Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Leonard Castellanos, 1972 December 26

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Leonard Castellanos on December 26, 1972. The interview was conducted in his office by Allen Bassing for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

ALLEN BASSING: This is Allen Bassing for the Archives of American Art. Today I'm talking to Leonard Castellanos of the Mechicano Art Center. Leonard, could you tell me how the Art Center got started?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: About three-and-a-half years ago Victor Franco and Merv Wright and about six artists, who were still with the center, wanted a place to show Chicano art, not Chicano art so much as concept, but to give Chicano artists an opportunity to enjoy some of the benefits of showing their work, selling it, and also becoming known, known on every level whatsoever as far as society is concerned. There was a great lack of opportunity, and there still is a great lack, because there are no direct channels into, let's say, a commercial entity such as the galleries on La Cienega, or commercial galleries which handle artists' work and deal with a percentage of it and so forth and so on. What happened originally was that Mechicano was established on La Cienega. At that time the gallery dealt in the more selective realm of selecting artists' work and displaying it. We found that that really wasn't what we wanted to do. What we wanted was to give the artist the opportunity to show, to have the benefit of an exhibition. But we didn't want him to compete in the stereotyped concept of one artist being better than the next and going up the ladder of success. The La Cienega area, as you know, is a very competitive area.

ALLEN BASSING: Right.

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Fortunately we had some lease trouble, so we closed that down. Then we were a floating organization, I would say, for roughly a year. While we were floating we had meetings in houses and in stores trying to raise funds. We had fund-raisers like the Mad Festival at the Palladium, which was music, art and dance. Most of the work that we had at that time was either stored at somebody's house, or usually was on exhibition at on of the schools, universities, colleges, whatever, throughout Southern California. We've probably had more shows than any other cultural center in Los Angeles. We always have two or three shows running concurrently. We've exhibited all the way to San Luis Obispo, to San Diego, to just about everywhere. We've had private showings. We've had openings. We have music. We have theater and son on. So it gives us great flexibility to work with whatever occasion, whatever festivals, and celebrations take place. During 1969-71 a transition was taking place. The Chicano artist began to ask himself what the hell he was, what was he doing, and what did he want. Basically these were internal issues that he had to learn to deal with himself. I wouldn't say he was seeking an identity. I think we all have that identity. I think he was seeking a direction. I hate to use that word "identity"; I think it's distorted. I don't want to think like that. I really don't feel a loss of identity. I just felt it exploding in outer space somewhere. So what happened was that we sponsored a few Chicano art symposiums in East Los Angeles. We had a good turnout of people. We found out that nothing was going to come of this unless we had a direction to go on. Every symposium developed in chaos. The elements of nationalism were present. The elements of Chicanoism, which were new in the sense that issues were being presented, were creating some kind of intellectual stimulus in some people so that they were starting to wonder what the hell was happening, what it was about. From that, we realized that the best thing to do was to get a building and do it; that's the only way you're going to accomplish anything. So we got this building here at our present location – 4030 Whittier Boulevard. We began the Art Center. The building was a laundromat at the time. It was in pretty bad shape. We leased it from a hospital. We got the community and the artists to donate their time and materials to rebuilding the structure into the Mechicano Art Center.

ALLEN BASSING: All right. Now I want to ask you something about yourself. What's your background? How did you get started in art?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Well, I graduated from Garfield High School in East Los Angeles. Then I went to Chouinard Art Institute for four years on scholarships. After I graduated I was an assistant instructor there for a quarter in print-making with Carter Everetts. From there I went to Cal State Los Angeles and got into the graduate master's program. I graduated from Cal State Los Angeles in 1968.

ALLEN BASSING: That was in Fine Arts?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Fine Arts. I have a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Chouinard and Master of Art – M.A. – from Cal State L.A. I was always doing something in the community; I was always involved in something.

Victor Franco at that time was into a newspaper, East Los Angeles newspaper. I knew about it. I wasn't too active because I was working and going to school at the same time. But somehow or other we met up. I guess out interests in art and in the community were similar. We were trying to do things. We were trying to get shows going. We were thinking about organizing schools, having classes in buildings and things like that. Through activities like these I became interested in what the organization called Talafue, the East Los Angeles Community Union, was doing – supposedly they're a community organization. They didn't have an art component. I rapped with the director at that time. I laid a story on him about what I thought art should be doing in a community. I thought it was really important. There wasn't really anything happening at that time; very little if anything, as far as artists or posters go. There wasn't even a minimum of services in the community. I convinced him to put me on the staff of the Director of the Fine Arts and Cultural Affairs, and develop it into an entity where I would create a liaison with most organizations, schools, artists, universities, all the way from U.C.L.A. to Irvine, dealing with Chicano artists basically, but, of course, dealing with the larger realm of art. What happened there was that I found out it wasn't as simple as getting a building, renting it, and starting to have classes in it, which I did. What really happened there was that I became very interested in the concept of developing a central nucleus of information, which we had never had; to advise artists where shows were happening; what was going on where; what festivals were being held; how can art work be shipped. I even got into concepts of developing funds for shipping artists' work to various places, and insurance, and all, because places in Los Angeles are really exorbitant and they have you no matter which way you go. If your work is damaged it takes them a long time to even recognize it. If they store your work they charge you and blah, blah, blah. You're screwed no matter which way you turn as far as your own work is concerned. It is a very futile kind of existence most artists lead because they seem to accept it. Not because they can't do anything about it, but it's because when we go to the institutions that supposedly teach art, you learn to deal with the institutions that handle your art. And those institutions have no kind of empathy or awareness of what your art is in the first place. You're merely a product. Just like the galleries we're talking about on La Cienega. You're a product, and if they can make money off you, they push you. And if the guy has a gallery in New York, you're lucky. Now this is not to say that a lot of the artists today that are considered good aren't good. All I'm saying is that it's too much of a chance, too much of a risk. Plus, art was only serving a kind of the ideal function of art; it wasn't really dealing with the elements of existence. It wasn't dealing with a lifestyle. It wasn't dealing with anything. It was the impersonalization of art. And I think this is what really motivated me to work with communities. When I would go to a community workshop that we established at that time – I had a little school that I formed for a while – it lasted for about a year. I had a silk-screen workshop, one of the first ones that existed in East Los Angeles, which produced posters for the community. It was fairly successful in the sense that we did a few posters. But I think what really motivated me was that artists would come in, people would come in, and start doing things. They worked in clay. They made funky things and everything, but they had a vitality and a life to them that I didn't feel anywhere else. There was an honesty in the application of material, there was an honesty in concept. It wasn't an art form approach to art, where the artist became the intellectual rather than the doer, where the artist became the critic rather than the guy who gets down to doing his own work doesn't give a hell about what anybody says about it. The artist had been serving too many functions. Now he was serving the main function that he should have been serving as an artist in society. I think this is what drew me toward community art in the sense that I saw I could identify with the energy, with vitality. And, also, it was very exciting to see concepts arise that had no relationship to anything around them. Chicano artists and craftsmen and folk artists – if that's what you want to call them – couldn't care less about what anybody else thought about their work. They weren't ready to be published. They didn't give a damn about the museum. So the isolation created a microcosm that perpetuated itself. You might say the physical existence became the reality; for instance, the barrios – that's what they expressed. Nobody else could come from the outside and express the barrios in any other way. From that, the ideas that developed out of the position I had at Talafue I realized were very vast, and that the organization, Talafue, was not interested in my real efforts to try to propagate art in this way. All they wanted was to have a nice silkscreen workshop that could produce posters. Of course, we had to figure out a charge for how many were going to come in because they couldn't subsidize it and lose money on it. It had to be a money-making entity, in other words; it had to be a profit making situation. In other words, my workshops or art centers or anything else that I wanted to develop, was unreal because they were primarily involved in the economic development in the community at that time. And so if art could be used as a tool for economic development, they thought it was fine. Well, I didn't think it was fine. So after a year-and-a-half, or a year and three months, of working with them I realized it was futile and that it wasn't going to work that way any more. Also, during that futile year-and-a-half or so – actually it had started a year before that – I had been working with Victor Franco and the Mechicano Art Center as a consultant to them, or I would promote shows, letting him know what was happening here, there, at schools, universities, etc. We'd transport works, call up people for trucks, just dealing with the basics of everyday existence in art work became a tangible reality. We never had before. It became a force that perpetuated and encouraged other artists to come and say, "Hey, what can I do? Can I put my work in that show?" We found out that what was happening was a beautiful thing. Artists were getting out of that precious bag of art, and they were going to have to get their hands dirty somewhere and learn to deal with the tangible realities of existing on a street corner with the supposedly street level people. So the idea of having your art work just put on a wall developed into what Mechicano is developing into right now. It's many things; we do a lot of community projects; we've done a lot of supergraphics projects; we have art shows going on most

of the time; and also community projects like bus benches that are sponsored by other organizations for us; we have classes; we have programs – like our silkscreen program now – designed to give free materials and expertise and technical assistance to anybody wanting it, at no charge. Of course a lot of the artists who are here – even under the grant – have to work for free, because the grant still doesn't allow for that much for how many artists we have on the staff and things like that.

ALLEN BASSING: You've just mentioned a grant. You haven't mentioned that before.

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Well, we have two grants. The first grant we received was the Catholic Foundation grant for silkscreen – Catholic Foundation for Human Development, C.F.H.D., they call it. That was for a silkscreen workshop and a general supply grant, which means that we didn't have to specify exactly every piece of material. Therefore it gave us some flexibility to deal with our own community in meeting the needs for the necessary supplies and spontaneity and growth of the development of the programs. We received that grant in January 1972. In June 1972 we received a grant from the national Endowment for the Arts specifically for a community silkscreen workshop. What that means is that the grant pays for all materials, pays for a small part-time salary to the director, and allows for money for one or two artists, part-time, to assist the people who want posters to come in and be trained from the beginning, from the layout design, to the final phase of printing. The only stipulation was that any organization or group wanting posters would have to lend us one or two people to be involved in the output of materials for them. That, of course, deals with the educational concept that grants are dealing with right now in the sense that if you're going to teach somebody something, we'll give you some bread. Anyway, why don't you ask me something?

ALLEN BASSING: Okay. These two grants are on-going, or are they for a specific amount of time?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: The Catholic Foundation grant ends at the end of this month. The National Endowment grant will end in June.

ALLEN BASSING: Will you be able to ask for more money from either one?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Well, we're trying. You're never sure about those things but we're trying to see if we can keep one or the other going. We think it's very necessary.

ALLEN BASSING: Do you have any sort of liaison with some of the local institutions and organizations in Los Angeles? What about the Parks and Recreation people? Do you have anything to do with them, or with museums, or with other cultural institutions?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Well, we've found out that in our total development, we have to be very selective of our liaisons. First of all, you must remember that in East Los Angeles right now there is a very intense level of social, economic, and political events taking place. Most organizations right now are geared for a socio-economic-political purpose whether they're under grants or not. There are people working for the Penthos, the ex-convicts. There are people working for housing re-development, which, of course, becomes a very political issue resounding blah, blah, blah. E.Y.O.A. funds several programs in East Los Angeles. And, of course, there are gang-federated organizations. They're too deeply involved in their own programs and the events taking place in their community to do anything else. So what we've done is we've created a liaison with the gang federation in East Los Angeles. We have a liaison with them in the sense that we produce and offer services to them. Also, we give them technical assistance and expertise and materials in supergraphics mural painting. This, of course, comes out of our own pocket. Right now we're supporting two projects in supergraphics, one in Loco Mada and one in Loya Mada – two different wall projects which we feel are producing very favorable results. Those singular projects with which we started has perpetrated within them a broader awareness in their community, and now they want more walls painted, a very simple, basic thing. But like I said, we don't have any direct funds for that. So now what we're doing is trying to apply for funds to support projects, not to do projects all the time. I think it's important now that we recognize we don't want to get a grant here to get ten supposedly accomplished artists out into the community to do them a big goddamned favor. We just want to give them materials and we want to give them artists who will tell them; "Well, that's just a cement wall. This is the way you make sure it doesn't have to much moisture. This is the way you seal it. This is the way you paint it." But the community's ideas go on the wall, they learn the techniques, and also they get the satisfaction of doing it. If they want to write in their own walls, nobody is going to go ego-tripping on this whole bit. I think that's very important. Mechicano is a very strange place in that way. We run very philosophically, I might say. We are very effective in the way that we operate. We're not oriented and structured under the usual corporate image sort of thing. For instance, I'm the director. But as director, I have no specific duties. I write all the proposals for Mechicano. My duties deal from proposal writing to getting down and designing and printing a lot of the posters, sweeping the floors, watering outside, talking to guys in the street, to going out and painting projects in the community. There's no clear definition of what anybody does other than the fact of what has to be done. Through our general meetings we delegate certain responsibilities to certain people. If they don't follow through, we replace them with people who are going to do the project. So we try to maximize the effect and the acts taking place in

the events rather than deal with, let's say, just the usual bureaucratic channels you would develop in an organization that's growing all the time. I feel that, if anything has to be done right away, we have enough people here other than myself who know what's happening to make those decisions. Of course we consult each other and all. But that's the way we have to operate.

ALLEN BASSING: How many people do you have here – both paid and volunteer – on the staff?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: We have only three people who are being paid by grants, three or four part-time consultants, stuff like that. The rest of the people – which consists of a total of maybe twelve, fifteen really active people – are free. All the classes we teach are free. We have classes in drawing, painting, silkscreen, stained glass, photography. We don't have ceramics right now. All these people volunteer their time, plus they also volunteer materials if they have them. The materials in most classes are free unless a student wants a special project that will incur special expense that we can't handle. In such a case we will help that student or situation; probably we will refer them to an agency or an organization that can give them materials at a very minimal fee, or maybe free. WE try to make those contacts for them.

ALLEN BASSING: How many students are in these classes? Are these mainly for children, adults, or anybody who is interested?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: The Center is for everybody who is interested. You know, there are a lot of things on children; everybody has this big concept about the glorification of children in the sense that they're the coming generation, and you have to let them know what's happening. That's a lot of bullshit. I myself as an artist realize the necessity of having to do things right now. And I think we have to remain open in that way, in the concept of how we deal with people. If there are kids around – they're always going to be around – we will teach them. We get a lot of kids in here. We don't deny them anything that we can give them. We try to propagate the ideas of art in the way that we would like, not just art as education or in education, and a sense of how organizations are starting to use art. I think that's a very important point. You see, right now most organizations are latching onto the art thing. This is what they call it. They don't know a goddamned thing about art. But because there's money available through federal agencies and funding agencies they write in a proposal for art. They know they might get it. So what do they do? They'll hire some Mickey Mouse dude who has no concept of working with a community or anything. To me it doesn't make any difference. They're ripping off the bread. Somebody is making a good salary, and they have a so-called art program. We're not interested in doing this. This is why we work the way we do. If an organization gets money for art, we will make our services available. We have artists who can be hired as consultants. Plus we design programs for a lot of organizations free. This means we've sat down with them, and they've told us what they have in the way of materials, and how many kids they're working with. For example, in our juvenile rehabilitation program, we have things like this; if they have fifteen kids a week and they want a design program for three days out of the week, two hours a day, we'll tell them something that will keep them interested, we'll try to design it that way; at the same time, it does not just become an arts and crafts thing where it's kind of nice to go in there and throw a few blobs of clay on the wall and walk out. The thing we stress is that we're sincere in what we're trying to do, and we don't like art prostituted just because it give organizations access to funds under the title of art.

ALLEN BASSING: Were you thinking of any organizations in particular in East Los Angeles that might be doing this latching on to art fashion?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Well, I have in mind a few significant organizations I'd rather not name. I think most organizations right now have started getting into that. So that would probably apply to most organizations that are being funded either federally or privately. I think that what the Federal Government is doing is fucking up a lot of things. It's putting art out on the market more or les because through their analysis and statistics they've come up with the idea that art has become a very nice teaching tool, just like I said before. So it becomes available and it becomes very general. It's no different from any program they have right now. It's not really going to be functional. It's not going to be recognized for its uniqueness. Most organizations, for instance, that would get an art program wouldn't know where to hire a qualified artist in the first place. They don't know that the person they hire can produce the programs that are supposed to be produced. Anybody can go in with a master's or a bachelor's degree and say, "Well, look, I'm an artist." That's not true. I mean that doesn't really apply. In a sense, sure, he's an artist, but to be an artist and to organize on a different level, and to be and exist, there are two different things. I think this is important because what I', talking about is street level education. Without street level education and understanding, most of your programs, especially in art, are not going to be implemented; they're not going to be functional. They're just going to be used. They're just going to be wasted. This is why I'm also leery of educational programs in liaison with universities and colleges and public schools within our community becoming alternate educational vehicles. Here we are already an alternate educational vehicle – if that's what they want to call it – because we're fulfilling needs that schools and universities aren't. This is obvious. This is why we exist. I think that's the energy that keeps us together. Like I said, we're not super-structured to the point where I'm so effective and efficient that I can keep an organization together single-handedly. If I had to do that I wouldn't do it because I'm a painter in the first place. And I don't want to lay that

kind of shit on anybody. But right now I've finished a proposal that's going to be submitted for a public educational in-school mural supergraphics program, meaning that walls and surfaces within schools are going to be painted with paid artist professionals as consultants; or they will design if they can't motivate the kids to do it. But the idea is to get an in-school contact, like an instructor or preferably a student (of course older - from junior high up maybe), to organize a project. We will help organize; we will work together in all the technicalities or organizing, whatever you want to call it, all the way through up to the point of painting the wall. But these students will get out of class and not be paid to paint a mural of their own design, of their own liking, whatever they want. The artist will just help them technically and say things like: "Well, you know, you can't do it this way; you've got to do it the other way. On this wall the basic material needs are very important," or whatever the case may be. Supergraphics – to go back to a little definition; I've been throwing that word around and I don't want to be confusing; to me means an immediate process through which painting and murals can be implemented. The reason I don't use the word mural too much is because mural has a connotation in people's minds of Mexico and Europe, of the old fresco thing which is very expensive and time consuming, and that every artist who paints a mural has to be a master, that kind of shit. Well, supergraphics is like dealing with their own graffiti. We go into that and we deal with our own imagery. We have to forget some things sometimes. You know, that's why our memory has to work that way. I think it's important that we realize the validity of not being able to do certain things. We can't paint frescoes in our community. It's too costly and expensive. So we use ordinary house paint. At the same time we have artists who, like I, myself, use enamels and acrylics and plastics and polymers and everything in my own work. So we're knowledgeable in those fields. We know that the life of a painting on a wall outside – a stucco wall – is three to five years if we do it right, and if we clean up, and if the moisture content and so forth and so on is not too heavy. But because it gives a contemporary expression of what's happening. And you don't expect a mural to stay up a thousand years. That mural should come down in three years. But it should be done over, just like a house is painted over. Our supergraphics program is probably less costly - if not equal to - painting a house or a building. And this is why we've designed it that way; this enables community enterprises and businesses to take advantage of the possibility of putting up a nice piece of art in supergraphics rather than just painting it one color with a contractor. Of course, I don't want the unions to get up tight about this. We have to deal with those problems, and if that's a problem, then we'll deal with it when we get to it.

ALLEN BASSING: Have you consolidated this particular project to put supergraphics up on school wall? Have you got schools lined up that have Okayed this?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Yes. We have not only one school – we have a whole area complex. You know, most of your educational institutions, especially within Los Angeles, are under area complexes, so many schools belong to a certain complex.

ALLEN BASSING: Yes. Right.

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Okay. We're dealing with one complex right know, which is Area G. Fifteen schools.

ALLEN BASSING: City Schools?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Yes, because we're unincorporated. So what we did was to make a whole survey of possible services available, cost estimates, approximate footage to be painted, how many artists would be needed for a one-area program, things like that. A proposal that I wrote up went to $70,000, which is nothing; it's minimal compared to most proposals. E.Y.O.A. funded a gang project for $80,000 without batting an eye. For an art organization to get $70,000 to implement from thirty to forty murals within your educational system is not a lot of money. They are actually doing something, plus the visual impact of those pieces and dynamics that take place are going to be so fantastic – of course, I look at that way – I'm a painter. I don't see how anybody could argue about $70,000 being a lot of money, but they are arguing about it. As you know, they are.

ALLEN BASSING: It's always like this in the arts.

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Right.

ALLEN BASSING: For any other kind of thing you're doing, the money is there. But with the arts they're always...

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: The last alternative. After they clear up everything on the table they say, "IF we have three cents left for art, well, that's fine, we'll give it to you. But if not, you're going to have to wait another year." This is the whole attitude in art. And I think everything I'm talking about maintains and pertains to the attitudes that we're overcoming. Those are all the obstacles we're dealing with. Not only do we have to deal with the pre-conception, let's say, of the established society outside of the barrios. But we have to deal with the minds and the educational level of art that has been indoctrinated into our people which has been so fantastic and so depressing, and which are school are still into. You know, they only give you an hour a week for painting and shit like this. What I'd like to see is that schools start hiring artists to come in and get paid to teach art one hour or two hours a day – people who are artists themselves, and get paid a salary of fifteen dollars an hour, or

something like that, which is nothing. They could have classes exchanged – Mechicano bussed over here and taught for a few hours a day, and things like that. Give them the validity of open education in the sense that not all knowledge comes from closed walls and blah, blah, blah. You know, this is the roots of what we're talking about. We're getting out into the community. Artists who come into the Center are feeling the dynamics of frustration. When they put their painting on a wall, somehow or other it isn't enough. It isn't enough to put a nice painting on a little wall – I don't give damn how nice the painting is. Now they want to get out; they want to do something; they want to get brushes and go paint. Not only is that stimulating, encouraging, and changing the visual and total environment of our community, but it's changing the artist's concept of what he is and his role in society. We're dealing with a family concept. This is the way we operate at Mechicano. Our family concept lends and grows by itself in the same sense that the artist who comes in and gets involved is not involved with who's better or who's worse. If you have a weakness then you fill it in with the student who is next to you and don't be ashamed about it. Nobody is looking at your work and evaluating it on the level of, you know, he's Number One, I'm Number Two, or Three, Four, Five. Everyone who comes into the Center is Number One as far as I'm concerned. According to what he does, that's where he's at. He's not judged in any other way. There's no sense of overt, superficial, pretentious questions of what we deal with or whether or not something doesn't apply exactly to what we do here. I think that's fantastic. That's new energy. Plus my work actually has gone through a lot of transitions just being here. I know that, contrary to popular belief about community arts coming from the community, community arts is being instigated and propelled and exploded into the community by your learned artists who have gone into the educational systems, said "fuck it," have come back and said "Okay, I'm going to shuck everything that they've told me, man, I'm going to start from the bottom." Of course they have technical facility now, you might say, dealing with materials, their minds and concepts, but they can apply it tangibly to real things rather than just a piece of paper and expect to be put up in a museum in ten years because they want to be famous.

ALLEN BASSING: I notice there's some work done out front of the Coronas Market along Whittier Boulevard. Is that supposed to be commercial?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: No, that was done by the Center.

ALLEN BASSING: Free?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: We did it for them, right.

ALLEN BASSING: Why did you do it free?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Well, they had two big carnation signs out there and we just didn't dig it. We went over and told them that we would design and paint the building free, plus, we'd pay for the materials. He had just moved in from Mexico and was trying to get a business going and he didn't have any bread anyway. So we chipped in; it cost us about $100 and materials. Another artist and myself designed it. The kids in the community painted it with us. And that's why it's not written on.

ALLEN BASSING: Ah! That's your insurance!

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Yes.

ALLEN BASSING: I notice over at the Mercado it's the same way.

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Right. I don't know who made that one. There was a young girl I saw painting on it once. But at least something is going up. I think many times the problem, especially with people from outside the community who come to view what we're doing here is that they get hung up on the matter of quality, you know. The first thing they look and say is; "Well, that's not too cool, they're not too good artists." But for that, they forsake and sacrifice all of the enjoyment, the beauty, and the relationships that take place when just one artist goes out into the community and paints a wall, and how many people are affected by that.

ALLEN BASSING: Right. You are a lot more than just the art critic. This is for the community and it's done by the community.

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Right. What I'm saying is that it's evaluated on that level by elements outside the community.

ALLEN BASSING: Yes, unfortunately.

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: For instance, people from the museum, people from West Hollywood or from North Hollywood come in and they evaluate it on their level rather than understanding that we're dealing with completely different things. It's not to be evaluated on a critical level. We're not competing with them. We don't care. I mean, if they want to evaluate it that way, that's fine with me. But this is all the stereotyping thing. What

we call a “community artist” to me is an artist who comes and works in a community, just like a guy who goes to work in a bank is a bank employee. It doesn’t inhibit him from going home and using his imagination, and building a little ship or an airplane or having a hobby, or playing tennis, or swimming. It’s the same thing we’re dealing with here. We’re getting a dynamic exchange of ideas and trying to take advantage of what is in our peripheral existence as far as the barrios are concerned. We’re not excluding anything. But we’re a Chicano cultural center, though we can’t put that down in our by-laws because, you know, it leads towards prejudice if we say only Chicano culture center. We’re a Chicano culture center because we’re in East Los Angeles.

ALLEN BASSING: Right. Just on account of the location.

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Right. Yes. We deal with those things.

ALLEN BASSING: Well, what about your relations outside East Los Angeles with, say, the County Art Museum, or the Natural History Museum or Exhibition Park? Do you deal with them at all?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Oh, we deal with them. We’ve never negated dealing with anybody. We’re not on a nationalist trip. We’re not on an identity art trip. Like I said before, I have no fear of identity. I know who I am. I know what I want to do. And I think that bullshit is over with. Everybody had to go through that learning phase of saying, “Well, who am I now?” I think that was the mental therapy that had a big place.

ALLEN BASSING: Then you really fell that this nationalistic feeling is a phase that people have gone through and that it’s no longer uppermost in their minds when they’re dealing with outsiders; that the “fuck the rest of you – we’ve got what we want here and it’s going to be done here by us - we’re not interested in any other institution or doing it anywhere else,” is a thing of the past?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Right. Well, I see it as a ludicrous kind of situation. It’s just like the situation of the Indians. For fifty years they’ve probably researched everybody and everything a bout Indians and spent fifty or seventy-five thousand dollars on research that could have gone into communities, could have gone into functional, purposeful things that could have helped a community. Our thinking is at the point where we realize that. We don’t want to be concerned with that shit any more. I don’t want to be analyzed, researched and examined over and over again. The hell with that shit! If somebody were to get a $10,000 grant to come and research Chicano art, well, I don’t know if I’d want to help them any more. I don’t give a shit about that any more. I would say: “Why don’t you get that money and put it into the community, do something with it. No more researchers.” I think the situation that the educational frame of mind has put us into is that we have to know who we are before we do anything. That’s a lot of bullshit. I think we’re finding out that we can do a lot of things and learn in the process where we don’t have to have any clear-cut definition to work with. The self-examination thing has cooled, which is good for me. I never cared for that. The nationalist feeling in the sense of art is good. I know I identify very well with Mexico. I’m proud of the heritage that is mine. But I don’t have to flaunt it, or slap anybody in the face with it. Personally I have never been to Mexico City. I was born here. I was raised here. I have that part of my culture that’s there; nobody can take it from me. I’m going to do everything I can to use what I have now. It’s not going to help me to sit in a corner and ponder my relationship to a pyramid that I never even walked on. I mean that’s ridiculous.

ALLEN BASSING: So you don’t feel that your art has to be nationalistic?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: No, I don’t think so. I think that the mind encompasses all areas and all fields and transcends those things. And I think that’s one thing that art has always had, and which art is essentially losing in the sense of a larger social participation. Art is becoming very impersonal. Art is becoming impersonal because the artist has started to feel that to conceive of art conceptually is greater than the act itself. It’s a reversal taking place in the artist’s mind. You know, when I saw that I said, “Hey, wait a minute!”

ALLEN BASSING: Did you happen to see the black artists’ show that was held at the County Art Museum?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Yes, I saw it.

ALLEN BASSING: Do you recall that about ninety percent of the content of the works that had obvious subject matter had to deal with blacks, and black environment.

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Right.

ALLEN BASSING: I would assume from what you said that wouldn’t care to see a Chicano art show along the same lines?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Well, I wouldn’t say that I wouldn’t care to. If it was well done and it was there, I would try to enjoy it as much as I could. I don’t want to think that it’s necessary for artists to deal with that kind of thing in a superficial, very super-conscious manner. I think we’re still going to do that evaluation for a period. Of

course the blacks are different. I don't think there's any connection with black and brown in relative life style. There might be a connection in suppression in society, social or economic circumstances. But when you get down to a life style I think there's a complete separation in ways of thinking and concepts that are going to be derived, especially as artists, towards examining that facet of existence. I don't think there's any real parallel to be drawn once you get into that kind of thing. Blacks have to do what blacks have to do. We have to do what we have to do. And it's going to be expressed and done differently. I think that's the most important point. I don't want to follow in those footsteps and say that because blacks did that we should do that; or that because blacks didn't do it we shouldn't do it; or vice versa. I think the wonderful thing that's happening right now is that we're realizing each other's differences, but instead of being antagonistic about it or envious or jealous or whatever, it's started to become an integral part of the communication we start to believe in. We deal with a lot of the culture centers in Watts. John Outterbridges's Compton Academy of the Arts is one of the best ones in the sense that they have a large musical component, they deal with individual arts, they deal in community arts – for instance, they had a show on cycles. They put on fund-raisers. They even had a funeral at their place. I mean openness is what we're talking about. We're not talking about a closed definition of things. We're not concerned with definitions; I don't want to be concerned with definitions. I think there are too many things to do right now to be concerned about a definition. But as we look at it later on, I'm sure there'll be definition to it. You can't help but have definition for things that are real and happening. For instance, Mechicano developed out of a Laundromat. We're Mechicanos. So there's a definition there whether we like it or not. But we're trying to work and expand rather than seek.

ALLEN BASSING: Yes. You mentioned before we start talking on the tape that you have had discussions with the County Art Museum about the possibility of an exhibit.

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Right.

ALLEN BASSING: And you mentioned a rather large number of art pieces that you would be able to have available. And they were a bit amazed at the large number that you had come up with. Well, what happened? Did it never get beyond the point of their amazement, or was anything more concrete ever worked out?

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Well, the usual shock and the bureaucratic bullshit went on. They called in several people. They wanted to know where would we like to have the show – the housing of it. They got into the technicalities about how some things were impossible; they were booked for, let's say, a year. Things like that can forestall anything, you know. Expenses, etc. We deliver our own shows, but the Museum, of course, deals differently. Also we're insured – we have all insurance for our work. We don't give any shows unless it's insured. We have the same stipulation for colleges and universities. When we have to, we'll rent or borrow a truck and we'll take our own work where it has to go. We get out and do it. The Museum feels differently about things like that. I think those small things are used by those kinds of structures like museums to keep that distance between, let's say, an organization like Mechicano, and the Museum.

ALLEN BASSING: Yes, but they're so small that I would think that if there was goodwill on the institution's side that something like that could be resolved fairly quickly if they wanted to.

LEONARD CASTELLANOS: Yes, I agree with you. I think that what we need is a lot of goodwill in institutions now. I'm twenty-nine years old. Hopefully, I see a generation of people my age, or around my age, that is getting into positions that have an open mind to things. I'm not saying that I want to wait for it. I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, or next year, or what ever. But I hope that the situation will get better. I don't want to get involved with bickering or, say, having a demonstration at the Museum because they didn't want to let us have an art show there. That takes my time and energy. And I would rather use that time and energy with the people we have here to build our Center, to do out things. I think that the age of demonstrations is past, to a certain extent, especially in East Los Angeles. That is due to many reasons, but for one thing, it's not effective, it doesn't produce positive results. It produces a lot of questions that are never answered. Usually, if we do have a demonstration, it ends up in violence and there's police confrontation, and then there's six months of bickering with the police department. So I think that will happen in the Museum, too. I don't think it's going to change right now. And I don't expect it to.

END OF INTERVIEW

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