

Artistic Priorities: Valuing Toronto's Youth

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Behind every choice is a motivation, and at times that motivation indicates a priority: that which is deemed and treated as more important than competing options. “Priority neighbourhood,” a term that has irritated many over the years, was previously used to refer to what the City of Toronto now calls a “Neighbourhood Investment Area” (or NIA): a neighbourhood facing greater socioeconomic barriers than other parts of the city. One of the reasons for skepticism around the term “priority neighbourhood” stems from the belief that, in many ways, the City has done the very opposite of putting these neighbourhoods first. Yet, throughout the Greater Toronto Area, artists have given these communities and their young residents a significant place in their lives and practices.

In my conversations with a few of these artists, I gained insight into a field of work that challenges the widely accepted views of what an artist does and what art education is “supposed to” look like. Carlos Delgado, Nadijah Robinson, and Annie Wong are three artists who are committed to working in some of Toronto’s NIAs. Alongside other work, they create art with young people; but Annie Wong has made this her main practice.

Contemporary artists, especially those engaged with the ever-evolving conceptual ideologies and creative strategies of today’s art world, bring a unique flavour to art education. Carlos, Nadijah and Annie possess a particular desire to validate the thoughts of young people through art. In speaking with them I was introduced to the intricacy of community or socially engaged art, as well as the expertise that they, as practicing contemporary artists, have to offer as educators.

Annie Wong is a multidisciplinary artist, arts educator, and writer whose work deals with people, the built environment of communities, and the social relationships within them. Together she considers this her artistic material. Her genuine fascination with vertical neighbourhoods moved her to collaborate with five youth from the Thorncliffe Park community in 2015, to create a map and walking tour of the neighbourhood.

Recently considered an NIA, Thorncliffe Park (TPK) is composed of a large number of high-rise apartment buildings. To Annie, “the way residents use the space is very creative and very interesting.” *TPK Walking Maps* was an experience of the youth guiding others through their vertical neighbourhood. This involved activations like hiding house keys and knocking on doors to meet neighbours.

Annie's practice straddles the line between simply making art and engaging in social activism through art. "I can't say that my work has an agenda entirely around social change," she explains, "but my work is definitely oriented towards rethinking the social... [it] strives to create an aesthetic experience, however outside of the traditional conventions and media of art making."

When I spoke with Annie, she highlighted that in her opinion *TPK Walking Maps* didn't really change anything in the community. However, great art was made out of the students' everyday navigations of their neighbourhood, which was the motivation behind the work.

Nadijah Robinson is a community-engaged, mixed media artist and educator who studied in the Urban Education Stream of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). The youth she has interacted with, who often live in Toronto Community Housing, are given few after school activity options, and those who attend her program, she admits, might not be "super willing participants." With that understanding, Nadijah nevertheless seeks to provide a space of enjoyable experimentation, where youth are able to exercise their ability to make choices. She says, "I'm doing these art workshops, not for the purpose of creating future artists... these skills that they develop in making art are translatable to other things... other fields of work, or self-expression..." This approach to art diverts from a focus on technical achievement to generating and developing creative skills for life.

As resident artist with Power Youth at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in 2015, Nadijah led a graffiti art workshop. She began it with a history lesson, educating the youth that graffiti writing was a tool originally used by young people like them. This introduction made the art form relatable. Thus, the students gained a sense of ownership and confidence in participating in this practice.

Artist **Carlos Delgado** is fascinated by human self-expression and the means by which we relate to one another within our modern systems. Raised in a small village in Colombia and currently living and working in Toronto, his abstract portraits have brought him international success. His practice reflects his belief that artists "have the social responsibility to use art not to just reflect the world around them, but to engage the world around them in that reflection."

Through his program *In Our Shoes* (which he has completed with the participation of over 250 students), Carlos works with the youth to

design their own distinctive pair of shoes, which are then theirs to keep at the end of the project. His most recent installment of this program was in Regent Park in early 2017. Sadly, near its end, a youth from the area was killed in a shooting, which shook the neighbourhood. With this tragic event in his thoughts, when exhibiting *In Our Shoes* at community hub Daniels Spectrum, Carlos installed the shoes in the shape of a heart, as a unifying symbol for the community. The shoes were originally to be displayed for two weeks; however the overwhelmingly positive response from community members led to the installation remaining in place for over two months.

Despite producing similar projects, the artists' motivation and passion differ from one another. For Annie, collaborating with others to create an experience is much more fulfilling than working individually. Although Carlos thrives in his studio, he finds satisfaction in making a positive contribution to communities through art. This motivates him to take time away from his studio to be in NIA's. While Nadijah likes to keep her personal practice separate from her education endeavours, they both connect to her desire to use art to facilitate healing.

By connecting with these artists, I've learned that some of the most relevant artistic initiatives are intangible, transitory and impermanent. They provide an encounter and experience for an individual or group in a particular moment in time, often leading to the creation of lasting memories. These artist-educators downplay their impact, yet Carlos, Annie and Nadijah all subtly but significantly are re-shaping art education, while affirming the array of viewpoints of Toronto's often overlooked youth.

Interviews with Carlos Delgado, Nadijah Robinson, and Annie Wong
conducted by the author, April 2017 in Toronto.



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