



Archive of activist art is in the making

By Alina Oswald - 12/28/2022



Guadalupe Maravilla, Avram Finkelstein, Vivian Crockett, and (on monitor) mayfield brooks at the New Museum. Photo by Alina Oswald.

For several consecutive years, Jersey City, has been named “the most diverse city in the United States” and one of the most diverse cities in the world. Its inspiring and engaging artist and activist community is proof of that. Hence, it’s no surprise that Jersey artists and activists are often drawn to events highlighting similar diverse communities, such as the event hosted by the [New Museum](#), with the Rubin Foundation, this past October in New York City.

The Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation “believes in art as a cornerstone of cohesive, resilient communities and greater participation in civic life.” Its early mission was “to support the arts, meet urgent human needs, defend liberty, and promote social justice.” And ever since its inception in 1995, the foundation has continued to do just that while expanding its projects to address other social issues.

In February 2022, the Foundation welcomed a new artistic director, Anjuli Nanda Diamond. She has worked for the foundation for the past decade and is the editor of *An Incomplete Archive of Activist Art* [Hirmer Publishers, 2022], a two-volume book “reflecting on the Foundation’s art and social justice initiatives.” The first volume focuses on the emergence of a cultural shift and the arts’ influence on forming community and justice. The second volume takes a closer look at artwork featured in the Foundation’s exhibition and event space.

This past October, Diamond stopped by the New Museum to talk about the new book. The event also included a “celebratory conversation” with renowned artists and activists whose “practices engage community building, organizing, pedagogy, and resistance” — Guadalupe Maravilla, Avram Finkelstein, and mayfield brooks.

Guadalupe Maravilla is a transdisciplinary visual artist, choreographer, and healer. He acknowledges his past by grounding his practice “in the historical and contemporary contexts belonging to undocumented communities and the cancer community.” Maravilla comments, “I create new mythologies that take the form of real and fictionalized rituals based on my own lived experiences.” He’s famous for his large-scale Disease Throwers sculptures, the shrines he creates by incorporating materials collected from across Central America, and various sonic instruments such as gongs. His work is in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and other museums in South America and Europe. Avram Finkelstein is a revered artist, activist, and author. His award-nominated book *After Silence* ([UC Press, 2017]) not only tells a history of AIDS through its images but also sheds light on the artist’s decision to focus on “cultural production for public spaces” as a means to consider the political implications of AIDS.



Avram Finkelstein at the New Museum. Photo by Alina Oswald.

Finkelstein is also the founding member of the Silence = Death and Gran Fury collectives. “Silence = Death has every bit of meaning to me now as it did when we were designing it,” he

once told me. “It really helps me to resituate myself in my own politics and in my own practice.”

He might be best known for the Silence = Death collective and poster. Yet, he has created other remarkable activist art such as *Women Don’t Get AIDS They Just Die From It* (Gran Fury, 1991), the *Four Questions poster* [Gran Fury, 1993], and, more recently, flash collectives. Speaking of collectives and art in public spaces, he would say, “Collectives are organisms; our commons, an exercise in collectivity.”

Avram Finkelstein’s work is in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MoMA, The Whitney, the Brooklyn Museum, the New Museum, and other public spaces. He is currently in residence at the Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program.

Movement-based performing artist, vocalist, urban farmer, teacher, and writer mayfield brooks joined the conversation via Zoom. “I am deeply humbled to be alive, gently journeying on this generous planet. I am also truly appreciative that I can share [...] my work with you in this lifetime. I am also forever grateful for my black queer ancestors, Marsha P. Johnson and Julius Eastman, who have guided me with shimmer and shine on my journey this year,” brooks says. Their work includes performances, installations, and collaborations. *The Viewing Hours* is particularly memorable in that it shows the artist immersed in a bathtub filled with water, covered in decomposing flowers and leaves. Thus, *The Viewing Hours* engages guests “in the act of witnessing as a first step in recognizing centuries of anti-black violence.”



Vivian Crockett at the New Museum. Photo by Alina Oswald.

Brazilian-American scholar and New Museum curator Vivian Crockett moderated the conversation. She is a Ph.D. candidate in art history at Columbia University. Her scholarly contributions have appeared in publications from institutions, including the Leslie-Lohman Museum and the Studio Museum in Harlem. Through her work, Crockett focuses on modern and contemporary art “at the varied intersections of race, gender, and queer theory.” Among

many other projects, she co-curated the *2017 Day With(out) Art: Alternative Endings Radical Beginnings*.

The insightful, “celebratory” conversation attracted a diverse and inquiring audience from Jersey City, the New York City Metro area, and worldwide. The eye-opening panel discussion also highlighted the practices and cultural shift taking place over the years in the art scene, especially in New York City, related to the “political stakes,” the urgency, and the framework surrounding collective care. It also emphasized the role art, in particular public art, has in documenting history and healing.

The process of documenting and healing through art, mainly through public art, is complex. It touches the mind, body, soul, and society. And as part of this complex process, artists continue to use institutional spaces for their work; blend art, social justice, and activism; and, thus, continue to create work. After all, the goal is to continue adding to the yet incomplete archive of activist art to develop and document “an enriching, energizing compendium” worth revisiting.

Find out more by visiting online:

The Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation: sdrubin.org/

The New Museum: newmuseum.org

Avram Finkelstein: avramfinkelstein.com

Guadalupe Maravilla: guadalupemaravilla.com/

Mayfield brooks: improvisingwhileblack.com/

Vivian Crockett: viviancrockett.com/