

THE LA LUCHA MURALS

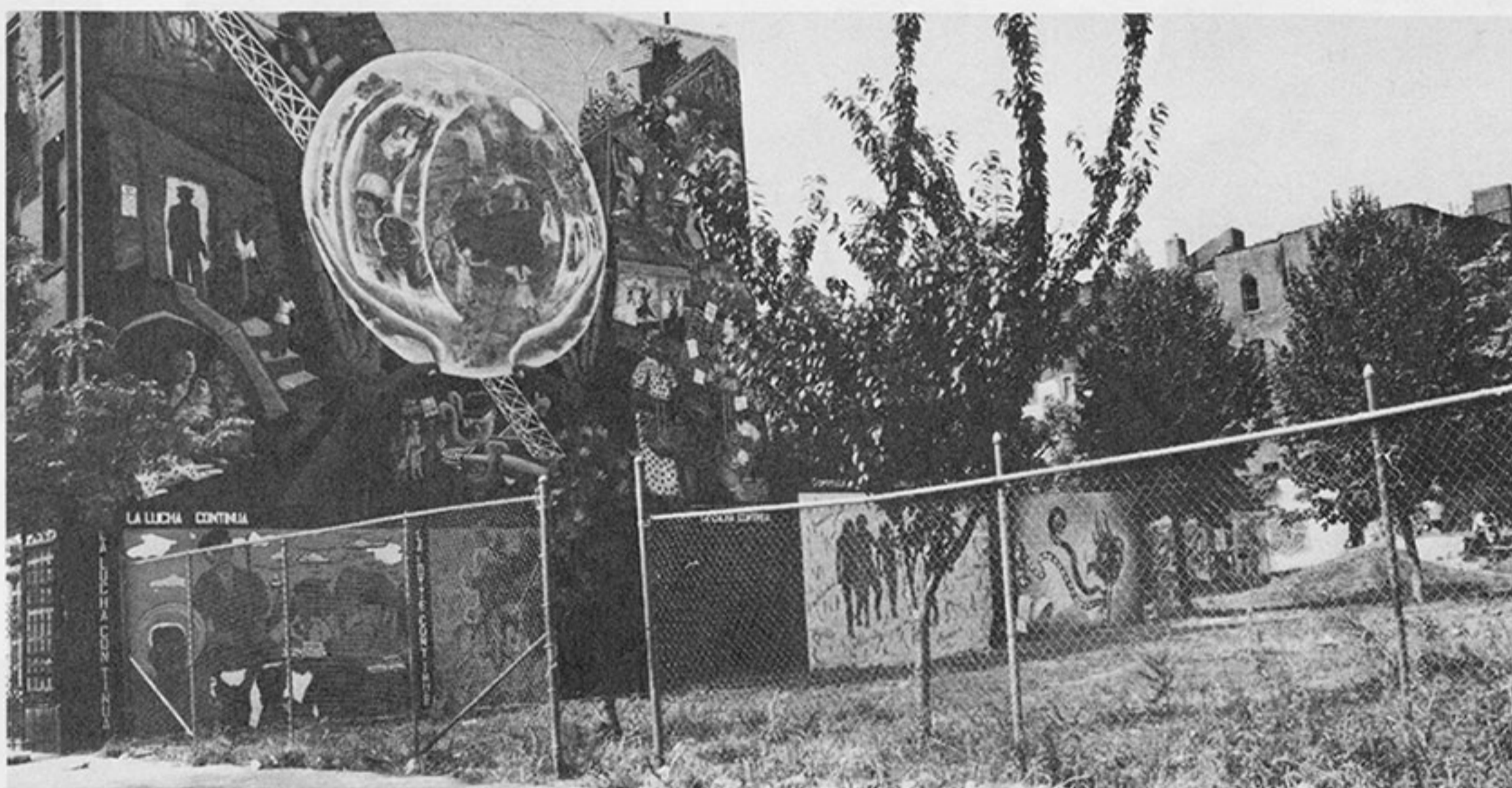
Artists Create Political Art Park in New York City

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES/LA LUCHA CONTINUA project consists of 24 murals painted on four buildings around a central place—La Plaza Cultural—between 8th and 9th Streets at Ave. C in New York City's Lower East Side. The transformation of this vacant lot into a political art park is the result of two months of work by more than 30 artists who donated their time and talents to the project. The more than 6,310 sq. ft. of murals treat the themes of Intervention in Central America, Apartheid in South Africa, and Gentrification in the local community.

The project was organized by Artmakers, Inc., a non-profit, multi-ethnic community murals group founded two years ago. It was executed in conjunction with Charas, Inc. a neighborhood housing and cultural organization. Supplies were obtained from Materials for the Arts, a New York City Department of Cultural Affairs program that collects donations and channels them to arts organizations and several other paint and hardware companies including Golden Artist Colors and Amsterdam Colorworks. The City also supplied some art student interns through its arts apprenticeship program. Money to pay for insurance, scaffolding rental, incidental supplies, and some administrative fees was raised by grassroots fundraising within the political art community. After the project began, we also received small grants from North Star fund and the Citizens Committee of New York. The total cash outlay came to no more than \$3,500 although the budget for such a project, were the artists to be paid and supplies purchased, would come to at least ten times that amount or \$35,000.

The decision to do this project came out of frustration with the blandness of most currently funded community art. It represented a desire to return to the organic feeling of the early mural movement when the personal conviction and politics of the artists and the aroused communities coincided. That frustration was fueled by the knowledge that political murals were happening elsewhere. A slide show by Jim Prigoff of the Balmy Alley project in San Francisco provided the final spark.

Coming on the heels of the Artists Call Against Intervention in Central America and the Art against Apartheid exhibitions in New York it seemed essential that the project deal with at least those two issues. The third issue, the housing struggle or gentrification, is the most important issue in the local neighborhood. The equivocal position of artists in the gentrification of the Lower East Side with the burgeoning East Village Gallery scene and the use by Mayor Koch of artists' housing as an opening wedge for real estate interests, had created a movement of young artists living in the Lower East Side and working against Gentrification. Two shows sponsored by the Not for Sale committee of PADD (Political Art Distribution/Documentation) expressed the high level of artists' interest and activism around this issue. In addition, we felt that it was an important educational and political statement to link these three struggles and emphasize the fact that they are the same struggle against the same enemy. The universality of this struggle for freedom and justice was emphasized in the project by the use of the words "the struggle continues" in many different languages as a logo to frame and separate the individual murals.



Call-out to Artists

In mid-April a call was sent out by Artmakers for "artists of conviction" interested in painting political murals to come to an open meeting. These and other artists recruited from the Art against Apartheid group and local community formed the core of the project. The group was mixed including minority, political, graffiti and East Village artists. A majority were women. The artists became the driving force for the project and provided the energy that made it possible. Design proposals were submitted and approved by a com-

mittee composed of Artmakers, Charas, and other concerned community people.

Once the designs were chosen, determining their exact location was the next challenge. Across from this building, also on Eighth Street is a trendy nightclub, 8 BC. The owners of the club were initially enthusiastic about the project, but it soon became clear that there was a large gap in taste between them and the more explicitly political artists. They did not like what they considered to be social realist art and wanted their building to convey a more East Villagay expressionist character. A kind of compromise was worked out in which the West wall of their building would be painted by a group of four artists associated with the club and the murals facing the club would be chosen jointly from our designs. In return, the East wall of the club, where some neighbors had planted a garden, would be curated entirely by Artmakers. The murals also had to be accepted by the organizers of that garden and another garden which had formed on the east end of the lot on Ninth St. The main principle behind locating the designs was to have all of the different themes visible from each viewpoint.

Two sub-themes which appeared in the actual design were feminism and

police brutality. Rikki Asher, who painted her wall in July because she was leading the Arts for a New Nicaragua brigade of muralists which painted three murals in Nicaragua in August, brought together the cultures and women of Central America and Africa in her design. Susan Ortega, one of the organizers of the Art against Apartheid exhibitions, portrayed South African women marching against apartheid, while Betsy McLinden used two symbolic female figures as agents for self-determination in the three regions. The police brutality theme was explored in three murals dealing with the story of

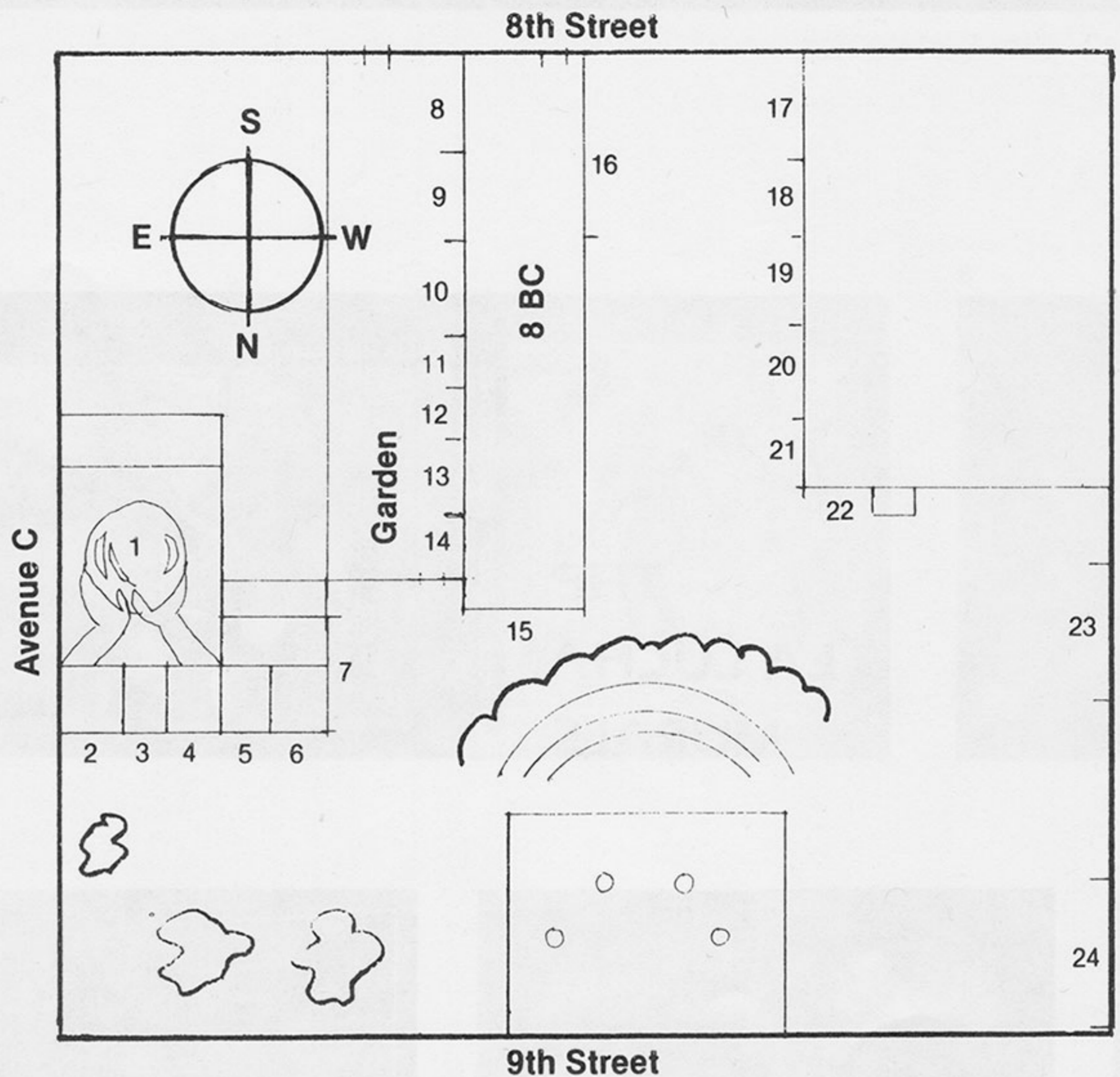
Michael Stewart, the young graffittist arrested and killed by police earlier this year. Seth Tobacman, a political illustrator and creator of World War III comix, created a dynamic image of confrontation between a youth and a mounted policeman—a local reference since Tomkins Square park, only a block away, is patrolled by cops on horseback. Etienne Li told the story comic book style in panels, while Chico, a local graffittist become artist, used spray paint.

The keynote mural, 40 x 30 ft., which I directed, dealt with gentrification and was designed and painted by a collective group of artists. An earlier mural on the same wall by Freddy Hernandez of Cityarts Workshop had been destroyed four years earlier when the landlord tarred over the mural to waterproof the wall. The former mural, a depiction of Chinese, Latino, and African culture is quoted in a corner of the present one in a scene of artists painting a mural.

We were concerned about the durability of paint on a tar surface since tar expands and contracts more than even the flexible paint and decided that like graffiti (which seemed to last fairly well), we would put only a thin layer of oil based paint on the wall leaving some of the tar bare. In that way we hoped that while there might be some minor cracking (as in old oil paintings) the paint would probably not peel off the wall. In addition to wanting to leave some black, we also decided that we wanted to present a mainly positive image.

Painting the Murals

Collectively we decided on the basic composition—a crystal ball with a possible future in the center surrounded by a series of vignettes representing the current reality and ranging from negative to positive. After the images were chosen different artists worked out each of them. Keith Christensen worked up the homeless family and shark-wrecker-limo scene; Marguerite Bunyan the evicted family and the fire escape scene; Etienne Li the sweat equity workers and the cultural center; Joe Stephenson the solar rooftop, Rikki Asher the market, and myself the crystal ball images. The idea for the police figure came from a drawing by Judith Quinn while the brick patterns were contributed by Therese Bimka. In the painting process some of the original artists dropped out and others joined in: Karin Batten, Camille Perrottet, and our two interns, Robert Brabham and Dorianne Williams. Beneath the large mural are five smaller murals: An image of Nicaragua by Karin Batten; a root-image containing the names of local grass



LA PLAZA CULTURAL

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| 1. Collective Mural,
Eva Cockroft, Director
With: Rikki Asher, Karin Batten,
Therese Bimka, Robert Brabham,
Marguerite Bunyan, Keith
Christensen, Etienne Li, Camille
Perrottet, Judith Quinn, Joe
Stephenson, Dorianne Williams | 10. Pat Brazill |
| 2. Karin Batten and friends | 11. Seth Tobocman |
| 3. Antony Buczko and
Keith Christensen | 12. Noel Kunz |
| 4. Cliff Joseph | 13. Betsy McLinden |
| 5. Camille Perrottet | 14. Etienne Li |
| 6. Maria Domingez | 15. Chico |
| 7. Susan Ortega and friends | 16. Luis Frangella |
| 8. Willie Birch | 17. Kristen Reed and Robin Michals |
| 9. Marilyn Perez | 18. Leon Johnson |
| | 19. Leslie Lowe |
| | 20. Dina Burstyn |
| | 21. Noah Jemison, Nora Jemison |
| | 22. Nancy Sullivan |
| | 23. Rikki Asher and friends |
| | 24. Amy Berniker, Ken Bloomer and
Allison Lew |

CHARAS, Inc. 605 East 9th Street, N.Y.C. 10009

roots organizations by Keith Christensen with a background by Anthony Buczko; An image of African Liberation by Cliff Joseph in which the flag becomes subtly organic with a red sky, green jungle, and within the black, the mass of people rising; An image of equality and freedom represented by naked children playing with a ball, and a symbolic image of a Puerto Rican mask by neighborhood activist and muralist Maria Dominguez.

Perhaps the most popular of the murals was "The Final Judgement" a collaboration by Robin Michals and Kristin Reed in which the jury that judges the arms merchants below is composed of portraits of neighborhood residents as well as world leaders like Nelson Mandela and Daniel Ortega. On the same wall is an image of South African Liberation by Leon Johnson, himself from South Africa, symbolic dancers on a rooftop by Leslie Lowe, an



exquisitely colored semi-abstract rendering of marchers at rest by Noah Jemison, and a ceramic piece by Argentine born artist Dian Burstyn. The ceramic, composed of separate pieces of clay mounted in a circle and signifying the endurance and break-up of the ancient Meso-American culture, is mounted on a rough cement section of the wall, itself a contemporary ruin.

The end wall was marred by a large and elaborate dog cage built of chicken wire and poured cement which suddenly appeared one night last spring. The anti-gentrification mural designed by Nancy Sullivan and Janet Vicario, and painted by Nancy Sullivan was given that spot. Nancy Sullivan, herself a Lower East Side dog-owner, decided to integrate the cage into the design and a painted image of the caged dog appears in the mural.

The garden wall, on the East side of 8 BC, contained some of the most negative and therefore controversial images. In addition to the murals mentioned earlier, there is a scene of the struggle against gentrification by neighborhood artist, Willie Birch; a lull in the fighting in Nicaragua by Marilyn Perez; the tomb of the Disappeared painted in

slashes of vivid color by Pat Brazill; and the marvelously complex and detailed gentrification octopus by Noel Kunz. The only murals not completed to date are those on the West wall of 8 BC which were peripherally connected with the project in that we were providing paint and equipment but over which we had no control.

Dedication Ceremony

To celebrate the completion of the murals and present them to the community, there was a dedication fiesta on Saturday, September 14, 1985 from noon to 7 pm. Organized by Charas and Artmakers working together. The program included performers representing the African, Latin, and political themes of the murals as well as two salsa bands. Neo Mnumzana, UN representative of the African National Congress and Roberto Vargas, Cultural Attache of the Nicaraguan Embassy provided a political context while MC's Chino Garcia, president of Charas and a long time community activist and the poet, Bimbo Rivas tied all the threads together. The weather was glorious and hundreds of people, a mixture of the political art world and local community, attended.

The dedication did not signify an end to the project. In a sense, it is only a beginning. Now that the images exist they need to become widely known. Hopefully, the La Lucha project can serve as the model for many more political art parks in other cities and countries. Painted images cannot stop wars or win the struggle for justice, but, they are not irrelevant. They fortify and enrich the spirit of those who are committed to the struggle and help to educate those who are unaware.

For the local community, the result is more tangible. An empty lot has become a place of beauty. For myself and the other artists who participated in the project, there was the sense of joy that comes from working successfully with others and the satisfaction of having accomplished something both public and coming directly from the heart.

Eva Cockcroft

Eva Cockcroft, Executive Director of Artmakers, was the coordinator for the La Lucha project.

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