

DIALOGUE DOCUMENTATION

prepared for
La Peña Cultural Center with support from The Ford Foundation
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ARTIST DIALOGUE

San Francisco, CA

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The Artist Dialogue was a gathering of 40 prominent contemporary artists working within, and/or impacted by, Hip-Hop performance forms. Sponsored by La Peña Cultural Center with support from The Ford Foundation, and in partnership with the Hip-Hop Theater Festival and Youth Speaks, the event facilitated an exploration of the aesthetic impact of Hip-Hop culture on contemporary performance through a series of large group and small session conversations over two days.¹ The content and structure of the Artist Dialogue was planned and administered by an Artist Planning Committee, with assistance provided by Project Director San San Wong and Ford Foundation Program Officer Roberta Uno. The Artist Planning Committee consisted of:

- Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas - Playwright, *New York Theater Workshop* and *New WORLD Theater*, Jackson Heights, NY
- Rha Goddess - Performance and Recording Artist, *Divine Dime Entertainment, Ltd.*, Forestburgh, NY
- Rennie Harris - Choreographer and Dancer, *Rennie Harris PureMovement*, Philadelphia, PA
- Danny Hoch - Actor, Playwright and Director, *Hip-Hop Theater Festival*, Brooklyn, NY
- Mildred Ruiz - Curator, Writer and Performer, *Universes* and Co-Founder, *The UniverseCity Theater Network*, Bronx, NY
- Steve Sapp - Curator, Writer and Performer, *Universes* and Co-Founder, *The UniverseCity Theater Network*, Bronx, NY
- Joel Barraquiel Tan - Poet and Writer, *Fil Am Arts*, Long Beach, CA

Also providing support and guidance were La Peña staff Sylvia Sherman and Juan Berumen, Hip-Hop Theater Festival's Clyde Valentin, Writer/Critic Jeff Chang, and Dave Mazzoli and Edwin Torres with The Ford Foundation. Rha Goddess, Mildred Ruiz and Steve Sapp served as the main facilitators during the two days.

PARTICIPATING ARTISTS

- *Aya de Leon (Oakland, CA)*
- *Baba Israel (New York, NY)*
- *Ben Snyder (Brooklyn, NY)*
- *Christine Bacareza Balance (New York, NY)*
- *Cristal Chanelle Truscott (Brooklyn, NY)*
- *deuce eclipse (Concord, CA)*
- *Eisa Davis (Brooklyn, NY)*
- *Erica Doyle (Rosedale, NY)*
- *Gigi Otalvaro-Hormillosa (San Francisco, CA)*
- *Golda Supernova (Chicago, IL)*
- *Hanifah Walidah (Oakland, CA)*
- *James Kass (San Francisco, CA)*
- *Jonzi D (London, U. K.)*
- *Kamilah Forbes (Brooklyn, NY)*
- *Kris Diaz (Yonkers, NY)*
- *Kwikstep (North Bergen, NJ)*
- *Lenora Pace (Brooklyn, NY)*
- *Maiana Minahal (San Francisco, CA)*
- *Marc Bamuthi Joseph (San Francisco, CA)*
- *Marla Teyolia (Bloomfield, NJ)*
- *Melinda Corazon Foley (San Francisco, CA)*
- *Mike 360 (Albuquerque, NM)*
- *Monique Martin (New York, NY)*
- *Olivia Malabuyo (San Francisco, CA)*
- *Paul Flores (Oakland, CA)*
- *Regie Cabico (New York, NY)*
- *Richard Montoya (Los Angeles, CA)*
- *Robert Karimi (Newark, CA)*
- *Rokafella (North Bergen, NJ)*
- *Tanya Saracho (Chicago, IL)*
- *Teo Castellano (Miami, FL)*
- *Toni Blackman (New York, NY)*
- *Traci Bartlow (Oakland, CA)*
- *Vanessa Vela (Los Angeles, CA)*

The Artist Dialogue utilized a variety of discussion formats and forums to encourage forthright and honest conversation amongst the participants:

Segmented Introductions

Participant introductions were divided into three segments over the two days. (10 at a time, except the last one, when any that had not introduced themselves to the group were invited to do so). Each introduction covered more intensive ground from "Who are you," which led to various and interesting self-definitions to "What do you bring?" to "What is in your CD player right now?" Several artists introduced themselves as "mother," "father," "educator," "community worker," and "activist," among other things. All of them introduced themselves as a composite of varying roles. It was reflective of the comprehensive nature - and family- and community-based sensibilities - of their personalities and the artistic groundings of the field they work within.

Rant Sessions

A "rant" is a two-minute, non-rehearsed, extemporaneous talk, informal and usually off the cuff. It can introduce a provocative issue one is passionate about or offer an unfettered opinion of a topic from the field or artists' experience. The first "rants" kick-started the Dialogue, led-off by specific members of the Artist Planning Committee who each introduced a burning topic and/or issue in the field. These initiated "rants" then devolved into smaller groups of interested parties for free-flowing conversation around each topic.

Another rant session was held near the end of the second day, and was opened up to the participants. The rants at this particular session were framed as issues and ideas to keep in mind as the group prepared for next steps. The "rants" successfully set a more conversational, informal, and open atmosphere for dialogue dynamics amongst a very large group of people.

1. "What the f**k is spoken word?" (Danny Hoch)
2. "When do the restrictive slots we are put into by the theater world start driving our aesthetics?" (Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas)
3. "Where is everybody else in Hip-Hop (non Blacks/Latinos)?" (Joel Tan)
4. "Why now? What needs vitality?" (Monique Martin)
5. "Why must I continue to validate myself as a practitioner of a living art and being (mis)labeled by others?" (Rennie Harris)

Whole Group Sessions

Usually a presentation of a panel, case studies or space for a community forum. All participants gathered in the main theater space, seated on chairs in one large circle. During these sessions, interactive exercises to encourage face-to-face meets and networking were also utilized.

Break-Out Sessions

These were divided along four tracks to provide specialized focus and intensive exchange, including:

1. Defining/Exploring Genre
2. Producing Issues
3. Artistic Craft Development
4. Field Issues

Each track offered three different small group discussions for specific topics over the two days. In addition, an Open Track was established for participants to create their own spaces for more intimate conversation around issues or reactions to the discussions and/or an opportunity to process and reflect over the content of the day. Open Track sessions occurred in the "Living Room" area set up by the Artistic Planning Committee.

Community Offerings

Interspersed throughout, often at the end of the whole group gatherings. During this time, participants were invited to share thoughts, ideas, announcements, stories, or short artistic pieces with the larger group. These offerings ranged from poems that honored the learning spirit of the group across cultures to distributing free T-Shirts to shared community information around pertinent civic and social topics and issues that impacted individual communities.

Hip-Hop History Timeline

Large white poster paper was stretched across one long wall upon which participants were invited to fill out a timeline of events, performances, and experiences within Hip-Hop culture over the last three decades of the 20th century to the present. Significant moments, founding energies/organizations/movements, important names, shows, and happenings from all over the United States (and to some degree, globally) were highly encouraged. Capturing these disparate histories from various communities, regions, perspectives, and cultures onto a 'communal text mural,' begins to build upon a more comprehensive, grass-roots vision of Hip-Hop cultures, and its impacts and innovations within and upon peoples' lives and across generations. The timeline is an evolving one and a visual facsimile will be reproduced for documentation purposes.

WHOLE GROUP SESSIONS

Hip-Hop vs. Hip-Hop: Maintaining Autonomy in the Era of Commercialization

Presenters: Alex Aquino & Doug Infinite, with Clyde Valentin, moderator

This session was a presentation of two guest speakers, Alex Aquino and Doug Infinite, who shared their stories as participants in, and producers of, the Hip-Hop scenes in the Bay Area and Chicago, with question-and-answer following. Discussion focused on the question, "What is Hip-Hop vs. Hip-Hop?" - namely, how does grass roots Hip-Hop culture and aesthetics survive and thrive alongside (especially when, at times, it is superseded by) the commercial Hip-Hop sector? Since the commercial Hip-Hop industry initially comes from that grass roots place, how does one get from there to here? The two guests spoke to their own journeys from grass roots localism, through commercialism, and into today. Both are Hip-Hop entrepreneurs that have elevated their local scenes to national, and international, acclaim, been courted by the commercial sector, and have established themselves as independent producers and businessmen, moving between the worlds of commerce and creativity without compromising too much of their aesthetic and artistic integrity.

Alex Aquino is a Filipino San Francisco-Daly City native, and is the founder of the International Turntablist Federation (ITF), which has chapters all over the globe and presents the annual ITF World Championship. Involved in the Bay Area Hip-Hop scene since the early 1980s, he started out as a B-boy/Break dancer and went on to become one of the most prolific promoters and producers of Hip-Hop in Northern California. After creating his own management company and independent record label (Ace Beat Entertainment) in the late 1980s, he managed some of the heavyweights of the DJing world, including Q-Bert, Mixmaster Mike, DJ Apollo and Shortkut, also known as The Rock Steady DJs/Invisibl Scratch Piklz.

In the mid-1990s, Aquino founded hip-hip.com Inc., the first Hip-Hop culture online site. His initial Internet foray was a natural extension of the global networking of ITF, enhanced and encouraged by his proximity to Silicon Valley and the emergence of the dot.com boom. He recently opened the International DJ Academy in San Francisco, a "fully-integrated DJ School" that is staffed by master teachers that are DJs of international renown, and hopes to provide an extensive educational curriculum that prepares its students for a career in turntablism, as well as preparing them for the music industry business. Aquino was able to raise the capital for this institution with local investors and without private foundation resources.

Doug Infinite, from Chicago, IL, has been a part of the Chicago Hip-Hop scene from its inception. As a producer/MC, Doug has helped launched the career of several artists, including Hip-Hop recording artist Common (Sense) and a young Rokafella. He started out DJing in Chicago, at a time when it was neither popular nor widespread. He then turned to producing and raised his own personal money (collecting Skycap tips as a luggage handler at the airport) to buy equipment to create Hip-Hop sounds and music from his apartment. This informal gathering space enabled the learning of formal Hip-Hop musical aesthetics, serving as an incubator of organic creativity. Doug started making some money after selling beats to commercial artists, which financed his own entrepreneurial enterprises as a Hip-Hop producer and operating the first skateboard shop in Southside Chicago. In both cases, for Alex and Doug, business acumen was learned on the fly, creative energy and communal networks fueled their entrepreneurship, and encounters with the commercial sector were constant.

Questions & Issues

- Issues of “economies of scale.” As much as the two stories highlighted the struggles of individuals and organizations to create, promote, and produce their artistic culture, if an artist or organization is offered \$1 million, what would s/he/they bring to the table? Would they be ready for this type of macro-economics, after having worked primarily in micro-economics on a local level? As one artist put it, “Does fear play a factor when it comes to money?”
- How do you flip the models of commercial industry so that artistic integrity remains? How do you stay with that integrity in the face of all that money? How do you work with, or around, the notion of “not selling out”?
- Who owns the work you have already done? What happens when the threat of co-opting and appropriation is very real? (A main example was how a white Elvis became the defining superstar of rock-n-roll, a genre with roots and a legacy from the blues, a Black musical form.)
- Hip-Hop artists are currently in the “throes of institutionalizing Hip-Hop.” In doing so, how does one assess the infrastructure of such an organic emergence of communal culture(s)? And how does one implement the business side of that culture(s) in a commercial, free-market environment?
- Can one emerge unscathed by an “industry” rooted in capitalism? Succinctly put, “At one point, you must decide what kind of condoms you’re going to have. If you’re gonna get f**ked, pick the condom.” It was suggested that one must know how to package oneself to get the deal, but to navigate in that arena, must be armed with a grounded self-awareness.
- Historically, since Hip-Hop came from working-class and poor backgrounds, large dollar figures “are way out of our experience.” Class mobility is a dream in Hip-Hop yet as an artist community, artists often function around a “we broke” ethos - “I’ll keep it underground and never sell out.” In that context, what does it mean to be faced with “the contract”? The question of “What are we feeling entitled to?” often comes up. A gap exists between class structures, yet relationships do not exist that assist in the “decoding” of each experience to the other, leading often to incomplete understandings and unclear consequences, especially in financial contexts.
- Some additional notable comments from the group include:
 - “New aesthetics equals new models equals new markets. You can find markets within markets.”
 - Going to the next level (of artistry, infrastructure, industry, or socio-economic sphere) is like “Jumping off cliffs. How many of you are willing to pick a cliff, move aside the rocks, back up, run and take a dive?”
- On Hip-Hop aesthetic: “You are creating a rhythm around these different notes. There are different notes in Hip-Hop. How do you create the rhythm to compose an actual composition, a nice tune? The integrity of the work, if embedded in Hip-Hop, embeds something else that’s invisible. It doesn’t necessarily have to include the [4 main] elements. The elements bring a sense of tradition and of maintaining it.”

Journey of Artistic Works: Case Studies of Work and Process

Presenter: Danny Hoch

Description of Work: Solo performance of multi-characters in a Hip-Hop universe, often presented comically, with sharp commentary on prevailing tensions, issues, and stereotypes of Hip-Hop culture and experiences.

Presentation/Process: Presented video clips from the upcoming HBO film, “*Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop*,” based on Hoch’s performances on a Los Angeles main stage, in a prison, and outdoors in the middle of a community park. Discussed the process of moving the pieces from life to stage to shifting performance contexts.

Presenters: Mildred Ruiz & Steve Sapp from Universes (with Rokafella)

Description of Work: Poetry-song-theater ensemble group that “sample from life” and are often thought of as “verbal DJs” drawing from a vast array of literary, poetic, musical, and Hip-Hop elements and traditions.

Presentation/Process: Discussed their journey as 5 friends “just hanging out” to the founding of an arts organization in the Bronx to their development into a performing ensemble. With origins in informal experimental fun, the group moved to performing at various venues, including cafeterias, bars and prisons, and then, eventually, to stages. They also discussed dynamics and issues of individual and group evolution as an ensemble company, including the movement of members through the group onto other projects, and the training of new members as well.

Presenter: Rennie Harris

Description of Work: Deconstructed Hip-Hop movements as an artistic dance form [abstract popping]. Begins by working the individual movements, and then taking away the fluid natural flow so that each movement is isolated and highlighted. Works with spare production elements, focusing purely on the movements in relation to a larger narrative.

Presentation/Process: Shared his personal development in Philadelphia from childhood beginnings into dance. Contextualized his work within a legacy evolving with steppin’ [which is a distinct dance form from the stepping tradition of Black Greek Letter Organizations at colleges and universities and more akin to the tap dance form with canes and formal wear] to popping then house. Demonstrated movements as he explained its context. Has evolved his work through ten years of repertory, including “Legends of Hip-Hop,” “Rome & Jules,” and his most recent, “Road to Mecca.” “Modern dance is no longer modern; Hip-Hop is contemporary dance.”

Questions & Issues

- How does critical reception of the work factor in how the artists present themselves, especially if reviewed with a lack of understanding regarding aesthetic language of Hip-Hop or the cultural context of the work? It was stated that if reviewed according to a dance aesthetic tradition, it is a helpful critique, but if an artistic piece is bashed without any knowledge of its cultural dance tradition, it is not. Harris pointed out that “Establishment” (usually white) critics have misconstrued and mis-critiqued Black artistic forms throughout American history and must often be reminded of that fact and “schooled” as to the cultural traditions, artistic forms, and aesthetic language of “non-Establishment” fields and communities of color. Also, a question was raised

regarding what audiences read for critique - *The New York Times* or the *Daily News*? - who is the audience you need critique from (this can include community and/or artistic-practitioner peers)?

- Maneuvering the theater world with a Hip-Hop theater piece brings its own difficulties in terms of preconceived notions of behavior, unfamiliarity with the improvisational nature of Hip-Hop aesthetics, and “upstairs-downstairs” issues with technical production staff at theaters. Also, people of color rarely get an opportunity to develop tech production skills. Whereas in other countries, artists may get government subsidies to develop their craft in all aspects of theater and production, artists of color in the United States do not, and when they get to a certain scale of production, they are not in control of production values, so their work tends to be overproduced.
- The Hip-Hop theater field has endless performers and creators, but not enough directors, dramaturges, or culturally-knowledgeable critics.
- The issue of peer-to-peer support and/or “dogging” was raised. How do you walk the fine line between supporting one another by seeing each other’s work and keeping your own stuff, and your own rep[utation], original and fresh?

BREAK-OUT SESSIONS

Track One: Defining/Exploring Genre

International Hip-Hop: Exploring Links

Session Leaders: Jonzi D & Robert Karimi

This session explored the links between Hip-Hop theater work and its aesthetics around the globe, both in international regions and that which is created in the U.S. by immigrant cultures. Conversation covered shifting representations, varying global contexts and access, a “sample consciousness” aesthetic inherent in Hip-Hop culture, and the notion of what is marginalized within and without Hip-Hop culture, in the U.S. and outside of it. Interesting insights on racial demographics, identity development and maneuvering, and the difference between U.S. commercial Hip-Hop and the more experimental and “pure” Hip-Hop energies around the globe that run closer to Hip-Hop’s revolutionary origins in the 1970s, were shared.

Hip-Hop in Theater/Theater in Hip-Hop

Session Leader: Danny Hoch

This session grappled with definitions of “Hip-Hop Theater” and “performance.” It also explored the tension in institutionalizing and elevating an artistic energy that by nature is a form of resistance culture to a potentially “elitist” art form within the very institutions it arose to counteract, resist, and create alternative histories and stories from. By expanding the definition of “Hip-Hop Theater” past the four main elements and including “theater specific to the experiences of the Hip-Hop generation,” the discussion also touched on a range of issues from a “dysfunctional

mainstream theater world” to marketing complexities to diversity of stories and practitioners to “cross-interventions” in inter-generational creativity. The group also touched upon quality, critique, and cultivation of new, emerging work in the ubiquitous “Spoken Word genre” alongside mature, established work that is just now being categorized as “Hip-Hop Theater.”

Genre Transformation: Word Becomes Flesh

Session Leaders: Marc Bamuthi Joseph & Roberta Uno

This session provided a case study of a spoken word artist transitioning work from a three-minute piece to a full-fledged one-hour plus stage performance. After a brief performed selection from Marc Bamuthi’s piece *Word Becomes Flesh* (a series of performed letters to an unborn son using poetry, dance, live music and visual art), the group engaged in an exercise to categorize the elements of performance and theater. This instigated a conversation about definitions, disciplines, structures, and assumptions about performance elements and overlapping aesthetics. Issues around artistic rigor, incubator space and time for development to transform between genres, love and appreciation of language itself, insights on the art of storytelling and how to get people to care about a performed piece over course of an hour were raised and discussed.

Track Two: Producing Issues

The Producers Process

Session Leaders: Clyde Valentin & Monique Martin

This session looked at roles in producing, sharing experiences of show production, the need for more producers who understand these particular art forms, and sincere explorations between the producer and the artist toward agreement on the goals of the production. Some of the main issues discussed include:

- Learning to produce (producers and artists)
- Letting go of producing (for artists)
- Producers as “facilitators of the process”
- Developing relationships of trust between artists and producers
- The need to learn the roles necessary for production
- How to develop trust in producers (from artist perspective)/ how to find producers that understand the forms, the issues and the work that the artist is creating (i.e. how to find a producer that “looks and acts like Clyde [Valentin, producer of the Hip-Hop Theater Festival]”
- Artists want to know: How do producers gain confidence in the work?
- The role of curating as “cultural capital”
- Is a marriage between Hip-Hop and commercial theater viable?

Strategic Artistic Career Planning & the Diversification of Income

Session Leaders: James Kass, Marla Teyolia & Kamilah Forbes

This session highlighted the importance of organizations that fully support artists on staff with a good salary, benefits and flexibility so they can do their work. Relationship-building is key to developing the “business” side of artist work. Three business models were presented by the facilitators:

- Business planning in the artistic development process (Marla Teyolia)
- Artist-run non-profit organization (James Kass from *Youth Speaks*)
- Director/Artist issues (Kamilah Forbes)

A roundtable of participants’ concerns followed and raised the following issues:

- Independent artists need representation (rather than be their own booker, manager, publicist, producer etc.).
- How does one diversify income and plan for career longevity?
- How does one do strategic planning?
- How can one learn to be more pro-active about booking (rather than waiting for people to find their website)?
- What is “marketable”?
- How does one arrange, manage and earn money from artist residencies?
- How can non-profits create commercial products?

Cultivating New Producers for New Times

Session Leaders: Jorge Ignacio Cortinas, Monique Martin & Vanessa Vela

The facilitators and participants of this session decided to join the “Scarcity & Exploitation” workshop led by Rha Goddess, concurrently scheduled at that time. It was determined that this workshop was relevant to the production process and that discussion would be more fruitful and wide-ranging within that setting and group.

Track Three: Artistic Craft Development

Myth Making

Session Leader: Eisa Davis

This session opened with a recording of jazz pianist Jason Moran doing a version of the Hip-Hop classic “Planet Rock,” in order to show the depth and breadth of Hip Hop’s influence on the more “legitimate” art forms. In the artists’ opinion, jazz has been co-opted to the point of being considered a “dead” artistic form but Hip-Hop has become a myth that jazz is now looking toward to revive itself. Discussion then focused on the idea of Hip-Hop theater’s use of myths for the sake of expanding the scale of the stories being told to mythic proportions. How can Hip-Hop theater do

this? Should communities retell myths? Or should they create their own? The discussion was a push and pull between those that entertained the notion of creating Black or Latino versions of American and Euro-centric myths and those that asserted that this practice devalued people of color's and young people's own cultural stories.

Sexual Storytelling Workshop

Session Leader: Joel Barraquiel Tan

This session began with the observation that Hip-Hop practitioners often talk about sexuality in terms of oppression but seldom discuss "what happens to our bodies from within us." Tan pointed out that artists of color may be afraid of sex writing because it can be so infantile and infantilizing, trivializing personal feelings and experiences. But he also asserted that sex is nonetheless an amazing space in which an artist can deal with issues of desire, yearning and consumption. The group took turns recounting their experiences with having read sex writing or having written erotica. Samples of quality erotica were shared and discussed, especially in terms of an exploration of the borders between violation and consent. After reading several poems aloud, the group engaged in a series of brief writing exercises. Tan ended the session by asking what role sexual storytelling has in Hip-Hop and in "Third World" cultures.

Performing Fierceness

Session Leader: Gigi Otalvaro-Hormillosa

This session was a workshop, consisting of a series of performing exercises that culminated in the group of 6 splitting off into 2 groups of 3 and taking a few minutes to develop and perform a scene of about 3 minutes in duration. By presenting her interest in interdisciplinary art that fuses the physical and cognitive, Otalvaro-Hormillosa has recently begun to understand the importance of meditating and stillness to her approach to her work, moving away from intellectualization toward a more instinctual approach. It was a process that she shared and actively explored with the assembled group, to good effect, as the group reflected that the exercises were valuable in lowering natural inhibitions.

Track Four: Field Issues

"You Ain't Black"

Session Leaders: Gigi Otalvaro-Hormillosa & Christine Balance

This session explored the "packed" phrase, "You ain't Black", with all of its ensuing complications, assumptions, stereotypes, identity and appropriation issues. A conversation about the dynamic of race relations, especially looking at the role of Afro-centrism in Asian and Latino cultures, ensued. The question of "Who is inside and outside of Hip-Hop culture?" encompassed a range of insights about sexual identities, generational perceptions, the movement of Hip-Hop culture from the streets to the suburbs, and the difference between East Coast/West Coast cultures and histories. The group discussed the potency of the word "Black" and its varying implications as well as the notion of "generation" in Hip-Hop, especially in terms of how emerging practitioners may be

transforming this art form or aesthetic genre without a critical sense of knowing where it is coming from. Participants considered creating new forms could balance out the line between appropriation and innovative creation, as long as the teaching maintains respect of what each person, community, culture, and history singularly brings to the table.

Representations of Gender I: Femininity

Session Leaders: Aya de Leon & Rokafella

This session explored how women could address their needs successfully, what those needs were, and how men could be supportive of women in these goals. None of the elements of Hip-Hop are stereotypically (traditionally) female professions. Theater, on the other hand, has proven a generally “easier” profession for women to take part in (e.g. women are cast in any number of empowering, interesting roles in theater). Female Hip-Hop theater artists drag all of the baggage of being Hip-Hop artists with them into the theater world. In addition, female Hip-Hop theater artists have different needs than their male counterparts. They may need to travel with children, have special health needs, etc. Near its end, the discussion focused on the business aspect of artistic careers, career planning and developing a five-year plan, becoming very practical, and including shared information about health care plans and the best ways to go about applying for a grant.

Representations of Gender II: Masculinity

Session Leaders: Regie Cabico & Marc Bamuthi Joseph

This session focused on questions around the role and representation of the male in Hip-Hop, exploring role models (or lack thereof), complications over gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, and how masculinity is defined in Hip-Hop images. A discussion around femininity and “homothugz” [hardcore masculinity that overcompensates in its aggressiveness and demonizes the “feminine” in all forms, within straight men, women, and queers] led to a conversation of how “hardness” and war imagery has become celebrated as a male Hip-Hop credo. It was pointed out that rites of passage for men of the Hip-Hop generation have been based on violence, not healing, so how does one get to the point of repositioning ideas of manhood in relation to femininity?

Scarcity & Exploitation

Session Leader: Rha Goddess

This session was a conversation about the notions of “scarcity” and “exploitation” within oneself as well as within a larger community, society, and mass commercial market. It began with the participants offering different definitions of “scarcity,” ranging from a “feeling of lack” to “a scarecrow living in the field of your hopes,” moving into ways “scarcity” plays out, such as “hoarding,” “competition,” ignoring self-care and health, “over-commitment,” and “shame.” It was pointed out that humans start out from a place of abundance as children, and then evolve into a culture of scarcity. This scarcity manifests within attitudes, approaches to art and life, and self-definitions. As artists, moving within the different arenas of non-profit performance spaces and the theater world exposes varying issues that scarcity underpins, leading in many cases to fear of exploitation. The lack of institutional mentors and a structured community of resources put

individual artists and practitioners in a vulnerable space. This often leads to relationships with people and power that develop into disappointment and betrayal. The closing question for the group and each participant was this: How can we shift current paradigms of who has and doesn't have?

NEXT STEPS CONVERSATION

The "next steps" session was a combination of small group conversation and large group presentations. The artists were divided into nine groups to discuss the following:

1. What do you need?
2. What do you bring?
3. What would you like to see happen next?

When the large group reconvened, a representative from each group reported out a summary of their conversations around these questions. The "next steps" that emerged focused around the following:

Aesthetics

What Do You Need?

- A working definition of "Hip-Hop Theater" that encompasses gender and sexuality issues, geographical sensibilities and histories, accommodates its emerging language(s) in its varying and evolving forms, and recognizes it as ART, and not "just popular culture."
- "Hip-Hop Theater" work that does not necessarily rely on the "solo act" but on multi-character ensembles with multi-faceted characters.
- More work with an erotic sensibility, to explore the notion of sex, both as a taboo subject and a freeing one.

What Do You Bring?

- Diversity of cultures and experiences in a "post Hip-Hop universe."
- Differing languages in aesthetics, in disciplines, in vernaculars, in foreign languages, in the urban/suburban divide, in the masculine and feminine sensibility(ies), in community work sectors.

What Would You Like to See Happen Next?

- Development of tech specialists familiar with "Hip-Hop aesthetics" and/or dynamics. For example, a tech crew that "can roll like a Hip-Hop crew" and be both on the mark and yet be able to have flexibility and improvise.
- New creative collaborations between artists, across racial, sexuality, gender, national and international lines.

Communications & Networks

What Do You Need?

- Some form of communication system to keep the artists connected, such as a newsletter, a list-serve, and/or a bulletin board.
- Mentoring relationships and mentors, especially directors and dramaturges for theater, educators for nurturing youth creativity (like at a Hip-Hop camp), and financial experts for business development skills.
- Funding networks.
- A system to link artists to each other and to existing institutions that can produce, support, and/or present them.

What Do You Bring?

- A real desire to connect with and support one another.
- Willingness to learn and exchange.

What Would You Like to See Happen Next?

- A directory of the artists gathered during the Artist Dialogue.²
- A database of the artists at the Dialogue that could be added to and expanded.

Artistic Exchanges

What Do You Need?

- Institutionalized places/spaces for artistic exchange and the resources to create and sustain them, bringing together artists from across the United States as well as abroad.

What Do You Bring?

- Current Hip-Hop Theater Festival model that is now in its 3rd year in NYC and has expanded to Washington, D. C., and soon, San Francisco, CA, is evolving into an institution -- a mobile one that encourages local Hip-Hop energies, cultures, stories, and aesthetics, as well as an overarching, nascent "Hip-Hop aesthetic."

What Would You Like to See Happen Next?

- Future Aesthetics Festival, with this Dialogue as its conceptual seed, that also offers training, dramaturgy, and development workshops, in addition to presenting the varying works of its artists. Also, establishment of a "cultural market" during the Festival where artists can support one another by selling each other's produced wares.
- An International Hip-Hop Exchange.
- Inclusion of arts administrators, funders, investors, and the commercial artists in many of these gatherings and festivals.

Infrastructure

What Do You Need?

- A connective and stable infrastructure that links artists, organizations, artistic work, and resources so that information, knowledge, exchange, and valid critique and development can be encouraged, facilitated, supported, and shared.

What Do You Bring?

- Initial gatherings of Hip-Hop Theater artists at recent Festivals, conferences and this Artist Dialogue.

What Would You Like to See Happen Next?

- Form a national alliance with regional chapters.
- Create and fund one Project Manager at an established organization or institution, to coordinate this network full-time, coordinating regular annual Dialogues, disseminate information, and monitor development and progress.
- Develop training programs that cover all aspects of performing, including the business side (financial advisors, producers, managers, and promoters).
- Build relationships between for-profit and non-profit organizations and sectors.
- Within communities, build bridges between artists and local businesses.
- Develop publications from the field, about the field.
- Develop dialogues and contextual critiques of the field within academic circles.
- Nurture investors and cultivate donors within the hip-hop community, including those who have "blown up," such as the commercial rap superstars, so that they can assist in setting up quality artistic hip-hop institutions, much like wealthy patrons have historically done with art museums, symphonies, ballets and "high art."
- Create a watchdog organization for and/or a union of artists to establish leverage in negotiating contracts and gigs. Also, to give them support and protection against manipulation and/or violation of their employment and artistic rights.
- Create new models of organizations as well as dynamics of organizing.

EVALUATION ³

Overall, the Artist Dialogue was artist-centered, well-facilitated, and structured toward encouraging maximum communication and creativity. Facilitators set a good tone from the start, allowing for open spaces, flexibility, and an informal environment that enhanced both the quality of conversation and the quantity of participation. Having artist-peers facilitate the Dialogue brought a level of comfort, empathy, and trust that generated a more organic sharing of thoughts, ideas, and critiques. It was also mentioned that having the Artist Dialogue in San Francisco, CA, fostered a more accepting, open, and

relaxed environment, as opposed to the hustle-bustle and aggressive atmosphere of New York City. Preceding the Artist Dialogue, the participants had the option to attend the performances presented by the Hip-Hop Theater Festival at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts; these performances served as a preview to the 1st Annual Bay Area Hip-Hop Theater Festival, planned for Spring 2004. In addition, workshops, educational panels, and related performance events were available for the artists and the general public throughout the weekend.

The Artist Dialogue schedule was long and packed on both days, but built-in breaks, long lunches, and a "Living Room" space allowed options for individual processing and rest. Receptions held - one the night before the Dialogue and the evening after - facilitated casual conversation and provided spaces for individuals to connect on a personal level, encouraging more organic connections, and in some cases, burgeoning collaborations. As the entire group worked communally through issues, definitions, and information about the Hip-Hop Theater field, through varying lenses of expression and experience, they developed a sense of "learning together." This was brought up repeatedly in the artist introductions throughout the two days and within many of the small group sessions.

A highlight of the gathering was an impromptu artist jam session near the end of the second day of the Dialogue. During the break in between the small group and large group gatherings for the "next steps" session, the jam session that emerged cranked up the volume, energy and creativity of the entire room with improvised MCing, beatboxing, and breakdancing. It illuminated the communal, organic, and often spontaneous creativity and energies of this field. Also, the Hip-Hop history wall timeline emerged as an inventive discussion point, providing a place for artist attendees to offer and share their own histories in the field, recording it for all to see and expand upon. In addition, holding the Dialogue at the theater/performance spaces at ODC and Youth Speaks, "where art is happening all the time," favorably impacted group dynamics and enhanced a creative, collaborative environment.

In terms of improvement, some felt there were too many tracks and breakout sessions to choose from. Since many participants are multi-taskers in their work and multi-faceted in their interests, they often had to forego sessions of vital interest that were scheduled concurrently. Some sessions were greatly impacted by this, most especially the "Representations of Gender, Part I: Femininity" breakout session, which had sparse attendance. It was remarked that this also alluded to a larger de-prioritizing of gender and women in the field.

Other feedback and questions included:

- Articulated perspectives varied between individual artists and artist organizations. A difference between institutional and individual concerns, and sensibilities, was evident.
- Only one international representative was present at the Dialogue. It was suggested that more participation of global perspectives, from other countries and from other global communities within the U.S., be facilitated.
- "Where are the youth in this Dialogue?" A counter question offered was "What about the elder artists that are mid-career?" This begged the larger question of "What are the generational parameters of this work?" One of the issues in this field centers on the heavy rap and youth focus of its most visible elements. Rap is commercialized to youth and many Spoken Word venues foster youth participation and expression. In light of this, it was suggested that youth voices be included in the future, ideally within an inter-generational exchange and learning environment.

- “What does it mean to be a Spoken Word poet in this day and age when doing poetry out loud automatically lumps you in with Hip-Hop?” These distinctions, tensions, and articulations are very significant for its practitioners, raising a larger aesthetics question: What is it that this generation has produced, where should it be categorized, and can it be? If “sampling consciousness” pervades Hip-Hop culture, where does the line get drawn between the straight “bite” for stylistic purpose only (without deeper context except to entertain), and the innovative creativity that elevates it to art? And what does it mean to elevate it? This brings to mind the funders’ briefing held in San Francisco in March 2003 “*Constant Elevation: The Rise of Bay Area Hip-Hop Activism*” - in light of that discussion, what is the Hip-Hop Theater aesthetic elevating toward? It is hoped that the upcoming Community Forum at the Ford Foundation in November 2003 will investigate these questions more deeply.
- “Does New York have a monopoly on defining Hip-Hop culture?” This begged a larger question of representation, resources, and regionalism that often played out in the small group breakout sessions. Hip-hop aesthetics are regionally-bound and it was suggested that better geographical representation would enhance and expand future discussions past the potential of becoming New York-centric.
- “What was the purpose of the retreat?” It was unclear for some if the purpose of the retreat was to “figure out what it means to be us” or to move the genre forward to more exciting possibilities. This led to some confusion as to definitions of genre - Hip-Hop, Spoken Word, or Theater? It seems as if this current exploration is settled at the crux of many intersections, where problems of category, identity, and expression yield interesting insights into Hip-Hop energies. How do you define an always-evolving energy? At the “*Constant Elevation*” briefing in March 2003, Davey D spoke to the fact that Hip-Hop is just one of several cultural energies that expressed and navigated grass-roots experiences, political struggles, and community dynamics over the past century, linking it with the development of the blues, jazz, and rock-n-roll. At one point, it was not defined, but simply *was*. It is when labels and categories arise that confusion may occur, perhaps facilitating missed linkages and severed contexts. Yet it also enacts a moment for critique to begin, for evaluation, for movement and reflection. Focused discussion, investigations, and explorations in these moments are crucial to building a more comprehensive context for these cultural movements and ensuring their connection to larger socio-political ones.
- “Why isn’t the production value of our work as community producers of professional/ mainstream grade?” Production value of work differs across communities and regions, depending on a mixture of financial resources and lack of institutional knowledge. Young communities - in terms of immigrant status, community development stages, and/or age -- need assistance in developing a higher standard of work and intention. Inter-generational linkages would be significant here.
- The question around whether Hip-Hop institutions should or should not be institutionalized came up, time and again. Since these creative works arise from individual entrepreneurship energies, what models existed, continue to exist, or are emerging for these community practitioners to look to? Some models offered throughout the Dialogue include: the International DJ Academy, the Hip-Hop Theater Festival, The UniverseCity Theater Network, and Youth Speaks. Is the 501(c)3 model applicable to Hip-Hop culture’s creative energies, and if so, in what ways?

Regarding emerging Foundation work along these lines, this Dialogue served to inform current explorations toward the shaping of a nascent Arts and Culture programming portfolio.⁴ Currently, programming (and a potential Individual Artists Initiative) is being developed along three lines: 1) Grants to the field; 2) Ecology for the artist; and 3) Moving arts work from incubation to exhibition and/or performance. A series of small grants has focused on exploring existing and emerging models, dialogues and networks, emphasizing the collaborative dynamic of working *with* the artist practitioners to understand the quality and context of the work itself. This Artist Dialogue was individual artist-centered convening as opposed to those conventionally focused on convening arts organizations and institutions. Some of the main investigative points include to: examine the idea that art forms themselves are democratic; investigate the power relationships that underpin access, resources, and visibility in the arts field and; explore interests in the changing demographics of artists, in region, in generation, in community-specific contexts, recognize the capacity for artists to lead and design meetings about arts issues, etc.

Presently, Hip-Hop culture is often discussed in established arts institutions and venues merely in terms of future audience development or education programs as outreach to new patrons toward greater program attendance. Rarely is it discussed in terms of art and aesthetics, especially in relation to language, perspectives, and content. In terms of content, these explorations would like to draw directly from the artists themselves to get a more comprehensive and accountable framework to understand and thus, better support this artistic work. Arts work is traditionally approached as discipline-specific, but Hip-Hop is interdisciplinary and more expansive in its demographics, in its practitioners as well as its audiences. Therefore, in probing the concept of individual arts and demography, the following aspects are being investigated: a clarification of aesthetics; exploration of the impacts and influences of international work, not just globally, but in local sites around the U. S., especially around the ways the “local is international”; inter-disciplinary performance and collaboration; and the impact of diasporic relationships in creativity and the making of art in varying contexts.

These explorations expand upon continuing Media, Arts and Culture (MAC) interests around cultural identity issues in a global world, power relationships between the individual and society and amongst communities of color and other community-specific populations, and the notion of democracy in the arts - as a concept, in practice, and as expressed or facilitated by artists and communities. Previous work has focused on knowledge-building in the humanities, linking networks of creativity across national and other boundaries, and providing access to diverse voices in a global world, both in a micro- and macro- sense. Planned programming intends to elevate MAC’s fields of work toward a greater diversity and complexity of expression and perspective. As evidenced in this Dialogue, Hip-Hop culture and its aesthetics as sites of cultural and artistic creativity are fertile ground to investigate these themes in a more intensive and comprehensive way.

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To receive a copy of the Future Aesthetics DVD, email: intervalarts-hiphop@yahoo.com

End Notes

- ¹ The Artist Dialogue was held at ODC Theater and Youth Speaks in San Francisco.
- ² A directory was created by Mikiko Thelwell and each participant received one at Dialogue's end.
- ³ The following evaluation captures this reporter's general observations as well as informal feedback from Dialogue participants.
- ³ Paraphrased from Ford Foundation Program Officer Roberta Uno's introductory remarks to the Dialogue participants on September 15, 2003.