

Community and Society Archive

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The Power of the Street Artist

By Robert Rabinowitz

Soon after we moved to the Upper East Side of Manhattan from London, I noticed, spray-painted onto the sidewalk outside the entrance to the 96th Street Subway stop, a magnificent painting of Jesus on the cross, an angular, muscular Jesus with his head drooped across his chest. Across the top of the painting the artist, who went by the name of de la Vega, had sprayed, 'Who created this divide?' I was not sure at the time what the divide was, but I soon learned. 96th Street marks the boundary between the Upper East Side and el Barrio, Spanish Harlem. It is a racial, social and economic divide. What excited me about the painting was the use of religious symbolism to mark a particular area of public space as special or distinct. A walk to the other side of 96th Street was not simply to travel through space but to cross a boundary freighted with social and historical meaning. To the artist, Jesus himself was crucified on this boundary through the suffering and social exclusion of those on the wrong side of it.

The painting reminded me of a favorite place in London, a semi-circular observation point on the pedestrian walkway of Waterloo Bridge which links The Strand with the South Bank, a huge arts complex. Someone had painted the words 'Jericho' and 'Jerusalem,' one on each side of the observation point. Again, I didn't know the meaning of the inscriptions when I first saw them, but I sensed that they transformed the observation point in some way, so that it existed not only in geographical space but upon a mythical plane as well. I later learned that the parable of The Good Samaritan was set on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem. One of the many homeless people who can be found living or panhandling in that part of London had no doubt painted the words, turning Waterloo Bridge into a Biblical road and the homeless people panhandling on it into innocents beaten and robbed.

Not long after I found the painting of Jesus (which has just been destroyed in the name of street repair), I noticed some more of de la Vega's work, brief epithets chalked onto the sidewalk or stuck there with masking tape, little exhortations towards optimism such as 'Become your dream,' or brief social critiques such as 'Magazines make my girlfriend feel ugly.' There were also pictures taped or chalked onto the sidewalk such as a hand holding a rose. I also began to spot the messages down in the East Village or scrawled around the Conservatory Garden in Central Park. I began to "collect" the messages, always looking for new ones, and to discuss them with my friends. Some people found the messages trite; some people found them pompous. Some people were deeply offended by de la Vega's claim that 'Women who dress provocatively become merely flesh in the eyes of men.' Some were even offended that de la Vega should be writing on public sidewalks, although none of the messages were permanent. But there was no doubt that the messages were making a small but significant change in my neighborhood. The streets were a little less anonymous - not just spaces in between places one really wanted to be. And some of the messages became sources of advice for me, as if my grandmother had whispered them to de la Vega as he chalked on the sidewalk.

I was so intrigued by the mysterious artist that one day I surfed the Internet looking for a way to contact de la Vega. I discovered that he was male, that his first name was James and that his studio was seven blocks north of my apartment. I was a little nervous, however, about crossing the boundary to East Harlem to go to meet him, so I enlisted a friend to walk with me. We went on the afternoon of the Puerto Rico Day parade, while Madison Avenue and Fifth Avenue were playing an uneasy host to East Harlem. Although we did not meet de la Vega, we found more messages on the sidewalk, more sidewalk paintings with religious themes and wall murals celebrating Puerto Rican heroes. But we also found a neighborhood quite different from our own; a neighborhood which made us feel a bit nervous at moments but which impressed us with the sheer vitality of its street life, with people sitting on the sidewalk in summer chairs, playing cards, laughing and talking while listening to music from their car stereos.

Later in the year, one Friday night in October, I discovered that I was not alone in responding to the intriguing allure of de la Vega's street art. For several weeks messages had been appearing on sidewalks around the neighborhood advertising an art show to be held at de la Vega's studio. On the night of the show, I met with a couple of friends between ma'ariv and dinner and we walked up Lexington Avenue to the studio on 103rd Street. For the first few blocks, the streets were pretty quiet and dark, but then we crested the hill between 102nd and 103rd to be greeted by the sight of hundreds of people of all ages and races milling around in the streets. People were spilled across the sidewalk in front of de la Vega's tiny studio where wine, chips and crudités were being handed out. The main show was in a school yard one block away.

As I examined the paintings and photographs, watched the video and listened to the band, I reflected on the make-up of the crowd. Right next to me, a group of young black men in baggy trousers, boots and bulky jackets shook hands, hugged and performed various actions of greeting. I know that I would not normally have felt quite so relaxed in their presence on an East Harlem street at night. The crowd also included a lot of twenty-somethings and families with kids. There were people who had obviously come from outside the neighborhood and there were local people who had dropped by to check out the commotion.

And I thought about de la Vega's achievement. With nothing more than a few words chalked on the street, he had not only succeeded in making my own neighborhood feel a little bit more like home, but he had also succeeded in getting people to cross the very boundaries about which he had previously expressed such despair. He brought people together in an atmosphere of celebration, overcoming fear and resentment. He gave people pride in their own neighborhood and he showed those who came from outside the warmth and vibrancy of East Harlem, counteracting stereotypes of poverty and violence. It seems to me that every community needs somebody like de la Vega, somebody to make us aware of our boundaries and of the people who live on the other side of them. And while such a person cannot remove those boundaries - that requires concerted action by a whole community - he or she can at least help us to imagine what life would be like if those boundaries were overcome. This is also a personal challenge as we think about our own New Year's and Millennium resolutions. How can I become a "de la Vega" for my own community?



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