



**NUL - New Urban Languages
Conference Proceedings**
Milan, 19-21 June 2013

Planum. The Journal of Urbanism, n.27, vol.2/2013
www.planum.net | ISSN 1723-0993
Proceedings published in October 2013

The theater as urban language

Experiences with the Theater of the Oppressed in Paris and Rio

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Keywords: Public art, oppressed, favela, to give voice and urban intervention

1. Introduction

Public art has been explored by the researchers who dedicated themselves to theorize a practice which has been daily more and more present in the urban space. The city in principle is a place that is able to receive all kinds of artistic manifestation, from graffiti extended to spontaneous manifestation of certain youth groups until official projects well-conceived evolving artist and architects. "All visual researches should be organized as urban research. The sculptor makes urbanism, the painter makes urbanism, even who compose a typographic page makes urbanism, makes urbanism whoever realizes something which placed as a value, between even the minimal dimensional scales, in the system of values." (Argan G. C., 1998). Following these thoughts, the discussions will point the identity between art and city can connect audience unifying art and urban space as whole, in this case with theater.

The Theater of the Oppressed developed by Augusto Boal (1931-2009) reached practitioners in many countries, crossing physical and cultural boundaries. His book *the Theater of the Oppressed* describes his techniques and reinforces the idea the spectator can use his own body to intervene in the action abandoning his object condition and assuming plainly his role as subject; the whole method is about the participants using his own body, emphasize the theme to be discussed and promotes a genuine action (Boal A., 2005). The techniques had many applications: social and political struggle, in psychotherapy, in pedagogy, for urban and rural spaces, never staying away from the initial proposal the theater which allows oppressed ones to fight.

He defined the concept of Aesthetics of the Oppressed (Boal A., 2009) as a project aiming to give back to those who practice it, the ability to perceive the world through all kinds of arts and not only through theater but correlating all arts in it. On his Forum Theater the audience has the chance during the scene to replace actors to frame their own questions for discussions through theatrical activities. Augusto Boal was in exile because of the Brazilian dictatorship, he left in 1971 and was living in different Latin American countries. Then 1978 he went to Paris and created a Center of Theater of the Oppressed. Finally in 1986



with the Brazilian amnesty, he could go back to his home town Rio de Janeiro, where he was active practicing and sharing his experiences on theater until his death, 2009 (Boal A., 2000).

Three forms of language crossed: the urban intervention as public art pieces, Theater of the Oppressed allowing participation of non-actors into a play and the work of communitarian leaders in a process of urban changes. The methodology of the research is the qualitative research: observation of the theater plays, analysis of cases in cities: Paris, Rio de Janeiro and interviews with participants, experts from these urban spaces, actors and directors. Based on two of my interviews, in this paper I will quickly analyze two projects one in Paris and one in Rio considering the context, the material, the artistic and urban context and the contemporary problems related to them (Leavy P., 2009).

2. In Paris

In Paris Muriel Naessens is responsible for an association called Féminisme Enjeux, a feminist militant association constituted by women and men, who fight for equality between men and women and uses mainly Theater of the Oppressed and the technique Forum Theater, that allow the audience to intervene in the spectacle. Naessens was trained by August Boal in Paris during his political exile. Almost in the totality of his days spent in France she worked with him in Paris. They worked a lot together all over France, doing workshops around Europe and in the whole world. As she feels oppressed as woman in Paris and everywhere she went with Boal, she met oppressed women too; she realized it was because of the patriarchal society: moreover the oppression against women in certain countries is extremely violent. Therefore facing this clear issue, she wanted to change it and the women emancipation.

Nowadays she works over the question of women oppression. The responsible in France for Planning Familial needed a new media to give voice to fight together with other women for their rights, Naessens decided to join them. She was already engaged in a political party, she decided to become really a militant feminist, entered in the group and brought the Theater of the Oppressed. During 12 years she utilized the method to try to reach their aims. In the Planning Familial they had too many demands on the schools, and with professionals, that Naessens created a new similar association: Féminisme Enjeux. She, as militant in an association, decided to dedicate exclusively to the feminist question with the Theater of the Oppressed, and then people joined the group. So they work with question of sexism, a very clear question of oppression in Paris. The group still tries to fight for equality between men and women. It not only focuses on the violence, but many issues concerning the women oppression: as the inequality in the salaries, the precariousness for the women work, also the hard and unstable part time jobs. There are many difficulties which make a woman not have a professional career. They don't allow her to do other important things for her existence; she cannot fight for her rights as a worker, because it is hard to manage taking care of her children combined with her work. Moreover there are mostly men in the unions and for this reason it is almost impossible that the women situation would be taken in consideration without more women engaged on it.

The starting point in the group is the women's personal stories that they would develop as theater. Right after they started playing theater coming from their experience as female with other women who suffer the same thing. The individual story becomes collective, a truly political situation, when one talks about a situation; unique to this woman, but it represents something that belongs to a group, a very particular story belongs to a social group with inequalities. Another important aspect is to render visible the system; the condition of the society as a whole. They turn visible what nobody wants to see and allow people to see something that concern them all.

Who are then the oppressed in Paris?

For Naessens it is clear who are the oppressed: if the domination is male, the oppressed are the women. There are men in her group, who are contrary to the male code of domination against woman. In order to change something they need all forces against the machismo. However she said there some women who don't recognize themselves as oppressed, who are, familiarized with the oppression and suffer it, but assume the role of the oppressor: those have a discourse which comforts the oppressor. Understanding

they are oppressed, they get the conscience to fight against it (Freire P., 2005). The oppressor worked so well that women don't evaluate the situation critically. According to Naessens everywhere and means, everything reinforces the message of the machismo. The system keeps the patriarchal system, educating children in the unequal domination; therefore the most complicate is to change it in the school. The National Education in France has a plan for it, but the school is absolutely necessary for dominating system to perpetuate it. The group aims to work on all school levels but it is necessary to work before with the educators, teacher and pedagogic staff because those work uniquely with young people, as well as, on the family base, towards the parents on their educational role. Féminisme Enjeux works more and more to address the question to these groups using the methodology of the Theater of the Oppressed to make them conscious about this social construction. If one shows it is a social construction, it will be offered the comprehension that it is not natural, as it is made up, it is possible to deconstruct it. Féminisme Enjeux works eventually also with the women migration and paperless immigrants, those are not dissociated of the social movements because the group doesn't claim a specific kind of women to join the group, they simply want equality because power is definitely not balanced. As more people start to be conscious about this social construction as more the cause goes forward.

The changes achieved in Paris

In Paris the movement of women liberation obtained what Naessens considers big achievements: the right of contraception and abortion. To talk about contraception and abortion is to talk about the sexuality, it was and still a taboo. One of the few progresses is the right for the abortion in France; but there is still no freedom, because it takes time to obtain the abortion: up to the fourteenth week of pregnancy it is not possible anymore. Even if the system allows the abortion; there is a big pressure to avoid it. Anyway, the greatest achievement of all times is the contraception: it means for her to have indeed the power to have the sexuality. The feminist struggle, has verified however the relation concerning all aspects it hasn't improved so much. Surely there are some progresses as the contraception, a concrete one, but at the same time it is not enough. There is still an enormous struggle: so they go to demonstrations, play theater at streets and public spaces and are still protesting for the equality.

In cases of home violence they work with women, who cannot leave their homes yet. Every time in the Forum Theater, there are some women who speak about it for the very first time: for the group, it is when they are most successful. Muriel Naessens is very emotional when she sees the scene in a theater night, because she actually saw it many times in the reality. The greatest moment of Forum Theater, for her, is when all in the audience are touched, when one woman decides to leave her violent home, and then another will say the same: So the ladies organize themselves to find them a place to stay etc. Naessens believes that it is a chain of changes, one wants, they move and they change.

There are some forced marriages in France as whole; there were more in the past, at the moment it is much less. The group was asked once to do a scene about the forced marriage for the immigrants but they argued the work exclusively with the forced marriage only in the immigrant context would reinforce the existing prejudices. Then they worked with the forced marriage as well as with the prohibited love relationship. Many women don't have the right on, in a certain milieu, to choose a partner from a different social sphere; it will be forbidden in some cases. Naessens affirms it isn't a forced marriage, it is not alike, but at the same time it obliges people mostly to the same. In a forced marriage scene, people from the audience argued that the forced marriage is prohibited in France during the Forum Theater piece. Therefore a girl in risk should just go to the police and denounce the parents. Denounce the own parents and put them in jail isn't easy: therefore the law was not really a response for it. In one situation the group took charges for a girl, who wanted then the association to meet her parents and explain them that she had the right to choose whom she wanted to marry, and the group had to make them understand it. So, on this behalf, the group Féminisme Enjeux obtained in Paris apartments exclusively for women, who are risking having a forced marriage. Nowadays for this purpose; there are two apartments per commune in Paris, to protect the girls in such situation.

There many other associations in Paris for women against violence because they want to change this situation. For Naessens it is necessary that the society takes in consideration how women would be

protected in case of necessity. She believes it is long way but after a very long time, they changed something.

3. In Rio

In 1993 Augusto Boal was elected by PT Labor Party, as member of the City Council Member of the city of Rio de Janeiro with the proposal of democratize the politics with theater. Olivar Bendelak worked engaged close to him, as head of his staff, in the development of the Legislative Theater in Rio. It was unique experience in the world: they did theater presentations in public spaces, where the pass-byes were allowed to replace actors and find collectively solutions for the presented problems and after suggest laws. Boal and his staff worked within different places in the city of Rio de Janeiro for their demands, with communities and formed around 60 groups of theater. Nowadays Bendelak is one of the coordinators of the Center of Theater of the Oppressed in Rio (Boal A., 2006).

Who are the oppressed in Rio de Janeiro?

Bendelak affirms that the oppressed in Rio are mostly the inhabitants of the *favelas* who suffer the lack basic infra-structure as sewage, potable water, and waste management. In many areas, especially in the hills, the transportation system is an issue for who live in poor areas and go to work in the richer areas in the south parts of Rio, as maids to clean houses and offices, brick layers, delivery personal, etc, in general, those, who live far away. It indicates that there are many people living in oppression, the population in the *favelas* as whole is victim either by the corrupt policemen or the drug dealers This poor population suffers all those oppressions; earn the worst salaries, have bad living conditions and difficulties with the dangerous location, mostly precarious houses, or barracks made of wood or cardboard. Bendelak affirms that in a developed world nobody should hunger; nor live without a descent house. Brazil is more developed now, but there are still many aspects to be improved.

Rio is a contrast of beautiful landscapes, seaside dream and violence, danger and lack of infrastructure and people suffer of with the inequalities. The local government nowadays finds ways to restrict the use of spaces, for example, with the excuse of coordinating it, it is necessary to take authorization by the administration region even if it is square with amphitheater. When the group tried to use the space of the square, the local administration said they are renovating it, but there was no plan for it. They loved to present plays in Largo da Carioca, in front of the subway station, thousands of people circulate weekly, an amazing public but now the permissions are restrict, they cannot do it, and there are just fences everywhere. The public authorities with the excuse of coordinate the public space restrict instead of facilitate the accessibility of cultural activities. Of course the group can ask for permission but if there is a spontaneous demonstration it is very hard to get permission at the same day, it takes at least five days with all bureaucracy. They would love to be always in public spaces in Rio, but the support doesn't exist. The idea of public square is to be stage of manifestations and demonstrations, Bendelak claims. The government promotes big events as Olympic Games, Football World Cup and right now the local administration build huge stages for concerts pay enormous amounts of money to certain artists to advertise those big events. Since two years he tries to raise discussions about it: the real inclusion requires the concrete actions to change the oppression situation

Changes the Legislative Theater brought to Rio

The public health problem is still a reality in Rio but a new law came with the Boal's mandate. A group of aged people asked for a medical doctor for geriatrics in the public hospitals. Sometimes they were assisted by a pediatrician. They got a law approved where all city hospitals in Rio should have a geriatric doctor. Before they did a theatrical intervention to claim it and the press saw it. Then the project of law was approved. There were many interventions through the Legislative Theater in the urban space resulting in 13 city laws approved.

For Bendelak another improvement which is not tangibility measured is the question of giving voice to oppressed ones. The group had an idea to give visibility to what happen inside the City Council.



Unfortunately the Brazilian population doesn't have this practice of going to the City Council or to the State Parliament to see a voting session. They create so a theater action called *Câmara na Praça*, City Council in the Square, in front of the building in a square in center of Rio, built a stage in and brought some chairs and Boal talked about the projects under discussion in the City Council in that week. Then they presented a scene of Forum Theater, from one community and with this dynamic, only a few minutes before the voting would start and told the audience, they could enter in the building to watch the session and the debates after. People were surprised to know they were allowed to enter and see the Plenum. So these were some transformations Bendelak affirms they achieved on the level of citizenship: motivation to participate.

3. Conclusion

The Theater of the Oppressed beyond its explicit tendency to a social character, worked also in its aspect of art, played by the ones, who feel themselves oppressed to show ways to transform it. The main focus is the social critic and the use of public space. It is a possibility to give voice to the community, be more visible and active participating. Moreover, art engaged using the artist creativity as well as makes the participant role active and stronger. The combination of visual art and theater is a simple possibility and it isn't new (Silva F. P., 2005).

Augusto Boal developed a method of popular education for emancipation; there is a contribution of a lot of minds, as Paulo Freire, Brecht and Stanislavsky and many others (Baumann T., 2006). It was a whole stream in Latin America in those times and in France as well. It is an interesting current on that moment, since 1968 political events severely unsettled cultural and social life also throughout Europe and United States. The mood was one irritation and anger with prevailing values and structures. While students and workers shouted slogans and erected street barricades in protest against "the establishment", many younger artists approached the institution of art with equal, if less violent, disdain. They questioned the accepted premises of art and attempted to re-define its meaning and function (Goldberg, Rose Lee, 2001). This current is still present. Muriel Naessens and Olivar Bendelak do Theater of the Oppressed as they feel oppressed and fight to transform things, in an engaged work. Although Rio and Paris are so diverse, it can be found points of convergence in their work in urban spaces (Lefebvre H., 2000). The method found its way to reveal in the urban space its quality to produce art and to question the social issues present on these societies, adding new techniques and adapting it to respond to the new local necessities. These two social centers have different ways to act, work and experience this method, as well as the theater plays are based on their particular way to activate and strength the citizenship through art. They implement projects and active participation and turn into protagonist the oppressed layer, aiming a dialogue through theater.

To conclude as work of art, the Theater of the Oppressed can offer a complete closed form on its uniqueness, as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting an open product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its specificity. Every reception of the work is both an interpretation and a performance of it because in every reception the work takes a fresh perspective for itself (Eco U., 2006). Many other groups around the world work in their contexts, encouraging people to claim for their objectives turning the theater language a way to face the cultural and urban inequalities.

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