

VISIÓN | doble

REVISTA DE CRÍTICA E HISTORIA DEL ARTE

Título: Santurce es Ley de vuelta al principio: Artistas y comunidad hacia un circuito infinito
Title: “Santurce es Ley” Back to Square One: Artists and Community Embark on an Infinite Loop

Autor / Author: Nina Coll Martínez
Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinot de Cayey

Resumen: Santurce es Ley llega a su sexta edición y con ella se busca una vuelta a los inicios del festival, con el fin de rescatar su esencia. La intención es la de crear un arte como motor para una reconstrucción alternativa del país desde la autogestión, motivados por las necesidades del entorno y de la gente.

Abstract: Santurce es Ley reaches its sixth edition, inviting to go back to the beginning of the festival, with the purpose of rescuing its essence. The intention is to create art as an engine for an alternative reconstruction of the country through self-administration, motivated by the needs of people and the environment.

Palabras clave: Arte público, Damaris Cruz, Festival Santurce es Ley, Javier Cintrón, Omar Obdulio Peña, Santurce

Keywords: Public art, Damaris Cruz, Santurce es Ley Festival, Javier Cintrón, Omar Obdulio Peña, Santurce

Sección: Inglés / **Section:** English

Publicación: 15 de abril de 2016

Cita recomendada: Coll Martínez, Nina. ““Santurce es Ley” Back to Square One: Artists and Community Embark on an Infinite Loop”, *Visión Doble: Revista de Crítica e Historia del Arte*, 15 de marzo de 2016, humanidades.uprrp.edu/visiondoble

Visión Doble: Revista de Crítica e Historia del Arte
Programa de Historia del Arte, Facultad de Humanidades
Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras
13 Ave. Universidad Ste. 1301
San Juan, Puerto Rico 00925-2533

+1 (787) 764-0000, extensión 89596
vision.doble@upr.edu
<http://humanidades.uprrp.edu/visiondoble>
<https://revistas.upr.edu>



"Santurce es Ley" Back to Square One: Artists and Community Embark on an Infinite Loop

Nina Coll Martínez

Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Cayey



Fintan Magee, *Glass Half Full*. Foto Nina Coll.

There is a one-of-a-kind space on Santurce's Calle Elisa Cerra whose charm is inescapable as it celebrates the history of the El Gandúl community and its people, echoing the past while also reflecting the present. The space known as *Los Originales de la 15* has been gathering objects drawn from the community's collective memory and inviting us to visit the past. One of its coordinators, Yiyó Báez Ríos, originally from Villa Palmeras, proudly tells us about the collection and shows us the barbershop chairs which belonged to the old establishment across the street, the sign from the *Longino* café located on the corner, the antique bottles from *la tiendita*, and

the old telephones, cameras, radios, lamps, and other knick-knacks that have been donated by neighbors. The memorabilia emphasizes the passing of time while also sensitizing us to the legacy of love and belonging that this community feels for Santurce. It was inside this space that I was able to understand how it's possible for us to form bonds with people, moments, and memories we haven't lived through, and feel as if we've somehow made a connection with people we've never met. For all the talk of revitalizing Santurce, this experience helped me realize that there may be no reason to do so. According to Yiyo, "This is the best corner in the whole world." For the past six years, he has been aware of the artists who have flocked to the area and who've managed to integrate themselves and gain the respect of the community due to their creativity, thereby further awakening *Santurcean* pride.

It all started with a group of graffiti artists and other creative people who shared their skills in graphic design and gravitated toward the collective showcase of art that has visually redefined the streets of Santurce. Spear Torres, who has been an active participant in this scene for the past eleven years, recognizes that both collaboration and integration have helped them form a significant attachment to these community walls. In a similar vein, Alexis Bousquet—the curator and main orchestrator for Puerto Rico's most transcendent art event—recounts how the official name arose from the get-togethers between graffiti artists in 2010. A tag left all across the city read "Santurce es Ley" (Santurce is Law). This urban expression, created by the artist Nepo, came to be the name of the event now recognized as a platform where seasoned artists and first-timers from Puerto Rico and abroad can exhibit and sell their work in an atmosphere where they are able to freely interact with the public.

After his experience in the fifth edition of Santurce es Ley (SEL5) in 2014, Bousquet thought the event had become too mainstream. The idea behind the art was saturated by the barrage of advertising that tried to coopt the event's brand, but which ended up detracting from the artistic purpose and the interest in the community. As a result, the aim this year is to return to the event's roots in order to rescue its essence, which is art as an alternative and self-managing force that can propel the country's reconstruction. From this year forward, Santurce becomes a laboratory in which the past experience and criticism will be redefined so as to reformulate a paradigm that can be applied to the needs of the environment and the people.

Now, after six years of experience, the project that began with a handful of art galleries and street murals by local artists has forced us to look at the city in a different way. This is motivated by the very features of the walls that metamorphosed from being seen as part of the problem of urban decay to a possible solution. Walking around Santurce has become a different experience. The art now found on its walls has fostered a new relationship with spaces that were commonly considered depressing environments due to the large quantity of derelict buildings, homeless individuals, desolate streets, and lack of proper lighting, all of which might also create a perfect setting for crime. However, after six years many of us have begun to lose our fear of walking these streets, as we realized how easy it is to maneuver. Santurce has an infrastructure that is simple to understand if we dare to cross the main streets and get into each neighborhood.

There is a sense of belonging and community identity. People protect each other, and even if the outward perception may be that of an unsafe neighborhood, when you are part of the community there is a feeling of mutual respect.



Omar Obdulio Peña Forty, *Francisco Oller con cerquillos*, 2014

If we lose that fear, it's a breeze of a 15-minute walk from Parada 15 to 22 (bus stops demarcating the extended stretch of SEL6—Calle Cerra to Calle Lloveras). A few blocks over from there, we reach the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico—where we can enjoy that institution's art collection and a peaceful garden to distract ourselves from the bustle of the city. Several weeks ago I had the chance to visit the museum free of charge on a Wednesday afternoon. I wanted to see the exhibition *Impressionism and the Caribbean: Francisco Oller and His Transatlantic World*. It was a very interesting exhibition for me, as it showcased the importance of this great Puerto Rican painter who decided to return to his homeland after having been educated abroad, in order to contribute to the social changes that were under way in the nineteenth century, during a period

of crisis. This is highly relevant nowadays, as many Puerto Ricans are leaving the island. Others, however, are also returning with the hopes of applying their skills to the context of Puerto Rico. In this regard, Bousquet comments on how many people go to places where everything is already done, where they'll just be another John or Jane Doe, while in Puerto Rico so much is broken and must be rebuilt from scratch.

After entering the museum, climbing the stairs to the second floor, reading the introduction to the exhibition and seeing the first gallery, one of the guards informed me that I had to leave, because I needed to pay a special exhibition fee of \$16.73. I found it a bit odd that the exhibition did not offer free access on the only day free of charge, since their main sponsor was the Special Joint Committee on Legislative Funds, which promotes incentives for nonprofit institutions to foster cultural activities in various communities in times of economic scarcity. In this case, the museum is inaccessible to many taxpayers. This led me to reconsider the museum's true accessibility when its official promotion seems to appeal to a young audience, inviting us to hang with Oller's buddies. Yes, precisely those European friends who revolutionized the history of art—Paul Cézanne, Claude Monet, Gustave Courbet, and Camille Pissarro—are also recognized for establishing their own exhibition areas outside official academic art institutions. Nelson Rivera—who wrote an article about the *Francisco Oller and His Transatlantic World* exhibition, which was published in *80grados* on February 26—quotes Oller: "Artists, like writers, are obliged to serve some purpose; their paintings should be educational texts, which serve to improve the human condition, condemn evil, glorify the good... they must be from the artists' time period, of their country, their legion, if they are to be truthful" (Speech at the Escuela Normal in Río Piedras).

In our own time, when artists are out on the streets producing their works, the art market's exclusivity makes it increasingly difficult to achieve institutional recognition and valorization. Artists have used digital platforms and the media, using self-management concepts to promote their art and thus many institutional channels are becoming obsolete. Based on their creative skills, they propose to recover the artistic essence by using the advertising format in their favor to bring the passerby into contact with the creative process. Art, then, is democratized, it's freed from the market and initiates direct interaction between people from the street and artists. It is my contention that if Francisco Oller were to return from Paris now he would be painting murals along the streets of Santurce, before meeting up with his buddies at the Museo. Recognizing his concerns for the political and social problems embodied in his canvas, it would be logical to think that he would use walls in public spaces to maintain a conversation with the people of the street.

A mural created by Omar Obdulio Peña for SEL5 in 2014 strengthens this argument. He presents Francisco Oller's self-portrait after a trip to the barbershop, with a taper-fade razor cut to mirror street style. At the MAPR exhibition, as Nelson Rivera notes, the Oller self-portrait is overpowered by a huge photograph of the artist. In contrast, Omar Obdulio Peña's mural on Calle Cerra exalts the self-portrait while also making it relevant to the present. Perhaps not many Puerto Ricans recognize that it is Oller, but they acknowledge that he is a national eminence, someone important to the country. While walking along the street, I heard others argue about

the subject's identity—whether it was Oller or Betances—sparking a discussion among people until they could pinpoint who it was. Consequently, free access to art on the street encourages debate and fosters education without any cost. More than ever, the new edition of *Santurce es Ley* seeks to educate and create inclusive solutions, not just to provide more space for artists, but to make different sectors of the population feel welcome, because the street belongs to everyone and we can all learn by sharing. Through education, we can use this great opportunity to prompt new ways of assuming responsibility for the crisis and urban decay.



Thomas Dambo, *Monstruo de madera*, 2016. Foto: Stephanie Silva.

One of the main objectives of this last edition was to create a slogan to promote participation in the event through social media channels such as Instagram and Facebook. Organizers were looking to get visitors out of their comfort zones with the hopes of fueling more interaction. One of the slogans encourages the use of alternative modes of transportation, "We are looking to build a city through art so we can all enjoy the event and Santurce; think about leaving your car behind and opt for other means of transportation."—@santurceesley

For several years, it was never imagined that so many people from other parts of Puerto Rico would flock to the streets of Santurce, hop out of their vehicles and walk through the neighborhood to enjoy the art event. It appeared to be a complicated mission given the urban planning that favors the use of a car, which causes us to become completely crazed by even the thought of walking. A work from SEL6 that highlights our dependence on cars was created by Danish artist Thomas Dambo. At the center of the parking lot located between Calle Cerra and Calle Elisa Cerra is a sculpture of an angry giant engaged in smashing a car. Commanding a large part of the attention in a parking lot normally used for cars, it offers insight into the hidden message behind the event, which is for people to get out of their comfort zones and connect with the environment. The recycled wood and the shattered car allow us to reconsider the value of what we simply throw away.



Luis Pérez, *Virgen*, 2016. Foto: Nina Coll.

This differs from the other curatorial intentions seen in the work of artist Luis Pérez. Concerned with visual contamination, he devotes himself to the appropriation and reuse of the posters and banner advertisements that bombard us. Cutting up different banners, he created garments

for images of women who bear a resemblance to the Virgin Mary. An initial interpretation could suggest the indoctrination via incessant consumption that governs our thoughts, while a second interpretation might make us think of the complete opposite: Repurposing the objects that "control" us to construct a new sustainable order.



José Luis Guitérrez, Escultura escenográfica Don Senario, 2016. Foto: Nina Coll.

This event seeks to promote a new trend. From now on, March 12 will be the Día Nacional del Consumo Local (National Day of Buying Local). The idea is for event visitors to realize the importance of keeping capital within the country. This way we can educate the public and the sponsors so that the country's predicament will improve by expanding the local economy. A message left by someone on Facebook indicates the same thing: "What would happen if for one day we decided to support local products 100%? What impact would that have on our local economy? Help us create awareness about the importance of buying local with a day where we think about what we produce and consume, leaving a clear message of the importance of creating our own sustainable economy. Let's make this go viral, and share it on all social networks!" @santurceesley

Restrictions on business permits have also been enforced, so that community members and artists are the ones to capitalize on the economic impact, ensuring that money stays in the neighborhood. An example of this was a paint company that sponsored the materials and equipment needed for a mural created by the students of the Escuela Central de Artes Visuales (Central School for the Visual Arts). The mural was made with the intention of raising funds for the creation of a scholarship for students of limited means. Alexis Bousquet emphasizes that this is an example of how creativity can make a difference that is beneficial to the community. Our aim is to advance creativity and establish new and positive ways for the sponsors to directly influence the empowerment of people. Another interesting idea is the opening of La Galería 100% (the 100% Art Gallery). Here artists can exhibit their work and receive 100% of the profit, without any middleman.

In this event, artists are not limiting themselves to creating large murals and selling their artworks in galleries, they are also thinking about establishing stronger bonds with the people. One of the most noteworthy works on Calle Elisa Cerra is the piece conceived and constructed by artist and theater performer José Luis Gutiérrez who, along with many volunteers, built a stage/sculpture known as *Don Senario*. This stage is meant to remain in the community after the event has finished, thus providing a space for scheduling dramatic performances and educational workshops.

Meanwhile, the idea of putting a finger on what we do not perceive—urban abandonment, lack of interaction between people, and indifference to the common welfare of our society—motivates artists like Damaris Cruz. For the execution of her mural, she transformed a small zinc-roofed wooden house that seemed abandoned—due to the accumulation of trash—and on the verge of collapsing. Many passersby would think this art intervention, in full view on Calle Monserrate, was simply an abandoned home, but in fact it is inhabited by Viola, a beloved resident of the neighborhood with whom Damaris has established a bond. Through this piece, Cruz directs our gaze toward what we might otherwise fail to notice. Similarly, Argentine artist Pastel intended his work to respond to the nature of Barrio El Gandúl. He did a preliminary exercise gathering wild plants that were growing by the walls and later, inspired by the shapes of these weeds, he created the composition for his mural. This is an attempt to draw attention to what gives the surroundings their character, which may not be visible at first glance. Meanwhile, Javier Cintrón, through his depictions of the *casitas santurcinas*, aims to produce a descriptive record of the neighborhood, and to situate us within the context of the community. Curiously, instead of using paint, the artist switched to charcoal to delineate the shapes. In this way, he expects his paintings to start fading, as people leaning on the walls will smudge the surfaces and blur the lines, making them gradually disappear. These artists hope their experience on the street will enable them to highlight details of everyday life in El Gandúl, and to emphasize the identity that defines its people.



Demaris Cruz, *La que reparte el bacalao*, 2016. Foto: Stephanie Silva

In a certain way, the selection process for the official artists at the event follows the culture of graffiti, where you command respect by working in the streets. According to María del Mar Frederique, the way to find a place within the barrio, as some artists and aficionados have already done, is by pushing yourself, and making yourself known on the walls. This is the case of Tatán, who for some years has been working on different characters through the streets of Santurce, creating conversations with passers-by. Using the platform offered by the event, he sets off to explore the walls of the neighborhood, taking with him the cans of paint and materials that have been left over from other jobs. He mentions that he and the artist Gilda Diverse found a small dilapidated house, and began asking about the property among community members. They were told that the city removed people who were living there without authorization, and afterwards it had been completely abandoned. Tatán explained to me that everything is a matter of common sense. The house is a public nuisance, and having the opportunity to improve its appearance—even without an official permit—has encouraged him to beautify its façade. On the inside, the house was falling apart, there were rats and debris, and the accumulation of trash had turned it into an unsanitary place for the community as a whole. Having the required permits didn't matter to them; they began to work, and would face consequences later. While they cleaned and painted, people around the barrio would approach them and ask what they were doing, and offer refreshments. They were receptive and grateful for the new personality of the house, which now had eyes and a mouth.



Tatán, *Monstruo*, 2016. Foto: Nina Coll

Two murals that attract attention because of their location away from the main area of the event are the works of Spear Torres and Fintan Magee. Spear Torres' mural is located on Avenida Fernández Juncos, near the exit to the expressway. His mural, called *La dualidad boricua* (Boricua Duality), shows a snake with two heads and two colors, red and blue, reigning over the country. Both halves of the snake coil at opposite sides, seeking to grasp hold of the crown (power), even though they are part of one and the same entity. This allegory, presented in a simple and clean graphic design, makes us ponder the political and economic situations that we face as a country, slowly awakening to the fact that we continue to cede power to a system that sells itself as being different, but ends up being the same, not presenting any real alternatives. Meanwhile, artist Fintan Magee created a mural on a water tank located at the beginning of Calle Cerra near Avenida Ponce de León. His piece, *Glass Half Full*, shows a boy carrying an iceberg in his backpack, while the rising water covers part of the city [cover image]. It presents a cruel fact that we tend to ignore. The day is drawing near when our children will live submerged under rising waters due to our inertia before the looming reality of climate change. We do not adopt

a position, because we expect someone else to correct our mistakes. The Australian artist, conscious of this very real situation, has localized this idea by using a Puerto Rican boy as a model for his work, thus directing the alert to our own national context.

While I walked down the streets observing the content of the artistic interventions, and noticing how people actively took part in the event by snapping selfies next to the murals and later posting them on social media, I asked myself if they realized that the event was intended to be more than just an alcohol-infused party. *Santurce es Ley* is hip and trending. SEL6 was long awaited and it managed to attract people to Barrio El Gandúl, to walk its streets and enjoy its gastronomic, musical and artistic offerings. While there, I wondered whether the throngs of young people were sensitive to their own presence, whether they recognized that their arrival was an invasion of this community. I wondered if they would ever return to the area over the course of the year, and whether it was possible that, through this event, they might manage to recognize their responsibility to these communities and to the country. I also wondered whether art could truly be a vehicle for change, and whether this was the case of *Santurce es Ley*.

This year's event logo provides a clue as to the project's aim. The infinity symbol is intended to reflect a specific goal: to maintain an ongoing relationship between artists and the community. SEL6 may be the last massive festival; the experience of these six editions has helped those involved recognize that there must be continuity throughout the year. A pertinent idea is being discussed—that of establishing an urban art laboratory that provides a continuous platform of support for artists, one that would serve as workshop to promote the teaching of urban techniques for the benefit of the community and become an attractive space for visitors. We should leverage negative conceptions of gentrification and prevent corporate interests from taking advantage of the work these artists have been creating for years. The Impressionists revolutionized the art world by distancing themselves from the stylistic and thematic restraints imposed by the *Salon* in Paris. Artists and cultural managers currently working on Calle Cerra are living examples of how self-management, collaboration



Spear Torres, *Dualidad Boricua*, 2016. Foto: Ramón Luis Rodríguez Andino.

and empowerment lead us to generate new participatory strategies where we can all experiment while working in the community's behalf. Santurce is a wall of experimentation aimed at bettering the country—it is our duty to grab a spray can and leave our own mark.

Translated by the students of TRAD 6640 (Translation for Museums, Graduate Program in Translation).