

# “Once upon a time in Bronx” and the current urban challenges of the Theater of the Oppressed. Combination of participatory art and theater in public spaces in Bronx, New York City, USA

"ÉRASE UNA VEZ EL BRONX" Y LOS DESAFÍOS URBANOS  
ACTUALES DEL TEATRO DE LOS OPRIMIDOS. LA  
COMBINACIÓN DEL ARTE PARTICIPATIVO Y EL TEATRO EN  
LOS ESPACIOS PÚBLICOS DEL BRONX, NUEVA YORK, EEUU.

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## Introduction

The Theater of the Oppressed is a method to empower the oppressed to fight against their oppressors by developing plays. It is very widespread around the world. The main idea of this theater method is to fight against basically all kinds of oppressions. As the Theater of the Oppressed is reflecting the left wing ideas from the 70s, it was received with skepticism in 90s in the USA but later gained the trust of the New Yorkers. The artist Melanie Crean goes beyond using the Theater of the Oppressed blended in two consistent art projects and showing that this method can be used as a media of art in public spaces.

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## Theater of the Oppressed: the beginning

Augusto Boal (1931-2009) systematized his political philosophy into an aesthetic language called "Theater of the Oppressed": it started being developed while the time of the Brazilian Dictatorship after the brutal military coup 1964, when censorship, repression and violence were commonplace, people were living under the hard line. The Theater of the Oppressed is diverse than traditional forms of theater, Boal shows forms to fight against oppression on pacific way, by doing a theater play, but at the same time also showing in scene a view to overcome the problem of oppression. The actors are people, who feel themselves in oppression, who can be professionals or non-actors: common people. It is practiced all over the world, crossing physical and cultural boundaries. It gives voice to those, who claim for urban transformation. The analytical process was influenced by ideas of Paulo Freire and Berthold Brecht among others. He wrote many books systematizing his method and explaining better how to use its techniques. (Boal, 2005)

In the time of the Brazilian Dictatorship he was arrested and tortured. Boal, after serving a term in jail, he left Brazil in 1971 for a long exile. After approximately four years, spent mostly in Argentina, he moved to Portugal and finally set up residence in Paris, where in 1979 he established his own Center of Theater of the Oppressed. Boal and his family returned to Brazil after the amnesty in 1986, after a long period abroad and started his theater works and experiences in Rio de Janeiro opening the *Centro de Teatro do Oprimido*. The Theater of the Oppressed is clearly an initiative within the Left Wings ideals and ideology from the 70s. In fact Boal, who was very politically active as an actor, playwright and theater director, was elected in 1992 as member of the City Council of Rio de Janeiro by the *Partido do Trabalhadores*, the Brazilian Labor Party, getting a sort of urban transformation by approving 15 city laws and 2 State laws during the period of 1993-1996. (Boal, 2005; Schutzman, 1990: 77-83)

## The reception of Theater of the Oppressed in New York City

When Boal start doing workshops in the USA, in the late 80s, after his long period in exile in Europe, he started to gain more attention spaces in other countries worldwide. Practicing the Theater of the Oppressed in New York City was challenging in the beginning in the late 80s and early 90s. Boal

had a special relation with New York City; in 1953 he studied in Theater with John Gassner in the Columbia University.

Schutzman affirmed in the 90s that the problematic was to transpose a third-world aesthetic of resistance to a first-world aesthetic of self-help during the “death of the cold war” era. By doing his workshops in New York City; after a long time he had created the Theater of the Oppressed, he was dealing with a significant lapse (1970s to 1990s) but with the asymmetric power politics that mark the change in context of Latin America to North America and Europe. For Schutzman while there may be a bond that unites Americans, South and North, in ways that East/West dynamics do not afford (Boal worked more in North America and Europe than in the former Soviet Bloc), the disparity in economics and political opportunity between South and North define most inter-American relations: interdependence. In order to understand Boal’s work in its changing context there are two points Schutzman made. First, although North and Latin America share an intimate history, they each represent opposing positions within it. North America represents the oppressors, the privileged colonialists, and Latin America represents the disempowered oppressed. In fact Boal strongly criticized the role of President of the United States and used the image of Uncle Sam as symbol of exploitation in his book the “Theater of the Oppressed” written in the 1971. (Boal, 2005) The second point regarding the problem of Boal’s relocation relates to an apparently apolitical attitude that crosses the contemporary art scene in New York City. Schutzman (1990) nevertheless affirms that the North Americans didn’t quickly dismiss Boal’s theater as irrelevant to contemporary politics. The reason was because social inequality is inherent within capitalist societies, therefore there will be always oppressed and oppressor ones. (Savage, 2002: 70-72)

Boal’s body work didn’t remain static; the techniques of the Theater of the Oppressed have been vitalized rather than weakened by their confrontation with the USA. The method today is used in the whole country in colleges, university, communities and by many oppressed groups; there is a necessity for that because the inequalities are still present. Therefore there is a use of the Theater of the Oppressed among the Americans nowadays, as the TONYC Theater of the Oppressed New York City group, which was founded by Kate Rubin in 2010. She is working actively against the oppressions in the city as well as many other groups are active. Although the skepticism Schutzman showed in her early article from the 90s there is still a function for it in

consumer society as USA, because there are still oppressed and oppressors there. Boal's workshops in New York City led to political action as I will analyze in this case study: two artworks using the Theater of the Oppressed as media for art in public spaces. (Schutzman, 1990)

### **"Once upon a time in Bronx" (2012)**

Prof Melanie Crean is an artist, who teaches in the Parsons College at the New School University at New York City. She is currently developing projects with a community in Bronx. She uses the Theater of the Oppressed methods and goes beyond it, as she did in her project called "Once upon a time in Bronx". Although mass media in general tell only stories about violence, criminality and prostitution in Bronx, they decided to design a game about storytelling, helping people to tell their own stories about the Bronx: stories about the past combined with visions of the future. From the initial stories they shared, they designed games, do photography and work on storytelling.

Crean was asked to do a Site Specific work and this term, at least in New York City, has been questioned. Crean affirms that maybe twenty years ago, or twenty five years ago, when people said something about the site Specific Work artwork it was about the physical site, the site almost as a piece of sculpture with no people on it, no politics on it, no sociology to it. So she was asked to do an art work but in her process it first starts by talking to people, what Bourriaud called relational aesthetics. (Savage, 2002)

There was a community center in Bronx, basically an organization that tries to provide programming that the community might otherwise lack, like after school programs for kids, or some with health or food, or housing advocacy, etc. It had an after school program for the kids and the neighborhood had a lot of kids, Caribbean and Hispanic ones. Mostly from Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic, a lot of them emigrated direct from Africa, and African American kids. So English, Spanish and Arabic had been spoken pretty much equally neighborhood. She considers it an authentic and multicultural neighborhood, but also very violent and poor, and not with a lot of resources. She went to talk to this group and they had an enormous empathy. She was interested in using arts to get those kids engaged.

In the United States, Crean affirms the Government has been cutting a lot of funding to the school system. So a lot of kids, who are creative, just get

bored. There was a group of ten young girls; around fourteen years old, very smart, but all of them had discipline problems at school, troubles for fighting. There are ones, who got arrested during the time she was there and went to the Juvenile Detention, which is for the ones under eighteen years old, who aren't yet an adult. It is mostly a lot of kids but when they are in, they connect with gangs and after stay with those gangs on the criminality. Crean wanted to do something together with them. They all were interested in arts. She is mostly with Photography and Video and designed games, so they are very interested on storytelling. So they decided to help people tell stories about the Bronx.

The group of girls in the beginning was not comfortable with Crean. First people from Crean's generation around 40s mean the adults, who made their lives difficult. In general anything associated with older people; it's going to be boring. In their minds school is boring too because of the oppressive situation they live there, when people talk down to them and they have no power and have to be silent. There is no dialogue: the girls just feel oppressed; they can't speak because they have been always told not to. Second, Crean is a white middle class woman from another area of New York City and there is clear segregation among ethnic groups, meaning there are very few white people at all in Bronx. So Crean decided to talk with Katy Rubin from Theater of the Oppressed New York City and they the program in two halves: on the one hand they talked about what kind of stories they already had been told about the Bronx, which was basically about robberies and prostitution, violence by the media. Therefore they decided what kind of stories they wanted to tell and how they could organize the game. As preparation they just played the Games Boal developed, so that they could learn to trust on each other, it was very useful.

Boal developed the Games, which are a series of physical and metaphorical exercises and activities to prepare the actors to be on stage. For him the Games have two important characteristics of the life in society: first, there are rules as the societies has laws, which are necessary to be realized but it is necessary creative freedom to doesn't turn life the game or life in servile obedience; second it is also important for the non-mechanization of the body and the non-alienation of the mind because the daily tasks are repetitive; especially at work or related to economical, environmental and social conditions of the one who practice it. The Games are sensorial dialogues, inside the needed discipline, demand creativity that is their essence. (Boal, 2001: 3-5)

They worked on designing a game, but the Boal Games were happening at the same time: they were these mechanisms, to get the girls talking about what they were not normally comfortable talking. They started to talk a lot about violence on the street, domestic violence from their family, and also problem with completely dysfunctional school system: whether they were basically the whole environmental totally dysfunctional. Crean used these Games basically to get them to tell stories. Then they used the process of them designing a game to get them to tell stories.

The other part of this project was Forum Theater, the interactive play. On the Theater Forum people from the audience can replace the actors in a play about the oppression in scene and change the end of the play. Getting them to feel comfortable with each other was the first part. The second part of the project was to give them a sense of mastery: during the Forum Theater play people participated: the girls performed it and were amazed that someone would listen their issues. Forum Theater was part of the process. The girls felt as the protagonists of a huge transformation and they were the protagonists of it. In the play they developed little stories out into a play and performed it across the street during the exhibition. They also showed the card deck: they did photographs together for it based on some Crean did and some screen prints, which were in the exhibition. Crean saw the game they designed as a remarkable output because these cards were an artwork in itself. She made a two channels video installation of the girls. One of them acts as themselves and then one of them acting as the character in the screen from the play. Boal's theory for Crean was an amazing tool helping her working with people and having it be in an equal level, because by playing these games, they realize they all were the same. It helps too in terms of collaboration and getting people to work together and empowers people to speak. Afterwards they were comfortable with each other and had a friendship.

### **"Memories of the future" (2013)**

The second project Melanie Crean started working was with a group of people in Hunts Point in Bronx. The Bronx is North of Manhattan and Hunts Point is the South Bronx it is the poorest Congressional District in the United States and also has the highest rate of violent crime in the US. It is a very intense place: lots of artists, but the social inequality is expressed spatially. She was working with a group of people to try to make some projects

at Hunts Point to help to change the way Hunts Points function and the way the place is perceived by people. Crean believes on what Boal said: it is the own oppressed who should fight against the oppression, however she thinks that by talking together, they can brainstorm and come up with some ideas. As Photography and Video artist she could tell stories that way. So she started working this time with African American, Caribbean and Hispanic adults. The Games were important in the same way as they were in her previous artwork. The group first had a very fixed idea about what should happen in politics. For them politics meant going to the community board and complaining but nobody listen to them: it was very frustrating. They just joined the project because this is their community; they had a sense of it and wanted to discuss to find solutions for it.

In the middle of Hunts Point there are unfortunately two jails; another problem in the Bronx is over incarceration. Crean affirms that in New York City jails are big business, owned by corporations and a way to make money. So they keep them full basically. So in the middle of this neighborhood Hunts Points, there is a big jail for young people, called Spofford Juvenile Detention Facility: it was a jail for people younger than eighteen, which closed two years ago; but it is still a huge empty area right in the middle of a small land area. The city allows people to make proposals to redevelop the site, but they haven't allowed that process to begin. Again the community wanted to be able to decide what should happen: another reason way they are doing the project. There is also a huge barge, a floating jail right up the coast of Hunts Point, in Bronx. Most of the people, who live in this neighborhood, have a kind of relation with the jail: some have been to jail themselves or someone in their families has been to jail, or someone in their family has been shot, or both: everyone is somehow affected by the memories of the jail; so everyone has been affected by this. Therefore the idea of the project they were working was called "Memories of the Future", which the idea was to tell stories about the past but also combine that with visions for the future. After two or three months stories started to come out and from them she made a play. The transformation was very clear: those people, who first said that they were not creative; they thought they were not interested in art; suddenly they are doing performances and the audience is clapping. The group was amazed.

Half of the group started writing poetry for the play. Poetry has a very special place in the Bronx because of the Hip Hop, which was basically born in the Bronx. So all the kids, who were born there, write rhymes just they

don't learn it at school, they learn it on the street and sing it through the subway. For this reason they decided to do a location based cinema project, a video project basically, with two spoken words poets. Crean was working with Caridad de la Luz, alias La Bruja, who is spoken word poet. It is kind of RAP but with no music; it is poetry that one perform, very rhythmic, a little bit musical but it is meant to be just performed, either on the stage or on the streets. Twelve people were developing this spoken words pieces, as if they were different buildings or land marks in Hunts Point.

They spoke about what they see, about what they have seen in the past and they also mean it to be some aid for the future. Therefore they filmed themselves on location, in Hunts Point. One part was developing something with video and the second part was working with some people with a program and application, an App, for a mobile phone. So this will be the Hunts Point App, where one call and it is GPS aware; each video clip is tagged with geo-location, the site where it was shot, so one walks through the neighborhood and when one is on the spot, where the video was recorded, she/he can watch it. So if someone is saying a poem about the spot for jail, when someone is standing in front of it, one feels what is like to be there, walking through this neighborhood. They were trying to be able to express their vision and to have it to be heard.

Moreover a couple of other layers will be participatory: people can submit media; there will be to other layers for sound and images, where people can just speak in their phones and tell like a poem or a vision of the future: then people can also take photographs, they can upload old photographs of the spot or do some new photos of the spot, so people can see how the neighborhood has changed and so on. It is all about past, present and future. Crean and the community tried to do poetry and it is where the Boal's theory came in: it helped people to think more metaphorically because first they tended to be very literal, but then they started to think more poetically and afterwards it opened people's minds to the possibilities of what they can do.

## Theater of the Oppressed as media for art in public spaces

Melanie Crean adapts the theory of the Theater of the Oppressed to do her own artwork and thinks that this method has a great potential. One can use it as a way to generate stories and from those stories, make all sorts of

things and that is exactly what she does.

She was talking about the idea of monument, when she and the girls made the deck of cards, she considered it as monument: all these games leading a way to tell stories. And when they were making the App, they thought that it could be the monument for Hunts Point: a way through conversation, reflecting space, buildings, narratives, mostly coming out through the own stories of the community: a monument built out of stories. She's interested get people to tell stories, share, play and collaborate. Crean sees the potential through the Theater of the Oppressed to create stories, bring images and create aesthetic elements and a collective elaboration of meaning

Crean's art in New York City is social practice or socially engaged art; as she comes from a Photography and Video background often the output has to do with images but it really can take any form. She is an artist, who uses her practice in an open way. In the past couple of years she was interesting in Boal and has figured it out more and more as point of process or as a process.

Public art or art in public spaces is already present in many urban spaces in New York City: in a very diverse presence: from graffiti, public sculpture until official art projects in urban spaces. There are popular performative art interventions connected to identity of the city. However in some areas of the city, where there is art but also poverty, violence and exclusion and criminality as in Bronx. According to Bourriaud art can be a social interstice. He claims that there is a possibility of a relational art, what he calls an art as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent private symbolic space, and this art points to a radical revolt of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art. To sketch sociology of it, this evolution stems essentially from the birth of a world-wide urban culture and from the extension of this city model to more or less all cultural phenomena. If, for a long period of time, the artwork has managed to come across luxury, lordly item in this urban setting, the development of the function of the artworks and the way they are shown attest to a growing urbanization of the artistic experiment. Bourriaud concludes that as a matter of the historicity of this phenomenon art has always been relational in varying degrees, i.e. a factor of sociability and a founding principle of dialogue. He believes that Art is the place that produces a specific sociability. (Borriaud, 2009 : 14-18)

The Theater of the Oppressed still has its scene in the social space in New

York City, present in many urban spaces there. Art in general is already politically engaged and has always been relational to the social space of the city and to local politics. Connecting the method of the Theater of the Oppressed with art projects in internet, in public media, in public square, or in public space in general intend most of the time the same: bring the audience closer to art and empower people. Looking for new visuals tools and a closer contact with the audience artists as Melanie Crean sees that the Theater of the Oppressed engages art contributing to empower oppressed ones. Moreover although it was born in the early 70s, it is still alive, interactive and speaking to all kinds of audience as in New York City. The group TONYC collaborating with the artists Melanie Crean was a great match.

To conclude, the focus here is not only about the participative art and how the participation in urban spaces is obtained; it aims the empowerment of those who feel oppressed and give them a chance for urban transformation. The aesthetic expression of these two artworks "Once upon a time in Bronx" and "Memories of the Future" (Crean, 2012; 2014), blended this two points together. She maintained her focus on social change by storytelling with Theater of the Oppressed as the community grows with exchange of knowledge. Through Theater of the Oppressed many issues could be discussed, it opens dialogues. Besides it is duty of art to criticize the structures of the society and with this method the participant is no longer passive. But it is still a work in progress.

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