

International Journal of Education & the Arts

Editors

Christine Marmé Thompson
Pennsylvania State University

S. Alex Ruthmann
New York University

Eeva Anttila
Theatre Academy Helsinki

William J. Doan
Pennsylvania State University

<http://www.ijea.org/>

ISSN: 1529-8094

Volume 14 Special Issue 2.6

September 6, 2013

Raising the Point!: An Artistic Approach in Supporting a Community's Call to Action

Jason Mendez
Duke University, United States

Citation: Mendez, J. (2013). Raising the points: An artistic approach in supporting a community's call to. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 14(SI 2.6). Retrieved [date] from <http://www.ijea.org/v14si2/>.

Abstract

This article discusses the notion of action and personal agency. The author discusses his experiences constructing an arts installation that supported a grassroots effort to revitalize Hunts Point, a community in the South Bronx that is home to 11,000 families, eighteen waste transfer stations, 40% of New York City's sewage, all of the Bronx's waste, a sewage treatment plant, a sewage pelletizing plant, four electrical power plants, and several public schools. More than 60,000 heavy trucks drive through the neighborhood each week. Due to pollution, asthma is the number one cause of absenteeism amongst children in Hunts Point's public schools. Educational reform typically focuses on improvements in the classroom, but students live in real communities with real problems. Giving students an enriching education in a community overwhelmed by pollution requires action outside of the classroom! This installation piece inspired the short documentary film, *Raising the Point!*

Action (n): Organized activity to accomplish an objective (Action, 2010)

Vision without action is a dream.

Action without vision is simply passing the time.

Action with vision is making a positive difference (Joel Barker, 1991).

Raising the Point! (Mendez, 2011)

This article is about my personal call to action. The following sections discuss my support of the South Bronx's Hunts Point community's efforts in improving the social, educational, environmental, and health injustices it encounters. Specifically, I focus on the issue of poor air quality. This project, *Raising the Point!*¹, is a unique grassroots effort to artistically support Hunts Point's mission in revitalizing the community.

Why Hunts Point? Whenever I discuss my work in Hunts Point I always inform my audience that this is more than research or a project. Hunts Point is my home. I grew up in Hunts Point; therefore, to identify my efforts as some sort of project or research study does not fully capture the essence of my level of commitment and investment. As a Hunts Point native, it is my responsibility to advocate for social justice in Hunts Point, as well as other sections of the South Bronx.

Hunts Point is a rather unique community. From the outside, Hunts Point may give the impression as being some silenced community, which struggles to mobilize and act. However, that is not the case. In fact, Hunts Point is a well-organized community home to numerous organizations, which advocate for social, environmental, health, and educational improvements. Despite efforts, the community still encounters numerous inequalities. Hunts Point is listened to, but not heard. My objective with the *Raising the Point!* project was not to create the illusion of being some Hunts Point savior, but to support the community's call to action.

¹ The title, *Raising the Point!*, derives from my documentary film about the issues discussed in this article. The film can be seen at the following link: <http://trace.tennessee.edu/catalyst/vol1/iss1/11/>

Hunts Point

During an initial interview for this project, Kellie Terry-Sepulveda, the executive director of The Point Community Development Corporation², described the Hunts Point community as a

section of the South Bronx [with] about 11,000 families. We are located in the 16th congressional district, which is known to be one of the most impoverished congressional districts in the nation. We have about a 24% unemployment rate. High school graduation rates are dismally behind the rest of the nation. Unfortunately, we are located in a highly dense area (personal communication, 2010).

Hunts Point approximately covers 2.1 square miles of the South Bronx³. In addition to 11,000 families, this rather small community is home to the Hunts Point Cooperative Market⁴, the new Fulton Fish Market, the Spofford Juvenile Detention Center, 18 waste transfer stations, 40% of New York City's sewage, 100% of the Bronx's waste, a sewage treatment plant, a sewage pelletizing plant, 4 electrical power plants, more than 60,000 trucks per week and a few schools sprinkled here in there (Restrepo and Zimmerman, 2004).

Collectively, these industrial facilities impact Hunts Point's air quality. The South Bronx Environmental Health and Policy study conducted by the Institute for Civil Infrastructure Systems at New York University's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service (2005), found that "only 5 to 10 percent of the fine particle pollution was soot from diesel exhaust, but it was that portion that seemed to be having the worst effect on the children's asthma (Fernandez, 2006, para. 25)." The findings add that their [neighborhood children] symptoms, like wheezing, doubled on days when pollution from truck traffic was highest. "The study also examined the proximity of expressways to schools. Four expressways — the Cross Bronx, Major Deegan, Bruckner and Sheridan — and the Bronx River Parkway run through or around the South Bronx. About one-fifth of all students from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade in the area go to schools located within 500 feet, or about two blocks, of major highways, the study showed." According to the South Bronx Environmental Health and Policy Study (Restrepo and Zimmerman, 2004):

² "THE POINT Community Development Corporation is a non-profit 501 (c)(3) dedicated to youth development and the cultural and economic revitalization of the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx.

³ In the South Bronx, there are 522,412 residents (60% Latino, 39% African American), 40% of which are below the poverty line."

⁴ The Hunts Point Cooperative Market is the world's largest wholesale food distribution center.

- Zip Code 10474—Hunts Point—has the highest number and density of industrial facilities in Bronx County (pp. 45).
- Concentrations of elemental carbon—a component of diesel exhaust from trucks—were higher at all South Bronx sites than at sites in Manhattan (pp. 42).
- Car exhaust and burning fuels are producing higher ground-level concentrations of pollutants, like CO (carbon monoxide), NO₂ (nitrogen dioxide), and SO₂ (sulfur dioxide), in the South Bronx compared to rooftop station samples (pp. 42).
- Local and regional air pollution from cars, power plants, construction activity, and other chemical processes are producing high concentrations of O₃ (ozone) and PM_{2.5} (particulate matter) in the South Bronx—at levels that exceed U.S. EPA standards (pp. 42).
- While urban environments generally contain a presence of NO₂ (nitrogen dioxide) in the air, samples from the NYU mobile van in the South Bronx were higher than scientists expected (pp. 42).
- Peak outdoor elemental carbon concentrations at South Bronx schools participating in the “Backpack Study” were related to rush-hour traffic, especially in the mornings (pp. 42).

Although heavy car traffic and truck congestion present environmental problems to Hunts Point residents, it is truck idling that has a more significant effect to the community’s poor air quality. According to Washington State University’s Extension Energy Program (2004) *Idling Restrictions* report, “Accurate idling statistics are not available.” However, “the industry estimates trucks idle approximately six hours per day, for a total of 1,830 hours per year. At this rate, U.S. trucks are consuming in excess of 840 million gallons of diesel fuel annually, while idling. Using the EPA idle emissions factors, PM emission rates resulting from truck idling amount to approximately 15 grams per day per truck or about 169 pounds of particulate matter per truck per year (pp. 2.)” Consider the detrimental health effects 60,000 trucks per week, with a larger number of them idling, has on Hunts Point residents.

A major health concern in Hunts Point is the number of children diagnosed with asthma. Compared to the rest of the nation, Hunts Point has nearly double the average of kids affected by asthma. According to the South Bronx Environmental Health and Policy Study (Restrepo and Zimmerman, 2004):

- There is a strong link between Bronx zip codes with high asthma rates and those with a large concentration of industrial facilities (pp. 42).
- Higher asthma hospitalization rates are more likely to occur in lower-income areas of the South Bronx and in areas where there is a large presence of Latino/Hispanic residents (pp. 42).

- Asthma hospitalization rates are highest in the central and southern parts of Bronx County (pp. 45).
- There is a strong association between asthma hospitalization rates, poverty, the percentage of Hispanic residents, and the number of industrial facilities in the Bronx (pp. 45).

How does the South Bronx Environmental Health and Policy Study's findings connect to schooling? Is this not supposed to be an article discussing arts as social justice in education? Educational discourse typically focuses on educational improvements inside of the classroom. However, there are critical factors that affect a student's educational experience before even walking through their school's entrance.

For example, Hunts Point Elementary School⁵ (HPES), which is located in Hunts Point, serves a little over 1000 K-5 students. If you researched HPES's grade level assessment data, you would find that HPES is above average in certain grade levels and below average in others. Assumptions can be made on the cause of the below average grade level assessments. Could it be a lack of resources or qualified teachers? Perhaps, but if you were to ask the principal, she would tell you that one of the biggest problems her school encounters is being located in a "desolate industrial neighborhood with high asthma rates (personal communication, 2010)." Since the majority of school absenteeism is related to asthma, giving a student an enriching educational experience in a community overcome by heavy truck idling is an injustice that requires action.

Social Justice through the Arts

Social justice works to construct a genuine, meaningful dialogue between those in marginalized and privileged communities. However, creating situations for such a dialogue to begin can be difficult and complex because there are limited or nonexistent opportunities to engage with those in power. The arts are expressive, stimulate our imagination, and open our minds. Therefore, using the arts as a mode of inquiry and representation pushes researchers and audiences to engage with content that constructs meaning and dialogue. The provocative nature and seductiveness of the arts creates these thought provoking opportunities for critical consciousness. The arts seduce the privileged into seeing the negative and dehumanizing effects their decisions and callousness results in for marginalized people. Thus, creating a meaning that is both personal and constitutive. This is accomplished through challenging the

⁵ Pseudonym

meanings and understandings privileged groups have about particular social conditions. Therefore, what a social condition means for different groups is what is at stake. For example, the meaning of those trucks running all day is being challenged through this work. This work contains alarming content that attempts to persuade people to accept a new meaning of those idling trucks, thereby constituting a new understanding and meaning of Hunts Point social condition.

Raising the Point! Arts Installation

Over seventeen years ago, when I was growing up in Hunts Point, the same dense industrialization, congestion, and idling issues existed. However, I do not recall ever hearing about individuals or agencies advocating for improvements or solutions. Hunts Point residents, such as myself, slowly become desensitized to our environment. We accept our neighborhood's environment as a normal lived experience, despite the fact of the detrimental living conditions. Therefore, the aim of the *Raising the Point!* art installation is to create a seductive, provoking, and personal experience, which incites action.

In my efforts to address issues of social justice, I founded the organization Potentialis. Potentialis combines research and the arts to actively advocate for social justice in education, health, environment, and community development. The mission of Potentialis is to develop sustainable programs, activist projects, and art infused initiatives that support and establish social equity. In order to address the poor air quality in Hunts Point, Potentialis collaborated with The Point and HPES to create an artistic installation piece that illustrates the effect idling trucks has on the Hunts Point community. The installation piece simulates the amount of air pollution residents of Hunts Point encounter at any given time. Viewers can interact with the installation for a personal experience.

Using purchased⁶ and donated materials; we constructed a large triangular wooden container. The container has five panels, three side panels and a top and bottom panel. The container's shape represents the "iron triangle", which represents the three major highways surrounding Hunts Point: the Cross Bronx, the Bruckner, and the Sheridan. Each side panel is creatively labeled with one of the "iron triangle" highways. The rest of the box is covered with a collage

⁶ All items purchased were bought using funds provided through a Global Youth Service Day (GYSD) grant.

of images, data, and statistics pertaining to Hunts Point, asthma, and ground level pollutants. Most of the collage consists of images of Hunts Point residents, especially children.⁷

Attached to one of the side panels is a hose connected to the exhaust pipe of an idling vehicle. The top panel is connected to a breathing apparatus. The breathing apparatus consists of a breathing mask and small hose. However, instead of exhaust flowing into the box a block of dry ice is placed inside. Small vents are placed around the box to allow the fog from the dry ice to escape. The dry ice creates the illusion that toxic fumes are flowing from the idling truck into the box. At no time, are there any exhaust fumes or dry ice fog flowing through the breathing apparatus. Lastly, a small mirror is attached to another side panel. Above the mirror reads the question. "What is Hunts Point?"

Accompanying the container is a Portable DVD player. Displayed on the screen are images and video of truck idling, car traffic, truck congestion, and children within the Hunts Point community. In addition to the images and video, audio of children with respiratory problems, car traffic, and truck engines idling can be heard through headphones. The installation will be displayed⁸ in numerous locations making it accessible to the community, community not being limited to residents, but to Bronx government officials and the industrial corporations responsible for the 60,000+ trucks per week.

Seductive

The installation piece has many physical attributes that make it visually appealing to the potential participant. The hoses, the breathing apparatus, the idling vehicle, the dry ice fog, the mirror, the vents, the box's imagery and text, the video and audio content all collectively work together to stimulate the viewer's desire to interact with the installation. Sensory overload is the key to sparking the curiosity of the common passerby. If the viewer is not interested in reading, they can listen, if they are not interested in listening, they can watch. Regardless of the option they choose, it will be a provoking experience.

⁷ You can view a time lapse video of the construction of the installation as well as the finished project from the following link, <http://vimeo.com/14464661>

⁸ The release date for the installation was April 23, 2010, Global Youth Day.

Provoking

I recall reading an article about the Trinity College community coming together to advocate against racism after an incident occurred on campus. What stuck out from the article was a faculty member's response to the rally:

Associate Professor of Sociology Johnny Williams memorably called the rally “bullshit” for being ineffective and called on the school to implement policies to change the existing status quo. “Don't feel good when you leave this. Feel uncomfortable. I'm uncomfortable all the time on this goddamned campus,” he said (Brown, 2008, para. 4).

In regards to the *Raising the Point!* art installation, the experience is ineffective unless it makes you feel uncomfortable. Every time an official, a resident, truck driver, commuter, or business owner travels through Hunts Point they must feel uncomfortable until change occurs. The images, video, and audio must provoke the participant to action. In my experience, research findings and statistical data do not have as much of an impact as attaching a face or a name to the problem at hand. For example, compare the below text to the adjacent image (Figure 1).⁹



Figure 1. “Local and regional air pollution from cars, power plants, construction activity, and other chemical processes are producing high concentrations of O₃ (ozone) and PM_{2.5} (particulate matter) in the South Bronx—at levels that exceed U.S. EPA standards (Restrepo and Zimmerman, 2004).”

An image showing the everyday experience of a Hunts Point family is far more provoking than reading a pamphlet about research findings. If the images are not enough, then the video and audio content will incite the participant. Using the Situationist critical art of

⁹ Photo courtesy of the South Bronx Environmental Health and Policy study brochure. http://www.icisnyu.org/south_bronx/admin/files/SouthBronxBrochure.pdf

detournement¹⁰, the video displays footage of car traffic, truck congestion and Hunts Point residents. However, instead of the original audio being used, sounds of truck engines and car traffic are overlaid on video of children and sounds of children with respiratory problems breathing are overlaid on video of trucks idling. The images, video, and audio create an opening for an experience to occur.

Personal

The key to making the installation inspire change is to make the experience personal to the participant. This is where the mirror comes in. This interaction has two steps: 1) read the question above the mirror, “What is Hunts Point?” and 2) look at the reflection. Ideally, the participant will realize that the question should not read “What is Hunts Point?,” but “Who is Hunts Point?” The answer is in the reflection; the answer is self. In creating and presenting the installation I must be careful not to lose the self in the art. If the art becomes the focal point then this installation becomes about the artist(s) rather than the community.

Conclusion

Normally, an arts installation can act as a channel to creatively express or entertain ourselves. However, using an arts installation for social justice, such as *Raising the Point!*, seductively leads us into a state of discomfort. We become uncomfortable because the veil that blinded our critical consciousness vanishes and we begin to see the injustice(s) that exists within our reality. When an event touches our critical consciousness we begin to ask the questions that lead to solutions. This process is reminiscent of a scene from the film, *City of Angels* (Silberling, 1998), when Meg Ryan’s character, Dr. Maggie Rice loses one of her patients on the operating table.

Dr. Maggie Rice: We fight for people’s lives in here, right?

Dr. Jordan Rice: Uh-huh.

Dr. Maggie Rice: Don’t you ever wonder who it is we’re fighting with?

¹⁰ “Detournement (‘diversion’) was [a] key means of restructuring culture and experience...Detournement proposes a violent excision of elements – painting, architecture, literature, film, urban sights, sounds, gestures, words, signs – from their original contexts, and a consequent restabilization and recontextualization through rupture and realignment (Sussman, 1989, p. 8)”.

Hunts Point's fight against truck idling is far more complicated than establishing stringent environmental and health policies. When discussing issues of social justice, something remains constant-- the existence of two entities: the marginalized [oppressed] and the privileged [oppressor]. In this particular case, it is easy to identify Hunts Point as the marginalized because despite efforts to revitalize the community, social, educational, environmental, and health inequities continue to exist. The difficulty comes in identifying the privileged [oppressors]. Is it the Bronx government officials, policy makers, industrial corporations, truck drivers or even ourselves? The privileged [oppressors] in this circumstance are those who perceive Hunts Points poor air quality issues as protocol rather than injustice. The *Raising the Point!* art installation is intended to aid participants in making this distinction. The installation's creative visual appeal invites the marginalized and privileged into a space that ultimately stimulates a dialogue that incites action. The action to do something or do nothing depends solely on the personal connection each participant makes with the art installation.

References

- Action. (2010). Retrieved January 25, 2010 from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/action>
- Barker, Joel. (1991). *The Power of Vision*. [DVD]. United States. Star Thrower Distribution, Inc.
- Brown, Rebecca. (2008). Community Rallies Against Racism at Trinity College. *The Trinity Tripod*. Retrieved from <http://www.trinitytripod.com/news/community-rallies-against-racism-at-trinity-college-1.2174395#.UgqRIIOxNxM>
- Fernandez, M. (2006, October 29). A Study Links Trucks' Exhaust to Bronx Schoolchildren's Asthma. *NY Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/29/nyregion/29asthma.html?pagewanted=all>
- King, M. L., (n.d.). Retrieved from http://thinkexist.com/quotation/take_the_first_step_in_faith-you_dont_have_to/14209.html
- Mendez, Jason (2011) "Raising the Point," *Catalyst: A Social Justice Forum*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 11. Retrieved from <http://trace.tennessee.edu/catalyst/vol1/iss1/11>
- Restrepo, C. and R. Zimmerman (eds). (2004). *South Bronx environmental health and policy study: Transportation and traffic modeling, air quality, waste transfer stations, and environmental justice analyses in the South Bronx. Final Report for Phase II & III*. Retrieved from <http://www.icisnyu.org/admin/files/ICISPhaseIIandIIIreport.pdf>

Steele, D. (Producer), & Silberling, B. (Director). (1998). *City of Angels* [Motion picture]. United States: Atlas Entertainment.

Sussman, E. (Ed.). (1989). *On the passage of a few people through a rather brief moment in time: The Situationist International 1957-1972*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Washington State University's Extension Energy Program (2004). *Idling Restrictions*. Retrieved from <http://www.energy.wsu.edu/documents/renewables/IdlingRestrictions.pdf>

About the Author

Dr. Jason Mendez is a Visiting Professor of the Practice at Duke University's Program in Education. Jason's scholarly interests include school reform, critical race studies, social foundations of education, cultural studies, arts education/integration, multicultural education, educational technology, and qualitative research, particularly; counter narratives, post-critical ethnography, and narrative theory. Working across disciplinary boundaries provides spaces for him to explore varied discourses framing issues in education, cultural studies, and critical race theory. Additionally, he founded the Potentialis Centre, a non-profit organization that combines research and the arts to advocate for social justice in education, health, environment, and community development. Potentialis develops sustainable programs, activist projects, and art infused workshops that support and establish social equity. Through Potentialis, Jason pursues global opportunities to collaborate with artists, researchers, educators, community organizations, and business leaders to support equitable outcomes for targeted communities. Prior to Duke, Jason was a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pittsburgh's Center on Race and Social Problems. Jason has also served as an Assistant Professor in the Teacher Education Department at CUNY's York College.

International Journal of Education & the Arts

Editors

Christine Marmé Thompson
Pennsylvania State University

S. Alex Ruthmann
New York University

Eeva Anttila
Theatre Academy Helsinki

William J. Doan
Pennsylvania State University

Managing Editor

Christine Liao
University of North Carolina Wilmington

Associate Editors

Chee Hoo Lum
Nanyang Technological University

Marissa McClure
Pennsylvania State University

Christopher M. Schulte
University of Georgia

Kristine Sunday
Pennsylvania State University

Editorial Board

Peter F. Abbs	University of Sussex, U.K.
Norman Denzin	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A.
Kieran Egan	Simon Fraser University, Canada
Elliot Eisner	Stanford University, U.S.A.
Magne Espeland	Stord/Haugesund University College, Norway
Rita Irwin	University of British Columbia, Canada
Gary McPherson	University of Melbourne, Australia
Julian Sefton-Green	University of South Australia, Australia
Robert E. Stake	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A.
Susan Stinson	University of North Carolina—Greensboro, U.S.A.
Graeme Sullivan	Pennsylvania State University, U.S.A.
Elizabeth (Beau) Valence	Indiana University, Bloomington, U.S.A.
Peter Webster	Northwestern University, U.S.A.