

A Complicated Affair: Performing Life on the Margin between Art and Politics

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Our first significant encounter was in the nature of a blind date. That was twenty years ago before IM, Skype or Facebook. I was combing *The New Times* classifieds searching for a job teaching art, as I had recently graduated after two years in art school, received my green card, and was eager to become a documented taxpayer. Moving from ad to ad, my eyes stopped on a call from the Bronx River Restoration Project for an art counselor for its summer program for children. At the time the Bronx was a place I had visited sporadically, so traveling by train from the Upper West Side, where I lived, to Fordham Road was in some ways no more than an urban excursion outside of the “center” and into the margins of “The City.” The job I found in the classifieds was mine for \$8.00 an hour. Yet this was a deal that would eventually transcend its nature as simply employment to mark the beginning of my love affair with the only borough in New York City that is part of the continental United States. In 2004 I moved permanently from Manhattan (where I ended up after emigrating in 1991 from the Dominican Republic) to the mainland, the Bronx. I was no longer an islander.

“An All-American City” proclaimed the metal signs strategically placed at some of its points of entry. This is the All-American City to which I voluntarily relocated from a gentrifying Upper Westside, where no matter how many academic degrees I had, or how white-collar-like I dressed, many of my Caucasian neighbors would automatically link my Latino looks and accent to a job in the service industry. I was their porter, doorman or delivery guy. On the other hand, in the South Bronx, I would be perceived as another Latino *luchando*, struggling, in a “New York City” that up to this day fails to recognize the value of its northernmost borough or the contributions of its inhabitants. In this Bronx I would become a middle-age man, watch my art overlap with life more and more, and become aware of the role of politics in my artistic practice. Politics, I learned, was an unavoidable topic in a Bronx whose streets have been walked by Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Jimmy Carter, and even Ronald Reagan, among others. Politics was an inescapable subject in the Bronx, more so in the South Bronx and in the south South Bronx, where the lack of economic and educational opportunities puts most of its residents at odds with those living in other parts of the City.

In this Bronx I gradually became involved in politics, while consciously avoiding turning my art into a purely activist pursuit. Nonetheless, the question remained for me as to whether or not to make art that would go beyond just commenting on economic disparity, simply examining social injustice, talking to people clad in black, or ending up beautifully hung in an art gallery. Yet it was clear to me that my artistic quest did not reside in an activism devoid of ritual, performance and aesthetics concerns. This disjunctive aspect, I thought, could be sorted out in a space where art, life, activism, protest, spirituality, healing, counseling, social work and celebration would come together without restriction, a locus that would propose dismantling fixed categories: artistic, political or otherwise.

With a general understanding of life in the Bronx, years of formal training in art and very little knowledge of politics, in 2005 I initiated a dialogue with Edwin Ramoran, the former director of Longwood Art Gallery/Bronx Council on the Arts, about my intention of being “baptized” in the water of the Bronx River. In 2008 I continued this conversation with William Aguado, the former executive director of the Bronx Council on the Arts. The ritual I planned would mark my passage from Lebanese Dominican, Dominican York (a Dominican who has settled permanently in New York City), and my transition into a Bronxite. The life-art ceremony I envisioned was to be preceded by a series of on-going exchanges with individuals and groups in different neighborhoods in the borough, inviting those I met to reflect and actively question what it meant for them to be from the Bronx and to live there.



CAPTIONS (All Photos: Alex Villaluz)

1. *Born Again: A Lebanese-Dominican Dominican York is born again as a Bronxite*, 2011. Baptismal procession: William Aguado, *padrino* and Susan Fleming, *madrina*. Ceremony officiated by Martha Wilson. Flower girls Aisha Rose Howie and Aida Celeste García Howie.
2. *Born Again: A Lebanese-Dominican Dominican York is born again as a Bronxite*, 2011. Nicolas' Baptism as a Bronxite.
3. Nicolas Dumit Estevez in *Born Again: A Lebanese-Dominican Dominican York is born again as a Bronxite*, 2011.
4. Nicolas Dumit Estevez In *Born Again: A Lebanese-Dominican Dominican York Is Born Again As A Bronxite*, 2011.

Furthermore, I also hoped to unearth some of the perceptions and misperceptions that attempt to define the Bronx's identity at home and abroad. The voices that would emerge during the conversations with the teenagers and seniors I met attested to the silence to which groups in power had relegated them for years. An example of this, offered by a student at Banana Kelly High School in the Longwood section, summarizes the mingling of anger, love, pain and political ferment. Art, for its part, laid out the space the student's words inhabited: "When I think of the Bronx I think of it as where my home is. I grew up here. A lot of violence in the Bronx, happiness too. People have a lot of experiences. New faces everyday, millions of people, projects, styles of clothing and girls."

To my surprise, the political sculpture that the students at Banana Kelly began to chisel out did not remain a dormant public art monument. Following a visit by Bronx Borough President Rubén Díaz Jr., some of the teens decided to write open letters to him, praising him for his accomplishments, demanding a more thoughtful gun-reduction program, asking Mr. Díaz to address some of the unanswered concerns they had about his invitation to Bronx residents to take back the streets. How can art use political strategies to underline the importance that these letters and the students' voices pose? My response was to exhibit the letters publicly at Longwood Art Gallery and at other venues. It remains to be seen as to whether or not the art audiences who read these documents will remain complacent observers, gallery goers -- art lovers happy to sip red wine and spend a few minutes looking at a cool political piece. In this case, one may be pushed to argue that Art (with capital a) has managed to commodify (Artify) politics.

In addition to the teenagers' voices there were those of the seniors at La Casa de Felicidad, a brand-new building for older residents. A group of twelve of them worked with me for several weeks using art in everyday life to highlight their experiences aging in a South Bronx where buildings were no longer being burned by greedy landlords or by desperate tenants seeking to move out, yet where rents were making it difficult for long-term residents to stay put in the place that many of them saw collapse and which they are now seeing rise again. One of the seniors in the video that documents their actions commented: "People say the Bronx is a bad place, but the Bronx is good because this is the place where I have lived the life that I have." Departing from the premise that the artwork I did with the group can in essence politicize and re-politicize society, as I write this piece, I am co-organizing with José Albino, Director of this senior citizens program, a screening of the video generated by the group. This event has the dual purpose of celebrating both the communal work created and also of moving the conversation of aging in the Bronx to the next level, to a stage of an artistic and political self-awareness where leadership can be fostered, irrespective of age. Is it about making art political or making political art? Or is it about using art as a malleable tool, just a tool, to understand and better one's society?

As the presentation of *Born Again: A Lebanese-Dominican Dominican York is Born Again as a Bronxite*,¹ drew near, I invited eight artists, through commissions from the Bronx Council on the Arts, to join in with independent projects of their own. And so, Nancy Hwang and wowe, Norene Leddy and Melissa Gira Grant, Michael Paul Britto, Ivan Monforte, Kathleen Howie-García (Lady K-Fever), and Linda Mary Montano, walked the streets of the Bronx, talking, hoping, dancing with and visiting some of its inhabitants. These artists and/or their collaborators turned politics into murals, generated videos documenting their struggles, mapped their route through different Bronx areas, and sat for family portraits—from Riverdale to the Grand Concourse. Nevertheless, aspects of the work produced, or at least most of its documentation, ended up in the white cube of the art gallery. Countering this, I would like to believe that in the exchanges between art and society those involved had the opportunity to rekindle the possibility of exercising citizenship. How can one as an artist remain silent?

Nicolas Dumit Estevez is an interdisciplinary artist working mainly in performance art and art-and-life experiences. He has exhibited and performed extensively in the US as well as internationally at venues such as Madrid Abierto/ARCO, The IX Havana Biennial, PERFORMA 05 and 07, IDENSITAT, Prague Quadrennial, The Pontevedra Biennial, The Queens Museum of Art, MoMA, The MacDowell Colony, El Museo del Barrio, among others. He teaches at the Transart Institute in Berlin, Germany. Estevez is currently pursuing a Master in Theology and the Arts at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Born in Santiago de los Treinta Caballeros, Dominican Republic, he lives and works in the South Bronx.

Notes: *Born Again: A Lebanese-Dominican Dominican York is born again as a Bronxite* was conceived by Nicolas Dumit Estevez for Longwood Art Gallery/ Bronx Council on the Arts and presented with collaborating organizations, including Bronx River Alliance, El Museo del Barrio, Banana Kelly High School, Lehman College Art Gallery, two programs from Phipps Community Development Corporation: Drew Gardens and La Casa de Felicidad, and THE POINT CDC, among others.

CAPTIONS (All Photos: Alex Villaluz)

5. *HOPE*, 2011. A three-day performance in which Linda Mary Montano and Nicolas Dumit Estevez made themselves available for three days as walking billboards on which individuals and groups from different Bronx neighborhoods wrote their hopes.

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