substitution of *presente* for *palante* in conceptualizing her and historian Johanna Fernández's show.

to fight entrenched discrimination against women by Cuban men, groups like the Women’s Caucus of the Young Lords consistently underscored the need for an ever-evolving struggle against capitalism, imperialism, racism, *and* sexism, rather than a linear, future-oriented struggle that deferred the pursuit of women’s rights to a period “after the triumph of the revolution.”²⁵

Other works by Sophia Dawson captured this complex call for a kind of change that could be at once present-oriented and open to future transformation. In two other large collage-paintings, *Women of the Young Lords* (2015) and *Sistahz* (2015), Dawson reworks other photographs of female leaders of the Lords: here they are pictured emerging out of a collage of *Palante* clippings that show women feeding children in the Lords’ free breakfast program, distributing newspapers, conducting political workshops, marching at rallies, responding to community *quejas* or complaints, and generally performing what was described by the Young Lord women as “the backbone of the day-to-day organizing work” of the group.²⁶ Painted in loose brush strokes in what seems like wet paint, these women appear not as fixed representatives of a single era but as emerging from historical documents and coming to life, as if the archive were not a stable, inert source of meaning but a breathing and evolving organism, always susceptible of new readings, new connections, and change.

Dawson’s nuanced approach to working with the Young Lords’ archive, which extended to collaborating with former Lords, was consistent with the curatorial approach of Johanna Fernández and Yasmin



Sophia Dawson. *Women of the Young Lords*, 2015. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 42 × 64 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

25 See the section titled “Revolution with the Revolution” in *Young Lords Party* and Michael Abramson, *Palante: Young Lords Party*, especially in Denise Oliver’s interview, in which she rejects the notion of a “revolution . . . after the revolution,” 48.

26 *¡Presente!* catalog, 29.



Miguel Luciano. *Machetero Air Force Ones (Filiberto Ojeda Uptowns)*, 2007.
Vinyl and acrylic on sneakers, 11 × 4 × 4¹/₂ in. Image courtesy of the artist.

Ramírez, which eschewed searching for one indelible archival image that might fix the Young Lords' legacy, instead opting to explore an evolving web of connections in order to enable new, unsuspected readings that might yet make the Lords relevant in ways we cannot now foresee. This approach was evident in an installation about the Young Lords' Bronx office by artist Hatuey Ramos-Fermín, titled *Vine pa' echar candela (I Came to Fuel a Fire, 2015)*. Rather than an exact replica of the office, Ramos-Fermín produced a place to sit and ponder the unexpected connections that were made possible by the inclusion of a computer, maps, Internet comments, and displays of recent scholarship.

Yet another section of the Bronx exhibition interrogated the legacy of Lords members who continued their activism after the end of the organization in 1976. A piece by Yasmin Hernández from the series *Archivos subversivos (Subversive Archives)*, entitled *Carpeta: Richie Perez (2007)*, meditated on the cultural activism of Lords member Perez by presenting a multifaceted, multivoiced reproduction of his FBI file. Atop this file, or "carpeta," Hernández superimposed Perez's quotes on activism along with a beautiful and folksy portrait painted onto burlap. This polyvocal portrait of Perez called on the viewer to take an active, self-reflexive role in evaluating the archive to reconstruct Perez's activist legacy. Within this context, Miguel Luciano's installation *Machetero*

Air Force Ones (Filiberto Ojeda Uptowns) (2007) was poised to incite conversations about the polysemic nature of archives, along with their capacity to enable the fetishization of objects. Like the Bronx exhibition as a whole, such interventions presented memorialization as a call to participate in a present-oriented, open-ended process of reconstruction, one that is continuously evolving and engages the viewer in a process of self-transformation and community creation.

PERFORMING THE SPIRIT OF THE LORDS:

LOISAIDA CENTER

Taking on the issue of memorialization explicitly and self-consciously, the show at the Loisaida Center in the East Village opened with a commissioned installation by the multimedia artist Adrián “Viajero” Román that displayed a group of *Palante* clippings collaged with various other objects associated with the Young Lords (the Puerto Rican and the Black Power flags, images of the Puerto Rican nationalist Pedro Albizu Campos, fliers announcing political and cultural events), along with archival documents and a number of ready-mades (votive candles, *shekeres*, conga drums, frames, Puerto Rican *pavas* or peasant straw hats, cans of *gandules* or pigeon peas). Together, these elements formed a kind of shrine to the spirit of the Lords, especially those most closely associated with the cultural activism of Loisaida: Eddie Figueroa, founder of the New Rican Village Cultural Arts Center, the Lord “poet laureate” Pedro Pietri, and Nuyorican poet and cultural activist Tato Laviera. In the tradition of spontaneous street shrines honoring the memory of a fallen community member, this hybrid, heterogeneous collage, or *sancocho*, as the co-curators Libertad O. Guerra and Wilson Valentín-Escobar describe it—referencing Fernando Ortiz’s trope for Caribbean transculturation processes as a dense, uneven stew that combines multiple and contradictory cultural traditions—appeared to reframe these objects as analogues for the broken fragments of memory and experience that people in Loisaida associate with the Lords, to invite viewers to revive or perform them so as to bring back the Lords’ spirit of open-ended cultural renewal.

Drawing on Joseph Roach’s account of popular mourning rituals, Valentín-Escobar has argued that New York Puerto Rican diasporic subjects invoke the spirits of their departed dead by performing fragmented strands of memory associated with them (songs, phrases, gestures, images, and dance) not so much to revive the past as to



Adrián “Viajero” Román. *Loisaida*, 2015. Multimedia installation. Image courtesy of Loisaida, Inc.

create new alternative forms of community, self, and place.²⁷ Unlike Sánchez’s evocatively beautiful *Once We Were Warriors*, Román’s collage suggests that there is no direct way back to the ancestors, only performances of memory that create continually evolving sites for community and self.

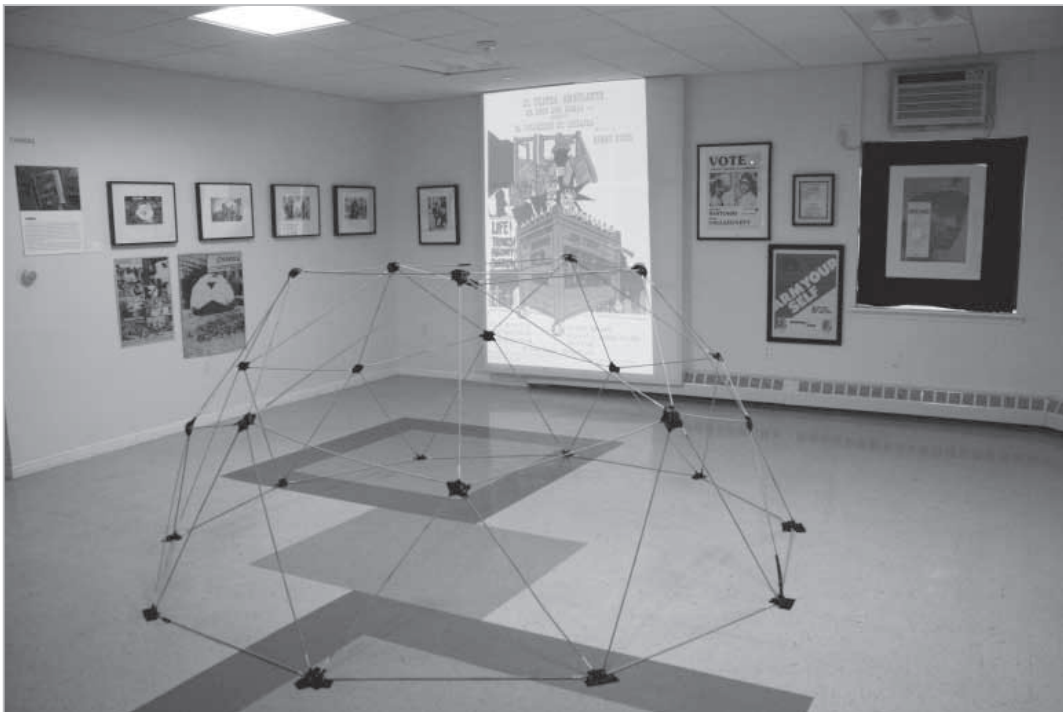
It was in this spirit of open, performative memorialization of the dead that the Center’s curators sought to engage their audience in order to uncover unexpected connections among what Valentín-Escobar has called “the Latino cultural left.” Perhaps one of the most unexpected such connections concerned Sylvia Rivera, the Puerto Rican transgender activist who participated in the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969 and founded the organization Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). Through the use of newly recorded oral histories and rare video footage of Rivera, the exhibition invited viewers to reconstruct possible linkages between the street activism of Rivera and that of the Lords.

The section that most dramatically represented the exhibition’s

27 Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University, 1996). Valentín-Escobar, “‘Nothing Connects Us All but Imagined Sounds’: Performing Trans-Boricua Memories, Identities, and Nationalisms through the Death of Héctor Lavoe,” in *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, ed. Agustín Laó-Montes and Arlene Dávila (New York: Columbia University, 2001).

goals was doubtless a room where a metal, skeletal reproduction of a geodesic dome stood in the middle, encouraging hybrid linkages among the diverse objects, institutions, events, artists, and media referenced on the walls: a photo of the original geodesic dome created on the streets of the Lower East Side in the 1970s by Buckminster Fuller in collaboration with the local activist community agency and cultural center Charas/El Bohío; a picture taken at the dome showing Bimbo Rivas, the Nuyorican poet who coined the term *Loisaida*, reciting from his famous poem of that name; an image of a poster announcing Rivas's play *El piragüero de Loisaida* (The Loisaida Shaved Ice Vendor) for the Teatro Ambulante, or Traveling Theater, *El coco que habla* projected on another wall; and displays of Máximo Colón's dynamic black-and-white photos of people transforming the streets of Loisaida through their performances of music, poetry, theater, dance, and art in Puerto Rican festivals such as Las Fiestas de Loíza Aldea.

Such constellations among disparate objects, artists, institutions, media, and events helped fulfill the exhibition's objective of creating new alternative senses of community, self, and place. They also spoke to the central questions informing the three linked shows that together made up ¡Presente!. As this text has argued, the three exhibitions'



Installation image of ¡Presente! *The Young Lords in New York*, 2015. Image courtesy of Loisaida, Inc.

different teams of curators chose to adopt parallel but distinct strategies to capture the singular sense of locality and presence that makes the Lords' legacies continue to resonate today, in line with the Lords' present-oriented, transformative, and decolonizing call for creative and ever-mutating notions of self, community, and place. The exhibition as a whole thus functioned not only as a story about the visibility of Latinos in the new social and political movements of the 1960s and 70s, but as an exploration of the living, generative potential that the Lords' histories continue to manifest in the three New York communities where their activism had the most impact. The exhibition's three component shows read as concatenated yet subtly different approaches to the archive of the Lords, allowing brief but significant glimpses into the institutional histories of the three partner organizations behind ¡Presente!. While El Museo del Barrio's show oscillated between memorial elegy and professional solidarity, the Bronx Museum reclaimed the margin (in this case, the participation of women) as a powerful vantage point from which to gauge the Young Lords' cultural significance, and the Loisaida Center encouraged its audiences to reimagine the multiracial, multiethnic, and sexually diverse avant-garde street activism that defined the Lords' "offensives." Such diversity of approaches demonstrated not only the complexity of this curatorial task, but the richness and vitality of the New York Lords' visual and performative archive.