Yvonne Force Villareal

Photography by Tatijana Shoran
Styling by Rinagrace Sapang
Hair by Rudy Martins
Makeup by Asif Zaidi

Lisa Perry black coat
L.A.M.B shoes
Belstaff leather poncho coat
BOYY bag
Ash boots
On the first chilly day of fall this year, I went to Culture Corps, to handle it and let Art Production Fund, the pair's only permanent project (and which has just received museum status) serves as a very personal endeavor; it was a very strong emerging artist, and simultaneously it made us feel like we were doing something fresh. We were getting behind an artist's vision and fully executing it, fundraising, securing a venue, and presenting it. We went in with this super fresh eye and made it happen. Afterwards, Doreen and I did comparative studies with other non-profits and really analyzed what we could do best, and after doing our research, we co-founded Art Production Fund, and we got our 501(c)(3) status in 2000.

Doreen Remen: We got started in a very organic, natural way. That's very personal to us; we didn't have a set of strict guidelines. Yvonne had someone who could put in some seed money for Art Production Fund, and we started doing projects immediately. We developed Art Production Fund as we worked. We realized we just need a core group, maybe us two and one other person so we can keep our overhead very low. We started to see that we really can't get grants, which are usually for projects that have a longer lead-time; our projects have shorter lead times so we need to raise money up-front. We go to companies and say, "This is a branding opportunity for your brand, something unique, unique content." We bring companies on as funders that way. We raise our own funds by creating branded editions of contemporary art, and through the revenue we're able to support creativity in developing Art Production Fund. Asking the way, we've always been self-funding.

YFV: We have an incredible amount of respect and admiration for the work Public Art Fund does, they've been around for a long time and they primarily work in NYC and the boroughs. We wanted to work nationally and now even internationally, so we work after the artists' project needs to be. For us it's whom we're working with and why it needs to be in that location.

AS IF: What inspired you to start Art Production Fund?

Yvonne Force Villareal: We met on the first day at the Rhode Island School of Design, we became great friends and eventually started working together. Around '95/'96 we started developing a project with artist Vanessa Beecroft called Show, which was a three-hour performance at the Guggenheim, which we presented in 1998. Over 1,500 people came, there was a major article by Roberta Smith in The New York Times the next day, and people either loved it or hated it and thought it was either anti-feminist or the new way of feminism. It was for us a catalyst in starting Art Production Fund. Number one, we realized how much it created a platform for Vanessa Beecroft who was a very strong emerging artist, and simultaneously it made us feel like we were doing something fresh. We were getting behind an artist's vision and fully executing it, fundraising, securing a venue, and presenting it. We went in with this super fresh eye and made it happen. Afterwards, Doreen and I did comparative studies with other non-profits and really analyzed what we could do best, and after doing our research, we co-founded Art Production Fund, and we got our 501(c)(3) status in 2000.

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AS IF: You mentioned other organizations, how do you differentiate yourself, for instance, from Public Art Fund?

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AS IF: What is your definition of art?

DR: Art is about self-expression and communication within a framework of language and history.

YFV: The projects we commit to are in a dialogue with art history, but also a dialogue with what is happening, so that it is highly accessible. What is art? It is a way to communicate something that you cannot put into words. It's an important means of an alternative culture and society and of empowering people. That's very close to me, as an artist who works in the public realm, especially in an art world that is sometimes considered increasingly elitist. Art is about transcendence. You can connect to the artwork and it brings you to another dimension.

At Art Production Fund, we are very interested in a higher level of consciousness, and we do commit to works that have that transcendent element in it.
AS IF: Was art always a passion of yours?

DR: Yes, my grandfather was an artist, Avraham Siman-Tov, and he was one of the first Israeli artists. My mother is also an artist so I grew up with their paintings all around our house. But I became most connected to art through the board game “Masterpiece”. I played it when I was eight, and there I saw all of the masterpieces like Hopper and Cezanne, I loved it.

YPF: I was a bit of a nomad as a child, I lived in many different locations and one of them was in Key West where we had no television, and so I drew constantly, and I became very good at drawing without even going to art school. And even though my grades weren’t so great I got into RISD because my portfolio was incredible. From that point I wanted to be a painter, but after a few years I realized that I really needed to make a living. I knew I wanted to be in the arts and so I started to work at a gallery. Then I sold an artwork, a Glenn Brown painting, for $3,000 and Barbara Gladstone sent me a check for $300. I said, “Oh my God! I can make a living telling people what to buy!” I should have bought it myself, of course, but I didn’t have $3,000. So I became an art advisor. It wasn’t being as creative as I wanted to be, even though I still do advising now, I knew the creativity would happen once we did Vanessa Beecroft’s show.

AS IF: I am interested in the commercial aspect, many of your projects are in Las Vegas, which is a very commercial place.

YPF: A lot of museums have started there, and so it’s an interesting place to bring culture. The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas asked us to do the public arts programming in their venue. All the projects we’ve done with them support our Production Fund and we do on-going research to bring the best projects with artists that can naturally work in such an environment. We invite the artists to do a residency program on a monthly basis, but we only invite artists we know who would want to work in such a highly public residency on the third floor, and it has been so successful. Then we invite artists every six months to do a video on the marquee. We’ve worked with Yoko Ono, T.J. Wilco, Jennifer Steinkamp, and David Shrigley, and this year we’ll be working with Laurie Simmons and Julian Opie. We are very excited to be bringing art to the public realm there. We do get paid a fee for doing that but it goes right back into our public art programming, and the artists are getting a very nice fee also, so it’s a fantastic, and it has led us to really love working in Las Vegas.

AS IF: When the commercial and fine art co-exist there is sometimes a blurring of lines, is there the subversive nature of art but art can also be corrupted, how do you view this tension?

DR: It’s interesting that you say “corrupt” and I think that is the assumption when you put art in an over-saturated space, but if you are very specific about the vision of the artist and integrity of the project then you can put it anywhere and the project will not be compromised. You can’t control but the output is pure so the artist will be better. I think that’s what I love about art, it’s so exciting. Artists are very discerning and don’t work, they’re forced. Doreen, the Texas Department of Transportation, we bring an artist in to actually do a branding project, for instance Tommy Hilfiger did a series of five surfboards: Scott Campbell, Richard Phillips, Lola Schnabel, Raymond Pettibon, Gary Simmons. It’s always benefiting the public art projects. We took a lot of chances and we were very much one of the first organizations to really start blending those lines. Now, 15 years later there are so many and nobody honestly cares anymore. We have sometimes gotten close to potential projects that would have brought us down and we haven’t gone forward with them, thank god, but you have to be very discerning and very selective, because so many mergers of corporate and fine art in my opinion dumb art down and don’t work, they’re forced. Doreen, Cathy Frame, APF’s Director, and I have different points of view, and we care about each other’s perspective. If one doesn’t feel comfortable with going forward on something, we don’t do it.

I think a good example of a project that we produced which actually analyzes this very question is Prada Marfa. Prada Marfa takes the idea of a brand and fully examines it without having been commissioned by ‘the brand’ itself. The one thing the artists, Elmgreen & Dragset, said was that Prada can’t fund us, but we needed Prada’s approval because we used the logo. Miuccia Prada, who is an incredible artist philanthropist, loved their work. We have this gorgeous letter from her giving us approval to use her logo. She asked how she could help in any way without giving money. It was very hard to raise the money because Elmgreen & Dragset were not really well known at the time, but we did it. The shoes and the handbags, if we had bought them, would have cost $40,000. The artists agreed that through the Prada Foundation we could get an in-kind sponsorship of the shoes and handbags. Miuccia actually picked out all those shoes and handbags. But the piece itself definitely questions our consumer society, and the perceived need we have for these luxury goods. It’s so poignant in so many ways.

Recently, the Texas Department of Transportation asked us if maybe this was an advertisement, and we explained that we were not commissioned by Prada, it is a pure art project. After a year of a big social movement to save Prada Marfa it has been given museum status. We have to take care of it for the rest of its life in perpetuity. It’s the only permanent project we have ever done but it has given us incredible satisfaction.
Show by Vanessa Beecroft, performed at the Guggenheim Museum, 1998.
AS IF: Was that the most impactful project?

DR: Because it’s permanent more people had time to see it and it makes you think how much more impactful the other projects could have been if they had been around longer. However, I think that all of our projects were done at the right time and in the right span of time, and the great thing about these temporary projects is that you can do a time-based project, you can do performances, and also projects that move over and allow for another project in that same location. All the projects were in the right time and very successful for their time. One thing that I do want to say is that we have the luxury of not having to measure.

YFV: Whatever project we’re currently working on is the most important project, that’s how we feel. Right now we’re so focused on Hanna Liden and on Ugo Rondinone. If we can’t make it happen within a certain timeframe it’s not going to happen, we need people to believe in it and get behind it.

DR: Plan B, our project with Rudolf Stingel at Vanderbilt Hall in Grand Central Terminal was named because there was literally a Plan A that didn’t happen. We’re working in the public realm so we have to react to it. Having that flexibility and openness has proven to be vital.

YFV: A piece we did with FriendsWithYou was called Light Cave at The Standard, High Line in New York City. People really do want a channel to get to a higher level of thinking or a higher level of consciousness. The artists, FriendsWithYou, are very much about love and belonging, and non-critical behavior and non-judgment. With Light Cave, they created a cathedral for anybody to worship what they needed to worship. A non-religious space where there was room for transcendence. We thought that this was pretty much what the world needs right now and it was extremely popular. It was shared on social media because it was so beautiful; everyone wanted their picture with it. People want to be with art and they want to be pictured with art.

A project that cost no money and happened within two weeks was Yvette Mattern’s Global Rainbow right after hurricane Sandy. The Standard, High Line gave us the roof. The laser people lent us the equipment, which was super high-caliber stadium lighting for mega-concerts, the only cost was flying the artist over here, and even the room at the Standard was free. It was basically a free project and it extended all the way to the Rockaways, these 7 beams of light, which gave people hope.

AS IF: What do you think about the state of contemporary art in the US and internationally?

DR: We’ve reached a place where anything is possible, it’s like the Wild West, a very exciting time right now for artists, for curators, for gallerists, for anyone who is entering the art world. The definition of art world for me has completely changed; it’s nebulous, to be defined, what’s the next chapter in contemporary art. Everything has changed in terms of how we document art, what will stay with us, what will resonate in the future.

YFV: Yes absolutely. I was at the last Frieze on preview day and it was packed. The first Frieze, 9 years ago, was very successful, but it was empty during preview. Things have changed so dramatically. It manifests in all different ways. Certainly the market has gotten super strong and that is why art has gotten so much public attention, because of the sales prices, but there is a revision of what Jeff Koons is selling for. There’s a dollar factor, because somebody else wants it and the result is it gets written up in People magazine. Now all these people know what art and art world means their way to the importance of art is a very specific time to do public art projects now. We hope that the fundraising for future projects will reflect this energized art world.
AS IF: Tell me about the funds you raise through merchandise.

DR: We have an ongoing line called WOW—Works on Whatever—where artists design functional objects. Every year we come out with towels. It started out with four artists and now every year two new artists make a towel. That is outside any particular project, and we continue to do it and launch at Art Basel Miami, which is a very nice platform for this. We make canvases that are sold on art.com. Those were born when we put artworks on the set of Gossip Girl. It was literally prop-art, and these are licensed reproductions you can buy and bring home and live with—it’s obviously done all the time but not with contemporary artists. Those are our two main product lines. Then within a project we might make an addition, we work with the artist on that project and sell a limited edition sculpture that is an artwork outside of this product category.

AS IF: It’s AS IF you had unlimited funds, what would be your dream project and where would it be?

DR: I would do a project between Palestine and Israel. Art taps into that realm beyond communication, and you would start seeing people who think that they have absolutely nothing in common and that they could never meet, joining and talking and conversing and somehow creating a dialogue, a bond within this art project. That for me would be the ideal project.

YFV: One of the things that Doreen brought to APF was working with Yoko Ono on the Imagine Peace project; we’ve done four distinct projects with Yoko, and we were just granted the Lennon/Ono Peace Grant. I’m also married to Leo Villareal. I would want to have Leo’s light projects in many different places, they bring great joy to people, they bring a reflection of their surroundings, they give people hope, they are very intelligent, and they are sublime. I just would like to see his light, which is a total community message, in many more places, not just places that don’t have any art at all but places that are underserved but also much more public places.