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When the Young Lords Were Outlaws in New York

By Holland Cotter



The exhibition "¡Presente! The Young Lords in New York," held in three parts at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, El Museo del Barrio and Loisaida Inc., recalls the Young Lords, a revolution-minded group that gained traction in the late '60s and '70s.

On July 26, 1969, a group of young Latinos stood in the band shell in Tompkins Square Park, in the East Village, and made an announcement. They were founding a New York branch of a revolution-minded political party called the Young Lords.

Inspired by the Black Panthers and an earlier street-gang-turned-activist Young Lords group in Chicago, their purpose was to gain social justice for New York's working-class Latino population, then largely Puerto Rican and treated with contempt by the city government.

Most of the members onstage that day were recent college graduates well versed in leftist political theory. To gain the trust and cooperation of Latino communities — concentrated in the East Village, East Harlem and the South Bronx — they knew they needed to get their feet on the street, and they wasted no time.

The next day they started a “garbage offensive” in East Harlem, the Barrio, pulling mounds of trash left festering by the city’s sanitation department into the middle of Third Avenue and setting the refuse alight. Local residents pitched in.

In October of that year, the Young Lords teamed up with a band of mostly black and Latino hospital personnel to force improvements in labor conditions and medical services for the poor at Gouverneur Hospital on the Lower East Side. (Six months later, they would take over Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx for the same reasons.)

In December, they occupied an East Harlem church and, until the police evicted them, turned it into a food dispensary and free clinic by day and a performance space for music, poetry readings and history lessons at night.



The exhibition at El Museo del Barrio includes work by Puerto Rican artists. Credit Ángel Franco/The New York Times

By that point they had started a newspaper, *Palante*. (The name, a contraction of “para adelante,” means “forward” or “right on.”) Bilingual and published every two weeks, it was a color tabloid with some of the jazziest graphics around.

You’ll find dozens of copies covering the walls in the tripartite exhibition “¡Presente! The Young Lords in New York.” Spread over three institutions — the [Bronx Museum of the Arts](#); [El Museo del Barrio](#) in East Harlem; and [Loisaida Inc.](#), a cultural center in the East Village — this show departs from straight political history by presenting the Young Lords as a cultural phenomenon as well as an ideological one, with a highly developed instinct for visual self-projection, right down to having an official party photographer, the gifted [Hiram Maristany](#).

Each of the show's three parts is more or less self-contained, giving a general picture of the party's brief history while centering on events specific to each venue. The Bronx Museum portion, for example, organized by two New York-based art historians, Johanna Fernández and Yasmin Ramirez, focuses on the July 1970 takeover of Lincoln Hospital, which is not far from the museum, but also touches on developments elsewhere in the city.

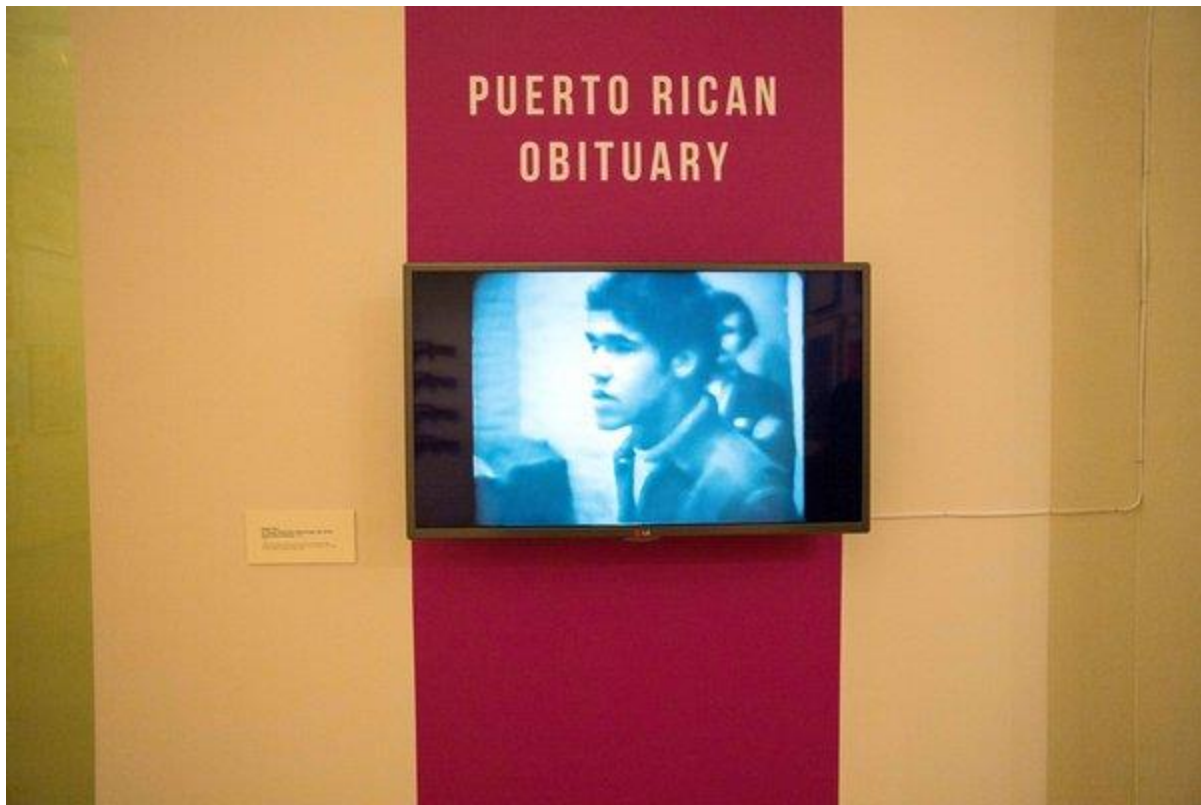
It gives particular attention to links between the Young Lords and [Taller Boricua](#), a print workshop started in East Harlem in 1970 by a group of Puerto Rican artists — Marcos Dimas, Adrián García, Carlos Osorio, Manuel Otero, Martín Rubio and Armando Soto.



Photographs and pages from Palante at El Museo del Barrio. Credit Ángel Franco/The New York Times

Still in operation in a converted public school building at 106th Street and Lexington Avenue, the workshop was originally across the street from the barrio headquarters of the Lords, who occasionally appropriated prints for Palante covers. Mostly, though, the exchange was in the form of aesthetic influence: The workshop's presence seemed to inspire members of the party who were artists.

[Denise Oliver-Velez](#), an African-American member of the Lords who designed several Palante covers, was one. She was also one of the few women to gain a place in the party's governing hierarchy. Like many other male-dominated radical groups, the Young Lords were inherently sexist and promoted a form of revolutionary machismo in their original statement of purpose. She would have none of it. Under pressure from her and another female member, Iris Morales, the group revised the statement to read: "We want equality for women. Down with machismo and male chauvinism."



A 1970 video of the poet Pedro Pietri reciting “Puerto Rican Obituary” at El Museo del Barrio. Credit Ángel Franco/The New York Times

Those words appear in the Bronx show and again in the installation at El Museo del Barrio, organized by Rocio Aranda-Alvarado and sharply designed by Ignacio Vázquez-Paravano. There are brilliant, monumental prints here by [Antonio Martorell](#), Juan Sánchez and Rafael Tufiño, although the general mood is dark.

A photograph by Geno Rodriguez records a demonstration after a teenager named Martin Perez died while in police custody. An issue of *Palante* records the death, under similar circumstances, of Julio Roldán, a Young Lords member. When the Lords staged an anger-fueled funeral procession for him in the streets of the Barrio, they were fully armed.



Bimbo Rivas reading poetry at an event in 1975. Credit Máximo Colón

A 1970 video of the poet [Pedro Pietri](#) reciting his chantlike “Puerto Rican Obituary” feels like a lament for the end of a certain type of activism. The Young Lords Party was already beginning to narrow along hard ideological lines and splinter into competitive factions. It had bought into American gun culture, becoming its own enemy in the process. The group had lost its connection to the grass-roots communities it was meant to serve.

The Pietri poem, however, ends with a direct address to the people of those communities, exhorting them to carry on and to find joy where they can and in who they are. The exhibition at Loisaida Inc., which opens next Thursday, is pitched in that key. Organized by Wilson Valentin-Escobar and Libertad O. Guerra, it’s about the cultural legacy that the Lords left, a populist activism that produced vivid images and had the imaginative lift of performance art.



Banners on display at the Bronx Museum. Credit Ángel Franco/The New York Times

In that upbeat spirit, Mr. Pietri often collaborated with another former Young Lord, Eddie Figueroa — you see them in beautiful photographic portraits by Adál Maldonado at the Bronx Museum. In 1976, Mr. Figueroa founded a space for experimentation, the New Rican Village Cultural Arts Center in the East Village.

Taller Boricua artists like Sandra Maria Esteves and Nestor Otero appeared there. So did a who's-who of musicians combining African-Caribbean forms with jazz. The mood, as captured in a series of fabulous photographs by Maximo Colon, was ebullient and embracing.

In terms of identity, the Young Lords were, at least initially, also embracing. Puerto Rican society is multiethnic and multicultural; so was the party. This may be one reason that feminism was able to forge a presence, and why the Lords made common cause with the gay rights movement.

A month before the Tompkins Square Park announcement, the Stonewall riots happened across town. [Sylvia Rivera](#), a transgender Latino performer who was rumored to have been involved in the riots and was arrested soon afterward, joined the Lords and helped attract a lesbian and gay contingent.

There's a small photographic homage to her at Loisaida Inc. And there are tributes to other figures from the past by contemporary artists elsewhere.



A Young Lords march in 1971. Credit Máximo Colón

At the Bronx Museum, the young New York painter [Sophia Dawson](#) has three strong paint-and-collage pictures made in collaboration with women who had been Young Lords. And a sculpture by [Miguel Luciano](#), also at the Bronx Museum, commemorates a militant offshoot of the Lords, a Puerto Rican nationalist group called [Los Macheteros](#), or the Machete Wielders.

For them, Mr. Luciano has customized a pair of Nike sneakers by transforming the brand's Swoosh logo into a machete emblem. In doing so, he symbolically gives these activists a swift means for attack and retreat. But he also asks a blunt question, particularly pertinent in the market-saturated present, about the bond between rebellion and consumption.

How revolutionary can you be if what you're basically fighting for is the right to have the coolest — usually meaning the most expensive — shoes on the block? The Young Lords, who knew a lot about style, might have had a persuasive answer for that. We could use one.

“¡Presente! The Young Lords in New York” continues through Oct. 18 at the Bronx Museum of the Arts; 718-681-6000, [bronxmuseum.org](#). Through Oct. 17, it will be at El Museo del Barrio, Manhattan; 212-831-7272, [elmuseo.org](#). From next Thursday to Oct. 30, it will be at Loisaida Inc., Manhattan; 646-757-0522, [loisaida.org](#).