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Young New Yorkers Seeks To Improve Criminal Justice By Providing A Creative Platform To NYC Youth



Adam Lehrer Contributor

Arts

I write about New York's art gallery system and museum structure.

New York is one of the last states prosecuting 16 and 17-year-olds as adults. With obscene over-crowdedness of the criminal justice system in New York City, many of these kids find themselves judged by nothing other than a record and what the arresting cop has to say about them. An organization called [Young New Yorkers](#) hope to rectify that. Essentially, Young New Yorkers is a diversion program, albeit one that actually focuses on these kids having their voices heard. Led by a coalition of street artists (artists that can relate to wanting to have their voices heard in a public forum well as being arrested) and creative types, Young New Yorkers offers an 8-week diversion program where participants learn to express themselves via photography, illustration, and design. The program ends with a Young New Yorkers Finale where the participants present a public art project commenting on a “social issue relevant to them.” What’s even better is that these kids usually see their cases dropped and criminal records sealed once the program is over, and early research demonstrates that recidivism rates are much lower in areas where the program is implemented.

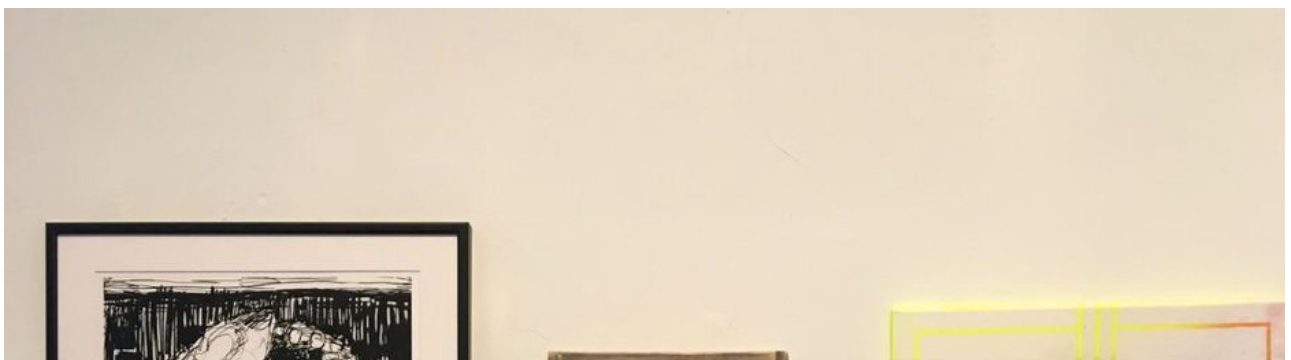


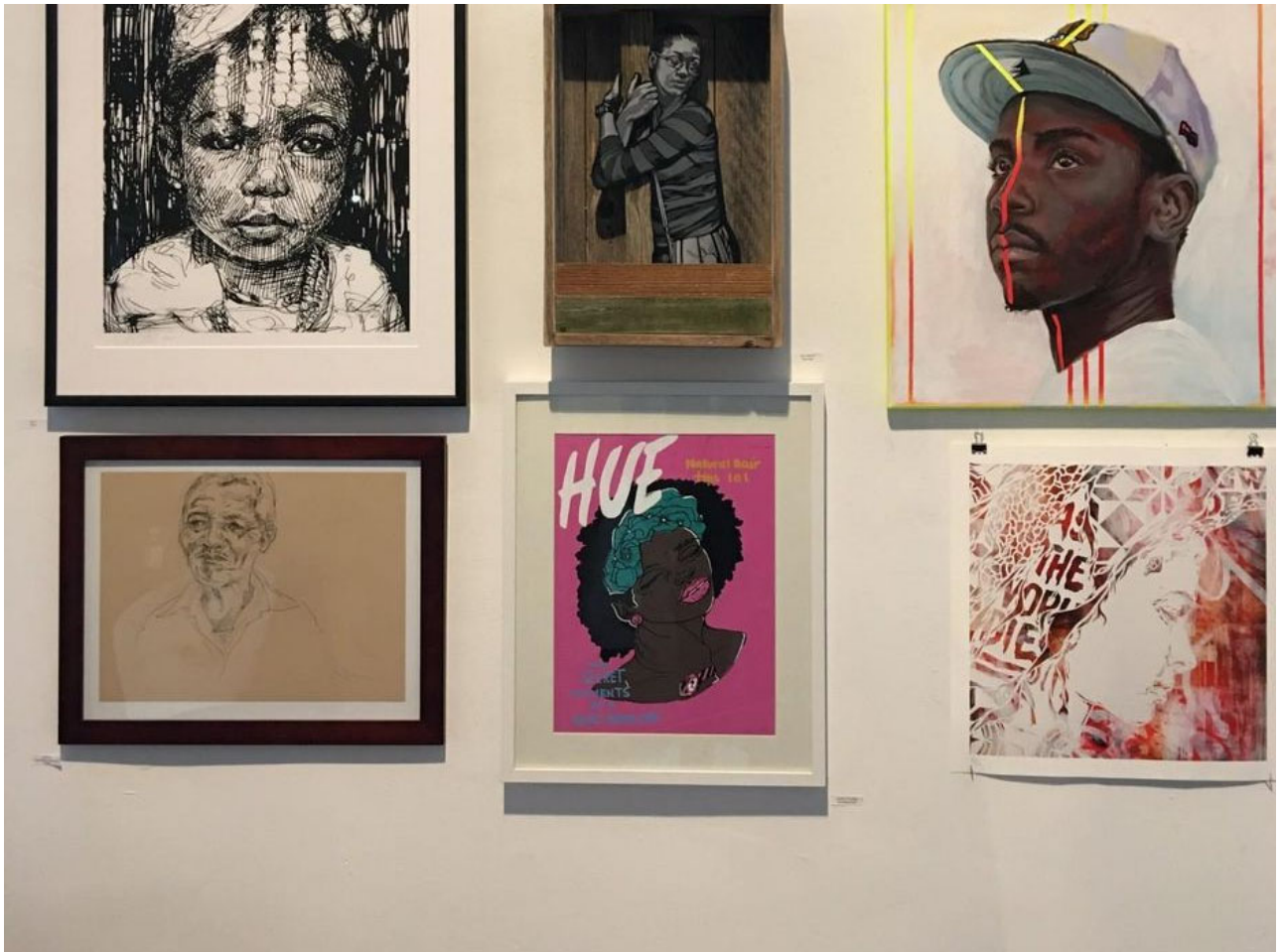


All images courtesy of Young New Yorkers

Every year since its inception YNY has held a silent auction fundraiser. In its fourth year, YNY partnered with [Paddle 8](#) and iconic street artist Shepard Fairey, who has offered many of his own pieces along with other artists [Swoon](#), Gaia, Icy & Sot and more. Curated by street artists Gilf! (Ann Lewis) and Lunar New Year and photographer Maya Levin, YNY held its last auction on April 7 and generated \$67,000 in art sales.

Gilf!, Lunar New Year, and YNY's Executive Director, the architect and public artist Rachel Barnard, talked to me about some of the important work that they are trying to accomplish.





Follow @youngnewyorkers on Twitter and learn more about their motivations for this work by following their stories using the hashtag #ynybecause

ADAM LEHRER: What was this organization's genesis?

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RACHEL BARNARD: Lunar was the first curator, and it was his idea to have a silent art auction. It was very low-tech at first. We all paid for it ourselves.

LUNAR NEW YEAR: The first auction was all about pulling our communities together. All these artists also have similar experiences (getting arrested). They all felt empathy, so it was very easy to have friends give art.

BARNARD: The point is, the event was very grassroots. Now, this is our fourth silent art auction. It's going to be, I imagine, one of the more significant surveys of street art in New York.

GILF: I was spending lots of time talking to lots of people about things I was outraged about. Finally, I started making work outside, because those were the only people who would listen, people in the public. You can make all the work in the world about wanting to change things, but we are giving kids the opportunities to think for themselves, to be who they are and be okay with that – that’s the most powerful thing you can do.

LEHRER: Are you selling pieces by artists traditionally known for street art?

GILF: We’re not cutting pieces out of walls. Why would we ever do that? Most of these are donated works directly from the artists.

LUNAR NEW YEAR: It’s grown from strictly street art based to traditional art, architecture, and photography.

LEHRER: And it’s been this team the whole time?

GILF: I’ve been less involved, but I’m becoming more and more involved with these guys.

BARNARD: Ann has been involved from the beginning. Starting a court-mandated program is a huge undertaking. We’re the first arts organization to get approval from the criminal justice agency. The way it started was a big group of people sitting around a table: social workers, artists, community workers, therapists, lawyers. To stay in a conversation where nothing is happening takes an enormous commitment to the cause.





LEHRER: I'm interested in the initial motivations you had for joining and starting the work. Was it personal experience, affinity for this work?

LUNAR NEW YEAR: For me, it was having go through the process of being arrested in New York City. I saw how useless it was. I wanted to use art to do something about it

LEHRER: How long was that process for you? Did you do time?

LUNAR NEW YEAR: I was just taken overnight to the community centers. We were taking like two-hour lunches. I thought, "How could this be transformative?" What if we turned that into something good?

BARNARD: I wanted to do very large-scale, contemporary public artwork that gave voice to people that didn't have one. Once I met the kids, there was no denying that this was probably my life's work. The last thirty years of political rhetoric around "Tough on Crime" has been devastating to poor communities and young people. In New York, sixteen and seventeen-year-olds are prosecuted as adults. We lost compassion for the larger things at play, like poverty and race.

LEHRER: Everyone talks about gentrification as a concept, but no one is really aware

of how big a problem it is. It keeps spreading. Theoretically, you're going to have to make \$100,000 to live in New York anywhere.

GILF: The average New Yorker spends 62% of his or her income on rent.

LUNAR NEW YEAR: It's not based on what the city wants. It's based on commerce, power, and money.

LEHRER: And then there's all this rhetoric about, "The government needs to stay out of this." But you need someone to keep that commerce in check.

GILF: We have communities that are being displaced and destroyed. The people that are making this happen are only focused on their pocketbooks. There are so many double standards in our criminal justice system. It's important to step back and give these kids the opportunity to have a creative voice. How many public schools in these neighborhoods actually have art classes? How many of these kids actually have creative outlets to release the stresses and tensions of living in poverty?

BARNARD: I just got my niece an internship at an architecture firm. Do these kids know that they can have an opportunity like that? We can do better than that.

LUNAR NEW YEAR: We're getting artists to teach kids. You create this space of imagination, like, "oh, it turns out I could be a photographer or fashion designer". You just need an area to be able to imagine.

BARNARD: One of our first graduates had a fairly serious case when he came to our program. He [at first] felt like he had no choices. When I met him years later for lunch he was in college, and he's overwhelmed with choices, and that's the opposite of oppression. That's what we want.

LEHRER: It can be emotionally draining to be in and out of court all the time.

BARNARD: It's trauma. When I was sixteen, I was scared of getting in trouble from the principal. Imagine. You're not near your parents and being transported with handcuffs on. That's nothing short of trauma, and some of these kids only jumped a turnstile.

I don't want to talk ill of police officers, because they have a hard job. But some kids will have a certain attitude in court, and the court will get fed up to the point that the punishment is not proportional to the charge.

LEHRER: I hate when I hear conservatives talk about police shootings like, "When you get caught, you can't resist." It's different when you've been harassed over and over again. You start to get a certain attitude.

GILF: You have a different attitude when you're constantly under surveillance.

BARNARD: Even if you don't resist, you're thinking, "I better play this right, because my life is literally on the line." Can you imagine the weight of having a police interaction, knowing they have their guns ready? The level of fear is astounding.

GILF: These kids are constantly bombarded with it. How does that, over time, change the way people experience the world?

BARNARD: What happens when you internalize it and you're on the train, riding into a more wealthy area, and people are edgy around you?

LEHRER: You'll either want to retreat into yourself, or you'll want to be more threatening.

BARNARD: And have fun with the threatening, like, "Boo!" People need to come together to talk about these hard things. Look at this, we're all together, we're talking about a serious issue, but we're having so much fun. There's a sense of ease, peace, and celebration. What's more adorable than half a dozen teenagers running an event?

LEHRER: I could see this program having positive benefit in other cities as well.

BARNARD: Our first step for growth would be to deepen rather than to expand. We want to be in an advocating role in the New York courts; [it's possible that they] can look compassionate and loving. It is a hard job, because we're talking really gritty charges sometimes. How do we hold a space for that when we're talking about these sorts of things? Young New Yorkers is one of those ways.

LUNAR NEW YEAR: It's also helpful to think of Young New Yorkers as an example.]

would like to see other people take up that responsibility as well.

GILF: It makes a difference. It's exponential.

BARNARD: We have a thing in class where we say, "This is your life. You're sixteen, and you don't have a prefrontal lobe cortex. You make an impulsive decision, and that's how you're wired. Your criminal record gets you in trouble for the rest of your life. Think about all the collateral consequences." If someone's life is narrowed at sixteen, it's as devastating for the community as it is for that person. He's a resource. That's how social capital works.

LEHRER: I really admire what you are all doing, what would you say the ultimate mission is?

BARNARD: Our mission is to transform the criminal justice system through the creative voices of Young New Yorkers. Our ultimate goal is that, at their exhibitions, they get a chance to really talk about issues that impact them the most. 100 teenagers were put in solitary confinement last year on Riker's Island. Because of the enormous numbers that go through the court system, it's very faceless. People get defined by their rap sheets. Every kid that has come through my program is nothing short of extraordinary. Through creativity we give them the chance to advocate for themselves. You want to get these kids out of the system as soon as possible. On the other hand, why don't we get them out of the system in a way that is fast AND empowering? We don't need to push them further into the depths of economic disparity.



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Adam Lehrer is an artist, writer and curator based in New York. Prior to moving to New York, Lehrer thought he'd be an investigative journalist working at local newspaper... [Read More](#)