

ARTOGRAPHY: Arts in a Changing America  
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**New Urban Arts**

*Written by Bill Westerman*

The first thing I noticed when I entered the graduation and fashion show at New Urban Arts was the intense energy of the crowd, probably about 200 people, most of them young students and young adult artists who comprise New Urban Arts' constituency. Judilee, who arrived separately, noticed and commented on it too. There was an enthusiasm in the gallery that was powerfully palpable, and served as a fierce entree to the vitality and importance of this organization. I didn't know what to expect of the idea of a graduation and fashion show, because the words themselves hint at something perhaps ceremonial in the most superficial and drab sense. But this was the opposite: it was a celebration of creativity and mentorship that not only attested to the quality of the work but also the depth of the accomplishment.

The fashion show was only the culmination of the event, and in some ways it was the least important element of the program, except of course for those who had designed some clothes. But there were two other elements of the event: the exhibition of work, and the graduation ceremony. The walls were covered with student work, ranging from work that was clearly by young people just beginning artistic careers, to work that was highly realized. In particular, the photographic work was very well done, one of the prints I admired by one of the youths had actually won a citywide photography contest. The work overall showed a willingness to experiment with new forms and techniques and in general a lack of fear about negative judgment. It was evidence of what board member Holly Ewald described as their goal for youth to "find voice to express what they are interested in, and to find voice to express who they are." This was echoed independently by one student of four years, Rebecca Volynsky, now at Boston University, who told us, "Because of this place I was able to find my own voice, with the guidance of mentors."

The mentorship piece is more complex and is one of the things that sets New Urban Arts apart from other organizations, and certainly other free arts classes I have seen elsewhere. I am sure this is described in their application. Each semester, 20 or so artists serve as artist-mentors to the students, and at current levels, about 300 students participate each school year. By their own admission, some of these [students] come only every few weeks, some come on a regular basis, several times a week. The point is not just instruction, but, in their words, to build deep and more sustainable long-term relationships between young and professional artists. The participants emphasize this is a relationship formed by both parties, that the choices the students make about their learning is an equally important part of the process. So the mentoring relationship is beyond instruction and encompasses encouragement, reaction, sharing, exchange, words you seldom hear when people describe inner city public education, or even at universities, frankly. Jason Yoon uses words like "bravery" and "values" when talking about the quality of the mentorship and the instructional style. At the graduation event, each student had to present his or her mentor with a flower, while each mentor presented his or her students with a book chosen for the student and a speech about how the student had developed, in front of the whole audience of some 150-200 people. There is a certain ingenuousness to all this that not only was inspiring, but also reveals how difficult it is to form strong, positive, artistically supportive relationships in a culture that only encourages materialism, competition, and cynicism.

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It is more than mentorship in just kind of a feel-good way, though. People actually speak of the transformation of lives that takes place through artistic instruction here. Artist-mentor and program graduate Kedrin Frias analyzes the individual transformation as a three-step process. Students come with “a set of impossibles,” meet people who say “try this,” and then find they end up succeeding, not failing. In the end, they “destroy all the impossibles or shoot them to the side.” He concludes, “People come here and we start chipping away at the things that hold you back.” What this does is transform the lives of young people with no artistic opportunities in school into lives where they can find themselves as creative individuals, whether they pursue a career in the arts or not. What I found, in informal conversations with several of the students during the event, as well as during our formal interview, was that young people who never considered they would be artists are finding new possibilities for life through this free program that eschews regimentation and formal attendance requirements and other aspects of “schooling.” Most memorably, I talked with one artist-mentor (and student alum), Abel Hernandez, now attending the Rhode Island School of Design on a full scholarship. Before I told him I was on a site visit from Artography, I asked him, if he thought he would be attending RISD now if it weren't for New Urban Arts? He replied, “I wouldn't be attending *college* if it weren't for New Urban Arts... Smart decisions happen here, and that was all free stuff that came in addition to the art.”

Jason Yoon, an experienced art educator and nonprofit administrator and the new Executive Director of this 13-year-old organization, thinks and talks about transformation and about this work as a form of social justice. There is, he says, “in my opinion, no more powerful means of social change than what young people do here.” But in addition to the students' transformation, Jason recognizes that the artist-mentors, of whom he was one, are also transformed by the relationship and the experience. Now after several years, they are addressing the impact on the artist-mentors as well, considering how they are transformed as artists and as mentors/teachers, as well as the impact on their own artistic practice. To this end, they have now instituted mentors for the mentors, adding a second layer of mentorship, senior mentors who can act as coaches. This not only will enable people to think through their work here more consciously, but will assist in documenting the practice that it may be replicated elsewhere. All are aware that the organization has grown to be an entity in and of itself, beyond the personnel or the space, and that there is a culture within the organization and a kind of alchemy taking place which remains a little bit beyond what we can label and discuss. The students are all volunteers, the artist-mentors receive just a nominal stipend (yet only one has not completed the school year in the life of the organization thus far), the space is nothing special, just two empty storefronts, and yet hundreds of young people have had their lives changed in profound ways. The artistic practice is a tool, but also an end in and of itself. Students don't just engage in the arts, they become artists. What is making this happen?

The leadership and organizational structure is an essential part of this, and something that makes these accomplishments possible. Essentially, the organization is minimally centralized. There is, of course, a board, and an executive director (but not a founding director, who moved on to graduate school), and some staff, but the organization feels like it belongs to everybody. All of the young people I talked to feel a stake in the ownership, and this was also evident in the energy at the graduation event. There are any number of people on the staff who could participate in the learning community we hope to establish with Artography. Jason Yoon himself is probably the

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best at analyzing what is going on, because he is closest to the data while at the same time an alum of the experience, and it is his full-time job to make this work. But part of what makes it work is that so much rests on the shoulders of the mentors and the students themselves. This is also one of the things that makes this so exciting to me as an ethnographer. The culture of the organization becomes manifest in the testimonials of the participants, and not just two or three people on staff. There is leadership and guidance going on at multiple levels, and as with the artistic instruction, it is not just an imposition from above, but a partnership among many and a respect for the culture of the organization and its short past. But this is not a “collective,” either. There is stewardship and responsibility, decision-making and a structure that makes this all work. There is a model here that may be replicable, a way to make other youth arts programs more effective (artistically as well as in terms of social transformation). Jason told us that the Department of Education is also trying to measure this in terms of outcomes and other measurable data. Some of the formula may have come from the founding structure, and a culture has developed that is self-sustaining to some extent. The energy we witnessed is carried along in part by inertia and in part by a leadership structure that guides the organization but with multiple gentle hands on the wheel. This doesn't speak to the quality of the art (which speaks for itself), but it does speak to the quality of the experience in the lives of young, growing artists.