



# Artist As Leader: Yazmany Arboleda

Yazmany Arboleda is a Colombian-American artist whose raw materials are neighborhoods and sometimes entire cities. The residents who bring these communities to life are not only his subjects but also his collaborators.

Among his more recent projects are large-scale works in Kabul, Afghanistan and Nairobi, Kenya. In Nairobi with the aid of several houses of worship he created “Colour in Faith,” a city-wide project in which he and a team of volunteers painted several religious buildings — including Christian churches, Muslim mosques and Buddhist temples — in a color named Optimistic Yellow. In Kabul he created what he calls a living sculpture when he and a team of volunteers and community activists gave away 10,000 pink biodegradable balloons to residents throughout the city as the ever-present cracks of gunfire continued to reverberate close by.

For the foreseeable future, he will be making art in his hometown of New York City. A few days before this interview, Yazmany learned that starting in August of 2020, he would be Artist in Residence with the city’s Commission for Civic Engagement.

Among the many organizations in which he plays a leadership role are Future Historical Society, a multi-generational team of artists, activists, educators and community members who represent a diverse range of connections to the neighborhood of Fort Greene in Brooklyn; and limeSHIFT,

an art-innovation consulting company that helps organizations unleash the power of place and people through creativity.

In this interview with Artist as Leader podcast producer Pier Carlo Talenti, Yazmany describes how an outsider's perspective has shaped how generously and delicately he weaves his art-making and leadership style into the fabric of every community he inhabits.

**Pier Carlo Talenti: Before we start talking about your leadership journey, could you please tell us a little bit about how you led yourself on your artistic journey to where you are now?**

**Yazmany Arboleda:** When I think about my process and my life, it's been a process of really following my heart. I have to say that I come from a conservative Colombian Catholic family, and as a gay man growing up in Colombia, I think I intuitively as an outsider began to try and understand society from an emotional, open-hearted kind of way. It's been a process of really identifying systems and becoming aware of all the things that I've been able to witness in my life that have informed who I am today.

I think about when I was in high school and was in all of the art classes — photography, painting, all kinds of things, I was doing sculpture — and I remember my mom telling me over and over again that if I was going to become an artist, I was going to end up sleeping under a bridge or working at local fairs where I would paint little kids' faces for money. It was her way of deterring me from pursuing a life in the arts. In some ways, because we come from a humble family, it was her way of asking me to go after a financial stability that would lead to a healthy life in her mind, the way she judged it.

From that framework, I was so passionate and so in love with the arts and with my capacity to express myself when I was growing up in South Florida, eventually when I decided to go to college, what I decided — kind of in conjunction with a conversation with my mother and really thinking about her values and my own — was to go to architecture school.

**While I was studying architecture in Washington, DC, I understood that it wasn't just the architecture that I was really going after. I was really interested in understanding the imagination and the practice of the imagination.**

I actually got a master's in architecture over a period of five years. While I was studying architecture in Washington, DC, I understood that it wasn't just the architecture that I was really going after. I was really interested in understanding the imagination and the practice of the imagination. So I began to look for programs around the world that would inform my architectural career or my learning in architecture school. I eventually went to study industrial

design in London. I studied fashion design in Milan for one semester. I studied communication and management at Parsons for another semester.

**Pier Carlo:** Wow.

**Yazmany:** Then when I did my master's I went to live and work in Brazil for eight months, where I was an intern at an architecture firm that was made up of architects, musicians and painters who were all working in the same space. What was magical and incredible about that period of time was that I went to Brazil without speaking Portuguese. Nobody who was in this firm in the North really spoke Spanish or English. I had to learn the language while I was leading a project where I was redesigning all of the branding for the firm, including their website, all of their communications, how they thought about themselves as a group of people. It was the process of learning this language, learning these people and being creative along the way, producing all of these different pieces of collateral.

But in my mind, it's always been this journey of, "Gosh, how are people living? How do I understand how they live? How do I communicate all of the different aspects of how we can relate to each other?" That can go from enjoying eating a piece of pizza together and talking about how our favorite food is Italian to really thinking through what is our spiritual practice. To me, these things are related.

It's really been a journey of going to these places and not just going to school and having a family of people who are around me through an education but also living and working with the people from those places and learning, not just their languages, but the way that people live. It's really been astonishing in terms of what I've gathered along the way.

After I graduated from college, I moved to New York City, and I knew that I was really interested in working in a place where there was much more than architecture. I began to look for firms that had architects and graphic designers and musicians and all kinds of talents and skills so that I could be informed by that kind of thinking and that way of being, all of them informing me at once. I ended up at this place called Imagination, where I worked for five years.

Imagination is a firm that's based in London but that has offices all over the world. There I was a three-dimensional designer and then eventually a creative director, but all of the work that I was doing there, again, it was thinking through, "Gosh, how do people come together and understand each other? How do we tell stories? How do we intentionally go after purpose and meaning in our lives and acknowledge it and name it so that it shapes the way we make decisions and how we think about ourselves?"

**Pier Carlo:** Then you decided to put these observational skills to use for something else. You pivoted.

**Yazmany:** Right, but I think it's important that we recognize and we define these things. In my mind, architecture is how materials come together. So far over my artistic practice over the past 20 years, when I think about all of my projects, I'm definitely thinking about, how is a staple being applied to make a book happen? How are people meeting and joining in, and how are we

materials in ourselves in the way we approach life and the way we act and engage with each other? There are a lot of ways in which my architectural training informed the way that I think about space, the way that I think about individuals in space and all these pieces of the puzzle that have been critical to the success of my projects.

**Pier Carlo: Clearly you have better-than-average observational and empathic skills, but somewhere along the way, you had to become a leader. Not only do you have audiences, but often your audiences are your collaborators; you have to lead your co-art makers. Then because of the scale of your works you have to establish community partners around the world, and you also have to navigate all sorts of governmental bureaucracy. That takes a lot of different leadership skillsets. Did your knowledge of your leadership abilities come hand-in-hand with your artistic discoveries, or did you have to develop both separately?**

**Yazmany:** I think I developed both together actually. When I think about my evolution and my growth as a leader, I definitely begin with being in high school. In high school, I was a part of Key Club International, and this is important because it's an amazing way of ... . In high school, in ninth grade, I came into a classroom, and I met a group of people who were really interested in community service and thinking about how leadership is learned and experienced by giving back to the community.

At that point, in ninth grade, I was so enamored with the idea of these people who cared about giving back and investing and finding themselves and their healing as young people through giving back and through caring for others. I began my journey. After freshman year, I ran for president of the organization for my high school, and I got it. After sophomore year, I ran for lieutenant governor, and I was in charge of all the schools in Broward County and Dade County in South Florida. Then in my third year, when I was a junior, I ran for international trustee, and I eventually became an international trustee who was representing all of the Key Club members from Florida and Jamaica.

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What was amazing about that was it was my way of feeling belonging and feeling purpose through an organization that accepted and treasured my joy and my way of being. All along the way as I was doing that and really investing in learning about all these different types of people and collaboration, I was also in the classroom with my art teachers in the darkroom doing all kinds of experiments and playing around.

The teachers, who were leading both the Key Club piece and the arts program in my school, were so invested in me and my capacity to experiment and to try things and to learn from them. "What are these materials? What can we make? How do we talk about all of these things that

matter to us through a way that's connective tissue?" As you said, I think the empathic skills were being developed in both arenas in my life simultaneously. They were informing each other.

One of the things that's really sweet and funny is that a lot of my projects involve the making of nametags, and I always like to make them kind of huge and bold. That began when I was in high school when I was making them for Key Club International. I've created crazy, fun nametags for the Artist as Citizen Conference, for my Colour in Faith Project in Kenya, I mean, everywhere. I have found that whenever I'm building community, if I show up with things that feel like gifts from the get-go, everyone opens their hearts and is willing and able to commit to these enormous visions that eventually belong to all of us.

**Pier Carlo:** I love the idea of opening the collaboration of a project with a gift. That's a great lesson.

**Yazmany:** Yeah. One of the great lessons of my life is that dignity is communicated through quality. If you show up with things that feel like they were handmade and created for each individual who's showing up, people take note, and they're like, "Oh my God, it matters that I'm here. People see me. Somebody prepared for my arrival." That completely changes the nature of your relationship to people.

**Pier Carlo:** Could you describe your first big community project that you made on your own, that was your idea and that you implemented yourself?

**Yazmany:** Yes, this really speaks to the process of my practice. In 2006 I'd been in New York for a year and a half. I had visions of becoming "a famous artist" in the way we thought about it in the late '90s, early 2000s, where it was really about the glam and the fun and like New York City and flashes and all these things. I was working at Imagination, and I saw the ... I don't know if you remember this commercial, this Sony commercial where they threw like 100,000 bouncy balls on the streets of San Francisco to promote color in their TV systems. I looked at that commercial and thought, "Oh my God, how stunning." I recommend it. If you haven't seen these commercials for Sony Bravia, they're really beautiful and they're really crafted. A lot of them were created by artists who Sony commissioned.

This particular one, I was like, "Those bouncy balls touch light in a way that's so spectacular." I thought, "What if I got a few of them and I saw the quality of how they reacted to light?" Then I ordered boldly. I can't even believe that. I mean, there are some things that I'm like, I don't even know where my head was at that I made that decision. I ordered 50,000 bouncy balls to my apartment in New York City. They came in I think it was like 50 boxes that were pretty big. Those boxes were in my hallway in my apartment for about six months. But it was this incredible puzzle. I was thinking, "How do we create portraits of people?" All kinds of people that I was photographing from my life in New York: bartenders, friends, architects, organizers, all kinds of folks.

I started putting these bouncy balls into these grids to make these portraits of these people. Over a period of a year, we put these things into grids. Then we eventually shipped the bouncy balls to Las Vegas to a printer that had a three-dimensional printer, where the printer could actually have

a circle grid that would eventually show these portraits that were really, really stunning and that looked like they were people that are made of plastic. But the whole thing was talking about perfection and beauty and our perception of that, given what we see in the culture and our relationship to ourselves.

What eventually happens is that I have this beautiful, incredible opening in this amazing Issey Miyake Tribeca epicenter in downtown Manhattan. I have this big party with all these photographers. There's a line to get into the opening. Everyone's dressed to the nines. One of the things that I find really funny and peculiar is that at the time, everybody after the party was like, "Oh my gosh, it was like we were in 'Sex and the City.' So glamorous, so beautiful, so fun." You know what was so funny was that throughout that experience of that party and that opening, I looked around and I marveled because I was like, "Oh my God, it's so crazy. Everybody's here to have a good cocktail and to have their picture taken." People weren't really invested in the fact that I'd spent the past six months working with all of the people in my community, my friends, my coworkers. At one point, some of the bouncy balls were in my office and people were actually helping me put them in because there were so many.

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What I understood then was that the six months leading up to that opening were actually the art that I was invested in creating in the world, which is people coming to help me and support my vision of what's possible and to have fun and lightness along the way. This collaborative process felt like it was what gave me life then. It wasn't that party. It was the process of actually making what we were making and having fun at the same time.

What happens at that point is I have this epiphany and I realize that the beauty and the aspect of the aesthetic is important but it's not as important as how it's made or what is the process that we go through to create whatever it is that we're creating. I understand immediately that at that point, as an artist, I wasn't interested in making objects. I was interested in building relationships.

**Pier Carlo: I want to go back a little bit to something you said when you ordered all those 50,000 balls and you said, "Where is my head?" What is it that let you do that? What do you think in your background or makeup or education created that fearlessness in you?**

**Yazmany:** I want to name here one thing that is really critical in my art practice that I name all the time when I speak about it and when I get interviewed or invited into new communities to work. I name risk as an enormous part of the practice. What I mean by that is that I think if we know all the answers about a particular process or a particular way of thinking, it's not

interesting. There's something about it that is killed in the process of naming all the answers immediately or trying to understand it all right away or through the process.

I think it's related to this fearlessness, because in my mind I think that the story of my family and where I come from is . . . . There are so many things about it that are so heartbreaking. Death was a very real part of my childhood. In my mind, I think a lot of my life has been led as if I could die tomorrow. If we don't try and experiment and go after our desires and our dreams and live in our bodies fully in this present, I'm afraid that I won't have time to do it later. You know what I mean? There's something about that that's really true in the way that I approach the work that I do.

**Pier Carlo:** Do the communities you work with understand that lesson, that everything they're going to do is risk?

**Yazmany:** It's not everything. It's a part of it. But it's important to always have questions and to leave space for those questions not to be answered. I think it's critical to the way that we feel and the way we marvel at ourselves and what we can accomplish individually and together. When I think about "Do they know that they're getting themselves into that?" I think I try to be really honest and authentic in myself and in my feelings and how I'm experiencing the world. I think that comes across when people meet me. I think when people join these processes, they know what they're going to be getting is as fun and as unexpected as anything. Maybe that's a little bit muddy and not clear, but I feel like part of what makes this work successful is the joy and the boldness and the whimsy of the work we do together.

**Pier Carlo:** You've worked abroad also in different cultures, notably Nairobi and Kabul, where, from what I understand, you could hear gunfire and the war not far off. Do you have to modify your leadership skills at all when you work in a different culture than what you're accustomed to?

**Yazmany:** Absolutely. I think you have to really be open-hearted in understanding the particular place and the particular people and how those things have shaped each other. I think there comes a respect with being an outsider and being able to look at systems and acknowledge all of the richness and all of the poverty that might exist within any given system.

I can tell you that for the work in Kabul, in particular, it was really such an incredible learning process because Afghanistan is in itself an official Muslim country. It's an enormous part of the identity of that place, how they think of themselves, how they lead their lives day to day. It was so funny, actually. In Kabul, all the time, I would get the question, "Are you Muslim?" Because I look like them. But they would be confused by the fact that I was a foreigner and that I didn't sound like them and also the reality that I was a Christian by my cultural background. That was always like a kind of sticking point.

I think one of the things that's important to note in that learning and that process there — and it's also related to my working in Nairobi — is that while I was doing the work in those places at that time, I never acknowledged or named the notion that I was a queer person. This is a critical piece, because I think I'm at a place in my life where I can no longer do that. I have to

acknowledge that my being queer and my being a homosexual within the constructs that I've lived in in the world are enormously a part of how I think and feel and how I inform space and relationship.

But it was critical that I did not share that at that time, because I thought then, and in some ways I think that now too, it would have gotten in the way of the work, right? If I told the people in Afghanistan that I was gay, I think that they would have thought or my access to resources, my access to be able to connect and do things there, would have been different. It would have been altered. Also, the reality that in Afghanistan, you could go to jail for the rest of your life if you are named or seen practicing anything to do with homosexuality and the same thing is in Kenya.

**Pier Carlo:** You could have put yourself in danger.

**Yazmany:** That's right. I was actually incarcerated and arrested in both places for different reasons. It's amazing. I've actually been arrested in Johannesburg, in Kabul, in Mexico. In New York City, I was brought in for questioning.

**All of these things have to do with one thing that I think is also a part of this practice, which doesn't really get spoken to or named often, which is, who makes laws and who are those laws made for? How do, through our artistry, we question these things and give back the humanity to people?**

All of these things have to do with one thing that I think is also a part of this practice, which doesn't really get spoken to or named often, which is, who makes laws and who are those laws made for? How do, through our artistry, we question these things and give back the humanity to people?

As people, we inherited this Earth. I think so often we forget that, because we're inside of these systems that are guided by economics and all of these different things that have evolved over the past 200 years. I think questioning and boldly asking questions around, who does it belong to and why and how can I act and not act in this space and why, is really important.

**Pier Carlo: Now that you're thinking of acknowledging your queer identity in your future projects, that will alter the geographical places where you might do future work, right?**

**Yazmany:** Yes and no. I don't know. In some ways, when I think about where I am now, I feel like being able to name it as an asset, as opposed to something that could be looked at as foreign or other in a way that's not desirable, I feel like in some ways, it is exactly that. It's the same thing as I think about artists and artistry, and I think about it as the future of the Earth, as the resource of the Earth, because to me, it is now in this moment in the history of the Earth that we



need to access and activate and exercise our imaginations more than ever, because our future is beckoning us to do so.

We all need to activate our imaginations. All of our artists should be everywhere, in private and public organizations and groups, activating how we think, how we feel, how we are inspired, how that inspiration moves us to action. What is that action? How do our aspirations and our boldness inform the actions we take with our lives, every day and generally in terms of what drives our purpose?

**Pier Carlo: Well, that leads me directly to my next question. If you recall, our original interview was scheduled to take place in early June. That was just as the country was learning about and reacting to the news of George Floyd’s murder. In the email that you sent me to ask if we could reschedule, you said that you needed to be focused on taking care of your community. Could you describe what you meant by that and how you’ve taken care of your community since then?**

**Yazmany:** Absolutely. As you know, the world is being transformed. One of the things that I find incredibly beautiful and important to name is that we now know that the world can change quickly, right? COVID teaches us that we can stop all of society and stay home and prioritize the lives of people and we can do that globally in every country within a span of a week, right? If we know that that amount of change can occur on this Earth through our human beings, we now know there’s enormous possibilities for what’s possible. The possibilities have expanded to a degree that’s astounding. That, to me, is a really critical piece of what we’ve learned through this period of time.

When I think about what I’ve been doing over the past three months while I’ve been in my apartment in New York and what it looks like to take care of your community, it looks like checking in with them over text, over the phone. It looks like over the Easter holiday, I knew that a lot of the members of the Future Historical Society — which is a community of people that I really love, that’s an enormous part of my life — I knew that many of them were older and were in their apartments alone during Easter.

What we did as a community of people was, all the younger people in the community who had older people in their spaces said, “Let’s make sure that these people know that they’re cared for and that we are thinking of them and that we are literally connected in this way, where we can literally order dinner for all of them and bring food and figure out how to buy the groceries for people and get it to them without harming them.” Truly continuously connecting like you’re a part of a family, with checking up on people to make sure they’re continuing to be OK, and if they’re not, to listen to what’s worrying them or making them nervous.

I think this simplicity of human-to-human connection and being really open about, “Hey, I’m suffering. Hey, I’m dealing with these questions. Hey, I don’t know; can you help me understand?” or, “I don’t feel well.” And, “That’s OK. How do we move through this together?” Even with what’s happened with George Floyd and Black Lives Matter and the question of white supremacy and systemic racism and how it permeates all aspects of our life, again, we can sit here and say and ask ourselves and listen: “How are we doing? What’s happening? What did we

inherit? How does what we inherited inform the way we feel and think in our bodies right now?" To listen, to make space and to make space for people to know that you're thinking of them and that you matter, that they matter to you.

**Pier Carlo: You've said that every town, every community should have an artist in residence, that it's really crucial to this country's continuing transformation. What do you think primarily needs to change for that to happen? Is it that artists need to step up or that communities need to invite them?**

**Yazmany:** Well, it's related to the change in our language and how we speak about artistry and the value of it in our society. I think it's related in my mind. It's not that there aren't enough artists to do that work. It's the reality that we have to change the system.

**I cofounded limeSHIFT with a group of other people at MIT who were really interested in thinking, how can artists come into communities and corporations specifically and build community within, where we transform the spaces people work in so that they feel better because they're acknowledging the humanity of the people that are there?**

I think about policy and systemic change through governmental frameworks and private organizations and public and private partnering to begin to believe that putting artists in all of these spaces, including corporations, will begin to transform how they operate and how they treat their people. I cofounded limeSHIFT with a group of other people at MIT who were really interested in thinking, how can artists come into communities and corporations specifically and build community within, where we transform the spaces people work in so that they feel better because they're acknowledging the humanity of the people that are there? We thought if we made the spaces like artworks that were cocreated with everyone who's present, people have a loyalty and connection to each other that will transform the work that's being done in those spaces.

When I think about what needs to change, I think that corporations ... I spoke to one of the founders of B Lab recently, Jay Coen Gilbert, who said to me that he totally agreed with me that the deactivation of art is in all these spaces and that we ought to think about how government can begin to provide subsidies to organizations, nonprofits, for-profits and collaborate so that maybe we have hubs of artists in every city that can come into projects and into groups and communities of people and begin to activate and look at what's happening and transform them with an open heart.

I think it has to do with policy. I think about the Federal Art Project that happened when the Great Depression was going on in this country. I think we have to now look at that and look at all that we know and we've learned over the past few decades, beginning actually there at that point:

What did those artists do at that time when the Great Depression was going on? How do we think now of this Great Depression in a way that goes far beyond the financing of our lives and more into the poverties that exist in the way we think about our education, our religions? I often think that we need new words for education, for economy, for politics, for journalism, for family, for religion, for democracy.

It's really beautiful. When I had the conversation with the Commission for Civic Engagement of the City of New York, the chair of the Commission, Sarah, said to me, when I spoke about my art practice . . . . I shared with them that I thought that art was a verb and not a noun, that it happens between people and that it's not just an object that hangs on a wall or a sculpture that sits on a table to make this space pretty. It's in fact a verb that activates our imaginations, that leads to our questioning, that leads to our growth in our spirit and in our intellect.

It was beautiful. Her response was so astonishing to me, and it was so simple, because it matches my approach in the same exact way. She said, "I believe that democracy is that too. It is not a noun but a verb, and it happens among us." I think it was that parallel thinking that made our connection true, that really serves as I think about the work that needs to be done in the City of New York.

**Pier Carlo: That's beautiful. Considering what you know about yourself today as an artist and a leader, what advice would have been useful for you to receive when you were first starting out?**

**Yazmany:** I am about to turn 40 in a year. I just turned 39 in May. I have to say to you that I am just, over the past couple of years, beginning to truly listen to my inner voice and to really believe that my voice and who I am has value in the world! When I think about that journey, I think I want to encourage all of the artists out there who are thinking about themselves in their practice and trying to figure out what they do and how they do it, I want to encourage everybody to really trust what's happening inside of them — and to yes, hear the voices of the critics, of your teachers, of everyone who is influencing the way you think about the work you do in the world — but to really believe in your way of being and your use of language and your approach and the actions that you take every day to experiment about, what is your art, who are you as an artist? All of these huge questions. Time and again, to go inwards and to really allow yourself to be heard, to honor your own voice in a way that's authentic and kind, prioritizing that kindness above all else.

Can I say one more thing about the last question?

**Pier Carlo:** Yes, please do.

**When you have the question of whether to be right or to be kind, always prioritize kindness.**

**Yazmany:** The best advice that I've ever received was, work hard and be kind to people. I think those two things are related. Actually, it's related to a thing that I say all the time, which is,

“When you have the question of whether to be right or to be kind, always prioritize kindness.” I think that dismisses our ego and it allows humans to be honest and relatable to each other. That, to me, is an enormous part of how I have found belonging on this Earth so far.

## Epilogue

Yazmany Arboleda works at the intersection of people, culture, societies and systems. He is an artist leader who balances global ideas and local impacts. Takeaways from our interview with Yazmany include:

- **Know your mission.** Family and society can influence your beliefs, but you ultimately choose what you stand for. A clear personal mission informs the work you will do and the people who will be drawn to it.
- **Strive toward a vision.** See your ideal future and continually move towards it. It will get you up in the morning with a purpose.
- **Know your values.** How you lead is as important as what you create. Be authentic, and people will be more apt to follow you.
- **Clarify your expectations.** Whether you want to challenge large systems or create lovely spaces, be clear on what you are doing so that others can align with you.
- **Be accountable.** Live in integrity with your mission, vision and values. They will guide you through the many chapters of your career and life.



Yazmany Arboleda

## ARTIST

Yazmany Arboleda (b. 1981) is a Colombian American artist based in New York City. He cannot do his work alone. An architect by training, Yazmany activates communities with large scale art projects that seek to build connections across barriers and highlight how linked we are. He believes that art is a verb not a noun. Over the past two decades he has created public art projects with communities in India, Japan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, South Africa, Afghanistan, Spain, Colombia and the United States. He has collaborated with Carnegie Hall, the Yale School of Management, and BRIC, among others. He is currently the artist in residence at IntegrateNYC and the associate director of communications for Artists Striving To End Poverty. He is a cofounder of limeSHIFT, the Future Historical Society, Remember 2019, and the Artist As Citizen Conference. He has lectured at UNC, MIT, and LPAC about the power of art in public space.