

"Healing Walls: Murals and Community, a Chicago History," installation view, Illinois Art Gallery, 1995-96. Left to right, works by: Mario Castillo, Marcos Raya, Kathleen Farrell. Photo by Jane Stevens; courtesy of Illinois Art Gallery.

Art's Chicago Public

PART ONE: The Mural Movement

by Claire Wolf Kwant

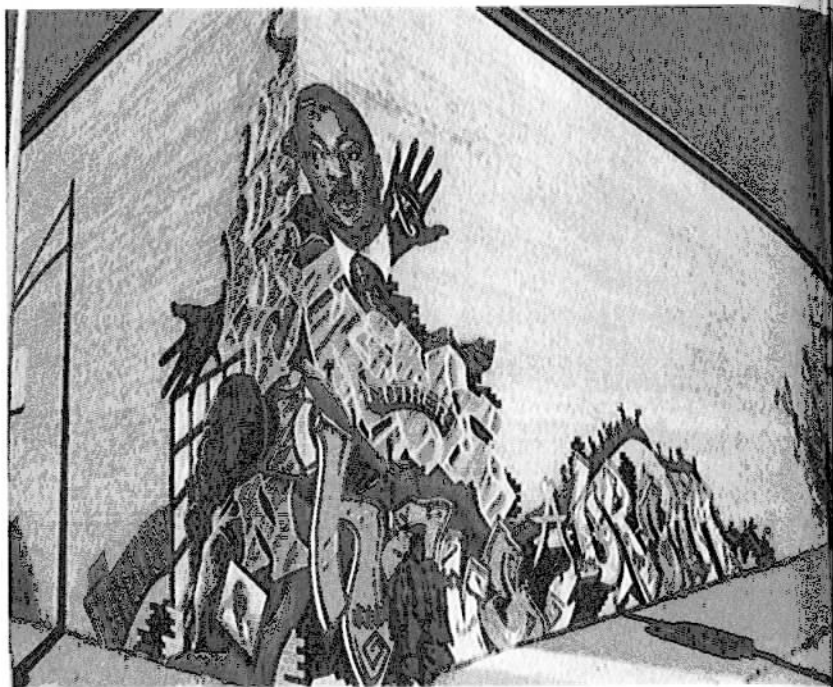
In recent years, we have witnessed a burgeoning interest in public and socially oriented art. This interest accompanies changes in the art world related to global transformations in demographics, economics, and in culture itself. In the United States, as previously well defined boundaries between artist and audience blur and shift, artists and art institutions are challenging traditional ideas about why, and for whom, art is important, and whether a wider public involvement in art is desirable or possible. In the ensuing rhetoric, it is useful to remember that since our dominant culture embraced Kant's criteria of disinterested beauty or the sublime for art in the eighteenth century, the avant garde has continually searched for a progression of singular definitions by which to separate art from non art, and thus to justify the artist's vocation. Since these pervasive avant gardist impulses continue to affect how art is understood in this country, they cannot be ignored. Yet they are not the only way to assess art's value. In a series of two articles, beginning here and concluding in the summer issue, I will focus on how artists and art world systems function—examining some of the different ways artists interact with a variety of publics in Chicago, often on the neighborhood level, and rethinking some of the new boundaries that are forming as the field of "public art" becomes institutionalized by the art world.

There are a number of organizations and artists' groups that have worked in the city for over 25 years (and sometimes far longer) to make art more available and relevant at the community level. While the second installment of my discussion will center on the public institutions, nonprofit arts organizations, and exhibition venues that promote and encourage public art in Chicago, I would like to begin with the Chicago mural movement. In the late '60s, muralists bypassed the limitations of a mediated museum and gallery system in order to speak directly to a larger and more diverse audience, following the lead of earlier, community-based organizations, such as Beacon Street Hull House, that were established in neighborhoods to organize activities that integrated art with other life-sustaining programs. My discussion of murals aims to demonstrate how their development set the groundwork for new theories that are now becoming part of mainstream debate and practice. A closer look at the history of the Chicago mural movement, documented in "Healing Walls: Murals and Community, a Chicago History," an important recent exhibition at the Illinois Art Gallery,¹ highlights some of the issues raised in the development of this genre.

One can theorize that the muralists transformed such views as Michael Fried's Modernist attack on Minimalist art as theater² into a positive stance, in which trained professional artists incorporated their sophisticated and specialized knowledge into new processes for new ends. Thus, Fried's negative view of artwork that included the spectator articulated a position that was subsequently reversed by the muralists. As these artists began challenging themselves to replace the relatively small scale of easel painting and the privacy of their studios with the monumental scale of exterior walls, architectural elements, and the public space of the city, they simultaneously aimed to invent alternative techniques and approaches in order to redefine art's function and constituency. For them, innovation took place on the streets instead of in their studios. Instead of endlessly talking about art, or the interior machinations of the artist and the art world, they began developing new ways to locate and make visible their communities' often hidden and heterogeneous concerns. This process also resulted in the re-examination of certain worn-out dogmas about significance in art: that it is only possible as the creative act of an individual; that collaboration necessarily erases differences; or that serious art is fundamentally adversarial to its community. Another issue that has, to my knowledge, never been theorized systematically, but is explored by the muralists, concerns how artistic innovation is defined by art-world professionals in contrast to examining how different kinds of innovation occur in different kinds of art.

Muralists seldom define themselves according to the conventional model of the individualistic and alienated artist/hero; instead, their stance toward strengthening their communities often comes from a sense of affiliation. As self-proclaimed cultural workers, some work to unearth and document shared histories and unspoken values in order to communicate them collectively, publicly, and monumentally. Others are concerned with constructing positive images of self as individuals and as groups, and to make visible a sense of the spiritual. According to muralist and educator Olivia Gude, "The exploration of self

through mythical archetypes, and polytheistic, rather than monotheistic, conceptions of self and spirit have been important cultural developments in the 1980s and '90s."³ Muralist Marcus Akiniana stated, "To me, an artist is like



a priest. Coming from the African cultural standpoint, the artist is a spiritual person, like a medicine man. There is a big responsibility that comes with that." To this end, Siddha Webber's combining text and poetry—often prayers—with images in many of the 33 murals he has made since 1969 is one unique approach to transforming forgotten, dilapidated walls into sites that nourish the spirit. Resistance takes place against destructive forces, such as racism, gang or police violence, drugs, and outside encroachment—i.e., unwanted government policies or financial development—which could destroy the character of the community. Some murals identify with a group's victimization, while others take a more proactive position as they strive for their community's enhancement.

Although murals have long and dissimilar histories in Mexico and in Europe—two artistic centers whose influence is strongly felt in the Chicago mural tradition—their development in the United States has been shaped differently

depending on their locations. John Pitman Weber and Hector Duarte note that certain Mexican stylistic devices and theoretical developments have greatly influenced Chicago murals; in particular, they discuss the mural as being visually interactive with its support, so that the architecture is an active ingredient of the picture. For them, murals must take into account their location and audience. Thus, a primary step in planning a mural consists of an analysis to determine who the potential viewers are, from what positions the mural will be seen, and how much time the average viewer is likely to spend at a particular location.

Also, by borrowing Mexican narrative devices, fractured compositions, and giant shifts in scale, Chicago muralists began alluding to events and ideas separated in time and space, and to mix images of myth, metaphor, and real events. They devised ways of collaborating while maintaining their individual artistic identities. For instance, by juxtaposing dissimilar elements such as flat African patterns with the naturalistic rendering of some figures and the stylization of others in an ordered but highly complex spatial design, the artists could

a language for black pride, identity, and empowerment. As with subsequent murals, its goal was to generate growth and healing through dialogue. Since then, several generations of muralists have worked alone or in ad hoc groups in different neighborhoods of the city.

In 1970, Walker founded The Chicago Mural Group with Eugene Eda and John Pitman Weber, developing over the years a theoretical and organizational structure that later evolved into the Chicago Public Art Group (CPAG).⁵ Although its membership has shifted over time, it has always been a multi-racial and multi-ethnic organization, now numbering about 30 members. CPAG initiates many of Chicago's most outstanding community-based murals, develops resources for funding, and, importantly, provides leadership in shaping the field.

Because there are so many noteworthy murals in the city, I can describe only a few examples of the different types made over the years by some leaders in the movement. *Another Time's Voice Remembers My Passion's Humanity* is one of a number of collaborations by African-American artists Calvin Jones and Mitchell Caton.⁶ Painted in 1979 on a wall facing the playlot adjoining the Elliot Donnelley Youth Center, this 18- by 42-foot work remains an exceptional example of the ways in which some murals can integrate images to convey multiple meanings, places, times, and artists' voices on a large scale. A realistically painted, middle-aged woman anchors the right edge of the wall: her shape, dress, and upright, purposeful stance faithfully represents the personage this figure symbolizes: the the stalwart strength of the matriarch. On the left, a similarly realistic depiction of a father embracing a child completes a family, while in front, silhouettes of running children picture the mischievousness and joy of youth. Occupying the center are depictions of the ordinary, wood-frame houses that may be found in working-class neighborhoods all over Chicago. Other, stylized images of faces, statues, and designs are African-American symbols of identity and empowerment, tying the present to reconstructions of the past and a hoped-for future. Recently, the community's commitment to its public art was demonstrated by its commissioning a restoration of the mural and the development of a unique art playlot that contains other two- and three-dimensional works by several artists, such as a delightful mosaic grotto, by Mr. Imagination, in which children can play.

Continuing the tradition of Chicago murals that took hold in the '80s, Olivia Gude teamed up with graffiti-artist Dzine, working with six teenagers to create *Still Deferred; Still Dreaming* for the Martin Luther King Boys and Girls Club. Effectively coupling different styles and sources for text and imagery based on the club's namesake and the engagement of the myth of the American Dream in African-American discourse, its design wraps the corner of the building, radically accentuating it. Traditionally painted, naturalistic portraits of Dr. King, Malcolm X, and Ghandi exemplify people of color who worked for peace and systemic change, while famous texts and references to Egypt speak to pride of heritage. Finally, by incorporating the street writing and spatial design of today's hip-hop culture, along with the appropriation techniques and fractured and flattened spatial design of contemporary painting, the

incorporate different styles, ideas of places, kinds of objects, or sets of opinions and experiences within one frame. Furthermore, like insiders in the art world utilizing certain idioms peculiar to contemporary art in order to increase the work's abstract complexity, many of the best muralists employ urban images and languages that are meaningful locally but seem hermetic to outsiders.

The Chicago mural movement's beginning is usually attributed to William Walker, who conceived the 1967 *Wall of Respect*.⁴ It was made jointly by artists in the midst of their African-American community to develop a positive image for people of that community:

Olivia Gude
and Dzine
*Still Deferred, Still
Dreaming*, 1993.
Installed at Martin
Luther King Boys
and Girls Club at
Washington and
Sacramento.

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artists symbolically intermix different generations and groups of people who are usually separated. Thus, the mural expresses the opinions of two widely diverse artists (teacher and graffiti writer), their teen collaborators, the sponsors, and the mural movement's ongoing examinations of the symbolic and theoretical complexity of Martin Luther King, Jr.

While themes of racial or ethnic pride and empowerment have continued to be important in the mural movement, artists such as Weber have generated murals that confront the widely contested social and political messages of their time (such as anti-war, environmental, and integrationist themes). These artists formed methods of targeting diverse but receptive audiences, negotiating funding (or, at least, supplies), shaping imagery and compositional devices, and acquiring sites (such as liberal churches and neighborhood community centers) suitable for such agendas. These murals, executed largely in the 1970s, were part of an effort to create new, issue-oriented communities that were not necessarily geographically situated. Unfortunately, few of these historically important murals remain in good condition due to the vagaries of weather, changing ownership of sites, and inadequate technical precautions.

Although Weber is less active today as a muralist, his leadership has been profound in the ongoing creation of a theoretical position for murals as a distinct genre of art. He has been active in developing appropriate principles for mural design and has experimented with more durable media, new techniques for collaboration, and various narrative and abstract styles to convey different sorts of meanings. One extant mural is an arresting relief of concrete, sgraffito technique, and mosaic; 1979's *For the People of the Future*,⁷ in which he and co-artists Lynn Takata and José Guerrero correlated a plant-like form abstractly alluding to nature with a hand holding a scroll imprinted with pictographs representing culture. Utilizing a strong, simple design that is immediately noticed on its busy street, and constructed out of nearly indestructible materials, the mural pictures the artists' plea for the continuation of both culture and nature.

Olivia Gude is an extraordinarily productive muralist of the generation following those originating the movement. She works both alone and in collaboration with community groups and other muralists, including her husband, Jon Pounds (now the director of the CPAG). In a 1992 solo mural on a railroad underpass in Hyde Park, Gude explored new ways to depict the multiple voices that occupy common space in this neighborhood. *Where We Come From . . . Where We're Going* stems from her observation that many of Hyde Park's diverse inhabitants are atomized individuals who seldom talk to one another. By stopping and interviewing people at the 56th Street and Lake Park Avenue railroad underpass where her 1500-square-foot mural now appears, she obtained fragments of oral histories that she transcribed onto a painted, frontally arranged lineup of portraits. She used other painterly and

compositional devices, such as radical shifts in scale and transparent layering of motifs, to point out that the singular stories and relationships that underlie these solitary facades are indications of multiple sub-communities: a neighborhood that is integrated, yet not integrated, and a community in which its constituent parts are far more important to its inhabitants than Hyde Park as a supposedly integrated whole.

An exemplary collaboration between Gude and students representing over 30

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different ethnic groups is the series of stunningly beautiful Venetian-glass mosaic murals created at Steinmetz High School in 1993-95.⁸ Although part of their purpose is to beautify the school and to recontextualize the space for its present users, the mosaics are also meant to be part of a didactic process to create a secluded work setting in which students from the racially tense high school could admire each other's developing mosaic skills and discuss differences and divisions among them. For two years, these students learned to research their histories and to communicate with each other to form new understandings. In the process, they learned technical skills necessary for translating themes from their diverse backgrounds into collaboratively generated designs and for executing the highly professional mosaics that now cover columns in the school's main entrance—a lasting legacy for themselves and their school.

Several other school murals also aim to represent the composite nature of the schools' populations. Images gleaned from children's drawings appear alongside African and Amerindian designs on the cracked-tile mosaics at the entrance to the Nobel School.⁹ Relating to the school's population of predominantly Latino and African-American kids, this lively hybridization of symbols is designed in a non-hierarchical schema.

While the murals at these schools strive to highlight both the mixed origins and the hybridization of their students, many of Chicago's Chicano murals isolate and amplify their particular historical and cultural roots and their stylistic ties to the great Mexican muralists. Although Mexico's tradition of mural art was a reflection of its government's earlier revolutionary ideals of educating and uplifting the "common man," in the United States it became an outsider art of a minority, displaced culture. Working mainly in the Pilsen neighborhood, Chicano muralists, both professional and

Marcos Raya has worked to depict evolving ideas of culture and to air other community issues. For the most part, Chicago's Chicano murals remain a monumental art, as they convert dilapidated walls into the sites of an art form symbolic of a culture that is alive, thriving, and evolving.

Hector Duarte's 1992 mural, *Honor Boricua*, (assisted by Sandra Antongiorgi) deserves close attention because it is an excellent example of how the Mexican mural tradition has been used by many artists to depict a variety of ethnic themes. Duarte is a Mexican-born artist who was trained in Siqueiros's workshop and has worked in Chicago for the past decade, producing many murals depicting various Latino themes.¹¹ This 20- by 33-foot acrylic mural depicts a Puerto Rican flag ingeniously floating among images of its host building's side wall (pictured as a new, columned arcade reminiscent of a beloved Puerto Rican historical site—an anti-slavery monument) and of Chicago and Puerto Rican landscapes. These symbols, and the body of water depicted in the mural's middle ground, signify themes of dual identity and a spiritual energy flowing back and forth from Duarte's patrons' roots in Puerto Rico and present reality in their Chicago community. The mural's exceptionally skillful, naturalistic painting is executed with a baroque sense of exaggerated perspective. It exemplifies the sense of optimism, integration, and harmony, and the technical drawing proficiency and command of space that are typical of many traditional Mexican murals.

Other muralists, in their efforts to resist homogenization within an Anglo society and affirm a sense of pride in their heritage, borrow images from folk art and pre-Columbian artifacts—particularly from the highly complex symbolic vocabulary of the Aztec and Mayan civilizations—as reductionist symbols of an imagined democratic and peaceful past. Unfortunately, this kind of unexamined, repetitive, and reductive use of symbols sometimes results in decorative and nostalgic clichés rather than a considered

attempt to come to grips with the complexities and violence of either the past or the present.

Murals in other parts of the city reflect the histories and themes of various other ethnic and racial communities. For instance, Cynthia Weiss and Miriam Socoloff's 1989 mosaic, *Fabric of Our Lives*, for the Bernard Horwich Jewish Community Center, focuses on Jewish histories of labor and immigration. Weiss's continued development of the mosaic as a particularly durable and beautiful technique has influenced many muralists.

From the beginning of the movement in the late '60s, murals have held dual and conflicting positions in the art world. Chicago's murals are ubiquitous. Like the features of long-married spouses, they are seen on our daily rounds but not always registered on our consciousness. However, their status as art is



Olivia Gude
Where We Come From... Where We're Going
(detail), 1992, 11' x 120', installed at 56th and
Lake Park Avenue.

amateur, were also influenced by protest movements of the '60s and '70s, including the Chicano movement in the Southwest and the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. A major project, recently restored, was the series of monumental murals covering several walls outside and inside the Benito Juarez High School. These huge and complex works, a collaboration between many well-known Latino muralists,¹⁰ celebrate Mexican culture and history. Several other mural projects in Pilsen, led by Francisco Mendoza, tend to be generalized depictions of Mexican cultural symbols done in collaboration with local students, while

often dismissed by arts professionals, even as they look for ways to duplicate many of the muralists' working methods. Paradoxically, those very artists who have been at the forefront of developing ways to deliver relevant messages via art to a wide and general audience are often relegated to the margins in mainstream art-world discussions of such topics. Their sophistication and efficacy in addressing their audience and developing imaginative uses of their sites—incorporating architecture, landscape, and scale in the process—are invisible to the uninitiated. Similarly ignored is their exhaustive investigation of the difficult process of collaboration: of learning to dialogue, to juxtapose conflicting world views without fighting (an aesthetic as well as a real-world activity), and to give up power in order to achieve a stronger and more efficacious whole.

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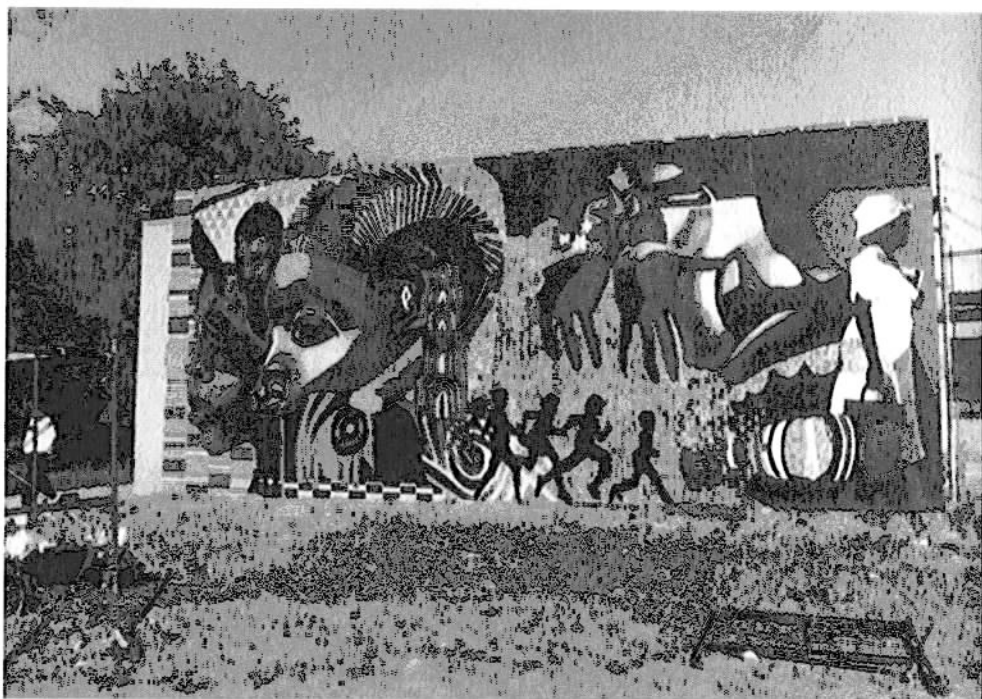
In practice, the word "collaboration" is used to mean many different things. "Art by Committee" is still considered to be weak art by many artists and critics, its power diluted through compromise; on the other hand, it is left unscrutinized as an unproblematic goal by others. Muralists sometimes collaborate only among themselves, using the wall as a forum for their joint messages to their audience. Sometimes collaboration means soliciting community input but not allowing for decision-making, and sometimes it actually involves the community in all aspects of the work's development. Its most radical interpretation by muralists calls for a flattening of hierarchy among all involved.

As the mural movement continues its development, some artists are engaging in pushing the genre in new directions. Most influential to them are recent theories in feminist, deconstructionist, and minority fields of scholarship, wherein discussions of issues related to identity formation and empowerment, and of social structures that allow for diversity and hybridization, are germane to their goals. Indeed, a fascinating but problematic mural by Bea Santiago Muñoz with Tim Porlock exemplifies such experimentation as younger muralists begin to put their interpretation of recent theory into action. This 1995 mural, *Fishing On Hogarths Head's Bay*,¹² is interesting and provocative in that it engages many of the important and contested issues of contemporary murals. Muñoz and Porlock worked collaboratively with their patrons, the students at Prologue Alternative High School, to depict themes and ideas gleaned from both the students' experiences and those of their artist leaders. Their witty and significant textual input is interspersed with various symbols and narrative elements in a determinedly nonhierarchical way.

Two cogent phrases in this mural summarize the ongoing dilemmas that the best murals address: Is the role of the public

artist to bring issues to the attention of the community? Or is the artist's role to depict the values, concerns, and interests of the community? These are questions of the artists, whose concerns presumably are part of, but not dominant in, the totality of the piece. Another phrase in the mural, "The Classical Hero has grown Old," conveys the workers' desire for change. Devices such as

these, in which many disparate activities, scenes, portraits, and symbols are included within one frame, continue the muralist tradition of indicating multiple sources of experience. Another tradi-



tional device—allowing for multiple drawing styles—also has been used to speak to the dilemma of how one can depict diversity (i.e., through images of people holding hands?). However, the tightly controlled space of the Mexican tradition has been replaced by a more haphazard arrangement of motifs to break up any tendency toward a unified narrative. Moreover, the mural's drawing tends to

be differentiated more by individual degrees of skill than by well-defined individual styles. Further notable inclusions are local "tags," which not only convey information among the students but also validate their "writing" as art.

This work squarely faces the muralists' desire to avoid unproblematic representations of people who are not accurately pictured by singular and stereotypical images, and their determination to find new ways to validate and portray hybridization. Although the work displays its leading artists' intelligence and proficiency with language and theory, it also epitomizes a contradiction between the artists' acceptance of advanced theory as an unproblematized basis for the work and a simultaneous disregard for a similar degree of aesthetic mastery. This mural's uneven drawing techniques and its unconsidered use of color and design in much of its field highlights the problem. In this case, language and concept have been falsely naturalized, while aesthetics are dismissed as being too culturally biased. Thus, part of the muralists' function, that of teacher and role model, has been abrogated in its failure to provide a paradigm for the students' development of a visual language. Furthermore, another common function, to provide aesthetic pleasure, is also lessened.

In contrast, the best murals, such as Gude's *Where We Come From . . . Where We're Going*, become the sum of all their relationships: of words, pictures, and concepts to their specific support, and thus they stand in their communities as more than the detritus of their process. Their effectiveness should be judged on multiple levels of aesthetics as well as the freshness of their approach to solving issues of more or less significance to both the artists and their community. The best of Chicago's murals have not only contributed to the way we think about art, but because they are everywhere in the city—not only in the poorer neighborhoods with which they are often associated—they have also changed the way Chicago looks.

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notes

- 1 "Healing Walls: Murals and Community, a Chicago History," curated by Judith Burson Lloyd, was on

view from October 27, 1995 to January 28, 1996 at the Illinois Art Gallery.

- 2 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum*, June 1967.
- 3 All quotations are from interviews conducted by the author or from documents and talks connected with the exhibition, "Healing Walls: Murals and Community, a Chicago History."
- 4 *Wall of Respect* was originally located on Chicago's South Side at 43rd and Langley. Part of it has been preserved and is installed at Malcolm X College.
- 5 Other cooperatives with wider goals but that also produced murals include MIRA, founded by Carlos Cortez and José Gonzales, MARCH (Movimiento Artístico Chicano), founded by Victor Sorrell, José Gonzales, Ricardo Alonzo, and Mario Castillo in 1967; and The Public Art Workshop, founded by Mark Rogovin in 1972. Other multi-purpose organizations that occasionally sponsor murals are The Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, Gallery 37, and the Boulevard Arts Center.
- 6 This mural was restored in 1993 by Bernard Williams and Paige Hinson.
- 7 *For the People of the Future* is located at the corner of Springfield Street and North Avenue.
- 8 Sponsored by Steinmetz High School and The Chicago Public Arts Group, the murals are located at 3030 N. Mobile.
- 9 Located at 4127 W. Hirsch. Co-designers were Mirtes Zwierzynski and Nina Cain, with a team of younger muralists and teenagers.
- 10 Participating artists include Aurelio Diaz, Antonio del Santos, Hector Duarte, José Gonzales, Jaime Longoria, Oscar Moya, Malu Ortega, Ray Patián, Marcos Raya, Celia Rodriguez, Roberto Valadez, and Salvadore Vega.
- 11 Some of these were produced in collaboration with Mariah deForest, who helped translate a conversation with Hector Duarte and elucidated many of my questions.
- 12 This 15- by 65-foot mural is on Lawrence Avenue, beside the railroad underpass just east of Sheridan Road.

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the considerable support and help I received from the following people: Edith Altman, who was my inspiration and guide to information; Jon Pounds, who spent days taking me to see all varieties of murals, and hours on the telephone explaining them and referring me to other sources; and Olivia Gude, Ed Maldonado, and John Pitman Weber, who provided me with guidance and historical data. Mariah deForest, Pat Devine, Diane Gramm, Hector Duarte, Joyce Fernandes, Juana Guzman, Jane Heilman, Karen Indeck, Greg Knight, Mike Lash, Pat Murphy, and Peter Taub were also extremely generous with their time and resources.

Mitchell Caton and Calvin Jones

Another Time's Voice Remembers My Passion's Humanity, 1979. Restored by Bernard Williams, 1993. 24' x 60'. All photos courtesy of Chicago Public Art Group unless otherwise noted.