



# Inspiring Change Through Art

Isabel Carrió

One night in 2001, on a visit to New York, I discovered the Art Students League. I was a tourist from Argentina—I had no plans to live in the city. Yet, as soon as I walked in the building, my hands warmed and I felt I belonged there. As I left 57th Street that first night with my schedule of classes, I knew I wanted to stay in New York. The city suddenly acquired a real meaning. My compass found its north.

After my five years of study at the league, I settled into life as an artist. There was my studio in Dumbo. There were galleries, shows, openings, and lectures. Grants and residencies and traveling. And while I was happy working alone in my studio, I felt something was missing. My compass was shaking itself up again, where it would point, I didn't know.

So I went searching again. Along the way, I realized what was missing from my life in New York: I wanted to share my knowledge with others. What I really wanted was to find some way to inspire change through art, to practice my art not just in my bright studio, but also in the world. I wanted to be engaged in some meaningful way out there.

My research led me to ArtCorp and their flagship Artist Fellowship Program. Based in Ipswich, Massachusetts, ArtCorp advances social change initiatives by helping development organizations and communities harness the power of art and culture. They focus on fostering local livelihoods, and environmental, health, and human rights initiatives. Their work is based in Central America. Since 2000, ArtCorp has trained and sent artists like me to Guatemala and Honduras to work with communities. The work they've done—music, documentaries, radio shows, parades, silkscreen, painting, murals, interactive theater—is as diverse and wide-ranging as the artists themselves.

ArtCorp's mission is "art for social change." It sounded like what I was looking for. I applied and was accepted. With some trepidation, I learned my

one-year assignment would be in the rural highlands of Guatemala. It seemed my compass was again quivering—this time it pointed south.

My first assignment was in an indigenous community called Guachucz. Located in Alta Verapaz, a mountainous region, Guachucz is remote. That first day I took three buses and walked for an hour up a long dirt road. While there is no electricity, no water, and no medical facilities, there is a school. For the seven hundred people who live Guachucz, the school is the center of public life. They speak a Maya language, Pokom'chi. Only the teachers at the school spoke Spanish.

My partner organization in Guatemala, FUNDENOR, had given me an assignment: "health and hygienic habits." There was no description of what that entailed. As an artist, I was unsure of what my role was. The teachers were giving toothbrushes to the children, which, for many, was the first time they had a toothbrush. I could see smiles full of holes. Still, I felt dumbfounded. FUNDENOR was a development organization, not an artist organization. I was the artist, and yet, I did not know what to do. What did art and hygienic habits have in common in a place where the only water was rainwater and there was no common language to link us?

That night the teachers helped me arrange my bed. We gathered in the schoolroom and pushed the tables together. They offered me a pillow and a few blankets, and there I made my bed atop the desks. Alone in the schoolroom, I thought of the two heavy books in my backpack, Styles, Schools, and Movements, and Art from Intuition. What use would they be? I felt disoriented and confused.

A white canvas. A work table. We all know the feeling as you clean the brushes and look at what looms in front of you. There seems to be nothing, no connection. Yet, we all know the what happens; we all know the story.

Opposite page: Painting a mural with students at the Guachucz school, 2011

Below: "The blind self portrait," Guachucz, 2011

Right top: Alida painting a quetzal bird, Guachucz, 2011

Right bottom: Ovidio in front of his self-portrait, Guachucz, 2011



Day by day, month-to-month, the canvas takes on colors and shapes. You step back to see what's going on, turn it around, and look at it again. Something is happening. You leave it and come back to it, and as if by magic, where you thought there was no connection, only the blank space of distance, suddenly a connection appears.

It happened with the people in Guachucz in the same way. And the artwork started.

Three months went by. I visited the community weekly. Even though I speak Spanish and they Pokom'chi, it's not difficult to see that the children enjoy drawing and painting. They wait for me every week and have the school room prepared with the cracked tables all set up, and the art supplies ready to go. Sometimes the supplies are more than ready, and I arrive to laughter, paint everywhere, mixed with high peaks of enthusiasm.

As part of the hygiene campaign, we have decided to do self-portraits. We will draw ourselves while looking in a mirror. What do they see? They see their beautiful faces, but also cavities in their teeth, mud caked into their skin, hair rising wildly from their heads.

The goal for FUNDENOR is to change their hygienic habits, make them feel confident about themselves, and most importantly, be healthy. But the simple truth of the art, before and beyond all that, is they are thrilled to see their own portraits. I pull one of my books out and show them the portraits by Matisse. They laugh and smile when they see the green lines and purple hair in the Portrait of Madame Matisse. And I think, Why not?

Next, I show them a cubist face. We cut their drawings into pieces, and we do the same. More laughing and discoveries in their fragmented new compositions.

We also have lots of seeds, fruits, and flowers. We look at Archiboldo's

portraits and decide we can do it too. So pass those red frijoles. Pass those bananas. Let's do a collage. All different ways to find a creative personal representation. The children had the opportunity to experience their artistic abilities in a way that thrilled them and made us all laugh. Maybe, I thought, art did have a place in this hygiene project after all. New toothbrushes are fun, but it was Matisse, Picasso, and Archimbodo who came to Guachucz to help the kids wash their faces, brush their teeth, and comb their hair. It was Matisse, Picasso, and Archimbodo who inspired the kids to try something new. In those cubist self-portraits, in their own collaged banana faces, they found a new way to look at themselves and feel good about what they saw.

Among other projects in Guachucz have been a large mural of two quetzal birds, which will later serve as measuring sticks to track the height of the community's children as they grow. The children and I pasted tape measures to the quetzal's long tails, and I had to smile as I watched them proudly standing next to the birds. Another large mural, an abstract composition, represents the Maya numerology. Another depicts ways to protect their water sources from pollution and contamination.

Not all the projects are with children. For International Women's Day, I photographed 110 women from the village of Purulha where I lived. All of their portraits were presented as an art installation in the public square. As I watched the community gather and the women proudly showing their portraits to their families and friends, all I could do was smile. For now, at least, my compass wasn't shaking—I was right where I wanted to be.

To see more work, meet other artists working in the field and learn more about other ArtCorp projects, visit their website: [www.artcorp.org](http://www.artcorp.org).

In the coming year, Isabel Carrió will work with ArtCorp and Ecologic in Guatemala to preserve ancestral practices and the environment through art. 