

THE BIGGER PICTURE

FREE ARTS NYC

Meredith Mendelsohn discusses the impact of Free Arts NYC and its mission to foster creativity in children and teens, on the occasion of its twenty-year anniversary.

One day this past fall, around a dozen teenagers sat on the floor of Christopher Wool's studio sifting through cardboard block-letter stencils. Wool was guiding them through the process of making works in the spirit of his instantly recognizable word paintings: short bits of text printed in a grid of capital block letters on a white ground. (IF YOU CAN'T TAKE A JOKE YOU CAN GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY HOUSE is a popular personal favorite.) Earlier, Wool had given them a messy silk-screening demonstration and answered impromptu questions. One particularly bold fifteen-year-old had asked him who his rivals were and whether he thought photography was an art. (Wool said he thought it was.)

The scene might sound like an art-class excursion for students at one of Manhattan's exclusive private schools. But these teens grew up without art in their schools, without field trips to galleries and



museums, without playrooms stocked with paints. Rather, they're participants in the Teen Arts Program of Free Arts NYC, a nonprofit organization that is quietly transforming the lives of low-income kids from underfunded schools around the city. While Free Arts NYC isn't the only nonprofit aiming to enrich the lives of New York kids through art, it is the only one providing them with the kind of insider access usually reserved for top collectors and curators. "We're taking these kids nine times a year to different artist's studios," says Liz Hopfan, the program's founder and executive director. "Some schools might have significant arts programming, but there isn't one in New York City that's taking you to make something in Christopher Wool's studio"—or, for that matter, in the studios of Taryn Simon, Dan Colen, Richard Phillips, Matthew Day Jackson, Rashid Johnson, or Eddie Martinez, to name a few of the artists who have opened their studios to Free Arts NYC kids.

For many of these artists, this is a way of giving back in an era when public schools are underfunded and art classes have been cut to make way for state-test prep, despite many studies demonstrating that arts education is linked to higher standardized-test scores, improved critical thinking, concentration, and confidence. "We're living in a time where the arts are under attack and budgets are being pulled so it's critical to support any activity that's trying to stimulate this chapter within education," says Simon.

Soft-spoken and petite, Hopfan wears jeans and a black turtleneck sweater on the day we meet, her blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. Her laidback demeanor belies the conviction that has fueled the rise of Free Arts NYC over the past twenty years.

OVER
3000
ONE-TO-ONE
MENTORSHIP
RELATIONSHIPS
ESTABLISHED
IN 2017



Hopfan's entry into the art world's inner sanctum was never a given. Raised in New Jersey, she relocated to California after earning her master's in education; while teaching in a low-income elementary school in South Central Los Angeles, she began volunteering at Free Arts, which had been founded in Southern California by an arts therapist in 1977. Impressed by how positively children in foster homes and shelters responded to having a creative outlet and guidance, she was inspired to reach out to New York City social-service agencies to assess the need for something similar there. Unsurprisingly, they didn't send her away.

"I don't come from a family of collectors or art makers, but I grew up with the culture of the city and I like art," she says. "I saw the impact that the Free Arts programs had on kids. That, coupled with the lack of resources I had as a teacher, really moved me. I really believed in the programs and couldn't have done it otherwise." She returned to the East Coast in 1997 and "peddled the idea to friends and family," she recalls. Things came together when she was introduced to a family looking for an arts organization to support. "They could give me their \$100,000, or they could give a museum their \$100,000. But if they gave it to me, it would be creating something." They did, and with that nest egg, Free Arts NYC was born. The organization has since grown from a one-woman band to a staff of thirteen. It has an operating budget of over \$2 million and serves over 3,000 kids a year. (In addition to the founding chapter in Los Angeles, Free Arts also has independent branches in Arizona and Minnesota.)

Free Arts NYC's model is straightforward, relying on partnerships that Hopfan has been cultivating over the years. Free Arts NYC identifies children for the program through city agencies, shelters, and schools, then provides them with opportunities. It reaches out to philanthropic sponsors: the clothing giant Uniqlo, for instance, recently hosted a Free Arts Day—a themed, curriculum-based artmaking event for kids—in one of its New York stores, enlisting dozens of its employees as volunteers to work with the kids. The Brant Foundation has also been instrumental, hosting Free Arts Days for children bussed up from the city to its sprawling grounds in Greenwich, Connecticut, where they are hosted by artists exhibiting there. Colen worked there with kids from Free Arts NYC to make abstract paintings like his own, using crushed flowers and M&Ms. He later hosted a group of teens in his studio. For him, the experience was not just about helping kids to be creative and learn skills: "I'd hope it would inspire them to know whatever their dream is, it is worth pursuing, no matter if it seems absurd, silly, or too grand."

18000 VOLUNTEERS HAVE PARTICIPATED IN THE PROGRAM



Opposite (top): Free Arts NYC teens participating in a studio visit with Christopher Wool where they learned about his creative process, watched a silkscreen demonstration, and made their own art inspired by the artist's word paintings, New York, November 2017

Opposite (bottom): Matthew Day Jackson giving students a demonstration in mark-making techniques and using wood-burning pens and an acetylene torch, Brooklyn, NY, June 2017

All photos this page: Photos from a Free Arts Day with Dan Colen at The Brant Foundation Art Study Center, Greenwich, CT, September 2014. The artist led children

from the Department of Homeless Services through his exhibit *Help! The group painted rocks to look like M&M's, created group flower murals, made model magic canvases inspired by Dan's gum paintings, and graffitied giant five-foot boulders. Photos by Patrick McMullan Company*

Following page: Taryn Simon with Free Arts teens during a workshop in which the group worked through themes and techniques taken from the artist's 2013 archival image installation, *The Picture Collection*. Simon guided students through a process of image selection in themes and terms, New York, June 2017

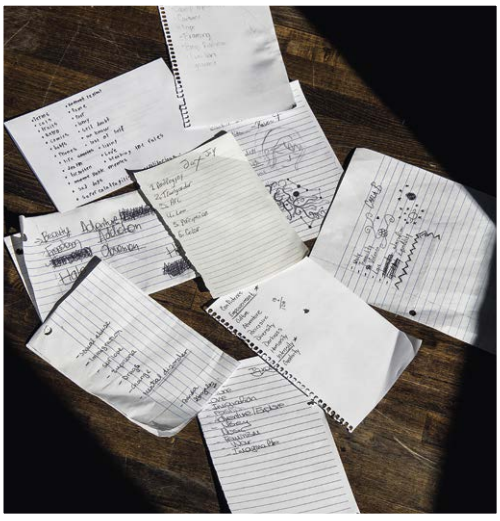
Helping kids to pursue their dreams is the mission at the heart of the Teen Arts Program, a newer track of the organization that Hopfan is growing. Teens accepted into the program are matched with a long-term mentor—a volunteer from the art or design world with whom they meet at least twice monthly for gallery, museum, and studio visits, and to work on their portfolios and applications to specialized arts high schools or colleges. Teens in the Career Exploration program tour creative businesses, meet employees there, and are assisted in applying for internships. “It’s a way of showing them job possibilities that would otherwise never be on their radar,” says Hopfan, who has brought the kids to Swarovski, Cynthia Rowley, Sotheby’s, Downing Frames, Penguin Putnam, and other companies. “Exposing these kids to artists and professionals and teaching them how to prepare a portfolio and go to an audition—it’s super special to me. It’s an education, it’s a career path, it’s culture, it’s a future. We’re heavily supported by the creative community, and we’ve been so fortunate to have access to all these great artists, and we’re sharing that access with these kids.”

Hopfan initially forged many of her relationships with artists through Free Arts’s annual benefit art-auction, its primary fundraiser since its second year in operation. Over the years, dozens of artists have donated works for the auction; meanwhile, Hopfan has gone from soliciting works from artists to commissioning them. A friend suggested she reach out to Polaroid, so she did, and the company began sending her OneStep cameras. She sent them to artists who used them to create original works to offer in the auction—Damien Hirst, for instance, sent her a collage made from 100 Polaroids of his dot paintings. Hopfan also began

arranging for artists to experiment with Polaroid’s legendary giant 20-by-24-inch camera, an opportunity that many of them jumped on, including Wool, the late Chris Burden, Barbara Kruger, and John Baldessari. “They’d get to shoot ten pictures and we’d get two of them to offer at auction,” explains Hopfan.

In 2013, Hopfan began a tradition of naming an artist as guest of honor at the annual benefit. “We reached out to Richard Phillips and he did a day with our teens in his studio.” He also created a limited-edition print for Free Arts that sold at the auction. From then on Hopfan began involving artists more directly in the work the organization does. “Artists are asked all the time to donate things but they aren’t really connected to the charity,” she says. “This is a way for them to experience firsthand the impact that they’re having.”



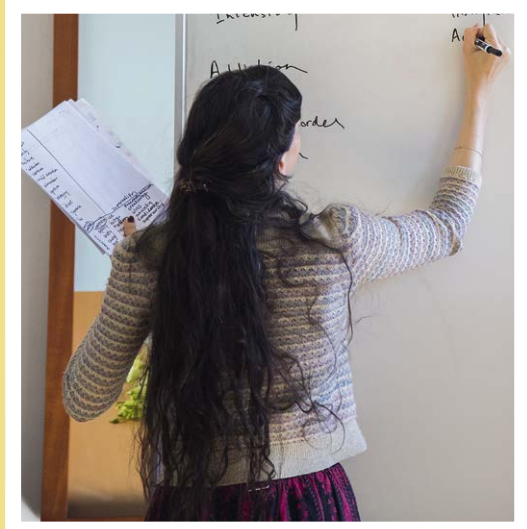


In a flash of fundraising moxie last spring, Hopfan asked Wool if he'd be willing to auction off a studio visit with teens. The winning bidder would get to accompany the kids to Wool's studio for a printmaking lesson. In 2013, Wool had brought a group of Free Arts teens through his show at the Guggenheim Museum that year, but he rarely offers studio visits to anyone, let alone strangers. Competitive bidding ensued and the prize eventually went to Gagosian's Lidia Andich. "We attend so many charity auctions, and usually when you bid on something you don't get to see where your money is going, so this was a really special opportunity," she says. "What I saw is that this really is one of the most charitable endeavors ever. The kids were so enthused to watch Christopher and so proud of their work. You could see their lives being changed right there."

For fifteen-year old Adonai—now a sophomore at New York's High School of Art & Design, thanks to the mentoring he received from Free Arts NYC—the benefits of exposure to an artist like Wool are vast. "I realized from Christopher that it's OK to be comedic, and that sometimes you just have to say what you're thinking," he says. He was quick to grasp Wool's working habits, too. "If he doesn't finish something or he gets stuck on something he doesn't quit. He just leaves it for the time being and goes back to it later. That's called a growth mindset, and people who have that are more successful."

For her part, Simon worked with teens over the course of several weeks both in her studio and at the massive picture archive of the New York Public Library, the inspiration behind her 2012 series *The Picture Collection*. The kids collaboratively came up with a list of words—"supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" and "androgyny" were among them—then hunted for images in magazines, papers, and other sources to illustrate what they saw. "It was different than anything I'd done before," says Raven, a seventeen-year-old from the Bronx who is hoping to attend the School of Visual Arts in the fall.

But it's the day-to-day social component that has perhaps made the biggest impact on kids like Adonai and Raven. "This experience has opened my eyes to what the life of an artist is like," says Raven. Adds Adonai: "We got to eat a meal with Dan Colen. That made me feel like I was part of a small family." And when Hopfan named Simon the guest of honor at its gala this past April, the artist reached out to Adonai and Raven to see if they would be willing to deliver a speech for her at the event. "That really meant something to me," says Adonai. "It's something I will always cherish."



50%
OF THE KIDS
PARTICIPATING
LIVE IN HOMELESS
SHELTERS

All images courtesy Free Arts NYC unless otherwise noted