

Women in the Community Mural Movement

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Women's role in the community mural movement is much greater than is generally recognized. Major city-sponsored mural programs in Boston (Adele Seronde and Summerthing), New York (Susan Shapiro-Kiok and Cityarts), and Los Angeles (Judy Baca and Citywide) have been initiated and directed by women artists, who have given these programs much of their character and philosophy. Women have led school mural projects, mural collectives, and mural-work with street youth. Whether working as individual muralists, members of coalitions, or in collectives, women have increasingly dominated the mural movement as a force for non-elitism, collectivity, and the practice of social philosophies ranging from humanism to Marxism.

Murals on urban walls reflecting the aspirations of neighborhood residents began as part of the more general social upheaval of the 1960s. Artists found themselves dragged into the social arena and forced to consider questions beyond those of pure form. By the late 1960s they could no longer avoid confronting questions concerning the relevance, audience, and uses of their art. A number of movements arose that tried to enlarge the audience and scope of contemporary art. Minority-group and politically active artists felt both a demand and an opportunity to create an art responsive to their special heritage and relevant to their own ethnic group, community, or movement. Mainstream artists attempted to bring art out of the museums and into the cities in the form of urban supergraphics, environmental sculptures, streetworks, and happenings. Out of the coincidence of these social and artistic forces the community mural movement began in 1967-68.

The mural movement took on different forms in different locations, depending on which particular combination of social forces spurred its beginnings. The first mural in Chicago, the 1967 *Wall of Respect*, was painted by 21 Black artists from the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) and celebrated Black history and culture. It was a political-art happening involving musicians and poets who played and read as the painting progressed. Although women artists participated in the *Wall of Respect*, they were not among those who continued the movement in Chicago and went from the OBAC wall to paint in Detroit.

For a long time Vanita Green's *Black Women*

(1970) served as the token of women's participation in the Chicago mural movement. Green was 17, a high school dropout, when she saw William Walker painting the *Peace and Salvation Wall of Understanding* near the Cabrini-Green projects where she lived. After watching for a time, she asked Walker for paints and brushes and on a storage shed nearby painted portraits of famous Black women from Aunt Jemima to Angela Davis. Almost immediately afterwards, the wall was defaced with large splashes of white paint, practically the only defacement in Chicago up to that time. When Green saw what the vandals had done, she commented, "Before, it was just a pretty picture, but it says more now." In general, though, during those early years women found their place largely as assistants and apprentices in one of the two major community-based Chicago mural groups: Public Art Workshop, led by Mark Rogovin, and Chicago Mural Group, a multi-ethnic coalition led by William Walker and John Weber.

In Boston, on the other hand, women played an important role in introducing the mural idea. Boston artist Adele Seronde's proposal calling for the use of neglected city sites to transform the city into a museum was the start. Through the collaboration of Kathy Kane of the Mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs, the Institute of Contemporary Art, a number of Black artists, and Seronde, Summerthing was launched. It was the largest and most productive of the early mural programs, beginning in 1968 and peaking in 1970. The Summerthing program combined elements of three distinct phenomena which had emerged the preceding year—the renaissance in Black culture (*Wall of Respect*), the "Summer in the City Paint-in Festival" and various clean-up programs, and the desire of environmental artists to work in urban spaces. Summerthing sponsored Black Power murals, children's playground and pocket-park projects, and decorative walls—all within a framework allowing for neighborhood control. Under Seronde's direction, the program emphasized the sociological rather than the decorative aspect of public art. Many impressive walls were painted from 1968 to 1970, especially in the Black communities of Roxbury and South End—including the first women's wall, Sharon Dunn's *Black Women*, painted in 1970.

Seronde is only one of many women who

Vanita Green. *Black Women*. 1970. Chicago, Illinois.



have made important contributions as organizers and administrators. Judy Baca, a leading Chicana muralist in Los Angeles, obtained City funding for a similar neighborhood-oriented large-scale mural program (Citywide Murals) in 1974. Shelly Killen heads a program for murals in prisons in Rhode Island, which has operated in the correctional institutions there for the past two years. Sandy Rubin's Alternate Graffiti Workshop in Philadelphia pioneered techniques for developing the artistic potential of graffiti writers; several of her workshop graduates have become muralists in their own right. Ruth Asawa and Nancy Thompson developed the Alvarado School-Community Program in San Francisco, which brings community artists into the public schools to enrich the school experience and has helped to open the doors to "Artists in the Schools" programs around the country. In fact, at the present time, the majority of the mural programs throughout the nation are directed by women.

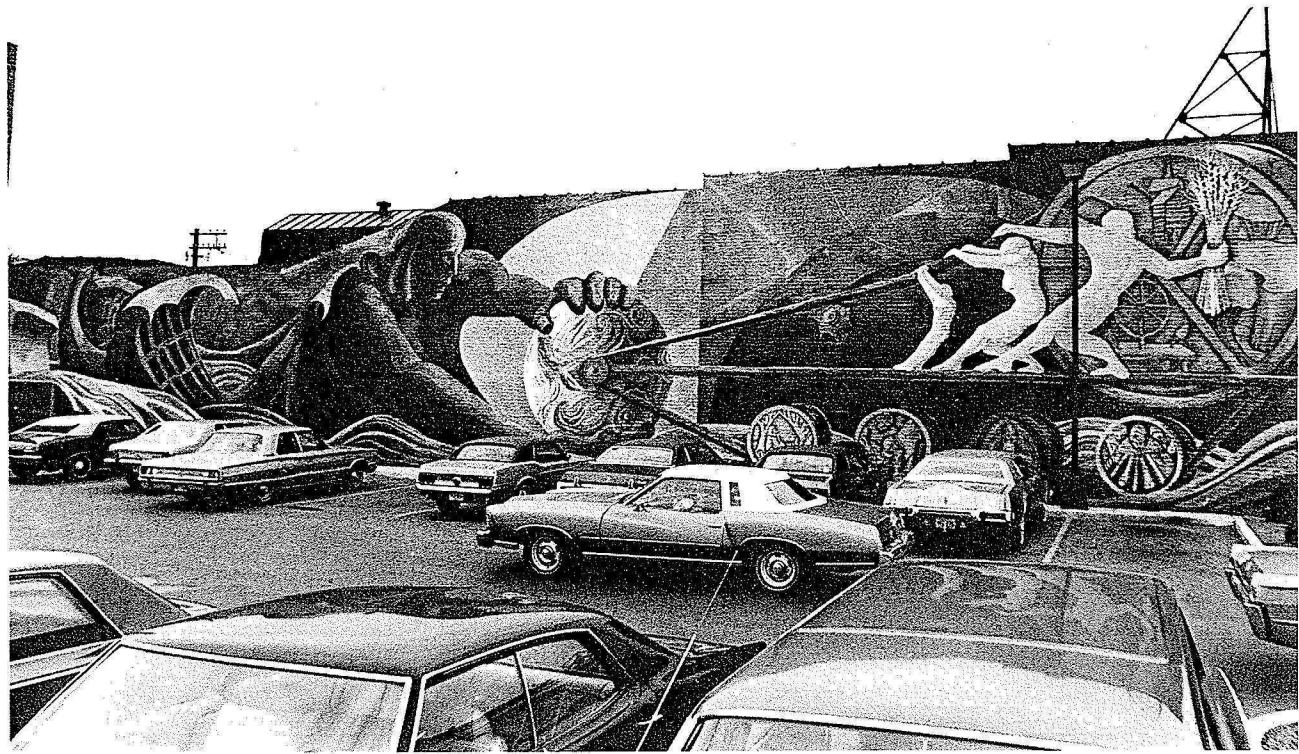
The major influx of women artists into the mural movement did not take place until 1971-73 when news about the community walls had become better known outside the actual mural communities. This was also a time of expansion for the Women's Liberation Movement. Many women artists tried mural work, but not all of them became muralists. Community mural

work, although highly rewarding, requires a certain kind of openness and great dedication. It also demands physical labor, community organizing, going to meetings, and an ability to deal with the great variety of people who come up to talk or make comments. However, a number of the women who did become involved in the early 1970s now identify themselves as muralists and are recognized for their artistic contributions.

The development of Caryl Yasko, one of the best muralists in the nation and a leader of the Chicago Mural Group, illustrates this process. Like Green, Yasko was introduced to the mural movement through William Walker when she volunteered as a parent-assistant for a mural he was directing with children at her neighborhood school. After this experience, Yasko and her partner in a small art enterprise, Kathy Judge, a ceramicist, worked with small children to paint *Walls of Hope*. Yasko and Judge were then invited to join the Chicago Mural Group. In the summer of 1972, Yasko directed her first major project, *Under City Stone*, a mural that runs throughout the 55th Street underpass in Hyde Park. Painted from Yasko's design with the help of a team recruited from passers-by, it shows hundreds of figures walking around and, above them, the machinery, technology, and pollution of today's city. Yasko painted herself in the

Caryl Yasko. *I Am the People*. 1974. 2659 N. Milwaukee, Chicago, Illinois. (Photo: Eva Cockcroft.)

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crowd—a slim young woman, paintbrushes in hand, a baby on her back.

The following year, Yasko painted in the heart of the Black-Belt South Side with a team of young Black people. Located on a prenatal clinic wall, this mural depicts statuesque, larger-than-life women with their children. In 1974 Yasko broke new ground for the Chicago muralists. Although murals had become commonplace in many areas of Chicago, certain white working-class areas peopled by Polish and other Middle-European immigrants remained untouched. The question of whether murals were valid only for minority-group ghetto areas or would also be meaningful in white working-class neighborhoods was in the air. In those cities where the murals had begun with the Black Power thrust of the late sixties, a movement toward more general themes was beginning. In 1974 Yasko began a mammoth mural in the Logan Square area of Chicago. The mural uses symbolic figures and images to identify the values of the largely Polish and Bielorussian residents of the area and to depict them working together to maintain control in a highly technical, mechanized world. This major wall has opened the door for a number of other murals in this and similar neighborhoods.

Yasko, however, is only one of many women muralists who have made important artistic contributions. Lucy Mahler's vivid mural at the Wright Brothers School in New York is one of the earliest murals on a public school building. Astrid Fuller, with her distinctive combination

Marie Burton, director. *Celebration of Cultures*. 1975. Milwaukee, Wisconsin. (Photo: Weber.)



Mujeres Muralistas. *Latinoamerica*. 1974. 25th and Mission Streets, San Francisco, California. (Photo: Eva Cockcroft.)



of a primitive literalism with surrealist images, has created a series of ambitious underpass murals in the Hyde Park area of Chicago. Holly Highfill, who painted an anti-war mural in the Loop area of Chicago (1973), has gone on to do several succeeding walls with gang youth. Marie Burton, who with Highfill and Rogovin co-authored the *Mural Manual*, works primarily with teenagers. Her *Bored of Education* in Chicago (1971) and the *Celebration of Cultures* in Milwaukee (1975) are among the most impressive of the school murals. And these are just a few of the women muralists working on community walls in a way that might be called the "Chicago model" (others are Justine DeVan, Esther Charbit, Ruth Felton, and Celia Radek).

In the Chicago model, the artist-leader of a mural team, using community and youth input, designs the wall and directs the painting of it. The community participates as a new class of patrons who help to pay for the mural and are consulted on the design. In spite of the change in patronage, and participation of community people as team members, the Chicago model's emphasis on professionalism is fairly close to the mural tradition through the ages. Murals, after all, have rarely been painted by individuals; mostly they are done by a group of assistants working under a master.

This hierarchical process has been challenged by several developments within the mural movement. One is the experimentation with

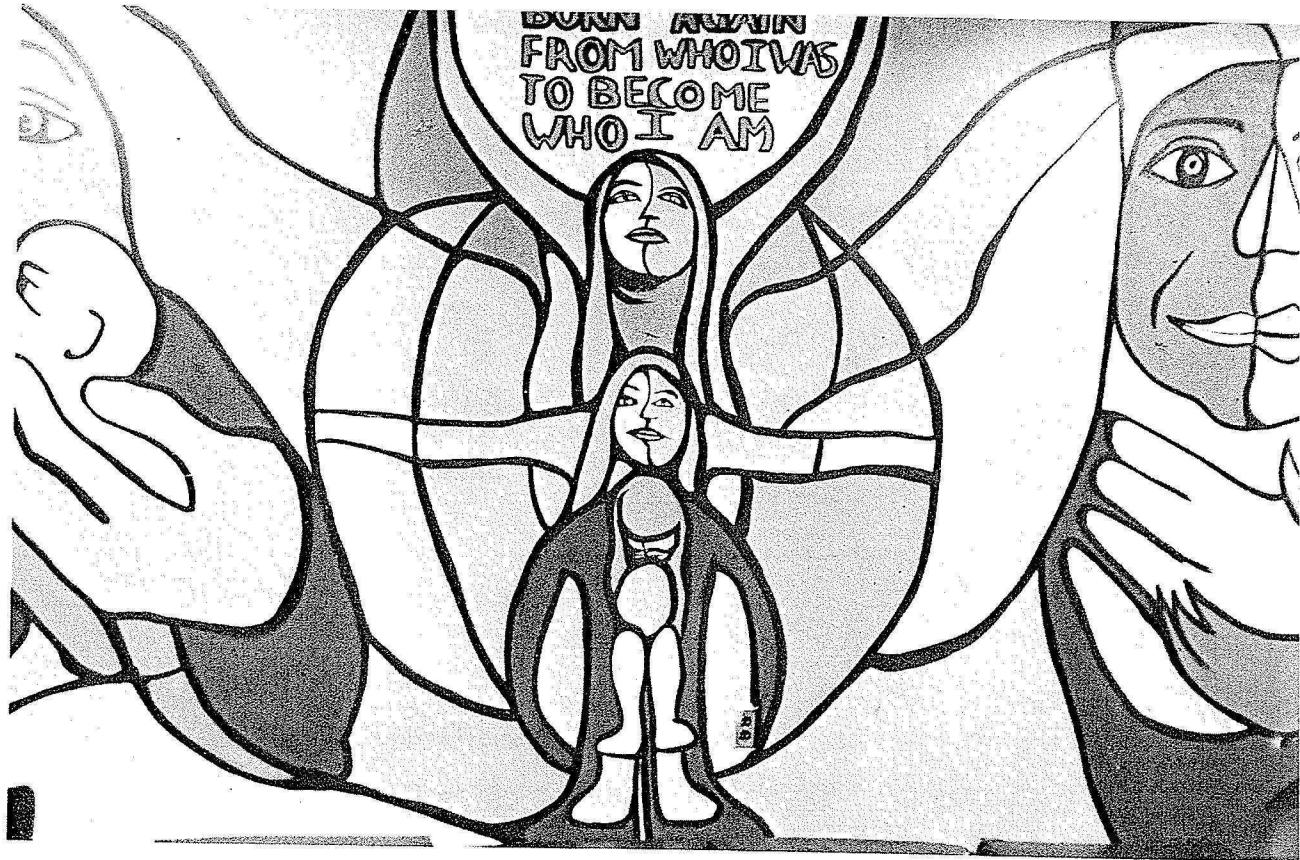
artists' collectives. A collective is a very difficult and highly unstable form of organization in a society emphasizing individualism, and few last longer than a year or two. Many women muralists have come into the movement as organizers or members of a collective group. The mutual support and shared responsibility the collective offers an individual is often necessary to provide the courage to attempt a first mural (and some of the labor power to finish it). Especially in the case of women this factor can be decisive.

Within the Latin culture, *machismo* often reaches rather extreme forms, yet this is countered by a strong communal tradition. It is not surprising therefore that in 1974 a group of Latin American women muralists—Mujeres Muralistas—was formed in San Francisco. Most of the women were students or recent graduates of the San Francisco Art Institute and connected with the Galeria de La Raza, the center for Chicano artists in the Mission district. Their philosophy was simple and very positive:

Our cultures, our images are strong. It is important that the atmosphere of the world be plagued with color and life. Throughout History there have been very few women who have figured in art. What you see is proof that women, too, can work at this level. That we can put together scaffolding and climb it. We offer you the colors that we make.

People's Painters. Women. 1972. Women's Center, Livingston College, New Jersey.

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Judy Baca, director. Hollenbeck Park Bandshell. Los Angeles, California. (Photo: Citywide Murals.)



Their two best-known walls, *Latinoámerica* and the Paco's Tacos Stand mural were both done in the spring and summer of 1974. They celebrate the beauty and richness of the Latin tradition. For *Latinoámerica*, the four women comprising the original core of Mujeres Muralistas—Patricia Rodriguez, Consuelo Mendez Castillo, Irene Perez, and Graciela Carrillo de Lopez—worked together to create the design. Different parts of the mural are painted by each artist in her individual style; yet the mural succeeds as a unified work because of the clear organization, and the distinctively bright, clear color that is characteristic of the group. In the Paco's Tacos mural the unity is more tenuous. The wall divides into two distinctly different halves reflecting the different artistic styles of Consuelo Mendez Castillo and Graciela Carrillo de Lopez. In many ways Mujeres Muralistas was never really a "collective", but rather a group of women who came together to work on a particular wall mural. An almost instant fame forced them into a prematurely formalized existence as a "collective group," while leaving them little time to resolve differences in political consciousness between members of the group, or cultural differences between Chicana and Latin American women. The problem of individualism was never really tackled, although there was an attempt to make decisions by a consensus of the group. Internal differences caused the group to dissolve formally early in 1976. The women who comprised Mujeres Muralistas are now working as individual muralists.

Many mural-painting collectives, including most of those that grew out of the largely white counterculture and anti-war movements, either start with women who then invite male artists in, or simply include both women and men. Often led by women with roots in Marxism and feminism, these collectives tend to be strongly anti-sexist, anti-imperialist, and to use overtly political images in their artwork. One of these groups was the People's Painters of New Jersey, who "muralized" Livingston College from 1972 to 1974. Modeled after the Ramona Parra Brigades of Allende's Chile, the People's Painters were concerned equally with the political effects of their murals and with trying to overcome individualism and a sense of personal ego. Their first wall was for the Livingston Women's Center, which was very appropriate since the founders of the group—Julia Smith, Kathy Jones, and myself—considered ourselves activists in the Women's Liberation Movement. We worked on the design collectively, discussing ideas first and then finding the images. We chose to work in a simple style, using heavy black outlines and flat color, so that the women at the Center could help us paint. We also consciously worked over parts of the mural that others had originated to combat the tendency

to say at the end of the project, "And this part is mine." While we did not wholly succeed in eliminating our sense of personal ego, we did find that by consciously emphasizing collectivity in our work we could overcome personal insecurities and achieve stronger political and artistic results. We went on to incorporate men into our group and painted eight other murals before agreeing to disperse in 1974, when some of our members graduated and others decided to go on to other things.

The Haight-Ashbury Muralists in San Francisco, a collective led by Jane Norling, see themselves as "anti-imperialist cultural workers." Their first mural, *Rainbow People*, was painted in 1972 as part of a large anti-war demonstration. A Haight landmark, *Rainbow People* was repainted and updated in 1974. *Unity Eye* (1973) diagrams the ingredients for creating a revolutionary culture in the United States. The mural shows a revolution peopled and led by women, and was painted by an all-female team. Most recently, the Haight-Ashbury Muralists have been working on a 300-foot-long history of the class struggle in San Francisco.

The most radical and problematic challenge to tradition has been the development of collective murals in which non-artist members of a community work with an artist-facilitator who helps them to create their own mural. While a strong emphasis on community participation characterizes all community mural projects, this particular emphasis reflects an attempt to create a "people's art" in every sense of the word. Simply providing paint and a wall to teenagers and young adults is not the answer. There must be a direction, a method for working cooperatively, and a technique that makes it possible to bypass the need for years of study of drawing and design.

The most complete method, and the model for much related work elsewhere in the nation, was developed by Susan Shapiro-Kiok and the Cityarts staff in New York City. This method begins with a number of concept meetings during which the theme is discussed. In the early Cityarts Workshop murals, scenes were acted out and developed, photographed, and then projected and traced. When the mock-up was complete, it was enlarged by an opaque projector and painted in. *Black Women of Africa Today* (1971), designed and executed by teenage girls at "The Smith" housing project on the Lower East Side, is typical of the early silhouette style. Later murals became more complex as the technique came to include the use of drawings and slides as well as photographs and the opaque projector. The Jewish ethnic mural at the Bialystoker Old People's Home is a collage of images designed and painted by a group of Jewish teenagers under the direction of Susan Caruso-Green (current director of Cityarts Workshop).



Haight-Ashbury Muralists. *Unity Eye*. 1973.
Haight and Shrader Streets, San Francisco,
California. (Photo: Tim Drescher.)

Eva Cockcroft. Warrensburg. 1976.
Oddfellows Temple, Main Street,
Warrensburg, New York. (Photo: Oren Lane.)

Tomi Arai, director, with Lower East Side
women, *Wall of Respect for Women*. 197.
East Broadway and Rutgers Street,
New York City. (Photo: Cami Homann,
Cityarts Workshop.)

Two other collective walls were painted in 1974 and 1975 by Lower East Side women under the direction of Tomie Arai. *The Wall of Respect for Women* (1974) epitomizes the non-antagonistic type of feminism portrayed on non-white community walls dealing with the theme of woman. Rather than condemning more traditional women's roles (e.g., mother, telephone operator), this mural celebrates all the roles played by women. The second wall, *Women Hold Up Half the Sky* (1975), painted by many of the same women who worked on the earlier wall, as well as some men, portrays women's oppression within the context of the larger social struggle. Although most of the images come from a generalized women's experience, the figures breaking out of oppression are of both sexes. In both walls women are shown performing their traditional jobs and, with few exceptions, this is the way women are portrayed in community walls.

Some murals about women emphasize the biological factor, and almost all include the mother-child theme. Yet these would be considered highly conservative images by the Women's Liberation Movement. The use of such stereotypical images of women is not the result of ignorance on the part of women muralists. In part it reflects the goals of Third World feminism, in which women's rights are seen as one part of the more general social struggle, and great care is taken to keep feminism from appearing to be a divisive force.

Within political organizations like the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP), political education courses discuss the need to overcome *machismo* and the oppressive role definitions which make it difficult for men and women to work together as *compañeros*. Some of the verses from the song "Quiero decirte" (I Want to Tell You Something), written collectively by Suni Paz, Juana Díaz, and other Puerto Rican sisters in 1972 and often sung at political rallies and community events, state the changes in the

male-female relationship for which they are struggling:

*Al la mujer me dirijo:
tu también debes luchar
para salir de una vez
de tu gran pasividad.*

*Al hombre le toca ahora:
entiende que la mujer
sabe pensar y sentir
y tiene derecho a ser.**

*(To the woman I say
you must struggle to abandon
your conditioned passivity
and to leave it behind.*

*To the man I say
try to understand
that a woman can think and feel,
and has a right to exist.)*

The mother in Latin culture is seen as the moral leader of the household and the authority in the education of her children. The forced sterilization of women by the U.S. government in Puerto Rico and other Latin American countries (as well as the poor at home) has served to intensify the felt need for women to bear children in order to preserve their race. This creates certain differences in attitude about population control and the family structure between Third World feminism and the rest of the Women's Liberation Movement.

Overtly feminist murals are found primarily on Women's Center walls, within the university world, and in certain selected city neighborhoods—Haight-Ashbury, for example—where a base of support exists. Most often, the feminist consciousness of women muralists is expressed by the substitution of female for male as a symbolic or heroic figure, or even by the mere inclusion of women as active figures in any mural.

The problem of responsibility to the perma-

nent audience, those who have to live with the art, is one with which the community muralist is constantly faced. The ideal is to work constantly at the cutting edge of issues—neither too far ahead nor too far behind. This is a continual struggle involving a constant series of difficult decisions and has been a direct part of my own recent experience as a muralist. After several years of working in a relatively radicalized university setting, I undertook some murals in a very different environment—a conservative small town in the Adirondack mountains. My problem was how to paint a bicentennial mural that would be accepted by the permanent residents as their history and yet not violate my convictions, or the truth. Just as I began work in early 1976, the very town authorities who were my sponsors whitewashed a youth mural on ecology I had directed in 1974, which was critical of the town's dumping sewage into the Schroon River. I conceived my design as a compromise: the ancestors of the present residents are shown as workers in the logging industry, the saw mill, and the textile factories—a working-class history, but one with only positive images. I began painting the wall with great misgivings. It was the reaction of the "locals," and their enthusiastic hunger for their own history, that made me realize that it is not just minority-group people or urban ghetto residents who have been deprived of their history and their right to their own art expression, but every segment of America's working people.

Communication between muralists around the nation has increased greatly since 1974. Three major mural conferences have occurred and the exchange of information and techniques has furthered experimentation. Many muralists who previously worked alone have begun to experiment with collective techniques and vice versa. In 1975, for example, five muralists from the Chicago Mural Group (Caryl Yasko, Mitchell Caton, Celia Radek, Justine DeVan, and Lucyna Radycki) worked on a collectively designed and painted wall. *Prescription for Good Health Care*. The muralists were a mixed group—racially, sexually, and in terms of previous mural experience. This was their first collectively designed wall, although they had helped each other to paint on other walls. The location at 57th and Kedzie is near the headquarters of the American Nazi Party in Chicago. Initially, there was some fear that racial attacks might prevent the group from working, but there were no disturbances during the time the mural was being painted. Acceptance in this white working-class neighborhood of a racially mixed group of muralists reflects the prestige that murals have achieved in Chicago.

The continuing attempt at collectivity and away from the individualistic "genius" concept of the artist prevalent in the art world has been one of the major distinctions pioneered by women in the mural movement; it derives at

least in part from the influence of the Women's Liberation Movement. The non-hierarchical structures of the early women's organizations, as well as the direct experience of consciousness-raising groups, with the sisterhood and support they provided, became a part of the outlook of a number of the women muralists. The changes resulting from their individual experiences with Women's Liberation led them to bring the same egalitarian and collective practices to the mural groups they joined or helped found.

While ideas from feminism and Marxism are implicit in the attempt to create a people's art—especially in murals by women—the level of politicization and consciousness among muralists varies greatly. Most community muralists, however, if they were familiar with Mao's words at the Yenan Forum, would agree that:

In the world today all culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such thing as Art for art's sake, art that stands above classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics.

If that is true, one must choose—and they have chosen.

*From "Brotando del Silencio" (Breaking Out of the Silence), songs by Suni Paz, Paredon P-1016, Paredon Records, Box 889, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11202.

Eva Cockcroft is a muralist and co-author (with John Weber and Jim Cockcroft) of the forthcoming book, *Towards a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement* (E.P. Dutton).