



## Two Women on the Street

Olivia Gude; Beatriz Santiago Munoz

*Feminist Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Women's Agency: Empowerment and the Limits of Resistance. (Summer, 1994), pp. 301-317.

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## ART ESSAY

### TWO WOMEN ON THE STREET

OLIVIA GUDE and BEATRIZ SANTIAGO MUÑOZ

*In the following conversation, veteran muralist Olivia Gude passes on to emerging muralist Beatriz Santiago Muñoz some of the history of the contemporary mural movement in Chicago, and they talk about women muralists and making and seeing large-scale images of women on the street.*

**O.:** Bea, you've done a few mural projects now. What's it been like for you?

**B.:** Well, it's strange the way people relate to you on the street. People seem to feel you are immediately of interest because you are a woman on the street doing big work. They don't associate heroic painters with women. People don't think of muralists as women or at least not the muralist who's in charge of the team.

**O.:** Yes, being on the street as a painter, I'm also very conscious of my gender. People—actually, to be accurate I should say "men"—often come up and say things to me like: "Oh, look at you! What a mess! Those clothes that you have on are all covered with paint." It's a crazy thing because I can't imagine people walking up to a man and discussing with him the style of his clothes, the fact that he is wearing appropriate work clothes.

This is something I've gotten to be really assertive with people about. I'll say, "Look, if I was a man, would you be making remarks about the fact that I have paint on my clothes? I'm doing a job here." No matter how matter-of-factly or kindly I say this, it seems to really put people off. I'm perceived as rude, as someone lacking a sense of humor. I believe men are offended because it does foreground persisting stereotypes of women—that they belong inside and that they should be attractively dressed.

**B.:** Right, Olivia, people often have said to me, "Silly girl, you've got more paint on your clothes than on the wall."

**O.:** Exactly. They'll say that in the morning and you want to say, "Excuse me, reality check. I've been a muralist for years. These are my work clothes. This is not just the paint I happened to get on me this morning." There is still a reluctance to accept a woman as a professional. To me, it seems to point to the image of the woman artist as only a hobbyist.

I must admit I love the power of being a muralist. I've thought a lot about Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. I realized a few years ago that I had chosen to be Diego. Although there are all sorts of wonderful things which can be said about Kahlo and her work, for me she represents a deep pathology.

**B.:** She's really known for her victimhood.

**O.:** I'm glad that an acknowledgment of the significance of that seems to be coming around. She's almost been canonized as "*the* woman artist," and she had millions of operations . . . such vulnerability and constraints. As I've gotten older and more identified as a muralist, I'm aware that it's been important to me that I think of myself as someone who is physically heavier, who has more gravity. It's been an important part of seeing myself as someone who could be out on the street, who was strong enough physically to lift scaffold and psychologically to be a presence directing other workers. It's been interesting to me experiencing a kind of power which comes from taking on public work. It's totally different from the power that comes from work which is privatized, interiorized—shown in interior spaces, dealing with internal issues.

**B.:** Well, you don't have to think of it as "being Diego" but as trying to inhabit the same space, the same public space. Making huge walls in public spaces gives more room for dialogue with a public than little pieces. It's also confrontational. When you have people walking down the street seeing you do something that big—they have to take it seriously.

**O.:** You're right, Bea. It's not being Diego. Also, as someone from the Chicago mural tradition, as a member of Chicago Public Art Group (CPAG), I'm part of a much more collective tradition than the Mexican tradition which sometimes seems to revolve around the term "el maestro." There's a "great one," and everybody else is an assistant or handmaiden. The Chicago tradition is much more oriented to collaboration. The quintessential mural that really galvanized attention to the contemporary mural movement was the *Wall of Respect*, a collaborative piece to which many African American artists contributed images of cultural pride.

Even as more large and complex murals were done here in Chicago

that employed assistants, the emphasis, the model, is that rather quickly serious young artists become co-artists and then lead artists. They aren't cast for years in the role of the assistant. It's a different tradition, I suppose, very egalitarian and American.

From the beginning the Chicago mural movement has had a working-class sensibility, both in its images and in its means of production. We work like dogs doing huge projects through the heat of the summer. It's not at all a situation where someone sets up your scaffold and you just walk in and pick up a brush. Unlike some other cities, the Chicago tradition has been to admire big, blockbuster murals which require hard physical work. In fact, some fine women muralists have gotten involved in mosaics—I think in part because it allows for the creation of large-scale work without the need for the physical stamina or the enormous amounts of concentrated time—something especially difficult for women with children at home.

**B.:** How do women muralists figure in Chicago history?

**O.:** There were several women who did a lot of work as the movement flourished in the mid-seventies—Carol Yasko, Astrid Fuller, Justine De Van (figs. 1, 2). I first came in contact with the muralists through one of Yasko's protégées, Cindy Weiss. I remember her telling these wonderful Yasko stories—about taking a class on murals at the Art Institute and having this very machisma woman in overalls with a big ring of keys come bursting into the classroom. Another story is that Yasko painted the Fifty-fifth Street mural, *Under City Streets*, with a baby on her back. I never asked Carol if that story was apocryphal, but it certainly created in my mind the belief that there was a place for women in the movement. We could compete with these macho mural men.

The image of the "founding fathers" in the Chicago mural movement has been very strong—Walker, Weber, Eda, Caton, Jones, Rogovin. I'm not sure if I would have been able to fit my work into this movement if I hadn't been introduced to those early women by the third-generation muralists like Cynthia Weiss and Nina Cain. Bea, I'm curious, as someone who has come into the movement relatively recently, what did it look like to you in terms of gender?

**B.:** I came from Puerto Rico, and there was no mural movement there. There was some government-sponsored public art. I didn't really like that or want to look at that. I became aware of mural painting when I was seventeen or eighteen, but I only knew of the Mexican muralists. The first person I met as a muralist here was you. I didn't think of



Fig. 1. *Black Women Emerging*, by Justine De Van with local assistants, 1977. Photo courtesy of Jim Prigoff. One of the earliest women's murals. More than twenty years later it is still a treasured piece of community art.



Fig. 2. *Prescription for Good Health Care* (detail), Carol Yasko, Mitchell Caton, Justine De Van, Celia Radek, 1975. A classic example of the Chicago collaborative style in which several professional muralists fuse their individual style and imagery. Chicago legend is that they locked themselves together in a room for a week in order to come up with the design.



Fig. 3. *I Welcome Myself to a New Place, the Roseland-Pullman Mural*, by Olivia Gude, Jon Pounds, Marcus Akinlana, 1988. Created by a multigenerational group of neighborhood residents.

founding fathers.

On the first mural I participated in with you, there were mostly women in that class so it was this nice women's collaboration. I suppose I never really reconciled the things I'd studied about the Mexican muralists with the collaborative experience I had, which I liked more than the solo tradition.

**O.:** Collectivity has been a value emphasized by the women in the CPAG. A moment I really treasure happened in 1988 on *I Welcome Myself to a New Place*, the Roseland-Pullman mural (fig. 3). Marcus Akinlana, Jon Pounds, and I organized the project with residents of the mostly white and Chicano Pullman and mostly African American Roseland. One wall of the mural is composed of patterns representing the nineteen different ethnic and racial groups from the area. During one of the design meetings, I looked up and noticed all the women gathered around the large-scale sketch of the pattern wall. Women were filling in patterns based on a Polish egg and an African statue; others were collaging in finished patterns or adding color. It was a wonderful image of women taking traditional skills in decorative patterning and collective work and giving them new meaning through scale and placement in the public domain.

I've been interested in looking at the connections between the contemporary mural movement and the women's cultural movement. There are strong parallels. Foremost is the emphasis on representing community life. Both movements have a part of their genesis in what was missing in Western art—both traditional and modernist. Certain areas of life had been completely blacked out from any representation.

Also I think both movements place a strong emphasis on authenticity being derived from both the individual and the collective. Truths are generated and discovered through a collective process of consciousness-raising groups or image-making groups.

**B.:** I've been learning about the mural movement over time—I'm learning about these things organically through all the CPAG artists' meetings we've had—seeing Carlos Cortez sitting there and passing on the stories. Right now I'm already doing murals, but I don't know enough about them. When you don't have the history, you invent your own story. Based on the ten or fifteen murals from the seventies I've seen and remembered, I've constructed my own history.

**O.:** Several years ago I recognized the problem that the archives of the CPAG had been lost and not kept up-to-date. I started to work on col-



lecting slides from the artists and others to re-create that history and make it accessible. As I did this work I was shocked by how good much of the early work was, not at all the familiar cliché of flatly painted, bland Peter Maxish work.

I've become so aware that political artists are always reinventing what they do without benefit of their antecedents. When I hear current discussions on collectivity and multiculturalism in the arts, I'm struck by how much these issues have been addressed by the multiracial community murals movement, especially issues of respectful ways of engaging audiences in the process of generating meaning.

Also, there are the "newly discovered" ideas about the way meaning is composed. You don't make work for no one, for a mythic universal audience. When I was in graduate school in the early eighties, to think about "the audience" was considered to be a sure way to end up with kitsch.

The possibility of art being politically efficacious is greatly diminished by the fact that over and over progressives lose their history. I think about all the artists and professors wiped out of the universities in the fifties—so we lost that connection to a vital Marxist, socialist art community. That's one of the main reasons the CPAG has devoted scarce resources to gathering information and images on the movement and now to doing restorations of some of the early works.

**B.:** Speaking of early works and the worker image in Chicago murals we were discussing earlier, I'm disappointed at all those images of a man working. There aren't really parallel images of women working until recently.

**O.:** Muralists did include women working in the seventies. Here's a classic "working-class" mural—two women of thirteen figures. I've struggled with the whole idea of whether we are responsible for depicting or creating realities. For example, the issue of showing "the people" in murals. Now it's easy for us to look at murals and criticize the totalizing myths of "the people" . . . the Benetton ads with children of different colors all sticking out pink tongues: "We're all the same underneath." It creates a false leveling. It's important to critique those kinds of images, to look at the underlying false assumptions.

Yet if you are serious about trying to create a multicultural society, you have to envision a society of different people together being able to have some sort of conversation or connection across racial and cultural lines. It is not an immediately obvious idea that artists would depict a

multicultural society. Survey the history of art. Look back at the WPA murals; for the most part they don't show that kind of diversity. Certainly the great Mexican murals tend to emphasize the forging of one racially blended people, not a society of existing and parallel difference. I believe that one of the roles the contemporary mural movement has had, one that now often seems didactic and simplistic, is to take on the task of publicly imaging a pluralistic society.

The Chicago mural movement was a multicultural phenomenon before the word "multicultural" was coined. There is an authenticity to these images because they arise out of multiracial communities and groups of artists who are themselves struggling to form political and aesthetic practices which respectfully incorporate difference. These images are then put into the public domain—in a sense beginning the debate about what such images mean, about their truth or falsehood, about their place in reimagining public life.

**B.:** That's a different viewpoint than I'm used to, Olivia. In Puerto Rico all the murals are done by the same group of people. They're history based and not very good. The really interesting murals are ceramic murals and abstract works. The typical representational murals show a Spaniard, a Taino, and an African American holding hands—all wearing some kind of period attire. It's insulting. That was one of the things I didn't like about murals. I didn't appreciate that fiction, and that's why your argument is of interest to me, but it's difficult to accept.

When Amar Tate, Stephanie George, and I were doing *Circle Journey* (fig. 4) on Fifty-third Street, I was trying to paint a woman who to me looked like she was herself a mixture of different races. Everybody just saw her as Black which is a symptom of the particular brand of U.S. racism—polarized. Some people in the neighborhood were a little bit mad that everybody in the mural looked dark skinned. Most people loved the mural, but a few were really insistent and in a way I was even more defiant. I did not want to include something just by being pushed into it. I think it was connected to those murals I saw early on in Puerto Rico. There's a lingering resentment—I don't even want to see it, a fictional utopia.

**O.:** I know what you're talking about, even though I have real respect for the early muralists who made those images. The piece I did down the street from your mural in Hyde Park, *Where We Come from . . . Where We're Going* (fig. 5), is actually a reflection on that theme.

I began the mural by standing at the site and stopping passersby, asking them to answer a few questions. I taped their responses and also pho-



Fig. 4. *Circle Journey*, by Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, Stephanie George, Amarr Tate, 1992. This mural's theme is the passing on of wisdom and knowledge about nature from the elders to younger generations.

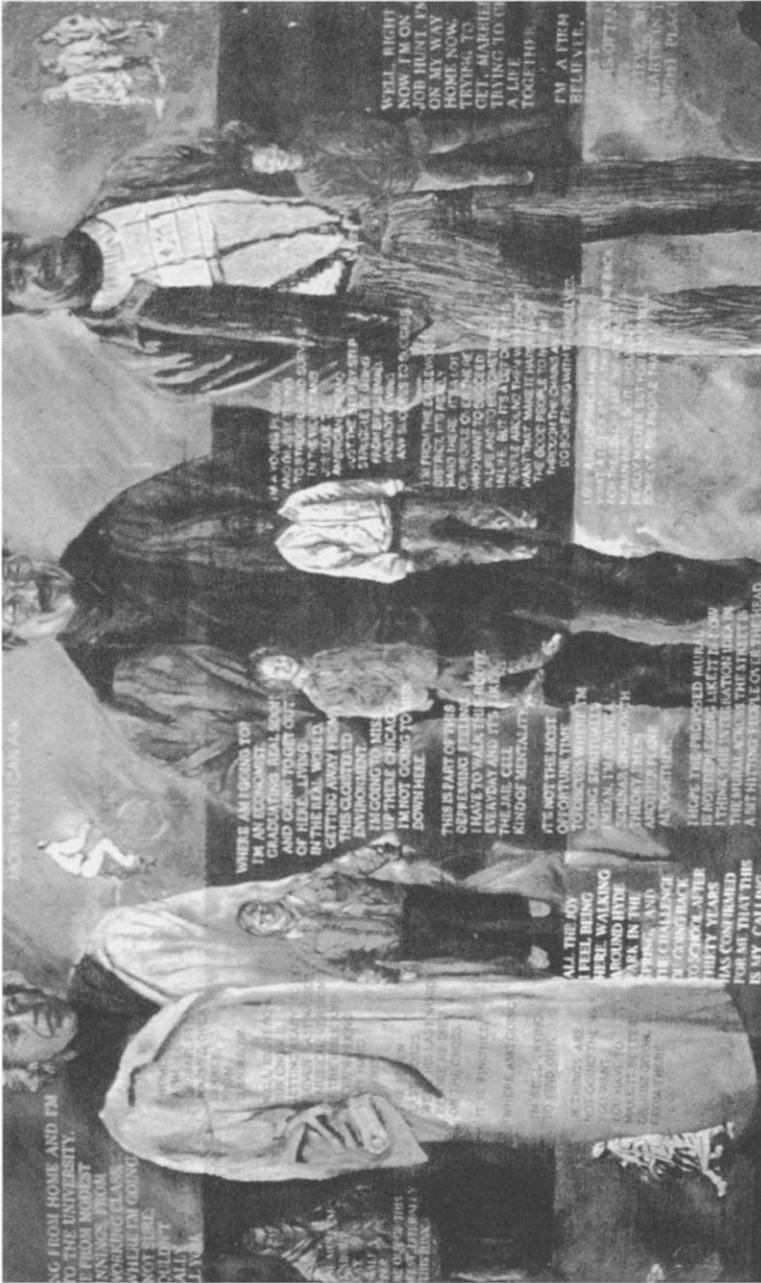


Fig. 5. *Where We Come from . . . Where We're Going*, by Olivia Gude, assisted by Rolf Mueller, 1992. Based on interviews with passersby.

tographed the people. I would ask them: "Where are you coming from? Where are you going?" I got a whole range of responses from monosyllabic "Home. Work." to metaphysical reflections on someone's sense of spirituality or life history. One woman in training to be a minister talked about where she was going in life now that her children were grown and the joy she felt being in Hyde Park studying for a new path. Minutes later another woman described the neighborhood as a depressing, run-down prison. A young man talked about his background coming from a poor neighborhood and the relationship of self-motivation and racism in trying to achieve personal goals. It was as though I could hear the thoughts of the people passing by. That's what I try to convey in the piece.

The mural is intended to problematize the notion of "the people" in community murals. Hyde Park is one of the oldest, stable integrated neighborhoods in the country. The questions the work poses are: "Is it actually a community of discourse? Are people really in contact with each other? What is it that constitutes a community? What is it that constitutes a people? Can you justifiably, even in an integrated neighborhood, show a mural of a diverse group of people together? Does it mirror the reality of people being together spatially, but actually existing almost totally within subcultures of communication?"

You'll enjoy this story, Bea. A criticism I heard about the mural was that there weren't enough people with suits. I was struck by the fact that class, not racial, issues seemed to be the source of tension here.

**B.:** That's interesting. When somebody asks me to paint a certain kind of person, that's really problematic to me. While we were painting on Fifty-third Street, someone kept asking about the ethnicity of the people and I'd say, "I can't tell you that—it's a mixture of things."

**O.:** It's almost like a Disney cartoon where they put eyelashes on a fish or frog to show that she's a woman.

**B.:** Yes, it ends up a little bit of a caricature, not necessarily the painting itself—but the act of doing it tends toward caricature. That's why I tried doing these mixed persons. Also, you can't have an infinite number of people in a mural. If there is only one woman in the mural, she ends up representing all women.

**O.:** Do we have to give up representation? These things sound so crude when you start to work them out. I remember a painter friend, Marcus Akinlana, and I would sometimes go round and round about how to make people look Puerto Rican or Mexican—I would draw a Mexican person with wavy hair, and Marcus would say, "No." I'd respond, "Look

at my best friend, Lucia, she's got wavy hair and she's Mexican." We'd go through how to make who look how. So absurd and simplistic, and yet I do believe these are legitimate issues.

People can't do what is not envisioned. I guess this gets into a discussion of "Which comes first, the representation or the reality?" I believe the relationship is dialectical.

Going back to Chicago Public Art Group, I think it's important to the mural's meanings that these images usually come from multiracial teams of artists so there is some reality to the images. As a group we have tried to explore individual ethnicity, cultural pride, reclamation, and celebration at the same time that we had a vision that could reach out across those barriers to do some work together.

**B.:** The good thing about *Where We Come from . . . Where We're Going* is that you actually got to take photographs and put the people in the mural. There's something satisfying about being able to put real people and real women in a mural.

**O.:** Women depicted in murals—that's an interesting issue. I'm thinking of the mural you did in 1992, *Circle Journey*, with that monumental woman.

**B.:** When I was making it I was thinking of making an image of a woman who is uncovering herself, uncovering her face in a very confrontational way, not ashamed—wearing a red dress, looking the viewer directly in the eye. I was thinking of her as a very strong woman, but I kept getting these comments about her as a vamp because she's wearing this red, form-revealing dress. I could see where they were coming from—especially with a snake twirled around her arm—it wasn't an innocent image of a woman.

**O.:** Bea, how do you feel about that? One thing I think about when I'm making a monumental image of a woman is this crazy thing about representation. You're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't. We were talking earlier about some of the heroic working murals in which women aren't depicted or out of twelve people there are two women. I say, "Where are we? We're not represented." But when you start making a representation, then there are new problems. Are we misrepresenting the reality? Or propagandizing?: Or romanticizing? Being falsely inclusive?

**B.:** I know what I was thinking. I definitely didn't want her to be earth mother, not so sweet. I didn't want her to be bountiful, everything flowing from her arms. I didn't want her to be necessarily a giver. I admit she's wearing a red dress. Obviously she has some sexual energy, but that



Fig. 6. *Mifflin Cooperative Mural*, by Olivia Gude, Jon Pounds, with sixty-five Cooperative members, 1987. The mural's imagery fuses incidents from the history of the radical co-op with an examination of issues of food production and distribution.

was sort of the point—she's not supposed to be ashamed of that. I guess the people who looked at it as vamp were getting what I didn't want them to get.

**O.:** When I first walked up and saw that image—I think it's a beautifully painted passage—to me she looks sexual, but she doesn't look at all vulnerable. She's confronting you, and she looks tough. There's always a temptation to pull back on ourselves; you don't want to make this foolish vamp; on the other hand, you don't want to have to desexualize a woman to put her image out there.

All the problems associated with representing women are made even worse in the mural tradition where you are operating in public space where the main depiction of women's bodies is to reveal them to sell beer or what have you. And the street is a place associated with women being vulnerable to unwanted approach, harassment, vulnerable to attack. So the issue of depicting sexuality is particularly charged. How did you end up feeling about that?

**B.:** Whatever you do, Olivia, there's room for somebody to look at it in a way you didn't intend, but I'm not going to not make a woman sexual because somebody might get off on it in the wrong way, because that happens with any image of a woman. I tried to make her in a way that protected her from that. I tried to make her confrontational, so that one couldn't just look at her, so that one had to be affected by her. I think that works in most cases.

**O.:** I've thought a lot about the bodies of women in murals, and one of the rules that I've set for myself (and this carries over into my studio work, too) is that although artists distort the proportions of the human body, change forms, stretch or condense forms, one thing I never do is create an elongated image of a woman's body. The reason for that is the whole fashion magazine image of a figure who is unrealistically tall and slim. It's a very destructive image. I guess I started thinking of that a lot on one of the first really large murals I did at the Mifflin Street Food Co-op in Wisconsin. The central image in the *Mifflin Cooperative Mural* (fig. 6) is a goddesslike figure whipping out a patterned cloth of life on which a potluck supper is being laid. I made her really meaty—actually a poor choice of words to describe a vegetarian co-op mural.

I've done several projects with Marcus Akinlana. I like working with him because he has a way of making his women shapely but with some weight to them. I think if you're not extremely careful about that in murals you are participating in a recapitulation of these oppressive, public images.



**B.:** And now these new, thinner models with shaved legs—they look pre-pubescent. I just cannot paint that.

**O.:** It's funny, Bea. I tried to be fresh in the Mifflin mural, to break new territory, but now here's a new muralist like you saying, "I didn't want to have this figure be an earth Goddess." It was a milestone for me to make a massive earth Goddess in a mural, to unite images of a Marxist critique of capitalist food distribution with a Goddess-centered spirituality. The Goddess of life is in contrast to emaciated business-suited skeleton characters who are eating money. It's funny how you push for something and then it becomes the thing that is in its turn critiqued.

**B.:** The Goddess image I was trying to avoid was the passive earth mother, the fertile ground upon which the rain falls. When I saw the Mifflin mural, I really liked it. It's an active image of a woman. In a way that's a parallel to what we've been discussing; she's a worker; she's doing; she's not just being.

I want to ask you a question, Olivia. We were talking about the envisioning of a multicultural society. Having that as a goal, how does that match with the kind of work which is also being done now which is very community specific such as Hector Duarte's piece, *Honor Boricua*, with the big Puerto Rican flag? Is it contradictory? Do you think both things are necessary?

**O.:** I don't see Afrocentricity or being Mexican- or Puerto Rican-centered in one's approach as being necessarily contradictory to a multicultural sensibility. Even being Eurocentric is not bad in itself. What makes Eurocentricity so dangerous is the racism embedded in its discourse and the way that racism was and is used to justify all sorts of atrocities and exploitation. But to give up hope for a progressive discourse being formed from this base is to give up all hope for millions of people. Perhaps we can only really thrive when each of us is rooted in the most positive aspects of the traditions of our origins.

I don't see Afrocentricity as the inverse of Eurocentricity. It's not necessarily about reversing the rhetoric of who is superior. I think it refers to looking at the world from a particular perspective in light of certain values. I think that all these are necessary. All of us are created beings. Are you the essence of being Puerto Rican or is it a created identity? How do you feel about that?

**B.:** I think both things are necessary. I have a problem with the utopian vision, but both things are good. There are murals that would be great to do that aren't geographically or racially based. It would be good to do

a women's mural, a women's community of political kinship. It's also problematic because then you are doing a woman's mural which may gloss over the differences among women.

**O.:** Yes, it's hard. I've been wanting to do a women's mural with several of us from the CPAG and an "all-girl" youth team. Of course, we run the risk of being false, of its being misunderstood. In a sense all representation is by its nature a lie, a distortion. No representation can ever be as complex as the thing itself. It's like the Borges story of the map that ultimately must be exactly coterminous with the kingdom in order to represent it adequately. Still, let's organize this women's project and give it a try.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Justine De Van and Cynthia Weiss for sharing with me stories of the early women muralists. Thanks to Chicago Public Art Group and its director, Jon Pounds, for assistance in gathering the images accompanying this article.

ERRATA:

We regret the following errors of attribution that appeared in the Volume 20 promotional brochure:

"Black Women Emerging" is a mural by Justine De Van;  
"Aren't I a Womyn?" is a mural by Dzine and Olivia Gude.

Our apologies to the artists.

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US-ISSN-0046-3663/301.412

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